



World War II – 1939 - 1945: A Reassessment of the Preparedness of Britain and France at the Eve of the War.

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Date of Submission: 17-09-2024

24

Date of Acceptance: 02-10-20

ABSTRACT

The study is a retrospect of the World War II with a view to ascertain whether the then super powers were adequately prepared for the outbreak of the war as from the mid-1939. Though to most observers, the Second World War was inevitable and obvious, however, to many people particularly in Britain, there were many reasons for doubt. Consequently, some of the world powers went into the war unprepared. The two countries covered in the study are the British and France. This work to its specific objective will contribute to the existing literature on the Second World War by investigating and conclude on whether Britain and France were well prepared to confront a possible threat from an external military invader like Germany as from 1939.

I. Introduction

II.

The Second World War is regarded as history's largest and the most significant armed conflict in terms of weapons, equipment, strategies and tactics deployed by both sides in the actual combat as well as the magnitude of destruction that occurred. It is generally referred to as a world war because nearly all the coun-

tries in the world were involved either militarily, politically, socially or economically.¹ The war affected the African continent and Nigeria in particular in two ways. Militarily, the war witnessed an increase in the number of men from Nigeria and other parts of Africa being drafted to serve as soldiers to fight in places in the Southeast Asia like Burma. Economically, the financial burden of the war was partly transferred by the European powers to some of their colonies in Africa in the form of food supplies and other essential raw materials.²

On the whole, the war pitched the major world super powers into the two opposing camps of the axis and the allied powers with the rest of the world taking sides with either of the two. The term axis was first used by Benito Mussolini of Italy to describe the alliance that was entered between her country and Germany in 1936 known as the friend treaty or the Rome-Germany Axis. The word was used as a pointer to the straight geographical line between the capital cities of Rome and Berlin and was a direct reference to the pact signed between the two countries.³ The axis powers comprised of a number of countries with the prominent ones being Germany, Italy and Japan. Other countries that were part of the pact



were Bulgaria and Romania, both of which later joined the allied powers before the end of the war. At the eve of the war, Russia was regarded as a member of the axis due to the friendly relationship that existed between her and Germany. However, as noted below, this relationship later went sour following the surprise attack launched on Russia by Germany during the course of the war.⁴

The allied power on the other hand was formed as a defence to the axis powers. The original members of the allied were Great Britain, Poland and France. At the early stage of the war, the United States of America was neutral unit until the Japanese attacked her naval base at Pearl Harbor Hawaii. Other countries that participated on the side of the allied powers were China, Australia, New Zealand, Canada, Netherland, Yugoslavia, Belgium, and Greece.⁵

Preparation for the war

Available evidence revealed that though a number of conflicts had begun much earlier to signal a possible outbreak of war, yet when it eventually broke out, it took most of the countries of the world by surprise as some of them were cut on unaware while others were out-rightly not prepared for it. Great Britain for instance was completely not prepared while France though expected the war but was cut unaware in the sense that the Germans penetrated France through an unexpected route. Some of the cause of the war were, the fallout of the treaty of Versailles, the desire by the Japanese for new resources through the acquisition of colonies, the emergence of Fascism which brought with it a number of world dictators like Mussolini of Italy and party Hitler of Germany.⁶ Others were the emergence of Hitler and the Nazi party as well as the great depression etc.⁷ However, the cause of the World War I is outside the scope of this study and do not require unnecessary reiteration here unless wherever relevant.

BRITAIN

How Prepared were the British

The military situation in Britain at the beginning of the war could serve as a valid argument to buttress

the fact that the country was only partially prepared for war. One of such situation was on the aspect of British military intelligence gathering system. Historically, the British military was noted for her effective and excellent intelligence mechanism which was put in place to give early alert on possible enemy threat. For example, in the early 18th century, the Duke of Marlborough had set up special network system agent which helped to keep the Duke informed about the French military plans and also to deceive French military about her military strategies and tactics of the Duke.⁸ Again, in the late 1800s, the Duke of Wellington had made use of effective intelligence against Napoleon.⁹ However, these British intelligence services were neglected in the years that followed, to the extent that little or no attention was devoted to the development of military intelligence. The famous British Field Marshal Haig was even quoted to have said that intelligence was not relevant for modern military during war.¹⁰ The result was that the British authority was ill-informed about the German military at the beginning of the Second World War due to poorly equipped intelligence gathering system. Consequently, the British spent the early period of the war in building a modern intelligence service for the purpose of the war and this was done in hurry.¹¹

The British foreign policy at the eve of the war also affected her preparation for a possible military confrontation with Germany. After the First World War, in an effort to discourage another war, the British authority adopted the policy of appeasement in her relationship with Germany and other perceived dictators. In fact, the British Prime Minister from 1937 to 1940, Chamberlain was of the opinion that war with Nazi Germany could and should be avoided instead of challenging her aggressive behavior, Chamberlain was encouraged by his advisors to follow a policy of appeasing and making concessions to the Nazi. As such, while Germany was busy building her military for a future war, Britain was less concerned.¹²

The consequence of the above British policy was that in the years before the war, a lot of minor crises occurred which Britain could not control. One of such aggression was the invasion of Abyssinia by Italy in 1935. Also from 1936 to 1939, General Franco, another Spanish dictator was engaged in a war to overthrow the elected government of Spain unchallenged. Instead of acting promptly, Chamberlain simply considered the eve



nts as quarrels in far-away countries between people of whom Britain know nothing about. To further compound issues, in the 1938 Munich agreement, Chamberlain agreed to Germany annexing the northern and western Czechoslovakian border regions under the pretext of an alleged privations suffered by the ethnic German population living in those regions. In the actual sense of it, Germany was interested in the coal, iron and electrical power enrichment in the Czech. While Chamberlain believed the handing over of the territories to Germany was done in the name of peace, Germany on the other hand targeted to use the resources to build her military. This situation continued and no matter how hard Hitler pushed, Chamberlain pretended that all was well and until the brink of Germany's invasion of Poland, he believed that war could be avoided and so did little to prepare for it.¹³

Even the public opinion in Britain then did not allow the British authority to prepare adequately for any military showdown with the Germany. The British public opinion was strongly shaped by the hardships created by previous First World War. The blood needlessly spilled by a generation of young men was remembered by their children and by the survivors. Everybody wanted to avoid another war as much as possible. This was reinforced by the conservatism that for centuries had shaped British politics and that is the British loved to avoid disruption. The ordinary British citizen felt that in as much as they were comfortable and contented, there was no reason to get involved in the trouble around the world. Though Winston Churchill in mid 1930s realized the threat posed by Hitler and started drawing public attention towards that direction, in reverse, the British public continued to push for peace as much as they could. Even when he saw the need for rearmament, Stanley Baldwin, a statesman of the Conservative Party who dominated the British government between the world wars, kept it out of his 1935 election manifesto for fear of losing votes.¹⁴⁰⁰

In the area of military capability, despite some challenges in the military arena, o

ne can say that Great Britain was to an extent comfortable and prepared for the war. The size of the army and the machinery used by the forces can testify to this fact. The British forces had the advantage of having a fully motorized system of troop movement which enabled relatively fast deployment of forces though the Wehrmacht. Also, British artillery pieces were of high quality. A British 25 pound artillery piece was particularly accurate and successful in destroying enemy tanks. However the armed vehicles of the British army at the time did not compare particularly favorably with those of their opponents. Though tanks such as the British 'Matilda' were difficult to destroy they however lacked the maneuverability to engage in rapid attacks. Other armed vehicles, such as the tanks initially deployed into Northern Africa, had insufficient armour and suffered at the hands of an experienced Panzer commander. Other equipment included the Lee Enfield 303 rifle, the 'Tommy gun' which was a semi-automatic sub-machine gun and the Sten gun. There were some problems with the reliability of some of these weapons but the Mark 2 Sten gun was noted as being susceptible to jamming. However, this gun could be easily dismantled and concealed which made it an ideal weapon for resistance forces throughout Europe. The rifles and semi-automatic weapons were supported by use of the 40lb Vickers 303 heavy machine gun which was extremely accurate and fired over 400 rounds per minute.¹⁵

The British Army in 1939 was a small professional force which was supported by the Territorial Army. At the outbreak of war, the British Expeditionary Force dispatched to France was 12 divisions in size. This was from a total force of 50 full and part-time divisions. In addition, a large number of foreign soldiers were also recruited into the British army from among the dominions and British colonies. This included a number of divisions from Australia, Canada, South Africa and New Zealand along with a large armed force of approximately 200,000 stationed on the Indian subcontinent. In terms of immediate preparedness, this force was relatively small compared with the forces of other major combatants. The fully trained professional army was limited in size and it took some time for troops from the dominions to reach Europe.¹⁶



For the British air capability, the Royal Air Force (RAF) in 1939 consisted of 135 squadrons. This comprised 74 bombers and 24 fighter squadrons. In addition to the 'fighting' wing of the RAF, there were a number of army support squadrons, reconnaissance squadrons and torpedo bombers. These were assisted by an Auxiliary air force of some 19 squadrons. Throughout 1939 preparations were made for a possible air war. This included large exercises in Southern France and practice blackouts in parts of England. By the outbreak of the war, radar had been fitted to a number of Blenheim bombers. This increased the chances of the bombers finding their target and provided early warning of enemy attacks.¹⁷

The plane radar was supported by two systems of Radar detection. Chain Home and Chain Home Low were two networks of Radar stations built along the south coast of England in the mid to late 1930s. Chain Home could detect formations of aircraft flying over the coast of France. This enabled the RAF to scramble fighter squadrons to intercept bomber formations and would allow the RAF to counter any Luftwaffe movements in the event of an attack on Northern France, the Low Countries or Britain. Chain Home Low provided radar coverage against low flying aircraft. There were 21 Chain Home stations and 30 Chain Home Low stations operational in 1940 and the development of this system of Radar meant that defensive sorties against the Luftwaffe could be easily coordinated. This was of paramount importance during the Battle of Britain.¹⁸

Despite these improvements recorded, although only a generation in existence, the Royal Air Force (RAF) had already developed traditions and beliefs that could not be shaken by mere evidence. Before the war broke out, one approach to bombing dominated the RAF's strategic thinking. Commanders believed that by throwing enough bombs at the enemy, they could ensure victory from the air. Never mind that they lacked the intelligence and guidance systems for accurate bombing. No regard was paid to the fact that their

bombs were not powerful enough to substantially damage German bombers. They also ignored the fact that if they had such bombs, they did not have the right planes to deliver them. As contradictory evidence mounted, this view persisted. When the air war intensified, photographic evidence showed that British bombing was nowhere near as effective as its advocates claimed. The response of Bomber Command was not to change its approach. Instead, it insisted that the photos could not be relied upon.¹⁹

The cost of maintaining the British military also affected both public opinion and government policy. The war of 1914 to 1918 had been hugely expensive. This had left Britain struggling to rebuild financially. Then came the Great Depression in the 1920s, delivering a gut punch to the British economy. Money could not be spared to maintain a military ready for a possible European war. The result was the Ten-Year Rule. Introduced in 1919, it stated the country would not take part in a major war for the next ten years and so had no need to prepare in the next year. The policy, ironically created by Winston Churchill as Chancellor of the Exchequer, lasted until 1932. The long-term squeeze on military funding led to shortages in such vital areas as tanks, anti-aircraft guns, and cans to carry fuel.²⁰

On the side of the Navy, the Royal Navy was, in 1939, the largest naval force in the world. The fleet contained 15 Battleships, 7 Aircraft carriers, 66 cruisers, 184 Destroyers, 60 submarines and a number of support vessels. The main naval base at Scapa Flow was considered to be impregnable and dominated the passage between the North Sea and the Atlantic Ocean. Additionally there were navies controlled by British Dominions. Though impressive in terms of size, the Royal Navy in 1939 had several weaknesses. Many of the capital ships were old, only 2 postdated the First World War. The air power of the Royal Navy was limited to short range reconnaissance. Many ships of the Fleet were fitted with ASDIC, a radar system that could detect submarines. Again, this suffered from having a short range and was not effective when the submarines had surfaced. This combined to leave the fleet open to attack from German U Boats, with only Depth Charges available as effective means of attacking enemy su



submarines from onboard the ships - air cover was provided by the Coastal Command and British submarines patrolled the North Sea and Northern approaches.²¹

Despite the sound footing of the British Navy force, there were still areas of disaffection. Tradition played a huge part in Britain's approach to the military. In the Royal Navy, this meant promotion only for those who had proved their worth as commanders at sea. It made sense where the command of fleets was concerned but in specialist areas such as supply and intelligence, it was counter-productive. Experts in specialist fields were not recruited, encouraged, or promoted through the ranks. Similar attitudes held throughout the military.²²

Some of the above identified shortcomings in the military affected the British military battle orders in some of her battles theaters. The Battle of Dunkirk for example was a disaster to the British. They lost most of their weapons in the fight, and only narrowly escaped losing their soldiers in the battle. The Battle of Britain gave a clear indication that Britain was not well prepared. The British pilots had a lack of training and were also much lazier than the German pilots who were training a lot. The Germans trained 800 pilots per month and the British only 200 a month. The Germans planes were so fast that the British air force found it difficult to intercept them.²³

III. Conclusion on Britain

In conclusion, one can see that Britain's victory against Germany in the Second World War was very much down to luck. Overall, I believe that Britain was not well prepared for the war. The Battle of Dunkirk was an early sign to show how unprepared they were as they were slow and also lost most of their equipment there. The Battle of Britain showed how the pilots and planes were not up to standard compared to the Germans. The victory seemed to be down to a lot of luck from a single bad call from the German general. However, there are also some signs which would have shown they were ready for war

such as the fact that the Germans could not completely destroy the Royal Navy or Air Force and so the British were prepared already as the Germans couldn't have defeated the British. Generally speaking, it could be argued that the British won, however shows that they were prepared.

FRANCE

How Prepared were the French

On the side of the French, her defeat in 1940 was the most traumatic event of the 20th century for her. What made it traumatic was not just the fact of defeat but the context of the defeat. Only few defeats in military history have been as rapid, decisive, and unexpected as the June 22, 1940 defeat of France. The defeat became more painful when viewed from the point that France was known to have previously won the First World War, a mere 20 years earlier even though at a terrible cost of 1.4 million military dead. Then France like other European societies was also hit by the great depression and the political turmoil that came in its wake.²⁴ Again, from 1933, France had to confront the Nazi seizure of power in Germany, including Hitler's aggressive foreign policy. One would have expected all these events to have had averse effect on France but she managed to survive them. Hence, the easy defeat of France in the Second World War by Germany has continued to raise questions begging for answers. Some of the reasons provided by most scholars since the 1970s tend to focus attention on the dilemma of France's geopolitical position, the inadequacy of its military plans, and the inability of the French army to execute its doctrine.²⁵

On paper, the French were stronger in almost every way, but they made the classic military mistake of preparing to fight the Second World War through their traditional static trench warfare tactic. France was extremely well-prepared for WWII and they knew it was coming. Tactically, the Germans had other ideas. The German army developed the Blitzkrieg tactics which was based on high-speed and mobile attacks on the enemy's weak points and it proved devastating in France. The Blitzkrieg according to some was the only reason that made France to perform as bad as they did during the military encounter with Germany. The blitz was almost impossible to beat, and as such the Germans first wreaked havoc on the Belgians so fast that France did not have as much time to prepare for war with German



y. The German advance also hit the French forces head-on and crippled the troops defending northern France. The advance did not give any attention to their flanks, but they got to Paris so fast that the French did not have time or military power to stop them because their strength had been weakened in the Blitz and could not mount an attack on Germany's flanks. The German blitzkrieg stormed armored columns at an "impossible" rate and there was no chance the French military was going to catch them before they reached Paris. Consequently, the Germans cut off most of the French supply lines and in that situation, France chose to surrender rather than attempt to retake Paris and fight street to street from a position of weakness in their own country.²⁶

Available evidence revealed that France had started early preparation for another major war shortly after the WWI ended. This could be seen through the French tactics of fortifying her borders against external invasion. Long line of defenses totaling a couple of hundred miles long along the German border was erected. This line of defenses was called the Maginot Line and was absolutely impossible to attack France by enemy head-on. With this in place, the only way for the Germans to get into France was to go through Belgium, which would give France more time to activate their forces and be prepared to defend their country. However, the French underestimated the capability of Germany as they did not actually expect that the Germans would attack the Maginot Line directly, instead predicting they would invade through Belgium. Unfortunately for them that happened to be the exact direction through which the Germans struck. They also miscalculated by assuming that the Ardennes Forest was too rugged and rough for the German army to attack through. The French also stationed all their forces behind the Maginot Line and adopted a defensive posture. With all supplies and ammunition to last weeks in their possession, it was expected that the troops at the Maginot Line had the capability to keep fighting Germany for long. However, immediately the German armor was behind the French line it was all over.²⁷

From the foregoing, it is clear that the French military tactics were extremely outdated at the start of the war. They had failed to recognize that warfare had fundamentally changed since the First World War. They were over-reliant upon the Maginot Line and they believed that this would stop any German invasion in its track. Since they did not believe that could defeat Germany outrightly, they hoped that the Maginot would drive up casualties and drive Germany to the negotiating table. They relied on defensive tactics and failed to grasp the impact of modern tanks and aircraft and the over-reliance on the Maginot Line meant that they were too defensive.²⁸

The Germans tanks were also much faster than the French tanks that in most cases simply crumbled and could not withstand the heavy power of the Germans. Notwithstanding the fact that they were very prepared for the war.²⁹ Tactical errors, delays and mistakes by French Generals compounded their original mistake of leaving the Ardennes mostly undefended. The speed with which Germany had built its forces to move was also too much for them to bear. The French had the means but not so much the knowhow at this early point in the war before the Germans had fully mastered the art of Blitzkrieg.³⁰

The German army was much superior to the French and the British. Hitler had built up the German army and in particular the air force (Luftwaffe). The Germans had developed superior weapons. In particular, they had developed superior aircraft such as the Stuka dive bomber and the Messerschmitt ME fighter plane, which wreaked havoc on the allies. The Germans placed a great deal of emphasis on mobile and armored warfare. They had superior tanks, such as Panzer Mk IV, which easily overcame the allies in almost every tank engagement in the Battle of France. It must be remembered that although the German army was superior to the French in many ways, this did not mean that the Fall of France was inevitable.³¹ While the French army was large and had been well resourced, it had not been modernized. It was still based on the idea that the next war would resemble the Great War. As a result, the French did not believe that any war with Germany would be a mobile one, but rather a war of attrition. This meant that they failed to develop tank tactics that took advantage of their tanks offensive capabilities.³² Even when the French did field effective



ve equipment, such as the SOMUA S35 tanks, they were mismanaged by French cavalry commanders. The Somua S35 tanks did not realize their true potential until they were commandeered by German commanders and utilized on the Eastern Front. During the invasion, German Panzer tanks quickly overcame the French defenses on the plains of Northern France. The French air forces were also not a match for the Germans in aerial combat. The French army was unable to cope with the German Blitzkrieg tactics and was quickly defeated after only six weeks of fighting.³³

The French also encountered the problem of poor military and political leadership. In 1940 the French general staff was led by General Maurice Gamelin, an officer widely respected. A veteran and war hero of the First World War, he was credited with developing the strategy that led to the decisive French victory at the Marne in 1914. He also tried unsuccessfully, to modernize the army. But Gamelin was suffering from a serious illness, whose symptoms included poor concentration levels, memory loss and other cognitive difficulties.³⁴ As a result, the military leadership of Gamelin was generally poor. They were slow to respond to the Germans and there was a marked reluctance to take any initiative and go on the attack. The political leadership of France was also very poor. According to one French commentator during the war, they could not inspire the French people, they were more interested in fighting among themselves than the Germans.³⁵

France was bitterly divided between the left and the right. This lack of unity of purpose in France was crippling at a crucial juncture in the war. The division also extended to the relationships between the military and political leadership of France. The French Generals were right wing and distrusted the left wing politicians who ran France. French ministers also did not trust the judgments of their generals. The French officer corps was more worried about a Communist revolution than a German invasion. For example, General Weygand was more concerned with maintaining social stability in the wake of the German invasion than actually fighting the Germans. Many later accused some French Generals

als of being traitors. Perhaps the greatest weakness in the French leadership was that they did not have a true war leader; as one Frenchman stated in 1942 they 'had no Churchill'. If France had a leader of the calibre of Clemenceau in 1940, perhaps the outcome of the Battle of France could have been different.³⁶

France was a powerful country with a large army and a vast Empire that stretched around the globe, but it was not cohesive. It had stark political conflicts and many politicians were more loyal to their political party than their country. People on both the extreme Left such as the Communists or the extreme right hated the French government so virulently; their support of the French government was best described as half-hearted after the German invasion. Many ordinary people were disgusted with the leaders of the Third Republic, who were widely seen as professional politicians who were both venal and corrupt.³⁷ Furthermore, defeatism was rampant at the start of WW II. France had a low birth rate and many were convinced that the country was degenerating; based on ideas current at the time.³⁸ The cultural pessimism in France meant that many, in the political and military elite believed that France could not defeat Germany and that any efforts to resist the Germans were pointless. Many people believed that France was a nation in decline and that her greatest days had passed. This led to a spirit of defeatism in France in the spring and summer of 1940, which played an important role in the Fall of France. Despite the valiant efforts of many French men against the German invasion, the French government and military were ill-equipped both politically and militarily to meaningfully contest Germany.³⁹

IV. Conclusion on the French

The fact that France fell actually was a surprise to many European countries because of France's pre-war preparation and military might. The fall of France served as a sign that the war would be a harder war than any that had been fought before and that the Germans would be a tougher nut to crack than any of the other nations involved in the war had foreseen. While France was protected by the Maginot Line and a fairly large army it put up little resistance to Germany. It only took a few weeks for the entire country to fall. The reasons for the sudden defeat of France in



1940 were numerous and varied. They included a failure of leadership, both at the military and the political level. The army of France was not only poorly led but had been equipped with inferior arms and equipment. Moreover, the Maginot Line not only failed to protect France, but it encouraged a defensive mentality that allowed the Germans to take the initiative at crucial points during the invasion. The French public was also bitterly divided. These political divisions and incompetent leadership convinced many French citizens that their country could not defeat Germany. All these combined factors combined ensured a swift defeat between May and June 1940.

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