

**To What Extent did Methamphetamine Contribute Towards the Success
of the German 'Blitzkrieg' against France in May-June 1940?**



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Section A: Identification and Evaluation of the Sources

This investigation will explore the question of to what extent did methamphetamine contribute towards the success of the German 'Blitzkrieg' against France in May-June 1940?

One of the most detailed recent writings on the use of drugs by the Nazis in World War II is the book *Blitzed: Drugs in the Third Reich* by Norman Ohler. *Blitzed* was first published in German in 2015 and then translated and released in English in 2017. Ohler's purpose in writing *Blitzed* was to educate the reader on the uses of methamphetamine within German society and the Third Reich. Ohler's intended audience was initially the German public and then the public in many other countries as the book was translated into other languages. The focus of Ohler's work is how methamphetamine was used between 1930 and 1942 in Germany, and the effects it had on its users. The book mainly focuses on Pervitin (methamphetamine), but names other drugs such as cocaine, caffeine, and heroin. *Blitzed* asserts that there was heavy drug use throughout Germany even before World War II. Ohler claims that Pervitin was a routine "grocery item" and that "Pervitin allowed the individual to function in the dictatorship." (Ohler, Ch. 10). One of the significant values of Ohler's work is that he visited abandoned drug factories and studied numerous documents, letters and books that were associated with the blitzkrieg and German society around 1940. (Ohler, Ch. 2). Another value is that he has written multiple books on Nazi Germany, so it is a topic he knows well. However, Ohler's knowledge of and feelings about Nazi Germany is also a limitation. Ohler admits that as a teenager he began hating Germany and felt a need to do whatever he could to make sure something like the Nazi regime never happens again. This suggests he may be trying to achieve that goal through his writings, which calls into question the historical accuracy.

The second source that I looked at in depth is a short documentary called *World War Speed* by the news source BBC. The documentary's origin was when it was filmed and released to youtube in 2019. *World War Speed* takes a deep look into the ways that drugs were used in the British and American army during World War II, while also talking about the use of Pervitin in the Third Reich. The purpose of this film was to show the viewer the struggles that the German, American, and British soldiers had to endure. This is interesting since it gives the viewer an understanding of some of the possible reasons why soldiers would turn to methamphetamine just to get through the day. The intended audience for the film is historians who are trying to educate themselves on different factors of war, while taking a closer look at drug use within the US and British armies. Before watching the documentary, I did not know that drug use was such a large part of the British and American militaries. The purpose of *World War Speed* is to shed light on other militaries using drugs. This source holds a lot of value, since it was created by the BBC, which is known to be a quite balanced and impartial news source. Since James Holland was the main person interviewed during the film, this also adds value to my source. Holland is an author and a historian who attended St. Chads College and specialized in World War II. Holland is known for his novels on different aspects of World War II. However, there are limitations to this source as well. For example, most of the people in *World War Speed* were from the UK, so they will all have similar perspectives on the war. However, their perspectives would be different from someone who is German.

Section B: Investigation:

In May-June 1940, as part of the Battle of France, the German army accomplished the incredible task of marching for over 10 days straight averaging 22 miles per day and trapped almost the entire British army on the beaches of Dunkirk (Holland). Prior to this battle 35 million pills of Pervitin were delivered to 3 million German soldiers, which leads one to ask to what extent did methamphetamine contribute to the German army's stunning success? (Ohler, Ch. 5). Although it is difficult to measure exactly what the impact was, as explained below it is clear from the fact that the German soldiers were able to move with incredible speed for an extended period without sleep that the use of Pervitin provided a significant benefit to the German army.

Before getting into the details of the Battle of France, it is necessary to understand two factors about Pervitin to comprehend why it had such an impact on the battle: (1) the impact of Pervitin on the human body and (2) the German "blitzkrieg" style of warfare.

A study done by Leo Conti in 1939 showed the impact that Pervitin, cocaine, and caffeine had on students while answering math questions. The study lasted from 4:00 pm to 6:00 am the next day. The morning after the study, the students who used Pervitin were still answering questions at a steady rate, but the students who had taken caffeine and cocaine were fizzling out and many of them had fallen asleep. However, when the results of the experiment came back, the Pervitin students had the most incorrect answers (Ohler, Ch. 10). Although Pervitin was shown not to help with conscious thinking, its sleep-depriving effects and ability to induce constant focus fit perfectly with the blitzkrieg tactics.

Due to the Treaty of Versailles following World War I, the size of the German military was limited, so they had to develop new tactics and techniques to fight as little as possible, while

being successful in territorial gains. In response to this, the Germans created and implemented the blitzkrieg tactics, which depended on speed and surprise to defeat the opponent. There were 3 main stages of blitzkrieg warfare. The first involved pilots attacking and gaining dominance in the air (Garber). After the planes, the German Panzer tanks would drive through enemy barricades and defences without stopping. German Panzer tanks were effective at ending trench battles because a Panzer would easily be able to smash through smaller trenches. Finally, in the last stage of blitzkrieg, the infantry would “clean up the leftovers.” (Cooke). Pervitin helped with all three aspects because soldiers who were high on Pervitin could stay awake longer, move faster and stay focused for longer time periods than when they were not under the influence.

This brings us to the Battle of France. In May of 1940, Germany was intent on conquering France, but in order to do so they needed to engage with the Netherlands, Belgium, Luxembourg, and France all at the same time. This is because these countries were all allied forces and would engage if one of the others was under attack. To carry out its battle plan the German military used the blitzkrieg tactics.

As I mentioned above, the first wave of the blitzkrieg tactics was an air attack on the enemy lines. German planes blew up airfields, communication towers and bridges in order to get the upper hand over the allied troops. The use of Pervitin among German plane crews is well known and in fact it was sometimes referred to as “Pilots salt.” (Garber). This was just one of the many “street names” for Pervitin. French soldiers actually found out that Germany was using methamphetamine when they were searching a downed German plane and found Pervitin in the pilot’s safety kit (Holland). The second wave of the blitzkrieg was carried out by the Panzer tank divisions. Once again the use of Pervitin was also very common within tank crews. The crew would be cramped into the small tank interiors for 15+ hours everyday and the use of Pervitin

helped them stay focused (Ohler). Finally, the infantry followed the tanks. For the infantry to keep up with the tanks, they had to travel over 20 miles every day. The difficulty of this task was discussed in *World War Speed*, since the historians in the film tried to replicate a 20 mile march. Many of the soldiers had packs that weighed upwards of 60 pounds, so the historians wore 60 pound packs and ate high concentrations of caffeine to try to replicate the Pervitin that the Germans were taking. Every one of the historians said that even with the caffeine, by the 16th mile they felt like they could not walk any more (Holland). The fact that German soldiers were traveling that distance everyday, gives us a better insight into the effects of high doses of methamphetamine. For these reasons, the German infantry referred to Pervitin as the “miracle drug.” (Garber). To understand the true speed of the military we have to look at key dates from the Battle of France. The German soldiers began movement into the allied countries on May 10, 1940 and by May 26 they had pushed British and French soldiers into Dunkirk. By June 4, when the last of the boats left Dunkirk, over 330,000 British and French soldiers had been evacuated. (Addaway). Only 5 days later, on the 9th of June, the German army had broken the Vagrart Line, which was the last French strong hold before Paris. Soon after on the 14th of June a Nazi flag was risen over the Eiffel Tower.

Further evidence that Pervitin played a significant role in the German army’s success in the Battle of France comes from the fact that the Allied troops who were fighting the Germans saw the immense effects that the drug had on them. As a result, the British army decided to take Benzedrine to match the Germans (Holland). Pervitin and Benzedrine have the same effect of flooding the consumer with a sense of happiness, however, Pervitin moved faster through the bloodstream (Holland). In *World War Speed* Holland describes finding a document from the British medical doctor that was signed by the British high command. The prescription was 20

milligrams of Benzedrine to every soldier each day, which was double the recommended amount (Holland).

In summary, although we can not measure the exact extent to which methamphetamine contributed towards the success of the German “blitzkrieg” against France in May-June 1940, it is clear that the German soldiers, who were known to be using heavy doses of Pervitin, were able to overcome extraordinary challenges, march for long periods of time, operate on very little sleep, and remain highly focused, all of which played a significant role in their victory.

Section C: Reflection:

This investigation helped me to gain an understanding of the methods that historians use when they research historical events. When I first picked this research question, I was concerned that there would not be adequate information on this topic because it is not something I have ever heard discussed. However, I was able to employ several techniques used by historians to complete the investigation. First, I identified a comprehensive discussion of the topic in the book *Blitzed*, which I used as my main source. After reading *Blitzed* I had a much better understanding of the topic and various threads to explore. I then read reviews, both positive and negative, written by other authors about *Blitzed*. This gave me a lot of insight into what other historians felt were the strengths and weaknesses of Ohler's arguments and the works cited by these authors to support their agreement or disagreement with Ohler provided additional sources for me to review. Finally, since *Blitzed* focused primarily on the impact of the use of methamphetamine from the perspective of the German military, I found a source that explored the perspective of the Allied forces that were fighting the Germans.

Conducting the research for this investigation caused me to appreciate some of the challenges that face historians. For one thing, often the evidence does not lead all the way to the conclusion. This gap opens the possibility for different interpretations and requires the historian to do some "guesswork." Historians can also face challenges with finding primary sources. In the case of my topic, it is unlikely there are many former Nazi soldiers alive who could speak directly about their experience taking Pervitin and how it impacted the Battle of France. This means historians are often left to rely on old records, newspaper articles and other secondary sources that were written at the time. This creates challenges because we don't know what the purpose or perspective was of the authors of these materials or how reliable their sources were.

As a result of this investigation I realized the limitations that historians have because the answers to many questions about history are subjective. This creates a risk that historians can either intentionally or unintentionally use their own perspective to shape history and influence what people think. While this may be positive in some cases it also gives the historian power to distort and mislead, which can be dangerous. One thing is certain from all of this and that is I need to keep my mind open and never assume that a historical writing should be accepted without question.

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