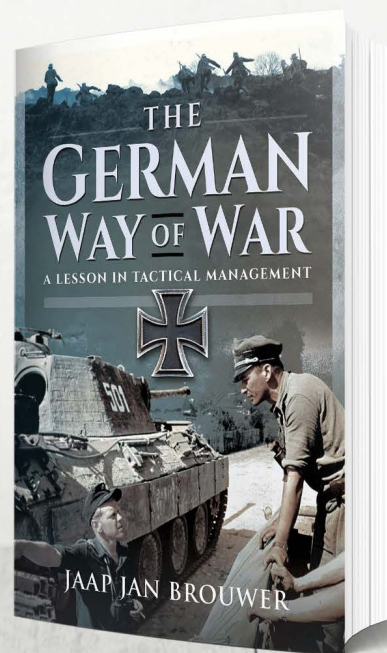


The German Way of War

A Lesson in Tactical Management



Jaap Jan Brouwer, Pen and Sword Books, Barnsley, UK, 2021, 240 pages

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Why did the German army have a relative battlefield performance that was remarkably superior to any of the Allied opponents it fought? That is the central question of Jaap Jan Brouwer's engaging and thought-provoking book *The German Way of War: A Lesson in Tactical Management*. Brouwer provides a collection of insights and observations across the doctrine, organization, training, materiel, leadership, personnel, and facilities (DOTMLPF) spectrum that help explain this significant difference in combat effectiveness.

Central to the theme of the book is the author's definition of combat effectiveness:

Combat effectiveness = preparation + reconnaissance + focus of effort (Schwerpunkt) + cooperation of units + speed/tempo + mass (maneuver + firepower) + tenacity/relentlessness

When looked at through this formula, it is clear that the German army was regularly able to achieve superiority in many, if not most of the components of combat effectiveness. Missing from his formula are the impacts of audacity, morale, and cohesiveness, but all are addressed elsewhere in the book.

Before units engage in combat, armies must be trained and organized. The foundation of this is soldier, leader,

and unit training. Brouwer highlights the difference in training approaches. In the German army, the concept of *innere führung* (inner leadership/self-motivation) is stressed, whereas in the U.S. Army, training centers on compelling compliance, breaking down the will and individuality of the individual, and then building it back as part of a military organization through repetitive actions and drills. The German system reliably produced soldiers who were able to demonstrate initiative, adaptability, and creative problem-solving in combat. The U.S. approach ignored human nature and created soldiers and junior leaders with an inability to think and act independently, poor adaptability, a lack of aggressiveness and initiative, and a risk-avoidance mindset.

Another crucial element of German army effectiveness was its embrace of the *Auftragstaktik* leadership and command technique. More than simply a command style, *Auftragstaktik* was a comprehensive command culture that permeated the entire structure of the German army. This system gave the German army significant advantages in the conditions of fog/friction/chance/chaos that are common in modern war. Instead of fighting against these conditions, the German army trained its soldiers to operate effectively in them

and even exploit them. The U.S. system of the era stressed detailed planning and compliance with orders and instructions. This tended to fall apart badly under the harsh realities of combat. While the U.S. Army has more recently embraced a watered-down version of

Other aspects discussed at length include the superb German General Staff system, the German technique of forming and employing ad hoc task forces (*Kampfgruppe*), roles of commanders and non-commissioned officers, allied reliance on firepower,

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Auftragstaktik as “mission command,” the adoption has been largely unsuccessful because the American version fails to capture the essence of the idea. The necessary cultural foundations that enable a true Auftragstaktik system remain unaddressed, with detailed planning, micromanagement, and risk avoidance common.

German tactical doctrine of the era was also a factor in its success. Components of this included recon pull, a focus on enemy weakness (surfaces and gaps), mobility, and a combined arms approach (the concept of “dilemma”). Most important was the focus on speed, audacity, and decisive maneuver rather than simple firepower and attrition. This is contrasted with the Allies’ (especially the United States’) methodical, firepower-centric approach. The emphasis in U.S. units was on detailed orchestration and contiguous operations, rarely on speed or audacity. This usually was unsuccessful against rapidly maneuvering German units. The German army maneuvered faster and more aggressively than the Allies. Even with far less firepower, it still resulted in significant battlefield superiority.

A recurring theme through the book is the attention the Germans paid to the human aspects of combat (and the Allies who almost ignored them). Psychology, mindset, and emotional factors were always taken into account. The Allies took a far more industrial approach to building and using military units. Nowhere was this more pronounced in the replacement systems, which were famously effective in the German army, and famously ineffective (almost criminally so) in the American and British armies. Overall, the morale and cohesion of German units tended to be strong and resilient (even in defeat and captivity), while the Allied units tended to be brittle, fragile, and weak in those respects.

relentless German reconnaissance (versus an almost complete lack of it on the Allied side), the German concept of *Schwerpunkt*, and the German emphasis on learning and adapting in combat. Overall, this enabled the Germans to employ a combat system that stressed audacity, agility, tempo, and tenacity. When used operationally against the U.S. style approach of detailed planning and precise synchronization, it was usually superior. It also resulted in German army units that tended to get better in combat, while Allied units tended to decline in combat effectiveness over time.

Interestingly, the author is not a professional military officer; rather, he is a Dutch management consultant. This results in a book that is not hobbled by doctrine or predetermined frameworks. While this does lead to the discussion wandering a bit and the use of unclear, non-doctrinal terms, the overall effect is positive.

While not all of the German approaches to the various DOTMLPF aspects of building or employing their army were successful, they got a significant number of them “more right” than the United States or any other Allied army of the era did. This resulted in an army that was man-for-man and unit-for-unit noticeably more effective than its opponents. For this reason, the German army remains a classic case study for those involved in any of the aspects of force modernization, training, leader development, or tactical operations. ■

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