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The Significance of Learning From History

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Abstract

Many military historians and military leaders agree that it is essential for military professionals to study military history to preserve and learn from it, but many military professionals did not realize that studying history alone is not enough. It has to be a combination of studying military history with a logical interconnection of current events and developments. Only this logical interconnection promises success for the future. Only those military professionals and leaders who realized this are and will be successful in battle.

It is essential for military professionals to study military history to preserve and learn from it, but studying history alone is not enough. It has to be a combination of studying history with a logical interconnection of current events and developments. Only this logical interconnection promises success for the future.

To prove this statement I chose two examples of major campaigns, two major landing operations, and two small colonial wars and compared them with each other. I will start with one of the most devastating campaigns in history, the Western Front in World War I.

World War I, Western Front

Because of complicated alliance systems at the outbreak of World War I the German Reich had the problem of having to wage a war on two fronts. In the east, this was mainly against the czarist Russia, on the western side against France, Germany's hereditary enemy. The German General Staff intended to solve this problem with the so-called "Schlieffen Plan" named after the developer of that plan, General Field Marshall Count Alfred von Schlieffen, Chief of the General Staff from 1900 to 1905 (Wikipedia 2008). His plan provided for a rapid mobilization and relied on defeating France by a rapidly executed attack still before the Russian forces completely mobilized.

In 1897, Schlieffen planned the attack against France as a rapid pincer operation through Paris in a southwestern direction. Changes to the original plan by Schlieffen's successors, bad communication links, arbitrary decisions of the various leaders, in particular, at the right army wing, and the lack of assertiveness among the army leadership resulted in the failure of the German western offensive. Thus the Schlieffen-Plan failed during the Battle of the Marne early in September 1914 (Shermer, 1973) (Taylor, 1964).

The frontlines froze. Trench systems, new weapon systems such as the machine guns, barbed wire, and mines helped to repel an attack without major problems. Frontal attacks resulted in terrible losses. Armies considered flank attacks as the only way to success. This led to a series of envelopment maneuvers that ended not until both armies had reached the coast. The trench system at the western front ran from the North Sea to Switzerland. The trench warfare at the western front continued until the German spring offensive in March 1918 (Shermer, 1973) (Taylor, 1964).

Against this background, the reasons for the blatant failure of the German military leadership need reviewed in detail. One cannot say the military leaders at the western front had not learned from history. In the German-French War of 1870-1871, during which both sides employed mass armies with millions of soldiers, Prussia defeated France within a few months by mobile warfare (Meyers Lexikon, 2008). The lessons learned from that war significantly influenced the training of the troops and their leaders as well as the strategies of the general staffs. Everyone expected a short passage at arms of highly flexible operating armies, and many in the military assumed the cavalry would continue to play an important role (Wikipedia, 2008).

Eventually, however, the military on both sides was better prepared for the previous than for the current war. During the 45 years long peace since the last war the military missed the opportunity to bring the rapid technological developments of the industrial age and the parallel weaponry developments as well as the rapid populations growth in line with their experience from the past war and adapt them. The helplessness and inability of the military leadership can hardly be better illustrated than by the dehumanizing strategy of exhaustion by bringing more and more soldiers and material to the front and put them into battle without any substantial

tactical idea, just hoping the enemy's reserves would deplete sooner than one's own resources (Wikipedia, 2008).

World War II, Battle of France, 1940

After the German invasion of Poland in September 1939 and the following French and British declarations of war, the adversaries of 1914-1918 met again at the same frontlines. Most of the military leaders of Germany, France, and Great Britain had fought at the western front of World War I, and that experience had influenced them decisively (Hart, 1950). After World War I, that generation systematically reappraised and assimilated the lessons learned then. All the western armies had drawn their lessons from World War I, which became evident in strategies, exercises, and maneuvers. All warring parties endeavored to learn from history. The conclusions the two sides drew from their World War I experiences, however, could not have been more different.

The French government assumed that any following war would be similar to the last one with adapted contemporary technology. Because of the terrible losses France had suffered during her offensive operations in World War I and supported by successful defense operations, they put their priority on defense and pushed the installation of a strong defense wall, the Maginot line. The policy directives of 1921 contained only one sentence about the role of armor: Tanks support infantry operations by engaging and reducing field fortifications and persistently resisting enemy infantry (Wikipedia, 2008).

After the lost war, the German leadership knew very well that a reprise of the years-long trench warfare could only end in another defeat. Therefore, new ideas picked up on the new tactics and technologies used during the last year of war. The relatively successful assault force

tactics became the basis of the new infantry tactics. The successful allied tank thrusts near Cambrai in 1917 sparked their interest.

In Germany General Hans von Seeckt, Chief of the Reichswehr gave young and innovative officers the opportunity to develop new technologies and tactics (Hart, 1950). In the German army, the conviction increasingly took hold that well-trained, highly mobile ground forces supported by aircraft could win offensive wars. In order to enable a rapid expansion, most of the Reichswehr soldiers received training that was far beyond the needs of their functions as leaders or specialists (Hart, 1950).

In 1940, when the war with Great Britain and France seemed to be unavoidable, the German leadership decided in favor of an offensive. Based on the plan of Lieutenant General von Mannstein strong armored forces were to push through the Ardennes, move towards the Channel, and encircle most of the Allied forces while simultaneously bypassing the Maginot line. Germany proved this approach in Poland. Armored forces, with the infantry and air support, enforce the breakthrough and then rapidly push into the depth of the battlefield. The following (motorized) infantry eliminates enemy pockets of resistance and secures the flanks of the advancing forces with anti-tank guns (Hart, 1950).

The success of the German offensive was overwhelming. The German attack that started on May 10, 1940, ended with the surrender of the French armed forces and the evacuation of the British expeditionary corps from Dunkirk by June 4, 1940. The German victory was overwhelming and unexpected – even for the Germans. That victory is even more astonishing because the German Wehrmacht had only 2.400 tanks, concentrated in 10 armored divisions.

At the same time, the allied forces had 4.800 and mostly heavier ones (Zentner, 1963) (Cartier, 1976). Those, however, were scattered throughout all their infantry units. The German

leadership used their experiences from the last war in connection with adapted new technologies and tactics. The allies had not developed their lessons learned any further and thought the next war would be a repetition of the last one.

Dardanelles Campaign, 1915

On November 12, 1914, Turkey entered World War I alongside the German Reich. When the confrontation lines at the western front had become static by the end of 1914, the allies looked for new options to decide the war in their favor. Winston Churchill, then Secretary of the Navy of Great Britain, voted for the Dardanelles Operation at the peninsula of Gallipoli with the objective to break through to Constantinople. On April 25, 1915, the invasion launched, with massive preparatory naval forces attacks. The invasion forces consisted of 14 divisions made up from a conglomerate of troops from Great Britain, India, Australia, New Zealand, Canada, France, and Senegal led by Sir Ian Hamilton (Shermer, 1973).

The operation plan was amateurish, there was no standard communication system, no logistical concept, and the cooperation with the navy was badly coordinated so that the invasion forces arrived in their area of operations four weeks late. Thus, the defenders had plenty of time to get prepared. Already during the sea transportation, the supply for the troops was lousy, and many soldiers weakened even before they had arrived at the battlefield. Little more than maps had evaluated the landing zones, so that the troops faced unexpected difficulties when landing. Because of currents, part of the troops drifted far-off. Several of the British generals were donkey generals. Donkey generals were incompetent military leaders, who built their careers working in the colonies and who were not able to command major units in a modern war (Wikipedia, 2008). Because of existing prejudice held against the Turkish army, nobody expected more than weak resistance. However, the resistance was significant. The Turkish

forces were mostly commanded by the German General Liman von Sanders. A few German units integrated into the Turkish defense front as stabilizing elements (Taylor, 1964) supported them. Among the Turkish, the young General Mustafa Kemal stood out remarkably. In fact, the Turkish defense forces were well prepared and highly motivated. All the landing attempts by the allies failed dramatically; a long-lasting and costly trench war developed. On November 19, 1915, the allies decided to start to evacuate the troops which took a few weeks which, on top of it, left about 1000 Australian soldiers back at the beach (Shermer, 1973).

The political outcomes after this failure included the resignation of Winston Churchill as the Secretary of the Navy of Great Britain and, later, also the resignation of the government. The Gallipoli landing was the first amphibious landing of invasion forces of this size in a modern war, therefore any historical comparisons are difficult. The invasion mainly failed because of bad plans and tactics of an ignorant military leadership. The allies suffered more than 140,000 wounded and killed soldiers (Wikipedia, 2008)

Operation Overlord, 1944

At the conference in Tehran in November 1943, Russia's demand to the allies for another front became more and more urgent. Therefore the western allies decided to use the already ongoing planning and execute the landing in France in 1944. The disastrous Dardanelles Operation was unforgotten. (After all, Winston Churchill, the current Prime Minister, had had the main political responsibility then, and this had nearly cost him his career.) Having started working as early as in 1942, the planning staffs were fully aware of the importance of precise planning, harmonization, coordination and consistent command and control.

Already in 1943, there were special orders for producing landing vessels, amphibious vehicles and manufactured harbors (Zentner, 1963). Units conducted training at mockup landing

beaches in Great Britain and Virginia that were almost exact replicas true to the originals. Lessons learned from amphibious operations in North Africa and Italy were incorporated. However, that was not all.

Already on August 19, 1942, the allies launched a major landing operation with about 6,000 Canadian soldiers near the French city of Dieppe at the Channel coast (Young, 1980). The objective was to briefly seize the city and destroy the coast batteries. Militarily, the landing operation was a failure; it failed because of the strong German defense. After only a few hours, the Canadian attackers evacuated. However, the lessons learned were invaluable. Any attempt to seize a harbor by a frontal attack was doomed to fail. Although an amphibious operation at the Channel coast (western France, Netherlands, Belgium) would have had the advantage of short distances, direct air support from British territory, and of direct access to the German Reich and the Ruhr area, it was likely to fail because of the German forces concentrated there. Based on these experiences the decision was to execute an amphibious operation in the open coastal area and to use man-made harbors.

The landing in the Normandy on June 06, 1944, was a complete success at all four landing zones and subsequently led to the victory over Germany (Zentner, 1963). On the day of the invasion, many among the German leadership still expected the main invasion to take place at the Channel coast (Hart 1950). Learning from past mistakes and adapting current developments and circumstances led to decisive success.

The Philippine War, 1899-1902

After the defeat of Spain in the Spanish-American War in 1899, the Philippines as well as Guam, Cuba and Puerto Rico became possessions of the United States of America (U.S.A.) Against a payment of 20 million dollars (Stewart, 2005). An outcome was that the U.S.A.

intended to act as colonial rulers similar to European countries. This conflicted with the independence movement of the population at the Philippines declaring their independence on June 12, 1898.

The war broke out on February 04, when a US patrol opened fire on a group of Philippine soldiers. Soon it became clear that the number of American soldiers was too small to bring about a decisive defeat of the Philippine army. Usually, they avoided major battles.

Further, they could count on the support from the population. A decrease of this resistance was remote; therefore, the Americans began to crack down on the civilian population, too. They used a "scorched earth tactics" which aimed at taking away the basis of the resistance. Under General MacArthur, the "scorched earth tactics" was intensified. On the smaller islands, the actions followed a determined procedure: Initially MacArthur requested the population to gather in camps. The Army considered anyone discovered outside the camps after a certain period as an enemy combatant. The depopulated villages burned to the ground. Only after the atrocities of American troops had caused more and more outrage among the American population, the new President Theodore Roosevelt declared an end to the war on July 4, 1902.

About one million Filipinos died in this war, while the military losses with about 4,000 Americans and 20,000 Filipinos were much lower (Wikipedia, 2008). In 1916, the Filipinos took over the governance, and except of the occupation by Japan in World War II, the country remained to be an American colony until 1946.

The extreme brutality against the civil population did not result in the breakdown of their resistance, but they more and more sided with the liberation movement. The strong aversion of the population, the results of which had been a problem for the U.S.A. many years, was deeply burned into the collective memory of the Filipinos.

The second Cuban Intervention, 1906-1909

The occupation of Cuba by the U.S.A. was another consequence of the Spanish-American War. Because of the experiences made on the Philippine theater, the U.S.A. agreed to the independence of Cuba. Until 1934, however, Cuba's sovereignty was restricted by the Platt Amendment which allowed the U.S.A. to intervene at any time should its interests be affected (Wikipedia, 2008). Therefore, the situation of Cuba most closely resembled that of a satellite state in the Warsaw Pact system.

After disputed elections, a revolt led by veterans of the fight for independence erupted in 1906. This gave the U.S.A. enough reason to place Cuba under the administration of a U.S. governor (Stewart, 2005). Having learned from the war on the Philippines, the Americans avoided a confrontation with the civil population. Instead, they tried to win the civil population over by infrastructure measures and job-creation programs. Most likely, these efforts prevented a long-lasting guerrilla war as well as deep anti-American resentments among the civil population. In 1908, the United States granted Cuba self-government and Cuba remained a reliable vassal of the U.S.A. until the Castro revolution.

Summary

By these historical examples, I described the failure of the warring parties of World War I to take into account the major social and technical revolutions when drawing their conclusions from the war in 1870-1871. France's error in 1940, for example, was to consider a future war to be not much more than a repetition of the previous one. Germany on the other hand had exploited and used new developments since the end of World War I and consistently enhanced them. This led to that success. I discussed the reasons for the failure of the Dardanelles operation. Then the conclusions the Allied drew from this, and how they translated all that, with

current findings and experiences, into an extraordinarily successful amphibious landing operation. The Philippine War is a prime example of how to alienate the civil population. The United States considered these experiences at least during the confrontation following soon thereafter and adapted to the specific circumstances in Cuba.

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