

The War Hitler Won: The Battle for Europe, 1939-1941

Robert Citino

"A Distinctive Language": The German Operational Pattern

In the fall of 1939, the German army (*Wehrmacht*) began a run of decisive victories that was quite unlike anything in living military memory. With their fearsome tank (*Panzer*) formations operating as an apparently irresistible spearhead, and with a powerful air force (*Luftwaffe*) circling overhead, the *Wehrmacht* ran through or around every defensive position thrown in its path. The opening campaign in Poland (Case White) smashed the Polish army in 18 days, although a bit more fighting was necessary to reduce the capital, Warsaw.¹ Equally

¹ For Case White, begin with the belated "official history" commissioned by the *Militär-geschichtliches Forschungsamt*, *Das Deutsche Reich und Der Zweite Weltkrieg*, volume 2, *Die Errichtung der hegemonie auf dem Europäischen Kontinent* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 1979), especially "Hitler's Erster 'Blitzkrieg' und seine Auswirkungen auf Nordosteuropa," pp. 79-156. Labeling this "official history" is misleading--it is far more a meticulously researched critical history by a team of crack scholars. Robert M. Kennedy, *The German Campaign in Poland, 1939*, Department of the Army Pamphlet no. 20-255 (Washington, DC: Department of the Army, 1956) continues to dominate the field, and Matthew Cooper, *The German Army, 1933-1945* (Chelsea, MI: Scarborough House, 1978), pp. 169-176, is still useful. Both Pat McTaggart, "Poland '39," *Command* 17 (July-August 1992), p. 57, and David T. Zabecki, "Invasion of Poland: Campaign that Launched a War," *World War II* 14, no. 3 (September 1999), pp. 26ff, are written for the popular audience, but are no less insightful for that. See also the memoir literature: Heinz Guderian, *Panzer Leader* (New York: Ballantine, 1957), pp. 46-63; Erich von Manstein, *Lost Victories* (Novato, CA: Presidio, 1982), pp. 22-63; and F. W. von Mellenthin, *Panzer Battles: A Study of the Employment of Armor in the Second World War* (New York: Ballantine, 1956), pp. 3-9. Steven Zaloga and Victory Madej, *The Polish*

impressive was the invasion of Denmark and Norway (Exercise Weser), which saw two enemy capitals, Oslo and Copenhagen, fall on the first day to a well-coordinated combination of ground forces, seaborne landings, and paratroopers.² Allied formations that arrived to intervene in Norway got a quick taste of the Luftwaffe, and were soon evacuating under heavy fire.

May 1940 saw the great offensive in the West: Case Yellow. Here, the Panzers smashed not merely the Poles or Norwegians, but the cream of the French and British armies, destroying the former and booting the latter off the continent in a frantic evacuation from the last port still in friendly hands, Dunkirk. Even with most of the British army gone, the Germans took an estimated two million French, British, Dutch, and Belgian prisoners.³

Campaign (New York: Hippocrene, 1991), is indispensable, still the only work in English based on the Polish sources. For a blow-by-blow account while it was happening, see *Deutschlands Abwehrkrieg von 1939*, part 1, "Die Ereignisse im Osten vom 1. bis 9. September," *Militär-Wochenblatt* 124, no. 12 (September 15th, 1939), pp. 729-733; part 2, "Die Ereignisse im Osten vom 9. September bis 16. September," *Militär-Wochenblatt* 124, no. 13 (September 22nd, 1939), pp. 769-774; and part 3, "Die Ereignisse in Polen vom 17. bis 24. September," *Militär-Wochenblatt* 124, no. 14 (October 1st, 1939), pp. 809-813. The most recent scholarly account melds German army operations and Hitler's murderous racial designs on Poland into a single chilling account, Alexander B. Rossino, *Hitler Strikes Poland: Blitzkrieg, Ideology, and Atrocity* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2003).

² For Weserübung, Adam R. A. Claasen, *Hitler's Northern War: The Luftwaffe's Ill-Fated Campaign, 1940-1945* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2001), remains the definitive portrait of this triphibious (air, land, and sea) campaign. James S. Corum offers another excellent contribution to his already impressive list of works on the German army with "The German Campaign in Norway as a Joint Operation," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 21, no. 4 (December 1998), pp. 50-77, which compares the record of German interservice cooperation with that of the allies, much to the disadvantage of the latter. Erich Raeder's memoir, *Grand Admiral* (New York: Da Capo Press, 2001), is a new edition of a venerable primary source. See especially pp. 300-318. For a fine operational summary of the Danish campaign, see Major Macher, "Die Besetzung Dänemarks," *Militär-Wochenblatt* 125, no. 45 (May 9th, 1941), pp. 1791-1793, written on the occasion of the campaign's first anniversary.

³ For Case Yellow, the scholarly work of choice is Karl-Heinz Frieser, *The Blitzkrieg Legend: The 1940 Campaign in the West* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2005), a very welcome English-language edition of the 1995 work *Blitzkrieg-Legende: Der Westfeldzug 1940*. Not only was it a detailed and comprehensive look at this most successful of modern military campaigns, it also staked out bold revisionist terrain that called into question all of the received wisdom about Case Yellow. Hardly the inevitable victory of a *Blitzkrieg*-oriented army, Frieser's vision of the 1940 campaign was instead filled with chance and contingency and the fog of war on both sides. It wasn't simply a victory of German armor, virtually all of which was vastly inferior to that of the Allies, but rather a victory for superior doctrine. Frieser therefore moved the discussion from hardware factors to areas of software: planning, command and control, logistics, and information. The author is a Bundeswehr officer-scholar publishing under the

The pattern continued into the next year. A lightning drive into the Balkans in April 1941 overran Yugoslavia and Greece. When a British force arrived to help defend the latter, the Germans routed it from one position to another and eventually drove it off the mainland altogether, forcing their hapless foe into its third forced evacuation in less than a year. The British destination this time was Crete, and there they got hit by a true thunderbolt: *Operation Mercury*, the first all-airborne military operation in history.⁴ It quickly seized the island from its

auspices of the official Military History Research Institute in Potsdam. He had access to the complete documentary record, stored in archives with which he was intimately familiar. For the planning of the offensive, see the still-crucial article by Hans-Adolf Jacobsen, "Hitlers Gedanken zur Kriegführung im Westen," *Wehrwissenschaftliche Rundschau* 5, no. 10 (October 1955), pp. 433-446; all subsequent work on the topic has been a commentary on this article, including the author's own *Fall Gelb: der Kampf um den deutschen Operationsplan zur Westoffensive 1940* (Wiesbaden: F. Steiner, 1957). See also the official history, *Das Deutsche Reich und der Zweite Weltkrieg, volume 2, Die Errichtung der Hegemonie auf dem Europäischen Kontinent* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 1979), especially the portions written by Hans Umbreit, "Der Kampf um die Vormachtstellung in Westeuropa" (pp. 233-327). The standard works in English are still Jeffrey A. Gunsburg, *Divided and Conquered: The French High Command and the Defeat in the West, 1940* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, Press, 1979), and especially Robert A. Doughty, *The Breaking Point: Sedan and the Fall of France, 1940* (Hamden, CT: Archon, 1990). For the role of Guderian's Panzers in the campaign, see the monograph by Florian K. Rothbrust, *Guderian's XIXth Panzer Corps and the Battle of France*. Finally, even with all these scholarly riches, there will always be those who turn to the fine popular account by Alistair Horne, *To Lose a Battle: France 1940* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1969).

⁴ There is an immense literature on the Crete campaign. The best scholarly account is still Ian McDougall Guthrie Stewart, *The Struggle for Crete 20 May-1 June 1941: A Story of Lost Opportunity* (London: Oxford University Press, 1966), a book that has aged quite well in the 36 years since it was published. The text is lucid and the criticism of both the German attacker and the Commonwealth defenders is judicious. See, in particular, the discussion on pp. 481-483. The best short introduction, probably still the most widely read account of the campaign, is Hanson Baldwin, *Battles Lost and Won: Great Campaigns of World War II* (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), pp. 57-113 ("Crete—The Winged Invasion"). See also D. M. Davin, *Crete: Official History of New Zealand in the Second World War, 1939-45* (Wellington, N.Z.: War History Branch, 1953), still an authoritative voice, and particularly so when discussing the unfortunate role of the 5th New Zealand Brigade during the Maleme fighting; Baron Friedrich August von der Heydte, *Daedalus Returned: Crete 1941* (London: Hutchinson, 1958), the account by a German airborne battalion commander; and Hans-Otto Muhleisen, *Kreta 1941: Das Unternehmen Merkur, 20. Mai-1. Juni 1941* (Freiburg: Rombach, 1968), a trenchant account published by the Federal Republic of Germany's *Militärgeschichtliches Forschungsamt*, including a great deal of primary documentation from the German side. Finally, for a postwar analysis by German officers (part of the *German Report Series*), see "Airborne Operations: A German Appraisal," Washington, DC: Center of Military History, 1989). One still little-used German primary source is the unpublished manuscript by Conrad Seibt, "Einsatz Kreta Mai 1941," part of the *German Report Series*, B-641, by the quartermaster of the *XI Fliegerkorps* during the campaign. A

British and Commonwealth defenders, who had to evacuate again, this time to Egypt. Indeed, in the opening phase of the war, it often seemed as if the evacuation had become the characteristic British military operation, and that "BEF" stood for "back every fortnight" or "back every Friday."

Finally, the summer of 1941 saw the opening of the war's main event. *Operation Barbarossa* was the greatest undertaking in military history, and German success in the opening weeks was amazing. With the Panzers ranging far and deep, the Wehrmacht sealed off one immense encirclement of Soviet forces after another: at Bialystok, Minsk, Smolensk. By December, the Germans stood outside Moscow. They had inflicted four million casualties on the Red Army, about 3 million of whom were prisoners, and to many observers, the Soviet Union seemed finished.⁵ Indeed, Germany had conquered the continent. What we might call the "Great European War" of 1939-41 was over. It was the war that Hitler won.

copy of the report, along with the rest of this immense series, is on file in the U. S. Army Military History Institute at Carlisle Barracks in Carlisle, PA.

⁵ For *Barbarossa* and the campaigns that followed in the east, one must begin with the German official history, *Das Deutsche Reich und Der Zweite Weltkrieg*, volume 4, *Der Angriff auf die Sowjetunion* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 1983), especially the sections authored by Jürgen Förster, "Das Unternehmen 'Barbarossa' als Eroberungs- und Vernichtungskrieg" (pp. 413-447); Ernst Klink, "Die Operationsführung: Heer und Kriegsmarine" (pp. 451-652); and Horst Boog, "Die Operationsführung: Die Luftwaffe" (pp. 652-712). For the state of the historiography in Germany, see Rolf-Dieter Müller and Gerd R. Überschar, *Hitlers Krieg im Osten, 1941-1945: Ein Forschungsbericht* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2000). Two English-language works that profoundly influenced all those that followed. Are the volumes in the *U. S. Army Historical Series*: Earl F. Ziemke and Magna E. Bauer, *Moscow to Stalingrad: Decision in the East* (Washington, DC: Center of Military History, 1987) and Earl F. Ziemke, *Stalingrad to Berlin: the German Defeat in the East* (Washington, DC: Center of Military History, 1968), which continue to be the source of choice for German operational details. The two-volume history of the eastern front by the John Erickson, *The Road to Stalingrad* (New York: Harper & Row, 1975) and *The Road to Berlin: Continuing the History of Stalin's War with Germany* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1983), was the first to do likewise for the Soviet side. Erickson also deserves special mention for his readable and at times inspiring prose. Another extraordinarily influential book is George E. Blau, *The German Campaign in Russia--Planning and Operation, 1940-1942*, Department of the Army Pamphlet No. 20-261a (Washington, DC: Department of the Army, 1955), once again part of the *German Reports Series*, with all the pluses and minuses that it entails. The officers being channeled here are General Franz Halder, Chief of the General Staff until 1942, General Gotthard Heinrici, "and others" (p. iii).

The memoir literature has been enormous, almost all of it from the German side. See, for example, Guderian, *Panzer Leader*, Erich von Manstein, *Lost Victories* (Chicago: H. Regnery, 1958); and Mellenthin,

Blitzkrieg?

Historical analysis of German operations in World War II continues to paint them as novel, as examples of a new method of warmaking called "*Blitzkrieg*" (lightning war). Allegedly invented in the interwar era, *Blitzkrieg* is said to have transformed warfare by mechanizing it.⁶ In place of the foot soldier and the cavalry, there were now machines, tanks and aircraft. In

Panzer Battles. More recent additions are Erhard Raus, *Panzer Operations: The Eastern Front Memoir of Erhard Raus, 1941-1945* (New York: Da Capo, 2003), compiled and translated by Stephen H. Newton; along with Peter G. Tsouras, *Panzers on the Eastern Front: General Erhard Raus and his Panzer Divisions in Russia, 1941-1945* (London: Greenhill, 2002).

In terms of modern scholarship, David M. Glantz is today the leading western authority, not only on the Soviet military but on the Russo-German war as well. He continues to ply his very successful trade, exploiting former Soviet sources that most other historians haven't even heard of yet, knitting them together with tight prose and often brilliant analysis, and churning out books with frightening regularity. A partial list includes *When Titans Clash: How the Red Army Stopped Hitler* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1995), written with Jonathan M. House, a welcome change from traditional analysis that saw Barbarossa strictly in terms of how the Wehrmacht lost it; *Stumbling Colossus: The Red Army on the Eve of World War II* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1998); *Colossus Reborn: The Red Army at War, 1941-1943* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2005), and for those unsatisfied with its nearly 800 pages of text, notes, and tables, *Companion to Colossus Reborn* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2005), which contains "a richer and more complete documentary foundation" than was possible in the earlier work. Specific operational accounts include *The Battle of Kursk* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1999), again with Jonathan M. House; *Zhukov's Greatest Defeat: The Red Army's Epic Disaster in Operation Mars, 1942* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1999); and *The Battle of Leningrad, 1941-1944* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2002). Needless to say, there will be others.

⁶ The term "Blitzkrieg," usually credited to western, specifically American, journalists, can actually be found here and there in pre-1939 professional literature of the prewar period. It signified any rapid and complete victory, although the Germans never did use it in any precise sense. For the earliest printed use of the term that I have found, see Lieutenant Colonel Braun, "Der strategische Überfall," *Militär-Wochenblatt* 123, no. 18 (October 28th, 1938), pp. 1134-1136, although the sense here is that the word has been already been in use: "Nach dem Zeitungsnachrichten hatten die diesjährigen französischen Manöver den Zweck, die Bedeutung des strategischen Überfalls--auch 'Blitzkrieg' genannt--zu prüfen" (p. 1134). For later uses, see Lieutenant Colonel Köhn, "Die Infanterie im 'Blitzkrieg,'" *Militär-Wochenblatt* 125, no. 5 (August 2nd, 1940), pp. 165-166, where "Blitzkrieg" is used only in quotation marks and is described as a "buzzword" (*Schlagwort*), as well as Colonel Rudolf Theiss, "Der Panzer in der Weltgeschichte," *Militär-Wochenblatt* 125, no. 15 (October 11th, 1940), pp. 705-708, which likewise uses the term in quotes. By 1941, German usage literature had dropped the quotes, although the word was still not used in any sort of precise technical sense. See Lieutenant Colonel Gaul, "Der Blitzkrieg in Frankreich," *Militär-Wochenblatt* 125, no. 35 (February 28th), 1941, pp. 1513-1517.

place of the trench deadlock that had characterized World War I, there were now vast campaigns of breakthrough, encirclement, and maneuver.

The only trouble with this consensus is that it is largely fictitious. The word *Blitzkrieg* itself is a fiction. The German army did not invent it and hardly ever used it outside quotation marks. It was a term that had been kicking around international military circles in the 1930s to describe a rapid and decisive victory, in contrast to the long, horrible war of attrition that had just ended, and it first gained widespread currency in the West in articles in *Time* and *Life* magazines.

The Germans did not "invent *Blitzkrieg*," then, but clearly they did something in the interwar period. The question is what? It had been a time of rethinking and experimentation for them, certainly, but we could say the same thing for all armies of the day. The British had invented the tank, after all, and were working on a radical Experimental Mechanized Brigade as early as 1928. Likewise, if there was one army in the world that was obsessed with the possibilities of tanks, aircraft, and airborne, it was the Red Army. What distinguished the interwar German army, arguably, was that it was not trying to discover something new. Unlike its neighbors, it felt that it already had a workable warfighting doctrine.

Since the earliest days of the German state, a unique military culture had evolved, a "German way of war." Its birthplace was the kingdom of Prussia. Starting in the 17th century with Frederick William, the "Great Elector" of Brandenburg, Prussia's rulers recognized that their small, impoverished state on the European periphery had to fight wars that were "*kurtz und vives*" (short and lively).⁷ Crammed into a tight spot in the middle of Europe, surrounded by states that vastly outweighed it in manpower and resources, it could not win long, drawn-out wars of attrition. From the start, Prussia's military problem was to find a way to fight short, sharp wars that ended in decisive battlefield victory. Its conflicts had to be "front-loaded,"

⁷ For a discussion of this point, see Robert M. Citino, *The German Way of War: From the Thirty Years' War to the Third Reich* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2005), especially pp. 4-5.

unleashing a storm against the enemy, either destroying it or bringing it to the table for negotiations.

The solution to this strategic problem was something that the Prussians called *Bewegungskrieg*, the war of movement. It was a way of war that stressed maneuver on the operational level, not simply tactical maneuverability or a faster march rate, but the movement of large units like divisions, corps, and armies. Prussian commanders, and their German descendants, sought to maneuver these formations in such a way as to strike the mass of the enemy army a sharp, annihilating blow as rapidly as possible. It might involve a surprise assault against an unprotected flank, or both of them. On several notable occasions, it even resulted in entire Prussian or German armies getting around to the rear of an enemy army, the dream scenario of any general schooled in the art. The desired end-state was the *Kesselschlacht*, literally, a "cauldron battle," more specifically a battle of encirclement, hemming in the enemy on all sides prior to destroying him in a series of "concentric operations."

This vibrant and aggressive operational posture imposed certain requirements on German armies including an extremely high level of battlefield aggression and an officer corps that tended to launch attacks no matter what the odds. The Germans also found over the years that conducting an operational-level war of movement required a flexible system of command that left a great deal of initiative in the hands of lower-ranking commanders. It is customary today to call it *Auftragstaktik* (mission tactics): the higher commander devised a general mission (*Auftrag*) and then left the means of achieving it to the officer on the spot. It is more accurate, however, to speak, as the Germans themselves did, of the "independence of the lower commander" (*Selbständigkeit der Unterführer*).⁸ A commander's ability to size up a situation and act on his own was an equalizer for a numerically weaker army, allowing it to grasp

⁸ See, for example, Major Bigge, "Ueber Selbstthätigkeit der Unterführer im Kriege," *Beihefte zum Militär-Wochenblatt* 1894 (Berlin: E. S. Mittler, 1894), pp. 17-55, as well as General von Blume, "Selbstthätigkeit der Führer im Kriege," *Beihefte zum Militär-Wochenblatt* 1896 (Berlin: E. S. Mittler, 1896), pp. 479-534. For a discussion of the issue, see Citino, *German Way of War*, p. 308

opportunities that might be lost if it had to wait for reports and orders to climb up and down the chain of command.

This command system was not always an elegant thing to behold. Prussian-German military history is filled with lower-level commanders making untimely advances, initiating highly unfavourable, even bizarre, attacks, and generally making nuisances of themselves, at least from the perspective of the high command. There were men like General Eduard von Flies, who launched one of the most senseless frontal assaults in military history at the battle of Langensalza in 1866 against a dug-in Hanoverian army that outnumbered him two to one;⁹ General Karl von Steinmetz, whose impetuous command of the 1st Army in the Franco-Prussian War in 1870 almost upset the entire operational appellation;¹⁰ and General Hermann von François, whose refusal to follow orders almost derailed the East Prussian campaign in 1914.¹¹

⁹ For the nearly forgotten battle of Langensalza, see Geoffrey Wawro, *The Austro-Prussian War: Austria's War With Prussia and Italy in 1866* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 75-81. Wawro is a meticulous scholar and a fine writer, one of the best working today, his work has largely superseded the earlier standard on the 1866 war, Gordon Craig, *The Battle of Königgrätz: Prussia's Victory over Austria, 1866* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1964). See also the still useful older sources, such as Oscar von Lettow-Vorbeck, *Geschichte des Krieges von 1866 in Deutschland*, volume 1, *Gastein-Langensalza* (Berlin: E. S. Mittler, 1896), an analysis by a General Staff officer accompanied by excellent maps, and Theodor Fontane, *Der deutsche Krieg von 1866*, volume 2, *Der Feldzug in West- und Mitteldeutschland* (Berlin: R. v. Decker, 1871), a popular account from one of Prussia's best known writers and novelists. For a synthesis, see Citino, *German Way of War*, pp. 153-160.

¹⁰ Once again, today's historian of record for the Franco-Prussian War is Geoffrey Wawro. See *The Franco-Prussian War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), which has now largely superseded the earlier standard work by Michael Howard, *The Franco-Prussian War* (New York: Macmillan, 1962). For the reaction of the Prussian high command to Steinmetz's near-debacle, see Wawro, *Franco-Prussian War*, p. 110. Dennis Showalter's *Wars of German Unification* (London: Arnold, 2004) places all three wars firmly into their historical contexts in often quite surprising ways and continues the tradition he began with *Wars of Frederick the Great* (London: Longman, 1996) in devoting unparalleled attention to the question of soldierly motivation. Arden Bucholz, *Moltke and the German Wars, 1864-1871* (New York: Palgrave, 2001), is also indispensable, an operational history that is firmly grounded in issues of organizational and management theory. The primary source is Helmuth von Moltke, *The Franco-German War of 1870-71* (New York: Howard Fertig, 1988). See also Daniel J. Hughes, ed., *Moltke on the Art of War: Selected Writings* (Novato, CA: Presidio, 1993), an indispensable selection of Moltke's works, smoothly translated and incisively annotated.

¹¹ François deserves a military biography in English. Until then, Randy R. Talbot, "General Hermann von François and Corps-Level Operations During the Tannenberg Campaign, August 1914," Masters Thesis, Eastern Michigan University, 1999, offers insightful operational-level analysis. On the Tannenberg

Nearly forgotten today, these events represent the active, aggressive side of the German tradition, as opposed to the more intellectual approach of a von Clausewitz, von Schlieffen, or von Moltke the Elder.

Bewegungskrieg, the war of movement on the operational level, is thus the key to understanding just what the Germans thought they were doing in the 1930s and in the opening years of the war. It was here that the Germans saw the tank and airplane making their contribution. Characteristically, they employed these new weapons on the operational level in large units. The result was the Panzer Division, a formation built around tanks, but also containing a full panoply of combined arms: infantry, artillery, reconnaissance, supply columns, bridging trains, all of which had their mobility raised to the level of the tank. A Panzer Division could assault and penetrate, smash through into the clear, pursue, and destroy any defensive position or formation that tried to stop it, then reform and do it all over again. It was not a wonder weapon or a magic bullet, but it certainly might have looked that way if you happened to be a Polish lancer, a Belgian antitank gunner, or a Greek infantryman.

Like all military cultures, the Germans had evolved a unique combination of traits. It was a "distinctive language" spoken only by the Wehrmacht, as the leading German military journal of the day, the *Militär Wochenblatt*, put it.¹² As in all of Germany's wars, the main question was whether Germany's adversaries could learn to decipher it in time.

campaign generally, the standard work is Dennis E. Showalter, *Tannenberg: Clash of Empires* (Washington, DC: Brassey's, 2004): exhaustively researched, a delight to read, and perceptive in its insight (the true strength of all Showalter's operational histories) into just what makes officer and men tick under stressful conditions. Norman Stone, *The Eastern Front, 1914-1917* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1975), is still indispensable for any inquiry into the war between the Central Powers and Russia, and so is Holger H. Herwig, *The First World War: Germany and Austria-Hungary, 1914-1918* (London: Arnold, 1997). A detailed German account of operations, with essential maps, is to be found in an article by Lieutenant Colonel Ponath, "Die Schlacht bei Tannenberg 1914 in kriegsgeschichtlicher, taktischer, und erzieherischer Auswertung," *Militär-Wochenblatt* 124, no. 8 (August 18th, 1939), pp. 476-482.

¹² "Seitdem mit dem Ende des Winters die deutschen Waffen wieder ihre vernehmliche Sprache zu reden begonnen haben..." in *Grossdeutschlands Freiheitskrieg*, part 145, "Die deutsche Frühjahrsoperation auf der Krim," *Militär-Wochenblatt* 126, no. 47 (May 22nd, 1942), pp. 13455-1348. The quote is from p. 1345.

Bewegungskrieg in Full Stride: The Balkans, 1941

If war was a simple contest to see who could most completely humiliate an opponent in a first encounter, then the *Wehrmacht* would have won World War II handily. The Polish, Danish, Norwegian, French, Yugoslavian, Greek, British, and Soviet armies all learned this lesson the hard way. The first six armies did not survive to tell the tale, nor did the states they were called upon to defend. British armies were smashed not just in their first encounter with the *Wehrmacht* (in France) but in the next three as well (North Africa, Greece, and then again in Crete). Britain managed to survive the experience thanks to the presence of the English Channel, a sturdy water barrier that has defied all would-be invaders since 1066. Likewise, the Soviet army was hammered as hard as any military in history during that first awful campaigning season. And finally, lest we forget, the U.S. Army's first meeting with the *Wehrmacht*, on an obscure hunk of Tunisian rock called the Kasserine Pass, was a humbling experience that should have made all Americans happy for the existence of the Atlantic Ocean.

The point is that first encounters with the *Wehrmacht* were inherently dangerous. Perhaps the classic example was the German campaign in the Balkans in spring 1941.¹³ Here the

¹³ The Balkan campaign garnered its share of attention at the time and in the immediately postwar years, but seems to have fallen off the historiographical radar screen since then. It is due for a modern, multilingual, full-dress scholarly monograph. The best place to start, as always for the German army in World War II, is with the official history, commissioned by the *Militär-geschichtliches Forschungsamt*, *Das Deutsche Reich und Der Zweite Weltkrieg*, volume 3, *Von der "non belligeranza" Italiens bis zum Kriegseintritt der Vereinigten Staaten* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 1984), especially part 3, written by Detlef Vogel, "Das Eingreifen Deutschlands auf dem Balkan," pp. 417-511. Janusz Piekalkiewicz, *Krieg auf dem Balkan* (München: Südwest Verlag, 1984) is quite useful in terms of both text and photographs. In English, George E. Blau, *The German Campaign in the Balkans (Spring 1941)*, Department of the Army Pamphlet no. 20-260 (Washington, DC: Department of the Army, 1953) has of necessity been the go-to work for a long time now, too long in fact. Part of the venerable *German Report Series*, it assembles the testimony of a number of German officers who took part in the campaign; the Foreword (p. iii) mentions Helmut Greiner, General Burkhard H. Mueller-Hillebrand, and General Hans von Greiffenberg. It has all the virtues (primary source testimony) and defects (the German officers being interviewed often did not have access to their war diaries, correspondence, or maps) that we associate with this series, which often matches excruciatingly detailed testimony with surprisingly superficial analysis. There is no particular need to use it with caution, but it needs to be supplemented with other sources. For the *German Report Series* and its impact on the postwar U.S. Army, see Kevin Soutor, "To Stem the Red Tide: The German Report Series and its Effect on American Defense Doctrine, 1948-1954," *Journal of Military History* 57, no. 4

(October 1993), pp. 653-688. For a German wartime view of "this wonderful operation, which in its excellence can stand beside the summer 1940 campaign in France," see General von Tieschowitz, "Der Feldzug im Südosten," and the anonymously authored "Olymp--Thermopylen--Athen" both in *Oberkommando der Wehrmacht*, ed., *Die Wehrmacht: Um die Freiheit Europas* (Berlin: Verlag "Die Wehrmacht," 1941), pp. 154-167 and pp. 186-197, respectively, as well as the pertinent articles in the ongoing wartime series *Grossdeutschlands Freiheitskrieg*: part 88, "Eine Woche der Siege," *Militär-Wochenblatt* 125, no. 42 (April 18th, 1941), pp. 1705-1709, pt. 89, "Kapitulation Jugoslawiens. Kroatien selbständig. Durchbruch durch die Front in Griechenland," *Militär-Wochenblatt* 125, no. 43 (April 25, 1941), pp. 1731-1736; p. 90, "Kapitulation der griechischen Hauptarmee. Athen und Korinth besetzt," *Militär-Wochenblatt* 125, no. 44 (May 2nd, 1941), pp. 1759-1764; and pt. 91, "Abschluss der Kämpfe in Griechenland," *Militär-Wochenblatt* 125, no. 45 (May 9th, 1941), pp. 1787-1791. For the use of specialist troops in the campaign, see Lieutenant Günther Heysing, "Pioniere auf dem Balkan" and Hans Rechenberg, "Fallschirmjäger im Südosten," both in *Die Wehrmacht: Um die Freiheit Europas*, pp. 168-174 and pp. 198-207, respectively, as well as Egid Gehring, ed., *Unterm Edelweiss in Jugoslawien: Aus den Erlebnissen einer Gebirgsdivision* (München: Franz Eher, 1941). For a journalistic account by two German war correspondents, sensationalist yet still helpful on the mood of the times, see Heinz Hüniger and Ernst Erich Strassl, *Kampf und Intrige um Griechenland* (München: Franz Eher, 1942). For the German view of Yugoslav operations, see "Ein Überblick über die Operationen des jugoslawischen Heeres im April 1941 (Dargestellt nach jugoslawischen Quellen)," part 1, "Die Mobilmachung und die Kämpfe vom 6. bis 8. April," in *Militärwissenschaftliche Rundschau* 7, no. 3 (1942), pp. 276-288, and part 2, "Die Kämpfe vom 9. April bis zum Abschluss des Waffenstillstandes am 17. April," *Militärwissenschaftliche Rundschau* 7, no. 4 (1942), pp. 387-399. For the German view of Greek operations, see "Ein Überblick über die Operationen des griechischen Heeres und des britischen Expeditionskorps im April 1941," part 1, "Die griechischen Verteidigungspläne, die Mobilmachung und der Aufmarsch der verbündeten Streitkräfte," in *Militärwissenschaftliche Rundschau* 8, no. 1 (1943), pp. 67-87, and part 2, "Die Operationen der verbündeten Streitkräfte bis zum Rückzuge des britischen Expeditionskorps aus Griechenland," *Militärwissenschaftliche Rundschau* 8, no. 2 (1943), pp. 167-178. The memoirs of the Greek supreme commander are indispensable, General Alexander Papagos, *The Battle of Greece 1940-1941* (Athens: Hellenic Publishing, 1949), as is the abridged volume of the Greek official history, Hellenic Army General Staff, *An Abridged History of the Greek-Italian and Greek-German War 1940-1941: Land Operations* (Athens: The Army History Directorate, 1997). There was a great deal of interest in the campaign within West German military circles after 1945. See, for example, General Kurt von Tippelskirch, "Der deutsche Balkanfeldzug 1941," *Wehrwissenschaftliche Rundschau* 5, no. 2 (February 1955), pp. 49-65; Leo Hepp, "Die 12. Armee im Balkanfeldzug 1941," *Wehrwissenschaftliche Rundschau* 5, no. 5 (May 1955), pp. 199-216; Sigfrid Henrici, "Sarajevo 1941: Der raidartige Vorstoss einer mot. Division," *Wehrwissenschaftliche Rundschau* 10, no. 4 (April 1960), pp. 197-208, and Edgar Röhrich, "Der Balkanfeldzug 1941," *Wehrwissenschaftliche Rundschau* 12, no. 4 (April 1962). See also the short piece on the occasion of Field Marshal List's 80th birthday, Hermann Foertsch, "Generalfeldmarschall List 80 Jahre Alt," *Wehrwissenschaftliche Rundschau* 10, no. 5 (May 1960), pp. 235-236. English-language works tend to focus on the British intervention in Greece and ignore the Yugoslavian campaign altogether. Robin Higham, *Diary of a Disaster: British Aid to Greece 1940-1941* (Lexington: University of Press of Kentucky, 1986) is far and away the best book on the topic, carefully researched (the narrative is in diary form, and often goes down to the level of minutes) and quite nuanced in its argument. It largely superseded the previous standard account, Charles Cruickshank, *Greece 1940-1941* (London: Davis-Poynter, 1976), although the latter is still useful on certain

Germans fought the front-loaded campaign to perfection, with German 2nd and 12th Armies launching two simultaneous operations into Greece and Yugoslavia on April 6th. *Operation Marita*, the invasion of Greece, had been in the works for months, a response to the humiliating defeat suffered by the Italian army in its invasion of Greece in late 1940. The invasion of Yugoslavia, by contrast, had been put together overnight, quite literally, as a response to a pro-Allied coup in Belgrade on the night of March 26th-27th, 1941. The brief time-span for conception and planning did leave a few loose ends here and there, and in fact the undertaking would take place under the nearly anonymous designation of "Operation 25".

It is easy to underestimate the significance of a campaign like this. After all, given its population and resource advantages, Germany should have been able to beat the Greek army, or the Yugoslav, or both at the same time. The same might be said about the Polish campaign in 1939, or the invasion of Denmark and Norway in 1940. Yet, those who look at the Balkan campaign and see only a great power landing a hit on two of the war's weaker combatants miss the point entirely: the Wehrmacht's complete and rapid victory over the Greeks and Yugoslavs mirrors precisely the treatment it meted out in every first encounter of the war, without exception.

The campaign in Greece was, in many ways an exemplar for the "short and lively" war. Here the Wehrmacht encountered not just another weak army of a second-rate power, as it was fighting in Yugoslavia, but a British and Commonwealth intervention as well. *Operation Marita* met *Operation Lustre*, the transfer of a British expeditionary force from North Africa to the

details. See also Christopher Buckley, *Greece and Crete, 1941* (London: H. M. Stationery Office, 1952), part of the series *The Second World War, 1939-1945*, "a popular military history by various authors in eight volumes," which has the attraction of offering a comparative discussion of both the failed intervention in Greece and the fighting on Crete. Matthew Willingham, *Perilous Commitments: The Battle for Greece and Crete 1940-1941* (Staplehurst: Spellmount, 2005) is another perfectly serviceable and well-written popular account. An exception the rule of Greek-campaign particularism in the Anglo-Saxon historical community is John F. Antal, "Operation 25: The Wehrmacht's Conquest of Yugoslavia," in Richard D. Hooker, Jr., *Maneuver Warfare: an Anthology* (Novato, CA: Presidio, 1993, pp. 391-404.

Balkans.¹⁴ "Force W," as it was known, was small, just two divisions (2nd New Zealand, 6th Australian), as well as the 1st Tank Brigade (of the 2nd Armoured Division), along with a small contingent of airpower. One German commentator called it "a drop in the ocean by the standards of continental warfare."¹⁵ The commander of the expedition, General Henry Maitland Wilson, was placed in a nearly impossible position, having to thrust forward a small force against an onrushing Wehrmacht coming at him from all directions.

The precise placement of this force was thus a matter of crucial importance, as well as controversy within the Allied camp. Essentially, the Greek supreme commander, General Alexander Papagos, wanted the British as far north as possible; Maitland Wilson preferred to stay as far south as he could manage.¹⁶ The plan that eventually evolved was, typically, the worst of both worlds. Force W would advance not-too-far-north, not-too-far-south to a defensive position stretching along the Vermion mountains and Aliakmon river (called the "Vermion line," rather grandiloquently, since there were no prepared works there at all).

For their part, and as always, the Germans were planning a bold operational-level stroke, using 12th Army's mechanized formations. While the infantry divisions of XXX Corps crossed the Rhodope Mountains into western Thrace, and the XVIII Mountain Corps had the unenviable task of smashing through the well-fortified Metaxas Line along the Bulgarian frontier, 2nd Panzer Division would cross into Yugoslavia towards Strumica. From here it would wheel sharply south, pass just west of Lake Doiran on the Greek-Yugoslav border, then drive as rapidly as possible on the major port of Thessaloniki. Its seizure would be a strategic blow to the Greeks, cutting off their entire 2nd Army still fighting to the east.

¹⁴ For the origins of "Lustre" and "W," see Cruickshank, *Greece 1940-41*, pp. 105-117, as well as Higham, *Diary of a Disaster*, pp. 94-117.

¹⁵ Mellenthin, *Panzer Battles*, p. 39.

¹⁶ Hellenic Army General Staff, *An Abridged History of the Greek-Italian and Greek-German War*, p. 173, speaks of "a deployment of all Greek-British forces at the fortified area of Beles [Veles]-Nestos," far north indeed. The British, by contrast, "supported the abandonment of the Beles-Nestos area and proposed the occupation of the Vermio [Vermion] line instead." See also Sketch Map 21, facing p. 164. On this question, see also Papagos, *The Battle of Greece*, pp. 322-323 and 325-326.

Simultaneously, however, there would be an even more dramatic stroke, a westward drive into southern Yugoslavia by XXXX Corps (9th Panzer Division, *Leibstandarte Adolf Hitler* SS Motorized Infantry Regiment, and the 73rd Infantry Division). The corps drove towards the Vardar river between Skopje and Veles, then, once again, wheeled sharply south, passing through the Monastir Gap and crossing into central Greece from the north. This resulted in a linkup with the Italians and the isolation of the Greek 1st Army still fighting in Albania. Moreover, the German maneuver would also fatally compromise the Allied defensive position, outflanking Force W.¹⁷

And so it went. There was a signal moment at the start of Marita. On April 6th, a *Luftwaffe* raid on the port of Piraeus scored a direct hit on the 12,000 ton ammunition ship *SS Clan Fraser*. It exploded spectacularly, triggering secondary explosions all over the harbor, destroying much of the port itself, along with twenty-seven craft docked there and a great deal of shore equipment, and shattering windows seven miles away in Athens.¹⁸ It was a calling card, announcing to Greece and to the world that the Wehrmacht was on the march and within hours, German forces were across the Greek border in strength. On the far left, XXX Corps had fairly easy going, since much of the Greek force in isolated western Thrace had been evacuated when German troops first entered Bulgaria. In the center, XVIII Mountain Corps found the Metaxas Line, and the Greek soldiers defending it, to be as tough as anything they had encountered in the war. Losses were heavy, with at least one regiment having to be pulled out of the line, but the attack on both sides of the Rupel Gorge, supported by massed artillery and non-stop attack by Stukas, finally chewed its way through the Greek wire, pillboxes, and concrete bunkers.¹⁹

The battle for the Metaxas Line soon became a moot point, however, as 2nd Panzer Division cut through light opposition to the west and reached Thessaloniki on April 9th. In the course of its short hop south, it overran elements of the Greek 19th Division which were just

¹⁷ Tippelskirch, "Der deutsche Balkanfeldzug 1941," pp. 54-55.

¹⁸ Willingham, *Perilous Commitments*, pp. 73-74.

¹⁹ Tieschowitz, "Der Feldzug im Südosten," pp. 158-159.

moving up into position. The Greek formation was ostensibly "motorized," which meant in this case a handful of Bren carriers and captured Italian tanks and trucks.²⁰ The fall of Thessaloniki made the entire Greek force to the east superfluous, and 2nd Army surrendered to the Germans on April 9th.

The *Schwerpunkt* of this campaign, however, lay with XXXX Panzer Corps commanded by General Georg Stumme. Jumping off at 5:30 am on April 6th, it encountered elements of 5th Yugoslav Army almost immediately. Brushing them aside, the mass of the corps reached its objective (the line Skoplje-Veles) the next day. Stumme's lead formations had made sixty miles that day, and had to perform a major river crossing of the Vardar. Passing through Prilep on April 8th and Monastir on April 9th, the corps stood ready to invade Greece the next day. On April 10th, XXXX Corps crossed the border, peeled off the 9th Panzer Division to link-up with the Italians in Albania, and continued the drive to the south, towards the Greek town of Florina.²¹

While not immediately apparent, the drive on Florina and thus into central Greece had unhinged the entire Allied position. Not only had the maneuver uncovered the communications of the Greek 1st Army in Albania, it had also inserted a strong mobile German force far into the rear of the original British defensive position along the "Vermion position." Maitland Wilson could read a map, and this news sent the entire Commonwealth force scurrying back down to the south from whence it had come, desperately trying to extricate itself from the jaws of two pursuing German pincers. Australian and New Zealand troops fought with their usual tenacity, and there was some gritty action by the rear guard, but on the operational level the front line moved steadily southwards. The original "Vermion position" became the "Aliakmon Line" (April 11th) which gave way to the "Mt. Olympus position" (April 16th) and then the "Thermopylae line" (April 24th), the last actually a crescent-shaped defensive position stretching

²⁰ Willingham, *Perilous Commitments*, p. 74. See also Papagos, *The Battle of Greece*, pp. 355-356.

²¹ Blau, *German Campaign in the Balkans*, pp. 86-87.

across central Greece from Molos in the east to the Gulf of Corinth in the south.²² The place names make the after-action reports read like some lost essay by Herodotus, which continues to lend the entire affair a certain epic aura that it does not at all deserve. In fact, the retreat was a nightmare, carried out under a nearly constant barrage of Stuka attacks. It had been the same in Norway and at Dunkirk, and now it was more of the same in Greece.

Making good use of the difficult terrain and their 25-pounder guns, however, the Commonwealth rear guards did hold up the Germans just long enough to allow the main body to escape, no small feat. The Germans, for their part, managed to keep up the pressure only by sending light pursuit groups ahead of their main body. There certainly were not entire Panzer divisions in play during this portion of the campaign. But even the smaller pursuit groups found themselves limited by the difficult mountainous terrain. At one point they tried, unsuccessfully, to pass a tank column through the pass at Thermopylae: the original European tactical exercise, one might say.²³ Even the most celebrated incident of the campaign, the April 26th airdrop onto the isthmus of Corinth by two battalions of the 2nd Fallschirmjäger Regiment, failed to succeed. Indeed, it met with disaster when a lucky shot detonated charges over the canal bridge, dropping it and killing most of the German paratroopers crossing it, along with the German war correspondent filming the action.²⁴ It did not matter one way or another. Most of Force W was off the mainland by this time, having already been evacuated from Rafina and Porto Rafti in Attica or from Monemvasia and Kalamata further south.

Athens fell on April 27th, the onrushing Germans swiftly occupied the Peloponnesus on April 28th and 29th, and the fighting was over by April 30th. General List's 12th Army had

²² For the retreat, there is no better guide than British armored commander Robert Crisp, *The Gods Were Neutral* (London: Frederick Muller, 1960), a much less famous companion piece to his classic on combat in the Western Desert, *Brazen Chariots* (New York: Ballantine, 1961). See, especially, pp. 138-156.

²³ Willingham, *Perilous Commitments*, pp. 90-91. For a detailed account of the Thermopylae fighting, see the New Zealand Official History, W. G. McGlymont, *To Greece* (Wellington, NZ: War History Branch, 1959), especially pp. 384-399. For the German tanks coming up single-file, see pp. 390-393.

²⁴ For the Corinth airdrop, see Piekalkiewicz, *Krieg auf dem Balkan*, pp. 110-111. The account includes a chilling photograph taken by a war correspondent moments before the bridge exploded, killing him and all the paratroopers on it.

dismantled the Greek army and driven the British into another helter-skelter retreat, and forced them into yet another evacuation that saved the men only at the cost of abandoning virtually all of the equipment. Nor were British manpower losses inconsiderable: 11,840 men out of the 53,000-plus who had originally embarked for Europe. In "tossing Tommy from the continent,"²⁵ German losses had been much heavier than in the Yugoslav campaign, yet still startlingly light overall: 1,100 killed and 4,000 wounded.²⁶

A War Won - a War Lost

From 1939 to 1941, circumstances handed the Wehrmacht a perfect opportunity to fight *Bewegungskrieg*: short, sharp campaigns within the friendly confines of central and eastern Europe, with its relatively short distances, temperate climate, and highly developed road and rail infrastructure. When it came to operational-level maneuver warfare under these conditions, the Wehrmacht was without peer. None of this was new in Prussian or German history, and indeed the exact same description might be applied to Prussian armies under Frederick the Great.

And yet, *Bewegungskrieg* had never been a panacea for Germany's strategic problems. For all the skill that the Germans had shown in operational-level maneuver, they had historically also shown serious and persistent weaknesses in other areas. The problem of logistics was rarely considered a priority. A quick and decisive battlefield victory obviated the need for a deep logistics net and, in fact, in seeking the former the Germans traditionally campaigned on a logistical shoe-string. Their intelligence and counter-intelligence were among the worst in European military history. Strategic planning—setting long range goals in manpower allocation and industrial production—was almost entirely absent. Above all, there

²⁵ The title of an article by German war correspondent Gert Habedanck, "Wir fegten den Tommy vom Kontinent," *Die Wehrmacht: Um die Freiheit Europas*, pp. 175-185.

²⁶ The campaign in Yugoslavia cost the Germans exactly 558 casualties (151 killed, 392 wounded, 15 MIA).

was the conceptual disconnect between even the most decisive battlefield victories and how they might translate into a victorious war.

Moreover, this was an army that had a definite comfort zone: the central European heartland. By mid-1941, however, Germany's national leadership was pointing the army towards higher goals. One was the physical destruction of the Soviet Union and the maintenance of a 1300-mile long defensive position from Archangel on the Arctic Ocean to Astrakhan on the Caspian Sea. Another was the prosecution of a logistics-heavy campaign in the vast and faraway deserts of North Africa. Both proved to be impossible tasks for an army that, historically, had been designed for far more limited encounters.

Indeed, let us end our narrative in that fateful first week of December 1941. Events were already in train that would change things forever. A highly gifted Soviet commander was assembling massive mechanized formations in great secrecy, deploying them in a great arc in front of Moscow, and preparing them for a mighty blow against their German adversary. Likewise, in the Pacific Ocean, a great Japanese carrier task force was heading east out of home waters, taking the northerly route to elude prying eyes. That fleet was about to summon the United States to its rendezvous with destiny.

Hitler had won a war, conquering the European continent from 1939 to 1941. That war, however, was now over. A new and much greater conflict was about to begin, one that would finally lay bare, for all to see, the inadequacies of the "German way of war."