



From Victory to Stalemate: The Western Front, Summer 1944 by Charles J. Dick.

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In *From Victory to Stalemate*,¹ British military scholar and former director of the prestigious Soviet Studies Research Centre at Sandhurst C.J. Dick deconstructs two major World War II European campaigns from the point of view of the “operational art”—warfare on the intermediate scale between tactics and strategy. Specifically, he offers a convincing, lucid analysis of the Allies’ failure to win a decisive victory that was clearly within their grasp: in the aftermath of the breakout from the Normandy beachhead in summer 1944, Gen. Dwight Eisenhower’s Allied Expeditionary Force (AEF) enjoyed advantages in both men and materiel as well as overwhelming air superiority. All that was needed to bring about a decisive victory was a bit of operational audacity. But, Dick argues, the over-cautious Allies misplayed a winning hand and the war dragged on well into 1945.

The first of the book’s seven chapters outlines the three levels of warfare with an emphasis on the operational art. Chapters 2–3 summarize what the Allies achieved between D-Day and late 1944, in particular, the imperfectly planned and executed “near breakthrough” out of the Normandy beaches. Chapter 4 addresses the “incomplete encirclement” of the two German field armies that were attempting a hopeless counteroffensive in early August. The Allies’ failure to close the “Falaise Pocket” remains a hotly debated subject to the present day. Chapter 5 concerns the AEF’s pursuit of German forces across France and north into Belgium up to the stalemate of the book’s title. The last two chapters concern “logistic realities” that brought the campaign grinding to a halt, as well as matters of command, operational art, and leadership.

Among the senior Allied generals, Dick praises only one—George S. Patton—for his clear grasp of the operational art and the possibilities afforded the Allies by their superior correlation of many types of forces. The other AEF commanders do not fare as well, though he points out their strengths. He writes, for example, that “Eisenhower proved to be an exemplary staff officer and a man of great charisma and ability, although he lacked boldness and originality. Above all he demonstrated a rare competence in the areas of alliance management and the political-military interface” (35).

The author stresses throughout the value of “deep operations” against a foe unable to mount a proper response. In late summer 1944, the German army in western France was a shadow of its former self, with little or no capability for operational maneuver: hence the collapse of its counteroffensive (ordered by Hitler) as the Allies were breaking out southward from the Normandy perimeter. Several divisions of the Wehrmacht’s 7th Army and 15th Panzer Army were left stranded in the Falaise Pocket. But the Allies failed to trap significant German forces, largely because US and British/Commonwealth armies’ “progress in tactics and techniques was not matched ... by a maturation at the operational level...” (54).

1. Its companion volume is *From Defeat to Victory: The Eastern Front, Summer 1944* (Lawrence: U Pr of Kansas, 2016).

Although thousands of prisoners were taken in the Falaise Pocket, too many experienced soldiers managed to escape. Had the US 1st and 3rd Armies been allowed to move deeper into the enemy's rear before closing the pincers, they would have crushed both German field armies and prevented a stalemate as summer gave way to autumn.

In assessing why this campaign was so difficult for the Allies, in spite of their far greater human and material resources, and air superiority, Dick points to the lack of combat experience on the part of Eisenhower and US army group commander Lt. Gen. Omar Bradley. Moreover, the combat experience of their British colleagues, Field Marshal Bernard Montgomery and all four of the numbered army commanders, in the First World War and the North African campaign of 1941-43 did not translate into operational-level expertise. Again Patton stood out: lessons learned from extensive reading in military history and his eagerness to exploit the superior mobility of his divisions stood him in good stead at the operational level against an enemy more and more immobilized by Allied airpower.

The Wehrmacht, however, remained a resilient and determined foe despite its handicaps: lack of maneuver space, interdiction of its supply lines by Allied airpower, and commanders supinely conforming to the strategic fantasies of Adolf Hitler. At the tactical level, they made the most of their few advantages, deploying many crew-served weapons in forward defensive positions—chiefly, MG-42 light machine guns and 81mm mortars. The Germans were also past masters in the use of antitank guns, now few in number but lethal, particularly the 88mm dual-purpose gun. The same was true of their Panther and Tiger tanks, mounted with more effective main guns than were the Allies' ubiquitous Sherman tanks. And somehow, despite the Allies' capture of thousands of German prisoners during and after the breakout from Normandy, the Wehrmacht deployed seasoned combat troops in spontaneously organized battle groups (*Kampfgruppen*) at critical locations. Dick notes that

As the sharper Allied intelligence officers noted, most of the thousands of prisoners swelling the Allied cages were from rear-echelon, air defense, security, and Luftwaffe ground staff units; experienced combat troops and units were making a determined effort to extricate themselves to fight another day, and these provided the cadres for improvised and refitting formations. (241)

While the author gives due credit to the exceptional intelligence that Ultra provided to the Allied armies, he also cautions that it

did not give the whole picture. It could not describe the rapid restoration of discipline and morale in an army that was apparently in the process of dissolution. Nor did it reveal the impressive organizational improvisation that enabled cadres to collect and weld remnants, stragglers, and a miscellany of undertrained and underequipped training and replacement organizations together with convalescents and overage or medically unfit security and occupation troops into moderately effective combat units and formations. (240-41)

Despite Allied armies' successes in late summer and fall 1944, including the liberation of most of France and Belgium from a brutal occupation, and the killing or capture of hundreds of thousands of German troops,

There was a consistent failure to capitalize on the enemy's weaknesses and conduct the vigorous pursuit that turns battle success into campaign victory.... When the enemy is badly damaged, unbalanced, in logistic difficulties, under great psychological pressure, and forced into increasingly belated and ineffectual improvisations, that is the time when ruthless exploitation of the initiative and risk taking pay the greatest dividends. (185-86)

Had the Allies shown greater operational initiative, they could have shattered the Wehrmacht army group in western France and been poised to advance through a virtually undefended German frontier and rapidly conclude the war before 1945. Why, then, did the professional education of American and British senior officers fail to prepare them to effectively wage warfare at the operational level? In his brief discussion of the “American way of war,” Dick points back to the Civil War and Gen. U.S. Grant’s grueling overland campaign of 1864–65, which “rather than his earlier, brilliant maneuvers against Vicksburg or Sherman’s actions in Georgia and the Carolinas, became the focus of American theory and the foundation of doctrine...” (43).

Dick notes that the Army’s primary doctrinal manual, FM 100-5 Operations, states that “an objective may sometimes be attained through maneuver alone; ordinarily it must be gained through battle” (45). He also identifies such institutional shortcomings of the US Army as the poor quality of infantry recruits, the wholly inadequate individual replacement system, an excessive reliance on firepower, and the top-down discouragement of initiative in lower-echelon officers and NCOs. The latter was in marked contrast to the Wehrmacht’s emphasis on “commander’s intent” (*Auftragstaktik*), encouraging aggressive initiative by subordinates.

The author highlights the influence of US Army Chief of Staff Gen. George C. Marshall on the senior cadre of US commanders in Europe. He had handpicked generals like Eisenhower, Bradley, Courtney Hodges, Jacob L. Devers, William C. Lee, Lesley J. McNair, and even Patton, many of whom studied under him at the Army War College and the Infantry School at Fort Benning during the 1920s. These were men of sound character with adequate leadership qualities, appropriate to a “citizen army” that had expanded forty-fold in the space of only a few years. But they understood little of operational art. His protégé Eisenhower dutifully implemented Marshall’s unimaginative “broad front” operational approach in northwest Europe.

The British way of war was conditioned by terrible memories of the Great War’s Western Front; Montgomery had to be ever-conscious of Britain’s extraordinarily casualty-averse general public and political leaders. He knew already during his time with the 8th Army in North Africa that British and Commonwealth forces could not turn tactical successes into meaningful operational gains. Hence his close personal supervision of subordinates and careful, set-piece operational planning. Consequently, British

commanders, staffs, and formations were used to relying on massive, sometimes unnecessary and logistically unsound use of firepower and very deliberate, overly cautious tactics. Unlike the Germans, they lacked sufficient relevant training and experience to conduct fluid battles, and neither HQs nor their commands displayed the agility demonstrated time and again by the Wehrmacht. (186)

Still, Montgomery undeniably had a better sense than his American counterparts of what the Allies might accomplish, and he consistently opposed Marshall’s broad front approach. Unfortunately, his overweening arrogance, refusal to admit errors, and didactic manner alienated his Allied colleagues, to the detriment of the coalition partnership. By contrast, the Germans had long studied and refined their own “way of war” which seemed to allow them to own the battlefield, despite their obtuse strategic planning.

Widespread public interest in the Second World War does not seem to be fading. If you read a single book about the war this year, *From Victory to Stalemate* should be the one.