

FIRST GREAT BATTLE IN THE WEST SHOWS POWER OF GERMAN MACHINE

A SWIFT ADVANCE

The Methods and Strategy of the German Drive Against Neutrals and Allies

By HANSON W. BALDWIN

A week ago last Friday at dawn the Nazi war machine rolled into the Netherlands, Belgium and Luxembourg. Yesterday, after nine days of Blitzkrieg, the Germans were in complete control of the Netherlands and Luxembourg; their forces were sweeping through Belgium and had broken through on a wide front into France, and the first great battle of the war—the Battle of the Meuse—had been won by the Germans.

It was evident, as the week ended, that the gasoline engine, in the air and on the ground, had revolutionized the art of war; it was also evident that the Allied defeat in the Battle of the Meuse might have serious consequences.

And yet French reserves were being thrown into the gap; a great battle best described as a "general mêlée" was raging from the Aisne to the Sambre Rivers and Generalissimo Gamelin called upon his men to "conquer or die."

I—STRATEGY

The strategy of the German drive to win the war was simple. There have been since the war began only two ways in which the Reich could win a positive decision—a terrific blow by land and air against France or a terrific blow by land and sea against Britain. The Norwegian campaign was intended to safeguard Germany's northern flank and to be prefatory to the latter purpose by gaining for Germany submarine and air bases close to the Northeastern Scottish coast.

The Maginot defense system—a fortified zone in depth of considerable strength extending from Montmédy to Switzerland—protects France against direct attack from Germany. An extension to this line from Montmédy to Dunkirk was started with funds provided in the 1937 budget, but real strong points were provided only at Mezieres, Givet, Hirson, Maubeuge, Lille and Dunkerque; this part of the frontier was not fortified in great depth and only field fortifications—trenches, barbed wire, tank traps, concrete pillboxes, some of which were not completed until last December—covered the frontier from Montmédy to the sea.

Into Action

The French mobile army, or mass or manoeuvre, concentrated on this left flank, and a British army of about two corps swung immediately into Belgium when that country was invaded on May 10, in attempts to take up positions with the Belgian Army along the natural defensive line of the Meuse River and the Albert Canal—a line which not only would protect Belgium, it was thought, but which also was the natural defensive line for France. The Belgian line was anchored by heavy fortified zones at Namur and Liège, and advance lines, believed to be of considerable strength, were established along the Hervé plateau in the north and in the difficult Ardennes Forest area in the south.

The line of the Meuse, bending eastward into France at Givet and Mezieres, and joining the Maginot Line proper at Montmédy, appeared to be one of considerable strength. Even when the Albert Canal line was breached by the Germans the first day, necessitating a modification of the Allied plan and establishment of a line anchored by the fortress of Antwerp in the north and extending thus along the Dyle River to Namur on the Meuse and thence into France, the Allied position appeared fairly strong. The weaker points were thought to be the northern portion of the line, where Antwerp was exposed to a possible pincer movement developing from Dutch Zealand and from Belgian Turnhout.

Allies Misled

But the Allies, judging from the scanty information available, seem to have been misled in one important respect, and perhaps to have erred in another. The Belgian Ardennes, supposed to have been well fortified and bravely defended by the famous Ardennes Chasseurs, was apparently fortified very inadequately and was similarly defended. And the French, when they moved their forces into Belgium to take up the line of the Meuse, apparently banked too greatly on the Belgian resistance in the Ardennes and left the extension of the Maginot Line from Montmédy to the westward manned by an inadequate number of troops.

And the Germans, aided by their efficient intelligence service and their uncanny ability for picking an enemy's weak spots, quickly developed the main thrust of their drive through the Belgian Ardennes, once the expected conquest in the Netherlands was complete and the decisive battle was joined in Belgium.

It was that great pressure, delivered along the curving length of the Meuse from Namur to near Sedan, that broke the French line in Belgium and in France and that forced the French from their favorite war of position to the German forte, a war of manoeuvre. Between the Meuse and the Sambre Rivers in Belgium the French apparently suffered a severe trouncing from the Germans in this battle of speed, and the victorious Germans, pressing southward between Maubeuge and Sedan, broke through the insufficiently held field works of the French border defenses, leaving the

GERMAN COMMANDER



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Colonel General von Brauchitsch.

strongly fortified "anchor" towns for later reduction.

Such was the German strategy. Tactically, how was it accomplished?

II—TACTICS

It was accomplished—this sweeping drive to the sea and the breakthrough on the French frontier—by months of careful planning and preparation, by complete unity of command and coordination of effort, by broad military vision that has due regard for the lessons of the past but anticipates the future.

It was this vision that foresaw the terrific tactical possibilities of the gasoline engine in modern war—in the plane in the air, in tanks and in other armored and motorized vehicles on the ground. And it was this vision which trained men to use such implements of terror in greater mass and with greater effect than the world has ever known.

It is important to note that, though the Nazis use machines, men control those machines and, contrary to widespread belief, the emphasis in training is upon the man. His initiative is fostered, for the Germans know that once the gauge of battle is joined it is upon the individual that victory or success will finally depend.

The German tactical system believes in as much decentralization of command as possible once the plans are laid and the huge machine strikes. This is in striking contrast to the French doctrine which clings to a close centralized command and a battle waged with carefully graduated manoeuvres.

Here, then, is the striking contrast between the German military system and all other systems: the Germans prepared for this war, the British (and the Americans) prepared for no war, the French prepared for the last war. The German tactics risk much to gain much quickly; the French risk little to gain little surely; the Germans use the tactics of speed, the French the tactics of time. It was these two fundamentally varying systems that clashed in Homeric struggle last week.

Use of Air Power

It was the gasoline engine (plus the Diesel) that motivated the spearhead of the assault, and it was the German air force, superior in strength to the Allied forces, that led the assault. The Germans have built their air force around one central theme. They recognize that in the final analysis conquest means land and to hold or control land ground troops are essential. They have, therefore, designed planes and developed coordinated aerial and ground tactics primarily to forward this end—the conquest of land and (secondarily) of sea.

The Germans use their planes like powerful and terrifying artillery—a mobile artillery with a limitless reach. When they attacked along the Meuse, their first problem was to beat down French machine-gun, rifle and artillery fire from the opposite shores, which prevented pontoon-bridge building and the establishing of bridgeheads on the opposite bank. The famous "Stukas" or Junkers dive-bombers went into action; some of them dived screaming on the concrete pillboxes; other planes skimmed over the tree tops, strafing and dropping fragmentation bombs. At the same time the German artillery in the rear laid down a tremendous barrage; French reinforcements in the rear zones rushing to the aid of their hard-pressed front-line troops were continuously harried by planes, delayed by bombings of railroads and roads, and interdiction fire from the German artillery sprayed all the approaches to the front.

Inflated Boats

When the river-front opposition was beaten down German infantry, using inflated rubber boats instead of the double-ended wooden assault boats our own army favors, paddled across the Meuse and gained footholds on the opposite bank which they gradually extended. In the meantime, German pioneers, or engineers, constructed pontoon bridges under fire, bridges strong enough to hold tanks. The bridgeheads on the opposite banks were extended and consolidated; soon the gradual pressure of the German infantry forced the French defenders back beyond machine-gun and rifle fire, and the assault was organized to break the main French defense lines—probably on the heights back of the Meuse.

It was such pressure as this—general apparently along the entire front from Namur to Sedan—that discovered several weak points. And once these weak points were

TACTICS OF REICH

Airplanes and Tanks Used to Overpower Resistance of the Land Armies

found and tiny gaps made in the French line, the famous German armored divisions swung into action. While the assault tanks and infantry struggled to widen these breaches, the armored divisions roared through the gaps made—each division containing 425 to 475 tanks, light and speedy; 3,000 other vehicles, most of them armored, including infantry carriers, motorized artillery, etc., with a total of about 11,000 men.

It is the job of these divisions, not to attempt to reduce strong fortifications (these are left as islands of enemy resistance, to be engulfed later in the rising German sea), but to rush past them, striking deep into the enemy's rear areas, exploiting the flanks of the breakthrough, disrupting enemy communications, and disorganizing enemy efforts to bring up reinforcements, to plug the gap and to consolidate on a new position. The armored divisions are often followed by motorized infantry and other forces until a torrent pours through the gap.

Pressure of Drive

This tremendous, driving pressure of the attack—which, once started, the Germans try to keep forever moving—is difficult to stop, unless it can be met with tremendous force, with great fortifications, like those in the Maginot Line proper.

With superior air power the Allies could probably quickly bomb the roving armored divisions of the Germans into immobility; indeed the vulnerability of these divisions is their necessity for refueling and re-supplying, and once stopped for this purpose they offer a shining mark from the air if not protected by their own planes. Thus, last Thursday, these "Blitzkrieg" columns, which are, in effect, nothing but powerful and swiftly moving "combat teams" of all arms, would have been excellent targets to an Allied force equal or superior in air strength and as liberally equipped with mechanized and motorized vehicles as are the Germans.

III—THE OUTLOOK

The Battle of the Meuse is history, but it has not been turned into another Cannae; the Germans have not won the war. Their smashing drive into France now obviously has three purposes: (1) a stab at Paris and the heart of France; (2) a drive to the Channel ports (accompanied by a push from the Zealand-Antwerp area down the Belgian coast) and an eventual blow by air and sea against England; (3) a decisive and terrific defeat (a Cannae or battle of annihilation) of the French Army, the Belgian Army and the British Expeditionary Force. The last, if accomplished, would inflict a terrible blow upon Allied land power, for France is the heart of that power. Capture of the Channel ports would prepare the way for a similar blow against Allied sea power, for Britain is the heart of that power.

Military History

But Cannae in military history are always grasped at but rarely achieved. The German breakthrough seems to have been made on a wide front—so wide that the salient will be difficult to reduce, the gap hard to plug, so wide that regardless of the outcome of the battle now raging it seems likely that subsequent fighting will be, perhaps for a long time to come, in France. The Allied situation, with Belgian, British and French forces in the west apparently in danger of being separated from those in the east, fully merits the descriptive adjectives applied to it by London and Paris—"serious," "grave," "tragic."

But the River Aisne, which the German drive has now reached, is a good defensive line; and there was a Battle of the Marne in 1914 which saved France. And it seems entirely possible that France will be saved again.

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