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## Preface to the 2014 Edition

Like many other people, I long cherished the hope of living in rural France in a house with a view, and a small family restaurant within walking distance. I dreamed of a life in which my London-based agent enabled me to continue to enjoy a modest income as a freelance illustrator. Then one evening over dinner in north London, an old friend mentioned that her family owned a house near the small fishing port of Erquy, on the coast of Brittany. It was empty and for rent! It was a now-or-never moment. Erquy is not near anywhere – at least it wasn't at that time – its fishing boats were few in number, the only road onwards led to the cliff edge and a magnificent view of the sea. The house was old and lovely. It perched on the cliffs overlooking a long curving beach and sand dunes. The local schoolteacher, seeing a chance to improve his English, became a mentor, guide and friend. I shall never forget joining him, and a half-dozen neighbours of varying ages, to climb precariously along the cliffs in search of the cherished ormeau – the local abalone. Afterwards, over crusty bread and coffee from vacuum flasks, I would listen to their wartime stories.

All this happened a long time ago. The war had ended only a few years previously and Brittany has always been last in the line for any French prosperity. The local people lived a hard and frugal life. I came to know the district and the people as I used my VW Beetle. ('Why are you driving a Boche car?' I was asked, not without a measure of hostility, every time I filled up. 'Because it was cheap and second-hand,' I learned to say in French.) In my

Boche car I explored the local towns and villages. It was there that I met men who had been a part of the 1940 debacle and were keen to clear up some of the misunderstandings and distortions that remained concerning that period. Some had maps and souvenirs. Although I didn't realize it at the time, it was then that this book *Blitzkrieg* was born.

As summer turned to winter the old house became cold. Any warmth generated by the ancient heating system was funnelled up its rather grand and curving central staircase to a large ornamental glass atrium that released it into the rooftop's icy coastal gales. Eventually I packed my few possessions into the Boche Beetle and headed south.

In the way that God is often so kind to reckless optimists, I found a vacant cottage in the Dordogne region near Sarlat. It was a demanding routine: a long walk to get drinking water from the roadside pump and coffee only after burning logs had got the kettle boiling. There, between ever-fewer illustration assignments, I started writing my first book: *The Ipress File*. My notes concerning the events of 1940 were put aside but they were not forgotten. The voices of the disillusioned French veterans who had shared their stories with me would not go away. From that time onwards I collected material and more memories of France in 1940 and, in a methodical way that all writers need, and historians prefer, I organized it for easy reference without actually planning a history book.

Eventually my dream of living in rural France was ended in the way that many dreams end: a lack of money. The combined postal services of England and France did not cater to illustration jobs for which urgent changes were demanded. To continue in my freelance work I would have to live in London. I was back where I started but I had a half-completed book – *The Ipress File* – and a bundle of notes about the Fall of France.

Over the years, my notes about 1940 joined some work I had done on the Battle of Britain and I suppose I became a little obsessive about the material I was collecting. I decided to set

aside time to tackle the two history books (which became *Fighter* and *Blitzkrieg*) on a full-time basis. By now I had another car. It was a light blue Hillman Minx convertible. I had seen it in a showroom in Piccadilly, offered second-hand but gleaming like new. It would never replace my first one, that Volkswagen Beetle with its crash gearbox and the dull grey paint, but it was more powerful and roomy enough to move furniture, pet animals and uncounted passengers.

I took my Hillman Minx to the Tank Museum at Bovington. I grew to know the museum well and I had found a comfortable little hotel that was said to be a favourite for Thomas Hardy, and had featured in his Dorset stories. Its most important facility for me was its proximity to the museum and the tank training grounds.

In the period leading up to the outbreak of war in September 1939, French and British generals had considered the various ways that the German army – now well equipped with modern tanks – could attack France (and perhaps the neutral countries of Holland, Belgium and Luxembourg). The system of fortifications that came to be known as the Maginot Line was reckoned to be a major impediment for the German planners. Virtually every expert agreed that the Germans would have to keep to the flat northern regions near the coast. It seemed obvious that an invading army, let alone an army using tanks, would not be able to tackle the Maginot forts nor negotiate the narrow roads that wound through the dense Ardennes Forest. And yet this is exactly what the Germans did. The only way to understand how this ‘Blitzkrieg’ could have succeeded was to follow the German routes in a tank. Without a tank, my Hillman Minx would have to do.

In the Tank Museum I took the measurement of the two largest German tanks of the 1940 period – the Mark III and Mark IV – and compared them to the dimensions of my Hillman motor car. In 1940 no German tank was wider than 9 feet 7 inches, so I could easily determine how much wider than my car they were. I then embarked on a series of Continental motoring trips. Using maps, diaries and memoirs, I followed the prongs of the German



attack. Step by step I travelled the routes of each element from the German concentration areas through Holland, through Belgium, through Luxembourg and France to the final positions facing England on the Channel coast.

The Ardennes Forest can be a dark and forlorn region. I was alone in my car and it wasn't designed to splash its way through the grimy little tracks. It was impossible not to be impressed that the Germans had pushed their armour through these trails. There were hump-backed bridges, prehensile vegetation and steep river banks to negotiate. Many times I hit a muddy patch and sat in the car, gunning the pedal, wheels spinning as I wondered how many cold lonely nights I might spend in the car until some itinerant foresters found me. Of course the German tank crews were not lonely, they were provided with combat engineers, bridging units, infantry and support troops. The Panzer men had other problems, among them was the weight of their tanks. In this sort of going, with dense forest either side, the tank was not the all-terrain vehicle that it was said to be. Even my Hillman had trouble.

The defeat of France changed everything. This huge industrialized nation, with its vaunted army and modern air force, succumbed in what became known as 'the sixty days'. And yet few people at the top, who were responsible for the debacle, wanted to talk or write about it. The British had little desire to examine the humiliating retreat to Dunkirk and the evacuation in detail, and the French had even less desire to rake over the Blitzkrieg that had broken both their military and morale. At war's end the German historians showed little interest in the events of 1940. When the Germans wrote about their war it was about the vast wastes of the East where millions of Germans died at the hands of the Red Army.

I felt that my conversations with French participants had provided me with an important opportunity. The Fall of France was the key to much else both before and after. It was the only true Blitzkrieg as I demonstrate in this book – although the word has been carelessly applied to all kinds of clashes. (I have always

loved France; we lived there happily and my sons went to school there.) I had no difficulty in finding people with vivid memories of 1940; I can't remember ever going to a town in France that didn't have a plaque commemorating the local men who died fighting the Germans in those summer months. I visited many of the places where units of the French army had fought and died gallantly, and there was no way that I could forget that it was the sacrifices made by the French rearguard that enabled so many soldiers to be evacuated from Dunkirk.

But to write a balanced account of the fighting in May and June I would have to talk with many Germans as well. Completely by coincidence I received a letter from General Walther Nehring asking me about something I had written in my book *Bomber*. This was an exciting stroke of good fortune for me. I recognized the name: General Nehring had been the Chief of Staff for General Heinz Guderian, and Guderian was not only the architect of the German victories in 1940 but also a prime creator of the Panzer Divisions and their tanks.

In *Fighter*, the companion volume to this one, I described the way in which Air Chief Marshal Sir Hugh Dowding had the virtually unique distinction of deciding upon the design of the fighter planes, organizing the radar and its vitally important reporting system, and then commanding the air battles. The only comparable achievement in modern times was that of General Guderian, who influenced the design of the tanks, the training of the men and the plan of attack and then led his force into battle. To have the advice and memories of General Nehring was a truly unique advantage in writing this history book.

I had spent a great deal of time in Germany researching my books, including *Funeral in Berlin* and *Bomber*. While we lived in Berlin, and then in Munich, I sought out German veterans of the 1940 campaign. It was also a chance to delve into that taboo subject – the rise and triumph of Hitler and the Nazi Party. If the Fall of France in 1940 was to be understood, the creation of the military-political machine that did it must be examined.

Thus came about some of the most interesting and challenging research I have ever done. Myths and illusions collapsed in the face of the words of the participants on all sides of the conflict. Now of course they are long-since dead and gone. I am pleased to have taken the opportunities offered at that time in that place.

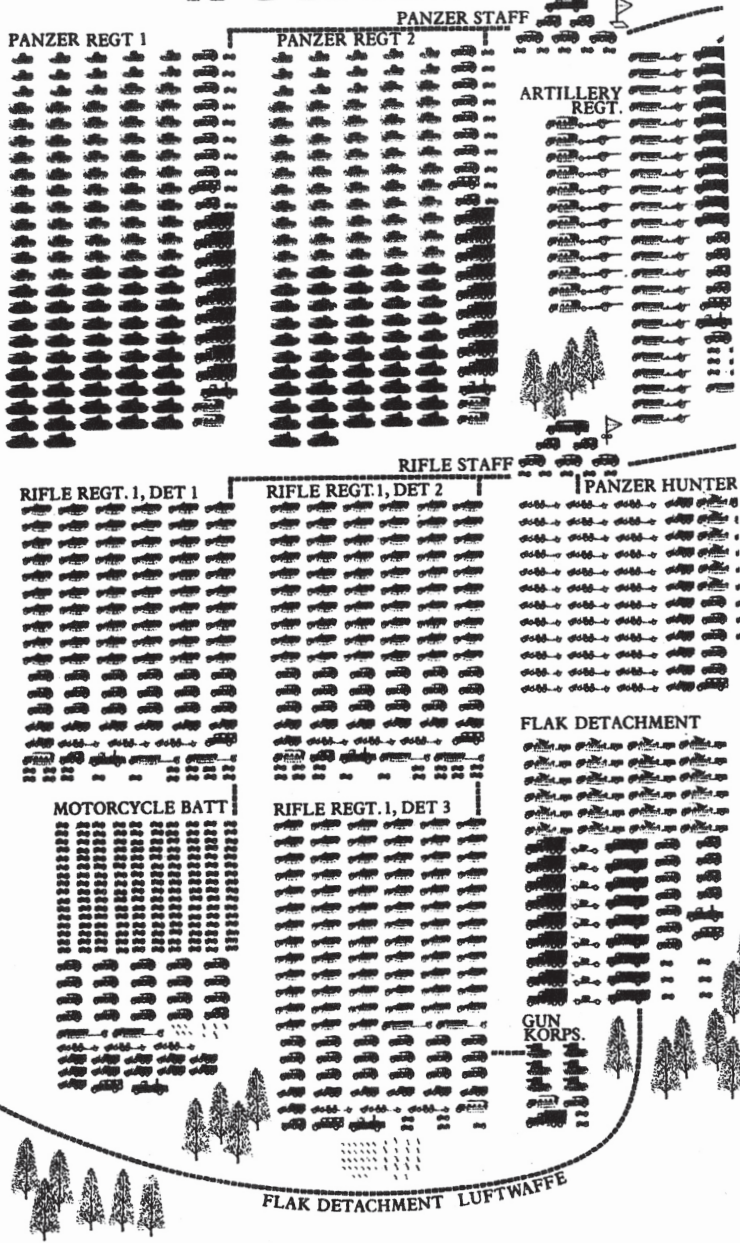
Len Deighton, 2013

## Author's Note

Certain German military terms are used throughout this book to help distinguish German forces from those of the Allies, for which English usage is employed. Although German words are explained in the text, it may be helpful for readers to have an easy reference to the following commonly used German abbreviations:

Flak	Fliegerabwehrkanone (anti-aircraft artillery)
Kwk	Kampfwagenkanone (tank gun)
OKH	Oberkommando des Heeres (High Command of the Army)
OKW	Oberkommando des Wehrmacht (High Command of all Armed Forces – army, navy and air force)
Pak	Panzerabwehrkanone (antitank gun)
Pz	Panzer (armour, armour plate)
PzKw	Panzerkampfwagen (tank)
7.Pz.Div	Panzerdivision (7th Armoured Division)

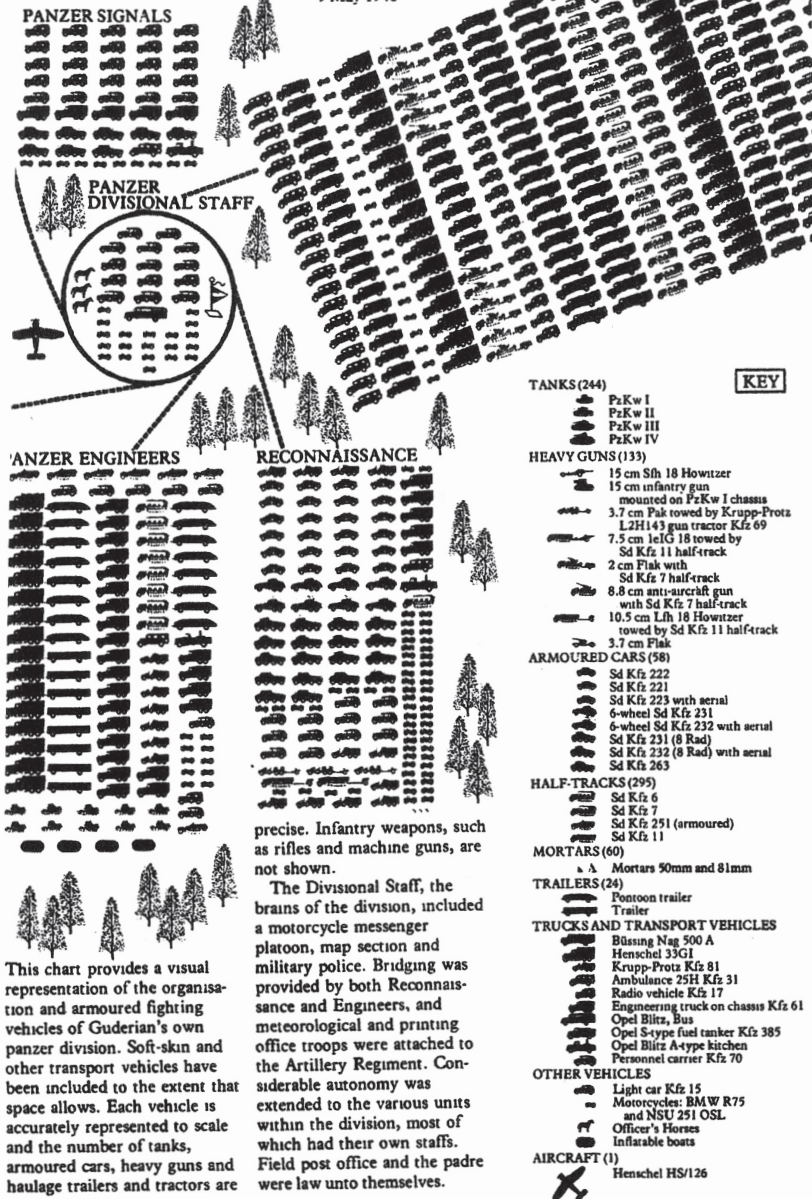
# A TYPICAL PANZER





# DIVISION

Based on Returns  
of Strength and  
Equipment for  
1.Pz.Div dated  
9 May 1940



KEY

## TANKS (244)

- PzKw I
- PzKw II
- PzKw III
- PzKw IV

## HEAVY GUNS (133)

- 15 cm Sfl 18 Howitzer
- 15 cm infantry gun mounted on PzKw I chassis
- 3.7 cm Pak towed by Krupp-Protz L2H143 gun tractor Kfz 69
- 7.5 cm leIG 18 towed by Sd Kfz 11 half-track
- 2 cm Flak with Sd Kfz 7 half-track
- 8.8 cm anti-aircraft gun with Sd Kfz 7 half-track
- 10.5 cm Lfl 18 Howitzer towed by Sd Kfz 11 half-track
- 3.7 cm Flak

## ARMoured CARS (58)

- Sd Kfz 222
- Sd Kfz 221
- Sd Kfz 223 with aerial
- 6-wheel Sd Kfz 231
- 6-wheel Sd Kfz 232 with aerial
- Sd Kfz 231 (8 Rad)
- Sd Kfz 232 (8 Rad) with aerial
- Sd Kfz 263

## HALF-TRACKS (295)

- Sd Kfz 6
- Sd Kfz 7
- Sd Kfz 251 (armoured)
- Sd Kfz 11

## MORTARS (60)

- Mortars 50mm and 81mm

## TRAILERS (24)

- Pontoon trailer
- Trailer

## TRUCKS AND TRANSPORT VEHICLES

- Büssing Nag 500 A
- Henschel 33GI
- Krupp-Protz Kfz 81
- Ambulance 25H Kfz 31
- Radio vehicle Kfz 17
- Engineering truck on chassis Kfz 61
- Opel Blitz, Bus
- Opel S-type fuel tanker Kfz 385
- Opel Blitz A-type kitchen
- Personnel carrier Kfz 70

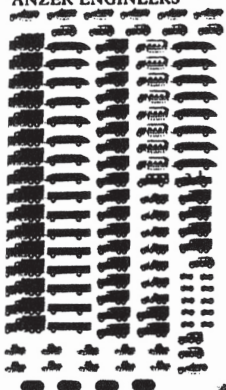
## OTHER VEHICLES

- Light car Kfz 15
- Motorcycles: BMW R75 and NSU 251 OSL
- Officer's Horses
- Inflatable boats

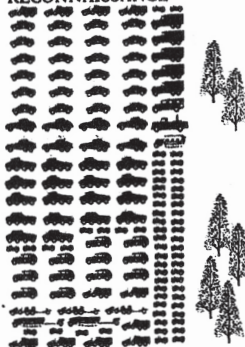
## AIRCRAFT (1)

- Henschel HS/126

## PANZER ENGINEERS



## RECONNAISSANCE



precise. Infantry weapons, such as rifles and machine guns, are not shown.

The Divisional Staff, the brains of the division, included a motorcycle messenger platoon, map section and military police. Bridging was provided by both Reconnaissance and Engineers, and meteorological and printing office troops were attached to the Artillery Regiment. Considerable autonomy was extended to the various units within the division, most of which had their own staffs. Field post office and the padre were law unto themselves.

This chart provides a visual representation of the organisation and armoured fighting vehicles of Guderian's own panzer division. Soft-skin and other transport vehicles have been included to the extent that space allows. Each vehicle is accurately represented to scale and the number of tanks, armoured cars, heavy guns and haulage trailers and tractors are

‘How good bad reasons and bad music sound when  
we march against an enemy’

NIETZSCHE

# Foreword

by General Walther K. Nehring, aD

In the 1920s, when the construction of rotor-driven ships was still being debated, the German Ministry of Defence arranged a trial run on the coastal waters at Stettin, for the benefit of officers and officials with an interest in technical developments. Among those who watched the trials was Heinz Guderian, then a major on the General Staff, 2nd (Stettin) Division. I was serving with the Defence Ministry at the time, and travelled down to the trials from Berlin.

Guderian and I had never met before. I still clearly recall that first impression he made on me. With his vital interest in technical matters, he stood out from the rest and would freely approach any officer whom he thought might share his ideas. It was in this way that I came to know him.

Then, in 1932, I was attached as First General Staff Officer to the Inspectorate of Motorized Forces, commanded by Major-General Oswald Lutz, whose chief of staff was none other than Guderian, by now OTL/Colonel. I served under him and under the subsequent chief of staff, Oberst Friedrich Paulus, right up to the end of September 1936, and was therefore at the very centre of the whole development of the new panzer force.\*

During those years I got to know my three superiors extremely well and was able to study them closely. Lutz was a man with great technical know-how, the father of motorized army units, while Guderian was the creator of the Panzerforce. As a man

\* See my book *Die Geschichte der deutschen Panzerwaffe, 1916–45*.



Guderian was a perfect complement to the older and more judicious General Lutz, who frequently shielded the impulsive younger officer against the attacks which he so often brought upon himself when discussing professional matters.

With his appointment in 1938 as Commander in Chief Motorized Forces, Guderian seemed to reach his goal, yet it was not until the war that Guderian's genius in the creation of a panzer force became fully apparent and made him famous throughout the world, a fame which has lasted to this day.

However exaggerated it may sound, it was Guderian's revolutionary organizational skills and tactical thinking which transformed the whole military situation in 1940. He had his own ideas on the art of surprise, believing always in being ready before his opponent and then presenting him with a *fait accompli*. Guderian had a wide knowledge of technical matters and was deeply impressed by the range of possibilities opened up by developments in modern technology. His sound basic knowledge of radio-telegraphy, acquired during his service with a signals unit in 1912 and 1913, was also to stand him in good stead in the campaign of 1940. Added to this gift for organization, as well as for leadership, was his ability as an inspired teacher who enjoyed great popularity among those under his command, as well as a model family life. In military operations Guderian always believed in being at the front so that he could take personal control whenever necessary. His chief of staff would deputize for him with his tactical support staff in temporary headquarters which could be moved as required.

There can be no doubt that Guderian played a decisive part in the victory over France in 1940. It was his task to capture the Ardennes, and the areas bordering on the river Meuse, in a single thrust and then quickly make room for the deployment of the two mobile columns following close behind. Although he achieved this quickly, he was forced by an overcautious High Command into making unnecessary stops, first at the narrow bridgehead at Sedan on 15 May, again at the river Oise on 17 May, and finally just outside Dunkirk on 24 May.

The panzer successes were particularly notable as they were gained against an army which basked in the prestige of the victory and glory of 1918. In 1940 the French Army was still considered the most powerful in the world. Allied forces were stronger in terms of armour and superior in numbers to the Germans (3,376 Allied tanks against 2,680 German tanks). What the Allies lacked were new ideas. Despite what they had seen happen in the Polish campaign, the Allies still relied on the Maginot Line for protection and thought only in terms of defence and a slow, drawn-out campaign. In the event, Allied tank formations were split wide open as they were forced to spread themselves along the full extent of the front and were made to follow the pace of the infantry, instead of consolidating to fight a concentrated campaign.

With the forces on both sides fully engaged in heavy fighting, Guderian's corps, with air support from the Luftwaffe, succeeded in crossing the Meuse and establishing a bridgehead far enough forward to enable an immediate advance westward. On 15 May, however, orders were received from the panzer group commander, General von Kleist, to stay in position. Any further advance had to wait until reserves could be brought up in sufficient strength from the rear.

Guderian immediately protested vehemently to General von Kleist that they should take advantage of the areas abandoned by the enemy to carry the thrust still deeper. At this time, too, 2.Pz.Div found a set of French orders which contained the words 'We must finally put a stop to this flood of German tanks.' These orders showed how critical the situation had become for the French and added weight to Guderian's argument for continuing the advance deep into enemy territory.

Kleist finally gave way. Guderian could advance next day, 16 May, with 1.Pz.Div and 2.Pz.Div, but 10.Pz.Div was to remain in position for use in the fighting around Stonne. On 16 May Guderian and his staff arrived in Montcornet and met up with the 6.Pz.Div of General Kempff's corps approaching from the right.

Close contact was maintained between Guderian and his 1.Pz.Div and 2.Pz.Div at all times.

Guderian had formed a firm conviction, based on previous strategic discussions, that they should push forward rapidly toward the Somme estuary on the Channel coast. The successful advances on 16 May now strengthened him in his belief.

But on the morning of 17 May General von Kleist announced that he would be flying in for a conference and that no further moves forward were to be made in the meantime.

The general arrived punctually. A heated but one-sided 'discussion' took place during which Guderian asked to be relieved of his command immediately! Kleist's reproaches to Guderian reached their climax when he alleged that Guderian had deliberately chosen to ignore the plans of the High Command. Rundstedt, the Commander of Army Group A, eventually found a way out of the impasse between the two men by claiming that the order had originally come from Hitler and therefore *had* to be obeyed, though 'reconnaissance in strength' was quite permissible as long as the headquarters remained in position. Nevertheless, a whole day, 17 May, had been lost and a great deal of personal unrest stirred up.

Despite this delay, Guderian's divisions reached the Channel coast on 20 May. The German Army had thus achieved its first goal – what Churchill later described as the 'sickle-cut clean through the Allied forces'. As a result the Luftwaffe was free to carry out raids which rendered the Allied-held sea ports of Boulogne and Calais useless for transport in or out. Dunkirk thus became the crucial port for the Allied forces.

On the evening of 22 May, Kleist decided to use Guderian's corps, with its 1.Pz.Div and 2.Pz.Div, for the attack on these three ports, but held back 10.Pz.Div in reserve, instead of letting it carry straight on at what was clearly a critical juncture.

Despite fierce Allied resistance, Guderian's 1.Pz.Div succeeded in establishing bridgeheads on the northern bank of the Aa Canal on the morning of 24 May. As other German forces were now

approaching from the west, it was clearly possible to close off the Allies' last possible exit in time to stop the evacuation en masse of French and English troops from Belgium.

Then once again Hitler himself rashly took a hand in the matter. Having decided to save the panzer forces for the second phase of the campaign, he sent a personal order to Army Group A on 24 May, without consulting the Commander in Chief of the Army, stating that 'no mobile units should proceed beyond a line drawn between Lens and Gravelines'.

It was Hitler's notorious 'order to halt' which allowed the Allies to evacuate their troops to England and, from there, to build the invasion army of 1944. With this order Hitler, the amateur, imagined that he could establish his role as Supreme Army Commander. In fact he simply destroyed the carefully considered plans of the German military command and gained merely an 'ordinary victory', with none of the decisive results which might have been achieved had the British Expeditionary Force been captured.

As Len Deighton's book clearly demonstrates, this was the crucial and fundamental turning point in the war between Britain and Germany of 1939–1945. From the moment of crossing the Meuse and achieving that major breakthrough, it was essential for German forces to forge rapidly ahead, so denying the Allies any chance to organize their defences. With the British Army trapped and the French on the run, it might have been possible to sue for a quick end to the war in the West.

Düsseldorf, March 1979



*Blitzkrieg*



**PART ONE**

**Hitler and His Army**





*'[Hitler] said it probably wouldn't harm the young fellows any if they had to enlist again, for that hadn't harmed anybody, for nobody knows anymore that the young ought to keep their mouths shut in the presence of elders, for everywhere the young lack discipline ... Then he went through all the points in the programme, at which he received a lot of applause. The hall was very full. A man who called Herr Hitler an idiot was calmly kicked out.'*

— REPORT OF NAZI MEETING, Hofbräuhaus, Munich,  
28 August 1920 – from *Hitler*, by J. C. Fest

In modern times, war has usually brought accelerated social change. The Americans who survived the Civil War were different men from the 'colonials' who had started fighting it. The Franco-Prussian War of 1870 changed Europeans from farmers into factory workers. But between 1914 and 1918 war changed the world at a pace that made previous history seem leisurely. The growth of literacy, governmental supervision of industry, conscription of men and women, and successful revolution, were each part of the legacy of the First World War. The weapons of that war were also a measure of changing technology, and the effects of this change were as far-reaching as the social changes.

In 1914 Europe went to war with armies designed for colonial 'policing'. The cavalry was armed with lances; uniforms were bright and buttons shiny. The infantry was more suited to eighteenth-century battles than to those of the twentieth. So were the generals.

Yet by 1918 a frightening array of modern weapons was in use: flamethrowers, four-engined bombers, machine pistols, gas shells, and tanks. New methods of waging war were tried. The European nations had become dependent upon overseas trade. German submarines sank Allied merchant ships on sight, and almost brought Britain to surrender. The British navy stopped ships bound for German ports and Germany came to the brink of mass starvation. After the war the Associated Medical Services of Germany estimated that 763,000 Germans had died of starvation as a direct result of the Royal Navy's blockade. Most Germans regarded it as a barbaric way of waging war on women and children, and resentment lingered in the German mind, and indeed still remains.

### **Germany in Defeat**

There were many reasons for the final collapse of Germany in 1918. With loved ones starving at home and no foreseeable victory, German fighting men became demoralized. Even the German advances of that spring played a part in this, for when the Germans overran Allied rear areas they found abundant food and drink, fine leather boots, sheepskin jerkins, and a great deal of military equipment. It was a cruel contradiction of the stories told about a Britain on the point of starvation and surrender.

For General Erich Ludendorff, First Quartermaster General of the German Army and the most powerful man in Germany, the spring advances brought a more personal blow. He found the body of his stepson, shot down on the first day of the offensive.

By the summer of 1918 there were a million American soldiers in France and more were arriving at the rate of a quarter million each month. The Germans were now fighting the whole world.

To compound Ludendorff's problems, an epidemic of Spanish influenza caused his armies to report that they were too weak to repulse Allied attacks. The epidemic was affecting the Allied troops too, but the malnutrition of the Germans and the way in which the Allied armies were being constantly reinforced by soldiers from

the United States meant that the Germans suffered most. Soon the Spanish influenza epidemic was to kill more people than did the war itself.

In 1918 Allied armies were using the newly invented tank in ever more skilful ways. On 8 August their resources were enough to put about 600 British and French tanks into the battle of Amiens. Light tanks and armoured cars penetrated the German rear and attacked artillery positions, a divisional headquarters, and even a corps staff far behind the lines.

The German front did not collapse completely because the Allies had nothing with which to exploit the breakthrough. The Germans put their front line together again and even managed some vigorous counter-attacks, but no one could doubt that it was the beginning of the end. Ludendorff himself wrote that as German reinforcements arrived they were jeered at as 'black-legs' and asked why they had come to prolong the war.

'August 8th was the black day of the German Army in this war,' wrote Ludendorff, and on 11 August Kaiser Wilhelm II, the German Emperor, said that the war must be ended and told his Secretary of State to begin peace talks.

The British official history says, 'It pleased the Germans to attribute their defeat in the field to the tank. The excuse will not bear examination.' Major General J. F. C. Fuller, tank pioneer and military historian, disagrees strongly with the official history, stressing that the morale effect of the tank gave it its importance. He selects – to support this argument – these telling words spoken by a German prisoner: 'The officers and men in many cases come to consider the approach of tanks a sufficient explanation for not fighting. Their sense of duty is sufficient to make them fight against infantry, but if tanks appear, many feel they are justified in surrendering.' As we shall see, these words echoed through France in May 1940.

Kaiser Wilhelm thought better of his decision to open peace talks, and his two senior officers, Ludendorff and Field Marshal Paul von Hindenburg, comforted each other with false hopes of a

last-minute miracle. But it did not materialize. Instead, Ludendorff endured the agonies of failure and watched his army in its death throes. This, the death of his stepson – and his wife’s inconsolable reaction to it – and the strain of overwork turned Ludendorff’s mind. By the time of the surrender he was mentally deranged.

These three – the Kaiser, Field Marshal von Hindenburg, and General Ludendorff – were, respectively, the most senior in rank, the most exalted, and the most powerful men in Germany. They had inflicted a military dictatorship on the country but displayed no skill in statesmanship. Their final error of judgement was to wait too long before opening up peace talks. By now the army was at the end of its strength and the Germans had little choice but to accept any terms that their powerful enemies offered. Rather than suffer the humiliation at first hand, the army sent a civilian to ask for a cease-fire.

The American President, Woodrow Wilson, had already told the Germans that, unless they got rid of ‘the military authorities and monarchical autocrats’, the Allies would demand complete surrender. In October 1918 Prince Maximilian, heir to the small provincial Grand Duchy of Baden, was chosen to assume the duties of Chancellor and Prime Minister of Prussia, as part of the transfer of power back to civil government.

At this final hour, Ludendorff suddenly had second thoughts about asking for peace and supported his plans to fight to the death with nonsensical statistics. It was enough to make the Kaiser regain his optimism. But Prince Max rejected their demands, saying, ‘The desire to perish with honour may well occur to the individual but the responsible statesman must accept that the broad mass of the people has the right soberly to demand to live rather than to die in glory.’ Prince Max repeatedly advised the Kaiser to abdicate, and, when he did not do so, simply announced the abdication anyway, adding that the Crown Prince, Wilhelm’s heir, had also renounced the throne.

Then, in one of the most casual transfers of power in modern history, Prince Max walked up to Friedrich Ebert, leader of the

Social Democratic Party, and said, 'Herr Ebert, I commit the German Empire to your keeping.'

The Kaiser, who had so proudly led his country into this terrible war, now packed his many bags and ordered the imperial train to the Dutch frontier. In Holland he went to the chateau of Count Godard Bentinck and asked for a cup of tea – 'strong English tea' – and shelter. It was a tradition of the Knights of the Order of St John that one gave sanctuary to a brother. But finding space for Kaiser Wilhelm's retinue was more difficult; most of them returned to Germany.

### **The Spartacus Revolt**

On 9 November 1918, the day on which Prince Max handed over the German Empire to Ebert, Karl Liebknecht, a forty-seven-year-old lawyer, onetime member of the Reichstag, and now Communist revolutionary, stood on the steps of the imperial palace and proclaimed a soviet of workers and soldiers. A red flag was hoisted overhead. With Rosa Luxemburg – an intellectual theorist, as compared with Liebknecht the agitator – he formed the *Spartakusbund*. This name, with its historical reference to the revolt of slaves in the ancient world, provides a clue to the nature of this Communist group. Idealistic, intellectual, and inflexible, its admiration of the Soviet Union matched only its hatred of the German generals and the rich. But it had no real policy that was not the subject of endless bickering. On 10 November, while the Spartakusbund was meeting in Berlin to adopt formally the new name *Spartakus Gruppe*, Ebert – already denounced by Liebknecht as an enemy of the revolution – was worrying about the more practical problems of food distribution, keeping the railways going, and upholding law and order.

While Ebert's Socialists were declaring an amnesty for political prisoners and granting complete freedom of the press, speech, and assembly, the Spartakus Gruppe were distributing leaflets declaiming 'All power to the workers and soldiers' and 'Down with the Ebert government'. Liebknecht's news sheet, *The Red*



*Flag*, was eagerly read everywhere and the demonstrations were well attended. Uncompromising as always, the Spartakus Gruppe was determined to see the sort of revolution that had transformed Tsarist Russia.

Friedrich Ebert, the new Chancellor (later to become President of the so-called Weimar Republic) was a moderate who had lost two sons in the war. He had no desire for violent revolution and no immediate desire to establish a republic, though he was determined to be rid of Kaiser Wilhelm and the Crown Prince. Ebert would probably have accepted Prince Max as Regent, and such a move would no doubt have been welcomed by a large part of the German electorate. Yet Kaiser Wilhelm's refusal to abdicate gave strength to the republican movements and was the main cause of the end of the monarchy. A monarchy would have provided an unending obstacle to the tyrant and a stability that Germany badly needed.

Ebert was attacked by men of the Right, who believed that only a return to military rule could provide the discipline and planning needed to make Germany prosper. More bitter were the attacks from the Leftists, who called him a traitor to Socialist ideals. Liebknecht was a vociferous enemy, whose middle-class background and privileged education persuaded him that extremist measures would bring simple solutions. Ebert, on the other hand, had a working-class background. He was a cautious pragmatist who knew that German workers were more concerned with hunger and unemployment than with polemics.

Germans knew well the feeling of hunger. Fearful lest they change their minds about the peace treaty, the Allies continued to apply the blockade of German ports long after the fighting ended. More than a million noncombatants had died in Germany and Austria in the last two years of the war. When the Armistice came, things got worse. There was no more food coming from the territories the Germans had occupied and now the Baltic ports were also closed. On 13 December, a month after the cease-fire, the Germans asked for essential goods to be allowed through the

blockade. These included wheat, fats, condensed milk, and medical supplies. Permission was refused. In Bohemia in February 1919, 20 per cent of the babies were born dead and another 40 per cent died within one month. In March 1919, the general commanding the British Army of the Rhine reported to London that his soldiers found the sight of starving children unendurable.

On Ebert's doorstep that Christmas was an even more pressing problem. About 3,000 mutinous sailors from Kiel, the base of the High Seas Fleet, were demanding 125,000 marks from the government. Trouble had started in the German Navy's High Seas Fleet on 27 October 1918, when its commanders ordered it to sea for one last glorious battle. All the battleships and small cruisers were suddenly afflicted with mechanical trouble that prevented them from leaving. Marines moved in and 1,000 sailors were arrested. Some ships were deployed to fire upon the mutineers, but it made no difference. On the battleships *Thüringen* and *Helgoland* red flags were hoisted.

The next Sunday, 3 November, in Kiel, there was a public demonstration on behalf of the arrested sailors. A military patrol fired on the marchers, and by the following day systematic disobedience had become a revolution, complete with sailors' councils and red flags. This was not a result of exhortation by Liebknecht and Luxemburg; they were as surprised as the admirals. By 6 November the mutineers were in control of the whole coastal region, including the cities Lübeck, Hamburg, Bremen and Wilhelmshaven, as well as some garrison towns inland. And yet the war was still going on, the cease-fire several days away. Troops arriving in Kiel to suppress the mutineers joined them instead. In Berlin the Spartakus Gruppe was gathering strength and preparing a congress to take place immediately after Christmas.

The law-and-order issue was crucial to Ebert's political survival. So far, his power had been unchallenged. Even Rosa Luxemburg admitted that the far Left had failed to win the masses away from Ebert. But a failure of law and order would certainly provoke a swift reaction from the middle classes.