

Learning from Decisive Battles Prerequisites to Define and Identify Them

The legacy of Sir Edward S. Creasy for the imagination and predictions of war

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The idea that wars can be ended with a single blow has hypnotised generals and military thinkers for centuries. However, it seems that the notion of “decisive battle” was firmly established only in the middle of the 19th century by the British author Edward S. Creasy. Creasy’s book *The Fifteen Decisive Battles of the World* inspired a tradition of historiography seeking to define the most important battles in the history of mankind. Importantly, Creasy noted not only the short-term strategic, but also the long-term social and political consequences of the decisive battles of his choice. This essay analyses the original concepts of Creasy, and also the later changes and additions to the tradition, created by Creasy, by the late 19th century and the 20th century Anglo-Saxon and German historians and writers. It argues that “decisive battle” is a concept of hindsight and a tool for historians, as the importance and the decisiveness of individual military engagements can only be gauged from a temporal distance. This has probably been never as true as in the ongoing “war on terror.”

Although there may have been forerunners for the term “decisive battle,”¹ the notion was firmly established by the British author Sir Edward S. Creasy in his book *The Fifteen Decisive Battles of the World – From Mara-*

¹ The use of the word “decisive” by Creasy and in this essay is distinct from the modern use of that term by the U.S. Army: “Decisive Victory: [...] Whenever the Army is called upon, it fights to win and operates to achieve decisive results at minimum cost to life and treasure.” *FM 100-7. Decisive Force: The army in theatre operations* (Headquarters, Department of the Army:

thon to Waterloo, which was published in 1851. It was a best-seller for decades to come. The fundamental problem of Creasy and many of his more or less prominent successors was to define and identify the “decisive” character of military engagements. The most important and innovative factor for the term “decisive battles” as defined by Creasy was the universal or global approach. His battles were certainly limited to the cultures inhabiting Europe, the Mediterranean and North America during the last 2,341 years, thereby ignoring for example any Chinese, Japanese or pre-Columbian American cultures, but nevertheless the choice of Creasy was much more universal and global than any approach before. This liberated the notion “decisive battles” from the nationalistic restrictions of the time and made it a tool for comparison in military history.

The Anglo-Saxon tradition of decisive battles started with Creasy and he dominated the scene up to the inter-war period. But the First World War as a global event with far reaching consequences (especially the collapse of the Russian, German, Austria-Hungarian and Ottoman Empires) necessitated a reformulation of Creasy, which was started by John Frederick Charles Fuller with his *The Decisive Battles of the Western World and their influence upon history*. Fuller began writing the book in the inter-war period, but finished it only after the Second World War.² As Fuller tried to become the Creasy of the 20th century, Joseph B. Mitchell was less ambiguous and simply updated Creasy by adding five post-1851 battles to the original fifteen chosen by Creasy.³ For some time new developments in military historiography seemed to make the approach of Creasy too old-fashioned for modern historians. But his approach prevailed, as many book titles (not only for the popular book market) would prove.

This paper discusses the development of the notion “decisive battle” in the context of the history of military historiography under the guiding questions: Are there lessons to be learned from decisive battles, or is the

Washington, DC, 1995), 1 of 13. The hint on this important difference in usage was given to the author by the late Lt. Col. Ted Westhusing.

² J. F. C. Fuller, *The Decisive Battles of the Western World and their influence upon history*. 3 volumes (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1954–1956).

³ J.B. Mitchell and E.S. Creasy, *Zwanzig entscheidende Schlachten der Weltgeschichte* (Gütersloh: Bertelsmann, 1968).

debate about the notion of “decisive battles” already the most important learning effect? If and how could the notion of “decisive battles,” which was dear to strategists of the long 19th century (until 1914), could still play a role as a theoretical model in post-9/11 warfare.

Birth of the notion “decisive battle”

Description and depictions of famous battles as curiosities are known since Antiquity. In the Age of Nationalism they became part of the national narrative of history, which was created to establish an identity of the nation-state. Probably the most famous of such early 19th century approaches of telling national history by a story of important battles was the *galerie des batailles* [battle gallery] in the Versailles castle, which since the 1830s depicted French history from the battle of Tolbiac to the much more recent Napoleonic Wars.⁴ Other examples for accumulations of battle scenes decisive for a national history are in the British memorial rooms in the galleries of the Sandhurst Companies⁵ for the army, and in the Gunroom of the Britannia Naval College at Dartmouth for the navy.⁶ Decisiveness of battles in such pictorial narratives was rather limited, as only victorious events for the individual nation qualified for entry in the respective memorial room. There were definitely forerunners for the term “decisive battle,” the concept was established by Sir Edward S. Creasy in

⁴ C. Constans, *Versailles. La Galerie des batailles* (Paris: Khayat, 1984): Tolbiac, Poitiers, Padernborn, Paris, Bouvines, Taillebourg, Mons-en-Puelle, Cassel, Cocherel, Orleans, Castillon, Naples, Marignan, Calais, Paris, Rocroy, Lens, Dunes, Valenciennes, Marseille, Villaviciosa, Denain, Fontenoy, Lawfeld, York-Town, Fleurus, Rivoli, Aboukir, Zurich, Hohenlinden, Austerlitz, Iena, Friedland, Wagram. The spelling and the order of the battle names always follow the respective book.

⁵ Blenheim, Dettingen, Salamanca, Waterloo, Inkerman, Marne, Somme, Ypres, Gaza, Amiens, Alamein, Salerno, Normandy, Arnhem, River Rhine, Burma. D. G. Chandler (ed.), *Great Battles of the British Army as commemorated in the Sandhurst Companies* (London: Arms and Armour, 1991).

⁶ The Danes, Sluys, Armada, Santa Cruz, St. James's Day Fight, La Hogue, Passaro, Cape Finisterre, Quiberon Bay, Les Saintes, Glorious 1st June, St. Vincent, Aboukir, Copenhagen, Trafalgar, San Domingo, Basque Roads, Acre, Falkland Islands, Jutland, River Plate, Taranto, Matapan, North Cape, Falklands. E. Grove (ed.), *Great Battles of the Royal Navy as commemorated in the Gunroom, Britannia Naval College, Dartmouth* (London: Bramley, 1994).

his book *The Fifteen Decisive Battles of the World – From Marathon to Waterloo*, published in 1851. It would be a most popular book for many years to come. Creasy chose his subject for the following reason:

The Universal Peace Society certainly does not, and probably never will, enrol the majority of statesmen among its members. [...] For a writer, therefore, of the present day to choose battles for his favourite topic, merely because they were battles; merely because so many myriads of troops were arrayed in them, and so many hundreds of thousands of human beings stabbed, hewed, or shot each other to death during them, would argue strange weakness or depravity of mind.

Creasy went on to explain that not the number of casualties makes a battle decisive, because

[i]t is not because only a few hundreds fell in the battle by which Joan of Arc captured the Tourelles and raised the siege of Orleans, that the effect of that crisis is to be judged: [...] There are some battles, also, which claim our attention independently of the moral worth of the combatants, on account of their enduring importance, and by reason of the practical influence on our own social and political condition, which we can trace up to the results of those engagements. They have for us an abiding and actual interest, both while we investigate the chain of causes and effects, by which they have helped to make us what we are; and also while we speculate on what we probably should have been, if any of those battles had come to a different termination.⁷

The most significant element in Creasy's notion of "decisive battles" was its globalism. His selection of battles was limited to Europe, the Mediterranean and North America in the last 2,341 years; and thus Chinese, Japanese, pre-Columbian American and other cultures were ignored. Nevertheless, Creasy's approach was more universal than any approach before him. This liberated the notion "decisive battles" from the nationalistic restrictions of the time and made it a tool for comparison in mili-

⁷ E.S. Creasy, *The Fifteen Decisive Battles of the World. From Marathon to Waterloo* (London: Nelson, s.a. [first edition: 1851]), 3–5.

tary history. The definition of decisive battles by Creasy was at least half-Clausewitzian as he embraced not only purely military aspects but also the “practical influence of the social and political condition” as a criterion for decisiveness.

“Decisive battles” between Anglo-Saxon and German interpretations

Although it had many forerunners, the concept of decisive battles as used – one might even say discovered – by Creasy had a decisive impact on the military historiographies from the second part of the 19th century at least up to the creation of a military history more inclined to social factors than to battles, i.e. up to the mid-20th century. For the matter of the argument of this essay, the discussion of the tradition or school created by Creasy will be limited to the Anglo-Saxon and to the German followers of Creasy only, as they show the possibilities and deficiencies of his concept in the most comprehensive way.

The Anglo-Saxon tradition of decisive battles started with Creasy and he dominated the scene up to the inter-war period. (The listing of the traditions does not seek to be complete, it takes the most obvious and in many cases most influential examples for an approach in the tradition of Creasy in different ages (especially for the pre-WW I, interwar, post-WW II periods). The First World War was a global event with far reaching consequences, including the collapse of the Russian, German, Austria-Hungarian and Ottoman Empires. It necessitated a reformulation of Creasy, which was started by John Frederick Charles Fuller in his *The Decisive Battles of the Western World and their influence upon history* (finished after the Second World War).⁸ Whereas Fuller’s approach was an ambitious one, Joseph B. Mitchell simply updated Creasy by adding five post-1851 battles to the fifteen chosen by Creasy.⁹

One could argue that new developments in military historiography made the approach of Creasy too old-fashioned for modern historians.

⁸ Fuller, *The Decisive Battles of the Western World*.

⁹ Mitchell and Creasy, *Zwanzig entscheidende Schlachten*.

As an example for a modern anti-Creasy approach the book *War in European History* by Michael Howard could be mentioned. Howard took the social status of the soldier as the structure of his military history, whereby the battles to a certain extent were degraded to be just a reflection of the social position of the soldier at any given period (Wars of the Knights, Mercenaries, Merchants, Professionals, Revolution, Nations, Technologists, Nuclear Age).¹⁰ Nevertheless the concept of decisive battle accumulations still has an appeal on the popular book-market.¹¹ There are other approaches within the broader Creasy tradition, which are less apt for direct comparison as they do not use the chronological approach, but for example an A-Z encyclopaedical order,¹² which was made popular by Harbottle half a century after Creasy.¹³ As the Chandler dictionary

¹⁰ M. Howard, *War in European History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976).

¹¹ P. K. Davis, *100 Decisive Battles from Ancient Times to the Present* (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 1999) and F. Regan, *Battles That Changed History. Fifty decisive battles spanning over 2500 years of warfare* (London: Deutsch, 2002).

¹² D.G. Chandler (ed.), *Dictionary of Battles. The world's key battles from 405 BC to today* (New York: Henry Holt, 1988): Actium, Aegospotami, Aquae Sextiae-Vercellae, Chaerona, Cunaxa, Gaugamela-Arbela, Leuctra, Victories of Marcus, Metaurus, Milvian Bridge, Palmyra, Pyrrhic Victories, Pharsalus, Rome, Salamis, Victories of Trajan, Ashdown - Saucourt - Paris - Dyle, Catterick, Civitate, Hastings, Lech, Maldon, Mauriac Plain, Roncesvalles - Suntel Mountains, Taginae - Casilinum, Yarmuk, Acre, Agincourt, Antioch, Arsuf, Ascalon, Ayn Jalut, Bosworth, Bouvines, Constantinople, Crecy, Dorylaeum, Kutna Hora, Liegnitz, Morat, Nicopolis, Poitiers, Sluys, Tinchebrai, Belgrade, Breitenfeld, Fontenoy, Lepanto, Leuthen, Lille, Malta, Naseby, Pavia, Poltava, Quebec, Ramillies, Rocroi, Armada, Acre, Assaye, Austerlitz, Borodino, Brandywine, Busaco, Gibraltar, Jena-Auerstaedt, Lake Champlain, Saints, Salamanca, Trafalgar, Valmy, Waterloo, Yorktown, Antietam-Sharpsburg, Balaclava, Buena Vista, Chancellorsville, Colenso, Delhi, Gettysburg, Hampton Roads, Manila Bay, Omdurman, Port Arthur, Sedan, Tsushima, Vicksburg, Amiens, Cambrai, Caporetto, Gallipoli, Jutland, Kut Al-Amara, Marne, Megiddo, Somme, Tannenberg, Verdun, Ypres, Madrid, Mannerheim Line, El Alamein, Ardennes, Arnhem, Atlantic, Berlin, Britain, Corregidor, Crete, D-Day - Seine, Dieppe, France, Gazala-Bir Hacheim, Guadalcanal, Gustav Line, Imphal-Kohima, Kursk, Leningrad, Leyte Gulf, Malta, Midway, Moscow, Okinawa, Pearl Harbour, Ploesti-Peenemunde, Sevastopol, Singapore, Stalingrad, Algiers, Cedar Falls-Junction City, Chinese Farm, Dien Bien Phu, Entebbe, Golan Heights, Goose Green, Hsuehchow, Imjin, Inchon, Indonesian-British Confrontation, Jerusalem, Khe Sanh, Khorramshahr, Malaya, Mirbat, East Pakistan, Panjsher Valley, Peace for Galilee, Port Stanley, Pusan, Red River Delta, Rolling Thunder-Linebacker, Saigon, Sinai, Suez 1956, Suez 1973, Tet Offensive. See also D. Eggenberger, *An Encyclopaedia of Battles: Accounts of over 1560 battles from 1479 B.C. to the present* (Mineola, NY: Dover, 1985).

¹³ T.B. Harbottle and G. Bruce, *Harbottle's Dictionary of Battles* (London: Granada, 1979). Harbottle and Bruce listed well over 1,000 battles.

the book *Strategy* by Liddell Hart was a milestone in modern “indirect” Creasy reception,¹⁴ although it did not stick to the battle approach, but used a discussion by periods instead and did therefore not qualify for the “direct” Creasy tradition.

As the Creasy approach is still very much alive in the Anglo-Saxon world, the choice presented here is necessarily limited.¹⁵ Outside the scientific or popular Creasy reception his concept is used for children’s books introducing military history.¹⁶ The comparison of the battles chosen by Creasy (updated in a post-World War II edition by Mitchell) with battles chosen by other authors adopting the Creasy method may help to discover both the nucleus and the analytical possibilities of the Creasy approach (Table 1).

First of all – and there is no surprise – the Anglo-Saxon tradition is very Anglo-Saxon-centred in its choice of post-Antiquity decisive battles. The choice of decisive battles by Creasy with the slight exception of Marathon prevailed within the choice of his followers, whereas the additions of Mitchell especially for the period “1776/1789 to the eve of WW1” did not make it to become part of the tradition. In general it seems that the agreement on what is to be considered as a decisive battle is much easier as more distant the authors are from the relevant period, i.e. there seems to be a consensus on the decisive battles of Antiquity and of the Middle Ages, whereas there has not yet emerged a canon of decisive battles for the 20th century. The decisive battle canon of Antiquity in the beginning of the Anglo-Saxon tradition tended to comprise slightly more Greek than Roman battles, but later added other events from Roman history. It may be an over-interpretation, but Creasy listing three Greek and only

¹⁴ B.H. Liddell Hart, *Strategy. The indirect approach* (London: Faber and Faber, 1967).

¹⁵ Other editions and re-editions of books in this tradition comprise M. L. Lanning and B. Rosenburgh, *The Battle 100. The Stories behind history’s most influential battles* (London: Sourcebooks, 2003); F. Pratt and E. Gorey, *The Battles that Changed History* (Mineola, NY: Dover, 2000); and W. Weir, *50 Battles that Changed the World: The conflicts that most influenced the course of history* (New York: New Page Books, 2001). C. Falls (ed.), *Great Military Battles* (New York: Macmillan, 1964) was an important book in the Creasy tradition, but was limited to battles from 1643 to 1944.

¹⁶ Megiddo, Thermopylae, Cannae, Tours, Hastings, Acre, Agincourt, Lepanto, Luetzen, Plassey, Trafalgar, Waterloo, Gettysburg, Sedan, Little Big Horn, Cambrai, Britain, Midway, Kursk – F. Wilkinson, *Famous Battles* (London: Macdonald Educational, 1979).

two Roman battles may still be in the mood of Philhellenism of the early 19th century, whereas later generations may be inclined to emphasise the more direct influence of Roman battles to the creation of modern Europe.

But how did the Creasy approach transform, when it was applied to another country? The German tradition started with a clear reference to Creasy, as the “idea of the editor was to edit Creasy [...] for the German reader,” but Christian Friedrich Maurer, author of *Entscheidungsschlachten der Weltgeschichte* [*Decisive Battles of World History*], declared “to be as independent as possible from the views of the English historian.”¹⁷ Much quicker than in the Anglo-Saxon tradition came an update for the changed perspective during the First World War, when Walter Heichen published his *Die Entscheidungsschlachten der Weltgeschichte von Marathon bis Tsushima. A book about the struggle of the peoples for the position of power in former and modern times*.¹⁸

Another try for such an approach was made on the eve of the Second World War in Nazi Germany, when Friedrich von Cochenhausen edited *Schicksalsschlachten der Völker* [*Battles of Destiny of the Peoples*].¹⁹ Cochenhausen and his fellow authors were a mix of retired soldiers very much in the tradition of the pre-1914 German military history writing and of representatives of new Nazi “scholars” seeing military historiography as a tool to foster the aims of Nazi ideology. During the Nazi period the Creasy approach was even adjusted to the racial concepts of Nazism and thereby limited to decisive battles of the Germanic tribes.²⁰ German

¹⁷ C. F. Maurer, *Entscheidungsschlachten der Weltgeschichte* (Leipzig: Weber, 1890) [“Der Gedanke des Herrn Verleger war es, E. Creasys *Fünfzehn Entscheidungsschlachten* für deutsche Leser herauszugeben. Ich glaubte, diese Arbeit übernehmen zu können, – allerdings unter der Voraussetzung, mich möglichst unabhängig von den Anschauungen des englischen Historikers bewegen zu dürfen.”].

¹⁸ W. Heichen, *Die Entscheidungsschlachten der Weltgeschichte von Marathon bis Tsushima. Ein Buch vom Ringen der Völker um die Machtstellung in alter und neuer Zeit* (Altenburg: Geibel, 1915).

¹⁹ F.v. Cochenhausen (ed.), *Schicksalsschlachten der Völker* (Berlin: Deutscher Verlag fuer Politik und Wirtschaft, 1937).

²⁰ K. Pastenaci, *Entscheidungsschlachten der Germanen* (Berlin: Nordland, 1944): Gallien, Teutoburger Wald, Strassburg, Adrianopel, Katalaunische Felder.

Table 1:

Decisive Battles – British/Anglo-Saxon tradition			
	Creasy / Mitchell (1851/1964)	Fuller (1939–40/1954–56)	
Antiquity	<u>Marathon</u> <u>Syracuse</u> <u>Arbela</u> <u>Metaurus</u> <u>Arminius/Varus</u>	Salamis <u>Syracuse – Aegospotami</u> <u>Gaugamela/Arbela</u> <u>Metaurus/Zama</u> Pydna	Dyrrhachium/Pharsalus <u>Philippi/Actium</u> <u>Teutoburger Wald</u> <u>Adrianople</u>
After Antiquity and before 1776/1789	<u>Chalons</u> <u>Tours</u> <u>Hastings</u> <u>Orleans</u> <u>Armada</u> <u>Blenheim</u> <u>Pultowa</u> <u>[Poltava]</u>	<u>Chalons/Mauriac Plain</u> <u>Tricameron/Taginae</u> <u>Constantinople/Tours</u> <u>Hastings</u> <u>Manzikert</u> <u>Hattin</u> <u>Sluys/Crecy</u> <u>Orleans</u>	<u>Constantinople</u> <u>Malaga/Granada</u> <u>Lepanto</u> <u>Armada</u> <u>Breitenfeld/Luetzen</u> Naseby <u>Blenheim</u> Poltava Rossbach/Leuthen <u>Plassey</u> <u>Plains of Abraham</u>
1776/1789 to the eve of WW1	<u>Saratoga</u> <u>Valmy</u> <u>Waterloo</u> <u>Vicksburg</u> <u>Koeniggraetz</u>	<u>Saratoga</u> <u>Chesapeake/Yorktown</u> <u>Valmy</u> <u>Trafalgar</u> <u>Jena/Auerstaedt</u> <u>Leipzig</u>	<u>Waterloo</u> Seven Days Battle Vicksburg/Chattanooga <u>Sedan</u> Port Arthur
WW1 and WW2	<u>Marne</u> <u>Midway</u> <u>Stalingrad</u>	<u>Marne/Tannenberg</u> Sari Bair/ Suvla Bay Amiens Vittorio-Veneto <u>Warsaw</u> <u>Sedan</u>	<u>Moscow</u> <u>Midway</u> <u>El Alamein/Tunis</u> <u>Stalingrad</u> <u>Normandy</u> Leyte Gulf
After WW2	–	–	

The names of battles, campaigns, and sieges are given in the spelling used by the different authors.

The distinction in five major periods is added for the purpose of the argument of this essay.

BOLD print: mentioned by 2 authors; UNDERLINED: mentioned by at least 3 authors

Regan (1992)	Davis (1999)
<p><u>Salamis</u> <u>Syracuse</u> <u>Guagamela</u> [sic!] Beneventum <u>Zama</u> <u>Actium</u> <u>Teutoburger Wald</u> <u>Adrianople</u></p>	<p>Megiddo Thymbra <u>Marathon</u> <u>Salamis</u> <u>Syracuse</u> Leuctra Chaeronea</p> <p><u>Gaugamela/</u> <u>Arbela</u> Ipsus <u>Metaurus</u> Kai-hsia <u>Zama</u> <u>Pydna</u> Alesia</p> <p><u>Pharsalus</u> <u>Actium</u> <u>Teutoburger Wald</u> Beth-Horon Milvian Bridge <u>Adrianople</u></p>
<p><u>Taginae</u> Yarmuk <u>Constantinople</u> <u>Lechfeld</u> <u>Hastings</u> <u>Manzikert</u> <u>Hattin</u> Las Navas de Tolosa <u>Ain Jalut</u> <u>Crecy</u> Tannenburg <u>Orleans</u> <u>Constantinople</u></p>	<p><u>Chalons</u> <u>Tricameron</u> Badr <u>Constantinople</u> <u>Tours/Poitiers</u> Pavia <u>Lechfeld</u> <u>Hastings</u> <u>Manzikert</u> Jerusalem <u>Hattin</u> Taraori Bouvines</p> <p>Ain Jalut Hsiang-yang Hakata Bay Brusa <u>Crecy</u> <u>Orleans</u> <u>Constantinople</u> <u>Granada</u> <u>Tenochtitlan</u> Panipat <u>Vienna</u> Cajamarca</p> <p><u>Lepanto</u> <u>Armada</u> Sekigahara <u>Breitenfeld</u> Shanhai-kuan Naseby Dunes <u>Blenheim</u> <u>Poltava</u> Culloden <u>Plassey</u> <u>Quebec</u></p>
<p><u>Saratoga</u> <u>Trafalgar</u> Austerlitz <u>Waterloo</u> <u>Gettysburg</u> <u>Koeniggratz</u> <u>Sedan</u> <u>Tsushima</u></p>	<p>Trenton <u>Saratoga</u> <u>Yorktown</u> <u>Valmy</u> Rivoli Aboukir Bay/Nile <u>Trafalgar</u> <u>Jena/Auerstaedt</u></p> <p>Prophetstown/ Tippecanoe Borodino <u>Leipzig</u> <u>Waterloo</u> Ayacucho San Jacinto Mexico City Antietam/Sharpsburg</p> <p><u>Gettysburg</u> Atlanta/March to the Sea <u>Sedan</u> Tel el Kebir Manila Bay Mukden <u>Tsushima</u></p>
<p><u>Marne</u> <u>Sedan</u> <u>Britain</u> <u>Midway</u> El Alamein <u>Stalingrad</u></p>	<p><u>Marne</u> Verdun Brusilov Offensive <u>Marne</u></p> <p><u>Warsaw</u> Poland [sic!] Dunkirk <u>Britain</u> <u>Moscow</u></p> <p>Pearl Harbour Singapore <u>Midway</u> <u>Normandy</u> Okinawa</p>
<p><u>Dien Bien Phu</u> Six Day War <u>Second Gulf War</u></p>	<p>Israel's War of Independence Huai Hai/Suchow Inchon</p> <p><u>Dien Bien Phu</u> Tet Offensive <u>Desert Storm</u></p>

military historiography obviously needed a long time to recover from these distortions and it is not by chance that many of the (West) German books on this subject between 1949 and 1990 were mere translations from the Anglo-Saxon tradition.²¹ This was even true for children's books.²² An exception to this rule were the East German historians Walter Markov and Heinz Helmert with *Schlachten der Weltgeschichte* [*Battles of World History*], which was published in both German states, but Markov and Helmert did not embrace the decisiveness aspect as much as Creasy had.²³

In 2001 established German academia came out with the book *Schlachten der Weltgeschichte* [*Battles of World History*]. The preface set this publication clearly in the Creasy tradition, but tended to excuse the approach and to explain why the publication could nevertheless be positioned within the current mainstream of German historiography.²⁴ Directly in the Creasy tradition, but on the fringe of academic German military historiography, was Klaus-Jürgen Bremm with *Im Schatten des*

²¹ F. Pratt, *Schlachten, die Geschichte machten. Von Issus bis zu den Midways* (Duesseldorf: Econ, 1965), and Mitchell and Creasy, *Zwanzig entscheidende Schlachten*.

²² V. Melegari, *Die grossen Schlachten* (Hamburg: Tessloff, 1982) as a translation from the Italian: Kadesch, Marathon, Salamis, Gaugamela, Cannae, Alesia, Katalaunische Felder, Poitiers, Hastings, Legnano, Kyuschu, Crecy, Azincourt, Orleans, Konstantinopel, Fornovo, Ravenna, Marignano, Pavia – Tunis, Lepanto, Luetzen, Rocroi, Maastricht, Wien, Fleurus, Belgrad, Fontenoy, Culloden Moor, Rossbach, Saratoga, Marengo, Trafalgar, Austerlitz, Waterloo, Balaklawa, San Martino-Solferino, Calatafimi – Volturmo, Gettysburg, Koeniggraetz, Little Big Horn, Khartum, Tsushima, Tannenberg, Marne, Skagerrak, Verdun, Vittorio Veneto, El Alamein, Midway, Stalingrad, Dien Bien Phu.

²³ W. Markov and H. Helmert, *Schlachten der Weltgeschichte* (Gütersloh: Prisma, 1983): Kadesch, Marathon, Salamis, Lechaion, Leuktra, Gaugamela, Tschang-ping, Cannae, Pydna, Pharsalos, Teutoburger Wald, Jerusalem, Abrittus, Argentoratum, Katalaunische Felder, Ninive, Poitiers, Lechfeld, Hastings, Legnano, Kalka, Hakata, Takashima, Sempach, Grunwald-Tannenberg, Usti nad Labem (Aussig), Murten, Pavia, Sekigahara, Luetzen, Wien-Kahlenberg, Hoehstaedt-Blenheim, Poltawa, Leuthen, Saratoga, Valmy, Bei den Pyramiden, Trafalgar, Austerlitz, Leipzig, Waterloo, Ayacucho, Solferino, Gettysburg, Koeniggraetz, Gravelotte-St. Privat, Adua, Mukden, Marneschlacht, Verdun, Skagerrak, Cambrai, Zarizyn, Guadalajara, Luftschlacht England, El Alamein, Stalingrad, Kursk, Normandie, Leyte, Berlin, Hiroshima.

²⁴ S. Foerster, M. Poehlmann and D. Walter, *Schlachten der Weltgeschichte. Von Salamis bis Sinai* (Munich: Beck, 2001), 7–18: Salamis, Gaugamela, Cannae, Hastings, Hattin, Ayn Dschalut, Murten, Panipat, Luetzen, Wien, Leuthen, Waterloo, Cold Harbor, Koeniggraetz, Sedan, Adua, Tsushima, Tannenberg, Verdun, Luftschlacht um England, Stalingrad, Okinawa, Dien Bien Phu, Sinai.

*Desasters. Zwölf Entscheidungsschlachten in der Geschichte Europas [In the Shadow of Disaster. Twelve Decisive Battles in the History of Europe].*²⁵ A more modern and academically accepted version was *Schlachtenmythen [Myths of Battles]* by Gerd Krumeich and Susanne Brandt, whereby the focus shifted from the decisiveness of the battle to the persistence of the myth of the battle.²⁶

The German authors can be compared in the following table (Table 2).

As the table shows, most striking is the choice of decisive battles in Antiquity. Before the Second World War, German authors agreed on Gaugamela and the Teutoburger Wald, whereby the victory of Arminius over Varus was at least as much decisive as a 19th century myth for the German nation-state as it was decisive in military terms. Quite remarkably the battle of Cannae practically did not play any role in pre-1945 publications, although it dominated German military thinking from the 1890s to the beginning of the First World War.²⁷ A trend concerning the choice of decisive battles is obvious: as more recent the period was, the more linked to German history the choice of battles became. The big exception to this rule is Trafalgar, but even this choice of a more recent battle is better explained by German history than by the battle itself. As the navy became an important tool of the politics of Wilhelm II and of national German self-esteem, naval battles had to be represented in such a canon of decisive battles. This is especially true for Heichen and von Cochenhausen.

Beyond the discussion of the canon of the German tradition, it is important to explain the big gap of nearly fifty years between pre-1945 and recent post-1990 publications. German military historiography was so much discredited after the Second World War, that there was in fact a massive break in such publications for nearly the whole Cold War

²⁵ K.-J. Bremm, *Im Schatten des Desasters. Zwölf Entscheidungsschlachten in der Geschichte Europas* (Osnabrück: BoD, 2003).

²⁶ G. Krumeich and S. Brandt (ed.), *Schlachtenmythen. Ereignis – Erzählung – Erinnerung* (Cologne: Böhlau, 2003).

²⁷ A. v. Schlieffen, *Gesammelte Schriften*. 2 volumes (Berlin: Mittler, 1913), J. L. Wallach, *Das Dogma der Vernichtungsschlacht* (Munich: dtv, 1980) and M. Healy, *Cannae 216 BC. Hannibal smashes Rome's army* (Botley: Osprey, 1994).

period. After the voluntary abuse of military historiography by Jingoism and Nazism and the destruction caused by the two world wars started by Germany, even serious military historiography had a hard time in the public view. That does not mean that there was no serious military history research during that time, but it could not appeal to the scientific and wider public in the same way as this was the case for military history writers in Britain, the USA or France. Therefore it is not by chance that German children's books on these topics were translations from the Italian,²⁸ that popular military history books were published as "Books on Demand" instead of a regular book by an established publishing house²⁹ and that the established academia tended to write on battle myths instead of decisive battles.³⁰

Another story was the communist (East) German Democratic Republic (1949–1990), where military subjects were from a Marxist perspective much more a topic than in West Germany.³¹ Military history books were seen as a tool to foster the defensive spirit of the East German population against the capitalist enemy in the West. However, Markov and Helmert proved that scientifically sound books could be written despite this political context. To conclude the analysis of these two traditions of the Creasy approach, it might be useful to contrast the Anglo-Saxon with the German decisive battles canon in the following table (Table 3).

Perhaps surprisingly, the intersection of the Anglo-Saxon with the German tradition comes out as a perfect match for a possible European canon on decisive battles up to the eve of the First World War: Gaugamela, Teutoburger Wald, Armada, Blenheim/Hoechstaedt, Poltava, Trafalgar, Waterloo/Belle-Alliance and Sedan. It certainly neglects anything outside Europe (ignoring even the American War of Independence due to the German canon), but for a pure European perspective the common nominators are excellent. Both the Greek and the Roman heritage is remembered by a battle, the Middle Ages are somehow neglected, but the choice for early modern Europe up to the second half of the 19th century well

²⁸ Melegari, *Die grossen Schlachten*.

²⁹ Bremm, *Im Schatten des Desasters*.

³⁰ Krumeich and Brandt, *Schlachtenmythen*.

³¹ Markov and Helmert, *Schlachten der Weltgeschichte*.

Table 2:

Decisive Battles – German tradition						Krumeich/Brandt (ed.) (2003)
	Maurer (1882/1890)	Heichen (1915)	von Cochenhausen (ed.) (1937)	Bremm (2003)		
Antiquity	Plataeae Syracus Gaugamela Sena Gallica/ Metaurus <u>Teutoburger [Wald]</u>	Marathon Syracus <u>Arbela/Gaugamela</u> Metaurus <u>Teutoburger Wald</u>	Salamis Gaugamela Zama Regia <u>Teutoburger Wald</u>	Salamis Zama Alesia	Marathon	
After Antiquity and before 1776/1789	Troyes/Chalons <u>Poitiers</u> <u>Lechfeld</u> Hastings Vittoria Orleans <u>Armada</u>	Catalaunische Felder <u>Tours/Poitiers</u> Hastings Tannenberg Orleans <u>Armada</u> Wien <u>Hochstaedt</u> <u>Poltawa</u> Liegnitz	<u>Tours/Poitiers</u> <u>Ungarnschlacht</u> Bouvines Bornhoeved Konstantinopel <u>Armada</u> Breitenfeld Wien <u>Hochstaedt</u> <u>Leuthen</u>	<u>Lechfeld</u> Mantzikert Tagliacozzo Wien <u>Poltawa</u>	Roncesvalles Peipussee	
1776/1789 to the eve of WW1	Saratoga Valmy <u>Belle-Alliance</u>	<u>Koeniggraetz</u> <u>Sedan</u> –	<u>Belle-Alliance</u> <u>Koeniggraetz</u> <u>Sedan</u> Tsushima	<u>Trafalgar</u> <u>Waterloo</u> <u>Koeniggraetz</u>	Raclawice Pyramiden Srirangapatna Berg Isel <u>Waterloo</u>	
WW1 and WW2	–	–	Tannenberg Marne 1918 –	Ardennen	Bir Hakeim Stalingrad Seelower Hoehen D-Day	
After WW2	–	–	–	–	–	

The names of battles, campaigns and sieges are given in the spelling used by the different authors. The distinction in five major periods is added for the purpose of the argument of this essay. BOLD print: mentioned by 2 authors; UNDERLINED: mentioned by at least three authors.

Tabel 3:

Comparison between the British/Anglo-Saxon tradition and the German tradition			
	Creasy (without Mitchell)	British/Anglo-Saxon tradition (Fuller, Mitchell, Regan and Davis)	German tradition (Maurer, Heichen, von Cochenhausen, Bremm and Krumeich/Brandt)
Antiquity	Marathon Syracuse Arbela Metaurus Arminius/Varus	Salamis Syracuse Gaugamela Metaurus/Zama Actium Teutoburger Wald Adrianople	Gaugamela Teutoburger Wald
After Antiquity and before 1776/1789	Chalons Tours Hastings Orleans Armada Blenheim Pultowa [Poltava]	Chalons Constantinople/Tours Hastings Manzikert Hattin Crecy Orleans Constantinople Lepanto Armada Breitenfeld Blenheim Poltava Plassey Quebec	Poitiers Lechfeld Armada Wien Hoechstaedt Poltawa
1776/1789 to the eve of WWI	Saratoga Valmy Waterloo –	Saratoga Valmy Trafalgar Waterloo Sedan	Trafalgar Belle-Alliance = Waterloo Koeniggraetz Sedan
WWI and WW2	–	Marne Midway Stalingrad	–
After WW2	–	–	–

Only battles mentioned in at least three works of the relevant tradition are listed.

BOLD print and UNDERLINED: part of both traditions. CROSSED OUT: not included in any tradition.



Battle of Poltava as depicted by the French painter Pierre-Denis Martin. Poltava did not feature in Creasy's book, but was included in most of the later European historians in the Creasy tradition

represents the European continent and its encounters in the Northeast, West, South and Centre (the Southeast with its Turkish invasions drops out because of the British tradition).

It is another story for the history of the post-1914 world, as the lack of any “measurable” canon by German tradition in the following of Creasy does not allow for the extracting of any intersections of either traditions. How good Creasy was in his choice of battles is highlighted by the fact that fourteen of his fifteen battles made it to persist at least in one of the two traditions (with the sole exception of Marathon, which did not make it for any tradition). The update by Mitchell was less successful for the period between Waterloo and the First World War, as neither Vicksburg nor Koeniggrätz really became generally accepted to be part of the canon. Instead of the choice by Mitchell, both traditions elaborated Sedan to be the most decisive battle for this period. Mitchell was much better for the two world wars as Marne, Midway and Stalingrad became firmly established within the canon of the Anglo-Saxon tradition.

There is only one battle, which was ignored by Creasy when he wrote his book in 1851, but made it into the common canon of the Anglo-Saxon and the German traditions: Trafalgar. As a pure naval engagement it certainly was not part of the focus of Creasy for his initial choice, but probably there are other reasons. Although Nelson was a hero in Britain ever since 1805 (and maybe even some years earlier), it probably took the patriotic impact of the celebration of the centenary of the battle and of his death in 1905 to firmly establish him within the British tradition. Amazingly, Nelson entered the German tradition in 1915 with Walter Heichen, which was clearly an effect of the enormous importance attributed by the German Emperor Wilhelm II and his contemporaries to the navy.

To finally conclude the analysis of the Creasy inspired traditions, a few derivatives have to be mentioned: there were and are still children's books adapting the Creasy decisive-battle-approach to introduce a young readership to military history. Thereby the Creasy approach is probably not taken for methodological reasons, but as a form of Guinness Book of World Records for battles, whereby decisiveness equals the record and thereby justifies the entry. Other approaches in this more or less entertaining fashion are books about *Last Stand! Famous Battles against the Odds*³² or on *Military Blunders*.³³ On one occasion the concept of decisive battles was, in a book on so-called *Essential Militaria*, transformed into a page long list of "One-Sided Victories."³⁴

Was there ever such a thing as a "decisive battle"?

The most basic form of a decisive battle is a fight one-man-against-one-man, a chieftain fighting another chieftain in a duel, thereby symbolising their tribes. By the defeat and/or the death of one of those chieftains the fate of his whole tribe is decided – from subjugation to annihilation. "Democratisation" of warfare following the American and French Revolutions obliterated this concept forever. There was no way to transfer

³² B. Perrett, *Last Stand! Famous battles against the odds* (London: Cassell, 1991).

³³ S. David, *Military Blunders* (London: Constable & Robinson, 1997).

³⁴ N. Hobbes, *Essential Militaria* (London: Atlantic, 2003).

this concept into a post-Absolutism-society, as the end of the doctrine of divine right meant the theoretical end of the validity of such representative duels, albeit in practice such personalised fights may never have played a major role.

It has to be mentioned that the ancient Athenian polis and the post-1776/1789 societies shared in their theoretical concept of defence much more than the army of the French King Louis XVI in 1788 shared with the revolutionary French Army of 1792. Decisiveness of battles somehow correlates with the form of the societies concerned. The theoretical shift symbolising the vanishing of the concept of a decisive fight may be illustrated by a Cold War scenario. The duel as a symbol was not so much between US Presidents and USSR General-Secretaries meeting sporadically in Geneva or Reykjavik, but in the area of deterrence between the two confronting nuclear arsenals. To be fair, one has to mention that the arrival of atomic weapons epitomised and somehow perverted the whole concept of a decisive battle. As any nuclear warhead was a decisive battle in its own capacity, the accumulation of decisive battles of two nuclear belligerents may well have annihilated both of them, thereby obliterating the difference between the victorious and defeated party.

The time between Breitenfeld and Waterloo has been described as an age of decisive battles. But as Russell F. Weigley pointed out in his study *The Age of Battles – The Quest for Decisive Warfare from Breitenfeld to Waterloo 1631 to 1815*: “If in a successful battle the enemy army could be substantially destroyed – an outcome occasionally taking place – then the whole course of the war might be resolved in a single day [...]. Yet the age of battles nevertheless proved to be an age of prolonged, indecisive wars.”³⁵

Despite Weigley’s empirical objection, the concept of a decisive battle still influenced the military thinking at the beginning of the 20th century. The most important example for this was the German military commander and thinker Alfred von Schlieffen, who died before the outbreak of the First World War, but was essential for forming the German strategy used during the initial phase of this war. Schlieffen was obsessed with the

³⁵ R. F. Weigley, *The Age of Battles. The quest for decisive warfare from Breitenfeld to Waterloo* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), xiii.

battle of Cannae and studied it with his subordinates again and again. As the Israeli military historian Jehuda Wallach pointed out in his ground breaking study about the dogma of the battle of annihilation, this Cannae obsession by Schlieffen led directly to the barbaric slaughterhouse of Verdun and by that, in a reversion of intentions, to the German defeat – instead of the intended decisive bleeding of the French.³⁶ Therefore the trench warfare of the First World War reduced the belief in decisive battles, but the re-emergence of speed due to mechanisation in the Second World War produced some new evidence for the thesis of decisive battles. The guerrilla warfare of the de-colonisation period and Vietnam again shattered the belief in such singular events. But there is a theoretical concept of decisive battle outside the actual warfare on the battlefields, as demonstrated by the following table.

Table 4:

Decisive Battle – 1st level:	
Deterministic concept of history	Open concept of history
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ultimate/Final battle/victory • Ordeal (decision by God) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Turn of the tide, turning point, decisive campaign • Pyrrhic victory
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • War to end all wars (militaristic version) / Eternal peace (pacifistic version) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There is probably no such thing as a war to end all wars or an eternal peace
Decisive Battle – 2nd level:	
Totalitarian version	Democratic version
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Vernichtungsschlacht” / “Mother of all Battles” / “Wunderwaffen” / “Endsieg” / “Endlösung” (Holocaust) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Spread of freedom
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Eternal peace in the version of Mao 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Eternal peace in the version of Kant

The theoretical concept developed here has two layers or levels. On the first level there is a deterministic versus an open perception of history, boiled down and thereby extremely simplified to some striking philosophical mindsets like the “end of history” by Francis Fukuyama on the one hand and the “openness of the future” by Karl R. Popper on the other hand. The deterministic concept would come with notions such as “ultimate battle/victory” or “final battle/victory.” In a pre-modern mindset

³⁶ Wallach, *Das Dogma*.

the decision by God via an ordeal would fit within this framework. The open concept would prefer expressions like “turn of the tide,” “turning point” or a “decisive campaign” (instead of a battle) and would embrace the possibility that there might be Pyrrhic victories. A deterministic concept would believe in a “war to end all wars” in the militaristic version or in an eternal peace in the pacifistic version. An open concept of history would be inclined to the assumption that there is no such thing as a war to end all wars or an eternal peace. The deterministic version seems more inclined to the concept of decisive battles, as the open perception may be more linked to an ongoing-process-concept of history.

The second level needs the differentiation of the first level as a background, but is not directly interlinked with the approaches of the first level. In fact, it seems that both the totalitarian version and the democratic version are more inclined to a deterministic vision. Totalitarian regimes have widely used expressions like “Vernichtungsschlacht” [battle of annihilation], “Mother of all Battles,” “Wunderwaffen” [miracle weapons] and “Endsieg” [German expression used by the Nazi propaganda for final victory]. One could even argue that the “Endlösung,” i.e. the Holocaust, fell into this category, whereby the former battle character changed to a carefully planned mass murder of innocent civilian population.

The democratic version could simply be described as the spread of liberty as expressed for example by Thomas Jefferson: “May it be to the world, what I believe it will be, (to some parts sooner, to others later, but finally to all,) the signal of arousing men to burst the chains under which monkish ignorance and superstition had persuaded them to bind themselves, and to assume the blessings and security of self-government.”³⁷ It has to be mentioned that there are even totalitarian and democratic versions of eternal peace. Eternal peace as envisioned by Kant is a well-known concept,³⁸ but Mao came along with quite another interpretation of that notion: “The revolutionary wars which have already begun are part of the war for perpetual peace.”³⁹

³⁷ T. Jefferson, *Writings* (Ed. by M.D. Peterson) (New York: Library of America, 1984), 1517.

³⁸ A. Dietze, *Ewiger Friede? Dokumente einer Diskussion um 1800* (Munich: Beck, 1989).

³⁹ Mao Tsetung, *Ausgewählte Militärische Schriften* (Beijing: Verlag fuer fremdsprachige Literatur, 1969), 268–271.

To conclude this chapter some modern developments have to be mentioned. Two studies on the Second World War, which were both published within ten to fifteen years after its end, made slightly different use of the term “decisiveness.” Whereas the German book very much embraced the traditional Creasy battle-approach, the British study focussed on decisions as a precondition for battles.⁴⁰ The focus on decisions may have been influenced by the atomic bomb experience at the end of the Second World War, when the decision by the commander (plus the preparations by technicians) became somehow identical with the battle (even though this is not the perspective of the people on the ground).

How the notion of decisiveness changed over time can also be demonstrated by illustrations of military history books. Whereas traditional representations would show a plan of a battle or a campaign, this imaginary would be partly replaced at least for the two world wars by graphs demonstrating for example the changing transport capability of the Allies on the Atlantic Ocean. Not the map showing the actual locality of a German U-boat sinking an Allied ship is decisive, but the graph illustrating the number of register tons sank by the U-boats. The parallel of this would be a graph depicting the casualties of a certain decisive battle, but one would probably in most cases search in vain for such a graph in any book predating the 20th century.

Guerrilla + propaganda + media = morale?

Charles de Gaulle in a writing of 1927/28 summarised the German defeat of 1918 with the notion “Defeat, a question of morale.”⁴¹ But what might be the minimal prerequisites for a decisive battle? Is it the short term decisiveness (at once) or the long term implications (dominance over a longer period or even a new era)?

⁴⁰ H.-A. Jacobsen and J. Rohwer (ed.), *Entscheidungsschlachten des zweiten Weltkriegs* (Frankfurt: Bernard & Graefe, 1960) and W. B. Smith, *General Eisenhowers sechs grosse Entscheidungen. Europa 1944-1945* (Bern: Scherz, 1956): Invasion, Normandie, Ardennen, Rhein, Ruhrgebiet, Bedingungslose Kapitulation.

⁴¹ C. De Gaulle, *Le Fil de l'Epee et Autres Ecrits* (Paris: Plon, 1990), 617–645.

Let us test the common nominators of the Anglo-Saxon and the German traditions in the footsteps of Creasy. Gaugamela finished off a Persian dynasty, but the Empire of Alexander did not last for long; the Teutoburger Wald somehow marked the limits of Roman expansionism, but the Roman Empire did not collapse immediately and in some form or another stayed on for several centuries; the collapse of the Spanish Armada made an emerging British Empire possible, but Spain stayed on as a big power for nearly two centuries; Blenheim/Höchstädt had importance to the balance of power in Europe in the age of Absolutism, but that era itself was just 85 years away from a decisive revolutionary blow; Poltava ended the greater Swedish Empire and was essential in creating the new Russian Empire; Trafalgar destroyed the French fleet, but coincided with Napoleon's biggest land victory at Austerlitz; Waterloo/Belle-Alliance finished the Napoleonic Empire, but did not stop the ideas related to the French Revolution; Sedan was essential for creating the German Empire, which within two generations was defeated twice in 1918 and 1945.

Even if one might disagree with one or another interpretation, it seems obvious that the criteria for calling a battle decisive are as different as the political, social, cultural and military contexts of these battles. A collapse of an old Empire may as well qualify for a decisive battle as the emergence of a new Empire would do, but the decisiveness of the battle may differ from a causality between the battle and the actual collapse or creation of an Empire to a situation, where the battle was not the real reason but that what finally triggered it. Some modern authors of the Anglo-Saxon tradition have interpreted Little Big Horn as a decisive battle: decisive in the sense that George Armstrong Custer and all his men were annihilated? Certainly. Decisive in the sense that the Indian cause succeeded militarily or politically? Certainly not. But nevertheless Little Big Horn became a symbol, which the Indians in the Civil Right struggle could count on.

There comes a different layer to the notion of a decisive battle: the propagandistic value. At least one author of the Anglo-Saxon tradition has counted Dunkirk as a decisive battle. Why is that? The saving of British soldiers by all boats available did not make Dunkirk a decisive battle in military terms; at most it made it a humanitarian success for a democracy

fighting Nazism. But it certainly was a decisive propagandistic step, as Dunkirk was not only perceived by the British public as a defeat followed by other defeats still to come, but also as a sign of hope. This may not be a rational evaluation of the actual event, but it may well have had practical implications for the propaganda effort of Churchill. And therefore it may well be more decisive in the long run than the German “Blitzkrieg” Panzer assault, which smashed France in 1940 and was quite decisive in the immediate present of May and June 1940.

The most decisive event of the Vietnam War was for many civilian Americans and Europeans not the Tet or any other offensives, but the massacre of My Lai. Although it had no military significance at all, it had a large impact on how the war turned out, because it influenced morale at home. It is trivial to say, but has to be mentioned, that hostage taking by ISIS and other terrorist organizations is terrible for the hostages and their families and a brutal and barbaric act, but has no military importance in itself. Only when Aljazeera, CBS, CNN and Fox report about it (sometimes showing the film footage provided by the hostage takers), it becomes a political and thereby military factor, as it may affect morale within the troops (including for this matter “neutral” aid organisations) and public opinion back home.

This essay is not the place to elaborate on this interdependency, but one has to keep in mind the consequences of the media age as a changed environment or context for decisive battles. Guerrilla fighters and terrorists can create via the media, and at times only by the media, a coverage of certain events, which are then a decisive factor within the conduct of war – and therefore decisive battles can be lost in this field. Could these current events be listed in the way employed by Creasy? At times. My Lai is probably the best example of this, up until now. To complicate things further: “At Alamein, Rommel was utterly defeated but not annihilated: Alamein was a decisive victory but not a complete one.”⁴²

This interpretation from the memoirs of Field-Marshal Earl Alexander of Tunis reminds us of a basic principle of Clausewitz: “Therefore the war is an act of violence, which forces our enemy to fulfil our

⁴² J. North (ed.), *The Alexander Memoirs 1940-1945* (London: Cassell, 1962), 26.

will.”⁴³ As much as the enemy was forced to fulfil our will, the battle was decisive. But what is then the difference between a decisive and a complete victory? “The importance of a victory does not only correlate with the increasing amount of the defeated enemy forces, but rises to higher degrees.”⁴⁴ To a certain extent the notion “complete victory” is the most decisive short-term outcome of a battle or a campaign. But even a complete victory may not qualify to be a decisive battle. If at Alamein Rommel had been not only utterly defeated but also annihilated, Alamein would have been a complete victory, but not necessarily a decisive battle, as the result would not have changed the position of power of Nazism within the Fortress Europe. The Normandy invasion was in that respect much more a decisive battle, not only by the historical outcome of this engagement, but because even a failure of the Allies would have had a decisive impact on the fate of continental Europe.

Concluding remarks: is there such a thing as a “decisive battle” in the War on Terror?

“There was no silver bullet” to prevent 9/11, argued Condoleezza Rice during the hearings on how 9/11 could have been prevented. As there was apparently no decisive measure to prevent the attacks on 9/11, the question would be, if there are at least in theory decisive battles in the fight against terrorism. After 9/11 a debate about the “war” character of the “War on Terror” started. An argument of – in the terms once used by Donald H. Rumsfeld – “Old Europe” strategists would be that the concept of “War on Terror” is an oxymoron, because the battlefields of terrorism and of armies are so different. Both sides have arguments for their case: decisive battles for some Afghan and Iraqi cities/fortresses on the one hand, ongoing guerrilla activities on the other hand. When the US-led

⁴³ C. v. Clausewitz, *Vom Kriege. Hinterlassenes Werk*. Ungekuerzter Text (Munich: Ullstein, 1980), 17 [“Der Krieg ist also ein Akt der Gewalt, um den Gegner zur Erfuellung unseres Willen zu zwingen”].

⁴⁴ Clausewitz, *Vom Kriege*, 235 [“Die Groesse eines Sieges [steigt] nicht bloss in dem Masse, wie die besiegten Streitkraefte an Umfang zunehmen, sondern in hoeheren Graden”].

war against the Taliban in Afghanistan started, the media reported about the US bombing of the bin-Laden mountain retreat of Tora Bora. The name “Tora Bora” alone, made in Western or at least in civilian Western minds, more allusions to an enemy in a James Bond film than to military fighting by the standards of the 21st century.

Then a massacre by Northern alliance troops of revolting Taliban at the Qala-i-Janghi prison at the fortress of Mazar-i-Sharif was reported. Much less was talked at the time about the capturing of the fortress of Mazar-i-Sharif in the first place and about the effects of the US bombing campaign on the ground (for example in Tora Bora). The media seemed puzzled, when out of the blue the Northern Alliance troops entered Kabul. During the progress of the campaign at least ordinary people (like historians), people without any access to the information of the military high command, could not feel the decisive points of the campaign. Several years and many CNN, Fox and BBC in-depth-reports and analysis have passed since then, one still could not feel the decisive points of this campaign. Were there yet a Stalingrad and a D-Day in the fight against terrorism?

When Kabul fell with surprisingly little resistance, a major campaign was certainly over, but there are still problems to grasp the content of that campaign. The argument would be that the complexity of the war on terrorism makes it even more difficult to grasp the decisive battle within this war – if there is one. The same goes with Iraq. The entry of US forces into Baghdad on 9 April 2003, – after hours and hours, days and days of embedded CNN camera views from the desert – clearly symbolised that the war against any organised Iraqi military under Saddam Hussein’s command was coming to an end. We know by now and probably guessed it then, that the fight with terrorist gangs was yet to come. But are there identifiable turning points? Was another purging of terrorist hideouts in Fallujah a turning point? And now with IS/ISIS/ISIL/DAESH? How many recaptures like Palmyra, how many drone strikes, and how many arrests in Brussels and Paris does it take to call it “decisive”?

At least in theory there is still the possibility of a decisive battle. But this decisive battle is what it probably always was: a concept of hindsight, a concept of historians in the tradition of Creasy. After the first Napoleonic abdication in 1814 most people would have seen the Russian Campaign

of 1812 and the battle of Leipzig in 1813 as the decisive battles of the war against Napoleon. When he returned to France from the tiny island of Elba a year later in 1815, it turned out that it would need another decisive battle – the battle of Waterloo – to close this chapter of history. With the experience of Napoleon's return, Waterloo could probably only by hindsight after 5 May 1821 (death of Napoleon at St. Helena), be labelled as the most decisive battle in the wars of the French Revolution and of the Napoleonic period. But most of the ideas represented by the French Revolution and Napoleon were not beaten, they re-emerged during the revolutions of the 1830s and in 1848, today they form in a revised form the essential core of nearly all European democracies. So probably Valmy in 1792 as the first victory of the troops of the French Revolution was more important than the decisive blow against Napoleonic rule at Waterloo in 1815, because the values of 1789 (Liberty, Equality, Fraternity) were much more decisive than the program set out by the self-proclaimed "Holy Alliance" after the defeat of Napoleon?

"From here and today starts a new era in world history, and you can say, that you were present." These were the words Johann Wolfgang von Goethe addressed to his fellow German soldiers, after they had experienced the French victory at Valmy.⁴⁵ One has to concede that Goethe caught the decisiveness of the battle on the spot, but how many victories have been declared to be decisive or even final and turned out to be Pyrrhic? Following the line of argument that decisive battles are a concept of hindsight and therefore a concept of historians, it is much too early to identify any decisive battles in the War on Terror. When Sir Edward Creasy wrote his book in 1851, the last decisive battle described by him was Waterloo. Waterloo, whether you accept it as a decisive battle or not, had been history then for thirty six years.

⁴⁵ J. W. v. Goethe, *Sämtliche Werke* (Ed. by K. Goedeke). Volume 24: Kampagne in Frankreich – Die Belagerung von Mainz (Stuttgart: Cotta, [s.a.], 51). ["Von hier und heute geht eine neue Epoche der Weltgeschichte aus, und ihr könnt sagen, ihr seid dabei gewesen"].

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