



From one war to the next: the experience of the Sturmtruppen in the transmission of German military thought

military-Earth thinking notebook

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From the autumn of 1914, the operations of the Great War came to a standstill and the belligerents settled into trench warfare. The search for a breakthrough became the preoccupation of the staffs, who reacted differently to this situation. The most innovative solution came from the German side. It is in keeping with the imperial military tradition and contributes to the transmission of its values beyond its dissolution.

"Defense is an action of a lower order which develops in the one who employs it a moral inferiority that is not possible to be achieved by the other. no material advantage is capable of redeeming" [1], asserted Colonel de Grandmaison [2] in 1911 during a conference at the School of War. This teaching illustrates current military thought. The decisive victory is obtained by movement and offensive. However, in the autumn of 1914, the operations of the Great War came to a standstill and the belligerents settled into trench warfare. The search for a breakthrough became the preoccupation of the staffs, who reacted differently to this situation. In the west, although pragmatically installed in a defensive posture until 1917, the most innovative solution came from the German side.

The creation of the Sturmtruppen (assault troops) appears to be an example of tactical adaptation to a fixed situation. It is a question of brutally and unexpectedly disorganising the adversary, seizing the opportunity that presents itself thanks to the initiative of the tactical leader. The objective is to obtain a break and then follow up with a strategic victory. The success of these battalions forced the German General Staff to establish as doctrine a *modus operandi* generated by its troops. This experience is part of the imperial military tradition and contributes to the transmission of its values beyond its dissolution.

This initiative, initially mixed, will bring in 1918 an effective tactical response which alone will not be able to lead to the decisive victory. However, the spirit and experience that resulted from it would fuel German thinking during the inter-war period and lead to the victory of 1940.

The birth of the Sturmtruppen

From the winter of 1914-1915, the Western Front came to a standstill in modern siege warfare. Permanent clashes were followed by battles that sought to break up the war. 3] This situation made it necessary to create troops specialising in reconnaissance and the breaking up of the front. In this perspective, the German army forms since 1915 elite battalions: the Sturmtruppen. Empirical, the use of these units becomes generalized and formalized following the successes of Caporetto and Riga in 1917. Several reasons explain their use in 1918 on the Western Front.

- 1917: The German need to break through

As a continental power, Germany is encircled and its resources are drying up. The effects of the naval blockade organized by the British and French fleets, the entry into the war by the Americans in May 1917, which reversed the balance of power in the west, as well as the armistice concluded on 15 December 1917 with the Bolshevik government, pushed the German general staff to act quickly to achieve decisive victory. The challenge was to regain movement, cross several lines of defence, exploit the breach and reach various nerve centres in order to avoid the wear and tear that the country, economically, politically and socially, no longer seemed able to withstand. There is therefore a need for innovation in order to overcome defensive walls that were previously impermeable.

- Different allied approaches

The French and English armies will react differently. Certainly, "corps francs" were created, as Joseph Darnand, who took a German staff prisoner on 14 July 1918, testifies, but they remained confined to harassment and reconnaissance missions within regular units [4]. Contrary to the German project, there would be no elite unit, but a desire to improve the general level of the French infantry. Thus, as early as 1915, Captain Laffargue's handbook *Study on the attack in the current period of the war* attempts to clarify the tactics of the infantry in the conditions of positional warfare [5].

The British did not modify their approach despite the terrible losses of the summer of 1916 on the Somme. The infantry will keep the same *modus operandi* throughout the war because the decisive battle is thought only through the "mass" of infantrymen. The novelty came in 1917 with the use of tanks which combined concentrated fire, armour and movement capacity. However, the great vulnerability of the tanks, their limited number and the absence of accompanying troops did not allow the breakthrough achieved to be exploited.

It was in Italy that the Sturmtruppen principle was copied through the creation in 1917 of the (daring) Arditi. As in Germany, the costly frontal assaults on the Isonzo forced the Italian general staff to rethink the breakthrough around autonomous detachments. The Arditi formed a battalion in its own right which, faced with a frozen front, with more efficient equipment, sought to shake up the Austrian lines.

The Germans wanted to create and equip an elite corps capable of winning the decisive victory, the Allies bet on a cumulative process of operational success that wears out the adversary [6].

- A mixed first experience

The first Sturmtruppen experience ended in 1915 in failure. The first engagement was made without doctrine or manuals. In fact, despite an effort of equipment, training and selection, the command does not know how to use this new unit. It was employed in May 1915 in the Vimy area to carry out earthworks and reinforce the infantry. Without support weapons or preparation, it was called upon to conduct a counter-attack that would cause heavy losses and would not demonstrate the expected added value. Poorly employed, dispersed and deprived of autonomy, the Sturmtruppen went back to training. Nevertheless, the Germans remained convinced that the key to success lay in the cooperation and manoeuvring of low-level complementary and autonomous units. They were given another chance in the Vosges in 1915. The detachments, which enjoyed a great deal of latitude, infiltrated and then overwhelmed the French on the Hartmannswillerkopf. Evidence is made that an autonomous detachment combining within it effective support (Flammenwerfer) can locally disorganize the enemy device.

The expansion of the Sturmtruppen

The expansion of the Sturmtruppen was under the command of Ludendorff, who replaced Falkenhayn as supreme commander of the army from 1916. After the tactical successes of Caporetto and Riga in 1917, Ludendorff decided on the massive use of these battalions and the generalisation of their *modus operandi*. On¹ January 1918, the document *L'attaque dans la guerre de positions* (Attack in positional warfare) enshrines this *modus operandi* as a genuine joint doctrine.

- A chaos tactic

Ludendorff returned to the practices of the imperial army which, since 1811 and the creation of the *Kriegsakademie*, imposed autonomy and decentralization of combat down to the lowest levels. They do not train strategists, but tactical technicians who are given a large degree of autonomy. In attacks, the assault battalions were divided into several detachments of autonomous assault groups, which included sappers, aerialists and machine-gunners, capable of destroying obstacles and fixing the enemy. The assaults took place in three successive waves. The first wave probes the enemy device in search of weak points. The second, 250 meters behind, isolates the nests of resistance without trying to neutralize them so as not to waste time. The aim is to create disorder and prevent any reinforcement. The third wave, equipped with heavy equipment (mortars), supports the second one and protects the flanks to allow the rest of the division to neutralize the resistance and enter the breach [7]. The whole is supported as closely as possible by the artillery's rolling fire. This tactic is described by the British military historian Liddell Hart as "expanding torrent" . Speed and initiative are crucial, seizing the opportunity is essential. Such was the surprise in the Allied lines that in 1917 the general commanding the 29th^{British} Division had to flee in pyjamas to avoid being taken prisoner. The focus is on "what has to happen" and not "how to get there ". The prerequisites remain surprise and preparation. To this end, the artillery concentrates its fire in a limited time and space in order to preserve the effect of surprise by targeting the command centres [8]. Air support is an excellent complement to artillery by strafing and bombarding nests of resistance. The drill and rehearsal of the Sturmtruppen became permanent in training and often executed before an operation "We repeated the almost forgotten forms of skirmish and movement warfare" [9].

- Synergy of means

Industrialization and technical evolution make it possible to develop new weapons. The merit of the German army is to combine the use of these weapons within the same combat unit in order to obtain a synergy of effects on the ground or against an enemy. Thus, the Sturm-battalion Nr. 5 is composed, in addition to the four pioneer assault companies, of a machine-gun company (8 to 12 pieces), a Minenwerfer detachment, a flame-throwing group and an assault gun group. "The unit's firepower was unmatched at the time" [10]. Staff Officer Guderian sees the commitment of these units. He understands the need for good communication to coordinate support/movement, the necessary proximity of the command echelon in the conduct of operations, and sees Germany's weaknesses in a war of attrition [11].

- A state of mind and experience

The feeling of belonging to a selected and better trained elite appears as a factor of motivation and adhesion. The requirement for training contributes to the improvement and dissemination of know-how. The assault infantryman becomes a seasoned technician. In "Steel Storms" Ernst Jünger emphasises the importance of having one of his NCOs receive and then pass on the lessons learned. This investment is "a first major teaching. An additional investment in human resources generally gives surprising tactical results" [12]. Assault troops nurture a spirit of cohesion that consecrates the cult of war sometimes to the detriment of the rest of the army [13]. This vision, idealized and politicized by the Third Reich, contributed to the myth of the Panzergrenadier of the Second World War. This experience of the assault troops will fuel the reflections of many German military leaders of 1940, as shown in the book "The Infantry Attacks" [14] by Marshal Rommel. Rommel describes the need to command from the front and the importance of surprising his opponent with massive fire support. The transition from experience to doctrine was made from the field to the headquarters. The experience of these men inspired German leaders, imposed itself on the staffs who established it as doctrine, and fed into the thinking of the inter-war period. The spirit and men of these battalions will influence the new Weimar Army.

Despite undeniable tactical successes, these troops could not offer Germany the strategic victory it had so long hoped for. This failure of the "tacticalization of strategy" [15] was due to poor logistics, heavy losses and the lack of reserves needed to exploit the breakthrough.

The transmission of an intellectual legacy

The experience of the assault battalions was preserved and enriched throughout the inter-war period. Invariant of German thinking, the general staff reflected on a short war on a single front: it is necessary to quickly win the decision in order to make "from a strategic misery, an operational virtue" [16].

- Experiences and reflections

The atypical and ephemeral experience of the Corps Francs between 1919 and 1923 continued the principles applied by the assault battalions during the Great War: initiative, autonomy, mobility. Admittedly, these irregular units operated with limited means in the face of an unconventional enemy, most often in a restricted space. However, the links

maintained and even the integration into the new army contributed to the transmission of knowledge.

On the other hand, the staff of the Reichswehr, "which then lived in the past to prepare for the future" [17], engaged in doctrinal reflection. The Treaty of Versailles, which limited the capacities of the German army, led to orient its doctrine towards mobility, the concentration of means, and favoured the creation of a professional elite in the command. Limited to 4,000, the German officers, by tradition, but also by obligation, return to the teachings of the Kriegsakademie which trains them for the next higher function. They can appreciate and place their action in a more global framework. It is thus an over-framed, elitist army, which favours tactical technicians over strategists, that is taking shape. In this context, Manstein and Guderian take up the principles and experiences of the assault battalions to transpose them to the operational level (expanding torrent) adapted to armoured vehicles. The leaders of 1940 conducted a doctrinal reflection drawing its source from the experience of 1918, associating technical progress with it.

- A forward command

The command, modelled on the 1917-1918 model, is by objective, "what must happen", with officers leading from the front in order to seize the favour of the moment. The leader must take initiatives, interpret orders, find solutions [18]. 18] Thus, in 1940, Guderian crossed the Meuse with his leading units. Rommel "embodied a whole generation of 'new hussars' trained to make decisions and dispel the fog of war by action" [19]. 19] The armoured and motorized divisions were grouped under a single command. Autonomous command, driven by objectives, training allow a better adaptation of officers to take initiatives and seize the opportunities presented to them. However, these tactical qualities, in the absence of a theatre of operations concept, cannot lead to total victory.

The use and concentration of forces are still the result of tactical thinking that should make it possible to achieve a breakthrough and avoid a war of attrition. The success of the German tanks of 1940 had historical reasons drawn from the experience of the assault battalions and the German military tradition. As General Delestraint summed up, "We had 3,000 tanks like the Germans. While we assigned three tanks per group to a thousand different groups, the Germans assigned a thousand to only three groups [20]". It was indeed a victory of the spirit.

This state of mind associated with technical progress allows the return of the war of movement.

- Coherence and organization of means

The German victory of 1940 was not due to the material capacities of the Wehrmacht, as shown by the large number of horse-drawn units. However, by limiting their means, the Treaty of Versailles forces the Germans to think about the effect to be obtained. The parsimony of the means obliges to carry out short and fast wars. Technical progress allows us to rethink the war of movement, and it is indeed the armoured weapon that will make it possible to do so.

The German tanks did not seek to fight but to sow disorder through the French lines, leading to chaos and madness [21]. 21] We find the spirit of the assault battalions, adapted to the speed and mobility of the armoured weapon. As the tank attacks, modelled on the operations of the First World War's Frankish groups, resembled buffeting, success rested

above all on the moment of surprise. The integration of the infantry from mechanised units, as part of armoured combat, was an important complementary innovation.

The air force operates in direct accompaniment and support of ground troops. This tool illustrates the tactical preoccupations of German thought, oriented towards a rapid war and not in a global strategic framework. The co-location on the ground of the Luftwaffe and Wehrmacht CPs makes it possible to shorten command times and achieve immediate effects on the ground.

The German victory of 1940 is eminently rooted in the German military tradition, which is highlighted by the experience of the assault battalions.

The creation of the Sturmtruppen was an innovative tactical response to a static situation. It is eminently in line with German military thinking and contributes to the transmission of the values that we find in 1940: initiative, surprise and autonomy. This experience confirms the "tactical technicality" of the German army. However, if the victory of 1940 appears above all as a spectacular tactical victory like Sadowa, Sedan or Tannenberg, it does not allow the decisive victory. Indeed, this world conflict enshrines the global strategy of nations. Moltke had already warned: "All the isolated successes that our courageous troops achieve on the battlefield are useless if they are not guided by a broad, concentrated and goal-oriented thinking about the campaign and even the entire war" [22]. This observation leads us to question the existence of the decisive battle and the role of the soldier in total war.

1] Jean-Jacques Becker, "[1] Jean-Jacques Becker, "Staff forecasts and the collapse of plans" Encyclopedia of the Great War 1914-1918, Bayard 2004.

2] Jean-Baptiste Duroselle, "...The Great French War 1914-1918", Perrin, 2002.

3] We can cite the Battle of Verdun in 1916, although not all historians are unanimous on the objectives.

4] One can also quote on the Eastern front the novel by Roger Vercel, "Captain Conan».

5] Philippe Naud, "The Sturmtruppen of the German army", Battles HS n°9.

6] Anne Duménil, "1918: les ruptures de l'équilibre", in Encyclopédie de la grande guerre, Bayard 2004.

7] Jean Claude Laparra, "From grenadiers to gladiators, offensive formations in the German army", Revue 14-18.

[8] "Ballets à la Brunchmuller".

[9] Ernst Jünger, "Storms of Steel", 1920.

10] Philippe Naud, "Les Sturmtruppen de l'armée allemande", HS n°9 Batailles.

11] Heinz Guderian, "At the head of the panzers, memories of a soldier", Plon 1963.

12] Michel Goya, preface to "...The infantry attacks" by Marshal Rommel, Le polémarque 2012.

13] Ernst Jünger, "War as an inner experience" Christian Bourgeois 1997.

14] Erwin Rommel, "The infantry attacks", Vöglgenreiter Verlag, 1937.

[15] Hew Strachan, "Strategy," in "Encyclopedia of the Great War", Bayard 2004.

[16] Karl Heinz Frieser, "The myth of the blitzkrieg", Belin 2003, pp 358.

17] Karl Heinz Frieser, "The myth of the blitzkrieg", Ibid.

18] Jean Lopez, 1745-1945, "[18] Jean Lopez, 1745-1945.Two centuries of fury and myths" Wars and Stories, June 2012.

19] Michel Goya, preface to "...".The infantry attacks" , Erwin Rommel, Le polémarque 2012.

20] Jean-Paul Pallud, "[20] Jean-Paul Pallud, "Blitzkrieg in the west"», 1991

21] On this subject, it is interesting to note that the Soviets applied the same principle from 1943 onwards, taking inspiration from the German model, but above all by taking up again the teachings of Marshal Tukhachevsky on in-depth operations.

[22] Karl Heinz Friser, "The myth of the blitzkrieg" Belin 2003.

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