2. The Fall of France: Democracy’s Dark Hour

In September 1939, the British and French declared war on Nazi Germany in response to its invasion of Poland, as promised. There followed a so-called Phony War; for months the Allied democracies hesitated, reluctant to plunge into combat. But on May 10, 1940, the day of reckoning came: the German army launched its much-anticipated attack on France and the Low Countries. Now the cream of the French army and ten divisions of the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) rushed forward to meet the German threat in prepared positions along the Dyle, Maas, and Meuse rivers in eastern Belgium and extending south along the Maginot Line, a system of fortifications the French had constructed in the ’30s to ward off attack by their aggressive German neighbor.

This beginning, so long in coming, proved inauspicious for the Allies. The Germans had anticipated the Allies’ defensive move into Belgium (a strategy employed in the opening act of World War I) and placed the weight of their attack not in northeastern Belgium but in the heavily wooded and far more rugged terrain of the Ardennes, near Sedan, just north of where the Maginot Line came to an end. What’s more, the Germans had developed a new all-out method of

A crowd gathers to examine newspapers in Washington, DC, announcing the Nazi invasion of Poland on September 1, 1939. The invasion led France and Britain to declare war on Germany. It also gave the Allies a demonstration of the Nazis’ swift and all-out blitzkrieg ("lightning war") tactic, an approach Germany would deploy with deadly efficiency against France the following summer. LOC
warfare—blitzkrieg, or “lightning war”—in which massed motorized armored divisions, supported by airpower, would crash rapidly through enemy lines, creating mass confusion and a communications breakdown.

The Allies had considered a major attack through the forested Ardennes impossible, and they failed to prepare for it; French troops stationed there were poorly armored and trained. Thus the Germans pushed west with alacrity. Within two days, seven German panzer (tank) divisions stood on the east bank of the Meuse in a line running fifty miles north from Sedan. On May 13, supported by more than a thousand aircraft, German motorized forces crossed the Meuse using rapidly constructed floating bridges. In spite of Allied attempts to destroy the German crossings from the air, Adolf Hitler’s forces suddenly found themselves in a position to advance rapidly across the largely undefended plain of northern France—just as they had planned.

**Escape to fight another day**

On May 19, a mere nine days after the attack began, German armored forces under the command of General Heinz Guderian reached the English Channel. The bulk of the French Army and the entire BEF were now cut off from most of France, trapped in a vast pocket that ran along the French–Belgian coast.

In the meantime, a political crisis in Great Britain had brought Winston Churchill into power as prime minister on the very day the German attack on France began. Traveling to France on a number of occasions during the battle, Churchill did all he could to bolster French morale, but it was too little, too late. Lacking an organized reserve and suffering from a weak command structure, the French were unable to mount a sustained attack against the German line that ran to the sea. By May 28, both the Dutch and the Belgian governments had surrendered. The BEF, along with what was left of the French forces that had dashed into Belgium just a few weeks before, had
been driven back to the channel around the northern French coastal city of Dunkirk.

In a desperate move to save as many men as possible, calls went out across the British Isles for anyone with a boat large enough to cross the channel to do so. Supported by the Royal Navy and Royal Air Force, thousands of ordinary Britons answered this call and, between May 27 and June 4, evacuated an estimated 338,000 Allied troops. This extraordinary volunteer effort became known as “the miracle of Dunkirk.”

By this point, however, it was obvious to all concerned—including Franklin D. Roosevelt—that France was in desperate straits. On June 5, after the Allied escape from Dunkirk, the Germans turned their attention southward to the rest of France. On June 10, the Italians declared war on France; on June 14, Paris fell; on June 17, Henri-Philippe Pétain, the new premier of France, announced to a stunned world that France could not carry on the war with Germany and was seeking terms; on June 22, France agreed to a humiliating armistice, signed in the same railway car where the Germans had accepted defeat in World War I.

As a somber Churchill put it to the House of Commons at the time, the battle of France was over; the “Battle of Britain” was about to begin.

A blow to Western democracies
The fall of France, a venerable democracy with substantial military might—including an army roughly the size of Germany’s, a large air force, and the fourth largest navy in the world—was an appalling wake-up call for Americans. That the defeat had been accomplished after a mere six weeks’ resistance shocked even FDR and his military advisors in Washington, DC. In the wake of the catastrophe, the president’s top military brass, convinced the British Isles would soon follow France’s example, urged him to concentrate on building up U.S. forces and defending the Western Hemisphere.

But FDR refused to accept their advice. In one of the most important and politically courageous moves of his presidency, he instead marshaled America’s considerable resources to help Great Britain in its hour of utmost peril. To get around American neutrality laws barring the provision of arms to nations at war, in the summer of 1940, FDR negotiated a trade, transferring fifty World War I vintage destroyers to the Royal Navy in exchange for two British naval bases in Newfoundland and Bermuda as well as long-term leases on other territory in the British Caribbean. This deal represented the first clear indication that the United States now regarded the defense of Great Britain as vital to its own safety. The gesture buoyed the spirits of the British people at a critical moment in the war.

FDR also took other measures to bolster American security in the wake of the fall of France. He strengthened U.S. ties to Latin America at July’s Havana Conference, which laid a plan for the mutual defense of American states, including the colonial possessions of defeated nations, should Germany attempt to seize them. In August he joined with Canada’s prime minister in creating the Permanent Joint Board of Defense to advise on the defense of North America.

Meanwhile, the British made plain their determination to fight on—“if necessary for years, if necessary alone,” as Churchill had told the House of Commons—by seizing the French fleet stationed in North Africa and elsewhere in an aggressive effort to prevent the fleet from falling into German hands and augmenting Nazi power on the seas.

It would be four long years before Allied forces would return to France itself, putting ashore on the beaches of Normandy to retake that country before pressing on toward the heart of Germany.

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Above, left: Royal Navy and U.S. Navy sailors inspect antisubmarine weapons, 1940. In the background are two of the American destroyers, USS Buchanon and USS Crowninshield, which Franklin D. Roosevelt would transfer to the Royal Navy on September 9, 1940, in exchange for naval bases. The destroyers—for-bases deal was a clear indication that America now considered Britain’s defense vital to its own security. LOC

Above, right: A disabled French tank in northern France after the German invasion, 1940. France boasted an army roughly the size of Germany’s, but it was unable to outmaneuver the Germans during their rapid advance. Archives Normandie
III. Four Freedoms: Preparing for War, Envisioning Peace

2. The Fall of France: Democracy’s Dark Hour

The Establishment of the Vichy Government

Under the terms of the Franco–German armistice, Germany carved France into two main zones: an occupied zone covering the north and west of the country (including Paris and the entire Atlantic coast), and the unoccupied zone encompassing most of south-central France, including much of the Mediterranean coastline. France was allowed to maintain a small army and keep its colonies in North Africa and elsewhere. French warships not already moored in domestic ports were to sail back to France, where they would be disarmed but not turned over the Germans—an outcome British prime minister Winston Churchill was determined to prevent through the use of force if necessary.

The French also were allowed to establish a government under the leadership of Marshal Henri-Philippe Pétain, located in the city of Vichy in the unoccupied zone. The Vichy government cooperated with the Nazi regime, promulgating anti-Jewish laws and replacing the French republican motto “liberty, equality, fraternity” with the slogan “work, family, fatherland.” Nominally in charge of the entire country, Vichy wielded executive power in the unoccupied southern zone, but the north was under the rigid control of a German military occupation based in Paris. This set off, in the aftermath of the armistice, a stream of desperate refugees—Jews, antifascists, artists, and other targets of the Nazi state—scrambling for escape through the south.

The French motto “Liberty, equality, fraternity” emerged during the French Revolution of the late eighteenth century but did not become institutionalized as the national slogan for another hundred years. Above, a placard with a common early variation of the slogan—“Liberty, equality, fraternity, or death”—announces the sale of national property in 1793. The government established under the Nazis in the French spa town of Vichy abandoned the traditional French motto in favor of “Work, family, fatherland,” a slogan somewhat more reminiscent of the Nazi rallying cry “One people, one empire, one leader.”
Charles de Gaulle and the Free French Movement

When Prime Minister Paul Reynaud resigned in June 1940 as leader of the French people, his replacement, Henri-Philippe Pétain, sought an armistice with the conquering Germans who had overrun France. This move was not without controversy. While most French people seemed to accept the necessity of bringing the fighting to an end—and hoped to preserve some small measure of independence in the process—one French leader staunchly refused to accept this arrangement. This was Brigadier General Charles de Gaulle.

Not a well-known figure in June 1940, de Gaulle had nevertheless been appointed undersecretary for national defense in the final days of Reynaud’s administration. In this capacity de Gaulle had met British prime minister Winston Churchill during Churchill’s final two meetings with Reynaud in mid-June 1940. Churchill was impressed by de Gaulle—whom he later called “a man of destiny”—and on June 16, just after the fall of Paris, arranged to have the Frenchman smuggled out of France aboard a Royal Air Force plane to London. There, on June 18, 1940, de Gaulle made a famous broadcast on the BBC rejecting Pétain’s call for an armistice. He invoked France’s still-substantial advantages—including the ability to call upon “the gigantic potentialities of American industry”—and urged his fellow Frenchmen to resist German domination as a matter of “honor, common sense, and the higher interests of the country.”

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De Gaulle’s broadcast signaled the beginning of the Free French movement and the creation of the Free French Forces, made up of Frenchmen who refused to accept the legitimacy of the Vichy government and remained determined to carry on the fight against the Nazis. On June 28, the British government recognized de Gaulle as the leader of all free Frenchmen, and in early August, signed an agreement with de Gaulle to provide the financial support needed to create and sustain this new organization.

De Gaulle’s initial radio appeal did not attract a large following. But his dogged determination to turn the Free French into a formidable fighting force eventually resulted in the establishment of the Free French army that would help liberate France in the summer of 1944—and take part in the invasion and occupation of Germany in the spring of 1945.

Above: General Henri-Philippe Pétain enters the northeastern French city of Metz in 1918 to receive military honors for his service in World War I. Pétain was in his eighties and widely known as a war hero when he became premier of France and made peace with the invading Nazis in 1940. General Charles de Gaulle, who would lead the Free French from exile in London, was relatively unknown.

Above: General Charles de Gaulle, left, with General Dwight D. Eisenhower, after the war. Eisenhower led the Allied forces in an invasion of Nazi-occupied Europe in 1944; de Gaulle’s Free French Forces took part in the Allied offensive to liberate his native France. LOC

Left: Franklin D. Roosevelt with, from left to right, General Henri Giraud, General Charles de Gaulle, and Winston Churchill on the lawn of the Anfa Hotel, Casablanca, January 1943. The leaders agreed at the wartime conference that the two Frenchmen would share leadership of the newly established French Committee of National Liberation, but de Gaulle would engineer Giraud’s removal from the committee in November 1943. FDRL
Franklin D. Roosevelt and Vichy France

The Roosevelt administration maintained diplomatic relations with the Vichy government of France until November 1942, when Allies, along with Free French troops, invaded North Africa to reverse Axis incursions in French (Vichy-controlled) protectorates Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia.

In working with Vichy, Franklin D. Roosevelt had hoped to use humanitarian aid to France as leverage in persuading the regime not to collaborate fully with the Germans, perhaps even to resist. Once the Allies decided to invade North Africa, the Roosevelt administration also entertained the hope that its ties to Vichy might allow the invasion to go ahead unopposed. But in spite of clandestine contacts between U.S. intelligence officials and Vichy authorities in France and in North Africa in the months prior to the invasion, this hope was disappointed. It was only after three days of hard fighting that a controversial deal between the Vichy authorities and Allies brought Vichy French resistance in Northwest Africa to a stop.

In France, meanwhile, the Allied invasion of North Africa brought a swift end to the unoccupied “free” zone, as German forces moved into the region to protect their southern flank. The Vichy government continued, but it came under increasing Nazi control in the final years of the war.

Above: French colonial troops man a machine gun post in North Africa in February 1942. Franklin D. Roosevelt had hoped that the Vichy-controlled French colonies of North Africa would not resist the Allied invasion in November 1942. The Vichy forces, including the colonial troops, did join the Allied cause, but only after a few days of fierce fighting. © IWM (E 8400)

Top: German prisoners of war being marched through the streets of Paris after its liberation by the Allies, August 25, 1944. In the beginning, many French people had accepted or even supported the collaborationist Vichy regime as a means to maintain some independence for France, but as the war progressed, French public opinion turned against the regime. FDRL

Above: A British rescue boat speeds to the location of a United States pilot down off the coast of North Africa, with guidance from a low-flying Hurricane, 1943. In November 1942, the Allies had landed in French North Africa and swiftly converted Vichy French forces there to the Allied side. In response, the Nazis moved to protect their southern flank on the Mediterranean by occupying the southern part of France formerly under nominal Vichy control. LOC
Franklin D. Roosevelt’s relationship with Charles de Gaulle was never easy, troubled as it was by the sometimes clashing interests of a world military and industrial power on one hand and, on the other, a vanquished and exiled government.

The fact that the Roosevelt administration maintained diplomatic relations with the Vichy regime—and, unlike British prime minister Winston Churchill, refused to recognize de Gaulle as the legitimate representative of the French people—created enormous tension between the two men. In turn, FDR and his secretary of state, Cordell Hull, found de Gaulle’s tendency to take unilateral action “in the name of France”—seizing the French islands of Saint-Pierre and Miquelon in December 1941, for example—galling and, indeed, unacceptable.

De Gaulle was not even informed when the Allies decided to invade Vichy-controlled North Africa in November 1942. Two months later, when Churchill and FDR met at a key wartime summit in Casablanca, the Roosevelt administration actually promoted an alternative French leader—General Henri Giraud, who had led French forces against the Axis in North Africa. The British continued to champion de Gaulle. As a compromise, the two Frenchmen agreed at Casablanca to become cochairmen of the newly formed French Committee of National Liberation (FCNL). Never comfortable with this arrangement, de Gaulle engineered Giraud’s removal from the committee in November 1943, leaving himself firmly in command for the remainder of the war.

The Allies once again gave de Gaulle scant notice in advance of their D-day invasion to retake the French homeland in 1944. But de Gaulle had anticipated the liberation of France and begun to establish the administrative machinery necessary to govern the country once it was free. On June 14, 1944, a week after the Allied landing in Normandy, de Gaulle returned to France and set these plans in motion. In July, following a series of meetings with de Gaulle at the White House, FDR announced that he was ready to treat the FCNL as the de facto authority in liberated France. In late October 1944, the United States gave FCNL formal recognition as the provisional government of France.

Meanwhile, on the battlefield, more than three hundred thousand Free French troops took part in the liberation of France. The Free French First Army played a major role in the Allied invasion of southern France on August 15, 1944, and the Free French Second Armored Division helped liberate Paris ten days later. On August 26, a triumphant de Gaulle entered the city, walking the length of the Champs-Élysées before a vast crowd and then entering Notre-Dame Cathedral in a moment of great emotion, unperturbed by a brief fusillade of gunfire that erupted inside the building.

Thanks in large part to de Gaulle’s extraordinary determination and unbending will, the French people had played an important role in liberating their country from Nazi tyranny, and the French nation would go on to assume its place among the great powers, becoming one of five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council and a driving force behind the unification of Europe.