

How have tactics and strategy changed over time?

MEDIEVAL AND EARLY MODERN PERIODS : c.1250s-1700s

The Medieval Period

Medieval strategy was based on the concept of limited warfare. Battles were usually a last resort. Armies tried to achieve victory through sieges of key towns and fortresses rather than risk a battle.

Armies were made up of **mounted knights, archers and infantry**. Battles often began with volleys of arrows, to create gaps in the enemy line for cavalry to exploit. Infantry could also be used in hand to hand fighting. Archers proved particularly effective in battles such as **Crecy** and **Agincourt**.

By the late Middle Ages cavalry were used less and there was more emphasis on longbowmen and infantry – including knights fighting on foot e.g. the battle of Towton (1461) in which over half the 50,000 combatants lost their lives. The increasing use of pikes also made cavalry less effective e.g. the Scots use of the schiltron at Bannockburn.

WELSH EXAMPLES : Guerrilla tactics

Welsh tactics at this time were to avoid pitched battles and instead make use of the terrain to launch and run attacks. This made best use of their limited manpower and inferior weapons. One exception to this was Owain Glyndwr's defeat of an English army at Bryn Glas, near Knighton, in 1402.

The early modern age

The early modern era saw changes in strategy. The use of cannon meant made castles and fortified towns less effective, so sieges were far less frequent. Wars were more often decided on the battlefield. This period – the so-called **"pike and shot era"** - saw the emergence of **mixed units of infantry with pikes and handheld firearms**. Cavalry were still used but were less effective in the face of massed musketeers, protected by pikemen.

In the **Civil War** both sides used very similar tactics. Before the start of the battle both sides would line up facing each other. In the centre would be pikemen and musketeers flanked by the cavalry on each side. The heavy artillery would be positioned at the rear and would fire over the infantry. The cavalry would attack first in an attempt to break the line of the opponents and make them scatter.

WELSH EXAMPLE : The Civil War

The Battle of St Fagans was the only Civil War battle to take place on Welsh soil. Though outnumbered, the more disciplined and tactically superior Parliamentary army won a decisive victory. The Civil war also saw one of the last sieges in British history. Harlech, a royalist stronghold, came under siege in June 1646. It held out until March 1647 when it was forced to surrender.

INDUSTRIAL PERIOD : c. 1750s - 1800s

The emergence of linear tactics

As **firearms improved** the number of musketeers increased, and the number of pikemen reduced. The introduction of the rifle and bayonet at the end of the 17th century made pikemen redundant.

By the 18th century **linear tactics** were in widespread use, with infantry soldiers becoming even more important in battle formations. The linear gave commanders flexibility by allowing them to change formation quickly on the battlefield. Infantry could be manoeuvred into:

- **line formation** - long lines, 2 to 4 ranks deep. They fired "en masse" in order to break the enemy line
- in **column** – to advance rapidly on the enemy
- into a **square** – to counter a cavalry charge (though being in a square made infantry vulnerable to artillery).

Linear tactics were used from the mid 17th century to the mid 19th century by British commanders from the Duke of Marlborough at Blenheim to Wellington at Waterloo.

By **the late 19th century**, however, as rifles and artillery became more accurate over greater distances, linear formations were abandoned. Troops now operated in a loose order described as a **chain**, with one or two paces between individuals. When faced with opponents like the Boers in the Boer War (1899-1902) the British army also had to adapt its tactics to an enemy which avoided pitched battles.

WELSH EXAMPLE : Like other infantry regiments, Welsh regiments were trained in linear tactics and took part in many of the major battles of this period e.g. Blenheim, Waterloo and Inkerman.

MODERN PERIOD : c.1900s-present day

World War I

Strategy and tactics changed again during World War I. At the beginning of the war both sides **"dug in"** and took up **defensive positions in trenches**. It became a **war of attrition**, with the strategy of both sides being to deprive the other of resources and manpower while sapping their will to fight. Though it was soon obvious that frontal attacks by infantry were not effective against weapons like machine guns, commanders continued to send waves of infantry "over the top" to break the enemy line as was seen at the Somme. Attacks would be preceded by artillery barrages with the intention of destroying enemy defences. Later in the war the allies began to use the **"creeping barrage"** - a forward-moving artillery barrage followed by advancing troops, a tactic which proved far more effective. Eventually however it was Germany's economic collapse which ended the war.

WELSH EXAMPLE : Welsh troops fought in many battles in World War I. They suffered particularly heavy casualties at Mametz Wood. After five days of heavy fighting they captured the ground, only for it to be retaken by German troops soon after.

World War II

World War II saw further changes in strategy and tactics. The German bombing of British cities, the **"Blitz"**, aimed to destroy morale and to force the country to surrender. The government's response was a policy of **"total war"** – mobilisation of all the nations' resources to defeat the enemy. As a result, civilians played a much greater role in this war. They had to accept rationing and blackouts and worked in armament factories to supply the military with weapons.

The German use of Blitzkrieg also changed tactics. World War II was much more fluid war than World War I and fought across larger areas. The combination of planes, tanks and infantry meant forces had to be better coordinated. **Tanks** had a huge impact and some of the most decisive battles such as el Alamein and the Battle of the Bulge featured large numbers of them. The use of motor transport and better **radio communications** enabled tactics to be more flexible.

The post-war period

Since 1945, warfare has become even more complex. Modern warfare relies on combined arms tactics – coordinating aircraft and drones with ground forces. The nature of warfare has also changed, so strategic planning has had to take into account developments such as cyber-attacks and terrorist activities, as well as preparedness for more conventional types of warfare.