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THE BATTLE OF FRANCE, WWIICW2ADMINISTRATIVE DATATITLE: THE BATTLE
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THE BATTLE OF FRANCE, WWII

IntroductionDuring the spring of 1940, the German Army began its offensive under the Manstein Plan by invading six countries in a little over three months, officially starting World War II. On May 10, 1940 approximately two million Germans invaded the countries of France, Belgium, Luxembourg, and the Netherlands in a quick, all out assault referred to as the Blitzkrieg. The Maginot line, which was believed by the French to be the ultimate form of <https://assignbuster.com/united-states-army-aviation-center-history-essay/>

defense against a future German attack, proved to be not much more than a nuisance to the invading army. While the other countries toppled immediately, France held out until June 22 before it signed an Armistice with the Germans effectively ending the war for the nation of France in a little less than six weeks time. The quick surrender of such a modernized nation to the German foes despite almost a decade of aggressive defensive tactics in anticipation of German attack, outlines an overall failure of leadership on both a strategic and tactical scale. The extreme lack of foresight in adapting to advancing military technology, underestimating enemy capability while overestimating one's own military strength, and the utilization of stale tactics ultimately led to French defeat. HistoryA defensive plan became a popular topic in 1919 when the French Prime Minister Clemenceau met with Marshal Pétain, the commander of the French Army. 1 Since the end of WWI, three main defensive strategies emerged for the French based on observations from Generals in the field. Two of these strategies based their arguments on evidence gathered from battles encountered in the era of trench warfare, advocating a line of fortifications along France's Eastern border. The other form of defense relied heavily on movement of ground, vehicle, and air assets that would be assumed to be too complex and expensive to be accurately put to use. The fortifications at Verdun were judged to have been the most successful in WWI, receiving a massive bombardment in artillery, yet staying relatively unharmed. 2 Almost the entire war was defined by heavily manned and entrenched forces behind barbed-wire and naturally dug positions, keeping advancing forces at bay for the better part of three years. The logical conclusion agreed to by French planners was that more heavily fortified positions with advancements in <https://assignbuster.com/united-states-army-aviation-center-history-essay/>

siege defense technology would be well suited for similar warfare. Plan and Preparation

The Maginot Line had essentially two planned purposes. One is that it would hold an aggressor at bay for a period in time in which the French could mobilize their own forces to the front. Secondly, it would be used as a formal point of defense to launch a counter attack. In both of these opinions, any attack would be fought on the outskirts of French territory and would not expose the internal portion of the country to destruction or occupation by foreign forces. The proposal was to stretch the majority of defenses along the border between Germany and France and extending mainly smaller and lighter installments South along the border with Italy. At the time, both Germany and Italy were considered threats to the French and as early as 1930, enough distrust of their neighbors led French leadership to invest nearly 3 billion Francs into a defensive plan. ³ The main fortifications however, would not extend through the Ardennes Forrest due to the fact that at the time the Line was being planned, France and Belgium were allies and no need was put forth to separate the two countries across their own borders. The border with Belgium would not go without protection; the French also included a military plan coinciding with the Line to address an attack through their ally. With such a large defensive structure protecting the East, the French could mobilize a majority of their forces and be prepared to meet and defend against an attack head on in Belgium itself. The Line was proposed to stop at the Ardennes Forest, such a densely wooded and hilly terrain that at the time, it was deemed impossible to pass with a large, mobile, and mechanized force. The Maginot Line was not an actual continuous structure such as a wall or dam, but actually a series of approximately 500 buildings, ⁴ each arranged according to a detailed and <https://assignbuster.com/united-states-army-aviation-center-history-essay/>

intricate plan based on the most modern defensive tactics of the time. The key to the actual Line itself was a series of fortifications which were large structures housing more than a thousand troops, artillery, mortars, food stores, underground tunnels, even field hospitals. They were spaced approximately 10 miles apart and stretched across the entire Eastern border. In between these fortresses were smaller encampments which held anywhere between 250 to 500 troops⁵ with slightly less provisions and weaponry. These fortifications were able to withstand serious firepower from an attacking force considering the structural integrity. The fortifications consisted of steel reinforced concrete up to 10 feet in thickness capable of withstanding multiple direct hits from artillery. The gun batteries were also reinforced with steel up to 3 inches thick, making the fighting position a formidable one alone, not to mention being placed in a position to be covered within the range of fire of adjacent fortifications. However, no matter how strong this defensive position was, it's undoing would be the weakest chain in the link and it had nothing to do with the thickness of concrete or steel. The French had planned too aggressively, stretched their limited resources thin, and overestimated the power of their defenses.

ExecutionThe French Army in the Northern portion of the country consisted of three main forces. Two Groups defended the Maginot Line to the east while the other was placed in the West and would move forward into the Southern portion of the country to defend against the Italian front. ⁶ The German plan to invade France involved three armies. One would advance through Belgium, one would stage to the East of the Maginot Line, and another half way between the two, opposite the Ardennes in the North. The Army group facing the Maginot Line appeared to have the dangerous task of

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a direct attack against the Line, but their primary purpose was to fool the French into committing troops to prevent an attack that would never take place. On May 10th 1940, the German Army attacked the Netherlands, and moved into Belgium. The French and British divisions moved up in anticipation to counter the attack. At face value, the attack was actually going as the French had initially planned, in which troops used the Maginot Line as a main source of static defense as major divisions moved up to the North to counter a main offensive stuck in the forestry of the Ardennes. However, the faults of their initial assumptions began to reveal themselves rather quickly as the initial invasion began. The German Army excelled in combined Arms combat and relied heavily on teams of engineers, infantry, light mechanized units, and tank battalions to form highly maneuverable and efficient Panzer Divisions who were not only fast, but also self-sufficient. A Panzer division could fight in sustained combat for days at a time and was suited to fight in a wide variety of conditions with both speed and power. 7 The French had underestimated the capability of the German's who easily moved their divisions with speed through the supposedly impenetrable gates of the Ardennes. The advancement of the German Army was also aided by their implementation of technology, in which the French lagged behind to their own peril. German forces had excellent communication systems, with radios installed and in operation in every tank enabling them to break position and counter French defensive positions at will. This allowed the German advancement to exploit weaknesses in the French defenses before they could react. Panzer divisions could also carry out a wide variety of missions to include reconnaissance and could reposition from an attacking stance to a defensive one in short notice to defend weaknesses as they

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developed. The ground gained by tanks could then be occupied by the infantry to set up artillery positions that could be used to further support the advance. French tactics regarding the use of mechanized forces was severely substandard to the German Army. The French did not focus their tank power to complement the use of infantry tactics, and their understanding of combined arms was lackluster at best. They spread their tank divisions too thin across the Eastern border and considered the tank to be primarily used as infantry support rather than an offensive weapon. ⁸ This resulted in the infantry having to adjust their tactics to the slower moving tank divisions which bogged down troop maneuvering. They were also slow to adapt to the technological advancements of the time, in comparison to the German forces. Very few French tanks had radios installed, and the ones that did found their equipment faulty and unusable a majority of the time. This severely hampered communications considering that without radios installed, most of the communication still had to be relayed personally and over vast distances making it almost impossible to quickly adapt to a changing battlefield environment. The French tanks were also slow in comparison to their German counterparts. Although the majority of French tanks had the better firepower, the speed in which they could maneuver negated that advantage. The negative aspect of heavier, slower moving tanks could have been lessened if the French had focused on a more combined, mobile force at the recommendation of some within the French command in the early part of the decade. In operational terms, the French did not seem to give much thought to armored units as offensive weapons. " Colonel de Gaulle tried during the 1930s to convince French High Command of the necessity to form armored divisions supported by aviation and <https://assignbuster.com/united-states-army-aviation-center-history-essay/>

infantry, military conservatism prevented these "new ideas" from emerging." 9 The French command was ultimately still convinced that tactics it had utilized to effect during WWI were still most relevant and efficient despite the appeal to many within the ranks who thought otherwise and saw the landscape of battle already changing. The end result was more than a million German troops and 1,500 tanks crossing the Ardennes meeting very little opposition. The French had virtually no air-support to help defend ground positions and had little resistance to German bombers who were totally un-affected by the massive defensive Maginot Line. By May 15th, the Northern German Army was clear of French defenses and the French Army began to crumble and break. With the French defense in disarray and unable to mount an effective retreat to more defensible positions, the other two German Armies were allowed to advance into French territory un-impeded until they halted at Dunkirk on May 24th. By the beginning of June, the Southern German divisions had bypassed the lower portion of the Maginot line effectively cutting the Line off from the rest of the country. The French would ultimately surrender at the end of the month. Lessons Learned

The Fall of France can be seen as more of a military blunder on the side of the French rather than a military achievement in part of the German Army. The planning and construction of the Maginot Line alone consumed so much time and resources that contingencies could not be effectively put to use when war became apparent. Such a linear effort by military and political leadership serves as an example of what not to do in historical context. Excellent military decision making revolves around multiple contingencies for numerous outcomes since the tides of war can never be estimated to certainty. Failing to properly analyze the enemy as well as one's own

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capabilities combined with a short sighted view of self-defense meant a quick and embarrassing loss in French history and serves as a lesson to modern military leaders. Technological advancement is mandatory in the scope of war. While equipment alone will not win a battle, it certainly can make it easier and more forgiving when confronting an enemy that is less modernized. The German Army proved this point as they steam rolled through a formidable size of French tanks that were uncoordinated with no ability to effectively communicate. This minor difference in technology, combined with the major differences in tactics made defensive preparations moot. Technology will always play a part in warfare, and in cases involving similarly matched opponents, the military with the better technology will certainly have the major advantage. Notes. William Allcorn, *The Maginot Line 1928-45*, (Lawrence, KS: Osprey Publishing, 2003), 34. 2. *Ibid*, 55. 3. *Ibid*, 61. 4. *Ibid*, 73. 5. J. E. Kaufmann, *Fortress France: The Maginot Line and French Defenses In WWII*, (New York: Stackpole Books, 2007), 112. 6. Len Deighton, *Blitzkrieg: From the Rise of Hitler to the Fall of Dunkirk*, (New York: Random House, 2000), 66. 7. *Ibid*, 86. 8. *Ibid*, 132. 9. Julian Jackson, *The Fall of France: The Nazi Invasion of 1940*, (Oxford University Press, 2004), 193.