"Où est la Masse de Manoeuvre?": Maurice Gamelin and the Lessons of *Blitzkrieg* in Poland

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Abstract

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The spectacular defeat of the French army in May-June 1940 has invited a long tradition of criticism aimed at France's Commander-in-Chief, Maurice Gamelin. In particular, Gamelin's strategy has been criticised for failing to provide a strong strategic reserve behind the French continuous front. This thesis will endeavor to explain why the armies of France were left with no strategic reserve to counter the German breakthrough along the Meuse river on May 12th, 1940. How could the French high command fail to provide the country with such a fundamental safeguard?

It will be argued that Gamelin's strategy was deeply affected by the Polish campaign of September 1939. This brief struggle had convinced him that the traditional use of strategic reserves had proven ineffective in a modern war. This conviction, coupled with erroneous intelligence grossly exaggerating the extent of the German military buildup, caused Gamelin to gamble recklessly with the deployment of his armies. His choice was to fortify France's continuous front with the bulk of the country's reserve forces in an attempt to receive the invader with the maximum concentration at the point of contact. This would leave the country defenceless in the event of a breakthrough anywhere along its extended front. Gamelin's gamble was thus an "all or nothing" proposition. When the German army indeed broke through the

center of his line, France's generalissimo had no answer and in admitting the failure of his risky deployment, fell into an abject defeatism which paralysed attempts to stem the tide of German armor.

Dedicated to my parents who have never stopped supporting me.

I would also like to acknowledge the invaluable assistance given to me by Norman Ingram, without whose advice and guidance this thesis would remain a collection of unrealised ideas.

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Introduction

The speed and finality with which France's army collapsed in May-June 1940 bewildered military and civilian onlookers alike, leaving them in search of explanations among the ruins of the Third Republic. Marc Bloch, one of the first and most astute chroniclers of the brief struggle summed up the sentiment of millions:

> We find ourselves today in this appalling situation – that the fate of France no longer depends upon the French. Since that moment when the weapons which we held with too indeterminate a grasp fell from our hands, the future of our country and of our civilization has become the stake in a struggle of which we, for the most part, are only the rather humiliated spectators."[1]

Such humiliation cried out for an explanation – some reason to make sense of total and unexpected defeat. From the start, France's high command was targeted for its part in the debacle. In particular, French strategists were indicted for their reluctance to evolve from the military framework of 1918 to the faster pace of warfare as it was practiced in 1940. *Strange Defeat,* Bloch's classic account written between July and September 1940, was among the earliest to accuse the French high command of incompetence. He observed: "What drove our armies to disaster was the cumulative effect of a great number of different mistakes. One glaring characteristic is, however, common to all of them. Our leaders...were incapable of thinking in terms of a *new* war."[2] In 1944, Pertinax (Journalist André Géraud) wrote a scathing critique of French political and military leaders. In *The Gravediggers of France* he concludes: "even more

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[1] Marc Bloch, *Strange Defeat: a Statement of Evidence Written in 1940* (New York: Oxford U.P., 1949), 174.

[2] Ibid. 36.

than the politicians, the Generals will have to answer the nation's misfortune."[3] Similarly, in his post-war memoirs, Charles de Gaulle describes a conversation he had with Prime Minister Léon Blum during October 1936, in which Blum expressed his belief that France's continuous front was secure. De Gaulle corrected the Prime Minister by reminding him that by 1918, faith in the concept of an inviolable front had already been abandoned and that advances in the designs of tanks and aircraft had only reinforced this point. De Gaulle claims Blum had been misled by the military establishment which failed to appreciate the impact of technological advancement during the interwar years.[4]

As Commander-in-Chief of National Defence, Maurice Gustave Gamelin stood squarely in the crosshairs of such accusations. A brilliant and accomplished general in his youth, Gamelin nevertheless failed dismally in his effort to defend France from the re-energized German military threat which had been steadily growing since Hitler's ascension to power in 1933. Following the defeat of 1940, Gamelin was arrested and detained at the *Schloss Itter*, constrained and humiliated by the same enemy he had once expected to defeat. In his way, Gamelin personified the French nation's downward trajectory from major Continental victor of the First World War, to defeated satellite of the Third Reich. Like that of the French army, Gamelin's reputation was so completely shattered by the events of May-June 1940 that it became difficult to reconcile most accounts of his pre-war persona with its post-war counterpart.

Historians too have wrestled with two mutually exclusive conceptual frameworks surrounding Maurice Gamelin. The first is of a brilliant career officer, feared and respected by

[3] Pertinax, *The Gravediggers of France* (New York: Doubleday, 1944), 84.
[4] Charles de Gaulle, *Memoires de Guerre I: L'Appel 1940-1942* (Paris: Plon, 1954) 19-20.

friend and foe alike. The British referred to him as "notre Gamelin"[5] while German General Beck hung a portrait of Gamelin in his study.[6] This version of Gamelin saw him fast tracked through the ranks of the army, attaining the position of general by the age of forty-four. As Commander-in-Chief of the Levant, he suppressed insurrection from 1925 to 1928 where he "revealed himself as a master of improvisation and adaptability."[7] During the crisis of 1914, he wrote the order leading to the decisive Battle of the Marne. He was the able and decisive commander of the 11th infantry division as of 1917, a unit which performed with distinction during the German Spring Offensive in 1918. This is the general pictured on the front page of *Time Magazine* in August 1939 referred to as "the world's foremost soldier".[8]

In opposition to this, another version of Gamelin has evolved after decades of investigation into the causes of France's sudden defeat. This version is of a slippery, eloquent bureaucrat-soldier. Prime Minister Daladier compared a conversation with Gamelin to sand falling through one`s fingers.[9] This Gamelin charged headlong into the Belgian trap outlined in Germany's Manstein Plan, and then refused to admit his mistake until it was too late to rescue France`s northern armies and the British Expeditionary Force from encirclement. This Gamelin appeared distant and ineffective throughout the nine days in which he led the French army subsequent to May 10th, 1940. It was an image supported by a number of Gamelin's own subordinates, even prior to the war and its immediate setbacks. Among them was his

[5] Nicole Jordan, *The Popular Front and Central Europe: The Dilemmas of French Impotence, 1918-1940.* (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P. 1992), 54.

[6] Ernest R. May, *Strange Victory: Hitler's Conquest of France.* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2000),128.

[7] Martin Alexander, *The Republic in Danger: Maurice Gamelin and the Politics of French Rearmament* (New York: Oxford U.P., 1992), 23.

[8] No Author, "Good Grey Soldier," *Time,* August 14, 1939 (34:7), 22

[9] Julian Jackson. *The Fall of France* (Oxford: Oxford U.P. 2003), 12.

Commander of the Northeast Front, General Alphonse Georges, who claimed: "He's nothing but a poor theoretician. When he visits the army, he gives monologues, never inquiring about the soldiers' needs. He evades questions instead of welcoming them. It isn't surprising then, that he fails to inspire any confidence among his subordinates."[10]

The two versions of Gamelin are so at odds with one another that it becomes difficult to consider them both in reference to one and the same man. Historians writing after the military disaster have largely favored the second version of Gamelin, gradually uncovering a long list of personal and professional shortcomings which, in one way or another, contributed to France's ill-prepared defense in the spring of 1940. "Whatever the deep-seated causes of the disaster may have been, the immediate occasion…was the utter incompetence of the High Command",[11] wrote Bloch. *Pertinax'*s attack was more personal; he levelled his gaze at specific personalities, dismissing the Commander-in-Chief's character as one singularly unfit for leadership. According to *Pertinax*, Gamelin burdened himself with what he thought were the "lessons [of the First World War]. All his learning sank into a set of fixed certainties which he was loathe to check against changing realities...he failed to notice that the experimental data upon which his arguments rested had gradually become obsolete."[12] Charles de Gaulle picked up on this same thread in the first volume of his memoirs. There, de Gaulle narrates a memorable encounter with Gamelin in April 1940. This passage famously described the *generalissimo*'s HQ at Vincennes as akin to a monastery, and Gamelin himself to a scientist in his laboratory. The image of a

[10] Paul de Villelume, *Journal d'une Défaite 23 août 1939 – 16 juin 1940* (Paris: Fayard, 1976), 267. (All translations from the French in this text are the work of this author, unless otherwise stated).
[11] Bloch, *Étrange Défaite*, 25.
[12] Pertinax, 34.

detached, aloof, unreachable Commander-in-Chief has become commonplace in the historiography of Maurice Gamelin's role in the failed defence of France, but de Gaulle comments upon it rather more eloquently than most. "He had convinced himself that at his level of command, the essential thing was to concentrate his willpower once and for all on a definite plan of action, and refuse to be dissuaded in this by any distraction whatsoever."[13] Later de Gaulle adds, "in hearing him, I was convinced that by pouring all of his efforts into one particular military system, and refining it tirelessly, he had made it into a kind of religion."[14]

Historians have revisited this perception of Gamelin time and again over the intervening decades. Alistair Horne described Gamelin's leadership style as operating "in a kind of intellectual vacuum."[15] Karl-Heinz Frieser echoed de Gaulle in concluding that Gamelin "consistently disregarded the operational realities and accepted only information he liked."[16] William Shirer observed, "the lethargy, the hesitancy of the Commander-in-Chief leaves one breathless."[17] Nicole Jordan suggested Gamelin entered the war "totally bankrupt of a military strategy, he bided always for more time to launch a mythical future offensive."[18]

What emerges from such studies, indeed from most studies on the subject of Gamelin, is the image of an incompetent leader, or in the words of R.J. Young, "an elderly general, no longer a decisive man…a philosopher general with a preference for negotiation over resistance…a

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[13]Charles de Gaulle, *War Memoirs : The Call to Honor 1940-42*. (New York : Simon and Schuster, 1955), 293.

[14] Ibid. 294.

[15] Alistair Horne, *To Lose a Battle (*Glasgow: MacMillan, 1969) 102.

[16] Karl-Heinz Frieser, *The Blitzkrieg Legend* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2005), 144.

[17] William L. Shirer, *The Collapse of the Third Republic: An Inquiry into the Fall of France in 1940* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1969) 701.

[18] Nicole Jordan, "Strategy and Scapegoatism: Reflections on the French National Catastrophe, 1940," In *The French Defeat of 1940, Reassessments,* ed. Joel Blatt.(Oxford: Berghahn, 1998), 22.

desire to bargain, to stall."[19] Historians have traced the roots of French defeat to a variety of short-sighted mistakes on Gamelin's part. These include his lack of flexibility, his inadequate strategic planning, and his failure to learn the lessons from Hitler's conquest in Poland. In the 1960s, Alistair Horne popularized the notion that the French High Command paid the price for "its apparent refusal to take cognizance of the lessons of the Polish Campaign."[20] Nicole Jordan has blamed the defeat on Gamelin's lack of strategic planning and on desperate attempts to keep the bulk of the fighting away from France, thereby avoiding the kind of bloodletting seen in 1914-18. As a result of this fixation, no plan was formed to deal with the possibility of a German breakthrough of the forward-set continuous front.[21] Karl Heinz Frieser has argued that Gamelin should have been able to identify the German feint into the Low Countries as the diversion it really was. But because Gamelin "disregarded the operational realities and accepted only information he liked" French army groups were unable to pull back toward the French border soon enough to save themselves from encirclement.[22]

Of chief concern to this work is the criticism of Gamelin for failing to maintain a strategic reserve of sufficient size to counter the German breakthrough on the Meuse. "This omission", Shirer writes, "was later to baffle the experts on both sides."[23] How could such an accomplished military leader fail to provide such a basic safeguard to protect his army against

[19] R.J. Young, *In Command of France: French Foreign Policy and Military Planning 1933-1940* (Cambridge: Harvard U.P., 1978) 120.
[20] Horne, 113.
[21] Jordan, "Strategy and Scapegoatism", 18-19.
[22] Frieser, 144.
[23] Shirer, 589.

unforeseeable setbacks? Gamelin is often accused of conducting war along the model of 1914-18 but even this outdated model would have put a priority on establishing a strong reserve behind the front lines. Historian François Delpla has observed:

> Gamelin wasn't fighting the previous war, he wasn't even prepared to do that. To wait for an attack from the enemy without knowing where the main effort will take place and to not have reserves ready to move as soon as this information was discerned, or at least to not even consider this a priority, that is what would have stupefied leaders from 1914-18, especially Foch.[24]

The intent of this paper is to present new insight into Gamelin's decision to leave France bereft of the kind of significant strategic reserves which saved the country in August-September 1914. Why were these reserve units incorporated into the front lines and thrown into Belgium where they were quickly outflanked and neutralised by the German army? It will be shown that this was done as part of a radical shift in strategy adopted by Gamelin following his study of the short war in Poland. Far from an oversight, the disappearance of France's strategic reserve was a deliberate attempt to change the French "procedures of combat" in response to the new mobile tactics put on display by German armor and aviation on the open fields of Poland.[25] It will also be shown that by committing his forces to an aggressive forward defense in Belgium, Gamelin embarked on a fully conscious, high stakes gamble to blunt the initial contact with the *Blitzkrieg*. This extreme risk was deemed necessary after years of inflated estimates of German strength had convinced Gamelin that he was facing odds of at least 2:1 on both land and air along his

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[24] François Delpla. *Les Papiers Secrets du General Doumenc: Un Autre Regard sur 39-40.* (Paris: Olivier Orban, 1992) 155n1.

[25] Doughty quotes Gamelin from April 1937 as saying, "while doctrine does not change, procedures of combat do", and added that procedures could be modified during a campaign. Robert A. Doughty, *The Seeds of Disaster: The Development of French Army Doctrine, 1919-1939. (*Hamdon, CT: Archon Books, 1985), 8.

northeast front. Finally, this argument will attempt to clarify the enduring questions which persist about Gamelin's seemingly inexplicable retreat from active command following the German breakthrough. It will be shown that even before May 10th, Gamelin envisioned his forward defense as an "all or nothing" proposition. When it became evident that he had guessed incorrectly, that the focal point of the German attack was further south in the center of his line opposite the Ardennes, Gamelin remained consistent to his strategic conception and treated the battle as though it were already lost, requiring only a little time to be played out to its necessary conclusion.

1- Inferiority Complex

In the years leading up to the Second World War, France's high command habitually over-estimated the strength of the renascent German military machine, while at the same time reporting negatively on its own ability to wage war successfully. At times, alarmist reporting on the speed with which the German army grew in size took on a life of its own.[26] On October 23rd 1939, the French Intelligence agency, the *Deuxième Bureau,* estimated 70 German divisions on the western front. The next day, this was inexplicably increased by twenty to a total of 90 divisions. Five days later, on the 29th, reports circulated reinforcing the picture of 90 German

[26] The habit of exaggerating German military potential started after 1918 as intelligence agencies included various paramilitary groups in the overall numbers of German soldiers. France was always suspicious of such clandestine groups whereby Germany could circumnavigate the restrictions imposed by the Versailles treaty. As a result, by the 1920s, French strategy was already based on wildly inflated imaginings of German strength. See Peter Jackson, "French Intelligence and Hitler's Rise to Power." *The Historical Journal.* 41:3 (1998): 800.

divisions, this time supported by 76 more in the rear.[27] By January 1940, Maurice Gamelin informed his government that the Germans had 135 divisions at the ready, soon to become 200. By mid-April, Gamelin increased this figure to 205.[28] On September 1st 1939, Lt. Col. Maurice-Henri Gauché, head of the *Deuxième Bureau*, estimated German strength at 150 divisions and predicted this was only half of Germany's potential. Gauché concluded that the Germans were supremely confident in the superiority of their means to wage war, compared to that of their neighbours.[29]

Recent studies place the *actual* number of German divisions on the eve of the attack at 157, of which only 93 took part in the attack on Western Europe.[30] Clearly then, French assumptions of German infantry presented the image of an overwhelmingly powerful neighbour with the potential to crush France's army (104 divisions manning the country's northeastern front) through sheer weight of numbers.

Infantry divisions were not the only exaggerated component of German military potential. Estimates of German armor, officially released by the *Deuxième Bureau* were similarly inflated. While French intelligence correctly assessed the number of *Panzerdivisionen* at ten since early 1940, they believed additional German tanks were also spread out in battalion strength throughout the army, as was the case in France. As a result, the *Deuxième Bureau*

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[27] de Villelume, *77-80.*
[28] May, *Strange Victory*, 352.
[29] Maurice Henri Gauché, *Le Deuxième Bureau au Travail* (Paris: Amiot, 1952), 162-3.
[30] Frieser, 36.

reported to Gamelin in April that total German armored strength was estimated somewhere between 7000 and 10000 tanks[31] to contest France's 3200.[32]

It has been suggested that such figures were used before September 1939 as intentional exaggerations created to discourage France's government from engaging in any diplomatic sabre rattling that might lead prematurely to war.[33] Their continued use and embellishment following France's declaration of war on Germany were rationalised by Gamelin himself as "smoke-screens in case things turn out badly"[34]. Furthermore, in his own memoirs, Gamelin admits that he allowed the *Deuxième Bureau* to publish reports of 12 to 14 *Panzerdivisionen*, of no less than 500 tanks each, in order to "shake up public opinion."[35]

Whatever political reasons there were to hyperbolise the German threat, it must be noted that Gamelin sincerely believed Nazi rearmament programs had vastly outpaced France's own efforts by the eve of the German attack on Western Europe. On May 18th, the penultimate day of Gamelin's military career, he believed the German invasion had included between 3000-4000 *heavy tanks*. In fact, only 278 *Panzer* IVs had actually taken part in the battle.[36] Even after war's end, Gamelin's estimate of total German *Panzer* strength during the battle was still grossly

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[31] Gauché, 189-90.
[32] Frieser, 37
[33] May, 353; Adolphe Goutard, *The Battle of France* (London: Frederick Muller, 1958), 25-26.
[34] Gamelin, *Servir I*, 272.
[35] Ibid. Norman Ingram has revealed an important reason why Gamelin felt the need to shake up public opinion. The prevailing pacifist sentiment of the 1930s caused concerns that large numbers of Frenchmen would simply refuse to fight when the time came. Ingram observes that "some estimates placed at 300 000 the number of men who, influenced by pacifism, are liable to return their mobilization papers or destroy them in the event of a direct threat of armed conflict." Norman Ingram. "The Circulaire Chautemps, 1933: The Third Republic Discovers Conscientious Objection." *French Historical Studies,* 17:2 (1991): 404.
[36] Jacques Minart, *P.C. Vincennes: Secteur 4. Vol II* (Paris: Berger-Levrault, 1945), 172-73.

inaccurate, numbering somewhere between 4000 and 5000 tanks.[37] He was not alone in maintaining the image of a German tidal wave crashing through the Ardennes. His successor as Commander-in-Chief of the French armies, Maxime Weygand, maintained his opinion that 7500 German tanks had taken part in the Battle of France as late as 1961.[38] Since the actual number hovered somewhere near 2100 (with an additional 330 Czech tanks seized in 1939),[39] there can be little doubt that in the months leading up to the invasion, France's high command had mistakenly convinced itself that the country faced crushing German numerical superiority in both manpower and armor.[40] In truth, France had superiority in both areas on the northeast front in May 1940.[41]

Joseph Vuillemin, commander of the French air force, prognosticated a similarly gloomy future for his pilots and machines in the event of war with Germany. At a meeting of the Comité Permanent de la Défense Nationale (March 15th, 1938), he predicted that in case of war with Germany, France's air force would be decimated (*anéantie*) within fifteen days.[42] At the same

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[37]Gamelin, *Servir I*, 160. In this overestimation, Gamelin was hardly alone. At his hearing during the Vichy government's Riom Trial, which labored to ascribe guilt for France's defeat on the military/civilian leadership of the Third Republic, General Georges estimated that between 7000-8000 German tanks had invaded France. He added that in his opinion, one German *Panzer* was worth 30 French armored divisions. Henri Michel, *Le Procès de Riom* (Paris: Éditions Albin Michel, 1970), p.288.

[38] Maxime Weygand, *L'Histoire de l'Armée Française*. (Paris : Amiot, 1961), 397.

[39] Frieser, 37.

[40] In his study of French intelligence gathering during the 1930s, Peter Jackson has shown that in an effort to combat the policies of disarmament and financial austerity, intelligence gatherers provided the civilian government with inflated estimates of German military power. Peter Jackson, *France and the Nazi Menace* (Oxford: Oxford U.P. 2000), 109-110. This explanation does not clarify why Gamelin and Weygand would have both received and accepted these numbers as well. Clearly, the image of a Nazi juggernaut had already crystalized in the perceptions of civilian and military leaders alike, independently of any politically-motivated "smokescreens" set up by the *Deuxième Bureau*.

[41]In his excellent study of the battle, Colonel Karl-Heinz Frieser has recently documented the number of infantry divisions which participated in the battle from May 10th to June 21st 1940 as 93 German versus 104 French. In terms of armor, the French also enjoyed an overall numerical superiority of 3254 versus a German total of 2439. Frieser, 36-37.

[42] Gamelin, *Servir II*, 326.

meeting, air minister Guy de la Chambre claimed that French production of aircraft stood at forty (soon to be sixty) per month. Marshal Pétain, also present at the meeting, voiced his concern over this shortcoming in light of the German production which he estimated at two hundred and fifty planes per month.[43]

On April 1st, 1940 Vuillemin presented Gamelin with the assumption that the *Luftwaffe* had already achieved a quantitative superiority which France alone could never hope to contest. His report counted 5700 first line planes with 8500 in reserve for a total of over 14000 planes.[44] This was to be pitted against France's 3100 planes stationed at home both in rear areas and at the northeast front in May 1940. In truth, the actual number of German fighters and bombers was around 3400 with another 2000 reconnaissance/transport planes in support.[45] What made Vuillemin's estimate so unnecessarily dispiriting was that it tended to sap whatever optimism could have resulted from the almost miraculous achievements made by the French air industry since 1938.[46] While it had mobilised slowly, French aircraft production had gained such

[43] Gamelin, *Servir II*, 326.
[44] May, 354.
[45] Ibid.
[46] After witnessing steady increase in aircraft production during 1935-6, French industry was unable to sustain the effort and declined somewhat in 1937 and 1938. By the following year, however, a truly remarkable increase in production brought the total construction of fighters from 134 in 1938 to 948 in only the first eight months of 1939. Following this incredible success, the final four months of the year saw the construction of another 940 fighters, for a total production in 1939 of 1888 machines. See R. Frankenstein. *Le Prix du Réarmement Français.* (Paris: Publications de la Sorbonne, 1982), 229. While exaggerated estimates of German production needlessly downplayed France's ability to compete with German re-armament, they also spoke to another detrimental tendency within French intelligence gathering services. This was the apparent inability to conceive of Germany's sometimes acute financial and economic constraints. As a result, French estimates relied on projecting numbers which were based on Germany's maximum industrial potential, and which far outstripped that country's economic realities. See Peter Jackson, "French Intelligence and Hitler's Rise to Power." *The Historical Journal.* 41:3 (1998), 810.

momentum as to outstrip production in Germany in the months leading up to the German invasion.[47]

The vast amount of misinformation regarding the extent of German military buildup, coupled with a tendency to exaggerate the shortcomings of France's own industrial/military potential, had a powerfully sobering effect on the French high command.[48] While there was no reason to doubt the fighting quality of the individual French soldier, it was not yet clear whether those soldiers would be able to meet their German counterparts in battle in sufficient numbers and with the necessary equipment to carry the day.[49] By August, even though Gamelin was able to tell his government that "the French army is ready for war"[50], he had no sure means of knowing just how hard and in what form the expected hammer blow from the east would fall.

To make matters worse, September brought ominous news from the east. Reports began to arrive from the intelligence gathering mission sent to observe and advise the Polish army struggling to defend itself against the weight of the *Wehrmacht*. Three main sources advised

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[47] Even the normally gloomy Paul de Vuillemin grew in confidence in the final months of the *Phoney War* stating that in terms of numbers of fighters, France would draw even with Germany in 6 months' time. This reversal of the usual image of *Luftwaffe* pre-eminence over the skies of Western Europe has been explored in the works of Peter Jackson, *France and the Nazi Menace,* p. 381*;* Martin Alexander, *The Republic in Danger: Maurice Gamelin and the Politics of French Rearmament* (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P. 1993)*,* p. 322 and Karl-Heinz Frieser, *The Blitzkrieg Legend,* pp. 45-46.

[48] In France, manpower and industrial shortages vis-à-vis Germany were well known. Peter Jackson argues that after Munich, the country was in a state of shock "by the realisation that France had come to the very brink of a war for which she was in no way prepared." Peter Jackson, *France and the Nazi Menace*, 306. In this atmosphere, intelligence on the progress of German rearmament only deepened the sense of inferiority and pessimism which already permeated French civilian and military leadership.

[49] Gamelin's 1940 War Plan was developed on the demoralizing assumption that Allied forces would suffer from a 2.3 to 1 inferiority. Jeffery Gunsberg. *Divided and Conquered: The French High Command and the Defeat of the West, 1940* (Westport CT: Greenwood Press, 1979), 139.

[50] This statement was made at a meeting of the Conseil Supérieur de la Guerre on August 23, 1939. Gamelin emphatically denied that he ever made such a claim, despite the existing transcript. According to him, what he intended to say was that the French army was "ready for mobilization and concentration." Gamelin, *Servir I,* 35.

Gamelin and the other French Chiefs of Staff on the nature of modern war as it was being practiced on the wide open Polish plains. Generals Felix Musse, Louis Faury and Jules Armengaud reported a new type of warfare, one of rapid armored movement and close co-ordination between air and ground forces. These reports explained the impact of massed armor hitting in waves upon a narrow front, creating a breach through which poured motorised infantry, all the while supported by the *Luftwaffe's* low flying bombers and fighter aircraft.[51]

Reports from the French mission to Poland were supplemented by the first-hand accounts of refugee Polish officers. These sources provided a wealth of information on German tactics. The accounts were gathered and synthesised by the *Deuxième Bureau*, into a publication entitled *Remarques Sur la Tactique Allemande Utilisée en Pologne*[52]. This compilation illustrated the German practice of choosing a narrow area within an opponent's line of defence in which to conduct breakthrough operations using large armored units. Once through the enemy's defences, their practice, as reported by Armengaud, was to outstrip the retreating enemy and block their retreat using highly mobile mechanized units. Any withdrawal thus became a trap from which Polish soldiers were unable to extricate themselves. Polish mobility was handicapped by the effects of these fast moving panzers, and even more so by the *Luftwaffe's* seemingly ubiquitous intervention.

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[51] Paul Armengaud, *Batailles Politiques et Militaires sur L'Europe : Témoignages (1932-1940)* (Paris : Editions du Myrte, 1948), 313. Armengaud was a former inspector General of the air force. His testimony focused on the unexpected efficiency of the German air force in supporting ground troops, especially during breakthrough operations. Armengaud reported directly to Gamelin about the impact of the *Luftwaffe* in Poland, making a deep impression on the generalissimo, particularly on the difficulties created by German bombing/strafing when attempting to mobilize strategic reserve units.

[52] Gauché, 138.

In 1969 Alistair Horne wrote, "Of all the attitudes struck by the French High Command during the Phoney War, none today seems more incomprehensible than its apparent refusal to take cognizance of the lessons of the Polish campaign."[53] This paper argues, on the contrary, that, far from being blind to the lessons of Poland, Gamelin was, in fact, guilty of *over-reacting* to the events of September 1939. As will be shown, it is possible to draw a clear line of distinction between Gamelin's strategy for the defence of France as it stood before September 1939, and how it was altered after this period due to his intelligence on German actions in Poland. To this end, a detailed look at the most important lessons Gamelin took away from the events in Poland becomes essential.

Lesson One: The Importance of Early Concentration

Armengaud sent his report from neutral Romania on September 23rd, deeply impressed by the speed with which the German army had overrun western Poland. According to him, one of Poland's most important mistakes occurred before the fighting even started. That is, Polish leaders declined to begin mobilization before the start of hostilities. This had been part of the Polish leadership's attempt to avoid provoking its German neighbour by concentrating the army along border areas. As Armengaud saw it, this catastrophic error had two important consequences. First, it limited the number of Polish soldiers ready to receive the initial shock of

[53] Horne, 113.

the Nazi attack to 700 000 soldiers.[54] Had the Polish high command mobilized ahead of time, this number might have been raised to over two million. As the German attack consisted of 1.2 million men, early Polish mobilization would have given them a considerable advantage in manpower, if not in modern equipment and machines.

Gamelin was determined not to make the same mistake. While war with Germany was declared by France on September 3rd, mobilization of the army started two days earlier on September 1st. Over the next four weeks, France mobilized eight armies. During this time, Gamelin strictly forbade any air attacks on Germany for fear of reprisals which would hinder mobilization. Reports from Armengaud and Faury indicated the enormously disruptive effects of German air attacks on Polish mobilization.[55] They also suggested that whatever forces were not in place at the beginning of hostilities stood very little chance of ever reaching their intended stations on the frontline. This was because *Luftwaffe* operations had the effect of rendering transportation networks useless, mostly through bombing runs on railroads and major crossroads. Faury, the head of the French mission to Poland, summarized the matter most succinctly:

> The Polish command has already lost the battle because it does not have the necessary reserve units available to reinforce units under duress and seal the breaches which appear between them. These reserves exist but the ability to mobilise them, to concentrate them are delayed, even paralyzed by the enemy aviation.[56]

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[54] Armengaud, 106.

[55] Faury, head of the French mission to Poland, wrote emotionally of the Polish resistance in a series of articles for the *Revue Historique de l'Armée* in the 1950s. In these articles, as in his official reports of 1939, he energetically defends the Polish army's performance in battle: "whenever there was an equality of materiel, they [the Polish soldiers] dominated their enemy." Quoted in Maurice Gamelin, *Servir III, (Paris: Plon, 1947),* 495. This account of the devastating effect of the German tank/plane tandem, even on a motivated and effective opponent, deeply affected Gamelin's subsequent planning for the defense of France.

[56] Louis Faury, "La Pologne Terrassée*" Revue Historique de l'Armée*. 9:1 (1953), 131-152. This quotation is from one of Faury's original reports from Poland and is included in his article published thirteen years later.

While these reports would have come to Gamelin's attention several days too late to affect the course of French mobilization in early September, they were to have considerable impact on the *generalissimo*'s decisions throughout the eight months of *Phoney War*. After all, Gamelin had watched his armies mobilize, unhindered by German reprisal on land and in the air, with enormous satisfaction.[57] Once his troops were in place, he was loath to move them, even as the weeks of inactivity began to drag on. According to some, these soldiers were needed elsewhere as French mobilization had taken place just as the harvest season was about to begin. The image of France's countryside filling with harvest spoiling for want of labourers struck Prime Minister Daladier as intolerable and he lobbied energetically to have Gamelin release the agriculturalists stationed at the front lines. Gamelin sharply reminded Daladier of "the possibility in a very short time, of Germany swinging back [west] with all her forces,"[58] and refused to sacrifice a single soldier for the benefit of French farmlands while awaiting the unavoidable onslaught from the east. The report from Poland was clear in summarizing, "Hitler's goal is to destroy his enemies, one by one, in one all or nothing blow".[59] Gamelin had completed his mobilization and would not risk repeating the Polish error by diverting sizeable amounts of manpower to serve other purposes, however important.

Lesson 2: The Ineffectiveness of Reserve Forces

[57] General Ironside arrived in Paris on September 4th, 1939 finding Gamelin "delighted at having so far completed his concentration without enemy air attacks." General Edmund Ironside, *The Ironside Diaries: 1937-1940* (London: Constable and Co., 1950), 141.

[58] Alexander, 355.

[59] Armengaud, 135.

In his report dated September 26th, Armengaud notes that reserves set aside by the Polish high command met the same fate as that of the army's front line soldiers. That is to say that movement was rendered impossible by the *Luftwaffe*'s interdiction of roads and railway junctions. Local reserves were often cut off and surrounded before they could arrive at what they believed to be the front lines. The speed and penetrative power of the German armored divisions coupled with the air-force's close support, prevented Polish reinforcements from playing any appreciable role in the short war of September 1939.

Gauché's intelligence from the war in Poland increased Gamelin`s apprehension concerning the power of the German air force to dictate the outcome of battle. Gauché warned of a "terrifying prelude to ground attack by a massive aerial bombardment of the HQs, communications, vulnerable areas. Paralysis of the army from the opening stages of conflict."[60] Just as Faury and Armengaud had previously reported from their first-hand observations, Gauché emphasised the inability of the high command to direct their intended battle in the face of repeated *Luftwaffe* interdiction. "This is followed by powerful advances from armored divisions…which pierce deeply behind enemy lines. It is not possible for displaced units to re-establish themselves. *The chief of the 2ème bureau strongly anticipates the repetition of this type of attack on our own front"* (author's italics).[61]

Faury's report in particular made this aspect of the *Blitzkrieg* perfectly clear. In the French mission's official report he wrote, "Polish reserves were attacked in their zones of concentration as their vanguards were arriving and their companions, obliged to abandon the devastated

[60] Gauché, 165.
[61] Ibid.

railroads, could only arrive slowly and in small numbers. In addition, they could only march at night."[62] Upon reading this and many other similar reports, Gamelin was compelled to think along different lines than the traditional view of placing large strategic reserves behind the front line. Gauché, Faury and Armengaud had all informed him that this would not be an effective strategy faced with the new German tactics as displayed in Poland.

2 – The "Culture" of the French Army

Following the events in Poland, it became clear that the traditional notion of rushing strategic reserves to bolster flagging areas of the continuous front would no longer be effective. After September 1939, Gamelin began to search for alternative ways to ensure France's inviolability. Before looking into his conclusions on this matter, it will be helpful to consider the nature of the military machine over which he presided, and consider its basic doctrinal framework. As a central purpose of this paper is to demonstrate how unorthodox Gamelin's solutions were in addressing the problem of German breakthrough tactics, it will be necessary to first clarify the habits and procedures practiced by the French army as outlined in military manuals of the late 1930s. Only then can one fully appreciate the radical nature of Gamelin's revisions.

[62] Gamelin, *Servir III, 489.*

In Poland, Germany had shown that modern equipment and innovative tactics could restore mobility to battlefield. The French army, however, remained steeped in the lessons which had eventually secured victory in the First World War. What was the "culture" of the French army? What ideological and methodological pillars supported its vast weight and defined its character? Any answer to this question necessarily begins with the concept of the "methodical battle". This was an outgrowth of French experience from 1914-18. In 1914, the French army entered into hostilities firmly tied to the concept of the "all-out offensive" (*l'offensive à l'outrance)*. This notion, which prioritized aggressive offensive operations, followed from the writings of Colonel Ardant du Picq. According to du Picq, French defeat in the Franco-Prussian War was the result of passive and unaggressive tendencies within the army and its leadership. In the years leading up to 1914, French doctrine increasingly supported the idea that high morale and ferocious waves of infantry charges could overwhelm the enemy. These ideas, though pursued doggedly by Generals Joffre and Nivelle until 1917, did not survive the trenches, barbed wire and machine guns of the western front.

Late in the war, the *methodical battle*, a new set of principles aiming at the preservation of the chain of command and the conservation of lives and resources, exercised far greater influence on French strategists than previous notions of heroic é*lan vital.* The *methodical battle* emphasised the importance of firepower in deciding the outcome of battle. While the infantry was still considered as "charged with the central role in combat,"[63] artillery support was viewed

[63] France, Ministère de la Guerre*, Instruction sur l'emploi tactique des Grandes Unités* (Paris: Librarie Militaire Berger-Levrault, 1937), 42. This manual, while containing sporadic additions to its predecessors praising the offensive as the mode of operations *par* excellence (p.66) nevertheless remains faithful to the defensive methodical battle as practiced at the end of the First World War. It has been convincingly used by Robert A. Doughty in demonstrating the lack of dynamism in French strategic thought during the inter-war period. See

as absolutely essential to the success of any operation. The 1937 military manual *Instruction sur l'emploi tactique des Grandes Unités,* which was often referred to as the "Gospel of the French army,"[64] intersperses regular text with bold print in order to emphasize the core concepts of French military theory. In this text, the largest such bold-printed section is found in the first section outlining the role of firepower.

> The effects of firepower are both material and moral. It creates killing zones where troops suffer massive and shocking losses which neutralise their will to fight and pin them to the ground, where materiel is destroyed and where organization is paralysed.[65]

Firepower was key to the French army's method of battle. "Le Feu Tue" or "fire kills" as Marshal Pétain wrote in 1921,[66] suggesting that artillery should always be used in close co-operation with infantry movement. Indeed, the ability of the infantry division to move at all was thought to be contingent upon the support it received from artillery barrages. Command and coordination of the artillery was therefore relegated to the higher echelons of command. French officers were taught that relinquishing command of a division's artillery support to lower subordinates would lead to "isolated, disjointed, sterile local actions." To delegate command of artillery in such a way, especially in the heat of battle, was described as no less than an "abdication of command."[67]

Doughty, *The Seeds of Disaster : The Development of French Army Doctrine 1919-1939* (Hamden CT : Archon, 1985), 72-90.

[64] Doughty, "De Gaulle's Concept of a Mobile, Professional Army: Genesis of French Defeat?" *Parameters* no.4 (1974), 26.

[65] France, Ministère de la Guerre. *Instruction sur l'emploi tactique des Grandes Unités.* (Paris: Librairie Militaire Berger-Levrault, 1937), 68.

[66] *Instruction* (1921), 23.

[67] France, Ministère de la Guerre. *Règlement de manoeuvre de L'artillerie, Deuxième Partie, L'artillerie au Combat* (Paris: Charles Lavanzelle, 1926), 52.

This coupling of infantry and artillery units fostered a pronounced top-down culture in the French army. Infantry was seen as mobile on the battlefield only insofar as its supporting artillery allowed it to be. As the artillery was carefully co-ordinated by higher-level commanders, so too was the mobility of infantry divisions. Ideally, battles took place after thorough preparation assuring advantages in men, materiel and battlefield position. The goal was to "impose one's will upon the enemy while…maintaining a strict economy of resources."[68] This apparent contradiction implied that only through the application of strict, methodical preparation and execution could battle be successfully offered to the enemy. This concept applied to both offensive and defensive operations. Even "audacious solutions should be executed methodically," explained the military manual of 1937 for the command of large units.[69]

Such principles necessarily slowed down the reaction time of the French army. Junior officers were restricted in their maneuvers because their supporting artillery was commanded by senior officers. This required a slow process of coordination between different echelons of command in order to execute basic movement. Thus we can determine a "culture" that existed within the French army during the interwar years which emphasised the pairing of infantry and artillery, firepower and central command over mobility. This is not to say that the French high command envisioned a static battlefield along the lines of 1914-18. The instructional manual on the use of large units (1937) claims "the offensive is the mode of operations *par excellence*…only the offensive allows for decisive results."[70] Nevertheless, any offensive was seen as dependent upon an initial superiority in soldiers, equipment, morale, tactical doctrine,

[68] *Instruction* (1937), 30.
[69] Ibid., 31.
[70] Ibid.,66.

strategic situation, and preparation. The careful buildup of each of these elements was the responsibility of the high command and would require a time-consuming, deliberate procedure. Maneuver of artillery during combat was also a slow process which ran according to established timetables. Displacement of 75mm cannon could take as much as three to four hours. In the case of the 105mm cannon, this could take up to 10 hours, while setting up the piece for firing required anywhere between 2 and 10 additional hours.[71] It is difficult to envision a sweeping forward movement of any sustained momentum by an army following such staccato patterns of advance. Yet timetables of this sort were considered crucial to the success of the methodical battle, and were even applied to a new manual on the use of tanks as late as 1939. In this manual the tank, like the infantry, was to follow strict patterns of movement in order to facilitate coordination with the artillery. The tank was to advance only with the "protection and support" of the artillery and in "intimate liaison" with the infantry.[72] Thus we see the potential of armored units for restoring mobility to the battlefield tempered by French insistence on firepower as the keystone to success. Movement, according to French strategic thought, was the result of a successful methodical battle which had already broken the enemy's will and ability to fight. It was not, as the Germans would see it, the key element in bringing about such a victory.

In fact, during the interwar years, French military minds were developing the idea that divisional mobility was in fact *decreasing* as a result of the incorporation of modern weaponry.

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[71] R.A.Doughty, *The Seeds of Disaster: The Development of French Army Doctrine 1919-1939*. (Hamdon Conn.: Archon, 1985), 101-02.

[72] France, Ministère de la Défense Nationale. *Règlement des unités de Chars de Combat, 2ème Partie: Combat.* (Paris: École des chars de combat, 1939), 91. Cited in Doughty, *The Seeds of Disaster,* 156.

Since the methodical battle tied heavy artillery pieces to infantry units, mobility was increasingly restricted. One professor at St-Cyr military college noted that the greater number of horse and trucks required to move heavy equipment made the 1930 French division thirty-four km long while on the march. The 1914 version of French infantry divisions on the march stretched out to only thirteen km in length or less than half of its future embodiment. In the 1930s, French military instruction manuals pointed to the fact that the infantry division had become less, rather than more fluid in movement since the First World War. They were "less supple and less tactically and strategically mobile."[73]

In its various manuals outlining official doctrine, the French high command referred to the subordination of mobility in favour of carefully orchestrated and consistent artillery support. Firepower trumped everything else and the enemy was to be met with "curtains of fire" at every encounter. This summarized the methodical battle and stood in direct contrast to what the French high command feared most, the encounter battle.

To meet the enemy in open terrain, forced to slug it out, fully exposed and deprived of the advantages of prepared defensive works, was anathema to most French military thinkers. Again in bold-print emphasis, the 1937 *Instruction* states:

> In general, and especially at the start of a war, it is important to fight methodical battles and to avoid battles of encounter. The latter, in light of the risks which they entail, do not lend themselves well to the employment of young or inexperienced troops. It is better, on the contrary, to only engage methodically on the battlefield, with all the necessary supporting firepower.[74]

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[73] Doughty, *Seeds of Disaster*, 104.

[74] *Instruction* (1937), 90. On this same issue, Charles de Gaulle wrote presciently in 1934. "How can we dismiss the impression of battle on uninitiated soldiers? Their danger is revealed to them in the maximum possible

Gamelin was fully immersed in this concept of methodical battle and had witnessed its inception and implementation during the First World War.[75] Nevertheless, historians must attempt to come to terms with the *generalissimo's* gradual but consistent revision of an intervention into Belgium which, as time went by, appeared increasingly contradictory to both the spirit and the letter of French military theory. As will be explored in the next section, lessons learned from the Polish campaign were primarily responsible for convincing Gamelin to stray from orthodox French military planning.

3 - Revising the Belgian Plan

On September 21st 1939 as the German campaign in Poland was coming to a close, Gamelin sent word to his "Commander of the Northeast Front", General Georges, outlining his conception of how best to combat the new German tactics.[76] This letter contains excellent advice and demonstrates that even at this early date, Gamelin was already familiar with the fundamental

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dosage and in the most terrifying form" Charles de Gaulle, *Vers L'Armée de Métier* (Paris : Acabose, 1934), 151. De Gaulle goes on to write movingly on the opening days of the First World War, when thousands of French soldiers stumbled through their first, confused trial by fire. From these two sources, we can see that fears concerning the efficacy of inexperienced troops were discussed as a potential liability against which precautions would need to be made. Nevertheless, Gamelin left the center of his line manned with only a few inexperienced divisions of secondary fighting quality, or "B" divisions.

[75] Resistance to modernization was viewed among many in the French army as a virtue. The "Infantry Combat Handbook" of 1938 praised French tactics precisely because they did not innovate but "preserved from oblivion the lessons of WWI. This was one of many publications which lauded the practice of resisting the temptation to depart from the lessons which had been so painfully learned in 1917-18." See Eugen Weber, *The Hollow Years: France in the 1930s* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1994), 251.

[76] Gamelin, *Servir I*, 245.

principles of the blitzkrieg. In it, he warns of the impact of German air support of ground operations and advises that armored counterattacks should be prioritized as the preferred method of countering armored breakthroughs in the French line of defence. Most interestingly, Gamelin describes the importance of defence in depth. He advises that Georges man the front line with the minimal possible number of soldiers to resist a German attack. Reserves should be established in depth behind this first screen, two layers deep. The first line of reserves should consist of infantry while the second line was to be made up of the more mobile forces: motorized units, cavalry[77] and the heavy armored divisions (DCRs).

The idea of a defence in depth, which Gamelin had also strongly emphasized to Polish Marshal Rydz-Smigly [78] before the war, is formally described in this letter. Such methods were perfectly in keeping with official French military doctrine of the time. The 1937 publication on the use of large military units states: "to sustain the effort demanded in battle, the commander requires a great number of reserves. These are to be used in order to relieve troops engaged in combat, as well as to allow for combined operations. The commander must continuously be mindful of their reconstitution."[79] And later in the same manual, we read: "Defensive deployment against armored vehicles is characterised by depth above all else."[80] Depth of defence was to be assured, not only through multiple "layers" of local reserves, but also from the

[77] While the use of cavalry as part of Gamelin's reserves may appear anachronistic, horses remained an important part of modern armies at the time and this speaks to the peculiar, transitional period of warfare during the interwar period. According to Frieser, the German army of 1940 was not characterized by Panzers and motor vehicles but by horses. During World War I, the German army used 1.4 million horses; during World War II, it used 2.7 million, almost twice as many." Frieser, *The Blitzkrieg Legend,* p. 29.

[78] Gamelin, *Servir II*, 411. At this time, Gamelin still advocated the use of powerful reserve units to maintain a continuous front. His advice to Rydz-Smigly of a defence in depth was given due to concern over the Polish high command's "unrealistic" defence plan which would attempt to defend everywhere along Poland's long border with the Reich, even within the highly vulnerable Polish Corridor. See Gamelin, *Servir II, 411-413.*

[79] *Instruction* (1937),101.

[80] Ibid, 176.

long-standing preference to conduct a forward defence of French territory, meeting any German attack on the Belgian Lowlands.

Since the end of the First World War, French military planners had prepared for such a move into Belgium at the onset of any future war with Germany. At a 1927 meeting of the Conseil Supérieur de la Guerre, Marshal Pétain stressed the advantages to France inherent in a pre-emptive move into Belgium. He argued that this was the only way to ensure a close cooperation between the two national armies.[81] The merits of such a move were obvious; it would serve to support France's Belgian ally while creating distance between the front lines and France's own border. Even after 1936, when Belgian King Leopold II announced his country's new policy of strict neutrality, French strategists continued to envision an eventual "rescue" of the Belgian army, putting distance between the front lines and France itself. By the time war was declared, this long-held strategy had taken two basic forms, the Escaut Plan and the more ambitious Dyle Plan.

The Escault Plan, or "Plan E", was a forward movement to the Scheldt river, hinging on the Belgian "redoubt" of Ghent.[82] Its advantages included a greater depth of defense, meeting the German forces at a distance from France's vital industrial northeast. The Escaut Plan would also allow France to incorporate the retreating twenty-two Belgian divisions following their initial resistance on the Albert Canal. Finally, it would provide a strong defensive line behind the river which, it was hoped, would have been already fortified by the neutral Belgians. This was a modest intervention into Belgium which would screen a narrow strip of coastline and a

[81] Gamelin, *Servir II*, 70.
[82] Gunsberg, 127.

few ports to the west of the Scheldt river. The bulk of Belgium's territory would remain unprotected and presumably sacrificed to Germany, at least for the opening stages of the war.

The inherent risk within the plan was that the French high command would remain unsure of the extent of Belgian preparations. That is, they would not be able to verify the level of fortification which awaited them on the west bank of the Scheldt river. Nevertheless, any footrace with the German army into Belgium would be aided by the fact that every location along the proposed line of defence, including Antwerp, the furthest point of advance from the French border, was closer to France than it was to Germany. This was an acceptable risk even in light of the recent demonstrations of German mobility in Poland.

In 1939**,** Gamelin expanded the scope of Belgian intervention by developing the Dyle Plan or "Plan D". This consisted of a deeper push into Belgium, with a view to taking up positions on the Dyle river line where it joined the Meuse. It offered the advantage of shortening the front line of defence from 750km to 680km[83]. It also aimed at preserving the majority of Belgian territory from being overrun while simultaneously depriving Germany of some important Channel ports. This last consideration was a matter of considerable interest to France's allies in Britain. Another advantage offered by this more ambitious excursion into Belgian territory, was that future offensives against Germany, which Gamelin had in mind for 1941 or 1942, would begin from a shorter striking distance to the industrial Ruhr region[84].

Such advantages were noteworthy, but the Dyle Plan failed to take into account a number of fundamental risks which should have, according to French military doctrine, dissuaded

[83] Gamelin, *Servir I*, 90-91.
[84] Ibid., 105-6.

Gamelin from adopting the maneuver. First, the Dyle Plan was considerably more adventurous in the amount of territory it encompassed. Some units from the French 1st and 9th army as well as the British Expeditionary Force were expected to advance some 60km further than allocated in the Escaut Plan.[85] The motorized and mechanized units within these armies were capable of conducting such a headlong rush but even these mobile units were trained to act in accordance with the tenets of the methodical battle from the moment they disembarked from their transports.

Though both plans required a rapid advance on the part of France's northern armies, this should not be interpreted as a new preference for greater mobility within the French army. Gamelin envisioned no such break from the principles of the methodical battle. Rather, the rush into Belgium was intended only as a rapid redeployment to new defensive lines. Upon encountering the enemy, French units were expected to resume the practice of methodical battle, moving at the pace of infantry, and supported by lengthy artillery barrages.[86] Large motorized groups under fire by enemy air forces were expected to leave the road and travel over country. If French units were challenged by the *Luftwaffe* anywhere en route to the Dyle, off road travel would have reduced speed considerably. In such conditions, French units would have been hard pressed to reach the Dyle ahead of German spearhead units.

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[85] It was for this reason that the Dyle Plan met with opposition among some of France's senior commanders. Among them General René Prioux, who as head of First army's Cavalry Corps was in charge of defending the Gembloux gap. Prioux officially objected to the Dyle Plan. Other high profile objectors were General Corap, commander of 9th army and General Blanchard commander of the 1st army. General René Prioux, *Souvenirs de Guerre* (Paris: Flammarion, 1947), 35.

[86] *Servir I*, 235-6, 286. Here Gamelin claims that, properly executed, the methodical battle could have been very successful against the German invasion. In his opinion, there was nothing wrong with the doctrine outlined in "his" *Instructions sur l'Emploi Tactique des Grandes Unités.* Gamelin, *Servir I, 236.* Gamelin uses the possessive pronoun in referring to this manual (*Servir I,* 235), which was referred to as the "Gospel of the army" (Doughty, "De Gaulle's Concept of a Mobile, Professional Army", 26. Rather than finding fault in "his" doctrine, he spends several paragraphs outlining how his vision had been improperly executed by his subordinates.

The Dyle Plan could only succeed if the 1st and 9th armies along with the BEF could arrive at their positions with sufficient time to deploy their artillery, a process which, as mentioned, could take as long as 10 hours for the more modern 105mm cannon. It was optimistic in the extreme to think that advance units of any German attack would fail to reach the Dyle before the French had dug in and prepared for a methodical defensive battle relying primarily on firepower. And yet, anything less than this would constitute a battle of encounter, the very thing most French military planners were determined to avoid. Despite the risks, Gamelin committed himself to the Dyle Plan on November 15th, 1939 in his *Instruction Personelle et Secrète no.8.*[87]

4 - Gamelin's "Solutions"

This overview of French military doctrine and strategy as it existed in the 1930s has been necessary in order to explore the striking unorthodoxy of Gamelin's response to the events in Poland. The present section will explore the novel solutions devised by Gamelin to resist German *Blitzkrieg* tactics. From September 1939 to May 1940, France's Commander-in-Chief engaged in a fateful re-imagining of the role played by strategic reserves in the upcoming battle. This evolution in his line of thought can be traced back to the first 'tweaking' of the Dyle Plan, shortly after the earliest lessons drawn from Poland had been learned.

[87] In *Servir III* p.143, Gamelin explains that the decision was taken with the consent of both General Georges and representatives of the British high command. Gamelin provides the full text of the *Instruction* in *Servir I*, p.82-83.

The Dyle Plan, in its original conception, involved ten French and five British divisions. The vast majority of France's remaining divisions remained integrated in what Karl-Heinz Frieser has aptly referred to as the "safe French tree trunk"[88]. Reserves at this point were considerable, including the 7th army, an elite mobile and coherent unit, stationed near the center of the French line, near Reims.

This would be continually revised by the g*eneralissimo* who began to see the Dyle Plan in ever more ambitious terms. By September 1939, Gamelin increased the number of divisions on his left wing from fifteen to twenty two. This included many of his most mobile units. A further amendment to this order of battle came on October 11th when he ordered the Seventh army removed from the strategic reserve and moved into the army's left wing near Antwerp. There its commander, General Henri Giraud, would remain, ready to act as operational reserve. This now increased the forces involved in the Dyle Plan from twenty-two to twenty-nine divisions.

Following the events in Poland, Gamelin continued to systematically incorporate ever increasing numbers of his reserve units into front-line service. The process culminated on March 20th 1940 when Gamelin introduced his "Breda Variant". This strategy proposed the full integration of the Seventh Army into the French front line. This mobile force would be pushed forward into Belgium and beyond, rushing toward Breda in support of the Dutch army. The "Breda Variant" to the Dyle Plan was formally adopted on March 12th, 1940 as part of Gamelin's

[88] Frieser, 92. "The safe French tree trunk" refers to the static defenses of the Maginot Line. North of the Line, the mobile parts of the French continuous front would be the ones taking part in the forward movement into Belgium (1st, 9th and 7th armies, alongside the B.E.F.) which, to pursue Frieser's analogy, would constitute the more vulnerable "branches" deprived of the advantage of well prepared battlefields.

Instruction Personelle et Secrète no. 11.[89] In accordance with this revision, the number of divisions committed to the mobile French left wing had risen to thirty, including elite motorized and mechanized units. It came at the expense of France's strategic reserve. This was Giraud's Seventh army which consisted of one DLM (light armored division), two motorized divisions and three class "A" infantry divisions. The new mission assigned to this force was especially risky as it required General Giraud's army to reach a point twice as far from France as it was from Germany.[90] Moreover, it would commit these forces to the far left of the Allied line, without any knowledge of where the main German effort would take place.

The Breda Variant was a bizarre reversal of policy on Gamelin's part. Not only was he thinning out his reserves, he was simultaneously bulking up his front line – exactly the opposite of what he advised for Georges on September 21st (see pages 25-26). Instead of ensuring layers of reserves, consistent with French army doctrine, he incorporated the bulk of his reserves into the front line. Furthermore, the Dyle-Breda Plan substantially increased the risk of an encounter battle with German spearheads thrusting westward through Belgium. Official French doctrine clearly stated that a commander should at all costs avoid such an engagement, choosing instead the pre-planned methodical battle. *Instruction sur l'Emploi Tactique des Grandes Unités*

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[89] Gamelin, *Servir III*, 177.

[90] This maneuver would require Giraud's 7th army to cover 175 km from the French border to Breda. German forces would only need to accomplish a 90 km dash to reach the same point. It is not surprising that General Blanchard, commander of the 1st Army expressed grave concerns about the feasibility of this plan. "We must have absolute certainty of not encountering the enemy before a minimum of eight days. Anything short of this would lead to an encounter battle offered in the worst possible conditions." Gamelin claims not to have heard of this objection until after the war was over. Quoted in Louis Crémieux-Brilhac. *Les Français de l'An '40 vol. II* (St Amand: Gallimard: 1990), 411.

stipulates an important detail justifying this preference, one which should have been of particular interest to Gamelin in the winter of 1939. It stressed the danger of an encounter battle, particularly for unseasoned soldiers facing an enemy which had already experienced battle.[91]

If some feared the risk carried by the Escaut Plan of meeting fast moving German armor somewhere in the open countryside before defensive positions could be properly occupied, the revised Dyle-Breda plan increased this risk considerably. The intended positions along the Dyle river were only slightly closer to the French border than they were to Germany. Considering that Gamelin encouraged movement by night only, in order to minimise contact with enemy aircraft, the risk of encountering advance German units was, if not assured, then certainly worthy of careful consideration. Gamelin accepted this risk despite having no way to verify what fortifications had been prepared by Belgian engineers, particularly in the Gembloux Gap. This was 25 miles of open, flat countryside between Namur and Wavre. Through this area, Gamelin expected the main weight of the German offensive to fall. Anything short of complete defensive preparations would guarantee the kind of encounter battle French military doctrine insisted Gamelin should make every effort to avoid.

In the end, the Gembloux Gap was not fortified to the extent anticipated by the French high command. The "barrage de Cointet", a tank obstacle constructed by Belgian engineers around Gembloux was ineffective due to large gaps in its line. There, on May 14-15, General Prioux's cavalry corps would encounter Hoepner's *Panzer* divisions in open terrain without the

[91] *Instruction* (1937), 90. Gamelin knew that his army was largely untested and would be facing a battle-hardened German army. This was precisely the circumstance in which French doctrine stressed the importance of avoiding encounter battles. The risky Dyle Plan thus contradicted a fundamental tenet of French military practice and must be seen as a radical departure from official doctrine.

advantage of prepared positions or pre-planned "curtains" of supporting artillery fire which characterised the methodical battle. About the defensive works prepared ahead of time by Belgian engineers, Prioux gave the following brief description, "No serious trench work, no wire...almost barren."[92]

In his memoirs, Gamelin attempts to minimize the importance of the Breda Variant to the outcome of the Battle of France. He describes the dash to Breda as an "hors d'oeuvre"[93] of little importance to the French defence incorporating over a hundred divisions. He argues that the misallocation of such a relatively small portion of available resources cannot be blamed for the disaster which befell the French army in May 1940. His argument that the maneuver involved only three divisions[94] can only be interpreted as deliberately disingenuous as Giraud's army was composed of six elite divisions (1st light mechanised, 25th motorised, 9th motorised, 60th infantry, 68th infantry and 21st infantry). Furthermore, in removing these forces from the strategic reserve (the name of this assembly until the adoption of the Breda variant was *1st army group reserve*[95]*),* Gamelin forced General Georges to replace them with most of the remaining reserve divisions. To back up 1st army`s crucial blocking of the Gembloux Gap, Georges replaced the departed Seventh army with the 1st and 2nd DCRs, the 43rd Infantry Division and the 1st North African Division.

In his attempt to downplay the relative importance of the Breda Variant Gamelin neglects to mention the striking inconsistency between this plan and the Dyle maneuver as it had

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[92] Général Prioux, *Souvenirs de Guerre* (Paris: Flammendon, 1947), 62.
[93] Gamelin, *Servir I*, 98-99.
[94] Ibid.
[95] Don Alexander. "Repercussions of the Breda Variant", *French Historical Studies* 8:3 (Spring 1974*),* 485.

been conceived before March 1940. That is to say that one of the Dyle Plan's chief advantages was in its shortening of the French line of battle. This was among the main selling points which had allowed Gamelin to have the plan officially adopted by the Conseil Supérieur de la Guerre. However, by including the Breda Variant, Gamelin was now extending the line again by another 50 kilometers, thus, removing the principle advantage gained by the Dyle Plan over its predecessor while simultaneously increasing the risk of an encounter battle with advancing German units.

When all the reshuffling was done in March of 1940, the center of the French line, which had once been backed up by Giraud`s powerful and mobile Seventh army stationed around Reims, was now essentially deprived of anything beyond local reserves. These were mostly "B" divisions of questionable reliability. The Breda Variant began this reorganization which ultimately left Georges unable to rush sufficient forces to plug the breach around Sedan when German tanks began to stream over the Meuse on the 12th of May. This is why Gamelin`s memoirs must be read with scepticism when he dismisses the Breda Variant as "merely an appetizer". Similarly, his memoirs miss the mark when he writes that General Georges had 28 reserve divisions at his disposal with which to counter any German breakthrough.[96] In fact, Georges did *not* possess enough reserves geographically positioned to guarantee the center of the French line.[97] This was because his Commander-in-Chief had already sent the best and most

[96]Gamelin, *Servir I*, 98-99. Elsewhere in his memoirs, Gamelin blames Georges for the thin line of defence around Sedan. "I only regretted...that he did not bring more reserves closer to the front behind the 2nd Army and the right of the 9th Army." Gamelin, *Servir I*, 316. It is difficult to pinpoint where Georges would have found such reserves in Gamelin's order of battle.

[97] Gamelin refers here to the inexplicably high number of divisions positioned behind the Maginot Line. Despite the fact that the massive fortifications were designed to free up divisions for action elsewhere along the front, the presence of nearly thirty divisions behind the Line remains unexplained. Gamelin claimed this was

mobile elements available to the far left of the French order of battle before rushing it headlong into Holland.

Georges had identified the danger to the French center long before the German attack and objected to the deployment of so many divisions into Belgium. His opposition to the Dyle Plan was presented officially for the first time on November 30th in a letter to Gamelin. This document stated, "In case of an enemy attack in strength on the center of our line...we could be deprived of the necessary means to strike back."[98] Undeterred, Gamelin deliberately excluded Georges from meetings in which he attempted to convince military and civilian leaders of the merits of his Breda Variant. Jeffery Gunsberg has pointed to a particularly crucial meeting of military chiefs in November 1939 where Gamelin "sold" his idea to Billotte (Chief of First Army Group), Giraud (future commander of the 7th army, charged with executing the Breda Variant), Darlan (Admiral of the Fleet) and D'Astier (Chief of Air Operations in the North) while neglecting to inform Georges of the meeting.[99] The absence of Gamelin's chief subordinate for the Northeast Front points to the deep division that had already developed between the two men over the issue of sending mobile reserves to Holland.

During the final weeks before the German attack, General Georges proposed ways in which sufficient reserves could yet be reclaimed from Gamelin's bulked-up front line. It was still not too late to reconsider the Breda Variant, Georges argued. This would conserve five divisions (one of the six divisions slated to participate in this operation would be kept on the far

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Georges' oversight (*Servir I,* 316*)*, while Georges claimed that he had always "deplored this excessive strength behind the Maginot Line" and attempted to correct the problem in the days leading up to May 10th. See Gunsberg, *Divided and Conquered* , 142 for an account of Georges' long-winded and unconvincing explanation.

[98] Minart, *P.C. Vincennes I*, 103.

[99] Gunsberg, *Divided and Conquered*, 131.

left of the French line). Not proceeding into Belgium, or at least choosing the less ambitious Escaut Plan over the Dyle Plan, would conserve fifteen more divisions, according to Georges.[100] Such recommendations fell on deaf ears as by now Gamelin was fully committed to the incorporation of reserves into the French front line.

Georges' efforts to scale back French commitment to military intervention into Belgium can be coupled with his aforementioned objection to the Dyle-Breda Plan of November 30th 1939 to suggest that Georges would have been less taken in by the Belgian feint had he been in Gamelin's place. Ernest R. May argues that in fact, Georges would have done no better than his superior as he essentially believed in a similar deployment of French armies. May argues that Georges objected to everything Gamelin decided upon not from personal conviction, but rather as a way to gain favour with Gamelin's political opponents, in particular Paul Reynaud.[101] May's argument does not give Georges' prescience enough credit. Whether or not he was in part politically motivated, it remains true that Georges was able to identify France's vulnerability to an attack in the center. Had he succeeded in obtaining a more solid reinforcement of this region, it becomes impossible to imagine a scenario in which German *Panzers* could have broken through as quickly as they did along the Meuse.

The move from the Escaut to the Dyle-Breda Plan was the result of Gamelin's radical re-defining of his strategy subsequent to the war in Poland. Lessons from that conflict had impressed upon him the need to increase as much as possible the number of effectives manning

[100] Villelume 285.
[101] May, 378.

front line positions. Risking an encounter battle was worth the addition of 22 Belgian divisions in addition to the 10 Dutch divisions which Gamelin hoped would rally around Giraud's Seventh army in Breda. Since he believed he was facing as many as 150 German divisions, as well as the probable impact of massed armor somewhere along his extended front, these additions were paramount in his thoughts. German armored breakthroughs in Poland were observed by the *Deuxième Bureau* to have taken place over a front of between two to four kilometers in width. These operations were said to be pursued with the greatest vigor using armor, planes and artillery.[102] Such information must have made the strongest impression on Gamelin who was tasked with defending 680 km of front line, any 2-4 of which could be the location of Germany`s main effort at breakthrough. The Polish war had convinced Gamelin that the traditional use of reserve forces could not effectively serve in the defence of France. Since reserve forces in Poland had been immobilised by the speed of the German tank/plane tandem in battle, Gamelin opted instead for a new and untried strategy. He threw the vast majority of his reserves into the front lines, particularly among those forces intended for Holland and Belgium, where he expected the main German effort to take place. The Breda Variant was only the most famous of these efforts and cannot be taken as an isolated miscalculation on Gamelin's part, but rather as an example of a general re-alignment of French forces following the remarkable German success in Poland.

Nicole Jordan has argued that Gamelin had been experimenting with a redefinition of the French strategic reserve since 1936. According to this revision the strategic reserve was no longer defined as an uncommitted force on French soil to be called to any point on the

[102] Gauché, 170.

continuous front as needed. Rather it would be a highly specialised mobile force to be committed to the Low Countries in the critical first days of conflict. Jordan calls it a "modernised strategic reserve."[103] In fact, Gamelin did not begin to significantly reassign his strategic reserve until after the Polish campaign. And by committing his reserve to the front line, it ceased to act in any meaningful way as a reserve force. **"**On a continuous front like ours," Gamelin wrote, "there could be no question, as some have supposed, of placing in reserve an organized army."[104] It is thus more accurate to call Gamelin's redeployment an *elimination* of France's reserve in favour of a more powerful front line – rather than a "modernization" or "reorganization" which somehow maintained the Seventh Army's identity as a reserve force, as Jordan suggests.

5 – The Great Gamble

In any event, since the maneuver was to fail completely in its stated goal of linking up with retreating units of the Dutch army, the Breda Variant can only be credited with distancing Georges' most cohesive and mobile reserve forces away from the centre of the French line where they would be needed most. The reason why this army failed to link up with its allies in Breda lay in the decision by the Dutch to retreat their army north, rather than south, toward "Fortress Holland". This fundamental lack of co-ordination with his allies appears striking when one

[103] Jordan, "Strategy and Scapegoatism", 24.
[104] Gamelin, *Servir III,* 345n2.

considers that Gamelin would risk such a valuable asset without first acquiring more information on the Dutch plan of battle. More striking still, is the fact that Gamelin had already received warnings before May 1940, indicating that the Dutch planned to retreat north, away from Breda, in the event of a German attack.[105]

The Breda Variant constituted an aggressive gamble to attempt the formation of a continuous allied front stretching from the Ardennes to Breda. It is important to note that no formal accord to this effect had been concluded between the French and their Belgian/Dutch allies-in-waiting.[106] Moreover, the Dutch decision to retreat northwards, away from Giraud`s advancing 7th army resulted from a lack of coordination between the Belgians and Dutch themselves. Belgian strategists had no interest in compromising their initial stance along the Albert Canal by stretching out their left wing to link up with Dutch units[107]. Therefore, we can be certain that Gamelin rushed his strategic reserve toward Breda without co-ordinating this move beforehand with Dutch or Belgian officials. In addition to this inexplicable oversight, Gamelin had not received any assurance that the Dutch and Belgians were prepared to assist one another in a common defence along the Dyle. Clearly, they were not, as demonstrated by the direction of the Dutch retreat.[108]

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[105] Général Roton. *Années Cruciales* (Paris : Charles Lavauzelle & Co. 1947), 133.

[106] This is a fine example of what Frieser has called, "The comedy of Franco-Belgian co-operation." (Frieser, 47). That Gamelin would have risked so much on such a tenuous grasp of his allies' intentions speaks to the extent of his desperation while planning France's strategy following the events in Poland.

[107] Roton, 133.

[108] What did Gamelin hope to gain by the Breda Variant? In his memoirs he states that the maneuver was intended to fuse a French-Dutch-Belgian line (*Servir I,* 96-99*)*. General Giraud, entrusted with the execution of this maneuver had serious misgivings about its feasibility, given the distances covered and the speed with which German armor could be expected to reach the same area. As for Gamelin's stated purpose of welding together a multinational line of defence, Giraud pointed out the obvious unlikelihood of improvising a unified command

The prospect of including thirty two Belgian and Dutch divisions within his continuous front appeared necessary to Gamelin due to the steady stream of alarmist and factually incorrect estimates of German military strength provided to him by the *Deuxième Bureau*. The dizzying extent of his gamble demonstrates the desperation with which Gamelin labored to address this perceived numerical inferiority. The Breda Variant, as noted elsewhere[109], did not suffer from a methodical excess, but rather from a total lack of method. It was at such a distance from the "culture" of the army tasked with its execution as to render positive results extremely doubtful. It was a giant leap, not only from French military doctrine emphasising the methodical battle, but also from Gamelin's own previously held views. Prior to the war, he expressed a distinct lack of enthusiasm for any pre-emptive move into Belgium. Paul de Villelume, military advisor to Prime Minister Paul Reynaud, cites Gamelin speaking to him several times before 1939 in a desultory tone, about the risks involved in such an operation. "On April 6th, 1937, he told me that he would never agree to come to Belgium`s assistance if that country did not request such aid *before* the beginning of hostilities."[110] Gamelin was adamant at this stage, two and a half years before the war began, that he did not wish to engage in an improvised operation, without a clear understanding between French and Belgian Chiefs-of-Staff. He refused to recklessly throw his divisions into battles of encounter like wood in a furnace. "Until the fall of 1939, [Gamelin] never ceased to condemn the folly of our eventual entry into Belgium".[111] Indeed, as late as Sept. 1st 1939, Gamelin wrote to Daladier: "If the Belgians don't call on our support until the

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between three nations at the last moment, while under enemy fire. These entirely sensible concerns went unheeded. See Gunsberg, p.131.

[109] Dennis Showalter, "Ce que l'armée française avait compris de la guerre moderne" in *Mai-Juin 1940: Défaite francaise, victoire allemande sous l'oeil des historiens Étrangers.* (Paris: Éditions Autrement, 2000), 56.

[110] Villelume, 154-55.

[111] Ibid, 155.

moment in which they're attacked...we would be forced to rush into an encounter battle with the added difficulty of supporting a retreating army – a very difficult task with modern equipment and aviation."[112]

Gamelin's caution, so evident before the Polish war, was again seen in his disapproval of a Saar offensive in September 1939. Voices in the government promoted this attack as a political necessity in order to fulfill the minimum of France's obligations to Poland. For his part, Gamelin regarded it as unnecessarily risky. He disapproved of the plan because any move into the Saar would require enough units that guardianship over the Belgian and Swiss borders would become uncertain.[113] Though he disapproved of the idea, he conducted the operation according to his own methods which, at this stage, still dovetailed perfectly with contemporary French doctrine. He planned the attack as "a series of powerful actions, fiercely mounted, and methodologically conducted."[114]

However, the hard lesson of the Polish campaign had impressed upon Gamelin the idea that only the strongest possible front line could hope to blunt the impact of massed German armor. Armengaud's report had counselled Gamelin to reject any maneuver like Joffre's retreat to the Marne in 1914. Given the mobility and air superiority enjoyed by the German military, any large scale retreat would soon become a rout.[115] Once broken, the line was not likely to be reconstituted by local reserves since fast moving German aviation and armor would prevent their deployment. Accordingly, Gamelin's strategy shifted dramatically from a defence in depth to

[112] Minart I, 133.
[113] Gamelin, *Servir III*, 27.
[114] Ibid.
[115] Armengaud, 213.

strengthening his front line to its maximum potential. This is precisely what the Poles failed to do, choosing to fight instead along their extended border with the Reich. When war began, multiple German breakthroughs easily pierced the thinly held line which was far too long to be covered adequately by the Polish army. Time and again, members of the French mission observed Polish soldiers pinned down by continuous strafing and low level bombing. At the onset of battle, Polish reserve units were paralysed by German air attacks, which effectively prevented the timely mobilization and concentration of reinforcements. Similarly, these attacks severed Polish units from communication with their high command.

Gamelin feared that once battle was joined, he might be stripped of the ability to command, coordinate and concentrate large reserve units by a German airforce which the *Deuxième Bureau* had only recently assured him outnumbered the French air force eight to one. Similar problems could be expected due to the impact of German armored units which the same official source informed him would outnumber French totals by as much as three to one. This is why Gamelin sacrificed most of his reserves and thrust them into the front lines. There, he hoped, they would at least be able to take part in actively holding the line, rather than suffer the same paralysis which immobilized Polish reserves. With this in mind, the famous exchange between Gamelin and Winston Churchill on the morning of May 16th 1940 acquires new significance. As the *Panzers* raced toward the Channel, Churchill asked, "Où est la masse de manoeuvre?" (Where is the strategic reserve?). To which Gamelin curtly replied, "There are none." Churchill voiced the confusion which many historians have experienced when considering Gamelin's apparent incompetence in failing to provide such a crucial element for the defense of France.

> I was dumbfounded. What were we to think of the great French army and its highest chiefs? It had never occurred to me that any commanders having to defend five hundred miles of engaged front would have left themselves unprovided with a mass of maneuver. I admit this was one of the greatest surprises I have had in my life.[116]

Churchill could not have known that French strategic planning had wagered everything on meeting the German army in Belgium and fighting it to a standstill. Gamelin's hope to saturate the battlefields until at least 1941 when buildup of Allied forces would allow for an offensive against Germany, would not be realised. Instead, his guess proved incorrect and France was forced to witness its best forces cut off by a German attack in the center of the line opposite the Ardennes forest. This was not a tragic oversight on the part of the French high command, but rather a deliberate, albeit risky, redeployment of forces specifically intended to solve the problems which had surfaced during the Polish campaign. In Gamelin's mind it was a calculated gamble intended to strengthen his front line, lend greater aid to Holland and avoid the devastating paralysis which plagued the Polish reserves in September 1939.

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[116] Winston Churchill, *The Second World War*, vol. 2: *Their Finest Hour* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1949), 47. For his part, Gamelin denied saying "There are none" in response to Churchill's question. Rather, he claimed to have stated, "There are no longer any," suggesting that he had not neglected to provide reserves, but that the speed of German success had already depleted those he had put in place. Paul Reynaud, *In the Thick of the Fight* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1955), 326n1. Alistair Horne observed that while the absence of a strategic reserve caught Churchill by surprise, the most alarming aspect of this exchange was not Gamelin's revelation but rather the "appalling gap in liaison existing between the two Allies." Horne. *To Lose a Battle*, 343.

6 – The Problem of Limited Resources

In such ways, Gamelin had definitively broken away from French military doctrine and risked an encounter battle in Belgium while depriving France of strong reserve forces in case of breakthrough. In his mind, the new form of warfare used by Germany called for innovative solutions. He knew that when the tide broke, and the time arrived to enact the long-awaited French drive into Belgium, time would be of the essence. The 1st , 7th and 9th armies (alongside the B.E.F.) intended for this dash would need to waste no time in setting up positions in support of the Belgian divisions whose addition to the allied cause Gamelin was so eager to recruit. This explains the number of rash mobilizations which shook up the French army from October 1939 to May 1940. The most famous of these took place following the so-called "Mechelen Incident" when plans for the Nazi invasion of Western Europe, *Fall Gelb*, were captured by Belgian military police from the contents of a downed surveillance plane. During this and other false alarms (notably those of January 15th and April 11th), Gamelin tipped his hand to the German intelligence bureau (OKH), signaling his intention to rush several army groups into Belgium at the onset of hostilities. The advantages offered to German strategists in receiving this information cannot be overstated. "By the spring of 1940," wrote Heinz Guderian, leader of the XIX army corps:

> We Germans had gained a clear picture of the enemy's dispositions…from their order of battle, it was plain that the enemy expected the Germans to attempt the Schlieffen Plan again and that they intended to bring the bulk of the

> allied armies against the anticipated out-flanking through Holland and Belgium…A sufficient safeguard of the hinge of their proposed advance into Belgium by reserve units – in the areas, say, of Charleville and Verdun – was not apparent. It seemed that the French high command did not regard any alternative to the old Schlieffen Plan as even conceivable.[117]

Despite the danger inherent in repeatedly showing the enemy the direction of one's strategic plans, Gamelin felt obliged to waste no time in preparing to cross the Belgian border immediately following the first signs of German attack. In his estimation, events in Poland had shown how difficult it could be to move armies and reinforcements to their intended area of deployment once German aerial attacks began in earnest. Gamelin's plan was to move into Belgium without delay, believing that an unhesitating sense of purpose was worth more than keeping his plans absolutely secret from the enemy at all costs. His Commander of the Northeast Front, General Georges, voiced his concern during one such false alarm. Gamelin rebuked him saying, "I have taken a position. I cannot go back on it. You have to know what you want. Otherwise you can't wage war."[118].

Doubt concerning the ability of reserve units to reach the front lines unmolested by the German air force was not the only reason behind Gamelin's decision to commit the bulk of his strategic reserve before the battle had begun. Also weighing heavily on his mind was the method in which the Germans had used their tank forces in Poland. Unprecedented concentration of armor was reported as characteristic of the new German method of war. Particularly noteworthy, Armengaud claimed in his September 26th report, was the pattern of encirclement which often

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[117] Heinz Guderian, *Panzer Leader* (London: Penguin, 2009), 96-7.
[118] Gamelin, *Servir III*, 157-8.

followed the initial breakthrough by *Panzer* units. Whenever Polish units began to retreat, they were pursued by German infantry engaging them, slowing their progress. Simultaneously, armored units were sent to outstrip the retreating Poles and cut them off from supply. Armengaud observed this same tactic used repeatedly and almost always successfully.[119]

Thus, the news from Poland presented Gamelin with an additional reason to deplete his reserves and incorporate them into the front lines before battle was actually joined. Lessons from Poland had shown the vital importance of preventing German breakthrough anywhere along France's 680 km of continuous front. While this would be true in any war, during any era, it was of paramount importance after the Polish conflict, when motorised/mechanised exploitation of any gap in the line went far beyond anything seen before in the history of warfare. If reserves could be expected to be pinned down and cut off by aerial interdiction, Gamelin thought it wiser to throw them into the initial confrontation where they could at least make their presence felt. His goal was to "saturate" the battlefield where he expected the main German attack to take place with soldiers and equipment. He wrote:

> In a closed battlefield, a confined space, the French and German armies would very soon be able to saturate the terrain. Now the experience of the last war shows that if empty spaces initially allowed maneuver, the saturation of fronts rapidly led to a balance of forces which could only be broken after a painful attrition of German forces.[120]

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[119] Armengaud, 313.

[120] Nicole Jordan, *The Popular Front and Central Europe: The Dilemmas of French Impotence, 1918-1940* (Cambridge, Cambridge U.P., 1992), 81.

Gamelin's view of modern war resembled a "mechanised Battle of the Somme,"[121] a static clash of men and machines without significant movement. In such an environment, a point of "saturation" is eventually reached where additional forces are irrelevant - they simply cannot fit onto the field of battle.

Thus, if the Germans were expected to use unheard-of concentrations of armor to effect a breakthrough in the front line, Gamelin had another good reason for solidifying that front line to its maximum potential in order to meet the original onslaught head on and, hopefully, blunt its advance. As Armengaud warned Gamelin on October 3rd 1939, "if a battle on the borders was lost due to a German breakthrough, through which the enemy sent the bulk of their armored divisions, preceded by their air force, the battle of France would be irredeemably lost."[122] Gamelin tried to ensure that France would survive the opening round of hostilities by flooding the expected Belgian battlefield with enough men and materiel to create the kind of stalemate seen during the First World War.

How confident could Gamelin feel about his chances of holding his newly reinforced line against the new German *Blitzkrieg* tactics? It bears repeating that Gamelin's own post-war estimates for the number of German tanks used in *Fall Gelb* was set in his memoirs between 4000 and 5000. The worst case scenario envisioned by the *Deuxième Bureau* raised that number to 10 000. Gamelin's sense of France's military inferiority to the Reich was exacerbated by his intimate knowledge of material shortfalls within the French army. The brief and half-hearted French incursion into the Saar in September 1939 gave ample indication of France's lack of

[121] Julian Jackson, *The Fall of France*, 11.
[122] Armengaud, 213.

preparation for an extended conflict. Tanks in General Réquin's 4th Army used up one third of their ammunition stockpile during this very limited engagement, despite firing no more than thirty rounds per tank.[123] Things did not improve in the months that followed as bottlenecks in industrial production due to shortages in manpower and machine tools persisted. If the French army found itself forced to fight in January, during the Mechelen alarm for instance, most artillery pieces (75mm cannons, 105s and 47mm anti-tank guns) would have stopped firing after two months at a projected firing rate of 3 500 000 shells per month.[124]

Such deficiencies in the equipment used by the French military were soon addressed. Subsequent to the Polish surrender – and only then – Gamelin embarked on fundamental changes to the composition of the army. Chief among these was the rapid establishment of heavy armored divisions. As early as Dec. 6th, General Billotte was urging the high command to oversee the formation of such divisions as an effective counter-punch to the power of the German *Panzerdivisionen.*[125] Martin Alexander has argued that Gamelin shared these views and had to fight the resistance of the Conseil Supérieur de la Guerre in order to create France's only large armored unit prior to 1939, the experimental heavy tank division. Alexander concludes that "Gamelin was undoubtedly one of the French Generals most favorably disposed to the offensive organization of the army through the use of mechanical power." and labored to convince the civilian government of the merits of armored divisions.[126] Certainly mechanization of the French land forces did benefit from the efforts of a small number of champions during the interwar period. In 1922, General Estienne wrote of the tank as "an independent weapon, which

[123] Minart. *P.C. Vincennes: Secteur 4, vol.1,* 64.
[124] Ibid.
[125] Frieser, 262.
[126] Alexander, pp. 122-123, 201-202.

admirably complemented the airplane."[127] General Doumenc, Gamelin's future Chief of Staff, encouraged the creation of mixed armored divisions as early as 1928. De Gaulle famously promoted the development of large armored formations in his study, *Vers L'Armée de Métier* (1934). General Héring was the only member of the C.S.G. to recommend organizing armored divisions as independent units, possessing their own artillery, communications, supply, air defense and maintenance support.[128] It is inaccurate however, to include Gamelin among this group of forward thinking military minds who were able to grasp the potential of armored divisions *before* they were put to the test for the first time on a large scale in Poland.[129] Prior to this display, Gamelin had a very flawed concept of the use of massed armor on the battlefield. He never envisioned large tank formations as capable of producing decisive operational results on their own. Rather, he viewed them as mobile firepower, to be used in keeping with the tenets of the methodical battle.[130] He spoke repeatedly of his opinions on these matters before the outbreak of war. In so doing, he displayed obvious skepticism for the potential of massed tanks as a means to re-establish strategic mobility to the battlefield. Shortly before the Polish campaign, Gamelin replied testily to General Flavigny's request for the immediate formation of a third *Division Légère Mécanique* (DLM). "You're annoying me (*vous m'embettez*) with your DLMs. There are already two in place. That's more than we need. In any event, there wouldn't

[127] Henri Michel, 215.

[128] Doughty, *The Seeds of Disaster*, 166.

[129] The very notion of large armored formations, and especially of de Gaulle's concept of a professional armored core to the army, was rejected by most in France's civilian leadership as it went against the republican notion of the *nation in arms*, the belief in the citizen soldier as the backbone of the nation's defense. See Robert Allan Doughty. "De Gaulle's Concept of a Mobile, Professional Army: Genesis of French Defeat?", 24.

[130] In this, Gamelin was not alone. As late as 1938, maneuvers in the Franche-Comté, led by General Prioux, come to the firm conclusion that armor was incapable of properly surveying the surrounding landscape and, as a result, could not be counted on for breakthrough operations unless the defensive system facing it had already been disorganized by other means. See Henri Michel, *Le Procès de Riom,* 214.

be enough room between the Maginot Line and the sea to maneuver them."[131] Later, challenged by the Conseil Supérieur de la Défence Nationale (CSDN) about the discrepancy between France's three armored divisions versus the nine reported German ones, he exclaimed: "It isn't because the Germans are committing an enormous error that we should emulate them! You understand that there will never exist a battlefield vast enough to permit the deployment of several divisions like those you are proposing."[132] In his towering work, *Les Français de l'An '40*, Crémieux-Brilhac reached the conclusion that "For France's inability to properly provide itself with armor, General Gamelin bears the decisive responsibility."[133] By this, Crémieux-Brilhac refers not to the number or quality of French tanks, which in both cases exceeded their German counterparts. Rather, he is speaking of the inability of the French high command to mould its armored vehicles into effective divisions capable of fighting a modern, mobile war. Gamelin's own comments on the unwieldiness of massed armour lends considerable weight to this argument. Gamelin's statements point to his conclusion, prior to September 1939, that tanks could not be used, without supporting units, to breach a continuous front like the one he had established on France's Northeast Front.

[131] Gamelin ordered a study in 1937 on the potential of an all-heavy tank division. General Martin, inspector of tanks, came to the conclusion that unaided, tanks could not reliably advance more than 1500-2000 meters. Mixed groups including infantry, artillery or aircraft would be required. After this, no further study was ordered by Gamelin in the C.S.G. By the start of the war, the only concentration of armor in the French army was 162 heavy tanks (SOMUA and B1) grouped into four battalions. Clearly, it cannot by argued that Gamelin had developed any vision of massed armor whatsoever before September 1939. For a detailed look at the 1937 study, see Crémieux-Brilhac, *Les Français de l'An '40*, p.390. Also, Gamelin's views make de Gaulle's concepts of massed tanks seem strikingly astute by comparison. De Gaulle wrote that far from worrying about the *space* needed to operate large armored units, everything could be applied on a front ten times narrower than was the case with the 1914 infantry division. De Gaulle, *Vers l'Armée de Métier,* 117.

[132] Le Goyet, 90.

[133] Crémieux-Brilhac, 383.

The Polish campaign however, decisively proved the value of armored divisions. It radically changed Gamelin's views on the matter and impressed upon him the error of his earlier notions concerning massed tank operations.[134] As a result, by early 1940, two new heavy armored divisions (with a third in assembly) and one new DLM were organized. The fact that these were thrown into battle in May 1940 after only a few months training and without committed air support speaks to the novelty of such ideas within the army. French armored units remained under-trained until the outbreak of hostilities. This had been a long standing problem of which Gamelin was well aware. The reason for this, again, was a lack of resources. Major exercises for large units were cancelled in 1937 and 1938 due to shortfalls in ammunition and equipment. These exercises would have been the only chance prior to the war for French Generals to practice large scale armored maneuvers and draw practical lessons from them. The absence of such experience does much to explain the poor performance of French armor in May 1940.[135]

In terms of anti-tank guns, the situation was even more alarming. The new 47 mm gun (an excellent weapon capable of penetrating the armor of any German tank) had, at the time of the Polish campaign, been distributed to only 16 out of 67 mobilized infantry divisions. Another 24 had been given 75mm batteries as an alternative. The remaining 27 divisions, more than a third of France's mobilized army, had to fend for themselves using the older 25mm gun which

[134] At the Vichy appointed Riom Trial in 1942, Gamelin claimed to have been committed to the establishment of armored divisions as early as 1935 and would have done more in this regard were it not for the opposition he encountered from members of the civilian government. It is interesting to note that two of the foremost of these, Blum and Daladier also made similar claims. Daladier professed to have been convinced of the merits of armored divisions as of 1933. Blum claimed to have become a supporter of mechanization after 1935. See Henri Michel, *Le Procès de Riom,* 217.

[135] Henri Dutailly. Les *Problèmes de l'Armée de Terre Française, 1935-40 (*Paris: Service Historique de l'Armée, 1980), 227-44.

had little chance against the German Panzer IIIs and IVs. In addition, only 10 of the remaining divisions enjoyed the regulation number of these largely ineffective weapons.[136]

This insufficiency in the number of anti-tank weapons was all the more alarming when considered alongside General George's own study on the Polish campaign. Georges, who would direct the battle against Germany on France`s Northeast Front from May 10-19th, stressed the importance of the anti-tank gun in countering an enemy attempt at armored breakthrough. According to him, it was "the decisive weapon, provided it is well utilized, mobile and in great supply, and provided there is a vast store of extremely mobile reserves at the ready."[137] Gamelin too felt that the anti-tank gun "will halt the tank like the machine gun halted the infantry in 1914-18.[138]

However, Gamelin was also aware that he did not possess anywhere near the number of modern anti-tank weapons required to put Georges' plan into action. He understood the impossibility of French industry meeting such demands, and instead focused on available alternatives, like fortifications and artillery of all sizes and calibres. Given France's industrial limitations, improvisation and careful prioritizing became necessary.[139] "One must be ready,"

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[136] Minart II, p.70-5, 79-81.

[137] Thierry Sarmant, "Prélude à Juin 1940: Le Commandement Français et les enseignements de la Campagne de Pologne de Septembre 1939." *Guerres mondiales et conflits contemporains.* No. 192 (Decembre 1998), 122.

[138] Pierre Le Goyet. *Le mystère Gamelin.* (Paris : Presse de la Cité, 1975) 91.

[139] A detailed account of the effects of French economic troubles on industrial production in the 1930s is beyond the scope of this paper. However, it bears mentioning here that in his memoirs Gamelin blames France's late start in re-armament for shortages in key areas (mines, anti-aircraft guns, anti-tank guns, aircraft of all types). See *Servir I,* 213. He claims that France should have begun to re-arm as of 1933 or 1934 at the latest, when the threat posed by Hitler's rise to power first presented itself.

wrote General Bineau, chief of Gamelin's Grand Quartier Général, "to make arrows out of any piece of wood."[140]

Gamelin waited for the coming battle at the head of a disparate and uneven army, excellent in some areas and woefully under-equipped in others. This reality, coupled with the alarming news from Poland that a concentration of armor would in all likelihood be applied to specific spots along the French line of defence, incited Gamelin to gamble recklessly in the deployment of his army. He knew he did not have enough troops or enough modern equipment to be strong everywhere. General Ruby would later criticise Gamelin's strategic deployment of the French army, stating that the "hinge" at Sedan, coupling the army's northern mobile units with the static fortress divisions of the Maginot line, should have been solidified "*de façon indiscutable"*[141]. But for Gamelin, it was not possible to provide reinforcement for every sector sufficient to blunt the advance of a concentrated armored attack. Therefore, he carefully considered where he expected the focus of the German effort, the *Schwerpunkt*, to be, and committed the bulk of his best forces in that location. This, he decided, was to be Belgium.

[140] Sarmant, 122.

[141] Général Ruby, *Sédan, Terre d'Épreuve: Avec la IIeme Armée, mai-juin, 1940* Paris:Flamarion, 1948), 112.

7 - Waning Resolution

We have seen the process whereby Gamelin reorganised the strategic deployment of the French army in response to the lessons learned in Poland. By placing his reserves among the units already allocated for the forward defensive line in Belgium, he hoped to spare France the disastrous breakthroughs witnessed in the east. But despite his re-deployment of the French northern armies, Gamelin remained deeply insecure about his ability to successfully resist a large scale German invasion conducted on the Polish model. Throughout the eight month *Phoney War,* Gamelin experienced a growing sense of defeatism that found expression in a thinly disguised effort to distance himself from the outcome of the upcoming battle. Any study of this process must begin with an analysis of his reconstitution of the French High Command.

Until January 1940, the Grand Quartier Général was located at La Ferté-sous-Jouarre, under the joint command of Gamelin, as Commander-in-Chief of Land Forces and General Georges, as Commander of the Northeast Theatre of Operations. On January 18th, there took place a fundamental reorganization of this command structure. The G.Q.G. now reported solely to Gamelin and was located thirty kilometers from La Ferté in Montry. General Georges, promoted to Commander-in-Chief of the Northeast Front, would have his own HQ staff which would report to the G.Q.G.

Both HQs would have their own detachments of three of the four "bureaux"[142]. Henri Gauché, chief of the *Deuxième Bureau*, described the inconveniences suffered by his staff as a result of the new command structure. Each morning, an officer would be sent to make the thirty kilometer trip from La Ferté to Montry. Late at night, the officer returned with important documents compiled by the branch at Montry. Each of these needed to be studied and re-approved by the *Deuxième Bureau* at La Ferté before it was distributed to its intended recipients. The loss of time and duplication of effort in each day's work is striking in its obvious inefficiency. Moreover, two hours were spent in travel time between the two branches of the bureau every time the Chiefs-of-Staff (General Gauché and Commander Baril) required a personal meeting, which took place frequently.[143]

Gamelin's explanation for the reorganization of the French command structure in December-January 1939-40 is rambling and unclear. An entire chapter on the subject within his memoirs spans nearly forty pages and yet offers no direct statement of purpose in undertaking such an unprecedented restructuring. Allegedly, the move was in part designed to allow Gamelin the chance to personally take over the strategic command of France's multiple "theatres of command." These included the Northeast Front, the Southeast Front, North Africa and the Levant. In so doing, he claimed to be relieving Prime Minister Daladier from many of his more

[142] The French army`s "bureaux" or *offices* consisted of the 1ère bureau (Organization), 2ème bureau (Renseignments), 3ème bureau (Operations) and 4ème bureau (Transports). The 4ème bureau was considered indivisible due to logistical responsibilities which spanned the entire armed forces. Of the four bureaux, it was the only one that remained fully headquartered at La Ferté, under the command of General Doumenc.

[143] Gauché, 201. Douglas Porch has conducted research demonstrating how the decentralization of the G.Q.G. had the effect of "preventing intelligence from speaking with a common voice and allowed preconceptions and fears...to substitute for a reasoned study of the facts." Porch, *The French Secret Services.* (Oxford, Oxford U.P., 1997), 160. This provides another possible reason for the tendency to exaggerate the extent of German re-armament throughout the Phoney War.

burdensome tasks. Other than this, Gamelin offers no direct comment on the advantages to be gained by such a shuffling of command structures. He does, however, suggest an underlying justification in what he perceived as General George's political untrustworthiness. In this opinion, both Gamelin and Daladier were in perfect agreement. In fact, Daladier was extremely sceptical about George's military competence and political reliability. "I wouldn't wish to confide in him…since he belongs to the *coterie,* as you know. He doesn't possess your [Gamelin's] serenity and independent spirit. Also, I don't have confidence in his military talents….[W]hat would you think about choosing General Billotte instead of Georges?"[144] In matters of officer selection and promotion, Daladier wished to marginalize Georges as much as possible. Gamelin writes, "[Daladier] wanted to see me maintain control over personnel to ensure that this responsibility would not fall into the hands of General Georges, whom he still suspected of belonging to a hostile political clan."[145]

Gamelin's lengthy apology for the G.Q.G.'s reorganization presents very little concrete evidence of his true motivations. Reading his explanation evokes the same confusion and exasperation expressed by French historian and Resistance leader, Marc Bloch:

> When a division of functions had been arranged between these last two - or, in ordinary human terms between General Georges and General Gamelin - I was once present at a lecture staged by GHQ with the object of explaining the new organization. The speaker made himself as clear as he knew how. I was not, however, the only one there who entirely failed to get any clear cut idea of what he was trying to bring home to us. There was confusion and over lapping at every turn.[146]

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[144]Gamelin, *Servir I,* 61-62.
[145]Ibid., 68.
[146]Bloch,97.

It is difficult to find any approving voices among those who witnessed the reshuffling first-hand. In General Georges' opinion, the reorganization of the high command was a disaster. The effort would require the passing of at least two months, he believed, before normal operations could resume. If a German attack took place during this time, "we would be exposed to the worst dangers."[147] Gamelin's successor as Commander-in-Chief of Land Forces, Maxime Weygand, held a similar opinion. "Such a clumsy organization would inevitably become, in time of war, the source of great difficulties and serious consequences.[148]

The question then is why did Gamelin embark on a reorganization of the chain of command which baffled everyone, and which received the opprobrium of the vast majority of his most highly placed subordinates? Was he alone able to glean benefits from this plan which has managed to elude every other observer (military or academic) over the last 70 years? While Gamelin has been harshly criticised for his military/strategic thinking, it has nevertheless been the general consensus of historians that he was a competent bureaucrat, a capable administrator, if not an inspiring leader of men. Martin Alexander defined his study of Gamelin as an endeavor "to focus attention...on Gamelin's positive contribution to French national security and political-military cooperation."[149] According to this study, Gamelin used his gifts as conciliator to "eradicate the confrontational atmosphere that [his predecessor] Weygand bequeathed... in 1935-36."[150] Similarly, R.J. Young, while not as devoted to the rehabilitation of Gamelin's reputation, nevertheless praises Gamelin's talent for providing "a cheery word of compromise" in his

[147] Villelume, 151.
[148] Weygand, 84.
[149] Alexander, 1.
[150] Ibid, 396.

relations both civilian and military.[151] Yet, even in this capacity of senior administrator in France's military bureaucracy, one must conclude that Gamelin failed miserably in unilaterally reshuffling the country's military command structure. In truth, Gamelin was not trying to improve the efficiency of the French command system. Rather, this was the start of a process of installing buffers between himself and the eventual conduct of the war. It was another example of what he referred to as "a smokescreen in case things go badly."[152] "The move into Belgium, it's all on you," Gamelin told Georges as French troops began pouring over the border on May 10th.[153] Such a comment failed to take into account Gamelin's central role in planning French strategy. Jacques Minart, Gamelin's own A.D.C. suspected "everything about the restructuring of the G.Q.G. had the effect of allowing the Commander-in-Chief to assign blame for any reverses to General Georges while allowing himself to take credit for any success."[154] Indeed, when the German armored divisions began pouring over the Meuse on May 12th, Gamelin pointed the finger to his beleaguered Commander-in-Chief of the Northeast Front. "Personally, I have no reserve forces," he replied to Lieutenant Col. Lanquetot, who noticed with outrage the absence of strong reserve forces able to counter the German breakthrough at Sedan. "All of our resources are in the hands of General Georges, who has full control over the Northeast Front."[155] As Weygand observed with characteristic asperity, "While [Gamelin] was the one to conceive

[151] Young, 181.
[152] Gamelin, *Servir I,* 272.
[153] Villelume 336.
[154] Minart I, 70.
[155] Le Goyet, 311.

the maneuver which led France to ruin, and who had ordered its execution, he nevertheless saw fit to announce that the resulting battle was, in fact, 'General Georges' battle'"[156].

Weygand had reason to cast doubt on the generalissimo's accountability. He knew Gamelin had already tried to resign his post twice.[157] On both occasions (the most recent taking place on April 12th, less than a month before the German invasion), political allies convinced him to stay at his post, but the reasons for these efforts at dissuasion remain unclear. Some[158] have pointed to Gamelin's fear that resignation would cause irreparable harm to the French army's reputation. Resignation by the army's Commander-in-Chief would indeed have attracted negative commentary at a time when morale needed to be maintained at the highest possible level. However, the fact that this was not the first time Gamelin had attempted to relinquish his command, coupled with the transparent transfer of responsibility onto the shoulders of his second in command, casts real doubt on Gamelin's desire to continue in his role as military chief. Moreover, General Doumenc, Chief of Staff of the Grand Quartier Général, wrote on March 13th about a meeting with Gamelin during which the *generalissimo* was unusually candid about his personal impressions.

> [Gamelin] told me, 'I'm handing in my resignation. I'll be leaving early to write it down.' A little later, alone with me, he added: 'It's my duty! My resignation will be a relief to France. It is a service that I will provide for the country. After all, I'm leaving behind a magnificent army in excellent condition.' Later he repeated all of this to General Georges when Georges had arrived.[159]

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[156] Weygand, 84.

[157] Phillip Charles Farwell Bankwitz. *Maxime Weygand and Civil-Military Relations in Modern France* (Harvard: Harvard U.P. 1967), 146.

[158] See M. Alexander, *The Republic in Danger,* 380. Gamelin himself offers a similar explanation in *Servir II*, 280-281.

[159] Doumenc, 153.

This exchange highlights a crucial element in understanding the enigmatic Gamelin; that behind the imperturbable exterior, Gamelin was a man of undulating emotional extremes which were manifested in alternating periods of extreme confidence and abject despair.[160] This tendency was displayed by the transformation of Gamelin's self-pitying attempts to resign in March/April into the supreme confidence he seemed to enjoy only a few weeks later on the day of the German attack. The morning of May 10th saw Gamelin in the brightest spirits, certain that he had guessed correctly and that the Germans were, in fact, engaged in a repetition of the 1914 Schlieffen Plan through Belgium. "If you had seen," wrote Paul Reynaud, the Third Republic's last Prime Minister, "as I have done this morning, the broad smile of General Gamelin when he told me the direction of the enemy attack, you would feel no uneasiness."[161] This optimism did not last. Only two days later German armor began to cross the Meuse and Gamelin collapsed again into sullen inactivity. The following section will attempt to build the case showing how Gamelin's own words and actions, subsequent to the German attack on May 10th, are those of a leader who is already convinced he is beaten, and who has, to all intents and purposes, given up the fight.

[160] "At the top of the hierarchy, he appeared alone, inscrutable, inaccessible...according to some...behind the rigour, the self-control, hid a passionate soul, a great sensibility." Le Goyet, 228. Nicole Jordan has observed, "Beneath the General's oblique and taciturn public persona was a man of intense emotion sometimes bordering on panic." Jordan, *The Popular Front and Central Europe,* 54.

[161] Reynaud, 295.

8 – Despair

"You want to know how I imagine war in the near future?" Gamelin asked the novelist Jules Romains on December 16th, 1939.[162] "Well I think that a period of apparent immobility will be followed abruptly by an action into which every resource will be flung all at once...and in which the decision will come much more rapidly than people think....Yes, it will be very rapid - and terrible." These words are particularly striking considering that Gamelin foresaw French victory being possible only after a long period spent accumulating Allied resources for an eventual offensive into German territory in 1941 or 1942.[163] In confessing to Romains that he imagined the outcome of the war to be *rapid* and *terrible,* Gamelin betrayed the extent of his growing pessimism concerning France's likelihood of winning a war with Germany.

This pessimism would have been fuelled in part, no doubt, by a number of French military exercises conducted prior to the war. These clearly demonstrated the awesome penetrative power of modern armored formations. The first such exercise took place in the spring of 1938 in the area around Sédan under General Prételat. The second occurred the following year around Nancy, led by General Réquin. In both cases the scenario in question was whether divisions of massed armor, advancing through the Ardennes toward the center of the French line, would have a chance at creating a breakthrough. In both exercises, the result was total French defeat. Gamelin makes mention of these wargames in his memoirs and would

[162] Jules Romains, *Seven Mysteries of Europe* (New York: Knopf, 1940), 73.

[163] In his deposition at the Riom trials on September 20th, 1940, Gamelin wrote, "I did not conceal that we could only obtain results against Germany at the price of a long war and that it would only be in 1941 or 1942 that we could take the offensive." Quoted in Nicole Jordan, *The Popular Front and Central Europe,* 295.

certainly have called them to mind in the days following May 12-13 as the *Panzers* succeeded in crossing the Meuse.[164] How then could France's leading soldier have failed to draw the important lesson from these early military exercises? In fact, before the Polish campaign Gamelin did not doubt the striking power of armored units, nor did he believe the Ardennes sector invulnerable to massive breakthrough operations. Rather, Gamelin's reaction to the war games of 1938 and 1939 was consistent with his long-standing conviction that armor by itself was incapable of exploiting such a breakthrough. That is, while he believed German *Panzerdivisionen* had the strength to create a breach somewhere in his line, Gamelin also considered a lengthy accumulation of infantry and artillery, along the lines of the methodical battle, necessary to transform the rupture into a decisive breakthrough. At this stage, before the war, he conceived of armored divisions as a kind of anti-siege weapon, a powerful force for counter-attack, especially in the opening phase of hostilities.[165] Therefore, he believed that even if the events depicted in the war games conducted by Prételat and Réquin were to come true, he would have time to rush re-enforcements to the area in time to prevent a collapse. Gamelin's great surprise from the Polish campaign was not the impact of German tanks in action, but rather the manner in which they threw themselves headlong into the breaches they had created, acting independently to exploit local breakthroughs.

Following the events in Poland, Gamelin believed he had provided sufficient counter-measures to this eventuality by the creation of three D.C.R.s (Division Cuirassée de Réserve),

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[164] Gamelin, *Servir II,* 402.

[165] R.J. Young. *In Command of France: French Foreign Policy and Military Planning 1933-1940* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1978), 227.

with a fourth nearing completion by the time of the German invasion. Their poor performance[166] and virtual annihilation restored France to the same scenario depicted in the war games of 1938 and 1939, without any remaining forces to stem the advance of German armor.

After May 12th, Gamelin's waning resolution collapsed into manifest defeatism. Although his lengthy memoirs aim to prove his unwavering *service* to the French republic, his readers are met with inconsistencies at every turn, which suggest the extent of the *generalissimo's* confusion and lack of direction during the last few painful days of his command. "I admit," Gamelin wrote after the war, "that I wasn't able to find the time to visit our northern front throughout the entire month of April." This conspicuous absence from the day to day activities of his army persisted into May, even after the German invasion had begun. He did address his troops on May 12th at ten in the morning, but from that day to the 17th, he was silent. He claims to have been preoccupied, at this crucial stage of the war, with events in Holland.[167] This is curious in the light of his description of the Breda Variant as an "hors d'oeuvre" which could in no way impact the general course of the battle. Why then did he devote his full attention to this appetizer instead of to the main course unravelling opposite the Ardennes? And if his attention was fully on matters taking place in Holland, why did he choose to absent himself from the only meeting called by the Dutch Queen Wilhelmina, before Holland's surrender? This

[166] The 1st, 2nd and 3rd D.C.R.s were largely irrelevant to the conduct of the battle. The 3rd was wasted by General Flavigny on May 14th, when he chose to spread his tanks in groups of three to bottleneck local crossroads instead of massing them for an attack. Few saw actual combat and were largely bypassed by the German armor swinging west toward the Channel coast. The 2nd D.C.R. was caught by surprise while unloading its tanks from railway transports. It too was bypassed and played no important role in the battle. The 1st entered into battle with its fuel trucks at the rear of the enormous column, with predictable results. The Fourth D.C.R. activated on May 11th under the command of Charles de Gaulle, made its presence felt on the 17th and 19th with two attacks in the area around Montcornet. These attacks, however, quickly ran out of steam due to a lack of aircraft support. Karl-Heinz Frieser's account of these actions are an excellent reference. See Frieser, 198-205, 264-65.

[167] Gamelin, *Servir I*, 335.

was an inter-allied meeting of the Comité de Guerre called by the Queen on May 15th[168]. No explanation for his absence is provided in Gamelin's memoirs, and it casts doubt on the General's claim to have been (overly) fixated on events in the Dutch lowlands.

Gamelin's record of involvement between May 12th and 17th is remarkably thin, in both tactical and strategic aspects of the battle. Such action consisted of limited requests for more British air support and minor directives to the air force and navy[169]. In any event, the Commander-in-Chief of the French land forces essentially withdrew from sight once the Meuse had been crossed and the battle took a decisive turn for the worse. Between September 3rd, 1939 and May 10th 1940, Gamelin sent Georges one hundred and forty general communications. Over the next nine days he sent none, despite his reservations about how Georges was handling the battle[170]. One observer watched him during this period, "serene in appearance, but giving way steadily to a creeping, deafening fear, isolating himself increasingly"[171]. On the 15th he contacted Daladier by phone to explain that he had no troops between Laon and Paris with which to contain the German breakthrough. Daladier cried out, "What I just heard would mean the end of the French army!" Gamelin replied curtly, "It is the end of the French army."[172] As one observer remarked, by the 16th he "wandered sad and detached, inspiring a profound pity, acting as though the battle was already lost."[173]

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[168] Le Goyet, 318-19.
[169] Villelume,343.
[170] Eliot A. Cohen and John Gooch. *Military Misfortunes: The Anatomy of Failure in War.* (London: Macmillan, 1990), 223.
[171] Minart II, 148.
[172] Julian Jackson, 9.
[173] Minart II, 163.

It was on this day when he, alongside Reynaud and Daladier, met with Winston Churchill at the Quai D'Orsay. Gamelin showed his guests a small map on which the breakthrough in the allied lines around Sedan was indicated in red ink. When Churchill inquired about the inevitable counterattack against the German "bulge", Gamelin's only response was, "inferiority of numbers, inferiority of equipment, inferiority of method" – and then a helpless shrug of his shoulders.[174] In this response we see the extent to which the Commander-in-Chief, bankrupt of any ideas to stem the tide of German armor, had resigned himself to defeat.

On the 17th, Gamelin composed his desperate eleventh hour *order of the day*. This document is curious for its near verbatim repetition of a passage from *Instruction sur l'Emploi Tactique des Grandes Unités*. This manual claims that in the event of armored breakthrough by enemy forces, bypassed soldiers were expected to hold their positions, "to stand and die rather than retreat....[E]ach defender must resist to the end and be killed rather than back away"[175] Gamelin deemed it "necessary to intervene due to various reports of indiscipline which had reached me from a collection of sources".[176] His message to the troops, issued at the height of the military crisis, demonstrates the extent of his detachment from the battle. Rather than drawing on any shared sense of patriotism, or anything at all which may have stirred the army on to greater efforts, Gamelin's words were instead inspired by the Ministry of Defence's operational manual. Most French officers would thus have recognised this source when Gamelin

[174] Churchill, 49.
[175] *Instructions* (1937), 116.
[176] Gamelin, *Servir III*, 412.

wrote, "any soldier who cannot advance must be killed on the spot rather than giving up the ground given to him to defend."[177]

Two days later (May 19th), Gamelin sat down to compose an update/explanation on the rapidly deteriorating military situation, addressed to Daladier as Minister of National Defence. As the battle raged, with the French armies in desperate need of focused leadership, Gamelin sat alone to write an enormous letter (complete with two annexes) on the battle as though it were already a historical event. In it, he laid blame on the morale of the soldiers, on communism in the ranks and on the nation's lack of preparation and commitment to war.[178] On the same day, Gamelin's liaison officer suggested replacing General Georges with General Huntziger, whose 2nd army had recovered well from its initial mauling, and was succeeding in preventing any widening of the breach around Sedan. Gamelin listened to the suggestion silently, then raised up his hands in a gesture signifying, "what difference would it make?"[179]

By the 19th, Gamelin's self-imposed removal from the conduct of the battle had so alarmed his subordinates that a number of them were spurred into action. General Doumenc, chief of the G.Q.G. in Montry was convinced that Gamelin should "faire acte de commande"[180].

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[177] Ibid.

[178] Ibid., 421-6. These fears were long-standing among many in the French military and civilian leadership. The questions of how many of France's soldiers were actually willing to fight had long haunted strategists and policy-makers of the Third Republic. Conscientious objection was seen as a growing threat to French defence. In this letter to Daladier, Gamelin is rehashing these same fears, blaming a pacifism born of various influences – communism, anarchism, defeatism – for what he perceived as the French soldiery's lack of reliability, particularly on the Meuse between May 12th-15th. Norman Ingram observes that conscientious objection "led to questioning the reliability of conscripts being called up to fight subsequent to being exposed to these influences." Norman Ingram "The Circulaire Chautemps, 1933: The Third Republic Discovers Conscientious Objection," *French Historical Studies*, 17:2 (1991): 403.

[179] Minart II, 197.

[180] Francois Delpla. *Papiers Secrets du General Doumenc: Un Autre Regard sur 39-40* (Paris: Olivier Orban, 1992), 248. Gamelin's only reference to this "acte de commande" is found in the opening pages of his

Doumenc telephoned the *generalissimo* and sent General Koeltz to pick him up by car. It was only after this effort by his subordinates to involve him directly in the battle that Gamelin sat down to write his *Instruction Secrète et Personelle no.12.* This was to be his final written command.

Much has been written about *Instruction no. 12*, but what is essentially important about this hastily written note, is that it had no basis in reality. While its content was theoretically sound, consisting of a plan to pinch off the German armored spearhead with simultaneous British and French attacks from both north and south, the resources for such an attack were clearly unavailable. Nowhere was the necessary equipment assembled and available. As Gamelin finished the *Instruction* with the words, "everything depends on the next few hours," it is unclear whether the General believed the instruction could actually have been acted upon. Certainly the situation maps on General George's walls, updated hourly, would have informed him that no such attack could be mounted according to the timescale he proposed. In any event, this letter was an anomaly in that it was the only *Instruction Personelle et Secrète* to be prepared by his own hand. The usual procedure was to have his personal staff prepare the directive and submit it to the G.Q.G.[181]

When he had finished this "acte de commande" requested by his subordinates, Gamelin placed the folded paper on a table near Georges. "I'm going back to Vincennes," he said, "you will read this after my departure."[182] This request constituted an inexplicable waste of time and

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memoirs where he writes, "On May 19th I had the clear impression that my intervention had become necessary." Gamelin, *Servir I*, 20. He makes no mention of Doumenc or Koeltz's participation in his account.

[181] Minart I, 213.

[182] Le Goyet, 341.

casts further doubt on Gamelin's sincerity in drafting *Instruction no. 12.* At that critical moment he left Georges to muddle through alone with his staff at La Ferté, unwilling to discuss his plan in any detail.[183]

Martin Alexander has defended Gamelin's aloofness during the battle, arguing that he wisely resisted "temptations to interfere and override his subordinate generals…for the first nine days of the battle for France."[184] Alexander states that any such interference "would have been akin to Hitler's incorrigible meddling in the minutiae of the eastern front battles of 1941-45." But as General Doumenc wrote in his diary, "Such a notion [that a Commander-in-Chief should avoid involving himself in the conduct of the battle] is entirely foreign to the accepted practice in our army."[185] Doumenc argues that French Commanders-in-Chief have always seen fit to take personal command at the key place of battle. "And the subordinates thus visited never dreamt of feeling themselves ruffled or humiliated" at the encroachment. Similarly, historians Eliot A. Cohen and John Gooch have observed, "Gamelin's inertia deprived his subordinates of the guidance they needed – a guidance that...the interwar regulations led them to expect."[186] Gamelin's absence from George's H.Q. in the crucial first days of the battle was therefore a personal decision which ran counter to established French military tradition.

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[183] Gamelin opens his memoirs by defending this *Instruction* to Georges. He claims "If I hadn't been relieved of my functions in the late afternoon of May 19th, I would have hoped to meet with General Georges on the morning of the 20th to familiarize myself with how he planned to execute my order." Gamelin *Servir I,* 15. This of course, would have meant another two hour round trip to Georges' headquarters. If everything was to "depend on the next few hours" as he claims in the *Instruction*, one can only wonder why he left La Ferté on the 19th asking his subordinate to delay reading his order until after his departure, rendering another meeting nearly a full day later necessary. Gamelin goes on: "Personally, I believe [Georges] should have made his way to the North on the 20th to personally watch over the development of the maneuver. This, in any case, is what I would have done." Considering Gamelin's conspicuous absence from command from May 12th to the 19th, this statement is at best doubtful.

[184] Alexander, 398.

[185] Delpla, 99-100.

[186] Cohen and Gooch, 221.

The record of Gamelin's conduct after May 12th clearly points to a leader who no longer seriously considered victory as a possible outcome to the battle at hand. Vincennes H.Q. was only informed of the seriousness of the German breakthrough at Sedan on the 15th.[187] After that point we see from Gamelin's own words and actions that his doubts and waning resolution on display since the end of the Polish campaign had turned into overt defeatism. Events in Poland had led Gamelin to accept a wildly risky gamble in sacrificing his reserves for a stronger front line. When this strategy failed, he ceased to act as Commander-in-Chief and marginalised himself, waiting impotently for what he saw as unavoidable defeat.

9 – Concluding Thoughts on Gamelin

A closer look at Gamelin's long service to the French army shows which attributes allowed him to reach such high rank and distinction. In his youth, he was singularly talented at quickly assessing a rapidly changing military situation and responding with a well-conceived solution from which he would not waver. Gamelin's steady rise through the ranks came in no small measure from the extraordinary impression this ability made upon his superiors. From St. Cyr to leading the French military mission in Brazil, to suppressing rebellion in the Levant, Gamelin never failed in demonstrating a subtle, adaptable intellect, high energy and quick, accurate appraisals of fluid military situations.

[187] Minart II, 148.

Assessments of Gamelin's soldierly talents between the 1890s and 1920s follow a distinct pattern. They serve to illuminate those attributes which served him in earning the approbation of his superiors. In 1899 General Lanrezac wrote of the then 27 year old Gamelin, "superior intelligence – quick and accurate judgment…ardent, upright, firm and decisive character."[188] In 1911, Joffre lamented the loss to his staff when Gamelin was given command of the 14th battalion of "chasseurs" in Grenoble: "[Gamelin] is noteworthy for his high culture, his judgment and his understanding of the most intricate military questions."[189] Joffre also made mention of Gamelin's "breadth of intelligence, the firmness and certainty of his convictions, the quickness and maturity of his conceptions."[190] This ability to form rapid assessments of military problems coupled with the decisiveness to act upon them promptly, characterised Gamelin's style of command. "If this is philosophy," *Time Magazine* published in a cover story on Gamelin in August 1939, "it is time all generals were philosophers."[191]

Since 1940 however, this intellectual prowess, so appreciated before the war, has been re-assessed and redefined in terms of an over-reflective tendency to see all sides of an argument and to act upon none. Defeat recast the pre-war image of Gamelin's contemplative acuity into one of bookish incompetence. Following the battle, Pertinax was quick to criticise the disgraced *generalissimo* as a serene and self-satisfied "military Buddha".[192] "It has become fashionable to accuse me of being a philosopher," wrote Gamelin in 1946.[193] Indeed, de Gaulle's portrayal of

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[188] Le Goyet, 17.
[189] Ibid, 20.
[190] Ibid, 36.
[191] No Author *Time Magazine* (Aug 14, 1939), 24.
[192] Pertinax, 34, 40 and 77.
[193] Gamelin, *Servir I,* 223.

Gamelin as a secluded scholar has, over the last seven decades, eclipsed his pre-war reputation as an intellectually gifted soldier and cunning strategist.

However, neither depiction of Gamelin is correct or complete. His talent for quick assessment of a military situation, which had been so appreciated by Joffre, was the same mechanism which convinced Gamelin of the desperate situation faced by France in the lead-up to war. It was this *firmness and certainty of his convictions*[194] which prompted him to embark on an extraordinarily risky forward defence into Belgium, and to effectively abandon the struggle once this great gamble had proven to be a calamitous mistake. Having thrown the dice and lost, he resigned himself completely to failure, as demonstrated in his behaviour from May 12th-19th. Historians have thus been faced with puzzling contradictions in their efforts to understand Gamelin's role in the Battle of France, resulting in decades of references to Gamelin's enigmatic nature.[195] In this vein, Thierry Sarmant wrote, "As for General Gamelin, silent and mysterious in all this affair, his feelings on the Polish campaign are not known."[196] The present work has endeavored to clarify this mystery alluded to by Sarmant and to demonstrate how Gamelin's "feelings" on the Polish campaign significantly contributed to the collapse of the French army in May 1940.

If historians have grappled with Gamelin's secretive persona over the years, it must be noted that they have been given less help than may have been hoped for by his own extensive writings. An elusive and selective rendition of facts and events characterise the writing style of

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[194] Le Goyet, 17.

[195] Consider the title of Le Goyet's *Le Mystère Gamelin* or that of Julian Jackson`s chapter "The Mysterious General Gamelin" in his larger work, *The Fall of France*.

[196] Sarmant, 124.

Gamelin's three-volume memoirs. In his enormous work, eighty pages are devoted to the Norwegian campaign, while only 60 are allotted to the Battle of France itself. When the author finally makes his way to the events of May 10th, 1940, after 1400 pages of text, he takes obvious strides to avoid the painful realities of his subject matter. In relating Prime Minister Reynaud's attempts to dismiss him just prior to the German invasion, Gamelin meanders through his memories of General Guillaumat, whose service in the First World War brought him into contact with a much younger Gamelin. "He always showed me great affection…he hugged me and said, 'All those who know your achievements hope that you stay in command of the French armies, especially if there is to be a storm.'"[197] This model of personal justification permeates Gamelin's memoirs. As a result, these texts have a tendency to gloss over information crucial to our understanding of May 1940, and elaborate instead on minutiae which serve to defend the ex-g*eneralissimo's* reputation.

A tendency to manipulate the narrative of his service to France obfuscates the real concepts and impressions which animated him during the crucial months of the *Phoney War*. Only through an analysis of his *actions* can we inform ourselves reliably on the true currents of his thoughts. And from late September to the eve of the German attack in the west, it was the Polish campaign which dominated his thoughts, dictated his strategy and prompted him to adapt radical solutions in an attempt to deal with what he increasingly saw as a desperate military situation.

[197]Gamelin*, Servir III*, 383.

The mystery of Gamelin is not really so mysterious when one considers that many of his most controversial decisions were taken in response to the Polish campaign. Historians have been too quick to dismiss his lack of strategic reserve with curt statements of incompetence. Often he has been criticized for failing to understand the nature of warfare as it existed in the late 1930s. Neither of these statements is true; they could not be true of a leader who had risen so high, so quickly and who had impressed his colleagues for so many years with the breadth of his knowledge and intellect. His fatal incorporation of France's strategic reserve into the front line was based on a rational appraisal of the experiences of the Polish army in the first few days of September, 1939. It grew out of faulty intelligence which had long convinced the French high command that German re-armament had reached an unrealistic level of development. Gamelin's aggressive forward defense was intended to counter the operational paralysis which the *Luftwaffe* had imposed upon the Polish army and its high command. It was an enormous gamble, a spectacular failure, but *not* the oversight that Winston Churchill had suspected. Having wagered France's fate on an attempt to saturate a limited battlefield in Belgium and grind the German armies to a halt, Gamelin had no answer for the breakthrough in the center of his line, opposite the Ardennes. Only then did his pessimism regarding France's potential to defend itself successfully give way to obvious despair and defeatism. After May 12th, his own words and actions point to a defeated leader, all too aware that he had staked his entire legacy on a losing hand. The Battle of France did not follow the now-familiar script of an aggressive Germany striking decisively against a hesitant and anachronistic French high command. Rather, it was Gamelin's own enormously aggressive strategy, informed by the most modern tactics used against his former Polish allies, which hastened France's shocking defeat.

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