



## "May the king have my head after the battle," or "the preponderance of the spirit over the letter,"

military-Earth thinking notebook

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Histoire & stratégie

**"It was the tanks, the planes, the tactics of the Germans that surprised our leaders to the point of bringing them to where they are today" [1]. With these words, and emphasizing beforehand the German ground and air mechanical storm which plunged France into the throes of defeat, General de Gaulle seems to minimize the key factor which allowed this dazzling victory of the German armies in June 1940. Indeed, more than tanks, planes, artillery or motorised troops, it was the doctrines and training of German staff officers that got the better of our armies, and above all their spirit of initiative developed from the lowest echelons to the highest.**

1) Appeal of 18 June 1940, General de Gaulle.

### **L'spirit of initiative, cardinal virtue of the German officer in the inter-war period**

The German officer has often been ridiculed as being stubborn, being described as someone stubborn, incapable of any questioning and obeying, like a machine, higher orders that he is unable to understand [1]. 1) This is an ancient representation that was already erroneous at the time. 2) However, this false image very quickly crept into the imagination of the French officers, who had been dazzled by their glory brought about by the victory of the First World War. The latter, perhaps a little too arrogant, neglected the study of the use of new technologies and refused to question certain lessons learned from the Great War [3]. On the contrary, the German army, although reduced to its simplest expression by its defeat in 1918, did not fail to continue working on the evolution of its doctrine.

Thus, General von Seeckt, then head of the armies, did not cease between 1920 and 1926, to train his army to the new forms of combat while safeguarding the German military spirit in spite of the material and human deprivation in the military field imposed by the Treaty of Versailles. For him, will combined with intelligence made it possible to direct action in three successive phases: decision, command and execution. But will will always prevail

over intelligence without erasing it [4]. 4] The Treaty of Versailles reached the heart of the physical body of the German army but, by various directives and regulations governing command, the conduct of troops in combat and the training of officers of General von Seeckt and his successors prevent the total collapse of their army and prepare its succession from 1933 onwards[5]. 5] In 1921, he published new regulations for the benefit of the entire German army, which all his officers had to know and apply.

In his introduction, he announces that this document deals with a modern army, equipped with the last technologies of the time and able to impose the will of its leaders [6]. A tactical theme that appeared in the *Militär-Wochenblatt* in 1933 thus includes a study on the use of tanks and large armored and motorized units when Germany did not yet officially possess any [7]. It is a question of carrying out a mobile and aggressive combat by using the fire power under armor of this type of material as well as by exploiting by its speed of concentration the effect of surprise created in a given place and at a given time, if possible after overflowing the flanks or on the rear of the enemy.

The cardinal virtue required of all officers, especially staff officers, is their spirit of initiative and sense of responsibility. Thus, the full and entire responsibility of the officer is always put forward, not to restrain him but on the contrary to ensure maximum freedom of action. Thus, the officer's full and complete responsibility is always put forward, not to restrain him but on the contrary to ensure him a maximum of freedom of action by not forcing him to wait for orders from the higher echelon which will come too late or will not be adapted to the situation which will have inevitably evolved [8]. He can and must, if necessary, disobey the letter in order to preserve the spirit of the mission and thus ensure the success of the great unity to which he belongs. In order to select staff officers and to compensate for the temporary disappearance of the war academy, General von Seeckt instituted a compulsory annual examination: the *Wehrkreisprüfung*. Tactical topics often involve bold choices to be made by the candidate officer. The officer must always be aware of his responsibilities within the overall manoeuvre and if necessary act on his own and without direct orders if he feels the situation requires it. This emphasis on initiative lasted until the beginning of the Second World War, as evidenced by one of the tactical themes proposed to the entrance examination for the war academy (reinstated in the meantime despite the ban of the Treaty of Versailles) in 1938: "The commander of an infantry regiment placed in corps reserve, who moves into the zone of main effort and, due to the absence of order, leads to consider an intervention on his own initiative (...)". "The proposed solution shows that the accurate assessment of the situation, thanks to which a break in the front line could be revealed and the design of a manoeuvre within the framework of the intention expressed by the higher command, complemented by the use of the commanders' own initiative, is not a matter of course. The proposed solution shows that an accurate assessment of the situation, thanks to which a break in the front line could be revealed and the conception of a manoeuvre within the framework of the intention expressed by the superior command, complemented by the firmness of character which knows how to resist calls for help and by the full awareness of the responsibility voluntarily assumed are the indispensable conditions for taking a decision in the direction desired by the army corps" [9]. The spirit of discipline, although central in any army, does not exclude the spirit of initiative, which is sought and encouraged in the German army, especially among its officers.

### **A total impregnation of doctrine and an abundant military intellectual life: the right to controversy**

This singular state of mind in a Western army is also particularly well conveyed outside

officer training schools by the publication and dissemination of numerous tactical and doctrinal manuals. In particular, the *Militär-Wochenblatt* (edited from 1816 to 1942) concentrates numerous reflections on the conduct of operations at all levels as well as proposals for the use of new military technologies, without a priori or fear of sanctions from the hierarchy. Concrete case studies, edited in a small, easily transportable format and coming from the First World War [10], complete the permanent training of the officers of the Reichswehr from 1918 to 1935, then of the Wehrmacht from 1935 onwards. They can address tactical or strategic operations, providing numerous concrete examples and other recommendations. The aim is to show the officers the atmosphere in which they will have to use their knowledge and apply authority [11]. 11] In this inter-war period, many military publications therefore encouraged officers to think about their profession and put forward the most daring ideas.

Thus, proposals for new doctrines came to light and were then integrated into the regulations for the use of arms. Artillery General von Eimannsberger was thus able to theorise and test the implementation during the Second World War of the use of tanks under autonomous command. In his writings, he was not afraid to attack the dogmas then in place and to confront the most prestigious leaders of the time. He developed at will a distinction between the old and the modern by opposing the "old" weapons that are the infantry and cavalry to the new weapons that he identifies as being the armor and aviation. He notes the importance of the necessary cooperation, but defends an autonomous use of these new weapons free from the guardianship of the so-called "old" weapons [12]. 12] But the fighter remains at the heart of his thinking: "In war, it is man who decides and not the machine. But we always forget to add that today the best soldier cannot fight, and even better, cannot win, without a machine" [13]. One of his students, General Guderian, published a book in 1936 [14] in which he developed his ideas which he applied successfully during the French campaign.

### **On the look-out for new ideas in the enemy**

Finally, the study of the enemy's doctrine continues and is even intensified. Numerous articles on the French army's combat methods as well as on the work of its staffs and the training of its officers are produced. They did not hesitate to follow and study the various French exercises and publications and were able to highlight the fundamental differences and exploit the weaknesses identified in anticipation of future operations. Thus, they note changes in combat doctrines and do not hesitate to draw all the consequences. German doctrine is radically governed by an offensive spirit which is reflected in the various regulations on the use of weapons. The leader's freedom of action is constantly emphasized and valued at all levels of command. The ultimate goal lies in seizing opportunities that will enable him to gain the upper hand over his enemy through bold but thoughtful actions. The dangers associated with this offensive doctrine are not, however, dismissed or relegated to second place. At no time should the officer's freedom of action be restricted, he must judge in his soul and conscience and then order accordingly in order to ensure the success of the manoeuvre in progress and, if necessary, by using unconventional means or means not initially intended for this purpose. On the contrary, the German reports on French doctrine note a totally opposite approach in the conduct of troops. The defensive spirit was sought and valued. Taking the initiative is discouraged by highlighting all the dangers of exposing oneself to the fog of war and the randomness of battle. It is necessary above all to plan, to calculate everything and to stick to the stated plan without deviating from it or failing to carry it out. Strategic or tactical surprise must be evacuated by means of a multitude of ready-to-use plans and variants. The officer is therefore infallible in his orders if he sticks to the plan

and its derivatives. However, German officers emphasize the most immediate danger induced by this type of military thinking: immobility or lack of responsiveness to an unforeseen event. The impossibility of exploiting an advantageous situation when it arises and has not been previously envisaged<sup>15</sup>. German officers were thus warned of the strengths and weaknesses of the French command well before the start of the 1940 campaign. Similar studies concerning the use of tanks and planes as well as the use of motorised troops were conducted with the same aim in mind, in order to detect any strength or weakness in the implementation of these new means by the French army.

**Thus, it is through the training of its officers and** the selection of those best able to serve on the staff that the German army has been able to maintain a spirit forged for combat and capable of initiative and decision-making. Moreover, through constant reflection, through the existence of places where new ideas can be expressed such as the *Militär-Wochenblatt*, but also through the ability to question itself in order to integrate these ideals into its own actions. By constantly thinking, by the existence of places where new ideas such as the *Militär-Wochenblatt* can be expressed, but also by the ability to question itself in order to integrate these new ideals into its doctrine, this army has succeeded in adopting and developing the new technologies in armament available at the time to develop new forms of combat that are still new. Finally, a permanent monitoring of the doctrines and training of French officers and staffs as well as the almost systematic criticism of French doctrinal production enabled German officers to detect the strengths and weaknesses of the French army in order to exploit them during the 1940 offensive. All of this was only possible thanks to this famous spirit of initiative which set as an imperative to act in the spirit of one's leader, without necessarily respecting the letter if the circumstances required it, and this as much on the battlefields as during training. "Tell the king that he can do with my head what he wants after the battle, but that for the time being, he must authorize me to use it for his service" <sup>16</sup>.

1) On this subject, refer to the numerous caricatures of the famous painter-drawer Jean-Jacques Waltz called "Hansi".

2) "For my part, I have never had the opportunity to see or hear a German officer, who put an original idea before me", P. de Pardiellan, "... I have never had the opportunity to see or hear a German officer, who put an original idea before me", P. de Pardiellan. The German army such as it is"», p.106.

3) The little investment in military aviation and the doctrine of positional warfare embodied in the Maginot Line are examples of this.

4) "The essential thing is action. It has three moments: the decision born of thought, the preparation of the execution or the command, the execution itself. In the three stages of action, it is the will that directs. Will emanates from character; character is more important to the man of action than intelligence. Intelligence without will has no value; will without intelligence is dangerous", General von Seeckt, "...Thoughts of a soldier"», p.169.

5) "It was a question of setting up an organization which gave satisfaction for the present and allowed and initiated the transformations, reorganizations, developments and enlargements for the future", General von Seeckt, "...Die Reichswehr».

6) This treaty "refers to the strength, armament and equipment of the modern army of a great power, and not to those of the German army of 100,000 men created in execution of the peace treaty". General von Seeckt, "Weapons control and combat operating in conjunction with each other"», p.3.

7) Colonel Eugène Carrias, "German Military Thought"», p.358.

8) "A sense of responsibility is the chief quality of a leader. All leaders must always remain convinced and constantly remind their subordinates that omissions, waste of time, are bigger faults than a bad choice in the use of means" Ibid, p.7.

9) *Militär-Wochenblatt* no. 28 of January 6, 1939.

10] For example: Military history of the troop-12 examples from the World War 1914-1918. Lieutenant Greiner and Major Ebeling.

[11] Colonel Eugène Carrias, "German Military Thought"», p.358.

12] "The normal evolution of the armoured weapon requires air and light. There is nothing to be hoped for if, like Cinderella, it must remain close to its stepmother the infantry and even the cavalry to serve them; for these stepmothers will jealously watch over that their daughter-in-law remains small and small and can be employed only for secondary work... A quick decision cannot be envisaged with the known means of combat. New weapons must be used. These can only be the armoured and air force weapons used in cooperation with the old weapons". Article by Artillery General von Eimannsberger, Panzertaktik, Militär-Wochenblatt No. 27 of 15 January 1937.

13] Article of Artillery General von Eimannsberger, Panzertaktik, Militär-Wochenblatt n°27 of January 15, 1937.

14] General Guderian, Achtung-Panzer !

15] "One finds as a fundamental principle in the German regulations the will to destroy the enemy, which dominates the offensive spirit. The French regulation, by its search for safety, is dominated by the defensive spirit". "Our conception of the conduct of encounter combat leaves the leader, even of a small unit, a great deal of freedom of action. He is thus able to exploit any favourable situation and achieve success on his own. It can naturally lead to miscalculations. French regulations, for fear of the latter, bind their subordinate leaders and leave them little initiative. The French want to act safely in all circumstances; they expose themselves to having their battle plan destroyed before it can be put into effect, by an energetic and enterprising adversary before it could be carried out, and thus to be trailed by events from the very beginning of the action. "Fundamental differences in the encounter combat according to French and German regulations", Militär-Wochenblatt n°36 of March 25, 1936.

16] General von Seydlitz at the battle of Zorndorf in 1756.

Officer of the train weapon, Squadron Leader Stéphane TRUNKWALD commanded the 1st Air Delivery Squadron of the 1st Parachute<sup>Train</sup> Regiment. He carried out several external operations notably in Chad, the Republic of Ivory Coast and Lebanon. He is currently serving as a liaison officer at the Air Defence and Air Operations Command and is about to carry out a six-month secondment to SHAPE in Mons.

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