

had to rely on Japanese forces to keep order, and on US aeroplanes to bring them back to coastal China, where they were then unable to bring an inflationary spiral under control.

As to the Communists, they had been fighting the Nationalists for a decade before the war broke out and had nearly been defeated. They would in the war to regroup, to grow their party and their armed forces, and to extend their territorial reach. They did so, first, during the first three years of the war, and then again after Operation Ichi-Go. Given the history of hostility and the deep distrust between the Nationalists and the Communists, it is unsurprising that fighting, often on a substantial scale, erupted between them again and again. By the end of the Second World War, the civil war between them had resumed in all but name. The Second World War in China was also about which vision of China's future would prevail – that of the Nationalists or the Communists.

When the Second World War came to an end, it was clear that Japan gambled to establish a Great East Asia Co-Prosperty sphere had failed in good, but many other issues remained undecided. There was therefore a sharp break between the Second World War and the Chinese Civil War, even between the Second World War and the Cold War. These concepts are only of limited use in analysing the fighting that took place in China between 1937 and 1951, when the Korean front lines settled down into a stalemate. In other words, the fighting in China must be studied not from a perspective originating in Washington, London, Berlin or Moscow, but on its own terms. As much as the USA, the USSR and Britain avoided becoming entangled in the China theatre during the Second World War, they would not escape its consequences afterwards, politically, of course, but also militarily. First during the Chinese Civil War, but especially after the communist victory in the people's war of the communists became a model that inspired national liberation movements around the globe. This would change the world in as much as the technologies that originated in the Second World War.

## The war in the West, 1939–1940

### An unplanned Blitzkrieg

KARL-HEINZ FRIESEB

TRANSLATED BY HARVEY L. MENDELSON

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In May 1940, there occurred 'the most mystifying event in the history of modern war'.<sup>1</sup> In the First World War, during four long years, the German army had tried in vain to break through the French lines. Yet in the 1940 campaign in the West, they broke through at Sedan in just four days. The tanks then rolled unstopably behind the Allied front in the direction of the Channel coast and encircled a total of 1.7 million Allied soldiers in a giant pocket. After six weeks, the campaign came to an end. The world initially reacted with bewilderment, but soon a plausible explanation was found. It was called *Blitzkrieg*.<sup>2</sup> Nazi propaganda exploited the situation to create the legend that the German victory derived from a concept established long before, by none other than Adolf Hitler, 'the greatest field commander of all time'. But the real 'Blitzkrieg legend' was first created after the war by a number of historians endowed with rich powers of fantasy. They sketched out the fictional story of a brilliant *Blitzkrieg* strategy, which aimed at nothing less than world domination.

### Hitler's failed *vabanque-politik*

Politically, Germany had already lost the Second World War even before it had really begun militarily. Paul Schmidt, Hitler's chief translator, reports on

<sup>1</sup> Golo Mann, *Deutsche Geschichte des 19. und 20. Jahrhunderts* (Stuttgart and Hanburg: Deutscher Bucherbund, 1958), p. 922. English-language version, *The History of Germany since 1789*, trans. Marian Jackson (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1968), p. 470.

<sup>2</sup> Karl-Heinz Frieseb, *Blitzkrieg-Legende. Der Westfeldzug 1940* (4th edn, Munich: Oldenbourg-Verlag, 2012). English-language version: Karl-Heinz Frieseb with John Greenwood, *The Blitzkrieg Legend: The 1940 Campaign in the West* (Annapolis, Md.: Naval Institute Press, 2005).

a somewhat ghostly scene at the Reich Chancellery, where, on 3 September 1939, he had to translate the British declaration of war:

After I finished, there was total silence... Hitler sat there as if petrified and stared straight ahead... After a while, which seemed like eternity for me, he turned to Ribbentrop who kept standing at the window as if frozen. 'What now?' Hitler asked his Foreign Minister with a furious gaze in his eyes as if he wanted to indicate that Ribbentrop had misinformed him about the reaction of the British. Softly, Ribbentrop replied: 'I assume that the French will shortly give us an identical ultimatum'... Göring turned to me and said: 'If we lose this war, may Heaven have mercy on us!'<sup>3</sup>

Hitler's determination to launch the Polish campaign constitutes one of the most catastrophic wrong decisions in German history. Once again, like a *va banque* gambler, he placed everything on one card – and, of course, this time he lost.<sup>4</sup> Great Britain and France declared war on him. Now then emerged the scenario that had always been the nightmare of German military strategists: a war on two fronts. Hitler had summoned up the ghost of the defeat of the First World War. There can be no doubt that – from a long-term perspective – Hitler wanted war, but September 1939 was much too early. Hitler had explained to his generals that 1944 was the earliest date at which the German Reich could catch up with its future adversaries. The Wehrmacht, which later became so feared, was still in a somewhat embryonic state. The Treaty of Versailles had at first allowed Germany to form only a deservingly small army of 100,000 men. True, at the start of the war, Hitler had called 4.5 million men to arms – though only 1.7 million were fully trained. The French armed forces numbered over 6 million men. Even Poland could mobilize an army of 3.6 million men, counting the reserves. The Polish army, however, was equipped and trained in outmoded ways and was also led in an outmoded manner. After four days, the Polish campaign was decided, and in eighteen days it was essentially over. It is important to emphasize that the Polish campaign cannot really be considered a Blitzkrieg, but only the preliminary version of one. Neither at the strategic nor at the operational level was the planning based on a novel conception. Once again, the military leadership, faced with a two-front war on account of Germany's geographically unfavourable middle position

<sup>3</sup> Paul Schmidt, *Statist auf diplomatischer Bühne 1933–45: Erlebnisse des Chefdiplomaten im Auswärtigen Amt mit den Staatsministern Europas* (Bonn: Athenäum, 1954), pp. 437f.

<sup>4</sup> *Va banque* is a term originally used in the backgammon card game, in which a player stakes everything on one card. It implies here an 'all or nothing' gamble.

sought to bring about an immediate decision. Yet the encirclement of the enemy did not require complicated manoeuvring along the lines of the operational plans of Moltke and Schlieffen; that outcome was actually preordained by geography. Simply from the initial disposition of the respective troops, the German divisions, which had already been deployed in East Prussia and Slovakia, had the Polish army surrounded from three sides. Moreover, in the East, the assault troops of the Red Army were standing ready. The initial position was entirely different on the Western Front, where the Wehrmacht confronted the Franco-Belgian fortified defensive line. And precisely in the case of the tanks, the action in Poland differed in an essential way from the campaign in the West. Unlike Panzer Group Kleist in May 1940, in the Polish campaign they were not yet operating independently. Instead, the tank formations generally fought on the tactical level as divisions (brigades in today's terms), incorporated within infantry armies. Several 'trump cards', which later became well-known elements in the German Blitzkrieg (for example, the airborne troops), were intentionally kept in the background to preserve the effect of surprise. Although the German General Staff thoroughly analysed the Polish campaign, it did not consider it a useful point of comparison in assessing a conflict with the Western powers. Interestingly, the military leadership of the latter came to the same conclusion. Thus the French Minister-President Reynaud characterized the attack on Poland as simply an 'Expedition'.

In reality, the success of the 'triumphant' Polish campaign hung by a thread. General Halder, the Chief of the Army General Staff, later explained: 'The success against Poland was only possible by almost completely barring our western border'.<sup>5</sup> The Western powers could have just walked into the Ruhr, the heartland of German industry, and occupied it. Yet they let slip this unique opportunity. Thus there arose that strange state of suspended animation known as the *détente de guerre*, which the Germans termed the Sitzkrieg and the British, the Phoney War or Twilight War.

Even today, it is almost unknown that at the end of the Polish campaign the German forces stood at the edge of a debacle and were judged by their military leadership as 'no longer capable of operations' (*nicht mehr operations-fähig*). That is to say, they were no longer logistically in a position to pursue the war. Only the sudden end of the Polish campaign saved the army and the air force from collapse, especially in the munitions sector. For example,

<sup>5</sup> William L. Shirer, *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich: A History of Nazi Germany* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1960), p. 634.

General Milch, the Inspector General of the Luftwaffe, warned that his pilots had sufficient bombs for only fourteen more days of fighting and that they 'could play skat'. When Hitler received these ill tidings he was at first bewildered and then flew into a rage. A high point of the ensuing 'crisis of nerves' was the suicide of General Becker, the head of the army ordnance branch, who felt forced – unjustifiably – into the role of the scapegoat. Hitler had pushed the still unprepared Wehrmacht into the adventure of war, even though its strength was just enough to last for a short campaign. Later, however, some historians imagined that behind it all lay a carefully crafted plan.

### The legend of the 'Blitzkrieg strategy'

One of the most fascinating theories of the history of the Second World War is that of Hitler's 'Blitzkrieg strategy'. In the First World War, the so-called 'grab for world power' (*Griff nach der Weltmacht*) had failed. It had been shown that the German Reich was economically not in a position to carry out a long-running war against the Western naval powers, with their virtually inexhaustible reserves of raw materials. According to this theory, that is why, in the 1930s, Hitler developed a new, supposedly brilliant strategy for victory, the 'Blitzkrieg strategy'. Now, the same exalted goal was no longer to be reached in a single global war, but rather stage by stage, via a series of small steps – that is, via a series of Blitzkriegs. The opponents would be overthrown, one by one, in individual campaigns with limited aims and limited duration, requiring only limited mobilization of the war economy. In the pauses between the individual Blitzkriegs, Germany's strength would grow stepwise through the exploitation of the recently conquered lands.

The fantasy of the historians was particularly stimulated by the notion of the so-called 'Blitzkrieg economy'. By means of a quickly accomplished broad preparation – and accepting the risk of giving up a deeper preparedness, spread out in time over several stages – in a very short period one could supposedly achieve a first-strike capacity sufficient to overpower in a short campaign the next opponent on the list. In this way, one could square the circle, and bridge the chasm between Hitler's worldwide expansion plans and the – otherwise insufficient – supply of raw materials needed to execute them.

This theory was expounded in the United States as early as 1945 by Burt S. Klein, and later in Great Britain, mainly by Alan S. Milward. Eventually, this thesis of the 'Blitzkrieg strategy' also gained some acceptance in German

historical writing.<sup>6</sup> This is true above all of the 'intentionalist' school, whose proponents believe Hitler's political actions were determined by a long-established programme. Particular attention was accorded to Andreas Hillgruber's two-stage (*Stufenplan*) model, with its notion of a *Weltblitzkrieg*. According to this model, in the first stage, Hitler wanted to conquer the European continent from his base in *Mitteluropa*, and in a second stage bring the bulk of Asia under his control. Only then would the economy be organized for total war, in order to challenge the United States for world dominance.

Yet, as with many other fascinating theories, here, too, the question arises of whether the politicians of that time really planned future developments with such specific goals in mind, or whether it is not rather the historians who have devised, from hindsight, systems and strategies to explain events whose occurrence was more a matter of chance. An investigation of the German sources yields a wholly different result: the Blitzkrieg, from its very beginning, was not a political-strategic but rather a military-tactical phenomenon. This idea developed completely independently of Hitler's plans for conquest, and its earliest stage is already recognizable in the First World War. At that time, the Germans were looking for new methods to overcome the rigidity of positional warfare and get back to a war of movement. Toward this end, they developed special assault-troop tactics, for breaking through a line and for a deeper thrust. The attacks of these assault troops were meant to be lightning fast, in order to exploit the effects of surprise. General Guderian adopted this assault troop tactic and incorporated into it the elements of modern technology, such as the tank, the aeroplane and the radio. The result was a breathtaking increase in the tempo of attack, which produced a great psychological shock. Never again was the shock of surprise to be as complete as it was in the 1940 campaign in the West, which may be considered the Blitzkrieg par excellence. In what follows, however, it will be shown that this Blitzkrieg was not in any way planned to take the form it actually did.

Hitler's 'Blitzkrieg economy' proves to be, upon closer examination, a fiction. At the beginning of the Second World War, the leaders of Germany faced a dilemma: should they carry out armament 'in breadth' for a short war, or armament 'in depth' for a long one. In this situation, it was the spectre of the First World War that had the most influence. Hitler and his

<sup>6</sup> Examples from both American and German historiography can be found in Frieser, *The Blitzkrieg Legend*, pp. 8f., 360–2.

generals were clearly aware of the traumatic experiences of positional warfare, with its endless battles of attrition. Accordingly, Germany's economic potential should be designed not to burn out in a lightning-fast manner, like fireworks, but rather to be kept at a low flame and thus be able to last for a long time. In planning the Western campaign, Hitler did not work on the assumption that it would take six weeks (which is all it actually lasted), but rather that it would go on for five or six years. Armament production was planned in such a way that a significant increase would be perceptible only after a year. The high point, however, was not supposed to be reached until the autumn of 1941. Yet at that moment in time the Wehrmacht stood not before Paris, but before Moscow.

The priority scheme for weapons procurement established before the Western campaign likewise provides no evidence of any expectation of a quick decision following on a Blitzkrieg. In first position are requirements which clearly point toward preparation for a long, stationary war, like the First World War: munitions and gunpowder factories, machines and machine tools. The second level of priority is the production of air U-boats, as well as Ju 88 aeroplanes. These were weapons that would be used in the long run as part of the war strategy against Great Britain. Only the third (and penultimate) position do tanks appear. An especially revealing figure is the distribution of steel within the armaments slated for the army. From the 445,000 tons allocated for the second quarter of 1940, only 5% or less than the 26,000 tons foreseen for barbed wire, obstacles, and so forth to be used in fighting a positional war. About twice as much steel was allotted simply to preparing the factories to produce future munitions than was made available for the production of armoured vehicles.

Even more revealing are the organization and structure of the German army. The military planners confronted the following opposing choice regarding the right goal to pursue: Should they create a small, elite army with motorized divisions, which would be suited to an operational war of movement – that is, a Blitzkrieg? Or should they form a large number of second- and third-class infantry divisions, which would be suited to positional warfare? Here, too, the image of the First World War prevailed. In May 1940, only 10 per cent of all the German divisions, in other words the spearheads, were fully motorized and could be employed in a war of movement. The great mass of the army moved at the pace of an infantry or the trot of a horse-drawn cart. The notion of the armoured German military moving like an avalanche of steel was only a propaganda fantasy.

In the First World War, the Germans had used 1,400,000 horses, and in the Second World War as many as 2,700,000. Following the campaign in the West, the Allied secret services were accused of total failure, because in spite of abundant information, they supposedly had not grasped the structure of the German 'Blitzkrieg army'. This criticism seems unjustified, because the German army, in terms of its structure, actually was not a Blitzkrieg army. After the failure of the Schlieffen Plan in the First World War, the German generals were totally opposed to any military adventurism. This attitude is expressed in a remark made in July 1938 by the General of the Artillery Ludwig Beck, at the time the Army Chief of Staff: 'The idea of a Blitzkrieg... is an illusion. One should really have learned from the modern history of warfare that surprise attacks have hardly ever led to lasting success.'

#### The struggle over the 'Sickle Cut' Plan

According to the calculations of the General Staff, the French campaign was not really winnable. France had taken shelter behind its Maginot Line and, together with its allies, was clearly superior to the German attacker. In May 1940, the Allies had at their disposal twice as many artillery pieces as the Germans (4,000 to 7,000). In terms of armoured vehicles, they were also clearly superior, with 4,204 tanks against the Germans' 2,439. Moreover, their tanks were of better quality. They were technologically a generation ahead, since for a long period the Germans had been forbidden to produce tanks and aircraft by the Treaty of Versailles. Thus the French Char B and the British Matilda tanks proved to be nearly invulnerable to German tank cannon and anti-tank weapons. Almost two-thirds of German tanks were unusable in combat against enemy tanks because of their inferior weaponry. Despite a widely held view to the contrary, the Western powers also enjoyed superior air power. Specifically, if one counts, in addition to the few planes that were operational at the front on 10 May, those that had been pushed back to the rear areas out of concern about a surprise German attack, then the Allies' total comes to 4,469 planes, as compared to Germany's 3,578.

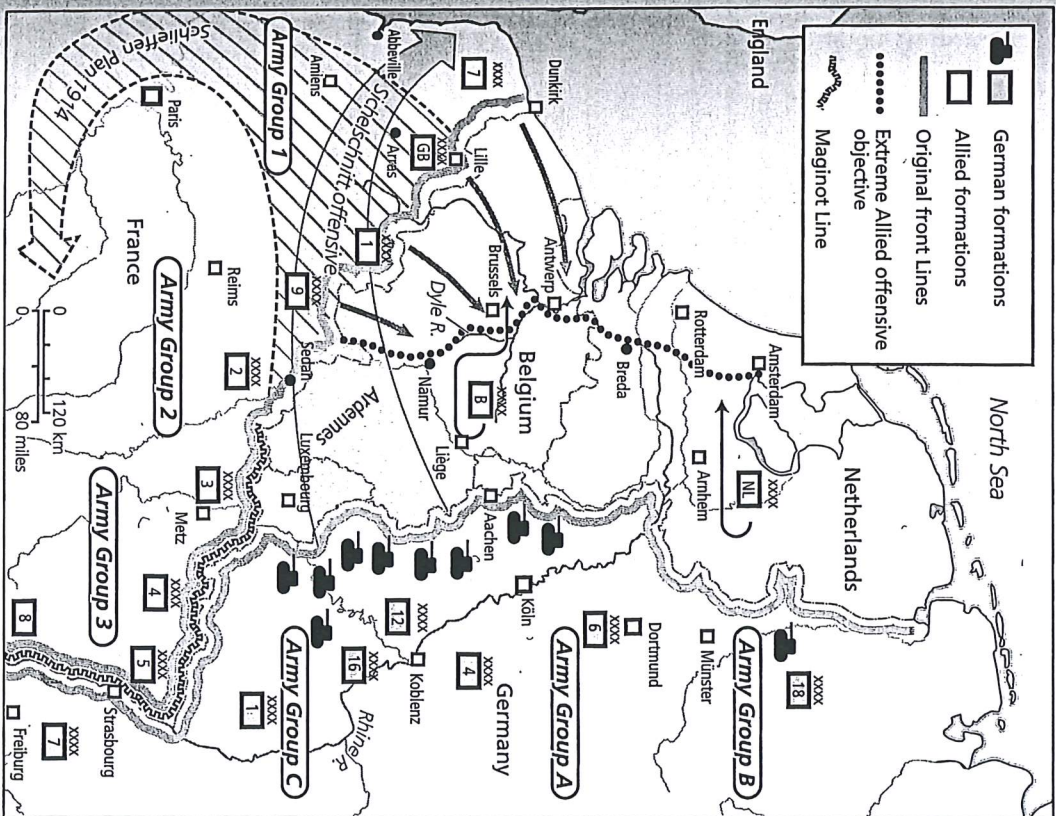
The German generals were rarely as united in their views as they were in their opposition to the campaign in the West. Hitler's plans for the attack were dismissed internally as 'insane' (*wahnsinnig*) and 'criminal'

<sup>7</sup> Wolfgang Foerster, *Generaloberst Ludwig Beck. Sein Kampf gegen den Krieg* (München: Isar Verlag, 1952), p. 123.

(*verbrecherisch*).<sup>8</sup> Even Göring spoke out against a Western offensive. But the dictator was obsessed by the notion of waging an offensive war in the future. In response, a conspiracy formed, led by the Chief of the Army General Staff, General of the Artillery Halder. He planned a *coup d'état* and the assassination of Hitler in order to protect Germany from a catastrophe. For a time, he even carried a pistol in his briefcase, "in order possibly to get down "Emil" (his codename for Hitler).<sup>9</sup> In the end, however, he lost his nerve. At some point, Hitler flew into a rage against General von Brauchitsch, Commander-in-Chief of the army. The dictator accused him of defection, roaring at him as if he were a recruit. And an expression used by Hitler in the heat of emotion led Halder to believe – falsely – that the plans for the coup had been betrayed. He panicked and ordered all the relevant documents to be destroyed. The resistance of the generals thus collapsed from within. Now there was nothing left for Halder to do but to carry on and turn to the planning of the inevitable campaign.

Immediately following the Polish campaign, the army's Supreme Command had elaborated an operational plan for an offensive against the Western powers. According to this first deployment order, the troops would not forward toward the Belgian Channel coast on each side of Brussels, with the point of main effort falling to the right wing. But this uninspiring proposal seemed only at first glance a copy of the failed Schlieffen Plan of 1914. The Chief of the General Staff, Schlieffen had planned an oversized new edition of Hannibal's battle of encirclement at Cannae (216 BCE). He wanted to envelop all the enemy armies stationed in northeastern France in a huge pincer movement and decide the outcome of the war with lightning speed. His successors in 1939, however, planned precisely what he had fervently rejected, namely an 'ordinary' victory without a strategic decision. Other proposals continued to be developed for the disposition of the troops, but none of them showed any trace of brilliance.

Then an outsider developed a plan which could make the seemingly impossible possible. This was Major General von Manstein, Chief of Staff of Army Group A. He characterized the operational plan proposed by the army high command (*Oberkommando des Heeres* – OKH), with its centre of gravity in the north with Army Group B, as too transparent. This was exactly



10.1 German and Allied operational plans, 1940

where the French would expect a German offensive. The consequence would be a frontal clash with the enemy's main forces. The greatest concentration of power on one side would confront its match on the other. The result would be, at best, a partial operational success. What was needed, however, was not a frontal push designed to drive the enemy back behind

8 Wilhelm Ritter von Leeb, *Tagebuchaufzeichnungen und Lageberichterlegungen aus zwei Wiltigen*, ed. Georg Meyer (Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlagsanstalt, 1976), pp. 184–5.

9 Helmuth Groscurth, *Tagebücher eines Abwehroffiziers 1938–1940*, ed. Helmuth Krausnick and Harold C. Deutsch (Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 1970), p. 167.

the Somme, but rather to get behind him, cut him off at the Somme and surround him. Only in this way could a decisive victory of strategic importance be achieved.

Thus Manstein proposed that the point of main effort be transferred from Army Group B on the right wing to Army Group A in the middle. Strong tank forces would attack there, where the Allies least expected it, through the wooded hills of the Ardennes. If the surprise attack worked and the Meuse River was crossed at Sedan, the German tank divisions could near push through the French rear areas to the coast, behind Allied front lines. Then, all of the Allied troops in northern France and Belgium would be surrounded in a giant pocket. This plan was later called the 'Sickle Cut' (*Sichelschnitt*). Manstein's proposal was based on the following assessment of the enemy's position. The Allies assumed that the Germans would once again follow the overall schema of the Schlieffen Plan, and thus expected that the enemy's forces would be concentrated in Flanders. France was protected along the front line's right sector by the Maginot Line. In the centre, the Meuse River and Ardennes formed a double geographical barrier. Thus the Allies could concentrate their best units along the left wing. Yet, not wanting to let all of Belgium fall unprotected to the aggressors, they planned, in case of a German attack, to allow British and French intervention troops to move north as far as the Dyle Line between Antwerp and Dinant. Mobile units would even push forward as far as Holland. However, precisely through this forward movement, the Allies would fall into the trap, for they would unwittingly set in motion a 'revolving-door mechanism'. The further to the north they pressed, the easier it would be for the German tank division to push in behind them from the south.

Liddell Hart compared this situation to a bullfight. In this analogy, Army Group B attacking from the north represented the *torreador's* red cape. It was supposed to attract the Allied intervention forces, like a raging bull, to some toward Belgium – right into the trap. For then tank divisions concentrated in Army Group A could thrust like a dagger into the bared right flank.

Yet the first victim of the 'Manstein Plan' was Major General Manstein himself. On account of this 'adventurous' idea of an Ardennes offensive which in some ways recalled Hannibal's crossing of the Alps with his elephants, he was sent off to an unimportant post. Previously, however, he had succeeded in convincing Hitler of the feasibility of his plan. In the meantime, the Chief of the Army General Staff, General Halder, had also changed from a bitter opponent to a strong defender of the idea, having been favourably impressed by the results of several map exercises. Now he

advocated transferring the point of main effort to Army Group A and wanted the majority of the tanks to attack through the Ardennes in the direction of Sedan. On 24 February 1940, he presented the fourth, and definitive, operational plan for the deployment of the troops.

Alister Horne described 'Sickle Cut' as 'one of the most inspired blue-prints for victory that the military mind has ever conceived'.<sup>10</sup> But the plan was condemned by higher-ranking generals as 'crazy and foolhardy'. After Halder had adopted Manstein's basic idea, he suddenly found himself being named the 'grave-digger of the Panzer forces'. The new plan of operations was stigmatized by the trauma of the failed Schlieffen Plan. Once again, everything was to be wagered on one card, and a campaign to be decided by a single turning manoeuvre. The most vehement criticism came from General von Bock, Commander-in-Chief of Army Group B, who reproached Halder for playing *va banque* with Germany's fate:

You will be creeping by 10 miles from the Maginot Line with the flank of your breakthrough and hope the French will warch inertly! You are cramming the mass of the tank units together into the sparse roads of the Ardennes mountain country, as if there were no such thing as air power! And you then hope to be able to lead an operation as far as the coast with an open southern flank 200 miles long, where stands the mass of the French Army!

This, Bock declared, was 'transcending the frontiers of reason'.<sup>11</sup>

General Halder had replaced Manstein with the outspokenly conservative Major General von Sodenstern, but this should have backfired on him, since the new Chief of Staff of Army Group A proved to be unwilling to go along with Halder's sudden change of mind. Yet Sodenstern would hold a key post in the upcoming offensive, and when the tank divisions foreseen for the 'Sickle Cut' drive to the Channel coast were finally concentrated in Army Group A, he devoted all of his energy to wrecking the plan, which he considered to be unworkable, or at least to weakening it decisively.

### The breakthrough at Sedan

The 'Sickle Cut' operation was a leap into the unknown, a gamble, for which there were no precedents in the history of warfare. Added to this was the

<sup>10</sup> Alister Horne, *To Lose a Battle: France 1940* (London: Macmillan, 1969), p. 141.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 140.

enormous time pressure. The feat in the north could succeed only if, by the fourth day, at the latest, the invaders had traversed the Ardennes and had crossed the Meuse. Otherwise, the Allies would realize in time that the German forces were concentrated not in Flanders, but near Sedan, and could call up sufficient reserves. Panzerkorps Guderian, which was to spearhead the attack, had to cover a stretch of 100 miles – through woods and dells. Finally, it was necessary to get over the Meuse River, which was protected by the bunkers of the extended Maginot Line. Accordingly, Guderian, with his feel for catchy slogans, hammered home to his soldiers the line: 'In three days at the Meuse, on the fourth day over the Meuse!'

The precondition for all this was to stake everything on one card – namely the tank. This was to be the first-ever autonomous employment of the Panzer force on the operational level. Panzer Group Kleist included five tank divisions and three motorized infantry divisions. The novelty here was that this Panzer group – which would be far in advance of the infantry armik marching on foot – was supposed to carry out an operational attack all on its own. With a total of 1,222 tanks, General von Kleist disposed of half the German Panzer force. Yet this Panzer group suffered under the burden of being viewed as provisional. If the surprise attack failed already at the Meuse, the formation would disintegrate within a few days.

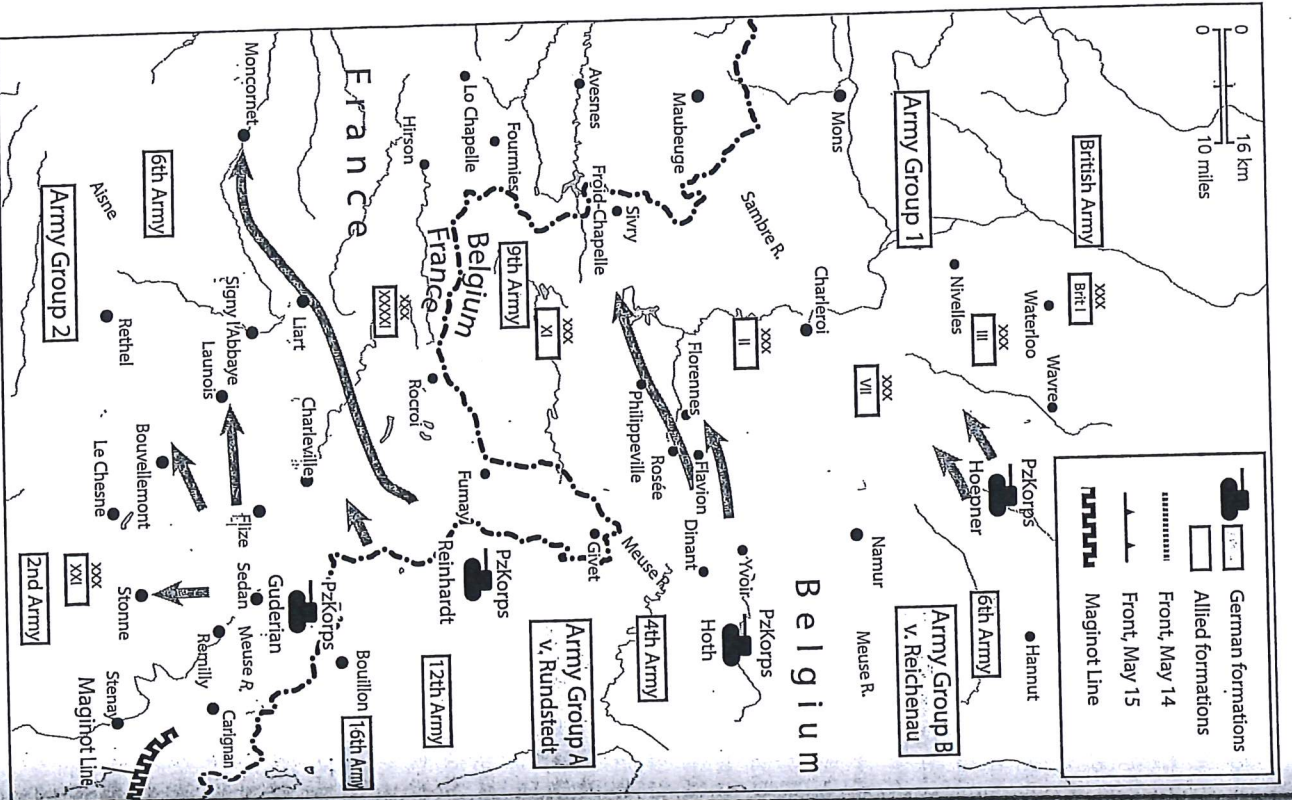
General von Rundstedt, the Commander-in-Chief of Army Group A suddenly came to doubt that the attack could succeed. Now the consequences of Manstein's transfer became very evident. Rundstedt, influenced by Sodenstern, decided on a bifurcated solution. Actually, the original intention was to have the Panzer divisions lead the attack in an initial echelon, which would have required the existence of a large network of roads. But Army Group A wanted, instead, to proceed along two tracks. The infantry divisions were to attack in parallel with the Panzer divisions in order to achieve what the latter were not trusted to do, namely, get across the Meuse. The road system in the Ardennes, however, was not sufficient for such simultaneous activity. Consequently, this ambivalent decision provided an immensely chaotic transport situation and – even without any action on the part of the enemy – might have almost completely ruined the Sichelschmitt Plan already in the Ardennes. Panzer Group Kleist disposed of over 400 motor vehicles, which makes it hard to understand for what reason this giant armada of vehicles was constrained to travel within a ravine-like corridor with only four routes of advance. The result was the biggest traffic jam ever seen in Europe, right up to the present time. On 12 May, the third day of the offensive, the columns were stalled for as much as 160 miles from the

Meuse, as far back as the Rhine River, spread out over French, Belgian, Luxembourg and German territory. This offered the Allied air forces a unique opportunity to destroy the German tank forces already in the Ardennes, where they sat trapped. Yet the German tanks remained almost completely undisturbed.

But now something occurred that even to Guderian – as he wrote in his memoirs – seemed 'almost a miracle':<sup>12</sup> the breakthrough at Sedan. The attacker's inferiority to the defender in terms of artillery was very pronounced: as low as one to three. Moreover, a considerable portion of the German marching units remained stuck along the overcrowded roads in the Ardennes. This included even the munitions columns, so that only twelve rounds were available for each artillery piece. In this situation, Guderian was entirely dependent on the air force, 'the vertical artillery' of the Blitzkrieg. The most violent event in the campaign in the West was the massive bombardment carried out by the Luftwaffe on 13 May at Sedan. It was one of the biggest surprises of the entire war. The effect of the psychological shock surpassed even that of the use of poison gas or tanks in the First World War. Never again did the German air force carry out such a massive attack against such a narrow stretch of the front line. The bulk of three tank divisions attacked at a bend, two and a half miles wide, in the Meuse River at Sedan. Here, at the focal point, the Luftwaffe carried out 1,215 bomber and Stuka missions. What was decisive, however, was the first use of the 'rolling raid' (*rollender Einsatz*) method. The air attacks continued throughout the entire day, and the continuous bombardment had a devastating effect on the defenders' nerves.

While the tanks were still standing in the Ardennes forest, the infantry was able to get across the Meuse in the first assault. French resistance collapsed like a house of cards. The cause was one of the key events of the campaign in the West, the 'panic of Bulson'. It began when the report of a French artillery observer was falsely transmitted. Suddenly, the rumour arose that German tanks had crossed the Meuse and already stood in Bulson, right in front of the division command post. The rumour spread like wildfire, and in a few hours, the French units dissolved in a tumult of panic. When, later, a parliamentary commission investigated the causes of this mass psychosis, soldiers of every rank asserted that they had seen German tanks with their own eyes. In reality, however, the first German tanks did not cross the

<sup>12</sup> Heinz Guderian, *Panzer Leader* (Cambridge, Mass.: Da Capo Press, 1996), p. 106.



10.2 Collapse of the French front on the Meuse, May 1940

Meuse until twelve hours later. The French investigative report consequently spoke of *un phénomène d'hallucination collective*. Sedan was thus the site of one of the most curious tank victories of the Second World War. It happened again and again during the war that tanks caused the enemy to flee without firing a single shot – just through their appearance. Here, however, tanks caused the enemy to flee without having appeared at all!

Yet, carefully considered, this was not a one-time curiosity, but rather a model case which lays bare particularly clearly the secret of the Blitzkrieg's success. It caused a revolution in the image of war in comparison to the battles of attrition of the First World War. The principle of physical annihilation was replaced by the principle of psychological confusion. The indirect effect became more important than the direct one. Already in the First World War, German assault troops had been employed to sow panic and confusion. This shock effect was now intensified to a monstrous degree with the appearance of the tank and the aeroplane. The most penetrating psychological effect was achieved by the Stuka: during its dive-bombing missions it activated a siren, the so-called 'Trummer of Jericho'. The horrible screeching of that siren became the terror fanfare of the Blitzkrieg. Never again would the surprise effect of the new attack methods be as powerful as it was at Sedan, where, for the first time in military history, tanks and planes were employed in huge numbers on the operational level. Even the German leadership was surprised. Thus the breakthrough of Panzerkorps Guderian led to the breakthrough of Guderian's ideas.

Remarkable, too, were the minimal losses. During the Battle of Sedan on 3-14 May, Panzerkorps Guderian suffered 120 deaths and 400 injuries. These figures are nothing short of astonishing, when compared to the losses suffered in the – overall unsuccessful – breakthrough battles of the First World War. In 1916, the British lost 60,000 of the 140,000 attacking soldiers on the very first day of the Battle of the Somme; altogether, the Allies sacrificed 660,000 men in that battle and the Germans 500,000 men.

What was decisive at the Battle of Sedan, however, was not so much the breakthrough as the breaking out from the bridgehead. The army high command's operational plan was only a half-hearted imitation of Manstein's bold 'Sickle Cut' Plan. The logical breach point was at Sedan. Manstein and Guderian, who had advised Manstein as his tank expert, planned an operation 'at one stroke'. The Panzers should thrust forward from the Luxembourg border at the highest speed, going non-stop to the Channel coast. Otherwise, the Allied armies on the north wing would have sufficient time to withdraw southward from the Belgian trap and get behind the



Somme. The potential danger was that after the breakthrough at Sedan the German Panzer divisions would be completely isolated, with their flank exposed, as they pushed forward through the enemy's rear areas.

This breathtaking idea frightened Hitler and the higher-ranking generals. They planned, instead, a 'slow-motion Blitzkrieg'. Not daring to make the great leap - in one go - to the Channel coast, they wanted instead to remain for a time, literally, at the halfway point at Sedan. The armoured divisions should wait several days at the bridgehead, until the infantry divisions marching behind them had also crossed the Meuse and could secure the flanks. Guderian had always objected to this approach, since it would allow the Allies enough time to form a new defensive line at Sedan.

But then came the decisive moment of the campaign in the West. On 14 May, one day after the breakthrough at Sedan, General Guderian, in the euphoria of the success, tossed aside all the commands of Hitler and his superiors. On his own authority, he pushed forward with his Panzers from the bridgehead toward the west - in the direction of the Channel coast. He thereby caused an avalanche effect, for he drew the remaining armoured divisions along with him. The generals at the high command level temporarily lost control of the situation, so that the operation increasingly ran on a dynamic of its own. Ultimately, it developed exactly in accord with Manstein's visionary prediction. Now the German armoured thrust, lacking the flanking protection of the infantry divisions, took on the shape of a narrow sickle. This is why, after the fact, it became known as the 'Sickle Cut' (*Sichelschnitt*), an expression first used by Winston Churchill.<sup>13</sup>

At the time, Sedan was linked in the thinking of German officers with another high point of the art of operational command. It was there that in 1870, Moltke won the famous battle of encirclement which became known as the 'Cannae of the nineteenth century'. Here, of all places, was resurrected in May 1940 an idea that had perished in the fires of the First World War. The pendulum of military technology swung back again from an emphasis on firepower to an emphasis on movement. The British General J. F. C. Fuller, who may be considered one of the pioneers of Guderian's idea later characterized Operation 'Sickle Cut' as the Second Battle of Sedan. It drew a parallel between Moltke's encircling movement and Manstein's even bolder idea of encirclement. Whereas, in 1870, the meeting point of the two

pincer armies was six miles away from Moltke's hilltop command post nearilly, the 1940 operation was a gigantic encircling movement, nearly 250 miles long stretched out in the form of a sickle, from the Luxembourg border to the Channel coast. In 1870, the Germans managed to encircle an army of 120,000 men; in 1940, about 1.7 million Allied soldiers fell into the 'sickle cut' trap. Today, military historians all agree that the breakthrough at Sedan spelled certain defeat for the French. It was already evident by 14 May that the Allied troops were outmanoeuvred on account of their poor position and that they had lost the campaign. Yet even more significant is the turning point which the battle represents in modern military history. The positional warfare which derived from 1918 was abruptly replaced by the modern operational war of movement. And it was just this concept which stood behind the suggestive slogan 'Blitzkrieg'.

#### The advance to the Channel coast and the danger of the exposed flanks

From the very beginning, Major General Manstein had taken into account the weak spot in the 'Sickle Cut' Plan. After crossing the Meuse at Sedan, the German Panzer divisions were to turn westward toward the Channel coast. It was precisely at this moment, however, when the tanks had left the bridgehead, and the infantry divisions, marching on foot, had not yet caught up with them, that the French troops could launch a counter-attack against the Panzerkorps Guderian along its unprotected flanks. Accordingly, in addition to the main thrust to the west, Manstein had also ordered a secondary thrust toward the south, in order, by means of an 'aggressive defence', to push into the area where the French would be preparing their expected counter-attack and prevent them from carrying it out. Lying nine miles south of Sedan, near the village of Stonne, the heavily wooded hills of Mont-Dieu (*massif de Stonne*) rise up steeply and threateningly - an ideal springboard for a counter-attack. It was at Stonne that the battle culminated. The most fiercely contested location of the campaign in the West, the village changed hands seventeen times within a period of three days. Here, on 14 May, the French made their sole attempt at a counter-attack on the operational scale. It was to be carried out by two army corps moving from the south toward Sedan. They included Group Flavigny, with its total of 300 tanks, among which there were about seventy Type Char B 'monster tanks', which were virtually invulnerable to German anti-tank guns. If these 300 tanks had begun to roll, the German units would have had no chance to

<sup>13</sup> Churchill spoke about a 'sickle cut' and an 'armoured scythe stroke'. Winston S. Churchill, *His Complete Speeches, 1897-1963*, vol. vi: 1935-1942, ed. Robert Rhodes James (New York and London: Bowker, 1974), p. 6226.

stop the avalanche of steel. It therefore had to be their goal to attack the avalanche before it started to move.

The failure of this potentially dangerous French counter-attack was already foreseeable, however, in the formulation of the attack orders. In conformity with a schema deriving from the First World War, the general in charge, Jean Flavigny, was supposed to: (1) seal off the enemy attack frontally via a defensive line along the *massif de Sonme*, and (2) attack in the direction of Sedan as soon as possible. But this was – in the case of a tank offensive – self-contradictory, since the defensive and offensive portions of the order excluded each other. Defence meant spreading the French units out in a linear pattern along a front line, while an attack required a narrow organization in depth and concentration at a single point.

On 14 May, at 6 a.m. – an hour before the first German tank crossed over the Meuse bridge – the French tank units had reached the southern edge of the *massif de Sonme*. Yet instead of immediately attacking the well German bridgehead, they used up another ten hours for a maintenance halt in the assembly area. It was not until 5:30 p.m. that Group Flavigny was ready to attack.

Now came one of the most decisive moments of the campaign in the West. If there was ever a chance to stop the German tanks, it was in the late afternoon of 14 May. From the perspective of the Panzerkorps Guderian this was the worst possible moment. The 1st and 2nd Panzer Divisions had already pushed on toward the west. They were no longer available to defend the bridgehead, and the 10th Panzer Division, which was still lagging behind, was not yet ready for deployment. Yet General Flavigny, one of the leading French experts on tanks, lost his nerve. He was completely frustrated by constant delays as his tank units tried to take up positions on the start line of the attack. Above all, however, the panic of Bulson made itself felt indirectly: throughout the entire day, Flavigny had again and again witnessed catastrophic scenes of terrified French soldiers streaming to the rear with tales of hundreds, even thousands, of attacking German tanks. Thus at the last minute, he rescinded the attack order.

Now he began to consider the defensive portion of his task and divided his tanks linearly along a twelve-mile stretch, in the course of which all the roads and passages were closed by so-called 'cocks'. Each cock consisted of one heavy and two light tanks. When, on the following day, he wanted to carry out his attack, it proved to have been easier to spread the tanks out than to bring them back together. Furthermore, in the meantime, German units had penetrated the French assembly area. Since the newly arrived

10th Panzer Division was too weak to be employed for defence, General Guderian decided to let it attack. Most importantly, the French forces were unable to gain permanent control of Sonme. General Flavigny now definitively cancelled his attack order. Thus the only French attempt at a counter-attack on the operational level had failed before it had begun.

During the push toward the Channel coast, two conflicts were playing out simultaneously: one on the battlefield and the other among the German generals. The traditionalists still showed themselves to be caught up in linear thinking. Their instinctive anxiety concerning gaps or exposed flanks derived from a time when there were no tanks. They found dizzying the idea of allowing the armoured divisions to push fully unprotected through the enemy's rear areas. Added to this was the breathtaking tempo of the attack. For the progressives, on the other hand, above all Guderian, it could not go fast enough. The latter explained that any delay meant strengthening the opponent. He had no anxiety concerning exposed flanks, seeing their best protection as lying in the enemy's confusion.

The conflict within the German high command culminated in the temporary replacement of Guderian by Kleist on 17 May at Montcornet (forty miles west of Sedan). Guderian's belief in the rightness of his ideas led him consistently to disregard the orders of his conservative-minded superiors. This time, however, he had gone too far, for he dared at Montcornet to attack beyond the line where the army group had ordered a halt. Yet on the same day he was restored to his command by a directive from higher up.

At just this moment, another German tank general undertook a forward thrust, one which brought his division the French nickname *la division phantôme* (the ghost division). This was Brigadier General Rommel, the commander of the 7th Panzer Division. The degree to which he took matters into his own hands on the night of 16-17 May far exceeded anything that other tank generals had allowed themselves during this campaign. By evening, his division had reached the extended Maginot Line at the French-Belgian border. Now he dared to do something no one had ever attempted: a frontal attack with tanks, off the march, against a fortified defensive line – and at night! The defenders were so surprised that the breakthrough succeeded with the very first assault. Rommel decided to exploit the enemy's confusion and pushed on further. In this case, a chance event came to his aid. The French 5th (motorized) Infantry Division had bivouacked for the night on the road to Avesnes, with their vehicles lined up along the road. Rommel's tanks drove right through their midst, cannon blazing on both sides. In the shortest imaginable time, the French division dissolved in a wave of fleeing

soldiers. They were literally rolled over in their sleep. Yet Rommel's forward thrust that night was not to be stopped. He did not halt until Le Cateau where his fuel finally ran out. The success of this night-time tank attack over a distance of thirty miles was overwhelming. Right at the start, two of the enemies' operative lines had been penetrated within a period of a few hours: the extended Maginot Line and the Sambre-Oise Line. On that night the French II Army Corps was largely destroyed or, in certain instances, simply melted away.

Yet in the grey light of dawn, Rommel saw that during his impetuous attack he was followed only by the advance detachment, a strengthened tank regiment. The bulk of the division still stood on Belgian territory and had given itself a night's rest. Radio contact had been lost; no one knew where General Rommel was. Thus his Panzer division had become the 'ghost division' not just for the enemy, but for his own headquarters. That night, Rommel and his tanks disappeared without a trace. The army high command was in a state of complete agitation. Even Hitler spent a sleepless night. Still, it was impossible to bring such a successful general before a court martial. Instead, Rommel received the Knight's Cross of the Iron Cross (*Ritterkreuz*) award.

Only a few generals realized as quickly as Rommel what unexpected possibilities were presented by this new weapon, the tank, if only one employed it decisively enough. To the contrary, the dizzying success of the Panzer divisions felt eerie to some of the higher-ranking generals. They did not encourage the efforts of these divisions; they even hindered them. Hitler himself now gave way to panic. General Halder noted in his diary for 17 May: 'In unpleasant day. The Führer is terribly nervous. Frightened by his own success he is afraid to take any chances and so he would rather pull the reins on us. Puts forward the excuse that it is all because of his concern for the left flank!'<sup>14</sup> On the following day, Halder wrote: 'The Führer unaccountably keeps worrying about the south flank. He rages and screams that we are on the best way to ruin the whole campaign and that we are leading up to a defeat.'<sup>15</sup> Although German reconnaissance revealed no evidence at all of an Allied counter-attack Hitler was a captive of the clearly deluded belief in an imaginary 'danger from the south'. He wanted to avoid a 'second miracle at the Marne'.

This phase of activity was thus marked by a complete reversal in the respective attitudes of these two utterly opposed personalities. Hitler, with

being a gambler by nature, had taken nearly criminal risks in his adventurous foreign policy, was suddenly filled with such anxiety by his own daring that he came close to suffering a nervous breakdown. In contrast, Halder, who before the campaign was derided for being timid, was suddenly bursting with self-assurance and confidence in victory. On 16 May, he wrote in his diary, 'Our breakthrough wedge is developing in a positively classical manner.'<sup>16</sup>

The danger on the south flank which held Hitler so transfixed did not exist at all. This is also clear from Winston Churchill's memoirs. Alarmed by the breakthrough of the German tanks at Sedan, the British Prime Minister flew to Paris. There, on 16 May, the French Supreme Commander, General Gamelin, presented him with a very sombre report on the situation, after which Churchill asked him where the operational reserve was. General Gamelin's answer was shattering, consisting of a single word: *Aucune* – it no longer existed. The Allied General Staffs were beginning to be gripped by an end-of-the-world feeling. General Ironside, the British Chief of the Army General Staff, wrote in his diary on 17 May: 'Right now, it looks like the biggest military catastrophe in history.'<sup>17</sup>

The Allies, in conceiving of the tempo of events, were still thinking in terms of their experience in the First World War, and they could not manage to gather their forces for an operational counter-attack. Once it was clear that the French army high command was not going to undertake any serious counter-measures, Ironside seized the initiative. The German tanks, meanwhile, had pushed ahead so quickly that a gap had opened between them and the infantry armies marching behind them. This was the right moment for an Allied pincer movement at Arras against the corridor, which was only twenty-five miles wide. The French army, however, was not in a position to concentrate its forces quickly enough at the south flank of the corridor. Thus, on 21 May, the British attacked from the north, essentially alone. But the whole action amounted to no more than an uncoordinated attack employing eighty-eight tanks, and after an advance of only a few miles, it was stopped by the guns of Rommel's 7th Panzer Division. On that same day, Panzerkorps Guderian reached the Channel coast and then turned northward along the coast in order to cut the Allies off from the Channel ports.

<sup>14</sup> Franz Halder, *The Halder War Diary, 1939-1942*, ed. Charles Burdick and Hans Adolf

Jacobsen (Novato, Calif.: Presidio Press, 1988), p. 302.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

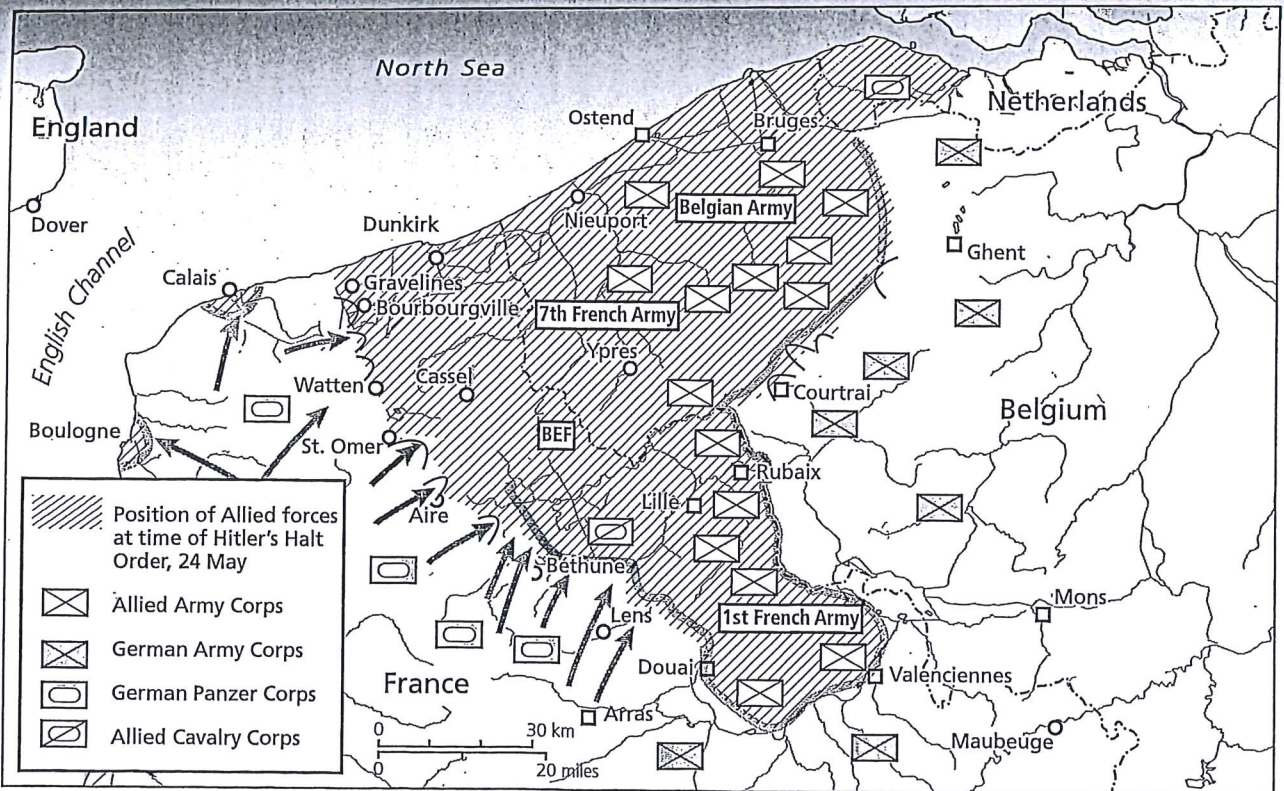
<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 297.

<sup>17</sup> Sir Edmund Ironside, *The Ironside Diaries, 1937-1940*, ed. Roderick MacLeod and Denis Kelly (London: Constable, 1962), p. 37.

### The halt order at Dunkirk

On 24 May, the German troops were within nine miles of Dunkirk, the sole Channel port east of the Somme that was still in Allied hands. No significant forces remained any longer between the German tanks and Dunkirk. It would only be a matter of a few hours and then the last escape route would be closed, and about one million British, French and Belgian soldiers would be trapped. The Allied forces were still locked in battle – at least sixty miles from Dunkirk – with the divisions of Army Group B, and they had no chance at all of reacting to the deadly threat behind them. Rather, they were in danger of being pulverized, of falling victim to the hammer-and-anvil principle. In accordance with General Halder's plan, Army Group B advancing from the northeast formed the anvil. It was to tie down the Allies frontally, while the Panzer divisions of Army Group A coming from the south would swing the hammer from behind them. At this point there occurred one of the strangest episodes in modern military history, 'the miracle of Dunkirk'. The Allied soldiers looked on in astonished disbelief as the German tanks suddenly stopped, seemingly halted by a magician's hand.

The moment of salvation for the Allies was, once again, owing to a controversy between the German 'progressives' and 'traditionalists'. On 23 May, the cautious Commander-in-Chief of Army Group A, General Rundstedt, issued a halt order (limited to twenty-four hours) for the tanks for the following day, in order to allow the infantry divisions to close ranks. General Brauditsch, Commander-in-Chief of the Army, and Chief of the Army General Staff Halder, however, wanted to push forward to Dunkirk immediately. Worn down by Rundstedt's continual attempts to slow the tempo of the operation, the two senior generals removed him from command of the tank divisions – against Hitler's wishes and without his knowledge. When the latter arrived at the headquarters of Army Group A on 24 May, he found Rundstedt, his trusted man, virtually disempowered. Hitler flew into a rage and removed control of the Panzer divisions from Brauditsch and Halder. At the same time, he confirmed Rundstedt's halt order. It was now Rundstedt who would decide when the tank divisions should continue their advance. On the afternoon of 24 May, General von Brauditsch was summoned to meet with Hitler. Since his arguments appeared to be overwhelming, he was fully convinced that he could persuade the Führer to immediately rescind the halt order. But Hitler was completely uninterested in his arguments, and instead accused him vehemently of having acted without authority. As for the halt order, he



10.3 Dunkirk

mockingly told him to see Rundstedt. A greater humiliation of the top leadership of the German army can scarcely be imagined. Generals Braunsch and Halder now had to come before their subordinate Rundstedt as supplicants in order to get him to continue the attack. But Rundstedt was deeply insulted and rejected their request.

During the Second World War, no other order provoked such passionate protest in the German army as Hitler's halt order at Dunkirk. Reporting on the reactions of some of the leading generals, Colonel Schmunt, Hitler's Chief Adjutant wrote: "They resembled a pack of hunting dogs that are halted at a dead stop, directly in front of the game, and that see their quarry escape."<sup>18</sup> Even the simple recruits were bewildered. From Gravelines on the coast as far as Arras, the German tanks stood lined up in rows as in a parade, and their crews had to look on powerlessly as, all day long, Allied units marched by them in the direction of Dunkirk.

Not until the morning of 26 May did Rundstedt give in to the heavy pressure from his subordinate generals and turn to Hitler. The latter lifted the halt order at 1.30 p.m., but it was not until 27 May at 8 a.m. that the troops had taken up their previous attack formation and were able to continue the offensive. This meant that the armoured divisions had been forced to remain stuck in place for three days and eight hours. During this time, however, the situation had changed fundamentally in favour of the Allies. On 24 May, a few German Panzer companies would have been sufficient to take the virtually undefended Dunkirk in a surprise raid, but by now the Allies had massed several divisions before this Channel port and formed a thin defensive position. Moreover, numerous units had marched in from their inland positions to the safety of the coast, where, in the meantime, an evacuation fleet had been assembled. It was not until 4 June that Dunkirk fell to the Germans. As a result of the halt order, about 370,000 Allied soldiers, including almost the entire British Expeditionary Force, escaped the trap and were evacuated by sea. In short, Hitler had diminished the strategic victory Manstein had sought to a merely operational one. There was no 'Cannae' at the Channel coast.

Hitler's halt order was one of the most fateful wrong decisions of the Second World War. Without his intervention, Great Britain would have experienced the greatest catastrophe in its history. Actually, it would have been a double catastrophe. Britain would have lost almost the whole of

its professional army. Beyond that, universal military service had only very recently been introduced. Who could have trained the recruits if nearly all the army's experienced soldiers and officers had been taken prisoner at Dunkirk? In the estimation of British historians, this would surely have meant the end of Churchill's government, and a new government could hardly have spurned political negotiations. The Anglophile Hitler had always dreamed of an alliance with the 'Germanic' naval power England, and would have been ready to offer it a ceasefire on generous terms. What the course of world history would have been if Germany could have concentrated all its power against the Soviet Union is a dreadful question to contemplate.

Ever since that time, historians have tried to explain what Hitler's motive was for the halt order, but all of the proposed answers fail to stand up to close examination. For example, the supposed softening of the terrain around Dunkirk can hardly have been the reason, since the rain which softened the ground did not begin to fall until after the halt order. The most absurd motive, however, is the one that Hitler himself gave. At that moment, compelled to justify himself, he sought to anticipate the expected criticism by asserting that he intentionally let the English escape: "He simply could not have allowed himself to wipe out an army of the "good consanguineous English race!"<sup>19</sup> Here he was referring to their common Germanic roots; for ultimately the Anglo-Saxons came from Germany. The halt order was thus supposedly a generous gesture to spare the English a shameful defeat and to make them willing to negotiate. Actually, this response was a way of glossing over his mistake. Indeed, during the evacuation he wanted to make use of specially fused anti-aircraft shells to bring about a bloodbath of the (consanguineous) Englishmen who were jammed together on the beach. Moreover, no German politician could have been so stupid as to intentionally allow the British Army to escape, since it represented a priceless bargaining chip for peace negotiations.

The real motive for Hitler's brutal intervention was a power struggle between himself and the army high command, since he suddenly found himself marginalized as military leader. The question at issue was who should have the final say regarding operational decisions: the civilian Hitler or the generals of the army high command? Thus, for the dictator, it was not a matter of tactical, strategic or political arguments, but rather a purely personal claim to power, namely the Führer principle (*Führer-Prinzip*). That is

<sup>18</sup> Jacques Benoist-Méchin, *Der Himmel stirzt ein: Frankreichs Tragödie 1940* (Düsseldorf: Droste Verlag, 1958), p. 146.

<sup>19</sup> Otto Aberz, *Das offene Problem* (Cologne: Greven Verlag, 1951), p. 129.

why he so vigorously asserted his authority over Generals Brauchitsch and Halder. Hitler's army military aide, Major Engel, was witness to this confrontation. He later revealed that Hitler's decision 'had nothing whatsoever to do with objective arguments but [was] merely intended to let the Commander-in-Chief of the Army know that he [Hitler] was in command and nobody else.'<sup>20</sup> To this extent, Hitler was in fact the victor of Dunkirk – but at what cost! The strategic collateral damage he caused with respect to his own war plans was considerable. As a result of his intervention, the potential effects of the 'miracle of Sedan' were nullified by the 'miracle of Dunkirk'.

In fact, Dunkirk was a decisive turning point in the Second World War, not only because of Britain's successful evacuation operation, which enabled it to pursue the war, but also because of the power shift within Germany's military leadership. The German General Staff constituted a superb military brain. Had Hitler made proper use of this instrument of the art of operational leadership, it would have been a dangerous weapon as he pursued his plans for further conquest. Since he considered himself a military genius however, he basically viewed the generals who surrounded him as mere pawns setting the stage for decisions he made on his own. When the French request for a ceasefire arrived at Hitler's command post on 17 June, General Keitel called the Führer 'the greatest warlord [Feldherr] of all time'. At that moment Hitler definitively succumbed to the delusion that he was a new Caesar. A frightful dilettante draped himself in a field commander's mantle far too large for him, and ultimately led his still victorious army into catastrophe.

### Case Red: only an epilogue

In accord with Manstein's conception, the campaign was divided into two successive major operations. First, Case Yellow (*Fall Gelb*) aimed at the encirclement of the Allied northern wing along the Channel coast. Then in Case Red (*Fall Rot*), the Allied southern wing, which was spread out along the Maginot Line, was to be encircled. Yet, after Dunkirk, the campaign was already decided, and thus Case Red turned out to be only an epilogue. The French soldiers displayed more fighting spirit than they did during May at the Meuse, where many had succumbed to a kind of shock, and the French army had changed its tactics in the meantime. Instead of a linear defence they adopted an echeloned defence in depth. Yet the French troops still

remaining had no chance of changing the outcome, for the Allies, superiority in forces at the beginning of the campaign had turned into its opposite.

Now, after a twenty-six-year delay, came the successful execution of the Schlieffen Plan. Guderian, whose Panzer corps had meanwhile been enlarged to a Panzer group, pushed out of the Sedan area behind the Maginot Line and up the Swiss border. In the meantime, the Seventh Army had crossed the Rhine at Breisach and broken through the Maginot Line. Attacking through southern Alsace, on 19 June it joined up with Panzer Group Guderian at Belfort. This move created a gigantic pocket, in which three French armies were trapped. Unlike at Dunkirk, this time there was a complete 'Cannae', in which about 500,000 French soldiers were taken prisoner. Moreover, the Maginot Line had been outmanoeuvred within a few days.

Simultaneously, the newly formed Panzer Group Kleist pushed far south into the French rear areas. On this occasion, Rommel's 7th Panzer Division set a record when, on the single day of 17 June, it advanced 150 miles without any contact on either side. Three days earlier, on 14 June, German troops had marched into Paris. The loss of the capital, which was undefended, was a major psychological blow to the French. On 22 June, the armistice was signed in the Forest of Compiègne. Hitler had very deliberately chosen the site of the armistice agreement of 11 November 1918. The signing ceremony took place in the same railway salon car in which the German negotiators of that time had been obliged to affix their signatures. This spelled the end of the French Third Republic, which had been created in 1870 as a consequence of the defeat at Sedan. Soon afterwards, Marshal Pétain established an authoritarian regime at Vichy, which was effectively under German control.

### Conclusion

Upon closer examination, the Polish campaign of 1939 turns out not to have been a Blitzkrieg. Instead, it conformed to the model of classic German military strategy. In contrast, the 1940 campaign in the West may be considered the Blitzkrieg par excellence. In reality, however, it was not at all planned as such. Hitler was counting, instead, on a years-long struggle, as in the First World War. Above all, the Blitzkrieg of 1940 had no connection whatsoever with the 'Blitzkrieg strategy' that has been ascribed to Hitler. According to that notion, the goal of world domination was no longer to be reached by making a single, all-out effort, as in the First World War, but rather stepwise, through a number of short Blitzkriegs. Yet up to this point, Hitler had planned no war against the Western powers – and certainly no

<sup>20</sup> Hans Meier-Welcker, 'Der Botschaftszug zum Anhalten der deutschen Panzertruppen in Flandern 1940', *Verteidigungstruppe für Zeitgeschichte* 2 (1954), 289.

Blitzkrieg; as a result of the Treaty of Versailles, the Wehrmacht was still at the stage of rebuilding itself. Instead, it was Great Britain and France who declared war on Hitler, following Germany's march into Poland. Thus, through his failed *va banque* politics, he had manoeuvred the German Reich into a total impasse. Since, in the long run, time worked against Germany, the only real chance it had to escape was by pushing forward, to wager everything on one card and to catch the enemy off-guard via a surprise attack.

It was precisely this risky undertaking, however, that frightened the German leadership, which was still traumatized by the failure of the Schlieffen Plan in the First World War. As Clausewitz explains, men do not [act] reasonably during big crises, since, driven to utter despair, they see no salvation other than risking a daring leap'.<sup>21</sup> This 'daring leap' over the Meuse River straight to the Channel coast was Manstein's 'Sickle Cut'. A desperate move of this kind was not something the Allied generals had reckoned with. They observed this breathtaking development with the same bewilderment as the irresolute Hitler, who was beginning to lose control over an operation that was becoming increasingly independent. Moreover, he felt relegated to the status of an extra by the generals, whose self-confidence was becoming more and more evident. In response, he allowed himself to be drawn into making an error through his intervention at Dunkirk, which ultimately nullified the strategic success they had all been seeking.

The campaign in the West was thus not a planned campaign of conquest. Instead, it was an operational act of despair to get out of a desperate strategic situation. The so-called 'Blitzkrieg concept' (*Blitzkrieg-Denken*) developed only after the campaign in the West. It was not the cause, but the consequence of the victory. What was successful in May 1940, to the surprise of everyone, was then made to serve as the 'secret of victory' for the realization of Hitler's visions of conquest.

<sup>21</sup> Carl von Clausewitz, 'Anzeichnungen aus den Jahren 1803 bis 1809', in Hans Rothfels, *Carl von Clausewitz, Politik und Krieg. Eine ideengeschichtliche Studie* (Berlin: F. Dümmler, 1920), p. 212.

## The war in the West, 1939–1940

### II

#### *The Battle of Britain?*

JOHN FERRIS AND EVAN MAWDSLEY

The victories of the Wehrmacht in May–June 1940 transformed the Second World War. France fell, Germany mastered Western Europe, and Italy entered the war. The British Empire fought on.

The summer of 1940 is hallowed in the memory of the English-speaking peoples. The BEF returned, alive but beaten, leaving its kit behind. On 4 June, Winston Churchill, a month in office as Prime Minister, promised resistance, 'if necessary for years, if necessary alone': '[W]e shall defend our island, whatever the cost may be, we shall fight on the beaches, we shall fight on the landing grounds, we shall fight in the fields and in the streets, we shall fight in the hills; we shall never surrender'. After Paris surrendered on 14 June, Churchill declared the end of the 'Battle of France' and the start of a 'Battle of Britain', which would decide the fate of civilization. He ended with an admonition: Britons should act so that if their empire lasted a thousand years, men still would say, 'This was their finest hour'.<sup>1</sup> On 22 August, as the air assault began, Churchill made his third great speech of that summer, emphasizing how British airmen were 'turning the tide of the world war': 'Never in the field of human conflict was so much owed by so many to so few'.<sup>2</sup> His rhetoric shaped history, and misshapes our view of what it was.

The fall of France started a cascade. The clash between British and German forces and strategies determined its direction. These events are associated with the 'Battle of Britain', but that matter is less simple than is often

<sup>1</sup> <http://hansard.millbanksystems.com/commons/1940/jun/04/war-situation>; <http://hansard.millbanksystems.com/commons/1940/jun/18/war-situation> – accessed 6 October 2014.

<sup>2</sup> <http://hansard.millbanksystems.com/commons/1940/aug/20/war-situation> – accessed 6 October 2014.

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