

# Influence of world war i on military innovation



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Although The Treaty of Versailles set up certain conditions that had to be followed, especially for Germany, the treaty did not stop Germany from carefully examining and analyzing WW I. Germany used the interwar period in order to use an after action review to develop different lessons and to carefully examine every aspect of military employment, not only during WW I, but also possible employments in the future.

Signing The Treaty of Versailles, on June 28, 1919, year, between Allied powers and Germany, the WW I officially ended. The treaty had fifteen (15) parts and four hundred and forty (440) articles which defined different aspects of future postwar relationships between countries involved in the war, and also limited postwar development of Germany in various fields. According to part five (5) of the treaty, Germany was forced to limit its military capabilities down to the one hundred thousand (100, 000) soldiers and four thousand (4000) officers, and in addition, the treaty prohibited Germany from possessing different classes of weapons. Facing strict and radical treaty demands, Germany appointed general Hans von Seeckt as commander-in-chief of the army, and that was the most important and most crucial element in German after war innovation. General von Seeckt put general staff in control of the army, along with officer's corps, carefully choosing, promoting and leading the most capable and experienced officers, and the rigorous selection induced officers who were able to understand future military engagements. Soon after as a result of this change, German army became " the only European force to undertake a ruthless, clear-headed analysis of recent military experience." [1] According to General von Seeckt, a detailed analysis was supposed to provide German army with

enough materials and lessons learned which would become guidance and later on a doctrinal template for future army development. As he noted: “ it is absolutely necessary to put the experience of the war in a broad light and collect this experience, while the impressions won on the battlefield are still fresh, and a major proportion of experienced officers are still in leading positions.”[2]In order to reexamine and analyze WW I, General von Seeckt established no less than fifty-seven (57) different committees, in various branches of the army, chaired by general officers and composed of men who had great experience and knowledge from WW I.

The committee 57, as already mentioned was established in different army branches, chaired by most experienced officers-generals and composed of roughly four hundred (400) officers who had huge experience from WW I. Most of those officers already have developed offensive and defensive doctrines, which were proved during WW I. The task for committee was concise and straightforward, the committee was supposed to examine everything that the war had brought. The final product was intended to be a short and concise examination of newly gained experiences and should include following:

- What new situation arose in the war that had not been considered before the war?
- How effective were prewar views in dealing with mentioned situations?
- What new guidelines have been developed for the use of new weapons in the war?
- Which new problems put forward by the war, the solution was not found yet?

The outcome and final reports and answers to questions mentioned above were robust and realistic assessments and provided detailed explanations of almost every situation that occurred during WWI, especially in the period between 1917 - 1918 year.[3]Examining those questions that general von Seeckt wanted to be reviewed by his committees, it showed that Germans used profound and complete research of last war reviewing recent battlefield experience as some kind of starting point for possible military engagements in future wars. Germans proved that creation of revolutionary military capabilities during a peace time definitely depends on detailed analysis of recent past.[4]Lessons learned from WWI, especially those developed from “Committee 57” had been used to develop famous military doctrine “Truppenführung” (Troop Leadership). That doctrinal document was an intellectual framework that would guide the future military engagements, and how to conduct war at the tactical level both in the air and on the ground.

As already mentioned, careful examination of recent past and lessons learned from WW I were incorporated into extraordinary Army Regulation 487 (Leadership and Battle with Combined Arms) or “Truppenführung”. This doctrine was a solid foundation for future military employments and actually was the way for future interwar innovation processes that Germany conducted. According to the new doctrine, maneuver played the most important role for future military engagements and those who would be able to move forces quickly with a combination of firepower and other enablers, would have a significant advantage. Offensive mindset, flexibility, initiative at all levels, exploitation and coherent leadership with decentralized

execution down to the lowest possible level were explained in details and provided guidance for leaders at all levels in German Army. In addition to maneuver, the doctrine emphasized the ability to transform and ability to adapt. Transformation and adaptation were crucial points for decentralized leadership mindset that Germany army adapted based on experience and lessons learned from the previous war. Although Germany was restricted by treaty, army leaders realized that there was a need to adapt and transform to new technological changes such as mechanized and armored units, and according to that they were seeking how to incorporate tanks and other armored carriers into new doctrine. They realized that future warfare would be highly dependent on the integration of mechanized and armored units, artillery and other technological advantages and recently discovered utilities such as radios. They already examined British use of tanks and one of the reports from the 1926 year emphasized speed, ability to strike independently and combined arms maneuver possibilities. From the 1929 year till the 1933 year, Germans used the opportunity to train their crews at the Kazan tank school in Russia, and it will lead to the development of armored units with a combination of firepower, maneuver, speed, radios and artillery fire support. Later on, at the beginning of WW II, this form of warfighting will be known as “ Blitzkrieg” or Lightning war.[5]

Development of Armored units - tanks at the early part of the 1930 year in Germany, and the creation of armored warfare expanded military capabilities and possible employments, and when Hitler came to power, in the 1933 year, he initiated a massive rearmament program and requested development of first armored units. By the 1935 year, the German army had

three armored (panzer) divisions and by the 1940 year ten armored divisions.[6]As already mentioned, at the beginning of WW II, Germans used “ Blitzkrieg” as a new form of warfighting, combined with the maneuver, speed, artillery support, and close air support and shocked the rest of the world. In the 1939 year, Germany invaded Poland and using already mentioned a form of warfighting it took them less than a month to crush resistance in Poland. It is important to mention that immediately after the invasion of Poland, German army conducted another after action review in order to prepare them self for following actions. Next country on Hitler’s wish list was France. The Invasion of France started on May 10<sup>th</sup> 1940 year, and for less than six weeks Germany conquered Belgium, Netherlands, Luxemburg, and France. The allied forces were defeated and forced to retreat to Great Britain. The French collapse was sudden and totally unexpected. “ The end came with the surrender of France on 22 June. Hitler insisted on signing the document of capitulation in the same railway carriage used when Germany had surrendered in 1918. The humiliation of France was complete”.[7]The combined-arms and armored warfare were proved by the end of the June 1940 year. The devastating victory against France and allied forces was described by French observer flying high over the advancing Germans, he described the outcome: “ The German tank detachments that move easily across the countryside because no French tanks oppose them produce irreparable damage even though the actual destruction they cause is apparently superficial. the tanks play the role of those chemical agents that destroy not the organism as whole, but its nervous system. Throughout the landscape across which the Germans have swept like lightening, the

French army, even it appears almost intact, has ceased to be an army. the enemy moves as he wishes..”.[8]

Even though German Armed Forces were limited by The Treaty of Versailles, the treaty did not stop them to examine and incorporate the best practices from WWI into the newly developed doctrine, and to develop capable officer’s corps which will lead the German Army during World War II. It showed that Germany used interwar period for adaptation, innovation, and development of combined arms maneuver incorporating speed, audacity, tempo, radios, artillery fire support and close air support and decentralized execution down to the lowest possible units.

It became clear and obvious, even today, that after action reviews play an important role in the most armies of the world. Lessons learned and their incorporation into different manuals with constant innovation and adaptation can help commanders and staffs to avoid any possible problem or surprise. For example, the United States Army is constantly conducting after action reviews and adopting the best possible practices in order to be able to answer to any challenge or threat. Since the 2001 year, when global war on terror started, the US Army adopted several manuals and operating procedures as a countermeasure for terrorist actions.

Notes:

Geoffrey Parker, *The Cambridge Illustrated History of Warfare, Chapter 15, The World in Conflict, Cambridge University Press, NY, pages 299-300*

<sup>2</sup> James S. Corum, *The Roots of Blitzkrieg, Hans von Seeckt and German Military Reform* (Lawrence, KS, 1992), p. 37.

<sup>3</sup> Murray & Millett, *Military Innovation in the Interwar Period, Chapter 1, Armored Warfare* (Cambridge University Press, NY), pages 36-37

<sup>4</sup> Knox & Murray, *The dynamics of Military Revolution 1300-2050, Chapter 9, Contingency and fragility of the German RMA, Cambridge University Press, NY, 1991, pages 156-159*

<sup>5</sup> Murray & Millett, *Military Innovation in the Interwar Period, Chapter 1, Armored Warfare Cambridge University Press, NY, pages 37-40*

<sup>6</sup> Geoffrey Parker, *The Cambridge Illustrated History of Warfare, Chapter 15, The World in Conflict, Cambridge University Press, NY, pages 299-300*

<sup>7</sup> [http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/worldwars/wwtwo/fall\\_france\\_01.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/worldwars/wwtwo/fall_france_01.shtml)

<sup>8</sup> Knox & Murray, *The dynamics of Military Revolution 1300-2050, Chapter 9, Contingency and fragility of the German RMA, Cambridge University Press, NY, 1991, page 155*

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[1] Geoffrey Parker, *The Cambridge Illustrated History of Warfare, Chapter 15, The World in Conflict, Cambridge University Press, NY, pages 299-300*

[2] James S. Corum, *The Roots of Blitzkrieg, Hans von Seeckt and German Military Reform* (Lawrence, KS, 1992), p. 37.



[3]Murray & Millett, *Military Innovation in the Interwar Period, Chapter 1, Armored Warfare (Cambridge University Press, NY), pages 36-37*

[4]Knox & Murray, *The dynamics of Military Revolution 1300-2050, Chapter 9, Contingency and fragility of the German RMA, Cambridge University Press, NY, 1991, pages 156-159*

[5]Murray & Millett, *Military Innovation in the Interwar Period, Chapter 1, Armored Warfare Cambridge University Press, NY, pages 37-40*

[6]Geoffrey Parker, *The Cambridge Illustrated History of Warfare, Chapter 15, The World in Conflict, Cambridge University Press, NY, pages 299-300*

[7][http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/worldwars/wwtwo/fall\\_france\\_01.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/worldwars/wwtwo/fall_france_01.shtml)

[8]Knox & Murray, *The dynamics of Military Revolution 1300-2050, Chapter 9, Contingency and fragility of the German RMA, Cambridge University Press, NY, 1991, page 155*