Line (formation)

Prussian Infantry attacking in lines during the [Battle of Hohenfriedberg](#)

The **line formation** is a standard [tactical formation](#) which was used by [infantry](#) in early modern [warfare](#). It continued the [phalanx formation](#) or [shield](#) wall of infantry armed with [polearms](#) in use during [antiquity](#) and the [Middle Ages](#). The line formation used [soldiers](#) standing or moving side by side forming a line.[1]

Frederick the Great

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The line formation provided the best [front](#) for [volley fire](#). However the line could not change direction easily and was open to attack by [cavalry](#).[2] [Frederick the Great](#) used the line formation, or "march by lines" as a part of his [oblique order](#) to fix this problem.[3] The other part of the oblique order was the "attack in echelon" (change to [column formation](#) and angle slightly towards the [enemy](#)). This way his line of soldiers, usually two ranks deep, could easily change the direction they faced.

17th century line formation

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An infantry [battalion](#) would form "in line" by placing troops in several [ranks](#). They could range in number from two to five, with two or three being the most common. During the [17th century](#) lines thinned out and became longer. [4] Using this line formation required greater [discipline](#) since the two opposing [armies](#) were often only 55 yards (50 m) apart.[4]

American Civil War

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A Civil War line, two ranks deep

During the [American Civil War](#) the standard formation for both attacking and [defending](#) was the line formation.[5] The line allowed the maximum number of soldiers to fire their [weapons](#) without hitting their own men.[5] The line formation worked best in open fields. The line could not move well in [wooded areas](#) or in rough [terrain](#). Both sides were still using tactics that were used in the [American Revolutionary War](#).[6] During earlier wars including the [Napoleonic Wars](#), single-shot [smoothbore](#) [muskets](#) were used

with fixed [bayonets](#).[6] A line would advance to about 100 yards (91 m) from the enemy line and fire in volley (all at the same time). Muskets were not very [accurate](#) and by all firing at the same time they were more likely to hit enemy soldiers.[6] After firing their one shot the soldiers would all move the line forward for a [bayonet charge](#).[6]

The new weapons in use at the beginning of the war made the older tactic unnecessary. Newer [rifles](#) and rifle muskets were now available that could allow the defenders to start firing at 200 yards (180 m) to 400 yards (370 m) yards away.[6] The development of the [Minié ball](#) ([bullet](#)) also increased the accuracy of rifles at longer ranges.[7]

Modern warfare

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A loose line formation is also used by many modern forces during assaults. It allows the use of maximum [firepower](#) to [concentrate](#) in one [direction](#) at once. This is useful when attacking an enemy position. It also enables the use of [fire and movement](#).

References

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4. ↑ [4.0](#) [4.1](#) *Weapon: A Visual History of Arms and Armor* (New York: DK Publishing, 2006), p. 99
5. ↑ [5.0](#) [5.1](#) ["A Very Basic Introduction to Tactics"](#). Polyticks. Retrieved 1 June 2016.
6. ↑ [6.0](#) [6.1](#) [6.2](#) [6.3](#) [6.4](#) ["Napoleonic Linear Tactics: American Civil War"](#). Thomas' Legion: The 69th North Carolina Regiment. Retrieved 1 June 2016.
7. ↑ ["Minié Ball"](#). History/A&E Television Networks, LLC. Retrieved 1 June 2016.