

Is the German 'Blitzkrieg' Military Strategy a Feasible Tactic in Modern Day Warfare?

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Abstract— *The 'Blitzkrieg' strategy was a well-formulated approach to rapid victory through the swift and simultaneous movement of multiple armoured, mechanical and infantry divisions during the Second World War. The research delves into the very principles of the Blitzkrieg strategy and attempts to discuss the feasibility of this military tactic in modern warfare environments. The research utilises the work of various experts in military strategy and operational art, as well as through primary approaches to persons of military status. The overall purpose of this study is to effectively conclude and recommend developments that can be made to the traditional Blitzkrieg strategy for the adaptation and improvisation of this tactic into modern warfare.*

The content of this paper also provides a comprehensive analysis of the operational doctrine of the Blitzkrieg strategy and the various developments that this strategy has been transformed through. The research also attempts to provide reasonable ground to make comparative stances of this strategy used in modern warfare including the Gulf War and the Israeli 6-day War. Moreover, the paper discusses the issues that have emerged in the utilisation of this strategy in unconventional warfare, including crises with guerrilla fighters and resistance groups, including operations in the Sri Lankan civil war against the LTTE terrorist force. The study reveals that multiple developments have been made to the traditional Blitzkrieg strategy in modern day warfare and tactical recommendations have also been provided throughout the paper, including armour defensive capabilities, terrain compatibility and historically accurate tactics to achieve air superiority.

Keywords— **Blitzkrieg, Military Strategy, Conventional Warfare, Modern War**

I. INTRODUCTION

Almost 82 years ago, the Nazi German war machine utilised the concept of Blitzkrieg during the early years of the Second World War to slice through European borders and annihilate multiple conventional armies, in an attempt to realise the German dream of Lebensraum. The term Blitzkrieg stems from the German words 'Blitz', which translates to Lightning, and 'Krieg', which translates to War, thus meaning Lightning War. While the Germans referred to this tactic as 'Schnellen Angriff', which meant 'Rapid Attack', the term Blitzkrieg in itself was coined by Western journalists who could not fathom a rapidly moving conventional force that was numerically inferior, yet strategically nonpareil.

The military strategy of Blitzkrieg refers to the military doctrine that utilises specialised force concentration consisting of armour, mechanised and motorised formations combined with close local air support. The sheer concentration of rapidly moving military vehicles enabled the German command to gain high levels of mobility during battle, which oftentimes secured the element of surprise and gained notable reach in terms of territory and expansion.

The concept of Blitzkrieg was influenced during the Second World War, by German Reichsmarschall (highest rank in the German Military; Wehrmacht) Heinz Guderian, who is known as the Father of Blitzkrieg. The strategy of Blitzkrieg was first used in the Second World War during Operation Himmeler in September 1939, when Nazi Germany repeatedly violated the Treaty of Versailles to invade the Second Republic of Poland. However, the Blitzkrieg was also previously tried and tested by the Germans during the Spanish civil war from 1936 to 1939. The doctrine was further utilised in the Nazi invasion of Western Europe, including in Belgium, Luxembourg, Holland and France in 1940, as well as during Operation Barbarossa, which was the German invasion of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) in 1941.

In terms of Modern warfare, the content of this paper specialises in the aspects of warfare in the 21st century, which has witnessed the increase in Guerrilla fighting techniques from terrorists and insurgency groups, mostly in aspects of unconventional warfare, including in the Sri Lankan civil war, the US war in Afghanistan and other modern warfare scenarios. Moreover, Modern warfare encompasses the aspect of Informationised war, which refers to the evolution of warfare into attributes of network- centric, cyber, psychological, electronic and information, in present day.

The entirety of the concept of Blitzkrieg was based on the doctrine that military victory could be achieved by the rapid movement of mechanized and armoured forces whilst being concentrated on weak points in the enemy lines, along with close air support, which acts as a surrogate for fixed artillery positioning.

In scenarios where strict and strong resistance was encountered, an improvisation to the general tactic was

Figure 02: Schematic of Blitzkrieg Encirclement (Global Security, n.d.)

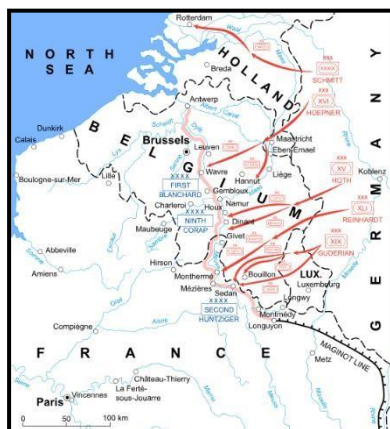
While Speed of Movement was one of the most crucial elements in the success of the Blitzkrieg strategy, smooth and clear communication and decision making were also significant attributes in the operation of this military strategy. This is because the rapid movement of troops, armour and artillery required constant progress in terms of territorial gain and expansion. However, in a scenario of war, a multitude of factors continually hinder the progress of the offensive and therefore in order to ensure continued mobility and constant movement, quick decisions have to be made, where a bypass of the resistance forces was undertaken, through which the advancing force attempted to outflank the enemy from either one of the two sides, or both sides together. This attribute was often followed by the subsidiary tactic of Kesselschlacht, which was the strategy of encirclement, where the advancing force enveloped the strong resistance, thus mounting a considerable amount of pressure on the enemy, and a deterioration of morale to force the resistance to surrender. This was evident during the Battle of Tomaszów Lubelski on the 18th of September 1939, where the German strategies of bypassing and encirclement resulted in the surrender of the entire Polish Army Krakow on the 20th of September.

be made, and thus the German command delegated decision making authority of aspects of the relevant battle to ground level junior officers who were the most exposed to the respective battle zone. In delegating decision-making authority, minor battle decisions could be made rapidly in minutes by ground level servicemen, whereas the French decisions were made from higher levels of the chain of command, which sometimes took several days to reach the ground level battalions and companies, thus considerably slowing down the momentum in battle for the Allied forces in the early stages of the Second World War (Imperial War Museums, 2018).

Another aspect of the Blitzkrieg strategy was the close evaluation and exploitation of the weak points in the allied defence and the massive concentration of armour and strength onto these points to secure a breakthrough. This was evident in the invasion of France and Belgium in 1941,

where while the regular German infantry battled against French and Belgian forces in Belgium, the plan of Fall Gelb, tactically identified the Allied weakly defended Ardennes Forest in Southeast Belgium and concentrated the armoured spearhead of the Blitzkrieg to slice through the forest thus outflanking large numbers of British, French and Belgian divisions, which ultimately led to the forced retreat of the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) and other remaining Allied soldiers during Operation Dynamo, where over 338,000 Allied troops were evacuated from Dunkirk, France to England.

Figure 03: The German Fall Geb under Blitzkrieg, 1940



One of the other major aspects of the use of Blitzkrieg was the psychological pressure and shock action that was placed on the defensive units through the overwhelming use of armour and the element of surprise. This was further triggered through the Luftwaffe bombings of key targets behind enemy lines, which oftentimes caused confusion among the defensive force.

As Germany attempted to secure Vernichtungsschlacht, which is complete annihilation of the enemy force by the German military (Nation States, 2014) through Angriffskrieg, which means a War of Aggression against the Allied powers (Verfassungsrecht and Mayer, 2003), a rapidly moving conventional force was required to take major powers out of the war in a short period of time. This was considerably achieved by the military strategy of Blitzkrieg during the early stages of the war; however, the question remains as to whether this strategy of rapid momentum is a feasible tactic in modern day warfare scenarios.

III.

CAN THE BLITZKRIEG MILITARY DOCTRINE BE USED IN MODERN WARFARE?

The concept of Modern warfare demands a multitude of various factors that would need developments in the traditional German Blitzkrieg strategy in order to be in the ballpark of feasibility in present day battle grounds. This is due to the fact that the evolution of warfare has been rapid in nature and therefore multiple military developments have been established, especially stemming from the military tensions of the Cold War as well as other major conflicts around the world, including the Korean War (1950-53), the Vietnam War (1955-75), the Gulf War (1991), the US invasion of Iraq (2004), the US invasion of Afghanistan (2001), and numerous insurgencies across the world. The feasibility of the strategy in modern times is affected by a plethora of various factors that cause considerable changes to military strategy;

A. Differences in Terrain

Terrain refers to a tract of land, especially in reference to its natural features. In warfare, terrain plays a significant role in the determination of the military strategy used and the advantages of the natural landscape that can be exploited to benefit the offensive or defensive forces. In the military doctrine of the Blitzkrieg strategy, the aspect of the terrain is of utmost importance in the effectiveness and success of the campaign.

In the European theatre of the Second World War, mostly open terrain and vast amounts of land space enabled the rapid movement and flexible manoeuvring of the offensive forces; Operation Barbarossa in 1941 opened the Eastern front in Europe, thus unlocking the largest front in the Second World War. In 1940, Germany held a total land area of 823,505 km² (Oberkommandos der Wehrmacht, 1941). The Blitzkrieg heavily relies on tank divisions spearheading the advances and therefore a large terrain in suitable conditions is preferred. However, in other locations across the world such as during the Sri Lankan civil war, the terrain was not in a suitable condition to exercise an all out Blitzkrieg strategy. This is because the T-55 Soviet Main Battle Tanks (MBT) used by the Sri Lankan Armoured Corps were specifically designed for the Russian and European terrains and not that of a South Asian Island nation. A rapid territorial expansion through the Blitzkrieg strategy in the Sri Lankan context would not contribute to proper efficiency due to the differences in terrain; the sandy terrains of Jaffna, the seaboard of Western Mannar, the jungles of Wanni and the paddy fields and rice bunds of the Eastern province (Mudannayake, n.d.).

Large terrains would provide an advantage for the offensive force to stage an effective strategy against its opponents. As Eaton (1991) mentions, this was evident in Operation Desert Storm during the Gulf war in 1990, where the US led coalition's intense bombardment preceding the ground war, showed similarities to the German JU-87 dive bombers' intense bombardment preceding the Panzer divisions' spearheading advancement. The Gulf war provided mostly open terrains outside of major cities that enabled the US led coalition to utilise Blitzkrieg-like tactics to gain momentum through rapid advancements into enemy territory.

B. Modern Anti-Tank Weapons and Tactics

In order to effectively slow down tanks and their momentum in battle, anti-tank weapons have been widely used since the Second World War. In 1942, the USA built M1 Rocket Launcher "Bazooka" was introduced to counter the heavily armoured German army, which competed against the German Raketenpanzerbüchse 54 (Panzerschreck), an 88mm anti-tank rocket launcher.

In Modern warzones, especially in conflicts against insurgencies, terrorists and rebel forces, the modern Rocket Propelled Grenades (RPG) is in wide use due to its relatively cheap cost and effectiveness. The modern RPG follows the design of the Soviet model of 1958, which was a direct descendant of the design of the German Panzerfaust during the Second World War. In terms of armour penetration, the Panzerfaust had the capability to penetrate up to 140mm of plain steel at a range of 30 meters, and a speed of 28 m/s (Internet Archive, 2001), while the chief Allied medium tank, the USA-made M4 Sherman had an upper bound armour of 177.8mm thick (Chris and Connors, 2000). The inability of rocket launchers to effectively penetrate the armour of most tanks in the Second World War contributed to its infeasibility in slowing down Blitzkrieg advancements.

However, in the decades following World War 2, the use of the RPG has significantly increased with developments made to its penetration capabilities, speed and range. The RPG-7 has been widely used in combat operations by insurgency forces across the world, including by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in Sri Lanka, Mujahideen rebels in Afghanistan and other terrorist groups. The effectiveness of the RPG-7 is robust that it was responsible for the downing of the 2 US-built elite UH-60 Black Hawk helicopters during the Battle of Mogadishu in Somalia, 1993.

This use of the modern RPGs severely deters the effectiveness of a potential traditional Blitzkrieg in modern day combat. Brigadier (Ret) Sri Mudannayake (2021) of the Sri Lankan Armoured Corps stated that the RPGs utilised by the LTTE

had the potential to slice through the frontal 300mm armour of solid steel in the Soviet T-55 tanks of Czechoslovakian origin, used by the Sri Lankan army against the LTTE terrorists. If able to penetrate, the RPG would ignite the ammunition and oil inside the tank which then had the potential to disintegrate the entire tank, due to the armour piercing jet produced by a shaped charge. In 2008, Russia unveiled the RPG-30, a rocket propelled grenade capable of penetrating the frontal armour of the Third generation M1 Abrams US-built battle tank (Hambling, 2008).

C. Hindrances to achieving Air Superiority

Air superiority was an essentiality in the successful operation of the Blitzkrieg strategy as battle tanks are vulnerable to bombs dropped from the skies, due to the relatively lower amount of armour on the top of the tank. This requirement of air superiority in the Blitzkrieg strategy is also hindered in modern day due to the use of the RPG, surface to air missiles and other forms of anti-aircraft weapons. In the Sri Lankan civil war, the LTTE used RPGs and Surface to Air missiles to hinder and destroy Sri Lankan air force operations, such as the downing of Wing commander Tyron Silvapullai and his Mil Mi-24 gunship with a SAM missile during the Second Battle of Elephant Pass in 1999 (Motha, 2019).

Although the problem of anti-aircraft weapons was existent during the Blitzkrieg advancements of the Second World War through the 88 mm Flak 37 Gun, the modernisation and development of this aspect of warfare makes it difficult to achieve complete air dominance in modern times (Flying Heritage, n.d.). Developments such as the Phalanx Close-In Weapon System (CIWS) pose serious threats to air to surface and surface to surface missiles as well as aircraft due to the rapid firing technology with proficient accuracy (Apte and Rendon, 2009). In Modern times, strategies must be implemented to neutralise these anti-air defensive structures thus ensuring higher efficiency in battle in terms of air support.

Moreover, vast developments have been made to the achievable altitude of modern-day aircraft in comparison to the military planes of the Second World War; the German Junkers Ju-86R is considered to be one of the models that could reach the highest altitude during World War 2 at 41,000 feet (Lehmann, 2019). At present the record for highest altitude was made in 1976 by the US-manufactured SR-71 Blackbird Strategic Reconnaissance Aircraft, when it reached an altitude of 85,135 feet. This record was achieved 45 years ago, after which massive developments have been made to reconnaissance and strategy intelligence aircraft, where the novel RQ-180 is presumed to hold altitudes far surpassing any aircraft, manned or unmanned, but are classified by military institutions (Piesing, n.d.). Due to the capability of achieving extreme altitudes, the accomplishment of air superiority is a far more complex attribute today, in comparison to the 1940s.

D. Tactical Nuclear Capabilities

The evolution of warfare triggered the creation of the atomic bomb in 1942, which further evolved into the hydrogen bomb in 1952. Although nuclear explosive devices were only used twice in warfare; during the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August 1945, the concept of nuclear warfare and capacity of nuclear weapons rapidly expanded during the Cold War. While 'Fat Man', the bomb dropped on Hiroshima, gave a blast yield of 21 Kilotons (88 terajoules), the Soviet Thermonuclear warhead developed in 1961; the 'Tsar Bomba' has a blast yield of 58 Megatons, which is 58,000 Kilotons (242,672 terajoules).

As the Blitzkrieg strategy focuses on rapid mobilisation and use of powerful armour in close combat and territorial expansion, the traditional strategy has no virtual protection against the powerful behemoths of nuclear warheads which have the power to effectively annihilate entire armies (Howard, 1981). In 21st century conflicts, a striking example of nuclear warfare threats in the South Asian region can be witnessed in the Indian-Pakistani conflict of Jammu and Kashmir, where the Pakistani Federal Minister Sheik Rashid has repeatedly threatened India in nuclear warfare if the latter decided to launch an invasion across Pakistani borders (IANS, 2020).

E. Informationised Warfare

As technology expands in continual developments and attributes, certain aspects of warfare are increasingly transcending into digital spaces of the cyber realm. In a report released by the US Department of Defence in September 2020, it was highlighted that China sees emerging modern world technologies such as Artificial intelligence, Cloud computing, Big-data analytics, Quantum information and Unmanned systems as focal points in the future of warfare (Office of the Secretary of Defence, 2020).

Informationised warfare further encompasses information warfare, which includes the propaganda campaigns of LTTE front organisations operating in Western nations which aim to disseminate disinformation and misinformation against the Sri Lankan state in terms of the Sri Lankan civil war. It further encompasses ideological expansion where the radical ideologies of the Salafi-Wahabi doctrines are exported outside the Middle East through digital spaces and other avenues.

This type of modern warfare cannot be entirely fought by physical power and force concentrated armoured battle tanks. The aspect of warfare in the 21st century has revolutionized war which requires specific and specialised military bodies

to combat ideological extremism, information warfare as well as cyber threats, which can have devastating consequences to present day operations in both military and civilian spaces.

IV. DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Owing to the various developments in modern day combat, the traditional Blitzkrieg strategy would be infeasible and ineffective in conflicts with rebel groups, insurgencies and terrorists, as it brings a plethora of disadvantages onto the battlefield. However, a restructuring of the strategy has been prevalent in recent times and improvisations and adaptations to Nazi Germany's lightning war is existent to provide a more relevant strategy to the respective conflict.

A clear depiction of the improvisation of the Nazi Blitzkrieg in modern warfare was witnessed during Operation Focus during the Israeli-Arab 6 Day War in 1967. Like the Luftwaffe attempted to gain air superiority before the Panzer divisions entered the battlefield, the Israeli air force organised a well-coordinated strategic bombing campaign where it crippled the air forces of Egypt, Lebanon, Syria and Jordan through bombardment of enemy air force bases and airfields.

A similar strategy was witnessed during Operation Desert Storm in the Gulf War, where the US-led coalition of over 35 nations deployed over 100,000 air sorties whilst dropping over 88,000 tonnes of bombs in the 6 weeks air campaign, ultimately achieving complete air superiority. During the same war, the US identified that a key aspect of defence that the Iraqi military possessed was its state-of-the-art radar equipment and therefore prioritised the annihilation of these radar posts at H-Hour using AH-64 Apache helicopters. The strategic destruction of these radar depicts the evolution in achieving air superiority and dominance in battle (Lambeth, 1993). The tactic of jamming communications and signals were also used during the Sri Lankan civil war both by the state forces and the LTTE terrorists.

As the problem of intense anti-aircraft technology is prevalent in modern day, the Gulf War can be taken as yet another example in understanding the developments that could be done to neutralise this threat. During Operation Desert Storm, the US naval forces and marine corps pilots deployed more than 100 ADM-141 TALD decoy missiles which were flown to divert superior Iraqi anti-aircraft fire away from the fighter jets which attacked strategic communications in the well defended city of Baghdad (Evans, 1991).

A key component of the Blitzkrieg strategy was the aspect of psychological warfare and shock action, which aimed to demoralise the defending forces' will to stand and resist the incoming force. The sheer combination of mobility, intense firepower and overwhelming armour was a driving attribute in achieving this phenomenon. In the context of the Sri Lankan war, the element of shock action was employed against the LTTE terrorists on multiple occasions, including Operation Bhoomi Kampa (Sinhalese: භූමිකම්පා), which directly translates to Operation Earthquake, where Eight T-55 Czechoslovakian-built battle tanks of the Sri Lankan Armoured Corps rapidly advanced the LTTE terrorists' sea tiger base in Mathagal, in the Northern part of Sri Lanka. The sea tiger base was a notorious outpost that was primarily used to shoot down incoming Sri Lankan Air Force planes landing at the neighbouring Palali airport in Jaffna. Brigadier (ret) Sri Mudannayake (2021) states that the overwhelming armour, firepower and mobility of these eight T-55 tanks sporting their D-10T 100 mm cannon placed a great deal of shock action on the defending enemy camp that the majority of the terrorists abandoned their positions and retreated into the fields. The 'Shock Action' created by 8 MBTs supported by wheel mounted Infantry, assaulting an LTTE Sea Tiger Camp was a classic Infantry - Armour combined operation. The enemy offered initial resistance with a sustained 81 MM Mortar attack on the army in the Assembly Area. As the combined armour - Infantry force assaulted, the enemy lost the will to resist and made a hasty withdrawal abandoning their fortified positions. Direct tank fire pulverized bunkers and underground shelter trenches (Mudannayake, 2021). The camp was overrun and the Sri Lankan Armoured Corps achieved a decisive victory.

Moreover, as the RPG-7 was widely used by the LTTE terrorists against the Sri Lankan military and tanks, the Sri Lankan Armoured Corps partnered with private companies in Colombo and designed a specialized iron mesh that was welded into the frontal armour of the tanks, with a brief standoff distance to the armour. As the RPG is a trigger-on-impact device that detonates when the grenade comes into contact with the object, the RPG explodes when it touches the iron mesh and the extremely heated jet of fire is shot forth. However, due to the standoff distance between the mesh and the tank's frontal armour, the effectiveness of this attack is severely crippled (Mudannayake, 2021). Further, modern tanks utilise an array of various defensive techniques to supplement for major issues, including techniques such as the use of composite armour for stronger resistance and Explosive Reactive Armour (ERA) to divert attacks from RPGs and similar weapons.

In Conclusion, the research identified that the Blitzkrieg was an excellent strategy in North European terrain using 1940's military technology to gain rapid momentum in territorial gain; however, it failed to secure German dominance over Europe as the Allied forces successfully transformed the nature of the war to a War of Attrition, thus outproducing

the Third Reich and its military bodies. The research identified that the Blitzkrieg was functional through an array of various components including armour, air superiority, shock action and communication.

It was revealed that the 1939-1944 mix of these components in Modern warfare would be detrimental to the campaign due to the advancement of military technology and doctrines. However, the basic components of the Blitzkrieg strategy remain to this day and different armies utilise different mixes of these components to inflict maximum effectiveness towards the battle objective depending on various factors such as terrain, communications, region, type of enemy etc. Therefore, the German Blitzkrieg strategy is an absolutely crucial aspect of war that can be improvised and adapted to in modern warfare to inflict high damage and effectiveness in war.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY



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ABBREVIATIONS

Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam – LTTE
 Union of Soviet Socialist Republics – USSR
 British Expeditionary Force – BEF
 United States – US
 Rocket Propelled Grenade – RPG
 Close-In Weapon System – CIWS
 Main Battle Tank - MBT

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