

History 12: World War II
1 Fall of France, May-June, 1940 – Discussion Handout



Hitler in Paris, June 23, 1940

Name: _____

Date: _____

Recommended Readings: Howarth Chapter 30, especially “Disaster in the West” and “Britain Alone”

- In west, France and Britain taking basically a defensive posture. From Oct. '39 to April '40, called the "Phony War" or "Sitskreig"

- plan adopted for invasion of west a maverick plan by General von Manstein... he had been relieved of his command by higher-ups, thought this plan too radical, doomed to failure. But Manstein got the ear of Hitler at a luncheon; his proposal was original and daring, appealed to Hitler

A. The Plan

- Original German plan had been a repeat of WW I Schlieffen Plan, but lacked element of surprise.
- A maverick plan by General von Manstein involved going through the center, the Ardennes forest, thought to be impassable to tanks. This gamble appealed to Hitler. Therefore the region was only weakly defended by 2 French divisions. Germans invade with 45 divisions, including 7 armoured divisions. Germans, with support of Stuka dive bombers, break through at Sedan, the infantry attacked from the north (see map, De Marco p. 137.) Luftwaffe had destroyed most of the French air force, May 10.

B. The Reality

- German General Guderian, races to the coast. Germans cover 151 miles in eight days, French resistance thinly spread, Germans trap 1/3 of French army and BEF's 10 divisions. The British and French had rushed to the defence of Belgium, then were trapped by the German tanks sweeping towards the coast to the south

- Central flank of Germans moved very rapidly ahead (in fact Hitler very worried they were going too fast... raging at the generals) May 20 first German formations reached the channel coast

- Germans didn't win because superior numbers, Allies and Germans about equal (allies 137 divisions French and British, 34 Dutch and Belgium) vs. 136 German divisions. Allies had more tanks 3000 to 2500) Germans had better tactics, also French and British disagreement over use of RAF.

- The British and French were able to evacuate the better part of their troops at Dunkirk "Operation Dynamo", largely because on May 24- Hitler ordered the German armies to stop; only a few miles south of Dunkirk, German generals furious- gives allies 48 hours, with armada of ships of all kinds from Britain, evacuate 340,000 men. Also left an abundance of equipment behind (see De Marco p. 135, map p. 137)

- Why the halt? One of big questions of the war...some historians says Hitler still wanted to leave open the possibility of compromise with England

- June 14, German troops in Paris! Maginot Line attacked from the rear, fell quickly.

- Meanwhile, in June, Mussolini declares war, had been reluctant before because had said Italy wouldn't be ready for war until 1943... But Italian troops invade south France, June 10, 1940 (Mussolini thought war would be over by Sept., 1940, wanted to get in on the spoils says "To make a people great it is necessary to send them to battle, even if you have to kick them in the pants.")
- June 17, French surrender, French Marshall Pétain sues for armistice, armistice negotiations began June 21, Pétain, hero of Verdun, set up a Prime Minister of Nazi dominated French state of Vichy. (see Howarth map p. 160)
- Hitler "rubs their nose" in it... used same railway carriage and same location used when the German's had signed the armistice for World War I... Hitler sat in Marshal Foch's chair.

German campaign in west cost only 27,000 German lives, 135,000 allied deaths

C. Why German Victory?

- Hitler, had the perception to support the creation of 10 armoured divisions (against some opposition) also, understood the psychology of warfare better, eg. equipped dive bombers with sirens, give off a devastating scream when attacking
- British and French not prepared for Blitzkrieg

D. The Fallout

- In Germany, the Germans felt the wrongs of 1918 vindicated, "restored right," massive outpouring of support for Hitler
- May 10, 1940, Chamberlain resigns, Churchill takes over, same day Hitler launches an invasion of Holland, Belgium and France. Hitler tells Mussolini in March 1940, "If France were finished...England would have to make peace."
- in Britain, Churchill gives his famous speech...Howarth p. 161, impact of Churchill, Fest p. 636 - 637
- General de Gaulle escapes to Britain, leader of the Free French, De Gaulle resented this, wanted to be acknowledged as leader of all the French
- on July 3, the British sank the French fleet which had retreated to North Africa, 1,300 French sailors were killed.
 - made it easier for the French to support the Vichy government. Opens up traditional French - British antipathy

Critical Thinking Questions to Consider:

1. How was this invasion of France different from the Schlieffen Plan of WWI?
2. What aspects of Hitler's strategies could be considered a surprise?
3. How was Hitler not prepared for the quick successes?
4. Why do some historians call Operation Dynamo the "Miracle of Dunkirk"?