

83 Years Ago: Fall of France, the Wehrmacht's Advance Through the Ardennes Forest

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Eight decades ago in the late summer of 1940 the Wehrmacht's generals, at Adolf Hitler's behest, were beginning preparations for a massive invasion of the USSR. Morale within the German Army was very good indeed, for obvious reasons. Within six weeks Germany's traditional nemesis France had been conquered at remarkable ease, along with the Low Countries of Belgium, the Netherlands and Luxembourg, demonstrating that this second major European war was proving rather different to the bitter toil of its 1914-1918 predecessor.

During the Battle of France which officially concluded on 25 June 1940 the Germans, with their revolutionary blitzkrieg, provided definitive proof to the world of their considerable superiority over the outmoded French Army. Three months before this attack, Hitler had been informed of the Manstein Plan relating to the Western offensive's strategy. The Manstein Plan called for a main thrust by the Wehrmacht through the famous Ardennes Forest, that would bypass an uncompleted Maginot Line, consisting of forts manned by half a million French soldiers – and thereafter lead to the trapping and annihilation of the French and British armies to the north; who were expecting, as in the Great War, the primary German assault to come via neutral Belgium.

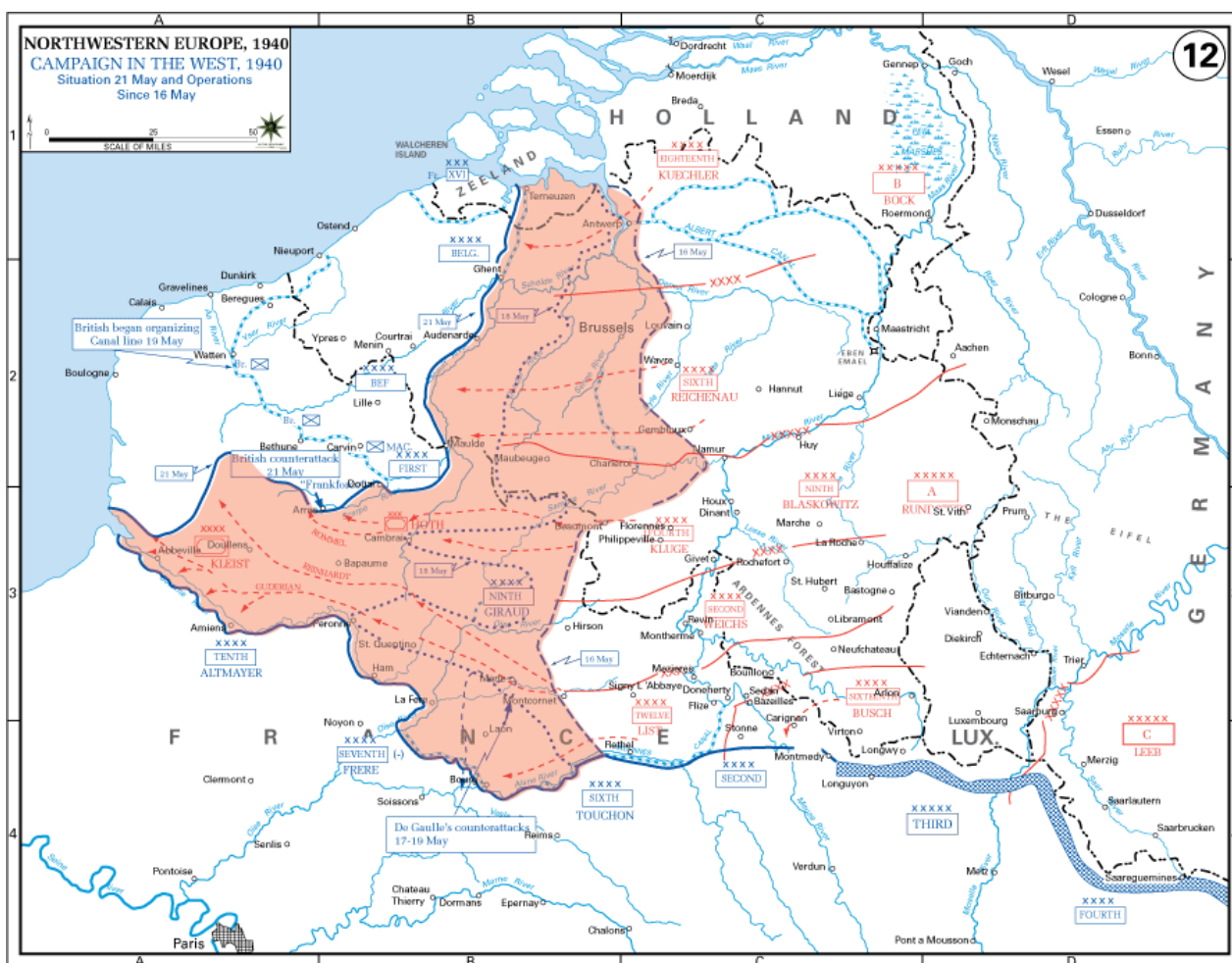
The Manstein Plan, named after **Major-General Erich von Manstein**, was an unconventional, bold and risky venture. Von Manstein has often been credited alone for developing his above successful strategy, which may not be entirely true. **Field Marshal Wilhelm Keitel**, one of Hitler's closest military advisers, wrote that the Nazi leader had already formulated through his own thinking, as early as October 1939, an identical proposal to that of von Manstein; and quite likely before the latter had come upon his idea.

Keitel wrote in September 1946 that,

“I will only go so far as to make it quite plain that it was Hitler himself who saw the armoured breakthrough at Sedan [in the Ardennes], striking up to the Atlantic coast at Abbeville, as the solution; we would then swing round northwards into the rear of the motorised Anglo-French army, which would most probably be advancing across the

Franco-Belgian frontier into Belgium, and cut them off". (1)

There is little reason to believe that, after the war, when Keitel was faced with the hangman's noose at Nuremberg, he would have invented this assertion in his memoirs; and Keitel had condemned Hitler for shooting himself, leaving his soldiers "to bear the guilt" for the crimes of the Third Reich. On 17 February 1940, Hitler summoned von Manstein to Berlin at the new Reich Chancellery for discussions, where in attendance were other military men like **Erwin Rommel** and **Alfred Jodl**. According to Keitel, von Manstein's dialogue with Hitler had simply confirmed the dictator's personal views of what the Western offensive should entail - and "this had greatly pleased" Hitler, as von Manstein was "the only one of the Army's generals to have had the same plan in view" (2). That very day Hitler gave his approval to the Manstein Plan, asking for its strategic thinking to be formally adopted. (3)



The German advance up to 21 May 1940 (Source: Public Domain)

The Germans were fortunate that the French leaders would prove so lacklustre and incompetent, regarding their preparations for another European war. France's top brass dismissed the possibility of German troops passing through the 100 mile stretch of the "impenetrable" Ardennes, as it was deemed by vaunted figures like **Marshal Philippe Pétain**, the Victor of Verdun. Yet in 1938 French military exercises along the critical section of the Ardennes at the town of Sedan - led by **General André-Gaston Prételat** - provided proof that the region could, in fact, be navigated quite comfortably by tanks and armoured vehicles, let alone men and horses.

General Prételat conducted a scenario in the Ardennes, whereby he mimicked a concerted

German attack that went into this area to Sedan. The result of the simulated operation was a successful navigation through the Ardennes for the invaders, and a complete defensive collapse along the Meuse river. Prételat passed on this vital report to the French high command; but it underwent suppression because it was felt morale would “be damaged” by its publication (4). Prételat estimated it would take the enemy, at most, 60 hours to reach the Meuse at Sedan. As it turned out, the Germans would arrive at the Meuse after 57 hours of marching through the Ardennes.

On 21 March 1940, France’s **Commander-in-Chief Maurice Gamelin** was forwarded information by a French politician, **Pierre Taittinger**, that the defences at Sedan “are rudimentary, not to say embryonic”. The 67-year-old General Gamelin, an intelligent but cautious and methodical man whose military thinking was rooted in the First World War, ignored the warning. Gamelin foresaw another long, drawn out encounter with the Germans. It was also the case that, by the 1930s and into 1940, many on the French side did not have the stomach for another conflict with Germany; the Wehrmacht hierarchy themselves sensed this. Field Marshal Keitel made the following observation, “the fact that the French had not exploited either the good weather, or the weakness of our Western defences earlier, could only lead us to conclude that they did not really want to fight”. (5)

On 11 April 1940, French **General Charles Huntziger** asked for four additional divisions to bolster the thinly guarded line at Sedan, but his request was refused (6). Due to intelligence accounts, the leaders in Paris were aware in the hours building up to 10 May 1940, that almost 50 Wehrmacht divisions were on the move and gathering ominously close to the Ardennes region. Over the preceding fortnight, the French military attaché in Switzerland had twice warned Paris that the German invasion would fall sometime between the 8th and 10th of May. He further relayed his opinion that the principal German manoeuvre would be towards Sedan. No action was again taken. During the evening of 8 May 1940, a French airman reported seeing German transport columns, 60 miles long, driving towards the border with their headlights on.

Image on the right: Belgian anti-aircraft gun, circa 1940 (CC BY-SA 3.0 de)



By May 9th, thousands of German vehicles and marching troops could actually be heard approaching the frontier. Before midnight on May 9th/10th, the French, Dutch and Belgian governments were all informed of large German troop concentrations close by. General Gamelin even learnt the correct date of the attack, May 10th, but still did nothing (7). As he said, they preferred “to await events”. Their waiting was almost over.

In idyllic spring weather, early on 10 May 1940 vast numbers of highly motivated German troops from XIX Panzer Corps - commanded by Heinz Guderian - were snaking their way through the thick and hilly land mass of the Ardennes, supported by considerable quantities of armoured vehicles and much larger numbers of horses. Guderian's panzers swept aside the Belgian and French units and, come the evening of May 12th, had reached Sedan. The Germans quickly discovered that this village had been abandoned by its defenders, who retreated across the Meuse. The Wehrmacht's position along the Meuse was for now precarious, as pontoon bridges were being prepared for the panzers to cross. A concerted French counter-attack could have wrought serious harm on the enemy. Though several counter-attacks were ordered, not one of them was carried out, a sign of the disgraceful collapse soon to come.

On the morning of May 13th Stuka dive bombers, with their mournful and piercing siren, arrived in 12 squadrons above Sedan (8). The Stuka was a poor military aircraft, with a flying distance of less than 400 miles and capable of holding only a light payload of bombs; but its siren had a devastating impact on the morale of French soldiers stationed along the Meuse, that was out of proportion to the damage imparted. With the stukas starting to dive, the French artillery fell silent as the gun crews took cover, cowering and demoralised in their bunkers (9). A mere 56 casualties were inflicted by the Luftwaffe bombardment, and none of the bunkers on the far side of the Meuse had been hit.



An abandoned Belgian T-13 tank destroyer is inspected by German soldiers. (Source: CC BY-SA 3.0 de)

It was not until mid-morning on this day, May 13th, that it finally dawned on the French high command, to their horror, that the bulk of the German attack was coming not through Belgium, but into the Ardennes, and successfully. Following the stukas' departure from Sedan, shortly after 4pm German soldiers began crossing the Meuse in broad daylight, where they met little opposition except for sporadic machine gun fire. At dusk on May 13th, the German bridgehead at Sedan was four miles deep and four miles wide, strengthening all the while. By now, still on the fourth day of the offensive, France's defeat in its war against Nazi Germany was assured.

The military historian **Lt. Col. Donald J. Goodspeed**, who at this time was based in England as a sergeant with the Canadian Army Overseas, could only look on at the unfolding

catastrophe occurring across the English Channel. Goodspeed recalled later that the French soldiers at the Meuse “who should have held the line and counter-attacked now gave way to disgraceful panic, and fled from the battlefield before they were seriously engaged”. (10)

Late in the afternoon on May 13th one French commander, of B Group Heavy Artillery in X Corps, reported that he and his men were surrounded by German machine gunners and asked desperately for permission to retire. In reality, along his section of the front there was not a German soldier yet in sight. His panicky request to retreat was accepted, and thereupon all of the soldiers under his command relinquished their posts and weaponry. French units within the 55th and 71st divisions likewise fled in disarray, saying they were being encircled by panzers when none throughout May 13th had crossed the Meuse at Sedan. Nearly all of the French troops at Sedan were leaving their positions, fleeing westwards, allowing their armour to fall undamaged into German hands. French commanders who had fought in them, like the 49-year-old Colonel Charles de Gaulle, later ordered counter-attacks to be launched but, once more, not enough reliable troops could be found to effectively implement them. Unfortunately, the direction of the war had been out of De Gaulle’s hands.

Many of the deserters produced the utterly false claim that a panzer group had reached the village of Bulson, well behind the French line. A significant number of officers joined in the rout, as anxious to escape from the Germans as their men. Lt. Col. Goodspeed wrote,

“This type of excuse for cowardice later gave rise to completely untrue stories of German fifth columnists in French uniform... As far back as 30 miles south of Sedan, French units were swept by irrational and shameful fear”. (11)

At the headquarters of the 55th French division, **General Pierre Lafontaine** heard the sound of voices outside of the window. To his amazement he saw many hundreds of deserting French troops filing along the road, some having thrown their rifles away. Lafontaine ran outside to accost them but he was unable to stop the panic-stricken exodus. Lafontaine spotted French officers among this rabble, and demanded to know who had given the order to retreat. He received merely evasive replies and no definitive answer to his questions. The deserters continued on their way, leaving the panzers and Nazi infantrymen to move effortlessly into the heartland of France, a black mark on French history which has never fully been erased.

On 14 May 1940, a joyous Hitler ordered all available German motor divisions, within reasonable distance, to pour through the gaping holes punctured in the French defences along the Meuse. During May 14th the Germans therefore made another unmolested crossing of the Meuse at Givet, having easily captured that town, about 35 miles north of Sedan (12). The French 55th and 71st divisions commanded by General Huntziger had evaporated. Huntziger, furious and humiliated, moved his headquarters to Verdun more than 30 miles to the rear, and ordered the French artillery to fire on any surrendering troops. German panzer formations soon grew tired of taking prisoners, contemptuously ordering them to throw their weaponry on the ground where the panzers rolled over it. The unseemly panic spread to General André Corap’s 9th Army, and by last light on May 15th it had practically disintegrated. Moreover, the French 18th, 22nd, 53rd and 61st Infantry divisions melted away into the sunset too, some of their soldiers crying “Panzer!” and “We have been betrayed!”

By May 15th with his centre burst wide open, Commander-in-Chief Gamelin still did not

order the French armies to return post haste from Belgium. His reaction was incredibly sluggish. On May 16th, the fleeing French soldiers began to reach Paris where they descended on the capital's bars and cafes, concocting terrible tales to justify abandoning their posts. It came as no surprise when Gamelin was mercifully sacked on May 17th, one week into the German invasion. Only a miracle could save France now, and none was forthcoming. Over following hours, the best of the Allied divisions were being cut away from the rest of France to the north. Guderian's XIX Panzer Corps, having led the way through the Ardennes and comfortably crossed the Meuse, on the afternoon of May 15th drove on with unfettered glee towards the Channel coast. (13)

To Guderian's relief they previously found the bridges intact over the Bar river, which the French had not bothered to destroy. Ideal for the panzers to roll across and provide the long envisaged coup de grâce for the marooned Allies – hundreds of thousands of whom were left to contemplate a mass exit from the port of Dunkirk. British propaganda did its best to portray the ensuing Dunkirk evacuation as an heroic rescue mission, when it was the culmination of a disastrous campaign for both the French Army and, to a lesser extent, the British Expeditionary Force (BEF). Not broadcast by Western propaganda were the nasty recriminations taking place in the background, between the French and British leaders.

In spite of the routine nature of this German victory, as in any large-scale war there were glaring risks involved that could have turned against the Nazis. At the offensive's outset, advancing towards Luxembourg's border further south, a column of German armour stretched unprotected for over 100 miles of open terrain. Had Allied warplanes been sent to this region in waves, they could have wreaked havoc on the Nazi war machine. French and British aircraft were instead directed northwards, to support the Allied armies moving into Belgium.

The Manstein Plan was also dependent upon the French political and military leadership committing an array of blunders, which they duly did. Had the warnings been heeded of a potential German advance through the Ardennes, and past errors rectified with a proper fortification of French divisions at Sedan and elsewhere, the German advance along the Meuse could have been halted or at least delayed. The arrival of superior quality French and British divisions, on the Meuse, might well have stiffened the resolve of those troops who withered away so shamefully when faced with determined German forces, who were bent on avenging Germany's defeat to the Western democracies in the First World War.

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Shane Quinn obtained an honors journalism degree. He is interested in writing primarily on foreign affairs, having been inspired by authors like Noam Chomsky. He is a frequent contributor to Global Research.

Notes

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2 Ibid.

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