



---

# BLITZKRIEG

A German term for “lightning war,” blitzkrieg is a military tactic designed to create disorganization among enemy forces through the use of mobile forces and locally concentrated firepower. Its successful execution results in short military campaigns, which preserves human lives and limits the expenditure of artillery. German forces tried out the blitzkrieg in Poland in 1939 before successfully employing the tactic with invasions of Belgium, the Netherlands and France in 1940. The blitzkrieg was also used by German commander Erwin Rommel during the North African campaign of World War II, and adopted by U.S. General George Patton for his army’s European operations.

Conventional wisdom traces blitzkrieg, “lightning war,” to the development in Germany between 1918 and 1939 of a body of doctrine using mobility to prevent repetition of the attritional deadlock of World War I. Soldiers such as Hans von Seeckt and Heinz Guderian allegedly perceived more clearly than their counterparts elsewhere in Europe the military potential of the internal-combustion engine combined with modern communications technology. Large formations moving on tracks and wheels, directed by radios, could rupture an enemy’s front and so disorganize its rear that countermeasures would be paralyzed. First tested in Poland, the concept reached perihelion in France and the Low Countries in 1940, when in less than six weeks the German army crushed the combined forces of four nations. Applied a year later against the Soviet Union, blitzkrieg purportedly brought the Wehrmacht to the gates of Moscow in six months. Some accounts insist that only Adolf Hitler’s incompetent interference tipped the war’s balance so far against

Germany that even blitzkrieg's most sophisticated refinements could do no more than stave off the Reich's collapse.

Seldom in the history of military thought have such elaborate interpretive structures been built on a more limited foundation. The term *blitzkrieg* was in fact never used in the title of a German military manual or handbook. Nor is it to be widely found in the memoirs or correspondence of German generals. The word was used in the Wehrmacht during World War II but was commonly considered to be of foreign origin. Guderian wrote in *Panzer Leader* that "our enemies coined the word." The first known use of the word *blitzkrieg* in an English publication occurred in an article in *Time* magazine in September 25, 1939, discussing the Polish campaign. From there the word came into general circulation as a shorthand description of a form of war that seemed to have no convenient existing frame of reference. From Western sources it expanded into German popular military literature, and from there into history. The transmission process was facilitated by the British theorists J. F. C. Fuller and Basil Liddell Hart, who insisted that their concepts of mobile war were fundamental to the German victories of 1939-1941.

Reality is at once more limited and more complex. On one level, mobile warfare was a *faute de mieux* improvisation that arose from the restrictions on conventional forces stipulated by the Treaty of Versailles. The German high command in the 1920s and 1930s also sought inspiration for the future in its own past—specifically in the ideas of Helmuth Karl von Moltke and Alfred von Schlieffen. Tanks, aircraft, and motor trucks were regarded as force multipliers facilitating traditional operational approaches. The aim of German military planners in both the Weimar Republic and the Third Reich was to achieve victory by enveloping enemy armies, threatening their lines of supply and communications, and forcing them to fight in an unexpected direction. The anticipated result would be quick, decisive victories for a state that since the days of Frederick the Great had been convinced of its inability to win a drawn-out war of attrition.

These concepts remained tactical and operational. Grand-strategic and economic planning in Adolf Hitler's Reich were not shaped by a doctrine of lightning war. A familiar argument is that Nazi Germany deliberately rearmed in breadth rather than depth, proposing to tailor its force mix to specific situations in the context of a diplomatic strategy designed to keep Germany's enemies isolated from one another. However, no significant data support such a grand design. Instead, the best evidence indicates that Hitler sought rearmament in both breadth and depth, with an economy oriented to military needs as completely as possible. Instead, far from coordinating their specific preparations, the army, navy, and air force competed so intensely for scarce raw materials that as early as 1938 their demands seriously overheated the ramshackle Nazi economy. Throughout the war the Wehrmacht's inability to cooperate internally was one of Germany's most significant military weaknesses—a far cry from the smoothly working machine that is the essence of blitzkrieg in popular myths.

Revisionism must not be taken to extremes. German operational successes in the early years of World War II were by no means the product of sheer good fortune. But neither did they reflect a coherent, planned approach to the diplomatic, economic, and military challenges that after 1918 confronted a state unwilling to accept the consequences of its defeat in World War I. What are commonly called blitzkrieg operations developed out of experiences gained on the field between 1939 to 1941. In that sense blitzkrieg is best understood as a post facto construction for explaining a complex structure of events and ideas.

The Reader's Companion to Military History. Edited by Robert Cowley and Geoffrey Parker. Copyright © 1996 by Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company. All rights reserved.

---

Article Details:

## Blitzkrieg

**Author**

History.com Staff

**Website Name**

History.com

**Year Published**

2009

**Title**

Blitzkrieg

**URL**

<http://www.history.com/topics/world-war-ii/blitzkrieg>

**Access Date**

February 07, 2017

**Publisher**

A+E Networks

---

This copy is for your personal, non-commercial use only.  
© 2017, A&E Television Networks, LLC. All Rights Reserved.