Blitzkrieg essay sample

Blitzkrieg, meaning lightening war, is a term that was coined by western journalists in 1939 to describe the combination and concentrated force of aerial, mechanized and mobile infantry power to push forward through enemy lines, a tactic greatly associated and heavily implemented by the Germans in World War II. The aim of using a co-ordinated and highly mobile attack was to take the opposition by surprise and therefore unprepared against a rapid, hard-hitting strike.

Although this technique provided a multitude of successes, like any military strategy, it has its limitations and its effectiveness varied with each individual battle. In order to establish to what extent Blitzkrieg could be considered a turning point, I will examine the effect it’s had on the way wars have been conducted since its recognition as a credited technique and compare it with previous war tactics such as static and defensive warfare which was favoured in World War One.

The development of weapons and rapid industrialisation in the 19th century eradicated the efficiency of defensive warfare, leaving an alternative being sought after. As powerful weaponry became more readily available and easier to posses, succeeding in attacks became much harder, Blitzkrieg provided a solution to these indecisive a strung out wars and it was wholly welcomed. Static and defensive warfare had been apparent in battles for a considerable amount of time and was believed to be the only way to fight for an extended period of time.

There are several battles to exemplify this including The American Civil war, The Crimean war and infamously world war one, the turning point for this

tactic. It became apparent that technology had advanced to far for this strategy; it would be a state of stalemate for to long and extremely costly with regards to lives as well as military expenses. Although Blitzkrieg was executed to its greatest scale under the German army, it is debatable to whether they had simply harnessed a method through the studies of other military documentations and theories.

Two decades previous to Germany's tactical war effort, J. F. C Fuller noted his proposed armed strategies through plan 1919 in which he highlighted the advantages of a mobile battlefield closely supported by aerial forces to disorganize and cut off troops. He also criticised the tactics that were used in the First World War, rendering a war of attrition and defences obsolete and an inefficient use of resources. However, although the ground work was there, it is impossible to label these early stages of blitzkrieg a turning point as the plans were never put into action or significantly recognised by British or Allied forces.

There are two ways of destroying an organization: 1. by wearing it down, 2. by rendering it inoperative. In war the first comprises the killing, wounding, capturing and disarming of the enemy's soldiers- body warfare. The second, the rendering inoperative of his power of command- brain warfare. To take a single man as an example: the first method may be compared to a succession of slight wounds which will eventually cause him to bleed to death; the second- a shot through the brain"[1].

This extract from Fullers " Military history of the western world" refers to the necessity of cutting off a power at the source as quickly and efficiently as

possible, a methodology picked up upon in later years by the “ Father of Blitzkrieg” Heinz Guderian. Blitzkrieg was a turning point with regards to the use of technology in a more efficient way than had previously been displayed. Britain’s debut of the tank in World War One had left a lot to be desired, they were slow, inefficient and subject to an unprecedented amount of mechanical difficulties, leaving their potential overlooked by many.

However, Hitler, who was a Corporal in the Great War, understood that these lumbering metal giants were to be the future of warfare and used this to his advantage. During the inter-war periods Germany’s arms industry grew rapidly with specific focus on the development of efficient and powerful tanks such as the Panzer IV, this was credited to the ideas of Heinz Guderian who specified the importance of mechanised and mobile forces in modern warfare.

The officers and men in many cases come to consider the approach of tanks a sufficient explanation for not fighting. Their sense of duty is sufficient to make them fight against infantry, but if tanks appear, many feel they are justified in surrendering”[2] This quote from a German prisoner highlights the impact tanks had on opposing forces, their visual splendour and overall force left many feeling overpowered and vulnerable.

Although tanks had been used previously on their own, the concept of combining them with them with combat air and mobile infantry force lies solely with Blitzkrieg; however, it is debatable that this strategy would have appeared much earlier if the industry and equipment were available, making

blitzkrieg less of a turning point and more of a natural development to coincide with the technology available.

A reason against Blitzkrieg being considered a turning point is that, although a proportionate amount of the Germans success' in World War Two were had under the implementation of tactic, it is questionable to whether strategic superiority was the key to their victories as opposed to their opposition being unprepared. When Germany invaded Poland in 1939, they already held a major numerical advantage with regards to men, tanks and the powerful Luftwaffe (German air force).

Poland's industry was considerably under-developed in comparison and their technology was out-dated, a large proportion of their new military developments had been sold to fund what they thought would be a defensive war in later years. Even without the application of Blitzkrieg, did Poland really stand a fighting chance against the German Army?

This theory is also applicable to the Germans invasion of France in 1940, they had spent a large amount of their military budget on defence tactic such as the Maginot Line instead of up-dating their arms industry and investing in modern technology, the French High Command in 1940 was not even equipped with radio to control their forces effectively. If allied countries had been less conservative in their views by preparing themselves for a repeat of World War One, would this of not made Blitzkrieg less effective, if not obsolete?

As Blitzkrieg had never been used at such a large scale and to such effect before the Germans employed it, there were factors which the opposition

could exploit, causing it to be considered less of a turning point. Hitler and other leading German military minds had not pre-anticipated the full importance of maintaining air superiority throughout the duration of the war. However, allied forces, particularly Britain, understood that aerial supremacy was crucial to overcoming the force of a Blitzkrieg attack. If one component of blitzkrieg is overtaken, the rest would unwillingly fall apart.

The Battle of the Bulge credited some of its success to the existence of heavy clouds, keeping allied air forces grounded. “ Anyone who fights, even with the most modern weapons, against and enemy who dominates the air, is like a primitive warrior who stands against modern forces, with the same limitations, and the same chance of success”. [3] This extract from the Rommel papers (Field Marshall Erwin Rommel -1953) highlights, with hind sight, the importance of aerial forces, something that had been overlooked by the Germans and may have ultimately contributed to their downfall.

However, this flaw in the blitzkrieg tactic has not gone unnoticed in its post-war implementations. Blitzkrieg also harbored further limitation with logistics which could prevent it from being considered a turning point. This was revealed by the German’s attack on the Soviet Union in 1941 known as operation Barbarossa. There were a series of initial victories for the Germans against the ill-prepared Red Army who believed at attack would not occur until at least 1942 leaving them with technology they hadn’t yet mastered and strategies not properly thought through.

Stucker dive bomber destroyed mechanized forces and inflicted heavy losses on the soviet that didn’t have the resources to replace them. The Red Army

was soon pushed back to the gates of Moscow whilst other major cities were taken over. However, due to bad logistical planning, the Germans soon found their supply units stretched to far and were unable to not only receive food and ammunition but the necessary fuel to maintain the mobility. Supply planes were in limitation after a futile attempt to air-supple a whole army in Stalingrad instead of ordering for their retreat leaving Germany without the vital supplies it needed.

The weather was also a vital factor in bringing the German's downfall, Russia's terrain was difficult and the closing in of winter soon brought unmanageable conditions. The Germans had pushed to far forward in an attempt to capture some of Russia's vital natural resources but soon found themselves surrounded with many of the resources they desired having been destroyed in the retreat, the Red Army promptly organized themselves and were able to push the German army back to the Berlin border.

Up until this point, Blitzkrieg had only been practiced on smaller countries in which the supply units were able to keep up with the mobile war effort, a crucial element in its success. The failure of the German's in World War two revealed the limitations blitzkrieg held. However, if they were of such significance and it was not a turning point, it would have been a tactic avoided in later warfare in favour of a more efficient technique. The problems it faced during its early implementation could be easily recognized and therefore improved upon.

During the six day war, Israel was fully aware that it had to dominate the skies if it wanted to succeed in conquering the Arabian nations with

blitzkrieg. Their first crucial move was to eliminate the Egyptian air force in a surprise attack. The Egyptian air force was the strongest and most powerful of all the Arab nations, it consisted of 420 modern and predominantly soviet built air craft. Israel claimed it destroyed 416 Arab aircraft, while losing 26 of their own in the first two days of the war, a move which subsequently and significantly aided them in winning the war.

Air superiority is an element which the German's neglected in the second world which is, debatably, what bought they're downfall; Israel understood it was a crucial aspect of Blitzkrieg and applied it with great success. It was adopted by the allied forces on D-day, although it took them an extensive period to organize themselves and move inland, a full scale blitzkrieg attack was launched incorporating air power and land attacks.

Blitzkrieg has also made appearances in the Gulf war in which coalition forces destroyed all communication systems with a three day airborne attack before ordering a mass attack of combined tank and infantry power annihilating opposition in Kuwait. The aim in all these war efforts is to weaken the opposition's defenses, cause disorganization through an airborne surprise attack before sending in a mass land force of tanks and mobile infantry to annihilate what's left with speed and force, the ground work of blitzkrieg.

Since its debut in 1939, blitzkrieg has been applied to almost all war efforts and to what appears great success. However, I believe its victories relied heavily upon the weaknesses of the opponent as described in the triumphs over France and Poland, if other countries had not been so conservative in

the tactics and developed their arms industry instead of relying heavily upon defenses I do not think that Blitzkrieg would have accomplished such success. Along with this, I think as a tactic it was developed to coincide with the advancing technologies that were becoming available rather than a break-through in strategy.

It is still not a flawless technique that can be executed with precise accuracy each time; logistics and limitation still hinder it from being a seamless process. Overall, I believe it was the technology at the forefront of being a turning point, blitzkrieg develops and changes with each new advancements and although I believe it to have significant input in the way war efforts are conducted, I do not think it is successful enough as a strategy alone to be deemed a turning point.