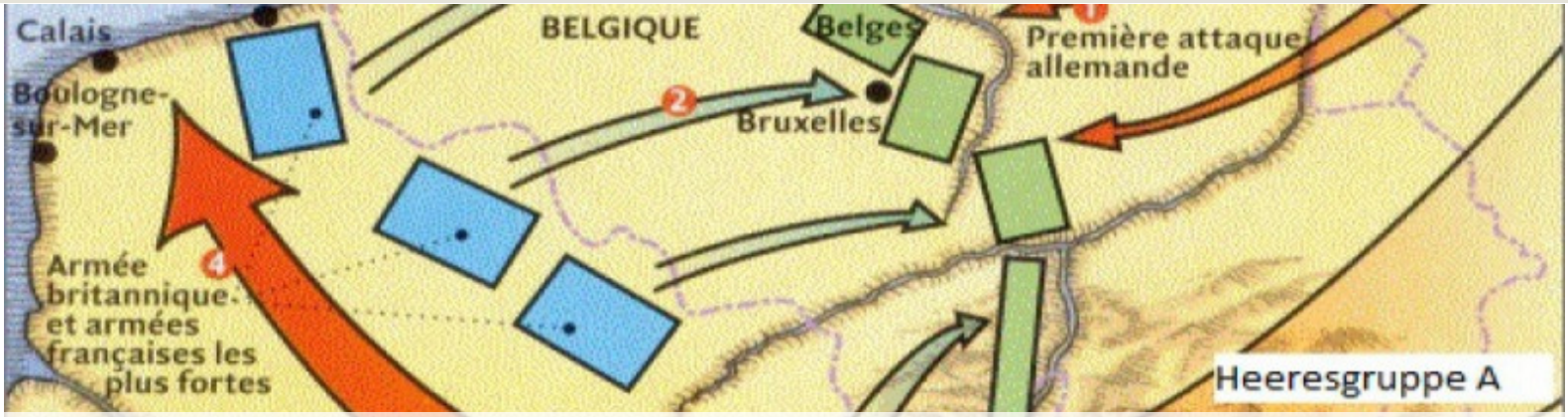

What was the Maginot Line used for?

military-Earth thinking notebook

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Histoire & stratégie

The fate of the Maginot Line is still a matter of debate today. Did it play the role that was expected of it? On the contrary, did it not turn out to be a costly and useless achievement? Colonel Ortholan, Doctor of History, shares his thesis with us here, expressed forcefully and based on concrete arguments, even if they are sometimes disturbing.

This gigantic undertaking, and technical masterpiece in this field, raises many questions to which it is sometimes difficult to provide a satisfactory answer. Was it necessary to build this third fortified system in our history at a time when France had won the Great War and its adversary was both ruined and in the throes of civil war? Who made the decision to do so, and was the decision taken at the right level of government? Should not most of the French military effort have been concentrated on modernizing the field army and the air force while France still had the world's largest army? Was there not simply a lack of French military thinking, of which the Maginot line has, in a way, become the symbol?

Finally, did the Maginot Line force the Germans, as is often claimed, to pass through Belgium to invade France?

One thinks then, and quite logically indeed, of the 1914 scheme in which the Schlieffen plan consisted of bypassing the defensive curtains in the east through Belgium in order to destroy the French army before turning all forces together against Russia. And the Germans admit, as they say and write, that it was indeed the presence of these defensive curtains that forced them to adopt this campaign plan in order to obtain a rapid and decisive decision in the west.

Hence the inevitable transposition of the defensive curtains from the Séré de Rivières system to the Maginot Line and from the Schlieffen plan of 1914 to the German campaign plan of 1940. Should we therefore deduce that the Maginot Line did us the "service" of forcing our enemy to pass through Belgium?

Two different wars, two different campaign plans

If one considers the mechanism of operations, one will notice that the 1940 invasion plan is totally different from the 1914 plan (Schlieffen plan). The Germans did indeed enter Belgium, but it was to attract the Allied forces and then take them from the rear into French territory by breaking through exactly at the junction of the front with the Maginot Line. Hence the conviction, perhaps, that if the Wehrmacht came close to the French defensive system, it was because it was not possible for it to pass further south.

In the sequence of operations, the Maginot Line did not take part in the first phase of the Battle of France in 1940, since the fighting only took place between Sedan and the North Sea. In the next phase, it was turned, to the point that, even if it was almost inviolate, it would only have to surrender, despite the undeniable bravery of its defenders.

It is certain that, as General von Manstein wrote, the Germans were no more willing to take the Maginot Line head-on in 1940 than they had been for the system of defensive curtains in 1914 [1]. Where, next question, would the German maneuver have been different if the Maginot Line had not existed?

When we say in France that the Maginot Line "forced" the Germans to pass through Belgium, we are thinking of their place when it is up to them to say so. But do they say so? Is there, for example, a German military official[2] of the time who supports this point of view? Is there a German historian[3] today who affirms it? However, it must be noted that no one ever mentions it: neither the military leaders of the time, nor the current German historians. And the best historians, often Anglo-Saxon [4], less dogmatic than we are, do not talk about it any more. So what do they say?

That is where we must try to understand how the Germans reasoned. One is led, as in a chess game, to consider the opponent's game and, in this case, that of the Germans. For it is they who must give us the answer.

Control of the North Sea and Channel coasts

Surprised by the declaration of war by Great Britain and then France on September 3, as a consequence of the invasion of Poland, Hitler wanted to defeat the French and British in the west as soon as possible and as quickly as possible. Since he had plans to invade the USSR, he had to avoid a bogged down war.

However, Britain's entry into the war immediately posed the problem for Germany of controlling the coasts of the North Sea and the English Channel in order to protect Germany's industrial north from British-led air operations. And these coasts are Belgian and Dutch.

In the marching diary of the Oberkommandoder Wehrmacht (OKW), the supreme command of the Wehrmacht, dated 6 October 1939, we read: "The Führer's constant concern is to know what would become of the situation if the French-English entered Belgium and Holland".

It is good to know that this concern does not date from that time, but from much earlier.

As early as 1934, Hitler believed that in the event of a conflict in the East, he should protect himself against England by occupying Holland and northern Belgium [5]. 5] In 1937, and again in 1939, he renewed this analysis as follows: "If we succeed in occupying and holding Belgium and Holland and defeating France, the bases for a victorious war against England will be acquired", while specifying that "the question of law plays no role in these strategic calculations". 6] This implicitly amounted to violating Belgian neutrality, while the war had not yet broken out.

It is an aspect of strategic level which was little evoked, but essential, and which represented a determining character in the choices of the German chiefs. Can it be argued at this level that the Maginot Line weighed heavily? You only have to look at a map. It is there that we must remember that General Jeschoneck, chief of staff of the Luftwaffe, will obtain from Hitler in November 1939 to integrate definitively thethe invasion of the Netherlands into the plan of attack in the west, precisely because the Dutch coast could put the industrial heart of Germany within reach of the Royal Air Force.

With regard to Belgian neutrality, which the great German general staff had made so cheaply in 1914 and which had led to the entry of Great Britain into the war on the side of France, Hitler proceeded in two stages.

Firstly, in order to have a free hand in the west before invading Poland, Hitler assured the King of the Belgians on 26 August 1939 "that theGermany will under no circumstances undermine the inviolability and integrity of Belgium and will respect the territory of the kingdom at all times. Then, at the end of the Polish campaign, on 9 October, he signed a memorandum setting out the conclusions of his strategic considerations. Since German industry was not in a position to sustain a long conflict, a rapid campaign had to be envisaged, which could be launched as early as the end of October. The aim would be to conquer naval and air bases in Holland and Belgium to put England "within firing range" and then to break the military might of France. Hitler was then convinced that once France was eliminated, Britain would be forced to negotiate.

He was therefore determined to violate Belgian neutrality, as he had envisaged as early as 1937, but in that case, would Britain not declare war on him, since it had been done since September 2, 1939?

And moreover, in such a situation, how could Hitler have allowed himself to respect Belgian neutrality? Faced with an adversary in a position to threaten his northern flank, it was impossible for him not to ensure control of Belgium, as well as of Luxembourg and the Netherlands, a group of states which, together with northern France, constituted a single theatre of operations.

Maginot Line or not, the Germans would therefore most likely have passed through Belgium. They had no choice.

The use of armoured and motorised formations

Another consideration is superimposed on those just stated by looking at the operational means available to the Wehrmacht in 1940: ten armoured and six motorized divisions. These sixteen divisions are the spearhead of the German armies, whose success rests as much on their rapid deployment as on their speed of progression. Only a flat ground allowed it, and, in the prospect of an offensive launched in the west, this flat ground was

in the plains of the north... including those of Belgium.

It can always be objected that German armoured and motorised units crossed the Belgian and Luxembourg Ardennes in May 1940 before breaking through the Allied front, terrain totally unsuitable for the use of such formations. Certainly. The Germans unquestionably played big but, first of all, it was an approach march and not a deployment and, moreover, our passivity made things all the easier for them as it was admitted in the French military creed that the Ardennes were impassable. The fighting only began at the Meuse river, and then led to the plain of Picardy where these units were able to give their full measure.

The battle of annihilation

We are now entering into the modalities of execution and we must return to the initial constraints: to defeat the French and the British as soon and as quickly as possible, that is to say, to conduct a short and decisive campaign.

First of all, the German General Staff was groping around. An initial invasion plan envisaged going due west through the northern plains, including those of Belgium, of course. There, German armoured and motorised formations could play to the full, but without ensuring the destruction of the Allied armies.

After some procrastination, the plan finally adopted, conceived by Hitler and General von Manstein each on their own, allowed this by cutting the Allied front in two to isolate one part from the other. It was just as much like using the northern plains, but in a completely different way. By attacking in Belgium on the Meuse with only two armoured divisions, the Germans led the Allied armies into the Belgian plains of Brabant and Flanders to meet them. The second phase of the manoeuvre consisted, after the approach march of seven armoured divisions through the Ardennes massif, in cutting the front in two between Namur and Sedan and turning these allied armies through the French plain of Picardy.

In the absence of the Maginot Line, one could have imagined these armoured and motorised divisions, for example, massed in the south of the Rhineland and in the Palatinate, crossing the border and piercing the front approximately between Thionville and Wissembourg. They would then have bypassed Luxembourg by crossing the Moselle and Meuse rivers in succession to move northwards in order to take the Allied front from the rear and continue over an incredible distance of almost 400 kilometres to the Channel coast? Was this realistic?

Already, the relief and hydrography of the first part of the terrain to be covered in French territory, which was therefore hostile, did not lend itself to the rapid deployment of these large units. Second, there would have been no surprise effect. The distance to be covered would have been such that the German lines of communication would not have finished stretching and the Allied command would have had a hundred times the opportunity to pull itself together by taking the German attack in flagrante delicto.

This scenario would only have been possible, and still with many reservations, if France had been alone in declaring war on Germany. There, perhaps, because it is not at all sure [7], Hitler would have spared Belgium and Luxembourg, and even the Netherlands, to avoid the entry into the war of Great Britain. There, unquestionably, the Maginot Line would have presented an obstacle of size to the German armies, but certainly not insurmountable, one can trust them on that.

But, first of all, there is nothing to indicate that in that case Hitler would not have invaded Belgium, the Netherlands and Luxembourg anyway, for the reasons stated above, and since, secondly, France would not have ventured to declare war on the United Kingdom alone, the German army would not have had the courage to do so.When we then see how the events actually unfolded, we must take into account the data that actually presented themselves to Hitler.

Undoubtedly, the Maginot Line could hinder German movements to the left of their manoeuvre, but only on the margins. It is hard to imagine a movement of greater magnitude. And moreover the success, German of course, was there.

Belgium in any event

Great Britain having declared war on Germany, everything was thus conspiring for the German staff, Maginot Line or not, to make Belgium a battlefield, and the plan implemented in May 1940, the Yellow Plan of October 1939 (Fall Gelb), can be explained for the three reasons summarized as follows:

- the urgent need to control the North Sea and Channel coasts as soon as possible;
- the obligation to use land which would allow armoured and motorised formations to operate as efficiently as possible;
- the need to wage a battle of annihilation in the prospect of a short campaign.

It is worth remembering that making Belgium a battlefield is not new. It has always been a path of invasion, one way or the other. We could go back to the wars of the Old Regime, the Revolution and the Empire, remembering that it was at Waterloo, in Belgium, that the First Empire finally fell.

And then, it is hard to imagine how, by massing more than three million men in seven armies along their western border, the Germans could not pass through Belgium.

We should also look at the very first minutes of the meetings of the High Council of War, from 1920 onwards, when the question arose as to whether or not to fortify. During these meetings, and before the first decisions were taken, it can be seen that both those in favour of fortification and its opponents were all in agreement on one point: the fighting would take place on Belgian territory. And why in Belgium and not in the south? Because the Belgian plain offered possibilities of deployment that the Ardennes massif or any other terrain further south could not offer.

This means that even without the Maginot Line, the Battle of France in 1940 would have taken place in Belgium anyway.

Reflections on a choice

Of course, the Maginot Line does not bear sole responsibility for the defeat. But the role it was led to play contributed to it. When, from 4 June 1940, the Germans launched the second phase of the battle, the Maginot Line was quickly turned around, to the point of being surrounded by General Prételat's army group n°2. At first, however, Weygand

hesitated to order the withdrawal for fear of leaving the defensive system to its own devices. When, finally, he took the decision to retreat, it was too late, part of this army group had to lay down their weapons and crews a few days later.

On the other hand, the question arises as to whether this entire army group should be maintained behind the Maginot Line, which certainly required reinforcement work in the intervals, but not to the point of holding back the entire two armies and their 800 tanks: enough to constitute two to three reserve light mechanical or battleship divisions that would have been infinitely more useful in reserve for the entire Allied front.

In this case, the Maginot Line would have brought a more useful contribution by being the shield of the right wing of the allied front, the left wing representing the sword.

1] Field Marshal von Manstein, "Lost Victory». Paris, Librairie Plon, p. 67.

2] And as specialists on the subject, we must mention General Heinz Guderian ("...").Memories of a Soldier") and Field Marshal Erich von Manstein ("Lost victories"), who both participated in the elaboration of the invasion plan in the West. Neither asserts that the Maginot Line forced the Wehrmacht to pass through Belgium, nor even suggests it.

3] For example, Karl-Heinz Frieser, in: "[3] The Wehrmacht was not forced to cross the Maginot Line.The Myth of the Blitzkrieg, the 1940 Western Campaign"Paris, Belin, 2003

[4] For example: Telfort Taylor, "Like a gigantic scythe"Paris, Robert Laffont, 1968 - John Mosier, "Blitzkrieg Myth", USA, Perennial, 2004 - Allister Horne, "How to Lose a Battle, France, May-June 1940", Paris, Texto, 2010 (reprint).

5] Bruno Chaix, "In May 1940, was it necessary to enter Belgium", Paris, Économica, 2005, p 75 and 76.

6] L. Koeltz, "[6] L. Koeltz.As fate played out"Hachette, 1957, pp. 17 and 238, cited by Bruno Chaix, Op. cit. , p. 74.

7] This is all the less certain if we consider his positions on this subject as early as 1934.

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