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The Fatal Predominance of National Interests in the Defeat of the Western Allies in 1940

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Germany's remarkable victory in the West in May and June 1940 continues to fascinate historians. Overwhelming advantages in manpower, weapons and materiel have long been discounted as an explanation; and even the decisive effects of 'blitzkrieg' have been questioned. What does seem clear, however, is that the Wehrmacht benefited from surprise, a superior command system, and an aggressive, offensive spirit which permitted momentum to be maintained. But to account for the speed and completeness of the Allied collapse another consideration needs to be emphasised; namely the failure of Germany's opponents to subdue their divisive national interests before and during the crisis.

The Nazi regime was seen to pose a military threat to both eastern and western Europe from 1936. France reacted by forming defensive agreements with the Soviet Union, Poland and smaller powers in central and eastern Europe while also pressing on with the development of her Maginot Line fortifications. Britain began cautiously to re-arm but refused to confirm a continental commitment for her small and under-equipped Expeditionary Force. Belgium, troubled by acute internal friction between her Flemish and Walloon populations, found a solution (in March 1936) in the proclamation of her strict neutrality, entailing a new emphasis on national defence and the resistance to attack from any direction.

In the Spring and Summer of 1939 Britain and France made belated efforts to convert their common fears of Nazi aggression into a genuine political and military alliance, but suspicions of each other's reliability ware still evident. The addition of the Soviet Union as an unexpected ally of Nazi Germany and therefore another potential enemy, speedily followed by their joint dismemberment of Poland, left Anglo-French strategic assumptions in turmoil. In retrospect the months of 'Phoney War' between September 1939 and early May 1940 may appear to have given Britain, France and Belgium an ample 'breathing space' in which to concert their defensive alliance, but in reality the numerous (and soundly-based) scares of an imminent German offensive militated against calm forward planning and, in some respects, actually increased friction between the three likely allies - as also did restlessness in some French and British groups at the lack of military action which was surrendering all initiative to the enemy (or indeed enemies, since in some quarters there was a reckless willingness to take on the Soviet Union as well.

In these anxious months, France dominated the Continental aspect of the alliance with Britain in terms of divisions, the command arrangements and strategy but remained critically dependent on British political, economic and naval support.

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As their failure to give substantial aid to Poland in September 1939 indicated, Britain and France had agreed on an initial phase of largely passive defence in which to build up their forces and resist a German offensive before, eventually, launching a decisive counter-offensive. This was a hazardous and ill-defined strategy with which both parties soon became dissatisfied, contemplating astounding proposals to 'hot up' the war in the Baltic, Scandinavia and the Near East. France was not yet seriously disturbed by Britain's modest contribution to the joint air forces on the Continent, since neither partner wished to provoke Germany by a bombing offensive but she was disappointed by the slow build-up of the British Expeditionary Force from four divisions in September 1939 to only ten by May 1940. The B.E.F.'s commander, Lord Gort, was given a modest place in the Allied chain of command in the First Army, but he had the right of appeal to the British Government if unhappy with French decisions - a right which he exercised on 25th May to obtain permission to retreat to the Channel coast.

Neville Chamberlain's government had reluctantly accepted a very limited Continental commitment as late as February 1939, and had also reluctantly gone to war over the flagrant German attack on Poland. But throughout the months of Phoney War, he and most of his colleagues continued to hope that all-out war on the Western Front could be avoided and a negotiated peace achieved with a German leader other than Hitler. Despite frequent scares of imminent German attack in the West, based on excellent intelligence, there was the same complacency in the British Government, encouraged by the C.I.G.S., General Ironside, accompanied by a gross underestimation of Nazi operational capabilities: how otherwise can we explain the diversion of units destined for France to stand-by for legally dubious and strategically reckless operations in Norway? Belgium posed an intractable problem at the heart of Anglo-French strategy. Given the experience of 1914, Belgium seemed to provide a natural buffer against German aggression and an advanced air base for bombing the Ruhr. French leaders had taken her co-operation for granted until the declaration of neutrality in 1936, and even after that assumed that Belgium would fit in with French strategy. For her part, Belgium naturally hoped to escape invasion from any quarter and was understandably reluctant to take any steps which would provoke an attack. While King Leopold and his Defence Minister were sympathetic to Britain and inclined to take same risks to develop understanding with her and France, other ministers were distinctly opposed to any steps which might compromise their neutrality. French assumption that Belgium would gladly admit her frontier forces before a German invasion were shown to be deluded in the Mechelen-sur-Meuse Incident in January 1940 when two German officers carrying plans for an imminent invasion crash-landed and were captured. Thereafter only tentative, unsatisfactory liaison was possible through Anglo-French military attaches in Brussels, and through clandestine visits by British officers in mufti. Crucial aspects of Belgian military planning, such as use of particular roads and the state of defence works, remained unclear. This state of affairs would not have mattered so much had the French and British decided to remain in their defences along the frontier with Belgium. Quite the contrary, however, by the end of 1939 the French Commander-in-Chief, Maurice Gamelin, had decided to send the Allied advance guard, including the B.E.F., deep into Belgium to hold a line perhaps as far east as the Albert Canal but more likely that of the river Dyle. To this daring plan he later added the 'Breda Variant'; a drive into the southern Netherlands with the aim of drawing the latter into the alliance - though there was never any real prospect that the bulk of the Netherlands could be protected. British strategists, such as Ironside, and Gort's able Chief of Staff Pownall, were dubious

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about Gamelin's plan to abandon familiar defences and lines of communications for a hazardous advance into the territory of a reluctant ally, and probably facing attack from the Luftwaffe while on the move. But acquiesce they did, and with fatal consequences. Lord Gort, conscious that his modest military contingent gave him little room for manoeuvre, (in either sense), simply interjected an occasional *'d'accord'* in the intervals of Gamelin's verbose strategic analysis.

The German offensive, beginning on 10th May 1940, achieved surprise despite, or perhaps because of, the frequent false alarms which had so destabilised the frontier units. The Allied advance of their left-wing (French 7th Army) into Belgium and Holland, plus the gross underestimation of the speed and power of the German drive through the Ardennes and across the Meuse, immediately disrupted the allied command structure and sent shock waves to the British and French governments.

Within the five days (May 10th-15th) the Wehrmacht had achieved a decisive breakthrough which exposed both the weakness of the Allied command and communications and the fragility of the political alliance. General Billotte was given the near-impossible task of co-ordinating the French, British and Belgian Forces north of the Somme. By 15th May the leading Panzer divisions had penetrated the Meuse defences and broken through into open country; the Netherlands surrendered; and the French prime minister, Paul Reynaud, spoke openly of defeat. The French Government was quick to blame its co-belligerent Belgium for the impending disaster and, as the First Army Group began to retreat haphazardly from Belgium, demanded that the British should retreat south-west across the Somme. The crisis was reminiscent in same respects of those of August-September 1914 and March-April 1918, but in this case enemy pressure was greater in terms of the speed of the advance and devastating use of air power. It was sufficient to cause chaos in the allied military command and a loss of nerve in the disunited French Government. The alliance began to disintegrate in an atmosphere of bitter recrimination and 'buck passing'.

For many years the hapless Belgians bore the brunt of Anglo-French complaints, but historians, including myself, are now generally more sympathetic towards their conduct during their eighteen days at war. The main charges are as follows. Belgium ignored growing physical evidence and good intelligence of German intentions to attack her as part of a general Western offensive, and refused repeated requests, particularly from France, of closer military co-operation, before she was actually invaded. Thereafter, with her King as the actual Commander-in-Chief in the field, Belgium was a co-belligerent but never a full ally because she had the limited goal of defending her own territory.

Her Army was more concerned to retreat towards the defence lines around Antwerp and Ghent rather than a determined defence in the Ardennes. French and British generals could not issue direct orders to a foreign king. Most significantly, after the single tragi-comic attempt to hold an allied conference at Ypres on 21st May to concert a counter-attack under the new Allied commander, Weygand, the remaining Belgian divisions were driven northwards so any possibility that they would fight on French soil disappeared. The most serious charge, however, particularly on the British side, was that King Leopold, having refused to be evacuated to England, without warning, suddenly took his country out of the war on the morning of 28th May, thus jeopardising the B.E.F. 's evacuation from the Channel ports. While few historians would contend that the Belgian resistance was heroic, it now

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seems clear that their better equipped divisions gave a good account of themselves; that from about 24th May they were subjected to intense attack and were almost entirely lacking in air cover; and from their viewpoint it was the British and French who had retreated precipitately leaving them in the lurch. It is certainly the case that Lord Gort's main headquarters had ample advance notice of the impending ceasefire, but he had put himself out of touch at an advanced command post. Whether the Belgian Government and King - by no means in accord before or during the war - should have behaved differently, in the nation's own interest, remains an open question, particularly as regards the King's decision to remain with his people at the risk of appearing to collaborate with the occupying forces. His ministers who hastily fled to France and later escaped to England, do not emerge in a heroic light.

The crisis in mid-May 1940 presented Britain with a very painful dilemma in deciding between the demands of national self-interest, which might well amount to the issue of national survival as an independent state and centre of a world-wide empire, and the pressures to continue as a loyal ally, aiming to keep at least part of metropolitan France in the war with all the assets that would bring. These included the greater part of the French coastline in friendly control; a powerful navy; and her strategically important empire in north Africa, the Middle East and the Far East.

What must surely impress us most in hindsight is the new Prime Minister, Winston Churchill's, tremendous emotional commitment to France and his instinctive feeling that the alliance must be maintained at almost any risk to Britain's own ability to defend herself. The vital need to preserve the alliance was not so evident to some of Reynaud's main enemies in France. Thus, from the outset, Churchill made heroic efforts to rally Reynaud and preserve a belligerent French government. He ordered Gort to conform to French military demands to retreat away from the Channel toast; he promised (and delivered) a second B.E.F. in the North West of France with a build-up in prospect of holding a 'Breton redoubt'; and above all, he was willing to commit additional fighter squadrons to the Continent. As a very curious postscript, when Reynaud was on the brink of defeat and replacement by a defeatist government headed by Petain, Weygand and Laval, Churchill was a party to the quixotic offer of union between the two nations.

Churchill successfully resisted the siren voices of colleagues, such as Lord Halifax, who would have followed the French example in seeking a negotiated peace, but failed in his herculean efforts to keep France in the war. First Lord Gort persuaded the Government that if the B.E.F. was not allowed to embark from the Channel Ports it would be engulfed in the French debacle. This was reluctantly accepted on 26th May and the 'miracle' of Dunkirk began. For the large contingent of French soldiers evacuated this was an opportunity to continue the war on French soil, but for the British it was a vital preliminary step towards home defence against invasion. Secondly, persuaded by Air Marshal Dowding, Chief of Fighter Command, that to sacrifice more squadrons in France would jeopardise the prospects of withstanding the Luftwaffe, Churchill bluntly refused Weygand's demands for all-out air support on 11th June. Since Weygand declared Paris an open city the following day, the British were surely justified in believing that the French political will to continue the war could not be relied upon. Lastly, in mid-June the British Government, again reluctantly, accepted General Alan Brooke's advice, shortly after arriving in Normandy as commander of the Second B.E.F., that his forces must be evacuated immediately to avoid being caught up in

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the French collapse. The immediate consequences of the allied collapse for their respective nations may be briefly summarised. Belgium experienced a Nazi occupation, relatively moderate at first, but increasingly oppressive in terms of anti-semitism and harsh exploitation of domestic labour and resources. King Leopold, striving through internal exile, to mitigate the effects of occupation, was accused of collaboration, imprisoned in Germany and after his country was liberated by the allies (mainly British and Canadians) felt obliged to abdicate. France accepted a humiliating defeat due to a collapse of political will when her armies were fighting well - perhaps better than in the first phase before 5th June - and resistance could have been prolonged. Until November 1942 the southern half of France, governed from Vichy, enjoyed nominal independence, but thereafter the heavy burdens of Nazi occupation were experienced everywhere. Bitter disputes over the initial military failure in May, but even more intensely over the Vichy regime, resistance and collaboration have continued to this day, thus obscuring the fact that in purely military terms the French did better after they had been shorn of allies - rather as some Britons, including the King, rejoiced at their liberation from entangling alliances at Dunkirk.

From the British perspective, the reality and the myths surrounding the Dunkirk evacuation have become completely dominant, thus obscuring awkward questions about the deeper reasons for the allied defeat. 'Dunkirk', for Britain, signified the escape of the bulk of the Army, while the Battle of Britain which followed, though by no means as quickly as expected, went far to ensure that she would escape enemy occupation. France's surrender, and Hitler's gigantic strategic errors, ensured that Britain would not have to fight another protracted all-out war on the Continent, and would at least emerge on the winning side. But the longer-term consequences were years of economic hardship, loss of empire and a marked decline in national prestige.

The allied defeat in the West in 1940 is a tempting arena for historians who like to pose the counter-factual question 'what if?' and imagine the consequences if particular decisions or events had been altered. What would have happened, for example, had France and Britain attacked in the West in September 1939 while Poland was still in the war; what if Britain had insisted on sticking to their frontier defences on which they, and the French, had expended so much effort; and what if Gamelin had kept his considerable armoured forces concentrated, thus enabling him to sever the vulnerable enemy lines of communication or 'Panzer corridor' to the Channel Coast?

These and other counter-factuals can be debated endlessly, but this paper raises other more significant questions about inter-national co-operation in face of a manifest threat by a unified enemy, inspired by nationalist fervour and ambition. What, for example, would have happened if Britain had made an earlier commitment of her forces to the Continent and had been less bent on appeasing Hitler in 1938? Would the Czechs then have resisted Nazi invasion at the cast of considerable disruption of the latter's preparations for a full-scale war? Even as late as the Mechelen incident in January 1940, would Belgian willingness to compromise on strict neutrality in favour of closer co-operation with Britain and France have permitted a more prolonged defence of her territory, thus upsetting the German advance along the Channel coast and making the Panzer corridor to the coast even more vulnerable? Over all, would the willingness of France, Britain and Belgium, in that order of importance, to make sacrifices in national interests in order to secure a genuine alliance with a fully worked out strategy and an integrated command and staff system been able to withstand the German

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attack and deliver a significant blow to Nazi prestige? The answer must surely be positive since with passing time the completeness of the German victory appears to be ever more strange and remarkable. But revision can only be pushed so far: national interests were far too powerful, even in the face of the growing Nazi threat, for a genuine coalition to be formed. Only spectacular errors in German grand strategy permitted the disunited and defeated nations in the campaigns of 1939-1941 to make some sort of recovery, mainly thanks to the overwhelming power of the United States and the Soviet Union.

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