

The Hutier Legend

by

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MANY English-language and French accounts of World War I speak of "Hutier Tactics" as a German secret weapon that nearly won the war in Ludendorff's spring offensive of 1918. What were the Hutier tactics and their origins?

Upon the outbreak of the war, all the major powers envisioned quick victories through lightning blows. The Germans had the Schlieffen Plan to encircle the French armies. The French Plan XVII projected the destruction of the German forces in the Metz-Thionville area. The Austro-Hungarians sought to smash the Serbians before the Russians could mobilize. The Russians drove a "steamroller" to flatten the Austrians at once.

Despite ingenious plans, daring feats, and self-sacrifice on all the battlefields, the Germans could go no farther than the Marne, the French army bogged down, the Serbs checked the Austro-Hungarians, and the Russians ran out of steam.

In the ensuing static warfare on the western front, where the trench, machine gun, and barbed wire made defensive operations supreme, the opponents were able to advance but little at the cost of thousands of lives.

Searching for the solution of how to cross no-man's land, the adversaries used concentrated artillery barrages, poison gas, the tank, and, increasingly, the airplane. None of these innovations, even when improved, made possible a breakthrough of the enemy defenses.



von Hutier

When Ludendorff launched his spring offensive on 21 March 1918, however, he achieved surprising success. The German Second, Seventeenth, and Eighteenth Armies broke through the Allied lines on a 100-kilometer front. Especially spectacular was the advance of General Oskar von Hutier's Eighteenth Army, which gained 10 kilometers on the first day, 12 on the second, 8 on the third, and 8 again on the fourth. When this operation came to an end on 4 April, Hutier's army had crushed General Sir

Hubert Gough's Fifth British Army, had taken 50,000 prisoners, and had come close to driving a wedge between the British and French fronts. Hutier's army had moved forward a total of 38 kilometers, an astounding drive.

The second German attack on 9 April, and the third launched on 27 May, were equally astonishing. For example, on the opening day of the second offensive, German troops

advanced 20 kilometers, the longest surge made on the western front since the beginning of trench warfare.

The impact of these German successes was tremendous. To many contemporaries, as well as to later historians, it seemed that the recipe for mobile warfare had been found. The victories of the Eighteenth Army were praised not only by the German Emperor, who decorated Hutier with the *Pour la merite*, but also by the Allies, and especially by the French.

The Paris magazine *L'Illustration* in June 1918 called Hutier "Germany's new strategic genius."¹ Later that month the *New York Times Mid-Week Pictorial* presented the portrait of Hutier along with such generals as Ludendorff and Below, with the remark that Hutier was "one of the most successful of the German commanders."² Several days later the *Army and Navy Journal* said of Hutier:

The enemy has worked out elaborate logistic features in his offensive of the present war which enable him to station his assaulting troops at a great number of points, twenty, thirty and possibly even fifty miles behind the intended point of attack. To General von Hutier in his March offensive... is ascribed the successful inauguration of the new method.... If this method is correctly ascribed to von Hutier's attack, the crushing and sustained effect it produced upon Gough's Fifth Army gives proof of its formidable nature.³

Hutier's successes made headlines, and military writers and historians came to accept him as a genius. Commandant Desmazes of the Military School at Saint-Cyr wrote in 1920: "The battles against the Russians (Sereth and Riga) ... had been the laboratory for a new tactical doctrine fostered by General von Hutier, the Army Commander ... and by Colonel Bruckmüller, who commanded the army artillery under General von Hutier."⁴ Major W. H. Wilbur, who would be a US general officer in World War II, said in his thesis at the Command and General Staff School in 1933: "In the offensive of March 21st, the Germans put into

effect a new tactical doctrine ... (that was) highly successful."⁵ Wilbur gave credit for this to Hutier and referred to it as the "new scheme for rupturing the enemy line."⁶

With Hutier's prestige and reputation established, his "Hutier tactics" became part of the curriculum in all American military schools. The ROTC *Manual on American History*, for example, said:

In addition to surprise, the Germans banked heavily on the effectiveness of the new tactics they had developed to penetrate strongly entrenched positions. The Hutier tactics, named after the German general who developed and first applied them in the siege of Riga, had proved highly successful at Caporetto in Italy and against the British at Cambrai in 1917.⁷

The US Military Academy textbook of 1950 stated: "Ludendorff expected to break the deadlock on the Western Front by the large scale application of the famous Hutier tactics, as used at Riga and Caporetto."⁸ And the 1969 edition of *American Military History* read: "For success Ludendorff counted on numerical superiority... surprise, and the first mass application of new tactics developed originally in the east by LTG Oskar von Hutier."⁹

Hutier's achievements were highly praised by S. L. A. Marshall, the noted military historian, in his book entitled *Blitzkrieg*, where Marshall nominated Hutier as the father of Blitzkrieg tactics. Arguing that lightning attacks were executed by German forces as far back as 1917 by Hutier's Eighth Army in the successful maneuver against Riga, he said:

German tactics on this occasion were hardly noted by the military historians because of the relative insignificance of the battle, which had only the purpose of straightening the German line, and economizing German troops.... Out of the Riga Battle, 1917, and the Michel (March 1918) Battle in France, 1918, came the tactical plan which subsequently matured as lightning war.¹⁰

Professor Larry Addington's recent study also presents the tactics of Hutier's storm troops as a major step in the evolution toward Guderian's panzer combat-team tactics.¹¹

Despite widespread emphasis on the Hutier tactics by French, American, and British authors, the German accounts of World War I present no evidence whatsoever of Hutier as the innovator of a tactical doctrine. Ludendorff himself makes no connection in his memoirs between Hutier's Riga campaign and the tactics of 1918. All that Ludendorff says of Riga is:

Supported by higher commands General von Hutier . . . made with his chief of staff, General von Suabertzweig, thorough preparations for the undertaking. The passage was successful. The Russians had evacuated the bridgehead . . . and with few exceptions, offered but slight resistance.¹²

In his description of Caporetto, Ludendorff does not even mention Hutier's name.¹³ And in his account of the March 1918 offensive, although he praises Hutier's army, he makes no reference to Hutier's tactics.¹⁴ Bias on Ludendorff's part against Hutier is unlikely because Hutier was his cousin and a close associate, not in any sense a rival or competitor.

General Wilhelm Balck, writing on the development of tactics in the First World War, says nothing of Hutier tactics. Nor does he credit Hutier as an innovator of a specific technique.¹⁵ General Krafft von Dellmingsinger, General von Kuhl, Colonel Bruckmüller, and Lieutenant Colonel Wachenfeld might have been expected to mention Hutier tactics but failed to do so.¹⁶ Nothing is to be found in the German Army's official publication of documents.¹⁷ The same applies to an official publication of lessons of the great war.¹⁸ And in a later official survey, Hutier is treated only as a troop commander.¹⁹ Yet, it is curious that Major Wilbur at Fort Leavenworth nevertheless cited Ludendorff, Balck, and other publications to prove Hutier's involvement in the development of Hutier tactics.

Other German studies are similarly silent. An authoritative and detailed analysis as late as 1938 makes no mention of the Riga operation or of Hutier Tactics or of the influence of eastern front and Caporetto experiences on the Ludendorff offensive.²⁰ A year later when the director of the German Army Military History Research Institute published an article on the war, he found no reason to mention Hutier's contribution to the tactics employed by Ludendorff.²¹

Not until 1944, when the final volume of the German official history of World War I was published, is there any German reference to Hutier as a tactical innovator. It says, "General von Hutier is considered by the Allies as a specialist in surprise attacks."²² But the study clearly implies that German historians disagree with that estimate.

A recent survey of German libraries and military scholars confirms the general picture. The commandant of the Maria Theresa Military Academy in Wiener Neustadt, Austria, remarked that he never heard of Hutier tactics.²³ A faculty member of the Army Officer's School at Hannover-Langenhagen, Germany, responded in a similar fashion.²⁴ A historian at the Military Archives in Freiburg was astonished by Hutier's reputation in other countries as an innovative tactician and especially by his association with the Blitzkrieg theory.²⁵ The Austrian War Archives in Vienna could find

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no documentary evidence to indicate the existence of a Hutier tactic.²⁶ A German research historian examined the works of more than thirty German officers who participated in the actions in which the Hutier tactics were employed and made personal inquiries of numerous former German generals and staff officers. He concluded that "A special Hutier tactics or a so-called Hutier tactic in the presently available German sources is nonexistent."²⁷

But how, then, did Hutier attain his spectacular success in 1918? The answer lies in the effective employment of "Infiltration Tactics." The essence of these new tactics consisted of two major changes in the methods used previously. First, the attacking infantry bypassed strongholds and enemy units at the flanks, leaving the destruction of these elements to the second wave, and advanced boldly by infiltrating small groups until it reached the enemy's artillery. To insure the success of the offensive, handpicked and especially trained units, the so-called "Sturm Bataillons" or "Stosstrupps," were organized in each division to lead the attack. To increase their fire power, these storming infantry battalions were equipped with special light artillery batteries and mortars.

The second change from previous tactics involved a different use of the artillery. Instead of attempting to destroy the opponent's field fortifications, the artillery's mission was to paralyze enemy artillery with gas and high-explosive shelling, as well as to

provide close direct support to the attacking infantry. To achieve the latter, a special firing technique was used to deliver an iron curtain of artillery fire at a predetermined rate immediately ahead of the storm troops. Invented by Colonel Bruckmüller, one of the most successful artillery officers of World War I, the "Feuerwalze" became the cornerstone of the infiltration tactics.

And, ever mindful of a Clausewitz general principle for the offense, "One of the strongest weapons of offensive warfare is the surprise attack . . .,"²⁸ great emphasis was placed on surprise. Unless local commanders were able to achieve surprise, the attack was delayed.

These infiltration tactics arose out of the defensive operations of the Central Powers in 1916/17, after Hindenburg and Ludendorff

succeeded Falkenhayn at the head of the German armies. As it became clear to them that radical changes in German tactics were necessary to resist future allied attacks, they found it necessary to establish a new defensive doctrine based principally on the experiences of the Somme and Verdun battles. To that end, they made a major effort to gather ideas and information from the experiences of a large number of commanders and staff officers, including small unit leaders in the trenches. After analysis, the data was published during the winter of 1916/17 in a series of manuals on defensive tactics for trench warfare.²⁹ These regulations were modified constantly based on new experiences from all fronts. For example,



Ludendorff

revisions occurred on 1 March, on 10 July, and again on 1 September, 1917.

The basic technique was defense in depth. Positions that could be held only with great loss of life were to be abandoned. An immediate counterattack using infiltration tactics on a small scale was to recapture the "lost ground."

In 1917/18, after the Russian collapse, the Germans launched an "offensive with limited objectives." Infiltration tactics, originally developed for counterattacking in defensive warfare, were employed. The capture of the Tobol Bridgehead, Hutier's Riga operation, and the Battle of Caporetto are examples of the technique.³⁰

The experience gained from these and many other smaller offensive actions, as well as from the Allies' offensives, was collected, carefully analyzed, drafted into directives and field manuals, and distributed to the troops. The manual, *The Attack in Position Warfare*, on which the March 1918 German offensive was based, appeared in print on 1 January 1918.³¹

The use of both the elastic defense and the infiltration tactics ignited sharp controversies among German staff officers and troop commanders. Unfortunately, Hutier's diary was destroyed in World War II, and no document in the German military archives indicates his stand on the matter.³² It is likely that Hutier, along with many other army and corps commanders, contributed to the new tactics.

Although it is difficult to credit the individuals involved in these innovations, one thing is certain—Hutier did not invent the tactics. They resulted from an evolutionary process in which many persons participated. If a single individual is more responsible than the others, it is Ludendorff himself, for he made the decision to collect, analyze, and formulate the use of these efficacious ideas.

Ascribing all this to Hutier was the work of the Allied Press, and particularly the French.³³ It is reasonable to assume that the other media carrying the news considered the French Headquarters a reliable source insofar as a contemporary combat report can be

reliable. Subsequently, American works would cite principally French sources to support their statements about "Hutier tactics." Combining the press reports with the prestige of the post-World War I French Army, we may reasonably suppose that it was the French who originated and propagated the legend. Why the French made Hutier a hero is a matter of conjecture. Was an enemy hero a political necessity in order to explain a shocking defeat? Was it simply a loser's rationalization of the March 1918 debacle? Did Hutier's Huguenot past contribute to his mystique? Could the French ego accept defeat from only a military genius?

Certainly the French needed to prevent disillusionment among soldiers and civilians alike at the tremendous advances made by the Germans in a formerly stalemated war. Propaganda was, after all, of vital importance in World War I. Perhaps the French had to rely on incomplete and inaccurate information from the front, and therefore made an educated guess as to the origin of the successful German tactics.

But to think that the Germans themselves would refuse to credit a hero, if one actually existed, is absurd, for they too had to keep up morale. "Hutier tactics" must be relegated to the status of historical legend.

NOTES

1. "Comment Attaquent les Allemands: La manoeuvre de von Hutier (March 21-April 5 1918)," *L'Illustration*: Paris, (1 June 1918).
2. *New York Times Mid-Week Pictorial*, 13 June 1918, n.p.
3. *Army and Navy Journal*, 18 May 1918, p. 1437.
4. W. H. Wilbur, *The German Offensive of March 21, 1918* (Ft. Leavenworth, Kan.: Command & General Staff School, 1933), p. 7.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 41.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 10.
7. *American Military History 1607-1958*. ROTC Manual, No. 145-20. Edited & published by Department of Army (Washington, 1959), p. 343.
8. *A Short History of World War I*, ed. by T. Dodson Stamps and Vincent J. Esposito (West Point, N.Y.: US Military Academy, 1950), p. 275.
9. Charles B. MacDonald, *World War I: The US Army Overseas in the Army Historical Series, American Military History*—general editor, Maurice Matloff (Washington: Office of the Chief of Military History, 1969), p. 385.
10. S. L. A. Marshall, *Blitzkrieg: Its History, Strategy, Economics and Challenge to America* (New York: Morrow, 1940), pp. 85-87.

11. Larry H. Addington, *The Blitzkrieg...* (New Brunswick: Rutgers Univ. Press, 1971), p. 34.
12. Erich Ludendorff, *Meine Kriegserinnerungen 1914-1918* (Berlin: Mittler und Sohn, 1919), pp. 385-86.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 386.
14. *Ibid.*, pp. 474-75, 480-82.
15. Wilhelm Balck, *Entstehung, Durchführung* (Berlin: R. Eisenschmidt, 1920), (2d ed., 1922).
16. a. Konrad Krafft von Dellmensinger, *Der Durchbruch* (Hamburg: Hanseatische Verlagsanstalt, 1938).
 b. Hermann von Kuhl, *Entstehung, Durchführung und Zusammenbruch der Offensive von 1918* (Berlin: Deutsche Verlagsgesellschaft für Politik und Geschichte, 1927).
 c. George Bruckmüller, *Die deutsche Artillerie in den Durchbruchschlachten des Weltkrieges* (Berlin: Mittler und Sohn, 1921). The title of the second ed., *Die Artillerie beim Angriff im Stellungskrieg* (Berlin: Offene Worte, 1926).
 d. Wahlenfeld, "Der Duna Übergang der 8. Armee im September 1917 und die Einnahme des Brückenkopfes von Riga," *Wissen und Wehr* (Hamburg, 1923), pp. 9-10.
17. *Urkunden der Obersten Heeresleitung* (Berlin, 1920).
18. Max Schwarte, general ed., *Die militärischen Lehren des Grossen-Krieges* (Berlin, 1920).
19. Max Schwarte, *Geschichte des Weltkrieges* (Berlin: Mittler und Sohn, 1923), pp. 223, 305, 351, 365. The second enlarged and revised edition treats the Hutier matter similarly.
20. "Die Entwicklung der Deutschen Infanterie im Weltkrieg 1914-1918," *Militärwissenschaftliche Rundschau* (Berlin: Heft 3, 1938), pp. 367-419.
21. Solger, "Der Durchbruchangriff dargetan an den Kämpfen im Jahre 1918," *Militärwissenschaftliche Rundschau* (Berlin: Heft 2, 1938), pp. 204-28.
22. *Der Weltkrieg 1914 bis 1918*, ed. by the Kriegsgeschichtlichen Forschungsanstalt des Heeres (Berlin: Mittler und Sohn, 1944), vol. 14, p. 21.
23. Letter, Major General Nitsch to author, 15 November 1973. (Note: This reference and the letters cited in the following four references are on file in the US Army Military History Research Collection, Carlisle Barracks, Pennsylvania.)
24. Letter, Lieutenant Colonel Knolle to author, 14 February 1974.
25. Letter, Colonel (Dr.) Rolf Elble to author, 12 December 1973.
26. Letter, Wirkl. Hofrat Dr. Winter to author, 19 March 1974.
27. Letter, Lieutenant Colonel Hermann Stein to author, 15 July 1974.
28. General Carl von Clausewitz, *Principles of War* (Harrisburg: Military Service Publishing Co., 1942), p. 26.
29. The most significant ones were (copies are available in the US Army Military History Research Collection):
 a. *Allgemeines über Stellungsbau* (Deutsche Oberste Heeresleitung, 13 November 1916).
 b. *Grundsätze für die Führung in der Abwehrschlacht im Stellungskrieg* (Deutsche Oberste Heeresleitung, 1 December 1916).
 c. *Verbindung der Infanterie mit Fliegern und Fesselballonen* (Deutsche Oberste Heeresleitung, 1 January 1917).
30. *Österreich-Ungarns Letzter Krieg 1914-1918*, ed. by Österr. Bundesministerium für Heereswesen und vom Kriegsarchiv (Wien: Verlag der Militärwissenschaftlichen Mitteilungen, 1930-1938), 7 vols.—see Vol. VI, pp. 97-99.
31. *Der Angriff im Stellungskrieg*, ed. by the Chief des Generalstabes des Feldheeres, 1 January 1918. (Copy on file in the US Army Military History Research Collection.)
32. Letter to Dr. Wendt (Direktor der Hochschulbibliothek der Bundeswehr, München, West Germany) from Dr. Stahl (Direktor des Bundesarchiv-Militärarchiv, Freiburg/Br., West Germany), 2 May 1974.
33. The first traceable mention of the extraordinary talents of Hutier is found in the French magazine *L'Illustration*—Gustave Babin, "La bataille continue," *L'Illustration*, 6 April 1918, p. 326. The next issue also emphasized his successes on the Eastern Front, and, after the German breakthrough in March, the July issue declared him "the new strategic genius of Germany"—"Comment Attaquent les Allemands: La manoeuvre de von Hutier March 21-April 5 1918," *L'Illustration*, 1 June 1918, p. 534. The American *Infantry Journal* cites for the same month a letter from French Headquarters dated May 1918 on which it bases the description of the new German method of attack and relates it to the Riga operation—"German Methods of Attack—New Mobile Mortar," *Infantry Journal*, July 1918, pp. 71-72.

