

HITLER'S RUN OF VICTORY

The German conquest of Poland in 1939 and the subsequent overrunning of western Europe in 1940 are landmarks in military history as decisive demonstrations of the theory of high-speed mechanized warfare—a theory which had been conceived in Britain but adopted in Germany, largely owing to the efforts of General Guderian, the creator of the German panzer forces. Although the senior German generals viewed the new technique with cautious doubt, and had allotted means for its development in more limited measure than its exponents desired, it sufficed to produce startling quick victories. The new technique not only revolutionized warfare but changed the course of world history. For the shattering effect of Hitler's victories on the position and outlook of western Europe could not be repaired by his ultimate defeat. Moreover the immense effort that America was led to make in turning the scales against Hitler resulted in the reorientation of world-power to the Western hemisphere. The ascendancy of Russia on the Eurasian Continent was another disturbing, and epoch-making, result.

The campaigns which produced the double revolution—in warfare and the balance of world-power—were also very significant examples of the strategy of indirect approach. In the second and greater case, particularly, analysis of the operations in the West makes it clear that the new type mechanized forces would hardly have succeeded without this accompaniment in strategy. But the effect was reciprocal. The mobility and flexibility of mechanized forces endowed the indirect approach with greater potentialities.

Poland, to her misfortune, provided an ideal demonstration site for the combination. Her frontier with Germany was 1,250 miles long, and had recently been extended a further 500 miles through the German occupation of Czechoslovakia. This had resulted in Poland's southern flank becoming as ex-

posed to invasion as the northern flank facing East Prussia. Western Poland thus formed a vast salient between Germany's two jaws.

The risks were increased by the way that the Polish forces were deployed, the bulk of them being far forward in the salient. The natural desire to cover Poland's main industrial area, which lay west of the Vistula, was dangerously buttressed by national pride and military over-confidence.

The Polish army at peace strength was as large as the French and not much smaller than the German. It comprised 30 infantry divisions and 12 cavalry brigades. But Poland's industrial resources were insufficient to make full use of her man-power, or even furnish an adequate scale of equipment for her active forces. On mobilization she could only increase her number of divisions by a third, whereas Germany could more than double hers, except for the armoured and motorized ones—but this limitation on Germany's side was offset by Poland's almost complete lack of such modern type forces.

That was the more serious because the Polish plain offered flat and fairly easy going for a mobile invader—though not so easy as France would offer, because of the scarcity of good roads in Poland, the deep sand often met off the roads, and the frequency of lakes and forests in some areas. But the time chosen for the invasion minimized these drawbacks.

Poland's enveloped situation made it inviting, and easy, for the Germans to pursue a strategy of indirect approach in the physical form. But the effect was much enhanced by the way they pursued it.

In the north, the invasion was carried out by Bock's Army Group, which comprised the 3rd Army (under Küchler) and the 4th Army (under Kluge). The former thrust southward from its flanking position in East Prussia, while the latter pushed eastward across the Polish Corridor to join it in enveloping the Poles' right flank.

The greater role was given to Rundstedt's Army Group in the south. This was nearly twice as strong in infantry, and more in armour. It comprised the 8th Army (under Blaskowitz), the 10th (under Reichenau), and the 14th (under List). Blaskowitz, on the left wing, was to push towards the great manufacturing centre of Lodz, and help to isolate the Polish forces in the Poznan salient, while covering Reichenau's flank. On the right wing, List was to push for

Cracow and simultaneously turn the Poles' Carpathian flank, using an armoured corps to drive through the mountain passes. The decisive stroke, however, was to be delivered by Reichenau, in the centre, and for that purpose he was given the bulk of the armoured forces.

The invasion was launched on the 1st September 1939, and by the 3rd—when Britain and France entered the war as required by their guarantee to Poland—Kluge's advance had cut the Corridor and reached the Lower Vistula, while Küchler's pressure from East Prussia towards the Narev was developing. What was more important, Reichenau's armoured forces had penetrated to the Warta, and forced the crossings there. Meanwhile List's army was converging from both flanks on Cracow. By the 4th Reichenau's spearheads had crossed the Pilica, fifty miles inside the frontier, and two days later his left wing was well beyond Tomaszow, while his right had driven into Kielce.

The Commander-in-Chief of the German Army, Brauchitsch, ordered the drive to be continued straight ahead eastward to, and over, the Vistula. But Rundstedt and his Chief of Staff, Manstein, took the initiative in varying the plan when they gauged, correctly, that the main Polish armies were still west of the Vistula and might be trapped there. Reichenau's left wing, led by an armoured corps, was directed to swing northward on to the rear of the big Polish concentration around Lodz, and to establish a blocking position along the Bzura River between Lodz and Warsaw. This northward swerve met little opposition, being unexpected, and as a result of it this massed Polish force was cut off before it could withdraw over the Vistula.

The advantage which the Germans had gained by their deep strategic penetration—along the line of least expectation and the line of least resistance—was now reinforced by the advantage of tactical defence. To complete their victory they had merely to hold their ground—in face of the hurried assaults of an army which was fighting in reverse, cut off from its bases, with its supplies running short, and increasingly pressed from the flank and behind by the converging eastward advance of Blaskowitz's and Kluge's armies. Although the Poles fought fiercely, with a bravery that greatly impressed their opponents, only a small proportion ultimately managed to break out and join the garrison of Warsaw.

On the 10th the Polish Commander-in-Chief, Marshal

Smigly-Rydz, ordered his remaining forces to make a general retreat into south-eastern Poland, in the hope of organizing a defence on a relatively narrow front for prolonged resistance. But this hope was frustrated. For while the ring west of the Vistula was being tightened, the Germans were already penetrating deeply into the region east of the Vistula, and carrying out a much wider pincer-manceuvre which outflanked the potential defence-lines of the San and the Bug.

The far-back line of the Bug was reached and turned by a remarkably indirect approach. At the opening of the invasion, Guderian's armoured corps had spearheaded Kluge's 4th Army in the thrust across the Corridor, in the north-west, to reach Germany's isolated province of East Prussia. It raced on through this German territory and came up on the extreme left, or eastern flank of Küchler's 3rd Army, facing south. Crossing the river-line of the Narev on the 9th September, Guderian drove southward, and by the 14th reached Brest-Litovsk on the Bug—a 100-mile drive down the baseline of the great Polish salient. His spearheads then thrust on a further forty miles to Vlodava, to meet the approaching southern pincer formed by Kleist's armoured corps. Thus the collapse of the Polish armies ensured by the time that, on the 17th, the Russians crossed Poland's eastern frontier.

The Germans' triumphant campaign in the West nine months later was not so plainly an indirect approach in physical shape, but even more of an indirect approach psychologically. It was inspired by the idea of upsetting the opponent's balance in a compound way—through achieving the unexpected in direction, time, and method, preceded by the fullest possible distraction and followed by the quickest possible exploitation along the line of least resistance to the deepest possible range. Moreover it owed its success, above all, to a baited gambit and ju-jitsu effect.

Early in October 1939, after overrunning Poland, Hitler issued his first instructions for an offensive in the West. These stated that, if it became clear that Britain and France would not agree to end the war, he would take action at an early date—because 'a long waiting period' would 'strengthen the military power of our enemies to an increasing degree', while it was likely to result in the neutrals swinging to the Allied side. In his view, time was against Germany in every respect. He expressed the fear that if he waited, as his military ad-

visers desired, the growth of the Allies' armament would overtake hers; that a long-drawn war would exhaust her existing, and limited, resources; and that it would leave her exposed to a fatal attack in the back from Russia—for he felt that his pact with Stalin would not ensure Russia's neutrality a moment longer than suited Stalin's purpose. Hitler's fear spurred him to force the French to make peace, by an early offensive, believing that once they dropped out of the war Britain would come to terms.

Hitler reckoned that for the moment he had the strength and equipment to beat France—because Germany possessed a superiority in the new arms that mattered most. 'The tank-arm and air force have, at the present time, attained technical heights—not only as weapons of attack but also for defence—that no other Power has reached. Their strategic potential for operations is ensured by their organization and well-practised leadership, which is better than in any other country.' While recognizing that the French had a superiority in the older weapons, particularly heavy artillery, he argued that 'these weapons are of no decisive significance whatsoever in mobile warfare'. With his technical superiority in the newer arms he could also discount the French superiority in the numbers of mobilizable soldiers.

The heads of the German army shared Hitler's long-term fears, but not his short-term hopes. Feeling that their forces were not strong enough to beat the French, they considered it wiser to stay on the defensive in order to see whether France and Britain became inclined for peace, or else attempted an advance that would offer an opening for crushing repulse and riposte.

But Hitler overruled their objections. The offensive was eventually fixed for the second week of November, but then deferred three days on account of unfavourable reports on the weather prospects and the railway transport situation. Similar short postponements—there were eleven in all—continued until the middle of January, after which there was a long interval until May, when the next warning order was issued—and this time confirmed. In the meantime, however, the plan had undergone a radical alteration.

The original plan, designed by the General Staff under Halder, had been to make the main attack through central Belgium—as in 1914. It was to be carried out by Army Group 'B' under Bock, while Army Group 'A' under Rund-

stedt delivered a secondary attack, on the left, through the hilly and wooded Ardennes. No big results were expected here, and all the armoured divisions were allotted to Bock, as the General Staff regarded the Ardennes as far too difficult country for a tank drive.

But Manstein, who was Rundstedt's Chief of Staff, considered that the plan was too obvious, and too close a repetition of the 1914 plan, thus being the line of attack that the Allies would expect, and be ready to meet. Another drawback, Manstein argued, was that it would strike the British army, which was likely to be a tougher opponent than the French. A third drawback, in his view, was that even if it succeeded it would only push the Allies back and gain the Flanders coast. It would not lead to a decisive result, as an indirect approach could—by cutting the communications and cutting off the retreat of the Allied armies in Belgium.

Manstein proposed that the centre of gravity should be shifted from the right to the centre, and that the principal thrust should be made through the Ardennes, as the line of least expectation. He considered that the armoured forces could be effectively used in that area, despite the apparent difficulties of the ground, and his view was reinforced by Guderian's expert judgement.

The boldness of the new conception appealed to Hitler. But the definite decision to change the original plan was produced by an extraordinary accident when, on 10th January, a staff officer who was carrying papers about the plan lost his way in a snowstorm when flying from Munster to Bonn, and landed by mistake in Belgian territory. The German High Command naturally feared that he might have been unable to destroy the papers (and, in fact, his attempt to burn them was a partial failure). Even then the Commander-in-Chief and the Chief of the General Staff hesitated to turn the plan round so completely as Manstein had proposed. Their resistance was only overcome after Manstein, going behind the backs of his superiors, had seen Hitler personally and gained his decisive support for the unconventional project.

During the interval, false alarms had led the Allies to show their hand, and their intention of advancing in force deep into Belgium. That disclosure, too, strengthened the case for changing the German plan in the way Manstein advocated.

Examining the course of events, it becomes clear that the

old plan would almost certainly have failed to produce any such decisive result as the fall of France. For the direct German advance would have run head-on into the strongest and best-equipped portion of the Franco-British forces, and would have had to fight its way forward through a stretch of country filled with obstacles—rivers, canals and large towns. The Ardennes might seem more difficult still, but if the Germans could race through that wooded hill-belt of southern Belgium before the French High Command awoke to the danger, the rolling plains of France would lie open to them—ideal country for a great tank drive.

Manstein had also reckoned with the likelihood of the Allies advancing into Belgium, and he counted on gaining an increased advantage from such a move on their part. His calculations were shrewd. Under the plan framed by General Gamelin, the Commander-in-Chief, the reinforced left wing of the Allied armies was to rush into Belgium immediately a German invasion opened, and to push eastward to the line of the Dyle, or beyond if possible. That Plan 'D' proved as fatal as the Plan XVII of the French in 1914. It played straight into the Germans' hands, by giving their offensive the form and effect of a flank counter-stroke. The further the Allies pushed into Belgium the easier it became for the Germans' Ardennes drive to reach the Allies' rear and cut off their left wing.

The fatal outcome was made all the more certain because Gamelin employed the bulk of his mobile forces in the dash into Belgium and left only a thin screen of lower-grade divisions to guard the hinge of his advance—facing the exits from the supposedly impassable Ardennes. When the hinge was pierced he was not only thrown off his balance, but had all the less chance of recovering it because the forces best fitted for switching to close such a breach were deeply committed in Belgium. In rushing them forward he had largely cast away his strategic flexibility.

The danger to the hinge was obscured for the moment by the Germans' opening strokes in the Low Countries—so startling that they acted as a supremely effective distraction. The Dutch army was thrown into confusion by an airborne swoop on its rear combined with a violent assault on its front, and capitulated on the fifth day. The Belgian army had its forward position pierced on the second day, and then fell back

to the Antwerp-Namur line as arranged, where it was joined by the British and French.

In Holland, early on the 10th May, German airborne forces made a surprise swoop upon both the capital, The Hague, and the hub of the country's communications, Rotterdam—simultaneously with the assault on its frontier defences 100 miles to the east. The confusion and alarm created by this double blow, in front and rear, were increased by the widespread menace of the Luftwaffe. Exploiting the disorder, a German armoured division raced through a gap in the southern flank and joined up with the airborne forces at Rotterdam on the third day. The Dutch, although strategically on the defence, were forced to become the attackers in a tactical sense—and were baffled in delivering assaults which they were not equipped to drive home. On the fifth day Holland surrendered, although her main front was still unbroken.

The physically direct invasion of Belgium also had a psychological indirectness of approach in the startling initial coup that opened the path for the invaders. The ground attack was carried out by the powerful 6th Army under Reichenu. It had to overcome a formidable barrier before it could effectively deploy, and only 500 airborne troops were left to help this attack. They were used to capture the two bridges over the Albert Canal together with Eben Emael, Belgium's most modern fort, which flanked this waterline-frontier. That tiny detachment, however, made all the difference to the issue. For the approach to the Belgian frontier here lay across the southerly projection of Dutch territory known as the 'Maastricht Appendix', and once the German army crossed the Dutch frontier the Belgian frontier guards on the Albert Canal would have had ample warning to blow the bridges before any invading ground forces could cross that fifteen-mile strip.

Airborne troops dropping silently out of the night sky offered a new way, and the only way, of securing the key-bridges intact. Fort Eben Emael was paralysed by a glider detachment of less than eighty men who descended on top of it, and bottled up the garrison of 1,200 men for twenty-four hours, until the German ground troops came up to capture the fort and drive across the captured bridges into the open plains beyond. The menace caused the Belgian forces to retreat towards the Dyle line where the French and British forces were just arriving.

These airborne coups in Belgium and Holland were conceived by Hitler himself, although their brilliantly successful execution was directed by the audacious General Student.

Meantime the armoured forces of Rundstedt's Army Group had been driving through Luxembourg and Belgium towards the French frontier. The bulk of them—5 armoured and 4 motorized divisions—were grouped under the command of General von Kleist, while the principal spearhead was Guderian's corps, of 3 armoured divisions. After traversing that seventy-mile stretch of the Ardennes, and brushing aside weak opposition, they crossed the French frontier and emerged on the banks of the Meuse—early on the fourth day of the offensive.

It had been a bold venture to send a mass of tanks and motor vehicles through such difficult country, which had long been regarded by conventional strategists as 'impassable' for a large-scale offensive, let alone for a tank operation. But that increased the chances of surprise, while the thick woods helped to cloak the advance and conceal the strength of the blow.

Yet, for all the surprise effect of this onrush of armour, it had still to cross the barrier-line of the Meuse. Much depended on the time of the crossing. General Doumenc, the French Chief of Staff, later ruefully said: 'Crediting our enemies with our own procedure, we had imagined that they would not attempt the passage of the Meuse until after they had brought up ample artillery: the five or six days necessary for that would have given us ample time to reinforce our dispositions.'

It is remarkable how closely these French time-calculations corresponded to those of the German higher command. The French chiefs had based their plans on the assumption that no assault on the Meuse was to be expected before the ninth day. That was the same timing that the German chiefs originally had in mind. At a war game in February, Guderian had proposed that the armoured forces should attack the Meuse as early as possible without waiting for the mass of the infantry and artillery to come up, but his proposal had been severely criticized by Halder, who considered that the ninth or tenth day was the earliest time practicable for such an attack. At a conference in March, Hitler asked Guderian what course he would propose taking after the capture of a bridge-head. Guderian answered that it should be exploited immedi-

ately by driving west towards Amiens and the Channel ports. His answer made heads shake disapprovingly at such rashness. But Hitler's nod was as good as a wink to Guderian.

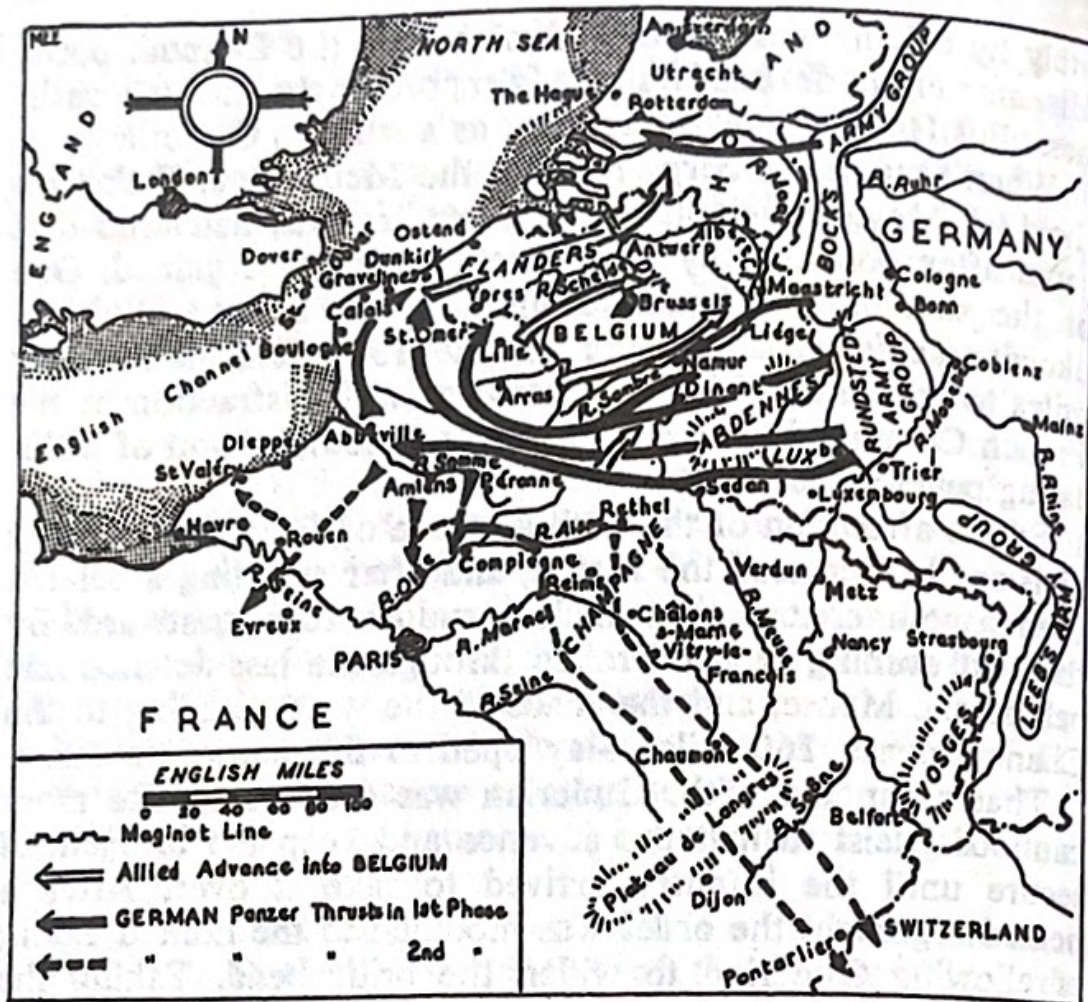
When Guderian's corps reached the Meuse near Sedan on the 13th May, its assault on the river-line was delivered that same afternoon, and by evening a crossing was gained. One of the smaller spearheads, Rommel's 7th Panzer Division, likewise achieved a crossing on the 13th at Dinant, forty miles to the west, and thus created a fresh distraction to the French Command as well as a potential combination of dislocating penetrations.

By the afternoon of the 14th all three of Guderian's panzer divisions had crossed the Meuse, and after repelling a belated French counter-stroke he made a sudden turn westward. By the next evening he had broken through the last defence line behind the Meuse, and the roads to the west—leading to the Channel coast, 160 miles—lay open to the panzer forces.

That night, the 15th, Guderian was ordered by the more cautious Kleist to halt the advance and keep the bridgehead secure until the infantry arrived to take it over. After a heated argument the order was modified to the limited extent of allowing Guderian to widen the bridgehead. Taking the fullest possible advantage of this permission he drove fifty miles westward next day to the Oise! The rest of the panzer forces joined in the westward surge, expanding the breach to a sixty-mile width and swelling the tank torrent that was pouring along the roads that ran across the back of the Allied armies in Belgium.

The torrent had its path made easier because the French Command was puzzled as to the course it was likely to take. A special advantage of the break-through at Sedan was that, being on a central axis, it could swing in any direction and threaten alternative objectives. Was it aiming at the Channel coast, or at Paris? While its advance seemed to be extending westward, it looked at first as if this might equally portend an early southwards turn towards Paris—and French imagination easily flew to such a possibility. The strategic flexibility of the German plan was increased by the mobility of the instrument, and the combination impaled the opponent on the horns of a dilemma.

The issue turned on the time-factor at stage after stage. French counter-movements were repeatedly thrown out of gear because their timing was too slow to catch up with the



changing situations, and that was due to the fact that the German van kept on moving faster than the French—or the German higher command—had contemplated. The French, trained in the slow-motion methods of World War I, were mentally unfitted to cope with the new tempo, and it caused a spreading paralysis among them. The vital weakness of the French lay, not in quantity nor in quality of equipment, but in their *theory*. Their ideas had advanced less than their opponents beyond the methods of the First World War. As has happened so often in history, victory had bred a complacency and fostered an orthodoxy which led to defeat in the next war.

On the German side, the higher commanders remained apprehensive about the risks of such a deep strategic penetration by a handful of armoured divisions. Hitler himself showed much nervousness, and in his anxiety about the southern flank put a two-day brake on the westward drive, so that the 12th Army could come up and form a flank shield along the river-line of the Aisne.

That delay jeopardized the German prospects, and might

have spoilt them if the French had not been by now in such a paralytic state. Hitler's hesitation foreshadowed a more costly one in the following week. But so much time had been gained in the preceding stages, and so much dislocation had been caused on the opposing side, that the pause on the Oise had no serious effect on the German prospects. Even so, it revealed a significant difference of time-sense on the German side. The gap between the new school and the old school there was greater than that between the Germans and the French.

In protest at the halt ordered on the 17th, Guderian had asked to be relieved of his command. But later in the day he was reinstated and told that he could continue 'strong reconnaissance'. His interpretation of this was to push on with the whole of his force almost as hard as previously. When the brake was released, his pace became even faster and on the 20th May he swept into Amiens and reached the sea beyond Abbeville—having cut the communications of the Allied armies in Belgium.

On the 22nd, after fretting over a further day's pause imposed from above, he drove northward for the Channel ports and the rear of the British army—which was still in Belgium, facing the frontal advance of Bock's infantry forces. On Guderian's right in this northward drive was Reinhardt's panzer corps, also part of Kleist's group. On the 22nd, Boulogne was isolated by Guderian's advance, and on the next day Calais. This stride brought him to Gravelines, barely ten miles from Dunkirk. Reinhardt's tanks also arrived on the canal line Aire-St. Omer-Gravelines and seized bridgeheads across it. But the continuation of the drive for Dunkirk—the last escape-port left for the British—was stopped next day by Hitler's order. This saved the British army, when nothing else could have done, from sharing the fate that befell the Belgian and a large part of the three French armies on the left wing. After two days the order was cancelled, and the advance resumed, but by that time the defence had been strengthened and the establishment of this back-shield held off the Germans long enough for the evacuation by sea of 224,000 British troops and 114,000 Allied troops, mainly French. Even so, the Germans had taken a million prisoners—at a cost to themselves of only 60,000 casualties—as a result of their great indirect approach.

The cause of Hitler's fateful halt order will never be com-

pletely clear. One motive, which he mentioned, was his fear lest his armoured arm might become bogged—the marshy state of Flanders had been deeply impressed on him by his personal experience there, as a corporal, in World War I. Another motive was his anxiety to maintain his armour intact for his next, and knock-out, blow against the French. A third was the belief, fostered by Goering, that the German air force would suffice to prevent any large-scale escape by sea, from Dunkirk, of the trapped British forces. But investigation has shown that the most immediate cause was the psychological effect of a small British counter-stroke with two tank battalions, that had been launched, at Arras on the 21st May, against the flank of the German drive to the sea. It played on the fears that Hitler and several of the German higher commanders had felt during this audaciously deep strategic penetration, and shook their nerve at a crucial moment. Kleist repeatedly put a brake on Guderian's drive. Kluge, the army commander directly above Kleist, was inclined to stop any further advance until the situation at Arras was cleared up. Rundstedt was naturally influenced by their anxiety. Thus, when Hitler visited Rundstedt on the morning of the 24th, he received a reinforcement of his own nervous doubts—and issued his halt order immediately after the conference. On this occasion Brauchitsch and Halder were for pursuing the panzer drive, but on the level between Guderian and them Hitler found ample backing for his fit of caution.

The next, and final, stage of the campaign started on the 5th June—the day after the Germans entered Dunkirk. The prelude to the new German offensive was itself astonishing—in the way that the German panzer forces, which had just previously been striking north-westward, were so quickly switched southward for a fresh stroke. Such rapidity of re-concentration in another direction was fresh evidence of how mechanized mobility had revolutionized strategy.

The new offensive was delivered against the new front, held by the remaining French armies, along the Somme and the Aisne. It was longer than the original front, while the forces available to hold it were much fewer. For the French had lost 30 of their divisions, besides the aid of their Allies, except for 2 British divisions. Weygand, who had replaced Gamelin, had collected in all 66 divisions, of which 17 were

in the heavily fortified Maginot Line, with which the improvised Somme-Aisne line linked up.

In this second act, Rundstedt's Army Group again played the decisive part, though it was not cast for this in the plan. Six of the ten German panzer divisions were allotted to Bock at the outset. But the planning was flexible and the battle took a different shape as it developed, so that Bock's strokes created the distraction which helped Rundstedt's to become decisive. The change of shape was a further proof of the capacity for *alternative* courses newly provided by armoured forces.

Bock's armies struck on the 5th June, but Rundstedt's not until four days later, owing to the longer time taken in re-deployment on that wing. In Bock's attack the principal effort was not so quickly or deeply successful as on the extreme right—where Rommel's panzer division broke right through the French defence by the third morning.

This quick penetration owed much to a piece of audacity on Rommel's part that no orthodox opponent would have expected—what he tried, and achieved, would hardly have been considered a practical possibility in any staff college exercise. On his sector, the French had blown up all the road bridges over the Somme, but had left intact a pair of rail bridges, with a view to the maintenance of the counter-offensive which they had dreamed of delivering. There can have seemed little risk in preserving these bridges as the single line rail-tracks were laid along two narrow embankments which ran for nearly a mile through marshy riverside meadows. Even for infantry to advance along these would be like 'running the gauntlet' on a tight-rope. Yet Rommel, having captured the bridges before dawn and gained a foothold on the plateau beyond the river, pulled up the rails and sleepers, and then ran his tanks and transport along the 'tight-ropes' under shell-fire, suffering only one check, of half an hour, when a tank was disabled in approaching one of the bridges.

By the first evening he had penetrated 8 miles deep, by the second 20 miles, and next day swept forward a further 30 miles, gaining quicker progress by advancing across country and thus by-passing the defended road-junctions. This deep thrust split the French 10th Army. Other German divisions were now pouring through the widening gap. On the night of the 8th, the fourth day, Rommel reached the Seine south of Rouen, after a 40 mile swerving drive through a dislocated

and confused defence which had been hastily strung across the approaches to Rouen and the Seine. Crossings were gained before the French had begun to rally and establish a defence of that broad river-barrier. Rommel's division switched round on the 10th for a 50-mile thrust to the coast, which he reached that evening, cutting off the retreat of the left wing of the 10th Army—5 divisions (including the 51st Highland). These, surrounded, were forced to surrender at St. Valéry on the 12th.

Meanwhile the main right wing attack from the Somme had found the going more sticky. It was a pincer-stroke, by two panzer corps under Kleist, from the bridgeheads already gained across the Somme at Amiens and Péronne. The right pincer, at Amiens, eventually broke through the French defence on the 8th and then wheeled south towards the lower reaches of the Oise, but the left pincer became hung up by tough opposition north of Compiègne.

As Rundstedt's Army Group, attacking the Aisne line on the 9th, had there quickly broken through the French defence, the German Supreme Command decided to pull back to Kleist's two panzer corps and switch them east, pass them through the wide breach along the Aisne, and use them to help in exploiting the French collapse in Champagne. This rapid switch was a fresh example of the flexibility of mobile armoured forces.

The decisive thrust was again made by Guderian—and it was once more a striking demonstration of deep strategic penetration combined with indirect approach. He had now been promoted to command Rundstedt's panzer group, and his two corps concentrated on the Aisne near Reims after a circuitous 200-mile move from the Pas de Calais. After the infantry of the 12th Army had gained three small footholds over the river around Château-Porcien, Guderian moved his leading panzer divisions into the bridgeheads during the night. They broke out next morning, the 10th, and drove forward with quickening pace, by-passing the villages and woods held by the French. Then French armour came into action, and a series of tank battles took place, but a penetration of nearly 20 miles was achieved in the first two days. On the third day Guderian's right wing reached Chalons-sur-Marne, and on the fourth Vitry-le-François, nearly 60 miles from the start. His left wing had now come up level after beating off flank counter-attacks. Guderian then drove on at increasing speed to,

and over, the Plateau de Langres—far behind the back of the Maginot Line—and raced south-eastward for the Swiss frontier. Chaumont was reached in a 50-mile bound on the fifth day, the 14th June; the River Saône on the 15th, by a similar bound; and early on the 17th the leading division swept into Pontarlier on the Swiss frontier, 60 miles beyond the Saône. That stroke cut the communications of the large French forces still clinging to the Maginot Line. Guderian's other divisions were already wheeling north to the Moselle to bar their retreat. A few hours previously, the French Government, with its armies in collapse, had decided to capitulate and appealed for an armistice.

Yet this decisive strategic victory on the Continent was rendered indecisive on the higher strategic plane by Hitler's subsequent failure to conquer the island of Britain. Here he paid the penalty for his halt order at Dunkirk. If he had prevented the British forces escaping through this one remaining bolt-hole, Britain herself would have been so defenceless that he might have conquered her even by hastily improvised invasion. But having missed his supreme chance of trapping the British army at Dunkirk, he could not hope to subdue her without a well-organized invasion in strength, and for that he had made neither plans nor preparations. His belated steps were too late, while his peace moves were too weak. When the attempt to gain control of the air over the sea approach was defeated in the 'Battle of Britain' the invasion project was foredoomed.

The insular obstacle continued to defy him—covered by the grand anti-tank ditch provided by the English Channel—and developed into an increasing threat to his schemes of continental control. This frustration had fatal consequences for him.

His run of victory continued in the following year—first at the expense of the Balkan countries, and then at Russia's—before it was checked in the depths of Russia. But he lacked the resources to make sure of the results at which he was aiming. For all the brilliance of his 1941 successes his decline can be dated from his failure in the 'Battle of Britain'—and this, in turn, can be traced back to his hesitating halt when Dunkirk was within his grasp.