

**Israel National Defense College**

**46th Class 2018-2019**

**Strategy between Theory and Practice: Strategic Thinking and Strategic Thought**

The outbreak of World War II and the Western Campaign 1939/ 1940

Lecturers and Academic Advisors: Dr. Dima Adamsky & MG Amir Baram

Submitted by: Col Klaus G. Harrer (Germany)

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19 January 2019

This paper will use the context of the outbreak of World War II and the Western Campaign 1939/ 1940 as the isolated background to critically analyze the concepts from the course “Strategy between Theory and Practice: Strategic Thinking and Strategic Thought”.

**Deterrence by Punishment**

The outbreak of World War II can be seen as a sequence of failures of deterrence. Germany could attack Poland, amongst other reasons, because of difficulties in the British and French Deterrence by Punishment strategy.

Deterrence by punishment threatens severe penalties, such as military escalation or severe economic sanctions, if an attack occurs. The focus of deterrence by punishment is not the direct defense of the opposed commitment but rather threats of wider punishment that would raise the cost of an attack.

The guarantee given to Poland by the British and French was an unsuccessful way of deterrence, since the Western allies could neither prevent Germany from attacking Poland nor take the offensive against Germany. Germany was not deterred from planning an attack on the West that should have been ruled out by the British and French deterrence strategy, since no British capabilities were available to enforce it. Once the non-aggression pact with Russia has been obtained, Germany believed that the point at which it would suffer severe sanctions was so far removed and so ambiguous that the implemented strategy did not serve as a realistic deterrence.

**The Revolution of Military Affairs of the Other Side and Strategic Culture**

*In the early morning hours of the 15th of May 1940 Prime Minister Churchill received an urgent phone call from the French Premier Reynaud. “We are beaten” Reynaud said in distressed English, “we have lost the battle.” It had only been five days after the German Army has launched a brought offensive into France and the Low countries. “Surely it can´t have happened so soon, “ Churchill replied incredulous at the rapidity of the defeat.*

*Winston S. Churchill, Their Finest Hour, 1949*

Many factors contributed to the Allied collapse in 1940, but the essence of the German victory was the innovative operational exploitation of technology common on both sides, the tank, airplane and radio. Speed, surprise and deception, combined with a superior tactical and operational performance gave Germany a relative operational superiority to which the Allies failed to adapt the competition of learning and winning the next war. Blitzkrieg can therefore be labelled a Revolution in Military Affairs of the Other Side (ORMA), a radical military innovation in which new organizational structures together with novel concept of operations, usually driven by technology, change warfare. The Wehrmacht used this advantage of innovation to inflict defeat on a qualitatively equal, numerically superior force.

Technology is mostly essential for a change in warfare, but technology is not enough to improve relative military effectiveness. As demonstrated by Blitzkrieg thoughtful changes can only take place, when new concepts of operations incorporating the new technologies are developed. Often this will result in new military organizations which reflect the new conditions. The German methods created a revolution in warfare, that France and its allies could not resist, still using the strategic thinking of World War I.

**Strategic Culture**

The success of the Blitzkrieg required not only the technology of the tank and a coherent doctrine on armored warfare supported profoundly by the Luftwaffe but also substantial changes in organization and Strategic Culture, which led to the new combined arms operations mirrored in the German tank divisions (integration of infantry with tanks) and the continued focus on tactical initiative at the lowest levels, which then formally became “Auftragstaktik”, as a new expression of German Strategic Culture. Developed mainly by Helmuth von Moltke, “Auftragstaktik” came to the scene as a Strategic Culture that allowed the swift success of the Blitzkrieg in World War II. The way that German armored and air forces operated, led to a revival of the operational war of movement rather than position warfare, that France and its allies could not resist, still using the static thinking of World War I. This showed an unambiguous difference in outcome between German and Allied Strategic Cultures, with France expecting a defensive war and Britain following the centralized model.

**Intelligence Cycle and Intelligence Surprise**

German Intelligence knew the Allies were unpre­pared for operations on the Western Front in the winter of 1939-1940 and provided the Wehrmacht with the time needed to prepare the western campaign. Despite reports about the timing and direction of the June 5, 1940 German attack into France was an Intelligence Surprise. For the French it was obvious that the Ardennes were impassable. The British ignored the warnings from Paul Thümmel, a high-ranking Abwehr officer that the attack would come through the Ardennes. French air reconnaissance took pictures from massive German contingents moving through the narrow valleys of the Ardennes, but the French Intelligence and leadership did not understand what they saw.

German Intelligence however on the Allies was decent. From British documents captured in Norway, photoreconnaissance, and reading some French codes, the German Intelligence knew of the plans, dispositions, and quality of French and British forces facing the German Wehrmacht. The Maginot Line fortresses were flanked and attacked from the rear.

Intelligence analysis was not as well integrated into the Allied Intelligence Cycle, planning and decision-making. Information was delivered to operations officers but there was no routine in their Intelligence Cycle like the German practice of allowing intelligence officers to comment on planning assumptions about opponents and allies. Evaluations had no analysis of predictions about German intentions.

More intelligence was collected about German behavior consistent with an Ardennes attack, such as the dumping of supplies and communications equipment on the Luxembourg border and the concentration of Luftwaffe air reconnaissance around Sedan and Charleville-Mézières were disregarded. When the German attack started the Allied Headquarters were saturated by the mass of incoming reports. Most were reasonably accurate when originally sent out but were outdated by the German´s rapid movements. The pace of the Blitzkrieg couldn´t be followed by the French and British Intelligence Cycle.

**Operational Level & operational**

*“There were commanders-in-chiefs who could not have led a cavalry regiment with distinction and cavalry commanders who could have led armies.”*

*Carl von Clausewitz*

The speed, flexibility and initiative of the German Wehrmacht took the Allies completely by surprise during the Blitzkrieg at the beginning of World War II. The doctrine of “Auftragstaktik” and Combined Arms integrated the operational-level ideas taught by Schlieffen with the tactical concepts developed during World War I.

Recognizing that battlefield conditions changed rapidly and that orders often became overtaken by events, the German army encouraged its commanders to make decisions without waiting for orders from above, thus allowing them to take advantage of fleeting opportunities as they arose. Above all else, this created aggressive and flexible leaders, able to close the gap between the overall strategic idea and the tactical level.

This culture was largely aimed at operational-level leaders, that is, the commanders of Germany's divisions and army corps, connecting the general strategy and tactics and turned them into one functioning system that worked in a manner relevant to the context.

Shocked by their experience, the Allied military observers who had survived the fall of France attributed their defeat to ORMA by the German Wehrmacht. Blitzkrieg seemed to be based around the universal use of new technology, doctrine, independent division commanders and hasty campaigns on the operational level.

**Offset, wishful thinking and critical thinking**

Why was France defeated comprehensively by the German Wehrmacht in only six weeks? The simple answer would be, that the French lost a battle.

The more complex answer lies just in issues of intelligence and comprehensive judgment. French military intelligence was not well systematized, low status and neither capable of the evaluation of sources, data, facts, observable phenomenon, and research findings nor able to draw reasonable conclusions from information available. A process we describe today as critical thinking. French agents found German forces massing for the push through the weakly defended Ardennes —the move that unhinged the French front—but the information was disregarded. The French believed that with effective British and Belgian assistance, the Maginot fortifications, economic superiority and modern technology, they could hold and defeat the German Wehrmacht on the flat plain of northern France. This was a profound misjudgment, based on wishful thinking of the French leadership.

France did not understand the “1940 system” and was therefore not able to identify the offset which arose since 1918 in order to better understand the reality they were facing. Subsystems like the British assistance, which represented only a portion of the British material and military resources, Belgium´s capabilities and the importance of the Maginot line were miscalculated. French defeat was the product of neglecting reality and trying to win the last war.

**The contrasting, the difficulties**

French and British commanders failed, because they did not understand, that changes in enemy´s Strategic Culture, the German development of new doctrine and new methods of warfighting, opened the relevance gap widely. Hindered by their experiences which led to their victory over Germany in 1918 they were not able to systemic thinking and failed to research their capabilities and abilities and contrast them with those of the enemy in order to successfully fight the next war. For the French contrasting would have meant to be intellectually capable of self-critically asses and scrutinize the own strategy in order to enable its validity. However, for them, there was no offset or drift. The years between 1918 and 1939 were a missed opportunity to challenge and contrast their system against the German threat and adapt it accordingly. Economy, Military and Society.

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