

## Notes toward a Social Psychology of Combat\*

Daniel F. Chambliss  
*Hamilton College*  
DAN RYAN  
*Yale University*

### **ABSTRACT**

Starting from the observation that an army is not a thing with an inherent unity, and that its integrity is always in jeopardy, the more so when under attack by a skilled enemy, we go on to review two approaches to military strategy, one which aims directly at the physical destruction of the enemy, and the other which aims at destroying the enemy's organizational integrity. Following Collins we suggest that armies in combat suffer defeat due less to physical destruction than to the collapse of their organizational base. After a brief consideration of the first strategy, we go on to more fully elaborate, with a pair of examples, the strategy of "imposed organizational dis-integration." We suggest a micro-translation of this strategy, delineating how it works at the social psychological level, to examine the social psychological bases of what is taken to be sound military strategy.

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# Notes toward a Social Psychology of Combat\*

Daniel F. Chambliss  
*Hamilton College*

DAN RYAN<sup>1</sup>  
*Yale University*

## I

There is a tendency, in telling stories of war, to portray armies as things, and battles as physical collisions between these army-things. We often talk as if armies move and act as coherent units which simply maneuver, attack, and occupy territory. But if one studies military history at the micro-level, one finds that armies are not given, fixed units which non-problematically move as a whole. Instead, it is their very unity which constitutes a primary problem for military organizations. For the army to be an army, to maneuver as a unit, to consistently occupy territory—these are the day-to-day problems, the ongoing tasks of an army's commanders.

If an army is not a given unit, neither is it simply a collection or crowd of people; it is more than just an aggregation of individual soldiers (Keegan 1976, 173ff). It is, rather, an exceedingly complex organization, full of connections, dependencies, coordination schedules, even bureaucracies, fiefdoms and patriarchies. And, if organizations are tools for getting things done, an army is, for a number of reasons, an exceedingly difficult organization with which to accomplish anything. An army is a large organization, larger than any civilian organization, its membership commonly numbering in the hundreds of thousands or even millions.<sup>2</sup> It is a multi-function organization: it must feed, clothe, transport, and shelter its members, often carrying supplies over thousands of miles, and provide services such as communication and medical care and evacuation, usually under poor conditions and in unfamiliar territory.

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<sup>1</sup> Now at Mills College.

<sup>2</sup> In 1985, for example, the U.S. armed services included 2.1 million persons on active duty of whom 780,000 were serving in the army, and this was in peacetime. (Luttwak, 1985:70).

Added to these difficulties is the fact that most of these thousands are temporary members of the organization, in for at most only a few years (less time than most undergraduates are in college), and so have little time to learn the methods of operation, the formal or informal customs of the organization. Armies in combat often move at a moment's notice, so soldiers don't pick the time at which they will fight—many times this will be at night, or when they are exhausted, in short, when people are least likely to do what is expected of them.

And all the while, on top of all of these difficulties, there may be thousands of other people out there doing their dead level best to interrupt you, to discourage you, to exhaust you, and indeed, if they can get their own group organized, to maim and even kill you. A difficult organization indeed.

One more difficulty in getting anything accomplished with an army should be noted: more likely than not, most of one's own soldiers, are recalcitrant members of the organization, either conscripted under the threat of imprisonment, or volunteers who may regret their decisions after it's too late to change their minds. They don't want to be there in the first place, and once the shooting starts, their first inclination is to dive in a hole, run away, or refuse their officer's orders. Consider a few examples from the relatively high-morale, well-equipped American Army of World War II:

- 1) Some 5-6% of all soldiers actually deserted in any given year (The peak rate in Viet Nam was about 7% in 1971.) (Luttwak 1985, 34).
- 2) Once in combat, up to 10% of the remaining troops immediately became psychiatric casualties, totally unable to function in a combat environment, shocked into a daze.
- 3) After roughly 140 to 180 days under combat conditions, exposed to enemy fire, soldiers became so worn down physically and emotionally that they were virtually useless to their units (Keegan 1976, 329).
- 4) Of the soldiers remaining physically present and relatively healthy after all this, a large percentage did not seem to want to fight and the majority did not even fire their weapons:

The thing is simply this, that out of an average one hundred men along the line of fire during the period of an encounter, only fifteen men on average would take any part with the weapons. This was true whether the action was spread over a day, or two days or three.... In the most aggressive infantry companies, under the most intense local pressure, the figure rarely rose above 25% of total strength from the opening to the close of action (S.L.A. Marshall quoted in Dyer 1985, 118).

In sum, then, an army is a precarious organization with strong tendencies to fail in its mission and, indeed, to disintegrate entirely. As Luttwak says,

...battles are won not by perfection but rather by the supremacy of forces that are 5 per cent effective over forces that are 2 per cent effective (1985, 115).

Thus, considering all the self-destructive forces that armies face as organizations, and the fact that the margin of their success or failure lies in how effectively they stand up to these forces and maintain their organizational integrity, armies are particularly subject to what we will call "imposed dis-integration." Indeed, our thesis is, to follow Collins (1989), that armies in combat suffer defeat not so much due to physical destruction as to the collapse of their organizational base.

From this thesis it follows that effective operational strategies are not those whose goal is physical destruction, but those that take aim at the organizational life of the enemy. Such strategies attempt to spread confusion and panic among the enemy, to exhaust them, or to baffle them, and only secondarily to kill large numbers of them.

There are then, roughly speaking, two approaches to winning a battle, one which aims at physical destruction, one which aims at organizational destruction. Let us consider briefly the first strategy, then go on to more fully elaborate, with a pair of famous examples, the latter.

## II

The first strategy, attrition, is the more obvious. It holds that to destroy an enemy army, one must kill enemy soldiers. This certainly seems plausible enough, especially given the "industrialization of killing" which has taken place over the past 150 years. High volume production of casualties has become easy with the development of machine guns, anti-personnel mines, aerial bombardment (including carpet bombing and the use of napalm), and finally,

nuclear weapons. These are not tools of one-to-one combat; indeed, their "advantage" is that they depersonalize the act of killing while exponentially increasing its efficiency. Cases are familiar: the massacre of 20,000 British troops on the first day of the Battle of the Somme in 1916 (Keegan 1976, 255); the immolation of 42,000 German civilians in two hours during the July 28, 1943 American bombing of Hamburg (Dyer 1985, 93); the Tayloristic use of body counts to chart the efficiency of the war effort in Viet Nam; and more recently analyses of prospective nuclear war in terms of "megadeaths"—millions of casualties. Such weapons seem well-suited for fighting wars of attrition.

As a strategy, attrition is predictably favored by certain constituencies. More powerful, or at least more populous, nations may find in the simple swapping of deaths a fairly reliable road to victory. Commanders who manage wars from far behind the front lines, removed from the hard realities of battle, may put their faith in attrition (as it was with the British commander Haig in WWI, or Lyndon Johnson in Viet Nam). For related reasons, modern air forces and navies seem to favor attrition strategies. Air forces tend to have a technical, industrialized notion of war, and engage in a more rational, less personalized form of combat. They return every day to the sanity of a calm organization and warm beds. Navies also fight more controlled battles, and the men on a ship cannot run away, so, navies too are more apt to believe in victory by the bigger guns and the larger fleets, than do armies.

While attrition is often the strategy of choice for a variety of reasons, it is unreliable as a path to victory, despite its appearance as the most reliable strategy. Total annihilation of the enemy is exceedingly difficult to achieve in practice. Armies and nations can sustain enormous losses of life and still maintain their organizational coherence, continue to fight, and often even emerge victorious. Again, the British suffered 20,000 dead and 60,000 casualties on July 1, 1916, the first day of the Battle of the Somme; by November 18 of that year they had sustained 420,000 casualties; but they continued to fight (Keegan 1976, 255). In World War II, the German military lost 3 1/2 million dead on the Russian front (Ropp 1959, 344), and yet continued as a very effective fighting force until the spring of 1945. And the Soviet Union, in that same war,

lost over 10 million military dead fighting Germany<sup>3</sup> (and perhaps another 10 million civilian dead), and not only kept fighting, but won the war and annexed large amounts of territory. The sheer loss of life does not very well predict who will win or lose a battle.

True, the losers in a battle generally suffer heavier casualties than the victors, but it seems that the greater part of these occur after the battle proper, that is, after the organizational collapse of one or the other army (Collins 1989; Keegan 1976). It is during panic and the ensuing retreat that massacres occur, as the pursuing victors cut down the fleeing enemy from behind, or frustrated and angry captors kill their prisoners (not a rare event<sup>4</sup>). Annihilation of one's opponent may be one of the goals of a military encounter, but the direct attempt to slaughter the enemy is—paradoxically—not necessarily a very effective means to achieve that end.

### III

A second strategy, one often more effective than physical annihilation, is to aim at undermining the organization of the enemy force—to impose dis-integration on the enemy. The goal of combat here is not destruction of enemy troops, but of their ability to conduct an organized resistance: not to kill more of them, but to generate fatigue, disrupt communications, cut supply lines, and induce panic so as to destroy the enemy army as an organization.

There are many ways to do this. One method, historically interesting, involves the use of tricks, almost gimmicks. Examples abound: calling a conference with enemy leaders and then letting them see what appears to be your enormous strength (rotating artillery units again and again through a clearing within eyesight, for example); sending buglers to the enemy rear and having them sound a charge (Napoleon's tactic at Arcola (Liddel Hart 1967 (1954), 103));

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<sup>3</sup> There is consistent disagreement over just what the accurate figure is. Some estimates range as high as 20 million.

<sup>4</sup> Dunnigan suggests that "as many as 50 percent of those who surrender do not survive the process." (1988:472)

dropping leaflets which deceptively inform an enemy that he is surrounded when, in fact, he is not; and all of the apparatus now known as “psy-ops.”

More generally, the creation of uncertainty among the enemy troops can weaken their resolve and put them off balance. This was a common frustration in Viet Nam:

...intelligence could not say definitely how many enemy units were in the valley. Intelligence was not even sure if any were there at all. The NVA regiment might be there; then again, it might not. It might have flak guns, then again, it might not. That was one of the things that made the war such a nerve-jangling experience: the constant and total uncertainty.... We were always tense with the feeling that anything could happen at any moment (Caputo 1977, 272).

Probably the best tactic for imposing disintegration results from attacking where the enemy isn't—or at least, striking at enemy weaknesses rather than strengths. When the strategy of attrition would say engage the enemy where they are, the strategy of organizational collapse would say attack where they aren't: exploit soft spots in the enemy line; slip through their lines; move where movement is unopposed. Or, if such opportunities are not available, attack where the enemy is weak, not strong; Alexander the Great was a master of this technique:

[Alexander] also brought [to battle] an integrated command technique..., first the belief that the enemy would, if the signs were read right, betray where he most feared attack, thereby signaling a psychological vulnerability..., second, the determination to place himself at the head of the culminating attack at that point (Keegan 1987, 78).

[the enemy cavalry], 20,000 strong, were drawn up along a front of some 2000 yards, and so massed ten deep. If in close order...only those in the front ranks could have seen anything but their immediate neighbors. Alexander's view, on the other hand, would have embraced the whole mass....

Did he wait for some evidence of some tremor in their ranks? Horses experience fear, and are particularly susceptible to the sensation of fear in their riders. It may have been a ripple of movement, signifying indecision or momentary loss of nerve, that precipitated his order to advance. Whatever the trigger... Alexander flung himself on to his horse [and attacked] (Keegan 1987, 190).

These methods work because panic, once begun, spreads easily. The key is to start a panic, and already nervous troops are the most easily panicked.

All of these methods aim to destroy the enemy organization by undermining what we could call its "self-confidence"—literally, its confidence in the integrity of its self, its sense of being a

cohering unit, that is, its members' sense of being part of one. We noted at the beginning of this paper that a primary problem for armies is simply to be an army, to act as a unit under an extraordinary array of difficult conditions; psychologically this means that soldiers must believe that the army is intact, that their comrades will stand up and fight, back them up, come to their aid.

What is most dangerous for individual soldiers in combat is the chance that their comrades will forget their duty, and each man, afraid of being abandoned in a hell-for-leather retreat, will first himself take to his heels, leaving the courageous to be slaughtered one by one. And for the army as a whole, disaster comes at exactly this point, when each soldier begins to think of himself primarily as an individual and to act in his own interest.

#### IV

Let us now review briefly two examples of battles in which an attempt was made to "impose disintegration"; and thereby show more exactly how we mean that combat often involves not so much physical as moral destruction. The examples are chosen to be fairly familiar ones: Napoleon's cavalry attacks at Waterloo, and the German Blitzkrieg into France in World War II. In the first case, the strategy failed; in the second, it worked remarkably well.

Napoleon at Waterloo—1815. In Napoleonic warfare, cavalry was primarily a psychological weapon. Hollywood to the contrary, mounted men do not trample enemies or scatter them through sheer physical impact. A cavalry charge only works if the defenders, seeing 800 pounds of horseflesh and armored rider bearing down on them at speed, panic and turn to run away, thereby exposing themselves to saber and lance. But against disciplined infantry arrayed in ranks with bayonets poised, no cavalry can prevail; however hard their riders might drive them, horses simply will not throw themselves on the end of a bayonet. A cavalry charge, then, is not a contest of brute strength, but of organizational discipline.

In 1815 Napoleon escaped from Elba and regained control of the French army. In June of that year he faced the combined English and Prussian armies in a campaign in what is now



Belgium. The Prussians, defeated by Napoleon in a battle at Ligny two days before, were some miles away from what would be the Waterloo battlefield on June 18. Near the village of Waterloo, Napoleon found that he had to break through the English under the Duke of Wellington in order to avoid being crushed between the combined forces of the Allies—the English in front, the Prussians marching in from Ligny to the east. His main weapon, following a heavy opening artillery barrage, would be repeated cavalry charges against the English line.

Wellington, for his part, understood Napoleon's tactics and prepared for them. First, he arranged many of his units on the reverse slope (the back side) of the ridges along which his line stretched, so that the solid shot artillery would have less impact. Second, he positioned his veteran units—in this very mixed army of veterans and green troops, English, Dutch-Belgian and German mercenaries—in visible positions so others could see them and be heartened. The veterans were less likely to falter under the attacks, and newer troops would have their faith in the army's solidarity strengthened ("We must not be losing, the veterans are still standing."). Third, and most importantly, he arranged his troops into square formations, with ranks of men facing outward around a center in which were officers and non-commissioned officers to maintain discipline. This way the men knew that their backs were protected, and anyone beginning to run away would run into the center of the square and be driven back into line by sergeants and officers brandishing their own weapons. Cavalry could—and did—flow around these squares repeatedly during the afternoon, but as long as the British simply stood their ground, and fired their muskets on command, the cavalry, for all the show of stamping hooves and glittering breastplates, were virtually ineffectual.

Keegan's description tells the story:

The feat of breaking a square was tried by the French cavalry time and again at Waterloo—there were perhaps twelve main assaults during the great afternoon cavalry effort—and always...with a complete lack of success. Practice against poorer troops had led them to expect a different result: a visible shiver of uncertainty along the ranks of the waiting musketeers which would lend their horsemen nerve for the last fifty yards,... then a sudden collapse of resolution and disappearance of order—regiment become drove, backs turned, heads hunched between shoulders, helmet-feet flying before the faster hooves of the

lords of battle: this, in theory, should have been the effect of such a charge (Keegan 1976, 155).

But, of course, it wasn't. The British army stood firm and the effort to disrupt the English line failed. The French forces, fatigued and despairing, were eventually routed, the slaughter continuing on into the night.

The Fall of France—1940. Our second example of an effort to impose disintegration is the German invasion of France in May, 1940. The general outlines of this battle are fairly well known: on May 10, after a long winter in which the Germans and the French sat and watched each other across the Maginot line, the Germans struck swiftly around the end of the line, cutting through the supposedly impassable Ardennes Forest, violating Belgian neutrality, and with several massive columns of tanks, knifed deep into France. They then turned right—to the West—and headed for the English Channel, cutting off a huge section of the French army and the entire British force on the continent. The Germans stopped just short of the coast, leaving the British to escape with many troops at Dunkirk; but the French army collapsed and France surrendered only six weeks after the campaign began. "Blitzkrieg," it was called, "lightning war." The Germans were masters of the technique, and the fall of France is the most dramatically successful application of it.

Some more detail to the picture, though, may show us why a Blitzkrieg works, for it is not a battle in the usual sense, that is, of enemies attacking and fighting with each other. The remarkable thing about this example, in fact, is how few casualties there were<sup>5</sup> and how the collapse of the French army was more moral than physical.

The details:

(1) Blitzkrieg is waged by multiple armored columns—the attack is not at a single point, nor are slow moving infantry the primary troops. Speed and surprise are essential, as the enemy are

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<sup>5</sup> During six weeks' fighting German losses totaled 27,000 killed, 110,000 wounded. The French casualties amounted to approximately 90,000 dead, 200,000 wounded, and 1,900,000 missing or taken prisoner (Horne 1979 (1969), 649-50).

struck at several points simultaneously, they are paralyzed and thus prevented from making a concentrated counterstrike.

(2) The columns—3 in the fall of France—penetrate the defensive line at some point, and then race ahead at full speed into enemy territory, typically outrunning their own infantry and sometimes even their supply columns. Such strikes are, by conventional wisdom, potentially disastrous, as they leave vehicles (tanks, personnel carriers, trucks) vulnerable to running out of fuel or being stopped by counterattacks on the exposed flanks of the advancing columns. The German response to these risks was to race ahead, seizing French petroleum supplies, moving so fast that French forces couldn't find them for a counterattack. Too, the German position suggested several possible final destinations—the rear of the Maginot Line forts to the southeast, Paris to the south, or the Channel to the west—again, making an orchestrated counterstrike impossible.

(3) Normally, a successful penetration of a defensive line would be followed by a turning of the enemy's flank, or by rolling up the defensive line from the rear—a reliable tactic for destroying that section of the army. But the Blitzkrieg—whose radical strategic conception was Hitler's, and whose operational details were Erich von Manstein's—simply abandoned the French army altogether, left it chaotic and bewildered behind it. While German infantry units maintained enough contact with the French to keep them pinned down, the huge armored columns rolled deep into France, cutting communication roads, destroying or capturing supplies, bushwhacking headquarters units, and then moving on to the next unanticipated destination.

Such were the main components of Blitzkrieg.

In addition, the Germans also employed a variety of "special operations," which were largely psychological in their effects. German troops dressed as Belgian soldiers (the "Brandenburgers") seized crossroads and bridges and infiltrated key towns. Paratroops dropped behind French lines fueled rumors of "Germans in the rear," as well as taking key points. More dramatically, German glider troops landed right on top of the Belgian fort, Eben

Emael, dynamiting gun emplacements before the Belgians even knew they were under attack.<sup>6</sup> Even the notorious Stuka dive bombers, valuable as flying artillery, were in large measure psychological weapons. Slow, under-gunned and under-armored, they were in fact quite vulnerable to fighter attacks, as the British later discovered, but here, early in the war, their effect was devastating, as the French historian Marc Bloch recounts in his narrative of the fall of France:

Nobody who has ever heard the whistling scream made by dive-bombers before releasing their load is ever likely to forget the experience. It is not only that the strident din made by the machines terrifies the victim by awakening in his mind associated images of death and destruction. In itself, and by reason of what I may call its strictly acoustic qualities, it can so work upon the nerves that they become wrought to a pitch of intolerable tension whence it is a very short step to panic. There is a good evidence that these noises were deliberately intensified by various mechanical means.<sup>7</sup> Aerial bombardment as developed by the Germans is never primarily designed as a method of spreading massacre and material desolation. No matter how thickly bombs may be sown, they never, in fact, register hits on more than a relatively small number of men. But the effect of bombing on the nerves is far-reaching, and can break the potential of resistance over a large area. It was doubtless with that end in view that the enemy High Command sent wave after wave of bombers to attack us. The result came up only too well to their expectations (Bloch 1968, 54-5).

The result of the Blitzkrieg strategy—audacious and risky for the attackers, whose entire armored capability could be trapped behind enemy lines—was that the French panicked. Politically fractious at the outset, defeated in early encounters, faced with frightening new weapons, never knowing where the Panzers were, and fearing that the Germans were headed for Paris or cutting behind them, the French army collapsed in chaos, huge units surrendering all at once.

## V

In the first paragraphs of this paper, we said that an army is not a thing with an inherent unity, and that an army's integrity is always in jeopardy, the more so when under attack by a

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<sup>6</sup> On May 10 nine German gliders "landed unopposed plumb on top of the fort" and in a short time 85 Germans had disabled the battalion-strong garrison. The prompt surrender of this seemingly invulnerable fort confused and demoralized the French forces and provided spectacular grist for Goebbels' propaganda mill (Horne 1979 (1969), 255ff).

<sup>7</sup> Bloch was correct. The designer had added the sirens just for this effect.

skilled enemy. We then went on to outline two approaches to military strategy, one which aims directly at the physical destruction of the enemy (attrition), and the other which aims at destroying the enemy's organizational integrity. Conventionally, these strategies are termed "attrition" and "maneuver," but such terms do not reach to the psychological level of the soldier on the battlefield. They describe operations, but not experiences. Similarly, there are a number well-known of principles of war: seize the initiative, surprise the enemy, maintain economy of force, focus on clear objectives, etc. which stand in need of psychological elaboration. Why is there an advantage in maintaining the initiative? How does surprise achieve its advantageous effects? We suggest a micro-translation of these organizational principles, delineating how each works at the social psychological level (Collins 1988). The point is to examine the psychological bases of what is taken (and often proven) to be sound military strategy.

In this paper we have suggested, following Collins (1989) and Keegan (1976), that combat is best seen not as an exchange of casualties (though that certainly occurs), but as an exchange of fear, in which each side tries—through massacre or bluff, battle or maneuver—to induce panic in the other side, to inspire in each individual enemy soldier the fear that his comrades are fleeing, about to flee, or have already fled, that he is standing alone, that defeat is inevitable, and that his own courage has finally become irrelevant.

We suggest that the most effective strategies work to destroy an army's self-confidence—its confidence that it is an army at all, an organization with integrity that can act as a unit and in which soldiers move as groups rather than self-interested individuals.

This result can be achieved, for instance, by destroying communication so that units do not know where other units are or how the battle is going, by launching terrifying attacks (as in cavalry charges or dive bombing), or by deception and trickery. Psychologically, it pays to attack an enemy's weakest point, where success is easiest and panic will ignite most quickly, even if such moves do not involve the greatest possible physical destruction of the enemy. Sheer audacity, too, pays—as the Germans found in France. The apparent irrationality and daring of the German Panzer columns, driving deep beyond their own infantry support and into

the enemy heartland, left the French bewildered and terrified—"Have we lost already? Where are they going? How can the Germans justify this? Our other lines must have collapsed, otherwise the Germans would not be doing this...." The result was the complete moral collapse of the French troops, who lost faith in their own comrades and in their ability to respond to the surprise, to the very outrageousness of the German plan.

In 1940 the Germans succeeded in imposing disintegration within the ranks of the enemy; in 1815 the French had failed. In neither case did sheer fire power or numbers provide the margins of victory or defeat.

There is, though, a subtle irony in all of this. What is good for the analyst—a hard-nosed realization of the fragility of an army's integrity—can be disastrous for the private soldier; he must believe in the army's integrity. More specifically this means: *he must believe that others believe in this integrity*. For the social scientist such unthinking belief would be the mark of professional failure; in looking at combat we must go beyond the level of conventional wisdom and soldiers' ways of thinking about warfare. At the risk of sounding frivolous, theirs remains to do or die; ours is precisely to reason why.

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