FRANCE 1940: THE ANATOMY
OF A ROUT

by

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ABSTRACT

My purpose in writing this thesis is to answer the question "Why did France fail as quickly as she did in May-June 1940?" There have been a great many books and articles written on the German campaign in the west in 1940 but I have found few which address the above question. To explain the reasons for the French defeat in 1940 is merely to reiterate a history which has been worked over a multitude of times. That France was defeated by Germany in 1940 comes as no surprise taking into account Germany's vast superiority over France in population and industrial output. Such superiorities, however, do not account for the rapid and sudden collapse of the French army since the Germany victory, for all intents and purposes, was sealed well before the bulk of German forces were committed. It is safe to say that the decisive French defeat was encompassed by a mere sixteen German mechanized divisions; (Germany's total mechanized commitment in the West,) supported by the Luftwaffe. It is therefore the purpose of this thesis to explain how such an event could have come about.

In short, for one to understand the incredible events of those few brief weeks in the summer of 1940, one must be schooled in the techniques of blitzkrieg. It was due to the application, by the German army, of the dynamic principles of blitzkrieg in relation to the stagnant and outmoded concepts and mindsets of the Allies that the true reason for France's meteor-like fall are to be found.
The Thesis has been divided into two parts. Part One deals with the period from 1919 to 1939. It was within those twenty years that the stage was set for the drama to come. Such topics as the opposing military mindsets, doctrine, war plans and dispositions, and the balance of forces are discussed in detail. Also included in Part One is a section concerning the various weaknesses in the French Army High Command. Only by understanding these elements will the events of the 1940 campaign be fully understood.

Part Two deals with the actual campaign itself. Here I have traced the course of operations as they unfolded between May 10th and June 4th. It was within the span of those three-and-one-half weeks that the campaign was decided. With the destruction of Billotte's Army Group and the expulsion of the B.E.F. from Dunkirk there was little the French army could do to stem the tide of German conquest. A description of the campaign allows the reader to see for him or herself how the thoughts and decisions which preceded the campaign, as discussed in Part One of the Thesis, applied and in turn affected its outcome.
CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

In the annals of military history there are few examples of campaigns which were carried out as successfully and decisively, with such a minimum cost in time and lives, as the German campaign against France in May-June 1940. The German victory in France in 1940 will stand the test of time as being among the most brilliantly conducted and planned operations in military history. The French army, reputed to be the finest in the world, steeped in the traditions of its glorious past, of Louis XIV and his marshals, Turenne, Condé, and Villeroi, and later of Napoleon, was humbled in a mere six weeks. How did it happen? What were the causes for this monumental turn of events which shocked the world, even the Germans. In this work I shall try to answer these questions. My purpose is not to explain why France was defeated in 1940, but why and how they could have been defeated so quickly.

French apologists have tended to attribute the defeat of their nation primarily to three factors. Emphasis is placed on the subversive activity of the communists in France whose sabotage of French industry and anti-war propaganda curtailed production and undermined morale at the front. Emphasis is also placed on the politicians whose incompetence and petty animosities placed France in a hopeless situation. The ultimate verdict of French apologists is that France was not prepared for war psychologically or materially. It is asserted that the Germans simply had too many men, tanks, planes, and guns, and that this was the result of the treasonous activities of
the French communists, and the blindness of the politicians, especially those of the Front Populaire of Leon Blum. Thus the blame is shifted away from the army and high command and toward the mysterious forces behind the scenes—the French army in short was betrayed.

The verdict of the French apologists bears little relation to the facts. There is no evidence that communist subversion played any significant part in the rapid French defeat. There is some evidence of sabotage in the armaments factories in France but it appears to be very limited and of no real significance to the course of operations. There was much political instability in France between the wars as one government succeeded another at the drop of a hat. Battles between socialists, communists, and neo-fascists divided France in the 1930s, debilitating industry and lowering the confidence Frenchmen had in their government. Although injurious to the French war effort, the political agitation of the 1930s does not explain the reasons for France's meteor-like fall in 1940. Much of the political divisions so prevalent in the 30s seemed to have vanished when France went to war against Germany in 1939.

That the French defeat is attributable to grave material deficiencies is also not totally accurate. Under the able leadership of Raoul Dautry, French production of arms progressed as never before. Although deficient in aircraft and anti-aircraft guns, the French army was actually superior quantitatively and in large part, qualitatively in tanks and heavy artillery. In number of divisions and manpower the allies actually held a rough parity with the Germans. Thus, as with the theory of communist subversion and political instability, the belief that France was defeated in 1940 due to grave material deficiencies is true only in part and in no way does it explain why France was
defeated so quickly. The German victory over France was sealed well before
the bulk of the German army became engaged. It could be safely said that the
defeat of France was accomplished by a mere sixteen German mechanized
divisions; (Germany's total mechanized commitment in the West), supported by
the Luftwaffe. To understand what is implied by the above statement one must
be schooled in the doctrine and methods of blitzkrieg.

It was the revolutionary and dynamic techniques of blitzkrieg, as
applied by the German army in 1940, coupled with the fossilized techniques and
mindset of the French army, that were the ultimate causes of France's rapid
defeat. In this thesis I have, therefore, placed major emphasis on the military
causes for the French defeat. In organization, leadership, deployment, tactics,
strategy, and most importantly of all, in doctrine, the French army proved to
be twenty years behind the times. The First World War had placed its indelible
mark on the French high command whose every thought and action was but an
echo of the previous war and its hallowed traditions.

I will furthermore trace the course of operations from the beginning of
the German invasion on May 10th to the point of no return, May 24th, when the
British decided to evacuate the continent via Dunkirk. After the fall of
Dunkirk on June 4th there was little the French could do to stem the tide of
German conquest. I have therefore decided not to cover the second stage of
the German campaign in France between June 5th through June 22nd. Before
I describe the course of operations between May 10 and May 24 I will set the stage for the drama to come by explaining the opposing mindsets, doctrines, war plans, dispositions, and orders of battle of the German and French armies. Only by doing so will the incredible events of those brief weeks in the spring of 1940 be understood.
PART ONE
THE STAGE IS SET
CHAPTER TWO
THE LEGACY OF THE FIRST WORLD WAR
The War that "Must" End all Wars.

It was November 1918. The war which Europe had prepared for, and meditated on, for the better part of a century was over. Europe lay exhausted, weakened, and prostrate. In France the great war of "revanche" had been fought and won over her ancient foe, but at what a dreadful cost. 1.5 million Frenchmen—one out of ten; three out of ten between the ages of eighteen and twenty-eight—were dead. Over 4.2 million Frenchmen were wounded, of whom 1.5 million were permanently maimed. The flower of French manhood had fallen. Vast tracks of what had once been rich French farmland were devastated by the terrific artillery barrages and by the march of armies, some areas never again to bear their sustaining harvests. Much of French industry had been either destroyed or dismantled and moved elsewhere. Rich mineral deposits had been plundered by the occupying German army. The French economy was in a shambles. There were further millions of homeless refugees to be resettled. If France was to learn anything from the war it was that never again can there be repeated such a bloodletting. Warfare was seen to be obsolete, or at least the kind of warfare where decisive victory could be

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gained at minimal cost. Modern weapons had become too destructive, making the costs of war far outweigh the profits to be gained. It was to be "the war to end all wars" or, more poignantly, the war that "must" end all wars.

In France, this new-found horror and aversion for war was to have grave repercussions for the future well-being of the country. Politically and diplomatically it was to lead to retrenchment, to a policy of appeasement, and ultimately, to strategic isolation. It would be upon this policy of appeasement that Hitler would feed and grow strong. It appeared that the bloodstained battlefields of Verdun, the Somme, and Ypres had drained France of her life's blood, of her martial spirit, her vitality and energy. Her blind passion for peace had made France equally blind to reality. Somehow war would be avoided, it must be avoided at all costs.

While Hitler's Germany armed for war, France was deluded into thinking all was safe and sound. Paul Reynaud, future French premier, wrote:

France was no better organized for the preparation and waging of war than she was allied, fortified, or armed. We did not think in terms of war. It was because we did not think in terms of it that we had neither allied... ourselves, nor fortified ourselves, nor armed ourselves.2

It was felt by many in France that all that would be necessary to ensure peace was to build a moat and stockade of unprecedented design between the common borders of France and Germany, and appeasement would do the rest. Alliances were made with the new found states which once constituted the old Habsburg Empire—"the Little Entente." Thus French security, and thence peace, was to be based on three accounts:

1. France's new moat and stockade, the Maginot Line, was inviolable, impregnable to anything the Germans could throw at it.

2. Germany would never again be so foolhardy as to wage a war on two fronts as a war against France and the Little Entente would entail.

3. Appeasement would satisfy whatever demands Hitler might have. It was even reasoned by some that perhaps the Versailles Treaty had been a bit too harsh, that Hitler's demands for a reunited Germany was justified. Like a man trapped on an island amidst a lake dominated by a ravenous crocodile. France sought first to contain the beast within a wall of fortifications, then passify the ravenous reptile by feeding it tidbits; (Rhineland, Austria, and the Sudentenland). The French bluff was called, for not only were the tidbits devoured but so too was France's eastern bastion, the Little Entente, and France did nothing to save them. With the sacrifice of Czechoslovakia at Munich by France and Britain, the legacy of World War I was finally laid bare for all the world to see. It was now time for the crocodile to turn on its appeasers but would they, at this late stage of the game, be able to defy its ravenous appetite and rejuvenated strength.

Militarily the legacy of World War I, epitomized for France by the battle of Verdun, led her to three conclusions: 1.) The methods that had worked then will work now; 2.) The French army could never again sustain such losses; 3.) Modern fortifications like Verdun, Toul, Nancy, and Epinal were the thing of the future, a solution to the problems of war. Thus the emphasis French generals were to place in the continuous front and to defensive warfare, as well as their general passivity and lack of initiative, all could trace their roots to experiences gained during the First World War.
As usual in warfare it was the defeated side which learned most from the previous war. In place of the all-assuming complacency of the French high command, inovative and energetic German officers were scrutinizing the lessons to be learned from their defeat. New equipment and doctrine were needed (of which much will be said later). The shock of massed allied tanks as had been seen at Cambrai (November, 1917) had left its marks on German soldiers who had lived through it. Clearly to many German minds the tank was the weapon of the future, a weapon which if properly employed could reap rich dividends. Among the other lessons to be learned from the First World War was the effectiveness of infiltration tactics. Infiltration tactics, also known as Hutier tactics, were evolved by the Germans during the "Great War" to help break the trench stalemate which was then so prevalent. These tactics were based on the infiltration by highly trained shock troops (stosstruppen) of lightly defended sectors of the enemy's front. After infiltrating the enemy line, the stosstruppen would undermine it from the rear in conjunction with a general frontal assault. Great successes were gained by use of these tactics, victories which included Gorlice-Tarnow (1915), Riga (1917), and Caporetto (1917). By such tactics France was nearly brought to defeat in the Spring of 1918. What was needed was a force which could properly exploit the breakthroughs gained by use of the stosstruppen—enter the tank. The tank could do what infantry-styled armies of the Great War had not been able to do, exploit deep into the enemy rear areas in a sustained manner.
German military thinkers also put emphasis on the use of air-power. Here much thought was given to the coordination of air and ground units and the effects airpower might have on enemy communications. It was thus the amalgamation of the above lessons, of the use of mass tank units employing the tactics of the stosstruppen, and closely integrated with airpower, that the concept of blitzkrieg was born. For Germany this was the legacy of the First World War.
CHAPTER THREE

MILITARY DOCTRINES: TWO OPPOSING MINDSETS

The Allied Mindset

The First World War had made a deep impression on the minds of commanders on both sides of the line. It was widely believed after the war that the art of warfare had reached its apogee. Never before were there seen armies as large or as well-equipped, with weapons of such destructive power as was seen during the First World War. Never was the cost in life so great or the destruction of property so widespread. It was widely feared that wars of the future would be even more destructive in lives and property than ever before. There was no longer room in warfare, it was felt, for personal initiative, dash, or daring. Only by adhering strictly to the well-tried, circumscribed rules of war that had brought victory to the allied armies in 1918 could one hope to cope with the new-found destructive powers of modern warfare. Among the orthodox hierarchy of the German, French, and British armies between the wars, the lessons of the Great War had become sacrosanct. Like clerics, the commanders of the German, French, and British armies preached their gospel, condemning as infidels or heretics all who thought differently. Among these armies, however, were lone souls who preached a gospel drastically different from the biblical truths of their orthodox overseers. Men like J.F.C. Fuller, Liddell Hart, Charles de Gaulle, and Heinz Guderian were evolving new and dynamic concepts of their own in the post-war years, concepts which threatened to tear asunder the orthodox beliefs of their time. The seeds of these new concepts were sown into the barren soils of Britain, France, and
Germany, but only in Germany were they to eventually bear fruit. The seeds would remain dormant in Britain and France as the German army marched to ultimate victory in May-June 1940. It is therefore within the realm of military doctrine that the main reason for France's meteor-like fall are to be found. A comparison of the two opposing military mindsets of Germany and France is now in order.

The military policy of the French army, up to the time of the clash of arms in 1940, was that of the continuous front. It started with the assumption that the great lesson of the last war was the overwhelming superiority of defensive weapons. Thanks to modern industry, it was possible for the first time in history to equip an army large enough to cover the entire French frontier from the North Sea to the Mediterranean. The massive well-equipped armies on the western front had been able to close off the entire frontier by a system of trenches and fortifications which had proven, until the end of the war, to be virtually impregnable. Penetrations, when made, were quickly sealed off by the rapid movement of reserves via rail to the threatened area. Each penetration would become a salient projecting into enemy lines whereupon it would be subjected to assault from three sides, and at great cost in life, eliminated. For nearly four years the western front rocked to-and-fro with the front lines never altering more than fifteen miles in either direction. Time after time the same expedients were resorted to; mass artillery preparations to open a breach, assaults by waves of infantry, the enemy trench is carried but the costs of the assault precludes further advancement. Enemy reserves are brought up and the area lost, is then retaken. In the final analysis, many of

those who went through the holocaust of 1914-18 on the western front came to the conclusion that the continuous front, buttressed by strong fortifications and backed up by mobile reserves, to plug any breaches that may have been made in the line, had revolutionized warfare for all time. Offensive warfare and the elements which encompassed it, audacity, speed, and elan, were condemned as dangerous principles made obsolete by modern firepower.

Winston Churchill wrote:

"It was now a very different France from that which had hurled itself upon its ancient foe in August 1914. The spirit of "Revanche" had exhausted its mission and itself in victory. The chiefs who had nursed it were long dead. The French people had undergone the frightful slaughter of one-and-a-half million of their manhood. Offensive action was associated in the great majority of French minds with the initial failures of the French onslaught of 1914, with General Nivelle's repulse of 1917, with the long agonies of the Somme and Passchendaele, . . . and above all with the sense that the firepower of modern weapons was devastating to the attacker."^4

Since the tactics of the First World War, as practiced in 1918, had brought France victory in that war, French generals in the inter-war period saw no need to change them. All that would be needed, they reasoned, would be to refine them, taking advantage of the advances made since the 1914-18 war in technology and science. General de Gaulle wrote in his memoirs:

"The army became stuck in a set of ideas which had had their heyday before the end of the First World War. It was all the more inclined that way because its leaders were growing old at their posts, wedded to errors that had once constituted their glory. Hence the concept of the fixed and continuous front dominated action. Organization, doctrine, . . . training and armament derived from it directly."^5

De Gaulle went on to write;

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In case of war, France would mobilize the mass of her reserves and would build up the largest possible number of divisions, designed not for manoeuvring, attacking, and exploiting, but holding sectors. . . . Everything converged to make passivity the very principle of our national defense.6

The man who was to have the most profound influence on French military thought between the wars was Marshal Henri Philippe Pétain, the hero of Verdun. In 1922, at the age of sixty-six, Marshal Pétain was made Inspector General of the Army, which post he held until his retirement in 1931 at age seventy-five. He was also, during much of this time, President of the Supreme War Council. In 1934 Pétain was made Minister of War, a post he held until 1936. Pétain's influence over the French army in these inter-war years was, in turn, deeply affected by his own First World War experiences, particularly at Verdun.7 From February to December 1916 there was fought at Verdun the greatest killing match in military history. When the human casualties came to be totalled the French admitted to having lost 377,231 men, of whom 162,308 were listed as dead or missing.8 Combined French and German casualties may well have exceeded 800,000 men. One combatant recalled how "the shells disinterred the bodies, then re-interred them, chopped them to pieces, played with them as a cat plays with a mouse."9 The command of the French Army at Verdun came to reside in General Pétain.

6. Ibid., p. 8.


9. Ibid., p. 125.
The horrors of the great battle made a deep impact on him. Never again, he promised, should the youth of France be forced to accept such hideous sacrifices, harking back repeatedly to one of his favorite maxims: "One does not fight with men against materiel, it is with materiel served by men that one makes war." Petain reasoned that the one factor in the battle that had proven decisive, aside from the "poilus," was the powerful forts in and around Verdun; forts like Douaumont and Vaux. Thus what is needed for the future, Petain among other French generals asserted, was a continuous chain of super Douaumonts guarding France's eastern frontier. The next logical step would be construction of the Maginot line.

Much of Petain's thoughts and beliefs were aptly contained in a book published in 1939 by General Chauvineau, a professor at the military college of Saint Cyr. The title of the book was Une invasion est-elle encore possible? The book was sponsored by Petain who wrote a preface for it. Marshal Petain summarized the book as follows:

From the land operations of the Great War General Chauvineau singles out the tactical lesson he finds the most important. To him the great novelty was the continuous front, the sudden discovery of which was the pivot of that war. The reasons for the continuous front are two in number; the huge numbers of infantry provided by the nation-in-arms and the effectiveness of modern defensive weapons. Both are the result of the twentieth century, which made it possible to equip, to maintain, and to arm all the soldiers provided by the nation-in-arms.

For the first time, the infantry was able to cover in sufficient density the whole theatre of operations from the North Sea to Mediterranean. The continuous front, by prohibiting flank attacks, has reduced all the ideas of opposing chiefs to simple frontal attacks.

11. Ibid., p. 71.
This continuous front proved to be stable, for the defense saw its resources increased in a far greater proportion than the resources of the offensive. The fire of automatic weapons at ground level, the network of barbed-wire entanglements, form a barrier no man can attempt to get through and hope to live.

The defensive has become so powerful that the assailant needs an immense superiority to enable him to open an attack. France, a nation-in-arms must be careful not to open the campaign with a strategic offensive. . . . It would mostly mean staking the country's fate on one throw of the dice. . . .

The essential condition of an effective cover is the establishment of a continuous front immediately behind the frontier line and making use of fortifications. The tactical and strategic lessons of the Great War show that this is the solution that must be contemplated.\(^\text{12}\)

General Chauvineau himself wrote:

No patriotic enthusiasm and no moral ardour can stand up against the properties of modern weapons. There is no way on the ground level of turning the impassable barrier created on the ground by the automatic gun in conjunction with barbed wire, if the whole theatre of operations is blocked off.\(^\text{13}\)

Should the enemy break Chauvineau's continuous front reserves would be given ample time to come up and seal off the breach. Chauvineau further conjectured that the high cost of producing tanks and heavy artillery prohibited their being used in sufficient numbers to break the continuous front. A British officer who attended a course for divisional and regimental commanders at the Centre des Hautes Etudes, shortly before the war, reported that 75% of the time was devoted to defense, and the main study the

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\(^{13}\) Ibid., p. 121.
consideration of a kind of enlarged Schlieffen plan. Leon Blum stated during the Riom trial that "already before 1936—and really ever since the other war—we were teaching and inculcating, and already practicing, the doctrine of impregnable fronts, absolute faith in fortifications and in the defensive. Everything was subordinated to the Maginot line." General Weygand, future commander and chief of the French army during the German invasion, declared on May 16, 1939 at Chatham House:

At an early stage in 1914, operations on the western front reached stalemate... This was accomplished with nothing but field fortifications, of earth, of wood, and corrugated iron. What will happen in 19—? Armies face each other even in peace-time across fortified lines of steel and concrete. How can a rapid decision be reached on such a front.

The renowned Military Staff College (Ecole Superieure de Guerre), struck one young officer as "having become a school of eunuchs where it was no longer a question of raising the level of thinking." Another youthful officer who attended it found its teachings to be "of an astonishing poverty." Teaching stressed the defensive, emphasizing that it had proven successful in the last war and would so prove again.


16. Ibid., p. 129.


The French High Command remained, up to the time of the German invasion, stubbornly convinced of the efficacy of their doctrine. New ideas were frowned upon or summarily dismissed. The fear of the new, of new weapons that necessitated new tactics, became an obsession. As late as 1936, when the new manual of instruction was drawn up by a committee of distinguished generals led by General Alphonse Georges; (future C-C Northeast Front: 1940), it was emphasized that despite the technological advances made in weapons:

The committee which has drawn up the present instructions does not believe that the technical progress sensibly modifies the essential rules hitherto established in the domain of tactics. Consequently it believes that the doctrine objectively fixed at the end of the war (1918) by the eminent chiefs who had held high command must remain the charter for the tactical employment of large units.\(^\text{19}\)

Stagnation had become the supreme form of wisdom in the French army.\(^\text{20}\)

On January 4, 1930 a vast majority in both chambers of the National Assembly voted for a law accepting the army's long-debated plans for a great wall on the eastern frontier. Begun in 1930 under the auspices of the Minister of War and wounded World War I hero André Maginot, the soon to be called Maginot line would stretch for eighty-seven miles from the Swiss border to Longwy. The line consisted of three great concentric lines, twelve miles deep. The backbone of the Maginot Line was its many giant gun emplacements sporting guns of up to 135 MM in disappearing turrets. Vast subterranean tunnels contained all the civilities of civilian life. Its greatest drawback was that it did not extend to the English Channel, leaving nearly

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20. Ibid., p. 181.
400 kilometers of Front unprotected when work was suspended in 1935. The Maginot Line had cost the French government 7,000 million francs, far in excess of previous parliamentary estimates. Money which could have gone to build up France's mechanized and air forces had been used to construct these fortifications. It was believed by French generals that the Maginot Line would help offset Germany's numerical superiority by allowing the French High Command to economize their forces, deploying them in more threatened and vulnerable areas. Here their reasoning was sound but, as will be seen later, this opportunity would be squandered by foolish troop dispositions. For France the greatest danger which stemmed from the line was the complacency and blindness it engendered in the French people. Many in France believed the Maginot Line to be impregnable and this belief led many people to underestimate the danger from across the Rhine, preventing them from preparing themselves mentally or materially for the trial ahead. This, so called "Maginot line complex" would act as a paralyzing force stifling initiative and energy. It was furthermore believed by many Frenchmen that the inviolability of the Maginot Line would act as a deterrent, dissuading Germany from launching another invasion of France. The doctrine of the continuous front had found in the Maginot Line its highest expression, and French soldiers peered out of its casements across the Rhine with renewed confidence. Gordon Waterfield, war correspondent for Reuters Press, toured the Front just before the German invasion;
When I visited the front line defenses as war correspondent during those quiet months before May 10th, I found all the commanding officers eager to show off their defense works. On the Rhine, north of Strasbourg, an enthusiastic colonel took me from one concrete emplacement to another; day and night soldiers were feverishly working.

'Fine concrete,' he kept on muttering as we strode through the woods along the Rhine bank; 'they'll never get through this! Magnificent concrete!'

I asked him if the Germans had such good concrete on the other side of the Rhine, a few hundred yards away.

'Oh no,' the colonel said, rather coldly, 'nothing like so good.'

'Is there any reason,' I asked, 'why you should not attack to prevent them making their defenses stronger?'

The Colonel smiled reprovingly at me as if I had made a blasphemous remark, but he was too broadminded to take offense at it. He made no reply. The truth was that nobody wanted to attack; their job was to go on making concrete until the Germans took the initiative.21

Among the many weapons employed by both sides during the 1940 campaign, two would far out-rank all others in importance: the tank and the airplane. It was due in large part to the expert handling of tanks in conjunction with aircraft that the German army was able to achieve the amazing feats it achieved in May 1940. In France the doctrine of the continuous front brought with it an equally orthodox and obsolete doctrine for the deployment of tanks and aircraft.

The British were the pioneers of the tank and tank warfare. The savage butchery of the western front led belligerents on both sides to the desperate search for a solution to the stalemate. The need to create a

fighting machine of some sort or other and as quickly as possible overrode all other considerations in 1915.22 The tank became the ideal solution to the trench stalemate. The infantry was now afforded the much needed protection it desired. Concentrated in large enough numbers and on a narrow front, the tanks could overrun enemy trench lines, destroying machine-gun nests and smashing down barbed wire entanglements. The infantry, advancing in the wake of the tanks, would then be able to occupy the enemy trench line at minimal cost, exploiting the breakthrough to the best of their ability. Tanks were thus assigned the role of support weapons and subordinated to the infantry, still regarded as the queen of the battlefield. It was in this role, as support weapons, that tanks became an integral part of the allied victory in 1918. Soldiers in the traditional branches of the army looked down on tanks, and the men who served in them were considered as nothing more than adventurous upstarts with no future in warfare. Tanks were seen to be noisy, dirty, slow, and cumbersome. They were merely a passing phenomenon born out of the exigencies of trench warfare. They could never become a separate branch of the army for they were too vulnerable to operate on their own. Tanks were therefore considered by traditionalists to be merely mobile gun platforms good only for close support of infantry. It was this sort of thinking which formed the basis for allied tank tactics right up to the German invasion in May 1940.

While bold and imaginative soldiers were evolving the dynamic concepts that would one day constitute the tactics of a future war, French commanders in the 1920s and 1930s were seeking merely to refine the tactics of old. This was no better illustrated than by the French doctrine for the employment of tanks. The manual of instruction for the employment of tanks drawn up in 1930 began:

Combat tanks are machines to accompany the infantry in battle, tank units constitute an integral part of the infantry. Tanks are only supplementary means, put temporarily at the disposition of the infantry. They strengthen considerably the action of the latter but they do not replace it. Their action, to be effective, must be exploited by the infantry at the moment of their impact; the progress of the infantry and its seizing of objectives are alone decisive.23

There were many in the French army who still regarded cavalry as a viable arm for future wars. General Weygand, Foch's right-hand man in 1918 and future commander in chief, urged the war council to be prudent in pushing the mechanization of the army, asked it "not to forget that horses are always useful," and declared that more horses "especially saddle horses" were urgently needed for the army. What was good enough, including horse cavalry, to bring victory in the First World War would be good enough to win in the

In December 1938 the Revue d'Infanterie featured an article by a Major Laporte exposing the latest ideas of the high command. "Not even the most modern tanks," he wrote "can ever lead the fighting by themselves and for themselves. Their mission must always be to participate along with the fire of the artillery and heavy infantry arms in the protection and support of attacks." The following year Marshal Petain wrote:

It would be imprudent to conclude that an armoured force, capable of advancing, it is claimed, 125 miles a day, forcing great strongholds and sowing a panic in the enemy's rear, is an irresistible weapon. Before a barrage of anti-tank guns and mines the armoured division would be at the mercy of a counterattack on the flanks. As for tanks, which are supposed by some to bring us a shortening of wars, their incapacity is striking.

In the same year Petain would write; "Tanks are too expensive and too cumbersome to use in great numbers or to achieve real surprise." The successful campaigns in Spain (1936) and, most notably, in Poland (1939) made very little impact on the French High Command. The British Chief of the Imperial General Staff, Field Marshall Deverell, asked General Gamelin (C-C French Army) what he thought of the German tanks in Spain. To which Gamelin replied more or less in these words; "All our information indicates that our policy is the right one. The German tanks, too lightly armoured, are

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25. Ibid., p. 177.  
26. Ibid., p. 178.  
Gamelin believed that anti-tank guns made the concentration of tanks too vulnerable. It was therefore necessary, he felt, that tanks be dispersed among the infantry to make them less vulnerable. Edouard Daladier, French Minister of National Defense, spoke for many at the time when he declared that even though the German Panzers were effective in Poland, they would not have as much success against the modern fortifications of France. At the Riom Trial, after the campaign in 1940 was all over, Daladier stated that "In all this long and miserable story you will find nothing but the dread of novelty, the absence of imagination." General Keller, French Inspector General of Tanks during the 1940 campaign, had this to say:

It is dangerous to consider lessons of the last war out of date. Even supposing that the fortified positions of the present front were broken or turned, it does not appear that our enemies could find a combination of circumstances equally propitious for their "blitzkrieg." We may therefore consider that in future operations the main function of tanks will consist, as in the past, in breaking down resistance that are holding up the infantry and in facilitating its forward movement upon successive objectives.

This from the man who was responsible for France's tank doctrine for the 1940 campaign. General de Gaulle, commander of the French Fourth Armoured Division in May, 1940, was among the first exponents of the new mobile

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30. Ibid., p. 131.
tactics of the German army. He wrote in his memoirs: "In the French army
tanks were to be used only for reinforcing the line and at need, restoring it by
local counterattacks."^31

Testimony at the Riom Trial provides further evidence of the
backwardness of French tank doctrine at the time of the German invasion in
1940. General Besson (C-C 3rd Army Group) was obliged to admit that the tank
was regarded merely as support in the rear of the infantry. General Réquin (C-
C 4th Army Group) stated that before the war tanks were considered only as
protective units.32 General Perré (C-C 2nd Armoured Division) reminded the
court that even after Berlin had decided in 1935 to form the first panzer
divisions the greater part of the army remained attached to the system which
regarded the tanks as auxiliary to the infantry.33 Manoeuvres in 1933 had
established the tactics to be employed in a future tank-infantry assault. It was
estimated that tanks were not to venture more than 1,500-1,800 meters in front
of the infantry, where they would seek out and destroy enemy machine-gun
nests. From the very fact that the tank was meant only to support the advance
of infantry it was deemed unnecessary to give the tanks of the day powerful
engines capable of maintaining high speeds, or with independent means of
refueling which would allow for a wide range of action. General Tissier of the
French Army summed it up when he wrote, "It was the refusal of the General
Staff, following the lead given by Marshal Petain, to oppose large formations of

33. Ibid., p. 130.
tanks to the panzer divisions that was at the bottom of the disaster to the French army." The distribution of French tanks is reflective of the tank doctrine adhered to; 700-800 French tanks were distributed among cavalry divisions for scouting and screening purposes. Between 1,500-1,700 French tanks were placed in battalion-sized units among the infantry for close support. The remainder of French tanks were placed in the three French armoured divisions all of which had been formed in the Spring of 1940. Even the French armoured divisions would be split up, their tanks committed piecemeal.

The French air doctrine was no better suited to modern warfare than was their tank doctrine. Fighter planes were used primarily for the defense of ground troops against enemy bombers. As for French bombers, M. La Chambre, head of the Air Ministry, stated that "the Air General Staff had never considered bombers as anything but 'reprisal planes.' Its whole policy consisted of maintaining a defensive aviation of fighter aircraft." The greatest weakness within the French airforce was in dive-bombers. The weapon that was to play such a major part in the French defeat was virtually ignored by the French Air Ministry. The ability of dive-bombers, acting as flying artillery, to cooperate with armoured units in breaking open enemy fronts was not appreciated by the French High Command. This was because they considered it to be the business of the heavy artillery to clear the way for the tanks. Dive bombing bridges, a tactic which was to prove so

34. Ibid., p. 134.
35. Ibid., p. 147.
36. Ibid., p. 147.
effective for the German army in 1940, was considered mere aerobatics by French Commanders. By January 1938 no dive-bomber prototype had even been under investigation.

Though nominally in charge of the airforce, General Gamelin left it to its own devices. Many French generals considered the airforce, like the tank corps, to be merely an auxiliary arm of the service - useful only for the support of the traditional branches of the army.

Weygand often said to me, in 1930-35, that he thought most people exaggerated the part aviation was to fulfill. 'You can't hold the ground with planes,' he said. 'Civilians will suffer,' Gamelin used to sum it up, 'and that will be extremely deplorable, but the military instrument proper will not suffer much harm and we need not bother too much about the rest.'

There was, therefore, no concept of air-ground cooperation. The airforce was seen to be useful only for defending friendly ground troops against enemy air attacks. While Luftwaffe doctrine emphasized the destruction of communication networks and command posts in order to paralyze the enemy's means of resistance, the French High Command sought mainly to assault enemy troop concentrations and columns on the march. These two targets were, ironically enough, the primary objectives of airforces during the First World War.

Having just described the military mindset and doctrine of the French Army, it is now time for a description of an opposing and vastly different military mindset, that of their future opponent, the German Army. The tactics that were to bring the German Wehrmacht such phenomenal success soon came to be known by the one word - Blitzkrieg (lightning war).

The German Military Mindset

The defeat of the Kaiser's armies in World War One left officers in the tiny post-war Reichswehr to ponder the reasons for their defeat and to find solutions to them. While the French and British military hierarchies went into a deep freeze enshrining the tactics that had brought them victory in the last war, young, energetic German officers were striving to turn those tactics upside-down. It would be a long and difficult journey before the dynamic principles of blitzkrieg were accepted in the German army. Contrary to popular belief, the German officer corps was not dominated by innovative, forward-thinking officers. The German military hierarchy of the 1920s and 1930s was, for the most part, as rigid, orthodox, and backward in their concepts as were their French and British counterparts. Opposed to the military hierarchies of the day were a hard-core of innovative mavericks, men like Liddell Hart, J. F. C. Fuller, Charles de Gaulle, and Heinz Guderian. By espousing the creed of change these brilliant men gained the enmity of their military superiors, whose very existence they threatened. Only in Germany were the new tactics adopted and then only because of the decisive intervention of Adolf Hitler.

Among the forefathers of blitzkrieg stand two Englishmen; Major General J. F. C. Fuller and Captain Liddell Hart. These were the men who would have the most profound influence on German officers during the inter-war period. General John Frederick Charles Fuller was the first pioneer of tank warfare. Fuller became commander of the British tank corps in December, 1916. He planned and coordinated the first large scale tank
operation in history at Cambrai in November, 1917. He was subsequently to play a major role in the victorious allied advance in 1918. Having seen their effectiveness at first hand during the Great War, Fuller sought to make tanks the principle weapon of the future British army. Much of General Fuller's ideas were contained in an operational plan he had submitted to Marshal Foch for his projected spring campaign of 1919. General Fuller writes:

> Had the war lasted another year it would have become apparent that in themselves tanks and aircraft were not weapons, but instead vehicles in which anything could be carried up to their maximum loads. Further, it would have been seen that as their dominant characterization was a new means of movement, made practical by the common prime mover petroleum, entirely new fighting organizations could be built around them—namely, self-propelled armoured armies and airborne armies and not merely self-propelled armoured guns and airborne artillery.

Two master theories emerged out of this experimental period, the one concerned mainly with tanks and the other solely with aircraft. The former was worked out in considerable detail by the author (Fuller) in May, 1918 in a study entitled The Attack by Paralyzation. This study was submitted soon after to Marshal Foch as the basis of his projected spring campaign in 1919 and was renamed "Plan 1919." The operative paragraph of this project reads: "Now, the potential fighting strength of a body of men lies in its organization; therefore, if we can destroy its organization, we shall destroy its fighting strength and so have gained our object." The plan would be carried out as follows: A large number of troops and material would be assembled on a

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39. Ibid., p. 380.

40. Ibid., p. 380.
ninety mile front. The Germans, it was anticipated, would mass their troops opposite the British concentration as was usually done. Once the Germans had massed the bulk of their forces opposite the British concentration, 800 medium D tanks in two columns would be committed in a pincer movement against both flanks of the German concentration. The flanking armoured columns would strike at enemy supply lines, communication centers, and command posts undermining the German front-line positions. These front-line positions would then be assaulted frontally by 2,500 heavy and 400 medium tanks supported by infantry. The undermined German front would give way and 1,200 more medium tanks would be committed in pursuit. Close support would be provided by the airforce throughout the operation. "Plan 1919" would require 5,000 tanks and 17,000 corpsmen. It was destined never to be carried out, however, for the war ended before it went into operation. One thing is clear, the groundwork for blitzkrieg had been laid.

Fuller would later describe the theory which was behind "Plan 1919." To Fuller there were two ways of destroying an organization: 1.) by wearing it down or dissipating it; 2.) by rendering it inoperative or unhinging it.\textsuperscript{41} He explains what he meant when he wrote:

In war the first comprises the killing, wounding, capturing and disarming of the enemy's soldiers—"body warfare." The second, the rendering inoperative of his power of command—"brain warfare." Example: to wound a man with slight wounds which will eventually lead him to bleed to death; the second—a shot through the brain.\textsuperscript{42}

General Fuller explains "brain warfare" as follows:

\textsuperscript{41} Ibid., p. 380.

\textsuperscript{42} Ibid., p. 380.
The brains of an army is its staff—army, corps, and divisional headquarters. Could we suddenly remove these from an extensive sector of the German front, the collapse of the personnel they control would be a mere matter of hours, even if only slight opposition were put up against it. As our present theory is to destroy "personnel" so should our new theory be to destroy "command," not after the enemy's personnel has been disorganized, but before it has been attacked, so that it may be found in a state of complete disorganization when attacked.

The means suggested was to use fast moving tanks supported by aircraft and followed by the traditional arms. The tanks would assault selected points under cover of the airforce breaking through and exploiting fast and deep into the enemy's rear areas disrupting his communications and spreading havoc. The "brain" would thus be killed rendering the "body" (personnel) inoperative. For the first time it was suggested that tanks become the primary arm, acting independently and in great numbers. It must also be noted that Fuller's theories contained the first true provision for the coordination of tank and air units each operating in a kind of symbiotic relationship. Fuller's ideas were to have wide repercussions and make a profound impression on the foremost creator of the German blitzkrieg, Heinz Guderian.

While General Fuller was espousing the paralysis of the enemy's will through "brain warfare," the Italian Giulio Douhet was advocating a similar policy through use of airpower. In his book, Command of the Air, written in 1921, Douhet described how enemy morale could be undermined by the use of vast fleets of strategic bombers which would make ground armies obsolete. The bombers would strike at civilian targets seeking to terrorize them into

43. Ibid., p. 380.
44. Ibid., p. 380.
Both Fuller and Douhet were alike in that they sought to attack the moral rather than physical makeup of the enemy. The Germans were likewise to take stock of Douhet's theories as the bombings of Guernica, Warsaw, Rotterdam, London, and Belgrade bear witness.

The second of the early disciples of mechanized warfare was Sir Basil Liddell Hart. A captain in the British army during World War One, Liddell Hart was gassed at the battle of the Somme in 1916 and saw no further action in the war. After his retirement from the army in 1927, Hart dedicated the rest of his life to the study and writing of military history and theory. Liddell Hart subsequently became what many consider the greatest military theorist since von Clausewitz. In an essay entitled *The Development of the New Model Army*, written in 1922, Hart advocated the mechanization of supply transport for divisions, followed by mechanization of the infantry battalions and mechanical traction for the artillery.\(^45\)

Hart proposed the creation of a combined-arms brigade which would consist of two tank battalions, three infantry battalions in carriers, a mechanized artillery regiment, and the necessary supply, signal and service troops, all mechanized.\(^46\) In the end he claimed the ideal army of the future would be a massive tank army supported by aircraft, self-propelled guns on tracks, and carrier-borne infantry in support. Thus was created the genesis of the German Panzer Division. Hart's theories on war closely parallel Fuller's, by whom he was much influenced. This is made apparent by some of Liddell Hart's writing. He was to write:


\(^{46}\) Ibid., p. 63.
It should be the aim of grand strategy to discover and pierce the Achilles' heel of the opposing government's power to make war. And strategy in turn, should seek to penetrate a joint in the harness of the opposing forces. To apply one's strength where the opponent is strong weakens oneself disproportionately to the effect attained. To strike with strong effect one must strike at weakness.

He goes on to add:

It is more potent, as well as more economical, to disarm the enemy than to attempt his destruction by hard fighting. A strategist should think in terms of paralyzing, not of killing. Even on the lower plane of warfare, a man killed is merely one man less, whereas a man unnerved is a highly infectious carrier of fear, capable of spreading an epidemic of panic. On a higher plane of warfare, the impression made on the mind of the opposing commander can nullify the whole fighting power that his troops possess... One must paralyze his nerves rather than pound his flesh.

Thus Hart is here seen reiterating Fuller's theories concerning "brain warfare" and paralysis through dislocation. These theories were to become all too familiar during the German campaign against France in 1940. Along with his espousal of "brain warfare," Hart advocated the need always to advance along the route of the indirect approach. World War One had demonstrated the futility and waste of frontal assaults against prepared positions. Only by masking one's intentions and employing the element of surprise through adherence to the indirect approach, reasoned Hart, could one gain decisive victory at minimal cost.

48. Ibid., p. 228.
In 1927 the British assembled the Experimental Armoured Force. This Innovative Force came to consist of an infantry brigade and attached tank and artillery units. It was with this force that many of the new theories of armoured warfare were to be tested. Manoeuvres were carried out by the Experimental Armoured Force on Salisbury Plain in 1927 and 1928. Valuable lessons were learned which included the problems of controlling and manoeuvring large numbers of tanks; the problem of supplying and maintaining them in the field; questions of mechanical reliability and similar mundane but vital matters.\textsuperscript{49} The lessons learned in the 1927-28 manoeuvres were put down in a manual which came to be known as the "Purple Primer." The confidential information contained in the manual was disclosed to the Germans by a British traitor who was later arrested and imprisoned. The Germans translated the "Purple Primer" and it eventually became required reading for the officers of Germany's nascent armoured force.

Conservatives and reactionaries in Britain fought against the new theories and much of the progress made by Fuller and Hart was undone in the succeeding years. The projected tank force was considered too costly to create and maintain in time of peace and conservative soldiers found themselves hard-put to replace their much beloved horses. An extract from a poem published in The Royal Artillery Journal in 1931 aptly represented the strong conservative feelings then prevalent in British army circles:

\begin{quote}
\textbf{49.} Hogg, \textit{Fighting Tanks}, p. 64.
\end{quote}
The dear old horse is going, 
you can see it in his eye. 
As long as we have horses 
though, the country will not die. 
Off to your stinking petrol fumes, 
go to your grease and oil! 
When engines cease to function— 
then horses will start to toil. 50

Although having little influence in Great Britain, the principles of Fuller and Hart were to play a significant role in the formulation of Germany's new war doctrine. The subordination of infantry to tanks; the massing of tanks into self-contained units; the coordination between ground and air units; the mechanization of support elements; the emphasis placed on movement, surprise, exploitation, and the indirect approach; the primacy of destroying an enemy's means of control rather than merely assaulting his body, all came out of the writing of Fuller and Hart, and mingled with other ideas then current in Germany, would provide the groundwork for what was soon to be known as blitzkrieg.

As we have seen, reactionism and conservatism were also prevalent in France. The French army of the 1920s and 1930s was reputed to be the finest in the world, its generals the best, its tactics the most refined. Within the ranks of the French army was a young forward thinking captain who disagreed with the current feelings concerning the French army. To Charles de Gaulle the French army was falling dangerously behind the times, rotting at the core, resting on its laurels. De Gaulle sought change in accordance with the dynamic military reformist circles. The future demanded new ways and new

50. Ibid., p. 63.
means. No longer would the mass armies of conscripts deployed in previous wars suffice in the more technological world of the future. France possessed a smaller population and weaker industrial base than Germany and there remained but one way to offset these disadvantages, reasoned De Gaulle. That was by creating a high-quality, professional force which would be maintained at all times whether at peace or at war. It was further stipulated by de Gaulle that this elite corps be fully mechanized and that any future war must be prosecuted in an offensive manner. The attack was to be carried into the enemy's rear areas, the main enemy concentration to be bypassed and surrounded. The policy of "brain warfare", as espoused by Fuller and Hart, was reiterated by de Gaulle.

In 1934 Captain de Gaulle put his ideas down on paper in a profound work entitled Vers l'armée de Metier. In that book de Gaulle described the composition of his elite mechanized corps. It would consist of six divisions of 100,000 men. Each division would consist of a heavy brigade containing a regiment of heavy tanks, a regiment of light tanks, a reconnaissance battalion of light vehicles and 900 guns. The division would also contain a brigade of motorized infantry, two regiments of motorized artillery on caterpillar tracks, a battalion of engineers, a battalion of communication troops, and a scouting group in fast tanks.\textsuperscript{51} Like Liddell Hart's New Model Army, de Gaulle's mechanized divisions were combined arms units and totally mobile. The cadre of these elite divisions would serve for six years then go into the reserves. De Gaulle went on to prophesy the warfare of the future, a type of warfare that would become all too familiar in France in 1940:

\textsuperscript{51} Tissier, The Riom Trail, p. 113.
But the wall once pierced, larger possibilities might suddenly lie open. The mechanized army would then deploy fanwise to exploit its gains. After a success, we shall rush to gather its fruits and to thrust out into the zone of prizes. We shall see the exploitation of gains become a reality, where formerly it was only a dream. Then will we open the road to great victories, to those victories which by their deep and rapidly extending effects lead to a general collapse among the enemy, as the smashing of a pillar sometimes brings down a cathedral. We shall see fast troops strike at his vital points, throw his dispositions into confusion. Thus will be restored that strategic extension of tactical results which once used to constitute the supreme end, and as it were, the nobility of the art.\textsuperscript{52}

It was to be tragic irony for France when in 1940 de Gaulle's prophesies would become reality as the German Panzers poured into her rear areas, her "zone of prizes."

In a memorandum published in January, 1940, de Gaulle stressed the need to maintain a constant body of men trained for offensive operations. He wrote that "as in every struggle that has gone before it, to be passive is to be defeated."\textsuperscript{53} De Gaulle emphasized in his memorandum the importance of creating independent combined-arms mechanized units, he wrote:

It would not, however, suffice to marshall endless files of swift and powerful machines, nor to train first-rate crews to use them. Nothing fundamental will have been achieved so long as the mechanical force is not given independent existence and is not organized with a view to attaining decisive objectives by its own action.\textsuperscript{54}

\textsuperscript{52} De Gaulle, \textit{The Call to Honour}, p. 12.

\textsuperscript{53} Tissier, \textit{The Riom Trail}, p. 115.

\textsuperscript{54} Ibid., p. 116.
Charles de Gaulle's progressive theories brought to him much scorn and ridicule from his conservative political and military superiors. Their divinely ordained belief in the efficacy of the continuous front; of the subordination of armour and aircraft, of the dominance of the defensive over the offensive, all grated against de Gaulle's theories. He was considered by many as an outlaw, a rogue, a heretic who was bent on overturning everything that was proven and right. He was seen to be gambling on the future of France with new-fangled, untried ideas born merely out of idealism. He was a knave and an upstart who was not to be trusted or taken seriously—so went the verdict against the one man who could have saved the sinking ship that was the Third French Republic. In the Mecure de France, a French general rejected the principle of motorization, "the Germans," he declared, "being naturally aggressive must naturally have panzer divisions; but France, being pacific and defensive, is bound to be anti-motorization."\(^55\) A critic from one of the big literary reviews wrote: "One is hard put to it to assess, with the courtesy one would wish, ideas which touch the fringe of delirium."\(^56\) The report on this subject, drawn up with the cooperation of the Army General Staff, concluded that the proposed reform "was useless, undesirable, and had logic and history against it."\(^57\) At the tribune of the Assemblée, General Maurin, Minister of War, said in answer to the orators who favoured the Corps of Manoeuvre,

\(^{55}\) De Gaulle, The Call to Honor, p. 19.

\(^{56}\) Ibid., p. 19.

\(^{57}\) Ibid., p. 20.
"When we have devoted so many efforts to building up a fortified barrier, is it conceivable that we would be mad enough to go ahead of this barrier, into I know not what adventure?" De Gaulle was attacked by socialists in the Front Populaire, and by French Communists, as a military reactionary bent on creating a professional standing army for the purpose of launching a military-rightist coup d'état. Thus de Gaulle was seen as a threat by his military peers because of his unorthodox military theories, and as a threat to the existing government because of the danger his proposed elite army would pose to their existence. Economists looked to the prohibitive costs such a standing body would require, and the effects it would have on the civilian economy. Assaulted on all sides, de Gaulle could only throw up his hands in disgust and watch France's enemy, Germany, evolve and carry out the policies he had endeavored so long and hard to give to the French army. Charles de Gaulle had failed to make his superiors see the light, the blindman was but one step from the abyss.

Across the Rhine, in Germany, the teachings of Fuller and Hart, among others, had not gone unnoticed. Defeat in the First World War had brought to Germany the need to evolve new tactics and theories of war. Having suffered defeat, and having been virtually stripped of her armaments at Versailles, Germany was not saddled with the victors' impediments of obsolescent ideas and equipment. All the lessons of the war were thoroughly and systematically studied. All manuals were rewritten and new principles and instructional

58. Ibid., p. 20.
courses were introduced. While French officers sought, in the inter-war years, merely to refine and upgrade the methods that had brought them victory in the Great War, certain officers in Germany's tiny post-war Reichswehr were seeking to carry the lessons of the war to their proper fruition, to evolve a new system of war.

To many German officers in the Reichswehr, the solution to the trench stalemate lay with mobility. Unlike their French opponents, the German army had not been confined to the static western front but had seen duty in the East, in Russia and the Balkans, where fluid operations were commonplace. The immensity of the Eastern Front, the lower density of men and armaments per square mile, and the inability of the Russians to bring up reserves rapidly, due to their archaic transportation system, had allowed the Germans to gain and exploit breakthroughs deep into the Russian rear areas. At Gorlice-Tarnow (May, 1915), one of the greatest victories of the war was gained by the Austro-German armies over their Russian adversaries. In five month's time the Russian army sustained over one million casualties and were thrown back upwards of 300 miles. In Serbia and Rumania vast envelopment operations resulted in the overrunning of both countries, each within a mere two month's time. Thus having witnessed the effects of mobility and exploitation at first hand, many German officers who had seen service in the east became naturally disinclined to view warfare as having reached its apogee in the fortifications of the western front.

The command of the new post-war Reichswehr came to rest in the hands of one of Germany's ablest soldiers, General Hans von Seeckt, who served from 1920-26. It was von Seeckt who, as acting Chief of Staff of Field Marshal August von Mackensen's Eleventh Army, masterminded the great Austro-German breakthrough at Gorlice-Tarnow. It was also von Seeckt who, acting in the same capacity, helped plan and coordinate the sweeping German victories in Serbia and Rumania. The Versailles Treaty, as already noted, had limited the German army to 100,000 men and prohibited the construction or use of offensive weapons. Under von Seeckt's guidance this 100,000 man army became the nucleus of the much expanded Wehrmacht of later years. Each soldier was made a potential leader and by the Treaty of Rapallo, (1922), German troops were allowed to train secretly with tanks and aircraft in Russia. To von Seeckt the era of mass conscript armies was over. What was needed was highly trained mobile shock units able to go anywhere at any time. He asserted that only by offensive action, utilizing surprise and the utmost mobility, could decisive victory be gained. In 1921 he wrote: "The whole future of warfare appears to me to be in the employment of mobile armies, relatively small but of high quality, and rendered distinctly more effective by the addition of aircraft."60 To give his men experience in the tactics of tank warfare, von Seeckt simulated tanks by draping automobiles with canvas, cardboard, or tin armor. Anti-tank guns and other forbidden artillery were mocked up in wood, and target planes for the wooden anti-aircraft guns were models whirled on the end of strings.61

60. Ibid., p. 47.

Although abolished by the Treaty of Versailles, the German General Staff remained in existence under the designation of the Office of Troops or Truppenamt which General von Seeckt headed. Among the chief tasks of the Truppenamt was to assess the reasons for Germany's defeat in the First World War and come up with solutions to them. Why had not tactical successes, such as Ludendorf's breakthroughs in the Spring of 1918, brought strategic victory?

What became evident to the German analysts was that the military technology of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries had vastly increased the power of weaponry without a comparable enhancement of mobility in its employment. The devastation caused by machine guns, mortars, and breech-loading artillery forced armies to go underground and entrench in order to minimize casualties. The fortifications became more elaborate, and ever increasing amounts of firepower had to be brought to bear against them if there was to be any hope of achieving a breakthrough. The amount of time and energy spent in achieving the breakthrough allowed the enemy to bring up reserves before they could be exploited. According to von Seeckt and other officers in the Truppenamt the solution lay in increased mobility. They reasoned that the failure to properly exploit the tactical penetrations made in the western front was due primarily to three major weaknesses: 1.) The army lacked logistical mobility preventing the quick movement of ammunition, food, and other supplies to the troops at the apex of the breakthrough. Mud and the devastation wrought by the terrific artillery bombardments rendered the intervening territory all but impassable.

2.) The army lacked strategic mobility. There was no adequate means of moving reserves through the breech quickly enough to sustain the advance. 3.) The army lacked firepower mobility. As the infantry advanced they soon outran their supporting artillery which was unable to keep up. Having lost their fire-support the infantry advance lost its impetus and ground to a halt. Solutions to the mobility problem were to be found in the tank and airplane. The tank, invented in Britain and used extensively by the allied armies during the latter part of the war had made a deep impression on those German troops who had to deal with them. General von Kuhl, who had been a staff officer in the Army-Group attacked and defeated at Amiens (1918), wrote: "In achieving surprise, the most important and decisive factor had been the tanks.63

In April 1922 von Seeckt appointed a young and enterprising colonel to the Inspectorate of Transport Troops, Motor Transport Department. That young colonel was named Heinz Guderian, destined to become the father of the panzers. Guderian had been a staff officer during the First World War specializing in wireless communication. He was on the staff of Crown Prince Wilhelm during the Battle of Verdun. The ceaseless and unnecessary sacrifices made at Verdun were revolting to him and he thought never again should the flower of German manhood be sacrificed on such a scale. Guderian soon fell under the spell of von Seeckt whose ideas concerning mobility, exploitation, and combined arms tactics attracted him. To Guderian the tank was the weapon of the future and its improper use by the allies during the First World War was scrutinized and exposed by him and his colleagues in the Motor Transport

Department. The allies' chief errors in the deployment of their tanks was that their attacks lacked sufficient depth; that there were no mobile reserves to exploit the breakthroughs made. The tanks were furthermore tied to infantry and when committed, were committed piecemeal. The slow rate of speed precluded them from ranging deep into the enemy's rear areas.

In 1931 Guderian was given command of the Third Prussian Motorized Battalion at Berlin-Lankwitz. This unit consisted of an anti-tank company, a motorcycle company, a dummy tank company, and a company of armoured reconnaissance cars. Manœuvres were conducted with emphasis placed on the cooperation of all arms in synchronization. Guderian wrote:

My historical studies, the exercises carried out in England, and our own experiences with mock-ups had persuaded me that tanks would never be able to produce their full effect until the other weapons on whose support they must inevitably rely were brought up to their standard of speed and of cross-country performance. In such a formation of all arms, the tanks must play the primary role, the other weapons being subordinated to the requirements of the armour.64

The German military hierarchy, however, was just as opposed to mechanization as were their French and British opposites. To them Guderian's sham army of canvas tanks were nothing but playthings, unfitted for the serious business of war. Guderian, like de Gaulle, was considered by the majority of senior commanders as a mere upstart and fanatical idealist whose ideas threatened the established order. It was fortunate for Guderian and the German army that in Hitler there was found a man of like mind. The novelty

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of armoured warfare and the economy in time and lives that blitzkrieg promised appealed to him. Hitler's first taste of mobile warfare came during the Kummersdorf maneuvers in 1933. Guderian wrote:

I was able to demonstrate a motorcycle platoon, an anti-tank platoon, a platoon of Panzer I's, and one platoon of light and one of heavy armoured reconnaissance cars. Hitler was much impressed by the speed and precision of movement of our units and said repeatedly: 'That's what I need! That's what I want to have.'

In 1931 Guderian was made Chief of Staff to the Inspectorate of Mobile Troops under General Lutz. Solutions were found for the weaknesses exposed by the Truppenamt in the First World War German army. Logistical mobility was gained by making the supply echelons as mobile as the tank units. Strategic mobility was gained by the creation of motorized infantry divisions which could keep up with the tanks and exploit breakthroughs quickly and deeply. Firepower mobility was achieved by the use of tanks, self-propelled guns, and tactical aircraft which acted as flying artillery. Thus was created a force that could not only smash through the continuous front but sustain the breakthrough so rapidly and in such depth as to render enemy countermeasures obsolete before they were even begun. By October 1935 three panzer divisions had been formed while at the same time the French and British armies had not one. Guderian had been given command of the Second Panzer Division and just afterward wrote:

Everything is dependent on this; to be able to move faster than has hitherto been done; to keep moving despite the enemy's defensive fire and thus make it harder for him to build up fresh defensive positions; and finally to carry the attack deep into the enemy's defenses. We believe that by attacking with tanks we can achieve a higher rate of movement than has been hitherto obtainable, and — what is perhaps even more important — that we can keep moving once a breakthrough has been made.  

65. Ibid., p. 30.
66. Ibid., p. 41.
Guderian sought to fuse the ancient concept of armoured protection with the revolutionary tempo of mobility provided by the internal combustion engine. Tanks could move more rapidly and for greater distances than was ever conceivable. Massed in large formations and supported by powerful air fleets, these forces would prove irresistible when deployed against all but the most powerful defenses. Guderian wrote: "We believe that the combination of the internal combustion engine and armour plate enable us to take our fire to the enemy without any artillery preparation, provided always that the important conditions for such an operation are fulfilled; suitable terrain, surprise, and mass commitment."\(^{67}\) It was vitally important, asserted Guderian, to concentrate the tanks into large self-contained units and not disperse them. To disperse tanks was to undermine their strength and reduce their shock effect. Surprise was the second pre-requisite for decisive victory. Surprise could best be obtained by adhering to the indirect approach, bypassing main centers of resistance and moving on into the void. To advance as quickly as possible at all times, never giving your opponent time to react or regain his balance. Guderian wrote that "only movement brings victory."\(^{68}\) In his important book, Achtung Panzer, written in 1937, Guderian describes the highest human quality called for by the panzer corps as being "a fanatical will to move forward."\(^{69}\)

Blitzkrieg doctrine can be seen in the metaphor of a wheel. The rim represents the enemy's army, his line of resistance. The spokes are his lines of communication, his roads, railways, and telecommunication system which supply

\(^{67}\) Ibid., p. 39.

\(^{68}\) Ibid., p. 48.

\(^{69}\) Home, To Lose a Battle, p. 51.
the rim, or lines of defense, with its war essentials. The hub is the enemy's source of supply and command center, its brain. In the panzer division Guderian saw the wheel's nemesis. It carried a concentration of force capable of cutting through the rim; it possessed the mobility and power to sweep through the spokes like a scythe. No matter how much of the wheel's rim remained in being, the slaughter of the spokes would destroy the wheel.70 Thus the concept of "brain warfare" as espoused by Fuller, Hart, and de Gaulle was here again reiterated by Guderian.

The means to obtain the ends of blitzkrieg was the Panzer Division and its supporting arms. The panzer division was totally self-sufficient. It contained its own contingents of anti-tanks and anti-aircraft guns. There were engineers to construct and repair roads and bridges. Divisional scout cars, motorcyclists, and scout planes provided effective reconnaissance and screening for the Panzer division. The panzer division furthermore contained its own infantry contingents, mounted in trucks or armoured troop carriers. The armoured infantry would reduce by-passed pockets of resistance, fight in built-up areas or hold ground overrun by the panzers. Supporting the panzer divisions was the Luftwaffe which acting as mobile artillery could help open breeches in the enemy line or protect the flanks of an advancing panzer column against enemy counterattacks. At long last was created a force which could turn the tactical success of a breakthrough into a strategic success by exploiting the breakthrough deep into the enemy's rear areas before they could bring up

reserves to stop it. It did not take long to convince even the most conservative German officers of the superiority of the new methods of blitzkrieg, it only remained for the French to learn its secrets, and 1940 was not long off.
CHAPTER FOUR
THE MATERIAL FACTOR

One of the great myths to come out of the Franco-German war of 1940 is that the German victory was made inevitable due to an overwhelming superiority of force. The myth that the French were swamped by overwhelming numbers of German tanks of the highest quality. In fact the Germans were not only inferior to the French in numbers of tanks but also, for the most part, in quality as well. It comes as a shock to many when it is realized that the German army of 1940 was in reality not the modern mechanized army of myth but an army with grave material deficiencies. Deficiencies which were successfully hidden by propagandists who sought to portray the German army as the futuristic army of the apocalypse. In actual fact the German army was materially no more modern or better prepared for war than were its French and British opponents. Only in the air did Germany enjoy a significant advantage, which goes far in explaining her tactical successes.

As far as manpower is concerned, the Germans and Allies were roughly even, with both sides committing about 136 divisions. Of Germany's 136 divisions only sixteen were mechanized. The remaining 120 German divisions were made up of dismounted infantry who marched on foot and depended on horse-drawn transport à la World War One. Thus contrary to popular belief, the mainstay of the German army which conquered Western Europe was made up of World War One styled infantry corps with little or no mechanization. The cutting edge of the German army was its panzer divisions. Of Germany's sixteen mechanized divisions ten were panzer divisions and the remaining six
divisions were motorized infantry. That these sixteen mechanized divisions sufficed is due to the revolutionary techniques of blitzkrieg in relation to the outmoded ideas of the Allies.

Of the 136 Allied divisions on the Western Front during 1940, ninety-four were French, ten were British, twenty-two were Belgian, and ten more were Dutch. The ninety-four French divisions were only those committed to the northeast front facing Germany. Many more French divisions could be drawn, if needed, from France's vast overseas colonies or from her Alpine frontier opposite Italy. Thus in numbers both sides, German and Allied, could deploy about 2 million men thereby maintaining a rough parity. The Germans however were better integrated than were the Allied armies.

In tanks, as has already been stated, the Allies were superior both quantitatively and qualitatively over the Germans. General Mellenthin affirms this when he writes, "The German army was actually inferior to the Allied armies, not only in numbers of divisions but particularly in tanks -- 4,000 to 2,000." He goes on, "Nor did we have any real advantage in quality."

General Guderian stated that the combined Anglo-French forces in the West in May, 1940 consisted of some 4,000 armoured fighting vehicles to Germany's 2,800 of which only 2,200 were available for operations. Guderian went on to write: "We thus faced superiority in numbers, to which was added the fact that the French tanks were superior to the German ones both in armour and in

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gun calibre, though admittedly inferior in control facilities and speed. 73

General Keller, French Inspector General of Tanks during the 1940 campaign claimed that the French had 2,695 front-line tanks not including second-line tanks or those committed by Britain. Defense Minister Daladier admitted that the number of French tanks amounted to 3,615 while Colonel Pérée of the Second Armoured Division estimates the French Army had 3,250 tanks and Britain 600. 74

The qualitative balance was in the French favor as well. The myth that Germany invaded France with a fleet of new and powerful heavy tanks of superior design is simply not true. Of Germany's 2,800 tanks deployed in the West nearly 2,000 of them were of the PzKPW I and PzKPW II designs, both obsolete at war's start. Both vehicles had been intended solely as training vehicles in the early and mid-1930s. They were never intended for battle but due to the expediency of war and the fact that they could be cheaply mass produced, were pressed into service becoming the mainstay of German armour during the Polish and French campaigns. The armour of both tanks was paper-thin and while the Pz I carried only two machine-guns as the main armament, the Pz II carried only the weak 20 mm gun. The best tanks in the German Army at this time were the PzKPW III and PzKPW IV medium tanks. Being larger and better armed than the Pz I and Pz II, the Pz III's and Pz IV's could stand up to most tanks of the period. Both tanks however were still under-armoured and the Pz IV's low velocity 75 mm gun was unsuited for tank

73. Ibid., p. 94.
74. Tissier, The Riom Trial, p. 53.
warfare. Still only 627 of these tanks were available for operations in the West. The balance of German armour was made up of the Czechoslovakian Pz 38(t). The Pz 38 was a product of the Skoda works in Czechoslovakia, adopted for use in the German army after the annexation of that country in March, 1939. It was a good, dependable vehicle for its time, mounting the fine 37.2 mm gun. Unfortunately, it represented only a small fraction of Germany's armoured commitment in the West.

The four principal battle tanks committed by France were the R 35, H 35, S 35 (Somua), and Char B-1 heavy tank. Both the R 35 and H 35, though comparable to Germany's Pz I and Pz II in size, were much better armoured and armed. The French Somua and Char B models were far and above superior to anything the Germans were to field in the 1940 campaign. With nearly twice the armoured thickness of Germany's Pz III and Pz IV, and mounting the fine 47 mm and 75 mm guns, these tanks were among the best tanks of the day. Furthermore, the French army had 800 tanks of the superior S-35 (Somua) and Char B variety, more than the Germans had of their superior Pz III and Pz IV variety.

Although French tanks were generally better armoured and armed than were the German tanks they faced, they were slower and had a more reduced range of action. This is in large part due to their military doctrine. As has already been explained, the French regarded tanks as nothing but support weapons to be distributed among the infantry. Since tanks in the French army were thought of as being good only for the close support of infantry, it was not considered necessary to equip them with powerful engines which would ensure high rates of speed. French armoured units were furthermore not equipped with mobile supply tenders to keep the tanks supplied with petrol while on the
move. Therefore the range of action for French tanks was severely reduced, keeping them from conducting deep exploitations which made the revolution that was blitzkrieg; but exploitation was the farthest thing from French minds.

French tank units were also inferior in their control facilities. Due to French tank design only one man was housed in the turret. This one man had the dual role of aiming, loading, and firing the gun, and directing the tank's movement. To perform such a dual role in the heat of battle was extremely difficult and time-consuming. Neither were French tanks equipped with radio. General Keller noted that most French tanks had no wireless apparatus and very few other means of communication.\(^7^5\) The lack of radio prohibited communication between the tanks of a given unit preventing the control and coordination of action necessary in any successful tank battle.

In German tanks three men occupied the turret, greatly facilitating control by freeing the tank commander from the task of loading and aiming the gun. Where there was a scarcity of radios in French tank units, all German tanks carried radios. This enabled the commander of a German tank unit to maintain contact with all his tanks at all times. German tanks were therefore better able to act as a team and to coordinate their actions.

In the field of artillery the Germans had superiority in anti-tank and anti-aircraft guns. In 1939 Germany fielded seventy-two anti-aircraft regiments to France's five. Defense Minister Daladier said after the campaign that no sustained effort was made to aid the anti-aircraft defense because the technical experts believed that only the airplane could fight the airplane.\(^7^6\)

\(^7^5\) Ibid., p. 55.

\(^7^6\) Ibid., p. 150.
General Roton stated that only twenty-two divisions were equipped with 20 mm anti-aircraft guns, each division allotted only twelve pieces. Thirteen other divisions were equipped with 25 mm guns, six per division. The remainder of the army had to make do with the old 75 mm gun of World War One vintage. It was the same story for anti-tank equipment. President Caous pointed out that the 61st Division had not a single anti-tank gun, while the 76th had six for a front of thirty kilometers. "Anti-tank equipment," said General Sciard, "was 50% below what it should have been." While inferior to Germany in A.A. and A.T. equipment, the French were superior to Germany in heavy artillery. Thousands of big guns dating back to the First World War were brought out of their sheds, greased, and redeployed by the French army. It was upon these guns and the fortifications of the continuous front, that the French army placed their hopes.

The most significant advantage in the field of arms was held by the German airforce. The superiority of the Luftwaffe over the French airforce provided one of the key factors in the decisive German victory. Germany would commit around 3,000 aircraft to her Western campaign. Opposed to the Luftwaffe was a mere 1,200 French aircraft mostly of obsolete design. Britain would add a further 475 aircraft. France had entered the 1930s with a mass of obsolete planes accumulated in the 1920s. A multiplicity of governments had prevented the development of any consistent air policy. The French aviation

79. Ibid., p. 57.
industry, as a result, languished during the 1930s. French Air Minister La Chambre found nothing but a disheartened industry of small workshops of which only one factory was equipped for mass production.\textsuperscript{80} In number of bombers the Luftwaffe held a massive superiority over its allied opponents. The Luftwaffe amassed 1,120 bombers for the campaign against France's 175 and Britain's 220.\textsuperscript{81} In number of dive bombers, the Germans had 324 against fifty-four French and zero British dive bombers. Furthermore, Germany fielded 1,016 short-range fighters and 248 long-range fighters of excellent quality. The French could field only 700 fighters of obsolete design and Britain a mere 130.\textsuperscript{82} France's most up-to-date fighter plane, the Morane 406, went fifty miles per hour slower than Germany's principle fighter, the ME 109. French bombers were considered by their pilots as nothing more than death-traps. A colonel of the bombing squadron in Lyon exclaimed just before the German invasion: "If the war should break out we will die bravely, my pilots and I, but that's all we can do!" Why? "Because there are too few of us and our machines are obsolete."\textsuperscript{83}

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\textsuperscript{80} Home, To Lose a Battle, p. 83.
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\textsuperscript{82} Ibid., p. 152.
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The French airforce, like their tank corps, was considered to be nothing more than a poor relation to the army. Most French bombers were not even equipped with radio, and ground servicing was rudimentary at best. Since the French government and high command had neglected their airforce and air defense, they have only themselves to blame for the debacle that lay ahead.
CHAPTER FIVE
WAR PLANS AND DISPOSITIONS

The opposing war plans and the dispositions which stemmed from them played a large role in the rapid fall of France. World War One's destruction in lives and property had placed upon the post-war French High Command two overriding concerns. Those concerns were to husband French manpower and keep any future wars off French soil. Emphasis was placed on the creation of a continuous front of defenses stretching from the English Channel to the borders of Switzerland. It was to be along this line that the Allied Armies would be amassed to passively await the coming of the German offensive. The main goal was to wear down Germany in a war of attrition fought on French terms. The initiative was to be left entirely in the hands of the Germans until such time as the weakening of Germany would permit an Allied counteroffensive. It was widely felt in France that the preponderance of German strength prohibited any aggressive action on the part of France, a policy that would only result in the bankruptcy of French manpower. With the horrors of the First World War still fresh in French minds, this was one thing that must never be allowed to happen again. Thus France intended to minimize their casualties while maximizing Germany's by remaining strictly on the defensive amidst powerful fortifications. Let the Germans bleed themselves white against our impregnable defenses, then will come the time of ultimate decision, was the opinion of French generals and statesmen. To further undermine German strength and morale a blockade would be instituted by the Royal Navy just as had proven so effective in the previous war. In this, as in so many other
respects, the French High Command prepared to fight the German army as if the German army were a replica of the French or, on the other hand, as if the Germans, by not subscribing to the true faith of the continuous front, were infidels whose ideas could be ignored.84

The fact remains that the C-C in 1940 and his predecessors were agreed on their broad conception of the war to come. And generals like Georges and Billotte and Protelat and Besson and Doumenc thought no differently. For them one fact took precedence over everything else; the combined resources of the French and British empires surpassed the resources of Germany and there would be time enough behind the shield of the Maginot Line to collect these resources and throw them into the battle. Before their eyes a vision of victory, to materialize after two or three years took shape automatically.85

The only war that the French generals were prepared to fight, psychologically and materially, was the "continuous front" type of war—waiting passively for the enemy to throw itself against the defense fortifications on the frontier, maneuvering the reserves to plug any break in the front lines, withholding any offensive operations until the enemy was thoroughly exhausted or disorganized by the successful defense.86 As General Gamelin stated just before the German invasion, "In this war the first one who comes out of his shell will be in great danger."87 Meanwhile the French army would sit and wait, wait for the Germans to lose heart in the war, and perhaps for the intervention of the United States.

84. Draper, The Six Weeks War, p. 415.
86. Ibid., p. 49.
87. Ibid., p. 35.
The most important question facing French planners was in which direction the main German blow would fall and how best to meet it? It was assumed that since Germany had launched their main drive through Belgium in 1914 then they would probably do so again. Their reasoning was not without merit. There were four main avenues of approach for an invading German army. They could invade Switzerland and descend into France by way of the historic Belfort Gap; they could strike across their common border with France; they could advance through the wooded Ardennes; or they could advance by way of the North Belgian plain, north of Liege. Of the four choices only the latter route offered the Germans any reasonable chance of success, so asserted the French High Command. A German invasion of Switzerland, although possible, was deemed unlikely due to the fact that Switzerland was an extremely mountainous land situated in an area devoid of any strategic significance. A major German effort there would leave the German borders stripped of troops exposing the vital Ruhr industrial region to enemy occupation. A German invasion of France across their common borders was deemed unlikely due to the presence there of the formidable Maginot Line. In the minds of French planners, only the most foolhardy general would ever contemplate such a move against fortifications considered by many to be impregnable. A German drive in the Ardennes was considered improbable as well. Its many hills and defiles, and its deep and foreboding forests conspired to make this area unsuited to mechanized armies. It was further estimated by the French General Staff that should the Germans come by way of the
Ardennes it would take them at least nine to ten days before they could gather forces sufficient for a crossing of the Meuse River. By that time powerful reserves could be moved to the area blocking the German drive. There remained just one avenue open for the German invasion, the north Belgian Plain.

The North Belgian Plain has been the traditional invasion route of armies down through the centuries. Prusso-German armies had used this route of invasion in 1814, 1815, and 1914. The north Belgian Plain offered several advantages to an invading army. It offered the shortest and most direct route to Paris. The countryside of central Belgium is relatively flat and open, thus suitable to tanks. There are many good roads and railways, and the many cities provide an invading army with ample opportunity for replenishing its stocks by requisitioning. It would be in this direction, via the Belgian Plain, that the Germans would make their main move, so asserted French planners; it would be the Schlieffen Plan all over again.

The question now was how best to counter a German invasion of Belgium. There were two alternatives: 1.) stand on the French frontiers and wait for the German onslaught; 2.) meet the German attack in Belgium. Proponents of the former plan sought to create a great wall of fortifications all along the borders of France, shielding France from outside aggression. But could such a wall be erected? The construction of the Maginot Line had left over 450 kilometers of front unfortified at monumental costs in money, material, and labor. It was highly unlikely that such a wall, extending from Switzerland to the Channel coast could ever have been constructed under the circumstances. Aside from costs one further problem had to be dealt with if such a line was to be completed. The northeast frontiers of France contained
the bulk of her industries and a large amount of her raw materials including

two-thirds of her coal deposits. Construction of a line of fortifications through

this zone would not only disrupt French industry but would have turned France's

chief industrial zone into a battleground the effects of which were seen during

the First World War and afterwards. Thus in order to avoid such an eventuality

one of two things had to be done: 1.) abandon the industries intact and pull

back beyond the Somme; or 2.) advance forward into Belgium carrying the war

away from the soil of France. The status of a great power prohibited recourse

being given to the former alternative so as early as 1927 plans had been

discussed for an advance into Belgium in response to a German invasion of that

country. The first formal discussion concerning the strategy to be employed on

the northeast front was held by the Superior War Council in 1927. Under the

guidance of Marshal Petain, acting Commander and Chief of the army and

President of the council, it was decided that "it was not possible to establish a
direct line of fortifications of the northeast front." It was further decided that

an advance into Belgium might be necessary. 

Five years later, on May 2, 1932, Petain, still President of the Council, set down in writing plans that were
to remain frozen in French minds right up to the German invasion. He stated:

"The point is not to organize a defensive front, but to prepare a mobile force

near the frontier and to make sure of its swift advance into Belgium." Two

years later in 1934, acting as Minister of National Defense, Petain in response
to questions asked by the Army Commission of the Senate said: "We shall

\[88. Ibid., p. 4.\]

\[89. Ibid., p. 4.\]
protect Lille, but not by fortifications in France. Lille will be protected by fortifications in Belgium."90 An advance into Belgium gave to the allies many advantages. It carried the war away from the soil of France and French industry; it provided cover for the strategically important North Sea ports, deemed vital to British security; it would add the large Belgian army to the rolls of a much depleted Anglo-French army; a move into Belgium would likewise provide a springboard for a future offensive against Germany's Ruhr industrial complex; and lastly, a move into Belgium was rendered necessary for prestige reasons. Much prestige would be lost if, having done nothing to aid Austria, Czechoslovakia, or Poland, the French armies stood by and watched the dismemberment of Belgium as well.

Having decided to go into Belgium in the wake of a German invasion of that country, the French High Command had next to decide how far into Belgium it was prudent to advance. three alternatives were considered by French planners: 1) could advance to the Albert Canal near the Belgian-German border; 2) could advance to the Dyle River; 3.) could advance to the Escaut (Scheldt) River line. The first effort of the French to develop a plan of campaign against a German invasion of Belgium was represented in General Georges' secret instructions of September 26, 1939. Georges wrote: "Two allied armies, the B.E.F. and French 7th Army under General Giraud, were to advance into Belgium and establish a line along the Escaut River between Condé and Ghent. The Belgians would complete the line between Ghent and Antwerp.91 Known as Plan E, the advance to the Escaut represented the most

90. Ibid., p. 6.

91. Ibid., p. 24.
conservative and least risky of the three strategic options considered by French planners. Plan E. had several disadvantages, however. The Escaut River was long and irregular in shape, and therefore difficult to defend. A defense behind the Escaut would leave nearly three-fourths of Belgium to the ravenous appetites of the German army. Brussels and much of the North Sea coast would lie naked before the German invader. What was most important, the large Belgian Army of twenty-two divisions would be left largely at the mercy of the Germans, an event which could not be allowed to happen due to the grave shortages in French manpower. An advance to the Albert Canal was soon ruled out as being too far removed from the French borders and thus too risky. On October 24, 1939 Gamelin, (C-C French Armies), issued orders telling the armies of the Northeast front to be prepared to advance to the Escaut. By November he had changed his mind and decided that the Dyle River should represent the extent of the Allied drive into Belgium. Known as Plan D a defense of the Dyle River offered several advantages over Plan E. Defense of the Dyle would shorten the defensive line by sixty-five miles freeing much needed reserves for the front. The Belgians were pleased, for the Dyle covered over one-half of their country including Brussels. Plan D also allowed for closer contact to be maintained with the Belgian army which in turn would help offset Germany's numerical superiority. The British were pleased with Plan D because it shielded the important North Sea ports. The plan also allowed for closer contact with the Dutch in the likely event that they too would be invaded. Thus Plan D appeared as a compromise between the rashness of Plan A (Albert Canal), and the conservatism of Plan E. It seemed the best and most rational solution to the problem imposed by a German invasion of Central Belgium; but the German schwerpunkt would come by another route.
In November 1939, French intelligence detected a major German deployment opposite the borders of Holland. This information was confirmed by Dutch intelligence. This intelligence prompted Gamelin to make a fatal amendment to the Dyle Plan. At the end of November Gamelin asked General Billotte, (C-C First Army Group), to study an extension of the Dyle Plan from Antwerp to Breda in Holland. The Mechelen incident of January 10, 1940 further solidified Gamelin in his belief that the main German move would be through Belgium and most likely Holland. On March 20, Gamelin issued a new directive supplementing the Dyle plan with the "Breda Variant." The Breda Variant provided for an advance into southern Holland by the French 7th Army of General Giraud. Giraud's seven first-rate divisions were to advance as far as Breda and Tilburg and render the Dutch all assistance necessary for the successful defense of that country. Gamelin's amendment was to have grave repercussions for the destiny of the Third French Republic. Giraud's 7th Army constituted Georges' (C-C Northeast Front) sole mobile reserve and its commitment to Holland left the French army without an adequate reserve to counter an enemy breakthrough. A full thirty Anglo-French divisions were now committed to an advance into the Low Countries. This force included two out of three of France's armoured divisions, five out of seven motorized divisions, and all three French light mechanized divisions. In other words over two-thirds of France's mechanized divisions were being thrown into the Low Countries to meet what was anticipated to be the main German blow. Among the few to have reservations about the amended Dyle Plan was the commander who was to direct it, General Georges. Georges saw Giraud's dash into Holland as being
nothing more than a dangerous "adventure" and cautioned Gamelin about being too intrepid in his advance into Belgium. On December 5 he sent to Gamelin a memorandum which read,

The problem is dominated by the question of available forces . . . There is no doubt that our offensive manoeuvre in Belgium and Holland should be conducted with the caution of not allowing ourselves to commit the major part of our reserves in that part of the theatre, in face of a German action which could be nothing more than a diversion. For example, in the event of an attack in force breaking out in the centre, on our front between the Meuse and Moselle, we could be deprived of the necessary means for a counter-attack.92

The Allied dispositions just before the German offensive read as follows. Along the Channel Coast was the French Seventh Army of General Giraud, (7 divisions); next in line came the British Expeditionary Force of Lord Gort, (10 divisions); next to the B.E.F. came the French First Army of General Blanchard, (10 divisions); next in line was the French Ninth Army of General Corap, (9 1/2 divisions); and next to the Ninth Army was the French Second Army of General Huntziger, (7 divisions). All of these armies comprised the First Army Group of General Billotte. It was Billotte's Army Group that was to establish a defensive line in Holland and Belgium: the Seventh Army was to advance into Holland, the B.E.F. and French First Army were to establish a line along the Dyle extending from Louvain to Namur, while the Ninth and Second armies formed the pivot for the advance, based in the Ardennes between Namur and Longwy.

Meanwhile the French Third, Fourth, and Fifth Armies were tied down in static roles along the Maginot Line under the over-all direction of General Pretélat's Second Army Group. General Besson's Third Army Group consisting

92. Home, To Lose A Battle, p. 126.
of the French Eighth Army covered the Swiss and Italian borders. In all, nearly 60% of the French Army was deployed in static roles in and around the Maginot Line—troops that could have been better employed elsewhere. French strength was scattered, in even proportions, all across the front in an attempt to be strong everywhere. In not one area was there concentrated forces large enough to render a decision on the field of battle. It is one of the truisms of war that those who attempt to be strong everywhere are strong nowhere. When one of Napoleon's marshals brought him a plan of campaign in which the French Army was neatly and evenly lined up form one end of the Frontier to the other, Napoleon asked heartlessly, "Are you trying to stop smuggling?" Napoleon could have asked the same question of General Gamelin.

One trouble with Plan D was that it was neither a real offensive strategy nor an old fashioned defensive one. It was a defensive strategy on an advanced line and therefore contained the worst features of both. Because it was fundamentally defensive, it gave the Germans the initiative. Because it was on an advanced line, the necessity of rushing forward half-way into Belgium gave the French many of the problems of an offensive strategy which they were not prepared to handle in doctrine or in material. Perhaps the most fatal weakness in the Allied dispositions was the tragic and foolhardy neglect of their defenses in the Ardennes region. As far back as 1934, Marshal Petain had declared the Ardennes to be "impenetrable" and an area that was "not dangerous." Petain said to the Army commission to the Senate:

93. Draper, The Six Weeks War, p. 41.
94. Ibid., p. 32.
Starting from Montmedy is the Ardennes Forest. It is impenetrable if we make some special dispositions. Consequently, we consider this a zone of destruction. . . . Since this front would have no depth, the enemy could not take action in it, and if he should, we will catch him again as he comes out of the forest. Hence this sector is not dangerous.95

Petain's blind assurance of the impenetrability of the Ardennes in 1934 was the assumption of the French command in 1940.96 In his plan of war submitted to Daladier in February 1940, General Gamelin had not even mentioned the Ardennes.97 In his secret Instruction No. 82 of March 14 General Georges, in outlining the possible moves of the enemy, had asserted that in the Ardennes "one can count on a relatively slow development of operations because of the poverty of the rail lines and roads there."98 French commanders reckoned that it would take two weeks for the Germans to successfully traverse the Ardennes, time enough for the transfer of French reserves to the Meuse to block them.

But was the Ardennes "impenetrable" as Petain and other French generals asserted? Its appearance would warrant such an assumption. The region was heavily wooded, its valleys studded with hills, its roads narrow and winding. Six centuries before Petrarch had declared the Ardennes to be "that savage and inhospitable forest from which warriors and arms emerge at great
risk." Julius Caesar concluded in his Commentaries that the Ardennes's "ill-defined and half-concealed paths made it impossible for men to advance in close formation and that the terrain in this region acted as a protection for the enemy." In August of 1914 French General Langle de Cary was ambushed and heavily defeated in this very region, an event still fresh in French memories. But was the Ardennes impenetrable? History belied such an assertion. Between the 16th and 18th centuries no less than ten successful operations had been carried out in the Ardennes.101

It was because French generals considered the Ardennes impenetrable that they were to station in this region their weakest armies. In this region were placed the French Ninth and Second Armies. The Ninth Army was responsible for defending the Meuse front from Namur to Sedan. Along this sixty-five mile front Ninth Army deployed 200,000 men organized into nine and one-half divisions. According to French military doctrine 3.5-4.0 miles should be the maximum frontage of a division on the defensive. On the Ninth Army front divisions were holding ten mile frontages. In fact Ninth Army held the most extended front of any other French or British army. Of Ninth Army's nine-and-one-half divisions only two were made up solely of regulars. The balance of the Army was made up of two series A divisions, two series B divisions, one fortress division, and two-and-one-half cavalry divisions. Of the


series A divisions only 23% of the officers, 17% of the N.C.O.'s, and 2% of the rank and file were regulars. The series B divisions were entirely reservist while the fortress division was all but immobile. The cavalry divisions were good only for screening and scouting and in no way could stand up to a panzer division. Ninth Army furthermore could field only 200 tanks, one-third of 1918 vintage. Only one of Ninth Army's divisions had their full supplement of anti-tank guns. The colonels were all over age and most of the men were forty or over and heads of families.102 There were also a large number of colonials in Ninth Army coming from lands as distant as North Africa, Indo-China, and Madagascar, few spoke French or cared to learn. General Alan Brooke of the British Army attended an Armistice Day parade in November, 1939 in the Ninth Army sector of the front. Watching the Ninth Army honour guard pass by Alan Brooke was shocked:

I can still see those troops now. Seldom have I seen anything more slovenly and badly turned out. Men unshaven, horses ungroomed, clothes and saddlery that did not fit, vehicles dirty, and complete lack of pride in themselves or their units. What shook me most, however, was the look in the men's faces, disgruntled and insubordinate looks, and although ordered to give "eyes left" hardly a man bothered to do so.103

Of the other French army in the Ardennes, the Second, things were not much better. The greater part of Second Army was deployed in the Western extremity of the Maginot Line. At Sedan was placed the weakest corps of Second Army. It was at Sedan that the Germans would make their biggest attack. The unpleasant task of defending the Sedan area fell to General Grandsard's Tenth Corps. Both of Tenth Corps's divisions were series B and

103. Home, To Lose A Battle, p. 188.
their weaknesses were no secret to Grandsard who stated that "cases of ill-will were rare, but the ardour for work, for training and the desire to fight, were even rarer." The general went on to say that "nonchalance was general; it was accompanied by the feeling that France could not be beaten, that Germany would be beaten without a battle."\textsuperscript{104} Of 450 officers in the Tenth Corp's 55th Division only twenty were regulars. The 71st Division at Sedan could muster only 10,000 men out of a normal establishment of 17,000. Its commanding general was old and physically enfeebled, unable to inspire his troops, his replacement a matter of days away.\textsuperscript{105} Only half a day a week was given to training and fire practice, the rest of the time was spent working on fortifications which never seemed to get finished. Sarraz-Bournet of the Deixième Bureau observed near Givet barbed wire entanglements of which the stakes could be pulled out with ease.\textsuperscript{106} Pierre Taittinger of the Chamber's Army Committee made a tour of the Meuse front and later reported glaring weaknesses in the Sedan sector:

> the defensive measures in this sector are rudimentary, not to say embryonic ... In certain works the concrete has not yet been poured. Along the approaches the minefields which have not been laid, the destructions which are envisaged, and the resistance of the blockhouses cannot hold up the enemy for more than an hour.\textsuperscript{107}

The deputies said afterward that they "trembled at the thought of what a German attack would do in this sector." Such fears fell on deaf ears at French

\textsuperscript{104} Ibid., p. 189.
\textsuperscript{105} Ibid., p. 190.
\textsuperscript{106} Ibid., p. 193.
\textsuperscript{107} Shirer, The Collapse of the Third Republic, p. 599.
Supreme Headquarters where the main German assault was still believed to be coming via the Belgian Plain. The front opposite the Ardennes would continue to suffer from neglect. André Maurois wrote of his experiences on the Meuse front:

I visited the troops outside Fourmies and Charleville and was struck by their lack of numbers. Returning to Vervins, I had the feeling of traversing an abandoned country. As the car rolled from one ungarrisoned village to another I could not keep from thinking of an invading army. How little trouble it would have had, once the frontier was crossed, in advancing as far as Vervins! And what would it have found at the entrance to the town? Wooden barricades that a child could have knocked down, a sentinel with a fixed bayonet and a police officer. That was not much to stop an armoured division.  

The commanders of the Ninth and Second armies, Corap and Huntzinger, were both new to mobile warfare. They had seen much service overseas and had never used tanks. Both lacked resolve and were inclined toward the linear concepts of the First World War. These were the men who would be pitted against Germany's panzer elite. They and the forces they commanded can only be seen as the sacrificial lambs of French stupidity and shortsightedness. What French reasoning failed to realize was that the Ardennes was not impenetrable and that the Germans could traverse it faster and in greater strength than they ever imagined.

On the 27th of September 1939 as the Polish Campaign wound down Hitler conferred with the top commanders of the German armed forces. After giving them a resumé of his conception of the political and military situation,

he disclosed his decision to launch an attack on the west front at the earliest possible date this year. German army commanders were aghast at the idea of launching an offensive in the west that year. It would take some time to shift the large number of troops and vehicles form east to west and German industry needed to be upgraded and expanded before such a major campaign could be conducted. Hitler would hear none of his generals' objections to an early start of the Western Campaign. To Hitler there was no time to be lost if Germany was to take advantage of her initial superiority in numbers and air power. There was no telling how long the favorable strategic situation, then existent, would last. On October 9 Hitler informed the Oberkommando des Heeres (OKH) or German Army High Command, to be ready to commence offensive operations by November 25 (later amended to November 12). On October 19 OKH submitted a plan for the Western Campaign codenamed "Fall Gelb." Fall Gelb provided for

a strategic concentration of the bulk of the German Field Army, organized into two army groups, along the Dutch, Belgian, and Luxembourg boundary from north of Wesel up to Trier. The point of main effort was to be in the sector of General von Bock's northern Army Group B, comprising the Eighteenth, Second, Sixth and Fourth Armies. In this sector all the German armoured units were concentrated in the area of Aachen, and were to form a mighty attack wedge which would drive rapidly through Belgium and Northern France, opening the way to the Channel coast for the closely pursuing infantry divisions. Generaloberst von Rundstedt's southern Army Group A, comprising only the Twelfth and Sixteenth armies, was assigned to advance through the Ardennes and Luxembourg in a west-north-westerly direction and to cover the main attack forces against the south. A third, considerably weaker group of forces, Generaloberst von Leeb's Army Group C, was assigned to defend the west wall between Trier and the Swiss border.


Thus, just as the French High Command had anticipated, the Germans were planning to launch their main assault through Belgium. All ten of Germany's panzer divisions would be deployed with Bock's Army Group to the north. Unlike the original Schlieffen Plan, Fall Gelb made no provision for a knock-out blow against France. It merely sought the defeat of Holland, Belgium and all Allied troops in those countries preparatory to an occupation of the Channel Coast. Paragraph one of the operational order read: "To defeat the largest possible element of the French and Allied armies and simultaneously to gain as much territory as possible in Holland, Belgium, and northern France as a basis for a successful air and sea operation against Britain and as a broad protective zone for the Ruhr." Fall Gelb was in essence a cautious "wait and see" plan with all subsequent movements being conducted in accordance with the changing situations of the moment. Franz Halder, chief planner at OKH, wrote, "In view of the fact that it was anticipated that the first battles, which would decisively affect the further course of operations, would take place in the immediate vicinity of the eastern border of Belgium, the initial geographic objectives for both groups, (A and B), were not too far distant. Further decisions had to be reserved for later. The operational plan submitted by OKH was accepted by Hitler who continued to press for an early start to the campaign.

111. Ibid., p. 98.

Support for the OKH plan was not unanimous, however. Acting as von Rundstedt's chief of staff in Army Group A was a soldier of genius who saw the OKH plan as the ruination of Germany's offensive superiority to no avail. That soldier of genius was Colonel General Erich von Manstein. To von Manstein Fall Gelb merely represented a watered-down version of the old Schlieffen plan. He asked the question, "What could possibly be achieved by turning up a war plan our opponents had already rehearsed with us once before and against whose repetition they were bound to have taken full precautions?" A repetition of the Schlieffen Plan, predicted Manstein, would merely result in the head-on collision between the main Allied and German armies. Such an event would preclude a decisive victory. Manstein further wrote:

Thus the German assault wing would have no opportunity, as in 1914, of achieving strategic surprise by a grand-scale outflanking movement. With the arrival of the Anglo-French forces it would have to fight an opponent as strong as itself and attack him more or less frontally at that.

Even should the Allied armies be defeated in Belgium they would be given ample opportunity of falling back gradually to the highly defensible Somme-Aisne river lines. Once there, the Allied Armies could bring up reserves and establish an even more formidable defensive position. Thus, according to von Manstein, the OKH plan offered only a partial success insuring for Germany a long and drawn out war. The OKH Fall Gelb Plan was seen to be rigid and unimaginative, the product of a pessimistic General Staff.

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von Manstein, *Lost Victories*, p. 98.

The rigidity of the OKH plan even began to cause some concern for Hitler. On November 12 Hitler made an amendment to it. The 19th Panzer Corps was shifted from Bock's Army Group B to Army Group A while the 14th motorized Corps was placed in OKH reserve. The role of Rundstedt's Army Group A was expanded as follows: "The mission of Army Group A would now be: advancing through the Ardennes to gain the Western banks of the Meuse in the Namur-Menzières sector, thereby providing the basis for continual westward attack or further northwest." Although Hitler's amendment had broadened the scope of the operation, the main Schwerpunkt remained with Bock's forces in northern Belgium. The amendment allowed for the greatest possible flexibility. Although the bulk of the German army would be committed to northern Belgium, the ultimate direction for the German offensive would depend on the amount of success gained by Bock's and Rundstedt's army groups. Should Rundstedt's army group achieve quicker results the main German drive would be shifted to his front to exploit them.

November 12 came and went quietly. The planned German offensive was postponed due to bad weather. Inclement weather would cause postponement of the start of the German offensive on eleven separate occasions throughout the winter of 1939-40. Such postponements allowed Manstein and the staff of Army Group A to press for a new operational plan, one which promised decisive results. Manstein's plan was based on the following principles:

1.) The aim of the Western offensive must be to force an issue by land. The offensive capacity of the German Army was our trump card on the continent, and to fritter it away on half measures was inadmissible.

2.) The main weight of our attack must lie with Group A, not B. It would consist in launching a surprise attack through the Ardennes — where the enemy would certainly not be expecting any armour because of the terrain — towards the lower Somme in order to cut off the enemy forces thrown into Belgium forward of that river.\textsuperscript{116}

Manstein's plan would depend on sheer speed and surprise, and was based on the strategy of the indirect approach. Intelligence of enemy movements and dispositions was accurate and exact. Guderian wrote that "by the spring of 1940 we Germans had gained a clear picture of the enemy's dispositions and his intentions to move into Belgium"\textsuperscript{117} Such knowledge further strengthened Manstein's belief that only by shifting the main weight of the attack to Army Group A in the Ardennes could decisive success be gained. Hitler's amendment of November 12 was dismissed by Manstein as being a compromise born from indecisiveness. To commit the 19th and 14th mechanized corps to Army Group A's front would merely weaken the offensive capacity of Army Group B without providing Group A with forces sufficient for the tasks allotted to them.

\textsuperscript{116} von Manstein, \textit{Lost Victories}, p. 104.

\textsuperscript{117} Guderian, \textit{Panzer Leader}, p. 96
Furthermore, to shift the orientation of the offensive from one front to the other, depending on the successes gained, would spoil any advantage attained through the element of surprise. Guderian was against the Hitler amendment because it would involve the dispersal of German armour, something which went contrary to the very ethos of blitzkrieg.

The one doubt Manstein had concerning the feasibility of his plan was whether such a large mass of vehicles, as envisaged, could get through the difficult terrain of the Ardennes. Such doubts were soon put to rest when Manstein consulted with the tank expert Guderian. Guderian wrote:

One day in November Manstein asked me to come to see him and outlined his ideas on the subject to me; these involved a strong tank thrust through southern Belgium and Luxembourg towards Sedan... He asked me to examine this plan of his from the point of view of a tank man. After a lengthy study of maps and making use of my own memories of the terrain from the First World War, I was able to assure Manstein that the operation he had planned could in fact be carried out.118

Bolstered by such assurances, Manstein, with Rundstedt’s support, submitted a memorandum to OKH outlining the new plan. In all, seven memoranda were submitted by Manstein to OKH over a period of four months without initiating a response. OKH, jealous of its prerogatives, chose to ignore Manstein’s memoranda and kept them from Hitler’s attention. Manstein soon became a nuisance to officers of OKH and at the end of January 1940 Manstein was replaced as Chief of Staff Army Group A by Colonel General Sodenstern. He was subsequently placed in command of the 38th Infantry Corps then forming at Liegnitz, a move which was intended by OKH to remove Manstein from the higher channels of command.

118. Ibid., p. 89.
The big turning point for the Manstein plan came on February 17. It was on that day that Manstein, along with the other newly appointed corps commanders, was invited to meet with Hitler at the Chancellery in Berlin. After the official gathering was over Manstein was secreted off to confer with Hitler in private. Hitler listened attentively as Manstein discussed his plan which was based on four principles: 1.) the desirability, and possibility, of gaining a decisive, as opposed to partial, victory over France; 2.) decisive success must rest with Army Group A which would launch its main drive through the Ardennes region. Having transcended the Ardennes, mobile elements of Army Group A would establish bridgeheads on the Meuse river between Dinant and Sedan then advance with all due speed to the Channel coast cutting the communications of all Allied armies deployed in Belgium. Such an occurrence would prevent those armies withdrawing behind the Somme; 3.) to insure the success of the operation Army Group A must be reinforced by one more army; 4.) Army Group A's armoured contingent must be enlarged to at least two panzer corps in the front echelon. The Führer indicated his agreement with the ideas put forward and shortly afterward the new and final operational orders were issued.\(^{119}\) The plan offered a quick and relatively cheap victory over France. Such a quick and decisive victory was deemed imperative due to the unpredictable nature of the Soviet Union. On February 20, 1940 the "Manstein Plan," dubbed Sickelschnitt, was officially instituted for use during the Western campaign.

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\(^{119}\) Ibid., p. 120.
The new plan relied for its success on the classic military principles of speed, surprise, and concentration. The sizeable allied forces expected to advance into Belgium would be surrounded by a lightning-like advance through the Ardennes and thence to the Channel coast. Opposite the borders of Holland and Belgium was deployed Colonel General Fedor von Bock's Army Group B which comprised the Eighteenth and Sixth Armies under Generals von Kückler and von Reichenau; a total of twenty-nine divisions. It was the task of Army Group B to act as a diversion to lure the allied armies deep into Belgium in conjunction with the main German drive in the Ardennes. Eighteenth Army, (9 divisions) would invade and occupy Holland while the powerful Sixth Army (20 divisions) would advance into the Belgian plain north of Liege. The advance of Army Group B would be formidable, and spectacular, it would be accompanied by the dropping of parachutists at key points in Holland and Belgium.\textsuperscript{120}

Meanwhile the main \textit{schwerpunkt} would come out of the heavily wooded Ardennes where the French least expected it. Deployed along the borders of Luxembourg was Colonel General Gerd von Rundstedt's Army Group A of forty-five divisions. Seven of Germany's ten panzer divisions were massed along this front as well as five divisions of motorized infantry. Rundstedt's army group comprised three armies: from north to south there were the Fourth Army (von Kluge); the Twelfth Army (von List); and the Sixteenth Army (von Busch). Three of Rundstedt's four mobile corps were placed under the command of Colonel General Ewald von Kleist and designated as \textit{Panzergruppe Kleist}. Kleist's tanks were to establish bridgeheads over the Meuse along a sixty-five mile

\textsuperscript{120} Mellinthin, \textit{Panzer Battles}, p. 14.
front between Dinant and Sedan preparatory to a drive to the Channel Coast in the direction of Peronne-Amiens-Abbeville. It was vitally important that Rundstedt gain bridgeheads over the Meuse as soon as possible in order to prevent a build-up of French reserves along the west bank of the river. Guderian wrote:

The essential thing was that we use all the available limited offensive power of our armour in one surprise blow at one decisive point; to drive a wedge so deep and wide that we need not worry about our flanks; and then immediately to exploit any successes gained without bothering to wait for the infantry corps.121

The major responsibility of the infantry armies in Army Group A was to provide cover for the vulnerable southern flank of the panzers as they drove to the sea.

The third and last army group deployed in the west was Army Group C under Colonel General Ritter von Leeb. Army Group C comprised the Seventh Army (Dollman) and the First Army (von Witzleben); nineteen infantry divisions. Army Group C was given the static role of masking the Maginot Line and preventing the large number of French troops contained therein from being deployed elsewhere.

A novel and unique addition to Fall Gelb was provided by the use of paratroopers. Germany organized one parachute division for the western campaign. The Seventh Parachute Division of 4,500 men was given the role of securing key bridges behind enemy lines in order to insure the rapid progress of German armour. Major delays would be imposed on the German time-table should the strategically important bridges over which the German Army was to

121. Guderian, Panzer Leader, p. 90.
advance were blown up. 4,000 German paratroopers were to be dropped over Holland; their mission was to secure openings into Fortress Holland (the Dutch territory encompassing Rotterdam, Amsterdam and the Hague). The key bridges to be captured were at Dordrecht, Moerdijk, and Rotterdam. Two regiments of von Sponeck's 22nd Air-Landing Division were to be air landed around the Hague to capture the Queen and state gold reserves.

The remaining 500 paratroopers would be dropped on Belgium. The objectives were the three key bridges spanning the Albert Canal and the great fortress of Eben-Emael, reputed to be the strongest in the world. If the German Sixth Army was to gain entrance into the north Belgian Plain it would have to be by way of the Liege bottleneck and the bridges over the Albert Canal. Overlooking the Albert Canal and commanding the Liege bottleneck was Eben Emael, linchpin of the Belgian frontier defenses. Its capture was the responsibility of only eighty German paratroopers. These men had prepared for the mission by training, under the most spartan conditions, on an exact replica of the fortress. The intense and systematic training had been going on since November 1939 at Hildesheim. Each man in the outfit was given a specific objective for which he rehearsed tirelessly. General Kurt Student, commander of German airborne troops said after the war, "We dared not fail for if we did the whole invasion would have failed." 122

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CHAPTER SIX

WEAKNESSES IN THE FRENCH HIGH COMMAND

The Commander in Chief of the French Army in May, 1940 was General Maurice Gamelin. Gamelin had been on Joffre's operations staff during the First Battle of the Marne in 1914 and is given credit for drawing up the operational plan that turned back the German invaders. It was at the Marne that Gamelin first gained his reputation as a cool-headed, quiet, unassuming strategist of much merit. He became known as a cerebral general as much interested in philosophy and the arts as in warfare. A senior French Diplomat dining with Gamelin at the French Embassy on one of his visits to London was amazed to hear the Generalissimo discourse on nothing but philosophy and Italian painting. Unashamedly, Gamelin was an intellectual who felt ill at ease in front of his troops (with whom his contact was kept to a minimum), much preferring the company of his fifteen adultatory staff officers with whom he could discuss books and painting.\(^{124}\) When Gamelin gave orders they sounded less like words of a fighting man calling for vigorous action than topics for academic discussion.\(^ {125}\) The British liaison officer, Sir Edward Spears, described Gamelin in the following terms: "affable, pleasant, urbane, forthcoming, smooth, intelligent, cool, secretive, and non-committal." He was

\(^{124}\) Home, To Lose a Battle, p. 117.

\(^{125}\) Ibid., p. 117.
a man who specialized in deliberative calculation. As Commander in Chief, Gamelin showed little vitality and no stomach for action. He became known for his timidity and overcaution and placed primary emphasis on defensive warfare. His chief concern was to avoid another bloodletting on the scale of World War One. While Poland was being overrun, Gamelin did nothing to aid them even though German defenses in the west were bared. Gamelin declared,

I shall not begin the war by a battle of Verdun. France is a nation with a low birthrate and it sustained frightful losses in the last war. I would not have strength to survive another bloodletting. The war she has to fight now must be a scientific war in which everything is so precisely foreseen that the losses will be almost nothing.126

The German coups in the Rhineland, Austria, Czechoslovakia, and as just mentioned, Poland, prompted no response from Gamelin who preferred to sit behind his Maginot Line and play a "wait and see" game. Gamelin was the perfect accompaniment to the appeasement politicians. General Georges, Gamelin's tactical commander of the Northeast Front, wrote,

There were great difficulties and much confusion in the French command, some attributable to politics, others to clashes of personalities, but all traceable to lack of strong men at the head of affairs over a long period. This resulted in a lack of direction and the absence of clear principles plainly formulated.127

Gamelin's headquarters was situated at the Castle of Vincennes. The castle was for many a dark and foreboding place. The castle dated back to the 14th century. King Henry V of England had died there of dysentery in 1422. The castle had also been turned into a state prison by Louis XIV (1643-1715), its notorious dungeon being the scene of much pain and suffering. Vincennes

126. Maurois, Tragedy in France, p. 73.
castle had been the scene in 1803 of the murder of the Due D'Enghein and much later, of the executions of Clemenceau when its moat ran red with blood. De Gaulle found Gamelin's headquarters at Vincennes "as quiet as a monastery."

"There was no radio, not even," as one of Gamelin's aides complained, "any carrier pigeons.‖ Colonel Minart, the aide, explains:

It was impossible for the C-C to receive direct and instantaneous reports from other headquarters or intercept radio messages from the armies in action or from aircraft so as to get a better idea of the situation immediately. Gamelin was from the first day of battle isolated, his headquarters a submarine without a periscope.

There he was, recalled de Gaulle,

In a setting which recalled a convent attended by a few officers working and meditating without mixing in day-to-day duties. In his study at Vincennes, General Gamelin gave the impression of a savant testing the chemical reactions of his strategy in a laboratory.

Pouring over his maps and mountains of reports like an elderly professor, Gamelin paid little or no attention to the need for effective means of staying in touch with his key subordinate's command posts. Pertinax says:

The truth is that as years passed by he became academic. He burdened himself with what he thought were the lessons of the war. All his learning sank into a set of fixed certainties which he was loathe to check against changing reality. His prejudices told him that safety lay in avoiding whatever might disturb the general balance of his system. As to military doctrine, he felt that he had foreseen everything, calculated everything, fitted all the pieces together and that there was nothing left for him to do. On the seventh day he rested.

129. Ibid., p. 621.
130. Wernick, World War II, p. 60.
131. Ibid., p. 60.
Communications between various command posts and with the field armies was primitive to say the least. There was no teletype service between the headquarters nor between the headquarters and the armies in the field. Dispatches to the armies in the field went mainly by motorcycle couriers, many of whom never reached their destinations or were hopelessly delayed en route due to the massive traffic jams which were to plague France. General Beaufre, an officer on the General Staff, tells about the situation, "Every hour or so a motorcyclist arrived at Vincennes for Gamelin, for we had no teletypes. Several cyclists got killed on the way in accidents." Other headquarters had to go through the civilian telegraph and long distance telephone facilities. It would take six hours, and sometimes more, for the army to get word through to the airforce for an attack to be launched and even longer for the orders to be executed.

One of the major weaknesses in the French command structure was its lack of unity. There were three headquarters each suffering from overlapping jurisdictions, petty jealousies, and outright hostility. The supreme command of the army rested in the hands of Gamelin at Vincennes. Tactical commander and coordinator of the armies on the Northeast Front was General Georges at Le Ferté-sous-Jouarre, forty-five miles away from Vincennes. The General Staff under General Doumenc was housed at Montry. It often took over an hour for Gamelin to drive the forty-five miles to see General Georges during the campaign because of the congested roads. General Gamelin held only nominal command of the airforce and navy. The airforce came under the direction of

Air Chief Vuillemin based at Coulommiers outside Paris. Vuillemin's tactical coordinator was General Tetu. The British Advanced Air Striking Force under General Barratt came under the direction of Bomber Command back in London. There was, therefore, little provision for the coordination between the allied air forces nor was there any unified air command. General Billotte of the First Army Group did not have jurisdiction over the B.E.F. which came under the direct command of Georges.

The same sorry tale applied to the French Bureaus. The Second Bureau, (Deuxième Bureau) or Intelligence Department, was split in two with its Chief at Vincennes and staff at La Ferté. The staff officers had to make daily trips to Vincennes in order to obtain their chief's signature on documents. The Third Bureau, (Troisième Bureau) or Operations Department, was separated from the Fourth Bureau, (Quatrième Bureau) or Transport and Supply Department. The Third Bureau was housed at La Ferté while the Fourth Bureau was centered at Montry. Officers of the Fourth Bureau had thus to make the daily trip to La Ferté, twenty miles, to confer with officers of the Third Bureau.

Such a mess was further complicated by the fact that Gamelin and Georges were bitter rivals. Unlike the meditative Gamelin, Georges appeared to be a man of action. Gamelin had made Georges his whipping boy by assigning him as Commander of Northeast Front. While directing overall war policy Gamelin left the execution, and thus the responsibility, for carrying out those plans to Georges. Spears wrote, "The struggle between Georges and Gamelin was extremely bitter. So ridiculous had the quarrel become that the absurd solution was adopted of creating yet another staff halfway between Gamelin's and
Georges' headquarters. The staff referred to by Spears was Doumenc's at Montry. The chief reason Gamelin established the Montry headquarters was to strip Georges of officers essential to the smooth running of his headquarters. This was demonstrated, as already noted, by the removal of the Fourth Bureau from La Ferté to Montry thereby separating it from its sister Third Bureau. Gamelin also retained at Vincennes the chief of the Second Bureau when he belonged with his staff at La Ferté. Thus, while Gamelin gave Georges the responsibility for coordinating the actions on the Northeast Front, he sought to debilitate and undermine his ability to carry out the tasks set him.

The many weaknesses in the French High Command had a paralyzing effect on the French war effort. Time and time again orders from the High Command bore little relation to the present situation. Faulty and archaic communications, divided counsels, delayed command decisions, and outmoded ideas crippled the French war effort. Compared to the decisive and fast-paced movements of the German Army, the French Army would be moving in slow-motion, unsuited in doctrine, material, and tactics to blitzkrieg.

134. Spears, Assignment to Catastrophe, p. 50.
PART TWO
THE CAMPAIGN
CHAPTER SEVEN

STAGE I: MATADOR'S CLOAK - (May 10-12)

At 0535 on May 10 the German Army crossed the borders of Holland, Belgium, and Luxembourg. The Luftwaffe ranged far and wide across Belgium and France, striking at airfields, command posts, and communications networks. Seventy allied airfields were attacked that day by the Luftwaffe and between 300 and 400 allied planes were destroyed. German paratroopers succeeded in capturing the Dutch bridges at Dordrecht, Moerdijk, and Rotterdam. In Belgium glider-borne paratroopers succeeded in capturing two out of the three bridges spanning the Albert Canal. At the same time, just eighty German paratroopers were assaulting the powerful Belgian fortress of Eben Emael defended by 1,200 defenders. Landing atop the fortress in gliders and employing special hollow charge explosives, and flamethrowers, the paratroopers succeeded in neutralizing the fortress in a mere thirty hours.

With Eben Emael neutralized and bridges over the Albert Canal secured, the powerful Sixth Army drove forward into the Belgian Plain led by the panzer divisions of General Eric Hoeppner's 16th Panzer Corps. In Holland the German Eighteenth Army had easily penetrated the Dutch Grebe-Peel line and, led by von Hubick's 9th Panzer Division, advanced toward Moerdijk, Dordrecht, and Rotterdam.

The Allied response to the German invasions of Holland and Belgium was swift and sudden. Plan D was put into effect and Billotte's First Army Group went into motion crossing the Belgium border and advancing headlong into central Belgium. The advance was cheered along the way by flower-throwing Belgian civilians. By the end of May 11, advanced elements of the French and British armies had reached the Dyle River aided in their advance by the conspicuous absence of the Luftwaffe. East of the Dyle, the Belgian Army was in a state of disarray as they fell back from their frontier positions hotly pursued by the German Army. They had been expected to hold the Germans on the frontier for at least a week but had only held for a day. By the end of the day on May 12, after some hard-fought delaying actions at Tirlemont and Hannut, the Allies were established on the Dyle line between Antwerp and Namur.

At the same time that the Allies were advancing into Belgium, General Giraud's Seventh Army was advancing into southern Holland. Giraud's movement was in accord with the infamous Breda Variant. The French advanced as far as Tilburg and Breda by the 12th, while the Dutch Army withdrew into "Fortress Holland."

As the Anglo-French armies advanced into the Low Countries an eerie feeling began to grip Allied Commanders in the advancing armies. The advance had seemed too easy, the long columns had gone unmolested from the Luftwaffe, as a matter of fact there was hardly a plane to be seen in the skies under which the Allied armies had advanced. Could it all be a German trap? Much disquiet was also felt at the Quai d'Orsay. As the allied armies moved forward into the Low Countries, Paul Reynaud telephoned Deladier warning:
We are emerging from our suit of armour! I mean from the fortified positions along our frontiers to go naked when we are inferior both in strength and equipment. We are exposing our naked bodies to the blows of the German Army!  

Elation reigned at Hitler's advanced headquarters in Munstereifel when it was confirmed that the Allies were moving into Belgium. A year later while reminiscing about the campaign, Hitler would say to his aides, "When the news came that the enemy was advancing along the whole front I could have wept for joy! They had fallen right into my trap!"  

Meanwhile, opposite the border of Luxembourg was massed the greatest concentration of tanks yet seen at war. On the 10th of May over 1,500 German tanks in three massive columns, each stretching for over a hundred miles, poured over the border of Luxembourg. This armoured avalanche was the spearhead of Gerd von Rundstedt's Army Group A whose mission it was to advance through the Ardennes gaining bridgeheads across the Meuse preparatory to an advance to the Channel Coast. This was to be the main German drive. Seven of Germany's ten panzer divisions and four of six motorized infantry divisions were deployed along this front. General Kleist, commander of five of those panzer divisions, stated after the war: "If this panzer group had advanced on a single road its tail would have stretched right back to Königsberg in East Prussia when its head was at Trier."  

Within twenty-four hours Luxembourg was traversed and by the 12th German armour

136. Benoist-Méeshin, *Sixty Days That Shook the West*, p. 82


had reached the Semois River deep in the Belgian Ardennes. The panzers met only
desultory resistance from weak Belgian cavalry screens who tried to hold up the
German tanks with demolitions. Advanced road networks such as Neufchateau,
Bastogne, and Martelange were secured by specially trained commando units
dropped by parachute. By the 13th German armour had reached the Meuse on a
wide front. What was supposed to have taken the Germans nine or ten days to
achieve had been achieved in three.

Opposite the great phalanx of German armour in the Ardennes was the
weak and under-equipped French Ninth and Second Armies. The rapid German
advance came as a shock to Generals Corap and Huntziger of Ninth and Second
Armies respectively. It had taken their troops three days hard marching to
reach their positions on the West bank of the Meuse and still their deployment
was incomplete. Seven cavalry divisions had been sent into the Ardennes to
defer the German advance but they had no more success than had the Belgian
cavalry in stemming the rush of the panzers. By the 13th extensive areas of
the Meuse between Givet and Houx were still undefended, or manned by weak
cavalry screens. What French troops were deployed on the river were
thoroughly exhausted from their route march and given no time to dig in. In
the Houx area General Martin (C-C 12 Corps) expressed disquiet about the
lack of adequate defenses there. It had already become evident by the third
day of the offensive that the French were operating on a different timetable.
The pace of the panzers was something new to them and throughout the
campaign French movements would remain well behind those of the Germans.

At the end of May 12 optimism still reigned at French headquarters. The
main threat was seen to remain north of Namur in central Belgium. The Allied
drive into Belgium had gone smoothly and the planned defensive line had been
reached. Reynaud stated, "Our supreme commander was convinced that the German army was running into disaster by taking the offensive. Far from dreading the German initiative, Gamelin asked for it in his prayers." 139

Everything appeared to be going according to plan. It was the calm before the storm.

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CHAPTER EIGHT

STAGE II: THE BATTLE OF THE MEUSE - (May 13)

The 13th of May dawned bright and sunny. It was hard to believe that two mighty armies were locked in mortal combat along a 500 mile front. For both sides everything appeared to be going as expected. The Allies seemed to be holding their own against the vaunted German blitzkrieg. Between Antwerp and Louvain stood the Belgian Army; between Louvain and Wavre along the Dyle stood the B.E.F.; between Wavre and Namur spanning the Gembloux gap was the French First Army; from Namur to Sedan was the Ninth Army; and from Sedan to Longwy was the French Second Army. Initial German assaults against the Dyle line and in the Gembloux gap had been successfully beaten back. The strategy of the "continuous line" was seen to be here vindicated.

On the Meuse Front French commanders still felt assured that they would be given time to prepare themselves for the inevitable German assault from across the river. French generals estimated that it would take another four to six days before the Germans could bring up the necessary artillery and infantry support for their crossing of the Meuse. General La Fontaine of the French 55th Infantry Division at Sedan thought the enemy would be unable to do anything for four to six days, as it would take them this long to bring up heavy artillery and ammunition and to position them.140 General Doumenc of the French General Staff stated after the war: "Attributing to the enemy our

140. Home, To Lose a Battle, p. 286.
own conceptions of time, we imagined that he would not attempt to cross the Meuse until he had brought up the bulk of his artillery. The five or six days we supposed necessary for this would give us time to reinforce our own positions.\textsuperscript{141}

No one appreciated the time factor more than the German tank commanders on the Meuse. German intelligence of French defenses along the Meuse was accurate and precise. The French defenses were seen to be, in many places, shallow and incomplete. Along this front were reservists, poorly trained and equipped. General Etcheberrigay of the French 5th Infantry Division said, "We received the shock at a point where we were not expecting it in a sector entirely without anti-tank defenses."\textsuperscript{142} To the German panzer leaders on the Meuse there was no time to be lost if the French weaknesses along this front were to be exploited and the front broken before French commanders realized their plight and shifted large reserves to the area. It was finally decided to launch the crossings without waiting for the supporting infantry and heavy artillery to come up.

For the crossing of the Meuse the might of the Luftwaffe was brought up in support. This was Germany's ace-in-the-hole. Two Fliegerkorps were assembled to support the crossings; the First (Loerzer) and Eighth (von Richthofen). Over 1,500 aircraft were readied for the assault, the equivalent of the total allied air strength in France. From 0700 to 1600 hours the planes droned overhead in great wedge-like formations attacking enemy troop

\textsuperscript{141} Shirer, The Collapse of the Third Republic, p. 656.

\textsuperscript{142} Ibid., p. 656.
concentrations on the west bank and command posts. French planes were nowhere to be found, German air superiority was complete. By mid-day the German air bombardment was building in intensity. Sergeant Prümers of the 1st Panzer Division was among the eye-witnesses:

Three, six, nine, oh, behind still more, and further to the right aircraft, a quick look in the binoculars — Stukas! And what we are about to see during the next twenty minutes is one of the most powerful impressions of this war. Squadron upon squadron rise to a great height, break into line ahead and there, there the first machines hurtle perpendicularly down, followed by the second, third — ten, twelve aeroplanes are there. Simultaneously like some bird of prey they fall upon their victim and then release their load of bombs on the target. Each time the explosion is overwhelming, the noise deafening. Everything becomes blended together, along with the howling sirens of the Stukas in their dives. A huge blow of annihilation strikes the enemy and still more squadrons rise and come down on the same target. We stand and watch what is happening as if hypnotized, down below all hell is let loose. And suddenly we notice that the enemy artillery no longer shoots.143

The terrific air bombardment paralyzed many of the bone-weary French defenders along the Meuse preventing them from acting against the subsequent German ground assaults. There was a paucity of anti-aircraft guns on this front and the German planes attacked with impunity. General Ruby tells of what it was like to be at the receiving end of the German air bombardment:

"The gunners stopped firing and went to ground, the infantry cowered in their trenches, dazed by the crash of bombs and the shriek of the dive-bombers; their only concern was to keep well down. Five hours of this nightmare was enough to shatter your nerves, and they became incapable of reacting against the enemy infantry."144 The experience did prove that the combination of a

143. Home, To Lose a Battle, p. 286.
144. Ibid., p. 291.
screaming noise with a huge white jet of flame, created a vision of apocalypse. The bravest men placed unexpectedly before such a menace, for which they had not been prepared, had little chance of holding their ground. General Conquet admitted that a portion of the officers on the Meuse front were unnerved by the air bombardment and displayed a lack of professional conscience. At 4:00 p.m. the German anti-aircraft, anti-tank and tank guns opened up on the French defenses across the Meuse adding to the cacophony.

As the great bombardment diminished in intensity, waves of German infantry lugging rubber dinghies ascended the river and began paddling across. Assaults were made along a sixty-five mile front between Dinant and Sedan. General Hermann Hoth's 15th Panzer Corps, spearheaded by Rommel's 7th Panzer Division, crossed at Dinant and Houx; Reinhardt's 41st Panzer Corps crossed at Monthermé and Nouzonville; and Guderian's 19th Panzer Corps crossed north and south of Sedan. Resistance varied according to the area chosen for the attack. Initial resistance at Houx was stiff and Rommel twice had to cross the river to stabilize the situation. After eight hours of fighting Hoth had succeeded in gaining a bridgehead over the river but had not been able to send any tanks over yet. At Sedan, where the majority of German aircraft had been deployed, things were going like clock-work. Led by Colonel Balck's 1st Rifle Regiment of 1st Panzer Division, German bridgeheads had been established at Glaire, Donchery, and Bazeilles and extended for over a mile before night's end. On Reinhardt's front, between Hoth and Guderian, at

Monthermé-Nouzonville things were not going smoothly. Reinhardt had received the weakest air support and the enemy-held west bank was steep and broken. The initial waves of German infantry were pulverized by well aimed French artillery fire. The carnage was great and by nightfall only a narrow sliver of the west bank was in German hands. It would take another two days' hard fighting before Reinhardt's bridgeheads at Monthermé and Nouzonville were secured. Meantime all through the night of the 13th the German combat engineers labored to bridge the Meuse river up and down its course. Only then would the tanks be able to cross in numbers bringing much-needed support to the thin string of infantry holding the bridgeheads on the west bank. It was now a race for time to see whether the Germans could expand their bridgeheads before the French brought up reserves and sealed the breach. By late evening, tanks were beginning to come across in a steady stream and French resistance showed signs of crumbling. Von Kleist commented on the calibre of enemy troops around Sedan: "The French division in the sector were poorly armed and of low quality. Their troops, as we repeatedly found, gave up the fight very soon after being subjected to air bombing or gunfire."147 Mellenthin described the French resistance after the bombardment as "feeble." Once the crust of the French defenses was penetrated French divisions began to dissolve. General Ruby describes what he saw:

A wave of terrified fugitives, gunners and infantry, in transport, on foot, many without arms but dragging their kitbags, swept down the Bulson road. 'The tanks are at Bulson,' they cried. Some were firing their rifles like madmen. General Lafontaine and his officers running in front of them tried to reason with them... Officers were among the deserters. Gunners were mixed together, terror-stricken and in the grip of mass hysteria.148


The battle was far from won, though, since the German bridgeheads were tenuous at best. Kielmansegg, a German tankman at Sedan, says that at 11:00 that night only a few rifle battalions and not a single tank had yet crossed the Meuse.\textsuperscript{149} General Georges described the German breakthrough as "a rather serious pinprick." Gamelin declared that night,

\begin{quote}
The onslaught of the mechanical and motorized forces of the enemy must now be faced. The hour has come to fight in depth on the positions appointed by the High Command. One is no longer entitled to retire. If the enemy makes a local breach it must not only be sealed off but counter-attacked and retaken.\textsuperscript{150}
\end{quote}

The tragedy on the Meuse can best be summed up by a postcard sent to Reynaud taken off the body of a French officer who had just committed suicide, it read: "I am killing myself Mr. President to let you know that all my men were brave, but one cannot send men to fight tanks with rifles."\textsuperscript{151}

\textsuperscript{149} Draper, \textit{The Six Weeks War}, p. 88.

\textsuperscript{150} Home, \textit{To Lose a Battle}, p. 318.

CHAPTER NINE

STAGE III: CONSOLIDATION OF THE BRIDGEHEADS - (May 14)

On the morning of the 14th Georges' situation report bore little relation to the perilous situation then brewing on the Meuse. Neither he nor Gamelin was convinced that the German bridgeheads on the Meuse represented the advance guard of the main German schwerpunkt. Optimism, even complacency, still reigned at La Ferté and Vincennes. In central Belgium along the Dyle line the allied armies were holding their own against the German Sixth Army. The Maginot Line seemed as inviolable as ever. In Holland the German drive was halted before "Fortress Holland." This was to be shortlived, however, for on that very day Rotterdam was leveled by the Luftwaffe, 900 civilians died in the inferno and the German army poured over the bridges leading into the city. The Dutch had had their fill of total war, next day they would capitulate.

On the Meuse front between Dinant and Sedan the 14th of May would be the day of decision. Could the French throw the Germans back into the Meuse or would the Germans be able to expand their meagre bridgeheads and in the process break open the front? All through the night of the 13th-14th the panzers rolled over the newly constructed pontoons but by daybreak only a small portion of them were over the river. As the day progressed the trickle soon became a torrent of men and machines. The bridges spanning the Meuse were the lifelines of the German bridgeheads on the west bank and their importance did not go unnoticced by the Allies. Throughout the 14th the R.A.F.
made attacks on the Meuse bridges. The obsolete British Battle and Blenheim bombers proved to be most vulnerable to German anti-aircraft fire. The versatile panzer divisions had massed their AA guns around their bridgeheads and their murderous fire claimed forty of seventy-one British bombers. That evening twenty-eight Blenheims returned to the bridges and lost a third of their strength in near suicide runs. Guderian writes, "Our anti-aircraft gunners proved themselves on this day and shot superbly. By evening they calculated that they had accounted for 150 enemy aeroplanes." The Official History of the Royal Air Force states: "No higher rate of loss in an operation of comparable size has ever been experienced by the R.A.F."

While British planes attacked the German bridgeheads spanning the Meuse, the French High Command planned a riposte. Attacks were planned against the northern and southern shoulders of the German bridgeheads. In the north the French 1st Armoured and 4th North African Divisions were committed against Rommel's bridgehead at Houx. What followed is indicative of the gross inadequacies within the French army. The French 1st Armoured Division was a powerful force. It contained 175 tanks, one-half of them of the excellent Char B model. The 1st Armoured had initially been sent to Charleroi to assist First Army in the Gembloux gap. Rommel's breakthrough at Houx compelled Georges to transfer it to the Houx area to drive into the flank of Hoth's 15th Panzer Corps. Due to damaged railroads and confusion of orders 1st Armoured

152. Guderian, Panzer Leader, p. 105.

took eighteen hours to reach Charleroi. Throughout the 13th the division remained inactive only twenty-five miles from Rommel's bridgehead. The division was ordered to Florennes twenty miles south but the roads were so congested with fleeing troops and refugees that it took 1st Armoured seven hours to reach its destination. In the process the division left its supply eschelons well to the rear and upon arriving at Florennes found its tanks out of fuel and stranded. On the following day, the 15th, Bruneau's 1st Armoured Division was attacked by Hoth's Panzers at Mettet and Flavian. Out of gas the French tanks were at the mercy of the enemy and only seventeen tanks remained fit for action at the end of the day. General Bruneau stated after the campaign, "I met a total incomprehension as to the employment of this arm. The High Command did not understand how tanks should be employed."

The plight of the 3rd French Armoured Division further confirms Bruneau's verdict. Brocard's 3rd Armoured Division, along with the 3rd Motorized Division, constituted the French 21st Corps of General Flavigny. The mission of 21st Corps was to drive into the southern flank of the German bridgehead near Sedan in conjunction with Bruneau's offensive in the north. As 3rd Armoured approached the German flank Flavigny ordered Brocard to disperse his tanks in order to contain the German breakthrough. The attack set for the 14th was postponed until 0600 next morning. The following morning the attack by 3rd Armoured was again postponed from 0600 to 1100 and then to 1300 hours. Brocard asserted that this would be impossible since it would take most of the day to collect his widely scattered tanks. When the attack was made on the 15th only one tank battalion and two infantry regiments could be brought

together. For the next three days piecemeal assaults would be launched against Guderian's southern flank in the Stonne area to no avail.

The failure to eliminate the German bridgeheads on the Meuse placed the French Army in a near fatal position. On the Houx front the French 11th corps was overrun and Rommel's panzers were surging past Philippville by the end of the 14th. On Guderian's front at Sedan Grandsard's weak 10th Corps had dissolved and Guderian's tanks were moving beyond Chémery and Chéhery toward the Ardennes Canal. The advances made by Hoth and Guderian threatened those French troops opposite Reinhardt at Monthermé with envelopement from north and south. The French 61st infantry and 102nd Fortress Divisions, virtually devoid of transport, were unable to avoid the double envelopement closing around them and they too dissolved in panic-stricken rout. General Beaufre described the impressions held by Frenchmen at the time:

The breaching of our front seemed diabolical, then credible. It was like the pale apparition of inexorable destiny. We began to feel that we could not break the terrible spell which had given the Germans their continual run of successes against Poland, Norway, Belgium and Holland. The French Army was nothing more than a vast inefficient tool, incapable of quick reaction or adaptation, quite incapable of taking the offensive or of any mobility. An anonymous German tank officer remarked that "the French tank corps fought bravely and well, but soon we got a definite feeling that their heart wasn't in it." Once the front was broken the French Army acted as if paralyzed and seemed unable to act. It was as if the French were under some sort of hypnotic spell, mesmerized by the lightening-like advances of their enemy.


Having failed in their counter-offensives against Guderian's bridgeheads on the 14th, there was little the French could now do to stem the tidal-wave that was upon them. The rout of the French Ninth Army was complete. Most of its divisions had dissolved into a panic-stricken mob of fleeing soldiers. German armour was now across the Meuse in force and driving forward relentlessly. 'In some places the Germans crossed by driving a number of tanks into the river and rushing the other tanks over on top. The advance was rapid and ruthless. The Germans paid no attention to refugees on the road and even drove the tanks over their own wounded rather than suffer delay.'\[157\] The Luftwaffe dominated the skies over the battlefield attacking anything that moved that was not German. French General Doumenc wrote, "The Luftwaffe raged relentlessly around the sector; communications were cut, orders could not be passed; it became impossible to control the battle."\[158\] With cries of "tanks in the rear" the 71st Infantry Division opposite Sedan broke and ran. General Menu wrote: "This cry re-echoed from group to group, from section to section. Riflemen and machine gunners got up and fled, taking with them in flight those of the artillerymen who had not already beaten them to it ... By 1400 hours there was no one any longer in position."\[159\] Sergeant Schulze of the 10th Panzer Division commented, "we found their artillery positions left as if they had fled. Some of the guns were still loaded; the

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159. Ibid., p. 329.
enemy had not had time to render the weapons unserviceable." The 71st's sister division, the 55th, soon joined the fugitives, and MPs had to be used to stem the flight. One of the regiments of the 55th Division was reduced to firing on the Panzers with its machine-guns because it had no anti-tank guns. The wounded colonel of this regiment was even seen firing with his revolver at a Panzer in order to save his honor. General Corap of Ninth Army, at his headquarters forty miles from the front at Vervins, remained oblivious of the plight of his broken army. The 55th Division left behind 3,000 shells and the guns to fire them. Hans Habe, an Austrian-born French soldier, wrote of an experience he had on the dissolving front:

We came to a house where two shell-stricken negroes sat smoking. They were looking for their regiment. One of them was a Corporal and understood French. He asked me whether it would soon be over. He, too, thought Germany hadn't done anything to him. I tried to explain that France was in danger. He did not seem to understand. 'Hitler no come Senegal,' he kept repeating. He smiled, showing his teeth and spoke at quick intervals to his comrade. 'Hitler no come Senegal, I no come Germany. I and Hitler no enemy.

A stray German shell exploded a few yards ahead of us. We threw ourselves to the ground. The Negro who knew no French shouted, 'Suave qui petit!' It sounded like 'shof ki po.' He probably did not understand the meaning of his cry. He had heard it at a moment of great peril, and from that time on he repeated it whenever he thought himself in danger... At every explosion the Senegalese yelled, 'Shof ki po!' 'Shof ki po!' Soon it began to sound like an Oriental prayer... Suddenly I heard an inhuman cry. It was one of the negroes. The negro's whole back had been torn open by a shrapnel splinter.

160. Ibid., p. 330.
161. Reynaud, In the Thick of the Fight, p. 304.
He was the first dying man I saw at the front. His eyes were wide open, his mouth was foaming, his tongue moved between his lips. And like a last wish or the name of someone he loved, he mumbled the words 'Shof ki po!' 'Shof ki po!' — Run for your lives! This was the slogan of the French Army, 'Run for your lives!' — 'Shof ki po!'\textsuperscript{162}

With his front disintegrating around him, Corap ordered a general withdrawal all along the Meuse. Huntziger meantime was pulling his Second Army away from the Meuse in a southward direction in order to shield the exposed flank of the Maginot Line. Huntziger's withdrawal merely widened the breach. By penetrating the French line at Sedan, Guderian had succeeded in interposing himself between the French Ninth and Second Armies. The panzers had broken open the French front on a front of sixty-five miles. Hoth was driving toward Avesnes; Reinhardt for Hirson; and Guderian for Montcornet. The Germans had won the race on the Meuse, it was now time for the Matador to plunge his sword into the helpless and unsuspecting Gallic bull. At French Supreme Headquarters in Vincennes the "savant" was still hopeful. At the close of the 14th Gamelin declared:

Much has changed since the last report. Still some small infiltrations in the area of Mezières-Charleville. There has not been any counter-attack at Sedan, but violent aerial bombardment and blocking action. The German advance appears to be blocked . . . All the prisoners indicate the fatigue of the German troops.\textsuperscript{163}

\textsuperscript{162} Desmond Flower and James Reeves, The Taste of Courage, p. 127.

\textsuperscript{163} Horne, To Lose a Battle, p. 345.
CHAPTER TEN

STAGE IV: THE SWORD IS PLUNGED:
THE PANZERS RACE TO THE SEA - (May 15-20)

The biggest concern for Georges on the 15th was to prevent the
Germans from hooking around the Western extremity of the Maginot Line.
Little did he know that the Panzers had already turned in the opposite direction
and were heading for the sea, across the line of communications of Billotte's
armies in Belgium. Georges telephoned the commander responsible for the
flank of the Maginot Line and told him "the whole issue of the war may depend
on it." As the German advance progressed the French High Command was
placed on the horns of a dilemma. With the panzers on the Oise they could
move on Paris, to the Channel coast, or loop around the Maginot Line striking
it from the rear. Gamelin was suddenly overcome by the tragic realization
that he had used up all the local reserves in a vain effort to save Ninth Army
and could not interpose a single division between Paris and the Aisne. The
American Ambassador William Bullitt overheard a conversation between
Gamelin and Daladier:

Gamelin: "Enemy across Aisne between Rethel and Laon."
Daladier: "We must attack!"

164. Draper, The Six Week War, p. 145.
Gamelin: "With what? I have no more reserves. Between Laon and Paris I do not have a single corps of soldiers at my disposal."

Daladier: (completely disillusioned), "Then it means the destruction of the French Army!"

Gamelin: "Yes, it means the destruction of the French Army."

Gamelin later that day warned Reynaud that he could not guarantee the security of Paris after midnight, May 16.

To plug the breach in French lines Gamelin assembled the Sixth Army under General Touchon and sent it to the Aisne River area around Montcornet and Laon. Troops were drawn from the Maginot Line and a new armoured division was formed under General de Gaulle. The 2nd French Armoured Division was brought forth to help plug the rapidly expanding gap in French lines. To help against wear and tear, French tanks were moved to the front by train. When 2nd Armoured was ordered into the fight they found that most of their flat-cars were missing. Those flat-cars had been used by 1st Armoured Division in their futile attempt to pinch out Rommel's bridgehead at Houx. What flat-cars were left were used to move portions of the division's tanks to the front by a long and gradual process. The tanks of 2nd Armoured Division soon became scattered over a wide area between St. Quentin and Hirson.

General Bruché, commander of the 2nd Armoured Division, lost contact with his scattered division, the whereabouts of which he knew not. Two of 2nd Armoured's artillery batteries were overrun by Reinhardt's tanks which then

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165. Ibid., p. 145.
proceeded to drive right through 2nd Armoured's assembly area. To add to 2nd Armoured's woes its tanks ran out of fuel. The wheeled supply echelons of the division had moved by road and became cut off by the swift moving panzers from the tanks of the division. Many of 2nd Armoured's tanks were swept up by the tide of the German advance, their gas tanks bone dry and their crews long gone. What remained of the division was pulled back behind the Aisne to be used as pickets guarding roads and bridges.

Meanwhile on the Meuse scenes of panic and chaos were everywhere. May 15th saw the complete destruction of the French Ninth Army. Its tired, underequipped reservists had done all they could against the overwhelming numbers of German tanks and planes. Corap's attempts at counterattacking the vulnerable German bridgeheads the previous day had been feeble and he ordered a general withdrawal all along the Meuse to re-establish the continuity of his lines. He was a general of the "continuous front" mold and the continuity of defensive lines meant everything to him. The line was to be reconstituted on the axis Liart-Signy L'Abbaye-Poix Zerron-Bouvellement. The French pull-back merely opened the floodgates, and the torrent of German armour succeeded in outrunning Corap's proposed defensive line before it could even be manned. As already alluded to, the French retreat became a rout. General Hassler of the French 22nd Division provides an eyewitness account of the carnage:
We passed through Couvin where all kinds of columns were mixed up together... The disorder worsened and our men in whom fatigue had exceeded anything that one could imagine, mounted on any vehicles they encountered, despite their officers who attempted to stop them... There were scenes of horror which occurred with women and children lying alongside the road dead or wounded, stretched out in ditches. The planes came in quantity, machine-gunning and bombarding in turn, increasing the confusion.  

Karl Stackelberg, a war diarist traveling with 41st Panzer Corps, describes what he saw along the Corps' line of advance:

All along the side of the road lay dead horses, abandoned baggage wagons, from which cases had tumbled down, their contents strewn about the ground, rifles thrown away, steel helmets, saddles and all kinds of other pieces of equipment. I saw dead Frenchmen lying in the ditches. I saw abandoned guns, riderless horses roaming about, and often this scene escalated to regular barricades compounded of vehicles, guns and dead horses that had been shot up together.

Stackelberg tells us what else he saw along the roadside:

There was a French column marching past our tanks. They had however no weapons and did not keep their heads up... They were marching willingly without any guard into imprisonment. Behind this first company which I saw followed new groups, ever new groups... It was inexplicable. How was it possible, that after this first major battle on French territory, after this victory on the Meuse, this gigantic consequence should follow? How was it possible, these French soldiers with their officers, so completely downcast, so completely demoralized, would allow themselves to go more or less voluntarily into imprisonment.

Even the Germans were surprised by the enormity of their victory and the quickness of their advance. Rommel was well ahead of his fellow tankers driving through Avesnes with guns blazing and moving on La Cateau. He describes what he saw along the way,

166. Home, To Lose a Battle, p. 354.
167. Ibid., p. 357.
168. Ibid., p. 357.
civilians and French troops, their faces distorted with terror, lay huddled in the ditches, alongside hedges and in every hollow beside the road. The French troops were completely overcome by surprise at our sudden appearance, laid down their arms and marched to the east beside our column. 169

To try to stem the German advance General de Gaulle was ordered to strike at the flank of Guderian's corps with his 4th Armoured Division. De Gaulle attacked at Montcornet and Laon on the 15th and 16th and, despite initial successes, was forced to pull back beyond the Aisne. His division, being newly constituted, lacked support elements and was without air support preventing it from sustaining his early successes. The issue turned on the time factor at stage after stage. French countermoves were repeatedly thrown out of gear because their timing was too slow to catch up with changing situations, and that was due to the fact that the German van kept on moving faster than the French had contemplated. 170 Orders sent out from Vincennes by motorcycle courier often did not reach the frontline commands until a day after they were issued and sometimes not at all. Accidents along the much congested roads claimed many couriers, and overhead was the Luftwaffe, dominant and aggressive, paving the way for the advance of the panzers. This was a wholly new form of warfare to which the French were sadly unaccustomed.

De Gaulle's pre-war prophecies were becoming reality;

But the wall once pierced, larger possibilities might suddenly lie open. The mechanized army would then deploy fanwise to exploit its gains. After a success, we shall rush to gather its fruits and to thrust out


170. Liddell Hart, Strategy, p. 247
into the zone of prizes ... Then will lie open the road to great victories, to those victories which, by their deep and rapidly extended effects, lead to a general collapse among the enemy, as the smashing of a pillar brings down a cathedral.

With the breaking of the French front, Paul Reynaud began to go to pieces. That night, the 15th he telephoned Churchill who tells us what ensued:

I was woken up with the news that M. Reynaud was on the telephone at my bedside. 'We have been defeated.' As I did not immediately respond, he said again, 'We are beaten; we have lost the battle.' I said, 'Surely it cannot have happened so soon.' But he replied; 'The front is broken near Sedan, they are pouring through in great numbers with tanks and armoured cars.' I then said, 'All experiences show that the offensive will come to an end after a while. I remember the 21st March 1918. After five or six days they have to halt for supplies and the opportunity for counterattack is presented. I learned all this at the time from the lips of Marshal Foch himself.' However, the French Premier came back to the sentence with which he had begun, which proved indeed only to true: 'We are defeated; we have lost the battle. 171

By the end of the 15th German tanks had crossed the Oise and were within a few days march from the Channel coast. It was not until then that Gamelin saw fit to order the withdrawal of the considerable Allied armies still deep in Belgium. First to the Dender then to the Escaut the Allied armies would retreat, harassed by the Luftwaffe and pummeled by Bock's armies to their front. It was the start of a retreat that would only end at the blood-soaked beaches of Dunkirk. It was the beginning of the end for the French Army and the Third French Republic.

The 16th of May would be another bad day for the Allied armies. Liaison officers brought with them depressingly uniform accounts of the "bad


appearance" of troops. Disorder, indiscipline reigns everywhere. In GQG at Vincennes Minart records something like "a wind of panic" was blowing by the end of the day.\textsuperscript{173} From Georges' headquarters on the 16th two orders were sent to the armies: 1.) Re-establish line form Antwerp-Charleroi-Anor Liart-Sigay L'Abbaye-Inor; 2.) Special Order 93 for tank attack to eliminate enemy breakout in the Hirson-Liart and Chateau Procien areas. To be conducted by Giraud using 1st and 2nd Armoured Divisions supported by an attack from north by de Gaulle's 4th Armoured. These orders reflect the illusory nature of the French High command. First of all, the line Charleroi-Signy L'Abbaye-Inor had already been passed by the German panzers. Second, the French 1st, 2nd, and 4th Armoured Divisions ceased to exist as effective fighting forces, their tanks, what few remained, scattered in penny-packets all over the French countryside. Thirdly, Touchon's Sixth Army could not lend assistance to the proposed offensive, they had their hands full merely holding their positions along the Aisne. The French High Command, miles behind the front at their mapboards, were like blind men groping in the dark for a solution to the catastrophe, that did not exist. St. Exupery, a French reconnaissance pilot stated; "In all seriousness the staffs appeal to us as if we were a tribe of fortune-tellers."\textsuperscript{174} The French army, virtually leaderless, was moving in slow motion. Meanwhile the panzers advanced onward, ever onward toward the sea. Guderian's 1st and 2nd Panzer Divisions covered forty miles that day, reaching the towns of Marle and Dercy (see map); Reinhardt's 6th and 8th Panzer Divisions reached Vervins and Guise. Hoth's 5th and 7th Panzer

\textsuperscript{173} Horne, \textit{To Lose a Battle}, p. 398.

Divisions had crossed the Sambre driving as far as Le Cateau, Rommel's 7th Panzer Division covering a record fifty miles. Rommel, riding with the tanks of his 25th Panzer Regiment advanced so far and fast that he outstripped his own supply and infantry components. He had several times to go back and fight his way through to the rear components of his division. Always the German generals remained up front with the forward elements of their units in contrast to their French opponents. Rommel wrote: "It was my intention to ride with 25th Panzer Regiment so that I could direct the attack from up forward and bring in the artillery and dive bombers at the decisive moment."\(^{175}\) To accentuate the weaknesses inherent in the French High Command, the Luftwaffe succeeded in virtually wrecking the French communication system and creating havoc in their rear areas. German air superiority was so complete that even French reconnaissance planes were prevented from carrying out their missions. The blindness of the French High Command was therefore further accentuated rendering their decisions superfluous.

As the German Army advanced morale soared. Guderian writes:

They cheered and shouted remarks which often could only be heard by the staff officers in the second car; 'Well done old boy,' and 'There's our old man,' and 'Did you see him, that was hurrying Heinz,' and so on. All this was indicative.\(^{176}\)

Guderian had given his tank men the order to keep moving forward until their

\(^{175}\) Rommel, *The Rommel Papers*, p. 15.

\(^{176}\) Guderian, *Panzer Leader*, p. 108.
tanks ran dry and that was what many literally did. At Marle and Dercy
Guderian ordered the towns to be searched. Guderian writes: "Within a few
minutes they had collected several hundred prisoners, Frenchmen from various
units, whose amazement at our being there was plain to see on their faces.
An enemy tank company, which tried to enter the town from the southwest,
was taken prisoner."

Always the German tanks advanced along the line of
least resistance, bypassing enemy concentrations and strongpoints, and
infiltrating deep behind French lines.

Saint-Exupery wrote;

One fact the enemy grasped and exploited — that men fill small space
in the earth's immensity. A continuous wall of men along our front
would require a hundred million soldiers. Necessarily, there are always
gaps between the French units. In theory, these gaps are cancelled by
the mobility of the units. Not, however, in the theory of the
Armoured Division, for which an almost unmotorized army is as good
as unmaneuverable. The gaps are real gaps. Whence this simple
tactical rule: 'An Armoured Division should move against the enemy
like water. It should bear lightly against the enemy's wall of defense
and advance only at the point where it meets with no resistance.' The
tanks operate by this rule, bear against the wall, and never fail to
break through . . . though the damage they do is superficial —
capture of unit staffs, cutting of telephone cables, burning of villages
— the consequences of their raids are irreparable. In every region
through which they make their lightning sweep, a French army, even
though it seems to be virtually intact, has ceased to be an army . . .
The Armoured Divisions play the part of a chemical agent
precipitating a colloidal solution. Where once an organism existed, they leave a mere sum of organs whose unity has been destroyed.

The French were unable to plug the holes fast enough before the panzers
were through and well beyond. The French were like the little Dutch boy
trying desperately to plug the expanding hole in his dam. The dam had broken

177. Ibid., p. 109.

releasing the floodtide of German conquest and the French had not enough fingers to plug the many holes wrought in their wall.

On the afternoon of the 16th Churchill flew over to France to meet with the top representatives of the French government and army. Churchill tells us what ensued:

I was conducted into one of the fine rooms, (at the Quai D'Orsay). Reynaud was there, Daladier and General Gemelin also present. Utter dejection was written on every face. In front of Gamelin on a student's easel was a map with a black line purporting to show the Allied front. In this line there was drawn a small but sinister bulge at Sedan. The Commander-in-Chief briefly explained what had happened. North and South of Sedan, on a front of fifty or sixty miles the Germans had broken through. The French army in front of them was destroyed or scattered. A heavy onrush of armoured vehicles was advancing with unheard of speed toward Amiens and Arras, with the intention, apparently of reaching the coast at Abbeville or thereabouts . . . When the general stopped there was considerable silence. I then asked; 'Where is the strategic reserve?' And, breaking into French; 'Ou est la masse de manoeuvre?' General Gamelin turned to me and, with a shake of the head and a shrug said; 'Aucune . . . 'Aucune?,' I was dumbfounded. What were we to think of the great French Army and its highest chiefs? It had never occurred to me that any commander having to defend five-hundred miles of engaged front would have left themselves unprovided with a mass of maneuver . . . Presently I asked General Gamelin when and where he proposed to attack the flanks of the bulge. His reply was; 'Inferiority of numbers, inferiority of equipment, inferiority of method.'

After the war Churchill declared, "I was shocked by the utter failure to grapple with the German armour, which, with a few thousand vehicles, was encompassing the entire destruction of mighty armies."180

That Gamelin was without a strategic reserve to counteract the German breakthrough was due to the ridiculous "Breda Variant." As we have seen, Giraud's mobile Seventh Army was ordered to advance into Holland to aid

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180. Ibid.
the Dutch. Seventh Army had constituted Georges' sole mobile reserve. Its presence might well have proven decisive against the weak and tenuous German bridgeheads on the Meuse during the 13th and 14th. Instead it had been sent into Holland where its strength was completely wasted fighting a lost cause. This was the reason for Gamelin's "aucune."

France's greatest ally at this time was Hitler and the German High Command. Both were becoming worried and cautious. The sudden French collapse came as a big surprise to them. Memories of the Marne were conjured up, of a seemingly defeated French Army which was able to strike back with decisive effect. Was history going to repeat itself? The deep southern flank of the advancing panzers along the Aisne and Somme offered possibilities to the enemy. Such fears were strengthened when de Gaulle launched yet another attack at Montcornet on the 17th. On the same day Hitler ordered a halt to the advance in order for the infantry corps to be given enough time to come up in support. The front-running panzer leaders were much dismayed. Such an order would ruin the advantages gained by the element of surprise and offer themselves up to an enemy attack. None were angrier than Guderian who had the halt order amended to allow for a reconnaissance in force. Guderian then interpreted a reconnaissance in force to mean a continuation of the advance and his whole corps moved forward contrary to orders. To prevent the High Command from again interfering with his advance, Guderian had a separate wire laid from his headquarters at Soize to his advanced mobile headquarters vehicle so "my orders could therefore not be monitored by the wireless intercept of OKH and OKW." 181

By such personal initiative and dash the fears and over caution of Hitler and his chiefs were set aside and the rapid victory over France consummated.

On May 18th the pace accelerated and German armour raced on to St. Quentin and Arras. Behind the panzers came the motorized infantry reducing bypassed centers of resistance and assisting the tanks in their advance forward. Well behind the motorized-infantry came the foot-slogging infantry masses marching along the dusty roads as far as the eye could see, singing their martial songs. By the 18th these infantry corps were beginning to line the Aisne providing the vital flank guards for the panzer corridor. They would be the sheath for the sword that was the German armour. Weak and belated French counterattacks would be broken up by the Luftwaffe streaking unmolested through the skies in search of prey. It was not until the 18th that the French High Command at last knew for certain that German tanks were driving for the sea and not for Paris. Billotte's imperiled armies in Belgium were pulled back to the Escaut (Scheldt) and the new and still incomplete Seventh Army was placed along the Somme in a blocking position.

On the 19th Guderian succeeded in gaining a bridgehead over the Somme at Peronne. Reinhardt moved through Bapaume and Le Catelet while Hoth was advancing on Arras and Lille. The Germans were now advancing over the old Somme battlefields of World War One. The ghosts of that battlefield would hardly recognize the form of warfare now unfolding. The German advance was now overrunning whole French units who willingly march off into captivity without escorts. Generals were also swept into the net. The audacious General Giraud was among the unfortunates, or fortunates, as the case may be. General von Kleist told Liddell Hart after the war:

I was halfway to the sea when one of my staff brought me an extract from the French radio which said that the commander of their Ninth
Army on the Meuse had been sacked and General Giraud appointed to take his place. Just as I was reading it, the door opened and a handsome French general was ushered in. He introduced himself with the words, 'I am General Giraud.' He told me how he had set out in an armoured car to look for his army and had found himself in the midst of my forces far ahead of where he had expected them to be. Behind French lines, along the roads leading to the front, great armies of refugees trudged, desperate, emotionless, bone-weary. Their belongings heaped upon wagons and carts, the long serpentine columns of fleeing civilians provided attractive targets for the Luftwaffe. The great mass of refugees clogged the roads preventing the rapid movement of French reserves to the front. As the campaign progressed, dispirited French troops joined the army of fugitives, discarding equipment and weapons in the process. The terror was increased by the spread of rumors warning of the widespread infiltration of Fifth Columnists behind the front. Soon no one was to be trusted and Fifth Columnists were to be seen around every corner. It got so bad that even army officers were not to be trusted.

On the 19th as the panzers neared the sea, Gamelin, in his "submarine without a periscope," ordered an attack from north of the panzer corridor by nine divisions, to cut through to the Somme. Under the tactical direction of General Prioux, the proposed attack never got off the ground. The divisions earmarked for the attack were fortunate to be holding their present positions let alone launching a major offensive. Pressed from all sides, Billotte's armies

in Belgium could not spare a single division for offensive operations. The French Army was now in a state of paralysis, the Third French Republic in its death throes. Still Frenchmen could hardly believe what was happening to their proud Army, reputed to be the finest in the world. An anonymous diarist wrote: "The French General Staff have been paralyzed by this unorthodox war of movement. The fluid conditions prevailing are not dealt with in the textbooks and the 1914 brains of the French generals." General Beaufre wrote:

This few weeks' campaign which led to a defeat so total and so sudden, was from the first to last an endless surprise exposing our inability to cope with the enemy's torrential advance or find any answer to it. Like a mad dream the enemy's forces were everywhere striking at will with diabolical freedom, while our feet remained rooted to the ground. We seemed constrained by a thousand invisible bonds which slowed down all our movements. It was like the pale apparition of inexorable destiny.  

183. Fuller, A Military History, p. 399.

184. Beaufre, 1940, p. 197.
CHAPTER ELEVEN

THE DESTRUCTION OF FIRST ARMY GROUP, (May 21 - June 4)

On the following day, the 20th, Guderian's panzers gained two more bridgeheads over the Somme at Amiens and Abbeville. A little later they reached the sea at Noyelles. The allied armies in Belgium were now cut off.

The disaster now staring France in the face prompted the French government to call for the removal of General Gamelin. On the 19th the "savant" from Vincennes was replaced as Commander-in-Chief by General Maxime Weygand. Just as Gamelin was being removed from command he was in the process of issuing Instruction No. 12 calling for an attack against both flanks of the panzer corridor from east and west. Billotte's armies entrapped in Belgium was to attack westward in conjunction with an attack across the Somme by Frere's new Seventh Army. Gamelin's removal from command caused the plan to be postponed as Weygand wanted to take stock of the situation for himself. On the 21st a limited attack was launched by elements of the B.E.F. at Arras. After some notable initial success, the operation ground to a halt and the troops spilled back to their starting positions.

Weygand was Foch's right hand man in 1918 and is given credit for master-minding the successful Allied counter-offensive of that year. His appointment was meant, in large part, to be a tonic to the troops. On the 21st Weygand flew into the pocket containing Billotte's trapped armies to confer with his subordinate commanders. The meeting took place at the town of Ypres. All the chief commanders of the entrapped armies were present except
Gort of the B.E.F. It was there agreed to launch a two-pronged offensive from the pocket westward, and from the Somme eastward. Such an offensive, it was anticipated, would cut through the panzer corridor and re-establish the line along the Aisne-Somme rivers. In the process a large number of German tanks would be cut off from their supporting elements. In essence, the "Weygand Plan" was nothing but a reformulation of Gamelin's plan of the 19th. In the meantime three vital days had been wasted in deliberation. The plan was further hamstrung by the sudden death of General Billotte in an auto accident on the 21st. Billotte was to be the tactical coordinator of the northern pincer and was the man most intimate with the details of the plan. It was not until three days after Billotte's accident that a replacement was found in the person of General Blanchard of 1st Army. Such delays doomed what little chance the plan had had for success. Weygand's plan was fallacious from the start. Billotte's armies in the north were in a state of chaos, fighting desperately to hold their positions against assaults from all sides. Frere's army on the Somme contained a mere five under-equipped divisions, hardly a force sufficient to penetrate the strong German defenses along the Somme. The Somme was now being lined by a thick belt of German infantry who, by hard marching in the previous days, had reached their allotted positions along the river.

The German panzers were meanwhile sweeping up the Channel coast and by the 26th both Boulogne and Calais had fallen. The only hope for the entrapped armies in the north was evacuation by sea from the only port still open, Dunkirk. On the 28th of May, Belgium surrendered; the much battered Belgian army had had enough. The B.E.F. was making for Dunkirk by the 24th and the French troops in the pockets began to feel deserted. Each side began to blame the other for the disaster. De Gaulle wrote:
The crumbling of the whole system of doctrines and organization to which our leaders had attached themselves deprived them of their motive force. A sort of moral inhibition made them suddenly doubtful of everything and especially themselves. From then on the centrifugal forces were to show themselves rapidly. The king of the Belgians was not slow to contemplate surrender; Lord Gort, re-embarkation; General Weygand, the armistice.185

Traveling along with the German Army was the American correspondent, William Shirer. Having viewed the German Army in action, Shirer could not but be amazed at what he saw. He wrote:

All day long at the front, you pass unending mechanized columns. They stretch clear across Belgium unbroken. And what a magnificent machine that keeps them running as smoothly. In fact that is the chief impression you get from watching the German Army at work. It is a gigantic impersonal war machine, run as coolly and efficiently, say, as our automobile industry in Detroit.186

Shirer went on to describe the military techniques of the German Army;

From all I've seen the French let the Germans dictate a new kind of warfare. This was fought largely along the main roads, rarely on a line running across the country. . . . An Austrian soldier told me last night that it was unbelievably simple. They went down the roads with tanks, with artillery support in the rear. Seldom did they meet any serious resistance. Dug-outs or posts here and there would fire. Usually the German tank paid no attention, just continued down the road. Infantry units in trucks behind, with light artillery, would liquidate the pillboxes and machine-gun nests. Once in a while, if resistance was a little strong they'd phone or radio back to the heavy artillery. If the big guns didn't silence it, an order went back for the Stukas, which invariably did. So it went, he said, day after day. This has been a war of machines down the main highways, and the French do not appear to have been ready for it, to have understood it, or to have had anything ready to stop it.187

185. De Gaulle, The Call To Honour, p. 43.
187. Ibid., 381.
With the Allied armies evacuating the continent at Dunkirk the French defeat was sealed. There was nothing they now could do to avert defeat. The best part of their army had been destroyed in the fighting from May 10th to June 4th, when the evacuation was completed. Allied losses through June 4th amounted to seventy-one divisions destroyed or eliminated; including twenty-two Belgian divisions, ten Dutch divisions, ten British divisions, and twenty-four French divisions. French losses included all three light mechanized divisions, and three of four armoured divisions. 50 percent of allied strength was thus eliminated in a period of twenty-five days. The entrapped armies had to leave all their heavy equipment back on the beaches of Dunkirk, enough to equip seventy-five divisions. 1,841 Allied aircraft had been destroyed and 1.2 million French prisoners were taken. It had proven to be one of the most decisive victories in military history. Total German casualties for the entire campaign were only 156,000.

188. Méchin, *Sixty Days That Shook the West*, p. 221.
CHAPTER TWELVE

THE FALL

Conclusion

The long and bitter rivalry between Germany and France had seen its last bloodletting. Germany's humiliating defeat in the First World War had been avenged and the hated Versailles dictat swept away. On June 22nd a humbled French delegation was served armistice terms at a forest clearing which only a few short decades before had been the site of one of France's greatest moments. At Compiègne, in the same railway car where an arrogant and haughty Marshal Foch had dictated Germany's surrender terms in 1918, French military representatives were compelled to repeat the ceremony for a defeated France. 'Was it just a bad dream, a nightmare? It had happened so fast. The German army's advance had seemed effortless, inexorable, overpowering. But these were the same people we had dealt with before and defeated. Certainly they are not supermen. It was just that we were not prepared for them this time. We were short of everything and what weapons we had were obsolete. It was all the fault of the politicians of the pre-war years and the treacherous communists who sabotaged industry and undermined morale at the front. That's it, we were betrayed by our own people from within. That must be the reason for the debacle.' So most Frenchmen claimed as the smoke cleared. In reality these reasons had very little to do with it.
In this study an attempt has been made to uncover the true reasons for the rapid French defeat in 1940. We have seen a French nation tired of war and fearful of the consequences of any new conflict in the future. While on the other side of the Rhine was a nation stinging from defeat, vengeful and determined to do whatever was necessary to regain her lost pride.

We have seen an army grow complacent with the years, become mesmerized with the ideas and methods of a past age. We have also seen another nation grow strong and vibrant, changing with the times, evolving a new system of warfare that was to place them light-years ahead of their future opponents. As so often happens in military history, victory breeds complacency among those who have attained it. There is a consequent reluctance to change what is considered a winning formula. The French High Command's belief in the efficacy of the continuous front made them blind to the new and revolutionary currents of military thinking between the wars. Such military mavericks as J. F. C. Fuller, Liddell Hart, Charles de Gaulle, and Heinz Guderian were largely ignored by generals and statesmen in France and Britain. These men were seen to be dangerous anachronisms of an age long since gone. Modern firepower had made offensive warfare too expensive and only by adhering strictly to the defensive amidst the fortifications of the continuous front could casualties be kept to a minimum and victory gained.
In Germany the losses incurred during the Great War had bred no such caution. To officers like von Seeckt and Guderian the solution to breaking the continuous front lay in increased mobility. The answer lay with the tank and airplane. With such means the continuous front could not only be broken but penetrated in great depth. By exploiting into the enemy's rear areas, entire fronts could be undermined by severing the enemy army's lines of communication and supply, to attack the brain of an army and not its body. As we have seen, once the panzers were able to break out of their Meuse bridgeheads they were able to dictate the course of events. The French army was simply unable to cope with the rapid pace of the enemy's movements. Unable to re-establish the continuous front; devoid of an adequate mobile reserve; and with their communications in tatters, the French army was helpless to stem the onrush of the Panzers.

Another important ingredient to the decisive German victory was provided by the Luftwaffe. From Day One of the invasion the Luftwaffe would enjoy undisputed command of the air over the battlefield. The Luftwaffe disrupted enemy communications, broke up enemy counterattacks, and paved the way for the advancing panzers. The criminal neglect of France's airforce before the war was inexcusable.

And lastly we come to war plans and dispositions. What slender chance France had of stemming the German invasion was further hamstrung by a faulty war plan and poor troop dispositions. The assumption that the
Ardennes was impenetrable; the deployment of 60% of the army in and around the Maginot Line; the headlong dash into Belgium; and the ridiculous Breda Variant all played right into German hands and acted as a foil for the German war plan. The inability of the French army to stem the German armour on the Meuse on the 13th and 14th of May, 1940, for all intent and purpose decided the campaign. And with Georges' sole mobile reserve, Giraud, then deep in Holland there was nothing between the panzers and the sea.

In reality, the Germans defeated France in six weeks not by the introduction of some new and revolutionary concept of war but by the re-introduction to warfare of the classical methods which had brought victory to the great captains of military history. These methods, when applied to the new weapons of the day, created a force which, for its time, was the most advanced in the world. The German General von Mellenthin sums it up best:

To sum up; the battle for France was won by the Wehrmacht because it reintroduced into warfare the decisive factor of mobility. It achieved mobility by the combination of firepower, concentration, and surprise, together with the expert handling of the latest modern arms -- Luftwaffe, parachutists, and armour.\(^{189}\)

If there is a moral to the story it is that time waits for no man or nation.

\(^{189}\) Melenthin, Panzer Battles, p. 30.
EVOLUTION OF PLAN: YELLOW OCTOBER 1939 - JANUARY 1940

OKH PLAN
29 October 1939

MÄNSTEIN'S PROPOSAL
31 October 1939

PLAN AS MODIFIED TO 15 January 1940
Meuse crossings of German troops at Dinant and Sedan: May 12th-14th
Detail of crossings at Dinant

**XXI CORPS (FLAVIGNY)**

- 3rd Armd.
- 3rd Motorised

**XXI CORPS (FLAVIGNY)**

- French Front on evening of 14th May
Situation, 4 June, and Operations Since 21 May

NORTHWESTERN FRANCE, 1940
CAMPAIGN IN THE WEST, 1940

Defensive perimeter established 28 May. Evacuation completed night of 4-5 June.
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