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### **The Fall of France, 1940**

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#### **Q. What was the defence policy of successive French governments between 1936 and 1939?**

A. French defence policy right through the inter-war decades (1919–39) was consistently defensive and non-aggressive – consistent with France’s status as a territorially satisfied ‘status quo’ power. The Maginot Line, constructed between 1929 and 1937, guarded the Franco-German frontier (though not the Franco-Belgian one). The fortifications symbolized this defensive cast to French strategy. Reluctant rearmament, modest in scale in 1934–35, became far more intensive from 1936 onwards. A rearmament investment programme that September committed 14 billion francs to new weapons systems, while the French aviation industry was nationalized and relocated to Toulouse and other production centres far from Paris to reduce vulnerability to German air attacks. The French readiness to invest in military preparations showed the Third Republic’s determination to defend against the mounting menace of Hitler and his aggressive sabre-rattling (evidenced by Germany’s reintroduction of conscription in March 1935 and its re-militarization of the Rhineland 12 months later).

France’s leaders were aware, however, that she could not defeat Germany alone. Therefore, French foreign and defence policy in 1936–39 was heavily determined by a quest for a firm British commitment to underwrite French security. This, however, was not obtained until February 1939. Another problem was the French need to find a counterweight to Germany in Eastern Europe. This had traditionally been Russia (through the Franco-Russian alliance of 1894). That union had foundered, however, on the ideological hostility of French political conservatives to Russia’s Bolshevik regime after 1917. This diplomatic problem was compounded by geo-politics: Russia had no common frontier with Germany after the territorial adjustments of 1919 had re-created Poland. Thus, even the French Left’s desire for an updated Franco-Russian (Franco-Soviet) defensive alliance was not self-evidently the answer to France’s strategic exposure, if faced by further German aggression as seen in 1914.

From late 1935, too, France faced a challenge to its North and East African colonies from Mussolini’s Italy, especially in the naval arena. France in the late 1930s was beset by a crisis of national self-confidence, fragile political and social unity, and was lacking the demographic and industrial clout that was available to Germany; it was a time of mounting and justified fearfulness that offered no easy solutions to her security predicaments.

#### **Q. How prepared for war was France in 1939?**

A. In terms of grand strategy, France was surprisingly well prepared for a certain kind of war in 1939 – a long war, opening with a defensive phase that might last two years. This phase was to be succeeded by more aggressive operations based on the full economic mobilization of finances, industry and the resources of the French and British empires (together, some 600 million people). The war was conceived in stages, eventually utilizing economic pressure, a blockade enforced by Allied naval supremacy and the greater resources of the French and British empires, to bring victory over Nazi Germany in the long run (and rather more quickly over Mussolini's fascist Italy, which French intelligence analysts rightly judged to be militarily and economically ill-prepared for war). In many ways the eve-of-war forecasts by French planners were not far out: the Second World War did last for six years (they had predicted four or five). Also, and again as predicted in 1939, the Allies were not able to follow the general strategic offensive until after 1942.

Politically, however, France was far less ready to confront the trials that armed conflict would inevitably entail. The legacy of the bitter social and political feuding of the Popular Front era (1936–38) meant there was no possibility of forming a truly 'National' (all-party) government 'for the duration', in September 1939. The conservative Right was deeply split within itself. On one side stood those convinced that France no longer had the energy, economic muscle or popular will for another long drawn-out fight with Germany. They favoured a fresh appeasement of Hitler (advocating acceptance of Nazi peace overtures after the German conquest of Poland in October 1939). But other conservatives belonged to a traditionalist/nationalist Germanophobe camp; they were ready to prosecute the war as the unavoidable third round of a 'struggle for Europe' that had begun in 1870–71 and had to be resolved once and for all by force of arms.

On the political left, the divisions between Communists and Socialists ran equally deep. Moreover, the German-Soviet Non-Aggression Pact (23 August 1939) muzzled those French Communists ready to resist Nazism. It also gave free rein to a government witch-hunt that saw the arrest of Communist parliamentary deputies, the flight of others to Moscow, closure of the party's offices and the banning of its newspaper.

Thus, the political landscape in France was much less settled than in 1914. Then party squabbles had been suspended by the so-called 'Sacred Union', a parliamentary truce to let French opinion rally and deal with the desperate danger posed by the invasion by the soldiers of Wilhelmine Germany, that August and September. In 1939–40 the political conflicts that raged on the French home front at times greatly surpassed in fury and bitterness any level of action seen on the military front-line during eight months (September 1939–April 1940) that commentators at the time dubbed 'the Phoney War', or the 'Bore War'.

### **Q. What was the French military strategy in 1940?**

A. French generals planned to commence with a defensive phase designed to last until at least 1942. During this time the British were expected to reinforce their initially modest military assistance to France. They deployed just five infantry divisions to France at the war's outbreak. This had risen to ten by the start of the German offensive in May 1940. Britain was working fast to create an even larger army to aid France: had Hitler not attacked, the British were scheduled to have 32 divisions on the Continent by the end of 1940, rising to 55 divisions during 1941. Thus, French

commanders were playing for time – during which they were also expanding their own modern formations (their number of tank divisions increasing from three to six, even between September 1939 and 10 May 1940).

The right flank of the Franco-German border was well protected by the Maginot Line fortifications. These were so strong that even the bold German High Command never dared attack the main positions, and only two lesser outworks on the Maginot Line's extreme left, near the town of Montmédy, south of Luxembourg, were captured by the Wehrmacht (the German army) in June 1940.

France's planning was at risk, however, from the stance of Belgium, sandwiched between two powerful neighbours, France and Germany. The Belgian government realized that their country was once again a likely battleground (as in 1914–18). Seeking to avoid this, Belgium withdrew from long-standing military coordination with France in October 1936, and welcomed a German declaration of intent to respect their neutrality in 1937. In practice, the closure of most routes into France by the Maginot Line left German strategists with little choice but to attack through Belgium, as they had done in 1914. French planners felt that the disadvantages of standing on the Franco-Belgian border to receive a German attack were too great. First, this border ran through or close by many French industrial towns whose output would be crucial for the expected long war of *matériel*; second, it was too long to defend in depth (longer than the Maginot Line); and, third, it had not been fortified in the pre-war years.

To resolve this problem, therefore, the French general staff gambled on a bound forward by some of their most mobile and hard-hitting tank and motorized infantry divisions. These forces dashed up on 10–11 May 1940 to advanced defensive lines where they tied in to the positions being held by the Belgian army's 22 divisions, from Breda and Tilburg in the southern Netherlands, across the central Belgian plain to the River Meuse and Luxembourg. These deployments were accepted by the British (whose small army at the war's outset had left them very much the 'junior partner' in Allied strategic decision-making).

Unable to be strong everywhere, the French High Command left the centre of the whole front lightly defended by just two divisions of reservist infantry and some cavalry. This was the sector south-west of Luxembourg, where the Ardennes Forest met the River Meuse from Dinant and Charleville to Sedan. French commanders reckoned the woods and the river were enough of an additional obstacle to make this a most unlikely area for a significant German attack. Disastrously for France, however, it was indeed to a strategy of using panzers *en masse* to smash through this central part of the French lines that Germany's generals turned, after their more conservative initial plans fell by chance into Allied hands in January 1940.

### **Q. Why did France fall so easily in 1940?**

A. This question raises two overlapping but ultimately quite distinct issues. The first has to do with why France suffered swift military defeat. The second concerns why that defeat led to the fall of the regime, the overthrow of the Third Republic (that had ruled France since 1875).

The military defeat is now considered by historians to result from poor force dispositions by the French (and British), and from German strategic boldness, operational dash and a good measure of sheer luck. In many ways the French and Allies should have been able to fight the German offensive that opened on 10 May 1940 (code-named 'Plan Yellow') to a standstill. German generals, and Hitler, were

worried this might happen, and reproduce the stalemate of the Western Front in the First World War, preventing Hitler turning east to engage the real enemy of Nazi ideology, the USSR and Bolshevik Communism. The French had as many tanks as the Germans, and they were often of superior design and combat capabilities. But too many were deployed, along with the best French motorized infantry divisions, on the frontier with Belgium, tasked with a risky dash to reach forward defensive positions in the southern Netherlands, around Breda and Tilburg, and link up with the retreating Belgian army east of Brussels. The British army – still with only ten divisions on the Continent in May 1940 – also advanced to join the Belgians. The French right flank was securely held by the much misunderstood Maginot Line – a series of fortifications along the Franco-German frontier. To the north-west of the Maginot Line near Luxembourg, however, the French forces were weak. And this was the part of the Allied line, on the River Meuse (whose defensive delaying power was over-estimated in Paris), that the Germans struck with seven of their ten armoured (panzer) divisions and motorized infantry.

Thereafter the Germans maintained such a high operational tempo, advancing rapidly, even recklessly, that they were always one or two jumps ahead of Allied efforts to restore a solid front. After the evacuations at Dunkirk, 26 May to 2 June 1940 (330,000 British and French troops saved), the Germans launched a second offensive southwards, code-named ‘Plan Red’. This smashed the improvised French defences north of Paris in a series of very hard battles. In these the French fought with much better spirit and tactical skill than in May, and several new generals of top-class ability emerged. Too many good troops and too much equipment had been lost in Belgium and on the sand dunes of Dunkirk, however. Despite a fighting retreat to the Seine and Loire, the French armies remained on the back foot and the battle ceased with the Franco-German armistice of 25 June 1940.

The French military defeat led swiftly to political collapse and the overthrow of the Third Republic. Even before the fighting had stopped, the French government, in office since 21 March 1940, had been ousted on 16 June 1940 in a cabinet crisis at Bordeaux (where ministers had fled to escape the onrushing Germans). The new prime minister was Marshal Philippe Pétain, the 84-year-old war hero of the 1914–18 conflict. He personified more successful times to the bewildered and demoralized French, but came to power armed with a right-wing anti-democratic agenda and a readiness to submit to the German conquest. He and his supporters accepted the Armistice terms proposed by Germany, which included German occupation of about 60 per cent of France, including Paris, the north and east, and the Atlantic seaboard. After frantic manoeuvres in which politicians’ reputations plumbed new depths in a welter of deal-making and back-stabbing, the parliamentarians of the Senate and Chamber of Deputies met in the unlikely ambience of the casino at Vichy, a spa town in central France. There, on 10 July 1940, with only 81 dissenters, they voted unfettered powers to Pétain, who formed a new, anti-democratic, anti-Semitic and misogynistic regime, the ‘French State’, its officials and ministers installed in the hotels of Vichy. It was the ‘fall’ of the Third Republic and the start of France’s dark journey down what Pétain called ‘the path of collaboration’ with Hitler.

### **Q. What was the long-term significance of this defeat?**

A. Many historians regard the defeat of 1940 as heralding the end of France as a truly ‘great’ power. Certainly it showed the economic and military disparity that had emerged between France and Germany, rivals since the early nineteenth century for

'mastery' in Europe. By the end of the Second World War, however, France had clawed back a measure of her lost prestige and gained a permanent seat on the Security Council of the United Nations, founded at San Francisco in 1945. This resulted from the efforts of the internal Resistance, and the political skill of General Charles de Gaulle. The latter had escaped to London in June 1940 and led a Free French movement that refused the armistice, denied the legitimacy of the Vichy regime and fought on at the side of the British (and, from 1941, the USSR and the USA).

Perhaps the greatest significance of the defeat was gradually seen beyond Europe, however. The defeat of metropolitan (or 'mainland') France was a humiliation. It instantly undermined the authority of France as an imperial power in North Africa, Sub-Saharan Africa, Madagascar, Indochina and beyond. The cause of French liberation in 1944–45 offered hope for liberation and independence for France's colonial subject peoples, motivating nationalist movements from Algiers to Hanoi. France would strive desperately to hang onto its colonies, fighting and eventually losing savage wars against liberation movements in Madagascar (1947), Indochina (1946–54) and Algeria (1954–62). For many French military officers, the determination with which they fought these post-war conflicts in the empire may be directly traced to their sense of humiliation at the great defeat of 1940.

For de Gaulle and those politicians who, in the decades after his death in 1970 called themselves Gaullists, laying claim to follow his thinking, the defeat showed that France ought never again to rely so much on others for its security. In this way the defeat left a sour legacy for relations with Britain (forced off the European mainland at Dunkirk) and with the USA that spurned desperate French appeals to join the war to 'fight for democracy' in June 1940.

In other ways, too, 1940 can lay claim to be one of the modern world's genuine turning points. French defeat ushered in a wartime economic interdependency (albeit on terms imposed by the conquering Nazi regime) that, by choice after the late 1940s, the French, Germans, Belgians, Dutch and others would gradually develop into the EEC (European Economic Community) of 1957. The EEC was the forerunner of today's European Union. Finally, many suggest that the shock of 1940 marked the beginning of the end of the primacy of Europe itself on the world stage. For the outcome of the Second World War had to be decided not by the big powers that began it on the Allied side – France and Britain – but by the newly emerging superpowers that thereafter dominated the second half of the twentieth century: the USA and the Soviet Union.

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