



National Library
of Canada

Bibliothèque nationale
du Canada

Acquisitions and
Bibliographic Services Branch

Direction des acquisitions et
des services bibliographiques

395 Wellington Street
Ottawa, Ontario
K1A 0N4

395, rue Wellington
Ottawa (Ontario)
K1A 0N4

395, rue Wellington

395, rue Wellington

NOTICE

AVIS

The quality of this microform is heavily dependent upon the quality of the original thesis submitted for microfilming. Every effort has been made to ensure the highest quality of reproduction possible.

La qualité de cette microforme dépend grandement de la qualité de la thèse soumise au microfilmage. Nous avons tout fait pour assurer une qualité supérieure de reproduction.

If pages are missing, contact the university which granted the degree.

S'il manque des pages, veuillez communiquer avec l'université qui a conféré le grade.

Some pages may have indistinct print especially if the original pages were typed with a poor typewriter ribbon or if the university sent us an inferior photocopy.

La qualité d'impression de certaines pages peut laisser à désirer, surtout si les pages originales ont été dactylographiées à l'aide d'un ruban usé ou si l'université nous a fait parvenir une photocopie de qualité inférieure.

Reproduction in full or in part of this microform is governed by the Canadian Copyright Act, R.S.C. 1970, c. C-30, and subsequent amendments.

La reproduction, même partielle, de cette microforme est soumise à la Loi canadienne sur le droit d'auteur, SRC 1970, c. C-30, et ses amendements subséquents.

THE BELGIUM QUESTION IN
FRENCH STRATEGIC PLANNING AND ARMY DOCTRINE
BETWEEN THE WARS

Christopher B. Leach
B.A., Simon Fraser University, 1987

Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of
MASTER OF ARTS
in the Department of History

© Christopher B. Leach
SIMON FRASER UNIVERSITY
December 1992

All rights reserved. This thesis may not be reproduced in whole or in part, by
photocopy or other means, without the permission of the author.



National Library
of Canada

Bibliothèque nationale
du Canada

Acquisitions and
Bibliographic Services Branch

Direction des acquisitions et
des services bibliographiques

395 Wellington Street
Ottawa, Ontario
K1A 0N4

395, rue Wellington
Ottawa (Ontario)
K1A 0N4

Your file *Votre référence*

Our file *Notre référence*

The author has granted an irrevocable non-exclusive licence allowing the National Library of Canada to reproduce, loan, distribute or sell copies of his/her thesis by any means and in any form or format, making this thesis available to interested persons.

L'auteur a accordé une licence irrévocable et non exclusive permettant à la Bibliothèque nationale du Canada de reproduire, prêter, distribuer ou vendre des copies de sa thèse de quelque manière et sous quelque forme que ce soit pour mettre des exemplaires de cette thèse à la disposition des personnes intéressées.

The author retains ownership of the copyright in his/her thesis. Neither the thesis nor substantial extracts from it may be printed or otherwise reproduced without his/her permission.

L'auteur conserve la propriété du droit d'auteur qui protège sa thèse. Ni la thèse ni des extraits substantiels de celle-ci ne doivent être imprimés ou autrement reproduits sans son autorisation.

ISBN 0-315-91096-8

Canada

PARTIAL COPYRIGHT LICENSE

I hereby grant to Simon Fraser University the right to lend my thesis, project or extended essay (the title of which is shown below) to users of the Simon Fraser University Library, and to make partial or single copies only for such users or in response to a request from the library of any other university, or other educational institution, on its own behalf or for one of its users. I further agree that permission for multiple copying of this work for scholarly purposes may be granted by me or the Dean of Graduate Studies. It is understood that copying or publication of this work for financial gain shall not be allowed without my written permission.

Title of Thesis/Project/Extended Essay

The Belgium Question in French Strategic Planning

and Army Doctrine Between the Wars

Author:

(signature)

Christopher B. Leach

(name)

Dec 21 '92

(date)

APPROVAL

NAME: Christopher B. Leach

DEGREE: M.A.

TITLE OF THESIS: The Belgium Question in French Strategic Planning
and Army Doctrine Between the Wars

EXAMINING COMMITTEE:

CHAIR: J. I. Little

C. Rodney Day, Professor

R. J. Koepke, Associate Professor

Leonidas Edwin Hill, Professor of History
University of British Columbia
(External Examiner)

DATE: 26 November 1992

ABSTRACT

This thesis examines French strategic planning and tactical doctrine from 1920 to 1939 focusing on the problems associated with the defence of the northern frontier facing Belgium. In the northeast, France relied on the occupation of German territory and then, in 1930, on the fortifications of the Maginot Line to assure her defence. In the north, the French High Command intended to advance into Belgium to establish a defensive 'continuous front'. This plan was consistent with French strategic aims but contrasted in form and in tactical requirements with the static defence of the Maginot Line. Belgian cooperation was essential for the efficient creation of the defensive line and the avoidance of the much feared encounter battle of movement. Despite an apparent willingness to cooperate through the Franco-belgian Military Accord of 1920, Belgium was a hesitant partner and was certainly not the 'ally' that France believed her to be. After a long diplomatic process of redefinition and withdrawal starting in 1930, Belgium terminated her military association with France and returned to neutrality in 1936. Nevertheless, in 1940 the French Army sat on the northern frontier waiting to enact a plan of advance that had seen little revision since 1930 despite the loss of Belgian cooperation.

Most analyses of French inter-war strategic planning and army doctrine inevitably lead to the debacle of 1940 and a comparison with the victorious *wehrmacht* and its *blitzkrieg*. No single work adequately addresses the nature of Franco-Belgian military cooperation and its importance to French strategic planning. A synthesis of secondary sources was done to fill this gap.

Consequently, this thesis argues that French strategic planning failed to address the changing realities of Franco-Belgian relations that flawed these plans long before the German invasion. Moreover, the French Army was not appropriately trained for the plan's tactical requirements that, as Belgian cooperation evaporated, demanded mobility and flexibility. The incompatibility of French tactical doctrine with strategic planning is evident in the *Instruction provisoire sur l'emploi tactique des grandes unités* of 1921 and the contemporary journal articles that predominantly supported that doctrine. By presenting chapters on French planning, on Belgium's perspective concerning military cooperation with France, and on French Army doctrine pertaining to the Belgian manoeuvre, this thesis avoids the usual French-German comparative structure. The French High Command's conservatism and commitment in the campaign of 1940 to the methods of the Great War were already foreshadowed in its unwillingness to amend the plans for the advance into Belgium during the 1930s.

Acknowledgements

The following thesis was the product of considerable personal effort but it was certainly not done in isolation. I am indebted to Dr. C. Rodney Day and Dr. Robert Koepke for their guidance and for the freedom they granted me throughout the process of research and writing. This thesis would not have been possible without the efficient service of the Inter-library Loans staff to whom I am grateful for the hundreds of sources they obtained from all over North America and France. Finally, I thank the Leach and Patterson families for their support and encouragement and Kevin Heinrichs for his patient technical assistance.

Table of Contents

Abstract	iii
Acknowledgements	v
Introduction	1
Chapter One: French Strategy and Planning.....	12
Chapter Two: Belgium and Military Cooperation with France.....	40
Chapter Three: French Army Doctrine and the Belgian Manoeuvre.....	71
Conclusion	98
Bibliography	102

Introduction

The defeat of France in the spring of 1940 has inspired numerous analyses of French interwar strategy and army doctrine. Two conclusions are usually drawn from these analyses: that the French High Command adopted archaic strategies and tactics and that these were particularly inadequate against the progressive methods of *blitzkrieg* developed by the German Army. Both of these assertions are valid and are safely vindicated by the events of 1940. France's defensive concept of warfare, so obviously represented by the Maginot Line, seems terribly outmoded when juxtaposed to the often romanticised descriptions of Germany's panzer divisions. Despite the usefulness of this comparison, the battle for France was not decided on the fortifications of the Maginot Line but in a battle of movement in Belgium. Although the Franco-German comparison may expose the tactical cause of the French defeat, it fails to explain why the French Army was engaged in a mobile battle apparently in contradiction to its defensive doctrine of war. This work will analyse French military planning pertaining to Belgium in terms of its place within the parameters of France's strategic aims and army doctrine. The erosion of Franco-Belgian relations exposed weaknesses in French planning that were ignored by the High Command and consequently extended the limits of mobility and flexibility in French tactical doctrine.

The region occupied by Belgium has suffered the consequences of

its gentle topography and strategically important location between France, Germany, Holland, and the English Channel. Charles de Gaulle summarised the campaigns decided in that small but easily traversable territory of Belgium and France's north-east:

Through it, Roman Gaul saw the Barbarians hurl themselves upon her wealth. It was there that the Monarchy struggled to resist the pressure of the Holy Roman Empire. There, Louis XIV defended his power against the combined forces of Europe. The Revolution all but came to grief there. Napoleon succumbed there. In 1870, disaster and shame advanced along the same road. In this fatal passage-way we recently buried one-third of our young men.¹

For France, the vulnerability of her political centre, Paris, was of particular concern. Located only 200 kilometres from the north-eastern frontier, the exposed location of Paris was as clear to the French as it was to the German invaders of 1814, 1815, 1870, 1914, and finally 1940.

After the Great War, the French compensated for their vulnerable frontiers by adopting a thoroughly defensive strategy designed to prepare France for total war while keeping its destructive consequences from French soil. In the northeast the French assured their defence first through the occupation of the Rhineland and, when that was terminated in 1930, through the extensive fortifications of the Maginot Line. In the north, Belgium's topography and her association with France through the

¹Charles de Gaulle, The Army of the Future, (London: Hutchinson, 1940), p.12.

1920 Franco-Belgian Military Accord offered the French an alternative to defensive works.

France lacked a major river barrier along her extensive northern frontier facing Belgium. As one French officer observed, "*...la seule ligne d'eau importante qui nous couvre de ce côté est le Meuse; encore peut-elle être tournée, comme en 1914, dans la patrie septentrionale de son cours en dehors de notre territoire nationale!*"² In contrast to France, Belgium's territory was crossed by several rivers such as the Scheldt, Dyle, Meuse, and the waters of the Albert Canal. But these slow moving rivers were only viable obstacles if manned by substantial armed forces which Belgium was unable to provide. France, however, was eager to defend Belgium's rivers and prepared plans to advance into her neighbour's territory to complete the 'continuous front' anchored on the Maginot Line to the south.

Although Belgium had abandoned her failed neutrality during the Great War and aligned herself with the French, her military value was negligible and her commitment to France dubious. The Franco-Belgian Military Accord of 1920 had established few assurances from a Belgian Government torn by domestic tensions between pro-French Walloons and the Flemings. Limited cooperation led to withdrawal, and finally, in 1936, Belgium

²Lt. Col. Lançon, "La défensive devant la mécanisation," Revue militaire française 62 (Oct-Dec 1936):p.48.

returned to a neutral policy, thus ending the already limited Franco-Belgian military relationship. France apparently faced a strategic dilemma. As one historian has observed:

The French could neither accept the prospect of remaining on their northern frontier while the map of Belgium was rolled up and the enemy approached Lille, nor obtain the military planning and prior access they needed to avoid a ruinous encounter on unprepared ground. A great question hung over the north.³

Although the French faced a diplomatic conundrum vis-a-vis Belgium, the Army's High Command was resolute and consistent in its plans for the north in the event of war with Germany. In 1926, the High Command had decided that, within a defensive context, the French would advance into Belgium to establish a defensive line.⁴ Even Marshal Pétain, the great proponent of the 'continuous front', was convinced that the Belgian manoeuvre was the correct course of action.⁵ In 1933, having observed the reluctance of Belgium to cooperate with France and to organise her own defence, de Gaulle sarcastically wrote "...let us not wait for her to tire herself out protecting us."⁶ Thus, for the Army there was no 'question' as to their intentions in the

³John C. Cairns, "Planning for la guerre des masses: Constraints and Contradictions in France Before 1940," Military Planning in the Twentieth Century, Editor Harry Borowski, (Washington: Office of Air Force History, USAF, 1986), p.48.

⁴Roger Bruge, Histoire de la ligne Maginot (Vol. I): Faites sauter la ligne Maginot, (Paris: Fayard, 1973), p.29

⁵Vivian Rowe, The Great Wall of France: The Triumph of the Maginot Line, (London: Putnam, 1959), pp.60-61.

⁶De Gaulle, op. cit., p.25.

north, but there were problems.

In 1940, Commander in Chief Maurice Gamelin was compelled to wait for permission to advance into Belgium, just as de Gaulle had forewarned. As Brian Bond observed, "Gamelin's dilemma of how to check a German attack well forward in Belgium without prior joint planning and in the knowledge that he would only be invited in after the attack had begun, was to constitute his most difficult problem throughout the Phoney War."⁷ In fact, Gamelin's predicament was not unique to the Phoney War but had existed to varying degrees since 1930 when Belgium began her withdrawal from military cooperation with France. Despite Belgium's return to neutrality in 1936, the French Army maintained its plan to advance into its neighbour in the event of a German offensive.

This thesis will show that the French High Command failed to react to the changing diplomatic realities of Franco-Belgian relations during the 1930s in its planning for an advance into Belgium. The strategic aspect of the manoeuvre was flawed by the lack of Belgian cooperation and the concomitant absence of inter-staff communications that put at risk the establishment of an effective defensive line. These problems were not limited to the period of war in 1939 and 1940 but existed throughout the

⁷Brian Bond, France and Belgium, 1939-1940, (London: Davis-Poynter, 1975), pp.41-42.

1930s. The possibility of an encounter battle *en route* to the designated positions became an increasingly worrisome aspect of the plan for the French. Mobility was emphasized only for the strategic advance to contact stage and was not an integral part of French tactical doctrine and operational aims. The French Army was ill suited to fighting mobile battles and to rapid redeployments, but those abilities would have been required if the strategic advance failed. The defeat of the French Army in the mobile campaign of 1940 was a disastrous conclusion to ten years of strategic and operational planning that risked fighting an encounter battle in Belgium. Such a risk was in opposition to the prepared defensive battle the French sought to fight, as represented by the Maginot Line.

Chapter One will focus on the French concepts of war, their strategic planning in Europe, and how Belgium fit into those plans. Much has been written about French interwar strategy but rarely is Belgium's importance prominently featured. If discussed, the focus is typically limited to Belgium's return to neutrality and its effect on French planning in 1940.

The complexity of Franco-Belgian relations throughout the interwar period has been largely neglected by francophile commentators on French strategy who see Belgium as having betrayed France. The most glaring example of this attitude is that of Alistair Horne in his book, To Lose a Battle.

Inaccurately believing that the Franco-Belgian Military Accord of 1920 was an alliance, Horne describes Belgium's decision to terminate the Accord and return to neutrality as being with "...the optimism of the imprudent little pigs."⁸ Although there is some validity to the statement, it fails to address the fact that King Leopold III and the Belgian government had several 'wolves' to contend with - France, Germany, and the internal struggle between the Walloons and the Flemings. In his excellent examination of French Army doctrine and planning, The Seeds of Disaster; The Development of French Army Doctrine, 1919-1939, Robert Doughty also erroneously asserts that Belgium had "...defected from her alliance with France."⁹ An 'alliance' did not exist between France and Belgium, and yet historians repeatedly present the French perception while neglecting that of Belgium. Robert Young's In Command of France offers a more balanced analysis of Belgium's position despite the comment that Belgium was "...proving awkward..." in regards to building defensive works according to French plans and deployments.¹⁰ Brian Bond and Judith Hughs, in France and Belgium, 1939-1940 and To the Maginot Line respectively, focus considerable

⁸Alistair Horne, To Lose a Battle, (Boston: Little, Brown, 1969), p.36.

⁹Robert Doughty, The Seeds of Disaster: The Development of French Army Doctrine, 1919-1939, (Hamden, Conn.: Archon Books, 1988), p.65.

¹⁰Robert Young, In Command of France: French Foreign Policy and Military Planning, 1933-1944, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1978), p.52.

attention on Belgium in their analyses of French interwar planning. However, both books suffer from their parameters of analysis. Bond is primarily concerned with the campaign of 1940 and therefore offers only an overview of the causes of Belgium's intransigent position towards France. In contrast, Hughs very effectively examines French strategy, planning, and army doctrine throughout the interwar period but is also compelled to summarise the Belgian position. Perhaps the best analysis of French planning pertaining to Belgium, although also limited to the years after 1936, is that written by a group of French and Belgian historians in 1968, Les relations Franco-Belges de mars 1936 au 10 mai 1940. With its contributions from both sides of the frontier, this book offers a balanced account of the military planning and diplomatic exchanges between the two nations. The appendices include numerous documents that proved invaluable to this thesis due to the dearth of available primary materials.

The tendency of most analyses to neglect Belgium's position in, and perception of, French interwar planning inspired the dedication of Chapter Two to those issues. Having established the importance of Belgian cooperation to French strategy, it follows that the nature of that cooperation, and the reasons for its decline, require examination. The Franco-Belgian Military Accord of 1920 was the basis of cooperation, and contention, between those two nations until the early 1930s. Jonathon

Helmreich's oft cited article, "The Negotiation of the Franco-Belgian Military Accord of 1920", illustrates the limited enthusiasm Belgium had for bilateral cooperation with France, even at that early stage in their relations. Of the few monographs available concerned with interwar Belgium, Jane Miller's Belgian Foreign Policy, 1919-1940 and David Keift's Belgium's Return to Neutrality proved most useful. Keift, and Roger Keyes in Outrageous Fortune: The Tragedy of Leopold III of Belgium, 1901-1941, offer apologist perspectives, emphasizing that the Accord was not a binding alliance and that France was insensitive to Belgium's domestic and strategic circumstances. For these authors, Belgium was a victim of her geography, cultural division, and limited international power. The insight of General van Overstraeten, in his book Albert I - Leopold III; Vingt ans de politique militaire Belge, 1920-1940, was invaluable as were the documents printed in the appendices. However, as King Leopold's military advisor, Overstraeten's observations are biased and, especially when pertaining to French interwar military effectiveness, written with the advantage of hindsight.

Despite the biases existent in the accounts of Belgium's position, when combined with the sources on French strategic planning two conclusions can be drawn. Firstly, the French belief in Belgian cooperation was originally exaggerated, later erroneous, and was finally based on wishful thinking. Secondly,

given the limits of Franco-Belgian cooperation and the continued insistence on the Belgian manoeuvre, the importance of tactical mobility became enhanced due to the growing likelihood of an encounter battle in Belgium.

Chapter Three examines the tactical doctrine of the French Army in order to assess its capability to engage in a mobile operation and to react in the field to the growing uncertainties of the planned advance into Belgium. Sources related to the French Army's doctrine are numerous, due primarily to its failure against Germany in 1940. Of particular note are the works of Robert Doughty who wrote The Seeds of Disaster; The Development of French Army Doctrine, 1919-1939 and numerous articles such as "French Antitank Doctrine, 1940; The Antidote that Failed", "The Enigma of French Armored Doctrine 1940", and "De Gaulle's Concept of a Mobile Professional Army".

Primary sources concerning tactical doctrine and related contemporary commentary are numerous and available. The basis of all French Army doctrine and regulations was the Instruction provisoire sur l'emploi tactique des grandes unités written in 1921 (henceforth referred to as the Instructions). Compiled by a committee of thirteen officers headed by Marshal Pétain, the Instructions' influence was felt throughout the interwar period. Numerous articles reviewed in this study from the military journals of the French Army - Revue d'infanterie, Revue

d'artillerie, Revue de cavalerie, and the Revue militaire française - all demonstrated a conformity to the Instructions. If most officers adhered to the accepted doctrine, Colonel Charles de Gaulle did not, and presented his views in his book Vers l'armée de métier. His vision of a professional army was in direct opposition to the citizen force that France possessed. Political and military response was negative and in 1935 a directive declared that only the High Command was sanctioned to discuss army doctrine.¹¹

Resistance to change is typical of armies founded on tradition and the experience of the past. For the French Army, the tenacious defence of its strategy and tactical doctrine was in contradiction to the diplomatic realities and their potential consequences on the expected battleground of Belgium.

¹¹General A. Beaufre, "Liddell Hart and the French Army, 1919-1939," The Theory and Practice of War, Editor Michael Howard, (New York: Praeger, 1966), p.140.

Chapter One: French Strategy and Planning

The Great War had a pervasive influence on French precepts of war and on French strategic planning after the Allied victory in 1918. The national mobilisation required to win that 'total war' sustained the belief that France would have to be prepared to fight such a war again. The loss of 1.4 million soldiers and the extensive destruction of French territory meant that the inviolability of France's frontiers was central to her post-war strategic aims. Indeed, war on French soil was not acceptable even if sound military theory and planning had to be compromised. French military strategy was thus primarily defensive, relying on the war-tested concepts of the methodical battle and *couverture*. Although French strategy rested consistently on defence, by 1930 there existed a duality of form differentiating the northeast from the north. In the northeast, the concrete and gun turrets of the Maginot Line presented an apparently impregnable front to the Germans and reassured the French. In the north, the French Army intended to advance into Belgium to establish a defensive line leaving behind an unfortified frontier. The fortifications of the Maginot Line and the planned advance into Belgium seem inconsistent, but both were derived from the same strategy and precepts of war that envisaged a prepared defensive battle.

The insatiable appetite of the Great War for men and materiel had demonstrated the importance of national preparedness for

total war in the future.¹ War would require the mobilisation of the nation's human resources and, due to its expected length, its economic and industrial strength as well. The quantity and quality of materiel would henceforth win wars.² Accepting that fact, General Debeney noted that "*...l'arsenal d'aujourd'hui s'étend sur le pays entier, il englobe ses mines, ses usines, ses fabriques de toute nature et une parcelle du sol national perdue est une brèche dans les munitions de guerre.*"³

Total war required a comprehensive plan for France's war effort and this was found in the methodical battle that had both strategic and tactical incarnations.⁴ Strategically, the methodical battle called for an initial defense, allowing for the completion of mobilisation, followed at an indeterminate time, by an offensive that led to ultimate victory. Although

¹Robert Doughty, The Seeds of Disaster: The Development of French Army Doctrine, 1919-1939, (Hamden, Conn.: Archon Books, 1988), p.15. Also see Judith Hughs, To the Maginot Line, (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard university Press, 1977), pp.56-57.

²Robert Young, "Preparations for Defeat; French War Doctrine," Journal of European Studies 2 (June,1972):p.158.

³General M. Debeney, "Nos fortifications du nord-est," Revue de deux mondes 23 (Sep 15, 1934):p.243.

⁴Doughty, Seeds of Disaster, op. cit., pp.9-10. The 'methodical battle' typically refers to the tactical employment of armies employing defensive fire-power to blunt an enemy's attack followed by a counter-offensive. This tactical principle, as used in the Great War, is mirrored in the strategic planning of the inter-war period. Robert Young calls this strategic process the "two-stage war". Young, "Preparations for Defeat," op. cit. p.158.

the offensive was still considered the decisive method of war, preliminary defense was both a choice and a necessity for the security of republican France.

The republican notion of a nation in arms - originating from the revolutionary '*levée en masse*' of 1793 - had a profound influence on the parameters of action open to the military in the period after the Great War.⁵ Recognising the inevitability of total war, the citizenry of France would be called upon to defend the Republic.⁶ Relying on the *levée en masse* meant by definition that a crisis was already at hand, and defense would be the only option.⁷ Moreover, initiating offensive action was militarily impossible given the small size of the standing army and the progressively diminishing service time of the conscripts.

After the shattering defeat of 1870, the Third Republic passed

⁵For a comprehensive study of the French concept of a nation in arms refer to Challener, Richard D., The French Theory of a Nation in Arms, 1866-1939, (New York: Russell & Russell, 1965). Challener argues that republican France viewed military service as a moral obligation to the nation. Indeed, it was only with a citizen army that a nation could fight a morally just war. Concurrently, professional soldiers were seen as aggressive, reactionary, and potentially dangerous to the Republic - the Boulanger and Dreyfus affairs fuelling that opinion -but necessary as a cadre for the mass armies needed in modern war.

⁶In 1935, General Debeney observed that "[L]a guerre moderne, la guerre de materiel impose la nation en armes." General Debeney, "Les conditions de la sécurité nationale," Revue hebdomadaire 23 (Feb-Mar 1935):p.395.

⁷Doughty, Seeds of Disaster, op. cit., p.16.

and maintained legislation for army conscription. While that remained relatively secure, the length of service time was hotly debated and saw progressive reduction during the 1920s. The Superior Council of War - an advisory council composed of the marshals and high ranking generals of France but chaired by the Minister of War or the President of the Republic - fought to sustain the size of the army which depended on the availability of recruits and the length of their service, combined with the size of the professional cadre. In face of political pressure and lacking any real power, the Superior Council had to accept a diminishing number of divisions, fewer recruits engaged in a shorter service time, and a reduced professional cadre. Hence, the request for a forty-one division army was reduced to thirty-two in 1920, and then twenty divisions in 1926.⁸ Conscription laws reduced the duration of service from three years to two years in 1921, to eighteen months in 1923, and one year in 1928.⁹ In 1935 conscription time was increased to two years to compensate for the 50% reduction in the number of conscripts available for service. This period, from 1935 to 1939, was known as the *années creuses* and stemmed from the absence of the unborn sons of the Great War's casualties. Finally, the professional cadre was also reduced from 150 000 to 106 000 in the 1928 law.

⁸Doughty, Seeds of Disaster, op. cit., p. 19.

⁹Stephen Ryan, Pétain the Soldier, (New York: A.S. Barnes, 1969), pp.219-223.

The standing army's small size limited its parameters of action both in peace and war. First, the army was responsible for the training of conscripts. The most capable soldiers, the professional cadre, "...n'auraient d'autre préoccupation que celle de l'instruction."¹⁰ Second, in the event of war the standing army was responsible for preliminary frontier security and was to provide the cadres for the numerous new divisions mobilised from the citizen army of reservists. When reorganised after mobilisation, the French Army's active duty soldiers and professionals would have been spread very thinly indeed. In 1939, thirty of the ninety-four divisions mobilised in the European theatre were considered 'active' formations with the remaining divisions being predominantly composed of reservists.¹¹ With her reliance on a *levée en masse* and a belief in total war, France adopted the concept of *couverture* to provide the initial defense of the methodical battle and to allow for her mobilisation.

Couverture was not an original concept, but was reinterpreted and made more rigid by the French after the Great War. Napoleon

¹⁰Eugene Carrias, La pensée militaire française (Paris: Presses Universitaire de France, 1960), p.327. Ryan also makes reference to the army's peacetime role "... as an instrument of instruction, a vast military school..." Ryan, op. cit., p.223.

¹¹Major -General R. H. Barry, "Military Balance," History of the Second World War (Part 4, 1973):p.96. Approximately 50% of the active division's infantry regiments were drawn from the standing army. The remaining divisions, known as 'A' or 'B' divisions, had a maximum of 2% of their rank and file drawn from the active-duty troops. Doughty, Seeds of Disaster, op. cit., p.23.

Bonaparte made extensive use of *couverture* in the form of cavalry screens and demonstrations.¹² These were designed to confuse and occupy the enemy while the Emperor concentrated his forces and surprised his bewildered foe. In addition to the limited security *couverture* offered, it also provided intelligence as to the movements of the enemy. In 1914 the French utilised frontier troops for a similar purpose, but increased their strength to eleven divisions to enhance their defensive value in order to ensure that mobilisation would not be affected by enemy moves.¹³ Both in 1805 and in 1914 *couverture* was not intended to stop the enemy but to slow his progress, confuse him, and, if necessary, trade ground for time. In the interwar period, France determined that ground was not available for trade and frontier defense would halt the enemy and protect French mobilisation.¹⁴

The secure mobilisation of France's industry also required a stalwart defence during the phase of *couverture*. For a nation

¹²During the campaign of 1805, Napoleon used large formations of cavalry, commanded by Joachim Murat, to screen his army's strategic out-flanking manoeuvre. This culminated in the Austrian surrender at Ulm and then victory at the Battle of Austerlitz. Philip Haythornthwaite, Napoleon's Military Machine, (Kent: Spellmount Ltd., 1988), p.114.

¹³Young, "Preparations for Defeat", op. cit., p.156.

¹⁴In 1930, General Targe defined *couverture* as "...l'ensemble des moyens nécessaires et suffisants pour assurer, pendant un temps limité, la protection de nos frontières contre toutes les incursions de l'ennemi." Gen. Targe, La garde de nos frontières: constitution et organisation des forces de couverture, (Paris: Charles-Lavauzelle, 1930), p.12.

committed to the notion of total war, France's industrial strength and natural resources were precariously close to the vulnerable frontiers of the northeast. High percentages of the staples of war - iron ore, coal, oil, and related industrial complexes - were located in regions and cities such as Alsace, Longuyon, Valenciennes, Briey, and Lorraine.¹⁵ It was imperative that these resources were available for the sustenance of the mobilised nation in arms who would be preparing for the final phase of the methodical battle, the offensive. Marshal Weygand was emphatic about the need to defend the frontier and used the Great War to illustrate that a *front inviolable* could be created.¹⁶ The inviolability of the frontier was thus of critical importance to the entirety of French military strategy and aims.

The requirement of *couverture* was further enhanced by the French fear of a German surprise attack, or the *attaque brusquée* as it

¹⁵Young, "Preparations for Defeat", *op. cit.*, p.157. Also see Doughty, *Seeds of Disaster*, *op. cit.*, pp.41-43.

¹⁶Carrias, *op. cit.*, p.325. Carrias goes on to refute Weygand's view of a 'front inviolable':
"...le front occidental avait été effectivement rompu en 1918 par les Allemandes à plusieurs reprises, les percées avaient été de 80 kilomètres de large, de 45 km de profondeur en Flandre, de 70 km sur 50 km au Chemin des Dames, de 30 km sur 12 km sur le Metz, mais le commandement allié avait eu le temps de constituer en arrière des brèches de nouveaux fronts, qui avaient été reliés aux parties de l'ancien non attaquées. L'axiome du front inviolable était une formule inexacte." (pp.325-326)

became known.¹⁷ Although the German Army's capacity for offensive action was negligible until 1937,¹⁸ the French military propagated an aggressive version of Germany's military strategy. In a 1936 article concerning army mechanisation, Lt. Col. Lançon stressed the danger of an *attaque brusquée* from Germany, whose population "...*classe la guerre comme un moyen normal pour atteindre ses fins politiques.*"¹⁹ Of principal concern was the possibility that a surprise attack could penetrate the defenses of *couverture* before France had mobilised her war resources. Lançon summarised the dire effects if *couverture* failed including "...*les voies ferrées, les routes, les lignes télégraphiques et téléphoniques coupées, les garnisons surprises dans leur casernements, en un mot non seulement la concentration, mais la mobilisation impossibles.*"²⁰ While this picture of doom was, by 1936, becoming more valid, in

¹⁷Robert Young, "L'Attaque Brusquée and Its Use as Myth in Interwar France," Historical Reflections 8 (1981):pp.93-113. Young explores the 'attaque brusquée' as a deliberately developed myth the army fed to the public and government to defend military expenditures. Although the threat of a German attack was exaggerated until the mid-1930s, Germany's vulnerable geographic location made short, 'blitzkrieg' type wars necessary. Moreover, the Nazi regime's political and economic programs made the stresses of total war unacceptable, thus imposing the parameters of limited war that demanded surprise and speed. See Alan Milward, The German Economy at War, (London: University of London, 1965).

¹⁸Robert J. O'Neill, The German Army and the Nazi Party, 1933-1939, (New York: James H. Heineman, 1966), pp.118-119. Until 1937, the German Army was concerned about a French attack, not the possibility of offensive action.

¹⁹Lt. Col. Lançon, "Motorisation et manoeuvre," Revue militaire française 60 (Apr-Jun 1936):p.50.

²⁰Lançon, "Motorisation et manoeuvre," op. cit., p.51.

the early 1920s France had little to fear from her defeated and largely demilitarised neighbour.

French aims and precepts of war remained consistent throughout the 1920s and 1930s despite the changes evident in their planning. In the immediate aftermath of the Great War the French held the strategic trump card of the Treaty of Versailles which provided France with numerous defense advantages. The demilitarisation of the Rhineland combined with the French right to occupy the west bank of the Rhine, ensured that war would not be fought on French soil and made an *attaque brusquée* against France virtually impossible. The reduction of the German Army to 100,000 men further assured French security. Within this context, the French formulated Plan P in 1921, which involved limited offensive strikes into Germany.²¹ Nevertheless, the advantages provided by the Treaty had temporal limits and the French recognised that they would need the help of allies if they were to counter successfully Germany in a future total war.

France looked both to her neighbours and to the east in her search for allies after the Great War. The perceived industrial and military might of Britain was considered vital to French security,²² but until 1936 the British remained uncommitted to

²¹Hughs, op. cit., pp.83-84.

²²Hughs, op. cit., p.57. Also see Robert Young, In Command of France: French Foreign Policy and Military Planning, 1933-1944, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1978), p.22.

continental alliances.²³ Britain was concerned more with her post-war domestic, imperial, and economic circumstances than with the French desire to isolate Germany. Indeed, the British supported the stabilization of European relations which involved the reintegration of Germany both politically and economically. Thus, far from pursuing Germany for her Treaty of Versailles obligations, Britain was active in the Treaty's revision through arrangements such as the Dawes Plan and the Locarno agreements, discussed later in this chapter.

Initially France enjoyed greater diplomatic success with the newly created nations of Poland and Czechoslovakia.²⁴ In 1921 a treaty was initiated with Poland that included economic and military agreements. If Germany posed a threat, France and Poland agreed to give mutual support of a scale and quality deemed appropriate by the signatories at the time of the crisis. In 1924 the Franco-Czechoslovak Treaty of Alliance and Friendship was signed that France hoped would extend to Czechoslovakia's Little Entente allies, Rumania and Yugoslavia. These treaties were in fact concluded in 1926 and 1927 respectively. Unfortunately, territorial disputes and cultural differences divided France's eastern allies and made concerted

²³Young, In Command of France, op. cit., p.124. In reaction to the German remilitarization of the Rhineland, in March 1936, Britain formally committed herself to French defense.

²⁴For a comprehensive analysis see: Piotr S. Wandycz, The Twilight of French Eastern Alliances, 1926-1936, (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1988).

action unlikely. In fact, while France sought to gain allies in the east in order to isolate Germany, these same allies, and even France, independently engaged in diplomatic relations with Germany that undermined the intent of the Franco-eastern alliances.²⁵

French failure to gain assurances from Britain, and the dubious value of her eastern alliances contrasted with the apparent success of Franco-Belgian relations. A defense agreement with Belgium was avidly pursued by France after the war due to that country's location on a strategically vulnerable portion of the French frontier. Belgium also sought to gain military assurances from her neighbours. Belgium approached both Britain and France, but the former refused to give Belgium any guarantee of support unless she was neutral. Neutrality had proven disastrous in 1914, and already in June of 1915 the Belgian government had decided to terminate her neutral status.²⁶ Hence, Belgium and France found themselves mutually rejected by Britain but both interested in the integrity of Belgian territory. On September 7, 1920, the Franco-Belgian Military Accord was signed after lengthy but mutually advantageous

²⁵Wandycz, op. cit., p.449.

²⁶Jane Miller, Belgian Foreign Policy Between Two Wars, 1919-1940, (New York: Octagon Books, 1964), p.70.

negotiations.²⁷

For France, the Accord with Belgium provided support for actions related to the stipulations of the Treaty of Versailles. This was most clearly manifested in the 1923 Franco-Belgian occupation of the Ruhr. Combined with the Rhineland, Belgium also provided a base for operations against Germany, safely originating from outside of France. Hence, Belgium was incorporated into Plan P and her forces put under joint command of the French Marshal Foch. The luxury of French offensive planning would, however, be short lived. The French reduced conscription service time to eighteen months in 1923 significantly reducing the army's effective strength. Furthermore, the French were compelled to reorient their foreign policy in a manner that deemphasized the Treaty of Versailles which resulted in the loss of many of the strategic advantages that the treaty had provided.

Financial crisis, diplomatic alienation over the continued Ruhr occupation, and the victory of the Cartel des Gauches in the 1924 elections resulted in a more conciliatory and less independent French foreign policy. Requiring loans from Anglo-American creditors as much as the assurance of continued

²⁷See Jonathon Helmreich, "The Negotiation of the Franco-Belgian Military Accord of 1920," French Historical Studies 3 (Spring 1964):pp.360-378. This is an excellent account and analysis of the negotiations of 1920.

reparations payments from Germany, Premiers Raymond Poincaré and Edouard Herriot were forced to relinquish their virtually unilateral monitoring of the Treaty of Versailles in favour of international involvement.²⁸ This process began at the July-August London Conference of 1924 and led to the acceptance of the Experts Commission's report named the Dawes Plan. The Dawes Plan undermined the French dominated Reparations Commission and put into question the legal justification of the Ruhr occupation. If the Dawes Plan were to resolve the reparations question, there was no need for French troops in the Ruhr. In fact, the continued allied military presence in the Rhineland lacked justification given Article 431 of the Treaty of Versailles which provided for an early withdrawal if Germany fulfilled her Treaty obligations.²⁹ These obligations seemed to have been achieved, or at least managed, by the Dawes Plan and the Locarno agreements signed the following year.

In October, 1925 the Locarno agreements were signed, stemming from the League of Nation's Geneva Protocol, the Dawes Plan, and the conciliatory assurances made by the astute German Foreign

²⁸Hughs, op.cit., p.152. Judith Hughs gives an excellent account of the diplomatic manoeuvres of the mid-1920s, such as the London Conference, the Dawes Plan, and the Locarno agreements. The internationalisation of German reparations management and western security would ultimately limit the strategic options available to France. Hughs, op. cit., chapters 4 and 5.

²⁹Hughs, op. cit., p.189.

Minister, Gustav Stresemann. France, Britain, Germany, Belgium, and Italy all agreed to guarantee the borders dividing Germany from her two western neighbours, France and Belgium. Although Locarno would theoretically assure peace in the west, France's eastern allies were not included in the agreements. Britain had no intention of coming to the aid of Poland or the Little Entente, which was a position the French yielded to in order to ensure British interest in the west. In addition, France was compelled to withdraw her forces from the occupied west bank of the Rhine in advance of the 1935 date specified in the Versailles Treaty. With yet another revision of reparations payments - the 1929 Young Plan - Article 431 of the Versailles Treaty was enacted and the French agreed to withdraw from the Rhineland in July of 1930.³⁰

Hence, under the guise of collective security, France had lost much of her foreign policy independence, had largely abandoned her eastern allies, and had again compromised her determination to uphold the Treaty of Versailles. France had, however, gained at least limited assurances from Britain - a departure from Whitehall's usual avoidance of Continental commitments. However, with the Rhineland lost and her eastern allies thus further separated, France had to reconsider her defense options.

During the 1920s, planning the defense of France proper caused

³⁰Hughs, op. cit., p.190.

heated debate amongst the highest ranking leaders of the French military. While the advantages stemming from the Versailles Treaty allowed for offensive planning against Germany, the loss of these advantages combined with the diminishing size of the army made the preparation of French territorial defense imperative. How best to achieve that end revolved around conflicting concepts of defense, the nature of fortifications, and the depth required for an effective defensive strategy. The principal players in this debate were Marshals Philippe Pétain, Ferdinand Foch, and Joseph Joffre supported by generals such as Eugene Debeney, Marie Guillaumat, and Edmond Buat.³¹ Due to his service in the Great War and his long tenure as vice-president of the Superior Council (1920-1931), Pétain wielded considerable influence in those formative years of French planning and doctrine.

From the discussions of the Superior Council of War and the Commission for the Defence of the Territory, created by the Council in 1922, two major concepts of defence emerged. Both options sought to gain time for, and protect, the mobilisation of France. Marshal Pétain and General Buat proposed the creation of a static 'continuous front', employing field fortifications and defensive works reminiscent of the trenches

³¹Robert Doughty gives an excellent account of the defense debate of the 1920s. Doughty, Seeds of Disaster, op. cit., pp.45-56.

of the Great War.³² Foch adamantly opposed static defense and encouraged offensive planning.³³ Chairman of the Commission Joffre, and his successor Guillaumat, agreed that France would be better served by a strategy that allowed for the offensive. Fortified areas would be the centres of resistance around which the attacks would flow.³⁴ General Debeney supported the idea of fortified regions but saw them as defensive bases and not as facilitators for the offense. It was Debeney's interpretation that would prevail, not only due to his influence, but also to the recognition that offensive planning was becoming untenable for the French Army.

The reduced size and service time of the army combined with the military implications of the Dawes and Locarno agreements put to rest most of the support for offensive planning and encouraged defensive preparations. In 1925, the Frontier Defence Commission, created by War Minister Paul Painlevé, identified three areas that required fortifying: the Metz, Lauter, and Belfort regions.³⁵ Not surprisingly, all three areas were located in the north-east, on the common frontier with Germany.

³²Doughty, Seeds of Disaster, op. cit., p.48. Also see Hughs, op. cit., p.199 and Jean Paul Pallud, "The Maginot Line," After the Battle (No. 60, 1988):p.1.

³³Hughs, op. cit., p.199 and p.48.

³⁴Doughty, Seeds of Disaster, op. cit., p.48. Also see Hughs, op. cit., p. 199 and Pallud, op. cit., p.1.

³⁵Pallud, op. cit., p.1

The nature of the fortifications was the next issue to be debated.

The French command recognised that fortifications were important to the success of *couverture* and made more economical use of the limited number of conscripts available. Analyses done in 1927 in the Belfort region concluded that Pétain's continuous front of field works required greater numbers of troops than larger concrete fortresses.³⁶ In recognition of this, Pétain re-evaluated his position and supported heavy fortifications. The Marshal did oppose, however, Guillaumat's proposal of surface fortresses located near the frontier. Fortresses were vulnerable to artillery and air attack, and their forward position precluded the sound military principle of defense in depth. Pétain suggested successive lines of defence resting on vast underground fortresses. The Superior Council accepted Pétain's concept of fortifications, but they maintained the need to defend the frontier so as to protect vital resources and industry from an *attaque brusquée*. This was particularly important given the imminent withdrawal of French troops from the Rhineland and the concomitant loss of that buffer zone. After two years of planning and revisions, the Minister of War, Andre Maginot, requested and secured the initial sum of 2 900 million francs specified by the army for the line of

³⁶Field fortifications required one battalion every two kilometres in contrast to the five kilometres suggested in the planning parameters. Doughty, Seeds of Disaster, op. cit., p.55.

fortifications in the north-east that would be known as the Maginot Line.³⁷

In form, the Maginot Line combined the fortified areas of Joffre and Guillaumat with elements of Pétain's 'continuous front'.³⁸ The Line consisted of complex underground fortresses manned by 65 to 1000 men depending on the size of the fort. Each fortress was carefully placed to take full advantage of the surrounding terrain with only the combat blocks exposed to the outside. Command posts, quarters, and storage facilities were underground, linked by tunnels. Only the major fortresses had artillery turrets, while minor works were limited to machinegun turrets. Interspersed between the fortresses were hundreds of small concrete casemates designed for about thirty infantry and their heavy weapons. To ensure flank and rear security, and to protect gaps between the fortifications, special interval troops were also provided.³⁹ When in 1935 most of the fortifications had been completed, the Maginot Line consisted of 22 major fortresses, 36 minor fortresses, 311 casemates, and 92 shelters

³⁷Pallud, op. cit., p.2.

³⁸Pallud gives an excellent description of the technical aspects and composition of the Maginot Line. Pallud, op. cit., pp.4-10.

³⁹Alistair Horne identifies the fact that these interval troops were a considerable drain on the mobile elements available to the French Army moving into Belgium in 1940. Alistair Horne, To Lose a Battle, (Boston: Little, Brown, 1969), p.27.

and observation posts.⁴⁰ It was an impressive achievement. General Debeney expressed his approval when he wrote: "*Nos fortifications de l'Est, bien moulées au terrain, à la fois souples et solides, méritent donc confiance.*"⁴¹ But it also left vast portions of France's eastern frontier unfortified, and most notably the historical route of invasion from the north, through Belgium.

Topography was an important factor in the French decision to leave northern Luxembourg and Belgium basically unfortified. To the immediate north of the Maginot Line, at Montmedy, lay the rough terrain of the Ardennes forest. This region was not considered as a viable invasion route, and if it was utilised by the Germans, Pétain forecast their destruction as they issued piecemeal from the dense forests.⁴² During the 1930s this attitude remained consistent in the French High Command.⁴³

Whereas the rugged terrain precluded the need for fortifications before the Ardennes, the Franco-Belgian frontier region was apparently too open for permanent works. Already in 1926 the

⁴⁰Pallud, op. cit., p.3.

⁴¹Debeney, "Nos fortifications...", op. cit., p.254.

⁴²Pétain stated to the Superior Council that "[S]'il s'y engage, on le repincera à la sortie des forêts. Donc ce secteur n'est pas dangereux." Quoted from Roger Bruge, Faites sauter la Ligne Maginot, (Paris: Fayard, 1973), p.34.

⁴³Doughty, Seeds of Disaster, op. cit., pp. 58-59. Also see Young, "Preparations for Defeat," op. cit., p.162.

Superior Council had decided that, within the context of defence, the French Army would advance into Belgium to establish a line of resistance along selected river barriers.⁴⁴ Pétain was also convinced that the north was a front of manoeuvre and that the continuous front would extend from north-eastern France through Belgium, hinging on the Ardennes. His reasons were numerous and influential.⁴⁵ The flat terrain of the Low Countries made effective placement of fortifications difficult, especially when combined with the engineering difficulties associated with underground fortresses and ground water. These difficulties, and the considerable length of the Franco-Belgian frontier, made fortifications prohibitively expensive.⁴⁶

For the inhabitants of the north, engineering and financial difficulties did not satisfy their desire for tangible defenses. Even before the Maginot Line had been started, between 1927 and 1930, the Chambers of Commerce and the *Chambre d'agriculture du*

⁴⁴At the December 17 meeting of the Superior Council, "[U]ne majorité semble se dessiner en faveur de l'entrée des troupes françaises en Belgique dans le cas où celle-ci serait à nouveau violée par l'Allemagne." Bruges, *op. cit.*, p.29. The rivers of Belgium were particularly important to French planning and *couverture*. General Camon suggested that "[P]our faciliter sa mission, une armée de couverture s'appuie généralement à une barrière difficile à franchir par l'ennemi, si possible, à un grand fleuve bridé par des places fortes." General Camon, "Armée de couverture," *Revue militaire française* 17 (Oct-Dec 1925):p.5.

⁴⁵For a summation of Pétain's views refer to Vivian Rowe, *The Great Wall of France: The Triumph of the Maginot Line*, (London: Putnam, 1959), pp.60-61.

⁴⁶Robert Frankenstein, *Le prix du réarmement français, 1935-1939*, (Paris: Publications de la Sorbonne, 1982), p.47.

nord voted resolutions that emphasized the need to defend the north.⁴⁷ Although the Superior Council resisted the notion and cost of fortifying the north, the government was compelled to react to public concerns. With the promise of additional funding from the Senate army commission, the Superior Council again considered northern fortifications in June, 1932.⁴⁸ The Council voted against fixed works and believed that the 250 million francs that they had been offered would be better used in tank and anti-tank gun development, and enhancing the defenses of the north-east.⁴⁹ War Minister Daladier ignored the vote of the Superior Council, however, and allotted almost 300 million francs to northern fortifications. This sum was superficial compared to the 7000 million francs spent on the much shorter Maginot Line.⁵⁰ The resultant fortifications built in 1934 were limited primarily to casemates in the regions of Valenciennes and Maubeuge, with field works covering much of the frontier between Sedan and Lille.⁵¹ Despite their inadequacies, the fortifications calmed public anxieties and allowed the military to continue their analysis of how to defend the north effectively.

⁴⁷Bruge, op. cit., p.29.

⁴⁸Doughty, Seeds of Disaster, op. cit., p.63.

⁴⁹The vote was seven to six against frontier fortifications in the north. Bruge, op. cit., p.31. Also see Doughty, Seeds of Disaster, op. cit., pp. 63-64.

⁵⁰Rowe, op. cit., p.86.

⁵¹Bruge, op. cit., p.31.

Strategic considerations significantly influenced the shape of northern defence. The need to protect resources and industry for 'total war' was particularly problematic. Located near the frontier, dense industrial regions, such as those of Valenciennes and Turcoing-Roubaix, would have been rendered battlefields if their defense was planned from within French territory. Clearly, this would not have been conducive to war production.

Keeping war from French soil also influenced planning for the north. By the late 1920s the French recognised that the Rhineland would be lost and relied on frontier defence to provide *couverture*. The difficulty of fortifying the north apparently precluded that option and encouraged the French Army to consider Belgium as her battlefield. Thus, instead of isolating Belgium on the wrong side of substantial fortifications, France embraced the military relationship established by the dated 1920 Accord, and defined her plans for the advance into Belgium.

With the establishment of the Maginot Line in the north-east, the French command formulated complimentary plans for the north that would, in effect, complete the 'continuous front' in Belgium. Plan C (1930), Plan D (1933), Plan Dbis(1935), and Plan E (1938) all foresaw a rapid French advance to defensive

positions along the rivers and canals of Belgium.⁵² The extent of the advance changed with each plan as the French command reacted to changing international circumstances. French plans to support Belgian formations along the latter's frontier with Germany were amended in 1930. In reaction to the evacuation of the Rhineland, Belgium opted for a more cautious relationship with France and demanded that French forces wait for an invitation before initiating their advance.⁵³ Plan D envisaged the establishment of a defensive line that ran from Givet, on the French frontier, through Namur, along the Dyle River to Antwerp.⁵⁴ Plan Dbis simply emphasized the need for efficiency and speed in the Belgian manoeuvre due to Germany's 1935 declaration of large scale rearmament and mechanisation.⁵⁵ Partly in reaction to the German remilitarisation of the Rhineland in 1936 and the Belgian return to neutrality the same year, another defensive line in Belgium was considered. Plan E limited the advance into Belgium to a line from Conde to Ghent

⁵²For an overview of French planning in the north see Doughty, Seeds of Disaster, op. cit., pp.65-67; Hughs, op. cit., pp.219-220. Plan Dbis and Plan E are discussed in particular detail by Lt. Col. Henry Dutailly, Les problèmes de l'armée de terre française (1935-1939), (Paris: Imprimerie Nationale, 1980), pp.93-111.

⁵³Doughty, Seeds of Disaster, op. cit., p.65. The Belgian position regarding French planning will be examined in detail in Chapter 2.

⁵⁴Doughty, Seeds of Disaster, op. cit., p.66.

⁵⁵Dutailly, op. cit., pp.93-100.

along the Escaut River, terminating at Zeebrugge or Antwerp.⁵⁶ Of the various options considered by the French command, Plan D represented the shortest defensive front and was the plan adopted by Commander-in-Chief Gamelin in November 1939.⁵⁷ Regardless of the depth of the French advance into Belgium, three factors were consistent in French planning: the emphasis on defense as opposed to offense; the conviction that the Belgian manoeuvre was the best defense option; and the recognition that mobility would be required to achieve the plans.

With its intent to establish a defensive line in Belgium, the French Army organised mobile defense parks. These mobile formations consisted of engineering equipment, supplies, and ammunition for the creation of substantial field fortifications, each sufficient for a division. The resultant fortifications would be established "*...en 15 jours, dans un secteur de 5 à 7 kilomètres de front...capable de résister a une attaque appuyée au maximum par du calibre 150.*"⁵⁸

The capacity to construct field fortifications was vital to the French Army. Believing in the devastating effectiveness of

⁵⁶Doughty, Seeds of Disaster, op. cit., p.66. Also see Dutailly, op. cit., pp.100-111

⁵⁷Doughty, Seeds of Disaster, op. cit., p.66.

⁵⁸Bruge, op. cit., p.8.

defensive firepower, the French feared an encounter battle of movement that the Great War had shown to be so costly. An unflankable defensive line would force the Germans into a frontal assault that would be destroyed by the French *mitrailleuses* and artillery. Ironically, the field fortifications planned for Belgium would not be dissimilar - and would likely be much weaker - to the works Pétain had unsuccessfully suggested for the north-east and that Debeney later criticised. In his 1934 article, Debeney wrote that "...les progrès du matériel avaient enlevé à la fortification de campagne sa puissance."⁵⁹ Indeed, the whole concept of the mobile defence parks was contrary to the rationale for the much praised fortifications of the Maginot Line.⁶⁰ Nevertheless, given sufficient time, and the ability to concentrate their mobile army in the north thanks to the Maginot Line defending the north-east, the French believed that an effective line of defense could be established. Neither the possibility that their hastily erected defenses might be confronted by a rapid aerial and mechanised assault, nor the threat of an encounter battle, dissuaded the French command from adhering to their plans.

The advance into Belgium was consistent with the defensive aims of France. War would be kept from French soil and the

⁵⁹Debeney, "Nos fortifications...", op. cit., p.247.

⁶⁰Hughs, op. cit., p.215.

couverture in Belgium would protect the industries and resources vital for conducting the methodical battle and total war. However, whereas *couverture* in the north-east was firmly established by the defenses of the Maginot Line, in the north it would be preceded by a potentially risky advance requiring considerable mobility. The contrast in form between the Belgian manoeuvre and the Maginot Line was problematic. Robert Young aptly observes that "...the almost instantly contrived legend of the Maginot Line served to impede the cause of mobility. So major an undertaking was this Line, so expensive, so well publicized, and ultimately so exaggerated, that fixed fortifications seemed to obviate the need for mobility."⁶¹ Mobility would be a negligible problem, however, if France were permitted to enter Belgium early enough to establish her defenses. For this permission, France relied on the cooperation of Belgium.

In the formative decade of French defence planning after the Great War, France felt confident in the notion that Belgian defense aims were congruent with those of France. Given the reasons outlined above, France was compelled to consider the defence of Belgium as part of her own defence.⁶² Paul Reynaud,

⁶¹Young, In Command of France, op. cit., p.62

⁶²Ryan, Pétain the Soldier, op. cit., p.263.

the outspoken French parliamentarian of the interwar years, went so far as to state that Belgium was considered a "...border province of France" in French planning.⁶³ The Franco-Belgian Military Accord of 1920 encouraged French confidence in Belgian cooperation. In his discussion concerning the Maginot Line, General Debeney disregarded the possibility that the Line could be out-flanked through Belgium. Debeney stressed that Belgium had renounced neutrality and had developed a considerable force of defence, but, more importantly, emphasized that France would come to the aid of her 'ally', thus negating that channel of invasion.⁶⁴ Throughout the 1920s the French believed - or, at least, relied on the concept - that the Franco-Belgium Accord was, indeed, tantamount to an alliance.⁶⁵ But, was the Accord an 'alliance' from the Belgian perspective? The 1923 occupation of the Ruhr seemed to support that notion for the French. However, with the allied withdrawal from the Rhineland and the increasingly intense international scene of the 1930s, Belgium seriously reconsidered her relations with France and her status in Europe. France, however, had set in concrete, both figuratively and in fact, a defensive strategy that they were unwilling to amend to respond to the new realities of the decade

⁶³Paul Reynaud, In the Thick of the Fight, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1955), p.92.

⁶⁴Debeney, "*Nos fortifications...*," op. cit., p.257-258.

⁶⁵Gunsburg believes that Pétain "...counted on Belgium as an ally..." during the defense debate of the 1920s. Gunsburg, op. cit., p.13.

prior to the Second World War.

Chapter Two: Belgium and Military Cooperation with France

Belgium assumed an important place in French military strategy throughout the interwar period stemming from its strategically vulnerable location between Germany and France. Despite Belgium's importance and vulnerability, her cooperation with the French was restrained in the 1920s and ultimately evaporated in the 1930s. The 1920 Franco-Belgian Military Accord was the vehicle for cooperation and was equated by the French to a treaty of alliance which would facilitate their plans for defense in the north. Even after its dissolution in 1936, the French continued to rely on the sentiment of collaboration that had encouraged Belgium to sign the 1920 Accord. Moreover, although military cooperation had ended, the French Army still believed that the advance into Belgium was a preferable defensive option to the defence of their own northern frontier.

Like France, Belgium also sought assurances from her friends after neutrality had failed her in the Great War. Although Belgium wanted military support from Britain and France, the fact that only the latter chose to join in an accord meant that the Belgian government had to tread gently in regards to her foreign and military policies so as not to appear dominated by her large guarantor. Relations with France were particularly distrusted by the Flemish population who were at odds with the pro-French Walloons in Belgium. As one historian has observed,

the fundamental dilemma of the Belgian military and government was how to placate the Flemish population's desire for isolation while planning a defensive network that coordinated with friends.¹ Thus, it is imperative to examine the Belgian perspective on the 1920 Accord and on their military relations with France. Through this endeavour, we will see that the French reliance on Belgian cooperation was misplaced. Belgium's efforts to redefine and then disentangle herself from her Accord with France were not sudden events but were rather a long process. Nevertheless, from before the conclusion of the Versailles negotiations to the beginning of the Second World War, France remained optimistic regarding Belgian cooperation, and held onto her plans for the advance into Belgium.

Belgium's limited enthusiasm for close military relations with France was evident even during the negotiations of the 1920 Accord. Belgian Foreign Minister Paul Hymans took the opportunity of the Accord negotiations - started in January 1920 - to advance economic demands related to Luxembourg and her rail system.² Until the Great War, Luxembourg's closest economic partner had been Germany, who also controlled the Duchy's railway. With Germany's defeat, Belgium sought to establish an

¹Jane Miller, Belgian Foreign Policy Between Two Wars, 1919-1940, (New York: Bookman Associates, 1951), p.235.

²Jonathon Helmreich, "The Negotiation of the Franco-Belgian Military Accord of 1920," French Historical Studies 3 (Spring, 1964):p.361-362.

economic union with Luxembourg. French Premier Georges Clemenceau concurred with Belgium's economic intentions, but demanded that Luxembourg's railways be controlled by France.³ This deadlock was broken with the replacement of Clemenceau by Alexandre Millerand and by French indebtedness for the support Belgium offered during the French occupation of Frankfurt and Darmstadt in April, 1920.⁴ In May, Millerand encouraged Luxembourg to engage in an economic union with Belgium, and the rail system was partitioned to the satisfaction of a Franco-Belgian commission.⁵ Having resolved the economic matters, the negotiations towards a military accord finally proceeded.

The French found it difficult to understand why Belgium had not shown more immediate enthusiasm for a military agreement. The French Commander in Chief of the allied armies, Ferdinand Foch, was frustrated by the months of economic discussions.⁶ For Foch the military dimension was paramount, as was upholding the stipulations of the Treaty of Versailles.⁷ The strategic advantages stemming from the Treaty - particularly the

³Helmreich, op. cit., p.362.

⁴Helmreich, op. cit., p.367.

⁵Miller asserts that, "[b]y making the Belgo-Luxemburg Union possible, the French government had paid the price for a military alliance with Belgium." Miller, op. cit., p.181.

⁶Helmreich, op. cit., p.367.

⁷France, Les relations militaires franco-belges, 1936-1940, (Paris: CNRS, 1968), p.18.

occupation of the Rhineland -combined with coordination and support from Belgium would ensure that a future war would be fought on German soil. The French believed that Belgian strategic aims were congruent with those of France and that Belgium would be relieved to be allied to her large neighbour.

Belgium was, in fact, leery of French strategic planning. The French focus on offensive operations and on enforcing the Versailles Treaty were opposed to the more modest Belgian emphasis on territorial security. Belgium did not want to be part of French military adventures and wanted a free hand in formulating her policies towards Germany.⁸ Thus, far from being a binding political and military alliance, the Franco-Belgian Military Accord of September 7, 1920, was a secret technical accord between the general staffs of the two nations.⁹ The letters of ratification exchanged by the heads of state, Millerand and Belgian Premier Delacroix, emphasized that the accord would become operative only in circumstances deemed appropriate by each state.¹⁰ Foch was disappointed by the

⁸Helmreich, op. cit., p.369.

⁹David Keift, Belgium's Return to Neutrality: An Essay in the Frustrations of Small Power Diplomacy, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972), p.2.

¹⁰Helmreich, op. cit., p.374 and Keift, op. cit., p.2.

vagueness of the Accord.¹¹

The stipulations of the Accord were simple but were open to interpretation.¹² France and Belgium pledged to mobilise their forces in the event of a German mobilisation. Furthermore, the two nations agreed to coordinate the defence of their frontiers. Due to the fact that there was no time limit on the Accord, the plans for defence and the use of the mobilised forces were left undefined in anticipation of regular inter-staff discussions. The vagueness of the Accord allowed Belgium to believe that she had gained a guarantor for her security while retaining her independence by virtue of the letters exchanged by Millerand and Delacroix. France, however, chose to believe that she had gained an ally.

Despite Foch's misgivings, French officials were quick to interpret the Accord as a veritable alliance. Confident in Belgium's will to cooperate, the French "*...croyaient, ou feignaient de croire que l'accord militaire suffisait à créer l'alliance et que, par conséquent, celle-ci existait réellement.*"¹³ This attitude became increasingly entrenched as

¹¹Judith Hughs, To the Maginot Line, (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1977), p.220.

¹²An edited version of the Franco-Belgian Military Accord of 1920 is presented in Gen. van Overstraeten, Albert I - Leopold III; vingt ans de politique militaire Belge, 1920-1940, (Bruges: Desclee de Brouwer, 1946), pp.36-37.

¹³France, op. cit., pp.17-18.

the French established more defensive plans in reaction to a weakened strategic position. General Gamelin expressed his belief in Belgium as an 'ally' when he wrote:

...une convention militaire (de 1920)...liait nos destinées. Cette convention dépassait en fait le cadre d'un simple accord militaire et avait une portée politique générale. Dès la menace d'une agression, la Belgique se rangeait a nos côtés.¹⁴

Within the strategic framework of *couverture* - that included the Maginot Line and the various plans for advancing into Belgium - the French believed, through strategic necessity, that their Belgian 'ally' concurred with their intentions.

It was politically impossible for the Belgian government to consider the 1920 Accord as an alliance. The political and cultural division between the Flemish and Walloon populations precluded any formal and close relationship with France. The very signing of the Accord was dependant on its secrecy and limited political dimensions. General van Overstraeten, who was the influential *aide-de-camp* of King Leopold III, commented on the need for secrecy:

Si cette convention entre militaires avait été écrite sous une forme propre à la publier comme organisant en commun l'occupation et la résistance franco-belge en Rhénanie, elle n'eut sans doute jamais recueilli que des suffrages approbateurs. Soit en raison de sa rédaction peu heureuse, soit que ses promoteurs lui attribussent une portée dépassant la période d'occupation, qu'ils redoutassent l'opposition publique a cet arrangement de durée indéterminée, son texte fut tenu secret avec une sollicitude sans exemple en

¹⁴Quoted from France, *op. cit.*, p.18.

*Belgique.*¹⁵

Ironically, keeping the Accord removed from public scrutiny actually served to exacerbate public fears that Belgium had attached herself more closely to France than was actually the case.¹⁶

The division between the Walloons and the Flemish was highly influential in government decision making. Eager to defend and expand their cultural rights, most Flemish worked towards reform through regular political channels.¹⁷ The Socialist and Catholic Parties served as their voice in politics through which they gained linguistic rights in the educational system, the military, and the courts.¹⁸ Given the Flemish effort to defend their cultural identity, it is understandable that relations with France were perceived as supporting the French speaking Walloons, and, hence, as undesirable.

The Flemish, and undoubtedly many Walloons, had particular concerns about Belgium's military relationship with France. The fact that the Accord was a bilateral arrangement with France alone was a disappointment. Belgium had sought British

¹⁵Overstraeten, op. cit., p.37.

¹⁶Miller, op. cit., p.181.

¹⁷Miller, op. cit., pp.35-36.

¹⁸Miller, op.cit., p.36.

participation in the Accord, but Britain would not commit herself to such an agreement unless Belgium returned to neutrality. Because that was contrary to Belgian post-war policy, she was left with France as her sole guarantor.

The French did little to calm Belgian concerns about their relations with France. Indeed, French planning and rhetoric seemed to infringe upon Belgian foreign and military policies. In the negotiations for the Accord, Foch proposed a larger military commitment from Belgium that was in proportion to that engaged by France.¹⁹ Foch withdrew his recommendations when the Belgian Ambassador Baron Edmond Gaiffier d'Hestroy suggested to him that they would be perceived in Belgium as French meddling. In 1927, Marshal Pétain stated that Belgium was the "...advance guard of Latin civilization."²⁰ By implication, Belgium was subordinated to role of a vanguard for France. French opinion was again voiced during the Belgian discussion on reducing the service time of their conscripts to six months. This possibility drew criticism from General Debeney in 1927.²¹ Debeney declared that he saw little worth in a military accord with a nation who showed such limited commitment to their armed force's effectiveness. Using the demise of the Accord as a threat was based on the belief that, like France, Belgium was

¹⁹Helmreich, op. cit., p.369.

²⁰Keift, op. cit., p.5.

²¹Overstraeten, op. cit., pp.40-41.

most fearful of a resurgent Germany. While partially true, the Belgians were often as concerned about French power.

Certainly one of the most damaging and arrogant comments exacerbating Belgian concerns was made by Pétain in 1930. Confronted by the need to wait for an invitation from Belgium before the French armies could advance into their neighbour, Pétain stated to the Belgian Ambassador that France might enter Belgium against her will.²² Three years later Pétain repeated his declaration, intimating that France might even fight Belgium to gain passage.²³ In 1932, General Debeney made the same comment concerning a unilateral French decision to advance into Belgium in the event of German aggression.²⁴ These statements clearly indicate the importance that the French High Command placed on the advance into Belgium and its role in the defence of France. Unfortunately, Belgium saw a France that was potentially aggressive and that viewed her neighbour as much as a battlefield as a junior partner in the military accord.

Belgian concerns about French influence in their defense policy paled in comparison to the fear of being dragged into a war in

²²Keift, op. cit., p.12 and Brian Bond, France and Belgium, 1939-1940, (London: Davis-Poynter, 1975), p.23.

²³Roger Keyes, Outrageous Fortune: The Tragedy of Leopold III of Belgium, 1901-1941, (London: Sechert Warburg, 1935), p.57 and Hughs, op. cit., p.223.

²⁴Stephen Ryan, Pétain the Soldier, (New York: A.S. Barnes, 1969), pp.277-278.

support of France's eastern allies or a war precipitated by France herself.²⁵ During the 1920s, France had concluded various treaties and accords with Poland, Czechoslovakia, and the Little Entente. Concerted military action against Germany and mutual defense had been considered and partially prepared. This Franco-eastern cooperation assumed a place for Belgium and prompted French President Poincaré to air his belief, in 1930, that Belgium should assist France in supporting Poland in the event of war.²⁶ For Belgium this was considered outside of the responsibilities outlined in the Accord and even further away from her national security concerns.

French and Belgian perceptions of the Accord were obviously divergent. If the Accord was designed to respond to German aggression, what defined that aggression? Although Belgium was required to mobilise if Germany mobilised, what if German aggression was directed against Poland or Czechoslovakia? Despite the provision for individual determination in enacting the Accord, association with an aggressive France would undoubtedly draw Belgium into war. Thus, at the most basic level, the military accord with France was perceived by many in Belgium - and particularly the Flemish - as counter-productive to Belgian security and, indeed, as potentially disastrous.

²⁵Bond, op. cit., p.23 and Hughs, op. cit., p.221.

²⁶Keift, op. cit., p.12.

While trying to assure their country's security through cooperation with France, the Belgian government had to mollify the electorate by emphasizing the defensive nature of the Accord.²⁷ This juggling act between foreign and domestic policies was made more difficult by the secrecy that shrouded the Accord and the absence of British support. Both of these difficulties were partially relieved by the Locarno agreements of 1925.

Belgium enthusiastically embraced the collective security stemming from the Locarno discussions. The Rhenish Pact, guaranteeing the common frontiers of Germany, France, and Belgium, significantly included British and Italian assurances. The involvement of Britain in Continental military affairs fulfilled a central aim of the foreign policies of both Belgium and France. For France, the price of British involvement was to compromise her position in regard to the Versailles Treaty and her eastern allies. By contrast, Belgium found in Locarno an avenue for greater liberty from her tenuous relationship with France.

Belgium interpreted Locarno as a more binding and significant arrangement than the 1920 Accord. In his 1925 article, the former Belgian Foreign Minister Henri Jasper repeatedly referred to Locarno as a 'treaty' in contrast to his single mention of

²⁷Miller, op.cit., p.182.

the "...accord militaire défensif franco-belge."²⁸ For Belgium, the Accord became a technical subscript 'organising' the French guarantee within the broader context of the Locarno agreements.²⁹ By giving primacy to Locarno over the Accord, Belgium sought to escape some of the difficulties associated with her close relations with France. Ironically, this re-evaluation of Franco-Belgian relations focused more attention on the now weakened and apparently redundant Accord.

It was difficult to reconcile having a separate military accord with France when the Locarno agreements established a collective guarantee of Belgian security. This reality was questioned by Fleming politicians and drew greater attention as French commentary grew increasingly arrogant and their military status more dubious.³⁰ The aforementioned statements of Pétain, Debeney, and Poincaré all illustrated the self-serving nature of French attitudes towards the Accord and Belgium. The French boldness in the north contrasted with a weakened strategic position in the north-east due to the premature withdrawal of troops from the Rhineland in 1930. Loss of the Rhineland meant the loss of a protective 'glacis' for Belgium.³¹ King Albert

²⁸Henri Jasper, "Locarno et la Belgique," Revue Belge II (November 1925):p.158

²⁹Jasper, op. cit., p.158.

³⁰Keift, op. cit., p.4-5.

³¹Overstraeten, op. cit., p.47.

expressed his concern about the withdrawal and questioned the value of the Franco-Belgian Accord with the forfeiture of the advanced positions in the Rhineland.³² Much had changed since the conclusion of the Great War and the signing of the Accord. The confident and victorious French were weakening under diplomatic pressure and their increasingly defensive plans did little to bolster Belgian confidence.

The creation of the Maginot Line by the French in the early 1930s spurred a number of concerns in Belgium. The length of the Maginot Line, ending short of the Franco-Belgian frontier, made it appear that France was encouraging Germany to plan any offensive operations for passage through the Low Countries. Despite French plans to advance to the aid of Belgium in Plan C and its incarnations, it was clear that France intended to avoid war on her soil while making Belgium a battlefield.³³ Still recognising the need for French support, the Belgians considered several defense options that they hoped would avoid a repetition of the Great War and the French vision of a defensive battle in Belgium.

³²Overstraeten, op. cit., p.60.

³³The Maginot Line was intended to defend the north-east while channelling German efforts to the north where they would be met by the bulk of the French mobile army. A residual advantage of a German incursion through Belgium was the French belief that Britain would more assuredly enter the conflict. Vivian Rowe, The Great Wall of France: The Triumph of the Maginot Line, (London: Putnam, 1959), p.53.

The Belgian General Staff considered both frontier defense and defence in depth. General Maglinse - Chief of Staff from 1919 to 1926 - proposed frontier defence in coordination with French northeastern defences, thereby creating a continuous front.³⁴ Financially, the heavy fortifications required for the scheme were well beyond the means of Belgium if they were to be similar to those of the Maginot Line.³⁵ Politically, border defence was perceived by the Flemish as an undesirable coordination with France inspired by the self-serving Walloons who inhabited the frontier provinces.³⁶ Militarily, the relatively weak frontier defences would have been easily penetrated and too distant for the advancing French forces to support.³⁷

Defence in depth was supported by General Galet, who had been King Albert's *aide-de-camp* and became Chief of Staff in 1929.³⁸ Galet believed that defending successive lines of resistance along Belgium's rivers, supported by fortresses such as Antwerp and Liege, made more effective use of the small Belgian Army. Although dubious about French support, a withdrawal would also more likely result in the French achieving a defensive position

³⁴Keift, op. cit., p.41.

³⁵Overstraeten, op. cit., pp.51-52.

³⁶Miller, op. cit., p.235 and Keift, op. cit., pp.46.

³⁷Overstraeten, op. cit., p.72.

³⁸Keift, op. cit., p.41-42.

alongside the Belgian forces.³⁹ Unfortunately, Galet's plans would have meant the loss of the Walloon provinces and Luxembourg; those that frontier defence sought to protect. Inevitably, defence in depth met with political opposition from the Walloons. The opposing strategic options, with their cultural biases, resulted in political paralysis and little military preparation.

How to ensure that Belgium would not be over-run in a Franco-German war was a problem that inspired a third option originating primarily from Flemish sources. In recognition of the Maginot Line's defensive power, it was suggested that France should extend her fortifications to the Channel.⁴⁰ With such a barrier awaiting them in France, it was hoped that Germany would see little advantage in charging through Belgium. Furthermore, France's unwillingness to plan offensive moves before their Maginot Line in the northeast implied that they would also remain on their side of any fortifications in the north. French movement into Belgium as a result of German aggression in the east was a concern especially amongst the Flemish. During the 1932 French debate on fortifying the North, the Belgian ambassador to Paris was instructed to assure French officials that Belgium would not be offended by French fortifications on

³⁹France, op. cit., p.21.

⁴⁰Miller, op. cit., p.234 and Hughs, op. cit., p.223. Also see France, op. cit., p.37 and Keyes, op. cit., p.57-58.

their common frontier.⁴¹ In 1933 the Belgian Minister of Defence, Albert Devèze, stated that "[I]l est bon que l'agresseur sache que, vint-il à bout de forcer un premier obstacle, il se retrouverait devant un second barrage."⁴²

Regardless of Belgian suggestions, the French General Staff had staunchly opposed the creation of substantial works and held onto their plans for advancing into Belgium. Since their own strategic planning was ill defined and France was their primary guarantor both through Locarno and the Accord, Belgium had little choice but to accept, in principle, the French manoeuvre into their territory.

Despite the apparent Belgian enthusiasm for France fortifying her northern frontier, there was still a strong voice that wanted French military support. Devèze viewed French fortifications as only a deterrent and supported the Maglinse school of Belgian frontier defence dependant on French aid.⁴³ When, in 1934, Pétain suggested that the French advance might only extend as far as the Meuse, "M. Devèze a protesté contre cette affirmation qui démolissait sa théorie de la defense intégrale du territoire."⁴⁴

⁴¹Overstraeten, op. cit., p.241.

⁴²Buchet, op. cit., p.34.

⁴³Keift, op. cit., p.44 and Buchet, op. cit., p. 30.

⁴⁴Overstraeten, op. cit., p.113.

Given the well known French belief in defence, the methodical battle, and the *levée en masse*, Belgian confidence in prompt French military support was limited. Keift asserts that the Belgians "...were dubious...about the value of assistance from the French Army which was, in their opinion, insufficiently trained, insufficiently mobile, and wedded to a mistaken concept of war."⁴⁵ General van Overstraeten concisely described the French Army as "...une armée de milices peu instruites, peu cohérente et peu mobile."⁴⁶ Prime Minister Paul van Zeeland stated in 1936, just prior to Belgium's return to neutrality, that even with the most minute preparations, the intervention of France - and Britain - would come too late to save Belgium.⁴⁷ The statements of van Zeeland and Overstraeten were born out of their preference for an independent policy and were, thus, biased against France. These views directly influenced Belgium's decision for neutrality in 1936.

What had been primarily a domestic problem over defining the nature of Belgium's military relations with France during the 1920s turned into an official diplomatic process of redefinition and withdrawal in the 1930s. Concern over the 1930 Rhineland evacuation combined with the established belief in the primacy of Locarno over the Accord prompted action in 1931. Foreign

⁴⁵Keift, op. cit., p.42.

⁴⁶Overstraeten, op. cit., p.48.

⁴⁷France, op. cit., p.33.

Minister Paul Hymans made the following declaration to the French Ambassador on February 20:

...l'arrangement entre les Etats-Majors du 7 septembre 1920 n'a jamais eu et ne saurait avoir d'autre objet de préparer et d'assurer pratiquement les conditions techniques de mise en oeuvre, pour l'exercice éventuel d'une coopération militaire entre la Belgique et la France dans le cas d'une agression non provoquée de l'Allemagne.

L'obligation de cette coopération militaire...est aujourd'hui déterminée de la façon la plus précise par les dispositions du Traité de garantie conclu à Locarno le 16 octobre 1925.⁴⁸

The Belgian intention of redefining the Accord as a technical document within the Locarno 'treaty' was clear in Hyman's statement. In March 1931 Hymans stated to the Belgian Chamber that "[L]'accord franco-belge n'est pas un traité. Il n'engage le pays."⁴⁹ Despite such clear messages, the French opposed or ignored Belgian efforts, or simply interpreted their statements in a manner favourable to France. In response to Hymans' February communique, the French Ambassador wrote that his government believed the Belgian perspective "...n'implique aucun changement dans les rapports établis entre nos deux pays et est, en conséquence, d'accord avec le gouvernement belge."⁵⁰ The French had agreed with Belgian's position but interpreted it in such a way as to ignore any change. Such diplomatic rhetoric was representative of a condescending French attitude which viewed Belgian queries and complaints as a necessary

⁴⁸France, op. cit., Annex II, p.45.

⁴⁹Overstraeten, op. cit., p.66.

⁵⁰France, op. cit., Annex II, p.46.

governmental response to Flemish disgruntlement.⁵¹

Belgian efforts to affirm Locarno as the principal vehicle of Franco-Belgian military cooperation included one change vigorously opposed by the French. Belgium believed that the Locarno treaty did not compel her to mobilise her armed forces in response to German mobilisation. This was one of the few binding stipulations of the Accord and one the French sought to maintain, asserting that Belgium was still obligated to mobilise. Furthermore, The French argued that Belgium, according to Article 16 of the League of Nations Covenant, had to allow France passage rights if her eastern allies were attacked by Germany.⁵² This attitude was reaffirmed by the aforementioned statement by Pétain of 1933 that declared the French intention to move into Belgium whether she approved or not. Although Pétain's comments were impetuous and improbable, they represented an attitude in France which Belgium feared.

In March 1933, Hymans reaffirmed Belgium's interpretation of Locarno and emphasized that France would require an invitation from Belgium before advancing into her territory.⁵³ This invitation would be solely based on a Belgian interpretation of events precipitating the potential need for French intervention.

⁵¹Keift, op. cit., p.15.

⁵²Keift, op. cit., p.16.

⁵³Keift, op. cit., p.17.

France agreed to Belgium's position, but again found a justification for unilateral action based on the Versailles Treaty in the case of a German violation of the demilitarised Rhineland.⁵⁴ The French had again found a means to facilitate their plans and, thus, perpetuated the frustrations felt by Belgium. Further efforts to define military relations were avoided by France and were left unresolved until the events of 1935 and 1936 drove Belgium to neutrality.

In early 1935, Adolf Hitler made the first in a series of bold moves that directly affected the security of Europe. Confident that Britain and France would take no tangible action against Germany, Hitler declared the official creation of the *Luftwaffe* and the start of universal conscription in direct violation of the military clauses of the Treaty of Versailles. With the exception of speeches of protest at the League of Nations, France and Britain did nothing. Similar inaction reigned when Benito Mussolini's Italy invaded Abyssinia. Here, protest served only to align Italy with Germany.

Belgium observed the interplay among the great powers of Europe and recognised the increasingly uncertain value of Locarno's collective security. Britain had shown little interest in opposing Hitler and, in fact, concluded a bilateral naval agreement with Germany in contravention of the Versailles Treaty

⁵⁴Keift, op. cit., p.18.

in June, 1935.⁵⁵ France had shown no more vigour in halting Hitler's ambitions. Consistent with France's policy of isolating Germany through alliances, the French concluded a treaty with the Soviet Union in May, 1935.⁵⁶ Far from adding to her sense of security, the Franco-Soviet treaty increased Belgium's anxiety about being dragged into a war for France and her allies.⁵⁷

The reoccupation of the Rhineland by the German Army on March 7, 1936 played a crucial role in Belgium's return to neutrality.⁵⁸ Hitler's flagrant violation of both the Treaty of Versailles and the Locarno pact should have brought immediate action from the other signatories. Unfortunately, the will to oppose Hitler had not matched the dictator's bold ambition. The risk of war prompted Britain to oppose concerted action with France. French Premier Sarraut and his Foreign Minister Flandin sought at least a police action against Germany but were refused British support. Protests and defensive inter-staff discussions were the only responses of Britain and France to Hitler's blatant dismantling of Versailles and Locarno.

⁵⁵Keyes, op. cit., p.50.

⁵⁶Piotr Wandycz, The Twilight of French Eastern Alliances, 1926-1936, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988), p.197.

⁵⁷Miller, op. cit., p.220.

⁵⁸For the Rhineland crisis and the Belgian reaction see Keyes, op. cit., pp.51-55; Keift, op. cit., pp.57-84; Miller, op. cit., pp.221-226; and France, op. cit., pp.23-29.

For several months the Rhineland crisis encouraged closer and more detailed military cooperation between France and Belgium than had existed ever before. On March 19, France, Belgium, and Britain signed a pact that called for inter-staff preparations in case of war on the Continent. With Britain involved, an avenue was opened that bypassed some of Belgium's domestic concerns about military relations with France alone and that justified Franco-Belgian cooperation within the context of the crisis.⁵⁹ The Belgian Chief of Staff, General Van den Bergen, met with Commander in Chief Georges Gamelin on May 15 and established preliminary plans as to the disposition of French forces in Belgium.⁶⁰ Having placed such importance on Belgian cooperation within their defensive strategy, the Franco-Belgian staff talks must have reassured the French.⁶¹

Although the crisis encouraged cooperative defensive preparations, French strategy and political will were shown to be manifestly weak. When, on March 9, Sarraut suggested a limited military response to the German Rhineland violation, the French staff warned that such an action would precipitate a full scale war.⁶² Given their reliance on the *levée en masse* and

⁵⁹Keift, op. cit., p.73.

⁶⁰France, op. cit., pp.28-29. Minutes of the meeting are presented in Annex VI, pp.52-58.

⁶¹Keift, op. cit., pp.74-75.

⁶²Keyes, op. cit., p.52.

total war, the French found themselves unable and unwilling to fight a limited action, especially in front of their Maginot Line *couverture*.

For Belgium, and all of France's eastern allies, inaction during the Rhineland crisis illustrated the uncertain value of collective security and assurances from France. Although Belgium did not want to be intertwined in a war for central Europe or, indeed, for the Rhineland, French and British acquiescence to Germany's illegal advance to Belgium's doorstep was unacceptable. Moreover, it was ironic that France had used the potential of a German advance into the Rhineland as a legalistic means to ensure French passage through Belgium, but when that advance became a reality she did nothing. Thus, previous Belgian fears of an aggressive France gave way to concerns about the timidity of her guarantor.

Concurrent with the extraordinary events transpiring in Europe, Belgian domestic politics became more unstable due to the results of the May 1936 election. Radical parties - including those of Flemish nationalists and the Communists - captured twenty-five percent of the popular vote while the prominent Catholic, Liberal, and Socialist parties all lost seats in the Chamber of Deputies.⁶³ Although the traditional parties still won a coalition majority, the Belgian political environment was

⁶³Keift, op. cit., p.96.

tense and was influenced by the radical periphery.

Belgium's new foreign policy reflected the greater Flemish influence in the Chamber.⁶⁴ With collective security buckling under the pressure of German dynamism and British appeasement, Belgium's role as a guarantor was clearly contrary to her means and security concerns. Engaging in a Franco-German war without British assurances was out of the question. Keift aptly observes:

Political extremism was threatening Belgium with chaos. The government had to find the *juste milieu* - a programme which would hasten the return of political stability without jeopardizing national unity. Belgian foreign policy thus could not favour one side or the other in Europe's political and ideological struggles.⁶⁵

Foreign Minister Paul-Henri Spaak responded to the domestic and international realities and declared, in July, that he sought a foreign policy that was 'wholly Belgian'.⁶⁶

Spaak's declaration initiated a series of diplomatic moves designed to extricate Belgium from any collective military commitments. Britain approved of Belgium's new found policy that mirrored some of Whitehall's hesitancy towards entanglement in Continental affairs. France, however, interpreted Belgium's

⁶⁴The political dynamics influencing the new Belgian foreign policy are superbly presented in Keift, op. cit., pp.102-121.

⁶⁵Keift, op. cit., p.114.

⁶⁶Keyes, op. cit., p.60.

independence as tantamount to granting the German Army free passage through Belgium.⁶⁷ In addition to the vulnerability of an unaligned Belgium, the French protested that the new policy was incompatible with Article 16 of the League Covenant. Although it was doubtful that France would charge to the rescue of her eastern allies, advancing into Belgium was still a fundamental part of her defensive strategy. France was thus unwilling to release Belgium from her previously signed commitments through negotiation. With Flemish extremists growing impatient, the van Zeeland government recognised that unilateral action was the only route open to Belgium.

Van Zeeland found a timely ally in King Leopold III. The Belgian monarch was active in the political arena and wielded considerable potential power.⁶⁸ As President of the Council of Ministers and as Commander in Chief of the armed forces, Leopold was privy to and could influence government legislation. His views on military matters were inspired by his advisor General Galet and his *aide-de-camp* Colonel van Overstraeten and predictably favoured an independent course. Amenable to van Zeeland's policies, Leopold offered to address the Cabinet in an

⁶⁷Keift, op. cit., p.117.

⁶⁸The Belgian monarch's power was constitutionally limited only by the requirement that his legislation be countersigned by one government minister. Leopold took an active role in resolving political crises such as in 1935 when he called on the outsider, van Zeeland, to form a government during an economic calamity. This was repeated in the divisive May 1936 election. See Keift, op. cit., pp.132-133 and Keyes, op. cit., p.32 and p.62.

effort to clarify the foreign policy and defense debate.

Leopold's speech of October 14, 1936 was a clear summation of Belgium's quandary. Emphasizing that war had to be kept away from Belgian soil, Leopold made the following observations:

Our geographical position requires us to maintain an army large enough to dissuade any of our neighbours from making use of our territory to attack another state...

An alliance, even if purely defensive, does not lead to the goal; for, no matter how prompt the help of an ally would be, it would not come until after the invader's attack, which will be overwhelming.⁶⁹

Leopold's speech was an unambiguous appeal for an independent Belgian defence policy and carried the weight of an official government declaration.

Although the King had not used the term 'neutrality' in his address, Belgian independence from collective security commitments had been declared. A flurry of diplomatic exchanges ensued, but the French were compelled to accept Belgium's new foreign policy. In November 1936, French Premier, Leon Blum of the Popular Front, pledged that France would not enter Belgium without her consent regardless of Article 16 or any other previous agreement that might have warranted such a move.⁷⁰

After the October speech, official inter-staff discussions

⁶⁹A full translation of Leopold's speech is presented in Miller, op. cit., pp.226-230.

⁷⁰Keift, op. cit., p.154.

between Belgium and France were halted. The military staffs of both France and Belgium were concerned about this rupture. Belgian Chief of Staff General Van den Bergen warned of the dangers of a German *attaque brusquée* and asked, "...ne serait-il pas bon de faire appel aux garants avant la violation du territoire?"⁷¹

Having adopted an independent path, civil authorities sought to avoid close military association with France that they believed would be ill received in Germany.

Although the termination of official military cooperation came rather abruptly, during the previous sixteen years Franco-Belgian staff talks had been scant at best. No source available for this study quantified the number of inter-staff meetings, but it appears that there was very little interaction.⁷² As late as 1934, Colonel Buchet's article emphasized the need for joint planning and for army manoeuvres in Belgium. He observed that "[P]our que des troupes soient prêtes, en cas de conflit, à occuper et à défendre une organisation fortifiée, les cadres et même les hommes doivent connaître l'endroit où il faudra tenir, savoir ce qu'ils auraient faire."⁷³ Buchet goes on to

⁷¹France, op. cit., p.38.

⁷²Keift states: "Given Belgium's vital importance for French military planning, it would have been natural for the French General Staff to undertake elaborate arrangements with its Belgian counterpart. There is no evidence that it ever did so, at least not until 1936. Keift, op. cit., p.8.

⁷³Buchet, op. cit., p.43

lament the fact that French and British planning for Belgium was limited to map exercises.

Although Franco-Belgian cooperation was manifestly limited, the end of that cooperation in 1936 was a blow to French plans in the north and should have had some effect. A noted historian, Jeffery Gunsburg, asserts:

...the Belgian denunciation of the Military Accord knocked the props out from under French strategy. France had always - unwisely and despite signs - counted on the use of Belgium as a springboard for a response to German action. The loss of Belgium was not only a disaster for France in 1936, it disrupted the foundations of French strategy against Germany and ultimately played a major role in the collapse of the west in 1940.⁷⁴

Unfortunately, the French General Staff did not react to the new diplomatic reality confronting them and held onto their plans for the advance into Belgium. For a short time, the French reduced the extent of the advance according to Plan E, in recognition of Belgian neutrality. Ultimately, however, Gamelin decided on the ambitious advance of Plan D that foresaw the movement of French troops to the Dyle River and the Albert Canal.

Gamelin interpreted limited information exchanges between the French and Belgian staffs in 1937 and 1938 as indicative of the Belgian will to cooperate. In fact, "...ces contacts

⁷⁴Jeffery Gunsburg, Divided and Conquered: The French High Command and the Defeat of the West, 1940, (West Port, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1979), p.30.

occasionels ont laissé subsister un grave malentendu: le général Gamelin pensait que, si la Belgique faisait appel à l'assistance de la France, les anciens accords militaires franco-belges, antérieurs à 1936, reprendraient immédiatement et automatiquement toute leur valeur...Aucun effort n'a été fait pour dissiper ces incertitudes."⁷⁵ Nevertheless, even if the French believed that the Belgians would rally around their standards, that cooperation would certainly only materialise once a crisis was afoot. Until that point, French planning remained necessarily vague.⁷⁶

Throughout the entire interwar period Belgium's military relations with France were wrought with conditions and limitations. Domestic political and cultural rivalries, enhanced by an arrogant France and an uncommitted Britain, forced Belgium's government to tread gently in her relations with nations progressively sliding towards war. In reference to the Franco-Belgian Military Accord of 1920, Helmreich observes "...that by 1931 even Paul Hymans regretted the conclusion of this agreement which brought the inconveniences of an alliance but few of the benefits."⁷⁷ Belgium had found little comfort in collective security and, in 1936, opted for an independent policy.

⁷⁵France, op. cit., p.12.

⁷⁶Hughs, op. cit., p.219.

⁷⁷Helmreich, op. cit., p.378.

Belgium's status as a hesitant partner of France was apparent in the 1920 Accord negotiations, in her enthusiasm for the Locarno pact of 1925, in Hymans' diplomatic manoeuvres of 1931 to 1933, and finally in the actions of Spaak, van Zeeland, and King Leopold III in 1936. Nevertheless, the French High Command was resolute and consistent in their intention to advance into Belgium to establish a defensive line. Believing that the Belgian manoeuvre was a strategic necessity, the French made no fundamental changes to their planning when Belgium withdrew from cooperation with France in 1936.

Whether it was with Belgian cooperation or not, the need for mobility was one certitude in the French intention to advance into Belgium. Achieving a defensive line prior to contact with the enemy was deemed critical. In the doctrinal instructions of 1936 it was emphasized that the French Army was "*...à éviter les batailles de rencontre, en particulier au debut d'une guerre ou il importait de n'engager les jeunes troupes que méthodiquement... avec les appuis de feux nécessaires.*"⁷⁸ Having adopted a defensive concept of war, the French Army was unprepared for mobility and the possibility of fighting a battle of movement in Belgium. The German invasion of 1940, and the French response in Belgium, showed that France's army was not capable of mobile warfare. However, the limits of French army

⁷⁸Eugene Carrias, *La pensée militaire française*, (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1960), p.332.

doctrine were evident long before the debacle of 1940 and become even more apparent when put into the framework of the Belgian manoeuvre.

Chapter Three: French Army Doctrine and the Belgian Manoeuvre

Throughout the interwar period, French planning for the north required their armies to achieve strategic, operational, and tactical mobility. By 1930, the strategic duality of the static Maginot Line versus the Belgian manoeuvre was mirrored in the tactical requirements of fortified defense versus mobility. Unfortunately, as the overall strategy of France became progressively defensive, so too did her tactical doctrine. The growing emphasis on defense undermined the cause of mobility in French tactics, training, and arms procurement. This was detrimental to the advance into Belgium and the French Army's ability to quickly react to the unforeseen elements of a German offensive. Concurrent with this tactical stagnation was the erosion of Franco-Belgian cooperation, and thus the likelihood of easily establishing a joint defensive line in Belgium as envisaged in French strategy. Nevertheless, from 1930 to the war, the plans for the advance into Belgium remained fundamentally unchanged. The French intention of fighting on a prepared battlefield was unassured by the Belgian manoeuvre and put at risk the French Army that was primarily trained for methodical battles of defence. This chapter will examine the French Army's inter-war tactical doctrine in order to demonstrate that it was inconsistent with the demands of French strategic planning for the north.

Although changing strategic realities encouraged the adoption of

a defensive tactical doctrine, it was the experiences of the Great War that formed a foundation of experience that wielded the most influence on the French Army. Parallel to the strategic notions of total war and the siege-like procedure of the methodical battle, came the tactical preference for defense over costly offense. The transition from the élan of the red trousered French soldiers of 1914 to the adoption of static trench works and artillery bombardments was influential on French military thought after the war. The conventions of trench warfare became even more pervasive with the Allied victory in 1918, that seemed to overshadow the significance of the German and Allied offensive successes of the same year.¹ In 1936, a Lieutenant Colonel Lançon supported the lessons of the Great War, stating that "*[L]a victoire du 15 juillet (1918), qui a sanctionné glorieusement en fin de guerre, la valeur de nos procédés défensifs, les faisait sortir grandis de l'épreuve; il était donc tout naturel de continuer, la tournante passé, a leur accorder toute notre confiance.*"² Charles de Gaulle, the enthusiastic proponent of a professional mechanised army, was less impressed by the influence of the Great War. He considered the past experience as detrimental to the development of a progressive army doctrine and strategy. Particularly worrisome

¹Robert Doughty, The Seeds of Disaster: The Development of French Army Doctrine, 1919-39, (Hamden, Conn.: Archon Books, 1988), pp.85-86.

²Lt. Col. Lançon, "*La défensive devant la mécanisation*," Revue militaire française 62 (Oct-Dec 1936):p.37.

for de Gaulle was the influence of the Great War experience on the training of the officer corps. He observed that "[T]he military caste, which has absorbed some terrible lessons, seems to have the tendency to give its chosen leaders the training designed for action in circumstances similar to those through which it has just passed."³ The influence of the Great War's veteran commanders was assured through the codification of their war experience in the statement of army doctrine titled, Instruction provisoire sur l'emploi tactique des grandes unités of 1921.⁴

The Instructions of 1921 took on the status of the army's 'bible' and saw little revision throughout the interwar period.⁵ In 1936 a new version of the Instructions was issued but it was more a reiteration than a revision of the established doctrine.⁶

³Charles de Gaulle, The Army of the Future, (London: Hutchison, 1940), p.149.

⁴Ministere de la Guerre, Etat-Major de l'Armée, Instruction provisoire sur l'emploi tactique des grandes unités, (Paris: Imprimerie Nationale, 1921). Hereafter referred to as the Instructions.

⁵Judith Hughs, To the Maginot Line, (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1977), p.70. Also see Doughty, Seeds of Disaster, op. cit., p.9.

⁶Paul Reynaud cites a report submitted by the committee in charge of creating the 1936 Instructions which states that "...the body of doctrine, objectively laid down on the morrow of victory by the eminent military leaders who had just exercised high command ought to remain the charter for the tactical employment of our large units.'" Paul Reynaud, In the Thick of the Fight, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1955), pp. 158-159. Also see Doughty, Seeds of Disaster, op.cit., p.11.

An American Army observer assigned to the French Army from 1935 to 1937, infantry Major R. Smith, characterised the French doctrine as "conservative" and opposed to progressive ideas concerning technological advances in aviation and mechanisation.⁷

The 1921 Instructions was created by a committee of thirteen individuals of various rank, headed by Marshal Pétain. The influence of Pétain was substantial, but the commonality of war experience amongst the committee members supported consensus and deference to the revered saviour of Verdun.⁸ Pétain was shocked at the casualties sustained in the *attaque à outrance* during the Great War.⁹ Instead of wasting lives in impetuous attacks, Pétain sought to weaken the enemy by employing larger quantities of war materiel, especially artillery, in support of the foot soldiers. The emphasis on firepower is evident throughout the Instructions, and was consistent with the concept of the 'methodical battle' that envisaged the destruction of an enemy's attack through the concentration of defensive fire.

Both in attack and defence, the effective use of fire power was

⁷Major R. Smith, French Tactical Doctrine, Organization, and Materiel, (United States Army, 1937), p.14.

⁸Donald Harvey, "French Concepts of Military Strategy (1919-1939)," (Columbia University PhD dissertation, 1953), pp.4-5. Also see Alistair Horne, To Lose a Battle, (Boston: Little, Brown, 1969), p.22.

⁹Hughs, op. cit., pp.46-47.

viewed as essential to the success of an operation. The introductory section of the Instructions had a separate heading for the 'Puissance du feu' which it immediately defined as 'érasante'.¹⁰ According to one officer, "[O]n ne manoeuvre pas sous le feu; c'est une vérité vieille comme le feu lui-meme."¹¹ This attitude towards the effect of firepower permeated through all aspects of French tactical thought and stifled concepts of mobility. In 1937, B. H. Liddell Hart observed this weakness in French doctrine and wrote that the French focus on firepower "...seemed to ignore the truth that fire is a means to movement, and that the effect is lost unless it can be followed up quickly."¹²

Artillery was deemed the "...par excellence l'arme du feu"¹³ and, as in the Great War, became the vital support arm for all operations of the army. In its supportive role, the artillery had to move in conjunction with the formations to which it was attached. The Instructions were emphatic, stating that "[A]u combat, la coopération étroite et constante de l'artillerie avec

¹⁰Instructions, op. cit., p.10.

¹¹Col. Didelet, "La guerre de mouvement," Revue militaire française 57 (Jul-Sep 1935):p.11. Another officer stated that "...c'est le feu qui fait la valeur d'une position défensive: le feu qui arrête." Col. Lauth, "L'infanterie dans la guerre de demain," Revue d'infanterie 79 (Jul-Dec 1931):p.1028.

¹²B. H. Liddell Hart, "The Armies of Europe," Foreign Affairs XV (No. 2, January 1937):p.240.

¹³Instructions, op.cit., p.25.

l'infanterie s'impose de facon absolue."¹⁴ Commentary in military journals repeatedly echoed the need for artillery support.¹⁵ In practice, however, the advance of the infantry and cavalry was slowed to ensure the support of artillery.¹⁶ This problem was exacerbated by the fact that as late as 1940 most of the French artillery, including anti-tank guns, was still horse drawn.¹⁷

Although firepower was considered decisive, the infantry was the 'queen of battles'¹⁸ and was the first arm of the military discussed in the Instructions:

L'infanterie est chargée de la mission principale au combat.

*Précédée, protégée et accompagnée par les feux de l'artillerie, aidée éventuellement par les chars de combat et l'aviation, elle conquiert le terrain, l'occupe, l'organise et le conserve.*¹⁹

¹⁴Instructions, op.cit., p.26.

¹⁵The Revue d'artillerie predictably contains countless articles in support of the decisive role of artillery. Although its importance is not questioned, improvements in mobility and mechanisation are discussed. For example, see the articles of Maj. Buchalet, "Organisation d'un systeme d'artillerie," Revue d'artillerie 96 (Jul-Dec 1925):pp.97-130, 252-277 and "L'emploi d'artillerie dans l'offensive," Revue d'artillerie 98 (Jul-Dec 1926):pp.140-174. Articles discussing more general themes also emphasize artillery's importance, such as Didelet, op. cit..

¹⁶Doughty, Seeds of Disaster, op. cit., p.104.

¹⁷French Army transport is discussed later in the chapter.

¹⁸Robert Young, "Preparation for Defeat: French War Doctrine in the Interwar Period," Journal of European Studies 2 (June 1972): p.160.

¹⁹Instructions, op. cit., p.23.

The primacy of the foot soldier was historically viable, but to relegate all other arms to its support was to undermine the potential of more mobile offensive weapons such as the tank. The emphasis on infantry in the Instructions was not surprising considering the composition of the 1921 committee. Of the six contributing divisional commanders four were infantry and two were cavalry.²⁰ There were no tank commanders and only one spokesman for airpower. It was clear that continuity with the past assured the primacy of infantry and took precedence over progressive conceptualisations of the future.

Of the three basic arms - infantry, artillery, and cavalry - the cavalry held the most promise for developing into a mobile armoured force. By the mid-Nineteenth Century the cavalry had lost its place on the battlefield due to the advances in firepower. Although French cuirassier regiments still existed in 1914, they were anachronistic, and quickly cavalry was more usefully employed for the purposes of reconnaissance and local *couverture* rather than for battlefield charges. After the war, the Instructions codified that role, stating that "[L]a cavalerie *reneign, couvre, combat en liason avec les autres armes.*"²¹ Although technology had rendered the horsed combatant obsolete, it had also provided the cavalry with a new mount; the armoured fighting vehicle.

²⁰Instructions, op. cit., p.15.

²¹Instructions, op. cit., p.27.

Armoured cars and tanks gave the cavalry some of the potential of 'shock' that it had lost. In the Great War and in the 1920s these vehicles were still slow moving, technologically crude, and typically used for infantry support. As armoured vehicles became more mobile, due to development in the 1930s, their use by the cavalry became increasingly viable. With the new technology, cavalry officers perceived their scale of action as widening.²² Nevertheless, doctrinal parameters proved to be a barrier to the resurgence of the cavalry as a potent fighting force and kept them limited to the role delineated in the Instructions.

Some of the most progressive conceptualisations of mobile warfare originated from the ranks of the cavalry. But, despite their interest in mobility and armoured vehicles, cavalry officers found it difficult to break with their assigned role of reconnaissance and security. Articles in the Revue de cavalerie reinforced the Instructions and failed to address adequately the potential of independant armoured cavalry formations. A consistent theme of some promise was the argument that the strength of cavalry contingents had to be increased to perform their mission of reconnaissance and *couverture*. Comparing an infantry division to a blind man, Major Picot argued that the cavalry element in the division had to be reinforced to enhance

²²Jeffrey Clarke, "Military technology in Republican France: The Evolution of the French Armoured Force, 1917-1940," (Unpublished PhD dissertation, Duke University, 1968), p.110.

their capabilities and their own survival.²³ This view was supported by a Major Mariot, but again the focus was on the limited role stipulated in the Instructions.²⁴ To increase the strength of cavalry formations may well have been conducive to enhancing the army's overall mobility. However, since the cavalry were committed to infantry support, the potential of mobility was lost, as was its application to the Belgian manoeuvre.

Another factor that opposed the independent action of cavalry was the French attitude towards armoured vehicles. In his article discussing cavalry reconnaissance units, a Colonel Pichon commented on the "...faiblesse de l'engin motorisé", as he observed in army manoeuvres in 1931.²⁵ Due to a tank crew's limited scope of vision, especially in close terrain, armoured vehicles were deemed vulnerable to enemy infantry armed with anti-tank weapons. Pichon's criticism was not limited to light reconnaissance vehicles, but included tanks as well. He noted that "[M]ême les chars, les vrais chars, qui ni les balles ni les obus de 37 n'entament, peuvent succomber s'ils sont attaqués à très courte distance, soit par le bombe, soit par la

²³Maj. Georges Picot, "Reflexions sur le role tactique de la couverture," Revue de cavalerie 42 (Mar-Apr 1932):pp.177-185.

²⁴Maj. Mariot, "Le groupe de reconnaissance divisionnaire dans la marche d'approche et la prise de contact," Revue de cavalerie 46 (Jul-Aug 1932):pp.459-483.

²⁵Col. Pichon, "Les groupes de reconnaissance aux manoeuvres de 1931," Revue de cavalerie 42 (Jan-Dec 1932):p.72.

déstruction des chenilles, soit par le feu, bombes incendiaires ou pétrole..."²⁶

The French Army's attitude towards the tank reflects the limited importance they placed on mobility and how that mobility could be achieved. As the tank was becoming the prominent land weapon during the 1930s, it is appropriate to consider the French concept of armoured warfare.

The Instructions was clear as to the limited role it envisaged for the tank. Defined by the cumbersome vehicles of the Great War, the tank was restricted to supporting the infantry. In fact, the Instructions stripped the tank of its independence by declaring that "[L]es chars de combat constituent une subdivision de l'arme de l'infanterie."²⁷ Tank formations were further tied to the infantry, when, in 1920, the separate armour command of the Great War was abolished.²⁸

Ironically, the French were hindered by their avant garde innovations in tank development during the war. France was

²⁶Pichon, op. cit., p.72.

²⁷Instructions, op. cit., p.25.

²⁸Robert Doughty, "The Enigma of French Armored Doctrine 1940," Armor 83 (Sept-Oct 1974):p.39.

quick to follow Britain in developing the tank for use en masse.²⁹ Unfortunately, the massive inventory of vehicles available after the war influenced the parameters of action for French tank formations in the future. Numbering 3000, the small Renault FT was the most influential vehicle.³⁰ Liddell Hart commented on the preponderance of those Great War veterans in French tank battalions during the 1920s and early 1930s. He observed, that they were "...slow machines..." which had "...a very limited capacity for crossing obstacles to achieve their purpose."³¹ With its light armour, weak armament, a range limited to 30 miles, and a top road speed of 5 miles per hour, the FT was indeed restricted to infantry support. Unfortunately this conception of tank usage stuck for all tanks even when new designs entered service in the 1930s.³²

French armour doctrine was not, however, as stagnant as it may appear. Many French officers considered the potential of the tank and armoured formations with some imagination. Arguing in

²⁹The efforts of Colonel Estienne during the Great War are noted by Doughty: "He conceived the idea of an armored fighting vehicle during World War I, played the most important role in convincing the High Command to construct tanks, and was the commander of the French armored forces at the end of the war." Doughty, "The Enigma of French Armored Doctrine 1940," op. cit., p.39.

³⁰Clarke, op. cit., p.30. and Doughty, "The Enigma of French Armored Doctrine 1940," op. cit., p.39-40.

³¹Liddell Hart, op. cit., p.240.

³²Doughty, "The Enigma of French Armored Doctrine 1940," op. cit., p.40.

favour of a new doctrine emphasizing manoeuvre, Colonel Didelet discussed the use of the tank for leading an attack rather than just supporting the infantry.³³ A Lt. Colonel Lançon enthusiastically postulated that the tank had eclipsed its role as simply a support arm and that it had become "...un engin stratégique susceptible de rénover la manoeuvre..."³⁴ To be employed in a more mobile offensive role, the French developed heavier tanks, referred to as *chars de manoeuvre ensemble*, and organised them into independent battalions.³⁵ These tank battalions would subsequently be grouped into larger formations to suit a particular operation in support of a division, corps, or army group.

Nevertheless, even those who were in favour of armoured mobility concurred with the prevailing view that tanks were vulnerable if employed independently and concentrated. Of principal concern was the effectiveness of the anti-tank gun. It was observed that, "...nos chars trouveront en face d'eux des engins antichars ..., dans la même mesure que nos attaques d'août 1914 ont trouve devant elles des mitrailleuses ordinaires."³⁶ Massed

³³Didelet, op. cit., p.24.

³⁴Lt. Col. Lançon, "Motorisation et manoeuvre," Revue militaire française 60 (Apr-Jun 1936):p.40.

³⁵Doughty, "The Enigma of French Armored Doctrine 1940," op. cit., p.40.

³⁶Buchalet, "Organisation d'un système d'artillerie," op. cit., p.100.

formations of vehicles were deemed even more vulnerable, adding to the threat of anti-tank weapons the effects of artillery and air attack.³⁷ Tank vulnerability thus limited their tactical and operational parameters of action. Even their expanded function in leading attacks was only an extension of their infantry support role since the tanks were intended to open the way for the infantry that plodded behind them.

French criticism of the tank was not ill founded. Tanks were - and continue to be - vulnerable if left unsupported by infantry and weapon systems such as artillery, anti-aircraft cannon, and aircraft. Instead of creating large, combined mechanised formations, the French solution was to keep the tanks in the proximity to those other arms. This employment was consistent with the French belief in the 'methodical battle' and the superiority of defensive fire power that they believed would negate manoeuvre on the battlefield.³⁸ In this concept, the tank would bolster the defence in an anti-tank role and, once the enemy had been shattered through firepower, the tank would support a methodical attack.

The most prominent voice in opposition to the accepted use of armour was that of Charles de Gaulle who drew comment for his

³⁷Lançon, "La défensive devant la mécanisation," op. cit., p.41.

³⁸Doughty, "The Enigma of French Armoured Doctrine 1940," op. cit., p.44.

views from the highest political and military leadership. In 1933, de Gaulle - then a Colonel - wrote a book entitled Vers l'armée de métier.³⁹ In it, he presented his concept of a small, fully mechanised army, prepared, at a moments notice, to engage in both offensive actions or pre-emptive attacks against an aggressor. He was impressed by the capabilities of the modern tank, as can be seen by the following excerpt:

Modern tanks each hold from three to fifteen men, who cannot be reached behind their armour by anything less than direct hits by large or medium shells, and they career about the battlefield at a surprising speed, firing in all directions. Their crews are protected from gas in their hermetically sealed block-houses, they can conceal their movements behind smoke-screens and they are in touch by wireless with the rear, with other tanks in their neighbourhood and with aircraft; they are indeed the aristocrats of war, freed from the fetters which shackle the infantry.⁴⁰

De Gaulle envisaged six divisions as the core of his army. Each of his conceptual divisions was composed of a heavy armoured brigade of tanks, a motorised infantry brigade, an artillery brigade, and all the support units of logistics and engineering that would allow the formation to act independently.⁴¹ Generally, de Gaulle's vision of an armoured division and the value of the tank were sound and progressive.⁴² Nevertheless,

³⁹The english translation is inaccurately titled, The Army of the Future.

⁴⁰De Gaulle, op. cit., p.58.

⁴¹De Gaulle, op. cit., p.88-89.

⁴²De Gaulle failed to recognise the full potential of airpower in its ground attack role. The Colonel emphasized the important, but limited function of reconnaissance for aircraft. De Gaulle, op. cit., p.90.

his views were vigorously opposed.

As the title of his book suggested, de Gaulle made the error of connecting his views on mechanised warfare to the establishment of a professional army. He was disdainful of the conscript army to which republican France had committed itself.⁴³ To man the complex machines of war, de Gaulle required 'war technicians' which could not be provided by the progressively reduced service time of conscripts.⁴⁴ Only the rigorous training and esprit de corps of permanently established professional units would render his 100,000 man army effective. A professional army was, however, unacceptable to both French politicians and the High Command.

A professional army was inconsistent with the role most French politicians envisaged for the military. De Gaulle's emphasis on mobility and armour seemed more appropriate for military adventurism than for ensuring the inviolability of French soil.⁴⁵ The political left was particularly concerned, as it considered the professional army a conservative or reactionary institution opposed to the republican notion of a 'nation in

⁴³De Gaulle, op. cit., p.48.

⁴⁴De Gaulle, op. cit., p.49.

⁴⁵Doughty, "De Gaulle's Concept of a Mobile, Professional Army: Genesis of French Defeat?," Parameters: The Journal of the US Army War College 4 (1974):p.29.

arms'.⁴⁶ Indeed, a professional army was likened to a "praetorian guard".⁴⁷

The High Command's rejection of de Gaulle's proposal was as vehement as that of the politicians. The four generals who held the positions of Vice President of the Superior Council for War and/or Chief of the General Staff between the wars - Pétain, Debeney, Weygand, and Gamelin - all "...chose to reject that force on its own merits."⁴⁸ Like the politicians, the generals were committed to the nation in arms, but they perceived it in terms of its place in total war. *Couverture* and a defensive continuous front could not be created with a small mechanised force that was better suited for offensive action than the accepted commitment to the defence. Another argument against the creation of a professional elite was that it would split the army both from a material and a morale standpoint. It seemed likely that a professional force would attract all the best

⁴⁶Léon Blum, leader of the Socialists and of the Popular Front of 1936, stated that de Gaulle had "'combined two ideas, which in my opinion should not be associated in any degree: one was the strategic employment of large armoured units and the other was the return of the professional army. I was tempted by the first idea; I was a resolute adversary of the other.'" Quoted from Doughty, "De Gaulle's...", op. cit., p.29. Also see Robert Young, "L'attaque brusquée and Its Use as Myth in Interwar France," Historical Reflections 8 (1981):p.169.

⁴⁷Stephen Ryan, Pétain the Soldier, (New York: A.S. Barnes, 1969), p.232.

⁴⁸Doughty, "De Gaulle's...", op. cit., p.30. Added to his military assessment, Pétain disliked de Gaulle, whom he called 'turkey'. See Ryan, op. cit., p.233.

equipment to the detriment of morale in conscript units.⁴⁹

Since tanks had been so closely linked to professionalism, French opposition to independent armoured formations became insurmountable. Nevertheless, the French were the first to create armoured divisions. Their use, however, was strictly in accordance with the supportive role delineated in the Instructions. In 1935, at the behest of Commander in Chief Maxime Weygand, the first of three cavalry divisions was converted into a *division légère mécanique* (DLM).⁵⁰ With its strong complement of four tank battalions, armoured cars, and mechanised artillery and infantry, the DLM was a powerful mobile force. Unfortunately, the three DLMs were designated cavalry formations and were thus restricted to reconnaissance and security duties for a corps or army group.⁵¹

A heavier version of the DLM was created in 1940; the *division cuirassée*. Employing some of the most powerful vehicles in the

⁴⁹Young, "L'attaque brusquée...", op. cit., p.100 and Doughty, "De Gaulle's...", op. cit., p.31.

⁵⁰Doughty, "The Enigma Of French Armored Doctrine 1940," op. cit., p. 41, Also see Jeffery Gunsburg, Divided and Conquered: The French High Command and the Defeat of the West, 1940, (West Port, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1979), p.15 and Clarke, op. cit., pp.108-109.

⁵¹Although mechanisation and the DLM encouraged the cavalry to believe their role was widening, it precipitated "...conflict with the rest of the Army, the Provisional Instructions of Marshal Petain, and the whole concept of a nation in arms." Clarke, op. cit., p. 112.

French arsenal - the B-1 Bis and the Hotchkiss H-39 - the three armoured divisions that were formed by the time of the German invasion were again limited to bolstering the infantry and required the correlative support of the artillery.⁵² Thus, whether it was a tank section accompanying an infantry battalion or an armoured division supporting an army, the basic function of armour remained restricted and lost to the cause of mobility. The French certainly had no intention of fighting a mobile armoured battle in Belgium.

Notwithstanding their intended use of armour, the French were well aware of the important role mechanisation was to play in modern war. Much of the anxiety concerning an *attaque brusquée* stemmed from the recognition of technological advances in motorisation that liberated enemy forces from concentrating at rail heads.⁵³ Time and space had to be redefined by the military to compensate for the enhanced speed of a mechanised assault.⁵⁴ Nevertheless, believing that defensive firepower could negate an enemy's manoeuvrability, the armies of France contained little motor transport and continued to rely on the

⁵²Doughty, "The Enigma of French Armored Doctrine 1940," op. cit., p.42. French tanks were qualitatively and quantitatively superior to those of Germany in the battle for France in 1940. A comparative assessment is presented by R.H.S. Stolfi, "Equipment for Victory in France in 1940," History 55 (No.183 Feb 1970):pp.1-20.

⁵³Lançon, "*Motorisation at manoeuvre*," op. cit., p.50.

⁵⁴Lançon, "*Motorisation et manoeuvre*," op. cit., pp.48-49.

railway and the horse for strategic mobility.

The issue of motorisation was frequently raised in military journals. In 1925, General Camon argued in favour of motor vehicles over horses, even considering the importance of leaving the animals for agricultural use in case of war.⁵⁵ He later observed that the lack of motorised transport hindered the French ability to manoeuvre at the outset of a conflict.⁵⁶ Similar concerns were expressed by a Lt. Colonel d'Arras, who wrote in 1930 of the need to motorise the supply trains of cavalry divisions.⁵⁷ He observed that the cavalry's mobility was restricted by their logistical units during manoeuvres the previous year. Ensuring the support of artillery through greater mobility was a frequent topic of commentary. Didelet stated that "...l'artillerie doit se déplacer très rapidement...pour être prête à appuyer l'infanterie à n'importe quel moment."⁵⁸ De Gaulle too emphasized that "...the artillery must keep in close touch with the battle-echelon."⁵⁹

⁵⁵Gen. Camon, "La motorisation de l'armée," Revue militaire française 15 (Jan-Mar 1925):p.299.

⁵⁶Gen. Camon, "Motorisation de l'armée," Revue d'artillerie 96 (Jul-Dec 1925):p.400.

⁵⁷Lt. Col. d'Arras, "Manoeuvres de la division de cavalerie de Luneville en 1929," Revue de cavalerie 40 (Mar-Apr 1930):p.189.

⁵⁸Didelet, op. cit., p.11.

⁵⁹De Gaulle, op. cit., p.126.

Despite an apparent interest in motorisation, doctrinal and strategic reliance on the defensive, with its concomitant financial commitment to the Maginot Line, precluded large expenditure on motorisation.⁶⁰ Thus, in 1940 only seven of seventy French infantry divisions had been completely motorised.⁶¹ The remainder of the infantry formations retained much of their animal drawn transport.⁶² Only twenty percent of the French artillery was motorised leaving approximately one hundred and sixty regiments animal drawn.⁶³ The anti-tank artillery was similarly bound to the limits of the rail system and the speed of the horse.⁶⁴ The requirement of mobility for the Belgian manoeuvre was clearly beyond the capabilities of the French Army.

The lack of motorisation and the doctrinal preference for defence certainly limited the mobility and flexibility of the French Army, but their system of command did much to exacerbate

⁶⁰Young, In Command of France, op. cit., p.62.

⁶¹R. H. Barry, op. cit., p.96.

⁶²Most of the French infantry divisions relied primarily on horse and rail transport. Even the partially motorised 'Type 2' divisions had all their support artillery horse-drawn. The thirteen fortress divisions had no motorised transport. Major Smith, op. cit., p.9; Horne, op. cit., p.30.; and Major-General R. H. Barry, "Military Balance," History of the Second World War 4 (May 1973):p.96.

⁶³Doughty, Seeds of Disaster, op. cit., p.96.

⁶⁴Robert Doughty, "French Antitank Doctrine, 1940: The Antidote that Failed," Military Review 56 (May 1976):p.41 and p.43.

that rigidity. To ensure the structured progression of the methodical battle the French emphasized the importance of consistently issuing and interpreting orders. The Instructions were primarily designed to facilitate that consistency, or 'harmony', of command.⁶⁵ To further avoid ambiguity, written orders were preferred to those transmitted by telephone or wireless.⁶⁶ The division was considered the basic formation of command within which all integral units had to act in concert. Brigadiers and lesser officers were afforded very little initiative.⁶⁷ One French officer commented on the "*grand risque*" that a division courted if its brigades acted discordantly; he suggested that brigadiers be allowed initiative only for local combats.⁶⁸

In contrast to the accepted command style of the French Army, de Gaulle opined that the increased cadence of modern mechanised warfare would necessitate the use of initiative by all levels of command.⁶⁹ Indeed, according to de Gaulle, the mathematician general of 1918, alienated from the battlefield so as to ensure

⁶⁵Instructions, op. cit., p.47 and p.135.

⁶⁶Smith, op. cit., p.8.

⁶⁷Major Smith observed that, "[S]ince all their operations contemplate the use of large forces, there is less opportunity for independent action by lower unit commanders." Smith, op. cit., p.15.

⁶⁸Maj. Keime, "*La cavalerie moderne*," Revue de cavalerie 40 (Mar-Apr 1930):p.212.

⁶⁹De Gaulle, op. cit., pp.141-149.

the careful coordination of men and materiel, was inappropriate for armoured warfare that required a visible commander capable of reacting to rapidly changing circumstances. De Gaulle's views on command, linked as they were to his armoured concepts, were similarly dismissed by the High Command. Like the Instructions that were born from the experiences of the Great War, the French officer corps and their systems grew from that body of doctrine from which they were trained.

The Ecole Supérieure de Guerre was the staff college of the French Army. Although its professors were mostly civilians, all military courses of a technical nature were instructed by high ranking officers carrying with them their war experience.⁷⁰ The curriculum of the Ecole was designed to prepare the officer for the practical aspects of command based most frequently on the methods proven in the Great War.⁷¹ There was little time or toleration for imaginative views. De Gaulle stated that "[A] great deal of labour aims at training every man to play his part in a centralized system and to conform to rigid rules, the whole thing codified in accordance with the model of the events of 1918."⁷²

The commentary by a Captain Jean Chretien supports the

⁷⁰Hughs, op. cit., p.77.

⁷¹Hughs, op. cit., p.78.

⁷²De Gaulle, op. cit., p.149.

assessment of the Ecole as being a conservative institution, concerned with teaching the command techniques established by the Great War and the Instructions.⁷³ Chretien fought in the Great War, attended the Ecole in 1923, and was assigned to the general staff in 1937. He summarised the instruction at the Ecole in terms of "'rigoureuse orthodoxie'" and observed that "'...hérétique était celui qui se permettait d'avoir une opinion personnelle.'"⁷⁴ Chretien observed the mediocracy of an officer corps in which dissenting views were unacceptable. He states:

*Le résultat de ce système fut que tous ceux que nous appelions les 'beni oui oui', individus sans personnalité ni caractère, classes dans le premier tiers, choisirent les places de l'état major général où la guerre les surprit, en tant que chefs de bureaux sclérosés dans les formules dont ils étaient incapables de s'évader.*⁷⁵

Since the officers being trained in the 1920s held high ranking positions in the 1930s, the significance of the Ecole's rigid instruction becomes evident.

Manoeuvre and mobility did not feature strongly in Chretien's picture of the Ecole, and he concluded that "'[L]'Armée française était totalement incapable de mener une action offensive.'"⁷⁶ While his assessment may have been accurate,

⁷³The experiences of Chretien are recounted in the book by Pierre Ordioni, Le pouvoir militaire en France, (Paris: Albatros 1921), pp.348-352.

⁷⁴Ordioni, op. cit., p.350.

⁷⁵Ordioni, op. cit., pp.350-351.

⁷⁶Ordioni, op. cit., p.350.

French officers still held the offensive in high regard and it was the first form of operation discussed in every section of the Instructions. Despite the decisive qualities of the offensive, in the methodical battle the defence was the first priority which occupied the minds of officers and the training of conscripts.

As the service time of French conscripts shrank, greater emphasis was placed on training defensive techniques. During the period of one year service (1928-1935), eighty percent of French conscripts spent up to six months in the frontier fortifications.⁷⁷ This was necessary to ensure initial *couverture*, but it did little to prepare the soldiers for the mobility and the encounter battles that they were potentially to experience in Belgium.⁷⁸

Weapons procurement also favoured systems designed for the defence. Since weapons had to be stock-piled to arm the *levée en masse*, less sophisticated weapons were preferred to expensive arms of greater complexity.⁷⁹ Hence, the anti-tank gun was preferred to the tank because it was easier to operate, was less expensive, and was slower to become obsolete. The best example

⁷⁷Young, "Preparations for Defeat," op. cit., p.158.

⁷⁸Doughty notes that after 1930 the offensive was not emphasized at all in French strategic and tactical preparations. Doughty, Seeds of Disaster, op. cit., p.33.

⁷⁹Doughty, Seeds of Disaster, op. cit., p.26.

of the French attitude towards purchasing defensive systems to avoid obsolescence was the Maginot Line.⁸⁰ Its concrete fortifications were considered less vulnerable to technological developments and were a solid foundation on which to deploy the defensive weaponry of conscripts. Again, the issue of preparing for mobile warfare in the north was not supported by the prevailing defensive attitudes.

The French High Command was concerned about the prospect of engaging in an encounter battle in Belgium, an eventuality made more likely by the intransigent and then neutral stance adopted by Belgium in the 1930s. Despite its likelihood, the French were determined to avoid encounter battles "...as much as possible", as noted by US observer Smith.⁸¹ Moreover, the Instructions never directly addressed the issue of encounter battles. A French officer commented on this lacunae in the Instructions and observed that, by contrast, the German Army regulations dedicated an entire chapter to the subject of encounters.⁸² Amongst the French staff, the prevailing

⁸⁰"Grâce au béton, on crût un moment qu'il était possible de fabriquer moins d'armes; de plus, son usure était jugée nettement plus lente que celle des pièces mécaniques d'un canon, d'un char ou d'un avion dont l'évolution constante des techniques exigeait le renouvellement incessant." Robert Frankenstein, Le Prix du réarmement français, 1935-1939, (Paris: Publications de la Sorbonne, 1982), pp.47-48.

⁸¹Smith, op. cit., p.7.

⁸²Buchalet, "L'emploi d'artillerie dans l'offensive," op. cit., p.148. Buchalet concludes his article with the following comparison of the concepts of mobile warfare of France and Germany:

assumption was that an attack compelled a defensive reaction. The Instructions were clear, stating that "[L]'assaillant, par son approche, oblige ennemi...à se couvrir par des retranchements rapides qu'il améliore progressivement et à ajuster ses feux d'infanterie et d'artillerie."⁸³ Thus, instead of preparing their forces for the possibility of a mobile clash, the French sought to prepare a battlefield for a defensive action that would theoretically destroy the attacker. Only then would the French continue their own advance. Hence, the French vision of a war of movement was methodical, calculated, and aimed at negating manoeuvre, not encouraging it.

The French Army's tactical and operational doctrine seemed appropriate for the strategic aims of France. Along the eastern frontier the Maginot Line presented a strong fortified front that the French conscript army could man with the confidence of having been trained in defensive techniques. In the north, the French plan to advance into Belgium to establish a defensive line was consistent with their overall strategy and tactical doctrine but left many questions unanswered. Unlike the Maginot Line, the Belgian manoeuvre first required mobility to establish

"Nous avons vu que, de notre côté, les prescriptions concernant la guerre de mouvement étaient inspirées d'un esprit de méthode et de prudence, alors que chez nos adversaires elles étaient marquées d'un caractère incontestable d'audace et animées d'un vif esprit d'offensive." Buchalet, "L'emploi d'artillerie dans l'offensive," op. cit., p.174.

⁸³Instructions, op. cit., p.59. Also see Article 4, "Cas d'un ennemi en mouvement", p. 85.

the continuous front. After 1930, numerous questions developed that became more worrisome as the decade unfolded. When would the French be allowed to cross the Belgian frontier? How long would the Belgian defences hold in order for the French to advance to their positions? Where would the German concentration be located? As these issues would not be resolved prior to the outbreak of a conflict, the requirements of mobility and flexibility were crucial for the French Army. Unfortunately, French tactical and operational doctrine, based on the examples of the Great War, was ill suited to contend with the variables of the Belgian manoeuvre. French attitudes towards firepower, armoured warfare, mobility, command control, and training favoured the methodical battle and its preliminary defence. Whereas the Maginot Line assured such a battle, the Belgian manoeuvre did not. In planning the advance into Belgium, the French command gambled that they could establish the prepared battlefield on which the German invasion would be destroyed. In 1940, the *Wehrmacht* was not so obliging to the French who were incapable of adjusting their battle plans to suit the new realities of modern war and *blitzkrieg*.

Conclusion

During the Phoney War, the French Army looked over the frontier into Belgium in anticipation of their advance that had been planned ten years before and conceived of in the mid-1920s. Trained to fight a defensive battle, the Army was uncertain as to the nature of their positions and how long they would have in order to prepare Pétain's 'continuous front' in Belgium. When compared to the established front of the Maginot Line, the uncertainties of the Belgian manoeuvre are as clear to the historian as they were to Commander in Chief Gamelin and his soldiers. Belgium had proven evasive from the start of their relationship in the Franco-Belgian Military Accord of 1920 and had ceased its military collaboration with France in 1936. Without the cooperation of Belgium, the French advance into her neighbour - Plan D - exacerbated the risks existent in the strategic duality of French planning in Europe. In his insightful work, The Six Weeks' War, Theodore Draper observed:

The contradiction in Plan D was that, although it represented a defensive strategy, it was not a passive one. Although it provided for a 'continuous front', it was a 'continuous front' far forward in the heart of Belgium.

Thus Plan D was all things to all men: a defensive strategy and a war of movement. Unless the French Army was guaranteed the time necessary to establish itself solidly on the new line in Belgium, it was likely to be dragged into a war of movement in open country under unfamiliar conditions with untested allies.¹

While Draper's statements are valid, his discussion is primarily

¹Theodore Draper, The Six Weeks' War, (London: Methuen, 1946), p.45.

limited to the immediate prelude to the campaign of 1940. The problems that existed in French planning were, however, apparent throughout the 1930s.

This study has shown that the dangers of France's dual strategy of fortifications and manoeuvre were evident long before the disastrous German invasion. The French preference strategically and tactically for the defence and the methodical battle contrasted with the difficulties associated with preparing for such a battle in Belgium. Why did the French High Command hold onto the Belgian manoeuvre despite the many diplomatic uncertainties and tactical risks?

The conservatism of the French Army after the Great War is the fundamental reason for the rigorous adherence to the established doctrine and planning. Although political considerations influenced the size, composition, and mission of the Army, it was the High Command that translated that mission into specific plans. In regards to Belgium, it was solely the military who was adamant about the advance and who opposed the construction of the fortifications that politicians sought to have on the northern frontier. French Army planning for Belgium was a congruent interpretation of the strategic aims and the precepts of war from whence they came. The fact that they were becoming less politically tenable was an issue for diplomats to resolve, not generals.

The structure, training, and experience of the High Command and the officer corps had much to do with their inability to amend significantly the Belgian manoeuvre to fit the changing strategic realities of the 1930s. Unlike the instability that characterised the governments of interwar France, the military hierarchy was remarkably stable. The two most important positions in the Army - vice-president of the Superior Council for War and Chief of the General Staff - were occupied by only five high ranking officers between 1920 and 1939.² In the French case, stability in the military hierarchy did not lend itself to objective assessments of military planning.

The influence of the Great War on French military doctrine and strategy was assured through its veterans who had been promoted to the highest positions in the Army between the wars. Alistair Horne describes the nature of the High Command:

In the military corridors one runs into the same old faces one has encountered a generation earlier. Brigadiers are now army commanders or C-in-Cs; battalion commanders have divisions or corps; the captains of 1918 are now in command of brigades or divisions. But they have aged. Symbolically, here is Marshal Franchet d'Esperey, the virile hero of 1918, now aged eighty-three, in his wheelchair...; Gamelin, the heir to Joffre, is sixty-eight; Weygand, the shadow

²The vice-presidency of the Superior Council for War was occupied by Marshal Petain (1920-1931), General Weygand (1931-1935), and General Gamelin (1935 until the war). The position of the Chief of the General Staff was occupied by General Buat (1920-1923), General Debeney (1923-1930), General Weygand (1930-1931), and General Gamelin (1931 until the war). Robert Doughty, The Seeds of Disaster; The development of French Army Doctrine, 1919-1939, (Hamden Conn.: Archon Books, 1988), p.112.

of Foch, seventy-three.³

These were not men ready for fundamental changes, but men who wedded new technologies to the methods derived from their experience in the Great War. Belief in the validity of that experience precluded the adoption of radical concepts, such as those of de Gaulle, and reinforced the strategic premise of the Belgian manoeuvre: keeping warfare away from France and protecting the resources and industry of the north for the conduct of a protracted 'total war'. Belgian intransigence was outweighed by these strategic premises as illustrated by the determination of the French High Command to enter Belgium to establish a defensive front with or without Belgian cooperation.

Thus, France planned to enact a strategic advance into Belgium in order to establish a defensive line in circumstances that were uncertain and diplomatically tenuous. While hoping that Germany would be drawn into this methodical battle of the past, in 1940 the French found themselves engaged in a mobile battle for which they were neither tactically trained or psychologically prepared.

³Alistair Horne, To Lose a Battle, (Boston; Little, Brown, 1969), p.123.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

I. Primary Sources

- Armengaud, Gen. Paul. "Les leçons de la guerre d'Espagne." Revue des Deux Mondes 15 (August 1937): 754-769.
- Arras, Lt. Col. d'. "Manoeuvres de la division de cavalerie de Luneville en 1929." Revue de cavalerie 40 (Mar-Apr 1930):171-220.
- "L'artillerie dans la bataille offensive." Revue militaire française 56 (Apr-Jun 1935):118-133.
- Baratier, Gen. "Force at faiblesse de notre armée." Revue de France 15 (Sept-Oct 1935):116-136.
- Barrard, Gen. "Reflexions sur la défensive devant les chars en guerre de mouvement." Revue d'infanterie 86 (Jan-jun 1935):1029-1047.
- Baures, Maj. "L'infanterie en présence du problème offensif." Revue militaire française 45 (Jul-Sept 1932):224-254.
- Besnard, Lt. Col. "La coopération infanterie-artillerie dans la défensive." Revue d'infanterie 77 (Jul-Dec 1930):330-358.
- Bloch, Gen. "L'avenir du char de combat." Revue militaire française 3 (Jan-Mar 1922):90-102.
- Boucherie, Gen. M. "La cavalerie moderne: l'évolution de la cavalerie, ses causes, sa nécessité." Revue militaire française 50 (Oct-Dec 1933):211-229.
- Brenet, Maj. "La cavalerie." Revue de cavalerie 11 (Sep-Oct 1931):525-547
- Brosse, Gen. J. "L'appui de l'infanterie dans l'offensive en guerre de mouvement." Revue d'infanterie 91 (Jul-Dec 1937): 368-375.
- _____. "La marche d'approche." Revue militaire française 48 (Apr-Jun 1933):5-43, 157-188.
- _____. "Les fronts de combat." Revue militaire française 43 (Jan-Mar 1932):36-64.
- _____. "La combinaison des armes." Revue militaire française 38 (Oct-Dec 1930):317-363.

- Buchalet, Maj. "Organisation d'un systeme d'artillerie." Revue d'artillerie 96 (Jul-Dec 1925):97-130, 252-277.
- _____. "L'emploi d'artillerie dans l'offensive." Revue d'artillerie 98 (Jul-Dec 1926):140-174.
- Buchet, Charles. "Le rôle de la Belgique dans la défense des frontières de la France." Revue de France XIV (Nov 1934): 27-47.
- Cammas, Capt. "La motorisation dans l'armée des Etats-Unis d'Amerique." Revue militaire française 36 (Apr-Jun 1930): 176-189, 317-333.
- Camon, Gen. "L'armée de couverture." Revue militaire française 17 (Oct-Dec 1925):5-27.
- _____. "Motorisation de l'armée - moyens de la réaliser." Revue d'artillerie 96 (Jul-Dec 1925):385-400.
- _____. "La motorisation de l'armee." Revue militaire française 15 (Jan-Mar 1925):289-305; 16 (Apr-Jun 1925):5-29.
- Debeney, Gen. M. E. "Conditions de la sécurité nationale." Revue Hebdomadaire (23 Feb and 2 Mar 1935):394-405.
- _____. "Les exigences de la guerre de materiel." Revue d'infanterie 82 (Jan-Jun 1933):577-615.
- _____. "Nos fortifications du nord-est." Revue des Deux Mondes 8e periode, 23 (Sep 15, 1934):241-262.
- Delmas, Lt. Col. J. "Essai sur l'infanterie." Revue d'infanterie 82 (Jan-Jun 1933):449-484.
- _____. (Maj.) "La manoeuvre de contre-attaque." Revue militaire française 37 (Jul-Sept 1930):308-330; 38 (Oct-Dec 1930):54-100.
- Didelet, Col. "Notes sur la guerre de mouvement." Revue militaire française 57 (Jul-Sept 1935):5-45.
- Doumenc, Gen. Joseph Edouard Aime. "La défense des frontières." Revue militaire française 38 (Oct-Dec 1930):5-28.
- L'Ecole Superieure de Guerre. "La manoeuvre du corps d'armée dans l'armée." Revue militaire française 50 (Oct-Dec 1933): 269-283.

- Failon, Jean de. "La crise de la sécurité collective." Revue Générale CXXXV (Jun 1936):650-659.
- G., Lt. Col. "Liason infanterie-artillerie." Revue d'infanterie 79 (Jul-Dec 1931):431-433.
- Gaulle, Charles de. The Army of the Future. London: Hutchinson, 1940.
- Jaspar, Henri. "Locarno et la Belgique." Revue Belge II (November 1925):157-169.
- Keime, Maj. "La cavalerie moderne." Revue de cavalerie 40 (Mar-Apr 1930):6-31.
- Lagabrielle, Maj. "Liason infanterie-artillerie - la solution des combattants." Revue d'infanterie 80 (Jan-Jun 1932):306-322.
- Lançon, Lt. Col. "La défensive devant la mécanisation." Revue militaire française 62 (Oct-Dec 1936):27-67.
- _____. "Motorisation et manoeuvre." Revue militaire française 60 (Apr-Jun 1936):32-62.
- Lauth, Col. "L'infanterie dans la guerre de demain." Revue d'infanterie 79 (Jul-Dec 1931):1014-1032.
- Leroy, Col. "La liason." Revue d'artillerie 96 (Jul-Dec 1925):5-33.
- Liddell Hart, B. H. "The Armies of Europe." Foreign Affairs XV (Jan 1937):235-253.
- Loizeau, Gen. L. "La manoeuvre défensive." Revue militaire française 48 (Jul-Sept 1933):5-30.
- Loustauneau-Lacau, Capt. "Le retour à la manoeuvre." Revue d'infanterie 78 (Jan-Jun 1931):673-694, 943-958, 1118-1137; 79 (Jul-Dec 1931) 118-135.
- Mariot, Maj. "Le groupe de reconnaissance divisionnaire dans la marche d'approche et la prise de contact." Revue de cavalerie 12 (1932):459-483.
- Ministre de la Guerre, Etat-major de l'armée. Instruction Provisoire sur l'emploi tactique des grandes unités. Paris: Imprimerie Nationale, 1921.
- Morel, Capt. "Esprit et finesse de commandement." Revue d'infanterie 77 (Jul-Dec 1930):61-70.

- Morin, Lt. Col. "De l'utilité de la fortification permanente." Revue militaire française 36 (Apr-Jun 1930):190-211.
- Perre, Jean. "Naissance et évolution de la conception du char de combat en France." Revue d'infanterie 86 (Jan-Mar 1935):13-30.
- _____. "Autre réflexions sur la defense contre chars." Revue d'infanterie 84 (Jan-Jun 1934):277-288.
- Pichon, Col. "Les groupes de reconnaissance aux manoeuvres de 1931." Revue de cavalerie 42 (Jan-Dec 1932):61-74.
- Picot, Maj. Georges. "Réflexions sur la rôle tactique de la cavalerie des grandes unités d'infanterie." Revue de cavalerie 12 (1932):177-185.
- Smith, Ralph. Report on French Tactical Doctrine, Organization, and Materiel. Based on observations made while at the *Ecole superieure de guerre* (1935-1937) by Maj. R.C. Smith. n.p., 1937.
- Targe, Gen. La Garde de nos frontières; constitution et organisation des forces de couverture. Paris: Charles-Lavauzelle, 1930.
- Tulasne, Gen. "Une nouvelle doctrine de guerre." Revue des Deux Mondes (May 15, 1932):282-303.
- Videcoq, Maj. Max. "L'officier de reserve en 1936." Revue d'infanterie 89 (Jul-Dec 1936):253-259.

II. Secondary Sources

a) Books and Dissertations

- Adamthwaite, Anthony. France and the Coming of the Second World War, 1936-1939. London: Cass; Biblio Distribution Centre, 1977.
- Bankwitz, Philip. Maxime Weygand and Civil-Military Relations in Modern France. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967.
- Beaufre, General A. "Liddell Hart and the French Army, 1919-1939." The Theory and Practice of War. Editor Michael Howard. New York: Praeger, 1966.
- Bond, Brian. France and Belgium, 1939-1940. London: Davis-Poynter, 1975.

- Bonnet, Georges. Quai D'Orsay; 45 Years of French Foreign Policy. New York: Times Press, 1965.
- Bruge, Roger. Histoire de la ligne Maginot Vol.I: Faites sauter la Ligne Maginot. Paris: Fayard, 1973.
- Cairns, John. Planning for La Guerre des masses: Constraints and Contradictions in France before 1940. Editor Harry Borowski. Washington: Office of Air Force History, USAF, 1986.
- Carrias, Eugene. La pensée militaire française. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1960.
- Challener, Richard. The French Theory of a Nation in Arms, 1866-1965. New York: Russell and Russell, 1965.
- Chapman, Guy. Why France Fell: The Defeat of the French Army in 1940. New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1965.
- Clarke, Jeffrey. "Military Technology in Republican France: The Evolution of the French Armoured Force, 1917-1940." Unpublished PhD diss., Duke University, 1968.
- Coquet, Gen. Alfred. L'enigma de notre manque de divisions blindées (1932-1940). Paris: Nouvelles Editions Latines, 1956.
- Crosier, Brian. De Gaulle. New York: Scribner, 1973.
- Doughty, Robert. The Seeds of Disaster: The Development of French Army Doctrine, 1919-39. Hamden, Conn.: Archon Books, 1988.
- Draper, Theodore. The Six Weeks' War. London: Methuen, 1946.
- Dutailly, Lt. Col. Henry. Les problèmes de l'armée de terre française (1935-1939). Ministère de la défense. Etat-major de l'armée de terre. Service historique. Paris: Imprimerie nationale, 1980.
- Fitzgerald, Sean. "A Vision of Future War: France 1919-1940." PhD dissertation, University of California, Berkley, 1974.
- France. Les relations militaires franco-belges, 1936-1940. Paris: CNRS, 1968.
- Frankinstein, Robert. Le Prix du réarmement français, 1935-1939. Paris: Publications de la Sorbonne, 1982.
- Gunsburg, Jeffery. Divided and Conquered: The French High Command and the Defeat of the West, 1940. West Port, Conn.:

- Greenwood Press, 1979.
- Harvey, Donald. "French Concepts of Military Strategy (1919-1939)." Columbia University PhD dissertation, 1953.
- Haythornthwaite, Philip. Napoleon's Military Machine. Kent: Spellmount, 1988.
- Horne, Alistair. The French Army and Politics, 1870-1970. London: Macmillan Press, 1984.
- Horne, Alistair. To Lose A Battle. Boston: Little, Brown, 1969.
- Hughs, Judith. To the Maginot Line. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1977.
- Keyes, Roger. Outrageous Fortune: The Tragedy of Leopold III of Belgium, 1901-1941. London: Sechert Warburg, 1985.
- Keift, David O. Belgium's Return to Neutrality: An Essay in the Frustrations of Small Power Diplomacy. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972.
- Kirkland, Faris. "The French Officer Corps and the Fall of France, 1920-1940." Unpublished PhD diss., University of Pennsylvania, 1983.
- Miller, Jane. Belgian Foreign Policy Between Two Wars, 1919-1940. New York: Bookman Associates, 1951.
- Milward, Alan. The German Economy at War. London: University of London, 1965.
- Mrazek, James. The Fall of Eben Emael: Prelude To Dunkerque. Washington, D.C.: R.B. Luce, 1970.
- O'Neill, Robert J. The German Army and the Nazi Party, 1933-1939. New York: James H. Heineman, 1966.
- Ordioni, Pierre. Le pouvoir militaire en France. Paris: Albatros, 1981.
- Osgood, Samuel. The Fall of France, 1940; Causes and Responsibilities. Boston: Heath, 1965.
- Overstraeten, General van. Albert I - Leopold III; vingt ans de politique militaire Belge, 1920-1940. Bruges: Desclée de Brouwer, 1946.
- Paoli, Francois. L'Armée française de 1919-1939. (vols. I and II) Paris: Service historique de l'armée, 1969.

- Reynaud, Paul. In the Thick of the Fight, 1930-1945. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1955.
- Rowe, Vivian. The Great Wall of France: The Triumph of the Maginot Line. London: Putnam, 1959.
- Ryan, Stephen. "Pétain and French Military Planning, 1900-1940." Columbia University, PhD dissertation, 1961.
- Ryan, Stephen. Pétain the Soldier. New York: A.S. Barnes, 1969.
- Wandycz, Piotr. The Twilight of French Eastern Alliances, 1926-36. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988.
- Young, Robert. In Command of France: French Foreign Policy and Military Planning, 1933-1944. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1978.

b) Journal Articles:

- Barry, Major-General R. H. "Military Balance." History of the Second World War 4 (May 1973):95-105.
- Cointet, Jean-Paul. "Gouvernement et haut-commandement en France entre les deux guerres." Défense nationale 33 (April 1977): 83-100.
- Doughty, Robert. "French Antitank Doctrine, 1940: The Antidote that Failed." Military Review 56 (May 1976):36-48.
- Doughty, Robert. "De Gaulle's Concept of a Mobile, Professional Army: Genesis of French Defeat?" Parameters: The Journal of U.S. Army War College 4 (1974):23-34.
- Doughty, Robert. "The Enigma of French Armored Doctrine, 1940." Armor 83 (Sept.-Oct. 1974):39-44.
- Dutailly, Henri. "La Puissance de la France en 1938 vue par le Général Gamelin, l'Etat Major de l'armée et le Secrétariat Général de la défense." Revue Historique des Armées 3 (1983):4-9.
- Helmreich, Jonathon. "The Negotiation of the Franco-Belgian Military Accord of 1920." French Historical Studies 3 (Spring 1964):360-378.
- Pallud, Jean Paul. "The Maginot Line". After the Battle (No. 60 1988).
- Stolfi, R.H.S. "Equipment for Victory in France 1940." History 55 (February 1970):1-20.

- Vanderstaete, Bertrand. "La Defense du Nord, couloir d'invasions 1871-1940: Fortifications et Plans Strategiques." Revue du Nord 70(1980):277-297.
- Young, Robert. "L'Attaque brusquée and Its Use as Myth in Interwar France." Historical Reflections 8 (1981):93-113.
- Young, Robert. "Preparation for Defeat: French War Doctrine in the Interwar Period." Journal of European Studies 2 (June 1972):155-172.