

The German Reaction to Blitzkrieg

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German forces rolled over France in six weeks and most of the western Soviet Union in less than three months. The perception that these achievements were calculated successes based on a reasoned understanding of the revolutionary combination of tactics and technology that Blitzkrieg warfare represented is, however, false and has caused a great deal of confusion in the interpretation of these historical events. A closer examination of how the German High Command responded to their successes shows that Blitzkrieg was a serendipitous achievement which the Germans understood as poorly as the Allies.

Blitzkrieg victories depended on aggressive advancement of mechanized units without regard to their flanks or the inevitable enemy force concentrations to their rear. This opportunistic form of warfare depended on the independent action of local commanders and represented an unprecedented loss of control for senior field commanders as well as for the High Command. Even the liberal German military system found its senior commanders frustrated by Blitzkrieg warfare. German commanders traditionally had substantial freedom of action but Blitzkrieg pushed the demands for freedom from command interference to new levels, which inevitably strained relations with senior commanders who watched with ever increasing unease as panzer commanders advanced beyond the limits of supporting forces.

All of the German victories in 1940-41 depended on the risky yet effective Blitzkrieg method. The practical consequence of this process was a loose encirclement of front-line enemy units that gradually became tighter as regular infantry caught up and filled in the flanks of the advancing panzers. Generally, the psychological impact on the enemy of such deep penetrations behind the supposed front lines was great enough to overcome the threat of obvious counter-thrusts and this effect usually lasted long enough for the Germans to move up the relatively slow regular infantry units and trap the bulk of the enemy in isolated pockets.

It was inevitable that some of the encircled forces would be able to break through the initially thin encirclements until German infantry were able to reinforce it. During this period there were usually moments in which the leading elements of a German attack were themselves in danger of being destroyed - by the very forces they had trapped. Also, any enemy forces outside the pockets represented threats to the flanks of the advancing panzers. For such reasons, the panzer and motorized units leading an attack into the enemy rear had tenuous contact with their own rear at times. There were even occasions when the marauding panzer forces ended up completely cut off and in danger of destruction by forces they had nominally encircled.

The German High Command was never comfortable with this situation and their problem of command and control was never resolved in a satisfactory manner. Even senior field commanders had reservations about such actions and their standard response was to try to slow down the advance in order to give the infantry time to catch up. It was an understandable response considering the ever-increasing risk of effective enemy countermeasures as the flanks lengthened and the panzers moved farther into the enemy rear and away from their support. Junior commanders often ignored the sometimes frantic orders to halt or slow down and, in so far as such actions proved successful, they were mildly rebuked for what was outright insubordination in some cases. When success was not forthcoming, they tended to be sacked for their recklessness.

For example, during the Soviet counteroffensive of 1941-42 a large number of German front-line commanders were removed for insubordination and a host of other reasons. Justifiable or not, it demonstrated the German command structure's ultimate response to failure in a Blitzkrieg campaign since the German Moscow offensive represented the first significant failure in over two years of war and the consequence of it was a purging of the commanders associated with the successful implementation of Blitzkrieg tactics in previous campaigns. The negative consequences of the risks associated with a Blitzkrieg campaign were made painfully clear during these critical winter months and the German High Command's response was to attempt to reduce the risk in future campaigns.

This process of risk reduction was formalized, in the spring of 1942, by Hitler's Directive No. 41 which also outlined the plan for the coming summer campaign on the Eastern Front. This document effectively summarizes the mistaken lessons learned by the Germans during the first year of the war with the Soviet Union. It observed that "[e]xperience has shown that the Russians are not very vulnerable to operational encircling movements" so that "individual breaches of the front should take the form of close pincer movements." Furthermore, it warned mechanized units against "advancing too quickly and too far" and thereby risk losing "connection with the infantry following them" and emphasized mechanized units "supporting the hard-pressed, forward-fighting infantry by direct attacks on the rear of the encircled Russian armies."

The debate over the scale of Blitzkrieg advances had been ongoing since the campaign against France in 1940. Directive No. 41 effectively settled the debate in favor of the risk adverse High Command. Even more devastating for the fighting of Blitzkrieg campaigns was the endorsement of limiting the pace of the mechanized advances to that of the infantry. By linking the pace of advance with the speed of marching infantry the overall effectiveness of Blitzkrieg was compromised. The practical effect of these instructions was to mix armored and motorized units with regular units and reintroduce into the German army practices that had proven fatal or nearly so for all of their opponents up to that time.

Blitzkrieg was, then, no brilliantly thought out military development. It was a fortunate combination of armor and tactics that relied on highly skilled and motivated soldiers to achieve its impressive results. The German High Command failed to either support or develop this revolution in warfare. Their only contribution to its success being the limited ability to tolerate the rogue behavior of its practitioners as long as it proved successful.