

**Neither Deterrence nor Defense:
The Failure of the French High Command May 1940**

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ABSTRACT: *Few events of the astonishing Twentieth century have caused as much conjecture and controversy as the Fall of France in 1940. The humiliating rapid collapse of a great European power, who at the time saw itself as preeminent in many respects, including military prowess, strategy, and expertise, shocked the world and promised to enable Nazi Germany to conquer the Soviet Union, completing the domination of Europe. My paper does not plan to plow through the millions of words written on this melancholy episode. Rather, I plan to follow the suggestion of Marc Bloch, who in *Strange Defeat* said: "But how was it that on many of us, and particularly, I gather, on regimental officers, the staff formation produced an undeniable impression of disorder as soon as the war entered its active phase? The explanation seems to be that the plan to stop the Germans in Belgium was an extension of the objective of the 'Maginot Line' to prevent German invasion of France. Casualties in Belgium were to be the functional equivalent of the impenetrable fortifications of the Maginot Line.*

The fall of France in 1940 changed the course of history—for the worse. Her front collapsed in six days, and her government surrendered in less than six weeks, from the start of Hitler's attack in the West. As a result of these swift events the war lasted six years, and spread over the world—with terrible immediate effects for many millions of people, and far-reaching consequences for Western civilization. Liddell Hart

I. 1940 Time and the French High Command

At the outset I should declare that this is a personal paper. The subject has troubled me ever since I was a boy. As the years passed and as I became more convinced of the link between citizen-soldiers and viability of liberal states, my disquiet with the failure of French arms to confront more effectively the forces of Hitler has deepened. If democracies continue to allow authoritarian regimes the initiative, will there always be time to respond before the total destruction of free peoples? Is there a trade-off between democratic regimes and military effectiveness? Can a warrior ethos be at home in a liberal state? Can a liberal state tolerate warrior virtues? Can liberal states have a military capability which reflects the values of democratic society and at the same time evince the requisite discipline, morale, valor,

self-sacrifice, effective violence, and decisiveness? Even if (as I believe) democratic states are stronger because they are freer and more legitimate than authoritarian states, other things being equal, have the facts of the modern battlefield so changed that this greater strength will be of less avail?

Against the backdrop of such questions, the Fall of France must be a source of concern for all those who hold the future of free peoples dear. Before we can pursue the central idea of this paper, it would be useful to dispel some widely held myths regarding the comparative strength of the German and French forces in May 1940. Despite the belief that the French Army was overwhelmed by superior German forces, the truth is that there was no significant German superiority in any respect, even if one does not count Belgian or British forces. It would be beyond the scope of this paper to detail the forces engaged in those fateful May days. The reader may consult Goutard's, *The Battle of France, 1940* or Williams's, *The Ides of May: The Defeat of France May-June 1940*. James Q. Wilson has a brief incisive analysis in *Bureaucracy*. The truly significant difference was the character of the respective high commands. Here the Germans enjoyed a decisive advantage. I will discuss the German High Command only tangentially,

letting its success speak for itself. I hope to present an appreciation of the French High Command which will illuminate how the strongest army in Europe dissolved in less than six weeks.

In purely military terms, Liddell Hart sees strategic blunder as the source of defeat:

Nothing could be more extraordinary than the way that the decisive events of 1940 were shaped. France was overcome by an offensive in which few of the higher executives had any faith, and the invasion only succeeded through a belated change of plan on the German side that happened to fit the situation produced by the rigidity of plan combine with over-confidence on the French side [Hart, p.105].

In other words, French confidence in the defensive produced a plan made the German High Command's skepticism of the Manstein strategy, to say nothing of more objective German weaknesses in men and material. Moreover, "No reasonable estimate of the prospect could have reckoned that the French Commander-in Chief, General Gamelin, would have made such an elementary blunder as to leave the hinge of his advance almost uncovered when he rushed the whole of his left wing armies into the central plains of Belgium to meet the threat there [Hart, p.132]." I will not contest Hart's account of the Fall of France, except to say that it overstates the strategic advantage gained by the taking of the Belgian cheese by the French. Unlike the Belgians, the French did not acquit themselves well enough to have a decisive strategy. Much more than a strategic failure was at play in May 1940.

Important as they are, I will largely ignore the many factors which led up to the debacle—the defeatism, the fifth column, the left-wing obstruction of war production, the right-wing sympathy with anti-Semitism

and fascism in general, virulent anti-bolshevism, the too vivid memory of the costs of victory in World War I without an appreciation of what defeat would have meant, the political farce of the interwar period, and the lack of a civic culture. The defeat of a great nation has many sources. The post-war disillusion of the twenties and the hard times of the thirties made it difficult for France to achieve the kind of unity which had enabled it to overcome trials and tribulations in the past. But other nations had suffered from the same debilities and the same horrendous losses of World War I, including Turkey and Germany and to a lesser extent Great Britain, without succumbing. Germany was revitalized by a charismatic leader who turned the defeat of 1914 into a reason for existence and revenge. Great Britain, once the war started, galvanized behind Churchill, overcoming many of the same divisions, social, political, and economic, which plagued France, and an additional one which did not apply to the French. Britain had disarmed itself, except for the navy. There can be no simple reason why the French Army collapsed. Nevertheless, I believe the abject and absolute failure of the French High Command is the single most important reason why an invaded country with a glorious military tradition and at least equal arms failed to defend itself.

Apart from isolated organized engagements and individual heroism, the French Army disintegrated. Colonel Goutard puts it with bitter precision:

This [the failure of the High Command to employ its forces properly] is how a great and victorious army, which had every opportunity to maintain and modernize its strength, came to be beaten by an army which had been defeated, suppressed for seventeen years, and then hastily reconstructed! This is how an elite body of 150,000 young men, detaching itself from this improvised army and led by an Austrian reservist corporal, could in a few days destroy a traditional army of 5 million men led by its Great War leaders under the aegis of a glorious

Field-Marshal. This is how Defeat was born of Victory [Goutard, p.43-4].

A few words need to be said to explicate Goutard's point with a view to setting up the next section. The employment of troops should not be restricted to the idea of positions on a map or the following of tried and true dispositions of troops etc. The French understood maps and troops as well as the Germans. They made countless plans which on paper were as likely to defeat the Germans as the German plans to defeat them. And although the campaign began badly for the French due to their taking the bait of a false Belgian offensive, there was no reason of maps or troops why this blunder could not have been redeemed. There was, however, a more fundamental reason why it was not. The French High Command did not understand *1940 time*. Again and again, they presumed, often in the face of a pattern of contrary evidence, that the Germans would not have enough time for their plans to succeed and that they, the French, would have time to recover. They underestimated how quickly the Germans could exploit an advantage making it decisive and they overestimated how quickly they could regroup. The Germans moved much more quickly and they much more slowly in May 1940 than anyone could have anticipated. Even the most optimistic of the German General Staff was surprised. The difference was that the Germans learned from their experience much more quickly than the French. Only the pause before the Dunkirk evacuations violated the logic of 1940 time, and this pause was over the fervent objections of the Generals in the field. The experience of attack now made them bolder than Hitler. They had experienced 1940 time at first hand. So, too, had their French counterparts. But the French High Command had learned nothing. They were still making perfectly sound plans for counter-attacks on absurdly over-extended German thrusts according to 1914 time.

There are many complex reasons for this failure to appreciate that times and time had changed. The Germans knew because they were weak they had to move rapidly and decisively or fail. Necessity made them bold. The French, along with their allies, were strong and only had to blunt the attack in order to allow their superior forces to prevail. Time, it seemed, was on the side of the French and the defensive. While this approach comported with the facts before the dramatic successes of blitzkrieg, it ceased to have any reality as the battle in France unfolded. This was not because the Germans were in reality strong and the French weak or that the Germans could not run out of gas, figuratively and literally, as the French recovered their balance sufficiently to defeat the invader. It was because the French High Command did not appreciate 1940 time. They continued, in defiance of all evidence and reason, to measure strength and weakness traditionally, literally, anachronistically. But why? To try to answer this question is the burden of this essay.

Anticipating my argument, I believe the French High Command's failure to understand how radically times had changed in the years since World War One had three underlying causes: one is the central thesis of Marc Bloch, the other of Jean Doutard, the third, my own. Bloch argues that the French High Command by becoming bureaucratized lost the essential properties of what it takes to lead an active life, properties which are all the more urgently required the greater the military danger. Doutard argues that the French High Command were not only incompetent in Bloch's sense but cowardly. My suggestion is that beneath these factors was another which allowed the French High Command to develop the attitudes it had in 1940. The incompetence of the French High Command was due to the unbounded and irresponsible cynicism of the French Government, including the French High Command, a cynicism that distorted an analysis of *raison d'état* and infected the

morale and combat efficiency of French soldiers. The strategic expression of this cynicism was the confusion of the French High Command of the concepts of deterrence and defense. Deterrence is defined as a strategy which hopes to prevent an attack by promising a rival much more destruction than this would-be enemy believes would be reasonable. Deterrence tilts the risk/reward ratio in favor of inaction, notwithstanding the aggressive inclinations of an adversary. It makes the costs certain too high for the benefits uncertain. Defense is the strategy of defeating an attacking force.

In the interwar period the High Command for all practical matters was an integral part of the French governing elite and therefore inevitably reflected the attitudes and values of the more traditionally conservative elements of that elite. In the wake of the catastrophic losses of the Great War, the Bolshevik Revolution, and the disintegration of the moral and social unity of pre-war Western Europe, the French High Command suspected politicians (and democratic politics in general) and resented their dependence on them, feelings cordially reciprocated by the politicians, especially those who led the left of center governments of the period. If the High Command could have been forgiven for wondering whether the great sacrifices of the War had been worth it, given the desultory political results, the politicians could have been forgiven for wondering whether the High Command could be trusted to fight for the Popular Front with the same vigor with which it had fought in 1914-18. In my view the Maginot Line was as much a compromise resulting from these suspicions and resentments as much as an objective assessment of the advantages of the defensive or the impenetrability of the Ardennes, both of which were grossly exaggerated, as Liddell Hart had stated as early as 1928. Important as this was as a cause for the failure to contemplate any military initiative as it drew its plans during the years before September 1939 and its

refusal to alter them afterward, it serves this essay only as a backdrop. For whatever the peacetime difficulties of the High Command, once Poland was invaded their principal responsibility to the defense of France should have become paramount, whatever their relations with the government. Despite millions of words to this effect from military and civilian authorities, this did not occur. The fault lay increasingly with the High Command. According to Bloch, the Army got virtually all that it asked for to defend France. Certainly, after the fall of Poland in 1939, no politician, least of all Reynaud, would have denied anything to the Army.

When the Meuse front collapsed in the six days after the German invasion, the failure of the High Command was even more palpable and less forgivable. Now, with all their plans for the defensive shattered, all their assumptions lying in shreds at their feet, it was the time for the High Command to rally its citizen-soldiers to the defense of France. They had over four million men under arms and a hated invader pouring over the land. Yet next to nothing of military significance happened. The leadership vacuum was very willingly filled by the Nazis and the German High Command. How could this have happened? Beneath the failure of strategy and tactics, beyond the discord of fractured social order, there had to be an explanation for so abject a defeat, for the dissolution in a matter of days of armed resistance by this French people under assault by those Hitler-led Germans. The two most convincing French explanations will now be discussed.

Whatever form the final triumph may take; it will be many years before the stain of 1940 can be effaced.... It was the most terrible collapse in all the long story of our national life. Marc Bloch, before his execution by the Gestapo.

II.Soldiers' Lament

It did not take a professional soldier, armed with hindsight, to appreciate the difference between 1940 and 1914 time. The German High Command did so on the spot instantly. So did General De Gaulle and a few other French field commanders. But so did ordinary citizen-soldiers, as the work of Doutard and Bloch make clear.

The Bloch Thesis: This brilliant historian, who served with distinction as a combat officer in World War One and in 1940, and as a member of the Resistance later, has this to say in *Strange Defeat: A Statement of Evidence Written in 1940*:

It was perfectly obvious that as soon as the Army of the Meuse had been broken, and the enemy began to show signs of becoming active on our front, the only hope of reestablishing the general situation lay in our 'disengaging', and establishing a new defensive line sufficiently far back to ensure we would not be overrun before it had been properly organized [Bloch, p.38].

Although Bloch, in large part anticipates the strategic military analyses of the defeat, unlike Hart, Williams, Goutard, Keegan, and others concerned exclusively with the military, Bloch does not see the failure of the French High Command as strategic incompetence *simpliciter*. By the same token, he did not ascribe the humiliation of French arms to pre-war defeatism or the Maginot Line complex, although he offers an excoriating critique of French society, especially its lack of a civic culture appropriate to the defense of "the sacred soil of France". For Bloch the incompetence of the High Command was not so much a matter of technique or intelligence as it was of character. The French High Command had become bureaucratic and scholastic.

But how was it that on many of us, and particularly, I gather, on regimental

officers, the staff formation produced an undeniable impression of disorder as soon as the war entered its active phase? The explanation may, I think, be found in the fact that the static order of office routine is, in many respects, the very antithesis of the active and perpetually inventive 'order' which movement demands. One is a matter of discipline and training, the other of imaginative realism, adaptable intelligence, and, above all, of character [Bloch, p.60].

And again:

Those bred up in army ways had, in the course of years spent in the bureaucratic machine, grown used to a certain amount of incompetence which rarely, if ever, ended tragically. Times changed, but not habits. To put the matter in a nutshell, one can say that staff experience under peace conditions did not provide a good training for character [Bloch, p.95].

Bloch does not make explicit what he meant by 'character.' His point, however, is clear. It takes character to operate effectively, to function, especially the more indeterminate, urgent, and perilous the situation. There are office virtues, Bloch assumes, but these are antithetical to an active life. And nothing is more active than war. "Weighed down, I do not doubt, by years spent in office work and conditioned by purely academic training, this regular soldier lost every quality of leadership—and of the self-control and ruthlessness which the word implies [Bloch, p.30]."

Moreover, this war required a quantum leap forward in terms of the French High Command's understanding of basic notions of space-time, 1940

time. "The ruling idea of the Germans in the conduct of this war was speed. We, on the other hand, did our thinking in terms of yesterday or the day before. Worse still: faced with the undisputed evidence of Germany's new tactics, we ignored, or wholly failed to understand, the quickened rhythm of the times [Bloch, p.37]." This was no cognitive problem, at least not one divorced from matters of character. "Early mistakes become tragic only when the men in charge are incapable of putting them right [Bloch, p.42]." Granted that German tactics were both new and terrifying, so far as the war in Poland could be ignored. But the weaknesses of blitzkrieg were obvious at the time to the men in the field. To maintain the offensive the Germans depended to an unprecedented extent on roads.

That is why the Germans, true to their doctrine of speed, tended more and more to move their shock elements along the main arteries. It was, therefore, absolutely unnecessary to cover our front with a line extending for hundreds of kilometers, almost impossible to man, and terribly easy to pierce. On the other hand the invader might have been badly mauled by a few islands of resistance well sited along the main roads, adequately camouflaged, sufficiently mobile, and armed with a few machine-guns and anti-tank artillery, or even with the humble 75! [Bloch, p.51].

This truth has been confirmed by many postwar analyses.

No one can say such tactics would have been decisive. It is clear, however, that the German advance would have been delayed, allowing the underlying strength of the French Army to come to bear. The purchase of all important time would have

been of incalculable value, all the more so to strategists devoted to the defensive. Such an approach would have mirrored exactly the subtlety of the German thrust through the Ardennes. Hart explains the German strategy as follows:

While it appeared to the world as a supreme example of the shock-offensive, it was really more remarkable for its subtlety. The essential condition for its success was the way that the Allied armies of the left wing, comprising the pick of their mobile forces, were lured deep into Belgium, and even into Holland. It was only through the left wing being caught in this trap, and wrenched from its socket, that the panzer stroke cut through the Allied left center deeply and quickly enough to have decisive effects. Moreover, as fast as the German armored divisions drove towards the Channel coast, cutting a pocket in the Allied front, the motorized divisions followed them up to form a defensive lining along the whole length of the pocket. These tactics extracted a maximum advantage from a minimum use of shock, and exploited the power of tactical defense as an aid to the offensive. For the burden of attacking, at a disadvantage, was thereby thrown on the Allied armies in any attempt to force open the trap and reunite their severed parts. Such subtlety is the essence of strategy [Hart, p.39].

To stay on the offensive the Germans had to employ a defensive strategy, which forced the French

to embark on an unwelcome offensive. The French response, as Bloch appreciates, should have been to attack in order to give their own defensive strategy time to adjust to the new conditions. Despite what I have already said about the commitment to 1914 time, there was nothing in Bloch approach which would have required anything more competent than any company commander could have been expected to possess. Indeed in the instances where local commanders did act in such a manner, they wreaked havoc on the Nazi columns. The French problem was not an inability to see what had to be done, but an inability to do it in a sufficiently organized way to blunt the German attack. Bloch does not think this was a matter of cognition but of character. The French High Command was unable to act or get its soldiers to act effectively.

When the Army was disbanded after the final campaign, it would have been hard to find a single officer among those with whom I was in daily contact who had the slightest doubt on the subject. Whatever the deep seated causes of the disaster may have been, the immediate occasion...was the utter incompetence of the High Command [Bloch p.25].

In a military commander character and competence are indistinguishable. Their presence can redeem all other shortcomings; their absence reduces all other resources to abstractions. Bloch sees much of the source of the character-competence flaw in broad social and institutional terms. There is little question that his thesis accounts for the behavior of the High Command up to September 1939. The strategy of the defensive was well-suited to the bureaucratic temperaments of those who filled the most important posts in the Army. Furthermore, it comported well with the divisions within French society. No one in

the High Command was willing to undergo the sacrifice and privation of the Great War, not in behalf of those people, whose ingratitude had been so overwhelmingly demonstrated.

The Bloch thesis does less well after the success of the blitzkrieg tactics in Poland. For the defensive now had demonstrable weaknesses. Yet the French High Command brushed this experience aside. Who could compare Poles with the French? Their army with the French? Their defenses with the French? This nationalistic blindness does too much and too little for the Bloch thesis. On the one hand, it usefully dismisses unwelcome experience, but it does not allow for the use of admitted staff skills of a bureaucratic army. Why were no plans drawn up—however unrealistic—for dealing with the strategic problem undeniably set by the Polish debacle? On the other hand, if French nationalism was strong enough to deny the facts of Poland, why was it not strong enough to deny the facts of the Ardennes offensive? Compare this sort of nationalism to the British or the Russian or the Belgian! Something besides nationalistic arrogance had to be at play, unless French nationalism is a very special sort of pride which welcomes defeat by its arch enemy.

And more important, as Bloch realized, the German offensive had revealed its dependency on roads. While this knowledge may have been too long in coming for the High Command, field commanders certainly were aware of it and could have done a great deal more to stifle the surge into France. It is at this point that another approach takes up the slack.

The Doutard Thesis: Jean Doutard, a private soldier, takes a more personal and individualistic perspective. It is immersed in the sort of militaristic nationalism that makes intellectuals and bureaucrats anxious:

With the army dead, shall we ever again see the Frenchman of former

days, the Frenchman who did not think the whole world was too vast for him, the 'dual Frenchman' born of the Revolution, half soldier, half citizen, the complete man, both builder and defender of his works (the plow and the sword, the tool and his shield), the only guarantor of immortal principles [Doutard, p.218]?

Nor are intellectuals then or now comfortable with the association of a warrior ethic with virtue, as elucidated by Doutard.

To defend one's country is no mean task. To fight by the side of the brave makes the most sordid men generous. [And again:] 'War is less costly than servitude,' said Vauvenargues. An old truth which every event confirms. The choice is always between Verdun and Dachau [Doutard, p.12&54].

The cool analysis of the historian Bloch is here bitterly recast in the fierce rhetoric of the journalist. What the French lacked was courage or rather the ability to bring their latent courage to bear. "Courage like artistic inspiration, begets itself. It isn't very difficult to act courageously when you've already done so once, just as it isn't so hard to write the hundredth page of a book as the first [Doutard, p.6]." He leaves no doubt as to who was responsible for this failure. Consider his views on the French military propaganda line:

'We shall win because we are the strongest.' Base words, the exhortation of a mean government to a cowardly people. They should have painted on the walls in great letters, 'We shall win because we are the bravest.' Besides being nobler, it would have been truer,

for war is not a question of arithmetic [Doutard, p.7].

The French High Command could hear de Gaulle on this point no better than they heard him regarding 1940 time. Doutard goes so far as to conclude:

I can only find one reason for our defeat: stupidity and cowardice. The generals were stupid, and the men did not want to be killed. These two things often go together. Troops know that an idiot has no right to ask them to get themselves killed. We were the strongest and we did not conquer. What was missing was virtue [Doutard, p.8].

Stupidity and cowardice are treated as aspects of the same flaw.

The Doutard thesis thus comes to bear precisely where Bloch leaves off. After the grand strategy has failed, after the politicians and their institutions have been proved bankrupt, after reason has equivocated its way into a concentration camp, then courage spawn of national feeling comes to the rescue. "Five stalwarts and a sergeant in every village in Brittany, and the face of the war would have been changed [Doutard, p.5]." How long could a million French soldiers fought a partisan war? How many German divisions would have been tied up in such an engagement? Would Hitler ever been able to attack the Soviet Union or create a Fortress Europa? Doutard is not concerned with answering or even posing these questions. For him all that mattered was the dishonor of an almost willing defeat. Neither the costs of resistance nor the benefits thereby gained by the Allies are central to his analysis. But the implications are plain. For Doutard the unwillingness to do what it took to defeat the Nazis is a sign of national shame, individual and collective cowardice (and stupidity).

Naturally, a government is not stupid in the way an individual is. It can even happen that a collection of very clever men may produce a stupid government. That is because politics calls for something more than a nimble wit. It calls for a broad view and for the force of character, two things you do not learn at a French law school or university [Doutard, p.17].

And that—the absence of character—suffices to condemn an entire generation and put into question a remarkable and fruitful cultural tradition.

For me, however, these questions are central, not because I wish to rewrite history or to consider what might have happened if... The questions are important because of the fact they were not seriously considered at the time by either the High Command or the Government. The French were not only defeated, they defaulted to defeat. They did so because of a factor which underlay both the Bloch and Doutard theses, one which I believe is implicit in their work. This factor was indeed a national character flaw, one not exclusively French, but one which in its French expression was the most grievous for the history of the West in the Nazi era. That flaw was irresponsibility.

‘Vice foment war; virtue fights. Were there no virtue we should have peace forever.’ Vauvenargues, quoted by Doutard

III. The Irresponsible State

It needs to be said at the outset that by irresponsible I do not mean non-altruistic. I mean, rather, an unwillingness to do what it takes to pursue one's own interests without unduly relying on others. By this test both Czechoslovakia and Poland were responsible states, even though the former "surrendered" to and the latter fought the Nazis.

Czechoslovakia needed the support of the West, failing to receive it, they knew they were doomed. Poland, believing it had the support of the West, fought and failing to receive it were defeated. Compare the actions of the French, despite written guarantees to come to immediate and effective aid of the Poles:

The French had an overwhelming superiority in men, guns, and tanks. Against their fully armed 85 divisions on the whole front the Germans had 34 divisions, all but 11 of which were reserve units with little training and lacking adequate arms, munitions, and transport. All the panzer divisions had been reserved for Poland. On Sept. 10 some nine more reserve divisions were added but they would have been little value against a serious attack. Fortunately for the Germans a serious attack was never mounted nor did the highly cautious French generalissimo ever contemplate one. By Sept. 12 the French forces had moved forward some five miles on a 15-mile front and occupied 20 deserted villages. General Gamelin thereupon commanded them to halt and on that very day, Sept. 12, to prepare to beat a retreat to the safety of the Maginot Line should the Germans attack through Belgium [Shirer, p.521].

This is the true Maginot Line complex; and it has less to do with the advantages of the defensive than with cynicism amounting to criminal negligence. If one is the Commander-in-Chief of a great army and one is at war, then one is simply required to use the resources at one's disposal to prosecute the war as efficiently and effectively as possible. Doutard puts it with

characteristic bluntness: "I want these functionaries, whom I pay, to know their business. That is to say, I want them to win wars. Or else let them be dismissed [Doutard, p.29]." No one believes now or believed then that refusing to attack the Germans in the Fall of 1939 the French were effectively prosecuting the war. What they may have believed is that the bully would move away—with Czechoslovakia, Poland, *et al*—and that the responsibility for the defense of France would move with Hitler. The French High Command—far more than the government which was becoming more belligerent as the phony war unfolded—was pursuing a falsely packaged deterrence policy. By 9 April, Reynaud was fully disgusted with the Army Chief: "'Gamelin acts more like a bishop than a great military chief. This cannot go on.' and on April 12: 'I've had enough of his stalling. I would be criminal to leave this gutless man, this philosopher, at the head of the French Army' [Shirer, p.562&4]." But not until 18 May was he relieved, that is, after the collapse of the Ardennes\Meuse front. Calling Gamelin's direction of the phony war a duplicitous deterrence policy may seem extreme. After all he was preparing to fend off a powerful attack anticipated to fall on Belgium that spring. But was he? In my view, the High Command's activities preparatory to the invasion of Belgium were not for the purpose of fighting a war against the Nazi but for the purpose of convincing them of the folly of attacking France proper.

The Germans themselves contributed to this French hope, *albeit* indirectly. Consider the German Plan Yellow [the attack through Belgium, favored by the German High Command], which lent credence to the defensive approach of the French. In the words of General Manstein:

The 1939 operation plan...contained no clear-cut intention of fighting the campaign to a victorious conclusion. Its object was, quite clearly, *partial*

victory (defeat of the Allied forces in northern Belgium) and *territorial* gains (possession of the Channel coast as a basis for future operations) [Manstein, p.99]."

Manstein and Hitler may have seen the successful completion of Plan Yellow as a stepping stone to greater gains, but the French saw the defeat of Belgium as a small price to pay to prove to the Germans that the invasion of France would be too costly to undertake. The French plan to contest the Germans in Belgium, the Dyle Operation, was another version of the preparations of the Maginot Line. The French movement of the bulk of their forces into Belgium and the Maginot Line were part of a strategy that was neither defensive nor offensive. The best characterization is that it was neither defensive nor deterrent, but an incomplete version of both concepts. The goal of this ambivalent and incoherent strategy was to avoid full scale war, at least to avoid any serious battles in France proper.

In my view implicit in the French strategy was this reasoning: (1) The Maginot Line creates so imposing a defensive front that it will never be attacked. The Germans will thus be permanently deterred from entering France via the classic invasion route to the heart of France. (2) The Germans will be left therefore with the old Schlieffen plan or some variant of it, as indeed Plan Yellow was. (3) If the Germans attack through Belgium, as we expect and want them to do, we will meet them on the Dyle River, imposing such high casualties on the invader at relatively little cost to the defender, that the attack will fail, offering two outcomes. (4) The first is that Germany will be driven from Belgium, proving the value of the defensive, and restoring the status quo ante. The second is that Germany will be stalemated in Belgium and sue for peace, proving the value of deterrence at least insofar as France is concerned.

Belgium might have to be sacrificed, like Poland and Czecho- Slovakia, but that is the unfortunate fate of little states. This reasoning makes sense of the following inexplicable actions of the French High Command. (1) The failure to attack Germany when Poland was being invaded in September 1939. (2) The failure to conduct any serious military operations during the phony war, September 1939-May 1940. (3) The unwillingness to consider an attack through the Ardennes, despite the obvious changes blitzkrieg warfare in Poland implied. (4) The French rush to fall into the trap the Germans set by their feint in Belgium [what Hart called an elementary blunder] without so much as a military nod to the Ardennes. (5) The utter collapse of meaningful resistance once the Meuse front broke, despite the vulnerability of the 125 mile column of panzers, lightly shielded by infantry on its flanks. All these actions and inactions make sense only if the French High Command strategy was to fight in Belgium or not at all. They had to believe that a bloody confrontation in Belgium would deter further German aggression; otherwise ordinary precautions in the Ardennes\Meuse region would have been taken. Otherwise, they would have honored their commitments in Czechoslovakia and Poland. Otherwise, they would have taken cognizance of the difference between 1940 and 1914 time. Otherwise, they would have learned the lessons of blitzkrieg. Otherwise, they would have prepared the nation for a long ordeal on French soil. Unwittingly, the Germans aided the French High Command's belief that their strategy was indeed appropriate. Their own skepticism regarding an offensive through the Ardennes underlined French convictions, further reinforced by the capture of Plan Yellow by the French.

They [Halder, Stulpnagel and Greifenberg], as well as the Commander-in chief himself [v. Brauchlitsch], obviously took a

negative view of the idea of an offensive war in the west and did not consider it the proper way to bring the war to a close. From what they had to say it could also be gathered that they did not think the German Army would be in a position to enforce a decisive denouement in the west [Manstein, p.71].

If the Germans believed this, after the victory in Poland, what would the French believe witnessing Poland and fearing the same fate?

Assessing the same facts as the French and German High Commands, Manstein (and Hitler, perhaps independently) drew opposite conclusions:

If we were to wait till 1942 to penetrate the Maginot Line, the Western Powers would in all likelihood have caught up with our lead in arms production. In addition, it would never have been possible to develop a decisive operation from a successful penetration of the Maginot Line. Against the minimum of 100 divisions available to the enemy side since 1939, this was no way to achieve decisive results. Even if the enemy committed powerful forces for the actual defense of the Maginot Line, he would have been left with an adequate strategic reserve of between 40 and 60 divisions with which immediately to intercept even a wide breakthrough of the fortifications. Without any doubt the struggle would have petered out inconclusively into trench warfare. Such could not be the aim of German policy [Manstein, p.83].

Instead of partial victory in Belgium and risking "the close of the war", Manstein saw that

The real chance lay with Army Group A, and consisted in launching *a surprise attack through the Ardennes*—where the enemy would certainly not be expecting any armor because of the terrain—towards the lower Somme in order to cut off the enemy forces thrown into Belgium forward of that river [Manstein, p.104, emphasis original].

If a successful campaign in the Ardennes avoided bringing the war to a premature close, it could not avoid being the riskiest of all plans for war in the West.

[General] Bock... emphasized to [General] Halder the risks of the plan in a brilliantly withering worst case analysis. 'You will be creeping by, ten miles from the Maginot Line, with the flank of your breakthrough and hope that the French will watch inertly! You are cramming the mass of the tank units together into the sparse roads of the Ardennes mountain country, as if there were no such thing as airpower! And you the hope to lead an operation as far as the coast with an open southern flank 200 miles long, where stands the mass of the French army' [Keegan, p.58].

Deeply aware of the risks, Manstein and Hitler nonetheless appreciated that the Maginot Line was not meant to be used, its deterrent objective all but assured. Still less was it to be a base for offensive thrusts into the flank of a German advance.

For one thing, the Maginot Line, unlike the fortress of Paris in 1914, was not a *place d'armes* from which a

counter-attack could spring panther-like against the German army's flank. On the contrary, its conformation and structure imprisoned its garrison within it, consigning it to a purely frontal defense.... For another, the German army would not be 'creeping by' the Maginot Line; its tank spearheads, if they could negotiate the Ardennes and cross the Meuse, would be driving onward at thirty or forty miles a day, as they had in Poland and as the French army, wherever its mass stood, was not organized to do. As to airpower, there certainly was 'such a thing', but the Luftwaffe was superior in quality of aircraft and in tactics of ground-air operations, considerably superior in numbers and far superior in fighting experience to the *Armee de l'Air* and the Advanced Air Striking Force of the RAF combined [Keegan, p.59].

An advantage far more striking than any tactical or strategic superiority was in the possession of the Germans, at least those like Manstein and Hitler who pursued total victory in the West, was an appreciation that the facts of the situation had to be overcome not surrendered to. The Germans were armed with necessity. They knew the Allies were stronger on paper. They would prevail in the field because they had to be bold. They had to do what Bloch and Douard said the French avoided doing at all costs. They had to gamble. They had to commit. They did so, betting all on the belief (and here Hitler gets the credit) that the French and British were simply not up to their responsibilities. Churchill put it thus:

Hitler was sure that the French political system was rotten to the core,

and that it had infected the French Army. He knew the power of the Communists in France, and that it would be used to weaken or paralyze action once Ribbentrop and Molotov had come to terms and Moscow had denounced the French and British Governments for entering upon a capitalist and imperialist war. He was convinced that Britain was pacifist and degenerate [Churchill, p.479].

How correct the German assessment was can be illustrated by first hand reports:

Karl von Stackelberg, a war correspondent accompanying German tanks, was astonished to encounter formed bodies of French troops marching to meet them: 'There were finally 20,000 men, who here...in this one sector and on this one day [May 15], were heading backward as prisoners...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?' [Keegan, p.74].

No one believed, not even the conceivers of blitzkrieg, that an army of 100 divisions could be so easily defeated.

Weak characters hate nothing so much as a strong and robust mind. Rene Doutard

IV. The Responsible State

No analysis which centers on France in years prior to May 1940 can fail to seem harsher than its author intends. When the facts are allowed to speak for themselves, they distort as much as they reveal, all to the discredit of the French, and most especially the French High Command. No critics have been more bitter and cruel than the French themselves, as any review of the literature will manifest. It must be said, therefore, that no western European state behaved responsibly in the interwar years, except the Germans under Hitler. There can be no harder truth than this. Every nation acted as if either Hitler did not mean what he said he would do, or that he would not be able to carry out his plans, or that--and this is the crux--that some other nation or group of nations would stop him. This absurdity went so far as to hope Hitler would come to his senses of his own accord, or at least calmed like an engorged boa constrictor. European states, like herd animals, responded to each aggression with a flurry of activity, mostly words, and then accepted the death of a fellow with a sigh of relief. "After all, I'm alive and the herd will survive. It always has." This was the sum and substance of European diplomacy in the wake of Hitler's take-over of the German state. Hitler's contempt for the Western democracies was well founded.

France has been singled out, because only France in Western Europe had the resources to stop Hitler's expansion. If Germany was not to dominate Europe, France must have provided the obstacle. It was France's role, if she could not achieve hegemony in Europe, to prevent Germany from doing so. Just as it was Britain's role to prevent either Germany or France from succeeding. Doing what it took to effect these policies is what I mean by responsibility.

By this standard Britain failed as egregiously as France, until Churchill reinvigorated Britain to its duty and self-interest. Pre-war Britain was less responsible than France, under the Popular Front, for the French at least spent resources adequate to their

defense. The British were either immersed in Baldwin's domestic concerns or in the Chamberlain's never-never land of "Peace in our Time". France was armed. Britain was not, except for the fleet. This is no credit to Britain. Once the war started, even after Churchill became Prime Minister, British irresponsibility continued. Churchill's memoirs cannot hide this fact. "The French government requested us," Churchill said, "to abstain from air attack on Germany, stating it would provoke retaliation upon their war factories, which were unprotected [Churchill, p.423]." Churchill did not even bother to say that he acquiesced or why he did so. He may have been worried about the effect of French civilian casualties on their war effort, but far more important was the effect of British casualties would have had on his efforts to rearm Britain. For years Churchill had been hectoring Parliament on the superiority of German air craft, particularly bombers, and the inadequacy of British defenses. There can be no doubt that he wanted desperately to buy time and little doubt that he was willing to spend French lives to do it.

My criticism here is not that Churchill was employing Machiavellian *raison d'état*, but that he was doing so irresponsibly. And for the same reason which afflicted the French. He believed against the evidence in the defensive.

I also rested under the impression of the superior power of the defensive, provided it was actively conducted. I had neither the responsibility nor the continuous information to make a new measurement.... In the opening months of the Second World War, I did not dissent from the general view about the defensive, and I believed that anti-tank obstacles and field guns, cleverly posted and with suitable ammunition, could frustrate or break

up tanks except in darkness or fog, real or artificial. In the problems which the Almighty sets his humble servants things hardly ever happen the same way twice over, or if they seem to do so, there is some variant which stultifies undue generalization. The human mind, except when guided by extraordinary genius, cannot surmount the established conclusions amid which it has been reared [Churchill, p.476].

I do not believe that Churchill meant to anoint Hitler as an extraordinary genius, but such is the way of self-serving declarations. This said, it must be concluded that Churchill, for all his limitations as a military strategist, did not in the final analysis fail in his role as commander of British forces. He did not fall into the cynical irresponsibility of the French High Command's policy of pseudo-defense\ pseudo-deterrence. He knew what his role was and what Britain's role was: There could be no dominant power in Europe without endangering the freedom of all Europeans, including the British. To this end Britain was prepared to do all she could to prevent this occurrence. While he was willing to have France spend herself to afford Britain time to rearm, while he had overestimated the power of German air and underestimated the resilience of his own people, he was not willing to have a Hitler-dominated Europe. Liddell Hart offers powerful testimony to this by his conclusion that the real explanation for miracle of Dunkirk and the lack of a serious effort to invade Britain was that Hitler is that "Hitler did not want to conquer England [Hart, p.107]." In other words, Churchill had good reason to believe that a policy similar to France's "deterrent" approach would have availed the British. Germany would have been willing for the foreseeable future to leave Britain to

her island and to her empire. To his lasting credit, I do not believe this was ever a consideration for Churchill.

Apprised of the realities of 1940, he could not have contemplated a solitary British invasion of Europe. Nonetheless, there is not the slightest bit of evidence that he would have allowed Britain to conform to the requirements of a Nazi Europe. From the beginning of his return to government, he was embarked on a campaign to make sure Britain would not have to face the European continent alone. He indefatigably tried to lure the United States into the war. If the attack on Pearl Harbor had not occurred he would have invented its equivalent.

Churchill's great strength was de Gaulle's: character, fired by arrogance and fired again by nationalism bordering on racism. He simply could not have abided a German state astride Europe, even if Britain could have remained immune across the Channel. This, as much as British balance of power interests, enabled him to defy the Nazis. What Doutard said of de Gaulle applied to Churchill: "This man gave us the ultimate proof that in any country the State is a matter of character [Doutard, p.221]." What character allows in an individual, it allows in a state. It enables the state to fulfill its obligations to its own people, by requiring its leaders to employ *raison d'état*, including the sacrifice of its young men in battle and its population under air attack or other reprisals. "These reasons of state, hateful and derided as they are, are as necessary to the life of a country, and indeed to the whole of mankind, as courage is for the safekeeping of a warrior [Doutard, p.83]." Failure to appreciate the hateful truths of *raison d'état* is the essence of political irresponsibility. A concomitant failure of generals in the face of an invasion compounds irresponsibility with cowardice and stupidity, the one reason for the Fall of France in 1940.

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