**Blitzkrieg**

Blitzkrieg means "lightning war". It was an innovative military technique first used by the Germans in [World War Two](http://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/WW2.htm) and was a tactic based on speed and surprise. Blitzkrieg relied on a military force to be based around [light tank](http://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/weapons_of_world_war_two.htm) units supported by planes and infantry (foot soldiers). The tactic was based on Alfred von Schlieffen’s ‘Schlieffen Plan’ – this was a doctrine formed during WWI that focused on quick military victory. It was later developed in Germany by an army officer called [Heinz Guderian](http://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/heinz_guderian.htm) who looked at new technologies, namely dive bombers and light tanks, to improve the German army’s maneuverability.

Guderian had written a military pamphlet called "Achtung Panzer" which got into the hands of [Hitler](http://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/adolf_hitler.htm). As a tactic it was used to devastating effect in the first years of [World War Two](http://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/WW2.htm) and resulted in the British and French armies being pushed back in just a few weeks to the beaches of [Dunkirk](http://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/dunkirk.htm). It was also pivotal in the German army’s devastation of Russian forces when they advanced through Russia in June [1941](http://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/1941.htm).

[Hitler](http://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/adolf_hitler.htm) had spent four years in [World War One](http://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/index.htm) fighting a static war with neither side moving far for months on end. He was enthralled by Guderian’s plan that was based purely on speed and movement. When [Guderian](http://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/heinz_guderian.htm) told Hitler that he could reach the French coast in weeks if an attack on [France](http://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/attack_on_western_europe.htm) was ordered, fellow officers openly laughed at him. The German High Command told Hitler that his "boast" was impossible.

Blitzkrieg was based on speed, co-ordination and movement; the major science of this approach was the ability to get large mobile forces through weak points in the enemy’s defenses and then cause damage when behind his static lines. With large formations cut off from communication and logistics, pressure could then be put on interior defenses. Its aim was to create panic amongst the civilian population. A civil population on the move can be absolute havoc for a defending army trying to get its forces to the war front. With so much focus placed on the frontline, if this could be penetrated then the ensuing doubt, confusion and rumor were sure to paralyze both the government and the defending military.

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| **"Speed, and still more speed, and always speed was the secret……..and that demanded audacity, more audacity and always audacity."**  **Major General Fuller** |

Once a strategic target had been selected, [Stuka dive bombers](http://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/junkers_87.htm) were sent in to ‘soften’ up the enemy, destroy all rail lines, communication centers and major rail links. This was done as the German tanks were approaching and the planes withdrew only at the last minute so that the enemy did not have time to recover their senses when the tanks attacked supported by infantry.

Most troops were moved by half-track vehicles so there was no real need for roads though these were repaired so that they could be used by the Germans at a later date. Once a target had been taken, the Germans did not stop to celebrate victory; they moved on to the next target. Retreating civilians hindered any work done by the army being attacked. Those civilians fleeing the fighting were also attacked to create further mayhem.

**How effective was Blitzkrieg?**

In [1941](http://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/world_war_two_1941.htm), a diary kept by an unknown French soldier was found. In it are some interesting comments that help us understand why this tactic was so successful :

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| **"When the dive-bombers come down, they (the French) stood it for two hours and then ran with their hands over their ears."**  **"Sedan fell as a result of a bombardment……….it was a superb example of military surprise."**  **"The pace is too fast……it’s the co-operation between the dive-bombers and the tanks that is winning the war for Germany."**  **"News that the Germans are in Amiens………this is like some ridiculous nightmare."** |

All the above were written in a period of just 5 days : May 15th [1940](http://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/world_war_two_1940.htm) to May 19th 1940.

Moreover, one of the key successes of the Blitzkrieg was its use of FM radios – these enabled the forces that had broken through the lines to inform support units as to their progress and relay information on what was behind enemy lines. This superior intelligence was a crucial tool at the German’s disposal and allowed them to perform far more organized assaults on the enemy. The communication technology promoted quick, decentralized decision-making that was key to this speed focused approach.

**Why were the armies of Europe caught so badly prepared by this tactic?**

The Blitzkrieg was fundamentally about moving away from the tried and tested methods of modern warfare and creating a new, more effective doctrine. To that end, [Hitler](http://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/adolf_hitler.htm) had given his full backing to [Guderian](http://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/heinz_guderian.htm). In Britain and France, however, the cavalry regiments ruled supreme and they were adamant that the tanks would not get any influence in their armies. The High Commands of both countries were dominated by the old traditional cavalry regiments and their political pull was great.

In [1940](http://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/world_war_two_1940.htm), Britain and France still had a [World War One](http://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/index.htm) mentality. What [tanks](http://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/weapons_of_world_war_two.htm) they had were poor compared to the German [Panzers](http://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/tiger_tank.htm). British and French tactics were outdated and Britain still had the mentality that as an island they were safe as our navy would protect us. [Nazi Germany](http://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/modernworldhistory.htm), if it was to fulfill [Hitler's](http://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/adolf_hitler.htm) wishes, had to have a modern military tactic if it was to conquer Europe and give to Germany the 'living space' that Hitler deemed was necessary for the Third Reich.

It was used to devastating effect in [Poland](http://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/attack_on_poland.htm), [western Europe](http://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/attack_on_western_europe.htm) where the Allies were pushed back to the beaches of [Dunkirk](http://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/dunkirk.htm) and in the attack on [Russia](http://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/russia.htm) - [Operation Barbarossa](http://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/operation_barbarossa.htm).