



By BRIAN J. HANLEY

Case **Yellow**

AND THE MODERN CAMPAIGN PLANNER

Stuka Raid on the Maginot Line, by M.I. Guhl

War Department

Perhaps the wisest statement to be found in any official military publication appears in Marine Corps Doctrinal Publication 1, *Warfighting*: “A leader without either interest in or knowledge of the history and theory of warfare—the intellectual content of the military profession—is a leader in appearance only.”¹ Mastering the art of operational planning depends more on the staff officer’s intellectual ability than on anything else. Breadth and depth of experience are indispensable, but by themselves are inert, a point that Frederick the Great—whose views on the subject are shared by other of the West’s most successful commanders—often expressed in his memorably pithy way. “A mule who has carried a pack for ten campaigns under Prince Eugene will be a no better tactician for it,” Frederick once said, “and it must be confessed, to the disgrace of humanity, that many men grow old in an otherwise respectable profession without making any greater progress than this mule.”²

A reflective turn of mind has no place in combat, but effective operational planning very much hinges on intellection—particularly the vigorous study of campaigns from the past. History cannot be regarded as a medium for prophecies, nor is it a fable that teaches ironclad lessons in a simpleminded way. What military history does resemble is tragedy. The most affecting and instructive narratives

the French plan, while outwardly sensible in regard to what we today call operational art, suffered from the absence of an intelligent understanding of the enemy’s mind and character

center on the reversal of fortune striking a country suddenly or catching it unawares—the collapse all the more pitiable because it can be contrasted with past glory. Chance has its place in such stories, but at heart tragedy proceeds from the actions—and so reflects the character—of talented but fallible commanders and statesmen. The universality of history, its reflection of our capacity for greatness, and our innate frailties of mind and morals thus

Lieutenant Colonel Brian J. Hanley, USAF (Ret.), works for an intelligence agency in Washington, DC.

can help sharpen the judgment and inform the intuition of the staff officer in ways that no other professional activity can.

What follows is an analysis of the German operational plan for an invasion of France in 1940—in particular its evolution from an unimaginative and timid version of the German strike through Belgium in 1914 to a plan that exploited the moral and intellectual sclerosis of the French high command.³ The value of studying this campaign—or any other of similar prominence—is that we see in play the insight and intelligent audacity of staff officers, which set the conditions for the Wehrmacht’s victory. By contrast, the French plan was superficially reasonable but devoid of an understanding of the enemy’s character and motivation.

The Duel Begins

Eight months after the Allies declared war on Hitlerite Germany in September 1939, the battle for France began. It lasted about 45 days. The ease with which the Wehrmacht liquidated the French army in the late spring of 1940 suggests that there was something inevitable about the lopsided victory. German propaganda films, set to the music of Richard Wagner and Ludwig van Beethoven, feature columns of Panzers on the move partially obscured by dust clouds—bringing to mind a stampeding herd of buffalo—or fanning out unmolested on the plains between Sedan and Abbeyville, attended by motorcycle-borne couriers—like pilot fish accompanying sharks. Widely published photographs from the period reinforce the idea of German invincibility and Allied impotence: roads clogged with refugees and routed columns of French infantry; grinning and smartly turned-out German soldiers sightseeing in Paris, which the city’s defenders abandoned without a fight; the British Expeditionary Force, bedraggled and denuded of its equipment, making its escape from Dunkirk in a motley collection of naval and civilian craft.

Though impressive, the German victory was by no means predestined. We should examine the German *plan* from its conception to execution—with particular attention to how the various obstructions were overcome and flaws cast out. The French plan deserves similar scrutiny, for it embodies an approach to planning that, while outwardly sensible in regard to what we today call operational art, suffered from the absence of an intelligent understanding of the enemy’s mind and character.

Because the means of war are force and counterforce—war is essentially a large-scale duel, as Carl von Clausewitz put the matter—and also because weight of effort bears conspicuously on operational planning, it is not unreasonable to begin by surveying the order of battle of the Allied and German forces in May 1940. Both sides fielded about 120 divisions. The Germans had greater numbers of aircraft—which were of high quality—and better trained pilots. The Allies held the advantage in quality and quantity of tanks, but German tank crews and commanders were much more efficient and also had the benefit of recent combat experience. Such



War Department (Eva Braun Collection/Foreign Records Seized)

differences that existed between the opposing forces in regard to artillery, small arms, and other weaponry were collectively not enough to confer to either side a decisive advantage of the kind the Germans enjoyed over Polish forces in 1939. The equipment of the combatants, then, reflects neither German invulnerability nor Allied feebleness; one could not predict with certainty the outcome from a survey of the opponents’ weaponry.

Plan Origins

Nor could one speculate with confidence on the outcome based on the origins of the German war plan—which was corrupted

by the animosity between Hitler and his generals as well as by competing professional agendas among senior military commanders. “Case Yellow” (*Fall Gelb*) was the name Hitler gave to the operational plan aimed at liquidating France’s military might. The initial version of Case Yellow submitted by the General Staff in late 1939 amounted to nothing more than an uninspired recycling of the Schlieffen Plan, embodying the letter of the plan that Germany went to war with in 1914 even as it was bereft of its spirit. The Schlieffen Plan called for enveloping the enemy with a sweep through Belgium and pinning him against the German-Swiss frontier; the Kaiser’s armies would then achieve victory by exploiting their own mobility and French military strategy, which was based on an attack through Alsace-Lorraine—far away from the main German effort.

The initial version of Case Yellow was also built around an attack through Belgium and Holland, but its objectives were faint-hearted by comparison. Unlike the Schlieffen Plan, this version of Case Yellow did not seek decisive victory; its objectives were to batter Allied forces, create a protective buffer for the Ruhr industrial region, and occupy strategically advantageous territory so that the war could be more efficiently prosecuted against France

and England. For all of its timidity, moreover, the original draft of Case Yellow carried risks that were not in play in 1914. For starters, the strategic surprise of 1914 could not be counted on in 1940. The French expected the Germans to come through Belgium and Holland—hardly surprising given the heavily garrisoned Maginot Line, the difficulty of traversing the Ardennes forest, and the precedent of World War I—which meant that, unlike Schlieffen, Case Yellow would be a frontal rather than a flank attack. There was also the possibility that an aggressive French commander might marshal forces on the exposed southern flank of the advance and cut its lines of communication just at the moment when the German offensive, worn down by breaking through Allied defenses, was running out of steam. The original Case Yellow failed to consider “the scope for maneuver open to a bold and resolute enemy commander,” writes General Erich von Manstein in his memoirs. “One had no right to assume that such leadership would be lacking, particularly in view that General [Maurice] Gamelin [the French army commander in chief] enjoyed with us. He certainly made an excellent impression on General [Ludwig] Beck [German chief of general staff] when the latter visited him before the war.”⁴

A more insidious risk was entailed by violating the neutrality of both Belgium and Holland in pursuit of a military objective of limited value. Whatever else may be said on the subject, the Schlieffen Plan at least weighed the strategic consequences of decisively defeating the French army against attacking a neutral country. By contrast, Case Yellow in its original form would have left the Allies undefeated and might well have provoked the entry of the United States into

the war either as a combatant or as a supplier of arms and materiel to the Allies.

So large were the flaws in the original Case Yellow plan that its very submission to Adolf Hitler can be interpreted as a form of insubordination, insofar as Generals Walther von Brauchitsch, commander in chief of the army, and his chief of staff, General Franz Halder, saw nothing but gathering catastrophe in an all-out assault on France before 1942. The point here is that even a well-trained and intellectually gifted staff can produce an insipid war plan—one that was bound to repeat the stalemate that led to Germany’s defeat in World War I.

Adapting the Plan

After much debate and bureaucratic maneuvering—envenomed at times by Hitler’s contempt for the General Staff, which was

the strategic objective of Sickle Cut was not to conquer territory or seize towns but to destroy the enemy armies in the field

reciprocated, and by reflexive misgivings among a few senior commanders about any audacious stroke against France, “Sickle Cut” (*Sichelschnitt*), as the revised version of Case Yellow came to be known, was settled upon.

The strategic objective of Sickle Cut was not to conquer territory or seize towns but to destroy the enemy armies in the field—as Hitler’s “War Directive #10,” issued on February 20, 1940, made clear:

*The objective of offensive ‘Yellow’ [that is, the revised plan] is to deny Holland and Belgium to the English by swiftly occupying them; to defeat, by an attack through the Belgian and Luxembourg territory, the largest possible forces of the Anglo-French army; and thereby to pave the way for the destruction of the military strength of the enemy.*⁵

Sickle Cut called for the employment of three army groups. The southern army group would face the Maginot Line, thus absorbing the attention of the 400,000 French troops posted there. Possessing no Panzer divisions, this group was the least formidable of the three. The northern army group, which included the weakest 3 of the Wehrmacht’s 10 Panzer divisions, would attack France by way



Hitler in Paris after the fall of France, June 1940

War Department (Heinrich Hoffmann Collection/Foreign Records Service)

of Belgium and Holland, the objective being to divert the heart of the Allied armies away from the main German blow—which was to be delivered south of the Liege/Namur axis. The Luftwaffe would concentrate its efforts in the north as a means of disguising further the location of the Wehrmacht's main effort. The most powerful of the three army groups, assembled under cover of the Ardennes forest, centered around seven Panzer divisions and was tasked to seize bridgeheads across the Meuse between Dinant and Sedan and from there to drive for the coast—thus trapping the Allied armies in northeast France and Flanders and separating them from French forces on and south of the Somme.

Intellectually marvelous, Sickle Cut reconciled boldness with prudence. It is commonplace among staff officers and commanders, as Helmuth von Moltke observed in his history of the Franco-Prussian War, that no plan survives first contact with the enemy, the implication being that once a plan is set in motion, victory depends on improvisation. Sickle Cut required little in the way of improvisation as it inherently accounted for friction, fog, and chance. Indeed, the plan accommodated both Hitler's Napoleonic self-confidence and the General Staff's fear of repeating the catastrophe of World War I—which almost all senior commanders had experienced first-hand. If all went well for the Germans—as it eventually did—Allied forces, assuming that their southern flank was protected by the impassibility of the Ardennes and the impregnability of the Maginot Line, would move northeast to repulse what to them seemed like the only sound avenue of approach. The army group advancing west across the Meuse River would ensnare these forces in one huge pocket. But if the Allies decided to establish a firm line before counterattacking—not an implausible assumption, given their defensive-mindedness—then the fast-moving German armored formations would paralyze the Allied command. This would likely happen even if French resistance along the Meuse was intelligently directed, and even if traffic snarls impeded armored columns making their way through the Ardennes—if only because senior French commanders would likely be unable to determine the main line of attack before it was too late.

Sickle Cut perfectly balanced strategic objectives against strategic risks, it took into account all reasonable possibilities in regard to the enemy's reaction to attack, and forces were composed and allocated in such a way



German infantry and tanks attack using *Blitzkrieg* tactics

German magazine *Signal*, 1942

as to match German strengths against Allied weaknesses. In fact, so renowned is the plan among military historians that its architect, Erich von Manstein, is better known nowadays for Sickle Cut than for his illustrious achievements as an operational commander on the Eastern Front.

The development of the plan demonstrates the productive interplay between conventional thinking and innovation among the German General Staff. The emergence of von Manstein's ideas was the byproduct of a professional culture that not only tolerated but also encouraged rigorous debate right up until an order was executed. Manstein's plan, no matter how brilliant, would never have seen the light of day had it not been given a sympathetic hearing not only by Hitler—bold ideas were very much to his liking—but also by Manstein's rather conservative-minded commander, General Gerd von Rundstedt. Hardly less relevant is that Manstein, Rundstedt, and several other senior commanders embodied the high traditions of the German General Staff. Officers were chosen for such duty based on their intellectual ability rather than on their political views or because advancement in rank absolutely required it. There was no corporate method or formula, or a bandwagon culture, that might have typecast Manstein's thinking as hopelessly exotic.

Failed Counterforce

The French began planning to repulse a German invasion in late September 1939—at about the same time as Hitler issued “War Directive 6,” the tasking for the original Case Yellow.⁶ By the end of 1939, “Plan D,” named

after the River Dyle on which the Allied forces would assemble, was decided upon. Because the only expedient line of approach for the Germans was through Belgium—so French commanders thought—Plan D concentrated Allied forces and most of their tanks and motorized transport in northeast France on a line west of the Antwerp/Namur axis. In the south, the Maginot Line was amply provided with infantry and artillery. Thus, the Allied front comprised two strong wings. Between them was a center that was held by forces deficient in ability, numbers, and equipment. These weaknesses, it was believed, were adequately compensated by the rugged upland country of the Ardennes and by the fact that German forces would have to cross the Meuse between Dinant and Sedan—a much more difficult undertaking than establishing bridgeheads on the narrower and shallower rivers in the north.

In devising Plan D, the French worked from the following three assumptions. First, the Germans would attack through Belgium and nowhere else in strength. Second, the Germans must not be allowed to occupy French territory—the battle must be won on Belgian or Dutch soil. Third, despite their success in Poland the Germans would have no choice but to fight the French by fracturing their frontline.

It is worth considering the validity of each of these assumptions. The French understood their center of gravity as residing in the country's industrial heartland and in its capital, which could—on account of the flat terrain, good roads, and relatively short distance—be most easily occupied by

driving across the Belgian frontier. Advancing through the Ardennes would be foolish not only because of the uncongenial countryside but also because the Germans, in attempting to drive a wedge between two strong wings, would leave their flanks exposed to

the French understood their center of gravity as residing in the country's industrial heartland and in its capital

counterattack. And attacking the Maginot Line would result in a replay of Verdun not for the French but for the Germans; this time there would be no Fort Douaumont.

The second and third assumptions—that France must hold the Germans back from French soil even as they decided to wait for the Wehrmacht to strike—are partially rooted in the experiences of World War I, when France's misbegotten offensive strategy yielded carnage beyond belief and nearly brought about France's defeat. But the defensive-mindedness embodied in Plan D also reflected the defeatism that consumed France between the World Wars.

In 1940, France was plainly averse to seeking a military test of strength with Germany. It had turned a blind eye toward Hitler's flouting of the Versailles Treaty during the mid-1930s and accepted war with Germany in 1939 with conspicuous reluctance. Why was this so? The unprecedented brutality of World War I spawned in France a school of pathologies that would paralyze its ability and will to fight in 1940: a stubborn popular indifference to strategic matters, particularly in regard to military funding and conscription, and, correspondingly, an ethos of individual pleasure-seeking; the ignition of sharp and sometimes violent political fractiousness—pent-up during World War I as a matter of national survival and pride; and a military infected by intellectual complacency and bureaucratic inertia.

The belief that a German advance could be stopped at the French border and then rolled back also illustrates the retrogressive thinking that can afflict any victorious army. Even though the Polish campaign demonstrated the lethality of *Blitzkrieg*, the French rejected outright the possibility of being subdued in a similar way. The French believed themselves to be tougher and more

resourceful fighters than the Poles; they also were convinced that the Wehrmacht's *Blitzkrieg* doctrine was reckless—effective against a feeble, disorganized opponent but ineffectual when set against an enemy whose courage and resolution stopped the Kaiser's armies at Verdun and on the Marne. There were French officers concerned about the rehabilitated German army—Colonel Charles de Gaulle, for one—but their points of view were peremptorily discounted.⁷

Such were the scope and depth of French self-satisfaction that senior commanders actually looked forward to the German attack: the sooner it came, the sooner Germany's perfidious ambition would be thwarted by French valor and the war brought to a swift, happy end.⁸ Even when French reconnaissance identified a German buildup between the Rhine and Moselle Rivers in the early spring of 1940, it was interpreted as an act of strategic deception. That the Germans might take risks that no French commander would dare countenance was never seriously debated.

It is easy to criticize Plan D given the outcome of the battle, but we should not forget that the plan was, by the standards of conventional thinking on operational matters, a competent piece of work. What has been given remarkably little emphasis in the postmortems on Plan D is the failure of the French to ask searching and disinterested questions about the culture of German military leadership.

the French failed to consider the possibility that Germany had learned a great deal from defeat in 1918 and that the leadership in 1940 was of a wholly different cast

The French assessed potential German action based on inanimate circumstances: terrain, equipment, doctrine, the proximity of France's industrial centers to potential avenues of approach, the material conditions of the earlier war, and so on. They also failed to consider the possibility that Germany had learned a great deal from defeat in 1918 and that the leadership in 1940 was of a wholly different cast from that of the Kaiser and his generals.

Had the French taken stock of Hitler's character, which was on display not only in *Mein Kampf* but also in his conquests leading up to the Polish campaign, they might have

been able to predict with greater accuracy the German course of action. Hitler was a gambler. The French generals might well have asked, given the circumstances, how will a gambler likely behave? What is the best way to thwart a gambler who relies on men of caution—Generals Walther von Brauchitsch, Franz Halder, Hans von Kluge—to achieve his ends? The French commanders seemed largely unaware of the enmity and political rivalries that beset Germany's political and military leadership—weaknesses that, had they been properly understood, might have been exploited once the battle had begun. Who can know what effects a sharp setback—actual or perceived—on the right bank of the Meuse might have had on the morale of senior German commanders and, correspondingly, Hitler's resplendent but insecure standing as a military genius? Today's joint planner should ponder issues of this kind with the aim of avoiding the sclerotic thinking that hastened, if it did not foreordain, the French defeat. **JFQ**

NOTES

¹ Marine Corps Doctrinal Publication 1, *Warfighting* (Washington, DC: Headquarters United States Marine Corps, June 20, 1997), 63–64.

² *Frederick the Great on the Art of War*, ed. and trans. Jay Luvaas (New York: Da Capo Press, 1999), 47.

³ For context, see T.N. Dupuy, *A Genius For War* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1977); L.F. Ellis, *The War in France and Flanders, 1939–1940* (London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1953); Walter Goerlitz, *History of the German General Staff, 1657–1945* (Boulder, CO: Praeger, 1985); Alistair Horne, *To Lose a Battle* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1969); Kenneth Macksey, *Panzer Division* (New York: Ballantine, 1968); Bryan Perret, *Knights of the Black Cross: Hitler's Panzerwaffe and Its Leaders* (New York: St. Martin's, 1986); William L. Shirer, *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1960).

⁴ Erich von Manstein, *Lost Victories*, ed. and trans. Anthony G. Powell (Chicago: Regnery, 1958), 102.

⁵ Hugh Trevor-Roper, *Blitzkrieg to Defeat: Hitler's War Directives* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1964), 21.

⁶ "War Directive 6" was issued on October 9, 1939; the French General Staff began war planning against the Germans on September 26. Also see Theodore Draper, *The Six Weeks War* (New York: Viking, 1944), 24.

⁷ Horne, 133.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 130–131; Perret.