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THE TRIUMPH
OF *BLITZKRIEG*

Blitzkrieg – ‘lightning war’ – is a German word but not known to the German army before 1939. A coining of Western newspapermen, it had been used to convey to their readers something of the speed and destructiveness of German ground–air operations in the three-week campaign against the ill-equipped and outnumbered Polish army. However, as the German generals themselves readily conceded, the Polish campaign had not been a fair test of the army’s capabilities. Despite allegations by some of them that the Wehrmacht had not shown itself the equal of the old imperial army – allegations which drove Hitler to a frenzy of rage against General Walther von Brauchitsch, the commander-in-chief, at a meeting in the Reich Chancellery on 5 November – the plodding Polish infantry divisions had offered no match to the mechanised spearheads of Guderian and Kleist. *Blitzkrieg* aptly described what had befallen Poland.

Would *Blitzkrieg* avail against the West? Hitler persisted into October in hoping that its spectacle would persuade France and Britain to accept his Polish victory; but their rejection, on 10 and 12 October respectively, of his peace tentatives, offered in a speech to the Reichstag on 6 October, persuaded him that Germany must make war again. His ambitions required at least the defeat of France, which might persuade Britain to sue for separate terms and inaugurate that accommodation of her maritime with his continental empire for which his upbringing as a subject of the old landlocked Danubian empire led him unrealistically to hope. On 12 September he had told his Wehrmacht adjutant, Rudolf Schmundt, that he believed France could be conquered quickly and Britain then brought to negotiate; on 27 September he warned the commanders-in-chief of the three services that he intended to attack in the west shortly; and on 9 October, even before France and

Previous page: Instruments of Blitzkrieg – Junkers 87 dive-bombers overfly a Panzer Mark IV during the Battle of France, May 1940.

Britain had rejected his peace offer, he issued Führer Directive No. 6 for a western offensive.

In an accompanying memorandum, which accused France and Britain of having kept Germany weak and divided since the Peace of Westphalia in 1648, he announced that nothing less was at stake than 'the destruction of the predominance of the Western powers in order to leave room for the expansion of the German people'. Führer Directive No. 6 described how that destruction was to be achieved:

An offensive will be planned . . . through Luxembourg, Belgium and Holland [and] must be launched at the earliest possible moment [since] any further delay will . . . entail the end of Belgian and perhaps of Dutch neutrality, to the advantage of the Allies. The purpose of this offensive will be to defeat as much as possible of the French army and of the forces of the Allies fighting on their side, and at the same time to win as much territory as possible in Holland, Belgium and northern France to serve as a base for the successful prosecution of the air and sea war against England and as a wide protective area for the economically vital Ruhr.

The plan of attack, codenamed *Fall Gelb* ('Case Yellow'), was to be worked out in detail by the high command of the army, the *Oberkommando des Heeres* (OKH). Although Hitler as Supreme Commander laid down broad strategic aims, he did not as yet involve himself in technical military affairs. Hitler nevertheless had strong if not clear ideas of what he wanted 'Case Yellow' to achieve. Here was to be the making of a strategic imbroglio which would set Führer and army at loggerheads for the next five months. Historically the German army, and the Prussian army before it, had always deferred to the fiction that the head of state was warlord – *Feldherr*. However, not since Frederick the Great had led his soldiers in person against those of the tsar and the Holy Roman Emperor had a head of state actually interfered in his generals' planning. Kaisers Wilhelm I and II, at the onset of war with France in 1870 and 1914, had transferred their courts to the army's headquarters; but they had both then surrendered detailed control of operations to their chiefs of staff – the Moltkes, Falkenhayn and Hindenburg in sequence. Hitler would have been willing to do the same had the successors of those men shared his vision of what the reborn German army could, with the *Luftwaffe*, achieve; but the commander-in-chief, Brauchitsch, was a doubter and his chief of staff, General Franz Halder, a quibbler. Halder was a man of brains, a product of the Bavarian General Staff Academy whose graduates were thought intellectually more flexible than those of the Prussian *Kriegsakademie*. His war experience, however, had been as a staff officer employing the step-by-step tactics of the Western Front; his original arm of the service had been the artillery, also dominated by step-by-step thinking; and he was a devout member of the State Lutheran Church and thereby conditioned to recoil from Hitler's brutal philosophy of domination, national and international, yet not to defy constituted authority by opposing it. As a result, he proposed a form for 'Case Yellow' which, as he admitted elsewhere, would postpone the mounting of

a decisive offensive against France until 1942. As outlined on 19 October, his plan was designed to separate the British Expeditionary Force from the French army and to win ground in Belgium which would provide airfields and North Sea ports for the German navy's and air force's operations against Britain, but not to achieve outright victory.

Thus he acquiesced in the letter of Führer Directive No. 6 but succeeded in denying its spirit. The expedient temporarily baffled Hitler, who lacked allies among the military establishment able to help him argue against Halder. On 22 October he unsettled his chief of staff by demanding that 'Case Yellow' begin as soon as 12 November; on 25 October he confronted Brauchitsch with the suggestion that the army attack directly into France instead of northern Belgium; and on 30 October he proposed to General Jodl, his personal operations officer, that the Wehrmacht's tanks be flung into the forest of the Ardennes, where the French would least expect them. Without expert military support to endorse these proposals, however, he could not jog 'Case Yellow' forward.

General Staff resistance rested on solid ground. Late autumn was no season for undertaking offensive operations, least of all on the sodden plains of rainy northern Europe. The Ardennes, even if its narrow valleys led directly to the open French countryside north of the fortified zone of the Maginot Line, was not the obvious terrain for the deployment of tanks. Hitler's wishes therefore seemed beggars looking for horses to ride – until Halder's plan came the way of fellow professionals and their rejection of its limitations reached Hitler's ear. The process took time, time which saved any revision of 'Case Yellow' from miscarrying, and it resulted ultimately in a fruitful outcome; for Halder was right to argue that late autumn was the wrong season for the attack on France but mistaken in believing that a bold strategy would not yield large results.

The professionals who took Hitler's side were the commander-in-chief of Army Group A, Gerd von Rundstedt, and his chief of staff, Erich von Manstein. The significance of Rundstedt's defection from the General Staff plan was his degree of influence, as one of the most senior generals in the army and commander of the strongest concentration of force on the Western Front. The significance of Manstein's opposition to Halder's 'Case Yellow' was that he enjoyed Rundstedt's support and possessed one of the best military minds in the Wehrmacht. At the outset he knew nothing of Hitler's dissatisfactions with Halder's plan. It merely affronted him as a half-hearted approach to a problem that instinct told him was susceptible of a full-blooded solution. As autumn weather worsened into winter, however, his instinct led him to advance one criticism after another of the Halder plan, each converging as if by steps in blind-man's-buff with Hitler's desires for the outcome of 'Case Yellow', and each at the same time laying the foundations for what would come to be called 'the Manstein plan'.

On 31 October the first of six memoranda he was to write arrived at OKH. It argued that the aim of 'Yellow' must be to cut off the Allied forces by a thrust along the line of the Somme, thus chiming in with Hitler's idea of 30 October for an attack through the Ardennes. Brauchitsch, the commander-in-chief, rejected it on 3 November but conceded

that more armour should be allotted to Rundstedt's Army Group A. Meanwhile, as bad weather forced one postponement of the Halder plan after another, Hitler vented his rage in person against his generals for their half-heartedness. He was determined on victory, he warned at the Reich Chancellery on 23 November, and 'anyone who thinks otherwise is irresponsible'. Manstein called support from other middle-rank professionals, notably Guderian, the tank expert, to endorse his conception of a knockout blow into northern France. Even discounting the possibility that the French and British would do him the favour of throwing too strong forces into Belgium – precisely what they were contemplating, though he could not know that – he was moving over more certainly to the conviction that a drive to divide the enemy forces along the line of the Somme was the correct strategy. Guderian's assurance that a tank force, if made strong enough, could negotiate the Ardennes, cross the Meuse and deliver the knockout blow reinforced him in that view.

Hitler, despite his differences with Halder, was still allowing his urge to victory to overcome his doubts in Halder's plan. 'A-Days', which would have set it in motion, were fixed four times in December and a final one for 17 January 1940. On 10 January, however, two Luftwaffe officers crash-landed in Belgium with parts of the 'Yellow' plan in a briefcase. Enough survived after their attempts to incinerate the documents, the German military attaché to Holland discovered, to compromise the offensive and to oblige the army to make a clean breast of things to Hitler. After his rage subsided – it resulted in the dismissal of the commander of the Second Air Fleet and his replacement by Albert Kesselring, who was to prove one of the most talented German generals of the war – Hitler postponed 'Yellow' indefinitely and demanded a new plan 'to be founded particularly on secrecy and surprise'.

Here was Manstein's opening. However, the last of his six memoranda had so tried Halder's patience that he had arranged in December for Army Group A's chief of staff to be given command of a corps, a theoretical promotion but, since the corps was in East Prussia, an effective dismissal of his troublesome junior from a post of influence. Protocol required, however, that corps commanders on appointment should pay their respects to the head of state. The ceremony ought to have been a formality; but on this occasion chance took Schmundt, Hitler's Wehrmacht adjutant, by Manstein's Coblenz headquarters where he got wind of the Manstein plan. It so uncannily matched the Führer's aspiration, though in a 'significantly more precise form', that he ensured Manstein should have a whole morning with the Führer on 17 February. Hitler was entranced, converted, and thereafter did not rest until Brauchitsch and Halder too had accepted the Manstein plan – which he passed off as his own conception.

OKH then demonstrated its institutional strengths. The direct descendant of the old Prussian Great General Staff, it worked merely as the handmaiden of a strong master. Hitler had thitherto shown the strength of will but not of mind to call forth its talents. Now that it had a clear expression of its master's voice, it concentrated all its efforts on transforming

the elements of the Manstein–Hitler conception – for an attack by strong armoured forces through the Ardennes forest into the rear of the Franco-British field army north of the Somme – into a detailed and watertight operation order. It worked fast. Only a week after Hitler's morning of enlightenment by Manstein, it produced a proposal, codenamed *Sichelschnitt*, 'Sickle Stroke', which was a transformation of their half-formed ideas. The theme of its plan was a reversal of Schlieffen's from 1914. That great chief of staff – already dead by the time his conception was tested on the field of battle – had based his victory plan on the expectation that the French would push into Germany south of the Ardennes, allowing the German armies to outflank them through Belgium. 'Sickle Stroke' was based on the expectation that in 1940 the French, with their British allies, would push into Belgium, allowing the German armies to outflank them through the Ardennes. It was a brilliant exercise in double-bluff, all the more so because it reinsured against the expectation's miscarrying. For, even if the Franco-British army did not push into Belgium, the unexpectedness of the Ardennes thrust and the power and mass of the armoured force with which it was to be mounted promised an excellent chance of catching the enemy in the rear and toppling him off-balance.

'Sickle Stroke' allotted the three German army groups the following missions. Army Group B, the northernmost, commanded by General Fedor von Bock, was to attack into Holland and northern Belgium, with the aim of tempting the Franco-British field army as far eastward as possible and seizing territory from which it could be outflanked from the north. Army Group C (commanded by General Wilhelm Ritter von Leeb), the southernmost, was to engage the garrison of the Maginot Line, penetrating it if possible. Rundstedt's Army Group A, in the centre, was to advance through the Ardennes, seize crossings over the great water obstacle of the Meuse between Sedan and Dinant, then drive northwest, along the line of the River Somme, to Amiens, Abbeville and the Channel coast. It was to command seven of the ten available Panzer divisions to spearhead the advance, leaving none for Leeb and only three for Bock.

Bock, displeased by his secondary role, emphasised to 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 then hope to be able 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.' To German officers of their generation, Bock's warning to Halder recalled the German army's last 'open flank' operation into France, in 1914 – the long dusty roads overcrowded with marching troops, the French nowhere to be found, the unprotected lines of communication ever lengthening, the great walled fortress of Paris, bulging with troops and artillery, looming unreduced in the rear until, like a thunderclap, the French counter-stroke was launched, the first Battle of the Marne lost, the German spearheads sent trundling into reverse and the urgent footfalls of

manoeuvre warfare drowned by the thud of spades digging the first trenches of the Western Front.

Bock was right to warn that the stagnation of another Western Front awaited the Wehrmacht if 'Sickle Stroke' miscarried; he was wrong to warn that it might miscarry as the Schlieffen Plan had done in 1914. For one thing, the Maginot Line, unlike the fortress of Paris in 1914, was not a *place d'armes* from which a counter-attack force could spring panther-like against the German army's flank. On the contrary, its conformation and structure imprisoned its garrison within it, consigning them to a purely frontal defence against frontal attack, which it was not Rundstedt's role to deliver. 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 organised to do. As to airpower, there was certainly '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 *Armée de l'Air* and the Advanced Air Striking Force of the RAF combined.

Hermann Goering's Luftwaffe would reveal its deficiencies later in the war; but in 1940 its strengths were paramount. Unlike its British and French equivalents, which had over-diversified in aircraft production and procurement – trying to build too many types at home and then being forced into purchasing from America to replace unsatisfactory models – it had concentrated on procuring a large number of a few types of aircraft, each of which was finely adapted to its specialised function. The Messerschmitt 109 was an excellent example of what today would be called an 'air-superiority fighter', fast, manoeuvrable, heavily armed and with a high rate of climb. The Junkers 87 was a formidable ground-attack dive-bomber, particularly when protected by the Me 109 and as long as ground-air defence depended upon the visually aimed anti-aircraft gun. The Heinkel 111 was an effective medium bomber, at least for daylight operations. Some alternative German types – the Dornier 17 bomber, the Messerschmitt 110 heavy fighter – were to prove misconceptions; but in 1940 the Luftwaffe was burdened with none of the obsolescent or obsolete types which equipped the French and British squadrons. Moreover, its senior officers included a number of first-rate men – Milch, Jeschonnek and Kesselring – whose transfer from the army to the air force was a token of their competence; too many senior officers of the French and British air forces, by comparison, were also-rans who had forsaken the army to restart frustrated careers.

The commonality of training shared by German air force and army officers – Jeschonnek had passed first out of the *Kriegsakademie* – ensured that the Wehrmacht's tactics of ground-air operations were fine-tuned. The staffs of its ten Panzer divisions knew that when they called for air support it would arrive on time, where and how they required it. This ensured a massive increment to the Panzers' power, which was in any case formidable. German tanks were not, model for model, notably superior to those of the British

and French armies. The Mark IV Panzer, the army's future main battle tank, was well armoured but undergunned. The Mark III, its workhorse, was inferior in protection both to the British Infantry Tank Mark I and the French Somua, the latter an advanced design whose all-cast hull would influence that of the American Sherman of 1942-5. However, the German tanks were integrated into 'all-tank' formations, the Panzer divisions, which were not only 'tank-heavy' – that is, unencumbered by unmechanised infantry or artillery – but also trained to maximise the tank's characteristics: speed, manoeuvrability and independence of action. By contrast, the British had only one armoured division, which was still in the process of forming; while the French, with more tanks than the Germans (3000 to 2400), had distributed half (1500) among their slow-moving infantry divisions, allotted others (700) to bastard 'cavalry' and 'mechanised' divisions, and kept only 800 to form five armoured divisions, of which in 1940 three were active and one – commanded by the wayward Charles de Gaulle – was still forming. Germany's ten Panzer divisions were not only homogeneous in composition, as a result of the reorganisation of the 'light' into true tank divisions since the Polish campaign; they were also subordinated to higher Panzer headquarters commanded by Hoepner (XVI Panzer Corps), Hoth (XV), Guderian (XIX) and Reinhardt (XLI). Guderian's and Reinhardt's Corps, with Wietersheim's XIV Mechanised Corps, a formation of motorised infantry divisions which included integral tank battalions, actually composed a separate entity, Panzer Group von Kleist. At the time of its creation it was a revolutionary organisation, the largest armoured force existing in any army and the forerunner of the great tank armies which were to sweep across the battlefields of the world in 1941-5.

— The Maginot mentality —

It was these dense concentrations of tanks which made the German army so menacing an opponent of those of the Western Allies, as the two sides watched and waited either side of the Franco-German frontier in the spring of 1940. The French army, 101 divisions strong, scarcely differed in character from that of 1914; it wore the same boots, manned the same artillery, the venerable 75 mm, and marched to the same tunes as under 'Papa' Joffre; many of its commanders had been staff officers to the generals who had led it to war in that terrible August twenty-six years earlier. Moreover, it was still a marching army, its pace of manoeuvre determined by the age-old rhythms of soldier's stride and horse's walk. So too was that of the bulk of the German army, whose 120 infantry divisions were as roadbound as those of the enemy. But the ten German Panzer divisions were not roadbound; the Luftwaffe squadrons that supported them were not even earthbound. Together they indeed threatened 'lightning war' against the groundlings of the Western Alliance. How did the Western generals hope to give them check?

The strategy of the West was founded first, of course, on its belief in the inviolability of the Maginot Line, that 'Western Front in concrete' which had consumed the disposable

margin of the French defence budget since the first funds for its construction were voted in January 1930. However, the French commitment to an 'impermeable' military frontier long predated that role. As early as 1922 the French army had determined that its soldiers should never again, as in 1914, have to fight a defensive battle in the open field; and every demographic and economic development since – the declining birth-rate, the static industrial base – had only reinforced that resolution. The original vote for the Maginot Line was for 3000 million francs; by 1935, 7000 million had been spent, one-fifth of the year-on-year military budget, but only 87 miles of fortification had been completed. Fortification experts were satisfied (rightly, as the events of 1940 were to demonstrate) that the money had bought effective protection as far as the line ran, which was along the Franco-German border – but there remained 250 miles of totally unfortified frontier, where France abutted Belgium. Not only had the money lacked to extend the line. The maintenance of good relations with Belgium had argued against its being found; for, on Hitler's reoccupation of the Rhineland in 1936, Belgium had revoked its military treaty with France, declaring itself 'independent' – though not neutral – but made clear its resistance to being left on the wrong side of the Maginot Line if it were extended northwards.

In the event of a German offensive, which seemed certain to be based on the exploitation of Belgian weakness (as in 1914), the French high command would therefore have to launch its mobile field army, with the British Expeditionary Force, into Belgian territory, without having been able to co-ordinate plans with the Belgian General Staff beforehand or reconnoitre the ground on which it was to fight. Nevertheless the French were obliged to accept this highly unsatisfactory basis on which to prepare a defensive battle. On 24 October 1939 General Maurice Gamelin, the French commander-in-chief, issued orders for an advance to the line of the river Schelde in Belgium in the event of a German attack. Three weeks later, on 15 November, when the disadvantages of that scheme had been realised, he issued an amended Directive No. 8 which set the line of advance on the river Dyle, a shorter front which connected the two big Belgian water obstacles, the Schelde estuary and the Meuse, from which river-mobile troops would hold the gap between it and the Maginot Line.

Directive No. 8 had the advantage of bringing the Franco-British force closer behind the projected positions of the Belgian army, which was twenty-two divisions strong on mobilisation and had an excellent military reputation; for all the scorn the Allies were later to heap on the Belgians, the Germans had regarded them since 1914 as tenacious opponents and would continue to do so even after the *débâcle* that was to come. Their front was also protected, as in 1914, by strong fortifications, particularly along the Meuse, on which much money had been spent.

Could the Belgians, even if fighting independently, win a delay on their frontier with Germany? Directive No. 8 promised an effective strategy. Its success would depend on the operational efficiency of the Franco-British forces of manoeuvre. Of these the British Expeditionary Force composed a homogeneous element, though of mixed quality. 'It was

no use', the British Ambassador in Paris had written to Lord Halifax, the Foreign Secretary, in January 1940, 'pointing to the size of the British Navy and Air Force . . . French public opinion wanted large numbers of troops in Europe.' The British had done their best; by December 1939 they had sent all five of their excellent home-based regular divisions to France. However, because the British military system was indeed regular, and yielding trained reserves in very small numbers by comparison with the conscripted armies of France and Germany, that almost exhausted its military resources. Extra divisions had to be found from the voluntary reserve, the Territorial Army, 'Saturday night soldiers' as they were known at home, high in enthusiasm but low in experience and skill. The five extra divisions sent to France between January and April were all Territorial; a final three sent in April were so deficient in training and equipment that even the British categorised them as 'labour' formations. Further, all thirteen were infantry divisions; in May 1940 Britain's only tank formation, the 1st Armoured Division, was still not ready for action. Nevertheless there was an impressive consistency of organisation and spirit in the British Expeditionary Force. The regulars had mobilised with Tommy Atkins's traditional and cheerful indifference to the identity of the King's enemies – or allies ('going to fight them bloody Belgians', a Tommy had explained to Siegfried Sassoon in 1914) – and the Territorials eagerly aped their sang-froid.

By contrast, the French army was a piecemeal collection of divisions and units, good, indifferent and plain bad. The good included the ten 'active' conscript infantry divisions, which were kept at full strength in peacetime, the seven regular divisions of the colonial army and those North African divisions of the *Armée d'Afrique* which had been brought to France. Less good were the category 'A' reserve divisions mobilised from the younger reservists; some of the category 'B' divisions, mobilised from reservists of over thirty-two, were militarily inert and even insubordinate. Lieutenant-General Alan Brooke, the future British chief of staff, recalled a march-past of such men in November 1939 with disgust: 'men unshaven, horses ungroomed, clothes and saddlery that did not fit, vehicles dirty and complete lack of pride in themselves or their units. What shook me most, however, was the look in the men's faces, disgruntled and insubordinate looks . . . although ordered to give the "eyes left", hardly a man bothered to do so.' The French tank and motorised divisions were of better human quality, but organised on no coherent system; the five light cavalry divisions (DLC) included horse and armoured-car units, the three light mechanised divisions (DLM) armoured cars and light tanks, the four armoured divisions (DCR) tanks only and the ten motorised divisions of track-borne infantry. They were distributed haphazardly among the armies, providing none of the commanders with an equivalent of the solid mass of armoured troops which would form the cutting-edge of Rundstedt's Army Group A. Perhaps the only French units logically trained and equipped to perform an allotted function were the fortress divisions in the Maginot Line, which included units of Indo-Chinese and Madagascan machine-gunners; but they, by definition, were prisoners of their positions and unavailable for deployment elsewhere.

The German army which opposed this miscellaneous Allied host impressed above all by the homogeneity of its composition. It maintained only three types of division: armoured (Panzer), motorised and infantry. The parachute divisions formed part of the Luftwaffe. By May 1940 all ten of its Panzer and all six of its motorised divisions were deployed in the west; so too were 118 infantry divisions, which, since the Polish campaign, differed little in fighting efficiency, whether they were pre-war 'active' or wartime reserve. The only oddities in the German order of battle were the 1st Cavalry Division (effectively a motorised formation), the elite mountain infantry divisions and the two motorised divisions drawn from the SS, the Nazi Party militia. The SS had already demonstrated in Poland a tendency to illegal brutality that it was to amplify in France. Otherwise its units differed from those of the army only in an evident determination to excel in courage on the battlefield.

The simplicity of the German army's organisation was reflected in its command arrangements. Authority over its formations ran from Hitler through his personal headquarters, OKW (*Oberkommando der Wehrmacht*, the Supreme Command), as yet an undeveloped instrument of control, to the army high command (OKH) and then directly to the army groups. In practice, as foreshadowed in Poland, Hitler would deal directly with the General Staff, locating his headquarters close to it, but leave direct operational control to its experts. The Luftwaffe's liaison staff at OKH directly co-ordinated air operations with the army's. On the Allied side, by contrast, operational authority rested with the French Supreme Commander, General Maurice Gamelin, but was exercised first through a Commander Land Forces (General Doumenc) and then by the commander for the north-east, General Alphonse Joseph Georges, under whom came not only the French Army Groups 1, 2 and 3 but also the British Expeditionary Force. The BEF's commander, General Lord Gort, answered operationally to Georges but politically to the British cabinet; but by May 1940, because Gamelin answered politically to his own cabinet, he had developed the habit of dealing directly with Gort rather than through Georges, while Gort ultimately looked to London for orders rather than to La Ferté (Georges' HQ), Montry (Doumenc's) or Vincennes (Gamelin's). It was a further structural weakness of the Allied command system that Gamelin's headquarters were near Paris, those of Doumenc halfway to those of Georges in northern France, those of Gort separate from his, and those of both the British and French air forces separate again. The Royal Air Force in France actually answered to two headquarters: Gort directly controlled the RAF component of the BEF, but the much larger Advanced Air Striking Force came under Bomber Command in Britain. The French air force had three levels of command above its operational squadrons, three separate squadron headquarters, and liaison staffs with both elements of the RAF.

Structural deficiencies were compounded by personal failings. Gort was a famously brave officer who had won the Victoria Cross in the First World War but identified over closely with his fighting battalion commanders. Georges had never properly recovered from a wound suffered during the assassination of the King of Yugoslavia at Marseilles in

1934. Gamelin, once operations officer to Joffre, was simply old – sixty-eight – and, what was worse, tired by age. De Gaulle, who visited him in his remote ‘convent-like’ headquarters at Vincennes during the phoney war, brought away the impression of a researcher testing the chemical creations of his strategy in a laboratory. Air Marshal Arthur Barratt, commander of the British Air Forces in France, had a more caustic judgement: ‘a button-eyed, button-booted, pot-bellied little grocer’. Gamelin’s operational directives read like philosophical tracts. No word, written or spoken, that issued from Vincennes carried fire to the men at the front.

Perhaps only a Prometheus could have done that – and there was nothing Promethean about Gamelin. Even the British army, a brotherhood of professional warriors and eager amateurs, approached the war with a sense of *déjà vu*; ‘as we have beaten the Germans once, why do we have to do it again?’ might have encapsulated their attitude. The French army, drawn from the whole of the nation, scarred by its terrible sufferings of 1914–18 and divided by the extremism of its politics, was touched by a similar sense of pointless repetition, but still more acutely. Albert Lebrun, the French President, noted after his visit to the front a ‘slackened resolve, relaxed discipline. There one no longer breathed the pure and enlivening air of the trenches.’ Winston Churchill, First Lord of the Admiralty, was ‘struck by the prevailing atmosphere of calm aloofness, by the seemingly poor quality of the work in hand, by the lack of visible activity of any kind’ on the French front. General Edouard Ruby, of the Second Army, found that ‘every exercise was considered as a vexation, all work as a fatigue. After several months of stagnation, nobody believed in the war any more.’

In part the French did not believe because the war was foreseen, not only by common soldiers but also by the generals, as a repetition of the trenches, long-drawn-out and indecisive. The common soldiers and generals of the German army had been given in Poland a vision of a different outcome; if they as yet lacked the faith to believe it could be repeated in the west, Hitler had no doubts. ‘Gentlemen,’ he told his staff on the eve of ‘Case Yellow’, ‘you are about to witness the most famous victory in history!’ On 27 April, persuaded by his reading of captured Allied documents relating to their intervention in Norway that he could not be condemned for his imminent violation of Dutch and Belgian neutrality, he announced to Halder that the attack in the west would begin in the first week of May. Weather forecasts enforced postponement of the date from 5 to 6 May, then 8 May. Finally on 7 May he postponed it again to 10 May ‘but not one day after that’. He held to his resolve.

‘Late in the evening of Friday 9 May from the Dutch frontier to Luxembourg,’ wrote Professor Guy Chapman, ‘outposts facing Germany became aware of a vast murmuring on the German side as of the gathering of a host.’ A warning of impending attack from the Belgian military attaché in Berlin, delayed in deciphering, was received in Brussels just before midnight. The Belgian high command at once put its army on alert; but by then the German vanguards were already moving to the attack. At 4.30 on the morning of 10 May,

airborne units began landing near The Hague and Leyden in Holland and on the crossings of the Meuse in Belgium. The most daring of the airborne attacks was against the Belgian fort of Eben Emael, guarding the junction of the Meuse with the Albert Canal, both key obstacles in the Belgian defence plan. German glider-borne infantry crash-landed on the roof of the fort, penned the defenders inside and, using concrete-piercing charges, overwhelmed them by the sheer surprise of their descent.

Surprise afflicted no one worse than the Dutch, who were genuine neutrals. They had taken no part in the First World War, wanted no part of the Second and commended themselves as an enemy only because parts of their territory, notably the strip known as the 'Maastricht appendix', offered an easy way round the Belgian water obstacles. The ability of the Dutch to defend their territory was minimal. Their army, only ten divisions strong, had not fought a war since 1830. Their air force had only 125 aircraft, half of which were immediately destroyed on the ground by surprise attack. Their best hope of delaying defeat, as they had learnt in the Eighty Years War against the Spanish three centuries earlier, was to retreat inside their waterlogged zone around Amsterdam and Rotterdam and trust to the network of its canals and rivers to delay the invader. The strategy which had cost Spain decades of campaigning was unhinged by German airpower in a few hours. By overflying the water defences of 'Fortress Holland' with streams of Junkers 52 transport aircraft on the morning of 10 May the Luftwaffe landed the whole of the 22nd Airborne Division in its heart, there to await the arrival of Army Group B's tanks. Despite the brave resistance of the Dutch army, the blowing of several vital bridges through the miscarriage of German surprise attacks, and the intervention of the French Seventh Army, the German airborne troops did not have long to wait. On the morning of 13 May, as the German armoured spearheads reached out to join hands with them as they were on the point of capturing Rotterdam, the Luftwaffe misunderstood a signal from the ground announcing their success and bombed the city centre flat. It was the first 'area' operation of the Second World War and a raid which killed 814 civilians. But it effectively ended Dutch resistance, prompting the Queen of the Netherlands to embark on a ship of the Royal Navy for a British port – she had asked to be taken to another part of her kingdom – and causing the Dutch high command to capitulate the following day. As Queen Wilhelmina left, she forecast that 'in due course, with God's help, the Netherlands will regain their European territory'. The Dutch people, who were to pass through the cruellest of German occupations in western Europe, were not to foresee that the Dutch empire in the East Indies would also be lost to them before liberation eventually came.

No word of criticism has ever been levelled against the Dutch by either victors or vanquished of 1940. Not so the Belgians. Although the German army found their soldiers stalwart in action – the official historian of the German 18th Division spoke of their 'extraordinary bravery'; the German opponent of Hitler, Ulrich von Hassell, judged that 'among our adversaries the Belgians fought the best'; while Siegfried Westphal, later to be chief of staff of the German armies defending France against invasion in 1944, noted that 'it

was astonishing to see that the Belgians fought with increasing tenacity the nearer the end of the war approached' – the British and French, both during the crisis of 1940 and ever afterwards, insisted on laying blame for much of what befell them on the Belgian army, King and government.

King Leopold's chief military adviser, General Robert van Overstraeten, has been characterised as the 'evil genius' of the 1940 campaign, resisting liaison with the French and British before the German attack and succumbing to defeatism as soon as it began. There is certainly something in both charges; but the truth was that Belgium found itself in an impossible position. Short of allowing France and Britain to garrison its territory from the onset – which would have compromised the neutrality it still believed to be its best hope of averting invasion – it had no option but to keep its military distance from the Allies, while fortifying its eastern frontier as best it could against the Wehrmacht. Even so, van Overstraeten did allow British and French officers wearing civilian clothes to reconnoitre the positions they intended to take up if Germany attacked; and, though he refused to co-ordinate defence plans with the Allies, he did transmit to them Belgian intelligence of German intentions, including details of the original 'Case Yellow' captured at Mechelen on 9 January, and subsequent indications of their scheme to envelop and destroy the Franco-British army on the Western Front.

Van Overstraeten's professional objection to closer co-operation with the Allies lay in his belief that nothing would induce them to defend the whole of Belgium. His (correct) judgement was that they intended to advance no further than the centre of the kingdom; his equally correct but harsher judgement was that they would allow the Belgian army to 'sacrifice' itself in its forward positions on the Albert Canal while they consolidated their own behind it on the Dyle Line. In the event, they did not even win the time to consolidate. The French Seventh Army, though commanded by Henri Giraud, a genuine fighting general and future rival of de Gaulle for leadership of Free France, made poor time along the North Sea coast on its mission to bring support to the Dutch and the Belgian left flank. It had further to advance than the Germans of Army Group B coming from the opposite direction, who proved more adept than it in negotiating water obstacles even, when defended. Its motorised reconnaissance elements also came under German air attack. By 12 May its advance was blunted near Breda, its objective, and on the following day it was ordered to fall back to guard the left flank of the Dyle Line near Antwerp. It did so pursued by the advance guard of the 9th Panzer Division.

The Allied deployment on to the Dyle was already going wrong. A 'domino effect' was in train. As the Dutch army fell back from its forward positions into Fortress Holland around Amsterdam and Rotterdam, it uncovered the left flank of the Belgians on the Albert Canal, where they were outflanked by the 9th Panzer Division. On the right they were outflanked by the 3rd and 4th Panzer Divisions, which were about to be let across the precipitous defile of the Meuse – the most formidable of military obstacles in north-west Europe – by the German airborne troops' descent on Eben Emael. While the Royal Air

Force tried vainly in a series of suicidal bombing missions to destroy the Meuse bridges in the face of the German advance, the Belgians began to fall back, hoping to feel behind them the support of the French First Army and the BEF advancing to the Dyle.

— ‘Steps in a dream’ —

Both these forces were in forward motion, the BEF passing by Brussels, the French First Army by Maubeuge, with the Ninth Army of General André Corap on its right. For the British their line of advance was familiar country. It ran through Marlborough’s campaigning ground, past Waterloo and across more recent battlefields of their military history, Ypres and Mons. ‘It was almost’, wrote the American war correspondent, Drew Middleton, ‘as if they were retracing steps taken in a dream. They saw again faces of friends long dead and heard the half-remembered names of towns and villages.’ Dream was shortly to become nightmare for them, and for their French allies too. The Dyle, to which they were advancing, was scarcely a natural obstacle at all; the artificial obstacles they had been led to believe the Belgians had erected along it were scattered or absent altogether (the British would encounter those that they had emplaced a few years later; collected and transported to Normandy, they would form a principal element in the German fortifications of the D-Day beaches). The French had two ‘cavalry’ and one mechanised division with them; the British had almost no armour at all. Opposite were the 3rd and 4th Divisions of Hoepner’s armoured corps, with over 600 tanks, their crews battle-hardened and trained for rapid advance by the experience of the Polish campaign. No wonder that an eerie cynicism suffused Hitler’s reminiscence of this stage of the campaign: ‘It was wonderful the way everything turned out according to plan. When the news came through that the enemy were moving forward along the whole front, I could have wept for joy; they had fallen into the trap . . . they had believed . . . that we were striking to the old Schlieffen Plan.’ Hitler’s own first experience of battle had occurred only fifty miles from the Dyle, in the dying stage of the ‘old Schlieffen Plan’ in October 1914. It had been a bitter and bloody baptism. Now: ‘how lovely Felsennest [Crag’s Nest, his ‘Sickle Stroke’ headquarters] was! The birds in the morning, the view of the road up which the columns were advancing, the squadrons of planes overhead. There I was sure everything would go right for me . . . I could have wept for joy.’

There were soon to be tears of anguish in his adversaries’ headquarters – but not from the hard-boiled Major-General Bernard Montgomery commanding the British 3rd Division whose troops on 11 May were digging in cheerfully on the Dyle Line; nor from Sir Edmund Ironside, the British chief of staff, whose diary tells that he judged ‘on the whole the advantage is with us’ and looked forward to ‘a really hard fight all this summer’; nor from Gamelin, who remained ‘above all preoccupied with Holland’ and had the previous day delegated his powers of command in Belgium to Georges; not even from General Gaston Billotte, to whom Georges had in turn delegated authority on the northern front

WEAPONS OF BLITZKRIEG

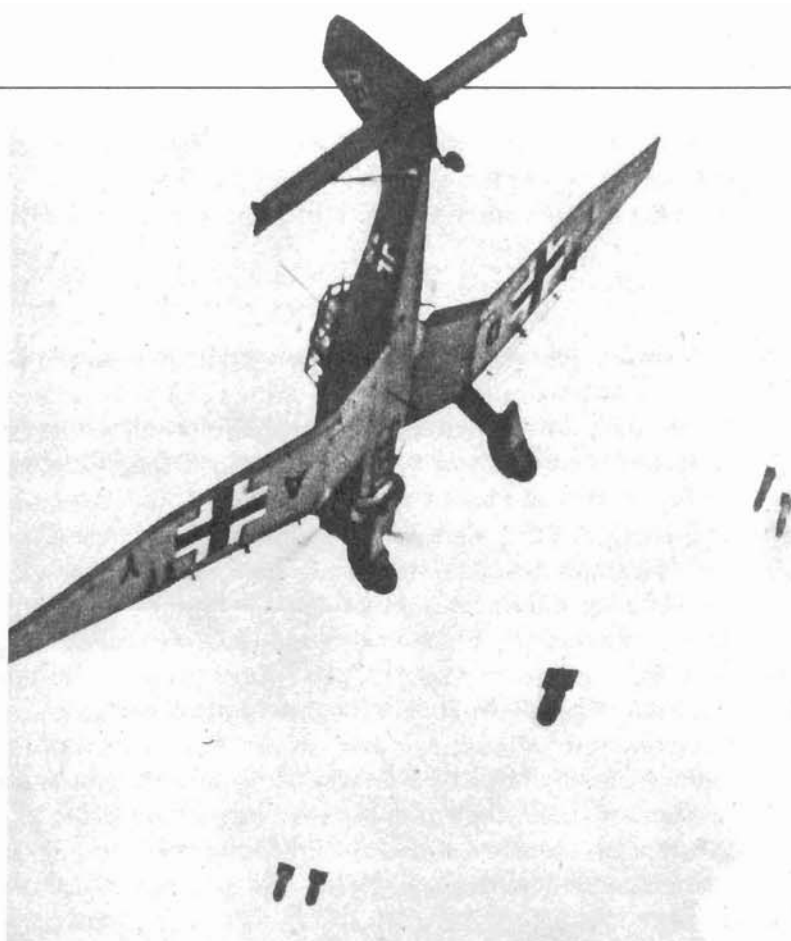
Right: A Junkers 87 dive-bomber, the dreaded 'Stuka' of the Battle of France. Its limitations were exposed in the Battle of Britain, where it proved highly vulnerable at the moment of pulling out of its dive. Heavy losses led to its withdrawal from the battle on 16 August 1940, but it subsequently proved highly successful in an anti-shipping role, particularly in the Mediterranean, and as a 'tank-buster' in the armoured battles on the Eastern Front.



Above: The crew of a German MG-42 heavy machine-gun on the Aisne during the advance into France.

Right: German infantry in inflatable assault boats cross a Dutch waterway under fire at the start of the Western offensive. This was how the Meuse was crossed on 13 May 1940.

Opposite: A column of Panzer Mark IIIs exploiting the break-out from the Meuse bridgeheads, May 1940. The Mark III was the mainstay of the German armoured force for the first two years of the war.





and who, with thirty divisions to cover fifty-five miles of line, had more than adequate force to fulfil his mission. On the 'line of engagement' along the Dyle, the Allies, despite the disturbing developments on their flanks and the softening of Belgian resistance in front of them, had reason to believe that they outnumbered the approaching Germans – as they did – and would be able to check their advance.

The Allied appreciation of the situation in Belgium, however, rested on the misapprehension (in which Hitler was then exulting) that there they faced the main axis of the German offensive and confronted their main concentration of force. As in 1914, their intelligence resources had failed to establish where the German *Schwerpunkt* lay. In 1914 it was the French cavalry, beating the thickets of the Ardennes when it should have been roaming Flanders, which missed the German spearheads; in 1940 it was the Allied air forces, flailing vainly at the German spearheads in Belgian Flanders when they should have been overflying the Ardennes, which had lost touch with essentials. From 10 to 14 May, the seven Panzer divisions of Army Group A nudged forward nose to tail along the Ardennes defiles in a traffic concentration so dense that General Günther Blumentritt calculated that if deployed on a single-tank 'front', the tail of the column would have been in East Prussia; they breasted up towards the weakest spot on the Allied front to form an irresistible force. These seven Panzer divisions – 1, 2, 5, 6, 7, 8, 10 – deployed between them 1800 tanks. In front of them they found in first line the two Belgian divisions of *Chasseurs Ardennais*, an old-fashioned elite of forest riflemen whose bravery counted for nothing against armour. When they had been brushed aside, the Panzers found themselves opposed by Corap's Ninth Army and part of Huntziger's Second. Although neither formed an elite by any estimation, with the Meuse at their front their reservists should nevertheless have been able to hold, at least in normal times; but May 1940 was not normal times. Almost as soon as the German vanguards of Army Group A made touch with the Meuse defences, they were able to find a way across. Corap's and Huntziger's outpost guards took fright, the banks of the river were abandoned and the breach in the Allied defensive dyke was opened.

General André Beaufre, then a junior staff officer at French general headquarters, described the impression the news made on General Georges at his command post at La Ferté early in the morning of 14 May:

The atmosphere was that of a family in which there had been a death. Georges . . . was terribly pale. 'Our front has been broken at Sedan. There has been a collapse. . . .' He flung himself into a chair and burst into tears. He was the first man I had seen weep in this campaign. Alas, there were to be others. It made a terrible impression on me. Doumenc [Georges's subordinate] – taken aback – reacted immediately. 'General, this is war and in war things like this are bound to happen!' Then Georges, still pale, explained: following terrible bombardment from the air the two inferior divisions [55 and 71] had taken to their heels. X Corps signalled that the position was

penetrated and that German tanks had arrived in Bulson [two miles west of the Meuse, and so inside the French-defended area] about midnight. Here there was another flood of tears. Everyone else remained silent, shattered by what had happened. 'Well, General,' said Doumenc, 'all wars have their costs. Let's look at the map and see what can be done.'

There is much in Beaufre's description of this scene that yields to exegesis. First, Sedan: the name of the town where Napoleon III had surrendered to the Prussians in September 1870 was in French ears synonymous with disaster. Second, the 'two inferior divisions': the 55th and 71st Divisions of Huntziger's Second Army were both composed of older reservists, and both had indeed taken to their heels at the approach of the German tanks. Third, what the map suggested might be done: the German penetration of the French line had occurred at a point so sensitive – as Manstein had intended – that any counter-measure adopted would have to be massive and almost instantaneous if it were to stop the rot. The story of Allied strategic decision in the next week would be one of seeking the telling blow.

The details of the story from the German side, however, boded even worse for Georges than he had grasped. For the Meuse had first been crossed not, as he believed, on the day before he had his nervous collapse, but the day before that, 12 May. As darkness fell, patrols of the motorcycle reconnaissance battalion of the 7th Panzer Division commanded by Erwin Rommel had found an unguarded weir across the Meuse at Houx, north of Sedan. Creeping across it, they reached an island in midstream from which a lock-gate led to the west bank. During the night reinforcements joined them there, so that by 13 May 'Sickle Stroke' had already struck at the foundations of the Gamelin plan. The next morning Rommel's engineers began to lay pontoon bridges across the river, while his tanks, waiting to cross, destroyed French bunkers on the other side with gunfire. By evening the bridges were completed and the first of his tanks had crossed the river – only 120 yards wide at this point.

The French might have dealt successfully with this bridgehead. It was as yet precarious. They tried a counter-attack, with a force that included a tank battalion, and Gamelin was told, 'the incident at Houx is in hand'. However, the tanks withdrew after taking a few prisoners, leaving Rommel's bridgehead intact, if not yet a burgeoning threat. Meanwhile French attention was diverted southwards by the assault of Army Group A's main Panzer formation at Sedan. They had been deploying in the open flood plain of the river, after three days of nose-to-tail driving through the defiles of the Ardennes, all through the morning of 13 May. General P. P. J. Gransard observed 'the enemy emerging from the forest ... an almost uninterrupted descent of infantrymen, of vehicles either armoured or motorised'. The French artillery brought them under fire; but it was answered by German bombing, first by high-level Dornier 17s, then by diving Stukas. The effect on the French infantry regiments was shattering. 'The noise, the horrible noise', repeated the wounded



brought to a field ambulance; better troops were to feel the same terror under air attack throughout this and subsequent wars. 'Five hours of this nightmare', wrote General Edouard Ruby, deputy chief of staff of Second Army, 'were enough to shatter [the troops'] nerves.' By three in the afternoon the Stukas drew off. As soon as they did so, the assault pioneers of the 1st, 2nd and 10th Panzer Divisions began dragging their inflatable boats to the water's edge. Setting off under a suddenly amplified hail of enemy fire – the French manned their weapons as they saw the danger they faced – the boat crews suffered heavy casualties and were here and there driven back, but along the whole line of assault, from Donchery to Bazeilles, established a series of footholds on the far bank. Bazeilles was a place of legend in French military history; it was there in 1870 that the elite *coloniales* had fought to the death against the Germans in 'the house of the last cartridge'. In 1940 it was the Germans who were ready to do or die at Bazeilles. Hans Rubarth, a pioneer sergeant of the 10th Panzer Division, ordered his men to throw their entrenching tools out of their overloaded boat in midstream: 'No digging for us – either we get through or that's the end.' Before the day was out, nine of his eleven men had become casualties but the group had taken its objective. Rubarth was promoted lieutenant in the field and awarded the Knight's Cross of the Iron Cross, Germany's highest decoration for bravery.

Such exploits, many times repeated, carried the storming parties of all three Panzer divisions across the Meuse during the afternoon of 13 May. In front of them isolated outposts of French infantry held their ground with great courage; but others ran at the sight of tanks – sometimes at the sight of French tanks, often merely at the rumour of tanks. French tanks did appear towards evening; they belonged to the 3rd Armoured and 3rd Motorised Divisions, but the counter-attack they had been sent to deliver was not driven home. As they withdrew from the river's edge, the Germans reinforced their own tank units, which by pontoon bridges had been transported to the French bank and prepared for the coming breakout.

That evening Gamelin, still at Vincennes, 120 miles from the crisis-point, issued an order of the day: 'The onslaught of the mechanical and motorised forces of the enemy must now be faced. The hour has come to fight in depth on the positions appointed by the high command. One is no longer entitled to retire. If the enemy makes a local breach, it must not only be sealed off but counter-attacked and retaken.'

During 14 May Gamelin's troops – who were far too widely dispersed to 'fight in depth' – did attempt counter-attacks against the German bridgeheads. None was successful, in part because the target was diffuse. The blade with which 'Sickle Stroke' would be delivered had not yet formed. Its component elements were still struggling out of their bridgeheads: the 6th and 8th Panzer Divisions north of Sedan; the 2nd, 1st and 10th to the south. The danger posed by the 5th and Rommel's 7th at Dinant had not yet impressed

Refugees from the war zone arriving in an area not yet overrun by the Germans, France, May 1940. Columns of refugees seriously hampered Allied troop movements.

itself on the French high command's consciousness. In a strict military sense, it would have been best to wait until the Panzer divisions had coalesced and started inland, before their supporting infantry had crossed the river to join them. Then the armoured column might have been caught 'in flank' and decapitated. As it was, the French 3rd Armoured Division wandered about the battlefield on 14 May seeking ineffectively whom it might devour. While the Panzer bridgeheads were enlarged, the German tanks refuelled and re-ammunitioned and the start-lines were drawn for a plunge into the French heartland.

Which of the German spearheads would be first away? The Panzer concentration around Sedan was the stronger, but that further north at Dinant faced the poorer troops of Corap's Ninth Army. André Corap, a fat and jovial colonial soldier with a talent for making his men like him, was opposed, moreover, by the wiry and ascetic Erwin Rommel, whose soldiers idolised him because he clearly cared only for beating the enemy. Rommel had won the *Pour le Mérite*, Germany's highest military decoration, as a captain by a brilliant stroke of personal initiative during the First World War, and destroyed much of an Italian division in the process. On 15 May 1940, by a similar initiative, he broke through Corap's tentative 'stop-line' before it could be manned and advanced seventeen miles for the loss of fifteen German dead. During the afternoon the 6th Panzer Division, crossing at Monthermé, north of Sedan, joined in the Ninth Army's destruction. The Indo-Chinese machine-gunners who had defended the crossings with devoted bravery for three days were bypassed (their soldierly qualities portended of the bitterness with which Vietnam would be contested by Ho Chi Minh's followers in the post-war years). Their French comrades-in-arms, whom the 6th Panzer Division met as it drove forward, showed no such tenacity – nothing, indeed, but pitiful demoralisation. Karl von Stackelberg, a war correspondent accompanying the 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, were heading backward as prisoners. Unwillingly one had to think of Poland and the scenes there. 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 demoralised, would allow themselves to go more or less voluntarily into imprisonment?

Not all French soldiers would give up the fight so easily. In the north the First Army was still resisting steadily, as it would do until its remnants were completely surrounded at

The first phase of the Battle of France. The second phase began on 5 June, following the Dunkirk evacuation. By 10 June the first German tanks had crossed the Seine, and Paris fell four days later.

BLITZKRIEG IN THE WEST



Lille. And on 15 May Charles de Gaulle, who had been appointed to command the 4th Armoured Division four days previously, received orders from General Georges to attack at Laon, which lay in the German Panzers' path, and 'gain time' for a new front to be established north of Paris. Although the 4th Armoured Division was still in the process of forming, de Gaulle, long an enthusiast for armoured warfare and a patriot whose love of country was fortified, not diminished, by its army's current demoralisation, accepted the challenge with ardour. 'I felt myself borne up by a limitless fury,' he wrote later. "'Ah! it's too stupid! The war is beginning as badly as it could. Therefore it must go on. For this the world is wide. If I live, I will fight wherever I must as long as I must until the enemy is defeated and the national stain washed clean.'" All I have managed to do since was resolved upon that day.'

De Gaulle managed to do little when he finally brought his division into action on 17 May. His tanks made inroads into the positions of the 1st Panzer Division, one of whose staff officers, Captain Graf von Kielsmansegg, who thirty-five years later would command the NATO forces in Germany, decided on showing them that 'discretion was the better part of valour'. However, they were too few to do more than frighten the Germans and by evening they turned about and withdrew to refuel.

The Germans had grown collectively nervous that day – although Guderian, commanding the 2nd and 10th Panzer Divisions, champed at the bit and sought by every means to get forward. But Hitler, recorded Halder, 'is anxious about our own success, doesn't want to risk anything and would therefore be happiest to have us halt.' Halder himself was concerned to line the 'walls' of the developing 'Panzer corridor' with his infantry, which was lagging behind the tanks; Brauchitsch, the commander-in-chief, was adamant that he should. The Panzers had advanced forty miles since the crossing of the Meuse four days earlier, were converging into a solid armoured mass of seven divisions and had the clear evidence of the collapse of the French Ninth and Second Armies everywhere before their eyes. The French First Army, the BEF and the Belgians were giving ground to the north, while the French to the south, immobilised in the Maginot Line and unable to manoeuvre for lack of transport, were clearly unable to intervene against the Panzers. Nevertheless the German high command, prompted by Hitler's anxieties, on 17 May imposed a halt on the advance.

German anxieties paled by comparison with those of the Allies. The Belgians, for the second time in the century, faced the prospect of defeat and occupation. The British were confronted by the fear of losing their only army – and large parts of their air force – if they continued to stand by their allies on a collapsing battle line. The French foresaw their army breaking into two, the better part falling victim to encirclement in Belgium and the northern departments, while the remnants struggled to form a new and doubtfully defensible front on the approaches to Paris. The potential for disaster loomed as large as in 1914 but the crisis was actually more acute. Then the French army had suffered defeat in the Battle of the Frontiers but retreated in good order under an imperturbable commander; in 1940

it was retreating in disorder, a disorder which grew worse daily under the nominal orders but not the effective command of a general who was surrendering to events. On 16 May Paul Reynaud, the French Prime Minister, sent for new men: to the Madrid embassy for Philippe Pétain, hero of Verdun, to join him as his deputy; to Syria for Maxime Weygand, chief of staff to Foch in the victory campaign of 1918, as a replacement for Gamelin. Both were very old – Weygand, at seventy-three, five years older than Gamelin, Pétain older still – but at this moment of agony their heroic reputations seemed a reassurance that something might yet be snatched from the yawning jaws of defeat.

Gamelin was now discredited. In Paris on 16 May he conferred with Reynaud and Winston Churchill – Prime Minister since 10 May, when the House of Commons had withdrawn its confidence from Neville Chamberlain – and admitted that he had no troops available to stem the German onrush. 'I then asked, "Where is the strategic reserve?"' Churchill recorded. 'General Gamelin turned to me and, with a shake of his head and a shrug, said "Aucune" ["There is none"]. There was a long pause. Outside in the garden of the Quai d'Orsay clouds of smoke arose from large bonfires and I saw from the window venerable officials pushing wheelbarrows of archives on to them.' (The burning of official papers was to be a token of apprehended defeat at capitals and headquarters throughout the Second World War.) 'I was dumbfounded. . . . It had never occurred to me that army commanders having to defend five hundred miles of engaged front would have left themselves unprovided with a [strategic reserve]. . . . What was the Maginot Line for?'

Churchill left for England promising to send six additional squadrons of British fighters to join the few already in France. However, so complete was German air superiority that fighter reinforcements could make no difference at this stage of the battle. What was needed was the strategic reserve he had discovered did not exist. Weygand, who assumed command from Gamelin on 20 May, attempted to improvise one by proposing ('the Weygand Plan') on 21 May that the encircled Allied forces north of the German break-in should co-ordinate convergent attacks against the Panzer corridor with the French armies still operating to its south. This reflected a correct appreciation of how to deal with *Blitzkrieg* and had in fact been proposed by Gamelin two days before, but the authority to execute it was lacking. Georges was now a broken man, while Billotte, to whom he had delegated authority, was killed in a motor accident on 21 May. The troops were lacking too. De Gaulle had attempted another vain counter-attack with his depleted 4th Armoured Division on 19 May; and on 21 May two British divisions, supported by two tank battalions, succeeded in denting the flank of the Panzer corridor at Arras, so alarming Rommel, commanding on the spot, that he estimated he had been attacked by five enemy divisions. However, these formations represented almost the whole Allied force available to Weygand for manoeuvre. The Ninth Army had disintegrated. The First Army and the BEF were constricted between the North Sea and the advancing Germans. The as yet unengaged French armies south of the Panzer corridor lacked transport, tanks and artillery. Meanwhile, after the German high command's hesitation of 17 May, the Panzers had

driven on. By 18 May they were driving across the battlefields of the First World War, skirting the river Sambre on their northern flank and the river Somme on the south. On 20 May Guderian's divisions reached Abbeville at the mouth of the Somme, thus effectively dividing the Allied armies into two.

These were heady days for Heinz Guderian. He was dedicated to the development of the Panzer arm and even before Hitler's rise to power was an advocate of what would be called *Blitzkrieg*. Frustrated by the timidity of his own high command – Brauchitsch, abetted by Halder, represented the fainthearts – he had had to resort to subterfuge in evading its orders to proceed with caution after crossing the Meuse. His creative disobedience had not yet won a great victory; he and the whole of the German Panzer force would have difficulty in achieving it. On 20 May Hitler reviewed plans for 'Case Red', the advance into the French heartland which would complete 'Sickle Stroke' and also complete the destruction of the French army – as long as the Panzer arm was kept intact. So it was that the British counter-attack at Arras, which had so alarmed Rommel, now alarmed Hitler once again. Rundstedt, commanding Army Group A, agreed with him that the Panzers had advanced too far for safety and should not proceed until the slower-moving infantry had lined the 'walls' of the Panzer corridor against a repetition of the Arras surprise. Brauchitsch, supported by Halder, now abandoned his earlier caution, urged that the Panzers should press home their attacks against the encircled Allies in the north, and even tried to transfer command of part of the striking force from Rundstedt to Bock, the situation of whose Army Group B, advancing on a front through Belgium, had now aroused Hitler's anxiety. When Hitler learned of the attempt on 24 May, however, he cancelled it and reiterated his refusal to allow the Panzers to press into the coastal lowlands which he claimed, from his own trench experience of the First World War, were quite unsuitable for armoured operations.

Hitler's 'stop order' would keep the Panzers halted for two whole days, until the afternoon of 26 May – two days which in retrospect have been deemed strategically decisive for the outcome of the Second World War. Unbeknown to the Germans, the British government had on 20 May decided that part of the BEF might have to be evacuated from the Channel ports and had instructed the Admiralty to begin assembling small ships on the British south coast to take them off. The operation would be codenamed 'Dynamo'. It was not yet to comprehend a full-scale evacuation; the government still hoped that the BEF, with the French First Army, would be able to break through the Panzer corridor to join the surviving bulk of the French armies on and south of the Somme – which was the point of the Weygand Plan. However, the BEF was itself becoming wearied by its battle in Belgium which had entailed a fighting withdrawal from the Dyle to the Schelde, and Gort was increasingly concerned by his responsibility for safeguarding Britain's only army. On 23

General Heinz Guderian, commanding XIX Panzer Corps, in his command vehicle during the campaign in France. The picture clearly shows two signallers (front) sitting at an Enigma machine.



May he had received an assurance from Anthony Eden, who was serving as War Minister, that the government would make naval and air arrangements to assist them should they have to withdraw on the northern coast. On the same day he concluded that the Weygand Plan could not be realised for lack of troops, tanks and aircraft, and withdrew from Arras the two divisions which had attacked Rommel with such effect on 21 May. 'Nothing but a miracle can save the BEF now,' Alan Brooke, commanding Gort's II Corps, wrote on 23 May; but on that day Gort's decision to disengage and draw the BEF back towards the coast in effect laid the basis for its salvation.

For Hitler had anticipated events. He was right to fear that the Panzers would get bogged down in the canals and rivers around Dunkirk, to which port Gort now directed the BEF. He was wrong to give the 'stop order' when he did, two days before the British – and a substantial portion of the French First Army – reached the watery sanctuary of the 'Canal Line'. When the stop order was revoked on 26 May that part of the Allied army he most wanted and needed to destroy was – temporarily – safe. Protected by the Aa Canal and the Colme Canal, the fugitive enemy could start embarking in the flotillas of destroyers and small boats which Admiral Bertram Ramsay began to send cross-Channel from the headquarters of Operation Dynamo that same day. Hitler had been assured by Goering that the Luftwaffe would prevent any evacuation from the Dunkirk pocket. During 24–26 May its aircraft did indeed raise havoc inside it and would continue to do so as long as the evacuation lasted, until 4 June. But it could not stop the evacuation ships closing the shore – the total it sunk was six British and two French destroyers in nine days of air attack – nor could it reduce the resistance of the Dunkirk defenders, many of them French, many of those French colonials, who gave ground with extreme reluctance against concentric German attack.

The Belgian army was forced into a capitulation north of the Dunkirk pocket at midnight on 27 May. It surrendered in almost exactly the same area where, in 1914, it had been able to consolidate a defensive position and continue the fight until 1918. Then, however, it had been supported by French and British armies which remained intact and combatant. Now, unfairly condemned for deserting them by allies who were themselves on the point of collapse, it had no option but to ask for terms. So, too, shortly would the divisions of the French First Army which were encircled at Lille and running out of ammunition. So bravely had they fought that, when they marched out to surrender on 30 May, the Germans rendered them the honours of war, playing them into captivity with the music of a military band. It was significant evidence of the fighting spirit of the French army of 1940 that a large proportion of these stalwarts were not French at all, but North African subjects of the French empire.

The evacuation of the BEF – and the French troops in the Dunkirk pocket who could be got to the beaches – was now in full swing. Only 8000 were got off on 26–27 May; but on 28 May, as the fleet of naval ships and civilian small craft standing in to the shore grew, 19,000 were embarked. On 29 May 47,000 were rescued; on 31 May, the day Gort himself



The 'miracle' of Dunkirk. 'Bloody Marvellous', trumpeted the Daily Mirror, but Churchill grimly observed that 'wars are not won by evacuations'.

left for England, 68,000. By 4 June, when the last ship drew away, 337,000 Allied soldiers had been saved from capture. The number included almost the whole manpower of the BEF less its temporarily irreplaceable equipment, and 110,000 French soldiers, the majority of whom on arriving in England were immediately transhipped and returned to French ports in Normandy and Brittany to rejoin the rest of the French army still in the field.

This now consisted of sixty divisions, some survivors of the battle on the Meuse, some withdrawn from the Maginot Line; only three were armoured, all much depleted, particularly de Gaulle's 4th Armoured, which on 28-30 May had once again tried but failed



to dent the flank of the Panzer corridor, this time near Abbeville. Two British divisions remained in France: the 1st (and only) Armoured Division and the 51st Highland Division, defending the coast west of Dunkirk (the British rifle regiments committed to the defence of Calais had already been overwhelmed). Against them the Germans deployed eighty-nine infantry divisions and fifteen Panzer and motorised divisions, the latter organised into five groups, each of two Panzer and one motorised divisions. These Panzer-motorised combinations formed powerful offensive instruments, which provided the model for the tank-infantry formations with which offensive operations would be conducted throughout the Second World War and, indeed, ever since. The Luftwaffe continued to deploy about 2500 strike aircraft, fighters and bombers, which they could now operate from captured airfields close to the battle line. The French air force, though reinforced by machines hastily purchased from the United States, and supported by 350 aircraft of the RAF, could only operate some 980.

— The Weygand Line —

Weygand, his 'plan' having collapsed, now pinned his hopes for resistance on the defence of a position which would be called the 'Weygand Line'. The resilient old general had not yet abandoned hope; he had even outlined a defensive scheme which mirrored that of the German offensive plan in its modernity. The 'Weygand Line', running from the Channel coast along the line of the rivers Somme and Aisne to join the Maginot Line at Montmédy, was to be held as a 'chequerboard' of 'hedgehogs' (NATO would adopt a similar scheme for the defence of the Central Front in Germany in the 1970s). The 'hedgehogs' – villages, and woods – were to be filled with troops and anti-tank weapons and to continue resistance even if bypassed by enemy spearheads.

The theory was excellent, the practice lamentable. The Weygand Line broke almost as soon as it was attacked by the right wing of the Panzer array between Amiens and the coast on 5 June. The fault lay not with the fighting spirit of the French troops, which had greatly revived, but with their material weakness. They were outnumbered and lacked tanks, effective anti-tank weapons and air cover. Colonials and reservists fought with equal valour. 'In those ruined villages', wrote Karl von Stackelberg, 'the French resisted to the last man. Some hedgehogs carried on when our infantry was twenty miles behind them.' On 5 and 6 June the Germans were stopped dead at several points and even suffered crippling tank losses. If the Weygand Line had had 'depth', the German advance might have been held by its outposts, but, once its crust was broken, there were no troops behind it to seal off the breach or counter-attack. Rommel, leading the 7th Panzer Division

Above: Men of the Royal Tank Regiment, who had taken part in the Arras counterattack, return from Dunkirk. **Belows:** Troops of the BEF waiting to be evacuated from Dunkirk. In all, 338,000 British and French troops were taken from the beaches.

across country when it was checked by hedgehogs commanding the roads, quickly found a way into the rear and was directed by the headquarters of Bock's Army Group B, to which he was now subordinate, to turn towards the coast and encircle the defenders of the Weygand Line's left wing from the rear; in the process he would force the surrender of the last British infantry division left in France, the 51st Highland.

On 9 June Rundstedt's Army Group A moved to the attack on the Aisne. Led by Guderian's Panzer group of four armoured and two motorised divisions, it was briefly checked, notably by the resistance of the French 14th Division under General Jean de Lattre de Tassigny, a future Marshal of France, whose reputation for defiance in the teeth of defeat was established that day. Yet on the Aisne, as on the Somme, the Germans were now too strong for any display of French courage to hold them in check. The previous evening Pétain, the Deputy Prime Minister, told his former chief of staff, Bernard Serrigny, that Weygand foresaw the possibility of holding the line for three days at most and that he himself intended to 'push the government to request an armistice. There is a meeting of the Central Committee tomorrow. I shall draft a proposal.' Serrigny warned that the next day would be too late. 'Action should be taken while France still has the façade of an army and Italy has not yet come in. Get a neutral to intervene in the approach. Roosevelt seems the obvious choice. He can bring his power to bear on Hitler.'

This was a counsel of desperation. Roosevelt had already declared to Reynaud his inability to influence the course of events in Europe, by the dispatch either of more new material or of the United States fleet, while Mussolini, who had told the British ambassador on 28 May that not even the bribe of French North Africa would keep him neutral, was now bent on declaring war before its termination deprived him of a share of the glory and its rewards. On 10 June, the day Pétain had indicated he intended to press the government to treat for terms, Reynaud evacuated it from Paris. As it headed for Tours on the Loire, whither Churchill would fly for his fourth meeting with his ally on 11 June, the German Panzer groups were outflanking the city to the west and east. The day after the government left, it was declared an 'open city', to spare it destruction. However, Hitler did not choose to attack it – perhaps, quite unnecessarily, fearing another Commune. Churchill, on his flying visit to Reynaud in Tours, reminded him of 'the absorbing power of the hour-to-hour defence of a great city'. However, those Parisians with cars were already streaming southwards in tens of thousands, while those who remained behind opened for business as usual when the first German soldiers arrived on 14 June; three days later they were thronging the terrace of the Café de la Paix, happy to be sightseers in the tourist capital of the world.

Frenchmen in uniform were still fighting, often to the death. Like the Belgians, they found at the approach of defeat an outraged capacity for self-sacrifice. At Toul, behind the Maginot Line, the 227th Regiment of Infantry fought on long after it had been surrounded. At Saumur the students of the Cavalry School held the bridges over the Loire from 19 to 20 June until their ammunition ran out. The garrison of the Maginot Line itself, 400,000

strong, refused all calls to surrender; only one section of blockhouses was ever to be captured by German attack. South of the Loire an officer of the Fifth Army watched a 'small group of Chasseurs Alpins from the 28th Division' cross on 17 June. They were 'led by a sergeant covered with dust, their uniforms in rags, marching in order and in step, the men bent forward, pulling with both hands at the straps of their equipment. Some were wounded, the dressings stained with dirt and blood. Some slept as they marched, ghosts bowed under the weight of their packs and rifles. They passed in silence, with an air of fierce determination.'

Comrades-in-arms of these mountain troops were meanwhile confronting Mussolini's attack on the Riviera across the Alpes Maritimes, Italy having declared war on 10 June. Four French divisions stood in the path of twenty-eight Italian divisions. They held their ground without difficulty, yielding nowhere more than two kilometres of front, losing only eight men killed against Italian casualties of nearly 5000. Eventually, in desperation, the Italian high command asked for German transport aircraft to land a battalion behind the French lines, as a token of success. 'The whole thing is the usual kind of fraud,' wrote Halder. 'I have made it clear I won't have my name mixed up in this business.'

— The humiliation of France —

Resistance in the Alps and the Maginot Line could avail not at all against German triumph in the heartland. The British landed the 52nd Lowland and the Canadian Division at Cherbourg on 12 June, to assist returning French troops to open a new front in the west; both had to be evacuated almost immediately to avoid capture. The day before, Churchill had seen for himself the hopeless pass to which France had been brought. At Tours, Weygand, all fight gone, told him and the French ministers: 'I am helpless, I cannot intervene, for I have no reserves. . . *C'est la dislocation.*' De Gaulle, determined on some 'dramatic move' to keep the war going, proposed to Churchill in London on 14 June that 'a proclamation of the indissoluble union of the French and British peoples would serve the purpose', and Churchill offered such a Declaration of Union to Reynaud on 16 June. His ministers rejected it categorically. Jean Ybarnegaray no doubt spoke for many in saying that he 'did not want France to become a dominion' (of the British Empire). Pétain was now chiefly concerned that France should not fall into disorder; even more than defeat and continuing casualties he feared a takeover by the left. His determination to seek an armistice which would allow the conservatives to continue in office was at least a policy; Reynaud had none. On the evening that Churchill's offer of union was rejected, President Lebrun decided that the old marshal should be asked to form a government. General Edward Spears, Churchill's personal emissary to France, left for England at once, taking with him Charles de Gaulle, who, promoted general on 25 May and appointed Under-Secretary for Defence on 10 June, was almost the only member of the government

determined to carry on resistance. Next day, 18 June, de Gaulle broadcast from London to the French people: 'This war has not been settled by the Battle of France. This war is a world war . . . whatever happens the flame of resistance must not and will not be extinguished.' He called on all Frenchmen who could join him on British soil to continue the fight. For this defiance de Gaulle would shortly be court-martialled and condemned as a traitor by the Pétain regime.

Pétain had himself broadcast to the French people the day before de Gaulle: 'Frenchmen, at the appeal of the President of the Republic, I have today assumed the direction of the government of France. . . . I give myself to France to assuage her misfortune. . . . It is with a heavy heart that I say we must end the fight. Last night I applied to our adversary to ask if he is prepared to seek with me, soldier to soldier, after the battle, honourably the means whereby hostilities may cease.' Hitler, the insistent 'front fighter', would treat 'soldier to soldier' but without the 'honour' his defeated enemy craved; Versailles had eaten too deep into his psyche for that. When the emissaries sent by Pétain met their German counterparts near Tours on 20 June they found themselves transported first to Paris and then eastward. On 21 June, at Réthondes, near Compiègne, General Charles Huntziger, whose Second Army had been one of the first victims of the Panzer onslaught, alighted from a German military convoy outside the railway coach in which the German delegates had signed the armistice of November 1918. An exultant Hitler observed his arrival; General Wilhelm Keitel, head of OKW, presented the armistice terms. They did not allow for negotiation: Pétain's government was to remain sovereign, but Paris, northern France and its borders with Belgium, Switzerland and the Atlantic were to become a zone of German occupation; Italy, on terms to be discussed with Mussolini, was to occupy south-eastern France. The French army was to be reduced to 100,000 men and 'occupation costs', set at an exorbitant franc:mark exchange rate, were to be met from the French budget. The French empire – in North and West Africa and Indo-China – was to remain under the control of the French government (which was shortly to establish its capital at Vichy), as was the French navy, which was to be demilitarised. All prisoners taken in the campaign, including the garrison of the Maginot Line, though it had not surrendered, were to remain in German hands. France, in short, was to be emasculated and humiliated, as Hitler believed Germany had been in 1918. The terms, in truth, were far more severe than those imposed at Réthondes twenty-two years previously. Then Germany had been left the bulk of its national territory and its soldiers their freedom to return to civilian life. Now the most productive part of French territory was to be occupied and two million Frenchmen, 5 per cent of the population but perhaps a quarter of France's active manhood, were to go into German captivity with no term fixed for an alteration of these penalties. The delegation argued, but, as Léon Noël, the former ambassador to Poland, observed, while it did so 'fighting was still going on, the invasion was spreading and fugitives were being machine-gunned on the roads'. Huntziger applied for instructions to Pétain at Bordeaux, where the French government had withdrawn. He

was instructed to sign forthwith and did so on the evening of 22 June. Meanwhile a delegation led by Noël signed terms at Rome with the Italian government, which provided for the occupation of the Franco-Italian border up to fifty kilometres' depth on the French side. The armistice with both Germany and Italy was then timed to come into force at 25 minutes past midnight on the morning of 25 June.

By then some German spearheads had penetrated deep into the 'free zone' which the armistice left to the new Vichy government. There were German tanks south of Lyon, German tanks outside Bordeaux; for a time there were even German tanks in Vichy. As the armistice terms took effect, they withdrew, without heel-dragging; the campaign of 10 May to 25 June 1940 had not cost the German army dear. The French counted some 90,000 dead in what many of their village war memorials, incongruously to British and American eyes, call 'the war of 1939-40'; the Germans had lost only 27,000. Theirs had been, in its last weeks, almost a war of flowers. 'Reached here without difficulty,' Rommel wrote to his wife from Rennes in Brittany on 21 June. 'The war has become practically a lightning Tour de France. Within a few days it will be over for good. The local people are relieved to see everything happening so peacefully.' The German army, imbued with the magnanimity of victory, behaved with all the 'correctness' to their beaten enemy that army orders prescribed. The French, as if shell-shocked by the catastrophe they had undergone, responded with an almost grateful meekness. Virtually no part of France had been spared the sight of beaten French soldiers – young conscripts, older recruits, black Senegalese, Arab light infantrymen, Polish and Czech volunteers, infantry, cavalry, artillery, tanks – falling back, dirty, hungry, tired, directionless, sometimes leaderless, on through fields and orchards ripening for harvest under a sun and skies whose daily brilliance remain, for victors and vanquished alike, inseparable from their memories of the 'summer of '40'. Amid the persisting normalities of life – Sunday lunch, first communions, *jours de fête* – the sensation of a predestined national doom, averted in 1918 by the tenacity of their British allies and the miraculous intervention of the Americans, overwhelmed the nation. This was how it had been in 1815, when the enemies of France had beaten the first Napoleon in Belgium; this was how it had been in 1870 when the Germans had beaten the second Napoleon in Lorraine. The victory of 1918 now seemed merely an intermission. The decline of *la grande nation*, set about by philistines and barbarians, might seem irreversibly charted. Pétain, hero of Verdun, embodied the spirit of his countrymen in June 1940 above all because they saw in him a being inured to loss and suffering.

The Germans, by contrast, were in lightened spirits. 'The great battle of France is over,' wrote Karl Heinz Mende, a young engineer officer who had fought the campaign from start to finish. 'It lasted twenty-six years.' The British, too, were in lightened spirits, perhaps perversely so. 'Personally,' wrote King George VI to his mother, 'I feel happier now that we have no allies to be polite to and to pamper.' Winston Churchill, face to face with realities, confronted the future in starker terms. 'The Battle of France is over,' he told the House of Commons on 18 June. 'I expect that the Battle of Britain is about to begin.'