

MILITARY AND POLITICAL ASPECTS REGARDING FRANCE IN 1940. THE CAUSES OF THE DEFEAT OF FRANCE BY THE GERMANS IN 1940

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Abstract. *This paper presents some military aspects of the causes of the defeat of the Allies in the battle of France in 1940. We examine some of the political features of France in the interwar period and also some of the diplomatic steps taken by the Anglo-French allies in the same period. In a certain sense, the battle of France in 1940 changed in the long term the structure of power in Western Europe.*

Keywords: *power, strategy, diplomacy, alliance.*

In our opinion losing the Battle of France by the Franco-British allies in World War in May June 1940 represents a crucial point in the history of World War II and in contemporary history. Among others factors the defeat marks the decline of the Western European Democracies in the face of Germany and indirectly in the face of the Soviet Union, the United States and Japan. Even though Great Britain and France won the second World War, they did not reestablish themselves as superpowers¹.

The reasons for losing this great battle include the military strategy, the quality and morale of the Army, and the combat troops, the internal politics of France and French diplomacy².

Although France could have won the military battle, many diplomatic battles were lost. France lost Czechoslovakia as an ally (in the end overcome by Nazi occupation in 1939), and Poland (defeated by Germany and the Soviet Union). From a geographic-strategic point of view Romania and Yugoslavia were too far away and besides this they had their own internal problems³.

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¹ Until 1939, the great powers were the United States, Germany, Great Britain, France, Japan and in a certain sense Italy. After 1945, at least for a few decades, the superpowers are the United States and the Soviet Union.

² Niall Ferguson, *The War of World, History's Age of Hatred*, translated by Alina Predescu, Bucharest, Rao, 2012, pp. 469-470.

³ Frank McDonough, editor, *The Origins of the Second World War: An International Perspective*, London, New York, Continuum, 2011.

What NATO and the United States brought to Western Europe after 1945 was a certain clarity which was not present in the period 1919-1940. Between 1919 and 1940 France had alliances with Poland, Romania, Czechoslovakia, and Yugoslavia. What was lacking in the interwar period and especially at the beginning of the Second World War was a common military strategic plan between France and Czechoslovakia or Poland to fight against Germany (and of course a collective action against Germany). The implementation of such a plan with Romania or Yugoslavia would have been hard to realize (considering the geography and the problems with the neighbors of the two countries), but it would have been possible, though, in the case of Poland and Czechoslovakia⁴.

The Munich treaty meant the weakening of Czechoslovakia and an increase in the strength of Germany. In our opinion there are various factors that have to be analyzed: the French leaders; the national socialist leaders; Hitler, especially whether he would stop just at revising the Versailles Treaty in the Central and Eastern part of Europe (Sudeten, Danzig, Polish Corridor, Austria) or whether he would stop only after occupying the so called Vital Space⁵. What was known is the fact that France had certain alliances for keeping the Versailles treaty, but also which could secure a certain degree of diplomatic security for France. The motive for the creation of these alliances was the guarantee of European stability⁶. They incorporated potential military alliances against the revisionist powers (encompassing a possible alliance between France, Poland, and Czechoslovakia against Germany). But it did not come to that. Up until May 1940 France did not have a real important military campaign against Germany (although Germany attacked Poland)⁷.

Military the leaders of the French army were playing the defensive card. From the point of view of Foreign Policy, France was divided between democratic groups and the Far Right and the Far Left. The fact that on the 9th of May 1940, even before the German invasion France did not have a prime minister is representative⁸. From the internal point of view the major advantage of France was that we don't have the killings we find elsewhere. France remains a democracy even after political disputes and violence⁹. Unfortunately France is not united (of the army population, politicians) in the will to fight. The army inactivity of 1939 and 1940 could have undermined this will to fight¹⁰.

From a diplomatic point of view France could rely only on Britain. Appeasement and the lack of a collective strategy undermined its other alliances.

⁴ *Ibidem*.

⁵ Liddell Hart, *The History of the Second World War*, Bucharest, Orizonturi Publishing, p. 15.

⁶ Jean-Baptiste Duroselle, *The History of International Relations, 1917-1947*, volume I, translated by Anca Airinei, Bucharest, The Social and Political Sciences Publishing, 2006, pp. 31, 63.

⁷ Antony Beevor, *The Second World War*, London, Phoenix, 2012, p. 32.

⁸ Jacques de Launay, *Great Decisions of the Second World War*, Bucharest, The Scientific and Encyclopedic Publishing, 1988, p. 93.

⁹ Bogdan Antoniu, Alin Matei, *Politics and Society in the Twentieth Century*, The Ministry of Education and Research, The Project For the Rural Learning, Postgraduate program in professional retraining of teachers in rural areas, 2007, the Interwar Democracies (I), France and Great Britain.

¹⁰ Ferguson, cited work, pp. 469-471, Churchill, *The Second World War*, vol I, translated by Any and Virgil Florea, Bucharest, Saeculum I.O., 1997, p. 190.

The interwar period is one of the most troubled periods of the contemporary history, which has ramifications even today. France represents a space of ideology and moral searching. We must not forget the numerous opposing forces that existed in France after the battle of 1940 within the occupied parts and within the Vichy regime.

From a military point of view the campaign of France has been studied a lot by the specialists. The German attack from the center broke through the defense and surrounded all the French troops in the Northern parts of France and in Belgium¹¹. The force of the attack through Belgium prevented a French counter attack against the advance of the German troops through the Ardennes¹².

Technically France had tanks at least as good as those of Germany – although their distribution was inefficient. In the air Germany had better planes¹³. The two opposing sides were almost equal, the battle of France being the largest battle on the ground up till then. In our opinion the German strategy but also the strategy of France made almost impossible a response which could have saved France – a withdrawal of the defense forces and the continuation of resistance or even a counter attack. Liddell Hart considers that the French offensive strategy in Belgium corresponded perfectly to the German counter to the South¹⁴. We emphasize the fact that the French had a defensive strategy of waiting for the German attack.

Another possibility would have been keeping the defense lines, and launching a counter attack against the German lines which were passing through the French central line of defense¹⁵.

In our opinion three factors were underpinned the French defeat: the defensive military strategy which, given the German strategy, turned out to be completely wrong; the political instability; and the morale of the soldiers and population. We can imagine what would have happened if the United States had not intervened in the war. We must not forget that Charles de Gaulle was a unifying symbol for France during as well as after the war. Also from a strategic point of view he had remarked upon the importance of the tanks¹⁶. From historical vision point of view it is hard to judge the consequences of the defeat of France. Eventually the Allies won the war, and France and also Western Germany won the peace (individually and through the European Economic Community). But, in 1940, the Allies appeared to have lost the war and Germany and the Soviet Union (then the ally of Germany) had a free hand in Central and Eastern Europe, and Belgium, Holland, Luxembourg, and large parts of France had been occupied by Germany.

The other parts of France were ruled by a dictatorship. Till 1944-45 this defeat meant losing the status of a great European power and of the democratic system¹⁷.

¹¹ Liddell Hart, *The History of the Second World War*, volume I, Orizonturi Publishing, Bucharest, p. 97.

¹² *Ibidem*, p. 101.

¹³ *Ibidem*, p. 96.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 102.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 104.

¹⁶ Charles De Gaulle, *War Memoirs. The Calling 1940-1942*, Bucharest, Political Publishing, 1969, pp. 14, 15.

¹⁷ Peter Calvocoressi, *Fall Out. World War II and the Shaping of Postwar Europe*, Iași, Polirom, 2000, translated by Liliana Anghel, pp. 93, 94, 151.

The British documents show us that after the occupation of Prague by Germany, Great Britain was preparing for war. The question of increasing taxes for improving the military and armament was raised by Neville Chamberlain and his Cabinet, and also the question of helping Poland from an economic point of view. The problem of a future alliance with Soviet Russia was also raised. The problem was that Romania and Poland did not want an alliance with Soviet Russia (the transit of Soviet troops on their territory). The British Cabinet discussed at length the issue of indirect aggression (if the Baltic States moved closely to Germany it would have been considered as an indirect aggression against the interests of the Soviet Union)¹⁸.

Great Britain feared eventual Soviet aggression in Eastern Europe. Diplomatically Great Britain was between the hammer and the anvil (like the entire Eastern Europe space which at that time was threatened directly by Germany, and as we can see, later by the Soviet Union). Great Britain had to choose between the acceptance of future aggression by Germany in Eastern Europe and the possible Soviet extension of power in that region. In reality, Great Britain chose a third way, keeping the alliance with France and declaring war to Germany without having the Soviet help. According to the documentary evidence, in June-July 1939 Chamberlain did not believe in the reality of a Soviet-German alliance¹⁹. There are two ways to read the Ribbentrop-Molotov act – as a failure of British-French diplomacy, or as a temporary victory for the totalitarian regimes in search of security and of new territories to conquer. We consider that the second interpretation is more accurate. Chamberlain did not want to sacrifice a part of Eastern Europe for an alliance with the Soviet Union. On the other hand France had the greatest military responsibility of the European western democracies, and as we know France was relying upon its defense strategy.

Through the Munich treaty France and Great Britain gave up partially but substantially the agreement with Czechoslovakia to guarantee the territorial status quo of Czechoslovakia. The problem has various features. From the ethnic territorial point of view Gerhard Weinberg shows that the French leaders were willing to accept certain German demands in the Sudeten land, bearing in mind the distribution of the population. Even in the event of the French winning a war in 1938 against Germany, the French leaders would have renegotiated Czechoslovakia's borders in favor of Germany²⁰. So the French and British leaders looked at the German advance as being partially justified (Anschluss, Munich).

The new European order no longer corresponded to the Versailles treaty. The immediate strategic aspect was very important. There were two possibilities: German advance with the acceptance of France and Great Britain, or German advance without this acceptance (after Munich). Before Munich also Hitler

¹⁸ Romania's National Archives, England, Microfilms, Number Inventory 1085, 1938-1939, roll 7, Conclusions of a Meeting of the Cabinet held at 10 Downing Street, 5 July, 1939, Cabinet 35 (39), Conclusions of a Meeting of the Cabinet held at 10 Downing Street, 5th July, 1939, Cabinet 36 (39), pp. 6,8,10, 16, Conclusions of a Meeting of the Cabinet held at 10 Downing Street, 10th July 1939, p. 2., Conclusions of a Meeting of the Cabinet held at 10 Downing Street, 8 July 1939, p. 2.

¹⁹ Conclusions of a Meeting of the Cabinet held at 10 Downing Street, 10th July 1939, p. 2.

²⁰ Gerhard Weinberg, *Reflections on Munich after 60 years*, in Igor Lukes, Erik Goldstein, editors, *The Munich Crisis, 1938. Prelude to World War Two*, Frank Cass and Company Limited, New York, 1999, pp. 9-10.

threatened Chamberlain with a war²¹. Militarily Czechoslovakia was prepared for a war but this fact did not count²². Officially Benes wanted French and British help, unofficially it seems that Benes sent a letter to the French which indicated that he agreed to certain territorial modifications in favor of Germany which encouraged the French appeasement policy²³. On the other hand the year 1939 represents the year of British and French rearmament, the year in which both cabinets and diplomats are more and more aware of the possibility and probability of a war. France and Great Britain choose the same method of giving guarantees to Poland, Romania and Greece against aggression. After the occupation of the rest of Czech territory by Germany, France and Great Britain were not willing to accept a German advance, similarly a Soviet advance (without the willingness of the countries of Eastern Europe).

In all of these cases as we can see that with regard to Poland there was not a common strategy between the French and the British on the one hand and the Eastern Europe countries on the other. After the attack on Poland, France and Great Britain declared war on Germany, but militarily the French troops made insignificant advances²⁴. The western powers talked about opening a front on the North Sea – Norway – but the Germans quickly occupied Norway²⁵.

Before the German invasion of Belgium, Holland, Luxembourg and France all the diplomatic cards were played. French and Britain had imposed an embargo on Germany²⁶. An unhappy event especially for France was the capture of the German plans. As a result the Germans changed their plans. The main attack was going to be through the Ardennes²⁷.

The French Army strategy was based on the Maginot line and especially on the infantry. There were very few armed divisions, with the rest of the tanks being spread out among the infantry. In the air they were weaker than the Germans. If in the north the French and British troops resisted, in the south the armoured divisions crushed the defensive line and began a powerful sweep to the north.

Essentially the French did not succeed in withdrawing, the German troops advanced more rapidly than the retreating French troops – these being blocked by the retreating French population. The French had expected a static war (more logistically sustained than the Germans).

The Germans benefitted, due to the advantages of their strategy, the advantage of the autonomous armed divisions and their aviation superiority. Furthermore,

²¹ John D. Clare, *Describing the events of Sudeten Crisis in 1938*, <http://www.johndclare.net/EII4.htm>, accessed at 5th October 2015.

²² M. Hauner, "Czechoslovakia as a Military Factor in British considerations of 1938," *The Journal of Strategic Studies*, Vol. 2, 1978, pp. 194-222, in Milan Hauner, cited work. See also Frank MacDonough, cited work, p. 361, nota 7.

²³ Benes, Pamei, vol. 3, docs. 65,78. Hints at possibilities on how to correct the Czechoslovak-German border in Germany's favor: DBFP/3/II, 884, 888, Milan Hauner, *The Sudeten Crisis of 1938*, Benes and Munich, in Frank McDonough, cited work, p. 377, note 44.

²⁴ Liddell Hart, cited work, p. 48.

²⁵ *Ibidem*, pp. 79, 85-93.

²⁶ *La France en guerre 1939-1940. Chemins de Memoire*, German Federal Archive, MINDEF/SGA/DMPA, <http://www.cheminsdememoire.gouv.fr/en/la-france-en-guerre-1939-1940-0>, accessed on the 15th October, 2015.

²⁷ Jacques de Launay, cited work, pp. 91, 92.

the excellent French road system played a role against France and to the benefit of Germany (unlike in the Soviet Union)²⁸.

In the face of the Blitzkrieg, a couple of defensive lessons can be learned – he must have a numerical superiority, and strong and deep territorial lines of defense. France did not have Soviet Russia's territory and the disposition of the forces was disadvantageous. The coordinated use of tanks and planes disrupted the French army.

Unfortunately the French military leaders based themselves on the strategy of the first World War. They did not take into the consideration the importance of tanks – which had been identified by Charles De Gaulle, and they did not take into consideration the importance of the airplanes. It turned out that the existing defensive lines could not resist the German attacks especially in the Ardennes. Perhaps more independent French tank divisions situated to the rear of the front would have been important.

From the point of view of Western European Democracies the battle of France means the loss of power by France and Great Britain in favor of Germany, and means the beginning of losing the status of superpowers – there are going to be replaced in the West by the United States and in the East by the Soviet Union (which imposed its regime by force).

The interwar period and the start of World War II marks the end of the Versailles Treaty, the end of the League of Nations, the changing of the power distribution in Europe and in the world. France had followed a much more proactive policy in the 20's. It is true that Germany was severely weakened. If in the 20's France occupies Ruhr²⁹, in the 30's France cedes a great deal to Germany. The problem in the 30's is that the foreign policy development and action operate on many different levels – the Versailles treaty, real politic, but also a moral level, good or bad, legitimate or illegitimate. France and Great Britain did not take into consideration the possibility of an offensive war which meant they had to base their strategy exclusively on defense.

Furthermore when they began to take the war against Germany seriously, they could not count on Soviet Russia without endangering the independence of Eastern Europe. In 1945 it turned out that they were right.

Unfortunately the collective security system did not succeed (geographically and logistically the countries involved were isolated and the lack of an offensive strategy could not have been of any help – the eventual success of this strategy is debatable – but it is clear that it was lacking) There are many important authors who have written about the second World War. One of them is Churchill. In his memoirs he acknowledged the disaster of the Battle of France. Churchill shows that the French troops' morale was low, as shown by his attitude when the Germans had begun to surround the French troops. In a meeting with the French leadership, he asked Gamelin: "Where are the reserve troops". He was answered, indirectly, that these troops did not exist. Another significant aspect was the order given by

²⁸ Niall Ferguson, cited work, pp. 469, 470.

²⁹ *France occupies the Ruhr: Inter war Period: Causes of WW2*, <http://inter-wars.weebly.com/france-occupies-the-ruhr-1923.html>, accessed at 15th October 2015.

Gamelin that the North Army avoid encirclement and attack the Panzer divisions in the South. Finally they chose to evacuate the French and German troops³⁰.

Conclusions

There are a couple of significant points that must be emphasized. The French and the British adopted a defensive military and political strategy (after 15 March 1939 more military than political). The French military strategy in 1940 worked to their disadvantage. They did not take into account the importance of tanks and planes. The reserve units did not exist.

After this battle the status of the French and British actors changed and the battle marks the beginning of the end of France and Great Britain's status as superpowers.

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³⁰ Winston Churchill, *The Second World War*, Saeculum I.O., Bucharest, 1996, translated by Any and Virgil Florea, Forward by Florin Constantiniu, pp. 241, 244, Liddell Hart, cited work, p. 113.