

The French Army in the Interwar Period *

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Marshal Ferdinand Foch once described Versailles Treaty as “not a peace but an armistice for twenty years.”¹ The majority of Frenchmen agreed to the bitter truth that Germany would never accept its defeat. The upcoming war with Germany was expected to be different from World War One. Still, not everybody agreed at the time that future battlefield environment will be so different. The French Army had a need to learn from the lessons of World War One and to adapt those lessons to the possible future challenges of a new war. All the French Army's efforts in legislation, doctrine development, modernization, education and training were conducted in order to prepare it for the future war with Germany. However, it is obvious from events that these preparations were unsuccessful.

The aim of this paper is to analyze the development and transformation of the French Army in the interwar period between 1918 and 1939. In light of the known facts on the development of the French Army in the interwar period my question is: How was the transformation of the French Army in the interwar period conducted and what was the effectiveness of this transformation in preparing the French armed forces for the upcoming war?

The paper will initially analyze the French policy developments made in order to prepare France for inevitable war with Germany. It will also touch upon the inability of the French government to implement the policy decisions in reality. Furthermore, the article will review the economic conditions and the role they played in the development of the French Army. The paper will also describe the development of French doctrine and the reasons why France developed the doctrine that it did. Furthermore, the article will analyze the advantages and disadvantages of the doctrine and provide some parallels with current doctrines used in the armies of the NATO nations.

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The French Army modernization plans, mainly mechanization plans, and use of technological achievements will be analyzed in comparison to the Germany's efforts in order to identify the possible French advantages and disadvantages. Finally, aspects of education and training of French Army will be analyzed to see what influence they had on overall developments during interwar period. This paper will be limited to only a brief review of the primary interwar developments of the French Army. The general modernization trends will be seen through the prism of the development of French Army tank and mechanized units. The paper will not discuss aspects of the reserve army or developments that took place in the other services.

1. Making the policy.

It is impossible to understand the French interwar military program without a review of the legislation affecting the armed forces undertaken by the French Senate and the Chamber of Deputies. There is one well-known Bismarck stricture that “Laws are like a sausages, it is better not to see them being made.”² He was exactly right, and the proof of this is what happened in the details of the legislative process of the French Senate and the Chamber of Deputies from the early 1920s to the 1930s. In this period the French legislators failed to produce an effective security strategy. This lack of a coherent policy became a major obstacle to France streamlining and organizing all its resources towards preparation for war with Germany.

The modern warfare system that evolved during the time of Napoleon and the Army of the Revolution, complete with the *levee en masse*, was cogently explained by General Rupert Smith in his “Utility of Force.”³ Armies built on that principle enjoyed victories on the battlefield until the new evolution of the Prussian military machine. At that point the professional officer corps and technical proficiency was the keys to success in war. However, by 1914 such an approach no longer guaranteed success. During World War I and the war of attrition in the trenches it was the production capacity of the country that won over the military proficiency of the army. The nation that had more resources and was able to raise more “battalions” would, in the end, win. The “Total War,” as a contest between nations rather than armies, restored French belief in their revolutionary *levee en masse* of 1793. The sense of *nation armee* was very well suited French mentality, along with the idea that that no other nation can make a comparable commitment to its national cause.⁴

The French leaders recognized the need to redefine *nation armee* and to transform it in accordance with the situation. It was no longer enough to concentrate large numbers of men on the battlefield without paying attention to the economics of war. A nation now needed a new comprehensive approach to national security arrangements where the hardship and the profits of the wartime mobilization were more equally distributed among the population. The French approach to grand strategy was shown in its “Law for the organization of the nation in time of war.” Instead of insuring the mobilization of human and material resources and the allocation of responsibilities among civilian and military agencies, the French law actually highlighted the clash between rational planning and political reality. The poor process to develop the appropriate laws demonstrated the limits of French leadership in terms of delivering a comprehensive security policy.⁵

The First Bill of the national mobilization law was initiated by Army Chief of Staff General Edmond Buat at 1920. Initially, the government shared the same view as the army and intended to revise the constitution to create an agency which would be able to deal with the integration of military and civil aspects of national defense planning. Two major political views existed at that time. One view, shared by General Buat, was for the need to coordinate industrial capabilities in support of armed forces. This position viewed comprehensive national mobilization as a trade for the reduction of mandatory service. The other view, shared by majority of the legislators, disliked conscript service and employed rhetoric to advocate shorter conscript service and generally ignored the other issues. As one might expect, the second view prevailed and the duration of conscript service was reduced without any other significant change in legislation.⁶

Only on March 1926, Joseph Paul-Boncour was appointed by the French Chamber of Deputies as spokesman for defense issues. He identified three requirements for the national organization law: the need to prepare France for a total war, the need to assure smooth transition from peacetime to wartime organization, and the need for flexible laws that could adapt quickly as circumstances required. The other important issue was that compensation paid for requisitions would not exceed the basic cost, so there would be no war profits.⁷

The next four years were spent in endless discussions on numerous issues such as: who could be called-up as reservists, should females be called-up, where should members of the Parliament and the Senate should serve during the war, whether private companies should make profits from military requisitions and requests, and many other issues. However, all those activities contributed very little to any genuine progress in the national defense program.

Further disagreements between “socialist” Chamber and “liberal” Senate led to dropping the revision of the defense law from the legislative agenda for the next six years. So, the first efforts to establish a French national grand strategy proved to be politically unobtainable at that time.⁸ In the next six years after the initial failure virtually nothing happened and the national mobilization bill seemed to be forgotten by everybody because there was no visible military threat to France at the time. It was a period of international disarmament talks, and the idea was that the increased development of national assets for the defense sector could undermine the French position in international diplomacy. France was also affected by the spreading Great Depression which began in 1929. In that period France was focused on defending its franc. Social conflicts, a depressed economy, France’s declining position in technology, and the poor state of the world economy all contributed to a general malaise. In that situation, defense against a disarmed Germany was not seen as a very important factor.⁹

The second attempt to establish a comprehensive national defense strategy was made in 1934. The New Chamber's Army Committee showed little commitment to the previous principles agreed to in 1927. The issues of excluding females from the call-up and payments for benefits were approved without discussion. All members of the Parliament lost their right to choose where they would serve during a war. However, further inter-ministerial discussions proved inability of the Committee to establish a clear peacetime and wartime command structure, to divide responsibilities among agencies, or even to keep the higher direction of the war in civilian hands.¹⁰

The “jointness” issue also was addressed during the process. In addition to three service staffs there also existed three different ministries, the actions of which were not well coordinated. The situation called for the transformation of those bodies into a coherent and unified structure. Originally the idea of a unified command was on the legislative agenda but

“the enthusiasm for drastic reform apparent in early discussions of military command arrangements soon evaporated in the face of inter-service tensions.”¹¹ In the end, only Marshall Petain was supporting that cause, but he found no support in the Defense Committee, nor within armed forces. So, final bill of 1938 left service independence untouched and contributed very little to the improvement of inter-service relationships.¹²

After the Second World War the former Minister of National Defense Daladier insisted that the military was the cause of France’s defeat in 1940. But he, as one of the ministers of war, was rightly to be blamed for fragmenting the powers of High Command and for delegating authority in defense issues to the different agencies.¹³

The implementation of the National Organization Law was also difficult. Writing the law and announcing mobilization was the easy part. Transforming this theoretical idea into the working system was much more difficult. All efforts to make this system work lacked decisiveness and lacked the necessary strong leadership. The military leaders were not interested in large revolutionary-style mobilization, and their actions were described by some historians as a combination of ill-will and negligence.¹⁴ Without military interest in the issue, civilian institutions also were not focused on mobilization planning. The weakest point of mobilization plan lay at municipal level. The results of mobilization exercises of 1938 and 1939 showed that local mayors paid little attention to their wartime and mobilization responsibilities.¹⁵

In conclusion, one can say that in generally those two decades of the interwar period were wasted because French legislators were not able to produce the needed legislative acts that would allow the transformation of French defense system between the wars. They failed in three major areas. First, they were overconfident in the French ability to understand their national defense requirements. Second, they were not able to transform existing political structures in accordance with a developed vision. Furthermore, they failed to establish the unified command structure and kept all three services and respective ministries as separate entities. This would later affect the overall approach of the services to the execution of operations. Finally, they constantly refused to admit the difference between theory and reality. Thus, the legislators were unable able to implement changes within governmental structures, both political and military.

As the Minister of National Defense Daladier stated in his testimony to the Chamber of Army Committee in December 1936, there were three pillars of French national security: national organization law, armament, and the ability to harness national resources efficiently. Knowing the German advantage in first and second area, France could achieve success only by placing emphasis on the later.¹⁶ The history of World War One had shown that French had missed this opportunity.

2. Economy

As we can see from the above, in the interwar period France lacked a comprehensive National strategy that would enable it to deal with German threat.¹⁷ However, from the point of view of the national economy, France was not in a disadvantageous position and the French indeed devoted a sufficient amount of resources towards defense issues.

The interwar period was marked by two economic depressions in 1921 and 1929. But that phenomenon was spread worldwide and did not affect only France. Hence, all countries were at the same situation and France got no advantage or disadvantage out of it.

France had a very well developed military industry and was able to sustain it throughout the First World War and further develop it during interwar period. Even though France had an extensive amount of surplus of equipment at the end of the First World War, it did not stop the French from creating completely new weaponry.¹⁸

Financial constraints were never a major limitation for France. In the period from 1918 to 1935 France spent on defense a larger percentage of its gross domestic product than any other great power. Although Germany spent more than France in its defense expenditures after 1936, much of the cost was due to the fact that Germany was purchasing new stocks of basic equipment, while the French Army already had considerable equipment stocks at its disposal.¹⁹ Still, France did not readily accept a position behind Germany and the French increased their defense budget from 12.657 billion francs in 1935 to 14.848 in 1936, 21.235 in 1937, 28.976 in 1938 and 93.687 in 1939.²⁰ One can conclude that the French defense system did not suffer from inadequate financing.

Of course, France could have spent more money on its defense needs. But more money would not have necessarily resulted in a better state of preparation for war. One cannot see how large financial resources might have resulted in any fundamental changes in any of the defense sectors. More money would not have resulted in the development of more modern vehicles, a different doctrine or wider acceptance of mobile concepts of war, or encouraged decentralized command and control relationships.²¹ In short, France's economical and financial situation in the interwar period was adequate and certainly was not the source of disastrous defeat of 1940.

3. Doctrine

This article will analyze the roots of French doctrine and the factors that influenced its development. The concept of the Methodical Battle became the centerpiece of French military thinking. That doctrine was grounded in the French obsession with superiority of firepower and the necessity to tightly control every action on the battlefield.

The roots of the French doctrine certainly lay in the lessons learned from World War One. There is no doubt that devastating experiences of World War One had tremendous impact not only on French military, but indeed on the French nation. The war had simply blown away much of French military attitude and institutional culture. From the pre-war population of approximately 40 million France mobilized 8,410,000. And out of those mobilized French lost in dead and missing somewhere between 1,382,400²² and 1,700,000 of its young men.²³ By the end of 1917 French Army was so shaken that it was largely out of action and mentally unable to take any offensive action. Their mind already was pre-set for the favor of defensive action. As John Keegan noted, "France sought literally to wall itself off from a renewal of the trench agony by building a simulation of the trench system in concrete along its frontier with Germany."²⁴

The legacy of Verdun is the most popular explanation of interwar French doctrine. The battle of Verdun demonstrated to everyone the power of defense. Influenced by the disastrous results of the *offence à outrance* the French Army prepared to fight next war behind the concrete of Maginot Line.²⁵ Initially post-war mind-set was more offensive than defensive and even fortification line was seen as part of offensive operation.²⁶ However, further developments and political influence marked a clear shift towards defensive concept.

There was one very well known Marshal Petain dictum that was constantly repeated by French military - "*le feu tue*" - "fire kills."²⁷ It came from the French experience and the belief in the superiority of defense and the primacy of fire over maneuver. The formal believe in the maxim "fire kills" came from the fact that contemporary weapons were the same as during World War One, when "fire demonstrably did kill."²⁸ During the war the French increased number of heavy artillery pieces from 308 in 1914 to 5,340 in 1918,²⁹ and those guns were set to play their role in upcoming war.

There are two lessons from World War One that certainly should be studied by French: the German stormtroop infiltration tactics and the Brusilov offensive. By the end of the war Germans had very successfully used infiltration tactics. In the 1917 and 1918 battles the Germans bypassed enemy strong-points and continued the advance forward, encircling and cutting off enemy troops. So, resistance of encircled units become irrelevant and they surrendered.

The Russian southern army group commander General Brusilov launched his offensive on a large front in 1916 with very little, but still precise artillery preparations in different places. In this way, the Austrians did not know where the main attack was coming and where they needed to send their reserves. Shocked by the initial attack from different directions, the Austrian defense soon collapsed and only the German intervention with their reserves pulled back from other fronts stopped the Russian offensive. As a result of this operation, Russian armies advanced for almost hundred kilometers and defending 4th Austro-Hungarian Army was almost annihilated. It was unimaginable to achieve such results on Western front.³⁰

After World War One the French Army put significant efforts into development of the most modern doctrines. All new ideas and new technologies were evaluated by a new system which was set-up by the Army. The army committee carefully analyzed all aspects of personnel, equipment, structure of the units and the ways of their employment. They wanted to maximize use of firepower of each weapon and each unit. The French leadership believed that the tests conducted in a scientific fashion were the best way of proving the feasibility of new concepts.³¹

The French military doctrine was based on two major concepts – supremacy of firepower and the Methodical Battle. The French Army believed in “fire kills” dictum and introduced greater use of the firepower, which made battlefield even more lethal. French disregarded possibility of using artillery as a tool to provide immediate support to smaller units. In the French view, artillery provided massive fire support to advancing or defending infantry. Such a view, of course, had its limits. It was difficult to conduct rapid maneuvers and it limited their flexibility in maneuvering while massing fires and controlling large units. The attacking force was limited in its advance by the effective range of artillery unit that was supporting the infantry.³²

The doctrine, which was focused on centralized use of massive artillery fire, inevitably required highly centralized synchronization of the battle itself. French called it *bataille conduite* – Methodical Battle. The Methodical Battle was tightly controlled operation in which movement of all units and fire from all weapon systems were fully synchronized and strictly executed in accordance with prepared timetables.³³ The battle itself was actually a series of engagements with strictly divided efforts, and clearly defined objectives, which should be executed in the right sequence.³⁴ Such an organization of the battle left little space for initiative of subordinates and no possibility to exploit any success in any phase of the operation.

The French saw the successful offensive operation in only one way. A hasty attack option was disregarded as too risky and too costly. The Methodical Battle was the solution. This required concentrations of fire with “three times as much infantry, six times the artillery and fifteen times the ammunition.”³⁵ To put it in simple terms, the attack consisted of successive bounds of the maneuver element, firstly tanks, then infantry, moved forward for about fifteen hundred meters, seized their objective and waited for friendly artillery to be relocated to new position. When the artillery was in place, the second phase of attack started with another move for fifteen hundred meters. And all that was done in a strictly orchestrated and synchronized way.³⁶

The basic doctrinal documents that were used by French Army in the interwar period were the *Provisional Instructions on the Tactical Employment of Large Units* (1921) and *Instructions on the Tactical Employment of Large Units* (1936). The 1921 *Instructions* was based on the use of firepower as the “preponderant factor of combat.”³⁷ It described flow of the Methodical

Battle as series of successive actions starting with preparation, explaining movement of units and materials and concluding with reorganization. The *Instructions* also emphasized the role of the commander as the coordinator of the battle. The *Instructions* did not abandon the offence, but put greater emphasize on the defense. While doctrine tended to slide towards defense, the Army “retained understanding of the importance of the offence.”³⁸

The 1936 *Instructions* introduced some new concepts, but mainly acknowledged the dominance of previous doctrine. However, the worst thing was that by that time French military doctrine moved from an innovative basis for military education and turned to the “unfortunate status of being an inflexible prescription.” Creative thinking and imaginative actions were replaced by new doctrine, which was blindly followed by the French Army.³⁹ That was a period, when French doctrine “had regressed rather than progressed.”⁴⁰ The modified doctrine introduced little innovation, since new weapon systems remained tied to the old ideas.⁴¹

However, it would be incorrect to say that French doctrine was purely defensive in nature. Discussions on vital importance of offensive actions popped-up from time to time at the War College and in the military publications.⁴² Even the *Instructions* of 1936 had stated that “only the offensive permits the obtaining of decisive results.”⁴³ Unfortunately the change in wording did not lead to the change in the mindset. Firepower was still the cornerstone of French doctrine and movement of troops or maneuver was seen as possibility to gain advantage in firepower only.⁴⁴

Nearly every book written on French Army development in the interwar period heavily criticizes French military doctrine. In fact, French interwar doctrine was the basis for what today is known as 2nd Generation Warfare. Speaking in general terms, we are not so far from the French doctrine today, because current NATO doctrine is also about “out-firing” rather than “out-maneuvering” the opponent. Today, as French before World War I, NATO nations are obsessed with “synchronizations” and “de-conflictions” to maximize their use of firepower and still pay too little attention to maneuver. However, a significant difference of current NATO tactical doctrine is in its offensive spirit and unquestioned maxim that only offensive actions can lead to a victory.

In conclusion it is correct to say that French Army was terrified by the amount of the casualties during World War One and failed to learn right lessons from previous war. As a result, the French developed a doctrine that over-emphasized the importance of the firepower, over-centralized command and control relationships, and killed any initiative of junior commanders on the battlefield. The new French doctrine was not an entirely wrong document in its explanation of tactical actions for the French Army, but the practical application of it was wrong, and this led to the disastrous results during the interwar period and in 1940.

4. Modernization of the army.

This chapter will present modernization efforts of French Army between World War One and World War Two in the field of mechanization. It will also describe organization of French mechanized units and their employment on the battlefield. Later it will be compared with similar German efforts. This chapter will show that French were actually in a more advantageous position than the Germans and they had better tanks. However, French failed to capitalize its advantage of having better tanks because their tactics and the role assigned to the tanks failed to exploit the full potential of this new powerful weapon system.

The development of the tanks in the interwar period was influenced by lessons from World War One. By the end of World War One the French developed their own successful tank, the Renault FT-17, two-man machine armed with short 37mm gun. Those tanks were designed to be used in mass and were very well suited for the “open-style” fighting during last periods of war.⁴⁵ Massive use of tanks during successful offensive of the Triple Entente's armies on the Hindenburg Line showed that different types of tank units were required. The Mark V slower and heavier tanks were able to broke through the German defensive position, but “the opportunities they made were admirably exploited by the lighter Whippets and armored cars”.⁴⁶ So, different types of tanks were required for the successful completion of the operations.

In 1919 France conducted series of studies in order to identify in which direction to proceed with development of new weaponry. As a result of those studies France decided to develop three types of tanks: accompanying tanks, battle and rupture tanks --or light, medium and heavy, as we can say today. The light tank, armed with machineguns only,

was supposed to support infantry. The medium tank, armed with canon and machineguns, also had the infantry supporting role. The heavy tank was supposed to break through the enemy fortified defense lines and protect other tanks from antitank weapons and enemy tanks. The only tank that was missing in French inventory was medium tank.⁴⁷

A new commission established in 1925 came up with the same recommendation of the development of the three tanks: light, medium and heavy. It only slightly redefined role of the medium tank.⁴⁸ The next change came in 1930, when the French eliminated requirement for the heavy tank and tried again to improve the light tank.⁴⁹ All those activities show that the French officials paid significant attention to the development of tanks, armored vehicles and mechanized units. As a result of all those activities French industry developed a number of vehicles.

The only heavy tank, the FCM Char 2C, was produced in small numbers. It never was incorporated in mechanized units and six tanks remaining in the inventory did not make it to the battle and were destroyed by German air action at a railway station in May 1940.⁵⁰

In the medium segment, France developed number of high quality tanks. The Somua S-35 was probably the best French tank at 1940. It had sufficient armor and was armed with modern 47mm high-velocity gun. 430 such tanks were available. The other available model was Char B1 and B1-bis battle tanks. They had the same turret as S-35, but in addition to that were armed with a short 75mm gun, so potentially it was one of the most powerful tanks at the beginning of World War I. Approximately 400 of those tanks were produced.⁵¹

The biggest numbers of produced tanks were, of course, the light tanks. All the production models of Renault R-35, Hotchkiss H-35 and H-39, AMC 35 and FCM-36 were armed with 37mm or 47mm guns and had significant armor protection. R-35 light tank had armor that German standard 37mm anti-tank gun was not able to penetrate. Two models, R-35 and H-39, went to mass production and by 1940 French industry had produced 1,100 of each.⁵²

The Wehrmacht construction program consisted of four main types of tanks. The Panzer I was designed mainly as training vehicle and it was armed with machineguns only. The Panzer II with a 20mm gun was

planned to provide some fighting capability. The Panzer III with a 37mm gun was the backbone of the newly formed Panzer divisions. The Panzer IV with a 75mm short cannon was produced to provide close support to the other tanks. However, vast majority of the tanks that participated in French campaign of 1940 were Panzer I and II tanks, which were weaker than majority of the French tanks.⁵³

In total, France had 2,285 tanks available on the North-eastern front. In comparison Germany had 2,574 tanks in its ten Panzer divisions. Disregarding technical differences in the tanks themselves, we can say that it was not the number tanks that made a difference, but ways how they were organized and employed.⁵⁴

First French manual on use of tanks was issued as early as 1920. It was based on experience from World War I and clearly stated that “tanks are not able to conquer or occupy terrain by themselves alone.” They always should support the infantry, and be employed in mass and on a large front.⁵⁵ In 1929 issued *Instruction on the employment of Combat Tanks* emphasized again that tanks are to be used only as “accompanying weapons of infantry” and to large extent limited its employment.⁵⁶ Further, in pre-war time issued *Regulation on Units of Combat Tanks, 2nd Part: Combat*, the limited role of the tank was emphasized again and the manual restated the tactics of moving in successive bounds for fifteen hundred meters, while all the time staying under the artillery coverage. The draft of this regulation did include a requirement for “more rapid speed to operation,” but later it was disregarded for the sake of order under the Methodical Battle.⁵⁷

On the contrary, Germans saw tanks as a maneuver element that conducted deep penetration and continued the thrust from the main defense line to the enemy's rear for four to five kilometers. The French tactics were described by one German officer as “seven minutes of attack and seventy minutes of waiting for the arrival of the infantry.”⁵⁸ The second important difference is that French doctrine overemphasized importance of the artillery. While German doctrine agreed on the importance of combined arms operations, it called for more mobile operations. German flexible doctrine exploited all the strength of the tank.⁵⁹

It is obvious that French industry was able to produce fine tanks in significant numbers. Even the quality of the tanks was better than those that were produced in Germany. However, the French underestimated the role of the tank and did not exploit its capabilities to their full potential. Instead of using the tanks' speed and shock effect, as Germans did, they limited its role to the support of infantry and did not use them as a maneuver element. The results of the 1940 war clearly showed that Germans, with their superior tactics, were able to beat the French who, in fact, had better tanks.

5. Education and training

This chapter will analyze the education and training systems of the French Army and will identify what influence those systems had on the overall developments of the Army during the interwar period. The French interwar education and training system mainly supported development and smooth implementation of the Methodical Battle concept rather than the preparation for the war itself and it did not support a realistic preparation for the up-coming war.

In 1936 the Minister of National Defense Daladier came up with a proposal to establish a National War College that would be designed for preparation and execution of "total war," where capable potential leaders from military and civil service would study national defense issues.⁶⁰ This "joint" proposal initially was countered by all the services that strived to maintain their own independence.⁶¹ However, in the end, Daladier's proposal prevailed and the National College was established with the aim to provide to its students "background in the problems of combined strategy" and to familiarize them with the political, economic and other implications on the conduct of war.⁶² However, the structure and curriculum of the college did not support such training since it offered little possibility for open discussion.⁶³ The National War College was founded only three years before the war and in general terms it contributed "nothing to French performance in that conflict."⁶⁴

The Army War College initially taught offence operations⁶⁵ but further on, with the development of Methodical Battle concept, it switched to blindly following the existing concepts. College tactics were taught on the employment of artillery, which limited maneuver to the maximum range of fire and necessity to displace artillery assets in order to support infantry's

actions. Overall, such an education left little room for the development of future commanders.⁶⁶

The French also failed to study history carefully. All the countries that participated in World War I drew their lessons learned from the same battles, but each country developed its unique conclusions. In order to avoid the massive casualties suffered during the last war, the French concept of the Methodical Battle was focused on the maximum use of fire power and tight control of all movement of troops, which consisted largely of relatively untrained draftees and reservists. Such an approach came from the lessons drawn from a narrow set of battles in 1918 which were in line with existing French thinking. The other lessons were mainly disregarded. The exercises proved to be of little value, since they provided little training and almost no food for thought. The French Army trained lackadaisically in contrast to Germans, who “prepared with the Teutonic thoroughness that they brought to war.”⁶⁷

Different types of the exercises also proved to be of a little help to improve existing doctrine or the war plans. In 1937 the French conducted explicit a comparison study of French and German armored units. The study concluded that French divisions are already “emerged from the experimental state,” while German are “still a subject of discussion.”⁶⁸ That was a much more positive evaluation of the situation then it really was at that time. General Billotte reported on successful outcome of the map exercise, where enemy forces failed to break through Maginot line. But speaking honestly, the general “paid more attention to the positive outcome of the exercise, then to the deficiencies it demonstrated.”⁶⁹ The exercise in the Sedan-Montmedy area in 1938 showed a clear weakness in the French plan as opposed to the strength of the Wehrmacht. As a result of the exercise General Pretelat requested only a minor change to the war plan and proposed a relocation of only one division. But, for the higher command, it was easier to reject the request then to rethink the plan and exploit the full potential of mechanized units. And, as a result, the unwanted information was ignored.⁷⁰

The French Army leadership, its generals and officers, were also responsible for the failures of the interwar development because most of them “failed in their responsibilities, for they failed to ask the hard questions.”⁷¹ Creative thinking and innovation at that time was replaced by methodical approach and fixed school solutions.

In conclusion, we can say that French interwar education and training systems supported the development and implementation of the Methodical Battle concept rather than a preparation for the war itself. All deviations from the existing doctrines, concepts and plans were disregarded, and all deficiencies that were identified during the exercises were rejected. The educational institutions and officer Corps also failed to produce the needed outcomes. As a whole, French training system did not support a realistic preparation for the up-coming war, but rather provided “doctrinally correct” education and training.

6. “Lessons learned”

What lessons we can learn from French interwar experiences that are relevant and applicable today? It all, of course, starts at political level. Security and defense issues should be treated seriously and they should not be sacrificed to the short-term political gains, because there is much more to lose. Political leadership should carefully evaluate the threat and put in place all required mechanisms in order to establish all necessary pre-conditions for successful development of the Army and efficient political and military leadership in times of crisis and war.

Lessons from previous wars are important. However, those lessons need to be addressed honestly and objectively. Real Lessons Learned must address all actions without separating them as to one’s own and the enemy’s actions. Knowing what lessons to learn and not disregarding some lessons only because do not fit into one’s doctrine is essential. It is unacceptable to try to make lessons fit current doctrine, because that is the shortest way to the military disaster.

Technological innovations must be exploited to the maximum extent possible, and not just made to fit the existing doctrine. They must be incorporated into doctrine and tactics, and be balanced with personnel, training and education systems.

Initiative should be one of the key elements of every military organization. Cutting down initiative from below and replacing it with rigid centralized control will lead to development of a military organization that is not capable of learning and can only obey orders. Military organizations that are not able to learn are set for failure only.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I will summarize and evaluate the French interwar activities. France had sufficient time for the preparation to the up-coming war and it devoted a sufficient amount of resources to do so. In 1938 Winston Churchill described French Army as “the most perfectly trained and faithful mobile force in Europe.”⁷² But why did it go so wrong? The French had all necessary prerequisites for success. Initially they had the political will to transform the defense institutions and armed forces in accordance with new realities. They had learned extensive lessons from World War I. They had all the needed military institutions like national and service war colleges in place to implement the required changes. They had proper equipment, which was of a better quality than the German equipment. But still, the French failed to prepare for the war properly.

The French developed the system where everything was predictable, and they forgot that the enemy always has a vote on the battlefield, too. The often mentioned friction of Clausewitz, that “chasm between planning and execution,”⁷³ played its role. And execution was main French problem at all levels starting from the strategic down to the tactical.

On the political field the French legislators wasted two decades in endless discussions and were unable to produce the needed legislative acts that would allow transformation of French defense system between the wars. They failed in three major areas. First, they were overconfident in France’s ability to understand her national defense requirements. Secondly, they were not able to transform the existing political structures in accordance with a developed vision. Furthermore, they failed to establish the unified command structure and kept all three services and respective ministries as separate entities. Thirdly, they constantly refused to admit the difference between theory and reality and were not able to implement changes within Governmental structures, both political and military.

France’s economic and financial situation in the interwar period was nearly the same as for the other major countries involved in World War I. France allocated sufficient and adequate resources to the military, and the resources were certainly were not the source of disastrous defeat of 1940.

The French Army developments during the interwar period were influenced by the lessons from the World War I. A major impression had been made by the terrifying amount of the casualties of that war. The French also failed to learn right lessons from previous war. The French Methodical Battle concept and the accompanying doctrine overemphasized the importance of the firepower, and it created an over centralized command and control relationship, and killed any initiative of junior commanders during the battle. The new French doctrine was not an entirely wrong document, but its practical application during World War II led to the disastrous results.

The French industry was able to produce good tanks in significant numbers. Even the quality of the tanks was better than those that were produced in Germany. But the French underestimated the role of the tank and did not exploit its capabilities to their full potential. The French Army viewed technological developments only as a supplement to the existing doctrine and was not able to understand its significance and exploit its full potential.⁷⁴ The French limited the role of the tank to supporting infantry and did not use tanks as a maneuver element. The Germans, who assigned a more significant role to the tank, were able to beat French with their superior tactics, despite the fact France had better tanks.

The French education and training system did not support positive development either. In fact, it supported the development and implementation of the Methodical Battle concept rather than preparation for the war itself. All lessons from exercises were disregarded and rejected, because almost nobody dared to challenge existing doctrine. As a whole, French training system did not supported realistic preparation for the upcoming war, but rather provided “doctrinally correct” training and education.

The Methodical Battle killed initiative, and the creation of Maginot line killed the offensive spirit of the French army and replaced it with “Maginot” mentality. From the fine, brave soldiers of World War I the French became punctual machines, afraid of braking synchronized order of action of the Methodical Battle. It all led to disastrous results in the beginning of World War II, when the French Army was easily defeated by German force.

The victorious French army of World War I was not able to prepare for the inevitable war with Germany, and it was unready in the beginning of 1940. All its efforts led the failure, and it could be concluded that French army preparations for the war were unsuccessful.

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