



## The training of the French army during the inter-war period and the "phoney war" its links with the 1940 disaster

1/2 - BRENNUS 4.0

le lieutenant-colonel Christophe Gué, officier référent histoire de l'armée de Terre

Published on 24/11/2019

Histoire & stratégie

**The French army was relatively poorly trained in May 1940, as evidenced by the panic that ensued, faced with the unexpected, and the lack of responsiveness of units in changing situations.**

However, the question of training seems to have had only a relative importance in the defeat, given the material, organisational and doctrinal shortcomings of the French army (armedThe question of training seems to have had only a relative importance in the defeat, given the material, organizational and doctrinal shortcomings suffered by the French army (defensive army, designed to carry out a "battle conducted" and lacking mobility and agility) and, especially, the Dyle-Breda plan, which was implemented on May 10, 1940, and which made these shortcomings particularly critical: the choice of an entry into Belgium, north of the Sambre et Meuse furrow, depriving the land forces of a significant reserve in the event of an enemy effort further south.

Such an assessment of the role of training in the disaster that occurred, however, amounts to forgetting the considerable risks that the Germans took in attacking in the Ardennes. The undertaking was all the more risky because a large part of the high command of its land forces was hostile to it and this would have aggravated the consequences of failure: the dissolution of the army and armoured corps, and the reintegration of Panzer divisions into the conventional armies. Such a failure was possible and it would have become likely in the face of French troops using their means more judiciously than they did.

This leads us to wonder whether French training shortfalls have not had far more serious consequences than might appear at first glance.

The answer to this question seems to be largely positive in that :

- the French military tool was diminished because of the way the training had been designed;

- the use of this tool, as it existed, suffered from the lack of training of the users.

### **The consequences of the inadequacies of the training on the military tool itself**

The lack of realism in training had unfortunate consequences on the equipment, organization and doctrine of the army. The lack of realistic training had unfortunate consequences on the equipment, organization and doctrine of the French army during the inter-war period, and the eight months of respite during the "phoney war" did not help to remedy this situation.

#### **Between the wars:**

During the inter-war period, the use of obsolete equipment, which the increasingly limited credits did not allow to renew significantly until the end of the war.<sup>1]</sup>, and the scarcity of general maneuvers with modern means, which took place thereafter, shaped military thinking and stifled creativity within the army. This was in stark contrast to Germany, where the lack of old equipment facilitated innovation and training with alternative means, as well as outside the restricted framework of the Reichswehr [2] and then the nascent Wehrmacht [3].

The situation was such that the doctrine and organization of the French army lagged far behind the possibilities offered by technology, particularly in terms of motorization and transmissions, which were not well understood.

Thus the transition from the infantry tank to the battle tank, i.e. to a new weapon, proved to be particularly difficult; and the need to create large units. The need to create large autonomous armoured units around a core of battle tanks proved difficult to impose despite the usefulness of such formations, even in defensive warfare. General Gamelin, Chief of the General Staff from 1931 onwards, was convinced that this could be met by strengthening infantry or medium light divisions.<sup>4]</sup> with tank battalions, as required, and it was not until September 1936 that he accepted the principle of reserve armoured divisions (DCR) to which actions in force could be entrusted. All this delayed the production of battle tanks and the development of the equipment needed to support and sustain them.

Aware of the lack of training at all levels, General Gamelin was not very much in favour of the autonomous action of subordinate units and the development of initiative at the lowest levels. As a result, he felt that the battle should be fought at the highest level [5].

The same problem arose at the joint level with the underestimation of the role of the air force in support of land operations [6] due to the lack of joint exercises. This situation was encouraged by the appearance of an independent air force in July 1934 (the Air Ministry dating from 1928), without the creation of a Ministry or a National Defence Staff [7].

<sup>7]</sup> Despite the respite it gave the French army, the "phoney war" did not remedy the situation.

#### **Phoney War:**

During the "phoney war", more than ever before, rigid defensive action was favoured over offensive action. The lack of training and experience of the high command made it difficult to learn the lessons of the Polish campaign. General Gamelin, who did not fully appreciate the possibilities offered by the engine, believed that he could thwart enemy attempts to break through by means of a static defensive line on the Maginot Line and its extension along the Meuse, as well as on the position he thought he had time to occupy and develop in Belgium, on the Dyle, and in the Netherlands (Breda region). In order to intervene there, he deprived himself of the reserve army that he possessed (7th army of General Giraud, stationed in Champagne). Under such conditions, priority was given to reinforcing the defensive means and the setting up of the armoured divisions, which would only be useful later, was further delayed.

This doctrinal stagnation was all the more annoying as among the Germans, the idea of regrouping armoured divisions, so as to have an instrument allowing to obtain decisive results, made on the contrary its way thanks to the training which the campaign of Poland had provided to the Wehrmacht.

It led to the formation of four armoured corps, two of which were themselves grouped into an armoured army (Kleist group = armoured corps Guderian and Rheinhardt + Wittersheim motorized corps), which was given the mission of operating in the Ardennes the breakthrough that would bring victory under the Yellow Plan.

Thus, during the inter-war period and the "phoney war", the inadequacies of training - the consequences of the choices made by the political authorities and the commanders - were among the factors that prevented France from having a military tool that was equal to its real potential. However, could these shortcomings not be compensated for by training adapted to the state of this tool?

1) This situation was favoured by budgetary restrictions and by the defensive choices made by the government under public pressure.

2) Clandestine training in Soviet Russia in particular.

3) Training within the framework of the activities of paramilitary organizations such as the National Socialist Transport Corps (NSKK) which, among other objectives, organized automobile competitions to improve equipment.

4) Discovery and exploitation missions.

5) Cf. 1936 Instruction on Large Units (IGU 36).

6) Which appears fully in IGU 36 in which only four pages are devoted to it.

7) Long requested by Marshal Pétain, the creation of a Ministry and a National Defense Staff were about to be carried out under the Bouis-son Ministry, but its fall in June 1935 put an end to the project. In June 1936 a Minister of National Defence was again instituted, but the incumbent (E. Daladier) was also Minister of War. The position of Chief of the National Defence Staff was not created until January 1938. General Gamelin, the incumbent, however, was given only a coordinating role between the three armies.

---

**Title :** le lieutenant-colonel Christophe Gué, officier référent histoire de l'armée de Terre

**Author (s) :** le lieutenant-colonel Christophe Gué, officier référent histoire de l'armée de Terre

**Release date** 12/02/2021

---

[FIND OUT MORE](#)

---