Mars & Clio

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A Note from the Editor

The present spring issue of Mars & Clio follows the format established by the 2024 and 2025 issues. As usual, the bulletin includes articles on topics related to military history, shorter notes, reports and communications, as well as book reviews which may be of interest to the membership. The present issue has a certain focus on 19th and early 20th century military history.

The articles section has a contribution by Swiss military historian Nicolas Penseyres on what might almost qualify as an exotic subject – how Swiss military circles adopted elements of Prussian wargaming culture into their own military education. Tony Cowan, building on a smaller piece in last year's autumn issue, takes a closer look at a fascinating episode from the first decade of the 20th century involving a handbook for aspiring military interpreters.

The Notes, Reports and Communications section has a long report by Andy Grainger of a visit to the Metaxas line, a set of – at the time – modern fortifications built in the latter half of the 1930s to protect Greece from a Bulgarian invasion. The place of heavy fighting in 1941, the struggle for the Metaxas line is usually overshadowed by events elsewhere, so the closer look taken here at the state of some of the fortifications today is more than welcome. Andy Grainger's report is preceded by a congratulatory message from the president of the International Commission for Military History on the occasion BCMH's 60th anniversary.

A brief review section concludes the present issue.

To slightly rephrase my comments from the last issue, the commission cannot exist without its members, and this holds true for Mars & Clio as well. The newsletter depends on the membership for contributions, and I would encourage members to come forward with articles or other pieces that might be of interest to fellow members; these could include reviews of books new as well as old, individual documents or reports from visits to battlefields, museums, or conferences.

Please feel free to contact me through the secretary general or directly at

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Jorit Wintjes

ARTICLES

Emil Sonderegger and the Culture of Wargaming: Between Prussian Tradition and Swiss Adaptation

Nicolas Penseyres

Introduction

Before computers and complex simulations, there was a table, topographical maps, counters and dice, and officers facing the unknown. It was in this minimalist setting that Swiss army officer Emil Sonderegger taught the essentials: judging, deciding and learning in the face of uncertainty. Each action brought them closer to a plausible, but never entirely predictable, future, forcing participants to adapt their choices and confront their assumptions. More than twenty years after the Prussian *Kriegsspiel* began to spread in Switzerland, Emil Sonderegger published a manual in 1897 that marked a milestone in the history of Swiss wargaming. Today, in the age of predictive algorithms and generative artificial intelligence, this lesson remains: simplicity and human confrontation remain at the heart of strategic learning. Sonderegger understood this well, which makes his manual a classic of its kind.

figure 1: Emil Sonderegger (Kantonaler Gewerkschaftsbund St. Gallen, 80 Jahre Generalstreik, St. Gallen 1998, 13)

Child of the Prussian *Kriegsspiel*

Emil Sonderegger, born on November 28, 1868 in Herisau, came from a family involved in politics and the textile industry. At the beginning of the following decade, Switzerland was undergoing a period of military and political upheaval, particularly following Prussia's victory over France in 1870-1871. This spectacular success drew the attention of military circles throughout Europe, including Switzerland, to Prussian training methods, of which *Kriegsspiel* was a central tool.[1]

This method spread mainly through Swiss officers' societies, which were places of training, exchange and military socialising. War games were ideal teaching tools for training officers in tactics, decision-making and reading the terrain without resorting to costly manoeuvres. For an army consisting entirely of reserves (called militia) such as Switzerland's, with short periods of military service, this made it possible to train soldiers outside their service time.

[1] S. n. “Réunion annuelle de la société militaire vaudoise des officiers de l'état-major général, du génie et de l'artillerie.” in: *Revue Militaire Suisse*. N° 2, *Revue des armes spéciales: supplément mensuel de la Revue Militaire Suisse*, 1873, p. 36.

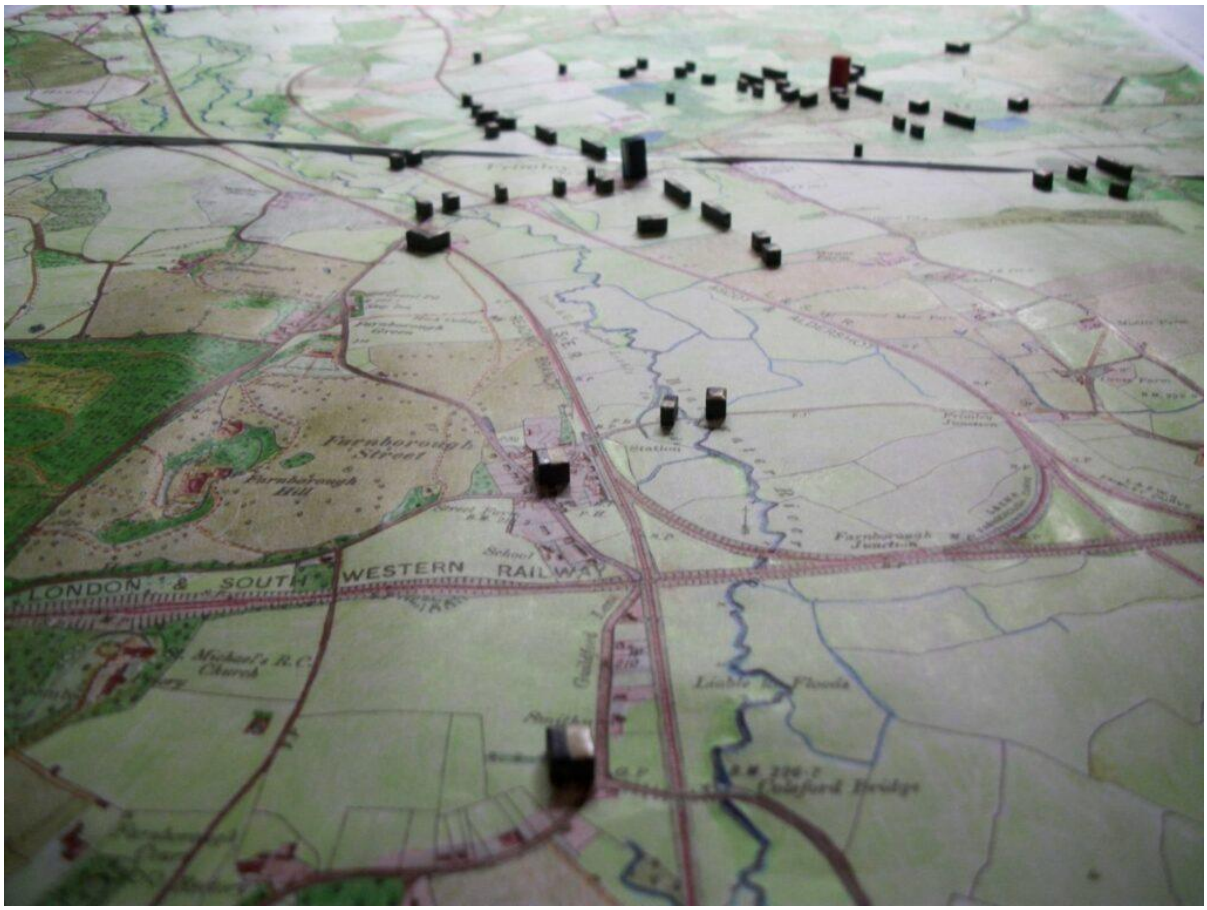
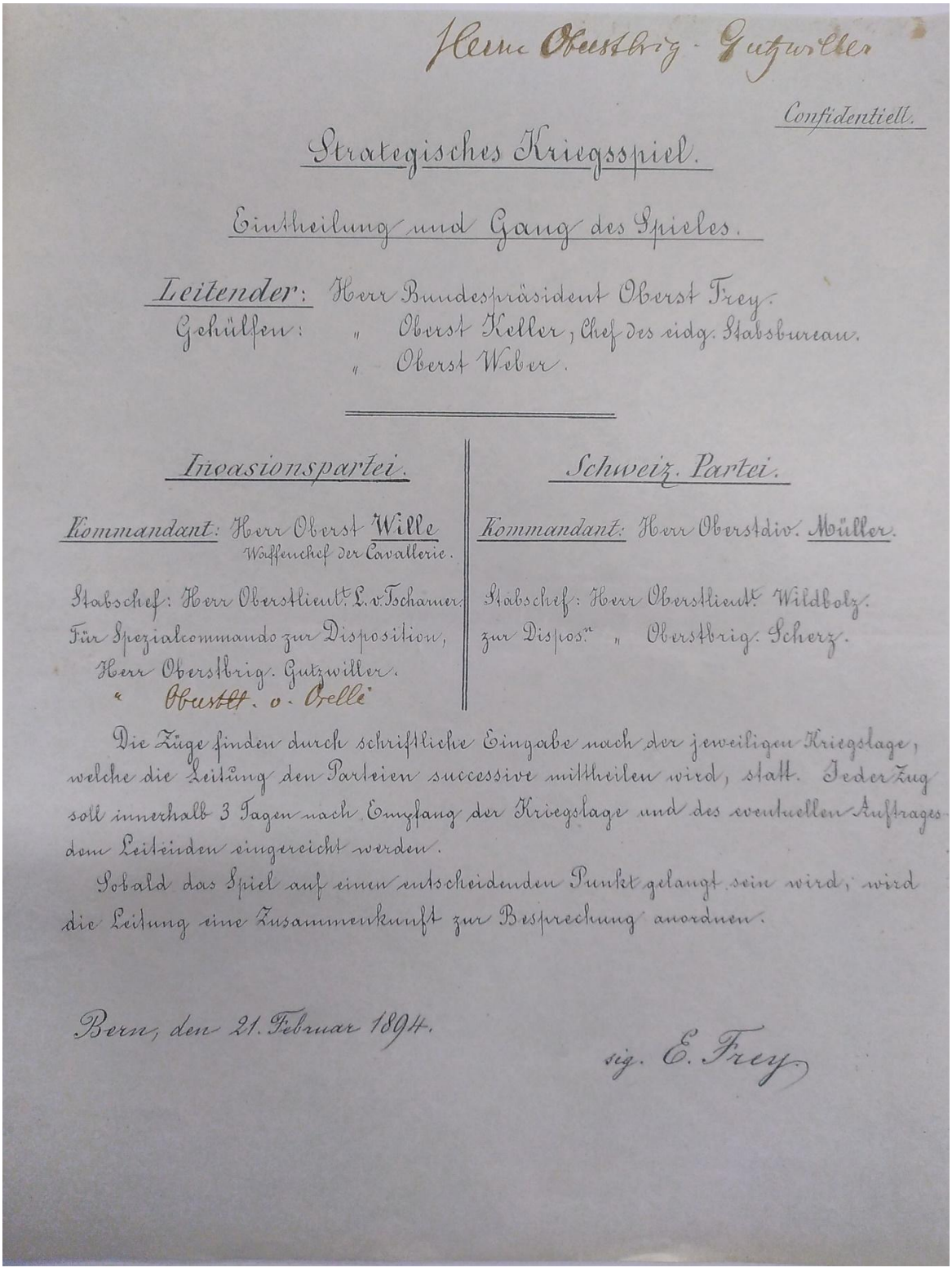


figure 2: Example of a *Kriegsspiel* on a topographical map, as it would have been practised in Sonderegger's time (*International Kriegsspiel Society*)

However, despite this enthusiasm, no real 'Swiss school' of *Kriegsspiel* emerged at that time. These exercises were largely limited to adaptations or translations of German works. Despite the absence of official regulations formally governing the practice in Switzerland, the General Staff actively used it. Every year, strategic games were organised at its instigation, demonstrating the interest of the highest military authorities in this tool for reflection and training. The importance attached to these games is clear,[2] particularly when they were conducted directly by the Federal Councillor in charge of military affairs. Colonel Emil Frey (1838–1922) brought not only his political skills to bear, but also his remarkable military experience as a veteran of the American Civil War (1861–1865), having attained the rank of Major in the Union Army.[3]

So, when the young Captain of the General Staff Sonderegger published *Anlage und Leitung von Kriegsspiel-Übungen*[4] in 1897, he showed some remarkable initiative in this matter. He thus

[2] Swiss Federal Archives (AFS), E27#1000/721#23486*, "Strategisches Kriegsspiel, Einteilung und Gang des Spieles," 21 February 1894, signed by Federal Councillor Emil Frey.
[3] Fritz Grieder, 'Frey, Emil', *Historical Dictionary of Switzerland (DHS)*, version dated 15 October 2009, translated from German. Online: https://hls-dhs-dss.ch/fr/articles/003823/2009-10-15/, accessed on 5 January 2026.
[4] Emil Sonderegger, *Anlage und Leitung von Kriegspiel-Uebungen* (Frauenfeld: Huber, 1897).



Herrn Oberstbrig. Gutzwiller

Confidentiell.

Strategisches Kriegsspiel.

Eintheilung und Gang des Spieles.

Leitender: Herr Bundespräsident Oberst Frey.
Gehülfen: " Oberst Keller, Chef des eidg. Stabsbureau.
" Oberst Weber.

Invasionspartei.	Schweiz. Partei.
Kommandant: Herr Oberst Wille, Waffenchef der Cavallerie.	Kommandant: Herr Oberstdiv. Müller.
Stabschef: Herr Oberstlieut.t L. v. Tschamer.	Stabschef: Herr Oberstlieut.t Wildholz.
Für Spezialcommando zur Disposition, Herr Oberstbrig. Gutzwiller.	zur Dispos.r " Oberstbrig. Scherz.
" Oberstlt. v. Orelli	

Die Züge finden durch schriftliche Eingabe nach der jeweiligen Kriegslage, welche die Leitung den Parteien successive mittheilen wird, statt. Jeder Zug soll innerhalb 3 Tagen nach Empfang der Kriegslage und des eventuellen Auftrages dem Leitenden eingereicht werden.

Sobald das Spiel auf einen entscheidenden Punkt gelangt sein wird, wird die Leitung eine Zusammenkunft zur Besprechung anordnen.

Bern, den 21. Februar 1894.

sig. E. Frey.

figure 3: The scenario sheet for the strategic game of 1894, signed by the Master Umpire, Federal Councillor Emil Frey himself. It is as well interesting to note that Colonel Ulrich Wille, future General and Commander-in-Chief during the First World War, was chosen to play the invasion party (AFS).

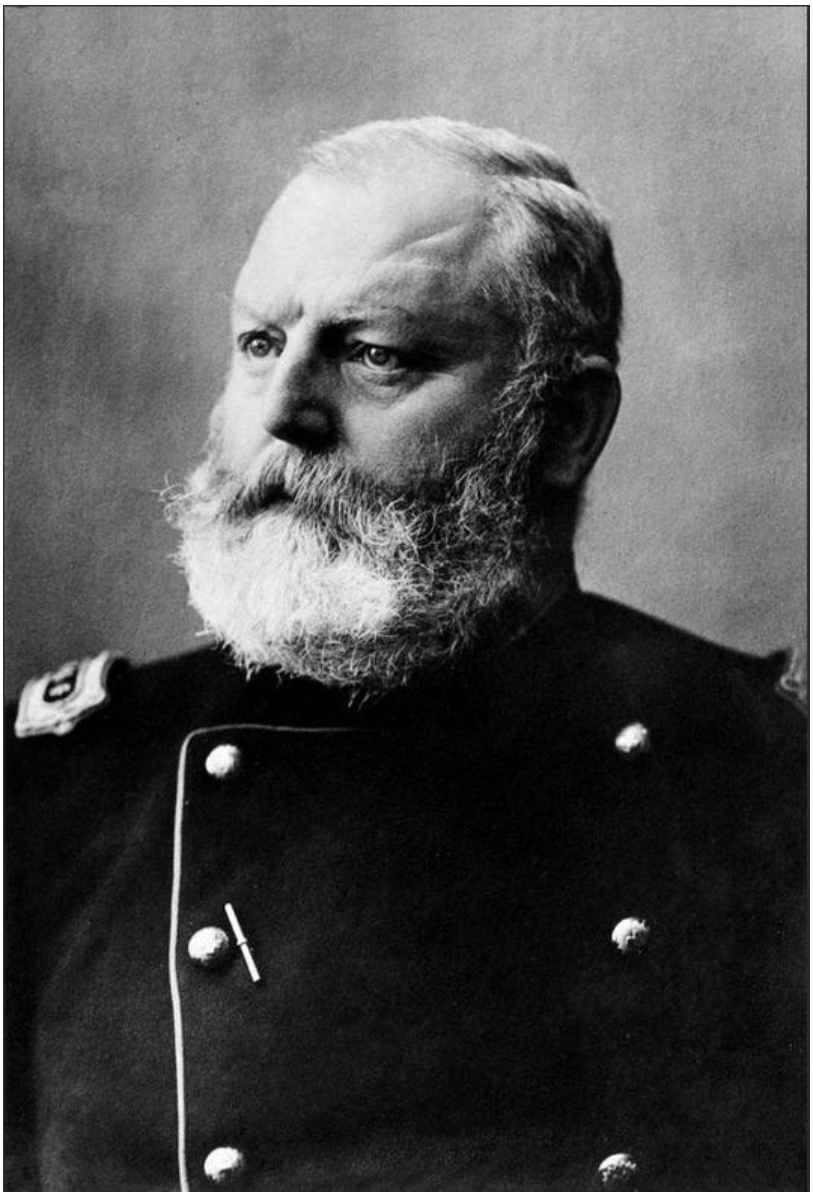


figure 4: Federal Councillor Emil Frey in 1890 in his uniform of Federal Colonel of the Swiss Armed Forces, he also held the rank of Major in the Union Army, following his involvement in the American Civil War. The sources tell us that he was acquainted with wargaming and functioned as head umpire in the yearly "Strategisches Kriegsspiel" (https://hls-dhs-dss.ch/fr/articles/003823/2009-10-15/)

followed in the footsteps of German authors who had written on this subject. His work was well received in an environment marked by local initiatives supported by officers' societies, which used war games as a tool, but without necessarily having the required theoretical foundations to use it optimally. Therefore, the educational value of the work convinced its readership:

> *"Applied systematically in central schools and general staff colleges as a demonstration of tactical theory, war games would be a useful substitute for many hours of theory – and above*

all for many of those sterile 'tactical drills' that are so popular in our schools, as if the art of leading troops could be learned 'by heart'!"[5]

After a career in the family business, Emil Sonderegger had devoted himself fully to a military career and rose through the ranks of the Swiss army one step at a time: Artillery Lieutenant in 1888, Captain in the General Staff in 1896, Chief of Staff of the 7th Division in 1901, Lieutenant Colonel in 1907, Chief of Staff of the 3rd Army Corps with the rank of Colonel in 1912, then, after a short period as Brigade Commander, Commander of the 4th Division (1918-1920) with the rank of Major General and finally Chief of the General Staff in 1920, at the age of 52. He also distinguished himself as an observer on the Western and Isonzo fronts during the First World War. In November 1918, during the general strike in Switzerland, Sonderegger made a name for himself as the person responsible for deploying security forces in Zurich and putting an end to the unrest.

Sonderegger resigned in 1923 due to profound disagreements over the reform of the armed forces, which, after the end of the Great War, suffered from a severe lack of political and financial investment. He also criticised the slowness of Parliament and the government in modernising military structures according to his ideas, which were considered too rigid by the civilian authorities at the time. However, he continued to take an interest in military affairs and in 1929 published a book entitled *Infanterieangriff und strategische Operation: Ausblicke und Vorschläge* (Infantry Attack and Strategic Operations: Outlook and Proposals).[6]

The rest of his career is more troublesome though. Out of frustration on the one hand, and undoubtedly out of a desire for revenge on his political opponents on the other, he moved closer to the far right. In 1933, he published *Ordnung im Staat*, an authoritarian programme inspired by the Italian fascist leader Benito Mussolini, calling for the abolition of parliamentary democracy in favour of a corporatist model.[7] In 1934, he founded the *Volksfront*, one of the many short-lived fascist movements in Switzerland. He died that same year at the age of 66, leaving behind an image tarnished by his ideological shift. His intelligence – Sonderegger spoke eight languages – and his leadership style, as well as his tendency to stir up passions, are now debated, but his intellectual legacy in the field of *Kriegsspiel* remains an important marker in the history of wargaming in Switzerland.[8]

The qualitative nature of wargaming

The history and contemporary practice of wargaming can be structured around two major methodological trends, often presented as opposites, but in reality complementary to each other: a qualitative approach, focused on decision-making, and a quantitative approach, oriented towards

[5] J. V., 'Bibliographie, Anlage und Leitung von Kriegspiel-Uebungen, von Emil Sonderegger, Hauptmann im Generalstab. — J. Huber, Frauenfeld, 1897 [review]', *Revue militaire suisse*. N°9, 1897, p. 432 (translated by the author).
[6] Emil Sonderegger, *Infanterieangriff und strategische Operation: Ausblicke und Vorschläge* (Frauenfeld: Huber, 1929).
[7] Emil Sonderegger, *Ordnung im Staat* (Bern: A. Francke A.-G., 1933).
[8] For a biography of Emil Sonderegger, see René Zeller, *Emil Sonderegger. Vom Generalstabschef zum Frontenführer* (Zurich: NZZ-Verlag, 1999).

measurement and execution. These two trends respond to distinct educational objectives and are part of different intellectual and institutional traditions.

The qualitative trend has its origins in the Prussian tradition of *Kriegsspiel* in the late 19th century, particularly in its evolution from a rigid game based on strict and complex rules to a so-called "free" game based on the arbitration of an experienced officer. The main objective of this approach is to train tactical leaders in decision-making in ambiguous situations, with incomplete information and facing evolving actions. The value of the game lies less in the final result than in the thought process it provokes.

Conversely, the quantitative approach is more in line with the Anglo-Saxon and analytical tradition, inspired by the initial Prussian *Kriegsspiel*, and characterised by a desire to rationalise the conduct of operations through calculation. Its main objective is the correct execution of orders received and the understanding of the measurable effects of military action. From this perspective, battle is conceived as the sum of basic engagements whose results can be aggregated. This approach is based on universal, standardised manuals that can be used both on maps and in the field, and aims to produce comparable, reproducible results that can be used for analysis or planning purposes.[9]

Sonderegger's book, which can be translated as "Design and Conduct of War Game Exercises", is explicitly in the tradition of the late 19th century Prussian *Kriegsspiel*, while adapting it to the specificities of the Swiss context. The book's ambition is not simply to propose a game, but to provide a normative framework for integrating wargaming as a military training tool in the Swiss Armed Forces.

Overall, the book pursues three major educational objectives: to train officers in decision-making rather than learning of doctrines, to encourage debate and the confrontation of hypotheses during debriefings, and to standardise practices through similar procedures and equipment. As such, Sonderegger's book can be read as a successful synthesis of the qualitative tradition of war gaming at the turn of the 20th century, focused on training judgement and drawing its strength from collective intelligence.

From educational tool to instrument of foresight

Although Sonderegger initially used wargaming for educational purposes – particularly for teaching tactics – he was already showing signs of what Peter Perla called the “research cycle”, meaning the integration of wargaming into a broader methodology and innovation process.[10]

It is therefore interesting to note that Emil Sonderegger acted as referee during the manoeuvres of the 1st Army Corps in 1907.[11] During the manoeuvres of the 3rd Army Corps in 1912 and as its Chief of Staff, he found himself working closely with Lieutenant General Ulrich Wille

[9] John Curry (ed.). *Wargames from World War II: Examples of Axis and Allied Wargaming Rules and Umpire Guidelines for Tactical Actions* (s.l.: History of Wargaming Project, 2023).
[10] Peter Perla, ‘Wargaming and the Cycle of Research and Learning’, *Scandinavian Journal of Military Studies* 5.1, 2022, pp. 197–208.
[11] Anonymous, ‘Carte de manœuvres 1907‘, *Allgemeine schweizerische Militärzeitschrift*. N° 34, 1907, Gratisbeilage (2 pages).

figure 5: The state visit of Kaiser Wilhelm II to Switzerland in 1912, attending the field manoeuvres of the 3rd Army Corps, was a big public and diplomatic event and became known as the “Kaisermanöver” (Wikipedia).

figure 6: The 5th Division Artillery in position during the manoeuvres of the 3rd Army Corps in 1912. Notice the white head strap worn, indicating their party in the exercise (Wikipedia).

(1848-1925), future Commander-in-Chief of the Swiss Armed Forces during the First World War. This relationship had a profound influence on their subsequent exchanges.

These manoeuvres were called *Kaisermanöver* because of the visit of German Emperor Wilhelm II on 4 and 5 September 1912. This visit took place against a backdrop of growing tensions between the major European powers, particularly with the approach of a possible war between the French Republic and the German Empire. In fact, anecdotal evidence suggests that Emperor Wilhelm II became convinced during this visit that the Swiss Armed Forces "would save him six army corps."[12] And while the manoeuvres fulfilled their strategic purpose – i.e. to demonstrate the strength of Swiss armed neutrality – they were also criticised on tactical grounds. Colonel Fernand Feyler's comment illustrates how the tactical training of commanders was lacking during field service:

> *"Many officers seem too preoccupied with commanding their units to look around them, examine the terrain and neighbouring troops, reflect on the situation and make decisions based not on regulations but on common sense, or to call a spade a spade, tactical sense."*[13]

In May 1919, after the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, 82% of the population of Vorarlberg voted in favour of joining Switzerland. However, the victorious Allies, notably France and Italy, opposed any territorial changes in Central Europe and assigned Vorarlberg to the new Republic of Austria via the Treaty of Saint-Germain (September 1919). Nevertheless, from a military point of view, Vorarlberg's annexation to Switzerland would have had new strategic implications. This is why Sonderegger, as Chief of the Swiss General Staff, ordered prospective studies to be carried out on the defence of Vorarlberg. This led notably to an operational wargame in 1921 investigating the conduct of operations on Austrian soil, as a measure of forward defence.[14]

In a presentation to the Officers' Society of the Canton of Bern in early 1924, Sonderegger shared his operational concepts on "evasive defence" (*Ausweichende Verteidigung*) against a numerically superior adversary and commented on the results of a *Kriegsspiel* session that had taken place there. He said he was convinced of the need to delegate decision-making authority to the lowest levels in this type of combat, occurring on successive lines of defence, with the higher command only indicating the lines and directions of retreat. However, the key to success lay in the optimal training of leaders and troops.[15]

The enduring relevance of Sonderegger's thinking

Sonderegger's thinking is organised around a coherent set of theses that define *Kriegsspiel* not as a simple simulation tool, but as a method of intellectual and practical training geared towards decision-

[12] Hans-Rudolf Kurz, 'Der deutsche Kaiserbesuch in der Schweiz',*Allgemeine schweizerische Militärzeitschrift*. No. 9, 1962, pp. 489-496.
[13], Fernand Feyler, 'Les manœuvres du 3e corps d'armée en 1912', *Revue militaire suisse*. No. 10, 1912, p. 826 (translated by the author).
[14] AFS, J1.203#1000/1312#1134*, "Kriegsspiel 1923/24-Schweizerischer Einmarsch in Vorarlberg unter Oberstdiv Sonderegger" (War game 1923/24 – Swiss invasion of Vorarlberg under Major General Sonderegger).
[15] AFS, J1.203#1000/1312#1134*, „Vortrag von Oberstdivisionär E. Sonderegger über Ausweichende Verteidigung, Einleitender Vortrag zur Kriegspiel-Uebung der O.G. Bern XI.23-I.24."

making. His writings reveal several structuring principles which, taken together, form a genuine theory of wargaming.

The first central thesis is that of *the* "true Kriegsspiel", understood as a practice rather than a technical device. For Sonderegger, the value of the game lies neither in the rigidity of the rules nor in the sophistication of the equipment, but in the educational use made of it. The tools must be adapted to the training objectives. This primacy of practice implies great methodological flexibility and constant attention to the context and level of the participants.

The second thesis concerns the role of chance, generally represented by dice. For Sonderegger, chance represents the risk and friction inherent in any collective action in a conflict situation. It generates plausible futures that deviate slightly from the expected norm, thus forcing participants to incorporate uncertainty into their reasoning. The wargame therefore does not seek to predict an exact outcome, but to train participants to make decisions despite unpredictability.

The third thesis is part of what can be described as a cycle of research and learning. Wargaming does not replace large-scale manoeuvres but complements them. It allows for the rapid repetition of experiments, the precise exploration of targeted situations and, above all, a structured discussion after the exercise. The presentation of initial intentions, the comparison of plans and results, and the analysis of discrepancies are at the heart of the learning process, much more so than the game itself.

Finally, Sonderegger makes a strong case for simplicity and Socratic discussion. Minimal equipment, combined with a carefully constructed scenario based on explicit assumptions, is sufficient to produce a plausible and intellectually rich narrative. Simplicity is not an impoverishment, but a condition for collective reflection: it frees the participants' attention and encourages critical analysis during debriefing.

These principles explain why Sonderegger's thinking resonates strongly in contemporary wargaming practices. First, because of the universality of the paradoxes he highlights: the tension between cost and precision, between narrative and raw data, between human interaction and automation. These issues cut across all areas where conflicts or crises are simulated, whether military, cybernetic, health-related or economic.

Contemporary writings attest to this, and Antoine Bourguilleau offers a telling summary:

- (War) *Games* rather than wargames;
- *Dynamics* rather than mechanics;
- *Plausibility* rather than realism;
- *Flexibility* rather than rigidity;
- *Discussion* rather than play.[16]

[16] Antoine Bourguilleau, 'Jeu de Guerre et formation des officiers dans l'Armée de Terre', Yann Auffret (ed.). *Les wargames dans la formation de l'officier.* Étude n° 121, IRSEM, mars 2025, pp. 43-47.

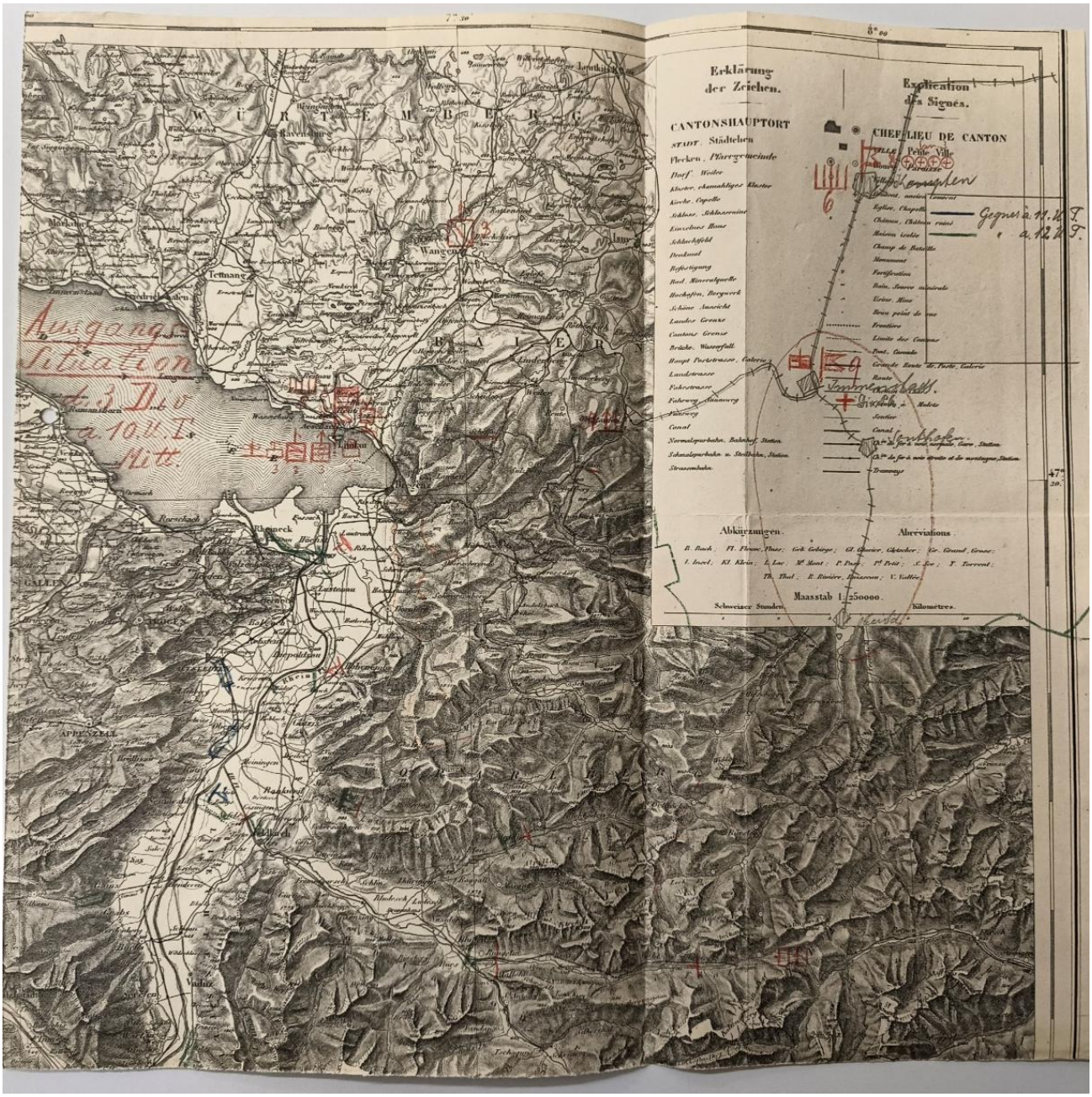


figure 7: A look at the 1:250'000 scale map depicting the initial position of both parties at the 10th exercise day during the 1921 operational wargame, in which an action in the Austrian Vorarlberg was played out. We can notice the Blue forces (Swiss) holding the position in the north close to the Konstanz Lake and advancing in the south into the Austrian mountains to hold better defensive positions against Red forces (AFS).

figure 8: Part of the exercise was to position the artillery correctly according to the overall tactical scheme. Here an example of a sketch of the Red artillery in the area of Sargans, close to Austria, in a wargame conducted by the 18th Mountain Infantry Brigade in 1920 (AFS).

Sonderegger also stands out for the methodological flexibility of his framework, which allows for simple and random human confrontation in order to achieve the desired educational objectives. In this respect, his writings on *Kriegsspiel* are conceptually very close to the modern understanding of the *Serious Game* tool.

Intellectual competence for the benefit of military expertise

Militarily, Emil Sonderegger spent his entire life campaigning for a Swiss army structured around three essential pillars: improved practical training, modern weaponry, and effective military leadership, based on a determined and a morally strong Officer Corps. This military and political thinking made him a visionary and uncompromising reformer, but one who was too uncompromising not to be dazzled by far-fetched theories and the destructive passions that marked the 1930s.[17]

Emil Sonderegger was, however, a figure of undisputed military expertise. He was a passionate officer who trained generations of future leaders with fascinating content. He understood

[17] Otto Scheitlin, 'Oberstdivisionär Emil Sonderegger.', *Allgemeine schweizerische Militärzeitschrift*. No. 1, 1959, pp. 33–46.

the intellectual value of military training through wargames: where action informs the reasons behind decisions, rather than being the simple consequence of thought patterns. A pioneering writer on the subject of wargames in Switzerland, he was also one of the few military figures, along with Eugen Bircher (1882-1956), to pass on his knowledge of the subject until the eve of the Second World War. This is all the more interesting given that it was through Colonel Bircher's pen that *the Allgemeine schweizerische Militärzeitschrift* bid farewell to Emil Sonderegger in 1934.[18] But was this intellectual lineage sufficient to guarantee continuity?

Having celebrated the 200th anniversary of the introduction of *Kriegsspiel* into professional military education in 2024, we can draw some clear lessons about its history. According to Jorit Wintjes, wargaming is a military capability which, like all other capabilities, is easily lost but difficult and time-consuming to rebuild. To preserve this skill over time, it is essential to integrate it institutionally into professional military education. This integration requires organisational support and a theoretical framework that is essential for the production of wargames adapted to educational objectives. The author points out that the history of the last two centuries shows alternating phases where wargaming is popular and fashionable, followed by periods where it is much less so, forcing those who have forgotten to rebuild everything from scratch.[19]

General Henri Guisan (1874-1960), Commander-in-Chief of the Swiss Armed Forces during the Second World War, challenges us in a note from 1942 relating to army orders: he refers to *Kriegsspiel* as a means of maintaining and developing the "intellectual flexibility" necessary for senior command.[20] This is exactly the qualitative approach that emerges from Sonderegger's analyses, in a different place and at a different time, but with the same universal and philosophical validity. This brings to mind General Beaufre's deep desire to define a true praxeology, a science of action, in which strategy would give full weight to decision-making. Is this not why wargames are indispensable to those who want to understand war and thus master peace?

> *"The destiny of man depends on the philosophy he chooses and the strategy he uses to make it prevail."*[21]

A Contemporary History graduate, Nicolas Penseyres is Head of wargaming at the Center for Military History and Foresight (www.chpm.ch) in Pully, Switzerland, and he is a PhD candidate in Security and Defence Diplomacy at the University of Fribourg (UniFR).

[18] Eugen Bircher, 'Oberst-Divisionär Emil Sonderegger zum Gedächtnis, 15. VII. 1934', *Allgemeine schweizerische Militärzeitschrift*. No. 7, 1934, pp. 464–467.
[19] Jorit Wintjes, '200 years of Kriegsspiel history – lessons to be learned?', Conflict Simulation Group, Blog, online, https://cosimg.github.io/blog/2024/11/07/200-years-of-Kriegsspiel-history.html, accessed on 5 January 2026.
[20] AFS, E27#1000/721#14299*, « Note sur le dispositif d'attente après mobilisation générale. » 29.09.1942.
[21] André Beaufre, *Introduction à la stratégie* (s.l.: Fayard, 2012 (1963)), p. 72 (translated by the author).

figure 9: The cover of Emil Sonderegger's book published in 1897. While it is mentioned in bibliographies on the *Kriegsspiel*, few know about its author and the pivotal role this book plays in the history of wargaming in Switzerland (Military Academy ETH Zurich).

Once upon a time before the Great War

Tony Cowan

The plot

The year is 1904. Anglo-German relations are tense, but King Edward VII may be able to patch things up with the ever-volatile Kaiser Wilhelm when he visits Germany. However, a junior German Guards officer has just written a language-training book with incendiary remarks about the British which will certainly cause a conflagration if published. King Edward decides he must raise this with the Kaiser…

Main characters

Oberleutnant [Lieutenant] **Wilhelm von Jecklin**, 3rd Guard Grenadier Regiment, studying at the Staff College [*Kriegsakademie*].
Carrie née Wille, his South African wife, originally from Graaff-Reinet in Cape Colony.
Lieutenant Colonel **Henry Shute**, Coldstream Guards, commandant and martial law administrator of Graaff-Reinet 1901-1902, and now Principal Private Secretary to the Secretary of State for War.
Lieutenant Colonel Count **Edward Gleichen**, Grenadier Guards, British Military Attaché in Berlin.
Sir Frank Lascelles, British ambassador in Berlin.
Secretary of State for War **H.O. Arnold-Forster** and the British Cabinet.
Count **Bernhard von Bülow**, German Chancellor.
King Emperor **Edward VII**, uncle of...
Kaiser of the German Empire and King of Prussia **Wilhelm II**.

The story

My interest in Wilhelm von Jecklin comes from a project I'm working on about German views of the British army from 1898 to 1918. As part of that, I look at how the Germans studied the British and what their language skills were like. On a research trip to the military archive in Munich, I came across a little book called *The Military Interpreter. Sammlung von englischen Übungsstücken mit Lösungen zur Vorbereitung auf die militärische Dolmetscherprüfung* [Collection of English practice pieces with solutions for preparing for the military interpreter examination], by *Oberleutnant* von Jecklin.

I wondered how such a junior officer would have the language skills to produce the book. Googling around, I came across his marriage certificate to a South African woman, Caroline 'Carrie' Wille, and even though from her name I assumed she was an Afrikaner, I thought that was probably how Wilhelm von Jecklin developed his English. Googling further, I found Matthew Seligmann's book about British military and naval attachés, *Spies in Uniform*, from which I first realised that what

figure 1: Wilhelm von Jecklin in uniform (with permission from the Wille family)

figure 2: Wilhelm von Jecklin and Carrie Wille (with permission from the Wille family)

seemed a simple language-training book had in fact caused a high-level Anglo-German row.[1] I followed up his references as well as contacting the Wille family, and that's when things got really interesting. Now read on…

When *The Military Interpreter* was published in 1904, Wilhelm von Jecklin was a 29 year-old lieutenant in the prestigious 3rd Guard Grenadier Regiment. He had some 11 years' service in the army under his belt; and he was a student at the German army Staff College, so he had a promising future.

By then he had been married to Carrie Wille for four years. She was born in Graaff-Reinet in the British Cape Colony; although the marriage certificate gives her religion as evangelical, she was in fact half-Jewish on her mother's side. Her father's parents were originally from Hessen in Germany but had emigrated to South Africa in 1843 as missionaries.[2] From Cape Town, they had made their way north to Graaff-Reinet, where their son Carl – Carrie's father – stayed and became a prosperous merchant. The rest of the family pushed on into the independent Orange Free State.

Carl Wille sold his business in 1895 and took his family to Europe. The two sons went to school and later university in Britain; the three daughters to schools in Dresden and Geneva. In Germany, the family apparently lived in the Berlin suburb of Charlottenburg for a while. This was where Jecklin's regiment was stationed, so that's one way he and Carrie may have met. Another is that the Jecklin family originally came from Switzerland, and the two could have met there. Either way, they married in Charlottenburg in 1900.

Wilhelm von Jecklin would have needed permission to marry, so Carrie's foreign nationality, her father's profession as a merchant and her mother's Jewish family origins were clearly no impediment even given the prevailing class-consciousness and antisemitism in a Guards regiment.

Carrie's parents and younger sisters returned to Graaff-Reinet in 1900, by which time the Boer War was raging. While their two sons were studying in Britain, other members of the family in the Orange Free State – Carrie's uncles and cousins – were fighting for the Boers. At least eleven were captured by the British; two of them were in a prisoner of war camp in Simonstown, but nine were transported to Ceylon, where one died. Putting all this together, it seems fair to assume that the family in Graaff-Reinet – which was under martial law at the time – would have had split sympathies, given that they had sons in Britain and many other relatives with the Boers.

Jecklin signed off the foreword to his book *The Military Interpreter* in March 1904, and it was certainly published by June.[3] The practice pieces in it are official documents and letters, with the German translation on the left and the English original on the right. Some of the documents are part of a fictional running scenario in which Germany invades and defeats Britain. These include:

- British use of dum-dum bullets contrary to the Geneva Convention.

[1] Matthew S. Seligmann, *Spies in Uniform: British Military and Naval Intelligence on the Eve of the First World War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 55.
[2] The story of the Wille family in this and the next three paragraphs comes from an unpublished manuscript, 'Wille Family Tree – Introduction', written by family member Roland Kingwill in 1981.
[3] This edition of *The Military Interpreter* from The National Archives (TNA), FO800/11, f. 326-378.

- How British soldiers who wish to surrender are to identify themselves, and regulations about British prisoners of war.
- A besieged British fortress firing on a German officer carrying a flag of truce.
- Conclusion of an armistice between Britain and Germany, signed by the plenipotentiaries of Kaiser Wilhelm II and King Edward VII; as part of this, the British are to surrender various forts.
- Replacement of the British authorities in the occupied counties of W. and K. by German authorities; German police and gendarmerie will supplement the British.
- The use of German currency in Britain, and the exchange rate between German and British currencies.
- A forced contribution of £500,000 to be paid by the county of W.
- Orders for prominent local British figures to report to Victoria Station to be used as hostages for protection against attacks on trains.

Documents outside this scenario include Martial Law Notice No. 3, signed by H. Shute, Major and Commandant, Graaff-Reinet and dated 4 January 1901 (i.e. during the Boer War). This is a genuine document based on a leaflet or poster issued in Graaff-Reinet by Shute on that date; although the third notice, it set out the basic martial law regulations.[4] We can assume that the Wille family in Graaff-Reinet had passed it to Jecklin via Carrie. Were they intending to damage Britain's reputation? They might have been. On arrival as commandant, Shute had been ordered to take 'severe measures' and this he had done.[5] His strict implementation of martial law had led to frequent complaints from local citizens as well as several unsuccessful attempts by the government of Cape Colony to remove him.[6] So he was not necessarily popular in the Wille household.

At some point before June 1904, the book's publishers sent a copy to Lieutenant Colonel Count Edward Gleichen, British Military Attaché in Berlin.[7] He realised the potential damage which the anti-British messages in the book would cause if they became public and immediately reported to his ambassador, Sir Frank Lascelles.

Events now developed in parallel in Britain and Germany. Ambassador Lascelles believed that publication of the book would 'raise a storm of indignation' in Britain. He therefore approached the head of the German foreign office, Oswald Freiherr von Richthofen, presumably with the aim of getting the book suppressed. Richthofen in turn took the issue up with *Generalleutnant* [Major General] Karl Litzmann, director of the Staff College and Jecklin's ultimate military superior as a student there. We don't know how Litzmann responded, but he certainly did not offer any apology.

[4] Major H.G.D. Shute Boer War diary, Appendix IV, National Army Museum, 2019-08-5-40-1. A handwritten note, presumably by Shute, says 'This notice was reproduced in a German mil handbook called The Military Interpreter, 1904.'
[5] Shute diary, 4 January 1901.
[6] Amelia Esther Clegg, 'The British Army, the Regimental Officer, and the South African War: Command, Leadership, and Professionalism in the Coldstream Guards Middle Echelon (1899-1902)', unpublished Ph.D thesis, Birkbeck College, 2023, 165-168 and 298.
[7] This account draws largely on British correspondence and records in TNA, FO 800/11; I have been unable to find any German sources.

By now, Gleichen had sent a copy of Jecklin's book to his military boss in London, Director of Military Operations Major General James Grierson, adding that the matter was being dealt with by Lascelles and Richthofen. Grierson passed Gleichen's correspondence to the Secretary of State for War, H.O. Arnold-Forster, either directly or via his Principal Private Secretary, Lieutenant Colonel Henry Shute – by coincidence, the very man who, as a Major and commandant of the Graaff-Reinet District, had issued the Martial Law Notice included in Jecklin's book.

Despite the assurances that the matter was being handled in Berlin, Arnold-Forster clearly felt the need to inform the Cabinet. We don't know what happened there, but in due course the issue – and a copy of the book – reached King Edward VII.

Meanwhile, Shute wrote to Gleichen complaining about what he called 'a scandalous book' and declining to allow his name to be associated with it. Although his job as Principal Private Secretary to Arnold-Forster is not mentioned in the correspondence, he was obviously too important to be ignored. Local Cape Colony politicians may have disapproved of his actions during the Boer War, but he had found favour with senior British military and political leaders including Field Marshal Lord Roberts and Lord Milner; he also had good connections with the local Reuters correspondent and Rudyard Kipling; and he had worked with Arnold-Forster, then an MP making a visit to South Africa. When Arnold-Forster became Secretary of State three years later, he asked Roberts to arrange Shute's posting as his Principal Private Secretary.[8]

So on 20 June Gleichen wrote a shirty letter to Jecklin asking him in no uncertain terms to withdraw Shute's name from the revised edition which was being prepared. Gleichen added:

> *... as an expression of my own opinion, ... I do not understand how an officer of a so-called friendly nation can permit himself to write a book which is, in its form, an indirect incentive to war on England, & to publish such grossly calumnious insults on British officers & men as have appeared in your book...*

A few days after this, King Edward arrived on the royal yacht in the German port of Kiel on a much-anticipated visit to the Kaiser as part of the sailing week there. He wanted to stress the sporting and family nature of the visit, but of course there was a major diplomatic aspect too. Anglo-German relations had experienced an extremely bumpy ride since at least 1896, particularly during the Boer War. Earlier in 1904, the British and French had signed the Entente Cordiale, potentially signalling a profound change in international relations and to Germany's own status as a world power. At the beginning of June – just over two weeks before King Edward's visit – Kaiser Wilhelm threatened Britain with war if it did not agree to German demands on its rights in Egypt, which it believed were affected by the Entente.[9]

Wilhelm in particular had high expectations of his uncle's visit and insisted on micro-managing their meetings. Before the first one, he was 'walking restlessly around the deck [of his own yacht], and could scarcely bear to wait for the time to go by'. The visit passed with exchanges

[8] Clegg, 'The British Army, the Regimental Officer, and the South African War', 162 and 294-298.
[9] John C.G. Röhl, *Wilhelm II: Into the Abyss of War and Exile 1900-1941* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 258.

of dinners on board the two royal yachts, watching the racing and other festivities, including a visit by King Edward to Hamburg. All appeared to go well, and the visit ended 'with the usual exchange of telegrams containing extravagant expressions of thanks and assurances of friendly relations between the two nations'.[10]

But in fact all had not gone well. Gleichen, who was present, takes up the story of what happened on the last day:

> *So when all the festivities at Kiel, which lasted for a week, were over and matters had been smoothed over, and both sides were feeling more friendly, King Edward pulled* [Wilhelm's] *book out of his pocket and said laughingly to the Emperor: "This is a nice sort of thing that your officers publish – and you pretend that your country wants to be so friendly with England. What humbugs you must be!" All this said in the most friendly chaff. But the Emperor was not at all in the mood for chaff; he took it very seriously indeed and was furious – with me! Though he never spoke to me about it afterwards personally, he said I had done a most outrageous and unfriendly thing in sending the book home to the King, and said that I ought to have come to him about it at once, and he would have stopped it; and here he was, having just made friends with England, and I had spoilt it all again.*[11]

This was serious enough that Lascelles wrote next day to the Imperial Chancellor, Bernhard Graf von Bülow, who was also formally in charge of foreign affairs:[12]

> *You are no doubt aware that the Emperor spoke to General Grierson and me very earnestly last night* [29 June, the day of the final meeting between the King and Kaiser] *about Count Gleichen's action in bringing Herr von Jecklin's book "The Military Interpreter" to the notice of the King. If I understood the Emperor correctly, His Majesty was under the impression that Count Gleichen had deliberately attempted to sow dissension between our two countries at a moment when His Majesty himself was doing all in his power to place the relations between them on a more satisfactory footing. I have reported in this sense to the King, who desires me to ask you to explain to the Emperor that His Majesty appears to have received an inaccurate impression of Count Gleichen's actions.*

Lascelles then explained the sequence of events after Gleichen received the book from the publishers, as related above. He continued:

> *So far from this being any desire to sow dissension between our two countries, it was with the earnest desire of preventing the possible publication of a book which could not have failed to raise a storm of indignation in England that His Majesty* [King Edward] *considered it advisable to speak to the Emperor personally on the subject. His Majesty considers that in bringing the book to my notice and in reporting that the matter was being dealt with by Baron von Richthofen and myself, Count Gleichen acted with perfect propriety and He therefore hopes that the Emperor*

[10] Ibid., 258-262.
[11] Major-General Lord Edward Gleichen, *A Guardsman's Memories: A Book of Recollections* (William Blackwood & Sons Ltd: Edinburgh and London, 1932), 264.
[12] Lascelles to Bülow, 30 June 1904, TNA, FO 800/11, f. 379-385.

will exonerate him from the blame which His Majesty [the Kaiser] *imputes to him, and will deign to grant him an audience for the purpose of offering any further explanations which His Majesty may desire to receive.*

The King lays great stress upon the Emperor's affording Count Gleichen an opportunity of offering explanations, as he is not only Military Attaché but is related to H.M. [King Edward] *through marriage, and the King having appointed him in the hopes of his being a persona grata to H.M.* [the Kaiser] *he would therefore deeply deplore if this untoward* [word missing] *should in any way damage his position in the eyes of the Emperor.*

You are aware how very much pleased and gratified the King has been by the very warm and cordial reception He has met with on the part of the Emperor, His Ministers, Household, Army, Navy and populace during his visit to Kiel which will never be effaced from his memory. He would therefore bitterly deplore any incident, however small, which might mar the effect of his visit on which I may say the eyes of the world have been brought to bear.

Next day, Gleichen called on Bülow to explain matters further. Bülow was very friendly, greatly deplored 'the stupidity and mischievousness' of the book, 'which he could not condemn too highly'; he also made very disobliging remarks about Jecklin. He himself believed that so far from sowing dissension between Britain and Germany as the Kaiser alleged, Gleichen had done his utmost in the opposite direction by trying to get the book suppressed. He supposed there must have been some mischief-making by those on board the German royal yacht to put these mistaken ideas into the Kaiser's head. Who did Gleichen suspect? Gleichen refused to name anyone, but in fact believed that the Kaiser's chief military aide, *Generalleutnant* Dietrich Graf von Hülsen-Haeseler, had something to do with it. Bülow said he would write to the Kaiser, forwarding Lascelles' letter and a statement by Gleichen.[13]

On 14 July, Major Friedrich von Trotha, a battalion commander in Jecklin's regiment, visited Gleichen. Trotha began by saying that Jecklin felt insulted by certain expressions in Gleichen's letter; Gleichen should withdraw it and apologise. Gleichen refused and showed him the book, which he had not previously seen. Trotha then admitted that the contents were 'pretty bad' and Jecklin had shown 'great want of foresight'. However, he had already been punished by being thrown out of the Guards, he had lost a lot of money over the book and he had often expressed his deep regret about it, including at an 'honour council'. Gleichen said that as Jecklin had publicly regretted what he had published, he was happy to withdraw his letter and in fact was sorry to have written it.

This in turn prompted Jecklin to write to Lascelles on 19 July:

Your Excellency

I beg to declare again, now that Count Gleichen has withdrawn the letter he wrote to me and regretted writing it, that I never had the intention of insulting the British people and army through the content of my book. Furthermore, I am happy to repeat that I regret having published the book in its offensive form.

[13] Gleichen to Lascelles, 2 July 1904, TNA, FO 800/11, f. 387-388.

I have the honour to be, Your Excellency, your humble
von Jecklin, Oberleutnant in 12th Grenadier Regiment

As the signature block shows, Jecklin had indeed been transferred out of his prestigious Guards regiment. However, Grenadier regiments were the senior infantry units of the army after the Guards, so 12th Grenadiers was a more than respectable regiment to be transferred to. Also, it was stationed in Frankfurt on the Oder, a reasonable-sized town only 50 miles from Berlin and with a direct train connection, so not the back of beyond.

In addition, Jecklin was allowed to complete the Staff College course and was then given a probationary secondment to the general staff. In the end, though, he did not get a permanent transfer to the staff. This Staff College–probationary secondment–permanent transfer or not to the general staff is all very normal, so his career did not necessarily suffer any other damage than the transfer out of the Guards. He even got to publish a second edition of his book in 1904, with the same content but omitting Shute's name and all but a few minor references to Britain.[14]

In fact, given that he had enraged both the Kaiser and the Chancellor – and no doubt other senior officers and officials – he probably got off lightly!

What happened to them later

Wilhelm von Jecklin. On the outbreak of war, he was a *Hauptmann* [Captain] commanding a machine gun company and was seriously wounded in late August 1914, losing his left eye. Having recovered, he continued to serve, at first in a variety of staff jobs but from early 1916 to the end of the war commanding a battalion; he was promoted Major in 1917 and awarded a high Prussian decoration. After the war, he became a right-wing local politician in Berlin. He died in 1937.

Carrie Wille. Despite her Jewish ancestry, Carrie remained in Germany after Wilhelm died until early 1945, perhaps protected by his military and political connections. As the Third Reich crumbled, she made a harrowing escape to Switzerland and from there returned to Graaff-Reinet in South Africa. She died in 1952.

Henry Shute. After leaving his job with Arnold-Forster, he served as Assistant Adjutant-General, Home District from 1905 to 1908 and was promoted Colonel. He died suddenly in 1909.

Count Edward Gleichen. His position in Berlin became untenable after further spats with the Kaiser, who had never really forgiven him for his actions over Jecklin, and he was transferred to be military attaché in Washington. After serving in an intelligence job in the War Office, he commanded 15th Brigade in 5th Division from 1911 to 1915 and 37th Division from April 1915 to October 1916. In 1917-1918 he served as a senior official in the Department of Information, which was responsible for British propaganda. He reached the rank of Major General, retired in 1919 and died in 1937.

[14] My copy of the second edition is from Bayerisches Hauptstaatsarchiv/Abteilung IV Kriegsarchiv, München, Library Abschnitt VI B/5 Nr. 1269.

Sir Frank Lascelles. He left post as ambassador in Berlin in 1908. As a senior member of the Anglo-German Friendship Society, he strove for good relations between the two nations right up to the outbreak of war. He died in 1920.

Oswald Freiherr von Richthofen. During the Kiel visit, King Edward conferred on Richthofen the Grand Cross of the Victorian Order (GCVO), which was in his personal gift. Richthofen was still head of the German foreign office when he died in early 1906.

James Grierson. He commanded 1st Division from 1906-1910, was promoted Lieutenant General in 1910, knighted in 1911, and commanded Eastern Command from 1912 to August 1914. On the outbreak of war, he was appointed commander of II Corps. He died of a heart attack in France on 17 August 1914.

H.O. Arnold-Forster. He left office as Secretary of State for War when the Conservative Party lost the 1905 election. He remained an MP till his death in 1909.

Bernhard Graf von Bülow. He retired as Chancellor, more or less forced out of office, in July 1909. From then on, he lived in Italy, where he was Ambassador from late 1914 till Italy's declaration of war in mid-1915. Some politicians considered him for Chancellor again in 1917, but his candidacy failed against the Kaiser's opposition. He died in Rome in 1929.

And last but certainly not least:

Dietrich Graf von Hülsen-Haeseler. Promoted *General der Infanterie* [Lieutenant General] in 1906, he died at a formal dinner two years later in unusual circumstances:[15]

> *Suddenly Count Hülsen-Haeseler appeared in ballet skirts – not for the first time – and began to dance to the music. Everybody found it most entertaining, for the Count danced beautifully, and it is an unusual experience to see a Chief of the Military Cabinet capering about in the costume of a lady of the ballet.*

Immediately after this, he died from his exertions.

Acknowledgements

I am very grateful to Andrew Bennett, a descendant of the Willes, and his grandmother Clare Sheard, who still lives in Graaff-Reinet, for the wealth of information they have given me on the family, together with permission to publish the photographs of Wilhelm von Jecklin and Carrie Wille. I also gratefully acknowledge the help of Major (Retd) Robert Cazenove, the Coldstream Guards' Archivist.

[15] Count Robert Zedlitz-Trützschler, *Twelve Years at the Imperial German Court* (London: Nisbet & Co. Ltd, 1924), 252-253.

News, Reports and Communications

A Message from the President of ICMH on the Occasion of the 60th Anniversary of the British Commission for Military History

The British Commission for Military History (BCMH) was formed in 1965 as a national branch of and under the auspices of the International Commission of Military History (ICMH). During the six decades since its founding, the British Commission and its members have distinguished themselves through balanced historical research; the prolific publication of historical monographs, studies, and related products; the organization and hosting of numerous national, regional, and international conferences, congresses, symposia, and battlefield staff rides; the publication of a seminal open-source professional journal, and the diligent support of ICMH goals. Our sincere congratulations to the prestigious British Commission for Military History on the sixtieth anniversary of its founding!

The current president of the British Commission is the experienced and well qualified Mr. Seb Cox, O.B.E. He was curator of documents at the Royal Air Force Museum, Hendon, before joining the Air Historical Branch in the Ministry of Defence as a researcher in 1984, and then served successively as a Historian and then Deputy Head before being appointed as Head of the Branch in 1996. Mr. Cox served nearly three as Head of the Air Historical Branch (AHB), making him the longest serving of the eleven individuals to hold the post since 1918. As Head of the AHB, he was the principal historical advisor to the Royal Air Force and on his retirement, in January 2025, he was appointed by the Chief of the Air Staff as Historian Emeritus to the RAF – the only individual to have been granted this accolade. The list of former presidents of the British Commission reads like a "who's who" of eminent British military historians, and includes Brian Bond (from 1986 to 2006), David Chandler, Richard Holmes, and William Philpott.

The Object, or Mission, of the British Commission is "to promote through research, publication and discussion the understanding of military history in the broadest sense, without restriction as to period or region." Through its Vision, the British Commission "strives to become a leading members' group for military history, offering an appealing range of activities, dynamic in research, discussion and publication, and recognized both for the quality of our work and our social esprit, while attracting and retaining members from a wide set of backgrounds, whether professionally engaged or not.' The BCMH Strategy encompasses five broad lines of action and development, including Membership, Activities, Publications, Communications, and Engagements.

The high quality, relevance, and quantity of BCMH's historical activities, engagements, and publications puts it clearly at the forefront of professional military history organizations. The British Commission frequently organizes and hosts multiple conferences on various military history themes each year, including a New Researchers' Conference, for early career historians, that began in 2010.

The BCMH has conducted for its members annual spring battlefield staff rides in Europe, to gain appreciation for the impact of terrain on tactical operations and the human dimension of combat soldiering. BCMH members have also supported the periodic British Army Chief of Staff's battlefield staff rides.

The British Commission is also preeminent in its effective publications programs. It has published, particularly during the Great War Centennial, occasional papers and "First World War Research Tools." Its flagship publication was *Mars and Clio*, containing articles, book reviews, Commissions news, and information from other military history associations. The British Commission began publication of the pioneering open access *British Journal of Military History* in 2014, publishing three well-received issues yearly with high quality academic articles and detailed book reviews.

The British Commission is also a pacesetter in military history activities in the United Kingdom, and collaborates frequently with other organizations, including the Institute for Historical Research, National Army Museum, Victorian Military Society, Western Front Association, Royal Air Force Museum, and others. This enhances the British Commission's relevance and impact, increases the spectrum of military history topics studied, and provides an active exchange of current research and the building of partner military history capacity and capability.

The British Commission continues to fully support the ICMH's efforts to tirelessly foster, promote, mentor, and coordinate many aspects of research results and studies in the field of military history, to include publication and education on a global basis, and collaboration between civilian and official Ministry of Defense historians. The British Commission also supports the sharing of best historical practices and development of partner military history cooperation.

The British Commission, established in 1965 and now celebrating its sixtieth anniversary, has made significant contributions to the professional study of military history during its six-decade existence. Over the years, it has remained "the broad church that is its greatest strength, a mixture of academics young and old, military folk serving and retired, heritage experts from the museums and interested and informed lay people." The BCMH and its outstanding historical achievements and accomplishments are of the highest standards and reflect great credit upon Great Britain.

Our heartfelt congratulations and most sincere appreciation to the British Commission for Military History on its unprecedented sixtieth anniversary!

Harold E. Raugh, Jr., Ph.D., F.R.Hist.S., F.R.A.S.
President, International Commission of Military History

(Full disclosure: As a student and scholar of British military history, I have served as a member of the British Commission for Military History since c. 2007.)

A Visit to Fort Rupel on the Metaxas Line – April 1941 to April 2025

Andy Grainger

figure 1: The site of a bunker at Fort Rupel (or Roupel), demolished after the campaign, possibly as a training exercise.

Introduction

A couple of years ago I heard that Alan Rooney (BCMH Member and MD of the Cultural Experience https://www.theculturalexperience.com/tours/greece-in-ww2-battlefield-tour/) was recceing a tour of Operation Marita, the German invasion of Greece in 1941. This area of Europe was completely unknown to me and I thought the scenery, food and drink might be worth a look so I signed up. The Greek campaign of 1941 is not exactly the most studied campaign of the Second World War and when it is, is mostly in terms of its impact on Operation Barbarossa and the campaigns in the Western Desert.

figure 2: The Black lines on the right show the Metaxas Line covering the border with Bulgaria in north-east Greece. The German invasion of Yugoslavia outflanked the Line although the forts at Rupel and elsewhere resisted frontal attacks for several days. Force W is the Commonwealth (mainly ANZAC) force deployed as part of Op LUSTRE.

The Rupel Pass

There have been fortifications on the Rupel Pass since time immemorial and the Greeks began to construct new fortifications once they had occupied the area after the Balkan Wars in 1912-13.

During the Great War Greek society was split between a monarchy that favoured the Central Powers whilst the mass of the population favoured the Entente (the National Schism). This instability continued post-war but on 4th August 1936 Ioannis Metaxas established a one-party authoritarian regime which lasted until his death in January 1941. A former Engineer Officer and Chief of the Army Staff he was appointed Minister of Defence in 1935, a post he retained for the rest of his life. During this time it was decided to strengthen the fortifications facing Bulgaria, seen since the Balkan wars as the most serious land threat to Greece and the new Line took Metaxas's name.

Although I had heard of the Line before the tour it was, to me, simply a name on a map. During my researches before the trip however I came across references to Maginot Line type disappearing turrets which shrugged off Stuka raids and bombardments by the heaviest German artillery. Because the Germans had invaded Yugoslavia they were able to outflank the Line but the forts held off German frontal attacks for several days despite being only partially manned. The visit to Fort Rupel turned out to be quite a surprise.

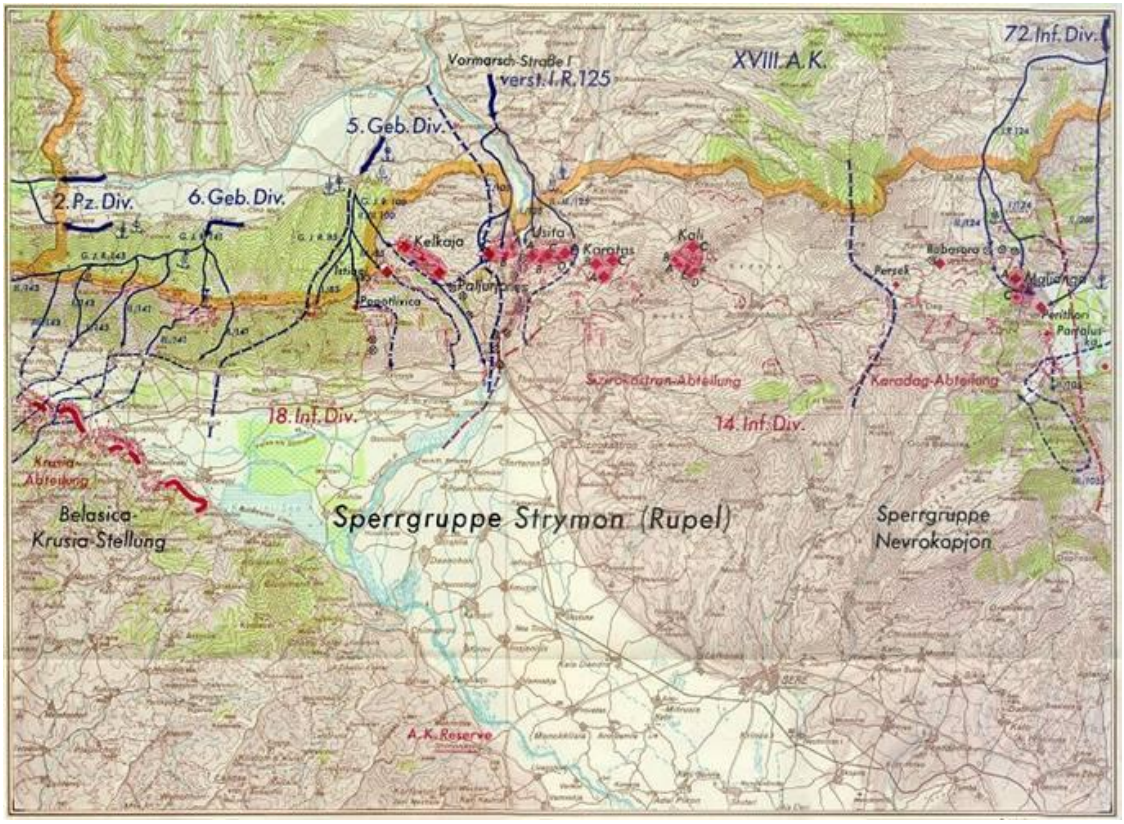


figure 3: This map shows the Struma Valley and the importance of the Rupel Pass taking the road through it. The pink blobs are forts – each of several bunker complexes linked by underground tunnels. IR125 is advancing straight towards them. To their right is 5th Gebirgsjäger (Mountain) Division. Its Mountain Regt 100 the neighbour of IR125.

We set out north from Thessaloniki towards the Rupel Pass which carries the main road running from Bulgaria to Thessaloniki. We initially headed towards Serres before turning north towards Rupel. The road parallels the River Struma and the Pass is 80 kms to the north in the mountains. Thessaloniki was – and is – Bulgaria's main port. Access to the sea is otherwise available only via the Dardanelles. It looks a fertile area. Plains of flat and cultivated land lie between ridgelines of significant height. This road was in fact the main Line of Communication in 1916 to the British XVI Corps which held the line of the Struma though the main British effort was based around Lake Doiran to the west. The Rupel Pass was overrun by the Bulgarians early in the war and not retaken by the Armistice.

It was a steep climb up the Rupel Pass, the Struma visible down on the left. The hills on the left rise to 800 metres; the Pass itself is at about 350 metres. We drove through a Greek Army checkpoint, continued up the steep hill and arrived at an open area with some low, white buildings and several coaches. It turned out to be a tourist facility with toilets and a café run by the Greek Army! The other coaches disgorged parties of Greek schoolchildren, doubtless here to learn about the defence of their country against a foreign invader. I think I had last observed this phenomenon during the BCMH Tour to Gallipoli in about 2008.

We were met by a Master Sergeant who recommended use of the facilities before moving to an open-air lecture theatre with superb views north into Bulgaria.

figure 4: Looking north into Bulgaria from the Briefing Area on Fort Usita, roughly in the centre of the map below. The Struma Valley and the road are in the low ground to the left.

The Master Sergeant pointed out the company locations on the ground which we could then identify on the Tour map. Because of tree cover which has grown up in the last several decades it was not possible to see much of the bunkers themselves, at least from any distance.

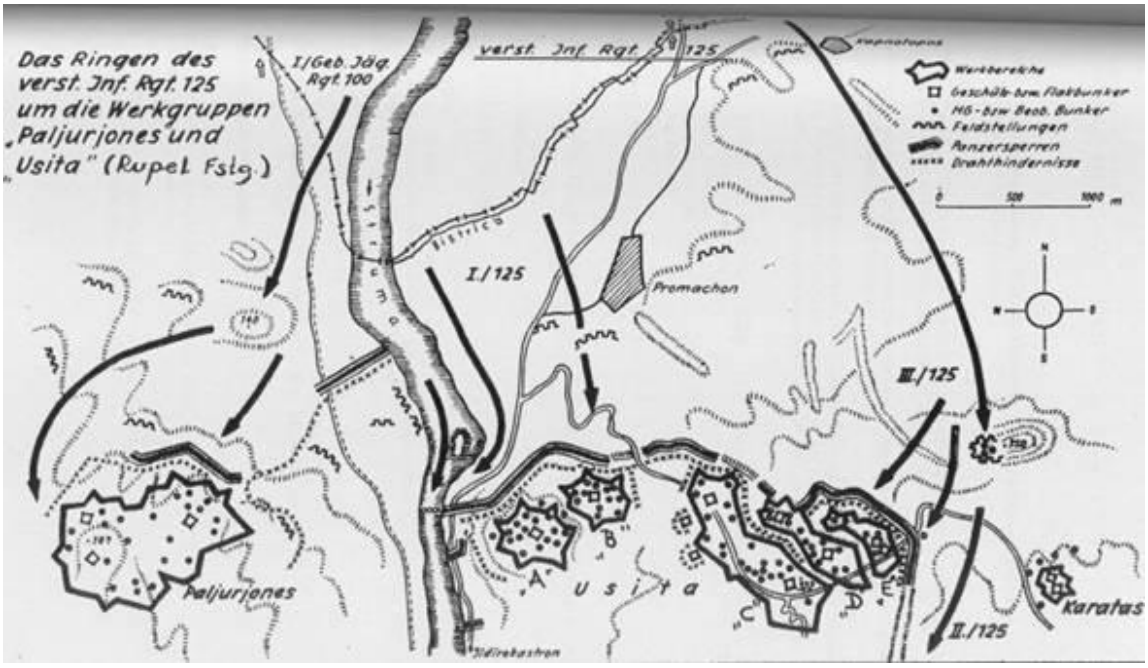


figure 5: The attacks by GJR100 on Paljurjones and IR125 on Usita. Each of the dots is a bunker or Observation Post.

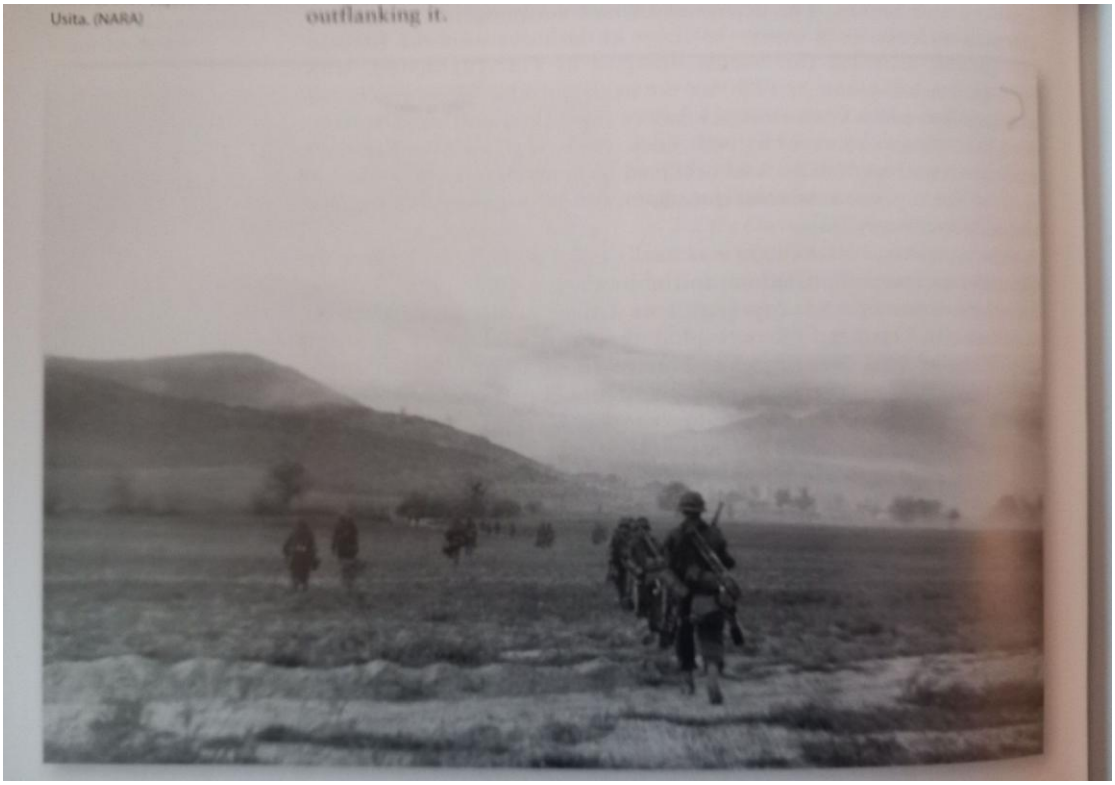


figure 6: German Infantry Regiment 125 heading into the Struma Valley and towards the Briefing Area on 6 April 1941. From *The Balkans 1940–41 (2): Hitler's Blitzkrieg against Yugoslavia and Greece* Osprey.

The Master Sergeant explained that Greece had a 'negative' relationship with Bulgaria after the Balkan and First World Wars. Metaxas was a military engineer by background and Head of the Army in WW1. He had attended the German General Staff Course. Though a Royalist he became an effective Dictator in the 1930's and built the Metaxas Line to address the main threat. It comprised 21 major fortified complexes of which the Rupel fort is only one and covers a distance of 155 kms. It was reckoned to cost the equivalent of 50 billion euros in modern terms and was built by workers from southern Greece who had no ties to the north. It was started in 1936 and construction took six years so by 1941 was nearly complete. It is very well sited and built and the technology is pretty much up to the Maginot Line. A massive engineering achievement for a poor country like Greece.

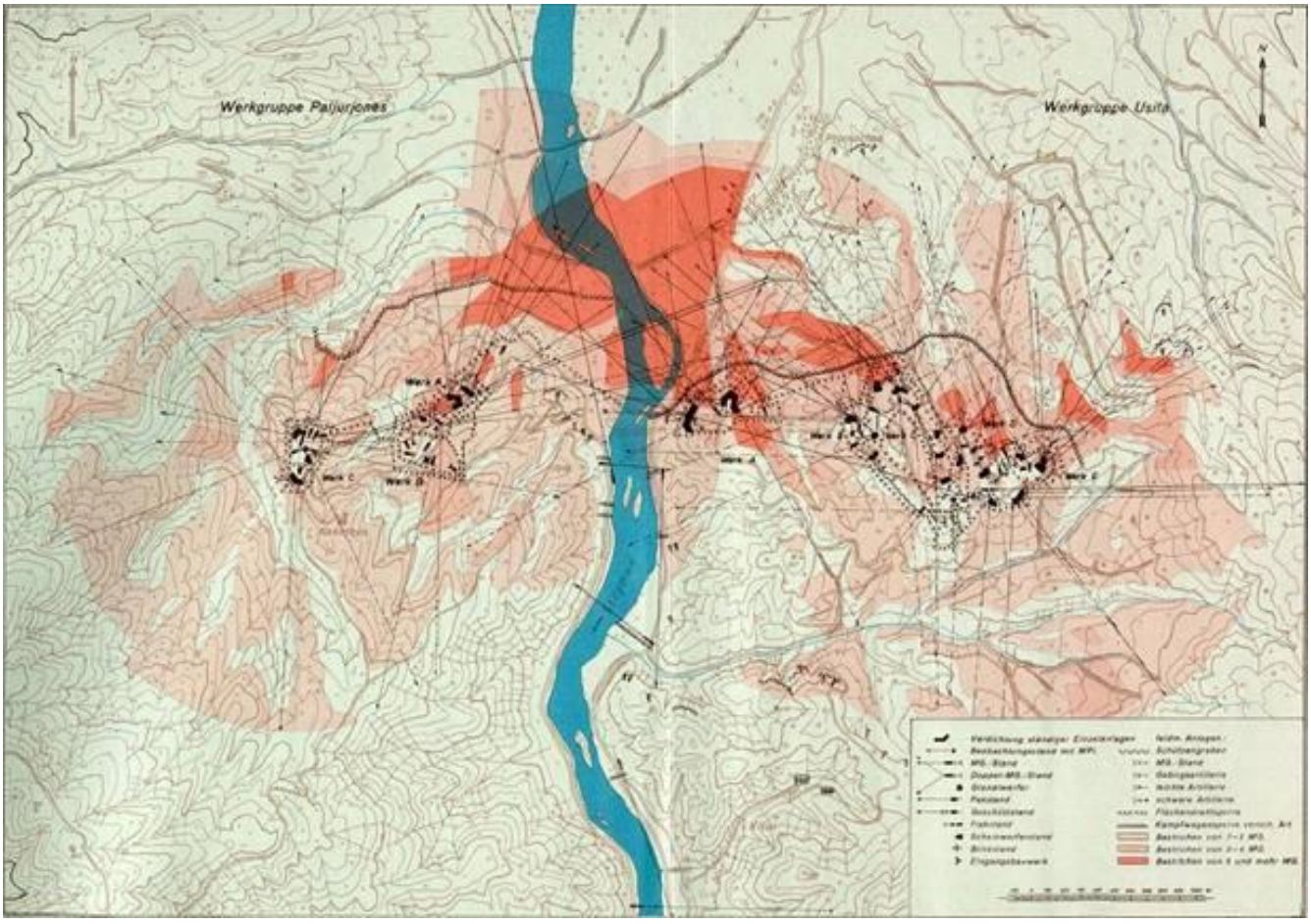


figure 7: The arcs of fire of Forts Paljurones (left of the river) and Usita (right). To the right of Usita is the Karatas fortification which was partially able to cover its right flank.

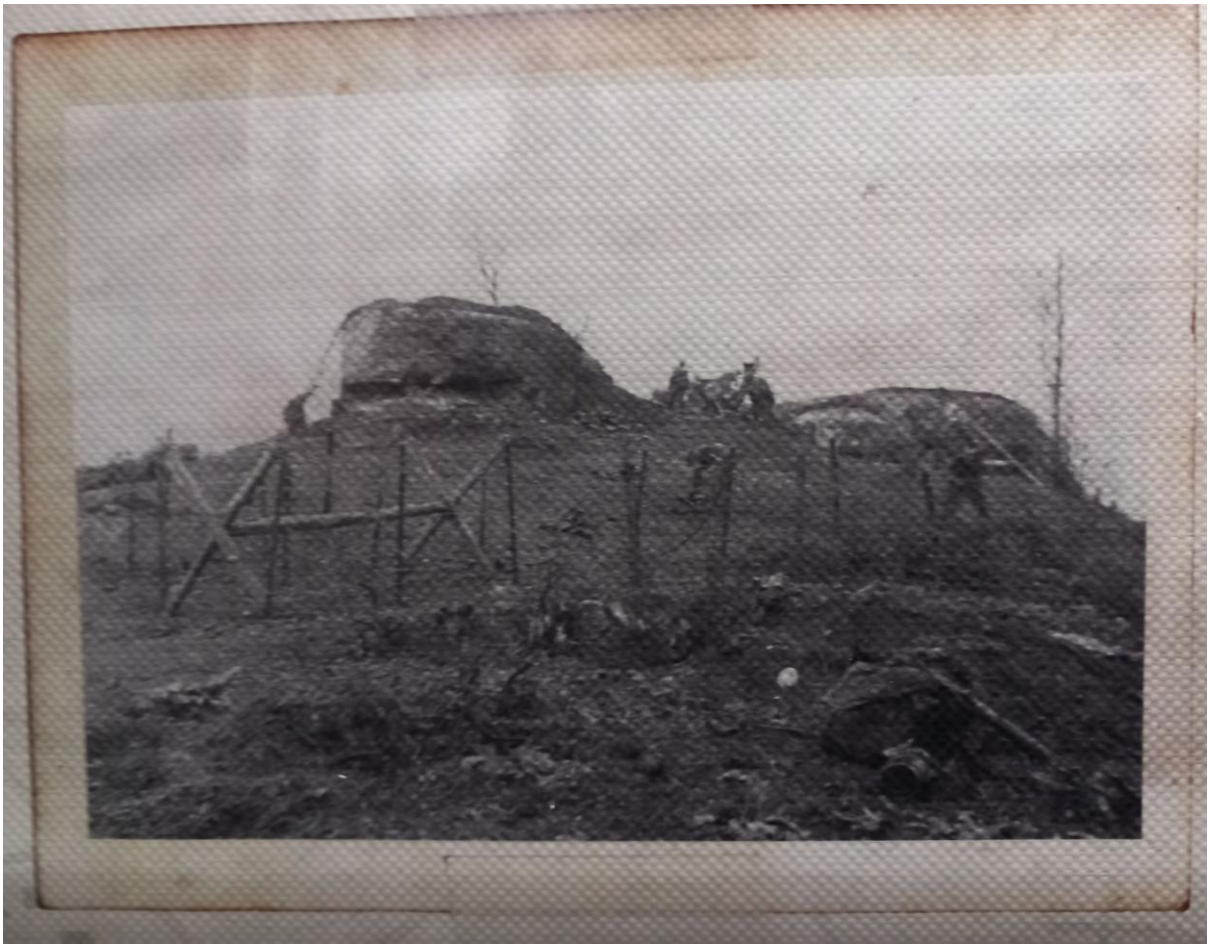


figure 8: The bunker which stands behind the modern Briefing Area, now on its glacis.

Fort Rupel, like each fort, is a collection of six underground complexes either side of the road. They comprise MG and anti-tank gun bunkers connected by concrete tunnels with electrical generators, telephone switchboards, kitchens, medical facilities etc. Food and water was stocked for ten days. Only a few bunkers were visible, painted in camouflage colours. Nowadays there is a lot of scrub and tree cover, rather more than in 1941. Some foliage was kept for camouflage but fields of fire would have been cleared. The garrison was about 900 men in six companies.

Down the tunnels we visited MG positions, the cookhouse, switchboard, surgery etc which the Greeks have restored and created displays with mannequins. There are also some very good photo displays. It was a very comprehensive and surprising tour as until I researched this trip I had no idea of the sophistication of the Metaxas Line fortifications.

figure 9: A section of part of one of the forts. Just three MG bunkers are shown together with their tunnels and support infrastructure.

figure 10: Defensive MG post inside one of the tunnels.

figure 11: One of the Artillery bunkers. Unlike the Maginot Line the guns fired from embrasures. In some cases German combat engineers were able to get close enough to push pole and satchel charges through the embrasures and knock out the crews.

Maginot Line bunkers were supported by *ouvrages* like Fort Schoenenbourg with guns in retracting armoured cupolas. The Greeks had designed the Metaxas Line on the basis of an attack by Bulgaria rather than German Stukas and armour. The supporting Greek artillery was therefore only protected by earthworks. Nevertheless it provided effective and vital support even under Stuka attack.

figure 12: The French 75 was widely used by the Greek artillery.

The German Attack on Fort Rupel

Sources: Wir Durchbrechen die Metaxas Linie. Geschichte der IR 125. Ein Weiter Weg. Der Kampf um die Metaxas-Linie. Buchner, Alex. *Allgemeine schweizerische Militärzeitschrift* : ASMZ, Vol.123 (1957).
As found at https://www.feldgrau.net/forum/viewtopic.php?t=31896

After the Greek guides had taken us around the interior of the fort our Guide, Col Bob Kershaw explained the German attack from their point of view using eyewitness accounts. The assault on Fort Rupel was carried out by the reinforced Infantry Regiment (IR) 125 supported by two of the new Assault Gun (StuG) batteries and some 88mm Flak guns. The axis of I Bn (see map) was straight towards us in the Briefing Area whilst the Gebirgsjäger (mountain troops) of Mountain Regt 100 tried to push through the high mountains to our left (German right). The attack took place on 6 April at which time it was sleeting and snowing with drifts of up to 2 to 3 feet. Conditions were therefore very difficult and the dozen or so StuGs found it very difficult to engage the bunkers. The Greeks

had never imagined that the line would be attacked by German troops and for their part the Germans had never planned to. Consequently their intelligence was very poor and, as so often, their assessment was based on wishful thinking rather than a possible worst case. They had planned on breaking through and driving the 80kms to Thessaloniki in 24 hours!! The preparatory bombardment by Stukas and artillery was spectacular but entirely ineffective as so few of the bunkers could be identified let alone hit and the tunnels were deep underground.

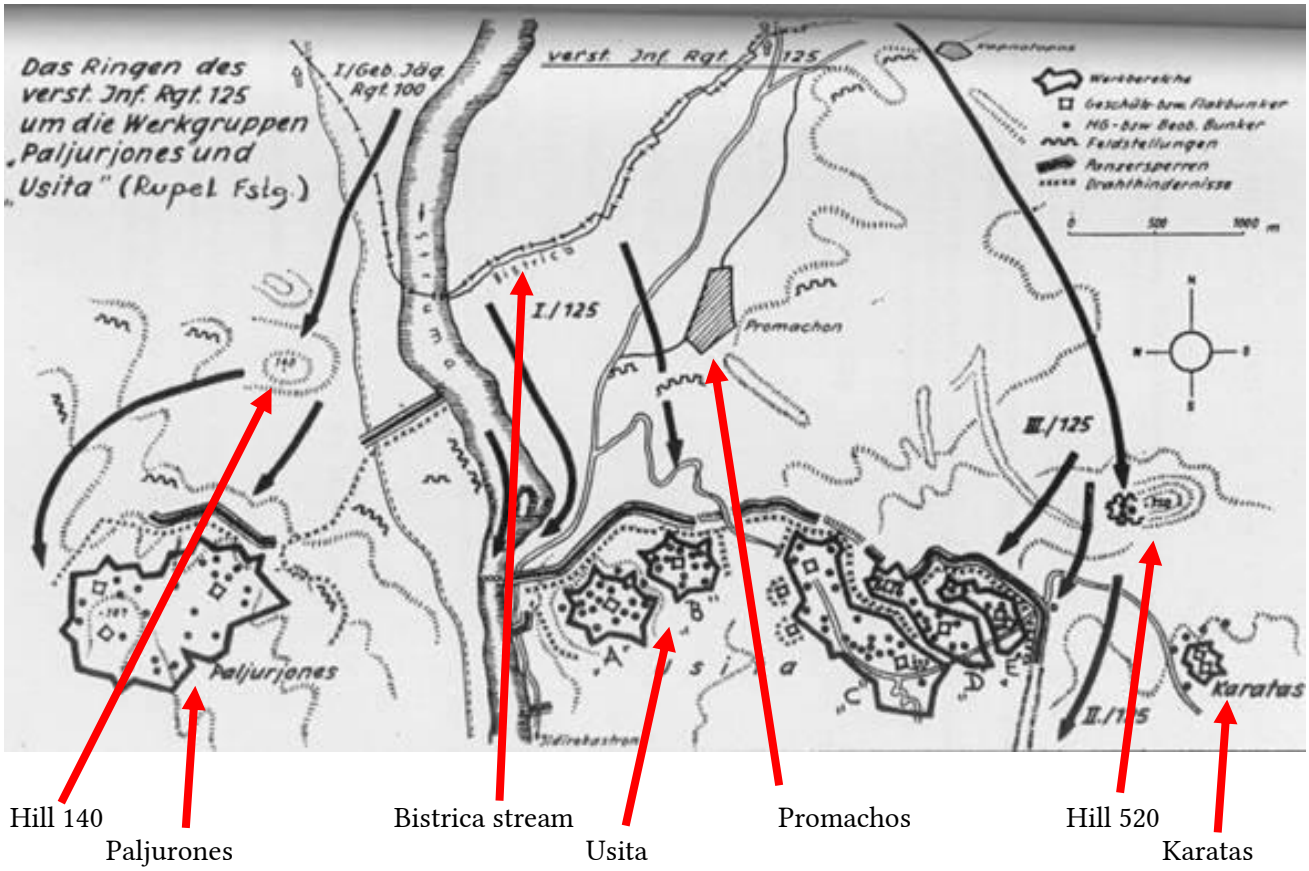


figure 13: A map of the attack.

figure 14: A newsreel team accompanied IR 125 and there are vivid photos in the displays inside the fort. Here German troops watch a Stuka strike on one of the forts.

This account is based on the German After-Action Report:

On the western bank of the Struma I Bn of GJR 100 captured Height 140 and then tried to attack Paljurjones. Despite four air strikes by Stukas heavy casualties were sustained and the attack on the fortification failed.

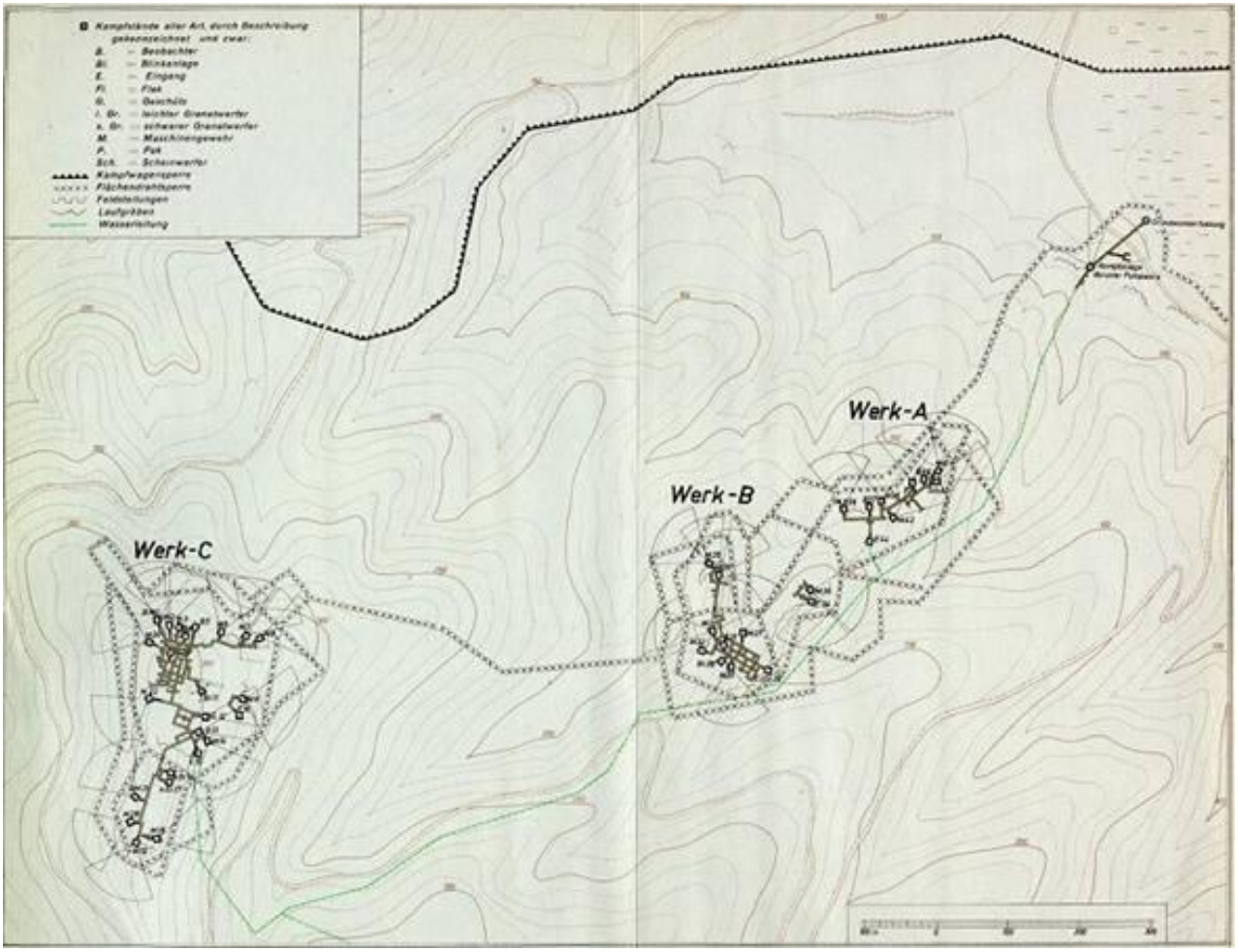


figure 15: A detailed map of the Usita fortifications.

On the eastern bank of the Struma I.R. 125 (Oberst Petersen) crossed the Bistrica after a brief skirmish with the Greek outposts. I Bn overcame the defensive positions southeast of Promachon and reached Work A at the Usita fortification by taking advantage of the air strikes and smoke screens but under the combined effect of the anti-tank and field artillery fire, the assault was stopped. A flanking operation with assault boats down the river failed due to the low water level and obstacles in the valley.

Then the II and III Bns crossed the Bistrica and under the covering fire of artillery, StuGs and Stukas the II Bn managed to get onto the key terrain at Hill 350 north-east of Usita [could not find on map AG]. Despite fire from the Karatas fortification the attack was successful and the enemy withdrew to the southeast. Taking advantage of its success, II Bn reached the southern side of Usita moving towards the Pass.

At 7:04 hors II Bn pushed towards Height 520, near the southern entrance of the Rupel Pass. They managed to hang on to this height despite strong counterattacks until the surrender of the Greek Army of Eastern Macedonia on 10th April 1941.

figure 16: The Railway Bridge over the Struma seized by II Bn / IR 125 around midday on 8th April. The Battalion was however isolated. (author's photo).

At 12:30 hours, the fourth assault began [to take Usita and open up the road to the south]. The enemy artillery caused heavy losses to the assault troops in the forming up area especially among the assault guns and engineers. As the enemy artillery had not been suppressed the assault was called off.

In the morning of 9th April 9 III Bn reported as follows: the eastern slopes within the battalion sector are dominated by enemy artillery to the rear [ie from Karatas] whilst the western and northern slopes are dominated by heavy machine gun fire and the valleys and ravines by mortar fire. The opponent's defences remain almost impregnable. The effective strength of the battalion has been reduced to 70 percent.

The fifth assault scheduled at 12:00 hours was suspended due to the surrender of the Greeks. The total casualties of IR 125 were 5 officers, 21 NCOs and 117 soldiers killed or wounded in action.

The Karatas fortification supported Work E of Usita with its artillery. Karatas was attacked by artillery and aerial bombardment but it was not attacked by the infantry. The Kali fortified group was bombed but not attacked by infantry and participated with two 120 mm guns in the defence of the fortification of Usita.

On several occasions German forces took up positions close to the forts only to be counterattacked by the Greek defenders during the night. The Greeks knew the ground intimately and at some forts took dozens of prisoners. Despite attacks on three successive days IR 125 therefore bounced off the bunkers at Fort Rupel. As noted in their report, parts of their II Bn managed to infiltrate between Usita and Karatas and reach a railway bridge over the Struma in the Greek rear but they were counterattacked and isolated. Unless Fort Rupel gave in the Germans could not use the main road to Thessaloniki.

figure 17: Greek and German wounded mingle after the capitulation on 10th April. (author's photo from the Museum display).

http://greekmilitary.net/metaxas.html At this link is a description of the fighting from the Greek point of view. The forts concerned are in the Serres valley, east of the Rupel Pass and attacked by the German 72nd Infantry Division.

Fort Rupel was ordered to surrender on 10 April as part of the capitulation of the Greek Army in Macedonia, 2nd Pz Div having outflanked the line via the Monastir Gap and a battlegroup had driven all the way to Thessaloniki by 9th April. The German Mountain Troops infiltrating to the west of Rupel had attacked the forts on the three peaks and eventually managed to take two of them. The other one, Istabey never surrendered and, like Rupel only did so receipt of specific orders. Even then,

the Germans agreed that the defenders could march out with the honours of war ie formally and with officers retaining their sidearms.

figure 18: German troops parading outside the Command Bunker to give the Honours of War to the garrison. (author's photo from the Museum display).

figure 19: The Command Bunker in April 2025. It gives entry to the fort and houses the Museum and a superb display of photographs. (author's photo).

figure 20: The Greek Memorial at Rupel. (author's photo)

IR 125 suffered heavy losses and was withdrawn from the line. 5th Mountain Division lost around 600 casualties ie about one in six of their infantry.

Before departure we paused at the Greek War Memorial which commemorated the 127 Greeks killed at Rupel. The Master Sergeant said that for many years German Mountain troop veterans had visited the forts which they regarded as a significant battle honour.

By the time we left Rupel, the peaks to the west were covered in black cloud and by the time we reached the main road it was pouring with rain.

Conclusion

At the time of the German attack on 6th April the great bulk of the Greek Army was based in north-west Greece facing the Italians. Lateral communications were very poor and so the Greeks hoped that they could push the Italians back and then transfer their troops east to face the Germans. The

pace and violence of the German attack rendered this policy unviable. The Commonwealth force of two divisions and one armoured brigade was well-equipped but at the end of a logistic shoestring. The tanks were nearly all abandoned due to shortage of spare parts.

Nevertheless, as seen above, the Greek soldiers fought very hard. At the end of the campaign the Army was demobilised rather than being taken back to Germany as POWs for forced labour. The Commonwealth force conducted a series of mostly successful rearguard actions before being evacuated by the Royal Navy from a series of beaches and small ports. All their heavy equipment was lost but even at this date most of the units and formations were re-equipped within a few weeks or months. I was informed but have not been able to confirm that the most significant German tank loss occurred when the ship transporting several dozen damaged Panzers back to Germany was sunk by a British submarine. The Germans felt that they had thrown the British back into the sea but this perception was incorrect – the allied rearguards had generally managed to slip away and get themselves evacuated rather than being overrun.

figure 21: German War Cemetery

Sources

Craig Stockings and Eleanor Hancock, *Swastika Over the Acropolis* (Leiden: Brill, 2013)

An outstanding work covering the whole campaign from the strategic to the tactical levels, well-written with good maps.

Pier Paolo Battistelli (Author) and Adam Hook (Illustrator), *The Balkans 1940–41 (2): Hitler's Blitzkrieg against Yugoslavia and Greece*: (London: Osprey, 2021).

A very useful summary.

Robert Crisp, *The Gods Were Neutral: A British Tank Officer's Very Personal Account of the Ill-Fated Greek Campaign in WWII*, (London: Frank Miller, 1959).

The author's memoir of Op CRUSADER is much better known because it has been reprinted but The Gods were Neutral is just as vivid. This account covers 1 (UK) Armd Bde's unsuccessful attempt to cover the Monastir Gap.

Howard Kippenberger, *Infantry Brigadier* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1949).

One of the classic infantry memoirs of WW2. During the campaign 'Kip' was commanding the NZ 20 Bn.

Links on the Metaxas Line as at 21 November 2025

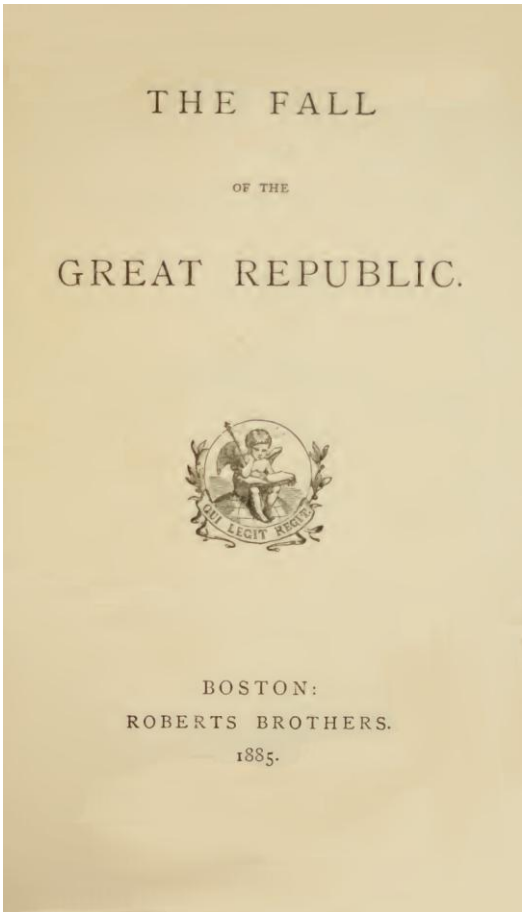
Metaxas Line: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Metaxas_Line

Fort Roupel: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fort_Roupel

Greek Army website on the Metaxas Line: http://greekmilitary.net/metaxas.html

Reviews

Sir Henry Standish Coverdale [Arthur Hitchcock], *The Fall of the Great Republic (1886–1888)* (Boston: Roberts Brothers 1885), 226pp.


THE FALL
OF THE
GREAT REPUBLIC.
QUI LEGIT REGIT
BOSTON:
ROBERTS BROTHERS.
1885.

Breaking the series of Great War memoires for once – though staying well into the niche of, well, niche material – , *The Fall of the Great Repulic*, published pseudonymously in 1885, is one of only a fairly small number of books applying the invasion novel approach to US affairs. Its relevance for the study of invasion novel literature in general stems both from this US theme and from the chance find of what apparently was the author's own copy in 2010 which revealed his identity: the book was written New Lebanon newspaper editor Abner Hitchcock (1851–1936).[1]

The Fall of the Great Repulic pretends to be an account of the events leading to the demise of the USA that was published in 1895 by the head of the European administration of the province of New York. It covers a series of events beginning with an economic downturn in the years 1882 to 1884; the resulting mass unemployment provides a fertile ground for socialist agitators. Radical political parties gain prominence, and while strikes and demonstrations become common in the major cities of the East, government response to the crisis is ineffective, rapidly eroding public trust. The texts singles out Irish immigrants as a particular source of troubles. By 1886 the republic is in crisis, with violence regularly erupting in the streets. In the summer of 1886 a revolutionary uprising throws country into chaos; federal authority proves incapable of preventing important cities from falling into the hands of the insurgents, and by the end of the year the country has effectively fallen into disorder. The last president dies of pneumonia contracted during his flight from Washington under circumstances that can only be called desperate:

> *His identity was concealed to the last, and, excepting the gentleman in whose house he lay and the physician who attended him, not one of the inmates knew that under that roof the last President of the United States passed away.*

[1] Amy McDonald, ‘An Anonymous Author Unveiled, 125 Years Later‘, *From Our Collections, New at the Rubenstein Library Rare Books*, March 4, 2011, https://blogs.library.duke.edu/rubenstein/2011/03/04/hitchcock/.

In 1887 a triumvirate of three revolutionary leaders – Mr. O'Halloran and Mr. Wagner, both with an Irish background, and an anarchist called Van Liest – assumes control. Soon, the revolutionary government is embroiled in a conflict with the United Kingdom over the release of certain revolutionaries from British prisons, which eventually leads to the arrest of the British ambassador in Washington and to the commencement of hostilities. A short military campaign results first in the capture of Boston by British forces and then in the formation of an Anglo-German-French alliance which, over the course of the following months, inflicts a series of crushing defeats onto US forces, the last battle taking place near the Gettysburg battlefield on June 12, 1888. In the end, the revolutionary government collapses and the territory of the former USA is put under the control of allies who establish military zones. A brief appendix provides twelve fictional speeches and newspaper articles supporting various sections of the text.

The Fall of the Great Repulic shares many characteristics with typical invasion novels; it differs somewhat in that its main focus is not the danger resulting from insufficient preparation of war, but rather the danger that certain elements of society – socialists and those with an Irish background – pose. While the book seems to have sold well and gathered some positive reviews, others were somewhat less taken by it, one reviewer noting:

> *Neither brilliant enough to entertain as a work of imagination, nor plausible enough to agitate as facts, nor new enough to startle as revelation, it is the work of an alarmist who has no remedy to suggest but who wishes to warn us.*[2]

While the modern reader is likely to share the more sceptical views of Abner Hitchcock's novel, it is still an important text for the study of invasion novel literature.

[2] Anonymous, 'The Fall of the Great Republic [review]', *The Critic*, June 20, 1885,

BCMH Events

Annual General Meeting

The Commission's Annual General Meeting will take place on Saturday, 7th of March 2026, from 10.30 am to 04.30 pm, at the RAF Museum, Hendon.

Details of all BCMH Events can be found on BCMH's website at http://www.bcmh.org.uk/events/

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