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## GERMANY IN THE WEST

### SIEGFRIED TACTICS

#### HOW DEFENSIVE THEORY HAS DEVELOPED

From a Military Correspondent

There are two characteristics which distinguish German military theories whether of strategy or tactics. In the first place, they are invariably simple; in the second, they are invariably held until they are overwhelmingly disproved. The German military mind, like the German scientific mind, is not as a rule speculative. It risks the danger of missing something new of value; but it rarely risks that of toying with the unprofitable or that of doubt and indecision whether or not it has followed the right course. Its decision taken, it goes forward steadily on the line selected. It adapts here, adds there, discards at a third point. But, short of suffering a catastrophe, it does not turn back upon its course and start anew.

In the realm of strategy the mishaps of the invasion of France and Belgium in 1914 have not caused the Germans to abandon their universal strategic panacea: envelopment, if possible, double envelopment, that is, of both of the opponent's flanks. Still less is it likely that they have abandoned the tactical theories which served them so well for a 12-month from the spring of 1917 to that of 1918, and which they may well believe subsequent events did nothing to disprove. The historical method is therefore a valuable key to present-day tactical theories, to the manner in which the Germans are likely to hold their Western defences, and, indeed, to the nature of those defences, in spirit and conception if not in actual terms of concrete and tank-traps. This is all the more so because the occasional glimpses which have been vouchsafed of these defences accord with the natural development of the defences of 1917 and 1918.

#### BACK TO 1915

To find the origin of these theories we must go back farther still, to the year 1915. At that period certain junior German staff officers began to question the soundness of the methods of defence then in force. Against modern weapons, said one of them, Lieutenant-Colonel Bauer, it had been found that the attack suffered enormous losses; but, what had not so far been realized was that defence as hitherto conceived also involved very heavy casualties which would be vastly swollen with increased production of artillery and ammunition. Another staff officer, Captain Geyer, got hold of some French instructions for defence in depth for small units and adapted them theoretically to divisions and army corps. The essence of his scheme lay in the disposition of the defensive troops, most of which were to be held in reserve and—this was the vital factor—outside the effective range of hostile artillery, in readiness for a counter-attack.

Meanwhile others, among them a certain Captain Rohr, were examining the possibilities of the offensive by means of a process which afterwards became famous under the title of "infiltration." A succession of waves of advancing troops was to exercise a continuous forward pressure. Where, in a section of the defence which had been pulverized by bombardment or where the ground was especially favourable to the attack, a break-in was achieved, the supports coming up from the rear were to help the detachment which had broken in, and on no account to butt their heads against centres of resistance still holding out. Every effort, especially shooting to a flank, was to be made to enlarge the breach. It was exactly the natural process of the incoming tide. Where the sea meets least resistance there it advances most quickly. Thrown back by rocks and the highest parts of the beach, it presses on past them and between them. In due time it engulfs them.

#### WILDERNESS PROPHETS

As the suggested method of defence was to be based on the counter-attack, it was timely that this suggested method of attack should have been evolved more or less simultaneously. Defence and attack, in fact, called for similar treatment, as was proved by the later evolution of almost precisely similar dispositions for both. Depth and mobility were the two principles upon which these early prophets based their lesson, for defence as well as for attack.

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For the moment, however, they were prophets in the wilderness. The Battle of the Somme was fought in the old way, without mobility or depth, by means of a rigid linear method of defence. In consequence the losses were enormous and the shock to the German Army was such that the leaders on the spot declared with one voice that a repetition was not to be endured. To avoid being subjected again to this terrible in-fighting his subordinates virtually compelled Ludendorff, now in supreme control, to authorize the great withdrawal to the position known to us as the "Hindenburg Line." By this move he saved his troops from a second Somme and shortened his front. But, what was equally important, he was able to put into effect on virgin ground and far away from hostile interference the theories which he had adapted from the studies of the staff officers mentioned above.

True, he was not particularly successful to begin with and was dealt a tremendous blow by the British attack at Arras on April 9, 1917. But, immediately after the opening of that battle he dispatched to the scene of action a certain Colonel Fritz von Lossberg, who was to be the general-utility man in all the most difficult roles for the rest of the War, and who must, from the practical point of view, be regarded as the creator of modern German defensive tactics. Colonel von Lossberg immediately transformed the faulty system which he found in operation. Then he went north to face the Allied offensive in Flanders and there perfected the methods which had served him so well in the later stages of the battle of Arras. Under his influence defence became zonal instead of linear, and the defensive zone became extraordinarily deep. Take, for example, the organization of a divisional front in Flanders at the opening of "Third Ypres" on July 31, 1917. The total depth was some 10,000 yards, divided into a forward zone, a battle zone, a rearward battle zone, and two zones for mobile reserves, known respectively as the "Fredericus Rex" and "Triarii" areas, with reference to tactics of old wars borrowed for the purposes of the scheme. The whole system was based on the counter-attack. Strong points, machine-gun nests, concrete "pill boxes," even the far-famed "Hindenburg Line" itself, became no more than items; they did not compose the system itself. And it can be said with some confidence that the same applies to

*Fritz von Lossberg*

the new *Siegfried-Stellung* by which Germany's Western frontier is defended.

Naturally, the Allies acquired masses of information about the development of the German defensive battle; but the British at least failed to understand it. We have it on the authority of the British Official History (1918, Vol. 1), by Brigadier-General Sir James Edmonds, that they took their whole defensive doctrine from one document, which was, in fact, copied almost word for word. Unfortunately for them, this document dealt only with construction of defences, not with disposition of troops. It made no references to the organization for counter-attack within the battle zone, and it omitted a vital factor, the placing of a counter-attack division behind each pair of front-line divisions. It was bones without flesh or spirit.

As a consequence the British, when preparing to meet the great German offensive of March, 1918, placed the bulk of their scanty forces in trenches and fortifications within effective range of the enemy's medium artillery, and practically omitted the organization for counter-attack. There were no strong counter-attack formations. (If it be urged that on the front of their Fifth Army counter-attack divisions were not available, it may be replied that the Germans had provided for such a dilemma; they held back behind the battle zone one-third of the strength of the front-line division to take its place.) In short, an attempt had been made to copy, even slavishly, the German elastic defence in depth, but owing to misapprehension there was quite insufficient depth and no elasticity. The result was that an altogether undue proportion of the defensive forces was destroyed by the first blow. Everyone knows the sequel.

This misunderstanding and misapplication of a sound theory persisted throughout the War. Indeed there is evidence from recent manuals which are available to the public that they persist still. The whole of the German theory has only recently been laid bare by Captain G. C. Wynne, as a result of long and skilful historical research. His conclusions have been embodied in a series of remarkable articles which have been appearing in the *Army Quarterly*. They represent an outstanding contribution to the science of modern tactics and should be studied by all whom they may concern or who wish to take an intelligent interest in the present situation. They not only reveal the nature of the problem and what is reasonably to be expected; they should also have the effect of clearing away misconceptions which have crept into our own training.

**THEIR OWN SYSTEM**

For this is not academic history. The *Siegfried-Stellung* of Herr Hitler is the development of the *Siegfried-Stellung* of Ludendorff and Colonel von Lossberg. Herr Hitler himself has said, "We have not a Maginot Line, but we have our own system of defence." Naturally no description of the organization of this new *Siegfried-Stellung* is available, but German manuals of instruction tell the story for who would read.

Weapons have changed and the defensive system has obviously been adapted to meet the new conditions. In particular the depth of the successive zones has been largely increased, and may now measure as much as 15 miles in places, though this would depend upon the nature of the country. The counter-attack divisions have to be kept not only out of the effective range of artillery but also beyond the manoeuvring capacity of heavy tanks. They must likewise have time to take cover from a heavy offensive from the air. Travellers in Germany during the crisis of last September were surprised to notice comparatively few troops near the frontier, but large numbers over 15 miles behind it. These were the counter-attack divisions, mechanized and mobile, in their assembly positions.

Concrete trenches and fortresses are an indispensable part of the system, but they do not comprise the system itself. For perhaps half the depth of the zone the attacker will be met by a series of positions which are actually outposts, though very powerful outposts, capable of strenuous resistance. It is when he reaches what is considered the main position that he will have to face the really big, organized counter-offensive.

The system has its weaknesses, which may be left for a further article.

**GAS-PROOF KENNEL**

**BELLOWS WORKED BY THE ANIMAL**

The number of dogs and cats destroyed in the last week or two is believed by one of the animal welfare societies to run into millions. Some of the destruction was inevitable, since persons officially evacuated from London and other towns were not permitted to take dogs or cats

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