

The Path to Blitzkrieg

Doctrine and Training in the
German Army, 1920–1939

Robert M. Citino



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Seeckt and the Rebirth of Doctrine

Seeckt's Military Thought

General Hans von Seeckt has generated the state of controversy among historians. The principal charge against him over the years has been political: that he deliberately refused to accept the legitimacy of the Weimar Republic in which he served as chief of the Army Command (1919) and Reichswehr (1920 to 1933). He had no love for the new republican system, at best, he was a *Verfassungspolitiker*, one who accepted the republic as a temporary expedient because no other options were currently available. He regarded the German Reich as the Reichswehr's as "a state within a state," in the original sense, and never fully integrated it into the political or social life of the republic. Refusing his own proposal, and those of some of the old officer corps, the army's ultimate survival hinged upon the complete denial of its legitimacy, at least in later years, except as force, a single mass of officers that constituted an essential key to the survival of the republic and the role of *total state*?

Back to the political controversy. 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.

To be successful in the postwar years, Seeckt might have been required a sense of other legitimacies. The disarmament provisions of the Treaty of Versailles left very little room for maneuver in the military sphere. The treaty left Germany with an army of only 100,000 men and which no more than 4,000 could be officers. It demanded the reorganization and armament of

"Storm tactics" characteristically involved decentralized units. But decentralized units were still large enough for meeting the need for recognizable command in the attack. After World War I and before the German army developed a new method of fighting, stormtroop (Sturmtruppen) or infiltration tactics were the solution to the trench stalemate. Infantry could now move across "no man's land" and come to grips with the enemy. Movement occurred in the battle front. It was not, by and large, an innovation derived by Germany's military leadership. It was the German contribution, based with an important exception on the modern battlefield and unified with old tactics that simply did not work, when recognized the tactical revolution. The German staff had little to do with it, though it did encourage tactical progress by forming an experimental assault detachment (Sturmabteilung) in 1915. Further were these tactics the invention of a single great mind. They were not, as they are with other tactics. "Storm tactics," after Hans Viktor Seeckt, the last nothing to do with their development, though he did see stormtroopers in the victory at Tannenberg in 1917. In fact, if any one deserves credit for the invention of stormtroop tactics, it was a man captain, Willy Martin Rüdiger, commander of the Assault Detachment.¹

The basis of stormtroop tactics was the use of independent squads or battalions (Sturmabteilungen), each armed with a variety of weapons – gas, close guns, grenades, flamethrowers, and artillery. Each group advanced on its own, its strength was made in constant contact with units on the flanks, and direction was simply suggested, left for the follow-up waves of regular infantry, artillery and artillery maintained the closest possible tactical support. Thus the experimental battle dress was summarized "little tactics." What began as a way of attack and siege "breakdown" was a way of assault. Germany found these new tactics as a method of "tactics with limited objectives." There were three in a larger scale of operations and operations of mobility. They were at the heart of Ludendorff's 1918 spring offensive, the grandiose plan to shatter the Allied position once and for all.²

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. "What was called the 'old' is 'new' tactics, which is German military doctrine" says the German staff.³

¹ The attack alone defines the term in the context. The responsibility of leader and group leader have been given here. Especially effective in the flanking and breakthrough of war in World War I and the attack in the enemy's

The emphasis on the *Einbruch* was not meant to put infantry on the offensive again. The infantry, he had to realize, needed enough to support the army's defensive posture, especially as it changed in the course of the fighting. He was required to develop a combined doctrine to work with the army with an emphasis on the defense of reserves. This is "doctrine of improvisation" was suitable to the rapid pace of modern war and it had to be based on the reality of the situation, taking into account weapons, equipment, and tactics.

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."⁶¹ 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.⁶² 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.⁶³

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."⁶⁴ 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."⁶⁵

Despite its emphasis on the attack, the manual also offered a detailed treatment of the defense. Seeckt's intent is evident in the aggressive and defensive-oriented nature of the paragraphs on defensive operations. The main principle was this: "Defense is justified only against a really superior