

# The Path to Blitzkrieg

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Doctrine and Training in the  
German Army, 1920–1939

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Sects and the Rebirth of Doctrine

## Seeckt's Military Thought

About his military abilities, however, there have been very few complaints. Facing the herculean task of restoring the German army after its collapse in 1918, he went about his work with wisdom and professionalism, blending the best of the old Prussian-German military tradition with the lessons that had been learned in the crucible of four years of total war. He was not an original military thinker, but his achievement laid the groundwork for the return of Germany to the ranks of the great military powers, a process that was under way well before Hitler came to power in 1933.

Stormtroop tactics necessitated the nearly complete decentralization of command, the surrender of much of an officer's authority to the squads, fire teams, and individual soldiers making the assault. It is a great paradox that this more decentralized, perhaps even "democratic," form of warfare arose not in the armies of the democratic west, but in imperial Germany.

Seeckt enshrined these land warfare developments in the new regulations. *F.u.G.* repeatedly emphasized that troops must be trained in the attack; they must proceed to the attack with flexibility in mind, seizing opportunities and bypassing obstacles.

Seeckt laid a great deal of emphasis on the possibility of achieving an envelopment of the enemy. In concert with a frontal attack, envelopment offered the highest possibility of a decisive victory. It could be most easily achieved, Seeckt felt, if the approach march of the attacking troops was aimed at the enemy's flank or rear, that is, if it were planned far in advance of the attacker's arrival on the battlefield. But he was clear on the point of what should happen if the envelopment failed: "If an envelopment is not possible, one must not shy away from the frontal attack."<sup>61</sup> Carrying out an envelopment required close cooperation between infantry and artillery. Through appropriate deployment in breadth and depth, he wrote, the commander could achieve unconditional superiority at some favorable position (terrain, a weak spot in the enemy lines), perhaps even a small-scale envelopment. A successful frontal attack would lead to a breach (*Einbruch*), which through further penetration in the direction of attack and through throwing back the enemy reserves might be increased to a breakthrough (*Durchbruch*). Once the enemy line was broken through, neighboring sectors of the front could themselves be enveloped and rolled up deeply.<sup>62</sup> But the victorious troops, he cautioned, had to advance as far forward as possible to engage the enemy reserves, rather than wheeling as soon as the breakthrough had been made. An immediate wheel by the breakthrough force would mean nothing but a tactical success. But a deep penetration that crushed the enemy reserves meant something else: victory.<sup>63</sup>

True to Seeckt's belief in the importance of combined arms, the concept of the interrelationship of infantry and artillery also received a great deal of attention. Artillery was an extremely powerful weapon, charged with the task of "breaking the resistance of the enemy, paving the way for its sister-weapon, the infantry, and with it fighting on to victory."<sup>64</sup> It had to be quick in deployment to be ready to support the infantry at the earliest possible moment. Infantry, for its part, had to recognize the limits of the artillery's ability and not put forward demands that the latter was incapable of meeting. "Infantry which acts without regard to its artillery usually hurts itself."<sup>65</sup>