The way in which the Germans planned and conducted their offensives in 1918 has been seemingly well covered by historiography. Details can be found in the German official history of 1918, as well as other interwar accounts. More recently, two scholarly works have covered the offensives in some considerable depth. Martin Kitchen’s *The German Offensives of 1918* appeared in 2001 and David Zabecki’s *The German 1918 Offensives* was published in 2006. Both of these works drew heavily on previously un- or at least under-used archival material. Both cover the planning and preparations for the offensives in some depth. Moreover, there are also good works on the tactics employed by the German forces in 1918 – Bruce Gudmundsson’s *Stormtroop Tactics* and David Zabecki’s *Steel Wind* address the development of the German infantry and artillery tactics, respectively, that found their ultimate expression in the German battlefield successes of March to June 1918.

However, there are a number of flaws within this historiography. First, the overviews of the German 1918 campaign given by Kitchen and Zabecki owe much of their conceptual framework to more recent ideas of battle and the operational art. In other words, both have a modern-day view of battle that is in turn based on a First World War Anglo-French conception of battle. Both authors see battle as being a step-by-step process, with distinct phases and sub-objectives: Battle is won by achieving these goals, capturing a key rail network or taking an important enemy

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position in a particular sequence. Based on this concept of battle, they see failings in both the German planning and execution of their 1918 campaign.

There is no doubt that the German army made significant errors in both the planning and the execution of their offensives in 1918. However, by using today’s concept of battle, the existing historiography fails to understand what the German army was attempting to accomplish in 1918. This article argues that in the spring of 1918 the Germans were attempting to transition from *Stellungskrieg* (trench warfare) to *Bewegungskrieg* (war of movement). In other words, they were trying to end trench warfare and restore a war of movement to the Western Front, and this helps us understand some seemingly poor choices made by Erich Ludendorff and the OHL in planning and executing the offensive. The training conducted by German units prior to the offensive provides us with a window on the type of battle the German army was intending and hoping to fight in 1918.

On this subject, the existing historiography on German tactics has served to obscure more than it has enlightened. Gudmundsson’s and Zabecki’s works tell us mainly about how small-unit tactics were used in *Stellungskrieg* and the battle to break through the enemy’s lines. Gudmundsson’s *Stormtroop Tactics* covers the story of the increasing decentralization in German infantry tactics that resulted in the 8-man squad, rather than the 250-man company, becoming the basic tactical unit on the battlefield. Zabecki’s *Steel Wind*, on the other hand, examines the increasing centralization of German artillery tactics, with armies, rather than divisions or corps, controlling complex artillery fire-plans in the 1918 offensives. Both works miss two important points: First, both are focused on how the German army fought *Stellungskrieg* and attempted to break through the deadlock of the trenches; neither tells us about how the German army intended to fight once the enemy’s trenches had been overcome. Following from this, neither work explores higher-level tactics, what the Germans referred to as *Truppenführung*. *Truppenführung* covers the area of tactics above regiment and explains how brigades, divisions, and army corps would operate together to achieve their battlefield goals.\(^5\) An examination of this important, but neglected, area can tell us much about what the German army hoped to achieve in its 1918 campaign and how they expected to do this.

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\(^5\) Some authors distinguished between ‘höhere’ and ‘niedere’ Truppenführung, with ‘höhere’ applying to all-arms units and ‘niedere’ applying to single-arm units. See Jakob Meckel, *Taktik* Bd.I: *Allgemeine Lehre von der Truppenführung im Felde* (Berlin: Mittler, 1883) p.1.
The Ideal of Bewegungskrieg

Despite the experience of recent wars, the rise of trench warfare in late 1914 caught most European soldiers off guard. With large numbers of men armed with rapid-fire rifles, machineguns, artillery, the trench system that extended from the English Channel to the Swiss border proved much more difficult to overcome than anyone had anticipated. Despite repeated attempts between 1914 and 1918, the French and British armies had not succeeded in breaking through the increasingly sophisticated and deep German defensive lines on the Western Front.

This is a far cry from the type of combat expected by European soldiers. The German army in 1914 recognized two types of warfare – Bewegungskrieg (war of movement) and Stellungskrieg (position warfare). Bewegungskrieg took place in the open: Units maneuvered to find the open flanks of enemy forces and battles were won or lost decisively, usually within a few hours or at most days. Stellungskrieg was fought around fortresses and on quiet fronts. It was slow, methodical type of warfare that relied on careful and thorough fire preparation before any offensive action.\(^6\) Focused as it was on winning a future war rapidly, the German army before 1914 expected to fight a Bewegungskrieg and trained accordingly.

Indeed, in the years before the First World War, the German army developed an idealized Bewegungskrieg. At its heart was the ‘Vernichtungsschlacht,’ or ‘battle of annihilation.’ Only by destroying one’s enemy could an ‘Entscheidungsschlacht,’ or ‘decisive battle,’ that would win the war be fought. German military theorist before 1914 made extensive use of history to support their beliefs about contemporary war.\(^7\) Drawing on military history, they posited that wars could and should be ended by means of a few great battles. These battles would have as their objective the annihilation of the enemy’s army, which in turn would render the enemy defenseless.

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\(^7\) The positions held by many leading German military historians and theorists in their Strategiestreit between the civilian historian Hans Delbrück is an example of this skewed use of history. See, Arden Bucholz, *Hans Delbrück and the German Military Establishment: War Images in Conflict* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1985); and Sven Lange, *Hans Delbrück und der ‘Strategiestreit’: Kriegführung und Kriegsgeschichte in der Kontroverse 1879-1914* (Einzelschriften zur Militärgeschichte No. 40 Herausgegeben vom Militärgeschichtlichen Forschungsamt) (Freiburg: Rombach Verlag, 1995).
and allow Germany to dictated peace terms. Despite its name, it is important to note that battle of annihilation did not mean complete physical destruction of the enemy force. In his study of his ideal battle of annihilation, Cannae, Alfred von Schlieffen noted that in the 20th Century ‘capitulations have taken the place of slaughters.’

Rather, the objective of a battle of annihilation in modern war was to break the enemy’s will to continue to fight. As Colmar von der Goltz said: ‘The foe is conquered, not by the destruction of his existence, but by the annihilation of his hopes of victory.’ Thus, the German ideal of a battle of annihilation before 1914 focused on attacking the enemy’s will to continue to fight.

In particular, the so-called ‘decisive battles’ of the German Wars of Unification – Königgrätz, Metz, Sedan – were held up as ideal battles of annihilation by pre-war German soldiers. Indeed, not only were these models because German observers believed they had won their respective wars, but the form they took was also seen as ideal. These battles were won by encirclement – the enemy’s field army was caught on the battlefield by numerous German armies and attacked from all sides. In these battles, the enemy’s will to fight had been destroyed by maneuvering his forces into a position from which it was difficult if not impossible to continue to fight. Of course, most observers recognized that encirclement battles, although ideal, were also rare. However, battles where one side focused on an enemy’s exposed flank were much more common in history and were much more likely to present themselves in future conflict. Thus, all chiefs of the General Staff, but in particular Schlieffen and Moltke the Younger stressed attacking the enemy’s flank as a means

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8 Jehuda Wallach, The Dogma of the Battle of Annihilation: The Theories of Clausewitz and Schlieffen and Their Impact on the German Conduct of Two World Wars (New York: Greenwood, 1986); and Robert M. Citino, The German Way of War: From the Thirty Years’ War to the Third Reich (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2005). Citino seems unaware that his analysis of pre-1866 German military thought is based on Imperial German research that focused on ‘decisive battle,’ but this reinforces my point.
10 The idea that war and battle were contests of opponents’ wills figures prominently in pre-war German military literature. For example, see Wilhelm von Blume, Strategie: Eine Studie (2nd ed.) (Berlin: Mittler, 1886) p.16.
12 Schlieffen, ‘Cannae Studies,’ pp. 210-211.
13 This was ‘demonstrated’ in Kriegsgeschichtliche Abteilung I, Studien zur Kriegsgeschichte und Taktik Bd.III: Der Schlachterfolg, mit welchen Mitteln wurde er erstrebt? (Berlin: Mittler, 1903).
of achieving battlefield victory.\textsuperscript{14} Again, the object of this attack was the enemy’s will to fight. By attacking the flanks, Schlieffen and Moltke hoped to throw the enemy’s defense into disarray. Not only did a flank attack threaten the enemy’s vital lines of communication, but it could also force the enemy to fight in a place and at the time of the attacker’s choice. Moreover, a flank attack threatened the enemy’s rear and put doubt into the mind of the enemy commander and his troops. To this end, in 1905 Schlieffen admonished his subordinates:

\textit{Why do you not want to look after the noble examples that have been handed down to you by the history of your Fatherland? All great captains have done fundamentally the same thing. When Friedrich the Great marched around the Austrian flank on that foggy December day, when Napoleon marched down the Saale in that fateful October 1806, and when the Field Marshal crossed the Moselle in the August days of 1870,\textsuperscript{15} these events appear very different, but fundamentally all three maneuvers rest upon the same idea: The enemy was to be forced onto another front, was to be beaten, and was to be forced back in the most unfavorable direction.\textsuperscript{16}}

Thus, we can see how \textit{maneuver} featured highly in the pre-war German concept of battle. German forces would seek out the enemy and attempt to move around his front to attack him through envelopment or at least on one of his flanks. It was through this maneuver that the enemy would be forced to alter his disposition and would be forced to fight under unfavorable conditions. Although combat was necessary, German soldiers before 1914 believed that threatening the enemy’s flanks and rear would produce a powerful psychological effect that would ultimately break the will of the enemy to continue fighting.\textsuperscript{17}

This ‘ideal battle’ was constantly stressed in the training of German officers before 1914. Works of theory and history, not always easily separated in Imperial Germany, had it at their heart. Moreover, the German army made extensive use of the

\begin{footnotes}
\item[15] Schlieffen is referring to the battles of Leuthen (6 December 1757), in which a Prussian army under Friedrich the Great defeated a superior Austrian army under Daun; the twin battle of Jena/Auerstädt (14 October 1806), in which Napoleon’s army crushed the Prussian army; and when Moltke defeated the Imperial French army in the space of the first 6 weeks of the Franco-German War.
\item[17] The German emphasis on flank attacks was not lost on her future enemies. French and British intelligence mentioned it frequently in their assessments of the German army.
\end{footnotes}
‘applicatory method.’ This put students into the shoes of decisionmakers in historical or mock battles, either in the course of staff rides in the field or in decisionmaking games in the barracks.\(^\text{18}\) In their staff rides and staff problems, Schlieffen and Moltke the Younger inculcated a generation of German soldiers with their concept of battle of annihilation.\(^\text{19}\) Moreover, book after book was of decisionmaking games was published in Imperial Germany, each reinforcing the prevailing belief in the German army that victory was achieved by attacking the enemy’s flank and rear.\(^\text{20}\)

Despite developing an ideal of battle before 1914, German military theorists were cognizant of the differences between war in the past and war in the early 20\(^{th}\) Century. Perhaps the biggest difference was the increased size of armies. In 1870, the German field army amounted to hundreds of thousands men when fully mobilized. By 1914, this had risen to millions. As armies grew in size, command became more difficult. In the German Wars of Unification, it was still just about possible for Helmuth von Moltke the Elder to overlook the battlefield and direct the troops under his command. With millions mobilized, this was no longer possible. The large numbers of troops meant that numerous independent armies, each of hundreds of thousands of men, had to be formed, and these would be spread out over hundreds of kilometers by 1914. German soldiers believed that the actions of these large, independent, and disparate forces had to be given structure by the strong will of a commander, a *Feldherr*.\(^\text{21}\)

However, it was not the job of the *Feldherr* to micromanage the action of the independent armies under his command. Moltke the Elder engraened within the German army the principle later known as *Auftragstaktik* – commanders would set the objectives for their subordinates, but these subordinates would determine for

\(^{18}\) Julius Verdy du Vernois was considered the father of this method within the German army. For his approach, see his *Studien über Truppenführung* (2\(^{nd}\) ed.) (Berlin: Mittler, 1873) pp. 1-3.

\(^{19}\) For Schlieffen’s staff rides and problems, see *Schlieffen’s Military Writings*, pp. 13-139; and Alfred von Schlieffen, *Dienstschriften* (2 vols.) (Berlin: Mittler, 1937-38). Although an edition of Moltke’s staff rides and problems was planned, the outbreak of the Second World War prevented its completion. Translations of some of Moltke’s staff problems can be found in the US National Archives. See ‘German General Staff Problems, 1892-1913,’ US National Archives and Records Administration, RG120, Box 620.


themselves the best way to complete these objectives.\textsuperscript{22} \textit{Auftragstaktik} also seemed the best way to deal with the limited communications available in the early 20\textsuperscript{th} Century. Although the telegraph and radios promised much, it was still difficult for a commander to grasp a situation on a battlefield hundreds of kilometers away. He had to trust his subordinates to complete their tasks without continual guidance from above. Instead of active command, in the age of mass armies, the \textit{Feldherr} served more as a coordinator. It was his job to give the independent armies their objectives and to coordinate their actions when in the field. As these armies might be fighting battles hundreds of kilometers from each other, it was the \textit{Feldherr’s} job to use these separate battles to accomplish his overall goal. Both Schlieffen and his successor Moltke the Younger highlighted the need for independent commands to work together for the common goal of destroying the enemy’s armed forces. Schlieffen described his theory explicitly in an article published after his retirement. In his \textit{‘War Today,’} the former General Staff Chief envisioned the \textit{Teilschlachten} (separate battles) of individual armies amounting to a \textit{Gesamtschlacht} (complete battle). Thus, in Schlieffen’s view, the battle of annihilation would comprise numerous smaller battles, separated in time and space, instead of the single, large battles of the past.\textsuperscript{23}

Indeed, as the size of armies increased, the need for independent units to be able to work together for common goals featured more and more in the staff problems of Schlieffen and Moltke. The two chiefs of the General Staff put great emphasis of training their subordinates in this \textit{Truppenführung}. Staff rides and staff problems focused on putting young officers in the roles of large unit commanders and in showing them how such units could and should work together within a plan devised by a \textit{Feldherr}. Indeed, in this light, we can see the Schlieffen Plan as providing the framework for a series of individual \textit{Teilschlachten}. 

\textit{The First World War and New Forms of Battle}

From autumn 1914, however, the Western Front stagnated in trench warfare. With maneuver playing such a central role in how the German army expected to achieve victory, the rise in trench warfare presented the Germans a much greater

\textsuperscript{22} See Helmuth von Moltke (the Elder), ‘1869 Instructions for Large Unit Commanders,’ in Daniel Hughes, \textit{Moltke on the Art of War} (Novato: Presidio, 1993) pp. 171-224. This document served as the basis for the later, \textit{D.V.E. Nr. 53: Grundzüge der höheren Truppenführung} (Berlin: Mittler, 1910).

conceptual problem than the Entente. Before the war, French and British ideas of battle stressed victory through direct action. The enemy’s will was to be broken in an extended engagement, and once the enemy broke, he was to be ruthlessly pursued, making complete his destruction. Given this, the breakthrough operations required in trench warfare provided no conceptual difficulties for the Entente armies. Moreover, pre-war Entente ideas of battle had an attritional component built into them – before any assault, the enemy was to be worn down by fire. 24 Focused before the war on maneuvering against an enemy’s rear and flanks, the Germans had dismissed breakthrough operations as impractical. 25 Moltke the Younger’s replacement as Chief of the General Staff, Erich von Falkenhayn, came up with a radically new concept of battle that he employed at Verdun. Eschewing both maneuver and breakthrough, his idea was to utilize battlefield attrition to place pressure on what he perceived as a French strategic weakness – her manpower deficiency. 26

However, Falkenhayn’s approach at Verdun did not deliver the rapid victory that he predicted, and a deep unease with his strategy lead to his replacement in August 1916 by Paul von Hindenburg and Erich Ludendorff. 27 Although the two men shared responsibility for the actions of the OHL, Ludendorff was clearly the brains of the duo. Ludendorff saw himself in the mold of Schlieffen and Moltke the Younger. He rejected Falkenhayn’s idea of a strategy of attrition and focused instead on the traditional German ideal of a ‘decisive battle.’ 28 Indeed, his experience on the Eastern Front from 1914 to 1916 suggested that this could be achieved. After all, the battles of Tannenberg and the Masurian Lakes in 1914 had resulted in stunning successes by a smaller German force against larger Russian units. As observers then and later pointed out, the conduct of these battles could have been lifted straight out of a pre-war staff ride. 29 If subsequent battles were less successful, Ludendorff attributed this

24 Foley, ‘What’s in a Name?,’ pp. 722-746.
27 For the most recent account of this, see Holger Afflerbach, Falkenhayn: Politisches Denken und Handeln im Kaiserreich (Munich: Oldenbourg, 1996) pp. 437-450.
28 Erich Ludendorff, Kriegführung und Politik (Berlin: Mittler, 1922) pp. 95-98.
29 Anon., Bei Hindenburg, Von seinem Leben und seinem Wirken (Berlin: Johannes Baum, 1915) pp. 35-37; Eugen Ritter von Zoellner, ‘Schlieffens Vermächtnis,’ Militär-Wissenschlafliche Rundshau
to a lack of resources, rather than a flawed operational approach. Indeed, Hindenburg later wrote of the war against Russia: It would be won, if not through a single great battle, a ‘Sedan’ in his words, than through a series of such and similar battles.\(^{31}\)

The experience of the two men once they took over direction of Germany’s strategy convinced them of their approach: The two men had not seen the failed Entente attempts to break through on the Western Front in 1915 and 1916. Their experience was of the methodical, step-by-step approach employed by the French and the British at Arras, in the Champagne, on the Aisne and in Flanders in 1917. These battles ended in abject failure for the French and British. However, German offensives in the east and in Italy in 1917 seemed to suggest that if the right tactics could be found, a breakthrough could be successful. This belief was reinforced by the success of the limited German offensive at Cambrai in late November and early December 1917. Moreover, operations in these theatres suggested that the traditional German approach to battle could still be successful under First World War conditions. Thus, Ludendorff went into the planning for the German 1918 campaign in the West convinced that the German army could still win the war by means of battlefield action, and as we shall see, his approach was based on the traditional view of battle prevalent before the war. The German offensive of 1918 would have two phases: First, the enemy’s defensive position would have to be broken through. Once this was accomplished, Bewegungskrieg would be restored and the German army could fight the way it believed it should. This Bewegungskrieg would deliver victory along the lines envisions by German pre-war theory.

Ludendorff used the winter of 1917/1918 to train German units in how to do these things, and the army was certainly in the need of this training. The German army on the Western Front, the Westheer, had not carried out a major offensive since the battle of Verdun in 1916, and this was not a breakthrough operation. The battle of Cambrai offered some experience, but as Army Group Kronprinz Rupprecht’s report on the battle indicated, the action had shown significant deficiencies in the Westheer’s capabilities. They wrote:

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\(^{30}\) Erich Ludendorff, \textit{Meine Kriegserinnerungen} (Berlin: Mittler, 1920) p.132.

The mobile battle conducted at Cambrai demonstrated holes in our training (staff and units), organization, and equipment for Bewegungskrieg. These must be filled during the winter. We have to shed much of the baggage accumulated through years of Stellungskrieg. We must constantly return to the basics that proved themselves at the beginning of the war. In the foreground for this stands schooling the leadership and the troops to be more nimble, as well as training in independent decisionmaking.32

Indeed, the Westheer needed the winter not only to train for the forthcoming offensive, but also to make itself materially ready. The German army had suffered the three years of Entente attrition and was 650,000 men under strength at the beginning of 1918.33 The peace with Russia allowed some strength to be transferred from the Eastern Front to the Western Front,34 but these troops often needed substantial training to enable them to fight effectively on the Western Front.35 In addition to troops, the Westheer needed substantial reinforcement in horses to increase its mobility.36 Over the winter of 1917/18, horses were exchanged between units in the Westheer, were purchased from abroad, requisitioned from home and the occupied territories and stripped out of the Ostheer. In the end, however, only enough horses and suitable manpower could be found to equip 52 divisions fully. These were classed as ‘Angriffsdivisionen,’ or attack divisions.37 The remainder of the divisions

33 Kriegsgeschichtliches Forschungsanstalt des Heeres, Der Weltkrieg Bd. XIV: Die Kriegführung an der Westfront im Jahre 1918 (Berlin: Mittler, 1944) p.29.
36 Motor vehicles could have offset this reliance on horsepower, but the German army was badly equipped with motor vehicles. The German army had only 40,000 compared to 200,000 in the Entente armies. Walter Sußdorf, ‘Das Feldkraftfahrwesen,’ in Max Schwarte, ed. Der Weltkampf um Ehre und Recht Bd. VI: Die Organisationen der Kriegführung (Leipzig: Barth, 1921) p.391.
on the Western Front had varying levels of horses; these divisions were classed as ‘Stellungsdivisionen,’ or trench divisions.

The OHL was determined that the 52 attack divisions of the Westheer were prepared to fight the traditional type of German battle. Over the course of the winter of 1917/18, each division was withdrawn from the line and given at least three to four weeks to refit and retrain. Some lucky units, such as the 5th Guards Infantry Division, had almost three months of rest and training before the offensive. In February, the OHL ordered all divisions taking part in the offensive to be withdrawn from the line until the attack. Moreover, the OHL ordered training commands to be set up across the Westheer to train the attack divisions and as many of the trench divisions as possible before the offensive.

The training of the attacking units was shaped by two important doctrinal publications that reflected the changes forced on German offensive tactical thinking by trench warfare. First, in January 1918, the OHL issued Der Angriff im Stellungskrieg, a manual designed to cover the breakthrough battle in trench warfare. Second, the OHL also issued an updated edition of Ausbildungsvorschrift für die Fußtruppen im Kriege, a revision of the pre-war Exerzier-Reglement für die Infanterie, that guided small-unit tactics in both Stellungskrieg and Bewegungskrieg. If the former was written to give overall guidance for how to conduct the upcoming breakthrough battle, the latter provided its nuts and bolts. The two documents shared many similarities, despite being written for different levels of command. First, both manuals stressed the importance of good leadership.

Commanders at all levels were to exercise their own initiative and take independent

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38 Weltkrieg XIV, p.41. As 52 Angriffsdivisionen took part in the Michael Offensive, I have used the higher number here.
39 Weltkrieg XIV, p.41.
41 Chef des Generalstabes des Feldheeres, Ia Nr. 5691, ‘Ruhe und Ausbildung der Truppe,’ 14 December 1917, HStA-Stuttgart, M33/2 Bü 300. The Generalkommandos of the VI and the XXIII Reservekorps functioned as the Ausbildungskommandos of the 17th and 21st Armies, respectively. See Heeresgruppe Kronprinz Rupprecht, ‘Kriegstagebuch,’ NARA, RG165/320/35/1.
42 Chef des Generalstabes des Feldheeres, Der Angriff im Stellungskrieg, 1 January 1918, BA/MA, PHD7/24.
43 Ausbildungsvorschrift für die Fußtruppen im Kriege (A.V.F.) (2.Entwurf) (Berlin: Reichsdruckerei, January 1918).
decisions based on the particular circumstances in which they found themselves. Further, both manuals stressed the importance of all-arms coordination in the attack. If the infantry was still the main means of bringing decision in battle, it relied on the artillery and increasingly on airpower to enable it to accomplish this task. Finally, the two manuals emphasized that attacks needed to advance deep into the enemy’s defensive system rapidly. *Angriff im Stellungskrieg* mapped how this was to be accomplished, and here we can see what would become erroneously called ‘infiltration’ or ‘Hutier’ tactics.\(^{44}\)

Within the attack sectors [*Gefechtsstreifen*], attacks should not be conducted uniformly. Strong points, villages, and woods are to be neutralized, in some circumstances through smoke. Units, deployed in depth, should by-pass these and attack sectors that appear to offer the least resistance. Following waves will take the strongpoint, etc., by envelopment….The foremost infantry must avoid any halt that is not absolutely necessary.\(^ {45}\)

*Angriff im Stellungskrieg* also developed the Westheer’s approach to the use of artillery. Building on the experiences of the Eastern Front and Italy, the new doctrine highlighted the idea that artillery was primarily to be used to neutralize the enemy through shock and through the use of gas. Only limited worth was placed on the destructive effects of fire on enemy positions. Instead of artillery barrages lasting days or weeks, the new doctrine foresaw short, intense barrages perhaps lasting only several hours. The new manual also emphasized the importance of the *Feuerwalze* (creeping barrage), designed to keep the enemy’s head down while the infantry maneuvered.\(^ {46}\)

The OHL and the armies continued to refine their tactical/operational doctrine between January and the beginning of the offensive in March. In a series of instructions, the OHL gave shape to the concept of battle by which it expected the Westheer to fight. To the OHL, one of the most important features of the upcoming breakthrough battle was that the attack had to be powerful enough to penetrate deeply into the enemy’s position on the first day and thus complete the breakthrough.


\(^{45}\) *Angriff im Stellungskrieg*, pp. 44-45.

\(^{46}\) Ibid., pp. 32-33. Although versions of the *Feuerwalze* had been employed during the battle of Verdun, a lack of offensive action by the Westheer between 1916 and 1918 meant that this tactic really developed in the east in the German army. See Georg Bruchmüller, *Die deutsche Artillerie in den Durchbruchschlachten des Weltkrieges* (2nd ed.) (Berlin: Mittler, 1922), pp.106-109.
quickly. Drawing on the experiences of Caporetto and Cambrai, they expected the enemy’s artillery positions to be taken in one fell swoop. Thus, divisions were to train in attacks up to 8 kilometers. Moreover, when it came to the assault, each division was to be assigned deep goals; the OHL was clear that divisions should not leap-frog each other, as was the British practice. Accordingly, the OHL forbade the early relief of attacking divisions, stating:

The subordination of the second line divisions to the first line…could lead to the second-line divisions being deployed too early and where resistance is greatest. The result would be extraordinarily high use of forces….The divisions of the first line must hold out for at least the first day of the attack. If we need to use the second-line divisions on the first day, then the offensive has failed. If the infantry meets difficulties, the artillery has to help them forward. The artillery must be quickly on hand and in enough force.

If reinforcement was necessary, divisions were to be put into the front line next to existing attack divisions, and each would have a narrower attack sectors.

Importantly, the OHL stipulated that training exercises ‘…must play out the entire offensive, not just the first break in. The use of two divisions one behind the other in a single divisional sector must be practiced in exercises.’ Goals were to be set far beyond the enemy’s defensive position so that there could be no temptation to rest once the immediate goals had been accomplished. Kronprinz Wilhelm expressed the objective in terms that the common Landser could understand and appreciate:

If the enemy’s artillery is taken, then the other positions fall by themselves. At this point and for the next hours and perhaps day, an initial window of success is opened, and everything depends on the immediate exploitation of this. Therefore, I believe it is necessary to go out to the enemy artillery positions when determining the goals of the breakthrough in individual attack sectors…. The infantry must be clear that they come out of enemy artillery

48 Heeresgruppe Kronprinz Rupprecht, Ia Nr. 5206, 24 January 1918, NARA, RG165/320/35/2.
49 Chef des Generalstabes des Feldheeres, Ia Nr 6239, 27 January 1918, NARA, RG165/320/11/?.
50 Armee-Oberkommando 17, Ia/Ib Nr. 327, ‘Erziehungsgrundsätze und Ausbildung für die Angriff,’ 13 February 1918, NARA, RG165/320/72/1.
fire quickest when they quickly and decisively home in on the enemy batteries, and particularly the positions of the heavy artillery.51

Command and Bewegungskrieg

The OHL also hoped to make use, particularly in the second phase of the offensive, of what they saw as a particular strength of the German army – its ability to outfight its opponents in Bewegungskrieg. Ludendorff spoke about the ‘superiority of our many years of military education,’52 and the 17th Army wrote about the weakness of the British, who were ‘not schooled in Bewegungskrieg.’53 In practice, this meant that the OHL expected commanders at all levels to exercise their initiative to take advantage of fleeting opportunities as they arose on the battlefield in order to outfight their opponents. Ludendorff expressed this in his important instructions for training of 25 January:

As in Bewegungskrieg, so too in the breakthrough battle the far-reaching independence and tactical agility of our lower commanders from company commanders upwards must be allowed to come into play. The lower commanders (battalion and regimental commanders) will in many cases have the decision in their hands…. Of fundamental importance is the place of the leader…. Divisional staffs belong far forward.

However, there is a curious level of cognitive dissonance apparent in the Westheer’s approach to this issue. On one hand, there was clearly a belief that the German army was superior to its enemies when it came to mobile warfare. On the other hand, the instructions for training issued by the attacking armies acknowledged that, the army of 1918 was not that of 1914. In February, the 18th Army wrote: ‘Commanders and troops are at the moment such prisoners of the years-long Stellungskrieg that it is only with difficulty that they can comprehend the conditions of the breakthrough battle and Bewegungskrieg.’54 In its instructions for training, the 17th Army stated that ‘…the principles of attack and Bewegungskrieg are no longer known in the lower ranks, in contrast to 1914.’ The 17th Army’s instructions, as well

51 Heeresgruppe Deutscher Kronprinz, Ia/Ic Nr 5360, 27 February 1918, NARA, RG165/320/25/2.
52 Chef des Generalstabes des Feldheeres, II Nr. 6405, 8 February 1918, NARA, RG165/320/25/2.
as the instructions from other armies, stipulated that older, more experienced officers (i.e., pre-war active officers) were key to changing this. Training instructions called for these officers to play a more active and direct role in training and to impart their knowledge of the ‘traditional’ way of doing things.\(^{55}\)

The OHL’s concept of battle clearly placed considerable emphasis on the role of the Westheer’s leaders from the lowest squad leader to the divisional commanders. However, the Westheer was suffering not only from a lack of suitable manpower, but also from a shortage of officers. At the lower levels, from company commanders downwards, the German officer corps had suffered greatly during the war. Those active duty officers who had not been killed, wounded, or captured had largely been promoted, or had at least had taken over higher commands. Moreover, the expansion of the army since 1914 meant that there were many more commands, further stretching the available officers. By 1918, it was common for battalions to be commanded by active-duty captains, meaning that companies and platoons were largely commanded by reserve officers or ‘wartime officers.’\(^{56}\)

On one hand, officer casualties helped the German army in the upcoming offensive. The junior officers within the Westheer’s companies and batteries were largely wartime officers. Most had seen considerable action and had mastered the skills necessary to command on the modern battlefield. They were young and for the most part up to the physical and mental challenges of the First World War battlefield. Those pre-war officers who had survived were commanding larger units by 1918. These officers had been trained in the pre-war techniques of battle and had the skills needed to fight the type of traditional mobile battle Ludendorff desired.

However, even with more senior officers, the German army faced problems by 1918. In peacetime, the army had about 90 infantry brigades and 170 infantry regiments. By 1918, these had increased to 200 and 600 respectively. Of course, officers had to be found to fill these posts, and in 1918 around 200 previously retired (i.e., much older) officers were being used to help fill the gap.\(^{57}\) Even here, the army

\(^{55}\) Armee-Oberkommando 17, Ia/Ib Nr. 327, ‘Erziehungsgrundsätze und Ausbildung für die Angriff,’ 13 February 1918, NARA, RG165/320/72/2.


\(^{57}\) Moriz Freiherr von Lyncker to Heeresgruppe Deutscher Kronprinz, 8 December 1917, BA/MA, RH61/1659.
faced problems. At the end of November 1917, Karl von Einem, the commander of the 3rd Army, wrote a stinging report about the suitability of many regimental and battalion commanders for the stresses of combat on the Western Front. The report noted:

I have seen that a very considerable number of commanders are not up to these conditions. Even before a large-scale battle has begun, the replacement of commanders is frequently proposed, because they likely would not stand the pressures. In large-scale battles then a further large number of commanders regularly fail due to a lack of nerves and willpower.  

Truppenführung: The Role of Higher Commands

The trench warfare of the Western Front had a far-reaching impact on command in the German army. The course of the war had seen a diminution of the importance of army corps and army as levels of command. In 1914, armies and army corps played significant roles in Bewegungskrieg. The army, usually composed of four or five army corps, was the highest field command. Both the army and the army corps, composed of two divisions, took active roles in tactical decisions on the battlefield. However, in the wake of the battle of the Somme in 1916 permanent ‘Heeresgruppen,’ or army groups, were created, each of which commanded three or four armies. Also in response to the battle of the Somme, the division had become the most important tactical unit, taking the place of the army corps, which lost its permanent connection to divisions and which now became a static, territorial command.  

The experience of 1917, however, demonstrated to the OHL that the tradition of Truppenführung was very much demanded by offensive action and that armies and army corps still had important roles to play in offensive battle, particularly in the Bewegungskrieg that would follow the initial breakthrough. In the German successes in Russia and Italy in 1917, armies and army corps had been essential in coordinating the maneuvers of their subordinate and neighboring units, as well as in ensuring the free flow of supplies. Further, Ludendorff believed that the British offensives of 1917 failed because ‘the higher commands did not understand how to exploit their

58 Armee-Oberkommando 3 to Heeresgruppe Deutscher Kronprinz, IIa Nr. 1014, 24 November 1917, BA/MA, RH61/1659.
extensive initial successes;’ in other words, because the British corps and army commanders did not command effectively. The OHL was clear that these levels of command would be essential in coordinating the actions of their subordinate units in the 1918 campaign. Moreover, experience and studies showed that divisions simply did not have the staff necessary to command the amount of artillery in use in 1918. Thus, the OHL intended higher commands to play a larger role in combat than had been the case in many years, and these commanders and their staffs needed to brush up their skills as well.

Ludendorff saw army corps and armies as essential in maintaining the momentum of advance, in exploiting opportunities as they arose on the battlefield, and in maneuvering subordinate units on the battlefield. On 25 January 1918, Ludendorff issued an order on the training of higher commands that highlights this:

Even more important in the offensive are higher commands (division, army corps and armies). For these commands, the husbanding of resources and the proper use of reserves is most significant. In general, reserves will not be used where the offensive has been held up by strong points or centers of resistance, which will cost unnecessary losses [Blutopfer], but rather where the attack is in motion and where it can be carried forward in order to break the enemy’s resistance in a neighboring sector by threatening his flanks and rear. This applies in particular to the use of the divisions of the second and third waves, which are the reserves of the army corps and armies. A premature employment of reserves limits their offensive strength and slows the momentum of the breakthrough.

The more these principles of command become the property of the lower as well as the higher commanders and the troops, the more commanders will play the decisive role demanded by offensive battle, but which has been forgotten to a certain extent even by us due to the imbalance of Stellungskrieg.

Given the importance of command, OHL insisted that even higher commands be located forward where they could exercise the most influence over the rapidly

60 Chef des Generalstabes des Feldheeres, Ia/II Nr.6608, 16 February 1918, NARA, RG165/320/25/2.
61 See General-Inspekteur der Artillerie-Schiessschulen to OHL, II Nr. 727/18, 5 February 1918, BA/MA, PH3/454.
developing battle. Ludendorff wrote: ‘All staffs, even those of the army corps and armies belong on the battlefield….’

With the limited resources available to the Westheer, even the attacking armies could not be strong everywhere. Therefore, Ludendorff recognized that choices would have to be made about where and how to attack. Drawing on the pre-war tradition of Auftragstaktik, the OHL left it to subordinate commanders to decide these questions. Ludendorff stressed the importance of choosing a Schwerpunkt, or main effort, for every attack, a choice that subordinates would have to make. In an order on training, Ludendorff wrote: ‘Every attack must have a Schwerpunkt. This applies not only to the army corps and division, but also to the regiment and battalion. The art of command is to recognize the Schwerpunkt and to deploy units against it correctly.’

Although the army and army corps had reclaimed some of their previous importance, the army group was still central to Ludendorff’s concept of battle in 1918. On 21 January, Ludendorff ordered that command of the main offensive be split between two army groups – Army Group Kronprinz Rupprecht would command the attack of the 17th and 2nd Armies, while Army Group Deutscher Kronprinz would command the attack of the 18th Army. This decision has been roundly condemned by contemporaries and historians alike. Hermann von Kuhl, chief of staff of Army Group Kronprinz Rupprecht, wrote in his diary on 22 January: ‘The division of the offensive is certainly unwise.’ The chief of staff of Army Group Deutscher Kronprinz, Friedrich Graf von der Schulenburg, later wrote: ‘Although I very much welcomed the part of our army group in the interests of the Crown Prince, I did not believe the division to be right from the standpoint of command. Unity of command could only be placed on firm footing when one army group was tasked with the conduct of the offensive, and, in this situation, this could only be Army Group Kronprinz Rupprecht.’

Ludendorff’s memoirs did, however, hint at the real reason for the command structure. He stated that: ‘It was desirable to make the fullest possible use of the

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63 Ibid.
64 Chef des Generalstabes des Feldheeres, Ia Nr.6578, 16 February 1918, NARA, RG165/320/25/2.
65 Kitchen, German Offensives, pp. 144-147; Zabecki, German 1918 Offensives, pp. 164-165.
resources of Army Group Deutscher Kronprinz.\textsuperscript{68} Splitting the offensive between two army groups meant that it would be possible to fight two, separate large-scale battles, one against the British and the other against the French, drawing on the resources of two army groups, rather than just one. Indeed, German intelligence suggested that French assistance to the British, in the case of a German offensive, might come in the form of a French counter-offensive elsewhere, most probably on the Aisne. Even if the French did send their reserves to the Michael breakthrough points, the more the 18\textsuperscript{th} Army threatened the French, the less aid they would be able send to the British. This increased the importance of giving Army Group Deutscher Kronprinz control over the ‘defensive’ side to the offensive.\textsuperscript{69}

In this decision, Ludendorff was drawing on important lessons of command from the war up to this point. The offensive in the west in 1914 failed in part because of poor command. Kuhl later said that if the Westheer had been divided into army groups in 1914, it would have fought a more coherent battle and some of the failures that led to the battle of the Marne could have been avoided.\textsuperscript{70} The defensive battles of 1917 confirmed the importance of army groups to German observers. The existence of such a level of command enabled the Westheer to withstand the simultaneous offensives from the British and French armies in 1917. Each army drew on its own resources to conduct its own battle. In 1917, unlike 1916, the Westheer was not forced to strip units ad hoc from quiet sectors of the front to feed a single defensive battle. Instead, each army group could make a determination of when and where units would be required and could regulate the use of reserves. Ludendorff was simply trying to apply the same principle to the offensive in 1918. As the war became mobile in the wake of a successful breakthrough, Ludendorff expected the two army groups to coordinate their actions with each other and amongst their subordinates to conduct a large-scale decisive battle along the lines of pre-war theory.

Thus, army corps, armies, and even army groups also conducted exercises to get themselves ready. Higher commands carried out extensive wargaming to test various operational ideas and, importantly, as a means of establishing the force

\textsuperscript{68} Ludendorff, \textit{Kriegerinnerungen}, p.475.
\textsuperscript{70} Hermann von Kuhl, \textit{Der Marnefeldzug} (Berlin: Mittler, 1921) pp. 244-245.
structure necessary for the forthcoming offensive.\textsuperscript{71} Army corps tried various new techniques in both wargames and exercises.\textsuperscript{72} The Westheer also made extensive use of its existing training establishments: Many commanders, including divisional commanders, and staff officers went through courses to hone their knowledge of the new offensive tactics.\textsuperscript{73} The Führerkursus at Sedan undertook exercises to explore questions of command and control in breakthrough battles\textsuperscript{74} and also carried out extensive trials on how artillery could be moved across a shell-cratered battlefield.\textsuperscript{75} The Artillerie-Schießschule conducted tests on the appropriate order of battle for the artillery during the breakthrough battle.\textsuperscript{76} All of this training was designed to shift the mentality of German officers from the lowest to the highest from \textit{Stellungskrieg} back to \textit{Bewegungskrieg}.

\textit{Conclusion:}

The pre-war German conception of battle was very different from that their main rival – the French. In 1911, an anonymous British observer wrote of the fundamental differences of approach of the two armies:

German war is a step from an uncertain present into an unknown future – the fate which lurks hidden in the womb of a still unfought battle – in French war the step into the unknown is taken from the sure basis of the known. The German conception of war embodies a splendid confidence in courage and initiative and the simplest application of force by average men; in the French conception of war we see a craving for certainty characteristic of a logical

\textsuperscript{71} Heeresgruppe Kronprinz Rupprecht, diary entry for 3 February 1918, ‘Kriegstagebuch,’ NARA, RG165/320/35/1.

\textsuperscript{72} For example, see, the list of questions sent by AOK 6 to its corps to be tested in ‘tactical wargames, discussions with the troop commanders and practical exercises with troops,’ AOK 6, Iab Nr. 1645, 27 January 1918, HStA-KA, GenKdo III.bay.AK, Bund 29.

\textsuperscript{73} For example, 189 officers took part in the third Führerlehrgang at Wörth between 28 February and 4 March 1918. Führerlehrgang Wörth, ‘Teilnehmer-Verzeichnis des Lehrgangs III vom 28.Februar bis 4.März 1918, HStA-Stuttgart, M635/2/551.

\textsuperscript{74} Führerkursus Sedan, II Nr. 2310, ‘Befehlsgliederung im Divisionsstreifen der Durchbruchschlacht,’ 16 January 1918, NARA, RG165/320/25/2. It is worth noting that the OHL rejected the recommendations of this report. Some units objected to training courses being used to test new doctrine, as they believed it took away from much needed training time. See AOK 6 to Heeresgruppe Kronprinz Rupprecht, Ia Nr 2012, 14 January 1918. The limited training time was made all the more important by the fact that the OHL had restricted or shut down some of the training courses to focus on the upcoming offensive. CdGsdF, Ia Nr 6198, 23 January 1918, HStA-KA, HGKPR/267.

\textsuperscript{75} Heeresgruppe Deutscher Kronprinz, IC Nr. 5093, ‘Bericht über Versuche des Führerkursus Sedan zur Überwindung von Trichtergelände durch Minenwerfer, Feld- und schwere Artl. und Lkw. am 9.2.1918,’ 11 February 1918, BA/MA, PH3/454.

\textsuperscript{76} General-Inspekteur der Artillerie-Schießschulen, Ia Nr. 6258/17, 27 December 1917, BA/MA, PH3/454.
race, and a faith in trained skill well befitting a nation which has long believed that its genius has led Europe in every field of science and art.\textsuperscript{77}

The rise of trench warfare after 1914 and the increasingly elaborate and detailed planning required to break into and through the enemy’s trenches reinforced the deliberate nature of French battle and shaped the developing British approach to battle. By late 1917, both the French and the British armies had embraced a step-by-step approach to battle, referred to by the British as ‘bit-and-hold tactics.’

The German army, on the other hand, did not modify its view of battle. As we have seen in this review of German training for the 1918 offensives, the pre-war ideas of a ‘decisive battle’ being won through maneuver still guided German planning for this offensive. Indeed, Ludendorff’s entire approach to the offensives demonstrates his continued adherence to the pre-war German ideas about battle. At conference on 19 January, Ludendorff stated:

We are talking too much about operations and too little about tactics. I have been part of many operations, but I never knew beforehand how an operation would run. Decisions must be made day to day and often even hour by hour. Whether one is in the position to direct a strike on a desired direction or whether one is forced to turn in another direction cannot be said before, and also not after three or four days. The picture can change so much that the original intention cannot be carried out. Therefore, I warn against the idea of setting a specific direction, even it this is the best. Instead, in all circumstances, we must focus on how to beat the enemy and how to get through his first position. What happens after this depends in many cases on decisions made by the hour. Then, the decisions must be correct.\textsuperscript{78}

Ludendorff’s emphasis on tactics rather than operations has been highly criticized, particularly in Zabecki’s recent account of the offensives. However, Ludendorff focused on tactics because he rejected the step-by-step approach enshrined in the Entente concept of battle. Instead, he remained wedded to the German concept of a flexible battle of maneuver. He believed the coming battle in 1918 would not be won by capture this or that rail center or defensive position, but rather by annihilating the

\textsuperscript{77} Anon, “The British Army and Modern Conceptions of War,”\textit{ Journal of the Royal United Service Institution} Vol. LV (Jul-Dec 1911) p.1191.

\textsuperscript{78} Verbindungsoffizier der OHL, ‘Operatives und taktisches betr. Westoperationen 1918 aus den Besprechungen mit Exz.Ludendorff am 18. – 21.1.18,’ 23 January 1918, NARA, RG165/320/36/1. See also, Konrad Krafft von Dettmensing, ‘Kriegstagebuch,’ entry for 19 January 1918, HStA-KA, Nachlaß Krafft/162, which has a slightly different wording.
enemy’s armed forces. This annihilation would be accomplished by German forces maneuvering enemy units into poor tactical positions. Following a successful breakthrough, or breakthroughs, German forces would advance deep behind the enemy and attack his flanks. The traditional German Truppenführung emphasized by Ludendorff in his training memoranda would ensure that the actions of individuals divisions, army corps, armies, and even army groups would have a greater effect than the parts. The sum of these actions would strike at the enemy’s will to resist and Entente resistance across the Western Front would collapse. To paraphrase Schlieffen: ‘Capitulations would take the place of slaughters.’

Having rejected the Entente’s more methodical approach to battle, Ludendorff did his best in late 1917 and early 1918 to restore the traditional German concept of Bewegungskrieg into his men. In the winter of 1917/18, the Westheer, or at least those units classed as ‘attack divisions,’ spent considerable time shaking off the habits of Stellungskrieg to be able to fight the type of battle envisioned by Ludendorff. However, the German army of 1918 was not that of 1914, nor were its enemies the same as they had been in 1914. Short of horses and advancing over extremely poor terrain against a resolute enemy, the German army of 1918 had nowhere near the ability to maneuver required by Ludendorff’s approach. Although the Westheer was able to breakthrough the Entente lines, it was not able to maneuver quickly enough to destabilize the Entente defense. This played into the hands of the Entente armies, who were able to use their methodical approach to battle to soak up the German offensives and allow the Westheer to exhaust its small reserves of horses and trained manpower, before returning themselves to the offensive in July against a much-weakened German army.