

BLITZKRIEG TO DESERT STORM: THE EVOLUTION OF OPERATIONAL WARFARE

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Illustrated

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Robert Michael Citino is an American history professor, scholar and author specialising in German military history. This extensive work on German military history and the credentials of the author make the book a credible source of information. The book seems biased in depicting the German military as the best but if one is acquainted with military history, it is a bias that could be justified.

Citino states boldly in the introduction that the German invasion of France in May 1940 should be seen as a day that changed the world. The magnificent skill employed by the German military indeed represented a profound contrast to the disease of stalemates infecting militaries before the Second World War. The invasion did not change the world; instead, it brought about an increased awareness of the importance of the operational level of war, a dimension of warfare previously neglected. The German operational effectiveness represented an evolution rather than a revolution in operational thinking. Although revolutions may have specific dates attached to them, evolutions do not. The Germans were successful in adapting their operational thinking to new demands. This adaptation did not occur in May 1940. It was a process which included war simulations and various other developments. Although Citino's statement that the "world changed in May 1940" and other such statements referring to a "revolution" may be flawed, the rest of the book certainly is not. The "evolutionary" concept is definitely captured throughout the book.

What Citino essentially does is to give an account of several wars, namely the Second World War, the Korean War, the Arab-Israeli Wars, the Indo-Pakistani War of 1971, the Iran-Iraq War and the American invasion of Iraq. A comparison is

made in each case between the militaries that were successful and those that were unsuccessful in achieving operational effectiveness. In each case study, distinctions are made in terms of which operational actions were right and which turned out to be wrong. Added to his analysis was command performance in the field. An underlying notion throughout this book is that the Germans were without a doubt the most competent in terms of conducting warfare at the operational level. The section labelled “Rebirth: Interwar military revolution” provides evidence of this by describing the adaptations made by the German military in the interwar period that contributed to the Wehrmacht’s operational success in the war. Further evidence of the German operational effectiveness lies in the manner in which several non-German commanders compared their operational success to that of the Germans. Citino further discusses operational effectiveness by using German military terminology (*Schwerpunkt*, *Aftragstaktik*) to refer to actions taken by non-German militaries. The “revolution” that Citino is so adamant about may be related to the fact that the Germans were successful in breaking the stalemate, and other militaries began to emulate them. Various militaries therefore evolved using the German military successes during the early phases of the Second World War as a blueprint for further operations.

The book highlights the importance of not attributing operational success to any single factor. Every war is different; factors contributing to operational success in one war may not necessarily have the same effect in another. Militaries are often eager to replicate the doctrines and manuals of erstwhile militaries that have proven records of operational success, failing to consider the importance of context and applicability. The German operational successes at the outbreak of the Second World War, for example, could be attributed for one, to the *Blitzkrieg* doctrine, which somewhat overemphasised the power of manoeuvre. As the war unfolded, the circumstances changed. The German manoeuvre-based *Blitzkrieg* doctrine, to some extent, failed to consider circumstances which demanded attrition-based operations on an enormous scale, making the doctrine inapplicable to the context. A case in point would be the German advance towards Moscow, which vastly increased the distance between forces and logistics, weakening the might of the Germans, ruining the command system and permanently forcing the German army away from Moscow.

The conclusion emphasises this very point. Manoeuvre or mobility, Citino says on page 301, “... might be useful only insofar as it allows the force to place fire more effectively from more points on the compass”. The analysis of several wars provided in this book confirms that militaries, which were operationally successful, achieved a balance between firepower and mobility and the importance of the ability

of such militaries to employ combined arms operations effectively. In other words, manoeuvre and attrition were used simultaneously during combined arms operations. When militaries failed to achieve such balance, it almost always presented challenges. The Indo-Pakistani War of 1971, for example, illustrates this point where the Indians took advantage of Pakistani immobility by swiftly penetrating border defences and effectively surprising units deployed in Jhenida.

The style of writing is simple yet intellectually stimulating. Citino's wit and humour add value to the book and make for pleasurable reading. The quality of evidence is outstanding and demonstrates the vast amount of research undertaken to write this book. In comparison to other authors writing on the German military and operational warfare, this book proves to be safeguarded from difficult terms and incomprehensible sentences making reading easier. Citino's similar works include the *Quest for Decisive Victory: From Stalemate to Blitzkrieg in Europe, 1899–1940*; *The German Way of War: From the Thirty Years' War to the Third Reich*; and *The Death of the Wehrmacht: The Campaigns of 1942*.

The use of the term "revolution" and other similar statements signifies the high regard in which Citino holds the German military. Some students of military history or military strategy will undoubtedly exhibit similar feelings. This book not only reinforces admiration for the German military during the early phases of the Second World War but is also able to stimulate one's imagination in terms of actual events and the magnitude of such occasions. The lists of corps and units involved in the wars can however be tiring, especially if one is not interested in creating mental images or sand models depicting actual events. From a scholarly perspective, the operational level of war in the South African context has to a large extent been neglected. This book will enable military personnel to come to grips with things operational. It provides a good reference for those studying military history and should not be ignored by anyone in any subject discipline attempting to understand operational warfare. This book should be part of senior army staff courses as it provides an understanding of the different levels of war in general and the operational level in particular.

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