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The Fall of France

By Dr Gary Sheffield

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The collapse of France, just six weeks after Hitler's initial assault, ripped up the balance of power in Europe. Dr Gary Sheffield considers the dramatic and unexpected defeat of the Allied forces in France.

Early tactics

Adolf Hitler came to power in Germany in 1933, leading Winston Churchill to remark, shortly afterwards, 'Thank God for the French Army'. To Churchill at that time, France's army seemed a powerful bulwark against possible Nazi aggression towards other European nations.

The defeat of this powerful army in a mere six weeks in 1940 stands as one of the most remarkable military campaigns in history.

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In 1939, as World War Two loomed, the British and French planned to fight an updated version of what happened in 1914-18 during World War One, but with some essential differences. The French had suffered massive casualties in frontal attacks in 1914. This time they were going to remain on the defensive in western Europe, while mobilising their military forces and industrial base to fight a total war. They planned to take the offensive some two to three years after the start of hostilities.

The 'Maginot Line' replaced the crude trenches in which so much of the 1914-18 war was fought. It consisted of a sophisticated series of fortifications, which were confidently expected to protect France's frontier with Germany, although crucially the line did not cover the Franco-Belgian frontier. In general, the slow-tempo, attritional fighting of World War One heavily influenced French military doctrine at the outbreak of World War Two.

Hitler's plan

Hitler was eager to follow up his victory over Poland in 1939 by attacking in the west, but bad weather forced the planned offensive to be postponed. Then, in January 1940, a German plane crashed in neutral Belgium, with a copy of the attack orders on board.

Hitler was forced to rethink, believing the plan compromised he turned for advice to General Erich von Manstein, who argued for a daring campaign. In effect, Manstein recognised that the Maginot Line was too formidable for a direct attack from Germany. Instead, he proposed a subsidiary attack through neutral Holland and Belgium, with the main blow against France to be launched a little later through the Ardennes. This was a hilly and heavily forested area on the German-Belgian-French border, where the Allies would be unlikely to expect an attack. The plan was to rely heavily on surprise *blitzkrieg* ('lightning war') techniques.

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Contrary to a generally held belief, the Germans had fewer tanks than the Allies (2,500 against 3,500) at this point. However, the tanks were concentrated into Panzer (armoured) formations. The French had some equivalent formations that were of good quality, but they were dispersed rather than concentrated in the German fashion.

Manstein's plan envisaged these Panzer divisions in a semi-independent role, striking ahead of the main body of the army, to disrupt and disorientate the Allies. This was a very risky plan - much more ambitious than the strategy used in Poland - and was opposed by the more conservative-minded generals. Hitler, however, although not without some misgivings, gave his approval.

Start of the attack

The attack began on 10 May 1940, with German air raids on Belgium and Holland, followed by parachute drops and attacks by ground forces. The two beleaguered nations were hastily added to the anti-German ad-hoc coalition that included France and Britain, but this only served to further complicate Allied command and control arrangements.

The Germans seized the initiative, capturing the key Belgian fort of Eben Emael with a daring airborne operation. The speed of the German advance and the brutality of the air raids gave them a huge psychological advantage, and on 14 May the Dutch surrendered.

The British and French had responded to the original attack by putting into operation a plan to advance to the River Dyle, in Belgium. The Allies pushed their best forces, including the British, into Belgium. Although the initial stages went reasonably well, a French force advancing towards Breda, in Holland, was pushed back.

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It soon became clear that by advancing into the Low Countries the Allies were dancing to Hitler's tune. On 13 May, the first German forces emerged from

the Ardennes near Sedan, on the River Meuse. In a two-day battle, the Panzers crossed the river, despite some surprisingly stiff resistance from the second-class French defenders, and near-suicidal attacks by Allied aircraft.

Race to the coast

A potentially decisive counterattack by two high quality French armoured and motorised divisions fizzled out into some fierce, but ultimately inconclusive fighting. Under the dynamic command of General Heinz Guderian, a pioneer of armoured warfare known euphemistically as 'Hurry-up Heinz', the German Panzers broke out of their bridgehead. They began to race towards the Channel coast, aided by the German aircraft that ruled the skies.



The decision to evacuate saved the BEF from annihilation ©

With the bulk of the Allied forces fighting in Belgium, there was little to stop the German forces as they sliced across the Allied supply-lines. The German spearheads reached the English Channel on 20 May.

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Lacking a centrally placed strategic reserve, the Allies tried to pull their armies out of Belgium to respond to the new threat emerging in their rear. And the Germans did not have it all their own way, as French forces under Charles de Gaulle showed how vulnerable the flanks of the German forces were to bold counterattacks.

Then at Arras on 21 May, a scratch force of British tanks and infantry gave a rough reception to Erwin Rommel's 7th Panzer Division. Yet this was all too little, too late. With German forces pushing through Belgium and the Panzers looping up from the south and west, the Allies were encircled. The Belgian army surrendered on 28 May, leaving a gaping hole on the British flank of the Allied forces.

Allied high command seemed paralysed. General Weygand replaced General Gamelin as French commander-in-chief, but it made no difference. Then General Lord Gort, the commander of the British Expeditionary Force (BEF), on 23/4 May took the morally courageous decision to abandon his role in a projected Anglo-French counterattack, and fell back on the Channel ports.

The French, not surprisingly, regarded this as a betrayal, but Gort's decision saved the BEF. Between 26 May and 4 June, a hastily organised evacuation by sea, code-named Operation Dynamo, lifted 338,000 Allied troops from Dunkirk.

That the German forces failed to press their attack on Dunkirk was largely thanks to grim defence of the Dunkirk perimeter by British and French troops, and the efforts of the much-depleted RAF.

Although as Churchill, who had become Prime Minister on 10 May rightly commented, 'wars are not won by evacuation', Dynamo was a victory of incalculable importance for the BEF. The return of the troops, even without much of their equipment, gave Britain a basis on which to rebuild the Army, sheltering behind the Navy and the RAF. It also strengthened the credibility of Churchill's insistence that Britain would fight on, thus influencing the neutral USA at a time when American aid was vital.

Second act

The second act of the Battle of France began on 5 June, with the Germans striking southwards from the River Somme. Despite the fact that the French in many areas fought well, the Germans destroyed the Allied forces in the field in short order. The 51st Highland Division, which had not been grouped with the rest of the British army, was surrounded at St Valéry-en-Caux, and was forced to surrender on 12 June.



British and French prisoners of war at St Valéry-en-Caux ©

The Germans launched a major offensive on Paris on 9 June, and on 13 June Paris was declared an open city, as the French government fled to Bordeaux. The first German troops entered the French capital on 14 June, little more than a month after the campaign began.

There were still spasms of fighting. A fresh British force was sent to Normandy, only to be evacuated almost immediately. The Royal Navy carried out evacuations from ports down the French coast almost as far as the Spanish frontier. Meanwhile, the victorious Panzers raced in different directions across France, finishing off pockets of resistance, crossing the River Loire in the west on 17 June, and reaching the Swiss frontier a few days later.

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The end came with the surrender of France on 22 June. Hitler insisted on signing the document of capitulation in the same railway carriage used when Germany had surrendered in 1918. The humiliation of France was complete.

Legacy

The French collapse was as sudden as it was unexpected. It ripped up the balance of power in Europe, and overnight left the strategic assumptions on which Britain had planned to fight Hitler completely obsolete. With France out of the equation, Britain's war for the next four years was fought in the air, at sea, and in the Mediterranean - but not on the Western Front. Not until D-Day, 6 June 1944, did a major British army return to France.



Four years passed between Dunkirk and D-Day ©

The legacy for France itself was complex. Resistance groups formed, but risked bringing savage reprisals on the civilian population if they attacked the occupying forces. While de Gaulle formed an army and a government in exile in Britain, he was technically a rebel.

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The 'legitimate' French government was that of Marshal Philippe Pétain, an aged World War One veteran, and had its capital at Vichy in central France. The

Vichy regime was authoritarian and collaborated with the Germans. Arguably, the wartime divisions within French society that were created by this arrangement are still not fully healed.

Historians have located the seeds of the French defeat in low morale and a divided pre-war society. This may be so, but in purely military terms, the Germans were a vastly superior force (although not in numbers). They used their mechanisation and manoeuvre more effectively, and benefited from domination in the air. German military doctrine was more advanced, and generally their commanders coped much better with high-tempo operations than did their Allied counterparts.

Allied command and control was cumbersome, and the Anglo-French operational plan was deeply flawed. However, the very success of the risky *blitzkrieg* approach led the Germans to gamble even more heavily on their next major operation - the invasion of Russia. But this time the strategy failed, with consequences for the Nazi regime that were ultimately fatal.

Find out more

Books

Pillar of Fire: Dunkirk 1940 by Ronald Atkin (Birlinn, 2000)

The Battle for France and Flanders 1940 Sixty Years On edited by Brian Bond and Michael Taylor (Pen & Sword, 2001)

To Lose a Battle: France 1940 by Alistair Horne (Penguin, 1979 and many reprints)

The Fall of France: The Nazi Invasion of 1940 by Julian Jackson (Oxford University Press, 2004)

About the author

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