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The Fall of France and the Summer of 1940

Thomas D. Morgan

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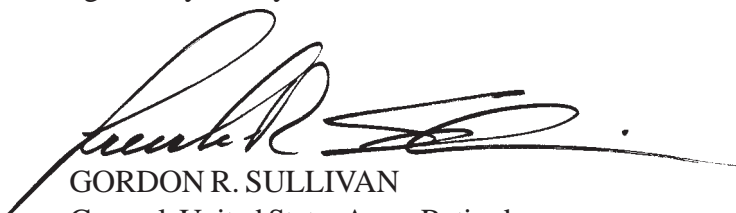
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Foreword

In 1939 Europe was at war again. By 1940, after Germany had conquered Poland, an uneasy “phony war” had descended along the Franco-German border as France assumed a defensive position against Germany. This paper discusses the beginning of combat—Germany against France and Britain—during the fateful summer of 1940 that saw Germany victorious on the continent of Europe. The *Blitzkrieg* Legend—the story of how the German Army rose from the ashes of defeat in World War I to defeat the victors of that war—was born after the battles along the Meuse River in May of 1940.

This historical research paper discusses one of the pivotal campaigns early in World War II. The German dominance of Western Europe in 1940 established the reason for the eventual Allied Liberation of France in 1944. There are many lessons—both political and military—to be learned from the fall of France in 1940. An irresolute French government, a weak allied alliance and a passive attitude in the face of fascism after the bloodbath of World War I allowed Nazi Germany to win the first rounds of World War II. The summer of 1940 shows how battlefield leadership, modern tactics and doctrine, and effective military organizations won out over modern equipment (France had in many cases better equipment than Germany). It was how the Germans used what they had that counted. Also, the end of the summer of 1940 saw the beginning of the allied war effort that started the long road back from defeat for Britain and France.

The German Army General Staff planned while the French and British Army staffs slept. German planning and training, coupled with the leadership of a dedicated officer corps, provided the basis for success in 1940. The U.S. Army can learn from Germany’s success as it transforms itself into a 21st century army and prepares for future conflicts. The great powers of France and Britain were humbled by the country that they had defeated just twenty years before in World War I. The Germans learned the lessons of World War I, taking advantage of modern technology and assuming considerable risk to execute an operational concept that led to victory in the West in 1940. The fall of France and the summer of 1940 highlight some of the ageless truths of war and give us some interesting military history.



GORDON R. SULLIVAN
General, United States Army Retired
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April 2006

The Fall of France and the Summer of 1940

Introduction

The collapse of France in the summer of 1940 astonished the world. France had been victorious in 1918 and, to counteract the fragility of the border with Germany, had made herself the dominant power in Europe. However, World War I (the “Great War”) had changed France’s military doctrine from offensive to defensive, resulting in the construction of the Maginot Line to guard against Germany. The left-wing Popular Front government of the mid-1930s hardened fears of Fascism and encouraged a defensive outlook. The “Maginot” mentality of politicians and soldiers developed into full-blown defeatism that crippled the Third Republic and rendered it ineffective before the threat of a Nazi invasion. As we face the dangers of terrorism and a divided world, we can learn lessons from France’s dilemma of 65 years ago. Failing to make the right decisions in the face of danger can have terrible consequences, as France learned to her great misfortune.

In the summer of 1940, World War II was underway. Poland had fallen in 1939 to Adolf Hitler’s Germany, leaving France as the main protagonist against Fascist domination of the Continent of Europe. After the conquest of Poland, a war without battle began on the Western Front. For eight months, interspersed with periods of false alarms that Hitler was about to invade Belgium or The Netherlands, a *drole de guerre*, or “Phony War,” existed. The Western Front became stagnant except for occasional artillery fire and patrolling. Complacency set in, and it was expected that a long, leisurely war of attrition would ensue, with Germany eventually collapsing from the Allied economic blockade. However, by the end of the summer of 1940, France had fallen, the Battle of Britain raged, and the famous desert campaigns in North Africa had started.

The Third Republic

Six weeks in the spring and summer of 1940 resulted in the defeat of France and the fall of its Third Republic. In a campaign lasting only 46 days,¹ the German Army accomplished the defeat of one of the world’s great powers using revolutionary, modern tactics of warfare. The rapid defeat of France, on the surface a strong republic, still astonishes the world. Nothing matches the fall of France for military significance and historical drama. The specter of a reunited Germany must haunt France, Poland and the rest of Europe today.

The seeds of France's ruin were sown long before 1939 and 1940 in the historic and turbulent events of the previous century. The Third Republic was proclaimed in 1875 in the turmoil that followed the Franco-Prussian War of 1870–71. During its lifetime the republic was to be wracked by political crises, including the overthrow of 107 cabinets—an average of almost two per year—until its end in 1940.² The President of the Republic became a figurehead; the real power lay with the Premier and the Cabinet.

The Legacy of Verdun

France bore the brunt of most of the fighting on the Western Front from 1914 to 1918. In 1916, Germany decided to break the stalemate on the Western Front by attacking the French salient at Verdun. Verdun became France's longest and most costly struggle of the war. For 10 agonizing months, at a cost of more than 400,000 men, France defended herself against the might of the German Army. France emerged victorious in 1918, but at a cost of a million and a half men; 27 percent of all able-bodied men between the ages of 18 and 27 were lost.³ No combatant nation except little Serbia had a higher death rate.⁴

In 1919, there were only 39 million French compared with 59 million Germans.⁵ Because of this shortfall, the draft call-ups for the years 1935–39 (birth years 1915–19) were enormously reduced; these would be called the “hollow years.”⁶ Also in 1919, the French Army reorganized. Marshal Henri Philippe Petain, who had rebuilt the French Army in the aftermath of Verdun and the disastrous Nivelle Offensive in 1917, institutionalized a policy of *apaisement* (pacification) in the army.⁷ The Vauban-inspired forts of Verdun had stopped the Germans in 1916. The French now saw the great forts of Verdun as vindication of their fortress strategy.⁸

After several years of national debate, the Minister of Defense conceived and proposed a continuous line of fortifications and sold it to the National Assembly. The fortified line along the French-German border would cover the mineral-rich Alsace and the heavily industrialized region of Lorraine, recently won back from Germany at the Versailles Peace Conference as the sacred prizes of World War I. Reliance on a fortress strategy would also conserve scarce manpower. These fortifications were named in honor of Andre Maginot, a politician from Lorraine who eventually became Minister of Defense. Maginot, as a sergeant at Verdun, had performed incredible feats of valor. He became a national hero and later secured the funds from a reluctant Chamber of Deputies for the construction of the line that would bear his name after his death.⁹ France had reversed the aggressive policies of the beginning of World War I and now was on the defensive, seeking safety behind a line of concrete and steel.

Malaise Militaire

The 1930s were a difficult time for France. The initial postwar prosperity had given way to the effects of the Great World Depression. The national sorrow over the immense loss of life during World War I, and the desire to avoid another, were the dominant

themes in the political and cultural life of the Third Republic in the postwar era. Politically the country was divided between violent, right-wing paramilitary leagues and left-wing self-defense groups established to protect Socialists and Communists. France's creative genius became dormant during the perennial government crises and instability.

Permanent fortifications and firepower (the French were famous artillerymen) had saved the nation in 1916. The Verdun legend and the Maginot Line mentality created the impression that defensive measures could save France from a stronger foe. What the firepower doctrine and Maginot Line mentality really did to the French Army was to petrify the tactical and strategic lessons gained from the Great War, kill imagination and initiative, and nullify the efforts of those who believed that the offense was the only way to win. France believed that a passive defense would cause the enemy to pile up his dead in front of her defenses. When it came time for a counterattack, the French Army would gain an easy victory. This was the strategy Petain had perfected in 1918.¹⁰ Little did the French realize that deterrence works only with a credible offensive capability—and the offense is only believable with the will to use it.

The French mobilization of 1939 went well; troops reported to their units, and the Maginot Line was occupied. The “Phony War” commenced. The Germans brought up men, supplies and equipment within range of the guns of the Maginot Line, but the French rarely fired at them. It was an odd kind of war. The Germans called it *Sitzkrieg*.¹¹ Neither side wanted to initiate air raids on the other's territory for fear of reprisals. The nightclubs of Paris did a brisk business, but monotony reigned supreme at the front. Morale was low, so men were given home leave. Drunkenness became a real problem as soldiers drank on duty and on leave to forget the boredom of military life. Special sobering-up chambers, called “disethylation rooms,” were established in train stations for men returning to their units from leave or pass.¹²

France's Flawed Plans

French propaganda extolled the Maginot defenses as a line without gaps from the Swiss border to the English Channel. In fact, 240 miles of frontier from the Luxembourg-Belgium border to the Channel were not fortified at all until the war started, when hastily constructed pillboxes were installed. When the Maginot Line was planned, the north-eastern border was not fortified because Luxembourg and Belgium were friendly neighbors; only the French-German border required fortification. Also, the “impenetrable” and therefore “naturally fortified” Ardennes Forest covered the Luxembourg frontier and the southern part of the Belgian frontier.¹³

Most of the French generals, except Charles de Gaulle, believed in a “continuous front” concept.¹⁴ It was generally believed that the Maginot Line was impregnable, the Ardennes Forest impassable and the Meuse River uncrossable, and that the left flank was securely held by the Belgians. France was thrown into consternation in 1936 when Belgium cancelled its 1920 Military Accord Treaty with France and declared itself neutral.¹⁵

France hurried to build “second category”¹⁶ defenses along the Belgian border, but the front was no longer continuous. The Maginot Line should have been continuous or not at all.

The French doctrine of 1940 had evolved from the Great War. Obsessed with her heavy losses on the Western Front in 1914–18, France turned increasingly to firepower and defense. The French military believed that a very powerful artillery attack would precede a tank attack. Thus, mobile reserves were needed to plug holes in the continuous front if the enemy broke through. The French doubted the effectiveness of large groups of tanks and airplanes. Therefore, the bulk of the French tanks and airplanes were spread out with infantry units, too diluted to do much good in resisting a surprise attack and unable to concentrate in time to counterattack effectively.¹⁷

In early 1940, an incident occurred that compromised the German war plans. A small German courier plane lost its way and made a forced landing inside Belgium near Mechelen. The pilot and courier were captured along with highly secret plans that described a German invasion of northern France through The Netherlands and Belgium. The Mechelen Incident caused the Germans to change their plans.¹⁸ The original Gelb (Yellow) Plan was inspired by the old World War I Schlieffen Plan. Hitler was unhappy with Gelb because of its



The Western Front, showing directions of the Schlieffen Plan (1914) and Sichelshitt (1940). Sichelshitt was General Erich von Manstein’s plan that caught the Allies by surprise because it went through the “impassible” Ardennes Forest in Luxembourg and southern Belgium.

limited scope and its compromise due to the Mechelen Incident. General Eric von Manstein, Field Marshal von Rundstedt's brilliant chief of staff in Army Group A, envisioned a bolder attack south at Sedan. Hitler heartily endorsed it. This new plan called for the panzers of Army Group A to cross the Meuse on the fifth day of the attack. Operations in The Netherlands and northern Belgium were now envisioned as a "matador's cloak" to draw French forces into that area while von Rundstedt struck the lethal sword blow in the south.¹⁹ The new German Manstein Plan was called *Sichelschnitt* (the cut of the sickle). As the French pushed to meet the Germans in The Netherlands, the Germans would come around with a great left hook through the Ardennes.²⁰

End of the Phony War

While the French waited behind their borders and in the Maginot Line, operations in Norway ended the Phony War in 1940. Hitler, enraged by the British seizing of the German prison ship *Altmark* in Norwegian territorial waters and alarmed by Allied interest in Norway (an outlet for iron ore from Sweden), decided to resolve the situation. On 9 April, Denmark was seized almost without firing a shot and 10,000 Germans landed by sea and air in Norway at Oslo, Kristiansand, Trondheim and Narvik. At almost the same time, French and British forces landed on the coast of central Norway to counter the Germans. Hitler lost 10 of his 20 destroyers and three of eight cruisers in the ensuing naval battles. But for the first time in the war, ground-based aircraft (German) had proven their superiority over capital surface ships (British), and the Allies were forced to withdraw on 3 May.²¹

France in 1940

For *Sichelschnitt*, Hitler could count on 135 of the German Army's 157 divisions. Against these, France's Northeast Front could muster 136 divisions (94 French, 10 British, 22 Belgian and 10 Dutch). The Allies could muster about 3,000 tanks to Hitler's 2,700.²² In overall numbers the Allies were superior in tanks, and the quality difference was not significant. The mainstays of the panzer divisions were the Mark I and Mark II tanks, armed with machine guns and, in the case of the Mark II, a 20mm gun. Mark III and Czech Mark 38 tanks with 37mm guns and the new Mark IV with a low-velocity 75mm gun comprised less than half of the total. Against these, the French had their new, heavy (33 tons) "B" tank—probably the best of any nation in 1940—with 47mm and 75mm guns. The French also had the fast, medium (22 tons) SOMUA (Société d'Outillage Mécanique et d'Usinage d'Artillerie) tank with a 47mm gun, the best antitank gun of that period. These modern French tanks (about 800) outnumbered the German Mark III and IV tanks (about 700), and the French also had more than 1,500 Hotchkiss and Renault tanks with 37mm guns. The French tanks were more heavily armored but lacked speed and radius of action compared to the German tanks. The Germans also had the advantage of tank radios (four-fifths of the French tanks had none), and the German tank units were better organized and trained. The French tanks were scattered among the light mechanized

divisions, the three new armored divisions (formed in 1940) and numerous independent tank battalions. These units had only about half as many tanks as their German equivalents because the French armor was intended to fight as a supporting arm for the infantry. The speed, radius of action and tactical employment of the French tanks were all geared to the tactics and speed of the foot soldier.²³

The Maginot Line had claimed the best weapons first, at the expense of the new mobile units. France was numerically superior in artillery but lacking in a modern doctrine of employment. The predominantly horse-drawn French artillery was not as mobile as the German artillery with its self-propelled guns for the panzer divisions. The Germans also far exceeded the French in numbers of anti-aircraft guns; the Germans could muster more than 9,000 (including some 88mm multipurpose guns) while the French had only 1,200, many left over from 1918.²⁴

In the air, the French were outnumbered by almost 3 to 1 (about 3,200 German aircraft against 1,300 French), not counting more than 600 British aircraft used against the Germans from 10 May 1940 until they were recalled to Great Britain after 20 May when their airfields were overrun. The faster German airplanes were used in direct support of the panzer spearheads. The French dispersed their aircraft over zones of operation and could muster only a few hundred over a vital combat zone while the Germans could mass more than a thousand. The real key to the German close air support was their Stuka dive-bomber. The French had nothing like it at all.²⁵

The Debacle

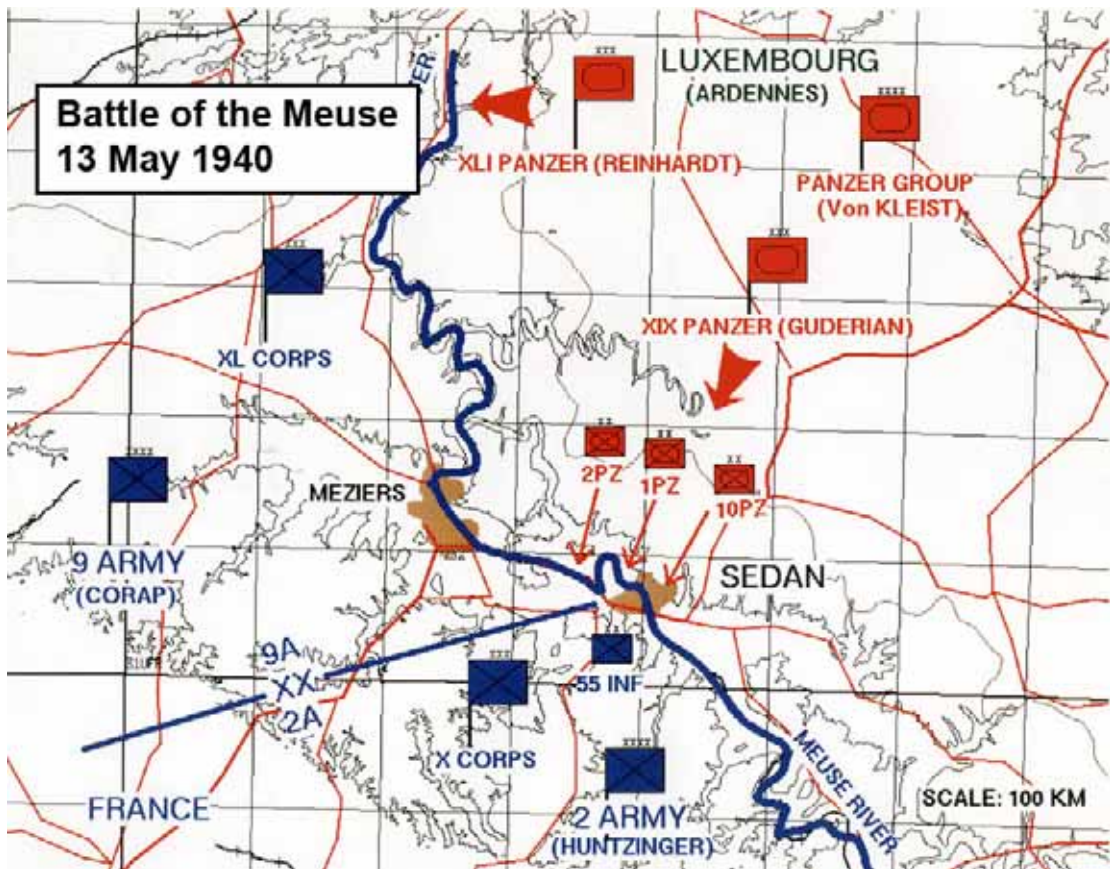
The Germans achieved victory over the Dutch, Belgian, French and British armies within 10 days. The first phase was the occupation of The Netherlands. At 4 a.m. on 10 May, the Germans bombed Dutch airfields and secured key installations in the Rotterdam area and The Hague with 16,000 airborne troops. They quickly spread out after landing to consolidate gains. The German Eighteenth Army drove straight into The Netherlands in three columns to link up with the airborne forces.²⁶

The most striking episode of the 10 May attack was the capture of the Belgian fort Eben Emael by 55 German commandos who landed by glider on the top of the fort.²⁷ The loss of Eben Emael resulted in the capture of Liege on 12 May. On that date, the German main effort was still thought to be north of Namur. The French Seventh Army raced into The Netherlands, where it was no match for the 9th SS Panzer Division. By 16 May, The Netherlands had surrendered. By 18 May, the French Seventh Army had been used up as a fighting force and its commander, General Henri Giraud, captured.²⁸

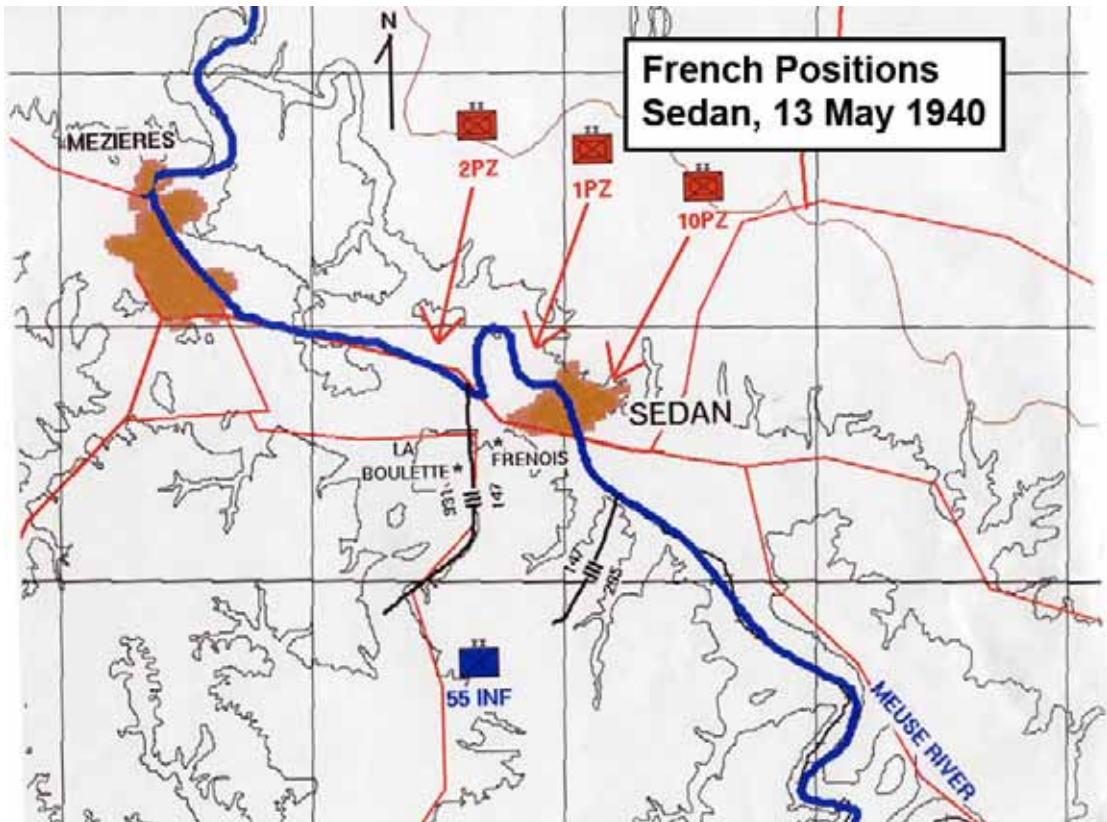
While The Netherlands was being occupied, the German main attack fell upon two weak French armies—the Second and the Ninth—holding the line of the Meuse River. The Second Army front at Sedan was held by second-line, reserve divisions and an inadequate line of field fortifications. Only the cavalry screens of both the Second and

Ninth Armies were across the Meuse in the Ardennes. These light cavalry divisions of horses and armored cars were no match for the German panzers, and the French were pushed out of the Ardennes. After three days, on 13 May, the Germans had reached the Meuse and decided to cross immediately.²⁹

General Erwin Rommel, later of Afrika Korps fame, started to cross the Meuse north of Dinant in Belgium on the night of 12–13 May. There were two other crossings: one by General Hans Reinhardt's corps at Montherme and the other by General Heinz Guderian's corps at Sedan. Guderian's force at Sedan was the main effort. The crossing sites on the Meuse when added together encompassed only about 12 miles, a far narrower attack than any decisive attack in World War I. The crossings were consolidated by the 14th, and the French were taken completely by surprise. With the crossing of their last great obstacle, the Germans were ready to break out and exploit their penetration of the French line.



The German panzers under Panzer Group von Kleist broke through the Ardennes Forest and headed for the crossing points on the Meuse River. Shown here are Reinhardt's XLI Panzer Corps at Montherme and the main thrust, Guderian's XIX Panzer Corps, at Sedan. Once across the Meuse, the panzers had a clear shot for the English Channel.



Blitzkrieg at Sedan. The 55th French Infantry Division, and especially the 147th Fortress Regiment, were struck by the 1st Panzer Division with Lieutenant Colonel Hermann Balck leading its advance guard.

Blitzkrieg at Sedan

Hitler used new military tactics called *blitzkrieg* (“lightning war”) for his campaigns in 1939 and 1940. Lightning-fast war had been an essential part of Prussian military thinking from the time of the Franco-Prussian War of 1870. The modern military methods needed to accomplish it evolved from a book entitled *Achtung Panzer!* by German General Staff officer Heinz Guderian in 1938. This book, ignored by the French General Staff, described for the first time the German methods of mass “irruption” (brutal breakthrough) by heavy tank formations accompanied by close air support. Guderian believed in concentrating powerful forces against narrow frontages. The point for the thrust, the *schwerpunkt* (point of main effort), was to be carefully chosen so that after the enemy defense was broken, German mobile units could roll out to place themselves on the flanks or rear of the enemy. Then attacking groups would continue the assault in an “expanding torrent” of men and machines.³⁰

Sedan typified *schwerpunkt* in 1940. Called “The Breaking Point” in Colonel Robert Doughty’s book of the same name, Sedan was the hinge of fate for France in 1940. A blitzkrieg attack penetrated the French defenses at a weak point—the hinge between the French Ninth and Second Armies at Sedan.

The 147th Fortress Infantry Regiment of the 55th Division held the French position along the Meuse at Sedan. The 55th Division was a relatively immobile, category B division, manned mostly by reservists 32 years of age or older. The division had only 80–85 percent of its authorized strength (about 13,000 troops), but it had 174 artillery tubes available to support it. The division commander, General Henri-Jean Lafontaine, operated out of a command post at Fond Dagot, about eight kilometers south of the main line of resistance (a series of bunkers at Frenois just south of the Meuse River).³¹

Initially, the Germans successfully crossed at three of six Meuse crossing sites: the 10th Panzer Division at Wadelincourt (east of Sedan) and the 1st Panzer Division—with the Gross Deutschland Regiment attached—at two sites near Gaulier (west of Sedan). Lieutenant Colonel Hermann Balck, commander of the advance guard of the 1st Panzer Division, crossed the Meuse on 13 May and descended on the French positions. Balck was a highly decorated veteran of World War I and one of Germany’s best combat leaders. It was unfortunate that the 55th Division and its 147th Regiment were in his path—he led aggressively from the front.³² The French soldiers in Balck’s way broke and fled past Lafontaine’s command post at Fond Dagot, abandoning most of their artillery.

In the Frenois sector south of Sedan was bunker number 7, with two machine guns. It was the last line of resistance before La Boulette, key to the German breakout and exploitation to the Channel. This bunker was the “breaking point.” It can be seen today and shows no damage—the French soldiers abandoned it without a fight. The last line of defense before La Boulette was ruptured and the Germans exploited their penetration into an “expanding torrent.” Much depended upon the strong leadership, training and determination of the German attackers at that point—and the lack of those elements on the part of the French defenders.

Dunkirk

The French were not able to stem the German flow, and the Battle for France was lost on 14 May. A 40-mile gap between the Ninth and Second Armies had been created. The panzers were across the Meuse, but the French High Command still believed the invasion of The Netherlands was the main threat. It was not until 18 May that the French realized the English Channel, and not Paris, was the main German objective. The Seventh Army, the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) and the First Army, all of the 1st Army Group, were still advancing.³³ Victims of Sichelsnitt’s revolving door, they were cut off from the rest of the French Army. On 20 May, the German panzers were at Abbeville on the Channel, and the 1st Army Group was in Flanders, isolated from the rest of France. The

evacuation at Dunkirk was the inevitable result of the debacle on the Meuse. After Dunkirk, France was at the mercy of the victorious Germans.

Three new French armored divisions were wrecked by the initial panzer thrusts. Colonel Charles de Gaulle assumed command of the fourth, and last, armored division as it was being formed at Laon. On 17, 19 and 27 May, he launched the only determined French counterattacks against the panzer corridor. These brave attacks failed because of lack of resupply (i.e., fuel and ammunition) and close air support. Nevertheless, de Gaulle's bold attempts represented the most positive note of the Battle for France. Based upon that, de Gaulle was taken into the government, and ended up in London before the final collapse as the only worthwhile symbol of a fighting France.³⁴

The End of the Republic

After Dunkirk there was much fighting still to be done, but France was doomed. Phase II of the Battle for France began on 5 June. German forces kept the French Army off base by crossing the Somme River and moving into the heart of France on a wide front, piercing the nation with several panzer columns. The French government abandoned Paris on 11 June, moving to Tours and finally to Bordeaux. Paris was declared an Open City and the Germans marched in on 14 June. French Premier Paul Reynaud appealed to President Franklin D. Roosevelt for help, but Roosevelt was in the middle of campaigning for a third term and could not offer any aid because of domestic politics. The French High Command became defeatist. Marshal Petain, now Vice Premier, wanted to quit fighting, and Premier Reynaud could not hold out alone. On 16 June, he resigned as Premier and Petain, at age 84, took over. Petain's first act was to ask the Germans for an armistice.³⁵

The Maginot Line was still intact, with food for three months and ammunition for three weeks. However, the Germans had outflanked the Line and were at its back. The interval troops who were to have come out of the Line to counterattack enemy penetrations had been pulled out to fight on other fronts, leaving the static, fortress troops of the Line in an untenable position. On 22 June, the French signed a humiliating armistice with Hitler—in the same railroad car in the same clearing near Compiègne where Marshal Ferdinand Foch had dictated armistice terms to the defeated Germans in 1918. The Germans occupied Northern France, and the French government settled in Vichy. The Maginot Line surrendered on 29 June only after the French High Command sent official representatives to the forts with the news of France's surrender.³⁶

After the armistice, the French Navy had dispersed to English and French ports in Great Britain, to Alexandria in Egypt, and to Mers-el-Kebir near Oran in Algeria. On Prime Minister Winston Churchill's orders, the Royal Navy seized the French ships in Great Britain and Alexandria, but the cream of the French Navy remained out of their grasp in North Africa. When the French admiral in charge refused the British surrender ultimatum, the British Mediterranean Fleet destroyed the French ships at anchor in a surprise attack on 3 July.³⁷

This attack by the British Navy made a deep, anti-British impression upon the French, who were still upset about the British retreat at Dunkirk and the withdrawal of the Royal Air Force (RAF) from France. Pierre Laval, appointed Minister of State by Petain, convinced President Albert Lebrun, the Cabinet and the Assembly to abolish the 1875 Constitution that created the Third Republic. On 10 July, the Assembly voted itself out of business and the Third Republic was dead.³⁸ The new French State became the notorious Vichy Government that collaborated with the Axis Powers.

Mussolini Strikes

As France was reeling under the German blitzkrieg, Italian dictator Benito Mussolini, anxious for his share of the spoils of victory, declared war on France on 10 June. When President Roosevelt heard of it, he declared to an audience at the University of Virginia, “The hand that held the dagger struck it in the back of his neighbor.”³⁹ The French handily thwarted the Italian invasion of southern France across the Maritime Alps and along the Riviera, launched on 20 June. However, upon the signing of the armistice with Germany, effective resistance ceased. France asked for and signed an armistice with Italy on 24 June.⁴⁰

The balance of power in the Mediterranean swung toward Italy, who set out to conquer a new African empire by opening military operations against Egypt and the Suez Canal. On 4 July, Mussolini’s forces attacked from Ethiopia and captured the Sudanese frontier town of Kassala to open the way for the invasion of Egypt from the south. On 4 August, the Duke of Aosta, in Italian East Africa (Ethiopia, Eritrea and Italian Somaliland), overran British Somaliland on the Red Sea. On 13 September, at Mussolini’s urging, Marshal Rodolfo Graziani invaded Egypt from Libya with an 80,000-man army.⁴¹

Mussolini’s dreams of an African empire were short-lived. The British drove the Italians out of East Africa while General Archibald Wavell unleashed his offensive against Graziani in the Western desert. The Wavell Offensive resulted in the complete destruction of Italian forces in Cyrenaica by early 1941.⁴²

Battle of Britain

No more British reinforcements could be sent to France after the evacuation at Dunkirk in early June. The last of the RAF Hurricane fighter squadrons left France on 18 June because their bases had been overrun by advancing Germans. The British people, whipped into a defiant mood by Churchill, prepared to defend themselves against Hitler’s next attack.

After consolidating his gains in occupied France, Hitler prepared for the invasion of Great Britain. Hitler set out to bomb the British into a submissive posture. The Battle of Britain raged over the skies of Great Britain from 8 August to 31 October 1940. At the beginning of the Battle of Britain, Great Britain had only 704 operational fighters against the Luftwaffe’s 3,500 aircraft, which included 929 serviceable fighters.⁴³

Waves of German fighters and bombers carried out attacks on southeast and Channel coastal targets in daytime raids. On 15 August, the Luftwaffe made a maximum effort to crack the British by attacking the RAF Fighter Command bases in southern England. That was the day the Battle of Britain reached the height of its fury. The Luftwaffe lost 89 of the 1,790 aircraft (520 bombers and 1,270 fighters and fighter-bombers) put into the attack by the Germans. The RAF lost 42 fighters.⁴⁴

On 18 August, the Germans withdrew the slow, vulnerable Stuka dive-bombers from the battle because of unacceptable losses. Later, on 7 September, the emphasis was shifted to the capital and the “London Blitz” began. This granted RAF Fighter Command a grace period to regroup and rebuild its airfields damaged in the German attacks.⁴⁵ The major concern of Fighter Command had not been aircraft but trained pilots. These air warriors were young; the average age was 20. They flew Hurricanes and Spitfires from airfields in Kent, Sussex and Surrey. They were the “few” that Churchill praised as contributing to Britain’s “finest hour.” New pilots filled the replacement pipeline from training schools, other commands and other countries such as Canada, Poland and Czechoslovakia. There were even a few Yanks “over there.”⁴⁶

Operation Sealion, the German invasion of Britain, was scheduled for the end of September. Time was running out for the Germans to destroy the RAF and establish mastery of the sky, necessary for a successful invasion from the sea. The Germans attempted a final maximum effort on 15 September to clear the skies of the RAF, but German intelligence was poor and more RAF fighters rose to meet the Germans than the Germans thought the British had. The Germans lost 78 planes that day, the British 35. After that, the Germans went over to night bombing to cut their losses.⁴⁷

Because of the successful efforts of the RAF, the German High Command advised Hitler that the invasion of Britain would be an unjustifiable risk. The Luftwaffe had lost 1,733 planes (and most of the pilots), and 693 planes were damaged. The RAF lost 915 planes and 375 pilots.⁴⁸ Hitler, realizing the futility of continuing to try to bomb Britain into submission, turned his attention and armed forces east to the Balkans and Russia.

End of Summer

The end of the summer of 1940 saw Charles de Gaulle trying to establish himself as the leader of the Free French by detaching the French colonies in Equatorial Africa south of the Sahara from Vichy France. Italy was making menacing gestures toward Greece, which was later invaded by both Italy and Germany. But the centerpiece of the summer of 1940 was the rapid invasion of France and France’s equally rapid fall. To the amazement of everyone—even Hitler’s generals—the decisive Battle for France was won in just five days. By the evening of 14 May, the Dutch were finished and the Belgians had abandoned their main line of resistance at Eben Emael on the Albert Canal. Most important, however, the French Ninth and Second Armies guarding the Meuse had been penetrated, opening up the center of the front for panzer exploitation to the English Channel.

It has been said that the materialism and mediocrity of France's leaders, and the waste of national energy in internal bickering and quarreling between the forces of the political Left and Right, led to the collapse in 1940. The backwardness and mistakes of France's generals, who had prepared for a future war with the tactics and doctrine of the last one, were also chief factors. Lack of modern equipment has been cited as a cause for the collapse, although France was numerically superior in quality and quantity in most weapons except front-line combat aircraft. The mistakes committed by the French generals were abetted by the lack of fighting spirit of a few key divisions at critical points and crucial times along the Meuse River, and the Allied failure to come together and launch a coordinated series of counterattacks once the German intent became known.

Nevertheless, Frenchmen did fight for their country. France bore the brunt of the fighting, with 120,000 killed, 250,000 wounded and 1,500,000 captured during six weeks of campaigning. By comparison, the Germans lost 27,000 killed, 111,000 wounded and 18,500 prisoners and missing. These were higher losses than for any comparable period of time during World War I. The Luftwaffe lost 1,469 aircraft, ensuring that Germany would not be able to maintain air superiority in the upcoming Battle of Britain.⁴⁹

France's defeat illustrates the dangers of an inflexible military policy that limits alternatives of political and military leaders. By 1940, France had surrendered the initiative and could only wait for the Germans to select the time and place for their attack. Europe today bears similarities to France in 1940. There is a reluctance of democracies in peacetime to accept the degree of national discipline required of wartime. It is easy for Americans to be critical of France for her performance in 1940. But Americans have never experienced the almost overnight disappearance of their armed forces and government, nor had that government replaced by a foreign-dominated, repressive government headed by a national hero. The French should not be judged too harshly because the summer of 1940 showed the results of their painful domestic battle with their past. Other nations are not immune from a similar fate.

Endnotes

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- ³ Guy Chapman, *Why France Fell* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1968), p. 3.
- ⁴ Alistaire Horne, *To Lose a Battle* (Boston: Little Brown & Company, 1969), pp. 37, 52.
- ⁵ *Ibid.*
- ⁶ Chapman, *Why France Fell*, p. 3.
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- ⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 11.
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- ¹³ Theodore Draper, *Six Weeks' War* (New York: The Viking Press, 1944), p. 3.
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- ¹⁵ J. A. Gunsburg, *Divided and Conquered: The French High Command and the Defeat of the West* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1979), p. 30.
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- ¹⁷ Robert A. Doughty, "French Antitank Doctrine, 1940," *Military Review*, Vol. LVI (May 1976): pp. 36–37.
- ¹⁸ Gunsburg, *Divided and Conquered*, pp. 136–142.
- ¹⁹ Horne, *To Lose a Battle*, pp. 183–193.
- ²⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 194–200.
- ²¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 202–207.
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- ²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 40.
- ²⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 38–39.
- ²⁶ Len Deighton, *Blitzkrieg* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1982), pp. 191–200.
- ²⁷ Winston G. Ramsey, ed., "Eben Emael," *After the Battle* Number 5 (1974), pp. 28–29.
- ²⁸ T. Dodson Stamps and Vincent J. Esposito, eds., *A Military History of World War II, Vol. I: Operations in the European Theaters* (New York: United States Military Academy, 1956), pp. 62–64.
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- ³⁰ Ferdinand O. Miksche, *Attack: A Study of Blitzkrieg Tactics* (New York: Random House, 1942), pp. 2–5.
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- ³² *Ibid.*, p. 139.
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- ³⁴ Noel Barber, *The Week France Fell* (New York: Stein and Day, 1976), p. 255; Gunsburg, *Divided and Conquered*, p. 201.
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- ³⁶ Winston G. Ramsey, ed., “Paris 1940,” *After the Battle*, Number 14 (1976), p. 2; Shirer, *The Collapse of the Third Republic*, p. 269.
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