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Science**

*The Enigma of German Operational Theory: The  
Evolution of Military Thought in Germany, 1919-1938*

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## Declaration

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**In loving memory of Omri Kidron, 1985-2008**

## Abstract

From the end of the Second World War historians have sought to answer one of its most intriguing questions: to what – and to whom – did the Wehrmacht owe its shocking initial operational successes? What was the nature of German strategic and operational perceptions, and were they new – or even, as some researchers have suggested, 'revolutionary'? Was German post-1918 military culture conducive to a thorough investigation of past mistakes, a re-evaluation of traditional notions, and the pursuit of new ideas?

In reality the Reichswehr officer corps jealously defended its inherited conceptual boundaries, retreated ever-deeper into a one-dimensional self-perception and strategic outlook, and offered conceptually ossified solutions to the Republic's pressing security problems. German officers, convinced that their doctrine and military world-view were flawless, never challenged the axioms and values that had brought army and nation to catastrophe in 1918: extreme warfare, culminating in the most destructive and eventually self-destructive actions; extremes of risk-taking; the endless pursuit of annihilational battles that dictated the reduction of strategy to meticulous operational and tactical planning; the trust in 'spiritual superiority' to overcome enemy advantages in material and manpower; ruthlessness; and an exaggerated drive for action at all costs. Idiosyncratic operational planning that was at times completely detached from strategic reality completed the picture of a military organisation unable to renew itself.

No comprehensive analysis has yet convincingly explained this astonishing continuity, or linked it to the allegedly innovative operational theory and doctrine that evolved in the second half of the 1930s. The concept of military and organisational culture can however provide the necessary theoretical foundations for understanding both that continuity and the doctrinal shape that it assumed in the imminence of the Second World War. It can explain – as this thesis demonstrates – the disastrous and seemingly inexplicable wrong-headedness of a group of otherwise highly intelligent men.

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## Introduction

### The nature and dynamics of German military culture

Modern German military history is a self-contradictory story of a Janus-faced military organisation. From the beginning of the First World War to the end of the Second, it offers some of the most enticing examples both of tactical brilliance and operational success and of strategic foolishness and blind extremism. It is a story that has captured and still captures the interest of historians and military practitioners alike: a story of a military organisation with an undying faith in the operational principles and military tenets that had seemingly guided it to a pinnacle of achievement despite unprecedented objective hardships. That military organisation in its different incarnations – Imperial German Army, Reichswehr, and Wehrmacht – supposedly overcame the most daunting obstacles and limitations in order to achieve some of the most breath-taking operational successes in history – and the most catastrophic final outcomes. German military history thus presents the most intriguing question of all: how and why did the army fail twice to translate its noteworthy brilliance and many accomplishments into lasting strategic victories? That question could be – and for many historians has indeed been – a genuine mystery. But the mystery persists only if we accept the fundamental assumptions of the narrative that is usually presented: that the German war machine prevailed when it did thanks to brilliant theory and effective practice, and failed when it did because of externally imposed limitations and setbacks, most if not all of which derived from forces – political, ideological, or economic – outside the military domain.



This thesis suggests a novel explanation for the German army's success and failures. It examines not simply what German military thinkers and planners wrote, planned, and strove for, not merely their declared intentions, but also their fundamental hidden assumptions about their craft and its nature, assumptions that moulded their understanding and preferences for certain ways of action. These largely unspoken assumptions, more than anything else, determined the German army world-view and created a shared pool of precepts, shaped German military practitioners' thought, prescribed their goals, and rendered self-evident – to initiates – the best ways to achieve them. This thesis therefore seeks to analyse the set of guiding assumptions that seemed 'natural' or 'self-evident truths' to Germany's military leadership, to examine how German leaders created a pattern of strategic and operational planning and conduct, and most importantly why *German military culture* repeatedly failed to change and evolve either with time or under the pressure of crises, traumas, and even victories.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Isabel V. Hull, *Absolute Destruction, Military Culture and the Practices of War in Imperial Germany* (Ithaca and London, 2005); idem, 'Military culture, Wilhelm II, and the End of the Monarchy in the First World War', in Annika Mombauer and Wilhelm Deist, eds., *The Kaiser, New Research on Wilhelm II's Role in Imperial Germany* (Cambridge, 2003). For a cultural analysis of French and British interwar strategic thinking, see Elizabeth Kier, *Imagining War: French and British Military Doctrine between the Wars* (Princeton, NJ, 1997). Theo Farrell and Terry Terriff, eds., *The Sources of Military Change, Culture, Politics, Technology* (Boulder, CO, 2002) pp. 3-21, discuss culture as a tool for inducing change in military organisations; see also the general summary by Farrell, 'Culture and Military Power', *Review of International Studies* 24 (1998), pp. 407-416; John Lynn, *Battle: A History of Combat and Culture* (Boulder, CO, 2003), offers a different approach and interpretation of 'military culture', and Peter H. Wilson discusses patterns and definitions of various aspects of military culture in 'Defining Military Culture', *The Journal of Military History* 72:1 (2008), pp. 11-43.

The field of *Strategic Culture* offers a broader analysis of the dynamics of change and continuity both in security perceptions and among a variety of agents involved in creating security policies; it has produced an extensive examination of the merits of cultural analysis as a causal explanation, and, in general, of the relationship between ideas and behaviour. See for example Colin S. Gray, *Modern Strategy* (Oxford, 1999), pp. 129-151, and idem, 'Strategic Culture as Context. The First Generation of Theory Strikes Back'. *Review of International Studies* 25:1 (1999), pp. 49-69; Alistair I. Johnston, 'Thinking about Strategic Culture', *International Security* 19:4 (1995), pp. 32-64, and idem, 'Strategic Culture Revisited: A Reply to Colin Gray', *Review of International Studies* 25:3 (1999), pp. 519-523; Ronald L.

The widespread interest in twentieth-century German military history has so far resulted in a great deal of outstanding research, to which this thesis owes a very considerable debt. The extensive and detailed scholarship of Wilhelm Deist and Michael Geyer on the origins and development of German interwar strategy, military concepts, planning, rearmament, and civil-military relations is indispensable, and will remain the foundation of any serious attempt to understand German military concepts and practices.<sup>2</sup> Williamson Murray, Robert Citino, and Karl-Heinz Frieser have offered insightful analyses of German operational successes that emphasise the unique mixture of the traditional and the novel in German doctrine and war-fighting.<sup>3</sup> Azar

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Jepperson, Alexander Wendt, and Peter J. Katzenstein, 'Norms, Identity and Culture in National Security' in Peter J. Katzenstein, ed., *The Culture of National Security: Norms and Identity in World Politics* (New York, 1996), pp. 33-75; Christopher O. Meyer, *The Quest for a European Strategic Culture: Transformation and Persistence of National Security Cultures in the UK, Germany, France and Poland* (Basingstoke, 2006), and idem, 'Convergence Towards a European Strategic Culture? A Constructive Framework for Explaining Changing Norms', *European Journal of International Relations* 11:4, (2005), pp. 523-549.

<sup>2</sup> Wilhelm Deist, 'The Road to Ideological War: Germany, 1918-1945', in Alvin Bernstein, MacGregor Knox, and Williamson Murray, eds., *The Making of Strategy: Rulers, States and War* (Cambridge, 1994); idem, 'Strategy and Unlimited Warfare in Germany. Moltke, Falkenhayn and Ludendorff', in Roger Chickering and Stig Förster, eds., *Great War, Total War: Combat and Mobilization on the Western Front, 1914-1918* (Cambridge, 2000), pp. 265-279; idem, *The Wehrmacht and German Rearmament* (London, 1981); idem, ed., *The German Military in the Age of Total War* (Leamington Spa, 1985); idem et al., *Germany and the Second World War*, vol. 1, *The Build-Up of German Aggression*, trans. P. S. Falla, Dean S. McMurtry, and Ewald Osers (Oxford, 1990); Michael Geyer, *Aufrüstung oder Sicherheit: Die Reichswehr in der Krise der Machtpolitik 1924-1939* (Wiesbaden, 1980); idem, 'The Dynamics of Military Revisionism in the Interwar Years. Military Politics between Rearmament and Diplomacy', in Deist, ed., *The German Military in the Age of Total War*, pp. 100-151; idem, 'German Strategy in the Age of Machine Warfare, 1914-1945', in Peter Paret, ed., *Makers of Modern Strategy: From Machiavelli to the Nuclear Age* (Oxford, 1986), pp. 527-596; and idem, 'Insurrectionary Warfare: The German Debate about a *Levée en Masse* in October 1918', *The Journal of Modern History* 73 (2001), pp. 527-559.

<sup>3</sup> Williamson Murray, *German Military Effectiveness* (Baltimore, 1992); idem, and Allan R. Millett, eds., *Military Innovation in the Interwar Period* (New York, 1996); Robert M. Citino, *The Evolution of Blitzkrieg Tactics: Germany Defends Itself Against Poland, 1918-1933* (New York, 1987); idem, *The Path to Blitzkrieg: Doctrine and Training in the German Army 1920-1939* (London, 1999); idem, *The German Way of War. From the Thirty Years War to the Third Reich* (Lawrence, KA, 2005); idem, *Blitzkrieg to Desert Storm: The Evolution of Operational Warfare* (Lawrence, 2004); Karl-Heinz Frieser, *Blitzkrieg-Legende. Der Westfeldzug 1940* (Munich, 1995).

Gat has contributed substantially on the many issues surrounding the origins and sources of conceptual influences on the development of German operational thought.<sup>4</sup> And in addition to the literature on the German case, the extensive general literature on change, transformation, and revolutions in military organisations and practices constitutes a rich and diverse array of scholarship that has added notably to our understanding of German operational and tactical conduct.<sup>5</sup>

Yet while military historians have offered sound and often brilliant analyses of German doctrinal and operational development, they have left largely unexamined the mechanisms and dynamics that explain not just *how* but also *why* this particular development – regardless of whether it was groundbreaking or not – came about. In the existing literature the forces that shaped German individual and organisational decisions appear to derive in most cases from rational calculation, ideological commitments, and foreign doctrinal inspiration. Yet these factors can only partially account for the unique development of German military thought, and cannot explain what shaped the organisational world-views, the states of mind, and the perceptions of available choices of the German military planners and practitioners. Isabel Hull has

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<sup>4</sup> Azar Gat, *British Armour Theory and the Rise of the Panzer Arm* (Oxford, 2000); idem, *Fascist and Liberal Visions of War. Fuller, Liddell Hart, Douhet, and Other Modernists* (Oxford, 1998); idem, *The Origins of Military Thought: From the Enlightenment to Clausewitz* (Oxford, 1989).

<sup>5</sup> To cite only the most salient examples, see MacGregor Knox and Williamson Murray, eds., *The Dynamics of Military Revolution, 1300–2050* (Cambridge, 2001); Stephen Biddle, ‘The Past as Prologue: Assessing Theories of Future Warfare’, *Security Studies* 8:1 (1998), pp. 1-74; Eliot A. Cohen, ‘A Revolution in Warfare’, *Foreign Affairs* 75:2 (1996), pp. 37–54; Farrell and Terriff, eds., *Sources of Military Change*; Emily O. Goldman and Leslie C. Eliason, *The Diffusion of Military Technology and Ideas* (Stanford, 2003); Andrew F. Krepinevich, ‘Cavalry to Computer: The Pattern of Military Revolutions’, *The National Interest* 37 (1994), pp. 30-42; Lynn, *Battle*; idem, ‘The Evolution of Army Style in the Modern West, 800-2000’, *The International History Review* 18:3 (1996), pp. 507-545; Clifford J. Rogers, ‘“Military Revolutions” and “Revolutions in Military Affairs”’, in Thierry Gongora and Harald von Riekhoff, eds., *Toward a Revolution in Military Affairs? Defense and Security at the Dawn of the 21st Century* (Westport, CT, 2000), pp. 21-35; William R. Thompson, ‘A Test of a Theory of Co-Evolution in War. Lengthening the Western Eurasian Military Trajectory’, *The International History Review* 28:3 (2006), pp. 473-503.

however largely filled this conceptual void through her analysis of imperial Germany's military culture, and has opened the way for further examination of the evolution of German military culture between the two World Wars.<sup>6</sup>

This thesis thus seeks to broaden our understanding of the events, processes, motivations and dynamics that shaped German interwar military thought, planning, armaments, and eventually the conduct of war. And although the pursuit of that objective often entails criticism of previous analyses and competing narratives of the German army of the 1920s and 1930s, the thesis also owes a great deal both to the outstanding scholars already mentioned, and to many of the very accounts that it criticises.

A 'health warning' is nevertheless in order with regard to method: any challenge to widely accepted claims of extensive change in German military thought and practice in the interwar era requires detail-oriented analysis of manuals, studies, and official and personal correspondence. Meticulous description and discussion of the raw materials that the German army produced as part of the never-ending effort to shape, re-shape, renew, adjust, and update its official doctrine is not merely a prerequisite for understanding the authors' basic assumptions regarding war, the preferable ways to conduct it, and shared organisational world-view and mindsets. Close scrutiny of *what the Germans actually wrote* is also essential precisely because the literature on German military history is pervaded with broad generalisations about the 'revolutionary,' 'extreme,' and strikingly innovative nature of individuals, operational concepts, and organisational practices. Yet examples or relevant quotations seldom back those generalisations, leaving the reader to wonder what in this or that concept was so exceptional, novel, or groundbreaking. This thesis thus

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<sup>6</sup> Hull, *Absolute Destruction*.

often emphasises the words of German military thinkers and practitioners themselves, a method that demonstrates beyond easy contradiction the existence of a particular dynamic of continuity in ideas, and provides a multi-layered picture of its subject for the reader, who benefits not only from the analysis but can also savour the original – and often memorable and inimitable – words that inspired it.

The fundamental premise of this thesis is that the principal characteristic of German military thought and practice – or, more accurately, of German military culture – was endurance and continuity. Yet mere exploration of the perverse durability of supposedly well-tested, tactically successful, yet strategically catastrophic theories, concepts, and practices of warfare stretching over decades would be redundant, even though their ultimately disastrous consequences are by no means agreed wisdom among scholars. Any such limited exercise could only show what happened to the German high command as it implemented its strategic, operational and tactical concepts – but not why those concepts endured and repeatedly prevailed in face of disconfirmation by the harshest of realities. An unreflective account would merely outline German military leaders' understanding of their profession, and would offer a limited and narrow analysis, rather than providing answers to far more intriguing and challenging questions: what determined the *Weltanschauung* described, and why was it so immune to change while nevertheless appearing so flexible? What established the frame of mind, what guided German military theoreticians and practitioners when they came to assess military problems and to choose from the limited variety of solutions available to them? What constructed, defined, and limited this variety? In short: what can explain – beyond the seemingly rational explanations given by the actors themselves – the recurring choices they identified, the ways in which they perceived them, and the solutions that they habitually envisaged to these challenges?

As already suggested, scholars have used the concept of “military culture” and cultural and organisational theories to this end for a number of years. Yet inevitably the nature of culture and the ways in which it constructs and influences actions requires clarification. Culture, for the purpose of this thesis, is the publicly available symbolic forms through which individuals and groups experience and express meaning.<sup>7</sup> By creating *meaning*, culture also constructs our *actions* as meaningful. Isabel V. Hull, in her brilliant exploration of German military culture up to 1918, defined cultures as historically created designs for living that exist at a given time as guides for behaviour.<sup>8</sup> By their mere existence (since they are explicit and implicit, theoretical and practical at the same time), cultures narrow and reduce the number of ways in which individuals can perceive and understand situations, and affect decision-making and actions in a unifying way.<sup>9</sup> That is, cultures channel both understanding of reality and reactions to that reality – out of an infinite array of possible explanations and reactions.

But how exactly is it done? What is the vehicle through which culture affects – or, to follow the claim above, narrows – the possible range of actions? One possible link between culture and actions is values. Values, immanent in all social systems, explain why different actors make different choices; values direct human actions to some ends rather than others.<sup>10</sup> The value of total victory shaped the German army’s lasting aspiration to win its wars through a single climactic battle of annihilation [*Vernichtungsschlacht*] that would produce victory by physically eliminating the

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<sup>7</sup> Roger Keesing, quoted in Ann Swidler, ‘Culture in Action: Symbols and Strategies’, *American Sociological Review* 51:2 (1986), p. 273.

<sup>8</sup> ‘Historically created designs for living, explicit and implicit, rational, irrational, and non-rational, that exist at any given time as potential guides for the behaviour of man’: Clyde Kluckhohn, quoted in Hull, ‘End of the Monarchy’, p. 239.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> Talcott Parsons, quoted by Swidler, ‘Culture in Action’, p. 274.

enemy's fighting forces. That value so thoroughly impregnated German doctrine, planning, and expectations that it outlived all the many failed attempts to realize it. Proclaimed values, however, do not always match actual actions and decisions. For example, the German high command, whose ostensible highest value and purpose was defending the Prusso-German monarchy and German sovereignty, consciously preferred a bloody end to both monarchy and sovereignty to safeguarding at least one of them by timely surrender in 1918.<sup>11</sup> Human actions therefore cannot be understood as simple attempts at realizing a given set of values.

If preserving the monarchy and state did not guide the German army in 1918, then the question is not what *declared values* guided Paul von Hindenburg, Erich Ludendorff, and associates, but rather what *unspoken assumptions* about the nature of reality and the preferred ways to react to and interact with it shaped their conduct. These are naturally not as easy to uncover as declared values, but they provide the foundation stones of the shared mental and intellectual system of Germany's military leadership. One way to trace its tenets beneath the often contradictory and misleading declared values would be to examine it over time: how did it respond to changing realities? For the enduring features of the army's decisions were not their aims but the ways in which the army organised its actions to achieve those aims – persistent ways of ordering actions through time that incorporate habits, moods, sensibilities and views.<sup>12</sup> Using culture as a causal explanation requires understanding it as a 'tool kit', a repertoire of symbols, rituals, and world-views, chosen selectively to construct lines

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<sup>11</sup> Hull, 'End of the Monarchy', pp. 245-258; see also below, pp. 63-67.

<sup>12</sup> 'Strategies of action', Swidler, 'Culture in Action', pp. 273, 276-282; Swidler uses the term 'strategy' to mean a general approach to organising action.

of action.<sup>13</sup> In this elastic, multi-optional sense, cultures do regulate actions by defining what is ‘possible’, ‘desirable’, ‘appropriate’ and ‘effective’<sup>14</sup>

Cultures thus provide identities, frameworks of thought for understanding the situation at hand and responding to it.<sup>15</sup> But that suggestion is less deterministic than it may sound. Theories of military and organisational culture are flexible enough to suggest a unified theoretical explanation to processes without neglecting particular, often seemingly contradictory events and outcomes. Yet “culture” is also a tempting explanation – tempting enough to offer all-embracing, “self-evident” reasons for every decision, action, and phenomenon, which quite easily might all seem to be “manifestations” of the organisation’s inherited culture. To avoid that slippery slope – a common difficulty with successful theories – it should be stressed that while military culture can convincingly explain the dynamics and mechanisms that narrow personal and organisational choices, it cannot in itself elucidate every possible decision, nor can it exempt individuals and organisations from responsibility for their actions – nor would it be at all appropriate to absolve the German warlords of any of their heavy responsibilities.

Yet another disclaimer is necessary. This thesis emphasises continuity in German military history and applies cultural theory to explain this continuity. Yet

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> See also Farrell and Terriff, *Sources of Change*, pp. 7-8, who use the term ‘cultural norms’ instead of ‘culture’.

<sup>15</sup> Farrell, ‘Culture and Military Power’, pp. 410-411. It is important to note that the relations between ‘reality’ and any given organisational reaction to it are always mediated through organisational culture and are often difficult to understand otherwise. For a different view, see Lynn’s diagram of ‘the discourse and the reality of war’, suggesting a direct and uninterrupted link between ‘extreme reality’ and ‘alternative discourse of war’. While Lynn is aware of cultures as mental structures that can ‘change or control reality to fit conception’ a process he labels ‘reformation’, he also claims that ‘through ‘recognition’, cultures may come to appreciate that conception does not suitably reflect reality, and ‘adjust the discourse [of war]’. Lynn does not explain, however, why some realities produce ‘reformation’ and others ‘recognition’, but suggests that this difference in outcome might have more to do with cultural needs than with the pressures of reality (Lynn, *Battle*, pp. 331-341).



military and organisational culture can also account for change. Conscious, deliberate change in doctrine and operational art is a rare phenomenon, far rarer than doctrinal continuity or organisational resistance to change, even in face of new realities.<sup>16</sup> But this thesis does not claim or assume that military organisations *cannot* change; rather it seeks to understand why in the particular case of the post-1918 German army changes did not occur, despite dramatic and even revolutionary shifts in military technology, in German domestic politics, and in Germany's international and strategic situation.

For cultures are not rigid constructions that replicate the same responses over and over again, imposing obsolete patterns onto mindless subjects. They act more like membranes, able to process new inputs of knowledge and requirements and to renew their outputs accordingly. They define the purpose and the possibilities of military change, but are not purely and inherently conservative factors; when culture *does* change, it can become a powerful engine for military change.<sup>17</sup> Indeed if culture restricted actors' possibilities and confined them to one unchanging limited set of options, paradigmatic shifts and changes could scarcely occur.<sup>18</sup> Ann Swidler, author of one of the most insightful sociological treatments of the dynamics of culture, refers to two models of cultural influence: 'settled lives' and 'unsettled lives'

Under the condition of 'settled lives', as enjoyed in Germany in the 1871-1914 era, culture and social structure are fused, existing models of organizing experience

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<sup>16</sup> On the dynamics of change and lack thereof in military organisations and thought see Williamson Murray and MacGregor Knox, 'Thinking about Revolutions in Warfare', in MacGregor Knox and Williamson Murray, eds., *The Dynamics of Military Revolution 1300-2050* (Cambridge, 2001), pp. 1-14; Farrell, 'The Sources of Military Change', in Farrell and Terriff, *Sources of Change*, pp. 3-38; and Lynn, *Battle*, pp. 331-341.

<sup>17</sup> Farrell and Terriff, *Sources of Change*, pp. 7-8; see also Meyer, 'Convergence', pp. 532-543, for an analysis of 'learning mechanisms' such as changing threat perceptions, the socialising effects of institutions, and crises, that can facilitate change in strategic norms.

<sup>18</sup> As Hull, Farrell and Terriff, and Kier suggest in their analyses.

exercise the undisputed authority of habit, ‘normality’, and ‘common sense’.

‘Settled’ cultures thus constrain the actions of individuals and organisations, by providing a limited set of resources from which to construct actions. Out of the ‘tool kits’ they supply, actors select certain cultural elements; publicly available meanings facilitate particular patterns of action, making them readily available while discouraging others – and it is in this way that the concept of culture can account for continuity.<sup>19</sup> Periods of social transformation and unrest (‘unsettled lives’), are by contrast usually marked by the emergence of new and competing cultural models for organising action. Revolutionary eras often involve the construction of new entities (such as new self-identities or organisational units), and shape new styles or forms of authority and of cooperation.<sup>20</sup> The First World War and especially the war’s final, desperate, extreme, and radicalising stages could easily have become a forcing-house for new ideas. Germany’s traumatic defeat might likewise have resulted in a complete break with ‘truths’ that had failed when tested and tested again to the point of destruction, or might at least have fostered the emergence of critical voices calling for a thorough rethinking.

After all, as Hull suggests, organisations are learning units.<sup>21</sup> *Organisational culture* can account for some or most of that continuity even in ‘unsettled’ periods – as well as for change. Historical learning from and discourse with the environment in which an organization operates can shape and systematize lessons and patterns of

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<sup>19</sup> Swidler, ‘Culture in Action’, pp. 278-284.

<sup>20</sup> Swidler, ‘Culture in Action’, 278-80. It is important to note, however, that apparent or hidden continuities inevitably persist even during radical periods of change, since ‘even the most fanatical ideological movement, which seeks to remake completely the cultural capacities of its members, will inevitably draw on many tacit assumptions from the existing culture’ (ibid., p. 279). The term ‘ideology’ figures here as an example of an emerging culture – ‘a highly articulated, self-conscious belief and ritual system, aspiring to offer a unified answer to problems of social action’.

<sup>21</sup> Hull, ‘End of the Monarchy’, p. 239.

learning, transforming assumptions into habits and undoubted 'obvious' truths. And military organisations present an even clearer case of cultural influence than most organisations.<sup>22</sup> For armies are highly systemised, formed, declaratively patterned organisations. They strictly regulate actions through official doctrines that reflect and reproduce their intrinsic culturally 'obvious' truths, and derive their actions from those truths. Actual strategic and operational planning and behaviour offer additional evidence, and their careful scrutiny may disclose hidden cultural assumptions that doctrine may for some reason have failed to express or adhere to.

Yet the focal argument of this thesis, as already suggested, is that German military and organisational culture maintained a persistent continuity. The tenets and axioms of that culture were clear and remained essentially unaltered before, throughout, and even after the first World War: extreme warfare, aimed toward the most destructive, and eventually self-destructive, forms of war; extreme risk-taking elevated from the tactical and operational realms into domain of strategy; the endless pursuit of battles of annihilation that dictated the reduction of strategy to meticulous operational and tactical planning; trust in German fighting spirit – *Geist* – and 'qualitative superiority' to overcome the adversary's advantage in materiel and manpower; a ruthlessness that subordinated everything to a self-constructed 'military necessity'; and an exaggerated drive for action.<sup>23</sup> In grand strategy, German military leaders perceived war as the only way to solve political problems and to elevate the nation's – and the army's – prestige, and they accordingly placed the army, its interests and plans, above civilian interests and decision-makers. In terms of operational method, German officers, restricted by geography and economics to

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<sup>22</sup> See Kier, *Imagining War*, pp. 28-32, and Hull, *Absolute Destruction*, Ch. 4 and 'End of Monarchy', pp. 239-242.

<sup>23</sup> Hull, *Absolute Destruction*, pp. 93-181, and 'End of the Monarchy', pp. 239-245.

envisaging short wars, always preferred decisive operations involving movement, in which speed and extreme tactical risk-taking were mutually reinforcing.<sup>24</sup>

Post-1919 German military culture thus made change improbable while disguising conceptual stagnation as renewal and vigorous lesson-learning. The doctrinal and operational patterns that it produced and adhered to are thus an especially puzzling case. German military thought and practice throughout and immediately after the First World War exhibit a radicalisation of existing patterns, rather than fundamental shifts in strategic and operational concepts and tenets. During the interwar era German military thought seemingly revolutionised itself, with precepts and doctrine following a supposed outburst of ostensibly new but in reality fundamentally traditional ideas. The explanation of this stagnation-disguised-as-transformation was a combination of profoundly autistic military conduct and a unique historical setting that allowed the elite of the German army to pretend for years that reality and its constraints did not really bind it, and that it was free to recast past, present, and future as it wished. An immense crisis in self-conceptualisation of the kind that only defeat in total war could force might have truly changed German military culture. The blow that the Versailles system delivered to the size and structure of the army was designed and expected to facilitate such a paradigmatic shift. But that change did not occur, and the task of this thesis is to explain how and why it did not.

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<sup>24</sup> See Gerhardt P. Gross, 'Das Dogma der Beweglichkeit. Überlegungen zur Genese der deutschen Heerestaktik im Zeitalter der Weltkriege', in Bruno Thoss and Hans-Erich Volkmann, eds., *Erster Weltkrieg, Zweiter Weltkrieg. Ein Vergleich* (Paderborn, 2002), pp. 143–166, and Robert M. Citino, *The German Way of War. From the Thirty Years' War to the Third Reich* (Lawrence, KA, 2005), pp. xiii–xviii. Although Citino does not use the concept of military culture, he does claim that *Bewegungskrieg* in its many manifestations – some of which he argues were revolutionary – was an institutional characteristic of the German army from Frederick the Great onward. Citino explains in great detail the various manifestations of the 'war of movement' dogma, but does not investigate the institutional dynamics that first elevated and then maintained that form of war, with its unique set of operational requirements, as an institutional axiom.

What do these considerations mean for the reader struggling to understand the enigma of German military thought in the interwar era, with its traditional catch-phrases regarding the nature of the 'war of the future', its persistently unrealistic doctrine, its megalomaniacal rearmament demands, its often absurd operational planning, and the detached-from-reality military discourse upon which it fed? It means that affirming the continuity of German perceptions of warfare is but one part of the explanation of the choices that the German high command made in the 1920s and 1930s. That continuity – that stubborn clinging to traditional ways of conceptualising the strategic quandaries, possible and preferable operational solutions and tactical methods, while suppressing inconvenient perceptions and interpretations, and eventually forcing their bearers out – was both an outcome and a motor of a process in which those values and traditions came to seem undeniable 'common sense'.<sup>25</sup> What began with Clausewitz's conscious if often seemingly self-contradictory reflections on warfare became the principal source of persistently unselfconscious, unquestionable, and unquestioned assumptions that eventually formed a body of 'natural' truths about warfare, and prescribed 'obvious' strategic and operational solutions, amplified to the point of institutional 'irrational rationality'.

It seems imperative at this point to point out that the German high command did not in any conscious way aim irrationally at self-annihilation when it drafted its plans before and during the two World Wars – however predictably self-destructive those plans might seem to us. Its leaders, general staff, and officer corps were planning and acting according to their best professional judgment in each situation, under the constraints imposed by Germany's limited military and economic

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<sup>25</sup> Following Clifford Geertz, Swidler explains 'common sense' as the 'set of assumptions so unselfconscious as to seem a natural, transparent, undeniable part of the structure of the world' ('Culture in Action', p. 279).

capabilities. However, their cultural norms determined their judgments, their understanding of their situation, and their perceived constraints. The cultural paradigm can thus help explain German choices, especially when they seem incompatible with strategic and operational realities and thus irrational, self-contradictory, and ultimately suicidal.

## Chapter 1

### German Military Culture: Founding Fathers and Paradigm Boundaries

What were the theoretical and doctrinal roots and background of the German Army's understanding of war, of its aims, and of the most efficient ways of achieving them – from the era of Clausewitz to the end of the First World War? A meticulous and extensive examination of German traditional perceptions of war is required, since theories of war are the foundation of all military doctrines and of their expressions in field service regulations and manuals. Theories of war (or rather, the most appealing among them) are eventually embodied in a more or less simple set of rules that conduct and reflect a given army's space of choices and actions. Understanding the logic and epistemology of these regulations and rules requires familiarity with the historical development of theory and doctrine. Clarifying that process will thus elucidate the manner in which the theories and assumptions of the 1920s and 1930s acquired the cognitive constraints and limitations so much in evidence, and the reasons why German theories of war eventually gave birth to an uncommonly persistent and rigid doctrine. Analysis of the doctrinal roots and inherited operational patterns that turned into the German 'truth' about warfighting will allow a comprehensive discussion and understanding of the faults and defects, as well as the excellence and tactical effectiveness of German doctrine as it evolved over the 1919-1938 period.

The discussion that follows focuses on Clausewitz's theory of war and his successors' implementations of it – what they implemented and why; to what extent

they were his ‘pupils’; how Moltke, and especially Schlieffen, found themselves facing a deadlock that resulted from the attempt to adapt Clausewitz’s maxims to the modern battlefield; some outcomes of their efforts; and the Imperial German Army’s reaction to the blatant failure of these promising pre-war concepts, its (alleged) effort to apply a strategy of attrition in the battle of Verdun.<sup>1</sup> Finally, the chapter will examine the radicalisation of German military practices, their extreme and eventually suicidal tendencies, and the frame of thought and conduct detached from reality that the German military leadership developed in the final phase of the First World War.

### **I. Clausewitz: The Foundations**

All quests for the origins of modern German military thought must begin with Carl von Clausewitz (1780-1831). Clausewitz was indeed the ‘military philosopher’ who defined the paradigmatic space that henceforth confined German military thought. Clausewitz created his cognitive tools from the Napoleonic empirical experience, an experience defined by the phenomenon of mass.<sup>2</sup> That phenomenon, as will emerge, played a significant role in shaping Clausewitz’s approach to the nature of war, the aims that were appropriate in the conduct of war, the definitions of the concepts of strategy and tactics, and the understanding of their mutual relationships. Clausewitz’s outlook, especially on that last issue, will also reveal why was it so easy, indeed almost natural, for figures such as Helmuth von Moltke the elder, Alfred von

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<sup>1</sup> Although a discussion of doctrinal evolution is imperative, what follows is merely a short survey that emphasizes above all the persistence of certain ideas, rather providing than a comprehensive discussion of the theories and writings of Clausewitz and of his immediate Prusso-German successors.

<sup>2</sup> Azar Gat, *The Origins of Military Thought* (Oxford, 1989), pp. 162-208, and Shimon Naveh, *In Pursuit of Military Excellence: The Evolution of Operational Theory* (London, 1997), p. 34.



Schlieffen, and Hans von Seeckt – all of them functioning at the practical levels of warfare – to draw their tactical formulas and prescriptions from Clausewitz’s theory.

‘Essentially war is fighting, for fighting is the only effective principle in the manifold activities generally designated as war’.<sup>3</sup> That sentence contains both the essence and the essential imperative of Clausewitz’s theory of war. For fighting is not only the common denominator of all wars; acknowledging its fundamental role means accepting the dominance of combat as the determining element of the entire character of war, as well as the resulting insights:<sup>4</sup> ‘Combat is the only effective force in war; its aim is to destroy the enemy’s forces as a means to a further end . . . it follows that the destruction of the enemy’s force underlies all military actions; all plans are ultimately based on it, resting on it like an arch on its abutment’<sup>5</sup> The aim is *destruction* in the most literal way; for Clausewitz clearly states that ‘every engagement is a bloody and destructive test of physical and moral strength . . . the destruction of the enemy’s physical force . . . is the real purpose of the engagement’<sup>6</sup>

Yet the physical destruction of the enemy cannot be achieved without the continued exercise of forces other than the physical; according to Clausewitz, the *moral* factors play a decisive role in war – as decisive, or even more so, than mere military strength. The moral elements of war ‘constitute the *spirits* [*die Geister*] that permeate war as a whole . . . they establish a close affinity with the will that moves

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<sup>3</sup> Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, ed. and trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton, NJ, 1976), Book II, 1, p. 127.

<sup>4</sup> Gat, *Origins*, p. 203.

<sup>5</sup> Clausewitz, *On War*, Book I, 2, p. 97.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, Book IV, 4, p. 231. For a further discussion of the Clausewitzian approach to bloodshed see Williamson Murray, *German Military Effectiveness* (Baltimore, 1992), Chapter 8. Murray identifies the German capability to think and act swiftly and effectively amid the terrifying realities of the battlefield – a vital component of German tactical excellence – as the outcome of German understanding of this ecology as inherently horrifying, chaotic, and violent.

and leads the whole mass of forces . . .'<sup>7</sup> In its form as an 'iron will-power', it is also the antidote, alongside combat experience, to the unavoidable effects of friction, which distinguishes the reality of war, with all its unexpected obstacles and setbacks, from neatly detailed plans.<sup>8</sup> The *spirit* [*Geist*], is therefore a fundamental element that determines military success or failure – and, however intangible, it can be created, nourished, and if need be, revived and honed.<sup>9</sup>

Clausewitz thus erected a simple paradigmatic structure in which each conclusion logically led to a subsequent one, and created a tightly coordinated set of unequivocal maxims. The aim of all wars is the total destruction of the enemy's ability to fight; no other goal can secure complete surrender. And each of the belligerents, following the same logic, will thus mobilise their forces to the utmost, and will aspire to engage in a single decisive battle – the integral battle of annihilation or *Vernichtungsschlacht*:

No matter how a particular war is conducted and what aspects of its conduct we subsequently recognize as being essential, the very concept of war will permit us to make the following unequivocal statements: 1. Destruction of the enemy forces is the overriding principle of war. 2. Such destruction of forces can *usually* be accomplished only by fighting. 3. Only major engagements involving all forces lead to major success. 4. The greatest successes are obtained when all engagements coalesce into one great battle.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Clausewitz, *On War*, Book III, 3, p. 185.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid*, Book I, 7, 8, pp. 119, 122.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid*, Book III, 5, pp. 188-189.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, Book IV, 11, p. 258. Although it is true that 'every period has its own Clausewitz', his Book IV explains the extent to which he was rightfully recognized as the formulator of the nineteenth century's belief in the dominance of the 'great battle'. For Clausewitz commentaries during the nineteenth century, see Gat, *Origins* pp. 183-186;

Given these principles, and given Clausewitz's description of battle as 'a slow process of mutual attrition, that will reveal which side can first exhaust its opponent', the underlying prerequisite for success would appear to be the concentration of force on a scale and with a speed greater than the enemy's.<sup>11</sup> These conclusions derive from a logical pattern in which the essential concept is *mass*:

In tactics, as in strategy, superiority of numbers is the most common element in victory . . . if we thus strip the engagement of all the variables arising from its purpose and circumstances . . . we are left with the bare concept of the engagement, a shapeless battle in which the only distinguishing factor is the number of the troops on either side. These numbers, therefore will determine victory.<sup>12</sup>

Clausewitz repeats the imperative of concentration on numerous occasions, thus stressing its importance. And of all the forms the desired 'great battle' may take in delivering the desired outcome – the enemy's annihilation – the most promising yet hazardous is the *battle of encirclement*:

Both in strategy and in tactics a convergent attack always holds out promise of increased results, for if it succeeds the enemy is not just beaten; he is virtually cut off. The convergent attack, then, is always the more promising; but since forces are divided and the theatre is enlarged, it also carries a greater risk. As with the attack and defence, the weaker form promises the greater success.<sup>13</sup>

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Antulio J. Echevarria, 'Borrowing from the Master: Uses of Clausewitz in German Military Literature Before the Great War', *War in History* 3:3 (1996), pp. 272-292; and the analysis of Beatrice Heuser, *Reading Clausewitz* (London, 2002) of what Clausewitz actually said, and of what others believed he had said.

<sup>11</sup> Clausewitz, *On War*, Book IV, 9, p. 249.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, Book III, 8, p. 194.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, Book VIII, 9, p. 619.

Clausewitz underlines this point several times: encirclement ensures massive increases in enemy losses ('to their very limit – to annihilation') and a more decisive defeat.<sup>14</sup>

But what are the implications of such a formative concept and its logical products, the imperatives of concentration and annihilation? The most significant is the enslavement of strategy to tactics, with grave consequences for the systemic conduct of war. For if the *Vernichtungsprinzip* constitutes both the end and the means at *all levels* of war, tactical battle must now govern the operational as well as the strategic levels.

Systems are goal-oriented, and their goals ought to lie in the specified outcome of the dialogue between and given set of political requirements and operational circumstances. Yet by defining a fixed and universal aim for all wars, Clausewitz not only short-circuited the political-military dialogue, which must precede war and regulate the course of action (a basic mechanism of the systemic conduct of war<sup>15</sup>). He also emptied strategy of any substance of its own. Inevitably, in Clausewitz's system, 'strategy' strives solely for the most favourable conditions for the single decisive battle of annihilation:<sup>16</sup> 'There is no higher and simpler law of strategy than that of keeping one's forces concentrated'<sup>17</sup>

Clausewitz also – and with complete consistency – emphasised the gulf separating politics from the conduct of war in theory:

If for the moment we consider the pure concept of war, we should have to say that political purpose of war had no connection with war itself; for if war is an act of violence meant to force the enemy to do our will its aims

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., Book IV, 4, p. 233.

<sup>15</sup> Naveh, *In Pursuit*, p. 42.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., pp. 34-48.

<sup>17</sup> Clausewitz, *On War*, Book III, 11, p. 204.

would have always and solely to be to overcome the enemy and disarm him.

That aim is derived from the theoretical concept of war . . .<sup>18</sup>

And this exclusion of the supreme political and strategic levels from setting the particular goals and aims, according to current understanding and needs, consequently opened the door for a highly problematic concept of the relationship between politics and war, a concept exemplified in the later absence of dialogue on war aims and the strategy for their realization between the Prusso-German chief of general staff and the German chancellor in the First World War era.

However, not all scholars have accepted that annihilation was a primary component of Clausewitz's theory, and *On War* indeed contains other and very different notions.<sup>19</sup> As opposed to the inference, according to which the integral battle of annihilation is the sole founding element of victory, as explained above, Clausewitz mentions in the first book of *On War* a *variety of means* to subdue the will of the enemy:

We can see that in war many roads lead to success, and that they do not all involve the opponent's outright defeat. They range from the destruction of the enemy's forces, the conquest of his territory, to a temporary occupation or invasion, to projects with an immediate political purpose, and finally to passively awaiting the enemy's attack. Any one of these

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., Book I, 2, p. 90.

<sup>19</sup> See for example Jehuda Wallach, *The Dogma of the Battle of Annihilation* (London 1986), pp. 16-18. Wallach, like other scholars of the Cold War era who saw Clausewitz mainly through the prism of his limited war concept, and strove to detach him from his other, less convenient ideas, goes so far to doubt altogether that Clausewitz was the 'prophet of annihilation'. He emphasizes as a counterargument the key role Clausewitz attributed to moral forces, mentioning that the enemy's intact forces will be dramatically affected, even paralyzed, by a decisive victory. Yet this argument cannot contradict the necessity, according to Clausewitz, of the decisive battle to create that outcome. And annihilation remains for Clausewitz the preferable means; the living may rally but the dead are no threat.

may be used to overcome the enemy's will: the choice depends on circumstances.<sup>20</sup>

Extensive research on Clausewitz's writings in the Cold War era has established that this duality (not to mention self-contradiction) can be explained in a major shift in 1827 in his thought on the nature of war.<sup>21</sup> Clausewitz had come to recognize that not all wars were total and annihilational, that the phenomenon of war is a diverse one, and that any theory that ignored that diversity would do violence to the historical record. Clausewitz needed to explain how war, with its inherently unlimited destructive nature (a *theoretical* concept that he did *not* abandon), had in general been limited in its historical manifestations.<sup>22</sup> He therefore sought to revise his manuscript to incorporate two new concepts.<sup>23</sup>

The first idea articulated a newfound recognition of the existence of two types of war: the first one (philosophically 'true' or 'absolute' war) aimed at completely overthrowing the enemy, and the second had limited objectives. Yet these two varieties were not in essence different, the first was rather the ideal manifestation of war in the abstract realm of thought, and the second its incarnation in reality, which can never be as impeccable. The first type of war is a Kantian ideal type, 'the pure concept of war'. It exists in 'the field of abstract thought' in which the 'enquiring mind can . . . deal with an extreme: a clash of forces freely operating and obedient to no law but their own'<sup>24</sup> The second type occurs when 'the world of reality takes over from the world of abstract thought; material calculations take the place of hypothetical

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<sup>20</sup> Clausewitz, *On War*, Book I, 2, p. 94.

<sup>21</sup> Gat, *Origins*, pp. 218-226.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 217-218, 225.

<sup>23</sup> Clausewitz, *On War*, 'Note of 10 July 1827', p. 69.

<sup>24</sup> Clausewitz, *On War*, Book I, 1, p. 78

extremes . . . the interaction of the two sides tends to fall short of maximum effort'.<sup>25</sup> Nevertheless war, as it takes shape in reality, can manifest itself in a manner that epitomizes its theoretical form: 'The more powerful and inspiring the motives for war, the more they affect the belligerent nations and the fiercer the tensions that precede the outbreak, the closer will war approach its abstract concept'.<sup>26</sup>

The later Clausewitz's second idea explains the variety of forms that war can take in reality: that political demands – needs, constraints and aims – determine the scale and extent of military operations. Politics, a force alien and external to the nature of war, constrains war's true essence, subjects it to its needs, and thus modifies its imperatives:<sup>27</sup>

[War] cannot follow its own laws, but has to be treated as a part of some other whole; the name of which is policy . . . In making use of war, policy evades all rigorous conclusions proceeding from the nature of war . . . [It] converts the overwhelmingly destructive element of war into a mere instrument.<sup>28</sup>

These new ideas facilitated Clausewitz's most famous conceptualisation of war as a continuation of policy by other means.

Yet it is important to emphasize that he never abandoned his concept that the 'absolute' form was the only true form of war, always superior to more limited forms. Even in Book I he emphasized that 'it is evident that the destruction of the enemy forces is always the superior, more effective means, with which others cannot

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., p. 79.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., pp. 87-88.

<sup>27</sup> Gat, *Origins*, pp. 220-225.

<sup>28</sup> Clausewitz, *On War*, Book VIII, 6, p. 606.

compete’<sup>29</sup> And he also died before completing the revision of *On War*, leaving only the first and the eighth books in conformity with his new mode of thought. As a result, *On War*, in addition to its highly complex structure, also enunciates an ambiguous and even incoherent theoretical construct that binds together, with all their implications, two mutually contradictory concepts of war.

What conclusions applicable to the Prusso-German wars of the following century thus spring from Clausewitz’s work? As Clausewitz readers have noticed, it is indeed easy to draw from his pages simple, *allegedly universal* truths, that apply – as the master claimed – to ‘all wars’, ‘all battles’ and for all military leaders, from the rifle company to the commanding heights of the *Generalstab*. Much has been written about Clausewitz’s rejection of prescriptive theories, mainly because of his own frequently stated resistance to such theories: ‘Theory should be study, not doctrine . . . theory need not be a positive doctrine, a sort of manual for action’.<sup>30</sup> Yet Clausewitz nevertheless believed that a true theory of war must provide lessons for commanders to bear in mind and to translate into practice.<sup>31</sup>

Clausewitz’s ambiguities have baffled historians and analysts of military thought alike. What were practical soldiers to understand by and infer from his work? Bound to the day-to-day practice of war, they remained oblivious to the intricacies of theory; they required unambiguous frameworks constituted by rules and formulas, alongside and deriving from theoretical concepts and approaches. And as already suggested, it was easy to isolate the tactical imperative and the logic of mass from the other components of Clausewitz’s theory, and to assume that the overriding aspiration of the soldier must be to attain the greatest concentration of force and to conduct an

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., Book I, 2, p. 97.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., Book II, 2, p. 141.

<sup>31</sup> Gat, *Origins*, pp. 196-197, 210-211.



integral battle of annihilation that aimed at the physical destruction of the enemy state's ability to resist. The German army's fundamental understanding of war, its *Kriegsbild*, thus embodied these perceptions in a lasting way, and the army articulated them again and again in every war that it fought, despite the explicit warnings of the later Clausewitz in his letters:

We must not allow ourselves to be misled into regarding war as a pure act of force and of destruction, and from this simplistic concept logically deduce a string of conclusions that no longer have anything to do with the real world.<sup>32</sup>

In the disputes over the true scope of Clausewitz's legacy and influence on the German army, scholars have tended to use the reading lists of the *Kriegsakademie* or the confessions of generals and other officers that they had never read *Vom Kriege* to demonstrate that he was highly respected and well-known but little read.<sup>33</sup> Others have strongly emphasized his writings as a primary doctrinal source for German army officers.<sup>34</sup> A third school has sought to detach Clausewitz from whatever may have been done in the name of his theory by assuming that Germany's highest-ranking officers could and did read him, but were incapable of understanding what they had read.<sup>35</sup> Yet that approach cannot lead to better understanding the true influence and impact of Clausewitz on the German army. It was not his *theory*, but rather what were

<sup>32</sup> Clausewitz, 'Two Letters on Strategy', eds. and trans. Peter Paret and Daniel Moran: Clausewitz to Roeder, 22 December 1827 (<http://www-cgsc.army.mil/carl/resources/csi/Paret/paret.asp#4.C>).

<sup>33</sup> See for example Peter Paret, 'The Influence of Clausewitz', in *On War*, p. 27; Klaus-Jürgen Müller, 'Clausewitz, Ludendorff and Beck: Some Remarks on Clausewitz's Influence on German Military Thinking in the 1930s and 1940s', *The Journal of Strategic Studies*, 9:2-3 (1986), pp. 249-250; and Murray, *German Military Effectiveness*, pp. 193-194.

<sup>34</sup> See Echevarria, 'Borrowing from the Master', pp. 275-277.

<sup>35</sup> See Wallach on Schlieffen; Wallach, *Dogma*, pp. 35-66, and Wallach, 'Misperceptions of Clausewitz's *On War* by the German Military', *The Journal of Strategic Studies*, 9:2-3, (1986), pp. 211-239.

*thought to be* – and were broadly accepted as – his *maxims* that were so profoundly and decisively influential.

The question of whether Prusso-German officers actually *read* Clausewitz or not is therefore irrelevant. One can quote Clausewitz's famous saying on the war as the continuation of politics by other means facilely without reading *On War* or even the relevant chapters, and without knowing how and why Clausewitz reached his conclusions. It is therefore easy to understand how the German Army could be Clausewitzian without necessarily reading Clausewitz. As we shall see, his perceived imperatives were embedded in the DNA of German military culture: in its thought, its field service regulations, and in its fighting methods. All German officers, regardless of their appreciation of Clausewitz, had his legacy engraved on their minds.<sup>36</sup>

## **II. From Moltke to Schlieffen**

The preceding theoretical background and analysis of the official mind of the *Generalstab* provides a basis for examination of Prussian doctrines and war plans: not only the extent to which they obeyed what they saw as Clausewitz's ostensible rules or prescriptions, but also the more interesting question of the extent to which they developed and adapted those perceived rules. Adaptation is naturally needed when armies must cope with political, economic, and technological change and with new demands, possibilities, and constraints – and the German army was no exception in that respect. Yet the essence of Clausewitz's maxims remained surprisingly unaltered

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<sup>36</sup> The most famous German general to openly denounce his heritage was Ludendorff, who insisted that 'all theories of Clausewitz must be rejected' (Müller, 'Clausewitz, Ludendorff and Beck', p. 250). Yet Ludendorff himself followed most of Clausewitz's maxims, and was referring in the quotation above to Clausewitz's analysis of the relationship between politics and war, on which Ludendorff's explosive views are well known.

for many years, although of course gradually adapted to the new reality of gigantic mass armies and industrial technology. Moreover, the very two different leading figures of the Prussian-German army – Moltke the elder and Schlieffen – shared those maxims, although they shared practically nothing else in their views of war planning, command-and-control, the capacity of technology to serve the needs of modern mass armies, and the relationship between politics and war. The immense differences between Moltke's and Schlieffen's perceptions have in effect obscured their common theoretical origin.

While Moltke described himself as Clausewitz's disciple, and was always so perceived by his contemporaries as well as by later scholars, Schlieffen's similar avowals have met with scepticism. The scrutiny of Schlieffen's writings, studies and war plans in the following pages will therefore seek to establish the extent to which he did or did not follow Clausewitz, while analysing Moltke (who was free of any need to prove his conformity) as a mediating agent and as the necessary link between Clausewitz and Schlieffen.

The two generals, who demonstrated a profound, even brilliant understanding of Germany's military needs in their respective times, and designed their plans to answer those needs, obviously changed and adapted Clausewitzian concepts to the new realities of the modern battlefield, new political demands, and of course to their own interpretative principles. Yet they never challenged the fundamental concepts set forth by the man whom they both saw as their guide. They therefore represent, despite their very different views and styles, a theoretical and conceptual continuum from the 1820s to the twentieth century.

## 1. Moltke

Helmuth Count von Moltke ('Moltke the elder'), chief of the Prussian general staff from 1857 to 1888, attributed his ideas to Clausewitz and described himself as Clausewitz's disciple.<sup>37</sup> His victories in Germany's wars of unification were in fact a major incentive for the Prussian army as well as other armies to study Clausewitz's *On War*;<sup>38</sup> his conformity with Clausewitz was thus unquestioned. And Moltke's adherence to the notion of annihilation was the first and foremost embodiment of that conformity. Hence his concept of strategic envelopment or encirclement (the *Kesselschlacht*) resulting in the grand decisive battle of annihilation (*Vernichtungsschlacht*) that Clausewitz had recommended:

We have been talking about a total victory – that is not simply a battle won, but the complete defeat of the enemy. Such a victory demands an enveloping attack, or a battle with reversed fronts, either of which will always make the result decisive. It is essential, then, that any plan of operation should provide for this.<sup>39</sup>

To that purpose Moltke stressed, as did Clausewitz, the importance of concentration of force. Moltke developed the use of modern railroads for that purpose, facilitating an operational sequence entailing rapid concentration and deployment (*Aufmarsch*), followed by a concentric advance on enemy forces by the deployed armies to engage in a decisive battle.<sup>40</sup>

Although not wholly sharing the manifold deductions about war's protean nature that the later Clausewitz had expressed in *On War*'s first book, Moltke nevertheless confined the aim of total destruction within a given state's existing

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<sup>37</sup> Gunter E. Rothenberg, 'Moltke, Schlieffen and the Doctrine of Strategic Envelopment', in Paret, ed., *Makers of Modern Strategy*, p. 297.

<sup>38</sup> Howard, 'The influence of Clausewitz', *On War*, p. 30.

<sup>39</sup> Clausewitz, *On War*, book VIII, 9, p. 625.

<sup>40</sup> Rothenberg, 'Moltke, Schlieffen', p. 300.

strategic capability and resources: 'Strategy cannot but always direct its efforts towards the highest goal attainable with the means at [one's] disposal'.<sup>41</sup> By doing so he subordinated the imperative of annihilation to the limitations of reality. That realism enabled him to comprehend that in case of a war on two fronts, the destruction of both opponents would be beyond Germany's capabilities.<sup>42</sup> Moltke was thus free to examine defensive-offensive operations, a theoretical freedom that his successors failed to exploit.

That is not to say that Moltke intended to subject the aims of war to statesmanship. While fully accepting Clausewitz's argument that the objective of war was a satisfactory political resolution, he also held that once the army had been committed to war, its direction belonged to the soldiers: 'political considerations can be taken into account only as long as they do not make demands that are militarily improper or impossible'.<sup>43</sup> It is important to emphasise these views of Moltke's on the appropriate relationship between politics and war, since, despite occasional claims to the contrary, he did not completely subordinate the conduct of war to politics; for him strategy allegedly

. . . serve[d] policy best and only work[ed] for the object of policy, but completely independent of policy in its actions . . . it is not the occupation of a slice of territory, or a capture of a fortress, but the destruction of the enemy that will decide the outcome of the war.<sup>44</sup>

A different and deeply influential insight that Moltke extracted from *On War* and used as the foundation of his concept of warfare and system of command was that the

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<sup>41</sup> Quoted in Michael Howard, *Clausewitz* (Oxford, 1983), p. 60.

<sup>42</sup> Naveh, *In Pursuit*, p. 75.

<sup>43</sup> Quoted in Rothenberg, 'Moltke, Schlieffen', p. 298.

<sup>44</sup> Quoted in Michael Howard, *Clausewitz* (Oxford, 1983), p. 60.

uncertainties of war rule out any attempt to impose general rules or rigid systems, or even to create detailed plans: 'The unpredictable outcome of the first great decisive tactical engagement lays the foundations for further decisions; the plan of operations thus cannot reach beyond the first decisive encounter with the main enemy force'.<sup>45</sup>

That view led Moltke to adopt and assimilate into the army's official doctrine a decentralized system of command: the directive command or 'mission tactics' [*Auftragstaktik*] system, which developed as a coherent theory during Moltke's tenure as chief of staff.<sup>46</sup> It stipulated that the high command should limit itself to issuing general instructions, outlining overall objectives and specific missions, while leaving tactical conduct within the framework of those objectives and missions entirely to the discretion of the operational and tactical commanders.<sup>47</sup> Directive command thus well suited Moltke's view of strategy as nothing more than a 'system of expedients' based on common sense.<sup>48</sup> What Moltke failed to perceive was that strategic 'common sense' is not applicable to, and may sometimes even be irrelevant to, the tactical echelon.

Directive command required that all echelons and components of the army be thoroughly knowledgeable about and comply with the operational goal. It was a

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<sup>45</sup> Moltke the elder, *Moltkes militärische Werke*, 20 vols. (Berlin, 1892-1912), vol. 2, part 2, p. 291; similarly, 'no plan of operations can extend with any prospect of certainty beyond the first clash with the hostile main force. Only a layman can pretend to trace throughout the course of a campaign the prosecution of a rigid plan, arranged beforehand in all its details and adhered to to the last. All successive acts of war are therefore not pre-meditated executions but spontaneous acts guided by military tact' (quoted in Wallach, *Dogma*, p. 54).

<sup>46</sup> However, Moltke never used this term, which was coined only after the First World War.

<sup>47</sup> Martin Van Creveld, *Technology and War: From 2000 B. C. to the Present* (London, 1991) p. 170; Naveh, *In Pursuit*, pp. 57-58; Rothenberg, 'Moltke, Schlieffen', p. 300. For further discussion of the German tradition of directive command, see Martin Samuels, *Command or Control? Command, Training and Tactics in the British and German Armies, 1888-1918* (London, 1995), pp. 7-33.

<sup>48</sup> Quoted in Rothenberg, 'Moltke, Schlieffen', p. 299.

difficult requirement to fulfil for a variety of reasons. The first was the general staff's initially low status and weak influence within the army. In 1864 it was still a minor advisory entity with no power of command; Moltke could only counsel commanders to follow his operational plan, and general staff members could only make their best efforts to persuade commanders to accept advice.<sup>49</sup> By 1870-71 the general staff had gained a more authoritative position, yet commanders in contact with the enemy still repeatedly refused to accept the command authority of the general staff.

Another cause of the army's failure to incorporate the directive command system harmoniously into its standard operating procedures was the tactical echelon's almost total obliviousness to operational aims, owing to a lack of coherent guidance from the commander-in-chief and to the deep-rootedness of the army's tactical patterns. Moltke's initial memorandum of 6 May 1870 to the chiefs of sections of the Great General Staff exemplified the ambiguous nature of his operational guidance. Moltke simply directed a generalized steady advance aimed at locating French forces and engaging them in battle.<sup>50</sup> Had he possessed an operational plan as understood by, for instance, the first Napoleon, he would presumably have communicated it to his tactical commanders. The fact that Moltke's memorandum even failed clearly to specify encirclement as the operational aim – even though it was, indeed, his aim – rendered him directly and personally responsible for his subordinates' notably poor compliance with that aim. For so long as the operational logic derived from the necessity of destruction, which could only be achieved through battle, the imperative

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<sup>49</sup> Samuels, *Command or Control?*, p. 12.

<sup>50</sup> Moltke, *Military Correspondence 1870-1871*, ed. Spenser Wilkinson (London, 1991), p. 172.

of annihilation was bound to supersede operational planning, unless the high command vocally and continually demanded compliance.

The other side of the operational coin was the effect on tactical patterns of the firmly established tactical imperatives in which the army had been indoctrinated for generations. Those patterns, which followed directly from the theoretical primacy of battle, determined that in any engagement – whether intended or unintended, planned or improvised – all friendly units within marching distance, which might amount to a whole corps and sometimes an entire army, must ‘follow the thunder of the guns’, abandon their previous lines of advance, and pile on.<sup>51</sup> In the event, once field commanders smelt blood, the overpowering urge to destroy the enemy in front of them and the freedom conferred by *Auftragstaktik* dominated rational calculation.<sup>52</sup> The battles of Spicheren, Wörth and Colombey were all encounters of this kind initiated by tactical units. These and other random battles resulted in horrendous losses, and sometimes, as at Gravelotte, thwarted Moltke’s notably loose but nevertheless detectable operational intentions.<sup>53</sup>

It is therefore understandable that Moltke, aware of these defects as well as of other difficulties inherent in the command of modern mass armies, enthusiastically used the telegraph. This open-mindedness toward new communications technology was not part of Clausewitz’s legacy; the master had indeed belittled the impact of technology: ‘it is clear that weapons and equipment are not essential for the concept of

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid, p. 82-84.

<sup>52</sup> Naveh, *In Pursuit*, pp. 76-78. Naveh illustrates how the Duke of Mecklenburg-Schwerin, commander of German 3rd Army, missed an opportunity to complete the German operational encirclement simply because he was unaware of Moltke’s plan.

<sup>53</sup> Rothenberg, ‘Moltke, Schlieffen’, p. 304 and Naveh, *In Pursuit*, p. 84. Naveh points out that both operational and strategic orders explicitly forbade tactical initiatives prior to those battles, yet despite those orders entire armies were drawn into huge battles under unfavourable conditions.



fighting, since even wrestling is fighting of a kind'.<sup>54</sup> Moltke nevertheless employed the telegraph to outline the general concept of coming operations, to update his picture of the overall situation, and on occasion to transmit succinct orders – but as a means of strategic direction, rather than of operational control.<sup>55</sup>

Moltke's concept of strategic envelopment, his emphasis on concentration of force, his subordination of war aims to political needs and national capabilities, his recognition of the unchangeable role of chance, friction, and moral elements, his prudent and restricted employment of technology, and his development of directive command make it easy to understand the nearly complete identity with Clausewitz's maxims later attributed to him. Yet Moltke did not hesitate to review and adapt his 'Clausewitzian' concepts to changing realities when reconsideration seemed required. By the end of his tenure as chief of staff he had become one of very few Prusso-German officers ever to reject his own previous solution to Germany's two-front quandary; he acknowledged that a swift operation on interior lines to neutralize one front through a decisive battle of annihilation was no longer feasible.<sup>56</sup>

Moltke imparted that flexibility and open-mindedness to Schlieffen.<sup>57</sup> Yet his willingness to meet the challenges of an ever-changing reality never broke through the conceptual framework consolidated by Clausewitz. As a result, his successors, and

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<sup>54</sup> Clausewitz, *On War*, Book II, 1, p. 127. Clausewitz's theory can nevertheless accommodate change, although he primarily recognized political and social rather than technological changes. It is important to remember that Clausewitz lived in an era of relatively slow technological advance by current standards, and naturally viewed the military-technological environment as relatively static. As Handel has argued, had Clausewitz written *On War* fifty or a hundred years later, he could scarcely have ignored the forces released by the industrial/technological revolution, and would presumably have adapted his theory to a radically and rapidly changing material environment: 'Clausewitz in the Age of Technology', in Michael Handel, ed., *Clausewitz and Modern Strategy* (London, 1986), pp. 57-60.

<sup>55</sup> Naveh, *In Pursuit*, p. 57-58.

<sup>56</sup> Rothenberg, 'Moltke, Schlieffen', pp. 309-310.

<sup>57</sup> See Schlieffen's willingness to experiment with a variety of operational concepts: Terence Zuber, 'The Schlieffen Plan Reconsidered', *War in History* 6:3 (1999), pp. 274-305.

especially Schlieffen, were perceived as rigid and narrow-minded military thinkers although they had at their disposal a solid theoretical platform which enabled them to confront the uncertainties and carnage of the battlefield while providing the security of a tightly formulated theory. Annihilation remained the motivating force of the German army's concepts and doctrines. Moltke was in that respect the chronological and conceptual link through which Clausewitzian thought permeated the German mass armies of the pre-1914 era.

## 2. Schlieffen

Alfred Count von Schlieffen, who in 1891 succeeded Moltke as chief of staff after a brief interim successor, exercised a deep and lasting influence over the German army during a tenure that lasted until 1905 – and long thereafter. His most characteristic quality was an ability to provoke strong feelings: admiration and resentment in equal measure. Supporters and followers regarded him as a model, as a professional genius who had solved Germany's military quandary by deriving from high-level theories a simple (and some would admit, simplified and formalistic) doctrine. Critics spared no invective in drawing the portrait of a narrow-minded military technocrat who took no apparent interest in the political implications of those curious red lines on his maps, the ones denoting 'international border'. As always with intensely disputed figures, especially ones as unsociable and obstinate as Schlieffen, neither description probably corresponds to the truth.<sup>58</sup>

Schlieffen was a 'typical product of the industrial revolution era' and was faced by the need to answer its challenges: enormous mass armies and their command-and-control, increasing mechanization, and new and improved technology, especially in

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<sup>58</sup> For some surprisingly humorous incidents that illuminate Schlieffen's character, see Walter Görlitz, *The German General Staff, 1657-1945* (London, 1953), pp. 129-130.

the realm of firepower.<sup>59</sup> His operational scheme can also be seen as inspired by the industrial era – a gigantic, mechanistic, and rigidly scheduled movement, an industrialised incarnation of Clausewitz’s vision of *Vernichtung*. Yet the dispute over the extent to which the great chief of staff conformed to Clausewitz’s theories has persisted from the creation of Schlieffen’s ‘plan’ onward, and has become even more vigorous after the two World Wars.

A variety of reasons might have led Schlieffen’s contemporaries to doubt that he was Clausewitz’s disciple. For later scholars, Schlieffen’s industrialized realization of Clausewitz’s purported maxims produced battlefield carnage in a scale never before seen, a slaughter that left the nations of Europe shocked and bewildered. Could that be the outcome of a theory that acknowledged the dominance of politics over war and accepted limited war as the most common form of the phenomenon? Schlieffen’s link to Clausewitz thus has to be put to the test.

### **3. New paradigm? Schlieffen as ‘deviant’: friction and command-and-control**

Schlieffen readily acknowledged his debt to the most obvious and natural source of theoretical common knowledge – neither more nor less than was expected of a Prussian general who was Moltke the elder’s successor:

He who teaches us war does so, consciously or unconsciously, even today, by leaning more or less closely upon Clausewitz, and by drawing from his inexhaustible reservoir of thoughts.<sup>60</sup>

Those were not the words of a man who was merely paying lip service to Clausewitz; Schlieffen indeed perceived himself as Clausewitz’s and Moltke’s disciple.<sup>61</sup> And he

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<sup>59</sup> Wallach, *Dogma*, pp. 33-34.

<sup>60</sup> Alfred von Schlieffen, 'Zur Einführung der fünften Auflage', *Vom Kriege* (Berlin, 5th. edition, 1905), p. iv.

and others – both contemporary figures and later scholars – expressed that view on numerous occasions.<sup>62</sup>

Accordingly, the German army thought of and taught Clausewitz and Schlieffen as complementary: whereas the first bequeathed a ‘philosophical strategy’, the second provided a much needed ‘applied strategy’ and practical outlook – to the great relief of most German officers.<sup>63</sup> As Wilhelm Groener, one of Schlieffen’s most fervent admirers, expressed it: ‘In Count Schlieffen’s writings you will never find spacious, theoretical discussions on strategy and tactics, nor scientific evolution of theories and maxims, but only life and reality’.<sup>64</sup>

Yet many others among Schlieffen’s adversaries, contemporaries, and later scholars saw Schlieffen’s concepts and practice in a different light: Schlieffen’s war plans purportedly revealed him less as a disciple than as a deviant who broke the continuity of general staff thought.<sup>65</sup> Pre-1914 military authors, members of the *Generalstab*, and scholars have varied in their reasons for designating Schlieffen as the broken link, and some criticisms owed more to personal pique than to professional objectivity. Once the degree of conformity to Clausewitz became a measure of professional legitimacy for military writers such as Colmar von der Goltz, Sigismund von Schlichting, and Hugo von Freytag-Loringhoven, identifying someone as having fallen short of the ‘military bible’ constituted a kind of denunciation, a convenient

<sup>61</sup> Wallach, *Dogma*, pp. 36, 69-70.

<sup>62</sup> See for instance Waldemar Erfurth, *Der Vernichtungssieg* (Berlin, 1939), p. 56.

<sup>63</sup> Wallach, *Dogma*, p. 70; also Wallach, *Misperceptions*, p. 215.

<sup>64</sup> Quoted in Wallach, *Dogma*, p. 70.

<sup>65</sup> See Rothenberg, ‘Moltke, Schlieffen’ p. 312. That Rothenberg used the very same quotation from Groener to establish his claim that Schlieffen was a ‘heretic’ with regard to Clausewitz’s teachings demonstrates the shallowness of the entire argument. Groener did not depict contradictions, but rather stressed the complementarity of the two figures. Moreover, Schlieffen never expressed open criticisms of Clausewitz.

way of attacking an adversary.<sup>66</sup> At the same time, the claim that Schlieffen had founded a new school of strategic thinking might have gained him an even more honourable position (which might be the reason for the firm rejection by some scholars of the notion of ‘Schlieffen’s new school of thought’, on the grounds that even the general’s ‘ardent supporters . . . frankly den[ied] this’).<sup>67</sup> The motives as well as the arguments of the critics are thus important for a full understanding of Schlieffen’s influence.

Whatever the reason for ruling Schlieffen out of the Clausewitz-Moltke camp, his perceived ‘heresy’ concerned two principal and interrelated issues on which, at first glance, he indeed seems to hold views dissimilar from those of the master – and somewhat revolutionary. Schlieffen simply ignored the factor of friction in his planning, and rejected Moltke’s system of directive command – designed to cope with friction – in favour of a more restrictive and potentially invasive command-and-control system. Schlieffen’s famous war planning memorandum of 1905, which was probably written in early 1906, exemplified these two features of his thought.<sup>68</sup>

Schlieffen produced several *Denkschriften* (studies) during his years as the chief of general staff, and several ‘memoranda’ or drafts in his years of retirement (the final one dated 28 December 1912), in his attempt to find an operational concept that would enable Germany to achieve the goal that Moltke, in his last years, had come to

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<sup>66</sup> Echevarria, ‘Borrowing’, pp. 284-286. Yet the professional requirement to ‘know your Clausewitz well’ did not mean that the writers mentioned above held the entire content of *On War* applicable to their present-day context. According to Echevarria, new technology such as railroads, telegraphs and airships posed a grave challenge in the eyes of Schlieffen’s contemporaries to Clausewitz’s writings on tactics and operations – the very same challenge that Schlieffen was attempting to face.

<sup>67</sup> Wallach, *Dogma*, p. 36.

<sup>68</sup> Hew Strachan, *The First World War*, vol. 1, *To Arms* (Oxford, 2001), p. 166.

consider impossible: total victory in a two-front war.<sup>69</sup> The operational concept of Schlieffen's 1905 memorandum might look, at first sight, as an expansion of a simple idea: a gigantic wing manoeuvre or *Flügel Schlacht* (according to the 1905 memorandum; the 1912 memorandum suggested instead a grand battle of encirclement using both wings, or *Kesselschlacht*):<sup>70</sup> '... the German army will win its battle by an envelopment with the right wing. This will therefore be made as strong

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<sup>69</sup> In recent years, newly discovered documentation that sheds light on German war planning prior to the First World War has permitted a re-evaluation of the evolution of Schlieffen's concepts, and has led to an intense dispute over Schlieffen's 1905 memorandum. At the heart of the dispute lies Terence Zuber's claim that the 1905 memorandum (Zuber repeatedly refers to it as '*Denkschrift*') is actually not a war plan but rather a study designed to urge the German government to expand the army. The study was supposedly an abrupt departure from Schlieffen's earlier pattern as revealed in his *Generalstabsreisen* (general staff rides), war games, and other studies. Zuber claims that the main feature of the 1905 memorandum, the envelopment of Paris, was never seriously tested in any of Schlieffen's rides or war games. However, as Terence M. Holmes has pointed out, the march on Paris was not a dominant principle of the 1905 memorandum: the guiding idea was the formation of a strong right wing, designed to envelop enemy forces wherever they might be encountered (and, if the French retreated to strong positions on the Marne or Seine and sought to hold out there, instead of 'doing the Germans a favour' by attacking them, the right wing would march around Paris in order to outflank them). Schlieffen's studies, rides, and war games (especially the summer 1897 study and 1904 ride) thus show the development of his concepts in the direction of the 1905 memorandum (Zuber, 'The Schlieffen Plan Reconsidered', *War in History* 6:3 [1999], pp. 262-305, and Terence M. Holmes, 'The Reluctant March on Paris: A Replay to Terence Zuber's 'The Schlieffen Plan Reconsidered'', *War in History* 8:2 [2001], pp. 208-232). Zuber's argument also ignores the obvious question of why Schlieffen would choose such an indirect approach to promote a burning need – army expansion – long since recognized and demanded by the General Staff; a top secret study could not be circulated, and would hardly be effective for that purpose. Moreover, it seems as if Zuber, in order to establish the 1905 memorandum as rooted in Schlieffen's earlier thinking, assumes that all the staff rides, studies, and war games would have to be tests of a single idea (a strong right wing marching on and around Paris), ignoring the natural systemic function of *Kriegsspiele* and staff rides: learning, deduction, and testing options. For further examination of these issues, see Terence Zuber, 'Der Mythos vom Schlieffenplan', in Hans Ehlert, Michael Epkenhans, and Gerhard P. Gross, *Der Schlieffenplan. Analysen und Dokumente* (Paderborn, 2006), pp. 45-78; Annika Mombauer, 'Der Moltkeplan: Modifikation des Schlieffenplans bei gleichen Zielen?' *ibid.*, pp. 79-100; Robert T. Foley, 'Der Schlieffenplan. Ein Aufmarschplan für den Krieg', *ibid.*, pp. 101-116; and Gross, 'There was a Schlieffenplan. Neue Quellen', *ibid.*, pp. 117-160.

<sup>70</sup> It was probably the difference between the two memoranda, aside from Schlieffen's tendency to justify his ideas retrospectively, that generated continued confusion with regard to Schlieffen's operational logic. The 1905 memorandum can be related to Friedrich's Leuthen wing-manoeuve (*Flügel Schlacht*), while the 1912 memorandum was modelled after Hannibal's Cannae battle of encirclement (*Kesselschlacht*), or its modern variant, the battle of Sedan (Naveh, *In Pursuit*, pp. 92-96). We can thus conclude that Schlieffen's conceptual evolution, employing the mass encirclement method to its extreme, reached its climax not in the 1905 memorandum but rather in the 1912 one.

as possible.<sup>71</sup> In both cases, this fearsome right wing, to which Schlieffen assigned no fewer than 35.5 army corps, would swing across Belgium and north-eastern France and sweep the French army eastward against the Moselle fortresses, the Jura, and Switzerland, and there crush it to pieces.<sup>72</sup> ‘The French army’, in Schlieffen’s recurring demand, ‘must be annihilated’.<sup>73</sup>

The simple idea thus manifested itself in an enormous and highly complex plan. The successful execution of the scheme demanded accurate, detailed, coordinated, and carefully timed implementation by the numerous components of the German fighting system. It was essential that every single element of the gigantic machine act in synchronization, an exigency that was absolutely critical. That was critical – yet allegedly, according to the German army’s own longstanding battle-tested theories – impossible to deliver.

‘Nothing is simple in war’, wrote Clausewitz; ‘the simplest thing is difficult’.<sup>74</sup> The element of friction, the factor that distinguishes ‘real war’ from the war of the planners, stood between Schlieffen’s simple concept and his intended simple decisive victorious war. As the author of a preface to the fifth edition of *On War*, Schlieffen surely knew well that ‘countless minor incidents – the kind you can never really foresee – combine to lower the general level of performance, so that one always falls far short of the intended goal’.<sup>75</sup> But the successful realisation of his plan demanded precisely the abolition of all such ‘countless minor incidents’. Schlieffen and his followers in the *Generalstab*, it seems, should have taken Clausewitz’s words more

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<sup>71</sup> Schlieffen’s great ‘memorandum’ of December 1905, in Ritter, *The Schlieffen Plan* (London, 1958), p. 138.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 138, 144-145.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 145.

<sup>74</sup> Clausewitz, *On War*, Book I, 7, p. 119.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*

seriously, and have kept in mind that ‘none of . . . [the components of a military machine] is of one piece: each part is composed of individuals, everyone of whom retains his potential of friction’ as they compiled and prepared to execute such a vast and complex war plan.<sup>76</sup>

The dissonance that emerges when considering these quotations from *On War* while reading Schlieffen’s plan, with its ‘frictionless’ assumptions and demands, has generated a range of responses, from the claim that Schlieffen had merely overlooked or disregarded the element of friction in his plan, to the suggestion that Schlieffen was altogether the ‘antithesis’ of Clausewitz and of his teachings.<sup>77</sup> However, as will emerge in the pages that follow, Schlieffen created his operational concept in full accordance with all other basic rules found in *On War*. His overlooking of a fundamental obstacle such as friction thus requires a notable effort at explanation. Considering his absolute obedience to *On War*’s other imperatives, any such effort leads to one of the following alternatives: either Clausewitz himself offered a solution to the friction problem, or Schlieffen devised one persuasive enough to meet the demands of his plan. It appears that the answer is a bit of both.

Clausewitz’s explanation of the ‘countless minor incidents’ that stand in the way of military success contains a second element, much less quoted than the first: ‘Iron will-power can overcome this friction; it pulverizes every obstacle, but of course it wears down the machine as well . . . the proud spirit’s firm will [*der feste Wille eines stolzen Geistes*] dominates the art of war as an obelisk dominates the town square on which all roads converge.’<sup>78</sup> Metaphors aside, here lies the answer that

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<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

<sup>77</sup> See for instance Wallach, *Dogma*, p. 75, and Rothenberg, ‘Moltke, Schlieffen’, p. 312.

<sup>78</sup> Clausewitz, *On War*, Book I, 7, p. 119.



Clausewitz himself provided for this distressing problem. He continues: 'To be sure, the best general is not the one who is most familiar with the idea of friction,<sup>79</sup> and who takes it most to heart . . . the good general must know friction in order to overcome it whenever possible . . .'<sup>80</sup>

The reader of *On War*'s first book can therefore rightly conclude that the obstacles or challenge posed by the element of friction to every war plan can in fact be met. According to Clausewitz himself, 'iron will power' is the remedy, although a dangerous one that will not always suffice. Schlieffen did not overlook, ignore or unintentionally exclude friction. He had the full intention of using the suggested remedy to its extreme, demanding: ' . . . an aim-conscious leader, an iron character, with an obstinate will for victory and troops that clearly understand the issue at stake' <sup>81</sup>

The supreme commander of 'iron character', be it Schlieffen or anyone else, would embody that will; yet in order to ensure that friction would indeed eventually succumb to willpower, the leader must maintain tight control over his massed troops, control of a kind never before possible. Fortunately, Schlieffen had at his disposal what was perceived as one of the major advantages of modern warfare, one that Clausewitz could not have taken into consideration: modern means of communication – telegraph and telephone.

Unlike Clausewitz yet like Moltke, Schlieffen's attitude toward technology was a highly positive one. In his striving to improve his forces' effectiveness, he increased the number of technical and support units, and promoted the adoption of innovations

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<sup>79</sup> A familiarity that Clausewitz attributes only to the first-hand experience that Schlieffen never possessed, for he never commanded units of any size in battle.

<sup>80</sup> Clausewitz, *On War*, Book I, 7, p. 120.

<sup>81</sup> Alfred von Schlieffen, *Dienstschriften des Chefs des Generalstabes der Armee* (Berlin, 1937-38), vol. 1, p. 243.

such as motor vehicles, mobile heavy artillery, and an embryonic air force (primarily airships and balloons, intended to free the cavalry from its reconnaissance missions).<sup>82</sup> His 1905 memorandum urged 'advancing, digging in, advancing . . . using every means of modern science to dislodge the enemy behind his cover'.<sup>83</sup> And he stressed that to make this rapid advance possible, even the *Landsturm* or reserve militia must be made mobile.<sup>84</sup>

Yet one of Schlieffen's biggest concerns remained the daunting difficulties of commanding modern mass armies.<sup>85</sup> Aides and ordnance officers alone would no longer do, especially when it came to executing fragile and intricate schemes of manoeuvre. For that purpose Schlieffen eagerly adopted whatever novelties technology had to offer. The 'modern Alexander', as Schlieffen saw it, could and should use 'telegraph, wireless, telephones . . . automobiles and motorcycles'.<sup>86</sup> These were supposed to compensate for the loss of control caused by the asymptotic increase in army size and consequent frontage.

However, Schlieffen had yet another reason to encourage the assimilation and use of modern communications. As mentioned above, his plan demanded the utter subordination to the operational goal of each component of Germany's immense mass army. Nevertheless, Schlieffen was indeed a true pupil of Moltke the elder's, and as such he also drew lessons from his predecessor's experience. The most obvious one was probably that the army could never meet demands of the kind Schlieffen was

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<sup>82</sup> Rothenberg, 'Moltke, Schlieffen', p. 313, and Wallach, *Dogma*, p. 53.

<sup>83</sup> Schlieffen, *Dienstschriften*, p. 144.

<sup>84</sup> Schlieffen's 'great memorandum' of December 1905, in Ritter, *The Schlieffen Plan*, p. 143.

<sup>85</sup> See for example this concern, as expressed (although dismissively) in a letter to his sister Marie, in Alfred Graf Schlieffen, *Briefe*, ed. Eberhard Kessel (Göttingen, 1958), p. 296.

<sup>86</sup> Quoted from Schlieffen's *Gesammelte Schriften*, in Rothenberg, 'Moltke, Schlieffen', p. 314.

making. The field commanders, who frequently faced the need to choose between conformity to the operational goal and immediate response to local threats or incidents, had time and again thwarted Moltke's efforts at control, while entangling themselves and neighbouring units in unplanned and futile combat.<sup>87</sup>

Schlieffen could not jeopardise his plan by trusting his field commanders to restrain themselves and to ignore their training and instincts. He trusted instead modern means of communication to ensure that local initiatives would not disrupt his planned sequence of events; entangle in unplanned and unnecessary complications forces that would be unquestionably crucial later on in assuring superiority of mass in the battle of annihilation; or endanger the rapid advance of the right wing. Yet if telegraph and telephone indeed improved communications, communications do not necessarily mean control.<sup>88</sup> Unlike Moltke, Schlieffen fell victim to the delusion that these new capabilities would allow him to maintain complete control to the very last detail.<sup>89</sup> And in turn the illusion of control legitimised Schlieffen's imposition of his vision of tight and detailed command-and-control – which contradicted the very essence of Moltke's directive command system – upon the German army.

Schlieffen thus constructed a plan of a grand encirclement designed, like a time-delayed or remote-controlled bomb, to unfold in an unstoppable sequence until its final stage led to the annihilation of the French army. But fighting forces, unlike bombs, cannot be left alone once primed: they may very well fail to follow their planned assignments strictly. Detailed planning helps, but even the most comprehensive plan cannot replace the necessary – yet unattainable for armies on the

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<sup>87</sup> Naveh, *In Pursuit*, pp. 83-86.

<sup>88</sup> Michael Handel's observation was as relevant in Schlieffen's era as it is in our own: 'Today, almost all failures of command and control do not stem from a lack of adequate communication instruments or information but instead from human error and problems of perception': Handel, 'Clausewitz in the Age of Technology', p. 68.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 63-65.

scale of 1914-18 – detailed control by the supreme commander. No assurance that each component would act as planned in complete coordination with the others, and lastingly attuned to their mutual aim could possibly exist.

Is it therefore justified to mark Schlieffen down as a ‘deviation’ from Clausewitz and Moltke? No evidence exists that he intended to challenge the traditions or theories of the Prussian-German army as he perceived them. And why would he? Clausewitz’s maxims, as applied in Moltke’s wars, had proven themselves well. The modern battlefield and the evolving military-political reality indeed posed new demands and threats. Schlieffen believed that by introducing a new command-and-control system and the technology to implement it, he had overcome the trap of friction. Schlieffen’s answers to the new challenges indeed altered and adjusted Clausewitz’s and Moltke’s maxims to the new reality. Yet these revisions were minor compared to Schlieffen’s scrupulous loyalty to the remainder of Clausewitz’s dicta and to Moltke’s teachings.

#### **4. Old paradigm? Schlieffen as disciple: The fingerprints of Clausewitz and Moltke**

An examination of Schlieffen’s views on warfare as well as his great memorandum of 1905 in its various versions – in order to trace its theoretical foundations, roots, and links – reveals no other inconstancies with Schlieffen’s predecessors, but rather the obvious influence of Clausewitz and Moltke on Schlieffen’s concepts and planning.<sup>90</sup>

The long-lasting value of the work *On War* lies, aside to its high ethical and psychological value, in its emphatic emphasis of the annihilation idea . . . [For Clausewitz]. . . ‘the destruction of the hostile forces is the most

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<sup>90</sup> The relevant documents include the 1905 memorandum, seven drafts, and the 1912 memorandum: Ritter, *The Schlieffen Plan*, pp. 129-182.

commanding purpose among those which may be pursued by war'. This is the doctrine that led us to Königgrätz and Sedan . . .<sup>91</sup>

Schlieffen identified the goal of any war, and even more so – any operation, any battle, indeed any effort made by fighting forces at any level of warfare – as the physical annihilation of the enemy's military forces.<sup>92</sup> The commander's task is therefore utter destruction or overthrow of his opponent, a goal best achieved by conducting the grand battle of annihilation.<sup>93</sup> The *Vernichtungsschlacht* is, therefore, 'the only battle worth striving for'<sup>94</sup>

In accordance with the logic of the annihilation imperative, Schlieffen emphasised the importance of the concentration of forces, declaring in words very similar to those of Clausewitz that the essential element of the art of command was to be 'numerically strongest on the battlefield'.<sup>95</sup> Indeed numerical superiority was one of Schlieffen's fundamental maxims: 'To achieve a victory you need the concentration of superior forces at one point'. . . 'All the forces must be drawn into the battle . . .'<sup>96</sup>

Yet he also realized that Germany might not enjoy numerical superiority in future wars. And like Moltke before him, Schlieffen believed that Germany could not endure a prolonged war. The requirement for rapid and decisive victory indeed fitted well with his preference for a decisive battle of annihilation. Schlieffen did not

<sup>91</sup> Schlieffen, 'Zur Einführung der fünften Auflage', pp. v-vi.

<sup>92</sup> D.V.E Nr. 53 – Grundzüge der höheren Truppenführung vom 1. Januar 1910 ('Principles of Major Unit Command'), written under the influence of Schlieffen's ideas, stressed that 'the utmost goal of every martial act is the annihilation of the enemy. That must always be striven for . . . (quoted in Wallach, *Dogma*, p. 78).

<sup>93</sup> Ritter, *The Schlieffen Plan*, p. 51.

<sup>94</sup> Schlieffen, *Briefe*, p. 310: '. . . dass die Vernichtungsschlacht die allein anzustrebende Schlacht ist'

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 297; see for instance Clausewitz, *On War*, Book III, 8, p. 194 (which also asserts the identity of tactics and strategy in this regard), and Book 5; 3, p. 282; but the 'other Clausewitz' also addressed the issue in a more qualified way: Book II, 2, p. 135.

<sup>96</sup> Schlieffen's *Cannae* research, quoted in Wallach, *Dogma*, p. 48.

dismiss other forms of operation – such as initial strategic defence on both fronts – but clearly came to prefer the destruction of one of Germany's two enemies first. His exercise critiques of general staff ride *Aufmarsch II* (east) in 1900/1 and of the general staff ride in 1904 (west) exemplified that inclination. In both he emphasised the vital principle of massing against one enemy, and defeating it in a swift and decisive manner that would render it unable to pose a threat, before turning on the other.<sup>97</sup>

Those deductions were not new to Schlieffen: he had inherited them from Moltke. But while Moltke, based on his experience in 1870-1871, soon doubted the possibility of achieving a swift victory on one front, and no longer counted on decisive battles but rather on diplomacy to bring Germany's wars to a satisfactory end, Schlieffen continued to believe in annihilational victory.<sup>98</sup> The key to its achievement was the identical form of battle that Clausewitz had recommended as the most rewarding and that Moltke used with great success in Germany's wars of unification, encirclement. Schlieffen made the idea of envelopment, flank attack and outflanking a 'patent solution' as Ritter put it, or an 'unalterable law' in Schlieffen's own words, for any attack by a numerically inferior force.<sup>99</sup> Other forms of attack would not do: frontal attack would provide only 'ordinary' results, not annihilation, while demanding overwhelming superiority, for under contemporary conditions breakthrough (*Durchbruch*) was possible only in special circumstances such as gaps

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<sup>97</sup> Zuber, 'The Schlieffen Plan Reconsidered', pp. 280-281, 289-291.

<sup>98</sup> Naveh, *In Pursuit*, p. 42; Rothenberg, 'Moltke, Schlieffen', pp. 306-311; Wallach, *Dogma*, p. 54.

<sup>99</sup> Ritter, *The Schlieffen Plan*, p. 51. Schlieffen's words applied to the outflanking manoeuvre: *Dienstschriften*, vol. 1, p. 87. Even Zuber's radical reconsideration of Schlieffen's concepts concedes that all of Schlieffen's exercises, studies and war games since 1896 examined, in one way or another, some form of flank assault (whether in the west or in the east, limited or massive in scale, offensive or counteroffensive), and designed to annihilate the enemy army (Zuber, 'The Schlieffen Plan Reconsidered', pp. 276-296).

in the enemy's front.<sup>100</sup> In his letter to Freytag-Loringhoven of August 1912, Schlieffen stressed that although “Cannae” (his perfect historical example of a complete encirclement battle) is not always possible . . . the attack against the flank is . . . necessary. The attack against the flank is the central [and] most vital essence of the whole history of war’.<sup>101</sup>

The answer to Germany's military challenge, as Schlieffen saw it, thus had to be flank attack. And in order to ensure its full effect, it had to be combined with frontal assault, in order to tie down large numbers of the enemy, as always based on the Cannae example: 'In strategy as well as in tactics the same rule obtains: he who strives for encirclement must firmly attack in front, prevent all enemy movement there and thus render possible the effect of the encircling wing'.<sup>102</sup>

The goals, assumptions and formulae of the Schlieffen Plan thus suggest Schlieffen's radical conformity with Clausewitz's imperatives. The plan embodied most of Clausewitz's demands in a modernised manner suited to the mass armies of Schlieffen's era: a striving to annihilate the enemy's army in a decisive *Vernichtungsschlacht* achieved by flank attack and facilitated by concentration of forces on an enormous scale. It carried the stamp of Clausewitz's paradigm, and cannot be dismissed as a violation of Clausewitz's precepts.

And likewise its faults: for the crucial defects in the plan lay not only in rigid impractical demands on units, command-and-control, and logistics. The plan's crucial defects stemmed from its basic logic, a logic that it shared with the Clausewitzian

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<sup>100</sup> Ritter, *The Schlieffen Plan*, p. 50.

<sup>101</sup> Schlieffen, *Briefe*, p. 317: ‘. . . der wesentlichste Inhalt der ganzen Kriegsgeschichte’; for the relatively late development of Schlieffen's obsession with Cannae, see Terence M. Holmes, ‘Classical Blitzkrieg: The Untimely Modernity of Schlieffen's Cannae Programme’, *The Journal of Military History* 67:3 (2003), pp. 745-71.

<sup>102</sup> Schlieffen, *Dienstschriften*, vol. 1, p. 108. See also Schlieffen's critique of his final war game, in 1905, which stressed the same lesson: Zuber, ‘The Schlieffen Plan Reconsidered’, p. 294.

paradigm, and that subordinated strategic and operational planning to tactical patterns. For, as Moltke's experience taught, if only tactical success leads directly to the strategic goal through successive battles, and preferably through a single great battle leading to annihilation of the enemy, then strategic planning was bound inextricably to the determinants that tactics established.<sup>103</sup>

It was that outlook that enabled Schlieffen to create a 'tacticized' operational plan and to believe that 'the battle of annihilation may be conducted today in accordance with the same plan Hannibal had contrived . . .'<sup>104</sup> even though in his 1912 memorandum Schlieffen literally copied – as if with a pantograph – the small-scale pattern of the battle of Cannae into a context that was a hundred times wider in space and more than two hundred times larger in numbers, thus creating fragile linear structures that were virtually impossible to manoeuvre and command.<sup>105</sup>

Schlieffen's mechanical reduction of strategic manoeuvre to scaled-up tactics would have been impossible without the complete identity between the patterns of strategic and tactical conduct that Clausewitz had already posited:

*Both in strategy and in tactics* a convergent attack always holds out promise of increased results . . .<sup>106</sup> 'The main factors in strategic effectiveness are the following: 1. The advantage of terrain. 2. Surprise – either by actual assault or by deploying unexpected strength at certain points. 3. Concentric attack (*all three as in tactics*) . . .'<sup>107</sup>

Even Schlieffen's avoidance of any engagement with politics, with its grave consequences, was an outcome of strict compliance with Clausewitz's – and Moltke's

<sup>103</sup> Naveh, *In Pursuit*, pp. 80-86.

<sup>104</sup> Schlieffen's Cannae research, quoted in Wallach, *Dogma*, p. 43.

<sup>105</sup> Naveh, *In Pursuit*, pp. 82-83.

<sup>106</sup> Clausewitz, *On War*, Book VIII, 9, p. 619 (my emphasis).

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*, Book VI, 3, p. 363 (my emphasis).



– logic. Schlieffen has been blamed for failing to serve Germany’s political goals, or even to take them into consideration, thus ignoring Clausewitz’s clear hierarchy according to which *Politik* must dominate war. It was supposedly that blind spot that allowed him to create a plan that carried immense political implications, such as the violation of Belgium’s neutrality and thus Britain’s virtually inevitable entry into the war, without consulting, much less seeking the approval of, the political leadership.<sup>108</sup>

But Schlieffen was not ignoring Clausewitz in that respect: he had followed Clausewitz closely. For, as suggested earlier, setting one fixed and universal goal to all wars – and Schlieffen, as we saw, never doubted annihilation to be that goal – had made politico-military planning altogether redundant.<sup>109</sup> It is therefore likely that Schlieffen never felt any need or obligation to share his views over his operational goals with the political agencies, since he had nothing to share: he aimed at annihilating the French army in accordance with the most well-known and deeply rooted doctrines of the Prussian-German army. And the details were obviously his commander’s prerogative and his professional domain. Schlieffen was indeed ‘the prototype of a new kind of un-political soldier’,<sup>110</sup> and neither he nor Germany’s political leaders foresaw the slippery slope that led from an artificial and complete

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<sup>108</sup> Schlieffen’s alleged indifference to the strategic consequences of a German violation of Belgium’s neutrality can be explained by his expectation, expressed in his 1904 exercise critique, that France would attempt to counterattack Germany through Belgium and Luxembourg, after a direct German attack against its fortress line on the Franco-German border. The war would therefore spill over into Belgium in any case: Zuber, ‘The Schlieffen Plan Reconsidered’, p. 286.

<sup>109</sup> Clausewitz, as mentioned earlier, set forth two contradictory notions of the objectives of war: annihilation as a universal objective, and political goals as determining military objectives that suited their needs. Yet the fact remains that Schlieffen, following Clausewitz, perceived annihilation as war’s only appropriate goal and the quintessential expression of its nature, and that his view was both a legitimate interpretation of Clausewitz’s unfinished discussion on that subject, and the interpretation prevalent in the Prusso-German army.

<sup>110</sup> Wallach, *Dogma*, p. 71.

disconnection between military planning and political needs to the subordination of politics to military requirements.

Schlieffen and his famous plan thus in no sense represented a new paradigm or concept of warfare. Schlieffen himself persistently ascribed to Clausewitz and Moltke the dominant influence over all German military thought, including his own. Yet Schlieffen's own avowals cannot suffice in deciding whether he followed Clausewitz's theory and to what extent. Individuals can be startlingly innocent about what actually influences their thinking; and the temptation to introduce innovations under a cloak of bogus consistency is ever-present, especially when challenging views as deeply rooted and traditional as the Prusso-German theory of warfare.

The answer must therefore be extracted from Schlieffen's planning and other writings. His *Dienstschriften*, his historical researches, the field service regulations of his time, and most of all, his war plan in all its many versions illustrate that Schlieffen did not suggest a new path for the German army. Schlieffen's thinking and planning contains nothing revolutionary: it represented a sensible adaptation of Clausewitz's most prescriptive rules of warfare to the modern reality of immense mass armies and electrical and electronic communications and machine-based mobility, processes that had begun during the era of Moltke the elder.<sup>111</sup>

Yet Schlieffen was no mere pale version of his predecessors. In terms of long-lasting influence his teachings were as significant as Clausewitz's and Moltke's. And his legacy, although time and again criticized by a variety of military thinkers, was perhaps even more profound in its effects.<sup>112</sup> That legacy entailed inherent fallacies:

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<sup>111</sup> Rothenberg, 'Moltke, Schlieffen', pp. 296-311.

<sup>112</sup> Basil H. Liddell Hart reported that Field Marshal Ewald von Kleist said to him after the Second World War that 'his (Clausewitz's) phrases were quoted, but his books were not closely studied . . . the writings of Schlieffen received much greater attention. They seemed

the 'tactization' of strategic planning; the striving to find an ultimate solution to Germany's military predicament, a universally and timeless formula of applied tactics that would free officers and troops from the need to think, leaving them only with the need to follow pre-planned and doubtfully relevant instructions; and finally, a fatal faith in technology as the answer to all theoretical and doctrinal paradoxes and inconsistencies. All these faults were the outcome of Schlieffen's reasonable adaptation, if not mere continuation, of Clausewitz's maxims and of Moltke's experience. They manifested themselves repeatedly in the German army's doctrines, planning, and combat practices in the years that followed Schlieffen's tenure as chief of staff.

Schlieffen's memorandum and its inner logic set forth both the fundamental understanding of war and of warfare that he bequeathed to the German army, and its inherent shortcomings. He constructed an immense and ambitious operational plan based on the delusional notion that tactical-scale combat and formulae could be duplicated and inflated in space and numbers while still remaining controlled and effective thanks to new command-and-control technologies. Thus Schlieffen, and with him his successors, became victims of their own efforts to master the conditions of Germany's military-political requirements and limits through the restrictive concepts they inherited and practiced as members of the Prussian general staff.

That same pattern persisted throughout the 1920s and culminated in German armour theory during the 1930s and the Second World War. The theoretical construct that Clausewitz had established, utilised by Moltke and subjected to massive quantitative inflation by Schlieffen, continued to serve the Prusso-German army

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more practical': Liddell Hart, *The Other Side of the Hill* (London, 1956), p. 214; see also Wallach, 'Misperceptions', pp. 215-218.

throughout its remaining existence. The irony of history reveals itself in Schlieffen's words regarding retrograde movement, in his critique of the 1897 field exercises:

This method of occupying and breaking off combat may suit a detachment, a division, in some cases an army corps, but cannot be applied to an army, consisting of four to five army corps, which cannot be observed adequately from one point. The commander-in-chief will hardly succeed in recognizing the crucial moment for retreat, even less so, in despatching the opportune marching orders to the troops and in ordering the latter to march off in due time.<sup>113</sup>

It was the German army's tragedy that Schlieffen could neither turn this critique into self-critique nor recognize its prophetic force, as a foretelling of the defeat on the Marne of his immediate successor, Helmuth von Moltke the younger, in September 1914.

### **III. Beyond Schlieffen: challenging annihilation? Erich von Falkenhayn and the strategy of attrition**

The shock of the Marne, compounded by the disastrous November 1914 breakthrough attempts in Flanders by Moltke the younger's successor as chief of general staff, Erich von Falkenhayn, might have resulted in a turning point. But German military thought obstinately refused to turn. Falkenhayn's next major project nevertheless has given rise to the claim that a 'school' that competed with annihilation-centred military thought, a school of attrition that ostensibly contested the primacy of Schlieffen's

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<sup>113</sup> Schlieffen, *Dienstschriften*, vol. 1, p. 45.

heritage in German military thought and its complete identification with the core perception of warfare in the eyes of most of its bearers. That members of the German general staff entertained various versions of *Ermattungsstrategie* on a variety of occasions seems reasonable enough. But did a 'school' of attrition exist? What did German officers mean by attrition strategy, and what were they trying to achieve by it? <sup>114</sup> In what ways did attrition, on its face value a notion contradictory to annihilation, correspond with, and even reflect, the German traditional dictum of annihilation?

### 1. Contending schools?

In order to understand just how isolated and rare were the voices that promoted attrition as a viable German strategy, it is useful to remember that their main proponent, Hans Delbrück, was a distinguished military historian but no member of the general staff. However popular he may have been as a military historian, he could never have represented a military trend, and his writings do not constitute a military 'school' <sup>115</sup> Accordingly, no prominent military figure other than Falkenhayn can be identified with the concept of attrition. And claims of the existence of an 'attrition school' competing with the army's traditional strategy of annihilation are accordingly

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<sup>114</sup> As Hew Strachan explains in his analysis of Falkenhayn's intentions, the exact meaning of the English term 'attrition' is notably amorphous. In his memorandum Falkenhayn used *verbluten* (to bleed out) at the tactical level, and *Erschöpfungskrieg* in relation to the strategy of economic exhaustion. Delbrück had used the verb *ermatten* in the pre-war debates, and *zermürben* during the war. All these are referred to here using the English word 'attrition', which does not differentiate between tactical, operational, and strategic or even grand-strategic levels (see Strachan, 'German Strategy in the First World War', in Wolfgang Elz und Sönke Neitzel, eds., *Internationale Beziehungen im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert* [Paderborn, 2003], p. 141).

<sup>115</sup> For an analysis of Delbrück's arguments and of the hostility with which the majority of German officers received them, see Robert T. Foley, *German Strategy and the Path to Verdun. Erich von Falkenhayn and the Development of Attrition* (Cambridge, 2005), pp. 38-55. For Delbrück's understanding of attrition or exhaustion strategy as deriving from Clausewitz's teachings, see Heuser, *Reading Clausewitz*, pp. 108-112.

notably restrictive: 'due to the weakness in Germany's strategic decision-making structure and to the opposition to this new concept of warfare before the war, Falkenhayn was left to develop from scratch the methods by which it could be implemented . . . in the face of opposition from within his own government and army' <sup>116</sup>

Delbrück received a fierce answer to his post-war assertions from a diehard Schlieffen supporter, the First Quartermaster General (deputy chief of the general staff) from October 1918 to September 1919, Wilhelm Groener.<sup>117</sup> Groener did not find it difficult to rebuff Delbrück's theory of attrition, and his explanation exemplified well the inherent meaning of annihilation as the categorical imperative of war, simultaneously embodying its political, economic, and military rationales, goals, and motivations, all wrapped in and reduced to a single decisive super-battle. The mainstream perception of war of the Prusso-German military elite held beyond doubt that annihilation was the requisite means as well as the sole possible goal:

Delbrück reproaches in the German general staff a dogmatic orthodoxy that refused to acknowledge any strategy not based upon the

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<sup>116</sup> Foley, *Path to Verdun*, p. 7. Foley, however, claims that an 'attrition school' did indeed exist; he painstakingly describes the various ways in which Falkenhayn's ideas were 'distorted' or, in most cases, 'overlooked'. Yet his meticulous analysis destroys his own argument: if attrition strategy was overlooked, that was clearly because it was so hugely unpopular that its supposed supporters could not even clearly explain its merits, let alone convince the rest of German officer corps. Foley concludes his discussion by suggesting that even those who agreed with Delbrück's interpretation of Clausewitz refused to associate themselves with the professor's strategic ideas (ibid., p. 53).

<sup>117</sup> See pages 76-92. On Zuber's claim that a large-scale conspiracy (of which Groener was supposedly a prominent member) of failed generals sought to forge a 'Schlieffen school' and a 'Schlieffen Plan' in order to justify their own wartime decisions, see page 76, note 13. Groener, however, like many of his colleagues, hid no shameful secrets: after the war, as before it, he and many others honestly held Schlieffen's original operational designs to be flawless, and had no reason, hidden or transparent, to lie regarding Falkenhayn's conduct, since it could not dramatically affect judgments on his own wartime strategic choices. Groener's words therefore stand as an authentic expression of general staff mainstream perceptions, and of the way that mainstream understood war and operational objectives long after the Schlieffen era.

destruction [*Niederwerfung*] of the enemy. The answer to that claim is that the *simplest* strategy was probably to trounce the French thoroughly and then leave it to political ingenuity [to find] the most advantageous manner of exploiting the resulting situation . . . So long as the French army had not been absolutely destroyed [*vernichtend geschlagen*], French policy would unquestionably have never given up the aim of reconquering the provinces lost in 1870-71.<sup>118</sup>

## **2. Germany's Verdun concept: Attrition?**

Despite passionate and widely held belief in the sovereign efficacy of annihilation, the German army under Falkenhayn nevertheless launched one of its greatest offensive battles of the First World War as a battle of attrition: Verdun. How did Falkenhayn come to rely on a concept so foreign to German military thought, what was he trying to achieve on the fireswept hills above the city on the Meuse, and how did he try to resolve the inescapable tensions between the established framework of Prusso-German military thought and his operational concept?

Falkenhayn's role was the most unfortunate and painful of all: he was the first chief of staff to face the prospect that his entire perception of reality, most basic assumptions, and fundamental truths about war – and the operational solutions stemming from those truths – were wholly irrelevant or inappropriate to the

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<sup>118</sup> Groener, undated, Bundesarchiv-Militärarchiv, Freiburg im Breisgau (henceforth BA-MA), N46-79, pp. 10-11 (emphasis in original). See also Groener's explanation of Schlieffen's rejection of attrition strategy, in which he again argued that the physical annihilation of armies was the path to the annihilation of their governments' will to fight, p. 88. For Groener's post-war analysis of Falkenhayn and of the Verdun battle, see BA-MA N46-41, N46-51.

situation.<sup>119</sup> As Groener recalled, Falkenhayn's initial operational preferences had been wholly orthodox:

Already around Christmas and New Year's Day 1914/1915 and then again after the winter battle in Masuria [in February 1915], I had spoken frequently with Falkenhayn about the prospect of a decisive blow in west or east, and had worked extensively on the problems involved in a breakthrough [battle] in the west, toward which Falkenhayn initially showed a certain inclination.<sup>120</sup>

That Falkenhayn's first and natural choice of strategy was the continuation of Schlieffen's and the younger Moltke's strategic line is well known;<sup>121</sup> so is the route he conceptualised and prepared for the all-encompassing, total mobilisation of German society by his successors, Hindenburg and Ludendorff, and for their extreme one-blow risk-taking.<sup>122</sup> Yet how do his thought and actions coincide with an alleged radical departure from the most fundamental essence of German military interpretations of the 'requirements' of 'reality'? To win the war, as orthodoxy taught, Germany must achieve decision through a single integrated battle of annihilation. And that was precisely what Falkenhayn tried to achieve at Verdun.

Contrary to the claim that he had developed an unorthodox operational concept, Falkenhayn's true display of 'outside the box' thinking was not strictly operational but

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<sup>119</sup> Holger Afflerbach, *Falkenhayn: politisches Denken und Handeln im Kaiserreich* (Munich, 1996), pp. 179-197, 198-210 and 259-265; idem, 'Planning Total War? Falkenhayn and the Battle of Verdun, 1916', in Roger Chickering and Stig Förster, eds., *Great War, Total War: Combat and Mobilisation on the Western Front, 1914-1918* (Cambridge, 2000), pp. 118-119; Foley, *Path to Verdun*, pp. 105-108; Wilhelm Deist, 'Strategy and Unlimited Warfare in Germany: Moltke, Falkenhayn, and Ludendorff', in Chickering and Förster, *Great War*, pp. 271-272; and Hull, *Absolute Destruction*, pp. 215-217.

<sup>120</sup> Groener memorandum, November 1927, BA-MA, N46-41, p. 141.

<sup>121</sup> See for instance Deist, 'Unlimited Warfare', pp. 271-272.

<sup>122</sup> Hull, *Absolute Destruction*, pp. 218-225.



strategic: his acknowledgement that Germany could not win the war militarily against all its enemies, and the realisation that his role had now been transformed: instead of total victory he needed to provide a military success that would remove one of Germany's enemies by diplomatic means. Many possible explanations exist for Falkenhayn's failure to develop his impressive and honest analysis, which in all likelihood ran counter everything his professional experience told him, into a coordinated German strategy. The most convincing one is the almost complete lack of cooperation of the chancellor, Bethmann Hollweg.<sup>123</sup> Germany's massive and ever-increasing sacrifices of lives and treasure made Bethmann and the rest of the German civil government abidingly unwilling to offer a peace agreement that either France or Russia could accept.<sup>124</sup>

There is nevertheless reason to examine whether Falkenhayn himself managed to translate his understanding of Germany's limited strategic possibilities into a new and coherent operational concept that would provide the reluctant Bethmann with room for diplomatic manoeuvre. But despite his ability to re-examine Germany's strategic situation coldly and to promote unexpectedly sober solutions, Falkenhayn failed to produce an operational design free of traditional constraints, assumptions and measurements of 'success'. And since the strategically limited goals and the correspondingly limited means of his operational plan for the battle of Verdun clashed

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<sup>123</sup> Afflerbach, 'Falkenhayn and the Battle of Verdun', pp. 118-119; Deist, 'Unlimited Warfare', pp. 272-275; and Hull, *Absolute Destruction*, p. 218. However valid this argument may be, Groener's 1935 observation on this failure of the military and political echelons to coordinate their strategic plans highlights the alacrity with which the army dropped every strategic failure on the government's doorstep: 'The hope that political resources might come to the aid of strategy becomes ever more deceptive as the hatred of [our] enemies and the productivity of their sources of [economic] strength increases. The strategy of attrition requires a great statesman even more than it does a great commander. [And] since in the [World] War we lacked either one, we achieved an acceptable outcome neither with the strategy of destruction nor with the strategy of attrition' (BA-MA N46-51, p. 89).

<sup>124</sup> See the durable analysis of Fritz Fischer, *Germany's Aims in the First World War* (New York, 1967).

with his – and the army's – conceptual axioms of unlimited annihilation, the plan was virtually destined to fail miserably.<sup>125</sup> Falkenhayn sought to knock France out of the war, and was extraordinarily willing to follow a rationale different from 'decision through annihilation', yet he could not in effect plan and execute anything but a battle of annihilation.<sup>126</sup>

More than any conceptual shortcomings, Falkenhayn's fault lay in his inability to disseminate his unusual operational thoughts and to follow his concept through to the necessary stage of tactical planning. Falkenhayn's notion of what must be achieved at Verdun was, quite naturally, interpreted by his subordinates first and foremost through the traditional framework of breakthrough leading to physical annihilation of as many enemy soldiers as possible, an interpretation Falkenhayn himself helped to reinforce by failing – like Moltke before him – to define with any clarity his operational goals before and during the battle.<sup>127</sup> And if Falkenhayn managed to break out of the boundaries of the 'Schlieffen School' – which in practice was the 'German school' – he did not transform that vision into a relevant operational plan. Presenting Falkenhayn as the champion of an altogether new framework for German military thought also ignores the operational aim he proposed to pursue through attrition: in place of a rapid and decisive annihilation battle, he planned a slow grinding decisive annihilation process on the largest scale that German resources would allow. In the end, Falkenhayn was trying to achieve the same goal that

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<sup>125</sup> For Crown Prince Rupprecht's unease about Falkenhayn's lack of faith in the plausibility of decisive victory ('How is the war supposed to end for us under these circumstances?'), see Hull, *Absolute Destruction*, p. 216.

<sup>126</sup> See also Strachan's analysis, according to which Falkenhayn did not intend or indeed plan Verdun as a battle of attrition: 'attrition was a rationalisation of failure. The purpose of the battle had been adapted to what had happened on the ground . . . by April it had become commonplace to describe the offensive on terms of attrition, and gradually even Falkenhayn himself came to explain the battle in the terms which he would later use in his memoirs' (Strachan, 'German Strategy' p. 143).

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 221.

Schlieffen had attempted, to knock France out of the war, by the same means, decisive assault to bring about an enlarged annihilation battle – this time multiplied *in time* rather than space – and without challenging any of the *Generalstab*'s axioms about the 'only' way to win wars.

Falkenhayn's subordinates, facing the task of creating a tactical plan based on his operational design, misunderstood his Verdun plan in accordance with the normative, Clausewitzian interpretation of operational goals: Verdun was to be an offensive that sought decisive annihilational results. Discussion of the sought-for breakthrough, not the goal and rationale of attrition, correspondingly played the major role in post-war reports and analysis by members of the German military elite such as Groener:<sup>128</sup>

February [1916]. Gen[eral] von Falkenhayn takes the view that any [strategic] decision must come in the west, and [that] the first step in that direction will be the attack on Verdun.

March [1916]. The defensive is and remains the stronger form of combat, and it therefore follows that frontal attacks can only be decisive if superior firepower on a *broad* front can shatter the defence both morally and physically, rather than [merely] seeking to push the defenders back here and there . . . If we are not strong enough to achieve powerful fire effects on a broad front then we must abstain from frontal attack on positions as well fortified [as these].<sup>129</sup>

Falkenhayn failed to impart the logic of his plan to its executors, in all likelihood because he himself had reconciled that logic with the common operational knowledge

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<sup>128</sup> See also Afflerbach's analysis of the broad-front attack argument with Knobelsdorf: Afflerbach, 'Falkenhayn and the Battle of Verdun', pp. 122-124.

<sup>129</sup> 'Aufzeichnungen General Groeners an die Historische Abteilung des Reichsarchiv', September 1933, BA-MA N46-41, pp. 212-215 (emphasis in original).

that he shared with his fellow officers – and to which he succumbed to in the light of the success of the initial attacks. Thus, for instance, Falkenhayn's plans left the question of taking the fortress of Verdun – a central operational goal, heavily affecting planning – unclear. That omission in turn, unfolded into operational confusion with grave results, for German 5th Army almost inevitably continued to consider the taking of the fortress a principal planning objective, with Falkenhayn himself seemingly supporting that aim when the opportunity appeared to present itself.<sup>130</sup> The discrepancy between Falkenhayn's intentions and those of his subordinates resulted in a plan in which only a large number of French casualties was accepted by all as the operational goal; a plan carried out despite its futility; and most of all a plan unstoppable simply because it delivered on its objectives – if at an unbearably high price.

The extent of misunderstanding or misinterpretation of the costs, benefits, and optimally efficient application of attrition emerges from post-war German efforts to assess its overall potentiality. Germany's wartime military leadership could conceptualise operational goals in fixed, narrow terms, and try and realise them with even less intellectual flexibility. Yet a plan that demanded new concepts, calculations, and operational and tactical conduct demanded something they could not deliver. Falkenhayn had gambled that a single daring, desperate battle would break the entire strategic stalemate, had committed a large part of Germany's dwindling fighting manpower, and in the end had held nothing back in case the gamble failed. That was not a new pattern; Falkenhayn had put his trust in mass and annihilation. And while he understood that Germany's plight called for a radically different operational concept and had sought to design his plan with non-traditional goals in mind, he failed to

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<sup>130</sup> Foley, *Path to Verdun*, pp. 197, 211-212; see also Hull, *Absolute Destruction*, pp. 220-221.

create sufficiently clear guidelines, or see to it that the officers responsible for the execution of the attack would comprehend concepts and pursue goals inherently different from those their understanding of warfighting allowed them to pursue. As Groener summed up the conventional wisdom in retrospect:

The purpose and aim – breakout from [our] ring of enemies – could never have been achieved through less than decisive successes, but only through a total victory [*vollen Sieg*] in 1914. In the later years of the war no chance of a total victory in the west was at hand. Neither Falkenhayn's battle aimed at bleeding [France] white at Verdun nor the breakthrough attempt of 1918, undertaken with insufficient forces, were suitable to overthrowing the enemy or at least making him inclined toward peace.<sup>131</sup>

The Imperial German Army – if at preposterous cost – showed itself the most efficient of the armies of the First World War in learning tactical lessons. It produced what is justifiably regarded today as a tactical revolution in military affairs, the combined armed assault by small parties of storm troops, the basis of modern infantry tactics.<sup>132</sup> Why then did the military leadership fail so thoroughly in its attempt to realise a lesser change in the army's operational and strategic planning, a change that required new precepts, but not new methods, arms, or resources? The discrepancy between the flexibility of German tactical practice and the rigidity of German operational and strategic thought illustrates the extent to which tactically-centred perceptions of warfare dominated German military culture. If tactics is all that matters on the way to victory, and if it does not produce the desired outcome, then the

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<sup>131</sup> Groener, 1935, BA-MA N46-51, p. 91.

<sup>132</sup> Timothy Lupfer, *The Dynamics of Doctrine: The Change in German Tactical Doctrine During the First World War* (Fort Leavenworth, 1981), and, for the relevant regulations, Erich Ludendorff, *Urkunden der Obersten Heeresleitung über ihre Tätigkeit 1916/18* (Berlin, 1920), 641-72.

problem is clear and the need for change is undeniable. Failures of strategy, however, are far more difficult to identify, accept, explain, or remedy. If the focus and centre of attention is somewhere else to begin with, as was the case with the German army, then mere acknowledgment that German strategic and operational assumptions might be flawed could almost by definition never gain traction. Indeed, once Falkenhayn's gamble at Verdun failed, the continued primacy of traditional operational concepts, emphases, and drives was assured. The door was now open for Hindenburg's and Ludendorff's radical interpretation of German military culture: their boundless application of the principle of 'military necessity', their limited interest in strategic planning and even in operations, and their unwavering faith in 'pure military victory' <sup>133</sup>

### **3. *Endkampf 1918: radicalisation and heroic suicide***

As the war drew to an end and Germany's predicament mutated into a rapidly spiralling military disaster, the army leadership, unable to resolve the dissonance between its conception of war, the unimaginable efforts Germany had put into that war, and the looming – and resulting – total defeat, plunged into increasingly radical interpretations of reality, and of the options that reality left to the German armed forces. The radical phase ended abruptly with Germany's 'shameful' collapse and surrender in November 1918. But that event and its impact on the hearts and minds of

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<sup>133</sup> Hull, *Absolute Destruction*, pp. 291-292. For a discussion of Ludendorff's complete subjugation of strategy and operations to tactical imperatives in Operation MICHAEL, March 1918, see Holger H. Herwig, *The First World War. Germany and Austria-Hungary 1914-1918* (London, 1997), Chapter 10; Ludendorff himself commented that 'I forbid the word "operation". We hack a hole in them. The rest will take care of itself [*das Weitere findet sich*]' : Rupprecht, Kronprinz von Bayern, *Mein Kriegstagebuch*, ed. Eugen von Frauenholz (Munich, 1929), 2:372 note. For discussion of the high command's trust in 1918 that a 'decisive' tactical victory would change the course of the entire war, see Hans Meier-Welcker, 'Die deutsche Führung an der Westfront im Frühsommer 1918', *Die Welt Als Geschichte* 21 (1961), pp. 165-168.

the military leadership shaped both German military thought and the emotional and theoretical climate in which it developed over the following twenty years. The radical phase of 1917-18 heavily affected all aspects of military thought and practice; aspects that shaped the boundaries and patterns of thought even more than the actual content of strategic and operational practices, as described in Chapters 2 and 3. The most salient 'lessons' the Prusso-German officer corps 'learned' had to do with 'truths' about politics and military strategy, truths that emerged in 1918-1919: who is serving whom, what is the ultimate goal of war, and what are the indispensable characteristics required to achieve it?

The issues surrounding the military and political conduct of war had a two-fold implication for the army's future world-view and assumptions: who was to determine the goals of war and thus, the limitations, if any, placed upon a given military effort, and whose interests – the army's or that of the civilian leadership – came first in time of war, when all strategic decisions must allegedly lie in the hands of Germany's military leadership. Here as elsewhere the experience of the Hindenburg-Ludendorff high command, especially toward the end of the war, conveniently allowed the army to hold the stick from both ends. The army was to have the final word in every political matter in which it chose to intervene, but final responsibility for subsequent failure would fall upon the civilian echelon. The army in consequence contemptuously rejected 'politics' – all aspects of state-craft that the army leadership could not clearly define as 'strategic' or as affecting operational questions – and left it to the civilians. At the same time, the denial of any possibility of a categorical split between 'politics' and military goals – since, conveniently, the army conceptualised military goals and requirements as 'national' ones – paved the way for the complete subjugation of 'politics' to the requirements of 'military necessity'. That reasoning proved to be the foundation the army's post-1918 world-view, and dictated the army's future

expectations of the civilian echelon throughout the years to come. As Ludendorff's former western front operations chief, Georg Wetzell, retrospectively explained:

The Reich government indeed had the Kaiser confirm in spring [19]18 that it bore *sole* responsibility for political leadership! General Ludendorff had [thus] consciously imposed on himself the greatest reserve in political matters vis-à-vis the Reich government. From the turn of the year [19]17/18 onward he was in any case absorbed in the military preparation of the western offensive to such an extent that the political aspects could only play a secondary role!<sup>134</sup>

That hierarchy also corresponded perfectly to the fact that the civil authority itself, be it Kaiser, civilian government, or the very sovereignty of Germany they embodied, were in the eyes of the officer corps expendable in the effort to observe and preserve the army's institutional values, as clearly demonstrated in the army's late 1918 suggestion of a death-ride by the Kaiser and a final annihilational national *Endkampf*. The 'final battle' was to take place after a few weeks of armistice, and involved desperate defensive fighting and a scorched-earth retreat that would destroy northern France, Belgium, and possibly Germany itself. Germany would thus force its enemy to offer an 'honourable peace' or – in the not unlikely event of defeat – would secure the 'honourable ending' offered by a final act of uncontrolled destruction and

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<sup>134</sup> Generalmajor Wetzell, 'Stellungnahme zu dem Entwurf einer Resolution des 4. Untersuchungsausschusses über die Ursachen des deutschen Zusammenbruchs im Jahre 1918', undated, BA-MA, RH61-134. For the most radical (and obsessive) expression of the domination of war over politics see Erich Ludendorff, *Kriegführung und Politik* (Berlin, 1922), and *Der totale Krieg* (Munich, 1935); for analysis, Roger Chickering, 'Sore Loser. Ludendorff's Total War', in Roger Chickering and Stig Förster, eds., *The Shadows of Total War: Europe, East Asia and the United States, 1919-1939* (Cambridge, 2002), pp. 161-163.



self-destruction.<sup>135</sup> As a subordinate, recalling a conversation with Ludendorff at the end of September 1918, described it:

. . . deeply shaken, I directed to him the question, ‘Excellency, if, as we must expect, unbearable [peace] conditions are imposed upon us, might your Excellency then hope along with me that a *furor teutonicus* like that I saw in August 1914 would be unleashed throughout the land, and would allow us to fight on even into utter destruction [*bis zum Untergange*]?’ His eyes blazed and he answered steadfastly and confidently, ‘I count on this, and most certainly [*ganz bestimmt*] hope for it!’<sup>136</sup>

The death-ride project, suggested by members of the general staff in October–November 1918, involved a suicidal charge by the monarch and entourage into Allied

<sup>135</sup> Hull, *Absolute Destruction*, pp. 309–320, and ‘End of the Monarchy’, pp. 250–252. For civilian projects for an *Endkampf* that called for an all-out ‘people’s war’ in September–October 1918, see Michel Geyer, ‘Insurrectionary Warfare’, p. 488. For a different analysis of the officer corps’ perceptions of and commitment to the Kaiser see Johannes Hürter, *Hitlers Heerführer. Die deutschen Oberbefehlshaber im Krieg gegen die Sowjetunion 1941–42*. (Munich, 2006), pp. 60–61. In examining the ‘ethos and politics’ of a group of young officers who later became the leaders of Hitler’s eastern armies, Hürter accepts at face value declarations such as Erich von Manstein’s fond evocation of ‘de[r] Begriff des “Königlichen Dienstes”’. But that interpretation fails to explain the gap between the declared value of total loyalty to the Kaiser and actual behaviour – the project of ‘expending’ the Kaiser in a death ride, as an example to the German people. Hürter later links the centrality of the civil-military leader, as previously embodied in loyalty to the Kaiser, to the persistent cooperation and personal loyalty of the officer corps to Hitler.

Alan Kramer offers an altogether different analysis, and a critique of Hull’s thesis that German destructiveness stands out; he claims that Germany was not unique in treating soldiers and civilians alike as expendable during the First World War (Alan Kramer, *Dynamic of Destruction. Culture and Mass killing in the First World War* [Oxford, 2007], pp. 114–158). However, Kramer’s methodology, which for instance leads him to compare German actions favourably with the efforts of the Turkish authorities to exterminate the Armenian minority, is flawed. Kramer fails to take into account the very different levels of socio-economic development of the two societies (German atrocities were committed by a modern, Western, and supposedly civilised nation-in-arms, not a despotic Middle Eastern empire, and thus demonstrate German uniqueness among modern states), to confront the German advisory role in the Armenian genocide (which Hull explores in detail), and above all to recognise that the most unique feature of German performance in 1914–18 was *self-destruction*; in terms of self-destructive spirit, planning, and dedication, no other national entity in Europe approached Germany’s performance in the first half of the twentieth century.

<sup>136</sup> Ernst von Eisenhart Rothe, *Im Banne der Persönlichkeit. Aus den Lebenserinnerungen des Generals der Infanterie a.D. E. v. Eisenhart Rothe* (Berlin, 1931), pp. 122–123; the author dates the conversation to 29 September 1918.

artillery and machine-gun fire – an outcome that would offer an inspiring example to the German troops and public and would rid Germany of its Kaiser without the need for an embarrassing abdication process.<sup>137</sup> That concept was the ultimate expression of the extremes of which German military culture was capable: self-annihilation if annihilation of the enemy proved impossible; the belief that a final sacrificial gesture would break Germany's run of defeat – victory or death. But the death-ride idea also demonstrated the army's basic assumption regarding who was serving whom: the Kaiser – the symbol of German sovereignty – was to sacrifice himself on behalf of military values, and not the other way around.

Both the notion of *Endkampf* and of the Kaiser's death-ride thus illustrate the Imperial German Army's conceptual framework in the final months of the war; pressed to the wall, the officer corps expressed with ruthless clarity its fundamental beliefs and hierarchies of values. Nothing was more important than upholding military honour, which the army equated with national honour, even if that entailed destroying the German people and state in a scorched-earth battle of national suicide, or sacrificing Germany's monarch, its symbol of sovereignty – or all three. Those convictions evolved further in the future; although circumstances had prevented its realisation, the concept of *Endkampf* and other initiatives born from the desperation and radicalisation of the final phases of the war and from the imperative to salvage German honour 'profoundly changed the German military's outlook on war and warfare . . . [and] opened new horizons'.<sup>138</sup>

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<sup>137</sup> Hull, 'End of the Monarchy', pp. 253-258.

<sup>138</sup> Geyer, 'Insurrectionary Warfare', p. 488.

## Conclusion

New horizons indeed soon presented themselves. But other assumptions regarding war – the reasons for Germany’s failure in the World War, and the salient factor that must be carefully nurtured to prevent similar future failures – were not new at all. That factor conveniently served both as explanation of military disaster while relieving the army of any responsibility, and offered the promise of future success: German *Geist*. The spirit of the people ought to transcend and compensate for any and all inferiorities in materiel; for as Germany’s situation deteriorated its military leadership’s faith in the omnipotent power of *Geist* had grown:

Even in 1918 the German army high command believed that it could bring to bear the German spiritual superiority [*geistige Überlegenheit*] of the instrument entrusted to it . . . The high command counterposed the rigid, artificially organised materiel-breakthrough-attack of the enemy to the *attack of German troops and leaders thinking and acting on their own initiative, in other words: with Geist over materiel!*<sup>139</sup>

Alongside operational perceptions and practices developed before and during the First World War, the state of mind of Germany’s military leadership in the final, extreme phases of the war, a state of mind that revealed the most fundamental assumptions of the officer corps regarding strategy, warfighting, and war aims, had eventually stripped Germany’s military machine of any goals or motivations but the will to fight to the end. That proved a powerful and enduring legacy to German interwar military thought.

Accepted wisdom quite naturally assumes that the experience of the World War provided the mental framework that henceforth determined the German army’s

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<sup>139</sup> Wetzell, ‘Stellungnahme’, BA-MA, RH61-134 (emphasis in original).

conduct, its assumptions about internal politics, international affairs, economics, military power, effective doctrine, effective operational concepts, optimum force structures and all other facets of theory and conduct within the scope of interest of military organisations.<sup>140</sup> The assumption that the war had deep and comprehensive effects is of course correct. Yet a more useful question regarding the effects of the World War on the German army would be to ask what kind of ‘lessons’ did the army draw from the war in the light of what its leaders held to be the ‘truth’ about the war and its aftermath? How did the army explain to itself the events and outcomes of the war, and how did those perceptions lead to conceptual change, if indeed change took place?

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<sup>140</sup> See for example Deist’s assertion that ‘For the Reichswehr, the First World War and its results, the treaty of Versailles, were the points of reference for all actions and planning’: Deist, ‘Reichswehr’, p. 375.

## Chapter 2

### The 1920s: The road most travelled

In the turbulent and even chaotic reality that surrounded the Reichswehr immediately after the end of the war, powerful self-deception inflicted daunting difficulties on its leadership. The alternative, imagined history it told itself, the politicians, and the German nation about the reasons for its defeat, and the unbridgeable discrepancy between its self-perception and the Treaty “dwarf-army” that it had become, hampered and ultimately prevented effective analysis of the errors that had produced the disaster of the World War. At the same time Germany’s mounting security problems called for rapid response. The army was required to produce the best answer it could to unknown challenges while suffering from unprecedented weakness. Unsettled eras and tectonic transitions often force organisations to transform their cultural norms, abandoning assumptions that have become irrelevant and patterns rendered obsolete by new realities.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, the Reichswehr’s attempts to address the new challenges it faced indicated a strong persistence of the army’s traditional ways of thinking, despite their incompatibility both with external realities and with the army’s conscious and reflective efforts to amend and renew its organisational framework and doctrine.

The very *raison d’être* of the Reichswehr was put to the test in the post-Versailles years. Could the German armed forces find ways to defend Germany? What had caused failure in the World War – and should therefore be avoided or changed?

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<sup>1</sup> Swidler, ‘Culture in Action’, pp. 278-284.

Contrary to previous analyses, the strategic and military solutions debated in Germany throughout the 1920s suggest that very little had changed in the army's operational thinking, in its self-perception, in its basic goals, and in its perceived role. They all carried the unmistakable trademarks of the Imperial German Army: the traditional, simplistic set of assumptions regarding the nature of Germany's security challenges, and the 'proven', 'effective', and 'pragmatic' ways to tackle them. Tragically, the Reichswehr's unchanged organisational response to new realities was veiled by its best intentions of renewal and regeneration; so deeply embedded was this self-deception that some of the contending groups are still described as nothing less than 'revisionists'.<sup>2</sup>

Three allegedly distinct perceptions of war emerged within military circles during the 1920s.<sup>3</sup> One evolved around the Reich defence minister, Wilhelm Groener;<sup>4</sup> another around Joachim von Stülpnagel, chief of the operations department (T1) of the camouflaged general staff or *Truppenamt*,<sup>5</sup> and a third, probably the most popular and widely accepted among the members of the officer corps, centred on the first chief of the *Truppenamt* (army chief of staff) and commander-in-chief of the army (*Chef der Heeresleitung*) Hans von Seeckt.<sup>6</sup> All three strove to alter Germany's strategic position radically, and ultimately offered a military path as the only viable

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<sup>2</sup> Geyer, *Aufrüstung*, pp. 76-97.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 228. Geyer identifies them as three successive trends of thought; see also Geoffrey P. Megargee, *Inside Hitler's High Command* (Lawrence, 2000), pp. 14-15.

<sup>4</sup> See Johannes Hürter, *Wilhelm Groener, Reichswehrminister am Ende der Weimarer Republik 1928-1932* (Munich 1993), and Wilhelm Groener, *Lebenserinnerungen, Jugend, Generalstab, Weltkrieg* (Göttingen, 1957).

<sup>5</sup> Wilhelm Deist, 'The Rearmament of the Wehrmacht: the Reichswehr and National Defence', *Germany and the Second World War*, vol. 1 (Oxford, New York, 1990), p. 377. For the structure of the German High Command 1920-1935 see Megargee, *High Command*, p. 4.

<sup>6</sup> Hans Meier-Welcker, *Seeckt* (Frankfurt am Main, 1967); Friedrich von Rabenau, *Hans von Seeckt. Aus seinem Leben 1918-1936* (Leipzig, 1941); and Hans von Seeckt, *Gedanken eines Soldaten* (Berlin, 1929).

way for Germany to recover from its humiliating defeat. All tried to answer the same alleged threats: a weak, disarmed Germany, exposed and vulnerable to a Polish or Franco-Polish attack.<sup>7</sup> All three ranged within a shared terrain of strategic logic and assumptions. And all three, despite what might seem radically different and even antithetical operational reasoning, ultimately abided by the rooted tendencies long displayed, and tested to destruction in 1914–18, by the Imperial German Army.

These included the perception of war as the only way to solve political problems and to maintain or elevate national prestige; a deterministic approach to future scenarios; a strategic short-sightedness that imposed upon all decisions an operational and tactical rather than strategic frame of thought, and that pitilessly subordinated all facets of civilian life to ‘military necessity’; extreme risk-taking coupled with the concentration of all forces on a single decisive effort, an approach incarnated in the long-held ideal of the battle of annihilation; and a willingness to sacrifice everything, including the very government that they served, for the sake of an ‘honourable’ – if potentially suicidal – outcome.<sup>8</sup> Above all, the three military figures discussed demonstrated a shared, rooted and even conscious pattern of detachment from reality, in their assessments of military capabilities, in their strategic and operational planning, and in their projection of future political and strategic possibilities.

The conscious efforts of Groener, Seeckt, and Stülpnagel to break with traditional patterns – for all declared these patterns irrelevant to Germany’s current predicament – thus bore little fruit. The three approaches discussed in this chapter

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<sup>7</sup> This analysis of security threats indicates, more than anything else, the state of mind of its authors. A hostile France, so the Germans assumed, would always fall back on military methods, since diplomatic and political means – the Versailles ‘Diktat’ – could not conceivably satisfy its allegedly rapacious goals.

<sup>8</sup> For these characteristics of the Wilhelmine army see Hull, *Military Culture*, pp. 257–258.

demonstrate the pervasive effect and uncanny longevity of German military organisational culture. All three were seemingly radically different from one other and brilliantly groundbreaking. But underneath the modern, revolutionary wording and intentions lay the operational logic, imperatives, and values of the 'old army'. The planners and thinkers of the Reichswehr thus proved unable to distance themselves from the patterns they had inherited, and were strikingly unaware of their failure – remaining convinced that they were engaged in a successful effort to reshape, and for some, to revolutionise, the army's intellectual and doctrinal framework.

The three military visions this chapter offers are not discussed in their order of appearance in the 1920s, but rather in reverse order: first Groener, allegedly the thinker who represents the greatest challenge to any claims of continuity and rigidity; then Stülpnagel, a supposedly uniquely radical practitioner; and finally Seeckt, who is considered by scholars as a traditionalist, and is discussed here as the officer who dominated the refounded army's thought and conduct, and shared in its most basic cultural characteristics. That order of presentation corresponds to the cognitive evolution of German military thought: not a linear one of 'sedimentation' or 'incremental' evolution, in which every step necessarily sprang from a previous, less-developed theoretical foundation, but a 'branching' evolution, in which the three theories, although naturally influenced and to some extent triggered by each other, all sprang independently and directly from the same body of knowledge and set of shared assumptions, as responses to differing perceptions of reality and of its requirements.

This chapter will examine the salient ideas of the three schools through studies, official documents and military manuals. Among the parameters discussed will be the perception of the desired relations between politics and strategy, as expressed directly and indirectly through operational proposals; the reasoning about and understanding of past failures and successes; and the operational and strategic



lessons drawn from these experiences. The discussion will also include an examination of the three schools' analyses of Germany's current threats and of possible or appropriate ways of facing them; the shape of the future army they advocated, and of its possible tasks; and other ideas that reveal unspoken assumptions and adherence to, or breaks with, inherited operational patterns.

### I. Wilhelm Groener

Wilhelm Groener served as the First Quartermaster General (deputy chief of the general staff) from October 1918 to September 1919, transport minister from 1920 to 1923, and defence minister from 1928 to 1932. Groener's ideas, plans and concepts as defence minister have singled him out in the eyes of scholars as a 'strategist', a moderate and sober military planner. He is often described as the leader in a pioneering learning process within the army that subordinated strategy (and thus operational planning) to political requirements.<sup>9</sup> Scholars have gone so far as to identify a 'circle' that shared his views, usually linking him with Schleicher<sup>10</sup> and the

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<sup>9</sup> Megargee, *High Command*, pp. 12-16; Murray, *German Military Effectiveness*, pp. 1-38; Wilhelm Deist, 'Rearmament of the Wehrmacht', pp. 375-404; idem, 'The Road to Ideological War: Germany 1918-1945' in Williamson Murray, MacGregor Knox, and Alvin Bernstein, eds., *The Making of Strategy* (Cambridge, 1994) pp. 352-392; idem, "'Blitzkrieg" or Total War? War Preparations in Nazi Germany' in Chickering and Förster, eds., *Shadows of Total War*, pp. 271-284; Michael Geyer, 'German Strategy in the Age of Machine Warfare 1914-1945', in Paret, ed., *Makers of Modern Strategy*, pp. 527-579; idem, 'The Dynamics of Military Revisionism in the Interwar Years. Military Politics between Rearmament and Diplomacy' in Deist, ed., *The German Military in the Age of Total War*, pp. 100-151; idem, *Aufrüstung oder Sicherheit*, pp. 76-112, 189-228. See also Gaines Post, *The Civil-Military Fabric of Weimar Foreign Policy* (Princeton, 1973), and Harold J. Gordon, *The Reichswehr and the German Republic, 1919-1926* (Princeton 1957).

<sup>10</sup> Groener was Schleicher's patron and personal friend; the two had shared interests, if not always world-views, until the rift in their relationship in November 1932. For their correspondence, see BA-MA N46-145.

*Ministeramt*, the Reichswehr's political office.<sup>11</sup> As defence minister, Groener strove for international agreement over arms control as means of circumventing Germany's security quandary, and of achieving a new comprehensive military-political design based on the stabilisation of Europe. He stressed that strategy served politics, and placed economic factors at the core of strategic planning.<sup>12</sup> Such views were indeed foreign to German military traditions, and were thus understandably branded as new and even revolutionary.

Nevertheless, a realistic assessment of the influence that Groener's allegedly ground-breaking concepts had on interwar German military perceptions and conduct should clarify a number of fundamental issues. The first is the precise nature of Groener's military vision and objectives before he became a member of the government, that is, before his primarily civilian duties redefined his frame of thought; the second is the nature and extent of his influence over military thinking and planning within the army during his tenure as defence minister. A sober look at Groener's prolific writings reveals his thoroughgoing concurrence with traditional notions. And careful analysis of the studies, plans, and doctrinal documents produced within the army during his tenure reveals how very few of them seem to bear his (and Schleicher's) fingerprints. There is therefore room to doubt not only the novelty of his ideas but also their overall effect on the development of military thought in the Reichswehr in the late 1920s and early 1930s.

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<sup>11</sup> The Reichswehr's political office was not part of the general staff, which adds to the difficulty of assessing the extent to which the majority of general staff officers shared or supported any of the views Groener sought to promote.

<sup>12</sup> Geyer, 'Dynamics of Military Revisionism', pp. 104-116, and 'German Strategy', pp. 560-565.

### 1. Groener the Soldier: 1919–1928

A natural departure point for any discussion on Groener's military *Weltanschauung* is his understanding and explanation of the army's defeat in the First World War – a defeat that placed in question the army's self-image and reputation. His reasoning is particularly revealing since it exposes the beliefs, assumptions, and frameworks that determined the core of his future strategy and provided the guidelines for ensuring that Germany's past mistakes would not be repeated. Groener wrote extensively about the war and was a self-declared 'enthusiastic supporter of the teachings of Count Schlieffen',<sup>13</sup> of whom he wrote unguardedly that 'When you read Schlieffen's 1905 *Denkschrift*, it is enough to make you cry out of rage and shame over our stupidity in 1914. If the leadership had not memorised it, they needed only to have put this breviary for victory in their pocket and then pull it out!'<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Groener, 'Die Entwicklung des Operativen Gedankens im Zweifrontenkrieg von 1871 bis 1914', October 1919, BA-MA N46/41, translated and quoted in Terence Zuber, *German War Planning, 1891-1914, Sources and Interpretations*, (Woodbridge, Rochester 2004) pp. 246-257. In this otherwise useful resource book, Zuber postulates the existence of a large-scale conspiracy of high-ranking officers from the 'Schlieffen school' committed to altering and distorting the history of the war. Their efforts were supposedly two-fold: to prove their teacher and his alleged Plan right, and to make sure that his name would not be linked with offensive failure in France. The shared cultural assumptions of the entire army elite make Zuber's exercise redundant. No 'Schlieffen school' could have existed – for no other 'school' competed with its widely held operational views. Most critical voices in the army attacked not Schlieffen's operational rationale, but rather the manner in which it had been implemented – not because they were trying to hide some shameful secret, but because they truly believed in the principles that the plan had expressed. Furthermore, Groener could have simply avoided referring to the matter altogether, as he successfully did with regard to his role in the abdication of the Kaiser; see for instance his letter to Stülpnagel from November 1925, explaining the events of 29-30 October 1918 and suggesting: 'It would now be best if humanity could finally put its mind to rest over all these past matters, and leave them to future historical specialists [*zünftigen Geschichtsforschern*].' BA-MA N46-79. The fact that Groener dedicated most of his studies and writings after the war to the Plan suggests that he believed in its value, as part of his overall military world-view. For more on Zuber, see Chapter 1, note 117.

<sup>14</sup> Quoted in Zuber, *War Planning*, p. 253.

Groener was personally linked to the 1914 warplan and was among those responsible for its execution.<sup>15</sup> As the head of the Rail Section in the General Staff in 1914 he possessed detailed knowledge of the Schlieffen plan and a vast understanding of its operational concept. According to Groener's own testimony, his unit played an important role in planning 'rail operations'.<sup>16</sup> Moreover, the fact that Groener – highly articulate and always happy to explain the logic of his thinking – felt no need to explain Schlieffen's operational thought in his studies indicates that he assumed the essence of the Plan to be well known to his readers.

Groener had, of course, many personal reasons to present himself as a loyal follower of Schlieffen, and overriding professional ones, shared throughout the officer corps, for shielding the army from blame and responsibility for the catastrophe that it had inflicted on Germany.<sup>17</sup> However, regardless of whether he might have gained political advantage by presenting the war as a huge deviation from Schlieffen's plan, Groener was clearly a true believer in the military value of the Plan, and in the strategic and operational rationale that it embodied. He was devoted to the officer corps, to the values for which it stood, and to their preservation. And he was adamant on the need to serve and maintain them.<sup>18</sup> As he elaborated in his memoirs, he spared no effort during the summer of 1919 to prevent the destruction of the power and

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<sup>15</sup> Groener was also familiar with the Plan's earlier versions (1905, 1912); see for instance BA-MA N46-40 and BA-MA N46-50. Zuber's claim in *German War Planning* that Groener's understanding of the actual plan and of its concept was weak is therefore questionable.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., p. 253.

<sup>17</sup> Groener, as First Quartermaster General, was the de facto head of the German army in October 1918; he played a decisive role both in the Kaiser's abdication and in the army's attempts to maintain its political position within the new regime.

<sup>18</sup> In a meeting in January 1919 on ways that the officer corps might '... commit its entire energy ... to building up army and Fatherland anew', Groener told Stülpnagel 'If they take my epaulettes away, I shall depart – and return, in another uniform entirely, after the [constituent] National Assembly': Heinz Hürten, ed., *Zwischen Revolution und Kapp-Putsch* (Düsseldorf, 1977), p. 48.

values of the *Generalstab*: ‘The most important point of all was that the *spirit* [*Geist*] that had dominated it, and the work that it had accomplished, should be preserved’.<sup>19</sup>

Groener never abandoned basic Wilhelmine operational logic nor the view that the officer corps stood above political restraints and at the centre of political decision-making.<sup>20</sup> It was Groener who attempted to establish teams of ‘mobile war commissars’ of low- and mid-ranking officers to supervise crisis management and to function as district commissars for ‘the civilian population’, who, especially among the young, had experienced a ‘reawakening of military spirit and soldierly sentiment’, as well as for the purpose of ‘practical exercise’.<sup>21</sup> Typically, Groener was never able to acknowledge the evident shortcomings of these notions.<sup>22</sup>

For all his later careful conjunction of strategy with political considerations, even Groener absentmindedly confused this supposedly equal relationship when analysing the World War. In an attempt to defend his great teacher’s operational decisions he challenged the assumptions of a critical study of the Plan, submitted to him in 1919:

‘what intent is the *Denkschrift* pursuing? Is it merely to establish the cold historical basis of how the operational concept developed, or should it

<sup>19</sup> Groener, *Lebenserinnerungen*, p. 516.

<sup>20</sup> In that spirit, he took the liberty of urging Ebert – in a memorandum of January 1919 – that the opportunity ‘to realize the German vision of a powerful Reich with a strong central authority embracing all the German tribes, of a sort that had not existed since Charlemagne, must under all circumstances be exploited. The German [constituent] National Assembly must in this regard compel the individual federal states to do its will’ (Groener to Ebert, 27 January 1919, in Hürten, *Zwischen Revolution und Kapp-Putsch*, p. 53).

<sup>21</sup> Groener, *Lebenserinnerungen*, p. 516.

<sup>22</sup> In his bid to explain what went so horribly wrong in 1914, Groener warned that ‘due to lack of healthy scepticism in the *Oberste Heeresleitung*, self-deception crept even more easily into their heads and increased the danger [of a blurred operational concept]’ (quoted in Zuber, *War Planning*, p. 247). But Groener himself was unable to show much scepticism when examining truths so transparently obvious.

demonstrate the military necessity of marching through Belgium as the prerequisite for victory in a two-front war? . . . After . . . [the] Chancellor failed here, the most important thing was solely to break the ring that has been created politically through military means, at a time that was the most favourable for us . . .<sup>23</sup>

As for the correlation between political ends and military means, even more revealing is Groener's comment on the assumption that Moltke the younger had altered Schlieffen's planning, since he had thought that the plan was suitable only for a one-front war: 'The political situation could have been anything you like: there was no other way to conduct the offensive against France and Britain than the one recommended by Schlieffen'.<sup>24</sup> To the suggestion that the political situation had become more dangerous and thus less accommodating to Schlieffen's bold strategy he replied impatiently that 'it was therefore even more necessary to remain true to the operational concept on which the offensive in the west was based . . .'<sup>25</sup> Groener thus still adhered not only to Schlieffen's operational teachings but also to his – and the German army's – tendency toward bold decisive gambles justified as 'the only way' to fight a successful war.

Groener's view of the true relationship and hierarchy of politics and strategy was manifested in his comment on the concept of the surprise attack on Liège executed in August 1914:

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<sup>23</sup> Groener, *Lebenserinnerungen*, pp. 248-249. Groener also explained here why Moltke's initial intention, to attack in the east and defend in the west, was mistaken. A rapid French mobilisation and deployment, facilitated by the French rail net, and the possibility of a prolonged campaign in the east with serious political consequences, ruled that contingency out.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 254.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 255.

Politically, this plan had serious consequences. The *coup de main* had to be conducted at once during the first days [of mobilisation], the wound-up clock had to run smoothly. The statesman was shoved aside precisely in the days in which policies in the Bismarckian sense would have been in the position to push the responsibility for the declaration of war and being the first to enter Belgian terrain onto the enemy. Entering Holland according to Schlieffen's plan left time for the diplomatic prelude to the war. However, Bethmann, Jagow and co. would not have been able to pull it off.<sup>26</sup>

And in response to the idea that by merely waiting, Germany might have induced France, who was under pressure from its Russian ally, to attack first: *'by this line of reasoning, because we took the military initiative in 1914, we could be held responsible for causing the war'*<sup>27</sup>

The relationship between strategy (operations would be the more appropriate term here) and politics depicted by Groener is clear: operational demands determine all else. Schlieffen had allegedly been wise enough to ease the diplomatic task, since, according to Groener, the violation of Holland's neutrality was not as grave a political mistake as violating Belgium's, presumably due to absence of a treaty of guarantee that Britain had signed. All in all, Groener assumed that German diplomacy had to find ways to serve military demands, and not vice versa. His second remark indicates that he could not possibly have understood that 'taking the military initiative' at the expense of any of Germany's neutral neighbours would have meant – and in 1914 did indeed mean – instant responsibility for 'causing the war'

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., p. 256.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., p. 251.

His comment also corresponded to a traditionally distorted and one-dimensional understanding of Germany's overall interests, seen solely through the lens of military necessity with tautological reasoning as the inevitable result. In that respect, another of Groener's comments from a later study, arguing that 'Schlieffen's plan was the summit of the military art and the most brilliant policy [*höchsten Kriegskunst und klarste Politik*]' was most revealing, as was his insistence that the alleged fact that 'the plan only achieved implementation in weakened form was the greatest political error ever committed'.<sup>28</sup> It suggests that Groener, like many other German officers, naturally attributed the ultimate responsibility for both the 'art of war' and 'politics' to one man: the supreme commander of the army. Embedded in Groener's mind was the assumption that the 'art of war' was superior to 'politics', that it overrode political limitations and swept aside diplomatic manoeuvring.<sup>29</sup> Groener thus smugly reinforced the army's self-imposed misunderstanding that its own 1914–18 mistakes had been made by others – '*Bethmann, Jagow and co.*'.<sup>30</sup> The hidden lesson, logically, was that only by leaving politics to army leaders of genius, in accordance with Prusso-German tradition, could Germany achieve victory in its next war.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Groener, 'Politik und Kriegführung', W10/50125.

<sup>29</sup> Groener's studies of the Great War are imbued with this assumption; he repeatedly stressed that Schlieffen's plan was *politically* wise, since it promised a swift annihilation of the French army and thus a speedy end to the war – a political goal that ostensibly overrode the political disadvantages of breaching Belgian neutrality and of provoking British intervention (see for instance BA-MA N46-40).

<sup>30</sup> Zuber, *War Planning*, p. 248.

<sup>31</sup> In 'Politik und Kriegführung' (W10/50125), Groener examined figures whom in his view embodied both politician and military leader: Frederick the Great, Napoleon and, of course, Schlieffen.



The same insistence on the primacy of military considerations even surfaced when Groener absentmindedly admitted that the plan had in fact been politically unwise:

In the situation actually created by the political encirclement of Germany, no [merely] political operational plan would have served. Time was up [for any such solution], [and] in war no supreme commander [*Feldherr*] could seek anything other than to break the ring unhesitatingly at an appropriate point, that is, in the west, with an exceedingly powerful [*übermässig*] offensive.<sup>32</sup>

As late as 1927 Groener was thus willing to push political limitations aside when time was of the essence; the nine years during which the Schlieffen plan served as the army's preferred war plan seemed to have provided insufficient time for producing a '*politischen Operationsplan*'

Groener also never abandoned the operational formula of a single decisive battle as the sole key to victory, however risky the gamble such a course might entail. He consistently claimed that the only way to end the World War was by achieving 'full' victory in 1914; the alternative concepts employed later, be it attrition at Verdun or breakthrough in 1918, could not promise the overwhelming results of Schlieffen's purportedly infallible decisive battle of annihilation.<sup>33</sup> In his comments from 1919 on Waldersee's pre-war suggestion of a preliminary short offensive in the east he wrote: 'As an operational concept, isn't this a half-measure?'<sup>34</sup> The only full or genuinely effective measure must naturally be the annihilation of the French army, the sole operational outcome that could determine the war's course. He stressed that 'A *great*

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<sup>32</sup> A study from 1927: BA-MA N46-80.

<sup>33</sup> BA-MA N46-51, pp. 88-91.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 250.

victory [would be achieved] only through a *very strong* right wing'.<sup>35</sup> In a display of impatience he dismissed the assumption that Moltke the Younger did not intend to achieve 'complete destruction' but 'the most complete victory as possible . . . in order to gain some breathing space', with a short-tempered remark: 'This appears to me to be a too far-reaching assumption. What do you call "the most complete victory as possible"? An "ordinary" victory, one that sacrifices the decisive effect of the operational concept?'<sup>36</sup>

In an extensive study apparently drafted in 1927–28, Groener unquestioningly presented the decisive battle as the only possible operational goal. But since he deemed it currently unattainable, Germany should abstain from war until it would be able to use such methods again.<sup>37</sup> Even his writings about future war from late 1928 onward, after he had become defence minister, reveal that his trust in tanks and modern technology stemmed from their supposed virtues in achieving the axiomatic early decisive battle.<sup>38</sup> Groener's unpublished notes elaborate his claim that modern technology immensely increased numbers, formations, and armaments, thus making concentric movement leading to annihilation possible once more.<sup>39</sup>

Groener's immediate post-war writings also made clear that the World War had strengthened not merely his military convictions but also an underlying world-view widely shared in German military – and civilian – circles: Pacifism is without a doubt [just] such a sterile belief [*unfruchtbarer Gedanke*], for it goes against the

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid., p. 254.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., p. 254.

<sup>37</sup> 'Bedeutung der modernen Wirtschaft für die Strategie', in Dorothea Fensch and Olaf Groehler, 'Imperialistische Ökonomie und militärische Strategie. Eine Denkschrift Wilhelm Groeners', *Zeitschrift für Geschichtswissenschaft* 19:3 (1971), pp. 1171-1172.

<sup>38</sup> BA-MA N46-148, 73, pp. 54-56.

<sup>39</sup> BA-MA N46-73, p. 46.

nature of the life-process. Only *Kampf* is eternal',<sup>40</sup> he wrote in 1919. Germany's task was therefore clear: 'I saw our foremost task as immediate engagement in battle against the Treaty of Versailles'.<sup>41</sup> Since Germany was stripped of its military assets and could not fight the Treaty by force, the means to bring the change must be diplomatic, the use or abuse of the League of Nations. Restoring Germany's military might was so essential that Groener stressed it several times in a major memorandum of August 1919: 'We must pursue only *one* task, energetically, tenaciously, and with all [conceivable] means: the revision of the Versailles settlement'.<sup>42</sup> Throughout the decade that followed, Groener devoted himself to that mission. What made him different from others dedicated to the same goal was his ever-growing willingness to leave much of the task in the hands of diplomats using peaceful legal measures.

Ultimately, according to Groener, deviation from Schlieffen's planning had brought about the critical failure of 1914. Yet he also realised that a different malfunction had made ultimate disaster certain, and, conveniently enough, that failure was not within the army's area of responsibility: economic planning and mobilisation. Unlike his stubborn adherence to traditional operational concepts, in this case he recognised the necessity for change. In his study of 'strategic implications of the modern economy' of 1927–28, Groener elaborated his analysis of Germany's strategic possibilities in light of its economic shortcomings and of modern economics.<sup>43</sup> He stressed the indispensability of an economically defined conduct of war; for Germany in particular it was a prerequisite for success. It was the *Stellungskrieg* that had doomed Germany in the World War: economic weakness required speedy victory.

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<sup>40</sup> Groener, *Lebenserinnerungen*, pp. 517-18.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 517. Groener is referring here to the summer of 1919.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 517-518 (emphasis in original).

<sup>43</sup> 'Bedeutung der modernen Wirtschaft', pp. 1170-1177; see also Groener's notes for this same article, BA-MA N46-73.

'Only movement leads to victory',<sup>44</sup> since a war of movement was the only kind that would not exhaust Germany's resources.<sup>45</sup> In any case, Groener argued, Germany must radically change its attitude toward economic preconditions, the key to future success. Only far-reaching economic preparations could sustain war, and a new war of attrition would require a mass army, advanced technology, and immense endurance on the part of civil society.<sup>46</sup> According to Groener, the German leadership in 1914 had evidently ignored these imperatives, and had thus predetermined the war's outcome, despite Schlieffen's best intentions and awe-inspiring brilliance.

A superficial reading of Groener's study would no doubt deem it an important contribution to German military thought, a voice of reason expanding the scope of strategic considerations and thus, perhaps, introducing the German army to a more comprehensive and genuinely strategic approach toward military planning. But Groener, the officer who had allegedly departed most radically from the army's established beliefs, proved unable to free himself from the chains of his own military culture. His persistent analysis of the purported true cause of the failure in the World War; his suggestions as to what kind of war Germany should wage under its overwhelming post-1918 economic constraints; and his conclusions regarding the qualities required if Germany was to recover its position as the dominant European power all evidenced the same shortcomings and patterns that had plagued German military thought throughout the previous two decades.

Groener's fundamental assumption that Germany was economically incapable of fighting prolonged wars was not new to German military planners, and had never before led them to prefer non-military solutions or to doubt the centrality of force.

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<sup>44</sup> Handwritten study, not dated, BA-MA N46-44, 46.

<sup>45</sup> 'Bedeutung der modernen Wirtschaft', p. 1174.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1175.

Indeed, as Groener himself stressed, Schlieffen had understood the importance of economic considerations and, according to Groener, had built his entire strategy on accommodating their demands.<sup>47</sup> Groener, however, went further by asserting that the connection between strategy and the economy went both ways: it both defined the shape of war and was defined by it. Germany's wars could therefore never hinge around border questions alone; they must also express and maintain its position as an economic superpower. Economic warfare was as important as the clash of arms.<sup>48</sup>

That might have been an important lesson for the Reichswehr to assimilate, especially in light of its operational and armaments planning from 1923 onward, which was and remained dangerously detached from strategic reality. However, the essential connections between strategy and economics that Groener drew from his analysis of the World War were surprisingly self-evident, superficial and banal, and did not manifest any deeper recognition of truths or implications as yet unknown to German military planners: the correlation between strategy and economics had a bearing on war aims; modern mass armies required the reorganisation of production to facilitate war, in order to provide personnel and munitions, despite the ever-increasing difficulties that task imposed on the economy; armament and munitions production was especially burdensome; geography was an important factor, and so on.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> See Chapter 1. It is interesting to note that Groener, faithful to Schlieffen's legacy, also used this opportunity to defend Schlieffen's operational departure from Moltke the elder's plans as a consequence of Schlieffen's respect for economic considerations. According to Groener, Moltke's plan for a defensive war in the west was unthinkable in a post-agrarian Germany, since the industrialized west could not be endangered by setting the *Entscheidungsschlacht* (decisive battle) there. Hidden within this ostensibly sensible strategic rationale was yet another example of the primacy of 'decisive battle' to which virtually all German officers subscribed (ibid., p. 1173).

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., p. 1171.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., pp. 1172-1175. See also his letter to Stülpnagel of February 1925, warning that war against England and the United States was destined to become yet another satanic *Stellungskrieg* because of their economic and technological power (BA-MA N46-42).

At the heart of Groener's strategic analysis stood his call for a strong economy that would be able to sustain a well-equipped army capable of conducting massive and decisive operations.<sup>50</sup> The economic core was intrinsically connected to Groener's operational vision as well. In terms of actual operational planning Groener offered little in the way of new ideas. As did others who tried to portray the next war and define its requirements, he envisioned 'The weapons systems of siege warfare: gas, tanks, air forces'.<sup>51</sup> All these, alongside improved artillery and mobilised infantry, would place a heavy burden on production but, crucially, would facilitate the return of operational movement. Decisiveness and movement would help to surprise the enemy and, to some degree, would compensate for inferior numbers.<sup>52</sup> Modern arms – and the economic means to produce them – were therefore a prerequisite for victory.

From the strategic and operational point of view, Groener did not expect Germany's next war to involve fundamental changes; but he stressed that the nation must be better prepared in terms of economic mobilisation. Since the economy had been, and still was, the principal impediment to a successful war effort, it should naturally be strengthened and taken into account in military planning far more systematically than hitherto. It goes without saying that traditional operational concepts were not the reason for failure, and therefore did not require major conceptual revision; a new, modern army would simply allow the fuller use of traditional concepts. Ludendorff would have no doubt agreed with Groener.<sup>53</sup> But had Ludendorff only remembered, that self-evident truth had been known and tried (albeit

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<sup>50</sup> 'Decisive operations' ('decisive' usually underlined) is a repeated idiom in Groener's notes; see Groener in Zuber, *War Planning*, pp. 246-257.

<sup>51</sup> BA-MA, N46-73.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> See Erich Ludendorff, *Der totale Krieg* (Munich, 1935), especially pp. 63-86.

too little and too late) before.<sup>54</sup> The test of Groener as innovator is thus not how groundbreaking was his explanation, but whether he followed it vigorously enough to overcome the tendency – a sort of second nature – to suppress long-term economic demands in favour of perceived operational requirements and military ‘necessities’.

Groener examined his basic assumptions to their full, going so far as to speculate whether modern economics might be inherently connected with peace, due to the distortions and destruction inescapable in war. World politics might offer measures, such as disarmament, security treaties, custom unions and so on, that could be instrumental in preventing war. Yet in 1927-28, although economic interests and motivations were important for Groener, nothing was as decisive as his aspiration for war. Despite disarmament, security treaties, courts of arbitration, customs unions, and the League of Nations, he stressed that ‘in that connection, alongside political conditions, geographic and economic ones [that] play a decisive role . . . efforts are ongoing to organize the peoples for war, and to integrate the economy into those efforts.’<sup>55</sup> For the time being, Groener voiced the opinion that Germany must achieve economic advantages *through* its conduct of war; for he had no doubt that Germany could rise again only through war.<sup>56</sup> That war must be, as he repeatedly stressed, a short war of movement, delivered by a well-equipped, well-armed mass army. It should be based on a thoroughly reoriented, mobilised industry, and decided in an *Entscheidungsschlacht* – a point so self-evident that Groener referred to it only in passing.

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<sup>54</sup> Only from 1917 onward did the OHL take full charge of economic mobilisation, and even then the German economy never displayed the same level of organisation and mobilisation found in the Allied economies. See Gerald D. Feldman, *Army, Industry, and Labor in Germany, 1914-1918* (Princeton, 1966), pp. 197-300, 349-458.

<sup>55</sup> Groener, ‘Bedeutung der modernen Wirtschaft’, pp. 1175-1176.

<sup>56</sup> And not the other way around, as Deist and others have argued (see for example, Deist, ‘Dynamics’, p. 112; Groener subordinated war to economic (and political) limitations and requirements only *after* he became defence minister.

It is therefore clear that if Groener was the voice of a new, sober, strategic-economic policy, his studies from the years preceding his appointment as the Republic's defence minister did not reflect any such tendency. Although some of his later ideas do emerge in his early studies, his conclusions inevitably contradicted his careful strategic analysis, and reaffirmed his continuity with Schlieffen's heritage. One factor exceeded all others in importance, but it was not the one Groener was trying so hard to point out:

In particular the German *Volk* requires [much time and patience] in order to travel the long and arduous road of political and economic resurgence. May it not forget along that road that despite material considerations and technology, spirit and the great moral values [*der Geist und die moralischen Grössen*] are the pre-eminent [elements in] the future of a people.<sup>57</sup>

Groener's final conclusion was a turn back to old convictions of the primacy of the spirit and of moral greatness, which axiomatically took priority over economic imperatives and the operational plans deriving from them in determining the outcome of Germany's renewed bid for world power. *Geist* and morale, as far as Groener as a German officer was concerned, were fundamentally German traits. That conviction, deeply embedded in every military calculation of Schlieffen's followers, and shared by Groener, almost nullified his efforts to introduce greater attention to economic constraints into German strategic planning. If ultimately the 'spirit', not economics, mattered most, then obviously it was the spirit, if fostered and wisely employed, that would prevail over economic limitations. Among the great moral qualities required, Groener counted the talent of the *Feldherren*, the martial virtues of the forces, and the

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<sup>57</sup> Groener, 'Bedeutung der modernen Wirtschaft', p. 1177 (my emphasis).



spirit of the people. The more salient they might be, he wrote, the more they would compensate for material weakness.<sup>58</sup>

And vice versa, warned Groener. For even the most modern technology and organizational measures at Germany's disposal would be useless in the face of a lack of enthusiasm among the troops and people, or worse, under the devastating effect of pacifist sentiments. Germany should therefore make sure that 'since wars are not about to disappear from the political arsenal [*Rüstammer*], there is no alternative to awakening and reinforcing in [our] youth that *Geist* that means nothing other than burning love of the Fatherland [*glühende Vaterlandsliebe*]. [Even] in this age of material penury and of international economic interdependence, that element of strategy must not perish'.<sup>59</sup>

Groener's writings of the early 1920s thus demonstrate the extent to which this purportedly most sober and realistic of German military planners nevertheless remained a product of Prusso-German military culture, unable to break out of the intangible, transparent boundaries that enclosed him and all other leading officers, and prevented genuinely new ideas from challenging an outlook that radically distorted reality. Blinded by the 'wisdom' of the army's flawed hindsight, Groener portrayed the conditions of future war much as Schlieffen had envisioned them two decades before: a short, decisive war of movement planned and designed around economic needs and limitations. He elevated economics to a decisive factor yet not as decisive as the spirit, which could, and should, compensate for lack of materiel. Ultimately, the patience and endurance of civil society would determine the outcome.<sup>60</sup> Groener did

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<sup>58</sup> BA-MA N46-73.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> See also the importance that Groener ascribed to '*kriegerische Geist*', which tends to dwindle as war continues, allowing political and social antagonisms to break out once more (Hürter, *Wilhelm Groener*, pp. 22-24).

not dare draw the fundamental lesson of the World War – that under no circumstances could Germany hope to achieve victory against an economically and industrially superior Western coalition.

Groener indeed stressed the importance of conducting economic war, while taking into account the interlocking connections between economics and war, and the possible ramifications of economic imperatives on future warfare, including the key role in any future conflict of the economic preponderance of the United States.<sup>61</sup> Yet the sum of all these lessons was to be integrated with ‘the elements of strategy noted by Clausewitz – moral, physical, mathematical, geographic, and statistical’.<sup>62</sup> Economic factors should be incorporated with, not dominate other factors. In assessing Groener’s military, diplomatic and economic perceptions, it is impossible to ignore the fact that in the early 1920s, while still thinking as an officer rather than a civil servant, Groener did not yet conclude that war was no longer a viable proposition for Germany; rather his emphasis on economic constraints and the importance of economic variables brought him to insist on an economically well-planned total war: ‘Would it not have been better, instead of stumbling into war, to have prepared it in *all* possible ways deliberately and stealthily [*zielbewusst und schweigend*]? In *all* areas: politically, militarily, and, not least, economically’.<sup>63</sup> In 1923, even Groener could not avoid radicalising the rationalities and ‘truths’ of his military world-view.

Only after he became defence minister did Groener gradually come to emphasise and express the government’s – as opposed to the army’s – outlook,

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<sup>61</sup> Groener, ‘Bedeutung der modernen Wirtschaft’, pp. 1171, 1175-1176.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1175.

<sup>63</sup> Groener, *Weltkrieg*, quoted in Hürter, *Wilhelm Groener*, p. 23 note 109.

hierarchy of interests, and frame of mind.<sup>64</sup> But if Groener's change of heart took place after he left the inner circle of military decision-makers, would ascribing to him a substantial level of influence on military theory and operational planning faithfully reflect the realities of Weimar's civil-military relationship, as well as the rationales and preferences of the mainstream of the officer corps? The process of alienation from traditional military views that catalysed the final change in Groener's perceptions worked both ways, and naturally affected how the general staff received his ideas – and inevitably interpreted them as external views imposed on the army. What kind of influence did Groener exert? Should his ideas and concepts be considered a 'trend' in military thought in the same manner as the concepts of Seeckt and Stülpnagel?

## **2. Groener the Minister: 1928–1932**

As defence minister, Groener's analysis of the future war Germany might face, and of its operational and planning derivatives, did not supersede or negate his earlier assumptions and analysis. He still founded his vision of the future on all the above-mentioned components of his traditional military *Weltanschauung*:

The forces that [must] always stand ready to overrun the enemy, cannot as in the past be the cadre of an army that is first to be mobilised. The war of the future begins out of the blue [*sturmartig*], with that instantaneous shock [*rasanten Wucht*] that only active-duty peacetime armies, with fighting vehicles held in readiness even in peace, can produce. In the event of success, such an assault could swiftly decide the campaign . . . But one

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<sup>64</sup> See also Hürter's analysis of Groener's military-political conceptions: *Wilhelm Groener*, pp. 21-35.

should not assume that a state will surrender after the first assault without exploiting all its material and moral forces.<sup>65</sup>

Faithful to his habit of coupling economic reasoning with longstanding operational axioms, Groener naturally assumed in 1928 that future war would gravitate toward the swift and decisive variety that Germany was inclined to fight. Modern means and technology, supported by effective economic planning and the German moral virtues, would make such a war possible. Groener shared these assumptions and the operational tendencies they expressed with the majority of Germany's military leadership at the end of the 1920s.

Yet Groener is widely considered a strategist for a different aspect of his military-political vision. In 1928, when he became defence minister, Groener was finally willing to choose economic welfare and peace over war openly, if temporarily, and to subordinate war to political requirements and solutions.<sup>66</sup> Following the logic of this world-view, Groener outlined an armament policy that situated the army as but one instrument of national security, naturally subordinate to the state's overall interests and limitations.<sup>67</sup> But by that time his influence on operational planning, although not rearmament planning, was fast declining.<sup>68</sup> As defence minister, Groener was in no sense part of the inner circle of operational planners at the *Truppenamt*. His primary concern was liaison between the armed forces and parliament, and he indeed

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<sup>65</sup> Groener, 'Deutsche Wehr'. BA-MA, N46-148, p 9. Groener went on to express his faith that future technology might 'attenuate, through new inventions, the terrifying effects of [current] weaponry' (ibid.).

<sup>66</sup> Geyer, 'German Strategy', pp. 561-565. See also Groener's suggestion that a German counterattack against a Polish might 'alert' the 'international community' – despite the absence of a military purpose, or, as he saw it, of any hope of military success.

<sup>67</sup> Deist, 'Rearmament of the Wehrmacht', pp. 387-338.

<sup>68</sup> For different analysis see Geyer, *Aufrüstung*, pp. 198-213.

promoted smoother cooperation between Germany's politicians and military leaders.<sup>69</sup> But his relations with mid- or even high-ranking officers were correspondingly distant. Any possible influence he might have exercised on the operational and force-planning staffs was, to begin with, indirect, always mediated through the *Ministeramt*, the chief of staff, and other key officers.<sup>70</sup>

Did the *Generalstab* fully internalise or even temporarily agree with the place the Defence Minister had allocated to the army in his national security concept? The majority of scholars have assumed that in the second half of the 1920s,

. . .the Reichswehr leadership saw itself as having to draw closer to the executive institutions of the Republic for mainly military reasons and, in return for financial and political assurance on illegal military measures, having to accept political control by the executive. As Reich Defence Minister, Groener endeavoured to extend this sphere of control . . . he penetrated to the heart of military leadership and control'.<sup>71</sup>

Studies and memoranda that the army regularly produced certainly supported that analysis; one for instance noted:

It would be useful if the peacetime Reich defence council and the war cabinet could be as similar in composition as possible. The war cabinet would then be fully in the game[*eingespielt*] in the event of war. A unified

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<sup>69</sup> Deist, 'Rearmament of the Wehrmacht', p. 386, and 'Ideological War', pp. 366-371. However Deist also acknowledged that between the autumn 1926 and 1930, 'The aim of revising Versailles and regaining unrestricted military sovereignty transcended all ideological, political, economic and social divisions . . .', and that after Seeckt's departure Reichswehr leaders were merely more keen on achieving these goals through cooperation with the state (*ibid.*, p. 369). That is, the trend of cooperation with the civilians emerged independently within the army itself before Groener entered office.

<sup>70</sup> Groener dealt with three chiefs of the *Truppenamt* during his tenure as defence minister: generals Werner von Blomberg, Kurt von Hammerstein-Equord, and Wilhelm Adam.

<sup>71</sup> Wilhelm Deist, *The Wehrmacht and German Rearmament* (London, 1981), p. 14.

armed forces ministry would be the best high command organization for the Wehrmacht . . . [O]pponents [of this view] pointed out that the conduct of war involved not [merely] the Wehrmacht alone, but rather the whole *Volk*. Thus many ministries rightly belonged under a single authority; the true defence minister was the minister-president.<sup>72</sup>

Yet the planners immediately juxtaposed that display of cooperation with the government (or, more accurately, with the amorphous '*Volk*') with the army's clear vision or the desired civil-military relations during wartime, delivered in even clearer words:

'With regard to the command authority and responsibility of the armed forces minister in war, the English (sic) literature is disinclined to allow the political minister to interfere in operational matters (a cautionary example: Churchill and the Dardanelles)'. And although 'contrariwise the pushing aside of the minister by Joffre at the outset of the [world] war was also not correct', still, inexplicably, 'a theoretically ideal solution would be that the chief of the Wehrmacht himself receive a seat on the war cabinet as an armed forces minister above parties [*überparteilcher*]'.<sup>73</sup>

All that Groener had achieved was lip-service by the Reichswehr leadership to the idea of civilian authority over the army. But should a war break out, the army would regain its place above petty politics and politicians in accordance with Germany's traditions and history. It would once more reassert its independent, unsupervised, sovereign prerogative to formulate and implement military decisions regardless of their political and international implications and consequences.

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<sup>72</sup> 'Spitzenorganisation', late 1928/ early 1929, by Hilmar Ritter von Mittelberger, BA-MA, N46-148, pp. 79-80.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 81.

That outcome was hardly surprising; ever since it had been compelled to accept a defence ministry headed by a civilian, originally designed to tighten civilian supervision of the army, the military leadership had made a clear distinction between the armed forces and the ministry of defence. The days of ‘complete fusion of general staff and war ministry’ were gone once the head of the war ministry was no longer the first quartermaster general.<sup>74</sup> The two organisations did not share the same interests, as had been – up to a point – the case with the Prussian *Kriegsministerium*.<sup>75</sup> Groener’s later ideas, so foreign to the traditional views of the officer corps, had little chance of finding support outside his ministry, and their durable incorporation into operational planning was an unlikely prospect indeed.<sup>76</sup>

Groener the minister was, and should be assessed, as a civil servant. His primary concerns fully expressed that frame of reference, which was very different from the one held at the *Truppenamt*. To officers such as Stülpnagel, who exchanged friendly letters with Groener, the minister’s concerns were simply irrelevant.<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> Wild von Hohenborn, first quartermaster general and Prussian war minister January 1915–October 1916, quote in Feldman, *Army, Industry and Labor*, p. 44.

<sup>75</sup> Gordon, *Reichswehr*, pp. 326-336. A Stülpnagel remark reveals that ‘S[eeckt] could not be persuaded to discuss all these matters [of defence] openly with the government’ (Post, *Civil-Military Fabric*, p. 179). That for most of the 1919-23 period, and from 1928 to 1930 the government was led by or included the ‘Marxist’ majority Social Democrats (SPD) hardly helped to consolidate a sense of shared interests between government and Reichswehr.

<sup>76</sup> See also Megargee, *High Command*, pp. 15-16. In trying to explain the unpopularity of Groener’s ideas within the army, Megargee points to the officer corps’ inadequate strategic outlook, a product of their organisational culture, that prevented its members from appreciating subtleties of strategy and the relevance of international power relationships to their calculations. Geyer, however, argues that the German officer corps was not willing to share military control with civilian authority, as Groener suggested, because of its ‘political mood’ and ongoing effort to maintain its autonomy, identity and skills (Geyer, ‘German Strategy’, p. 564). On the persistent resistance in the army to Groener’s ideas, and their consequent marginality, see Geyer, ‘Dynamics’, pp. 112-114.

<sup>77</sup> The correspondence between Groener and Stülpnagel makes this evident. Although Groener urged his ‘old friend’ to consider the inevitable outcome of war against an economically and technologically superior ‘England’, backed by the United States, and concluded that war was therefore undesirable and should be temporarily avoided, Stülpnagel dedicated his research to finding a way to wage just such a war, which he deemed inevitable and even desirable, regardless of the devastating consequences for Germany. It is therefore

Groener's ideas never received serious consideration, and unlike the visions of Stülpnagel and Seeckt, they received no operational test. Naturally, as defence minister Groener deeply – if briefly – affected the course of armaments planning. But he did not radically alter the army's strategic views or its solutions for Germany's security needs.<sup>78</sup> His later vision was hardly realised beyond the level of memorandum distribution and, as the army's doctrinal and operational documents indicate, never became widely accepted.<sup>79</sup>

That was especially true during Groener's final months in office. As his political power base and the trust in him of both Reich president and Reichswehr waned, his ability to implement his concepts and transform them into durable plans came to nought. His successors, Kurt von Schleicher (1932–33) and Werner von Blomberg (1933–38), were both appointed fresh from their military careers and managed to eradicate his policy with ease, swiftly restoring traditional concepts of operational and rearmament planning. Groener's policy of careful subordination of Germany's rearmament efforts to its overall international interests was turned upside down, as demonstrated by Schleicher's demands for equality of armaments in the Geneva disarmament conference, and the implementation of the 'second armament

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clear that neither Groener's strategic analysis, nor his insinuation that he would be 'advising' Stülpnagel on political and strategic problems again soon, prompted the latter to reconsider his views on the timing, nature and scope of Germany's future war (see BA-MA N46-42).

<sup>78</sup> Geyer, *Aufrüstung*, pp. 141-148, 198-228. Groener rationalised the Reichswehr's rearmament plans and smoothed cooperation between the army and the government, but he did not manage to subordinate those plans – much less the operational planning that derived from them – to his economic and political concept and to its implications; see also Deist, 'Ideological War', pp. 367-368.

<sup>79</sup> See also Murray, *German Military Effectiveness*, p. 13. For a different view, see Deist and Geyer, who do not however explain how it was that, despite being allegedly so influential for a short while, Groener left no substantial legacy in Reichswehr war planning. See for instance the rejection by the chief of the Truppenamt, Werner von Blomberg, of Groener's concepts in March 1929 despite the clear failure of the 1928 war games, which had expressed competing operational concepts; Blomberg was removed from office yet the operational concept he supported prevailed (Deist, 'Rearmament of the Wehrmacht', p. 391).



programme' in the spring of 1932, which marked the renewed subordination of Germany's foreign and domestic policy to its military policy.<sup>80</sup> Schleicher, and even more so Blomberg, either refused to understand the connection between Germany's open rearmament efforts and its decreasing international status and overall security, or were simply willing to risk Germany's security for the sake of rearmament.<sup>81</sup>

Groener's civilian concepts, which had developed only in the final stages of his career failed to outlive their maker's term in office.<sup>82</sup>

## II. Joachim von Stülpnagel

Joachim von Stülpnagel was an infantry and general staff officer who served as chief of the operations department of the *Truppenamt* until February 1926, and was notably important thereafter. He has often been mentioned together with Groener and Seeckt as one of the figures who most heavily influenced Reichswehr operational planning in the second half of the 1920s. Interestingly, his concepts have rarely received detailed treatment; scholars have disagreed over whether he was 'revolutionary' or 'reactionary'; yet all describe his operational plans as radical and his strategic

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<sup>80</sup> Deist, 'Rearmament of the Wehrmacht', pp. 386-404, 508-509.

<sup>81</sup> Deist himself notes that 'international considerations played no role in the policy of the new defence minister [Schleicher]' (ibid., p. 395). See also Geyer's analysis of the fundamental contradiction between German rearmament and German security, *Aufrüstung*, and idem, 'Dynamics'

<sup>82</sup> In his analysis of change of strategic norms, Meyer refers to discrepancies in strategic perceptions between 'strategic elites' and the rest of society as a characteristic of the 'societal learning process'. That model applies equally to organisations; Meyer's statement that '[elites cannot] single-handedly transform collectively held strategic norms' also fits Groener's vain efforts to change the army's strategic perceptions (Meyer, 'Convergence', p. 539).

analysis, in sharp contrast, as distinctly realistic.<sup>83</sup> His studies and official correspondence disclosing his vision of Germany's future war make it easy to understand why Stülpnagel became identified with ruthless, extreme, and total warfare. His operational suggestions have indeed been considered so radical that many scholars have branded them 'delusional', 'irrational',<sup>84</sup> or even claim that Stülpnagel and his supporters, who included Blomberg, were aware of the fact that their operational vision was fictitious and unattainable, but nevertheless consciously clung to it obdurately, tolerating no other solution, until Groener's *Ministeramt* supposedly put an end to their wild plans for a 'people's war' blood-bath.<sup>85</sup>

Stülpnagel has been considered not only radical in his operational vision, but also substantially different in his military perceptions and world-view from the majority of his conservative colleagues in the officer corps.<sup>86</sup> The Seecktian old guard allegedly clung grimly to a strict military orthodoxy against which Stülpnagel and his circle 'revolted'.<sup>87</sup> His readiness to involve the army in everyday politics, and his willingness to place Germany's hope for victory in its planned future war in the hands of unprofessional and lightly armed civilians in guerrilla-like warfare, have led commentators to describe Stülpnagel's ideas as sharply deviating from the officer

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<sup>83</sup> Deist, 'Rearmament', pp. 377-392 and 'Ideological War', pp. 363-367; Geyer, *Aufrüstung*, pp. 80-97, 188-198; 'Dynamics', pp. 107-112; and 'German Strategy', pp. 556-562.

<sup>84</sup> See for instance Deist, 'Ideological War', p. 365; and Geyer, 'Dynamics', p. 110, and 'German Strategy', pp. 560-561.

<sup>85</sup> Geyer, 'Dynamics', p. 108.

<sup>86</sup> Geyer, *Aufrüstung*, p. 84.

<sup>87</sup> The 'Fronde', in Geyer's words, was led by von dem Bussche, Chef der Heeresorganisationsabteilung (T2), Stülpnagel, Chef der Operationsabteilung (T1), and Blomberg, Chef der Ausbildungsabteilung (ibid., pp. 80-82). In a letter of April 1925 Stülpnagel complained that the 'nothing new!' conduct of the army had remained as it was, while he and Bussche had managed to introduce their ideas only partially, within their own departments (BA-MA N5-20, p. 93). Scholars, in sharp contrast, agree that Stülpnagel's ideas dramatically affected the Reichswehr's planning; see for example Geyer, *Aufrüstung*, pp. 183-198 and Deist, 'Rearmament', p. 378.

corps' traditional detestation, exemplified among others by Seeckt, of any breach of the sharp distinction between the armed forces and untrained civilian 'masses'.<sup>88</sup> This subchapter will therefore examine not only the origins of Stülpnagel's military conceptions, but also the extent to which Stülpnagel's views were unique among his cohort.

The confusion regarding the character of Stülpnagel's ideas and the extent to which they were a novelty is closely linked to their characterisation as 'extreme'. For if a clear link exists between Stülpnagel's desperate solution to post-1918 Germany's hopeless vulnerability on the one hand, and the logic of the conceptual pattern that dictated the army's conduct up to the end of the First World War on the other, then Stülpnagel's concepts cannot be simply branded irrational or novel. However extreme his ideas may seem to the contemporary reader, they could be accurately labelled as such only by Stülpnagel's peers, colleagues, and superiors. That this was far from being the case, and that – for instance – Stülpnagel's concepts stood at the centre of the Reichswehr's operational discourse, and were tested in the 1927/8 and 1928/9 war games, suggests that in the eyes of other members of the officer corps, Stülpnagel's ideas were anything but too extreme to be seriously considered.<sup>89</sup> Stülpnagel was no radical loner; if anything, he was yet another link in a heuristic chain characterized above all by the continuity and persistence of a seemingly irrational inner logic.<sup>90</sup>

As with Groener, and despite his best intentions, Stülpnagel did not deviate in any substantial way from the military culture that inhibited his understanding of Germany's strategic reality and options. On the contrary: his was the clearest voice expressing the values and practices that military culture disseminated. This subchapter

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<sup>88</sup> See for example Geyer, *Aufrüstung* p. 89.

<sup>89</sup> For an analysis of these war games see Geyer, *Aufrüstung*, pp. 96-97, 188-198.

<sup>90</sup> See Hull, 'End of the Monarchy', pp. 239-245.

will thus place Stülpnagel in his theoretical and operational context, and attempt to distil out the elements of continuity and change, and the shared axioms and values so vigorously expressed in the operational alternative that he proposed.

### **1. Acknowledging the problem: Stülpnagel the realist**

Stülpnagel's answer to Germany's security problems originated from requirements far different than those that prompted Groener to write his studies in the early and mid-1920s. Stülpnagel was a member of the camouflaged general staff corps and head of the T1 (operations) section of the *Truppenamt*, and was thus involved with straightforward operational planning. While Groener could develop his ideas of grand strategy and military-economic planning to their natural conclusion in the form of a temporary rejection of war, officers such as Stülpnagel toiled upon the Reichswehr's mundane and detailed operational plans – and had to find immediate answers to the frightening reality they were strikingly willing to acknowledge.

Their problem was that not all members of the higher echelons of the army were as keen to face grim realities. Until the occupation of the Ruhr by French forces, the *Truppenamt* had been immersed in Seeckt's unrealistic strategic assumptions and planning, and had been influenced by his political aloofness, all of which prevented the army from effectively pursuing Germany's security interests or even fulfilling its own organisational goals.<sup>91</sup> The Ruhr events of 1923–24 (or 'rape', as a thoroughly humiliated officer corps repeatedly termed them)<sup>92</sup> and the Reichswehr's inevitable

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<sup>91</sup> Geyer, *Aufrüstung*, pp. 85–87, 'German Strategy', pp. 556–557.

<sup>92</sup> For instance, Blomberg underlined his rearmament suggestions with the claim that 'great states cannot suffer military rape without military resistance', and supported the establishment of a border militia despite its obvious impracticality. 'What happens if France comes and rapes us despite all treaties, signatures and compromises', he wondered – without taking into account that the border militia would make no difference at all if France attacked in force (quoted in Geyer, 'Dynamics', pp. 107–108; see also Geyer, *Aufrüstung*, p. 208).

display of impotence served as a dramatic wake-up call. The crisis prompted the realisation by Stülpnagel and others that the way they imagined themselves and the Reichswehr had nothing to do with reality.<sup>93</sup> The very foundation of the army's strategic assumptions, the operational plans derived therefrom, and the capabilities required to implement them were all flawed or totally absent. Stülpnagel and other officers of his circle thus set out to eliminate the painful gap between their self-conceptualisation and surrounding reality, and to build the Reichswehr's war plans on realistic foundations.<sup>94</sup>

At the heart of Stülpnagel's thinking therefore stood the sober acknowledgement of Germany's strategic weakness. Tragically, his response to an uncomfortable and unflattering reality, and to the limbo of unreality in strategic and operational planning into which the army had fallen, was a consciously self-destructive program for action. Realism in the analysis of Germany's strategic dead end did not inhibit Stülpnagel in the least from following German military traditions and inherited dogma, and from exhibiting no realism whatsoever in his operational planning.

To further complicate efforts to understand his ideas, Stülpnagel repeatedly declared his intention of making a clean and unsentimental break with past notions deemed obsolete or irrelevant to Germany's current situation and capabilities: 'The development [of war] is ongoing, [and it] changes constantly – it is thus our duty, basing ourselves on the military history of past centuries, to seek constantly after the new, not [after some] eternally valid recipe for victory'<sup>95</sup> Yet Stülpnagel failed

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<sup>93</sup> See Geyer, *Aufrüstung*, p. 80.

<sup>94</sup> 'Gedanken über den Krieg der Zukunft'. BA-MA N5-10, p. 2. See also Deist, 'Reichswehr and National Defence', p. 377, and 'Ideological War', pp. 363-364.

<sup>95</sup> 'Gedanken', BA-MA N5-10, p. 2.

miserably. As will emerge, this purportedly most radical of Germany's 1920s military thinkers failed as lamentably as Groener – the only supposed strategist among them – to break the glass wall of the culturally imprinted notions of operational realism that all members of the Prusso-German *Generalstab* had inherited.

## **2. The opponent within: self-delusion**

Stülpnagel launched his campaign for a stern wake-up call for the army with an assault on the draft *Guidelines for Higher Leadership in War* by *Oberst* Constantin Hierl, circulated within the *Truppenamt* in late 1923.<sup>96</sup> It is worth describing Hierl's ideas, since they expressed the mainstream views of the officer corps that Stülpnagel so vehemently denounced. The *Guidelines* are notably detached from reality in the best Seecktian tradition: they speak to leaders of a non-existent army, armed with non-existent weaponry, and enjoying a non-existent freedom of strategic choice. In short, it was an imaginary manual for an imaginary army. It offered no guide to a German military leadership seeking to solve strategic problems in the real world of the mid-1920s, as the army's humiliating impotence during the Ruhr crisis so painfully demonstrated. Hierl's *Vorschrift* thus provided comprehensive discussion of guidance for the deployment [*Aufmarsch*] of a division equipped with modern weapons, although the Reichswehr had none,<sup>97</sup> and on strategic attack as the only means of defeating the enemy and crushing his political will – while the dwarf-army could not

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<sup>96</sup> 'Leitlinien für die obere Führung in Kriege', BA-MA RH2901; see also Geyer, *Aufrüstung*, p. 81.

<sup>97</sup> BA-MA RH2901, pp. 33-42.

launch anything remotely similar to such attacks<sup>98</sup> – along with detailed discussions on the ‘decisive’ advantages of frontal compared to flank attack.<sup>99</sup>

The *Guidelines*, it should be noted, were not merely a fantasy-guide for a phantom army; in the eyes of its writer and readers they were by no means a futile academic exercise. They were a draft doctrinal document, and as such they captured and expressed their audience’s frame of mind as well as the dogmas that defined the successful conduct of war. Their opening paragraph asserted that ‘The overthrow of the enemy consists of the annihilation of the enemy forces’, advising, however uselessly, that ‘The quest for the annihilation [*Vernichtung*] of enemy forces is thus the highest principle of war’<sup>100</sup> That this axiom appeared in the *Guidelines* despite the fact that no German officer could conceivably have hoped to put it into effect in 1923 speaks volumes of its status as an unequivocal self-evident truth. So powerful were this and other fundamental assumptions expressed in Hierl’s draft manual that even his harshest critics, who successfully exposed his work’s irrelevance, made no effort to challenge the dogma’s infallibility.

Hierl’s *Guidelines* in fact evoked a number of enthusiastic comments. ‘The draft is outstanding’, claimed a T4 letter signed by Major Ludwig Beck: ‘T4 therefore takes the view that the field manual should be published soon, as that is also very much in the interest of the training of general staff officers’.<sup>101</sup> Stülpnagel, however, bitterly opposed it and the stagnant thought that it expressed and threatened to perpetuate. His response to the document was an immediate and sober call for a painful reality check. ‘The Hierl paper’, observed Stülpnagel, ‘has been drafted in line

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<sup>98</sup> Ibid., pp. 48-49.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid., pp. 50-51.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid., p. 4.

<sup>101</sup> BA-MA, RH2-2901, July 1924. p. 125. Naturally, T4 had its own organisational reasons to support Hierl’s ‘Leitlinien’, as it had been produced under its auspices.

with Schlieffen's outlook. Sch[lieffen] prepared for war with mass armies. [But] is it credible that in the coming war we will be able to put up "masses" against our enemies?'<sup>102</sup>

Indeed, as Stülpnagel strenuously pointed out, self-delusion regarding strategic and operational deployment were but one expression of the conceptual dead-end in which German operational thought found itself, and he used the blatant irrelevance of Hierl's prescriptions to challenge the entire theoretical and operational structure the *Guidelines* expressed. What the army needed was a comprehensive change in its conceptual vocabulary, one that would break with outdated convictions, even – as Stülpnagel implicitly suggested – those inherited from the indisputably great Schlieffen himself:

[As one] educated militarily in Schlieffen's tradition, it is not easy for me to have to argue against the practical application of that tradition. [But] only if the German general staff succeeds in thinking through the problem of the war of the future – which we shall have to fight in a few years – and in generating new theory, will we [be able to] win it. We cannot seize the [victor's] laurel crown at one stroke. We must educate *Volk* and army in the thought that we must fight a war in which we are "the weaker" . I am convinced that although we describe ourselves as the heirs of a great past, we must inaugurate a new era in the history of war. It will not be enough to content ourselves with time-honoured

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<sup>102</sup> Stülpnagel's official reply to T4 regarding Hierl's 'Leitlinien', undated (probably summer 1924), BA-MA, RH2-2901.



rules based on false assumptions; we must rather seek to think through  
[these] new conditions . . . <sup>103</sup>

Yet an enormous gap separated Stülpnagel's level-headed analysis of the actual realities and constraints the Reichswehr faced and of the tendency of its members to tackle them using unrealistic and outdated concepts, and his willingness to re-examine the very foundations of German military practice inherited from Schlieffen and from the imperial army on the one hand, and on the other the nature of the solution he eventually offered. For the sake of German 'honour', Stülpnagel seemingly replaced Seeckt's phantom single decisive battle of annihilation with a very real, blood-chilling gamble, equal in its risks only to the Schlieffen plan itself. His answer to German military impotence was a tragically radicalised manifestation of pre-existing German military culture in content, shape, vocabulary and frame of thought. The supposed gap between Stülpnagel's prescriptions and tradition calls for a careful examination of his strategic and operational thought – which will show that Stülpnagel's solution derived from the inherited world-view and rationales that he applied when analysing the new problems that he and the Reichswehr faced.

### **3. Finding a solution: Stülpnagel the radical**

In his well-known and much-quoted briefing for the officers of the Reichswehr ministry, 'Thoughts on the War of the Future', as well as in his extensive official correspondence, Stülpnagel laid out Germany's strategic problem as he saw it: Germany would shortly have to wage war 'in order to free itself from the Ver[sailles] *Diktat* and from the French vermin in the Rhineland', despite the fact that it could not

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<sup>103</sup> Ibid. See also Stülpnagel's comment: 'France maintains 800,000 men under arms in peacetime . . . Poland, Czechoslovakia, and Belgium are hostile . . . these states possess a [mass of] materiel that we could not possibly begin to match even through the most strenuous imaginative efforts' (quoted in Geyer, *Aufrüstung*, p. 81).

'at this point generate manpower and materiel even approximately equal to that of the enemy'.<sup>104</sup> The point of departure of Stülpnagel's entire project thus clearly ignored real-world political and strategic necessities or considerations; Germany had to wage war without bothering to define its goals (be they military or political) clearly, and regardless of the chances of winning, that is, with no inner logic beyond the self-evident necessity of 'war'. In effect, in Stülpnagel's eyes the chances of success and even its definition in the form of detailed goals were completely irrelevant to the question of 'war'. His point of departure therefore linked him from the very inception of his argument directly to the chaotic, extreme and eventually suicidal *Zeitgeist* of the OHL, in which he had prominently served in the final stages of the World War.<sup>105</sup> Furthermore, it exposed the similarity of his strategic assumptions to those of the same colleagues whom he had criticised: both had willingly and seemingly naturally ignored political constraints or rationales in their planning.

In facing Germany's forced military weakness, Stülpnagel developed an unusual two-phase plan for the contingency of French or Franco-Polish attack. In the first phase the army and local population combined would employ an attrition strategy to halt or at least slow down the attacking forces through guerrilla methods. That was an unusual choice, but Germany's situation was so desperate that Stülpnagel saw no other solution:

The great principles of war remain unaltered; only their implementation changes in accordance with the age. Inequality in material forces compels

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<sup>104</sup> 'Gedanken', BA-MA, N5-10, p. 22; parts of the document are also found in Heinz Hürten, ed., *Das Krisenjahr 1923: Militär und Innenpolitik 1922-1924* (Düsseldorf, 1980), pp. 266-272.

<sup>105</sup> Hull's observation regarding the ever-present probability that German officers would reject objective limits and resist any conceivable reality-test, continuing to believe that 'victory, not defence, and not 'peace', was the goal of war', is thus also relevant to the state of mind of Stülpnagel – and others – long after the World War had ended ('End of the Monarchy', p. 244).

us to travel new paths. These novelties in strategy and tactics, reinforced by the moral might of a gigantic national uprising, will surprise and dismay the notably rigid and methodical French.<sup>106</sup>

Indeed, the first phase's operational logic aspired to exploit fully the strategic weaknesses of over-stretched and relatively immobile French forces vulnerable to surprise attacks by small yet highly mobile German forces.<sup>107</sup> Standard guerrilla actions, however, would not suffice. By sparing or shying away from no means available and by implementing a comprehensive scorched-earth policy in order to deprive the enemy of operational assets, Stülpnagel hoped to create a window of opportunity in which the enemy would be weakened and disjointed enough to allow the Reichswehr to launch a battle of annihilation in the most favourable possible conditions.<sup>108</sup>

Stülpnagel repeatedly stressed that in order to compensate for Germany's weaknesses in conventional military might, nothing whatsoever was off limits or too extreme: 'All persons and all things' would become weapons.<sup>109</sup> That *Leitmotiv*, intended both as a method and as an end in itself, is the reason Stülpnagel's 'Thoughts on the War of the Future' subsequently became the most well-known example of the radicalism and fanaticism of the Reichswehr approach to warfare: 'The weaker the field army, the more vital the 'people's war [*Volkskrieg*]' becomes, as the ultimate means by which a helpless people defends itself against its oppressor. A national

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<sup>106</sup> 'Gedanken', BA-MA N5-10, pp. 17-18.

<sup>107</sup> 'Französischen und deutschen Kampfverfahren', BA-MA N5-20, pp. 37-39.

<sup>108</sup> 'Gedanken', BA-MA N5-10, pp. 18-20. Scholars do not dispute the nature of Stülpnagel's operational goals and recommended methods; for a brief yet accurate analysis of his plan, see Deist, 'Rearmament', pp. 377-378.

<sup>109</sup> Geyer, 'Insurrectionary Warfare', p. 148.

hatred that [we must] raise to the highest pitch must not shrink from any available means: sabotage, murder, [and] chemical or biological attack [*Verseuchung*].<sup>110</sup>

Such an effort, as Stülpnagel himself readily observed, would either produce a bitter, costly and ultimately marginal military victory, or a comprehensive blood-bath and scorched-earth catastrophe that would mark the end of a sovereign Germany<sup>111</sup> – an outcome Stülpnagel was unreservedly willing to accept: ‘Today and for the foreseeable future an appeal to arms would [only] be a heroic gesture. I am aware that we could have war forced upon us, but I am equally aware that it could only lead to [our] destruction [*Untergang*].’<sup>112</sup> That was not the first time Stülpnagel had envisaged Germany’s choice as glorious death or shameful surrender – and as always, he made his choice without hesitation.<sup>113</sup>

The ruthless and extreme warfare Stülpnagel stressed was but the natural continuation of the nightmarish *Endkampf* projects of late 1918. Stülpnagel’s limited operational perceptions were a mirror-image of the narrow-minded outlook that had consistently brought the German general staff to disregard any contingency but victory gained through a single daring plan that might also bring Germany to its end as an independent state. Both during and after the World War it was not only natural but also perfectly rational for Stülpnagel to perceive Germany’s strategic choices, once its military machine was engaged, as a Manichean dualism, and to accept calmly

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<sup>110</sup> BA-MA, N5-10, p. 45.

<sup>111</sup> Geyer, ‘Strategy’, p. 558.

<sup>112</sup> ‘Gedanken’, BA-MA N5-10, p. 45.

<sup>113</sup> Stülpnagel was one of the *Generalstab* officers who had tried in September 1918 to promote a suicidal ‘death ride’ of the Kaiser in order to inspire an all-consuming yet heroic *Endkampf*. Hull, ‘End of the Monarchy’, pp. 245–246, 255–256. In his memoirs, Stülpnagel claimed he did not approve the death ride initiative, yet other sources reveal his active support (see Joachim von Stülpnagel, *75 Jahre Meines Lebens*, (Oberaudorf, 1955), p. 147 (Institut für Zeitgeschichte, Munich; warmest thanks to Dr. Thomas Schlemmer for facilitating my consultation of this important and otherwise unobtainable privately printed source).

the Fatherland's total demise in flames as a viable strategic contingency: "History knows no [other] *Volk*", as [Oswald] Spengler *correctly* says, "whose path has been shaped in a more tragic way than ours. In great wars all [others] fight [merely] facing [the alternatives] of victory or defeat. *Wir* [must] always fight facing victory or annihilation"<sup>114</sup> Germany's military tradition, for Stülpnagel, required either total victory or honourable and equally total catastrophe.<sup>115</sup>

An attempt to reconcile the divergent operational concepts expressed in Stülpnagel's plan, and to place them in a theoretical and practical context, is thus a confusing task. Stülpnagel and his supporters apparently held both ends of every conceivable stick: they opted for a lengthy scorched-earth campaign of attrition and a short decisive battle of annihilation, people's war and mobile warfare by professionals, and war free from political limitations, logics and goals, yet also a victory facilitated by well-timed diplomacy. Blomberg even invented international intervention as a *deus ex machina* to rescue Germany at a decisive moment, turning the grim results of the 1927/8 war games, which were based on Stülpnagel's concepts, into a brilliant German success.<sup>116</sup> That Blomberg felt free to use political intervention when it suited his purposes, and regardless of the entirely predictable lack of cooperation by other powers, is indicative of the limited understanding of the members of this circle of the complexity of the political and diplomatic world, which did not stand awaiting their orders, as they naively and consistently assumed.<sup>117</sup> No

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<sup>114</sup> 'Gedanken', BA-MA N5-10, p. 5 (my emphasis).

<sup>115</sup> Deist, 'Ideological War', p. 365; see also Hull's discussion of the imperative of absolute victory: *Absolute Destruction*, pp. 178-181.

<sup>116</sup> Geyer, 'Dynamics', p. 108.

<sup>117</sup> In this respect, Blomberg's lack of self-awareness is impressive. In his *Besprechung* during the 1928 winter games he reprimanded his officers in the following terms: 'Many participants have clearly recognized the necessity of avoiding decisive combat until after the arrival of the second wave [of the planned mobilisation of German forces]. But despite that insight, they committed their units to the attack or to sustained resistance so early

wonder then that scholars have been confused about Stülpnagel – at first glance, his ideas seem a complete shambles. Nevertheless, under close analysis the basic tenets of Stülpnagel’s military world-view make his seemingly self-contradictory concepts seem all too – if perversely – logical.

#### **4. A revolutionary and radical approach?**

Was Stülpnagel’s planning indeed so radical compared to his cohort’s fundamental assumptions about Germany’s past and future wars? Scholars have struggled to bridge the discrepancy between the sober analysis of Germany’s strategic problem and the reality-free solutions that officers such as Stülpnagel offered, explaining that ‘under certain circumstances, professionalism and extremism go together well’<sup>118</sup>

Surprisingly, this sound argument is accompanied by a self-contradictory assumption: that the general staff’s planning of ‘total war and scorched-earth tactics on German soil’ marked a ‘transition’ in its military thinking, coupled with later acknowledgement that ‘if the German military wished to preserve their ‘traditional’ standards, Bloomberg’s stance [in supporting Stülpnagel’s ideas] was quite logical. Many officers, perhaps the majority, followed this line’<sup>119</sup> As was entirely natural, since, if Stülpnagel’s analysis was realistic and professional, why then should we assume his operational ideas lacked those very same qualities? His ideas have indeed represented a ‘quantum leap’ in German military thought for scholars, and his operational vision was certainly an impressive adaptation of traditional goals to a new

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and so far forward that bloody combat against a superior enemy was unquestionably to be expected. The reason [for that conduct] is that these gentlemen avoided giving up terrain liberally and subordinating political or economic considerations to military ones as a logical consequence of their assigned missions’ (‘Operative Aufgabe 1928, Besprechung’, BA-MA RH2-2964, p. 5).

<sup>118</sup> Geyer, ‘Dynamics’, p. 110.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid.

and pressing reality and an unprecedented and painful lack of means. But that vision did not express a fundamental 'transition' or change in German strategic and operational logic, perceptions and tendencies, as the next pages will suggest.

It should likewise be clear that Stülpnagel and his supporters did not, as often suggested, 'recognise' or 'know' that their suggestions were 'unrealistic', 'ideological' or driven by 'sentiment', and that they nevertheless stuck to them for lack of other solutions to the problems that their duty assignments required them to tackle militarily.<sup>120</sup> The members of the German general staff were in reality equally incapable of conceiving of a strategic problem that could not or should not be solved by military force, and of understanding the inherent limitations of that force. The foundation stones of their world-view and the ways in which they interpreted power relations channelled their understanding of choices and possibilities; the German military leadership literally could not envisage other solutions to power-political challenges than purely military ones. That was the rationale and motivation behind operational planning and rearmament policies that seem so unprecedentedly extreme and counter-productive for Germany's security. Simply put, the Reichswehr's professional viewpoint left its leadership very little choice.

But how can any of this be termed 'revolutionary'? In what ways did Stülpnagel differ from Groener and Seeckt, who allegedly represented opposing perspectives and plans? As mentioned, in his studies and letters Stülpnagel repeatedly stressed the need to break with an outdated heritage and to focus on 'people's war' – notions for which scholars have labelled him a revolutionary. But in reality Stülpnagel turned away from old operational patterns only in order to express them once more – and without notable alteration or delay. Whenever possible, Stülpnagel backed up and

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<sup>120</sup> Ibid., pp. 107-108.

validated his most radical arguments with quotations from the great Schlieffen himself, along with appeals to his colleagues' ever-present willingness to invoke extreme choices and measures regardless of cost if *military necessity* seemingly demanded it:

Schlieffen once said, "in desperate situations only desperate methods serve." Our situation will [indeed] be desperate, and unless we wish to resign ourselves to it, we must nevertheless find methods born of despair that are of such elemental power that they appear to guarantee us either victory, or common ruin alongside our enemy [*den gemeinsamen Untergang mit dem Feinde*].<sup>121</sup>

But it was above all when seemingly breaching the traditional conceptual constraints of German military thought by doubting its most central aspects, namely the dogma of annihilation, that Stülpnagel demonstrated most completely his conformity with it. Stülpnagel not only clarified that he sought the traditional operational goal, if by means adapted to Germany's post-1918 situation; he also turned to Schlieffen himself for support of his interpretation of dogma:

It may seem presumptuous of me to assert that in the realm of strategy we have remained immobile [in our adherence to] the Schlieffen recipe – the theory of annihilation [*Vernichtungsgedanke*] using modern mass armies of roughly equal force. The fundamentals of [his] strategic theory unquestionably remain eternally correct. But their implementation changes according to the correlation of forces [in any] given [situation], and I am

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<sup>121</sup> 'Gedanken', BA-MA N5-10, p. 17.



convinced that nowadays Field Marshal Schlieffen would give us a new ‘recipe’.<sup>122</sup>

Stülpnagel’s attempt to introduce a more practical approach to planning than that proposed by figures such as Hierl, and to tailor a new strategy for Germany based on realistic assessment of its military power was therefore confined by impassable conceptual boundaries. That is the explanation for the alleged gap between his strategic analysis and his operational concepts that has bewildered scholars for so long. If Stülpnagel’s operational vision was ‘radical’, it is only because it was a faithful adaptation of an old and equally radical ‘strategic *Rezept*’ – self-contradictory terminology that pointing to the perennial reduction of strategy to tactical formulas, a *Rezept* to which Stülpnagel also subscribed.

But might the idea of a people’s war have been revolutionary within the restricted framework of German military thought? In actuality *Volkskrieg* was merely a desperate effort to make possible once again the axiomatic decisive battle through a force structure concept – in the final analysis – notably close to Seeckt’s vision of a small, professional and highly mobile army backed by a larger mass of improvised militia.<sup>123</sup> The intellectual origins of his concept, as explained to his colleagues in March 1924, were likewise entirely traditional both in substance and in method – which was simply to scale the German defensive tactical system of the final phases of the World War upward into an operational concept: ‘*The tactical zone-combat of*

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<sup>122</sup> BA-MA N5-20, p. 110.

<sup>123</sup> See Dennis E. Showalter, ‘Plans, Weapons, Doctrines: The Strategic Culture of Interwar Europe’, in Chickering and Förster, eds., *Shadows of Total War*, pp. 66-67. Showalter attributes the idea of a national militia complementing a small professional army to Walther Reinhardt, Seeckt’s predecessor as Chef der Heeresleitung, thus suggesting its popularity within the early Reichswehr leadership, but also links the early 1920s militia concept directly to its extreme *Volkskrieg* expression in the mid-1920s, as well as to its ultimate manifestation in the early 1930s – in the form of the army’s support of the paramilitary Nazi *Volksbewegung*.

1917/18 thus becomes, operationally, wide-area warfare in the greatest possible space and depth.<sup>124</sup> Stülpnagel's demand for an all-consuming people's war also corresponded well to the traditional willingness to sacrifice everything for military necessity. He did not merely suggest *any* sort of *Volkskrieg*; he demanded a deliberately and radically brutal and fanatical one. That was indeed an unusual measure in view of the Prusso-German army's longstanding abhorrence of 'Freischärler'.<sup>125</sup> But Stülpnagel operated in an unusual time. What was unusual about his suggestions was the dovetailing of guerrilla war – traditionally a protracted affair – with the operational logic of annihilation, and the reassertion of a single decisive battle as the ultimate goal – a partial change in method scarcely as revolutionary as often argued.<sup>126</sup>

Any rational and realistic application of old wisdom to new reality – any attempt to 'translate' the laws of rapid 'decisive' battles of annihilation, extreme warfare and tactical ruthlessness, faith in the strength of German spirit and the demand to fight on until victory or common *Untergang* alongside the enemy, in a world in which Germany had no army to speak of – would have produced a 'radical' plan. Stülpnagel's vision is thus 'radical' not because of its entirely standard operational assumptions and demands but because he was willing to apply this operational logic

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<sup>124</sup> BA-MA N5-20, p. 24 (emphasis in original); see also p. 23. For the scaling-up of tactics as tradition, see Chapter 1; on German tactical developments in 1917/18, see above all Lufser, *Dynamics of Doctrine*.

<sup>125</sup> On this often paranoid attitude and the reprisals it generated both prior to and during the World War, see John Horne and Alan Kramer, 'War Between Soldiers and Enemy Civilians', in Chickering and Förster, eds., *Great War*, pp. 153-168; idem, 'German "Atrocities" and Franco-German Opinion, 1914: The Evidence of German Soldiers' Diaries', *The Journal of Modern History*, 66:1 (1994), pp. 1-33 and idem., *German Atrocities, 1914: A History of Denial* (New Haven and London, 2001); see also Mark R. Stoneman, 'The Bavarian Army and French Civilians in the War of 1870-1871: A Cultural Interpretation', *War in History* 8:3 (2001), pp. 271-293.

<sup>126</sup> For a different assessment of the idea of people's war, and comparison of this concept with Seeckt's professional army concept, see Geyer, *Aufrüstung*, p. 89.

and its implications to untrained fighting groups of civilians engaged in guerrilla warfare. As expected, the reasoning behind and justification for this demand was once again the paramount claim of military necessity:

In this context we must keep in mind that the war of the future will be directed against the entire people. Not merely the field army, but also the sources of [economic] strength and nerve centres of a given country will be the objectives of warfare. [Although] victory over the enemy will always remain the goal, the roads to that goal will vary in accordance with the available forces.<sup>127</sup>

It is also important to remember that expanding the borders of the operational realm and applying its demands to civilians were not in themselves at all unprecedented in German military tradition, although they had usually been applied only to enemy societies.<sup>128</sup>

### **5. Operational concepts: from attrition to annihilation**

The first stage of Stülpnagel's two-fold plan's thus rested on an unlimited war of attrition fought by soldiers and civilians alike that would absorb the enemy's initial attack and slow, harass, and delay the attacking forces and possibly halt them completely, thus making possible the second phase – a decisive battle of annihilation launched by well-equipped, well-organised military forces with some limited, yet strategically sufficient, success.<sup>129</sup> International support for Germany as the victim of aggression would then put an end to the fighting before France and its allies could launch another strike. Stülpnagel conceived of the first phase as 'strategic defence'

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<sup>127</sup> 'Entwurf', BA-MA N5-20, p. 72.

<sup>128</sup> Hull, *Absolute Destruction*, pp. 226-262.

<sup>129</sup> 'Gedanken' BA-MA N5-10, p. 20.

that, if effectively implemented, would lead into the second phase of ‘war-deciding offensive’:<sup>130</sup>

In contrast to the first phase of the war, the strategic offensive will now move to the fore. It must force a decision through a coordinated assault with powerful air and artillery support. Great mobility – in other words, supply columns – is desirable . . .<sup>131</sup>

Our battle technique must involve accepting partial gains and [on reaching] an equilibrium of forces at several locations, but [must] in the process keep in sight the [ultimate] aim of annihilation [*Vernichtung*] of the enemy. The recognition and exploitation of enemy weakness or error is the [essence of] the art of command.<sup>132</sup>

Stülpnagel’s plan is often described as one based on ‘attrition strategy’, and it is worthwhile asking if this was indeed the case.<sup>133</sup> Since Stülpnagel himself was caught between the limited operational possibilities of ‘people’s war’ and the dogma of the mass-army battle of annihilation, his operational logic tended to be ambiguous and at times self-contradictory, as a result of his efforts to serve two incompatible concepts. Thus Stülpnagel’s underlying logic seems at times *both* attritional and annihilationist: ‘Initially we must consciously employ “attrition strategy” rather than “annihilation strategy”’, he claimed, but went on to assert that ‘Obviously we must doggedly stick to the purpose of ultimately fighting the decisive battle through according to Schlieffen’s teachings. [But] that can only happen once the preconditions for such a battle have been established and the corresponding equilibrium of forces

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<sup>130</sup> Ibid.

<sup>131</sup> ‘Entwurf’, BA-MA N5-20, p. 73.

<sup>132</sup> ‘Französischen und deutschen Kampfverfahren’, BA-MA N5-20, pp. 37-39.

<sup>133</sup> See for example Deist, ‘Rearmament’, pp. 377-378.

has been reached.<sup>134</sup> Yet as he commented immediately afterward, ‘Not the annihilation of the enemy but the uprising of the entire *Volk* for [its] liberation in the most primordial defensive struggle will be our first objective’.<sup>135</sup>

Stülpnagel’s theoretical confusion dissolves once we understand that his attrition strategy, to be implemented in the ‘strategic defence’ phase, derived directly from the centrality and necessity of annihilation. Stülpnagel in no sense abandoned the eternal axiomatic wisdom of pursuing annihilation at all costs. Rather, in a manner entirely similar to Falkenhayn in 1916, Stülpnagel subordinated his strategy of attrition to the logic and requirements of annihilation. Attrition warfare, unlimited in space and time, would eventually make the desired annihilation battle possible:

. . . .to compel the enemy again and again to slowly ‘gnaw his way through’ the entire territory of Germany [*immer wieder zu einer langsamen ‘Durchfressen’ durch das ganze deutsche Gebiet zwingen*] and thus gradually weaken him both in morale and materiel. The enemy, with his heavily armed masses, must face this invisible opponent in bewilderment. The temporary concentration of large forces at locations that permit sudden surprise offensive strikes must always be kept in mind in such a situation.<sup>136</sup>

Stülpnagel also confirmed the interrelationship that he saw between attrition and annihilation by seeking to ascribe to his attrition strategy an ‘annihilational’ quality regardless of its own merits and its contribution to the wearing down of enemy forces:

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<sup>134</sup> BA-MA, N5-20, p. 26.

<sup>135</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 27.

<sup>136</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 25.

‘Impairing lines of communication and evading decision can offer, even in this phase of the battle, the prospect of major successes even against a superior enemy’.<sup>137</sup>

Stülpnagel indeed linked the attrition concept to the final *Vernichtungsschlacht* as much as he could in detailing his *Rezept*, either because he knew that linkage would appeal to his audience, or simply because for him as well, decision by battle was the cherry on the tedious, grinding cake of attrition: ‘It is a question . . . of seeking through individual actions at the front and in the rear of the enemy a great success: gaining time – while damaging the enemy as much as possible – for the launching of the decisive battle . . . The struggle to gain time must thus lead into the struggle to annihilate the enemy’.<sup>138</sup> He indeed played throughout music ideally suited to the officer corps’ ears and mood, emphasising the ‘battle’ part of attritional combat, with the added military value it offered: ‘As with the defence of a great modern fortress, the attacker must meet resistance everywhere throughout a broad forward area. The more active the conduct of that resistance, the better, naturally!’<sup>139</sup>

All this was to be successfully accomplished by identifying and exploiting the numerous vulnerabilities, or in Stülpnagel’s words the ‘Achilles’ heels’ of the French. The French army was still exhausted from the World War, it hid behind its armour and thus deprived itself flexibility and manoeuvrability, and any war it would fight in Germany would expose its extensive masses and their extended communications, and provide a vast array of opportunities for surprise attacks. To those who doubted German chances, Stülpnagel suggested that it would be unwise to overestimate the French.<sup>140</sup>

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<sup>137</sup> ‘Gedanken’, BA-MA N5-10, p. 32.

<sup>138</sup> Ibid., pp. 31-32.

<sup>139</sup> Ibid.

<sup>140</sup> Ibid., pp. 18-19.

Stülpnagel devoted considerable portions of his briefing to convincing his audience that local operational successes were possible for Germany's tiny army as long as its existing divisions enjoyed sufficient levels of armament, training, and mobility, and it cultivated a number of key operational axioms that were all far from new. He repeatedly stressed that flexibility, speed, mobility and surprise, as well as other tactical lessons drawn from the World War, would facilitate success:

For a strategically defensive deployment, my idea is not an extremely thin broad front; I rather believe that we should deploy all-arms task groups, with the gaps between thinly covered by border guard militia and cavalry. If the enemy attacks, his rear-area communications will be disrupted by guerrilla action [*Volkskrieg*] and rail demolitions . . . The swift redeployment of our units through forced marches, railways – and truck transport becomes a necessity . . . I am thinking especially of night marches – and night combat. That is an advantage of the defensive that we did not need to consider as much in the World War, but which will play a notable role in a future war.<sup>141</sup>

By thus linking his plan's two phases conceptually Stülpnagel had eased the tension between the unusual measures he had suggested and the traditional operational logic that they ultimately served. It was at this point in his plan that Stülpnagel's instincts – moulded by his embedded military perceptions – derailed his realistic analysis. Yet Stülpnagel and his supporters kept insisting on the feasibility of his concept, since it was the most faithful projection of the fashion in which they understood Germany's limitations and the means of overcoming them. The details of his operational

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<sup>141</sup> Ibid., pp. 29-30.

planning, and of Stülpnagel's efforts to cope with Germany's military weakness and to apply his operational notions, are therefore worth examining.

### **6. Operational concepts: a new 'Rezept'?**

Scholars have so far presented Stülpnagel's operational ideas as revolutionary or at least novel because of the centrality of the people's war concept in his plans. Yet as suggested above, a well-organised conventional military offensive was a central part of the plan. In what way, then, did his vision of this offensive, regardless of its plausibility, and of the operational and tactical means to realise it, express new concepts of conventional warfare?

Only a strategic offensive, preached Stülpnagel to the choir, could decide the war in Germany's favour, and the Reichswehr must therefore strive to execute it.<sup>142</sup> Yet in order to achieve that goal, the *Feldherr* should not cling to outdated concepts, but rather search creatively for means to demoralise and eventually annihilate the enemy.<sup>143</sup> Stülpnagel's creative search singled out five suggestions: 'The relationship between offence and defence; the deployment of forces [*Kräftegruppierung*]; surprise of the enemy; the importance of the character of the terrain in the battle area; and the employment of army-level cavalry [reconnaissance].<sup>144</sup>

Stülpnagel's readers were, of course, intimately familiar with these basic, self-evident points. Yet Stülpnagel used some of these operational basics as the theoretical departure points that, with some slight exaggeration, have justified interpreting his ideas as revolutionary. The question that should therefore be asked is whether these operational ideas were indeed groundbreaking, or – as Stülpnagel himself repeated

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<sup>142</sup> Ibid., p. 32.

<sup>143</sup> Ibid., p. 33.

<sup>144</sup> Ibid.



fastidiously – were they merely a manifestation of traditional precepts. It is important to note that here and elsewhere in his writings, in his attempts to promote the components of his *'Rezept'*, Stülpnagel refrained from stressing their novelty. On the contrary: he painstakingly highlighted the links that connected all his suggestions to embedded concepts, especially when adjusting them to the perceived requirements of future war.

Thus he described at length the advantages of keeping the correct relationship and coordination between offence and defence, using relevant historical examples from Moltke the elder to the World War.<sup>145</sup> He emphasized the importance of surprise with a quotation from 'our infantry training manual', in order to justify the extreme forms of surprise that he felt free to advocate: 'What is true for operations and tactics is also true to an even greater extent for the invention, in the fields of technology and chemistry, of weapons systems that can ensure surprise. I believe that we must accomplish the maximum in creative work with a minimum of forces. No inhibitions of any sort should exist (gas and smoke, bacteria, motors, electrical remote control and detonation, aviation . . .).<sup>146</sup> And the contribution of even a single cavalry corps would allegedly be immense, thanks to its ability to astonish enemy forces and thus fulfil 'The foremost aim[:] . . . to employ each weapon in decisive offensive combat at the right time and from the most effective location'<sup>147</sup> All these ideas were wholly traditional, and Stülpnagel rightfully presented them as such.

The concentration of force in order to achieve local and temporary advantage in face of a numerically superior enemy was a more nuanced suggestion, designed to

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<sup>145</sup> Ibid., pp. 33-36.

<sup>146</sup> Ibid., pp. 38-39. In the one Stülpnagel argument that might be interpreted as apologetic, he justified the use of measures illegal under international law by quoting 'an English officer' who allegedly claimed that a nation fighting for its life should disregard 'paper conventions'.

<sup>147</sup> Ibid., p. 41.

satisfy the imperative of achieving decisive results with the minuscule forces at Germany's disposal. Stülpnagel's attempt to bridge the gap between operational imperatives and operational reality is a prime example of his mental boundaries. Instead of presenting genuinely new ideas – for instance taking his 'people's war' concept to its logical extreme by avoiding decisive battles altogether – Stülpnagel simply decreased the level of 'decisiveness' demanded and thus fitted it to the abilities of the shrunken army. Thus he described concentration of force as a partial answer to the impossibility of flank attack, given that 'we will in many cases have to throw our weak units at the enemy merely frontally, and without deployment in depth, in order to hold him up.'<sup>148</sup> Stülpnagel hammered home his conclusion that only tactical success was within reach (and only tactical success was required) by repeating that the tactical concentration of forces was the essential step. That logic, well-known to his readers, was not merely an operational lesson; it was a compromise to keep the familiar goal in sight while attempting to achieve it in an unorthodox way.<sup>149</sup>

Stülpnagel's argument in favour of concentrated forces aiming at local tactical breakthroughs instead of strategic flank attacks, given the expected reality of warfare and the improbability of achieving 'decisive' results in the coming war, was the pinnacle of realism that 1920s German military thought achieved – before colliding with and succumbing to its own peculiar, institutional, irrational rationality:

In this case we must once again fight in all-arms task groups that have a genuine [measure of] fighting power and possess reserves deployed in depth. Only in this way can we launch genuine operations, that [will] give

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<sup>148</sup> Because of the nature of the expected front and against Stülpnagel's own wishes (ibid., pp. 36-37); see also his discussion of outmanoeuvring the enemy by exploiting his mistakes (ibid., pp. 37-38).

<sup>149</sup> See also Geyer's emphasis on Stülpnagel's loyalty to the axiom of annihilation of enemy forces in a single decisive battle (Geyer, *Aufrüstung*, p. 87).

an intellectually superior commander the chance to defeat even a powerful enemy. The long-standing fundamental principle of concentrating forces at a decisive point [while] notably weakening others must continue to dominate us.<sup>150</sup>

These were not the words of a revolutionary.

### **7. The thumb on the scales: German *Geist***

Stülpnagel had based his entire bid for success through his novel concept of ‘people’s war’ on yet another traditional conviction which (as always) he shared with others: the greatness of the German spirit as a decisive factor for both soldiers and civilians alike: ‘German *Geist* must vanquish French materiel!’<sup>151</sup> Stülpnagel demanded, of course, a far more extreme expression of ‘German *Geist*’ from German civilians than did Groener and others. Yet it is the shared and unvarying confidence in this quality and in its supremacy over mere material factors that provided both Stülpnagel and Groener with the foundation for planning a victorious future war:

Perhaps the German army will be called upon to inaugurate, in the war of liberation that it has taken up, a new era in warfare, in that it will overcome, through the most extraordinary spiritual and intellectual efforts, the force of materiel, in the form of enemy military technology extraordinary both in numbers and effect. In any case I can conceive that

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<sup>150</sup> ‘Gedanken’, BA-MA N5-10, p. 37. A discussion, in the same spirit, of Schlieffen’s teachings accompanied this conclusion: ‘We speak of this [principle] constantly, in accordance with the teachings of our great master, Schlieffen, but forget that in reality, at Cannae Hannibal kept his centre weak in order to prevail with his strong wings. It is clear that a [plan of] battle of this kind places the highest demands on the commander’s strength of will and the quality of the troops. But we must scrutinize tasks of this kind thoroughly from a theoretical standpoint, in order to be capable of dealing with them in practice (ibid.).’

<sup>151</sup> ‘Deutscher Geist muss über französische Materie siegen!’: ‘Gedanken’, BA-MA N5-10, p. 18.

these novelties in warfare will have a demoralizing effect on the French half-breed *Volk* [*Mestizenvolk*], that relies above all on its gigantic armaments, and on the nationally [fragmented and] hastily thrown together [*zusammengewürfelte*] Polish and Czech armies.<sup>152</sup>

An equally important part of Stülpnagel's conception rested on his conviction that the French lacked any such spirit – a commonplace in German military thought with devastating consequences in both 1914 and 1916.<sup>153</sup> Stülpnagel also paid considerable attention to a variety of ways to break the French spirit, as part of the unrestrained and hellish war he planned to unleash upon Germany; 'strong air units [might] attack the enemy population . . . the struggle for air superiority will take on a major importance in future war. And we [ourselves] must be prepared [to face] enemy forces landed by transport aircraft squadrons in our rear.'<sup>154</sup>

Stülpnagel's understanding of the German spirit and of German moral qualities, however, did not simply reduce them to a code-name for lasting commitment. For him, unlike Groener, '*Geist*' was neither an innate quality nor a mysterious Germanic silver bullet. Stülpnagel did not enjoy the same freedom from realistic planning Groener had enjoyed in 1924; while Groener contemplated a distant future war that Germany would fight as the aggressor, Stülpnagel had to plan an all too contemporary war in which Germany would be attacked by far stronger powers. However radical his plans may seem, strict realism was his guiding principle as well as a personal characteristic, and he could not afford himself to treat moral qualities as an omnipotent magic remedy that would answer every need. He warned against the misunderstanding of the 'buzzword', as he called it, 'French materiel against German

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<sup>152</sup> BA-MA, N5-20, pp. 26-27.

<sup>153</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 27.

<sup>154</sup> 'Gedanken', BA-MA, N5-20, p. 21.

*Geist*' (which he frequently used himself), as implying that moral qualities in themselves would suffice in future war:

That thought is complete nonsense [*barer Unsinn*]. We require strong if not [necessarily] equivalent armaments, and must [then] – arithmetically speaking – strive for balance or superiority through an advantage in moral forces. In addition, in accordance with the experience of the [world] war we should not underestimate the moral strength of the French, and should reflect that their well-organized units will be facing our newly-raised and inevitably loosely organized ones.<sup>155</sup>

Stülpnagel's more practical (and demanding) version of faith in German *Geist* was therefore one that saw moral qualities as the factor that could tip the balance, provided some balance could first be achieved by a comprehensive rearmament effort and suitably creative planning. In that scenario, France's powerful strike would break against the wall of German will, while France's spirit would be put to the test and duly fail: 'France fights for greed and plunder, with a sense of its own [material] superiority. Its sons and mothers will not be inclined to make great sacrifices [in such a struggle]. . . as bloody losses and risks increase, it may well emerge that . . . the French *Volk* may quickly become war-weary, and prepared to leave us our freedom.'<sup>156</sup> For Stülpnagel, the more total the warfare, the more likely that enduring German commitment, coupled with tactical wisdom, would prevail over French military might.

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<sup>155</sup> 'Gedanken', BA-MA 5-10, p. 18 (also 'Schlagwort'); see in addition his 'Französische und deutsche Kampfverfahren', BA-MA N5-20, p. 37.

<sup>156</sup> BA-MA, N5-20, p. 27.

### 8. Cooperation with the civilian authorities?

Stülpnagel and other ‘young Turks’ often figure in the literature as those who, for practical reasons connected to their planning of future total war, supported a shift in the army’s attitude toward the despised government of the German Republic.<sup>157</sup> Instead of Seeckt’s suspicious and reclusive style – which was largely an extension of the Wilhelmine army’s deep-rooted aversion to politics and civilians; increased mistrust between army and government; and impacted negatively on the army’s yearnings for bigger budgets and multi-year rearmament plans – the young Turks allegedly sought to deepen cooperation between Germany’s army and its government in order to overcome ‘political obstacles’<sup>158</sup> But what kind of cooperation did they have in mind?

It should be noted that Stülpnagel was scarcely an enthusiastic supporter of the German Republic, its governments, parties, or politics, much less the national priorities it had so far pursued.<sup>159</sup> Moreover, as a soldier, and especially one who had witnessed and had actively contributed to German escalation at the end of the World War, Stülpnagel’s loyalty was first and foremost to the German army, not to the

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<sup>157</sup> See for example Deist, ‘Rearmament’, pp. 381-383, and ‘Ideological War’, pp. 364-365.

<sup>158</sup> See for instance Hull’s comment on Hindenburg’s ‘fetish of his disdain for politics’, and his and Ludendorff’s persistent avoidance of declaring themselves to be Germany’s official political leaders (Hull, ‘End of the Monarchy’, pp. 238, 245-246).

<sup>159</sup> His introduction to ‘Thoughts on the War on the Future’ is thus full of rants against all the above, well exemplified by the following: ‘The German people has in the final analysis disarmed itself under the pressure of its own governments. I do not thereby ignore the fact that the fist of the Entente was enduringly at the throat of the government of the day, and that interaction with domestic politics may have blurred the vision of the republican government. [But] so long as we lack a German government that sets itself the task of preparing our struggle for national liberation with clarity and consistency, and with all appropriate foreign policy caution [nevertheless] considers the spiritual rearmament [*Wehrhaftmachung*] of the German *Volk* as its highest moral obligation, [we] cannot expect genuine practical work in this area’ (‘Gedanken’, BA-MA N5-10, p. 6).

political entity that the army purportedly served.<sup>160</sup> It is thus not surprising that Stülpnagel was consistently willing to sacrifice the Republic's interests to the army's interests and aspirations.

It also goes without saying that Stülpnagel was naturally inclined to believe that while the civilian government officially held sovereignty over Germany, the military leadership alone was entitled to make decisions regarding war – where, when and how to fight it – entirely free from civilian interference. But what would happen if the people were to go astray in their aspirations, that is – if they were to refuse to wage war altogether? In other words, what room should be left for civilian decision-making based on the people's will? Stülpnagel's claims were simple: if the people's aspirations ran contrary to the army's best judgment, those aspirations must change:

Weary sceptics and pathetic pacifists have declared that a future resumption of war by military means [*mit den Waffen*] is hopeless or criminal . . . large sectors of the [German] people even today regard with scepticism a war against a France bristling with weaponry, especially when [such a war] has been made into a domestic political catchphrase. We officers must take to heart all the [underlying] causes, [and] the great warning of the war: [the necessity] of greater political realism.<sup>161</sup>

That was indeed a view far distant from Seeckt's traditional notion of immunizing the army against the divisions and temptations of politics, but it was scarcely a profession of faith in a close cooperation that involved submission of the army to civilian control. The actual meaning of cooperation between the army and the government was cooperation in achieving the goals the army believed must be

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<sup>160</sup> Be it the *Kaiserreich* or Republic (Hull, 'End of the Monarchy', pp. 245-246, 255-256).

<sup>161</sup> 'Gedanken', BA-MA N5-10, p. 4.

achieved, and in following directives and timetables for fulfilment of those goals dictated by the army. In that spirit, Stülpnagel shared with the Foreign Office in March 1926 his vision of ‘the short-term goals of general German policy’ and the ‘short-term goals of German disarmament policy’; he fully acknowledged that disarmament was a political issue, but nevertheless merrily assumed command, and prescribed world domination by stages: first an end to disarmament and demilitarization, the reconquest of the lost territories from Poland, and the *Anschluss* of Austria; then irredentist conflict with Czechoslovakia and Italy; and finally, in the more distant future, ‘fighting in opposition to the Anglo-American powers [*amerikanisch-englische Machtkreise*] over raw materials and markets’<sup>162</sup> Stülpnagel’s correspondence at no point assumed an equal partnership with the civilians; for him, the army alone possessed the correct solutions, while the government was bound to make mistakes:

Currently the question of whether and how the work of state and army in making our *Volk* willing and able to bear arms can be carried forward is decisive. If, in accordance with the Versailles *Diktat*, the army must ‘play dead’ for the next years, the question arises of whether the government [simply] accepts that situation while hoping for better times, or whether – as has not happened up to now – it resolutely takes the path of initiating all measures outside the Reichswehr’s narrower remit necessary to promote the future military power [*Wehrkraft*] of our *Volk*.<sup>163</sup>

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<sup>162</sup> Stülpnagel, ‘Abrüstung’, March 1926, *Akten zur Deutschen auswärtigen Politik 1918-1945*, Series B, 1925-1933, vol. 1/1 (Göttingen, 1966), pp. 341-350 (war aims: pp. 343, 345).

<sup>163</sup> BA-MA N5-20, p. 110.



Stülpnagel was thus no doubt more willing to cooperate with the civilian authorities than was Seeckt; he had no choice but to support a cooperation that would ensure the implementation of the total military preparation that he judged necessary and appropriate. As with Groener and virtually all his colleagues, Stülpnagel identified the weakest link, the one that had allegedly broken the chain of military successes in the World War, as the German people. Moreover, his plan necessitated political unity and an iron will on the part of the entire nation, the galvanisation of its spirit, and readiness for the utmost sacrifice by each of its members: ‘the categorical imperative of fighting and dying for the Fatherland.’<sup>164</sup> Ensuring that the *Geist* of the German people was unshakable thus stood at the very heart of his ‘people’s war’ plan, and his understanding – and demand – for that militarily necessary *Geist* was an extreme one.

Stülpnagel knew that full well, and he was thus willing to ‘cooperate’ with the civilian administration in order to awaken and harden the people’s spirit and to ensure the national unity that had allegedly failed the army in 1914–18. Unfortunately the government did not exhibit the level of commitment and wisdom with which Stülpnagel was supposedly so keen to cooperate.<sup>165</sup> Consequently, and in order to galvanise the people and nurture their military spirit Stülpnagel offered a list of ‘suggestions’ that make it impossible to consider his intentions as ‘cooperative’:

The necessary measures would include: the creation of a national defence council . . . the passing of a Reich sport law, the implementation of which would be only apparently the remit of the R[eich] Interior M[inistry], [but] in reality would be controlled by the R[eichs]w[ehr] Min[istry] . . . The assignment of sufficient state funding – directly or indirectly – to the

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<sup>164</sup> ‘Gedanken’, BA-MA N5-10, pp. 11-12.

<sup>165</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 6.

Reichswehr . . . for the encouragement of military technology – and chemical [warfare], . . . the hiring of civilian employees to free up the troops . . . the strengthening of territorial defence in accordance with army suggestions, but camouflaged as civilian activity . . . the most severe punishments for treason, which would be defined in the broadest possible way . . . Propaganda.<sup>166</sup>

The inner logic of Stülpnagel's suggestions makes clear that at the heart of his concept lay the assumption that the civilian government and the army were entangled in an unequal relationship in which the party entitled to make demands was the army.<sup>167</sup> The demands mentioned, and the many others specified in his 'Thoughts on the War of the War of the Future', demonstrate that Stülpnagel did not assume the government or the people should have – or would wish to have – any say whatsoever in the effort to organise and prepare the country for total war. Stülpnagel indeed did not shy away from openly claiming that

in internal politics a total transformation must occur before [we can] think seriously of appealing to arms [*bevor ernsthaft an die Aufnahme des*

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<sup>166</sup> BA-MA N5-20, pp. 110-111. See also his suggestion of 'national and [para-]military education [*Erziehung*] of our youth at school and university. The creation of hatred against the external enemy'. ('Gedanken', BA-MA N5-10, p. 9). Stülpnagel's insistence on this point derived from his belief, shared throughout the officer corps, that a lack of fighting spirit on the part of the people had doomed Germany in the World War, despite its striking military successes.

<sup>167</sup> For a different view see Post, *Civil-Military Fabric*, pp. 93–97. Post suggests that the Reichswehr accepted civilian control to some extent and with some degree of sincerity from 1925 onward. However, as MacGregor Knox has noted, Reichswehr cooperation with the Republic was an outcome of budgetary, strategic, and operational needs, not to mention lack of alternatives to the Republic; the limited cooperation did not change the Reichswehr's self-image and understanding of itself as an institution independent of the current German state (*To the Threshold of Power, 1922/33: Origins and Dynamics of the Fascist and National Socialist Dictatorships*, vol. I [Cambridge, 2007], p. 264 note 65). For another analysis which recognises the army's utilitarian reasons for partial cooperation yet stresses that 'considerations of foreign policy were at the forefront of the Reichswehr's view of and relationship with the Weimar Republic' see William Mulligan, 'The Reichswehr, the Republic and the Primacy of Foreign Policy, 1918-1923', *German History* 21:3 (2003), pp. 348-349.

*Krieges gedacht werden kann*]. The preconditions for this are . . . The creation of a strong Reich authority while pushing aside [current] pathological parliamentary conditions . . . The education of our *Volk* to accept the state [*die Erziehung unseres Volkes zum Staatsgedanken*] – labour service obligation (the system of Frederick William I).<sup>168</sup>

The government and people for their part should be ready to invest enthusiastically everything required, and be subject to incessant training, preparation and eventually execution of the army's destructive plans. Thus, 'The war of the future demands from the very first moment the commitment of the entire strength of the *Volk* . . . Dictatorial laws, the most strenuous discipline [*Zucht*], the most extreme demands upon leaders at all levels are a matter of course. Sacrifices must be demanded of every *Volk*-comrade [*Volksgenosse*].<sup>169</sup> In an interesting choice of words, and correspondingly to his belief that the parliamentary system was 'pathological [*krankhaft*]' and should be replaced by a system that would better 'represent' the people's will, Stülpnagel assessed that 'the moment for the national uprising will [only] come when the preparations of the politicians and the armed forces have been harmonized with the national will of the majority of the *Volk*'<sup>170</sup> That remark displayed a total lack of awareness of his own underlying assumption: that the people would naturally adopt the military viewpoint and warplan as the true expression of their own aspirations, regardless of whatever other choices might be available; that was the 'cooperation' he envisaged.<sup>171</sup> Stülpnagel could not have imagined the reverse

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<sup>168</sup> 'Gedanken', BA-MA N5-10, pp. 9-10.

<sup>169</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 11-12.

<sup>170</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 6.

<sup>171</sup> Deist and others have taken Stülpnagel's words at face value, and suggested that his 'radical conclusion from the trauma of 1918' was the source of an aspiration to 'harmonise' with the national will of the *Volk* (Deist, 'Ideological War', p. 364 and 'Rearmament', p. 381). Stülpnagel indeed drew some conclusions from 1918, but respect for

scenario, in which the government cajoled the army to implement a civilian vision of security. And indeed a very similar scenario – in the course of Groener’s attempt to promote his notions of gradual rearmament and closer cooperation with the international security system – had failed miserably to find support and cooperation within the Reichswehr, given its incompatibility with perceived military interests and with Reichswehr planning.

Stülpnagel further clarified the unequal civil-military relationship that he envisaged in declaring that: ‘Only the highest levels of the army need concern themselves with these matters . . . Following this road consistently will produce greater success than the muddling about [*herumtasten*] of the Reichswehr up to now in all mob[ilisation] issues, with the related internal and foreign policy dangers’.<sup>172</sup> Both the content and wording of these suggestions indicate that Stülpnagel had no desire to share responsibility with government or people, but sought rather to dominate both. He was profoundly unwilling to abandon Seeckt’s demand for military autonomy in the conduct of war, or to ‘harmonise’ military measures with the *Volk*, but rather aimed to compel the government and people – if necessary, even by force – to take an ever more active part in his all-encompassing total war.

The true nature of Stülpnagel’s views on the superiority of the army over the government, and his assumption that the latter ought to subordinate itself totally to military goals that it might initially resist – and should therefore be forced to accept – is especially evident in his warnings against a French preventive war. Stülpnagel evaluated that threat as immense, but his recommended strategy to cope with it did not

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the will of the *Volk* – which after all had in the army’s eyes had shamefully mutinied – was not one of them. By ‘harmonising’ he meant the total subordination of the people to the will and goals of the army, and not the other way around, or even some sort of co-equal partnership in determining goals and methods.

<sup>172</sup> BA-MA N5-20, pp. 110-111.

of course include diplomatic negotiations that might compromise Germany's rearmament efforts. After all, for Stülpnagel the conflict with the French 'half-breed *Volk*' was unavoidable, and therefore Germany's only realistic policy should be to increase the speed, extent, and secrecy of its rearmament plans, preferably implemented by a dictatorial system of government committed to the army's goal of an unlimited 'war of liberation'. As he remarked to a friend in January 1924, 'It is our misfortune to lack in Germany a man of outstanding qualities, who can and will rule dictatorially. *We* would support such a man, but we neither wish to nor can play that role ourselves.'<sup>173</sup> The task of the politicians was thus to achieve swift rearmament by every possible means, whether they and the German people liked it or not:

This danger [French preventive war] is so great that we must work against it with any and all methods. These are . . . political leadership, which must orient itself toward evasion and delay. The responsible statesman must have the courage to confront the unpopularity he will face from nationalist sentiment in the country . . . [S]ecurity precautions surrounding our preparations take on the greatest importance. If we do not summon up the necessary national discipline – secrecy, concealment, deniability – I see our task as hopeless. Blatherers and those elements who seek to exploit the preparation of external war for domestic political ends must go in front of a criminal judge, for the well-being of the state is in play.<sup>174</sup>

## **9. The irrelevance of international politics**

Yet Stülpnagel's most obvious display of his inherited world-view was related to his analysis of and opinions on the nature, structure and workings of international politics,

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<sup>173</sup> Hürten, ed., *Das Krisenjahr 1923*, p. 243; emphasis in original.

<sup>174</sup> 'Gedanken', BA-MA, N5-10, pp. 44-45.

and of the desired design and conduct of Germany's grand strategy. To begin with, and as a result of Stülpnagel's limited understanding of international politics, his political analysis displayed his customary narrow-minded, one-dimensional quality. After briefly considering the possible roles that Great Britain and Russia might play in a future war, he concluded that Germany's most relevant enemies were France ('our mortal adversary') and Poland.<sup>175</sup> Since Stülpnagel could not have even imagined a solution to Germany's post-1918 problems that did not entail the use of force, war was by definition inevitable and necessary; the only question was, against whom, at least initially?

When I thus see the precondition for the possibility of war in the moral and material support of foreign powers, I nevertheless do not suffer from the conceit that a beneficent providence will offer us a war between England (*sic*) and France . . . We must prepare ourselves to stand alone at first against France and Poland, and perhaps Belgium; other powers [will] only gradually take our side.<sup>176</sup>

Moreover, and despite his acute analysis of Germany's military options and possibilities, Stülpnagel never managed to expand the boundaries of his security perceptions, and break the mental framework fixed in his mind at least since the World War. The professional integrity and expertise that produced notably realistic assessments of Germany's military capabilities were closely related to the same limited framework that hampered him in his efforts to conceptualise his country's political interests. Not only did he call for unlimited rearmament that would put Germany under severe economic strain and in ever-present danger of occupation by

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<sup>175</sup> Ibid., pp. 7-8.

<sup>176</sup> Ibid., p. 8.

France;<sup>177</sup> he apparently could not understand the extent to which that path would damage Germany's international position, and did not consider dangers other than a French pre-emptive attack. At the heart of his understanding of the nature of international relations stood power, which he understood as being synonymous with military power. Without sufficient arms, Germany was of necessity easy prey for its neighbour's power-political rapacity.<sup>178</sup> Its only hope, which justified any potential danger deriving from its fulfilment, was rearmament. With arms, there might be a war that Germany could win; without arms, there surely would be a war that Germany would shamefully lose. Stülpnagel had constantly displayed an extremely blinkered understanding of strategic threats and was never able to accept factors such as economic might and international alliances as strategic assets equal in importance to armaments, troops, and *Geist*.<sup>179</sup>

Entirely typically in view of the precepts and intellectual background that constrained Stülpnagel's thought, the need to rearm – however counter to Germany's overall national interests rearmament might be – thus transcended in his eyes all other interests, aspirations or policy considerations. His reasoning left no room for nuanced calculations of the sort advanced in Groener's elegant and elaborate later conceptions. In Stülpnagel's view, sufficient armaments and powerful armed forces were the fundamental attributes of the position of strength without which no state could hope to negotiate successfully with its peers – and such negotiations were in his eyes

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<sup>177</sup> Geyer, 'Strategy', p. 560.

<sup>178</sup> 'Entwurf', BA-MA N5-20, pp. 72-73.

<sup>179</sup> See for instance Groener's 1924 letter to Stülpnagel urging him to include in his analysis the United States, as an overwhelming political and economic power that affected all European conflicts and their aftermaths – a factor that Stülpnagel scarcely mentioned, much less dealt with at length in his strategic planning (BA-MA N5-20, pp. 70-71).

inseparable from incessant threats of force.<sup>180</sup> Armaments were not, under any circumstances, themselves negotiable – not even if their acquisition or possession directly threatened Germany’s international position and security interests; in effect, in Stülpnagel’s world-view, any such scenario was logically impossible.<sup>181</sup>

Today an awakening is underway in a great part of the *Volk*, a recognition that a people without armaments of its own in this warring age [*waffenkriegenden Zeit*] can only be the plaything [*Spielball*] of other powers, and also that the *Diktat* of Versailles was only the close of one phase of the war, and that a new phase, carried on with the greatest bitterness, has followed, a phase that has as its objective the end of Germany, the annihilation of its political, economic and cultural independence [*Eigenleben*]. Either Germany capitulates forever – the thought, God be praised, is even today intolerable to every German – or Germany seeks once more in a great uprising to decide by force of arms the issue of whether 100 (*sic*) million Germans shall be the slaves of 40 million Frenchmen.<sup>182</sup>

Stülpnagel had no doubts about the only way to settle this question, and it had nothing to do with diplomacy: ‘No one can paint our current impotence in too hard-headed a fashion, if he [also] must bear responsibility for committing German blood to battle. Our cry must therefore always be: “Let us arm!”’<sup>183</sup>

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<sup>180</sup> ‘We must be clear that today we are a defenceless state, and are so considered. We can today no longer conduct overseas policy [*Weltpolitik*]; we have perhaps been thrown back by centuries, and must first once more seek to become a continental power . . . We must once again take up the position of Prussia in 1813 . . . [And] what I have set forth can only be implemented if the political instrument is [first] placed on a sound footing’ (‘Gedanken’, BA-MA N5-10, pp. 7-8).

<sup>181</sup> Geyer, ‘Dynamics’, pp. 109-110.

<sup>182</sup> ‘Gedanken’, BA-MA N5-10, p. 5.

<sup>183</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 46.



Revealingly, Stülpnagel accompanied his call for unrestrained rearmament with an economic analysis – but one that had a very different point of departure than Groener’s. Economics, for Stülpnagel, merely involved statistical compilations indicating the quantities of arms, munitions and other military products a country could manufacture, and was no more than an instrument meant to facilitate war, and logically subordinate to its demands. In his extensive survey of the ‘war of the future’, Stülpnagel even found room for a brief discussion of economics and its relation to war. Since his planning assumed from the outset the partial or complete destruction of Germany, including its economy, he – logically enough – considered a strong economy as an important but not decisive factor. Stülpnagel was ready to compromise: ‘With regard to economic issues, it is enough to say that a people must live before it can fight. Starving masses are only capable of riots; they will feebly and miserably collapse as soon as they face a serious adversary.’<sup>184</sup>

Especially in the case of economic planning, Stülpnagel’s analysis exposed the unwillingness of Germany’s military leadership to implement what even its members recognised as central lessons of the World War. Stülpnagel, along with many of his colleagues, had realised that strategic planning and the conduct of war entailed a much broader range of activities than the OHL had imagined or had been willing to engage in; that was particularly true of economic planning and of the structural reorganisation of the state administration needed to meet wartime requirements. In short, Germany must develop more comprehensive as well as more thorough war planning and preparations; and the *Generalstab*, which lacked sufficient knowledge, manpower and experience for that task, would have to trust, cooperate fully with, and share authority with the civilian government. But from time immemorial, every German military

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<sup>184</sup> Ibid., p. 10.

instinct counselled abhorrence of any such possibility; the army inevitably aspired to reserve all war planning and decision-making prerogatives to itself, while simultaneously showing no real interest in any planning that was not strictly ‘military’, that is, operational. The result was an unbridgeable gap, a striking dissonance; even an officer such as Stülpnagel, who had founded his concepts on civilian cooperation, whether free or coerced, thus found himself cornered into briefly mentioning economics, and then leaving it completely out of his or anyone’s area of responsibility:

Economic mobilisation must be so [well] organized, that in the event of war the entire national economy can be shifted to new tasks and can work for the war unconditionally from day one onward. It would be tempting to go into all these questions, on which I have only touched briefly. They [economic preparations] are however not part of my remit, and I would like to express the hope that I might occasionally discuss [these matters] with those more expert than myself.<sup>185</sup>

That ‘hassle-free’ approach – admitting non-military aspects of strategic conduct and planning are vital but focusing on operational planning issues nevertheless – not only echoed the Reichswehr’s past, but also testified to its continued vitality.

#### **10. ‘Hold[ing] doggedly to the aim of annihilation’**

Did Stülpnagel then rightly deserve his later reputation as a revolutionary theorist and planner? He never saw himself, nor was he seen by his colleagues, as such. His vision never demanded a complete divorce from the powerful constraints that regulated his thought and set the analytical boundaries of his heuristics. Stülpnagel sought to

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<sup>185</sup> Ibid., pp. 10-11.

readjust – and succeeded in readjusting – his frame of thought, rather than breaking with it; he criticised the mental ossification around him, but not the fundamental truths about warfare, strategy, and the conduct of war that had caused the stagnation that he denounced. In his call for new, more relevant operational concepts he was merely trying to serve perennial goals in more appropriate, practical, and rational ways:

*We must hold doggedly to the aim of the annihilation [Vernichtung] of the enemy in a great battle, [but] we must consider the path to that objective far more carefully than heretofore. Our times demand methods different from those of the World War! [And] so long as this is not clearly recognized, it is best that we not [re-]issue old formulas as new field service regulations for combat leaders.*<sup>186</sup>

The inconsistency and confusion that later surrounded the character and qualities of Stülpnagel's vision resulted from the clash between (i) his sound critique of the Reichswehr's stagnant interpretation of operational axioms on the one hand, and (ii) his adherence to those very same axioms when offering his own analysis on the other. True, Stülpnagel sharply criticised the clinging to operational concepts that were no longer practical or reasonable. But his answer conformed to yet another traditional pattern – the scaling-up of tactics into operational and even strategic concepts, and a parallel scaling-down of strategic planning and thought into simplistic tactical formulas.<sup>187</sup>

Stülpnagel had also called for a thorough rethinking of past practices and a search for new frames of thought. But what did he offer instead? A war so total it

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<sup>186</sup> My emphasis: Stülpnagel's official reply to T4 regarding Hierl's 'Leitlinien für die obere Führung im Kriege' (undated, probably summer 1924, BA-MA, RH2-2901).

<sup>187</sup> See Chapter 1.

lacked boundaries or goals, and in which the chances of success depended upon putative German virtues and unrestrained ruthlessness: a war based on a plan devoid of strategic non-military calculations, utterly contemptuous of diplomacy, and necessitating unrestricted means and suicidal willingness to sacrifice everything in the name of an 'honourable' finale. His operational concepts derived from the same addiction to annihilation regardless of operational plausibility and strategic realism. And the centrality that he attributed to *Geist* also suggests that Stülpnagel shared with his colleagues more traditional convictions and patterns than he rejected.

Accepting Stülpnagel's version of the war of the future as novel would force the reader to ignore the tenets underlying his vision. Stülpnagel's fundamental strategic and operational world-view, seemingly so different from Groener's, although actually similar to Groener's total war argument of 1927, stemmed from the same limited reservoir of possibilities that had inhibited German military thought since the nineteenth century; its very 'radicalism' was an accurate and 'realistic' expression of that limited reservoir, as it was understood in the 1920s Reichswehr. In that sense, Stülpnagel was indeed far more realistic and down-to-earth than Groener. He disdained time-honoured pathos, ancient buzzwords, and Schlieffenesque great plans; instead he fashioned his heritage into a plan that was conceivable and plausible to those who shared his tenets and believed in their eternal pertinence. The difference between Stülpnagel and Groener is therefore not in their shared departure point and system of beliefs, but in their different perceptions of its applicability in the second half of the 1920s, perceptions that derived primarily from their different posts and responsibilities.

Stülpnagel represented the most serious, rational attempt to adjust German military theory to post-1918 realities. Not Stülpnagel the officer but the basic military *Weltanschauung* he inherited was itself radical and extreme; any rational adjustment

to or relevant manifestation of its tenets in postwar Germany would have been 'radical'. That is the reason Stülpnagel's colleagues did not criticise his ideas as irrational, extreme, or implausible. On the contrary: they were thoroughly examined, that is, they were treated as a possible strategy and operational concept.<sup>188</sup> In that sense, Stülpnagel failed for the most unexpected reason: he was not radical enough. Had he fully exploited the possibilities of a prolonged 'people's war' – which would have obviously and comprehensively ruined Germany, but Stülpnagel was wholeheartedly willing to risk Germany's existence as a basic assumption in his planning – without also proposing 'real' operational initiatives, he would have rightfully earned his place in a radical pantheon.

But any such break with the army's *raison d'être* was far from Stülpnagel's mind. Above all, Stülpnagel sought to adjust – and succeeded in adjusting – the traditional patterns of the army's operational concepts to the grim reality that he faced. Fortified by the typical obtuseness of his ilk against the mere possibility that the people might not joyously lay down their lives in a Wagnerian *Endkampf* with Germany in flames – in fact, against the possibility that war planning and war aims have facets other than purely military ones, Stülpnagel was incapable of producing anything other than a self-destructive plan for future war. His analysis of Germany's strategic situation was the most sober, sharp and clear-sighted that the Reichswehr of the mid- and late 1920s produced. That those qualities did not characterise his resulting planning testify to the self-imposed blindness that his precepts dictated.

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<sup>188</sup> As well as branding him as radical and his planning as illusory, scholars agree that Stülpnagel deeply affected Reichswehr operational planning: 'his "Thoughts on the War of the Future" formed the basis and provided an impulse for planning that went far beyond the strictly military sphere' (Deist, 'Rearmament', p. 378; see also Geyer, 'Dynamics', p. 110).

### III. Hans von Seeckt

An authentic aristocrat in manner, he brilliantly personified the old-school Prussian officer type.<sup>189</sup>

His greatest strengths were in areas long-studied and familiar. Novelty he viewed with scepticism; nothing new [ever] crossed his mind.<sup>190</sup>

Hans von Seeckt, army chief of staff in 1919–20 and *Chef der Heeresleitung* from 1921 to 1926, was – and is still seen as – the saviour of the *Reichswehr*. He allegedly reawakened the army's faith in a technologically advanced war of movement aiming at decisive battles of annihilation, and set in stone the army's faith in the infallibility of traditional operational notions. Most of all, he has figured as the man who revived the defeated army's self-confidence and thus marked out the path for the return of Germany's famous tactical and operational superiority.<sup>191</sup> Seeckt thus ostensibly provided an indispensable service to the *Reichswehr*, and rightly earned his place in the German military pantheon. But in so doing he also made an unconscious yet crucial decision that dramatically affected the army's entire future trajectory: he chose self-preservation through intellectual stagnation and unrealism over the army's past, present, and future, and over the realistic assessment of its capabilities, role, resulting doctrine, political goals, and future plans. In short, as the head of the German army and the most influential military figure of the *Reichswehr* he preferred, faithful to the organisation's pre-existing cultural patterns, to follow the army's narrowly perceived self-interest. He traded the present for the past and the future, and dangerously

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<sup>189</sup> Stülpnagel on Seeckt, in Stülpnagel, *75 Jahre Meines Lebens*, p. 189.

<sup>190</sup> Blomberg on Seeckt, quoted in Geyer, *Aufrüstung*, 81.

<sup>191</sup> See for example Robert M. Citino, *The Path to Blitzkrieg*, pp. 5, 7-72; idem, *The German Way of War* (Lawrence, KA, 2005), pp. 240-244.

distanced the army from the here and now of 1920s Germany and the limitations that the postwar situation imposed.<sup>192</sup>

Correspondingly, Seeckt's agenda of refurbishing traditions 'abandoned' or 'distorted' during the war necessitated the elevation of the consequences of these traditions into undeniable doctrinal and operational successes so great that they could not be doubted, much less radically amended or ignored, while simultaneously striving against the limitations of Versailles, and effectively imposing the army's own foreign policy on the Republic. The quintessence of Seeckt's legacy to the army was his agenda of ignoring reality and cultivating a comforting alternative reality, while remaining oblivious of the political, economic and even security ramifications of his choices.<sup>193</sup>

In Seeckt's defence, his decision was probably the only one that could have salvaged some form of cohesion, unity, and sense of institutional identity for the *Reichswehr*. Facing reality and the naked truth – that the army itself had utterly failed in the mission it set itself, and had brought military and political calamity on

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<sup>192</sup> On Seeckt's escapism – his focus on putative future capabilities rather than present impotence – see Geyer, *Aufrüstung*, pp. 77-80.

<sup>193</sup> For a substantially different view, see Citino, *Path to Blitzkrieg*, pp. 34 and 10-11, who claims that Seeckt, as the commander of a defeated army, had sought and instilled a 'new, novel and modern . . . military doctrine', despite of his 'conservative' and even 'reactionary' views. Citino lavishes praise on Seeckt for his allegedly open-minded approach (also commenting that Seeckt 'refused to wear blinkers': *German Way of War*, p. 240); he assumed that 'It would have been the easiest thing in the world for Seeckt, forced by the Versailles Treaty to maintain a state of military weakness, to ignore the unpleasant experiences of the war, to succumb to the lure of nostalgia, and to look longingly on the past and ape the doctrine of Moltke and Schlieffen in a sterile and uncreative fashion' (*Path to Blitzkrieg*, p. 35). Yet that claim could scarcely be further from the truth. Even before the war ended, and in its best traditions of self-analysis, the German army had inaugurated a massive research effort to draw out and assimilate the lessons of the war (see Markus Pöhlmann, 'Yesterday's Battles and Future War. The German Official Military History, 1918-1939', in *Shadows of Total War*, pp. 223-238, and James Corum, *The Roots of Blitzkrieg* [Lawrence, KA, 1992], pp. 1-24, 37-39). Ignoring the acute need for self-assessment would have been simply unprofessional, and unthinkable for Seeckt. But even the most honest intentions, such as those Seeckt presumably entertained, cannot compensate for detachment from reality and heuristic poverty. Seeckt's ability to see around his blinkers was and remained severely limited.

Germany, might have so damaged the self-assurance, public reputation, and political standing of the officer corps that the *Reichswehr's* very existence would have been in doubt. Nor were Seeckt or other senior officers personally inclined toward or capable of putting aside the lenses through which they experienced and understood their world. In that sense, Seeckt's clinging to old precepts and to the basic claim that *deviations* from orthodoxy had doomed Germany in the World War, coupled with his attempt to prepare the execution of traditional operational axioms with new technology that would promise victory in the next, was in effect the only policy he and his colleagues were capable of imagining and following.

The very source of Seeckt's immense influence over the officers of the Reichswehr was therefore the powerful self-deception that he helped to create and legitimize. He was both allegedly sober and aware of the army's dire situation, and at the same time reassuringly optimistic about its future:

I have already made clear that we are in no condition to resist militarily. I will not even mention numbers, [for] today's warfare also requires the provision of technological means, heavy artillery, aircraft, tanks, and especially munitions. Look the situation in the face. We must bear it; puny and narrow was the bridge that led over the abyss, and tortuous the road on either side, but we have put them behind us; I am hopeful that the flatlands lie before us. I believe in our future.<sup>194</sup>

Yet as the humiliating results of the Ruhr Crisis so well demonstrated, a dangerous and eventually semi-permanent detachment from immediate realities lay at the root of Seeckt's optimism.

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<sup>194</sup> BA-MA N247-75, 'Ansprache', 10 July 1920, pp. 23-27.



Periods of social unrest, transformation, or crisis can sometimes induce deep systemic and cultural change – both in modes of experience and in ‘natural’ habits.<sup>195</sup> But the post-war *Reichswehr*’s existing cultural assumptions remained firmly locked in place. If army doctrine and practice had not failed Germany in 1914–18, there was no need to challenge them. Instead, their further enforcement and the repression of any ‘deviations’ was the obvious line to follow. The army, by explaining defeat without re-examining its own fundamental beliefs, preserved its institutional identity. But the price it paid in return was heavy; setting this identity and its accompanying practices in stone as unchallengeable truths meant sacrificing the possibility of genuine learning from past mistakes, of effectively assessing reality, and of flexibly re-evaluating basic ideas, assumptions and practices as ever-changing conditions demanded. The complete and overt disregard of real-world demands and limitations that still baffles readers of German interwar military writings, as well as students of German military planning in the Second World War, originated and was nurtured in German military culture long before the 1920s. And thereafter Seeckt’s agenda legitimised the irrelevance of reality to military planning, and thus presented the army, along with the chance to prosper and excel for a time at the tactical level, its ultimate death-sentence.

Hans von Seeckt is the most clear-cut example of the argument at the core of this thesis, that between 1919 and 1938 no paradigmatic shift in military concepts occurred in the German army – and especially not during the 1920s, in which the most prominent of Germany’s military brains closely followed and conformed to the army’s organisational culture. In words and deeds alike, Seeckt’s prime motivation was to re-establish and revive – with minor adjustments and improvements – certainly not to

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<sup>195</sup> Swidler, ‘Culture in Action’, pp. 278-280.

revolutionise. Unlike Groener and Stülpnagel, he never aspired to change; as Stülpnagel retrospectively remarked, this was ‘an old general, who held existing circumstances to be good, and desired no further innovations in the army’ once the Reichswehr had been consolidated.<sup>196</sup> Seeckt’s program, his vision and his plan to rebuild the army from the ruins, rested on the restoration of old notions that allegedly – and with disastrous consequences – had not been respected or implemented. Yet what precise system of military beliefs did Seeckt promote, and how did he aspire to apply it? What concepts did he oppose, and why? And what was the price that he unintentionally committed the army to paying, by preferring to strengthen the Reichswehr’s self-esteem and status at the expense of realistic self-assessment?

### **1. Military world-view and operational vision: forgetting nothing**

Reflecting back in 1933 on his career and on the foundations of his military analysis, Seeckt commented that:

The development of German military institutions in the fifty years before the war had involved continuous standardization and harmonization; the war itself had in its natural course moved things further along that road. The recreation of the army begun after the war, under the pressure of events and the conditions imposed [at Versailles] could only bring this process to its conclusion if something new and vital could be created, and this could only succeed through the coordination of all concerned for the achievement of a single goal.<sup>197</sup>

But what exactly did Seeckt mean, beyond his stress on the increasing domination of the Kaiserreich’s Prussian military core over the armies of the lesser federal states,

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<sup>196</sup> Stülpnagel, *75 Jahre meines Lebens*, p. 234.

<sup>197</sup> Seeckt, *Die Reichswehr* (Leipzig, 1933), pp. 54-55.

and what were the decisions and conduct involved in this self-proclaimed mixture of tradition and innovation?

Seeckt's faith in a war of movement and his attempts to resurrect that concept have made him the talisman of German military brilliance, and, as mentioned, have spared him some of the criticism that post-1945 military history literature has showered upon his colleagues. Expressing faith in mobile operations and attempting to rebuild an army to execute such operations was no obvious military agenda in 1919, as the interwar trajectory of the French army demonstrates.<sup>198</sup> But the question remains whether Seeckt stuck to his guns as a gifted and far-sighted military planner reacting intelligently to the crisis of mobility – thus initiating a new doctrine for the Reichswehr<sup>199</sup> – or whether he simply clung blindly to the old and familiar, aiming merely to reuse the same purportedly winning formula with improvements that would allow Germany to re-launch the same war that it had just lost, but in a fashion that would be winnable.<sup>200</sup> The strengthening of traditional doctrinal tendencies and operational faith in itself was exactly what the *Reichswehr* needed as an institution. But that is all it was: a clinging to traditional patterns, often insufficiently adapted or even completely unsuitable to new political, strategic, and technological realities.

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<sup>198</sup> See Deist's analysis of the army's early and mid-1920s internal debate over the reasons for the failure of the Schlieffen plan – a debate over the plausibility of achieving swift decision in the age of mass armies. Such reassurance 'seemed to be necessary', especially in light of the indecisive positional warfare of 1914–18: Deist, 'Reichswehr and National Defence', pp. 378-379; see also Gross, 'Dogma der Beweglichkeit', pp. 154-156. For an analysis of the role of Seeckt's vision of small, high-quality, mobile armies, supported by air forces as the theoretical foundation of Blitzkrieg warfare, see Karl-Heinz Frieser with John T. Greenwood, *The Blitzkrieg Legend* (Annapolis, 2005), p. 331.

<sup>199</sup> As suggested by Citino, *Path to Blitzkrieg*, pp. 5, 7-11; likewise Matthias Strohn, 'Hans von Seeckt and his Vision of a "Modern Army"', *War in History* 12:3 (2005), pp. 334-335.

<sup>200</sup> As Geyer had argued in *Aufrüstung*, pp. 79-80; idem, 'German Strategy', pp. 555-557.

Seeckt was a highly intelligent man, and his approach was naturally scarcely one-dimensional and simplistic. But it was also less sophisticated and advanced than usually depicted. One example is Seeckt's often-mentioned detestation of catchphrases, including the invocation of the sacred battle of Cannae, and of simple-minded dichotomies such as the strategy of destruction versus the strategy of exhaustion.<sup>201</sup> Yet what might seem as nuanced critique of his era's gospels was actually far from it. Seeckt's 'campaign' against 'catchphrases' was in reality, for all his elegance of style, a recapitulation of militarist notions that nakedly exposed his rigid world-view and limited political understanding. Seeckt thus rejected 'pacifism', since

[w]ar and peace are decided by higher powers than princes, statesmen, parliaments, treaties and alliances – they are decided by the eternal laws which govern the growth and decay of nations . . . the kind of pacifist who would deliberately make his own nation defenceless in such fateful encounters . . . deserves to be hanged to the nearest lamp-post'.<sup>202</sup>

'Imperialism', the catchword that summed up so many of Wilhelmine Germany's attitudes and policies, Seeckt sought by contrast to re-habilitate:

Unfortunately, the word [imperialism] is often used in public to designate and confute every strong demonstration of vitality, every expression of the will to survive in the great struggle of nations . . . only the Englishman is permitted to view the conception of 'empire' as a reflection of legitimate pride in a might which encompasses the earth; in any other nation

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<sup>201</sup> See for instance Citino, *German Way of War*, pp. 240, 242.

<sup>202</sup> Hans von Seeckt, *Thoughts of a Soldier*, trans. Gilbert Waterhouse (London, 1930), p. 6.

‘imperialism’ clearly implies a treasonable menace to the peace of the world.<sup>203</sup>

And accordingly ‘militarism . . . ha[d] become almost a term of abuse’; but unjustly so, as Seeckt echoed, with perfect pitch, the 1914-18 effusions of German savants and public figures: ‘I assert that militarism made first Prussia, then Germany great and strong . . . it enabled us to resist a hostile world for four years and . . . repelled waves of Bolshevism . . . Prussia and Germany of to-day owe their survival to the old militarism’. Nor did Seeckt neglect the complaint that ‘patriotism’ in other countries was attacked as ‘militarism’ in Germany, and concluded by warning of the fatal consequences of catchwords – Germany had been forced to agree at Versailles to the destruction of its armed forces because of its so-called ‘imperialistic’ and ‘militaristic’ aims.<sup>204</sup> Small wonder then that the man who based his outlook on the very mainstream of general staff thought concomitantly adhered to the set of operational formulas that mainstream abided by and dictated.

## **2. Modern warfare, modern armies, antique dogma**

Seeckt is most famous for translating his operational vision, which stemmed from his assumptions regarding the nature of modern warfare and the lessons of the World War, into detailed structural and operational conclusions, based on the employment of a small, well-equipped and highly mobile professional army backed up by a larger militia.<sup>205</sup> That army would be able to absorb the enemy’s initial blow, reorganise, and

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<sup>203</sup> Ibid., pp. 6-7.

<sup>204</sup> Ibid., pp. 7-8. The same logic caused Seeckt, in his prophetic mode, to claim expectantly that ‘war of aggression’ was a definition imposed by the victors, and that a war of aggression was, in effect, ‘only a defensive policy (like preventive war)’ (ibid., p. 13).

<sup>205</sup> Seeckt had entertained this idea as early as February 1919, in a letter to Groener that elaborated his grand scheme of rebuilding the German army, and included at-length

deliver a decisive blow of its own. Thoroughgoing emphasis on combined-arms operations, coupled with force-enhancing technologically advanced weapons, would facilitate decisive battle; the untrained militia would then assist the professional forces in annihilating and mopping up enemy forces. Seeckt sought to rebuild the Reichswehr according to that concept, based on his projections about the nature of modern armies and modern warfare.<sup>206</sup> He was and still is persistently praised for the supposedly modern elements in his operational concepts, such as ‘mobility’, ‘combined arms’, and most of all his famous aversion to mass armies. But were these views ground-breaking, and did they stem from doubt about the dogmas of the Prusso-German military creed?

The tenets of Seeckt’s operational world-view were clear enough. ‘If we give the conception “Cannae” its right meaning, we find that it implies insistence on that method of warfare which leads to the destruction of the enemy. This is to be the most surely attained by a vigorous envelopment of his two flanks – see Cannae’.<sup>207</sup> The logic Seeckt displayed from this point on was clear, coherent, and utterly flawed. Seeckt held to pre-existing operational truths, even when aware of drawbacks that might prevent the fulfilment of the German army’s prescribed formula. Thus, while explaining that double envelopment was only possible when enjoying superiority of force and a favourable strategic deployment, Seeckt concluded that in the absence of both, and when a ‘Cannae’ envelopment was impossible, ‘it must at all costs be kept

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discussions of force structure and the division of labour between the line and militia (BA-MA N247-77, pp. 8-9).

<sup>206</sup> For a succinct and balanced analysis of Seeckt’s operational vision that elegantly places it in its theoretical and operational context, see Wallach, *Dogma*, pp. 229-240.

<sup>207</sup> Seeckt, *Thoughts of a Soldier*, p. 10.

in mind that any form of envelopment, if only on one flank, is the surest road to annihilating success’<sup>208</sup>

Indeed the series of manuals produced in the early 1920s, faithfully reflecting Seeckt’s operational beliefs, recommended that operational technique as the most reliable one for achieving annihilation.<sup>209</sup> As the momentous field service regulations of 1921, ‘Command and Combat with Combined Arms’ (H.Dv. 487, *Führung und Gefecht der Verbundenen Waffen* or *F.u.G.*) succinctly explained,

The attack alone snatches the initiative from the enemy. It gives the fullest scope to the superiority of leaders and units. The envelopment of one or both flanks and attack on the enemy’s rear is especially effective. Thus can the enemy be annihilated [*Hierdurch kann der Feind vernichtet werden*]. All attack orders must bear the stamp of the most extreme decisiveness. The leader’s will to victory [*Siegeswille*] must penetrate down to the last rifleman.<sup>210</sup>

Seeckt was engaged in what he honestly believed to be a sincere, genuine, and even painful process of learning the lessons of the World War, a process also expressed in his reflections on military history and practice. Yet his attempt to draw lessons well illuminates the conceptual boundaries that obscured his thought. Seeckt directly acknowledged that envelopment was not the operational aim or norm in numerous battles, and suggested frontal attack as the most effective possible solution when either single or double envelopment was impossible. In strong words he denounced

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<sup>208</sup> Ibid., pp. 10-11.

<sup>209</sup> Interestingly, the impossibility of fully annihilating a modern mass army was not one of the characteristics, challenges, and setbacks pertinent to such armies that Seeckt discussed; at the very heart of his otherwise critical analysis of modern warfare, *Vernichtung* remained unchallenged as the primary goal and rationale for action.

<sup>210</sup> H.Dv. 487, *Führung und Gefecht der Verbundenen Waffen (F.u.G.)*, Part 1 (Berlin, 1921), p. 9.

the 'military precept' that had dominated German campaigning in 1914–18 and had persisted in German military thought after the war:

In post-war manoeuvres the desire for envelopment at any price and the extension of the front [in an attempt to outflank the enemy] until it ceased to be a front at all had to be combated as though there had never been a war to teach us. The consequences which this craze for envelopment produced in the war were inevitable.<sup>211</sup>

Yet as already suggested, Seeckt's analysis in no way altered the simple tactical and operational guidelines at the core of *Reichswehr* doctrine, guidelines that also carried Seeckt's signature. *Führung und Gefecht* naturally followed this line, once again stressing envelopment as all-purpose panacea:

Pursuit harvests the fruits of victory. The pursuit strives for the annihilation of the enemy if this was not possible in the preceding fighting. Preparations for pursuit should be made early, [and] still uncommitted units launched along a decisive avenue of attack. Impact on the flanks and rear of the enemy remains the aim for which to strive.

Troop fatigue is never sufficient reason for wholly or partially neglecting the pursuit.<sup>212</sup>

Even Seeckt's harshest critique did not suggest any drastic change of means and methods, much less the repudiation of Germany's acclaimed military masters whose example the army should follow. Like virtually every other German officer seeking to prove or disprove military wisdom, Seeckt called upon 'Schlieffen himself' to validate other forms of battle as legitimate: ' . . . in his plan for a war with France, [Schlieffen] renounced all attempts at double envelopment in favour of re-enforcement of the

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<sup>211</sup> Seeckt, *Thoughts of a Soldier*, p. 11.

<sup>212</sup> H.Dv. 487, *Führung und Gefecht*, Part 1 (1921), p. 10.



decisive right wing'.<sup>213</sup> Above all else, Seeckt never doubted that the one decisive battle, whatever operational form it might take, would remain the key to successful campaigns and wars; he was incapable of envisaging, much less developing, a strategic outlook free of the all-embracing tactical logic of the battle of annihilation.

Seeckt's adherence to decisive *Vernichtungsschlacht* as the motivation, prime goal, and basic logic of strategic and operational planning can also explain the small to non-existent attention he devoted to strategic questions that extended beyond the very narrowest operational framework. If battle was still the key to successful warfighting, why should anyone waste doctrinal effort and attention on minor matters such as economic mobilisation and cooperation with the civilian government? Seeckt's force planning and proposed military build-up not only accommodated the demands of rapid, mobile warfare, but also spared the army from the annoyance and distraction of genuine strategic planning and war conduct.<sup>214</sup>

Seeckt's adherence to the pivotal dictum of decisive battle and to its rigid operational implications is most evident in his analysis of the strategy of destruction versus the strategy of exhaustion. Sharp as always, Seeckt mocked those who conveniently placed the 'Hindenburg-Ludendorff regime' under the 'Clausewitz-Schlieffen doctrine of "destruction of enemy forces"' while marginalising Falkenhayn's era as a 'feeble strategy of exhaustion'; Seeckt knew that neither the second nor the third OHL had neglected the destruction of the enemy as guiding principle and highest goal of war, and that both strategies had been understood and framed with that aim in mind:

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<sup>213</sup> Ibid.

<sup>214</sup> See Deist's assertion that Seeckt's small operational army plan 'offered the advantage of avoiding two main problems . . . the motivation of the population and the readjustment of industry. Such factors were irrelevant to Seeckt's preferred kind of warfare' (Deist, 'Ideological War', p. 363). That preference further deepened the German army's indifference to in-depth strategic planning.

[in the World War] . . . our means to pursue a strategy of destruction in the decisive military sense failed . . . our only hope was that our enemies, impressed by this desperate resistance, might . . . grow weary of the tedious strife . . . every one of these sorties was conducted with the will to secure a decision . . . the soldier know only one aim of the war: the destruction of the enemy forces.<sup>215</sup>

The 1924 capsule summary annex of *Führung und Gefecht* emphatically reiterated this wisdom, and explained further that:

Only pursuit consummates victory. In the pursuit the annihilation of the enemy should be sought by overtaking him and seeking to cut off his retreat. Successful pursuit makes further battle unnecessary. Thus even today the saying that ‘the last breath of man and horse’ must be committed to the pursuit is binding. Even a victorious unit is exhausted . . . [But] the leader who recognizes in good time the approach of victory [*der den heranreifenden Sieg rechtzeitig anerkannt*] can fashion an ‘ordinary victory’ into an annihilational decision [*kann aus einem ‘ordinären Sieg’ eine vernichtende Entscheidung gestalten*] even with numerically inferior forces. For that purpose the mobility of all units, especially artillery and air assets, and all available transport is to be exploited . . .<sup>216</sup>

The means that would allow the resurrection of the war of movement and thus achieve annihilation were modern technology in the form of aircraft, tanks, mobile artillery, and the like; Seeckt earned his favourable reputation in the eyes of scholars

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<sup>215</sup> Seeckt, *Thoughts of a Soldier*, pp. 14-17. See also a similar remark from Seeckt’s ‘Moderne Heere’ article of 1928, cited by Citino, *Path to Blitzkrieg*, p. 10.

<sup>216</sup> H.Dv. 487, *Führung und Gefecht*, Part 3, *Einführung und Stichwortverzeichnis* (1924), pp. 30-31.

through his specifically technological approach to modern warfare.<sup>217</sup> He is consequently often described as a brilliant planner, open to incorporate and cleverly employ technological advances, although Seeckt's faith in the continuing if limited operational value of cavalry – and insistence on retaining the lance – tarnished his supposedly sophisticated technological verve and understanding in the eyes of some, despite his careful reservations.<sup>218</sup>

Seeckt had no interest in technology per se, nor was he willing to amend doctrine in light of or in the service of technological advances and requirements. His approach to technology – as Schlieffen's before him and many others after him – was practical and utilitarian: how can technology serve the army in realising *its current doctrinal goals*? Seeckt was thus willing to mix old means and objectives with new technology. Technology was never an end in itself or a decisive factor in doctrinal development; it was simply an aid, one among many, to an operational goal – decisive battle – that was always prior and superior to the means used to achieve it:

It is the specific characteristic of the art of leadership that it concentrates all available forces for the *decision*. Greater mobility must often counterbalance numerical inferiority. In this connection the marching performance of troops, the use of rail, motor transport, and all manner of vehicles, as well as the exploitation of night to conceal movement play notable roles. Frequently the commander [*Führer*] will have to make do with forces that seem to him inadequate. Such situations require

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<sup>217</sup> See for instance Citino, *Path to Blitzkrieg*, p. 9, Deist, 'Ideological War', p. 363, and Corum, *Roots of Blitzkrieg*, pp. 31-33.

<sup>218</sup> Blomberg proposes depriving the cavalry of its lances; Seeckt disapproves: Kirsten A. Schäfer, *Werner von Blomberg. Hitlers erster Feldmarschall* (Paderborn, 2006), pp. 58–59 and note 313, p. 230.

correspondingly greater economy [of force] in areas [that are] not decisive for the battle.<sup>219</sup>

Finally, Seeckt had yet another vital operational value to impart in his manual and to his army; a force so vital that it determined the outcome of battles and campaigns: ‘The decision must always be a whole-hearted one [*Der Entschluss muss immer ein ganzer sein*]. Only the will to victory can ensure victory . . .’.<sup>220</sup> Seeckt’s faith in moral qualities was not restricted to such characteristic expressions of the will to win, crucial as it might be to the combat soldier; he deliberately demanded the kind of spirit responsible for the army’s radically self-destructive preoccupation with tactical victory at all costs:

[I] thank [you] for recalling [the anniversary of] Gorlice [Seeckt’s greatest victory, the 1915 breakthrough that cracked open the Russian front]. That it was the only [such remembrance] enhances both its merit, and yours . . . What a miserable era! . . . [And], indeed, a miserable *Volk*, that cannot remember [the things] about itself that were genuinely great and that forged victory: extraordinary gallantry, and obedience [Todesmut und Gehorsam]. Yet an end will again come; I know not when, but I know it will come at some point . . .<sup>221</sup>

Seeckt never came close to questioning, much less challenging, what his culture affirmed was the nature of warfare and the necessary elements of effective and successful combat. Consequently, even when commanding an army wholly unable to engage in any form of decisive battle – and when partially admitting that such decisions could only be achieved by modern armies fighting modern wars – Seeckt

<sup>219</sup> H.Dv. 487, *Führung und Gefecht*, Part 1 (1921), p. 12 (emphasis in original).

<sup>220</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 9.

<sup>221</sup> Letter of May 1922, quoted in Rabenau, *Hans von Seeckt*, p. 271.

could not have consummated his valid critique by enunciating a new, revolutionary, or merely improved doctrine. He remained confined within the very same precepts he deplored. Worse, he stamped them indelibly upon the *Reichswehr* for years to come through the power of his post and his charisma and personal prestige.

### **3. Civil-military relations: learning nothing**

An intriguing trend among military historians tends to generally absolve Seeckt of opinions, theories and policies for which his colleagues have been harshly criticised.<sup>222</sup> Seeckt's world-view and conduct in his relations with the German government, and what he deemed to be desirable structure of 'cooperation' or 'subordination' between the army and the state were all typical of his ilk. His view rested on the same traditional concepts and bore the same imaginary scar of civilian 'defeatism' and 'betrayal' that had purportedly ended the World War with German defeat. Yet Seeckt also operated in what he no doubt felt to be a complicated political reality, suppressive of and hostile to the army.<sup>223</sup> He often used more soothing wording in political matters than other *Generalstab* officers cared to use, presumably in order to safeguard the *Reichswehr's* interests and to cultivate its friends. Camouflage, in other words, has favourably affected historians' judgement of Seeckt's world-view, of his policies, and of his attitude toward the Republic. Despite the indisputable fact that Seeckt conducted his own secret foreign policy and maintained a

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<sup>222</sup> For instance, Post (*Civil-Military Fabric*, p. 95) has claimed that 'Seeckt believed that the Clausewitzian principle of political primacy must be revived', while nevertheless admitting that Seeckt himself 'challenged' that very same 'dictum'. According to Post, the inconsistency resulted from Seeckt's contempt for politicians. But that contempt itself was simply yet another facet of Seeckt's inherited normative concept of civil-military relations, rather than the source of Seeckt's utterly independent and almost subversive conduct of military affairs.

<sup>223</sup> See also Meier-Welcker, *Seeckt*, p. 282.

frosty and sometimes deceptive stance toward the various governments he was sworn to serve and defend, his persuasive declarations of service to the state still affect historical assessments of his conduct.

One notable example of the manner in which Seeckt managed to speak ‘democratic republicanism’ and mean ‘primacy of the army and of its interests over civilian requirements and civilian control’ was his bid to double the size of the ‘dwarf-army’ forced upon Germany at Versailles:

The survival [*Bestand*] and prosperity of the *Volk* is inextricably linked to the Reichswehr. As a part of the *Volk* and as the most powerful support of the state, the Reichswehr must conform to the development of *Volk* and State . . . [a]nd the trust of the Reichswehr in the government and to [its own] higher commands . . . [as well as] the trust of the *Volk* in the Reichswehr must be sustained, and, when it has been lost, re-established.<sup>224</sup>

That heart-warming introduction preceded Seeckt’s suggestion that Germany should establish a 200,000-man army instead of the Treaty-mandated 100,000 men, a recurring theme of Seeckt’s throughout the spring and summer of 1920, not simply as a result of security requirements but first and foremost in order to allow the members of the now-demobilising *Freikorps* to join the army legally.<sup>225</sup> The Seecktian world-

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<sup>224</sup> BA-MA N247-67, 18 April 1920, p. 46.

<sup>225</sup> For Seeckt’s own thoughts regarding the multifaceted German attempt to revise the terms of Versailles and to create a 200,000-man army, see BA-MA N247-67 pp. 47-48, BA-MA N247-75, pp. 20-27 and BA-MA N247-77, pp. 8-9. The attempt had failed, according to Seeckt, because of the opposition of the Left: ‘[a]dmittedly a united front cannot be established, since the radical political parties on the Left under the leadership of the Independent Socialists have declared themselves against the claims of the armed forces’, even before he had had the chance to face the French and their ‘naked will to annihilation’ at the Spa conference: BA-MA N247-75, ‘Ansprache an die Offiziere des Reichsministerium’, 10 July 1920, pp. 20-21; see also Corum, *Roots of Blitzkrieg*, p. 30. For a different analysis of Seeckt’s original intention in promoting the 200,000-man army, see Strohn, ‘Seeckt and his Vision’, p. 322. Yet Strohn’s claim that Seeckt had subordinated his military demands to the

view stemmed from the assumption that an inherent difference existed between the interests of the army and those of the Republic, and that the superiority of the interests of the former over those of the latter was self-evident. That claim Seeckt soothingly expressed as the army's shared destiny with the state, while ignoring that same state's needs, limitations, and expressed will – a stance characterized Seeckt's dealings with the Republic from beginning to end.

Seeckt himself never concealed his fundamental vision of civil-military relations and its origin, which firmly placed him at the very heart of the Prusso-German military tradition. One of the allegedly misguided 'catchphrases' he took upon himself to correct in his *Thoughts of a Soldier* of 1929–30 was Clausewitz's most famous claim that military power must serve political ends and limitations: 'war is a continuation of policy by other means' Unintelligently applied, Seeckt argued, that catchphrase could be used as 'a premise to the most erroneous conclusions'<sup>226</sup> Seeckt then set out to explain Clausewitz's real intentions, elucidating the way the German military leadership had always interpreted Clausewitz. Seeckt understood well the theoretical gap between the concept of war as policy and the ideal-type of uncontrollable annihilational nature of war. And he made his choice without hesitation:

. . . after the experience of our own day, Clausewitz's dictum cannot be accepted without qualifications, although it must be admitted that political presumptions and political preparations have their influence on the

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'political and economic possibilities of the state' (since Seeckt was willing to compromise over his initial insistence on 300,000 men) would make Seeckt the most unusual and politically – and economically – aware army chief that Germany ever possessed, and ignores the general's own well-nigh irrefutable testimony about his motivations at Spa. The same can also be said for Meier-Welcker's attribution (*Seeckt*, pp. 283–284) of the general's insistence on a 200,000-men army to his commitment to internal security, again in direct contrast to Seeckt's own words, as well as to his later studied indifference to the fate of the Republic.

<sup>226</sup> Seeckt, *Thoughts of a Soldier*, p. 8.

conduct of war. The quotation from Clausewitz has been misunderstood if, as a mere platitude, it obscures *Clausewitz's own doctrine of the true nature of war, which has for its object the destruction of the enemy.*

Properly understood, the words quoted mean that war has no existence *per se*, but is joined by laws of its own to the organic life of nations . . .

Clausewitz . . . himself became a catchword when we piously repeat his pronouncements without studying his meaning'.<sup>227</sup>

Seeckt naturally presented the two spheres – military and political – as distinct and separate from one other. The military sphere was wholly free, in its pursuit of victory – which Seeckt conceptualised in military terms alone – of the limitations attending the civilian sphere. Seeckt was as adamant as Germany's military leaders before him that when it came to war, the army had the first and the last word. That was his fundamental philosophical framework, which in effect nullified his ostensible tolerance for civilian authority, since for him no such authority could exist once war had been launched: 'War aims . . . those things [territorial acquisitions and other benefits] would have been the consequences, not the aims, of war. They are political, not military problems . . . the soldier knows only one aim of war: the destruction of the enemy forces'.<sup>228</sup>

Given that framework of civil-military relations, which established the distinctiveness and independence of the army, its conduct and its goals, from civilian authority (whatever the form of regime), Seeckt's call for the re-establishment of trust

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<sup>227</sup> Ibid., pp. 9-10 (my emphasis).

<sup>228</sup> Ibid., p. 17. Post's almost apologetic suggestion (*Civil-Military Fabric*, pp. 170-171) that Seeckt's 'deviation' from the 'principle' of political control resulted from his distaste for the Republic and for its party politics is thus unnecessary. Seeckt would have exhibited the same aversion to monarchical interference or political guidance in military affairs and warfare: 'I use the word "statesmen" in this discussion to mean the political head of a state, be it an absolute or constitutently limited monarch, a dictator, a president, or a more or less anonymous government, or cabinet' (*Thoughts of a Soldier*, p. 33).



between the army and the government was naturally a one-way street: the government had a lot of improving to do: 'It is impermissible that only hostile comments and [political] attacks are brought to the Reichswehr's attention, while signs of care and concern [*Fürsorge*], of thanks, and of recognition remain unexpressed'.<sup>229</sup> Seeckt's resentment of the Republic's governments of course derived from far more serious causes; he held the Republic as responsible as the Entente powers for the harsh terms of Versailles. Reporting on the army's failure to secure changes to the Treaty's military clauses at the Spa conference of July 1920, he bitterly commented that '... I spoke against the notion of handing over responsibility to large numbers of individuals, the Reichstag, the Reichsrat, [or] the cabinet members in Berlin, who would have to permit us to guide them in their decisions, or be excluded and placed before a *fait accompli*'.<sup>230</sup>

That statement also expressed Seeckt's assumptions regarding the precise nature of the relations between the civilian and military echelons of the Weimar Republic. The 'pygmy' army, in Seeckt's words, had no choice but to cooperate with the Republic; neither liked one another, but each was dependent on the other for survival.<sup>231</sup> In poetically explaining their shared destiny, Seeckt went so far as to suggest a shared identity between the army and the state; that identity was, however, by definition a military one.<sup>232</sup> Quite like Stülpnagel, who merged army and *Volk* into a single entity fighting for and in the name of military values in the future, Seeckt

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<sup>229</sup> BA-MA N247-67, 18 April 1920, p. 46.

<sup>230</sup> BA-MA N247-75, 'Ansprache', 10 July 1920 p. 22.

<sup>231</sup> Post, *Civil-Military Fabric*. See also Deist's explanation of Seeckt's comment: since both the dwarf-army and the Republic in which the army played a restricted political role were Versailles-born 'anomalies', they could thus only be an interim creations, and in that sense they would share the same destiny (Deist, 'Reichswehr and National Defence', p. 376).

<sup>232</sup> See also Wallach's similar analysis and interpretation of Seeckt's remark that 'The army serves the state and the state alone; for it is itself the state' (Wallach, *Dogma*, pp. 236-237).

merged the army with the state and granted that state military values in the past, present, and future.

This army possessed the unique characteristic that it closely accommodated itself to political developments, and even after some parts of it had confronted one another in enmity [in 1866], had nevertheless developed into a uniquely structured whole unified around a single concept – like the Reich itself. That feeling for order and subordination that was rooted in and had been systematically developed among the prewar German people, combined with inborn commitment to the homeland and long-cultivated submission to the idea of the state, had created a people's army that corresponded as perfectly with Germany's unique qualities as [it did] with its [own] historic mission. If the victor wished to destroy Germany through the so-called peace settlement, he had first of all to destroy its army.<sup>233</sup>

When pressed to the wall in the difficult times of early 1919, Seeckt went so far as to stress that a strong army meant a strong Republic. But such statements are scarcely evidence of a sudden willingness to subordinate traditional military prerogatives to civilian control. Rather, Seeckt's emphasis on power-politics and the centrality he ascribed to military might in both internal and foreign affairs, which he revealingly reduced to a single entity,<sup>234</sup> suggests the kind of shared identity he had in mind – an identity that partook far more of the well-known 'army that has a state' than vice versa:

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<sup>233</sup> Seeckt, *Die Reichswehr*, pp. 8-9.

<sup>234</sup> See also Seeckt's note that 'if we wish to speak of foreign policy, then we are almost compelled to begin with domestic affairs, for internal circumstances provide the foundation on which foreign policy must be constructed' (BA-MA N247-141, p. 97).

The domestic power of the state must be based on [military] might. In order to govern, the government needs a standing army. The strength of that standing army has been prescribed to us by the peace settlement. [That strength] is in addition dependent on our economic efficiency. [But] within those limits, anyone who still credits us with a world role [*der uns noch Weltgeltung zuspricht*] must wish for as large a standing army as possible. That [aspiration] has nothing to do with foreign policy aims and principles. First the fog of [fine] phrases [and] the pale shroud of anxiety must disperse, and our politics must be led by men who *will* rather than [simply] suffer; not one of them will see a strong army as being detrimental to his policies.<sup>235</sup>

To Seeckt's dissatisfaction, the Republic's government consistently failed to live up to the army's expectation that a façade of de jure civilian control would merely veil the army's complete de facto freedom of action. The government, although normally willing to cooperate, could never do enough. Seeckt on his part had maintained a deep suspicion of the 'radical left' government, and tried to shield the army as much as possible from its dangerous influence.

But Seeckt's assertion of military primacy had yet another implication, which he vigorously enunciated. If 'war influences policy as it is influenced by policy',<sup>236</sup> and if the Republic and its politicians were contemptible, then naturally the army as the supreme power within the state should not shy away from itself engaging in the international game of power politics. If political decision making was to affect decisions about war, Seeckt had no intention of leaving that kind of politics to the politicians. His contempt for parliamentary politics, exacerbated by his hostility to the

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<sup>235</sup> BA-MA N247-77, pp. 8-9.

<sup>236</sup> Seeckt, *Thoughts of a Soldier*, p. 10.

post-1918 regime, prompted Seeckt to exercise his 'authority' and initiate his own foreign policy:

The army is the foundation of state power and [that power's] mightiest weapon. [The state] must be disposed to commit it to action at any moment, and correspondingly prepared. That the army cannot do, if its leadership remains without information on and influence over the internal political situation . . . The demand that the army be kept out of politics is indisputably correct . . . [But] this fundamental principle that the army be unpolitical should not be interpreted as . . . barring the army leadership from [playing a role in] the overall development of state policy.<sup>237</sup>

Seeckt's army accordingly took an active part in designing a separate strategic frame of action, as well as in setting its own foreign policy goals. The vast rearmament effort and military build-up that Seeckt promoted directly threatened Germany's security. Military cooperation with Soviet Russia – another pariah in the international order of the early 1920s – could and in part did undermine Weimar's fragile foundations even further.<sup>238</sup> The Reichswehr's independent foreign policy disregarded the Republic's needs and immediate interests, and stood in striking contradiction to Seeckt's famous theoretical writings on the question of division of

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<sup>237</sup> Seeckt, *Die Reichswehr*, p. 79. Interestingly, the relevant literature all too often chooses to quote, stress, or favourably interpret Seeckt's words on this matter, as on so many others. Meier-Welcker for example mentions that Seeckt's orders 'that the army should definitely be informed about political developments', were coupled with the assurance that 'the resulting political intelligence service should not lead to political activity by military organizations, and that intelligence bureaus and command staffs should avoid [expressing] any judgments on political matters' – a precept that Seeckt himself scarcely honoured (Meier-Welcker, *Seeckt*, p. 285).

<sup>238</sup> For the details of Soviet-German cooperation, and Seeckt's political analysis and rationale that complemented his strategic and operational motivations, see Vasilis Vourkoutiotis, *Making Common Cause. German-Soviet Secret Relations, 1919-22* (New York, 2007), pp. 62-105, and Manfred Zeidler, 'The Strange Allies – Red Army and Reichswehr in the Inter-war Period', in Karl Schlögel, ed., *Russian-German Special Relations in the 20th Century* (New York, 2006), pp. 106-118.

authority, responsibility, and priorities in terms of interests between army and government. It further exposed the historic fracture between the German army and its civilian government, which had remained hidden and under control until 1918, and made it an open schism.

But Seeckt could always explain his interference with German foreign policy as yet another facet of his highly complicated – not to say self-contradictory – theory of civil-military relations. ‘The nature of their [the statesman and soldier] respective duties demands of both departments a close, constant, and frank co-operation’,<sup>239</sup> he declared, and went on to explain that ‘It is for the statesmen, not for the soldier, to decide whether the possibly superior prospects of a military offensive are not outweighed by political disadvantages’.<sup>240</sup> At the same time, ‘The prime responsibility for deciding against which enemy his forces must be launched to secure a decisive issue falls to the soldier . . . this decision involves political consideration’.<sup>241</sup> And Seeckt’s unvarnished interpretation of the division of responsibilities between the army and the government was fully revealed in his discussion of the Schlieffen plan, always the touchstone of interwar German military thought:

Graf Schlieffen’s plan . . . was known to the Government. Once the Government accepted the plan and the contingent necessity for widespread preparations during peace, it accepted the responsibility for all the political consequences which might arise therefrom . . . My only concern now is to fix the responsibility for the fateful war plan of 1914 . . . in

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<sup>239</sup> Seeckt, *Thoughts of a Soldier*, p. 35.

<sup>240</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 37.

<sup>241</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 41.

exemplification of the principles which must underlie the cooperation of the political and military heads'.<sup>242</sup>

Using and abusing civilian authority according to its needs, accepting or avoiding involvement and responsibility at will, was a convenient cover for the Reichswehr.<sup>243</sup>

Nor did Seeckt see this stance as contradicting his understanding of the desirable division of responsibilities between the political and military echelons. He was simply following old patterns: the army is allegedly not involved – except for 'military matters' and everything those matters might include.

In all probability, Seeckt believed that he was sincerely, openly, and honestly conducting a policy of cooperation with the civilian authorities – or would have conducted one under different, more favourable political conditions. However deeds, far more than words, best delineate his concepts. As most literature on the early years of the *Reichswehr* stresses, the levels of cooperation, trust, and transparency of the budgetary, political, and other goals involving both army and Republic dramatically increased after Seeckt's departure, once the operational concept of 'people's war' as the answer to French superiority, and the level of cooperation that concept was assumed to necessitate, overrode the army's inherent distaste for the Republic.<sup>244</sup>

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<sup>242</sup> Ibid., p. 38.

<sup>243</sup> Seeckt conveniently omitted from his analysis the fact that the Imperial German Army did not present the government with several different operational choices in 1914, and thus forced the government to accept the Schlieffen plan and its political implications in its entirety, if the government wanted – as it soon did – to use military force to achieve its objectives in the July crisis. It is noteworthy that Seeckt's linkage of convenience between government decisions and military outcomes served him well as early as 1919, when, in his attempt to save as much of the Wilhelmine army as possible, he stressed that 'The contemporary objection that a strong standing army leads to a policy of conquest is untenable. State policy determines the use of the army; if [state policy] is harmful, it will use the army in a fallacious way, whereas a beneficial policy [will use it] in a correct way' (Seeckt, 'Entwurf', 17 February 1919, BA-MA N247-77, p. 8).

<sup>244</sup> Post, *Civil-Military Fabric*, p. 8, and Deist, 'Reichswehr and National Defence', pp. 383, 385.

Military requirements, not fine words and repeated lip-service, motivated the limited cooperation with their government that Reichswehr officers were willing to tolerate.

The unbearable toll that Seeckt's reality-free optimism demanded, and the deliberately blinkered operational vision his refusal to accept and face the present imposed, inhibited military planning and shaped the Reichswehr's doctrinal path for years to come. It strengthened not merely the army's tendency to avoid present-day strategic and operational tasks, but ultimately shaped its evasion of future tasks as well:

Some future chief of the general staff can rack his brains over whether, in the field employment of the war army as a whole, the standing army should be mixed in with the militia units, or whether the first should act as an elite force [*eine Stosstruppe*] . . . An army's force structure can only have war, not eternal peace, in mind.<sup>245</sup>

Seeckt unabashedly admitted that his solution to Germany's strategic problems was not only operationally unfeasible and strategically insufficient for the present, but also possibly for the future. That, however, was decidedly the lesser evil. Although Seeckt's operational vision and planning lacked the basic merits of plausibility and suitability, that did not prevent him from promoting his vision regardless – simply because his solution perfectly implemented his military precepts. In doing so he impressed on future planning a pattern of studious indifference to real-world constraints; that was his most lethal bequest to the *Reichswehr*.

One typical analysis of Seeckt's legacy has suggested that 'the principal charge against him over the years has been political: that he obstinately refused to accept the

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<sup>245</sup> Seeckt, 'Entwurf', 17 February 1919, BA-MA N247-77, p. 10.

legitimacy of the Weimar Republic . . . About his military abilities, however, there have been very few complaints’<sup>246</sup> Yet Seeckt’s faults did not lie primarily in his highly traditional approach to relations with the civilian leadership and to its authority. Rather, Seeckt failed in his duty as *the commander of an army*: to conceptualise his tasks, build his forces, and design a doctrine suitable to the military challenges of the present.<sup>247</sup>

Seeckt thus ultimately both saved and doomed the *Reichswehr*: he cut the last threads that connected German military planning to political, economic, and eventually operational requirements, limitations, and logic. Seeckt knowingly placed strategic and operational decisions beyond political restraints and outside the immediate context of Germany’s security problems, and within an imaginary, one-dimensional wish-fulfilment fantasy. By doing so he did not merely prepare the ground for future planning that ignored basic operational needs, limitations, and setbacks for the sake of keeping cultural assumptions and patterns intact – he made that quantum leap himself.

### **Conclusion**

It is perhaps understandable that so many scholars have found the discourse that evolved throughout the 1920s in the *Reichswehr* to be rich, diverse, and innovative. The military and political events of late 1918 and early 1919 could and probably should have facilitated great leaps and changes even in the most stagnant of

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<sup>246</sup> Citino, *Path to Blitzkrieg*, p. 7.

<sup>247</sup> See also Geyer’s assertion that ‘Seeckt’s strategic thinking never conformed to European realities: ‘His operational doctrines posited an army that did not exist . . . despite efforts at modernisation, rigidity and inflexibility characterised the internal practice of the *Reichswehr*’ (Geyer, ‘German Strategy’, p. 556).



environments. A transformed military culture might well have emerged in the turbulent decade that the Reichswehr faced after its defeat. Indeed a number of operational solutions and organisational assumptions that *appeared* to be new took shape, and were expressed in official manuals and documents. That apparent novelty was, however, a mirage that disguised traditional patterns and concealed an increased and inherent drive toward extremes that intensified and amplified the army's seemingly outmoded inheritance. The alleged competition between three superficially different operational concepts was in effect redundant; all three bore the marks of their common origin, adhered to the perceived truths of the army's organisational culture, and ultimately drew upon the same array of ostensibly effective solutions.

The greatest military mystery of the 1920s is thus not how well the Germans managed with the very limited resources, both legal and illegal, at their disposal, but how the Reichswehr managed to spend an entire decade intensively studying its conduct in the World War while effectively evading drawing any meaningful strategic and operational lessons from that experience. A revealing example can be found in the immense official history of the World War that the *Reichsarchiv* – acting as host to research teams of ostensibly retired officers – organised and largely completed. That comprehensive effort concentrated almost exclusively on the operational aspect of the war – hardly a surprising outcome, given the traditional focal point of German military thought.<sup>248</sup> What else was there in war to research? The result was an impressive yet redundant effort of broadening and improving German understanding of battlefield failure in the World War. Traditional frameworks dictated the questions,

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<sup>248</sup> For military historiography in interwar Germany, see Markus Pöhlmann, *Kriegsgeschichte und Geschichtspolitik: Der Erste Weltkrieg: die amtliche deutsche Militärgeschichtsschreibung 1914-1956* (Paderborn, 2002), and idem, 'Yesterday's Battles'.

themes, and interests of military history research, as well as the results of the various studies produced to answer them.

Could the Reichswehr have developed a truly novel and groundbreaking discourse on security, strategy, and warfare? Most certainly yes, given a context conducive to change, such as a wide-spread recognition of German operational and *military* failure in the World War. The rigidity of fundamental German military assumptions was an inevitable outcome of the army's acute need to maintain the legend of a civilian stab in the army's back, a narrative required to maintain self-respect and perceptual cohesion, and to explain to itself and to the nation the inconceivable reality of a war lost without honour [*Ehre*] and glory, without a great and decisive *Endkampf*, and without the attainment of the comprehensive destruction that its world-view dictated.<sup>249</sup> That need superseded all other considerations, and doomed from their conception efforts at learning lessons and developing doctrine, as well as the Reichswehr's future operational planning and conduct. Quite logically, if military failure had not determined the World War's outcome, then nothing more than minor improvements and better technology were needed for the next war.

The leading general staff officers of the 1920s were convinced that they were indeed learning how to avoid mistakes – mostly those of others. That conviction exercised considerable influence over later historical evaluation of their doctrinal and organisational efforts. Yet in reality they remained deeply ignorant of the reasons for their unacknowledged military failure. That is the reason for the absence of significant perceptual or doctrinal shift away from the theories that had guided the Imperial German Army throughout the war and had steadily radicalised its conduct throughout

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<sup>249</sup> For the context, see especially Boris Barth, *Dolchstoßlegenden und politische Desintegration. Das Trauma der deutschen Niederlage im Ersten Weltkrieg, 1914-1933* (Düsseldorf, 2003).

the war's final, chaotic, and supremely destructive phases. In the eyes of Germany's military leaders, any necessary changes must involve the people and politicians whom they allegedly served – the purportedly defective parts of the German war machine. And thus a considerable portion of future planning was now dedicated to various ways of 'organising' German civil society. Yet even that interest in a non-operational aspect of war-fighting was scarcely revolutionary. It was deeply inhibited by yet another traditional unquestionable and unquestioned assumption: the centrality of the army and of military power within and to the state. When war impended, the people must gladly serve 'the categorical imperative of fighting and dying for the Fatherland', and the politicians must uncritically and unconditionally obey military demands and requirements.

Thereafter the road lay open for the further evolution of German military culture in complete accordance with the defining moments at the end of 1918. The aspiration to and planning for dictatorial iron-fist organisation of the entire people to face war was accompanied by disdain toward parliamentary civilian government and unwillingness to 'dirty' the army's hands with politics. What had begun as aloofness toward politics under the monarchy ended as overt hostility to the Republic; the habit of self-referentially setting military goals and deciding independently upon the consequent plans and policies followed. Even more dangerous was the pattern of avoiding realistic assessment of constraints and plausible calculations of feasibility. Other qualities that thrived in the 1920s climate of self-inflicted blindness were the cult of military necessity, with its inherent pressure toward the radicalisation of warfare; the imperative of extreme risk; and the infallibility – as operational concept – of the decisive battle of annihilation. German military culture remained in a time-warp, embracing flexibility of thought and practice only when they served its long-standing operational goals and furthered its inherent extremism. Its interest in

technology – motors, radios, poison gas, rockets, and aircraft – was simply a consequence of its atavistic thirst for ‘*vernichtende Entscheidungen*’.<sup>250</sup>

Groener, Stülpnagel, and Seeckt all briefly threatened to push the edge of the envelope of accepted military wisdom: Groener by suggesting the subordination of military requirements to state interests; Stülpnagel by blurring the divisions between civilians and soldiers in a merciless all-embracing guerrilla war; Seeckt in his clinging to a war of movement carried out by a small professional army. Yet none was as revolutionary as often portrayed. The seemingly different operational solutions advocated by Groener, Stülpnagel, and Seeckt in their attempts to address Germany’s strategic problems developed from a shared doctrinal root. *Führung und Gefecht der verbundenen Waffen* was the ultimate proof that neither ‘mainstream’ official thought nor ‘radical fringe’ suggestions varied notably from past notions, despite their revamped appearance.

The solutions the Reichswehr considered assumed the restoration of Germany’s military might as an indisputable prerequisite, and thus endangered the fragile Republic far more seriously than its perceived enemies were likely to.<sup>251</sup> Yet how and in what sense did the army ‘fail’ to ‘understand’ that the solutions it so meticulously debated and tested were, for the most part, wholly unrealistic? The officer corps saw both Seeckt’s operational assumptions and ambitious armament plans and Stülpnagel’s operational ideas as realistic and achievable. The question is therefore not whether those plans and ideas ‘made sense’ or not, but rather in what way did their inner logic comply with the unshakable system of truths that animated

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<sup>250</sup> On the exemplary mix of military-technological fanaticism and strategic autism that characterised the army’s missile programme from its origins in 1929 onward, see above all Michael J. Neufeld, *The Rocket and the Reich” Peenemünde and the Coming of the Ballistic Missile Era* (Cambridge, MA, 1995).

<sup>251</sup> As Geyer convincingly contends in *Aufrüstung* and ‘Dynamics’.

the Reichswehr, that set of assumptions and explanations that yielded meaning and desired courses of action in a bewildering reality? Being 'rational' in the German officer corps meant obeying both the inner logic of German military thought and practice and its operational imperatives. Security problems must be answered militarily, and by the army alone, freed of a civilian authority that was illegitimate because civilian; and only through operational patterns that had supposedly never failed. In that sense to plan seriously a large-scale suicidal war against France in 1924–26 was not only sensible but also perfectly rational, and the inner cultural logic that inspired it persisted into the intellectually unchallenging, technologically exciting, and budgetarily exhilarating environment of the Third Reich.

The most immutable feature of German military logic and the one to which virtually all succumbed in the 1920s was its chronic disregard for the need to grasp strategically, as well as to plan, any military effort – a direct result both of the army's absence of a strategic tradition, and of its assumption that strategic planning before and during the World War had generally been faultless. That is not to say that the general staff intentionally abandoned, or was uninterested in, strategic planning and the conduct of war. But it is to emphasise that the Reichswehr's very concept of 'strategy' remained the one it had inherited from the Imperial German Army: flawed, shallow, superficial and essentially tactical.

As in its pre-war operational studies, the army's focus on tactics and tactical imperatives subjugated strategic conduct to operational and tactical demands, rather than vice versa; that tendency was evident in the studies, plans, and official documents that Seeckt, Stülpnagel, and even Groener produced, as well as in the institutional research conducted by the *Reichsarchiv* and the general staff history branch. Although fully recognising the totality of the World War as a decisive cause of German failure, the Reichswehr's official-historical analysis still privileged battle narratives,

technological issues, and ‘strictly military’ – that is, non-political – history.<sup>252</sup> The supplementary volume on finance and economics was only published in 1930; it was dedicated to the question of Germany’s allegedly inadequate armaments in comparison to those of its enemies, and managed to express two of the army’s main arguments about the war – that its launching had been against German interests and therefore Germany was not to be blamed for it; and that the decision to go to war had been solely a civilian one.<sup>253</sup> Both the major operational visions debated in the army and in its official history of the World War indicate that for the high command, the tactical aspects of the operational level of warfare were, implicitly and explicitly, still the only ones that determined the outcome of wars, and while the general staff had recognized more comprehensive aspects of planning, these were, as always, of a lesser significance.<sup>254</sup>

The real essence of German ‘strategy’ becomes clear when viewed in combination with the Reichswehr’s approach to strategic planning and to the conduct of war in the broader sense. The *Generalstab* indeed understood the requirements of modern, ‘total war’, and the importance of economic and operational long-term planning and preparations.<sup>255</sup> To accuse the Reichswehr leadership of indifference to

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<sup>252</sup> Pöhlmann, ‘Yesterday’s Battles’, pp. 230-238.

<sup>253</sup> Ibid., pp. 233-234; among the more plausible accounts of the decisive army role in July-August 1914, see especially Annika Mombauer, *Helmuth von Moltke and the Origins of the First World War* (New York, 2001), and idem, ‘A Reluctant Military Leader? Helmut von Moltke and the July Crisis of 1914’. *War in History* 6:4 (1999), pp. 417-446.

<sup>254</sup> As discussed both in the previous chapter and in the next, the intensity and centrality of the German high command’s interest in tactics reflected and maintained its tactical frame of thought at the expense of strategic planning. Timothy Lupfer points out the marked discrepancy between German tactical flexibility and innovativeness on the one hand and ‘flawed’ strategic conduct on the other in his *Dynamics of Doctrine*, but he does not attempt to explain it.

<sup>255</sup> For a thorough investigation of the concept and practice of ‘total war’ in Germany, see the series of volumes on ‘total war’ edited by Roger Chickering and Stig Förster, especially Afflerbach, ‘Falkenhayn and the Battle of Verdun’ and Wilhelm Deist, ‘Strategy and Unlimited Warfare in Germany: Moltke, Falkenhayn and Ludendorff’, in Chickering and

these subjects would be misguided. But strategic planning and strategic insight were treated de facto as less important and useful than the perceived crucial, central, and decisive operational – but in fact tactical – factors and framework. In that sense, none of the figures discussed in this chapter ever transgressed these conceptual boundaries: total *warfare*, rather than total war, constituted the focal point of German perceptions. Non-operational aspects of war always came a distant second to operational demands.<sup>256</sup> Reducing ‘strategy’ to only those aspects that directly and immediately served operational needs was the most natural tendency of German military planners. Yet to the best of their knowledge, they were not ignoring strategy but – entirely to the contrary – were motivated by the clearest strategic lesson of the World War: focusing on a swifter and still more decisive *Entscheidungsschlacht* while assuring the maintenance of the population’s *Geist*, devotion, and endurance. That cultural pattern, as did others, persisted well into the 1930s and was further radicalised in the Second World War.

It should of course be noted that alongside its inherited and persistent myopia, the Reichswehr’s leadership also inherited – and further developed, under impossible conditions – the Imperial army’s excellent tactical instincts, on which the

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Förster, eds., *Great War*, pp. 265-279, as well as Jürgen Förster, ‘From “Blitzkrieg” to “Total War”, Germany’s War in Europe’ in Roger Chickering, Stig Förster, and Bernd Greiner, eds., *A World at Total War, Global Conflict and the Politics of Destruction 1937-1945* (Cambridge, 2005), pp. 89-107. Förster mentions that the officer corps tended to equate strategy with operations and was therefore ignorant of the strategic and ‘total’ aspects of war planning. Later it became hostile to the establishment of planning agencies designed to address such issues out of fear of organisational competition (p. 92). While Chapter 3 will analyze this subject further, it is important to note here that the army’s traditional understanding of the nature of war’s demands upon civil society and upon the economy was inherently blinkered.

<sup>256</sup> Operationally (on the battlefield) all German planning aimed at ‘total war’ – the total destruction and annihilation of the enemy armed forces and, as war escalated, significant parts of the enemy civil society as well. German planners therefore acknowledged the need to mobilise, rearm and prepare economically for that immense task, and were willing to make all necessary sacrifices. But they perceived the strategic aspects of total war in a simplified, shallow fashion, as secondary to the total warfare (*Kriegführung*) that constituted the very core of German military practice.

Wehrmacht's record of success was later built: initiative at all levels of command, extending downward to the individual rifleman; relentless aggressiveness; extreme daring; and a deep understanding of the emptiness and chaos of the modern battlefield, and of its requirements. That tactical discernment, elusive and difficult to define, and the conceptions it engendered, eventually produced, as in the First World War, the most accomplished warriors and units, the most impressive tactical capabilities, and the most devastating war machine in Europe. That result was also a consequence of the German army's long-standing 'organisational approval' of discussion, of a climate tolerant and supportive of the developing and testing of new ideas, within the limitations of its own inherited conceptual boundaries. That German officers could not think, or were simply uninterested in thinking, outside their self-imposed box nevertheless indicates the extent to which perceptions can and often do supersede reality.

The break with reality of the Reichswehr officer corps was, as described, a natural result of the unbearable tension caused by the conflict between reality and self-image. The Reichswehr leadership could not possibly have accepted the army it commanded as it really was: a defeated army turned into a police force, stripped of heavy weapons and past glory alike. The price for that departure from sober self-assessment was heavy. It further encouraged the pre-existing inclination toward an operational discourse completely detached from operational reality, and provided a ground more fertile than ever for the continuity of the army's traditional analysis of strategy as limited, operational, combat-oriented planning alone. Worse was to come, since the traditionalist tendencies so ardently yet unselfconsciously preserved and nurtured were soon bound to collide with complex strategic and operational requirements that no one in the German officer corps was culturally capable or equipped to recognize, internalise and not least, to face successfully. In its attempt to



draw lessons from the World War experience and to conceptualise its new role and capabilities, the German army, despite its best efforts, learned almost nothing, and was thus unable to forget the truths and habits that it had to leave behind if it were again to seek to realise its dangerously unrealistic aspirations.

## Chapter 3

### **The enigma of the 1930s: Transforming German military thought?**

Despite genuine attempts to offer new military solutions to the challenges of a novel strategic and military reality, the military leadership of the 1920s did not reformulate military thought in Germany, nor did it attempt to do so. Its most 'groundbreaking' or 'radical' solutions still stemmed from and coincided with accepted wisdom, longstanding operational patterns, and an intentionally unrealistic analysis. The realities of the 1930s were however quite different, and German military thought rapidly adjusted. Armament and force structure restrictions were soon to be lifted, long-meditated rearmament plans realised, and financial and raw materials limitations loomed. The Reichswehr, and later the Wehrmacht, was about to expand exponentially and to bring into being entirely new air and armoured forces.

Yet questions remain: what change or changes took place in German thought about and practice of warfare in the 1930s? What paradigm, what set of explanations can best facilitate our understanding of the thought processes of the German army during the critical decade that preceded the climactic campaigns of 1939-1941? A number of interpretations offer competing narratives, explanations, and emphases in detailing the process that created the most successful army of the opening phases of the Second World War. The most prevalent is that a 'revolution in military affairs' or 'RMA' took place in Germany during the interwar era. Most succinctly defined as 'a

revolutionary change in how war is fought',<sup>1</sup> an RMA, for the purpose of this analysis, is a military phenomenon defined by radical changes and transformations of military doctrine, military organisations, and war-fighting.<sup>2</sup> As will emerge shortly, the applicability of that explanation to the interwar German army lacks empirical grounding. It also rests on two common and interrelated logical fallacies, the notion that great consequences must have profound and even revolutionary causes, and the temptations of teleological 'backward-looking analysis'. Researchers have almost inevitably sought – and have naturally found – the explanation for Germany's immense initial successes in a new doctrine and method developed to perfection in the 1930s.

The challenge nevertheless remains: what other than a well-managed technological and doctrinal revolution can explain German operational success, and who was responsible for the way in which new military technology affected, or was incorporated into, existing thought and practice? Scholars have suggested several possible sources and 'agents' of change: ideological ('fascist') or foreign (mainly British) influences, young (mostly mid-ranking) officers who were armour enthusiasts, and a small faction of 'armour experts' within the German officer corps. Many of the works that figure in the resulting passionate debate nevertheless risk

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<sup>1</sup> Clifford J. Rogers, 'Military Revolutions' and 'Revolutions in Military affairs', in Thierry Gongora and Harald von Riekhoff, eds., *Toward a Revolution in Military Affairs? Defence and Security at the Dawn of the 21st Century* (Westport, CT, 2000), p. 22.

<sup>2</sup> Historical analysis of change and continuity in military affairs benefits – or rather, suffers – from a plethora of competing RMA definitions and 'paradigms'. However, most fall into two main categories, which Rogers has described as MR ('Military Revolutions') and RMA ('Revolutions in Military Affairs'); a military revolution – a far-reaching strategic, political and social transformation – results directly from changes initially restricted to the military-technical and operational realms (Rogers, *ibid.*, pp. 22-24). Williamson Murray and MacGregor Knox employ similar categories in 'Thinking about Revolutions in Warfare', *The Dynamics of Military Revolutions*, (Cambridge, New York, 2001), pp. 6-14. See also Andrew N. Liaropoulos, 'Revolutions in Warfare; Theoretical Paradigms and Historical Evidence. The Napoleonic and First World War Revolutions in Military Affairs', *Journal of Military History* 70 (2006), pp. 363-384, proposing as paradigms the 'Social Wave' (corresponding to MR) and the 'Radical transformation' (corresponding to RMA).

falling into the ‘backward-looking analysis’ trap. The post-war exaggerations, omissions, and outright lies of the surviving German generals and of military historians with a proprietary interest in a particular presentation of the history of the evolution of the German armoured forces have added further complications.<sup>3</sup> The putative ‘agents of change’, organisations such as the Inspectorate of Motor Transport Troops and key figures such as Oswald Lutz and Heinz Guderian, have consequently been habitually linked with British armour thought, writings, and experimental field exercises.<sup>4</sup> These widespread claims and assumptions raise further questions. First, what views did German ‘armour experts’, armour enthusiasts, and the relevant sections of the high command actually hold on armour and mechanised warfare, and to what extent did those views originate from and faithfully reflect ‘imported’ foreign perceptions? Second and no less important, to what extent did ‘armour experts’ such as Lutz and his associates influence the Wehrmacht’s overall mechanised and non-mechanised operational doctrine, build-up character and pace, armaments planning, and operational patterns? In other words, what part of the Wehrmacht’s overall performance in 1939–41 can be attributed to the influence of ‘armour experts’ and armour enthusiasts?

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<sup>3</sup> Most famously B. H. Liddell Hart in his extensive post-war writings about and involvement in the historiography of German military affairs – to the point of coaching Heinz Guderian’s memory (and memoirs) and seeking to manipulate Rommel’s and Manstein’s writings in order to emphasise his own putative prior influence on the German armour experts; see Gat, *British Armour*, pp. 1–18, 43–48; B. H. Liddell Hart, *The Other Side of the Hill: Germany’s Generals, Their Rise and Fall, and Their Own Account of Military Events, 1939–1945* (London, 1951); John Mearshcimer, *Liddell Hart and the Weight of History* (London, 1988), pp. 33–48; and Kenneth Macksey, *Guderian: Panzer General* (London, 1975), pp. 40–42. The post-war writings of Guderian himself, like those of most other German generals, are highly self-interested and must be read with extreme care on both military and political issues.

<sup>4</sup> Among the many scholars who ascribe to British armour theorists and practitioners an indispensable role in the development of German mechanised doctrine, Azar Gat offers the most comprehensive and in-depth analysis: Gat, *British Armour*, pp. 43–95.

## **I. Technology and innovation: the clash of interpretations**

The subsections that follow will seek to elaborate the difficulties inherent in existing interpretations of German doctrinal development, and propose a further mechanism of transformation: ‘evolutionary change’ or ‘culturally-constrained change’. Such a conceptualization allows reconsideration of the pace and dynamics of organisational transformation, of its human agents, and of the inter- and intra-organisational spread of ideas and practices. The later portions of this chapter will then supply the historical evidence that underpins the notion of evolutionary change.

### **1. ‘Blitzkrieg’ as RMA**

As already suggested, claims that the German ‘*Blitzkrieg*’ constituted an RMA benefit from what appears to be a self-evident logic inherent in an equally self-evident development of events: the German army embraced mechanised and armoured warfare sometime in the late 1920s and early 1930s, either through the adoption and application of a foreign, groundbreaking, and mostly British armour doctrine, or through the development of new and no less groundbreaking armour concepts of its own. The Wehrmacht then went into battle equipped with a perfectly matched winning combination of new technology, brilliant doctrine, and perfected training and warcraft. In effect, and as pointed out by historians, the ‘*Blitzkrieg* RMA’ serves as the classic case of a technologically-induced RMA, as well as a benchmark example of a modern RMA.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Stephen Biddle, ‘The Past as Prologue: Assessing Theories of Future Warfare’, *Security Studies* 8:1 (1998), pp. 44-55, 61. For more examples of the prevalence of the notion of *Blitzkrieg* as the classic RMA case study see for instance Rogers, ‘Military Revolutions’, p. 23, and Gray, *Modern Strategy*, p. 203; William J. Fanning ‘The Origin of the Term ‘Blitzkrieg’: Another View’, *Journal of Military History* 61:2 (1997), pp. 283-302, offers fascinating semantic information.

Those who assume that a German RMA actually took place draw on the shocking and devastating operational conduct and outcomes of the Wehrmacht's 1939-1941 campaigns. But even the most enthusiastic supporters of the notion of a 'German RMA', or at least of a period of radical innovation, still concede the existence of strong traditional components within the German army's theories and conduct of war. And those who do not see developments in the 1930s Reichswehr as revolutionary have understandably also noted the persistence of traditional concepts.<sup>6</sup>

Revolutions by their nature trample on traditions, and the very concept of RMA emphasises and demands great discontinuities.<sup>7</sup> As this chapter demonstrates in detail, the German army did not in actuality conceive a new and revolutionary operational theory. The new technology of armour and mechanised warfare, long-desired and at last within reach by the mid-1930s, in no sense inspired a similarly new and revolutionary military theory and practice. Moreover, German military leaders neither intended to create nor succeeded in producing revolutionary operational methods and organisational structures in order to support the novel concepts. Ample evidence, some of which will figure later in the chapter, suggests that the German army's activities in the 1930s did not fit any of the commonly described characteristics of an RMA.

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<sup>6</sup> For analysis of the issues of tradition, innovation, and revolution, see Williamson Murray, 'Armoured Warfare: the British, French and German experiences', in Williamson Murray and Allan R. Millett, eds., *Military Innovation in the Interwar Period* (Cambridge, 1996), pp. 17, 38, 40-45; Eliot A. Cohen, 'A Revolution in Warfare', *Foreign Affairs* 37 (1996), pp. 46-47; Gray, *Modern Strategy*, p. 203; Citino, *German Way of War*, pp. xvi-xvii, 244-256, 267, and idem, *Blitzkrieg*, pp. 18-28 (while Citino titles his discussion 'Rebirth: the Interwar Military Revolution', he also argues that the German army mostly followed its traditions. It thus remains unclear what, apart from technology, was 'revolutionary' about German doctrine and practice in the interwar years. Nor does Citino explore the conceptual debates regarding the appropriate employment of the new technologies); see also Frieser, *Blitzkrieg Legend*, pp. 329-346, and Biddle, 'The Past as Prologue', pp. 44-55.

<sup>7</sup> Gray, *Modern Strategy*, p. 3.

Furthermore, the operational and tactical unfolding of Second World War, and the results of its campaigns, are readily explicable without recourse the RMA concept; innovations need not be revolutionary to be significant.<sup>8</sup> As Thomas G. Mahnken has suggested, a combined-arms revolution affected all the leading armies of Europe, as well as the United States, in the course of the 1920s, the 1930s, and – following the stunning initial successes of the Wehrmacht – the early 1940s.<sup>9</sup> But that general revolution, widespread and authentic as it was, and induced both by technology and by the lessons of the Great War, neither began nor was ‘made’ in Germany, despite Germany’s starring role from the late 1930s until 1941. Each army transformed itself through struggle within and against its own idiosyncratic organisational culture, doctrine, and constraints.<sup>10</sup> In the final analysis, if a RMA took place in the early 1940s, it was a process shared by all the major belligerents, and one that matured fully only in the heavily industrialised Allied nations and in their lavishly supplied armies. This chapter seeks rather to explain the dynamics of change within the *German army in the 1930s* (if either dynamics or change indeed existed), not the processes that spread armoured and mechanised warfare throughout the industrialised world during the Second World War.

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<sup>8</sup> Emily O. Goldman and Andrew L. Ross, ‘Conclusion: The Diffusion of Military Technology and Ideas – Theory and Practice’, in Emily O. Goldman and Leslie C. Eliason, *The Diffusion of Military Technology and Ideas* (Stanford, 2003), p. 394.

<sup>9</sup> Thomas G. Mahnken, ‘Beyond Blitzkrieg: Allied Responses to Combined-Arms Armoured Warfare during World War II’, in *ibid.*, pp. 243-266. Mahnken claims that ‘Germany’s development of combined-arms armoured warfare has become the canonical case of peacetime military innovation’, which then ‘triggered a revolution in military affairs’ (p. 244). The Germans supposedly set the tone and direction of change for other armies, a proposition Mahnken does not fully confirm in his ensuing analysis of the notably diverse cultural and organisational interpretations of combined-arms warfare. While certainly providing an initial incentive for change, the Wehrmacht did not prescribe a formula for change in the early 1940s – just as it did not innovate by following any such formula prescribed by others in the early to mid-1930s.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 244.

## 2. 'Fascism': Cause or context?

A second explanation of the seeming novelty of German mechanised warfare doctrine and of the massive effort directed toward applying it in the 1930s emphasises the role that 'fascism' purportedly played in its advent.<sup>11</sup> Fascism, according to this thesis, provided an ideological construct characterised by a fascination with modernity, attracted the political enthusiasms of officers who played a key role in drafting the Wehrmacht's doctrine, and above all provided a favourable political climate conducive to financing mechanisation and supportive of the free development of mechanised operational methods. Fascism thus allegedly stimulated and guaranteed the birth of groundbreaking mechanised and armoured concepts in 1930s Germany.<sup>12</sup>

Fascism, or rather the National Socialist regime and *Weltanschauung*, indeed played a role in the evolution of German military thought.<sup>13</sup> But was that role crucial? Were the bearers of fascist visions within the army – if their views can indeed be justly branded 'fascist' – central players in the quest for an armour employment doctrine described in this chapter? The two high-ranking officers normally considered fascists, or at the very least unusually fervent supporters of the Nazi regime, ideology, and cause, General Werner von Blomberg and Colonel Walter von Reichenau, were

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<sup>11</sup> In view of the contested plausibility and doubtful historical usefulness of the generic (lower-case) concept of 'fascism' – both in general and above all in relation to military affairs – quotation marks around the term should henceforth be assumed. No adequate answers have emerged to the objections raised (to cite only two of many critiques) by Bernd Martin, 'Zur Tauglichkeit eines Übergreifenden Faschismus-Begriffs', *Vierteljahrshefte für Zeitgeschichte* 29 (1981), pp. 48-73 and Gilbert Allardyce, "What Fascism Is Not: Notes on the Deflation of a Concept," *American Historical Review* 84:2 (1979), pp. 367-88.

<sup>12</sup> Gat's most elegant formulation runs as follows: 'Nazi political support and the orientation of right-wing radicals within the armed forces were a significant factor in directing German rearmament . . . toward modern means of war, revolutionary doctrines, and radical operational schemes': Gat, *Fascist and Liberal Visions of War*, pp. 3-6, 80-103.

<sup>13</sup> Just as the army's military culture – especially its paramount emphasis on the tactical virtues of boldness, initiative, ruthlessness, extreme violence, and escalation as the answer to any and all difficulties – was a formative influence on the National Socialists themselves.



hardly avid Nazis, fully-fledged fascists or, most importantly, social and organisational ‘insiders’ in the army circles that developed operational doctrine in the 1930s. Blomberg was widely considered ‘somewhat strange’, and Reichenau was if anything viewed as even more eccentric.<sup>14</sup> Above all, in his capacity as War Minister Blomberg – like Groener before him – exercised only limited influence over the army’s doctrinal evolution and operational planning.<sup>15</sup> The contribution of Blomberg and Reichenau to the evolution of mechanised thought in the Wehrmacht was thus not essential, regardless of the undeniable honesty of their faith in modernised forms of warfare and originality of their ideas in that regard.<sup>16</sup> Similarly, the dichotomy that Azar Gat suggests between ‘political radicals’ such as Blomberg and Guderian and far less radical figures such as Ludwig Beck (army chief of staff, 1933-38), which inextricably links armour enthusiasm with political radicalism, cannot in itself explain the nature or course of doctrinal development or operational practice in Germany, for the very same reasons: the group that actually created the doctrine, practice, and force structure of the post-1933 German army was a cohort of general staff officers, not of

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<sup>14</sup> In the succinct judgment of Field Marshal Gerd von Rundstedt (quoted in Richard R. Muller, ‘Werner von Blomberg, Hitlers “idealistischer” Kriegsminister,’ in Ronald Smelser and Enrico Syring, eds., *Die Militärelite des Dritten Reiches: 27 biographische Skizzen* [Berlin, 1997]), p. 52; on Reichenau as outsider see for instance Bernd Boll, ‘Generalfeldmarschall Walter von Reichenau’, in Gerd R. Überschar, ed., *Hitlers militärische Elite*, vol. 1, *Von den Anfängen des Regimes bis Kriegsbeginn* (Darmstadt, 1998), pp. 195-96.

<sup>15</sup> For details on Blomberg’s estrangement from military circles see Gat, *Fascist and Liberal Visions of War*, pp. 90-100 and Macksey, *Guderian*, p. 53.

<sup>16</sup> In seeking to strengthen his claim of inextricable links between the putative fascist-modernist inclinations of leading German officers and their support for mechanised warfare, Gat places Blomberg at the very centre of armaments decision-making and doctrinal development. Deist, on the basis of exhaustive archival knowledge, by contrast stresses Blomberg’s ‘modest success in imposing policy’ upon the commanders-in-chief of the three services, which was ‘especially true in the armament sector’ (Deist, ‘Ideological War’, p. 378). Macksey also notes that ‘Blomberg, as Minister for War, was sympathetic but too remote within the military structure’ from those involved in the formulation of armour concepts to have much influence (*Guderian*, pp. 57-8). The complex, often suspicion-ridden relationship between the German war ministry and the armed forces after the First World War (described in chapter 2) is often neglected in attempts to draw a map of the individuals and forces that most profoundly affected the evolution of German military practice.

'fascists'. These officers adhered mostly to their professional rather than political truths – both in general, and when dealing with operational thought in particular. Thus, many other ideational sources, far more widely and collectively shared than putative fascist inclinations, played the dominant role in shaping and influencing the operational ideas tested and eventually selected by the Wehrmacht's elite.

Arguments that directly link 'fascism' with 'mechanised warfare' do not merely fail when tested against the actual involvement and influence of supposedly 'fascist' officers within the army. They fail even more starkly when applied to Hitler himself. For the national leader most identified with mechanised warfare rarely bothered himself until the late 1930s with details of armament plans, or with promoting those plans except through ever-increasing appropriations and fiery rhetoric. As Geyer has suggested, Hitler 'neither structured the process of rearmament, nor set the targets, which were still defined by the four-year programme of December 1933'.<sup>17</sup> In that respect it is important to note that claims that a regime was fascist do not necessarily apply to its army, and that the most mechanised armies of all were those of the western liberal democracies and of Soviet Russia, which owed their character not merely to their ideological settings but above all to modern industrial capacity and to the mass mobilisation of resources for war that their states successfully practiced; by the late 1930s, mechanisation was the order of the day regardless of the nature of the political regime. Here too, the two facts of 'fascist

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<sup>17</sup> Geyer, 'Dynamics', p. 136; see also Deist, 'Ideological War', p. 379, who suggests that no evidence exists of Hitler's interest or detailed involvement in any armament programme before the summer of 1936 – by which time the army leadership was already fully engaged in a fundamental doctrinal debate over the operational meaning of 'mechanised warfare', as discussed in detail in this chapter. Finally, Macksey belittles Hitler's ostensible role and alleged deep interest in building tank forces, citing a post-war remark of General Georg Thomas, head of the Wehrmacht Economic and Armaments Branch, who claimed that 'the great importance of the tank was not recognised [by Hitler] until the success in the Polish campaign' (Macksey, *Guderian*, p. 58).

regime' and 'mechanised warfare' call for a mediating variable to explain the relationship between them.

The evidence hardly suggests simple, direct linkages between fascism as a style of political ideology and 'its' purported mechanised operational interpretations. The ideologically-driven fascination of fascist leaders with up-to-date technology, and even their skilled abuse of its potentialities in areas such as the mass media and mass production, could not in itself guarantee the creation of modern technologically-oriented armies. A generous military budget and governmental commitment to rebuild armaments production and create super-modern armed forces were simply not enough to build an army that thought and operated in mechanised terms. The connection between fascism and military thought is better understood if approached as follows: was the Nazi regime, with its admiration of technology and its preeminent emphasis on war, indispensable to the development of German operational concepts? The Nazis were no doubt notably keen and excited about producing, equipping, maintaining, and ultimately using a mechanised army. But the demands for mechanisation and the doctrine developed to make it a reality were German army products that long preceded and existed independently from the inclinations and motivations of the political system.

A more nuanced understanding of the connection between fascism and mechanised warfare might be possible through consideration of the overlap between military culture and the social and political climate in which it evolves, and with which it maintains various forms of discourse. Gat is thus entirely correct in pointing out the technology-friendly 'climate' – or, better yet, the *context*, provided by the regime. Yet, as the Italian example shows, adoration of technology can serve as an important vector but cannot prescribe, much less force, technological or operational

change.<sup>18</sup> Only pre-existing military-cultural inclinations, tolerance of and openness to technology already available can mediate and translate fascist intentions into modern, mechanised concepts and forces. Fascism can thus provide scholars with a context – indeed an indispensable context explaining strategic and political decisions.<sup>19</sup> The National Socialist regime offered a comfortable setting hotbed for the development of armoured vehicles and of other novel military technologies, and it lavishly and increasingly allocated financial and manpower resources for rearmament. But the regime's predilections and efforts cannot account for the shape and employment of the resulting forces. And in the long run, even the National Socialist regime failed to develop the industrial foundations required to sustain in global war the shiny mechanised armies it enthusiastically promoted.<sup>20</sup> Furthermore, even the world-views and political acts of fascists – or National Socialists – cannot be reduced to formulas such as 'mechanisation enthusiasts'; theirs was not a 'mechanised war' but a war dedicated to the realisation of a political vision to be achieved regardless of the exact nature of the means required. 'Polities wage war, they do not just wage land,

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<sup>18</sup> For the military culture, doctrine, and armaments of the army of the first 'fascist' regime, see MacGregor Knox, *Hitler's Italian Allies: Royal Armed Forces, Fascist Regime, and the War of 1940-43* (Cambridge, 2000), especially Chapter 3.

<sup>19</sup> Murray and Knox suggest in 'The Future Behind Us', *Dynamics*, pp. 180-181, that in principle, national strategic concepts should determine the structure, composition and employment concept of the armed forces – and the German strategic concept of the late 1930s was without doubt a creation of its regime. Knox and Murray also emphasise that 'revolutions in military affairs *always* occur within the context of politics and strategy' Thus, regardless of whether a 'revolution' resulted, the connection between fascism and military thought in its German incarnation, in the Nazi regime's support for an army that would realise its strategic plans, played a significant role in the evolution of German military thought. But that role took the shape of a contextual and indirect setting in which cultural factors and forces could thrive.

<sup>20</sup> A major theme of Adam Tooze, *The Wages of Destruction: The Making and Breaking of the Nazi Economy* (London, 2006).

ground, mechanised, armoured or tank warfare'; the National Socialist regime waged race-war.<sup>21</sup>

### **3. A decisive British influence?**

As with claims of the influence of fascism, a nuanced and detail-sensitive approach is likewise appropriate to the question of the alleged British influences on German military thought – a process usually assumed to be, or presented as, a simple, direct and unmediated German fascination with, and acceptance and assimilation of, a foreign armoured doctrine (or doctrines, if French and Russian influences are taken into account as well). The historical realities surrounding German doctrinal and operational production were however more complex. The evidence calls for a more sophisticated model of the spread or diffusion between armies of not only technologies and weapons systems but also of the concepts for their effective employment. As will emerge in the following pages, the wholesale adoption of imported operational concepts, especially if their implications are strategically far-reaching, is highly improbable.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Gray, *Modern Strategy*, p. 204; see Hitler's noteworthy remarks on this theme to mid-ranking army officers, 10 February 1939, in Jost Dülffer, Jochen Thies, and Josef Henke, *Hitlers Städte. Baupolitik im Dritten Reich* (Cologne, 1978), p. 303.

<sup>22</sup> Goldman and Ross, 'Conclusion', p. 372; the authors emphasise the role of culture as mediating any attempt to 'adopt, adapt or respond to innovations observed elsewhere'. Paul J. Dimaggio and Walter W. Powell provide a broader theoretical canvas: although they focus on corporations rather than military organisations, they stress the processes through which organisations become *similar* in their attempts to *change* ('institutional isomorphism'). The thesis of mimetic isomorphism fits the international spread of mechanised warfare in the interwar era, but historians might also note that 1930s armies, while becoming ever more similar in their interest in mechanised warfare and in the general structure of their armour and mechanised forces, did not engage in similar 'modelling' of other armies' operational concepts; such concepts were instead debated internally and shaped by idiosyncratic organisational cultural prisms and limitations (Dimaggio and Powell, 'The Iron Cage Revisited: Institutional Isomorphism and Collective Rationality in Organisational Fields', *American Sociological Review* 48:2 (1983), pp. 147-160).

It would naturally be unreasonable to assume that the Germans did not attempt to learn from British experiences, and intentionally or unconsciously avoided implementing British-developed lessons regarding armoured warfare. After all, the British Army was until the early 1930s the most advanced of the major armies in testing and experimenting with armoured forces and doctrine.<sup>23</sup> But German ‘learning’ or ‘assimilating’ of British principles still obeyed German cultural assumptions and patterns; scholars who have researched the spread and diffusion of transformations or innovations in doctrinal and technological practice (often packaged as ‘military style’) emphasise that technology filters into any given military organisation in accordance with that organisation’s own perceived institutional interests and purposes,<sup>24</sup> and that, while the ‘mimicking’ of other institutions has been a significant factor in military development, ‘external examples are filtered through the local context and the existing culture of each army’.<sup>25</sup>

German doctrinal documents in the early and mid-1930s thus show very little indication of heavy British influence.<sup>26</sup> In the second half of the 1920s the Reichswehr had no armour doctrine to speak of except its own traditional paramount emphasis on combined-arms battle – an emphasis that was to outlive any imported operational lesson. In the early 1930s, when actual experiments with armour became possible at

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<sup>23</sup> Gat, *British Armour*, p. 92.

<sup>24</sup> Lynn, ‘Evolution of Army Style’, p. 509; see also Thompson, ‘Co-Evolution in War’, pp. 474, 484.

<sup>25</sup> Wilson, ‘Defining Military Culture’, pp. 33-34. Even in the most obvious cases of operational and theoretical learning and close cooperation among allies. In the case of American and German military cooperation during the Cold War, agreement on doctrine was unlikely, and did not materialise. Both armies retained their distinct roles, goals, technologies, past operational patterns, organisational cultures, and obstacles to and limitations on change: see Ingo W. Trauschweizer, ‘Learning with an Ally: The U.S. Army and the *Bundeswehr* in the Cold War’, *Journal of Military History* 72:2 (2008), pp. 477-508, a Cold War case study that indicates that even with ‘unlimited’ opportunities to assimilate foreign armies’ patterns, learning processes do not break free of organisational and cultural interpretation and constraints. See also Goldman and Ross, ‘Conclusion’, pp. 391-2.

<sup>26</sup> See this chapter, pp. 197-208, 215-225 for detailed analysis.

the German base at Kazan in Soviet Russia, the Germans tested not only or even mainly British concepts and armour deployment practices, for the simple reason that the armour employment challenges they now faced were virtually universal.<sup>27</sup> Moreover, an exaggerated emphasis on German learning of British theories and exercises has often been justified by citations from works by far from impartial authors, from Liddell Hart to Guderian himself, but have also been based on German army intelligence reports and a large pool of articles on and translations of British thinkers and experience that appeared in the *Militär-Wochenblatt*.<sup>28</sup> It is however worth noting that alongside the files dedicated to the British forces, the German Military Archive contains impressive quantities of intelligence reports and operational analyses of other foreign armoured forces.<sup>29</sup> Historiographical bias – the assumption of the centrality of British theory in German armour development – may well have caused scholars to focus on reports on Britain, and to neglect other potential foreign influences, especially the Red Army. That Germans and Soviets might have learned from one another was at the very least a plausible scenario, since the German army's only concrete experience with armour before 1933 was gained at Kazan.<sup>30</sup>

The challenge of accurately assessing British influence over German military thought also raises two methodological and theoretical questions. The first is how to assess correctly the contribution of experts, enthusiasts and specialists in one

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<sup>27</sup> The most detailed accounts of Soviet-German cooperation are Manfred Zeidler's *Reichswehr und Rote Armee 1920-1933. Wege und Stationen einer ungewöhnlichen Zusammenarbeit* (Munich, 1993), and Mary R. Habeck's *Storm of Steel: The Development of Armour Doctrine in Germany and the Soviet Union, 1919-1939* (Ithaca, NY, 2003). Habeck describes how the German army examined British, French, and Soviet armour organisational practices (*Storm of Steel*, pp. 207-208).

<sup>28</sup> See for instance Gat, *British Armour*, pp. 51-56.

<sup>29</sup> For details, see pp. 232-234. For analysis of the focus of the German intelligence files as well as the scope and scale of articles dedicated to British armour theories in the *Militär-Wochenblatt*, see Gat, *British Armour*, pp. 51-56.

<sup>30</sup> Habeck suggests that the thought of German armour enthusiasts such as Lutz and Guderian resembled the Soviet 'deep battle' concept (*Storm of Steel*, p. 237).

particular field – armour – to the general or overall doctrine and practice of an entire army. In other words, can historians proclaim that the ‘German army’ held revolutionary concepts of armoured warfare if only some of its armour experts – retrospectively – claimed to have held them? Should scholars focus solely or even principally on the armour experts and their ideas, or rather emphasise the extent to which these ideas affected the German army’s overall operational goals and conduct, and were directly incorporated into army-wide doctrine?<sup>31</sup>

The second point to bear in mind in this connection is that different groups – ‘general staff officers’, ‘specialists’, ‘German armour experts’, or even ‘British armour experts’ might understand and perceive any given technological artefact – tanks, of course, included – in inherently different ways. That technology is socially constructed means that different groups will, by definition, provide different interpretations of technological artefacts, of their significance and, above all, of their appropriate employment.<sup>32</sup> The same follows for German armour enthusiasts and their purported British models; even assuming ‘direct’ emulation between the two groups, cultural factors most probably stood in the way of the clear-cut adoption and application of imported ideas, and affected the ways in which all such ideas could be understood, ways potentially very different from those of the originators of the concepts. Even avid admirers of British concepts ‘Germanised’ them, interpreting them in accordance with their own long-standing mindset.

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<sup>31</sup> Habeck’s work offers a salient example of the recurring projection of the armour specialists’ views onto the more general doctrine of the German army, regardless of the actual degree to which those views gained wider acceptance and incorporation into the army’s doctrine, manuals, and conduct in the second half of the 1930s (see for instance *ibid.*, pp. 240-241).

<sup>32</sup> Trevor J. Pinch and Wiebe E. Bijker, ‘The Social Construction of Facts and Artefacts: Or How the Sociology of Science and the Sociology of Technology Might Benefit Each Other’, in Wiebe E. Bijker, Thomas P. Hughes, and Trevor J. Pinch, eds., *The Social Construction of Technological Systems: New Directions in the Sociology and History of Technology* (Cambridge, Mass. 1989), pp. 40-44.



#### **4. Evolutionary change with culture as its mediator**

This chapter rejects both the claims of revolutionary change and suggestions of 'fascist' or British influences as the agents of the purportedly revolutionary developments in German armour theory, and turns to the manuals, official doctrinal documents, and correspondence generated during the German army's 1930s force build-up in order to trace the conceptual structure that governed the perception and interpretation of modern, technologically-driven armoured warfare by the German military leadership. The theoretical point of departure of the analysis that follows is that no great conceptual changes took place in Germany's army during most of the 1930s, and that whatever change did occur in tactical practice was gradual, and appeared years later than previously assumed.<sup>33</sup> Cultural mechanisms preserved the hard core of German military theory and practice untainted by and protected from change, while promoting a series of gradual tactical updates prompted by technological progress.

Adopting new technology in itself does not necessitate change in the goals, means, patterns of actions, accepted heuristics, or mindsets of organisations. New weapons may appear to demand major modifications in existing practices, but armies are unlikely to adopt weapons that undermine embedded operational assumptions. Even if a new weapon can promote organisational transformation, its employment will most likely remain restricted, at least initially, by orthodox thought and perceptions. This is what happened in the Reichswehr and later the Wehrmacht when they planned

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<sup>33</sup> See especially Biddle's eloquent refutation of claims that a German RMA existed, and insistence that an 'essential continuity' provides the best explanation of the Wehrmacht's initial successes in the Second World War (Biddle, 'The Past as Prologue', pp. 44-55). Biddle, however, does not provide an explanation of the dynamics or mechanisms that maintained continuity in face of technological innovation.

and then established their armoured and mechanised forces and capabilities: an openness to new weapons created a false semblance of conceptual innovation.

What was the German army's approach to technology and to its appropriate incorporation on the battlefield? The second paragraph of the Wehrmacht's 1933-1934 field service manual, *Truppenführung*, reads: 'The conduct of war is subject to continual development. New weapons dictate ever-changing forms. Their appearance must be anticipated and their influence evaluated. They then must be placed into service quickly'<sup>34</sup> These were not new ideas: as discussed in Chapter 1, in the Prussian and German armies technology in the form of new weapons and means of communications had received careful scrutiny, and – if found useful – rapid introduction into service. Reichswehr and Wehrmacht had no inherent aversion to new weapons, on the contrary. But, as mentioned, technological novelties, however demanding and transformative they may seem in retrospect, rarely enforce changes in strategic conduct.<sup>35</sup> In other words, for the Germans, new military technology served existing conceptual structures rather than changed them. As Dennis E. Showalter has noted, 'the German army considered new tools of war . . . in the context of their probable contribution to the army's 'macro systems' of making war. . . [that is. . .] the legacy of seeking decisive battles to resolve limited wars in stable matrices'.<sup>36</sup> And as described in the previous chapter, the faith in modern technology and in new weapons as the means to implement traditional concepts had been prevalent in the Reichswehr

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<sup>34</sup> Bruce Condell, David Zabecki, eds. and trans., *On the German Art of War: Truppenführung* (Boulder, CO, 2001), p. 17.

<sup>35</sup> In part because of their frequency; see Howard E. Aldrich and Martin Ruef's analysis of frequent organisational changes (an army's adoption of new weapons constitutes such a change), leading to a short-lived momentum rather than comprehensive organisational transformations: Aldrich and Ruef, *Organisations Evolving* (London, 2006), p. 138.

<sup>36</sup> Dennis E. Showalter, 'More than Nuts and Bolts: Technology and the German Army, 1870-1945', *The Historian* 65:1 (2002), p. 125; see also Frieser, *Blitzkrieg Legend*, pp. 329-331.

since the early 1920s. No conceptual transformation – as expressed in the army’s doctrinal documents – and surprisingly little organisational change thus accompanied the incorporation of the modern weapons that purportedly led to the birth of the new doctrine of ‘*Blitzkrieg*’. In a nutshell, the new technology did not alter the self-understanding of Reichswehr, or, after 1935, of the Wehrmacht, as a fighting organisation in either theory or practice.

The German military elite – or at least some of it – no doubt paid great attention to foreign military experience; it also enjoyed and exploited the new regime’s enthusiasm for military technology and for the impressive new armaments that Hitler happily financed. But more than anything, it continued to see itself and to understand its surroundings with the conceptual tools that its culture had provided. German officers could not escape applying their heuristics, beliefs, assumptions, and habits to the new possibilities offered to them. More than ‘learning’ new doctrines, they interpreted them, and their interpretations, adjustments and emphases – as expressed in the weapons they developed, their doctrinal goals, and the organisational structure of their armoured divisions – stemmed from their military culture. Weapons systems such as the Wehrmacht’s seemingly innovative radio-equipped tanks merely expressed the traditional German emphasis on communications and tactical flexibility, while the provision of a variety of tank models for various tasks reflected German understanding of the manifold ways in which tanks could and should co-operate with the other combat arms.<sup>37</sup> Similarly, operational goals continued to emphasise shock as the means to annihilation.<sup>38</sup> As Showalter has observed, tanks and motor vehicles

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<sup>37</sup> Citino, *German Way of War*, pp. 253-256, and as succinctly described in Martin van Creveld, *Technology and War, from 2000 B.C. to the Present* (London, 1991), p. 180; see also van Creveld’s analysis of the structure of German army armoured divisions: idem, *Fighting Power: German and U.S. Army Performance, 1939-1945* (Westport, CT, 1982), pp. 53-54.

<sup>38</sup> Citino, *German Way of War*, p. 254; van Creveld, *Fighting Power*, pp. 28-30.

were added to existing doctrines and force structures, not the other way around.<sup>39</sup>

In the final analysis, no great revolution in operational perception occurred in the 1930s German army. New means of warfare emerged, and the army sought to devise appropriate methods of using them. But no great leap forward occurred, no great new vision of warfare materialised, no German-made RMA ensued.

## **II. From an imagined army to a real one: doctrinal changes?**

The turn of the decade did not mark a change in the intellectual inclinations of the Reichswehr's doctrinal experts. Ambitious rearmament plans and an ever more robustly financed rearmament drive inspired an unremitting interest in an updated and appropriate doctrine that would match the much larger army of the near future.<sup>40</sup> The results, however, do not indicate substantial shifts in strategic and operational perceptions, but rather a continued and reverent adherence to precepts as ancient as the writings of Moltke the elder.

### **1. 1930: Yet another operations manual**

The doctrinal opening gun of the 1930s was yet another attempt to update or supersede the 1910 *Grundzüge der höheren Truppenführung*. In a conscious effort to create a more up-to-date and applicable doctrinal document than the one Hierl had put forward in 1923, *Generalmajor* Richard Schürmann produced in the autumn of 1930 his 'Considerations on War Leadership and Command [*Gedanken über Krieg- und*

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<sup>39</sup> Showalter, 'Technology and the German Army', p. 136.

<sup>40</sup> For details on early and mid-1930s rearmament planning see Geyer, 'Dynamics', pp. 117-147; idem, 'German Strategy', pp. 568-572; Deist, 'Reichswehr and National Defence', pp. 383-386, 392-404; and idem, 'Ideological War', pp. 371-380.

*Truppenführung*].<sup>41</sup> The differences and similarities between Hierl's and Schürmann's attempts to revamp the army's doctrine and adjust it to their own times point to the distinctive theoretical and practical emphases of the 1920s and the 1930s, and illustrate the development of the army's operational perceptions in the years that separated the two documents.

*Gedanken über Krieg- und Truppenführung* opened with the acknowledgment that between the 1910 manual and the one proposed in 1930 lay the experience of a world war.<sup>42</sup> Trivial and self-evident though that point of departure might sound, it prescribed – together with inherent respect for the old wisdom embodied in the earlier manual – a genuine attempt to analyse the lessons of the First World War experience, particularly in terms of command and control, and to try to implement those lessons in the changing realities of military power, technology and organisational structures of the 1930s.<sup>43</sup> Such an approach stood in striking contrast to the fundamental assumptions evident both in Hierl's 'Guidelines for Higher Leadership in War' as well as in Seeckt's 'Command and Combat with Combined Arms', both of which treated the First World War as an unfortunate – and extraordinary – deviation from the German army's successful traditions of thought and practice, and consequently offered little from which to learn. As a result, the notably unrealistic elements of past strategies that both Hierl's and Seeckt's manuals had projected into the future now gave way to a level-headed discussion of the strategic challenges of the present, as they had been shaped by the recent past.

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<sup>41</sup> BA-MA, RH2-2901; see also the cover letter, BA-MA, RH2-2901, pp. 149-150.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 155-156.

<sup>43</sup> Schürmann explicitly outlined the relationship between the old wisdom and the new lessons of the World War in his manual: 'The *Gedanken über Krieg- und Truppenführung 1930* contains, as did the *Grundzüge der höhern Truppenführung vom 1. Januar 1910*, the theory of war [*die Kriegslehren*]. It shuns detail, which is the province of the field service regulations, *Command and Combat with Combined Arms*' (*ibid.*, p. 158); for the 1910 manual, see Ch. 1, note 92.

One result was an underlying and fundamental understanding of the need to strive for a shared framework of battlefield and campaign coordination between headquarters and forces in combat; the 1930 *Gedanken* offered a comprehensive and highly advanced discussion of the means of achieving a shared operational consciousness and goals among the different fighting echelons. It first explained clearly the character of the different levels of command and the appropriate relationship of the various levels to the operational rationale of any given campaign:

Strategy means the art of command, the art of seeing, thinking, and leading militarily in order to defeat the enemy. Tactics is the theory of the employment of armed forces in the preparation and execution of battle. Operations are enterprises directed toward a military goal that correspond to the fundamental rules of strategy and tactics.<sup>44</sup>

The draft manual then went on to explain how the different units and levels of command work together toward a shared goal and stressed – paraphrasing and expanding the key sentence of Moltke the elder’s 1888 infantry regulations – that ‘[i]ndividual initiative that maintains a connection with its context, and subordinates itself to the operational concept of the responsible commander, is the foundation of great successes in war; when subordinates wait for orders, favourable opportunities inherent in a given situation cannot be exploited.’<sup>45</sup> The upper echelons, for their part, should ‘always feel the pulse beat of their units . . . Higher commanders should remain in personal contact with their immediate subordinates, and if possible with the fighting

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid., p. 164. See also Naveh, *In Pursuit*, Ch. 2. The persistence of this foundation of systemic rationality is also evident in the post-war studies and reports written by German generals under the auspices of the US Army Historical Division, such as Günther Blumentritt’s ‘Die Gefahren operativer und taktischer “Systeme”’ (Ms. 009) and ‘Strategisch, operativ, taktisch’ (Ms. 044), BA-MA, ZA-1/1210 and ZA-1/1246.

<sup>45</sup> BA-MA, RH2-2901, p. 172; *Exerzir-Reglement für die Infanterie* (Berlin, 1888), p. 109: ‘Die in solchen Grenzen sich geltend machende Selbstthätigkeit ist die Grundlage der grossen Erfolge im Kriege.’

units, while cautiously evaluating [whatever] momentary impressions [they may receive].<sup>46</sup>

Finally, the principal tools that were intended to keep all components of the system adhering to the lines of a systemic goal were the general staff officer, the liaison officer, and the war plan. The general staff officer 'interprets the concepts and the will of the commander to the executants; he must possess a lively fighting spirit and strong willpower, in order to permeate the manifold ramifications of the unit'.<sup>47</sup> The liaison officer was 'a means through which the commander can inform himself, independent of his own actual presence, through personal [telephonic] and written messages and reports through channels, or acquire information or [ask] questions about events, above all in battle, and to facilitate contact between commanders or to enhance the often excessively terse transmission of orders'.<sup>48</sup> Still more impressive was the holistic and integrative role assigned to the war plan: its function was to combine and harmonize the political and the military goals of war, and it accordingly encapsulated the rationale of the entire war effort, while prescribing its conduct: 'It brings the concerns of statesmanship and economics into conformity with military considerations, determines the interaction of the conduct of war by land, sea, and air, establishes guiding principles for the economy and for industry, and designates the objectives and methods of propaganda'.<sup>49</sup>

The document that opened the Reichswehr's effort to renew and refine its core strategic and operational beliefs thus demonstrated the brilliant systemic framework the German military leadership – from generals to field commanders – enjoyed as

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<sup>46</sup> BA-MA, RH2-2901, p. 172.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 173.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 174.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 175.

early as 1930. This system of strategic and operational command suggests the direction upon which, with time and suitable armament planning and resources, the Reichswehr could have rightfully regained its famous excellence in warfighting. Yet despite its more apt operational emphases, the fundamental framework of thought remained remarkably similar to the one displayed over the years in numerous Reichswehr studies, papers, and manuals. Schürmann incorporated the strategic analyses of the 1920s and their virtually unanimous resulting focus on leadership, the German people, and the German spirit described in previous chapters. As a result, even the most advanced sparks of operational insight that Schurmann's *Gedanken* exhibited ultimately conformed to traditional modes of thought.

## **2. Technology and armaments**

The 1930 *Gedanken* acknowledged the importance, potential, and – indeed – inescapability of an ever more technological battlefield, and, as in the past, embraced it as a military norm.<sup>50</sup> Yet the fundamental German army world-view – subjecting materiel even in the form of advanced weaponry to human will and effort – still set the tone, precluding excessive fascination with and over-reliance upon the power of machines, while encouraging inter-branch cooperation and combined-arms tactical and operational patterns:

Yet the machine invariably serves man<sup>51</sup> . . . Man remains the leader  
[*Führer*], sustained by the qualities of the soul [*Seele*] that draw their  
power from the moral energies [*sittlichen Triebe*] of the *Volk* . . . They

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<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 173.

<sup>51</sup> A notion immanent in, if hardly exclusive to, German military culture, neatly summarised for contemporaries such as Schürmann by an eminent warrior and stylist: 'Denn den Kampf gewinnt nicht die Maschine, sondern er wird durch die Maschine gewonnen' (Ernst Jünger, *Das Wäldchen 125. Eine Chronik aus den Grabenkämpfen 1918* [Berlin, 1926], p. 59)



empower him with valour and [self-]discipline and the will to victory as the preconditions for definitive success. . . . No branch of service can claim to be more valuable than another. All contribute, each in accordance with its character, to victory, [and] each depends upon the other. Only the most profound cooperation between arms leads to the objective; their reciprocal acquaintance and understanding is therefore indispensable.<sup>52</sup>

The stress on combined-arms methods was perfectly justifiable – but scarcely novel.

### **3. Civil and military leadership, statesman and *Feldherr***

The question of leadership in time of war and the appropriate relations between the civil and military echelons is the one in which the Reichswehr fell victim most spectacularly to its own traditional outlook. The Wilhelmine army did not perceive its mission and role as serving the Kaiser; quite the contrary.<sup>53</sup> Its approach toward the Republic was similar only more radically disconnected; its own interests and agenda were paramount. But the German army did need to find ways of conceptualising and explaining exactly what its prerogatives were, and how the national decision-making process should be structured during war. On that question more than others, the ‘lessons’ of the World War played a decisive role in creating the veneer of pseudo-subordination to civil authority that had in actuality grown out of the army’s imperative institutional need to escape responsibility for the catastrophe of 1918-19. German officers always maintained that the government was ultimately responsible

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<sup>52</sup> BA-MA, RH2-2902, pp. 182-83 (emphasis in original); ‘*Technik und Seele*’ figure among the points in Schürmann’s immediately preceding heading.

<sup>53</sup> An attitude neatly summed up by a verse of Adalbert von Chamisso, who had served as a Prussian officer in the Napoleonic period: ‘*Und der König absolut / Wenn er unseren Willen tut.*’

for wars – but ‘military’ decisions, defined broadly and loosely indeed, were theirs alone. The officer corps was by and large indifferent to the elementary logical fallacy hidden in their ‘responsibility-free’ strategic approach:

War is thus the ultimate means of statecraft for the government of a nation, for the state leadership. It must accept responsibility for war. . . .

The statesman cannot dispense . . . with the advisory judgment of the supreme commander [*des Feldherren*]. He must however have a clear perception of the essential nature of war, just as the commander must understand the necessities and potentialities of statecraft.<sup>54</sup>

The central offence of past German governments of course regarded ‘morale’ – or lack thereof. Here, the *Gedanken* became particularly revealing of its creator’s and readers’ world-view: ‘The state leadership must both in its actions and in its effects on morale place and maintain the *Volk* in a condition to offer the most extreme resistance as well as fulfilling its other military tasks. [The leadership] thus becomes the Supreme Command [*Oberste Kriegsleitung*].’<sup>55</sup> Two immediate disclaimers followed this seemingly surprising declaration. The first echoed deep aspirations within the Reichswehr, expressed in numerous researches, studies, and personal letters, for a strong and charismatic leader who would embody both civil and military authority.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> BA-MA, RH2-2902, p. 160.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid. (emphasis in original).

<sup>56</sup> See for instance Stülpnagel’s variation on this theme, Chapter 2, p. 134. For *Feldherr* studies see especially BA-MA, RH62-270. The subject kept the army’s research department busy during the entire decade of the 1930s, and continued into the early 1940s. In an attempt to understand the role and characteristics of the modern genius-*Feldherr*, numerous studies focused on figures such as Moltke, Schlieffen, Falkenhayn, Joffre, and Kitchener. The assumptions embodied in this research were similar to those of Schürmann. As one unsigned study from 1935-36 concluded, ‘[e]ven in purely military operations [his task] involves more the allocation of forces, roles, [and] tasks to [his] subordinate commanders than [it does] implementation, although it is scarcely conceivable that in genuinely large decisive battles [*Schlacht-Entscheidungen*] the supreme Führer would remain in the far rear at a central protected location, and there await the outcome.’

In 1930 – as in 1933 – the Reichswehr longed for a man who would unburden it of the need to obey, or even to take into account, the irritating constraints of democratic politics. If modern times made finding such a man impossible, then decision-making would have to be limited to the smallest possible number of individuals:

The uniting of state leadership and supreme military command in a single individual is thus the ideal, if [that individual] is equally blessed with statecraft and the talent of military command. That is a rare state of affairs. The Supreme Command will thus in present circumstances normally be a corporate body. The number of its members must be limited.<sup>57</sup>

The second disclaimer merely repeated 1920s notions of the army's exclusive proprietary right to all military decisions, whether strategic or grand-strategic, thus in effect nullifying the authority of the government over the management and direction of war: 'In all military questions that touch upon the security of the Reich the military leadership is responsible to the state leadership.'<sup>58</sup>

#### **4. Operational ends and means**

In line with this notably traditional framework of civil-military relations, the *Gedanken* maintained that peace-time missions and conduct were completely separable from war-time ones. It opened with a remarkably modest, defensively-oriented definition of its own fundamental mission: 'Defence of the national territory against enemy invasion and maintenance of armed neutrality in war in the midst of our neighbours are the principal missions of [the German] armed forces [*Wehrmacht*]'.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> BA-MA, RH2-2901, pp. 160-161.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 162.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 157.

However, and entirely naturally, when war breaks out and the military leadership takes the lead, the overall goal and the means to achieve it change. In order to present a unified national conduct of war, *Gedanken* meshed political goals with military ones, conveniently pointing to the only possible interpretation of ‘goals’ in war. Unsurprisingly, that goal was annihilation:

With the commencement of hostilities the greatest measure of responsibility falls upon the supreme leader of the armed forces, the *Feldherr*, who must fit his campaign plan (plan of operations) into the framework [established by] the state leadership toward the strategic goal, [which is] the overthrow of the enemy forces and the annihilation [*Vernichtung*] of the enemy’s military resources . . . Thus are constituted the closely intertwined tasks of Statesman and *Feldherr*. The thinking and aspirations of statesman and *Feldherr* must reciprocally interpenetrate [*sich gegenseitig durchdringen*].<sup>60</sup>

And if the approved operational goal remained the destruction of enemy forces, so too did the means of achieving that goal, expressed in the axioms of offensive warfighting and annihilation through decisive battle, reiterating and reinforcing for years to come the army’s traditional and seemingly immutable tactical framework. If at all possible, the attack is appropriate, even [when] on the defensive [*auch in der Abwehr*]; only the attack results in decision’.<sup>61</sup> Likewise,

Victory in decisive battle frees us from the most disagreeable situations. Battle thus exceeds in importance all other military undertakings. Victory in the decisive battle is the final goal [*Endziel*] of any operation. . . . In the war of movement battle as a rule develops

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid., p. 162 (emphasis in original).

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., p. 172.

directly from operations. In the operations leading to battle lie the seeds of victory or defeat. But only tactical victory on the battlefield can decide.

Tactical inferiority can deprive promising operations of victory; tactical superiority can free us from nasty operational situations.<sup>62</sup>

Thus, alongside and superimposed over its new and highly developed ‘operational cognition’, the army’s traditional tactical framework nevertheless prevailed, dictating tactical and operational patterns as well as subordinating the strategic plan – indeed the entire strategic mission – to its demands, successes, and failures.<sup>63</sup> The brilliant theoretical structure of the strategic, operational and tactical levels smoothly discoursing and reconciling ends and means crumbled in face of all-consuming tactical essentialism of Moltkean tradition: ‘The unpredictable outcome of the first great decisive tactical engagement lays the foundations for further decisions; the plan of operations thus cannot reach beyond the first decisive encounter with the main enemy force.’<sup>64</sup> The tactical aspiration to a single decisive battle thus prescribed strategic axioms, rationales, and ultimately the initial deployment and war plan: ‘In the power of the forces [employed] lies the first source of success; we can never be strong enough for the decisive battle . . .’<sup>65</sup>

### **5. Geist and Wille in a new key**

The discussion of and the central place allotted to fighting spirit (*Geist*) did not diminish in importance; it remained a focal point of analysis and effort for the future German forces and people, and a means of conceptualising – and obliterating – enemy

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid., p. 233 (emphasis in original).

<sup>63</sup> Naveh, *In Pursuit*, Ch. 2; van Creveld, *Fighting Power*, p. 164.

<sup>64</sup> BA-MA, RH2-2901, p. 176 (emphasis in original); similarly and famously, Moltke the elder, Chapter 1, p. 31 and note 45.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 171.

motivation.<sup>66</sup> Yet the analysis of *Geist* and *Wille* and of their role in war that Schürmann presented in 1930 was more nuanced and less straightforward than the input-output simplicities of the army's traditional 'Geist-must-prevail-over-materiel' style:

In war all is uncertain and little is calculable . . . one's own will collides with the independent will of the enemy, and is constrained by frictions of all kinds . . . In the fog of uncertainty that dominates in war, at least one thing must be firm and definite: one's own will, which must be discernible in every situation and at all times. The firm will to victory of commander [*Führer*] and troops forms the moral foundation of victory . . . Great successes can rarely be achieved without great dangers. He who wills great things must take great risks.<sup>67</sup>

Such assertions of the centrality of *Wille* focused on its effect on the fighting forces and on the role of the military leader; analysis of the role of *Geist* involved the relations between the fighting and non-fighting components of the war machine:

The wars of our own age are national and ethnic wars [*Volkskriege*]. The armed forces are not the sole combatants; even the unarmed part of the population is touched by war . . . The will of the enemy is directed not merely against the fighting forces, but also directly against the source of military strength, the people in the homeland. Pressure

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<sup>66</sup> This distinctive emphasis on the role of the enemy's fighting spirit and on the necessity of crushing it utterly was a fertile soil in which the brutal suppression of the *Wille* of the European peoples later invaded and occupied by German forces flourished as both axiom and practice.

<sup>67</sup> BA-MA, RH2-2901, pp. 167-171 (emphasis in original); similarly, on willpower in the fog of war and the relationship between danger and success, Moltke the elder (1869), *Militärische Werke*, vol. 2, part 2, pp. 172, 211. For more on the power of the will in battle, 'Gedanken', pp. 233-34, and especially 239: 'In borderline cases the stronger will to victory and the more inflexible faith [*festere Glaube*] in victory decides [*the issue*]' (emphasis in original).

through economic warfare methods and the impact on the morale [*Geist*] of the *Volk* of psychological manipulation [*seelische Beeinflussung*] to cripple its energy and willpower take their place alongside armed conflict.<sup>68</sup>

This notion of *Geist* and of its functions were also closely linked to the macro-management of the national war effort, as theorised during the 1920s. Following the assumptions deriving from its 1920s analyses of Germany's failure in the First World War, and as previously discussed, the army now held the state responsible for non-military war preparations. Yet the ultimate authority to coordinate and prioritise all such efforts was to remain firmly in the hands of the army. That was the almost-elegant solution for the civil-military dilemma of a Reichswehr that was now fully aware of the prerequisite for effective and efficient mobilisation of the entire nation and of its economy, yet reluctant to repeat its own (unacknowledged) macro-management debacle of 1916-1918. The Reichswehr opted instead to 'outsource' this task to the state, using the by-now standard tautological argument that the state expressed the will of the army which in turn expressed the will of the state:

A *Volk* cannot carry out such tasks without having prepared itself for them. These *preparations* of the *Volk* for war involve governmental, military, economic, and psychological [*seelische*] measures. These tasks, united in the hands of the state leadership, are to be resolved by the relevant organisations on their own responsibility. A unified will and a single goal must direct them. Pre-eminence among all these measures belongs to *those of the armed forces*, as the executants of the will of the state. In consequence, the state leadership has the duty to

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid., p. 161.

create for the *Volk* a Wehrmacht able to confront the missions that will face it.<sup>69</sup>

The 1930 *Gedanken über Krieg und Truppenführung* was markedly similar in spirit and concept to *Truppenführung*, the manual issued in 1933-34 that served as doctrinal foundation to the Wehrmacht that was soon to appear. As one of the links in the chain of doctrinal evolution stretching from Seeckt's 1921-24 'Command and Combat with Combined Arms' to *Truppenführung* in 1933-4, *Gedanken* highlights the direction, tone, and limits of the slow and nuanced process through which the German army adapted itself to and discoursed with its changing environment, and seemingly rejuvenated its fundamental perceptions.

### **III. The 'when and how' of the development of German armour doctrine**

As mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, the process through which Reichswehr and Wehrmacht developed their operational methods to deliver what was later termed '*Blitzkrieg*' is of immense importance to any overall understanding of the evolution of German military thought and practice. It is the prime example of what seemed to be the assimilation of new technology and the application to it of appropriate operational axioms – whether pre-existing, seemingly fresh and newly invented, or perhaps borrowed. As also mentioned, one of the methodological pitfalls awaiting scholars in any attempt to dissect the reorientation of military systems into technologically-oriented (although not technologically-based) ones is the question of whose opinions should historians trust as 'representing' the alleged 'shift'. In this case, was it the armour enthusiasts or the military leadership that shaped and directed the complex

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<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 161-162 (emphasis in original).



process of doctrinal change and adjustment to the new possibilities that tanks, aircraft, and radio communications offered?

Self-inflating accounts of this process have usually depicted armour 'enthusiasts' such as Blomberg, Werner von Fritsch (army commander-in-chief, 1934-38), Lutz, Guderian, and others locked in struggle with an uninspired, conservative, and even hostile general staff – above all Beck.<sup>70</sup> That this picture is at best inaccurate and crude is already accepted by many military historians, who are aware both of the unfeasible financial and industrial requirements that the early visions of armoured warfare posited, as well the doctrinal risks they would likewise involve.<sup>71</sup> The theory and dynamics of military culture, however, highlights yet another facet of the German army's doctrinal and armaments decision-making. It was not merely a healthy and natural caution that dictated the pace and direction of German armour development, but also, and above all, the cultural axioms that established both the very goals that such operations were to serve and the best and most effective methods of serving them.

A necessary first step to understanding the real nature of German armour thought would be to establish both when its core ideas expanded into clear operational perceptions and patterns, and the content of those core ideas, by scrutinising the texts and contexts surrounding the development of mechanised warfare in pre-1939 Germany. Scholarly judgments vary markedly regarding the moment at which German armour doctrine took on its final pre-war shape – and decisions about that

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<sup>70</sup> See for instance Guderian, *Panzer Leader* (New York, 1952), and Macksey, *Guderian*, pp. 37-79.

<sup>71</sup> For instance Murray, 'Armoured Warfare', pp. 41-42; Klaus-Jürgen Müller, *The Army, Politics and Society in Germany 1933-1945. Studies in the Army's Relation to Nazism* (New York, 1987), p. 85; Bernhard R. Kroener, *Generaloberst Friedrich Fromm. Der starke Mann im Heimatkriegsgebiet : eine Biographie* (Paderborn, 2005), p. 245; and Gat, *British Armour*, p. 74; and the discussion on pp. 209-243.

chronology depend in part on the historian's view of who or what affected the process most.<sup>72</sup> The most recent detailed analysis of the development of German armoured warfare suggests that the overall doctrinal concept that eventually enabled the Wehrmacht's *panzer* forces to overrun Europe was for all practical purposes already perfected between 1923 and 1933.<sup>73</sup> It rested on advanced concepts and expressed fresh operational ideas: that armoured forces would dominate the future battlefield, fighting independently, yet in a coordinated effort with slower forces. Armoured forces, as the army's principal combat arm and the core of its striking forces, would employ speed, mobility and range to achieve decision. 'Decisive' results, however, would not take the form of fighting and winning 'ordinary' battles; rather, well-timed operations, launched by surprise deep into the enemy rear, would produce the collapse of the enemy's entire armed resistance.<sup>74</sup>

Two factors cast doubts on this impressive picture of early 1930s German armoured doctrine. First, at least some of the assumptions mentioned were shared only by the most radical spokesmen of mechanised warfare; and second, as will shortly emerge, even the most enthusiastic armour supporters did not break radically with mainstream German operational thought. And in any case, if allegedly groundbreaking ideas were the property only of the small group of German officers involved with

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<sup>72</sup> Thus the supporters of the theory that British influence was paramount have placed heavier emphasis on the years 1927-1934, while those who credit Hitler with a pivotal role in the process point to 1933-1936.

<sup>73</sup> Habeck, *Storm of Steel*, pp. 159-161, 194, 206. Such assertions coexist uneasily with Habeck's recognition of the fact that 'the German army as a whole' lacked the Red Army's confidence that machines would dominate 'modern warfare'. Yet according to Habeck, German doctrinal disagreements of later years (discussed in detail in the following pages) focused on questions of organisation, which Habeck assumes to be of secondary importance (*ibid.*, pp. 188, 194).

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 163-164, 192-194, and Gat, *British Armour*, pp. 84-85. Habeck claims that Lutz's views (which she quotes extensively to create the doctrinal picture described above), when taken together with the ideas expressed in *Truppenführung*, demonstrate that as early as 1933 the high command had achieved unanimity on a highly advanced and even radical armour doctrine (*Storm of Steel*, p. 194).

experimental armoured forces, the picture of pre-war German doctrine as an exercise in radicalism is difficult to sustain. An army's doctrine is not confined to small carefully-selected leadership groups or to experimental forces. By its very nature, it must be shared by all arms, and serve both as the 'brain' and the 'central nervous system' of the fighting body, coordinating the functioning and cooperation of all its organs. Whatever operational wisdom the armour experts may have developed independently but did not manage to disseminate further is irrelevant when examining the doctrinal and operational 'nervous system' of the Wehrmacht as a whole. *Shared* axioms and modes of action were the ones that eventually determined the conduct of the German army, and they are therefore the ones on which scholars should focus in their efforts to decode the Wehrmacht's operational script. The analysis that follows will thus focus on the extent to which unorthodox ideas, especially those that directly challenged received operational truths, did or did not spread or dictate the Wehrmacht's armaments and force build-up, doctrinal developments, and operational concepts, as well as the cultural dynamics that shaped this process.

### **1. 1930-1933: Shaping armour doctrine in the mould and service of greater truths**

The inextricable link between German armoured operational concepts and the more general German operational perceptions reflected in the 1930 draft manual, is immediately apparent. Conspicuously, at a time when the Reichswehr, still deprived of tanks, aircraft, and means to experiment with or construct its own guidelines for the operational use of super-modern weapons, and/or when it was allegedly enthusiastic about learning from the British experience, showed no such tendencies in its internal studies. Instead, German military discussions demonstrate an idiosyncratic understanding of how to use modern technology's potential for mobility, movement,

firepower, coordinated action, and the resulting shock effects. Internalisation of the character, pace and dynamics that modern weapons systems dictated was, however, still restricted; the absence of advanced weapons in German hands indeed prevented any other outcome. The result was a still stronger emphasis on traditional notions such as the centrality of infantry in fulfilling the axiomatic goal of ‘decisive’ blows against enemy forces. Thus, although it emerged after the groundbreaking British armoured experiments of 1927-28 that are often cited by scholars as proving the British Army’s pivotal role in the development of German concepts, the 1930 draft manual does not support any such claims:

In armies that wholly lack or have only a small establishment of armoured fighting vehicles, the *infantry* is in the final analysis the combat arm that must win the battle, [even] against an opponent that is so equipped. The essence of infantry combat is fire and movement. . . Only the assault [*Stoss*] brings decision. The situation of the infantry is the best guide to the overall combat situation.<sup>75</sup>

The traditional emphasis on the combined-arms approach and the centrality of the infantry likewise still stood at the very core of German operational concepts:

All arms compete to carry the infantry up to the enemy and into the assault. Through its equipment with light and heavy infantry weapons [and] the provision of heavy mortars, [infantry] cannon, and communications gear, it possesses a fighting power that makes it independent in many situations of artillery, tank, and air support. The mobility of the infantry is increased through [motor] transport.<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> *Gedanken*, ‘Das Heer’, BA-MA RH2-2901, p. 183 (emphasis in original).

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.* As part of its emphasis on the combined-arms approach, ‘*Gedanken*’ also stressed the roles of cavalry, artillery, air forces, transport units, communications, and

These foundational precepts predetermined the German approach to armoured operations and the extent to which future German armoured formations were to operate independently from the other components of the fighting forces. The German army saw tanks, from its initial attempts to define their battlefield roles, *both* as a weapons system that should operate independently (especially heavy tanks, given their unprecedented mobility and armour), *and* as yet another component, however important, of a larger infantry-centred operational effort geared toward the goal of shock, annihilation, and – thereby – decision. The Germans could thus simply ignore, at least during their first doctrinal steps with armour, the agonies and obsessions regarding the issue of subordination of the tanks to the infantry, and vice versa, that attended the evolution of British armour doctrine:

The most effective assault forces of modern armies are armoured fighting vehicles (major armoured formations [*Panzerverbände*]). They enter the scene as independently operating formations and support the other arms through reconnaissance and [flank] security, as well as in battle. Speed and heavy armour allow them to penetrate deeply into enemy [positions]. Their heavy armament enables them to strike effectively at most ground targets. . .<sup>77</sup>

The 1930 draft manual did not in the least reflect the final decision purportedly achieved in 1929-1930 regarding the future employment of armour. Nor did it suggest that ‘enthusiasts’ had ‘lost’ a ‘battle’ against ‘conservatives’. And it did not preclude changes to German operational concepts in the mid- or late-1930s. But it does attest to the power of cultural assumptions that themselves channelled or narrowed down what

logistical units *in combination* in delivering the ultimate shared goal of ‘*Schlachtentscheidung*’ (ibid., pp. 184-187).

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

the military leadership would assume to be its operational possibilities, preferences, and priorities. Claims that ‘moderates’ willingly chose or forcefully accepted the ‘middle way’ are incomplete. The ‘middle way’ was, to begin with, the ‘natural’ outcome of any collision between German military culture, new technology, and production and financial constraints.

The decisive moments of transition within long-term trends and processes are difficult to define with precision. But if German military thought had one such moment in the 1930s, it certainly did not take place in 1930 or 1931. But when, if at all, did such a decisive moment occur? The next major doctrinal pronouncement that can shed light on German military perceptions and operational evolution is the Wehrmacht’s official field service manual of 1933-34, written by Ludwig Beck: *H.Dv [Heeresdienstvorschrift] 300: Truppenführung* – a title most succinctly translated as ‘Army Service Regulation 300: Command’.

## **2. 1933-1934: Heeresdienstvorschrift 300: Truppenführung**

As many scholars have observed, *Truppenführung* (‘TF’) offers very few if any novel ideas, intellectual frameworks, or operational concepts; its purpose was to reconcile traditional perceptions with new technology and with that technology’s battlefield implications.<sup>78</sup>

### **(i) The discourse of decisiveness: decisive actions and decisive factors**

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<sup>78</sup> See James Corum, Bruce Condell, and David Zabecki’s forward and introductory notes, *Truppenführung*, pp. viii-xiii, 1-12. Corum points out the traditional character of the document as a faithful expression of the ‘German way of war’, as well as its effective incorporation of new arms into existing concepts. Condell and Zabecki specifically link *Truppenführung* to Seeckt’s *FuG* in concepts and even in phrasing: ‘entire paragraphs and sections were carried over into *Truppenführung*’.

*Truppenführung* further accentuated the high traditional value attached to 'decisive' conduct and 'decisive' outcomes, and not only stressed 'decisive' actions but also offered a clear hierarchy of decisive factors. 'Decisiveness' thus became simultaneously a value, a practice and a requirement – and, synergistically, the multiple manifestations of decisiveness purportedly decided operational success. Unsurprisingly, none of these manifestations were unprecedented:

The decisive factor, despite technology and weaponry, is the value of the individual soldier. . . the calibre of a leader and of the man determines the combat power [*Kampfkraft*] of a unit, which is augmented by the quantity, care and maintenance of their weapons and equipment. Superior combat power can compensate for inferior numbers. The greater the quality, the greater the force and mobility in war . . . the first criterion in war remains decisive action. Everyone, from the highest commander down to the youngest soldier, must constantly be aware that the inaction and neglect incriminate him more severely than any error in the choice of means.<sup>79</sup>

(ii) Operational ends and preferred means

'Decisiveness' never lost its centrality because the archetypal operational goal, that is, the annihilation of enemy forces, in itself virtually the definition of 'decisiveness', required that characteristic to be present in both ends and means. Beck's translation of the value of decisiveness into the practice of decisiveness was disarmingly simple:

One can never be strong enough at the decisive point. The commander who tries to be secure everywhere, or who wastes his forces on secondary missions, acts contrary to this basic rule . . . Pursuit [*Verfolgung*] guarantees the culmination of victory. The purpose is to annihilate the

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<sup>79</sup> *Truppenführung*, Introduction, pp. 18-19.

enemy when such action was not possible in the preceding engagement .

A decisive victory can only be achieved through judicious resumption of the offensive . . .<sup>80</sup>

Which could be achieved in several ways, some (traditionally) better than others:

. . . the attack is executed along its base direction by movement, fire and shock. The attack can be launched from a single direction against the enemy front, where the greatest strength usually lies. Normally, however, the attack is directed against the flank or the rear of the enemy. . . a flanking attack is more effective than a frontal attack. The simultaneous attack against both enemy flanks requires great superiority. The envelopment of one or both enemy flanks, reaching deep into his rear, can result in the destruction of the enemy.<sup>81</sup>

The omnipotence of the axiom of annihilation thus remained as central as ever to the evolution of German military thought, campaign planning, and operational patterns. Nothing whatsoever transcended *Vernichtung* as a principle, a guide, a state of mind, and of course a practice. Annihilation stood as a self-understood truth, beyond explanation; any attempt to diminish it as the *raison d'être* of battle in the eyes of German doctrine and of its bearers (or to claim that it was not, after all, the operational goal of German armoured forces) must first explore why annihilation was considered so vital, and why the paramount doctrinal document of the Wehrmacht demanded that every conceivable effort, energy, and resource be spent in the attempt to achieve it:

Enemy forces not destroyed in the penetration and the succeeding envelopment must be pursued . . . the victor pursues on a broad front,

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<sup>80</sup> Ibid., pp. 22-24.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., p. 88.



always intending to outflank the enemy, to overtake him, to take positions in his rear, or to cut him off from his rearward communications . . . fighter aircraft and bombers will operate against the retreating enemy main body, even at the expense of other targets . . . From the very moment the enemy begins to retreat, the subordinate commanders who are closest to the enemy initiate the pursuit, immediately and without waiting for orders. They must act boldly and independently . . . coordination with adjacent units is essential . . . every effort must be made to close with the enemy main force.

So important was the effort to destroy the enemy that the ultimate motivator was needed to propel it: the senior commander must 'inject his subordinate commanders with the will to victory [*Siegeswille*]. He orders all available forces to move in the direction of decisive pursuit, and as soon as possible he advances reformed or newly formed pursuit forces. . . .'<sup>82</sup>

The second central cultural characteristic that served as both a value and practice was cooperation and combined-arms operations: *Truppenführung* stressed it at every opportunity. True, by the very nature of annihilation as a goal – a goal only the infantry could definitively accomplish by closing with the enemy – some combat arms were more equal than others.<sup>83</sup> However, the principle of cooperation as the means to achieve the full potential of annihilation persisted throughout 'TF':

The objective of combined-arms elements in an attack is to support the decisive action of the infantry with sufficient firepower and shock effect against the enemy. This allows the infantry to break through deeply and to

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<sup>82</sup> Ibid., pp. 104, 116-118.

<sup>83</sup> 'The infantry assures the complete defeat of the enemy through fire and intensive pursuit. When necessary, it engages the enemy with hand grenades and bayonets . . .'. (ibid., p. 117).

break the enemy resistance decisively. The first step in this goal is achieved when the enemy artillery is overrun or forced to withdraw. All arms committed to an attack must know each other's mutual capabilities and limitations. They must maintain close and continuous communications with each other.<sup>84</sup>

And the manual provided ample and detailed discussions on cooperation between the different arms – infantry, artillery, cavalry, armour, and air forces.<sup>85</sup>

A key derivative of cooperation as a value and combined arms as a practice was the inherent demand for ever-improved communications technology, to facilitate effective combined action. The German army has often been praised for insisting on equipping tanks and tank units with voice radio communications and enciphered teletype networks, thus providing for the superb tactical and operational employment of armour. But the Germans did not accidentally stumble upon the idea that communications might be vital; theirs was a culturally-induced instinct apparent long before tank units were fully introduced.<sup>86</sup> *Truppenführung* repeated several times that

. . . both the infantry and the artillery are responsible to ensure their coordination by close and continuous communications. The relationship must be maintained not only between commanders, but also between the forward infantry elements . . . and the artillery observers . . . the infantry must support the artillery liaison team. This is accomplished by direct

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<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 'Execution of the Attack and Combined Arms Coordination', p. 92.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid., pp. 90, 92-98, 100-105, 182-205.

<sup>86</sup> See Citino, *Blitzkrieg to Desert Storm*, pp. 21-28; Frieser, *Blitzkrieg Legend*, pp. 339-341; and Macksey, *Guderian*, pp. 50-51.

communication between the artillery observation posts, the forward observers, and the most advanced infantry elements.<sup>87</sup>

(iii) Armour and mechanised warfare: serving the fighting system, not the infantry

Unlike the *FuG*, written when Germany's army possessed no tanks, *Truppenführung* was able to offer a concept based on actual testing, however limited in nature. Still, it is important to note that in 1933 the Wehrmacht had yet to establish armoured divisions, which eventually came into being in 1935 and became operational in 1937. *Truppenführung* thus offers the reader a glimpse into an evolutionary stage of German armour doctrine, one that is closer to its untested values and therefore more prone to reveal basic assumptions regarding new technology in general and tanks in particular, and also – since the organisational platform for the independent employment of tanks had yet to appear – the army's natural inclination toward the support role for tanks in battle. By providing a window into the mental framework that prescribed the ways in which tanks should be employed – at the very the beginning of armour development – *Truppenführung* clarifies not only the origins but also the later development of German armour doctrine and practice, as is also evident from the documentation that preceded and accompanied the establishment of the armoured divisions. Faithful to the value and practice of cooperation, *Truppenführung* stated that:

At a focal point of a battle, where all available forces should be concentrated, the commitment of a particular arm should correspond to its relevance to the decisive situation . . . combat elements may sometimes be committed against the enemy's forward positions or

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<sup>87</sup> *Truppenführung*, pp. 94-95; see also the similar emphasis on close communication between armoured forces and supporting artillery, p. 97.

against an enemy putting up a determined resistance . . . [or] a counterattack through friendly positions.<sup>88</sup>

At the very core of German operational perception stood the assumption that each and every component of the fighting machine was to serve the shared purpose of battle – which, preferably and by definition, was the annihilation of enemy forces. Thus the Wehrmacht's fundamental assumptions took the sting out of the question of armour employment from the very beginning. The question was not, and could not have been, formulated simply as 'should tanks be subordinated to infantry, or should tanks operate independently?' Such conceptualisation was meaningless when the paramount importance of the operational goal, and the effective cooperation that – axiomatically – must be dedicated to achieving it moulded the options and content of German operational choices. Tanks should be used – of course – in every possible way that would assist or facilitate success. Like the other combat arms, they could operate in and of themselves, but only as part of a *system*.

Early German conceptualisations of the role of tanks therefore rested on a technological understanding – that tanks enjoy 'speed, extensive operational ranges, limited cross-country capability', and its cultural translation into a 'natural' operational axiom: that they could thus execute 'various missions'. They could support infantry forces during breakthrough; they could assist in the pursuit; they could fight enemy tanks – and they could and would do all that, and more.<sup>89</sup> That assumption did not negate a deeper understanding of armour capabilities and possible range of employment – considering, of course, overall operational requirements:

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<sup>88</sup> Ibid., 'Tanks', p. 193.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid., pp. 194-196. The same approach is evident in the chapter 'Air Forces', which emphasises above all the coordinated action of air and ground forces, and the shared knowledge required of each regarding the other's operational capabilities and needs. The authors dedicate the lion's share of the discussion that follows to the 'Communications and Ground Installations' that are to facilitate their cooperation (Ibid., pp. 197-205).

An attack by armoured vehicles either proceeds in the same direction as the infantry, or comes from a different direction . . . too close a contact with the infantry reduces the advantage of the speed of the armoured vehicles and may put them at a disadvantage with respect to the enemy's defence. They should be manoeuvred in such a way that they either eliminate the enemy weapons that impede the infantry attack . . . or that they break into the enemy positions simultaneously with the infantry . . . the deployment of the other arms should conform to the operational requirements of the armoured vehicles.<sup>90</sup>

(iv) The Wehrmacht, grand strategy, and politics: a farewell

The discerning reader may notice one noteworthy omission in *Truppenführung* compared to previous manuals, and its neglect of the subject was not in the least unintentional. *Truppenführung* offers no discussion, insights, or assumptions regarding the political level of war-fighting and war-management. The German military leadership of course did not in 1933-34 foresee the political limitations that it would eventually accept or even impose upon itself. Nor did it assume that Germany would become the kind of dictatorship it became soon after the publication of *Truppenführung*. Rather the lack of discussion of what had formerly been jealously guarded as a natural if threatened prerogative of the army – its right to determine when, where and how should Germany wage war, regardless of the political and grand-strategic implications of such decisions – indicates that the German army had

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<sup>90</sup> Ibid., p. 96.

finally, silently and unobtrusively, decided to forego that prerogative, assuming that the much longed-for ‘man of outstanding qualities’ would shoulder the task himself.<sup>91</sup>

The lack of any discussion of the place of politics and grand strategy in war in a manual mostly drafted by one of the army’s leading strategists, Ludwig Beck, might seem ironic. However, Beck’s reputation as a strategist – a result of his sensible aversion to Hitler’s efforts to provoke a war over Czechoslovakia in 1938 – derived merely from his grim operational calculations and low estimate of Germany’s chances of military success, if tested.<sup>92</sup> When the odds looked better, Beck took a different view: he was one of the leading supporters of the reoccupation of the Rhineland and of the illegal, rapid, unilateral rearmament of the early and mid-1930s, a line of radically irresponsible military policy that compromised German security no less than did the Czech crisis.<sup>93</sup> On the question of civil-military relations, Beck firmly and unsurprisingly believed in the army’s natural right to a central place in the German state and its decision-making. But he also idealised the authoritative leader who could combine both civil and military authority. And as part of the conservative elite’s effort

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<sup>91</sup> See Stülpnagel’s aspiration in 1924 (Chapter 2, p. 134); see also the editors’ note on the absence of the ‘political and strategic levels of war’ in the manual (*Truppenführung*, p. 9).

<sup>92</sup> Beck, ‘Bemerkungen zu den Ausführungen des Führers am 28.5.38’, 29 May 1938, and his resulting letter to Brauchitsch 3 June 1938, in *General Ludwig Beck. Studien und Dokumente zur politisch-militärischen Vorstellungswelt und Tätigkeit des Generalstabschefs des deutschen Heeres, 1933-1938* (Boppard am Rhein, 1980), pp. 521-37.

<sup>93</sup> Klaus-Jürgen Müller, ‘The Military and Diplomacy in France and Germany in the Inter-War Period’ in Klaus-Jürgen Müller, ed., *The Military in Politics and Society in France and Germany in the Twentieth Century* (Oxford, 1995), pp. 114-119. Beck’s stance on the issue of rearmament seems even less responsible if we recognise that he understood – unlike most of his ilk – the drastic international implications of rapid German rearmament. But like his colleagues, Beck nevertheless demanded that the foreign office comply with and serve military requirements: *ibid.*; *idem*, *The Army*, pp. 81-83, 89; and *idem*, *Beck*, pp. 142-225; Geyer, *Aufrüstung*, likewise offers an outstanding overview of the strategic and international context and consequences of Beck’s policies.

to promote the vision they in part shared with the Nazi party, Beck welcomed and facilitated Hitler's consolidation of power.<sup>94</sup>

The great irony – and also great tragedy – of the evolving fashion in which the German army perceived the ideal relationship with Germany's civil government is that the Wehrmacht finally surmounted its long-delayed learning curve, and subordinated itself to the guidance and authority of 'politics' at the least appropriate moment, and to the least appropriate 'politics'. That was, of course, no historical coincidence; only when the military aspiration to discover a leader who embodied both the qualities of *Feldherr* and of authoritative head of state had been fulfilled, albeit in the form of a man whom some within the military leadership secretly despised, could the German army finally submit itself to a higher authority. Hitler himself was wise enough to make that submission decidedly pleasant and resistance to it inconceivable by giving the military elite exactly what it wanted. Beyond the usually-emphasised disappearance of the loathed Republic, the lavish and ever-growing armament budgets, the introduction of conscription and the creation of a new mass army, the unprecedented promotion prospects, and – soon enough – the opportunities for battlefield revenge and glory, Hitler cleverly offered an even brighter future: he spared the generals the nitty-gritty of grand-strategic planning and responsibility. That, more than any other, was a selling point that German military practitioners could not resist.<sup>95</sup>

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<sup>94</sup> Müller, *The Army*, pp. 59-65. For more on Beck's views on civil-military relations see his study 'Der Anführer im Kriege', in Ludwig Beck, *Studien* (Stuttgart, 1995), pp. 23-45, and his further notes on the subject in N28-2, pp. 105-108.

<sup>95</sup> See also Showalter's comment that Hitler appealed to the German generals as a leader capable of synergising the 'craft of war' with the 'art of policy', taking on the role of Bismarck in establishing the 'political and diplomatic matrices' while the Wehrmacht itself focused happily on fighting and winning the war (Showalter, 'Technology and the German Army', p. 137). And in early 1939 Hitler himself cited none other than Clausewitz, in confidentially enlightening an audience of mid-ranking army officers about his mission to achieve Germany's goals by political means, and if those means failed, by their continuation –

### **3. 1935-1938: From doctrine to operational concept. What should armoured and mechanised divisions do, and how should they do it?**

On the specifics of armour deployment and tactical and operational employment, Beck – and most of Germany’s military leadership – maintained a rational and entirely predictable stance. They interpreted the options that the new technology offered in accordance with the axioms of traditional German operational wisdom.<sup>96</sup> They did not ask what they could do for tanks, but rather what tanks could do for them. Far from being ‘against’ or ‘in favour’ of tanks, Germany’s military brains busied themselves with applying this new factor to their old equations. The one *goal* to which they aspired was the resurrection of a perfected war of movement, aimed at bigger, better and technologically-enhanced battles of annihilation. All levels of command realised that fast armoured forces could better realise their dominant and longstanding value and practice of envelopment and annihilation – a recognition reflected in the concluding reports of virtually every exercise that the *Kriegsakademie* held between 1930 and 1935.<sup>97</sup> Discussing the general staff trainees’ solutions to the 1932 exercise – war against Poland – the then chief of staff, *Generaloberst* Wilhelm Adam, repeatedly emphasised to the future commanders the importance of decisive, rapid attacks, executed as a joint effort by all forces available.<sup>98</sup>

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thus fulfilling the army’s long-held ideal of a leader who could shoulder the burdens of German politics, strategy, and war-management in the service of a nationalist political vision (Hitler’s Kroll Opera House speech, 10 February 1939, in Dülffer et al., *Hitlers Städte*, pp. 311-312).

<sup>96</sup> Showalter, ‘Technology and the German Army’, pp. 125, 135-136.

<sup>97</sup> BA-MA RH2-102, 103, 104, 105, 106, 107.

<sup>98</sup> Adam, ‘Besprechung der 1. operativen Aufgabe 1932’, BA-MA RH2-104, pp. 23-24; see also Adam’s emphasis to commanders on the importance of ‘thinking in “Kampfwagen-Zeiten”’ in every operation that included tank formations, since halting them or restricting them to the pace of the other forces would most likely result in disastrous delays in the attack. Adam’s warning – alongside his insistence the centrality of speed – attests to the



The *method* that promised the smooth achievement of the operational goal was, predictably, close and effective combined-arms cooperation – a fundamental axiom that, however successfully applied in the past, dictated self-imposed limits on the Wehrmacht's exploration of armoured and mechanised warfare potential throughout the 1930s.<sup>99</sup> The general staff's 1935 perceptions of tank employment, missions, and preferred techniques naturally continued to reflect the ones expressed in the 1933-1934 manual and in the exercises and studies of the early 1930s.<sup>100</sup> In his July 1935 'Retrospective considerations on the operations of the armoured corps in the situation posed for the army staff ride of 13 June 1935', Beck observed that assignment of tank units to infantry or artillery commanders would be beneficial in some situations, since it will allow the combined forces to achieve shared goals that neither could achieve on its own:

The tanks thus increase the fighting power of the inf[antry] divisions at the beginning of the attack. Only combined action by the tanks and the combat echelons of the infantry divisions can open a road into and through a previously unshaken adversary; only then can the advance of the remaining echelons of the armoured divisions be contemplated. Command of the [initial] assault must therefore be assigned to the infantry divisions, and to them the armoured divisions – or at least the [tank] echelons taking part in the initial phase of the attack – must be

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awareness of the German military leadership that armoured warfare was about to impose fundamental changes on the battlefield of the immediate future. That awareness, evidenced in numerous reports and studies, refutes the post-war claims of the armoured experts that the high command was ignorant of and obtuse about the requirements and implications of armoured warfare (BA-MA RH2-2968, p. 10).

<sup>99</sup> On the importance of the value and practice of combined-arms operations see also Murray, 'Armoured Warfare', pp. 40-42; and Habeck's discussion on the army's early 1930s search for well-coordinated combined-arms battles (Habeck, *Storm of Steel*, pp. 139-143).

<sup>100</sup> For a detailed discussion of Beck's early and mid-1930s rearmament plans, including his views on mechanised warfare, see Müller, *Beck*, pp. 198-199, 206-214, 218-221.

subordinated. Only thus can it be guaranteed that all preparations for a *combined* attack – especially for the assignment of targets to the artillery and heavy weapons, for blinding the enemy with smoke, for cooperation [of tanks] with the infantry, etc. – will be correctly implemented. Only later, once the armoured divisions must detach themselves from the slower inf[antry] divisions in order to exploit the common victory, can operational control [by the infantry over the armoured divisions] be lifted.<sup>101</sup>

Beck was thus not, as some have sought to portray him, a narrow-minded conservative who could not grasp the capabilities of armour, and sought only to subordinate and limit tanks to infantry-support tasks.<sup>102</sup> He understood all too well what tanks could do, and was delighted to free the tanks to perform their own independent missions once a successful breakthrough had opened the road for exploitation in depth. He was not, however, willing to permit the new instrument run the show on its own in ways wholly detached from the tenets of successful campaigning as he understood them. Beck, like most German generals, resented yielding to ‘what the *tank could do*’; he wanted armour capabilities to serve what the *army should do*, in accordance with its longstanding goals and its long-established ways to achieve them, namely, concentrated decisive battles of annihilation. *Panzer*

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<sup>101</sup> Beck, ‘Nachträgliche Betrachtungen zu dem Einsatz des Panzerkorps in der Lage der Truppenamtsreise von 13.6.35’, 25 July 1936, BA-MA, RH2-134, pp. 81-83 (emphasis in original).

<sup>102</sup> See for instance the analysis of Beck’s armour concept by Condell and Zabecki, who claim that Beck ‘apparently wanted to follow French doctrine and tie the tanks down to close support of the infantry’ (*Truppenführung*, p. 7). Yet the documents described or quoted in the following pages make clear that Beck not only acknowledged and, to a certain extent, supported independent missions for armour, but also had no intention of following *any* foreign doctrine – be it French, British, Russian or any other. His role was to formulate a *German* doctrine that would suit *German* perceptions, assumptions, and capabilities (see also Habeck, *Storm of Steel*, pp. 212, 221-225, and this Chapter, pp. 230-236).

divisions, awesome instruments though they might be, amounted to no more than a means to that end – much like all other components of the military machine:

. . .it is probably the case that infantry divisions committed against a strong enemy [force] cannot do without the precious assistance of the tank arm. For that purpose small tank units [*Kampfwageneinheiten*] rather than major armoured formations [*Panzerverbände*] are necessary. For that same reason tank regiments are likewise urgently needed as army-level reserves, in order to produce decision at the critical point [*Schwerpunkt*] of the battle.<sup>103</sup>

Beck and the high command were not 'stubborn'. They merely continued to follow the traditions of German military thought, as had virtually all their predecessors. So powerful was the impact of the past on operational patterns that its effect lasted for the better part of the mid-1930s. Long after the Wehrmacht had supposedly formed 'revolutionary' operational concepts that allegedly imitated British ideas, its leadership still conceptualised armoured striking power and its contribution to modern military campaigns in accordance with notions and convictions that can only be described as traditional: combined-arms breakthroughs and exploitations that ultimately served the infantry's mission of carrying out successful flanking movements and annihilating the enemy forces.<sup>104</sup> Thus, in January 1936, the general staff affirmed the hierarchy of roles assigned to the *Panzerverbände*, defining their tasks as:

1. a) Frontal attack in cooperation with other major formations;

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<sup>103</sup> Beck, 'Nachträgliche Betrachtungen', p. 84.

<sup>104</sup> See for example Beck's notes, undated, but probably 1935, on the immediate need to resume large-scale all-arms field exercises in order to practice combined-arms techniques (N28-2, pp. 32-33).

- b) Conversion of break-in into [a] breakthrough, in cooperation with other mot[orised] forces.
- c) Attack on wings and flanks, in cooperation with other mot[orised] forces.
- d) large-scale counterattack.

2. For the accomplishment of the above-mentioned missions the suitability of major armoured formations both for combat against enemy infantry . . . and artillery, and also against enemy tanks is a precondition. In that connection it must be assumed that combat against enemy tanks, which will be unavoidable – and should not be avoided – in the course of the modes of employment noted in 1. a-c above, will be the rule rather than the exception. These combat missions incumbent upon tank will frequently blend into one another, or will have to be fought through simultaneously.<sup>105</sup>

The general staff fully acknowledged and anticipated that tank formations would be assigned detached missions and conduct independent battles. But these were to dovetail and coincide with the central task of achieving the traditional systemic goal prescribed by the logic of other forces, a goal that did not correspond or even acknowledge the logic of ‘paralysis’ of the enemy’s system but fully subscribed to the traditional aspiration to *Vernichtung*. Whether operating under the control of the infantry or operating independently, German armoured formations served the traditional operational goal.<sup>106</sup>

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<sup>105</sup> ‘Organisation und Ausstattung der Panzerverbände’, 21 January 1936, BA-MA, RH2-1135, pp. 257-260.

<sup>106</sup> See Habeck on the doctrinal distinction between tank brigades, tied to the infantry, and armoured divisions, for the operational independence of which the armour enthusiasts fought long and hard. Habeck describes the tank brigades’ doctrinal emphasis on ‘high speed,

#### 4. Force structure, composition, and build-up: the projection of future

##### operational requirements

That by January 1936 – and even later – the Wehrmacht still did not possess a final, agreed core of armour operational doctrine, and certainly not a revolutionary perception of armour employment inherently different than its fundamental perceptions of the early 1930s is obvious. Naturally, this state of affairs reflected mostly upon organisational and force structure issues: the pace and priorities accorded to lighter or heavier tanks, the number and make-up of armour formations, the army's over-all structure and organisation, and the speed and logistical underpinnings of its build-up. Efforts to bring into harmony strategic threats (especially that of a multi-front war) and the operational requirements consequent on those threats with considerations of doctrine, organisation, production, raw materials, and costs, and to frame coherent long-term plans continued throughout the winter of 1935-1936 in the course of a lengthy discussion of 'increasing the striking power of the army'<sup>107</sup>

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loose connection with the infantry, and combined-arms operations' as a victory for the supporters of armour over 'skeptics . . . [who] . . . had no influence' (Habeck, *Storm of Steel*, pp. 239-241). The doctrinal concepts described were however mainstream practices accepted by all. If anything, they indicate the reaffirmation of traditional patterns even by the armour enthusiasts, whose own operational aspirations evidenced the paramount role of German army tradition.

<sup>107</sup> A very partial list of the studies and documents reflecting this effort, focusing on surviving correspondence between the chief of the general staff, his subordinate staff sections, the army's central logistical and ordnance authorities, and the *Inspekteur der Kraftfahrtruppen* from the second half of 1935 onward, must include Beck, 'Erwägungen über die Erhöhung der Angriffskraft des Heeres', 30 December 1935, BA-MA, RH2-1135, pp. 129-143 (see also 174-225); 2. Abteilung (the general staff section dealing with force structure and unit organisation), 'Heeresaufbau 1937', January 1936, BA-MA, RH2-1010, pp. 178-180; Beck, 'Ausstattung und Organisation der Panzerverbände', 9 January 1936, BA-MA, RH2-1135, pp. 273-278; Allgemeine Heeresamt (henceforth AHA), 'Organisation und Ausstattung der Panzerverbände', 15 January 1936, BA-MA RH2-1135, pp. 269-272; Beck, 'Organisation und Ausstattung der Panzerverbände', 21 January 1936, BA-MA, RH2-1135, pp. 257-260; , AHA, 'Erhöhung der Angriffskraft des Heeres', 22 January 1936, BA-MA RH2-1135, pp. 115-126; AHA, 'Pz.-Verbände' (production of heavy tanks), 28 January 1936, BA-MA, RH2-1135, pp. 254-256; Heereswaffenamt (henceforth Wa A), 'Panzerverbände' (including detailed production data for different tank types and future production plans and estimates), BA-MA

The fundamental question that troubled the general staff was how to improve and strengthen the Wehrmacht's offensive capabilities despite financial constraints and a tight schedule, given that in all probability the next war the German army would fight would once again be a multi-front war that required rapid strategic decision.<sup>108</sup> As always, the military leadership kept its operational axioms firmly in mind when prioritising possible alternative solutions to the objective of greater *Angriffskraft*. Those solutions were – simply put – either to create additional armoured formations, or to focus efforts on the motorisation of more infantry units.<sup>109</sup> Both options were tested against their possible contribution to the overall goal, a more effective offensive, and in the end the general staff deemed both options necessary and appropriate. However, the very definition of 'effective offensive' in German operational thought, namely, creating the most promising opportunities for annihilation, still assumed that the infantry was the combat arm that the other arms supported, and shaped the manner in which the entire 'increase in striking power'

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RH2-1135, pp. 261-268; 'Panzerverbände', February 1936, BA-MA, RH2-1135, pp. 252-253; Wa A, 'Entwicklung von Pz.Kpf.Wg.', 23 March 1936', BA-MA RH2-1135, pp. 241-249; 2. Abteilung, 'Vortragsnotizen zur Übersicht der Inspection d. Kraftfahrkampftuppen', 2 June 1936, BA-MA, RH2-1135, pp. 285-288; 2. Abteilung, 'Vortragsnotiz' (tank armament), 13 August 1936, BA-MA RH2-1135, pp. 23-25.

Other studies that shed light on the operational concerns of the high command in the second half of the 1930s are 'Operative Studie Polen', undated, unsigned, probably 1935, BA-MA, RH2-383, pp. 28-31; and RH2-1146, pp. 116, 122-124, 126-127; the 1930-1935 *Kriegsakademie* exercises all reached similar conclusions, reiterating the requirement for mobile and armoured capabilities and support, in the service of the offensive and the goal of annihilation: BA-MA RH2-102, 103, 104, 105, 106, 107. Finally, on the enormous gap (often of substantially more than 50 percent) between tanks ordered and tanks supplied as of October 1936, which highlights the setbacks and limitations of production with which Beck was rightly concerned at the beginning of that year, see 'Stand der Tankfertigung', 8 October 1936, BA-MA RH2-1015, p. 80.

<sup>108</sup> The winter of 1935/6 marked a shift from strategic defence as the centre of military attention to strategic offensive capabilities in the Wehrmacht's operational planning and thought. It is important to note that the renewed focus on offensive capabilities and methods was initiated by Beck in person, and not forced upon him by internal professional or external political pressure: Beck, 'Erwägungen über die Erhöhung der Angriffskraft des Heeres', 30 December 1935, BA-MA RH2-1135, p. 129.

<sup>109</sup> See also Gat, *British Armour*, p. 94.

discussion took place. The axiomatic indispensability of rapid infantry movement initially prompted the German military leadership to understand and present their choices in an infantry-oriented manner:

- 2) In the course of scrutiny of the current plan for increasing the offensive power of our army, the following possible improvements have emerged:
  - a) Raising the hitherto planned number of army-level tank formations. . in order to ensure that the war-strength army has the necessary striking power;
  - b) Conversion of inf[antry] divisions into p[artially] mot[orised] divisions in order to increase operational and tactical mobility.
- 3) Beyond those steps, consideration appears necessary:
  - a) about raising the prospects of success of pure tank formations through the possibility of temporary attachment of fast-moving infantry formations (for example mot[orised] inf[antry] regiments);
  - b) about the organisation of the infantry'.<sup>110</sup>

Moreover, the fact that the general staff perceived its options as mutually exclusive alternatives inclined it toward the infantry, and the army's frame of analysis thus dictated the hierarchy of solutions:

The fitness for purpose of the present organisation and equipment [*Zusammensetzung*] of the armoured division must be confirmed through practical experience. So long as the [present] limitation of the army to thirty-six divisions prevents the further establishment of armoured divisions except by sacrificing inf[antry] divisions, it will be necessary to

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<sup>110</sup> Beck, 'Erwägungen über die Erhöhung der Angriffskraft des Heeres', 30 December 1935, BA-MA RH2-1135, pp. 129-130.

set [any] such major formations up as supplementary [to the army's organisation plan]. In that connection, as a first step, only mot[orised] inf[antry] formations come into question as the necessary augmentation to the purely armoured formations.<sup>111</sup>

These central doctrinal questions and their operational implications, as well as financial and other constraints, far from being decided, had still required that 'further practical data . . . be awaited' as of January 1936.<sup>112</sup> And during the rest of 1936 the general staff produced a series of documents examining the operational logic of tank deployment, combat, and organisation along the spirit of its January conclusions. In March 1936 Section 2 (Organisation) of the general staff and the *Heereswaffenamt* concurred, during the ongoing 'striking power' deliberations, that the three main tasks of the *panzer* forces were 'a) Support of inf[antry] attacks, b) anti-tank defence, c) independent operational employment in company with other mot[orised] arms', and accordingly suggested production of further tank models and additional development and armament plans as well as suitable tank gun calibres, with no hint of dissatisfaction with the content or prioritisation of the armour tasks under consideration.<sup>113</sup> Likewise, in accordance with the principle of cooperation toward the shared operational goals that technology was welcome to serve but never to overshadow, the general staff throughout the summer of 1936 lent a friendly ear to

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<sup>111</sup> Ibid., p. 134.

<sup>112</sup> Beck, 'Organisation und Ausstattung der Panzerverbände', 21 January 1936, BA-MA, RH2-1135, pp. 257-260.

<sup>113</sup> 2. Abteilung, 'Vortragsnotiz', 23 March 1936, BA-MA RH2-1135, pp. 287-289. The only reservation expressed regarded over-production of too-lightly armoured vehicles vulnerable to heavy machine-gun fire. See also Wa A, 'Entwicklung von Pz.Kpf.Wg.', 23 March 1936, BA-MA RH2-1135, pp.241-250, outlining the production of four different types of tanks to cover the different types of agreed missions (the three tasks assigned here to tank forces reappear in most of the documents dealing with tank formations, doctrine, armaments, and development throughout 1936).



calls coming from its Section 2 and from the infantry divisions for ‘no more *panzer* divisions for now’<sup>114</sup>

In October 1936 Section 2 reaffirmed once again that ‘The infantry remains the principal combat arm, despite the existence of major armoured formations – the arm for favourable opportunities, dependent for its effectiveness on surprise and on [suitable] terrain, and which, if committed in masses without regard for losses, can decide the battle’.<sup>115</sup> Yet again, neither technophobia nor intellectual backwardness inspired such views. On the contrary: the remainder of the document was dedicated to the need for advanced ‘infantry tanks . . . equipped with machine guns and cannon, for the assault’.<sup>116</sup> The attitude of the military leadership toward tank employment derived not from an aversion to armour, but from the greater operational goal tanks were to assist in achieving.

It was not until January 1938 that the German army leadership at last embraced an operational concept that emphasised tanks as an independent arm. Yet machines nevertheless remained part of an effort to achieve the traditional customary operational goal – in a faster, smoother, and more efficient manner. The insight that ‘it is unsound [*falsch*] . . . to tie the armour to the speed of the infantry; that gives the enemy time to reinforce his defence and gives the [enemy] artillery considerable time to fire; tanks will be destroyed’ was merely one element in the broader canvas of the campaign and its goals.<sup>117</sup> The opening of the document still explained somewhat apologetically that ‘Large-scale attacks without armour have as yet failed due to two

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<sup>114</sup> 2. Abteilung, ‘Besprechung: Oberstlt. Buhle, Major Schell, In 6’, 22 July 1936, BA-MA RH2-1135, p. 27.

<sup>115</sup> 2. Abteilung, 12 October 1936, BA-MA RH2-1135, p. 6.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 6-9; see also 2. Abteilung, ‘Gedanken über den Infanterie-Kampfwagen’, 5 October 1936, BA-MA RH2-1135, pp. 10-11.

<sup>117</sup> Generalkommando VII Armeekorps, ‘Verwendung von Panzereinheiten im Kampf der verbundenen Waffen’, 5 January 1938, BA-MA RH53-7/108, p. 200.

things . . . The break-in frequently succeeds. . . [but] the attacks proceed so slowly that in general the defender has time to take countermeasures'. And the author went on to put any possible contribution of the armoured forces in its correct place and context: 'Tanks will however help [us] to break in so swiftly and deeply that the enemy has no time in which to stop the hole. . . Tanks alone cannot decide a battle; a battle is won only when the infantry is victorious. Thus tank attacks must enable the infantry to advance swiftly' <sup>118</sup>

That was no mere lip-service. The immanent *value* as well as the well-tested *effectiveness* of combined-arms operations prescribed detailed examination of several competing options, of all variants available through the careful orchestration of tanks, infantry, and artillery in cooperation, as the 'break-in with the infantry' versus 'following up the infantry assault [*Nachstoss*]' discussion regarding armour employment exemplifies: . . . precise cooperation is most fruitful when all preparatory actions are precisely organised. That works best when all offensive weapons systems [*Angriffsmittel*] are employed simultaneously.<sup>119</sup> The '*Nachstoss*' option by contrast would be necessary only when:

. . . terrain and/or mines do not permit the simultaneous commitment of tanks, inf[antry], and so on, [and] the infantry must first have conquered the terrain in [the course of] its attack. Then only can the armour be brought up and committed. Consequences: the commander must rely almost exclusively on the armour commander . . . All-arms cooperation is more difficult, since precise agreements between the commanders [of each echelon] is more difficult . . . The [success of the] attack is . . . dependent on the prior success of the infantry, and [the

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<sup>118</sup> Ibid., p. 201.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid., p. 203.

commander] will have difficulty in seizing the right moment [for the armour attack].

That less promising outcome stood in sharp contrast to a triumphant summing up of the ideal option: ‘Simultaneous attack by armour together with infantry permits detailed preparation and guarantees positive teamwork in the execution of the attack; it allows us to hope for a swift and sweeping success’.<sup>120</sup> Although the inevitable organisational competition between arms for missions, budgets, and prestige remained heated, the upper echelons of the Wehrmacht exhibited a consistent commitment to the interpretation that their military culture imposed upon any new military technology and on its possible battlefield employment.

#### **IV. Revolutionaries? German armour experts, enthusiasts, supporters – and their ‘rivals’**

The discussions of operational effectiveness so far examined make clear that ‘advanced’ and/or foreign concepts of ‘independent’ tank forces uncommitted to the goal of annihilation never managed to break the army’s powerful cultural patterns, simply because such notions were inherently foreign to German goals and practice. But did they ever have a serious chance of gaining the decision-makers’ attention? If the general staff, led by Beck – and the majority of Germany’s military leadership – followed the well-trodden path of previous German operational thought when conceptualizing and debating armoured warfare, did the armour enthusiasts follow a substantially different path?

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<sup>120</sup> Ibid., pp. 203-204.

Naturally, not all who took part in the 1935-36 discussions on increasing the army's 'striking power' agreed fully with Beck on the means by which to realise that goal. However, despite the 'deficiencies' in Beck's early 1935 suggestions, the analysis and suggestions of the general staff's organisation experts and operations officers revealed the extent to which most of those who took part in the discussions shared the same frame of reference. Section 2 and the operations department (*Oberquartiermeister I.*) insisted that a more salient role to be given to armoured and mechanised formations in all calculations of and planning for offensive capabilities, for the sake of the shared operational goal and in order to enhance the contribution of all forces taking part in the offensive:

3. (Operational and tactical mobility) . . . decisive attacks are possible only with difficulty – or are simply no longer possible – without the commitment of powerful tank formations. If that view is accepted, then the result is the demand for major units, that – in cooperation with armoured formations – can follow the armour swiftly in order to hold or fully exploit the gains of the armoured units. In that case only complete all-terrain motorisation of the major infantry formations that come into question can accomplish the objective. Normal infantry divisions [will] arrive too late, and lose all chance of surprise.<sup>121</sup>

Contrary to the picture common to many post-war accounts, 'armour enthusiasts' and 'non-enthusiasts' did not stand on opposite banks of the river of military technology; nor did they ever need to reconcile wholly different approaches toward technology and operational goals, and toward the vital question of which was to determine which. At no stage of German operational evolution did they represent or

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<sup>121</sup> O. Qu.I./2. Abt., 'Erhöhung der Angriffskraft des Heeres', December 1935, BA-MA RH2-1135, p. 185.

promote concepts completely antithetical to the operational rationale and logic that prescribed the subordination of technology – tanks included – to the greater operational goal of decisive battle. For that reason, virtually all the sections and offices involved in the general staff discussions on ‘increasing the striking power of the army’ accepted the centrality of the infantry as the main force responsible for realizing the successful battle of annihilation – with some expressing this view more vehemently than others:

The principal mission of the tank is and will remain the support of the inf[antry] attack, regardless of whether the infantry attacks frontally or in an enveloping movement, and whether it advances on foot or by motor vehicle. Correspondingly, the attack on live targets has priority. Only when the enemy for his part seeks to support those targets with tanks will tank combat against enemy tanks come into question. That will only rarely be the case, for if the enemy can employ this weapon to any great extent, then it might seem obvious that the particular attack location has been especially poorly chosen. A deliberate tank-against-tank battle, however, seems most improbable . . . <sup>122</sup>

From the perspective of both the armour and mechanisation ‘enthusiasts’ and of those less subscribed to armoured warfare, infantry was thus not a competitor but

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<sup>122</sup> Friedrich Fromm, chief of the Allgemeine Heeresamt, ‘Erhöhung der Angriffskraft des Heeres’, 22 January 1936, BA-MA RH2-1135, p. 115. Fromm harboured a particularly radical disdain for armoured warfare, and aspired to employ tanks, if at all, only in infantry support missions. His rationale was above all economic and logistical, but his stance ultimately derived from his deep conviction of the centrality of direct, old-fashioned annihilation through infantry frontal assault: ‘in this occasion a previously unresolved issue should nevertheless be dealt with briefly: how do I help the infantry surmount the last three hundred metres in the assault? Repeated efforts have been made to solve this problem through new and improved weaponry, but until now without success. The excessive refinement of armaments and the fear of bloodshed [*die Blutscheu*] lead to tactical degeneration! (ibid, p. 121). For detailed discussion of Fromm’s views see Kroener, *Generaloberst Friedrich Fromm*, pp. 238-254; also Gat, *British Armour*, p. 72.

rather an important 'client' with particular needs that required their attention and the army's and the state's financial and productive resources, which however might be exhausted in the process of mechanising the infantry to the greatest extent possible.<sup>123</sup> Other offices and sections that took part in the discussions presented similar points of departure that constrained their suggestions of the most suitable and effective ways of using mechanised and armoured vehicles to enhance German offensive power. Most supported the motorisation of infantry units alongside the separate development and deployment of several types of tank, each suited to different missions, from infantry support to tank-against-tank combat.<sup>124</sup> Conceptual frameworks of that kind were widespread precisely because they stemmed from a shared attempt to abide by acceptable operational axioms. Naturally, not everyone was pleased with the operational direction or the expected results. But it is important to realise that disagreements derived from different conceptions of the best ways in which new

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<sup>123</sup> The correspondents included Lutz's inspectorate, the AHA [Allgemeine Heeresamt], and Sections I, II and III of the general staff, as well as Beck as chief of staff (ibid., p. 121). As a faithful opponent of mechanisation and of armour (even in direct support of the infantry), Fromm's AHA did not fail to stress the economic strain that motorising or mechanising some of the army's infantry divisions would inflict, or the likely delays inherent in the realisation of any such vision: 'It must be pointed out that the new vehicles that may come into question will never be obtainable in sufficient numbers from the [civilian] economy in the event of mobilisation, [and] the necessary peacetime production will require some time' (ibid., p. 122). In facing the AHA's conservative analysis, reluctance to mechanise, and view of tanks as – at best – an infantry support weapon on one side, and the calls of the armour enthusiasts for comprehensive mechanisation and 'independent tank divisions' on the other, Beck (and the majority of the general staff) strove to implement his 'a bit of everything' solution. The central point here is that all those who took part in the debate aspired to serve the same uncontested operational goal and rationale – *Vernichtung* – albeit through very different methods.

<sup>124</sup> Wa A, 'Entwicklung von Pz.Kpf.Wg', 23 March 1936, BA-MA RH-1135, p. 246; pp. 241-49 contain a detailed description of and discussion on the different kinds of tanks and their missions; see also Wa A, 'Offensive Abwehr von Panzerwagen', 30 October 1935, BA-MA RH2-1146, pp. 30-49. An AHA memorandum of January 1936 however insisted that the production of four different types of tanks, each for a limited number of missions, was financially unfeasible, and suggested instead the focusing of production on tanks equipped with the 37mm anti-tank gun and with machine guns, which could accomplish a variety of missions in cooperation with infantry, fight armour, and contribute to the defence (AHA 'Organisation und Ausstattung der Panzerverbände', January 1936, BA-MA RH2-1135, pp. 269-272).

technologies could serve time-honoured operational goals, not from disagreement over the operational goals themselves. As the Army Ordnance Department, responsible for actually developing Germany's armoured fighting vehicles, put it:

The call for new weaponry in order to increase the striking power of the army will become ever-stronger as the equipping of the infantry with ever-greater masses of m[achine] g[uns] threatens to choke off all free movement on the battlefield. The corresponding progressive decrease in the combat power of the cavalry and on the other side the massive boom in motor transport lead directly to the demand for speedy motorised and armoured mobile formations with superior combat power.<sup>125</sup>

Virtually all members of the German high command ('enthusiasts' or otherwise), thus considered armour and mechanisation development not as competition with but as enhancements of and supplements to the infantry's capabilities. Section 2 expressed an even greater devotion to traditional operational patterns in its explicit suggestions that mechanised formations act 'in the manner of the former army-level cavalry [units]', emphasising their role in attacking, outflanking, and sealing envelopments (a concept already suggested in December 1935).<sup>126</sup> Later army high command correspondence on the issue reiterated these views in describing the operational role of light mechanised formations, and made plain the agreement in conceptual and operational planning alike between the

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<sup>125</sup> Wa A, 131/36 g.Kdos., 13 March 1936, BA-MA RH-1135, p. 246.

<sup>126</sup> For a discussion of the role and deployment of light mechanised formations that was firmly centred on enhancing their 'battle-deciding' characteristics and their possible contribution to flank attacks, see O.Qu.I./2. Abt., 'Erhöhung der Angriffskraft des Heeres', December 1935, BA-MA RH2-1135, p. 186, and 2. Abteilung, 'Mechanisierte Verbände', 6 February 1936, BA-MA RH2-1135, pp. 229-233; also Beck, 'Aufstellung der leichten Divisionen', 15 June 1936, BA-MA RH2-1135, pp. 27-28.

allegedly alienated armour and mechanisation experts and the rest of the Wehrmacht high command.<sup>127</sup> Section 2 drew an even more explicit connection between cavalry forces and missions and the new mechanised forces in May 1936:

After the abandonment of army-level cavalry and taking into consideration the development of offensive forces in modern armies, two principal areas for the employment of *mechanised* formations come into question that form the basis for [deciding the] organisation and armament of these formations: a) employment as decisive [*schlachtscheidender*] attack and breakthrough formations . . . b) employment in the manner of the army-level cavalry formations of the past.<sup>128</sup>

The unwavering commitment to the goal of annihilation through movement as the very heart of mechanised warfare – which by definition departed from British ‘expanding torrent’ concepts involving shock and paralysis of the opponent’s ‘nervous system’ and consequently of his fighting capabilities – was a central cultural focus that predetermined the ways in which German armour experts approached the limitations of their instrument and the discrepancies between their mechanised vision and its realisation. As Lutz put it in autumn 1935:

. . . with motorisation as well it is a question of establishing priorities [*Schwerpunktbildung*]: motorisation there where it is unconditionally necessary in order to raise mobility and striking power, in other words in the logistical echelons and in fully motorised major combat formations, [and] no motorisation of parts of those major formations

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<sup>127</sup> 2. Abteilung, ‘Leichte Verbände’, August 1936, BA-MA RH2-1135, pp. 16-17. The only addition to the reply was the request of Section 2 for a professional opinion on smooth cooperation between the different components of the light division – another focal point of interest shared by every German officer involved with the mechanisation of the army.

<sup>128</sup> 2. Abteilung, ‘Mechanisierte Verbände’, May 1936, BA-MA RH2-1135, p. 58 (emphasis in original).



that in the main march on foot or are horse-drawn, [parts] that would have to be incorporated in the line of march of those formations.<sup>129</sup>

Section 2 likewise naturally rejected horse-drawn components within the otherwise fully motorised elements of motorised divisions. But since its members knew well that abandoning horses altogether, although desirable, was as yet wholly unrealistic, they did not advocate or seriously draft plans to that end:

By autumn 1937 we will seek to motorise the four [infantry] divisions as extensively as the supply of motor vehicles will permit. In that connection we must expect that [some] individual infantry or artillery battalions will have to remain horse-drawn. In the event of mobilisation these horse-drawn components will transfer to the reserve infantry divisions, while the motorised divisions will be lacking the components that have not already been motorized in peacetime.<sup>130</sup>

The coexistence of horses with motor vehicles – whether armoured or unarmoured – was simply unalterable German military reality; promoting mobilisation did not necessarily mean sacrificing other, albeit dated, contributions toward movement, but rather determining their appropriate employment.<sup>131</sup>

The practical approach toward horses and the natural acceptance of the crucial role they would still play in any forthcoming war stemmed from the cultural perception of technology that ‘armour experts’ and ‘non experts’ shared. Neither

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<sup>129</sup> Lutz, ‘Neuaufstellung *motorisierter* Panzer-Abwehr Kompanien der Infanterie’, 5 October 1935, BA-MA RH2-1146, p. 76.

<sup>130</sup> 2. Abteilung, ‘Vortragnotizen zur Aufstellung der 4 motorisierten Divisionen’, 6 May 1936, BA-MA RH2-1135, p. 56. See also Gruppe III (of Section 2), ‘Motorisierung von 4 Divisionen’, 30 April 1936, BA-MA RH2-1135, pp. 77-79. For discussion of the employment of horses in motorised divisions see Gruppe III’s memorandum of 5 September 1936, BA-MA RH2-1135, pp. 18-19.

<sup>131</sup> For AHA views on the optimal combination of horses in motorised and partially-motorised formations, see AHA, ‘Erhöhung der Angriffskraft des Heeres’, 22 January 1936, BA-MA RH2-1135, pp. 117-118.

conceptualised the coming of the tank as an ‘all or nothing’ proposition that necessitated a complete organisational, doctrinal, operational and financial restructuring, as did the armour enthusiasts in Britain.<sup>132</sup> This is why the German cavalry’s slow incorporation (and finally almost complete makeover) into mechanised and/or armoured forces was relatively the least painful such transition in any major European army.<sup>133</sup>

Most of the officers who took part in the 1935-1936 deliberations were, undoubtedly, armour, mechanisation, and motorisation enthusiasts. Their plans and aspirations for heavier armour formations, mechanised assault infantry, and motorised armies were no less comprehensive or advanced than those of their French, British, and Soviet counterparts.<sup>134</sup> But their enthusiasm and dedication did not serve armour, mechanisation, or motorisation as means in themselves. Ultimately, they toiled to resolve questions that they shared with the rest of the Wehrmacht’s planners and practitioners: how could technology best serve operational goals, rather than what new operational goals technology might prescribe. ‘Armour enthusiasts’ thus did not hold substantially different views than their ‘non-enthusiast’ colleagues, and the two groups’ professional disagreements were far less acute than in other European armies.

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<sup>132</sup> Gat, *British Armour*, pp. 1-18.

<sup>133</sup> Macksey, Guderian, pp. 61-62 and Habeck, *Storm of Steel*, pp. 164-165, 208-209.

<sup>134</sup> See for instance 2. Abteilung, ‘Bildung einer Mot. Armee’, 20 June 1936, BA-MA RH2-1135, pp. 99-100; 2. Abteilung, ‘Vortragnotiz (Bildung einer Mot. Armee)’, 3 August 1936, BA-MA RH2-1015, pp. 88-89; 2. Abteilung, ‘Vortragsnotizen zur Übersicht der Inspektion d. Kraftfahrkampfruppen’, 2 June 1936, BA-MA, RH2-1135, pp. 285-288; AHA, ‘Pz.-Verbände’, 28 January 1936, BA-MA, RH2-1135, pp. 254-256; 2. Abteilung, ‘Vortragsnotiz’, August 1936, BA-MA RH2-1135; 2. Abt., ‘Mechanisierte Verbände’, 6 February 1936, BA-MA RH2-1135, 229-233; 2. Abteilung, ‘Leichte Verbände’, August 1936, BA-MA RH2-1135, pp. 16-17; 2. Abteilung, ‘Mechanisierte Verbände’, May 1936, BA-MA RH2-1135, p. 58; Gruppe III, ‘Motorisierung von 4 Divisionen’, 30 April 1936, BA-MA RH2-1135, pp. 77-79.

**V. Disciples of the British ‘school’? The German army and British armoured warfare experimentation**

Yet another difficulty attending efforts to trace the evolution of German armour doctrine and practice is, as described at the beginning of this chapter, the question of putative foreign and especially British influence over German ideas and development. The most eloquent advocates of extensive, early, and long-lasting British influence cite as a vital example a 1927 memorandum by Fritsch, according to which fast tanks ‘most probably’ will become ‘the operationally decisive offensive weapon . . . most effective if concentrated in independent units like tank brigades’.<sup>135</sup> Even assuming – for the sake of argument – that this recommendation stemmed solely from the British experience and lessons, it is far from clear that the very meaning of ‘operationally effective’ was the same either for German armour enthusiasts or general staff officers as it was for British armour theorists and practitioners. In other words, did Germans and British have the same operational goal in mind when they envisaged a particular method of employment of armoured forces?

As the previous pages demonstrate, the operational concepts relating to armoured warfare that Germany’s military leadership thoroughly re-examined in the early 1930s were most heavily influenced by previous German operational habits, concepts, and values. Foreign notions such as paralysing the enemy ‘nervous system’ (rather than annihilating large chunks of his fighting body) or Soviet notions of ‘deep battle’ that clashed with or merely failed to coincide with German tenets simply did not register in the Reichswehr’s doctrinal consciousness.<sup>136</sup> ‘British influence’ as a

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<sup>135</sup> Gat, *British Armour*, p. 54.

<sup>136</sup> For a concise analysis of B. H. Liddell Hart’s concepts (the ‘indirect approach’ and paralysing of the enemy’s nervous system rather than physically destroying him in battle) see Gat, *British Armour*, pp. 1-18. German understanding of and willingness to learn from the Soviet ‘deep battle’ concept is disputed. While researches agree that German armour experts

whole therefore deserves a careful second look. German observers did not in practice simply understand and apply British (and other) operational experiences exclusively from within their own existing framework. They rather made a conscious attempt to create an operational code far different than that of other armies, a code that moulded the focus, scope, goal, and appropriate organisation and forces for armoured operations.

A number of studies and planning documents attest to the nature of the German approach. Adam's analysis of the British 1932 exercises opened with the observation that for objective reasons connected with political and operational goals and methods, the British summer field exercises were of relatively small relevance to the German army:

In the tactical unit training of the English (*sic*) army, the guiding conceptions of which have until now rested on the experience gained in the World War, a fundamental change has begun to emerge. The colonial missions of the army have once again assumed a central place and are to be decisive [*massgebend*] for the army's training [programme]. . . annual training will close with a tactical command-

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enjoyed access to Soviet doctrine and ideas through the shared school in Kazan, Soviet military literature, and German intelligence sources, they differ over German judgment of these ideas. Habeck suggests that armour enthusiasts and experts such as Guderian and Lutz shared doctrinal and organisational ideas similar to those of their Soviet counterparts [Habeck, *Storm of Steel*, p. 237]; Gat claims that German experts' approach was far different, since they sought to avoid the Soviet 'division of roles' for tanks into three types of armoured unit, and instead followed the 'British model' of an independent tank role, exclusively concentrated in armoured divisions [Gat, *British Armour*, pp. 74-76]; and, although he does not address the subject directly, Naveh presents the German and Soviet logic of operational and systemic approach as antithetical, thus not merely suggesting that the Germans lacked a full understanding of the 'deep battle' concept in its general operational context, but also implying that any German attempt to emulate Soviet concept – if ever existed – would have been a futile exercise [Naveh, *In Pursuit*, pp. 105-208].

post exercise on mountain warfare based upon the lessons learned during Indian [north-west frontier] punitive expeditions.<sup>137</sup>

What the German high command was truly interested in and what it could (and wanted to) conceptually and vicariously test emerged from Adam's concluding remarks:

Concluding assessment: An exercise designed and conducted with a particular purpose in mind must not lead to false tactical conclusions. Even if the left wing of [British Army] 3rd Division was seriously shaken and in part annihilated, annihilation or rolling up of the entire division [by the tanks] could not have resulted without a simultaneous infantry attack.<sup>138</sup>

Adam dedicated a considerable part of his general analysis to questions such as cooperation between motorised and non-motorised forces, and to the performance of tank units that possessed radio communications.<sup>139</sup> But he allowed very little room – in effect, one paragraph – for the lessons the British Army itself had drawn from the manoeuvres. Adam's analysis, in effect, persistently sought to understand the British summer exercises through German 'lenses', and to read British actions and decisions and their implications from within the conceptual pattern the Wehrmacht was in the process of establishing.<sup>140</sup>

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<sup>137</sup> Adam, 'England. Die Manöver der Kampftruppen. Sommer 1932', May 1933, BA-MA RH2-2968, p. 2.

<sup>138</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 9. Habeck relates this conclusion of Adam to his alleged 'prejudices' against tank-only assaults; however, given his interest in annihilation, those 'prejudices' were merely the culturally-founded operational views shared throughout the German army elite (Habeck, *Storm of Steel*, p. 190).

<sup>139</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 15-16.

<sup>140</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 17-18.

That whatever lessons the Germans could extract from British experience inherently reflected their *own* military culture is also evident in the conclusions that Beck drew from the 1934 British manoeuvres. In criticising the conduct of British commanders, Beck noted that: ‘The keyword for the mission [*Auftrag*] must be: attack straightaway, and search out and crush the enemy. Each hour lost tells against the attacker’.<sup>141</sup> His specific references to the lessons that the army should draw from the British exercises made it absolutely clear that nothing could be taken from the British at face value, or embraced regardless of the German army’s idiosyncratic values, considerations and constraints, much less mindlessly copied. On the contrary: he exhibited a notable awareness of the danger of too enthusiastic ‘learning’, as well as a conscious willingness to derive only operational lessons that could serve longstanding German doctrinal priorities:

I cannot escape the feeling that we have somewhat exaggerated the effectiveness of independent armoured formations in [the course of] our theoretical deliberations. I also have the impression that in the present state of [the] technology, the fast tank intended for independent operations is far less capable of fulfilling its missions than is its slower brother, designed for combat in the ranks of the attacking infantry. For this view the experience gained in the French field exercises, in which only infantry tanks were employed, provides authoritative support.<sup>142</sup>

Moreover, the high command’s January 1936 discussions on the organisation of *panzer* formations referred to French armour experience and formations as valuable sources from which to learn, and a natural enemy to take into consideration when

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<sup>141</sup> ‘England. Manöver des Panzerverbandes 18. bis 21.9.1934’, December 1934, U.S. National Archives, College Park, MD, Microcopy T-79, roll 16, frame 817.

<sup>142</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 823-824.

building a German counterpart.<sup>143</sup> Especially revealing of the doctrinal interest that French armour elicited is the high command's January 1936 discussion of equipping and organising its own armoured formations in order to create smaller yet heavier tank units. The army leadership was still frustrated by its lack of actual field experience to guide its way, but it was not British lessons that the army leaders deemed most relevant. Instead, they chose to highlight yet again the colonial nature of British military requirements and practices:

At present, [our] deliberations over the equipment and organisation of major armoured formations as yet rest merely on theoretical foundations, since the necessary practical experience is not yet available to us. It therefore seems all the more expedient to take into account the measures [adopted] in those countries that in the fifteen years since the War have been able to amass practical experience without [the impediment of disarmament] restrictions. In this connection the study of French organisation and equipment seems especially worthwhile, since English [*sic*] tank formations appear, in their organisation and equipment, to be at least in part adapted to the requirements and demands of colonial warfare.<sup>144</sup>

Likewise, the surviving body of German studies of foreign armour forces from the 1930s is not limited to or even mainly focused on the British experience. Previous scholarship has suggested the existence of a process of examination of different approaches that the German army 'translated' or filtered through German axioms and

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<sup>143</sup> Beck, 'Organisation und Ausstattung der Panzerverbände', 21 January 1936, BA-MA, RH2-1135, pp. 258-260, and Wa A, 'Offensive Abwehr von Panzerwagen', 30 October 1935, BA-MA RH2-1146, pp. 30, 35-38, 41-42.

<sup>144</sup> Beck, 'Ausstattung und Organisation der Panzerverbände', 9 January 1936, BA-MA, RH2-1135, p. 273.

limitations, with special emphasis on Soviet ideas – a natural development resulting from the sharing of armour development expertise since the 1920s.<sup>145</sup> The files indeed suggest that the Reichswehr and Wehrmacht intentionally considered a wide spectrum of learning sources and operational examples, a spectrum that grew continuously in breadth throughout the 1930s, as more and more foreign armies joined the British in testing and developing armoured warfare concepts and formations. In the late 1920s and early 1930s, the reports on foreign armies focused on doctrinal and practical lessons, but as time passed and the Wehrmacht's self-confidence and experience grew, the armour forces of foreign armies became above all a field for intelligence-gathering. Thus, alongside the 1924-1925 reports on the British manoeuvres, the Germans carefully studied the French 1922, 1923 and 1924 manoeuvres, and in 1928-29 examined the status of motorisation and armour in the American and Soviet armies.<sup>146</sup> Booklets produced between 1925 and 1928 on foreign armies examined the composition and numbers of their motorised units analysed the French, Czechoslovak, Polish, and British armies.<sup>147</sup> A study from late 1928 compared the 'extreme wing' of the 'English school', referring to the theories of J. F. C. Fuller and Basil H. Liddell Hart, with French armour doctrine, and criticized the British 'all mechanised, all armoured, no infantry' approach while favouring French views, albeit interpreted in German cultural terms:

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<sup>145</sup> See for instance Habeck, *Storm of Steel*.

<sup>146</sup> 'Bemerkungen zu den Englischen Manövern 1924 sowie Übersichten Britisches Reich Sep. 1924 bis März 1925', BA-MA RH2-1603; 'Die Französischen Herbstmanöver 1922, 1923 und 1924', BA-MA RH2-1547; '1928-1929. Bewaffnung, Motorisierung und Panzerausstattung des amerikanischen Heeres', BA-MA RH2-1822; 'Verwendung des États M. (Flugzeug und Motorenentwicklung in der Sowjetunion)', 1929, BA-MA R43 I-745.

<sup>147</sup> BA-MA RH2-2285. See also BA-MA files RH2-1438, 1439, 1440, 1441, 1442, 1443, 1444, none of which focused on the British army. By 1937 the foreign armies reports also included the technical progress of American and Italian forces, and other 1936-7 reports were dedicated to the motorisation of the Italian, Polish, Russian and Czechoslovak armies (BA-MA RH2-1587 and RH2-1604).



The tank apparently serves as an indispensable supporting arm for attacks that aim at a decision, but [it] can in no way replace infantry. . The usefulness of mass armies [remains] unaltered. . The internal combustion engine is likely merely to make the mass of divisions of the traditional kind more mobile, by lightening the loads of the infantry and by easing logistical constraints.<sup>148</sup>

The interest in various foreign armies continued throughout the early 1930s, with France as the subject of more reports than Britain.<sup>149</sup> By the mid- and late-1930s the German army was giving equal attention to the French as well as the British, a fact reflected in correspondence, in high-echelon discussions, and in the official studies that the Wehrmacht's leadership produced and fed upon. A 1938 analysis mentioned the contrasting 'English' and 'French' concepts of armour employment, and referred to 'German, English, French, Russian' organisational structures for armoured formations that stemmed from the various armies' diverse operational concepts.<sup>150</sup> Finally, a 1938 examination of efficient cooperation between tanks and other offensive arms in foreign armies confirmed the Wehrmacht the validity of its own course:

Development of tactical thought on armoured formations after the [First World] War: free independent employment (England) – Distribution to the Inf[antry units] (France). Gradual convergence of these views. Now almost everywhere notably similar: (a) mixed formations. . for

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<sup>148</sup> 'Zukunftsheere und Mechanisierung. Englische und französische Anschauungen', BA-MA N46-148, p. 76.

<sup>149</sup> 'Heeresmechanisierung und Motorisierung in England, Frankreich und Polen', 1931-1932, BA-MA RH12-6/V.22; 'Veröffentlichungen der ausländischen Militärliteratur', 1927-1931 (focused heavily on France), BA-MA RH12-1/V.87 and RH2-1489, RH2-1442, RH2-1443.

<sup>150</sup> Generalkommando VII Armeekorps, 'Verwendung von Panzereinheiten im Kampf der verbundenen Waffen', 5 January 1938, BA-MA RH53-7/108, p. 200.

independent operational and tactical employment. (b) Purely armoured units [*reinrassige Panzereinheiten*] for combined-arms combat.<sup>151</sup>

It would of course be inappropriate to ignore the fact that British armour thought and experience did indeed affect German armour experts – a fact of which the German officers involved in armour made no secret before the war.<sup>152</sup> Yet the exact nature of British influence was far from the simple, straightforward German copying or emulating of British wisdom as it appeared in Liddell Hart's *Daily Telegraph* columns or in the translations found in the pages of the *Militär-Wochenblatt*. Heinz Guderian, for instance, aspired to emulate British armour thought and practice, and as late as August 1936 referred in print both to J. F. C. Fuller's writings and to the British 1935 field exercises, in an essay entitled 'Armoured Units and their Cooperation with other Arms'.<sup>153</sup> Scholars' claims that the writings of Fuller and Liddell Hart had a comprehensive effect on Guderian's thought, although manipulatively presented after the Second World War, are in all probability correct. Guderian did seek to promote a substantially unorthodox perception of the appropriate effect that armour technology should have on German operational practice, and indeed believed that the very nature of armoured warfare – the combination of speed and armour – required a wholly new orientation toward the technology and its logic. Under no circumstances should tanks wait for the infantry; if the infantry forces were not mechanised, tanks must deploy and operate separately in order to maximise the effect of their fighting qualities – a viewpoint that sounds notably 'British', tank-oriented, and 'early Fuller'.<sup>154</sup>

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<sup>151</sup> Ibid.

<sup>152</sup> Gat, *British Armour*, pp. 67, 78-79.

<sup>153</sup> Heinz Guderian, 'Die Panzertruppen und ihr Zusammenwirken mit den anderen Waffen', *Militärwissenschaftliche Rundschau*, August 1936, pp. 607-626; for Guderian's analysis of British views and experience, see pp. 614-615.

<sup>154</sup> Guderian, *Achtung – Panzer! The Development of Armoured Forces, their Tactics and Operational Potential* (London, 1992), pp. 200-207.

Yet in many ways even Guderian the ‘radical’ still expressed the traditional cultural logic in his very demands for a new approach to mechanised warfare. The quantitative methods upon which most of the arguments supporting the ‘British influence’ rest, if applied to Guderian’s 1936 article, establish that – as promised by his title – the lion’s share of his text dealt with the issue that bothered him no less than it bothered the high command, namely, cooperation with other arms; however radically eccentric his stance may seem, it was nevertheless by and large a product of German military culture. Non-mechanised infantry, explained Guderian, is always too late. *But what is it that it is too late for?*

In his *Achtung – Panzer!*, published in 1937, as well as in his post-war writings, Guderian gave a notably fuzzy impression of the operational goal the tanks were to serve: was their general mission to facilitate swift-moving large-scale battles of annihilation – or were they to bring shock, confusion, and finally the collapse of the enemy’s ‘nervous system’? Although the answer to that theoretical question did not necessarily prescribe any specific employment or organisational pattern for armoured formations, to pose it clarifies the tangible limits of ‘British influence’ over German armour theory. For these two contradictory operational goals embodied entirely different, uncompromising, and eventually unbridgeable military world-views. In that significant respect, Guderian’s pre-war and post-war writings showed his readers two entirely different pictures.<sup>155</sup>

In *Achtung – Panzer!*, in his discussion of striking power, Guderian hailed tanks as having such power to ‘the highest degree’ Striking power, according to

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<sup>155</sup> See also Macksey, *Guderian*, pp. 45-72. Gat offers a surprisingly short discussion of the question of ‘paralysis vs. annihilation’ goal, simply stating that ‘Panzer leaders, most notably Guderian . . . saw the role of the mechanised forces [as] . . . bringing about a total collapse of the armed resistance . . .’. Guderian, however, as his writings make amply clear, was not always so definite about the tanks’ ultimate goal (Gat, *British Armour*, pp. 82-85).

Guderian, was ‘the power that enables combatants to get close enough to destroy the enemy’ Other comments further reveal his repertoire of military axioms: ‘it would be a grave mistake to commit tanks to areas where you do not wish to stage a decisive battle . . . ’ Tanks, in effect, if used correctly, were simply the way to bring about the desired and culturally required decisive results:

Great commanders always strive for decisive – and thus mobile – warfare, and seek to this end to maintain the numbers of their mobile units [*schnellen Truppen*] in a favourable relationship to those of their slower formations. [And] even today mobile forces can only secure a decisive success if they are strong enough in relation to the [size of the] army as a whole.<sup>156</sup>

But Guderian subscribed mostly saliently to his own military culture when actually linking shock with annihilation: ‘you must bring fire to bear on the enemy by closing to close range, identifying the targets that pose the greatest hindrance to the attack, and annihilating them by direct fire’.<sup>157</sup> ‘Destroying the command system’ was, for him, not a goal but an instrument to ensure decisive battle – or so he wished to present the tank and its possible contribution to the army’s campaigns.<sup>158</sup>

In *Panzer Leader*, written after the war and, as mentioned, to a considerable extent under Liddell Hart’s thumb, Guderian was less clear, and offered almost no reference to wider operational goals. While discussing the importance of movement, for instance, he suggested that the most important contribution of tanks would probably be their ability to ‘keep moving once a break-through has been made’, and failed even to mention any post-breakthrough mission. Elsewhere he maintained that

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<sup>156</sup> Guderian, ‘Die Panzertruppen’, p. 625.

<sup>157</sup> Guderian, *Achtung – Panzer!*, pp. 202-204.

<sup>158</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 202.

the sources of hostile fire should be 'either destroyed or made inoperative', suggesting that he regarded both options as similar.<sup>159</sup> Guderian thus demonstrated not only the German indifference to the nuances and complexities of Liddell Hart's 'indirect approach' to warfare or to operational goals such as 'paralysis' – rather than 'annihilation' – as the looked-for consequence of shock. The scarcity of Guderian's postwar references to the strategic goal of the campaign derives from the general lack of interest in such matters among German armour experts, who joyfully busied themselves exclusively with tactical detail. Indeed strategic analysis is difficult to find in either Guderian's pre-war or post-war writings; faithful to his own cultural limits, Guderian's thoughts on mechanised warfare were confined essentially to the realm of operations and tactics, and strayed toward the higher goals they were meant to serve.

### **Conclusion**

The archival evidence offers little support for the assumption that the German military leadership willingly restricted its foreign sources of doctrinal and practical military knowledge solely or primarily to the British experience. That untenable thesis appears to stem from two sources: the distorted post-war picture provided by British scholars and surviving German generals, and the world primacy of British armour experiments in the mid- and late-1920s, which generated a general interest in their findings and outcomes, and no doubt created what seemed to be a noteworthy German interest in

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<sup>159</sup> Guderian, *Panzer Leader*, pp. 41-42. Nevertheless, in his other references to the role of *panzers* in cooperation with infantry, it was obvious that the two options were not similar – and equally obvious which option Guderian preferred: 'regarding the cooperation of tanks with infantry, it can be said that it is the mission of the armoured units to break enemy resistance swiftly and definitively [*rasch und gründlich*], and indeed not through temporary paralysis [*Lähmen*] resulting from the moral effect of armoured attack, or through attempts to roll the enemy flat [under the tank treads], but through the annihilation by fire of the enemy encountered in the battle zone' (Guderian, 'Die Panzertruppen', p. 618).

the British armour experts. Yet when the time at last came for independent and non-theoretical German experiments, the German army swiftly and effortlessly moulded its armour formations in its own cultural shape.<sup>160</sup> Far more than the tables of organisation and equipment of the armoured formations themselves, it was the substantial difference between the overall operational goals that tanks were to serve in the two visions of armour warfare that made direct 'emulation' virtually impossible. The goal of annihilation on the one hand and the goal of 'paralysis' on the other expressed fundamental perceptual differences, and prescribed operational methods that were inherently foreign to one other.

By and large, as late as January 1938, the German army remained firmly loyal to its own well-rooted principles and practices of war-fighting, whether mechanised or otherwise. Its armour enthusiasts did not successfully – or in most cases, at all – spread imported ideas of advanced armoured operations, and no such ideas reached the level of comprehensive and accepted doctrine. That outcome was not the consequence of an outmoded and conservative mindset, but rather derived from the natural processes through which military culture sifts and filters new ideas, adjusts them to its time-honoured and trustworthy moulds, and defends its own operational code from too hazardous experiments and risky changes. It was only when traditional demands for further change were fulfilled, and German forces themselves 'tested' the combination of new technology and traditional doctrine and operational goals in action in 1939 and after, that significant adjustments and improvements to its doctrine could be introduced.

What then did happen, doctrinally and practically, in the Wehrmacht of the 1930s? A new technology was rightly identified as facilitating old concepts, further

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<sup>160</sup> See also Corum, *German Way of War*, pp. 253-267.

enhancing ancient operational axioms and long-prized values – speed, combined arms, initiative, and shock – as well as placing within reach the time-honoured operational goals of decisive battle and swift and total *Vernichtung*. The result was not an RMA, for new technology did not induce a radical change in military concepts, in the organisation of forces, and in the character of war. While the German army underwent a significant evolution in the course of its experiments with and incorporation of new technology into existing perceptions and an existing organisational culture, it was only when armoured warfare spread to other armies that enjoyed a far better chance to develop innovative organisational thought, stronger industrial systems, and almost unlimited resources, that mechanised warfare could metamorphose itself into a genuine RMA: ‘the application of new technologies into a significant number of military systems combines with innovative operational concepts and organisational adaptations in a way that fundamentally alters the character and conduct of conflict’<sup>161</sup> The process that took place before the Second World War in the Reichswehr and Wehrmacht, despite its intrinsic interest and the impressive – and fatal – fruits it bore in the immediately following years, was nothing more than the natural evolution of a brilliant and deeply entrenched organisational culture.

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<sup>161</sup> Krepinevich, ‘Cavalry to Computer’, p. 30.

## Conclusion

### **Military culture: Necessity, contingency, and choice**

Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please, under circumstances they themselves choose, but rather under circumstances directly found in, given by, and transmitted from the past.

– Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon Bonaparte* (1852).

The story of German operational thought and practice and their development in the interwar years is not unexplored. The Wehrmacht's successes in the first years of the Second World War have led scholars to devote considerable attention to the sources of German battlefield primacy, of the armies that prevailed despite inferiority in numbers and materiel through superior doctrine, operational brilliance, and tactical excellence.

This thesis has attempted to examine well-known narratives, well-known (and less well-known) archival documents, and well-known figures involved in this oft-told tale from a perhaps novel angle. Its purpose has been to provide a clear overall explanation of what happened in German military thought in the 1920s and 1930s, and to understand how the German army marched into the Second World War as it did. Cultural theory and the set of explanations that it provides, as described earlier in this thesis, help to clarify both the mechanisms and the context of a number of issues that historians of German military affairs have faced with some bafflement. Why and how did a military organisation act repeatedly against the security interests of its own country, as well as its own institutional interests? What were the origins and further



evolution of the unique dynamics of German military practice, and what formative world-view produced and reinforced the army's conceptual ossification? Most curiously, for what reasons did both contemporary and later spectators see these processes as constituting a striking record of innovation?

In itself, the claim that a powerful dynamics of continuity was the most influential force behind the initial German successes in the Second World War is not a new one.<sup>1</sup> But the mechanisms that explain the persistence of tradition, the incorporation of new technology into long-standing patterns, and the gentle, unselfconscious ways in which members of military (and other) organisations align their individual analyses and frames of thought with their shared organisational assumptions is rarely explained or tested in detail against the historical evidence.

However powerful and persuasive the cultural explanation may seem, it is not without flaws. The most common among them, as already described, is the theoretical pitfall that awaits those who ascribe every opinion, development, and analysis to a simplistic set of cultural constraints, and ignore the complexity of human reality and its inherent variety of choices – as well as objective and culturally-constructed limitations. Even more tempting is the assumption that, given an extreme organisational culture and an environment that encouraged that culture's further radical evolution, its bearers – Germany's military leadership and officer corps – were not merely predisposed to create the operational doctrine and practices on show throughout the Second World War, but actually predestined to follow that course. That could not be further from the truth. Military culture is not and should not be understood as some sort of stealthy deforming disease. However immanent and unreflective they may be, cultural constructs can only rarely completely block all

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<sup>1</sup> See especially Corum, *German Way of War*, and Biddle, 'The Past as Prologue'.

other possibilities and interpretations but those ‘natural’ to the world-view from which they derive. And even if a military-cultural mindset is inescapable, it can never be monolithic: it cannot mould its subjects into cultural ‘clones’. In other words, both in military organisations and in other social organisms, alternative choices of thought and practice – which the current organisational culture will not discard as too illegitimate to explore – always exist. Military culture is merely constraining, not deterministic.

An ample body of evidence suggests that even those most devoted to the infallibility of core German operational ‘truths’ could interpret those same ‘truths’ along competing lines and acknowledge the plausibility of alternative interpretations and courses of action. The post-war analyses by Wilhelm Groener – sharp as always – of Falkenhayn’s strategic planning demonstrate how culturally-constructed perceptions are not immune to self-reflection and unorthodox insights:

Nor do I believe that even the most brutal will to annihilate [*der brutalste Vernichtungswille*] in summer 1915 would have carried a great German offensive in the West to decisive victory, since we lacked the forces [required] to move from tactical breakthrough to operational envelopment.<sup>2</sup>

Groener never rejected, of course, the pillars of the German operational thought – the human will and its role in the axiomatic decisive battle of annihilation. But he did acknowledge the possibility that even if all the demands of German military culture were met, victory might still be denied – a recognition that later opened the way for a long-overdue revision of his entire military world-view. Groener was not alone in his ability to see and conceptualise beyond the limits of the traditions and tenets that he

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<sup>2</sup> Groener, BA-MA N46-41, p. 238.

himself endorsed; the *Forschungsamt*'s comprehensive effort to research and study the *Feldherr*, his qualities and his art, from the second half of the 1930s onward offers other examples. The *Feldherr* discussion, which naturally raised the question of civil-military relations, provoked statements such as 'The military leader must also be an outstanding statesman and diplomat; and he must also raise the immense sums of money that war devours . . .', and gave rise to calls for a 'total *Feldherr*' as well as for 'total war'.<sup>3</sup> Yet another Reichswehr study of the art of war called for adherence to Clausewitz's insistence that war was not an isolated phenomenon, rather than simply following his 'prescriptions for war', as had been prevalent before the World War.<sup>4</sup>

Military culture thus does not and cannot prescribe a given series of reactions to external and internal challenges and decisions. Hindenburg and Ludendorff, radical practitioners though they were, admitted military defeat in September 1918, *before* a total military collapse occurred, even though they could have continued to refuse to admit it in the expectation of miracles through German *Geist*, as they were culturally prone to do – a stance to which Ludendorff briefly returned in October.<sup>5</sup> And when defeat was finally on the table, military culture was not solely responsible for the almost unanimous post-1919 refusal of military circles to acknowledge it. After all, the German army had in the past proven its ability to use a devastating defeat to learn and reform, if it so wished. Rather, in a political climate that threatened its very existence, the military leadership was left with little choice of how to justify its past (and thus also present) plight to itself, to the Republic, and to the German people. The

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<sup>3</sup> 'Wandlungen des Feldherrn-Begriffs von der Zeit Moltke bis zum Ende des Ersten Weltkrieges', BA-MA W10-50138. See also W10-50137, 'Das Bild der modernen Feldherrn', the author of which quotes from a *Feldherr* study by Dr. W. Solger, director of the Kriegsgeschichtlichen Forschungsanstalt des Heeres, p. 37.

<sup>4</sup> Unsigned, undated studies (probably from 1935-36), 'Erörterungen über Clausewitz', and 'Auffassungen zum "Totalen Krieg" und "Absoluten Krieg"', BA-MA W10-50123.

<sup>5</sup> See Hull, *Absolute Destruction*, pp. 304-309. One of the officers who persuaded Hindenburg and Ludendorff to admit military defeat was Joachim von Stülpnagel.

ossification of the army's 'infallible' operational concepts that followed was thus – although unfortunate for the Reichswehr – an outcome determined less by German military culture than by the acute political pressures that the army faced in 1919. It is also important to emphasise that military culture does not necessarily impair its subjects' capacity for rational decision-making: although deeply immersed in their organisational culture, both Seeckt and Stülpnagel were capable clear-sighted and sharp analysis. Both were indeed driven by their willingness to 'look the situation in the face', and never doubted that Germany and its army had suffered military as well as political defeat: 'we must never forget that we lost the war'.<sup>6</sup> Despite the severe limitations imposed by the Treaty of Versailles, both attempted to address the causes of that defeat. It was only from that stage onward that German military culture 'kicked in', and shaped the scope and content of the concepts developed in the course of their efforts. Seeckt's and Stülpnagel's writings thus demonstrate that military culture does not blind its subjects to objective constraints, nor does it force a single 'natural' solution to the challenges that harsh realities impose.

That the power of any military culture is limited seems to be obvious from the fact that it cannot force 'predicted' outcomes and organisational reactions, even when an existential crisis looms. As described throughout this thesis, armies – including the German army – are constantly negotiating their status, freedom of action, and relationship with their civilian authorities. On two occasions after the collapse of the *Kaiserreich* the German army faced severe external pressures to serve as the indispensable pillar of the civilian government – pressures that touched upon its very self-definition and self-understanding as a fighting organisation. However, the cultural conditioning that demanded complete freedom from civilian control, essential as it

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<sup>6</sup> Seeckt, 'Ansprache', 10 July 1920, BA-MA N247-75, pp. 23-27; Stülpnagel, 'Gedanken', BA-MA N5-10, p. 4.

was to the army's self-definition, did not prescribe its reaction to political pressures in 1919-24 and 1930-33; the nature and extent of those pressures, and the preferences and affiliations of the officer corps turned out to be as strong as or even stronger than cultural imperatives. Whereas the newly-born Republic ostensibly offered subordination to civil authority but in actuality conceded quasi-independence, the Nazi regime offered the reverse – and the army rejected the Republic and chose Hitler. In 1933 and after the Wehrmacht acted in part against its cultural template, and sacrificed its independence for other rewards.<sup>7</sup>

Discussion of change and continuity raises yet another important question. Did German military culture suffer complete stagnation throughout the interwar years? The answer is 'no'. As already pointed out, especially during the early 1930s, it regenerated and updated itself in response to new and challenging realities, and especially in response to new technologies. But none of these often subtle and ultimately limited changes ever breached existing conceptual boundaries. None stands as a shining novelty that could rightly be termed a 'revolution' in German military affairs. Yet the German army's interwar record was not necessarily lacking in merit. Its military culture was, after all, an effective one, wonderfully (if unintentionally) suited to new technologies and to their effective incorporation into existing operational modes, and providing and reinforcing the exemplary operational and tactical practices that in the end proved self-defeating.

Germany's military failure in the Second World War had many sources – but the evolution of its military culture was one of the most central and crucial of all. In its subtle, non-conscious power of narrowing perceived possibilities, choices, actions and

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<sup>7</sup> Most notably, as described, freedom from strategic planning, but also the loan of Nazi ideology as a tool to steel the *Geist* of the troops and the population, and rearmament and force structure expansion limited only by the resources of German society, and of Germany's eventual conquests.

reactions, it provided both a climate and a powerful dynamics conducive to a limited, superficial examination of past mistakes. It lured German military thinkers into the trap of attempting to achieve old goals with new means instead of re-thinking those goals in the light of new technological possibilities. Most of all, it allowed them to cling to old operational concepts even while – or even through – ‘adopting’ or ‘developing’ seemingly new ideas.

That German military thought could have developed in far different directions is evident from the words of its founding father, who offered his successors a highly complex, non-reductionist analysis of their profession and of its requirements:

The only question, therefore, is whether, when war is being planned, the political point of view should give way to the purely military . . . that is, should it disappear completely or subordinate itself, or should the political point of view remain dominant and the military be subordinate to it? . . . Subordinating the political point of view to the military would be absurd, for it is policy that creates war. Policy is the guiding intelligence and war only the instrument, not vice versa. No other possibility exists, then, than to subordinate the military point of view to the political . . .<sup>8</sup>

Yet it was Clausewitz’s Kantian vision of the conceptual ‘purity’ of limitless violence that bedazzled the naive military readers of subsequent generations:

If for the moment we consider the pure concept of war, we should have to say that political purpose of war had no connection with war itself; for if war is an act of violence meant to force the enemy to do our will its aims would have always and solely to be to overcome the enemy

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<sup>8</sup> Clausewitz, *On War*, Book VIII, 6, p. 607.

and disarm him. That aim is derived from the theoretical concept of war...<sup>9</sup>

Ironically, the very richness of possible interpretations and readings of Clausewitz's highly complex point of departure allowed German military thought to evolve legitimately if fatally into the narrow-minded and extremist vision dominant throughout the first half of the twentieth century, and most notably in the event-filled years between the two World Wars.

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., Book I, 2, p. 90.

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