Sedan, 10-15 May 1940: Strategic Analysis & Map Study

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German Planning

In the spring of 1940 the Germans achieved one of the most spectacular victories in the history of warfare: the defeat of the combined armies of France, Great Britain, Belgium and the Netherlands in a six week campaign that was considered nearly miraculous even by the commanders who planned and executed it. The seeming ease of that victory and the embarrassment it caused the Allies has led to a number of myths and half-truths being adopted by both sides to explain what happened and who should be given credit and blame.

Since Hitler had dismissed the idea Great Britain and France would declare war on Germany in 1939 over the fate of Poland, it presented him and his high command with a huge problem when they did just that. No one on either side had planned what to do next. Not until 9 October did Hitler issue Fuehrer Directive 6, which stated:

An offensive will be planned on the northern flank of the western front through Luxemburg, Belgium and Holland. This offensive will be launched at the earliest possible moment and in the greatest possible strength. The purpose of this offensive will be to defeat as much as possible of the French Army and the forces of the Allies fighting on their side, and at the same time to win as much territory as possible in Holland, Belgium and Northern France to serve as a base for the successful prosecution of the air and sea war against England and as a wide protective area for the economically vital Ruhr.

At the time Hitler was seemingly thinking of a campaign that, at least initially, had only limited objectives: to gain the ports and airfields necessary to facilitate a longer attritional struggle with France and Great Britain. That was conventional strategic thinking, with emphasis on the grabbing of important points as the prelude to a longer war, and it was rooted in Hitler’s experience of World War I.

The deployment directive issued on 19 October by Chief of the Army General Staff Gen. Franz Halder therefore called for the northern-most army group (Army Group B), with three armies and the majority of the panzer divisions, to advance west on both sides of Brussels to seize the Channel coast. Though Halder and his staff had seemingly followed the intention of Fuehrer Directive 6, Hitler immediately commented the scheme was just like World War I’s old Schlieffen Plan, and he warned: “You won’t get away with an operation like that twice running.” (In fact, of course, they hadn’t gotten away with it even once.)

Hitler’s comparison was unfair, though, because the Schlieffen Plan had been aimed at nothing less than the envelopment of all French armies by eventually swinging west of Paris, and then to head southeast from there for the Swiss border. Halder’s plan was far less ambitious, as it didn’t envisage the envelopment of significant enemy forces; rather, it sought to merely push them back onto an unspecified line across northern France. More than one historian has since suggested that lack of ambition on the part of Halder and his staff was intentional, and was intended to passively illustrate to Hitler their lack of faith in any scheme calling for an all-out offensive in the west.

In the face of Hitler’s criticism, a second deployment directive (29 October) introduced an additional westward thrust spearheaded by panzer divisions driving south of Liege, though it retained the same limited overall objective. On 11 November, still unsatisfied, Hitler ordered a third thrust should be...
added using mobile forces through the Ardennes region via Arlon and Sedan. That back-and-forth was carried on with the idea the plan—once adopted—was to be carried out immediately. That is, the idea at the time wasn’t to wait for a late spring or early summer launch date, but to go forward as soon as a scheme could be settled on. Thus those early plans may have been given their less ambitious objectives because all involved understood it was to be a winter campaign fought under less than optimum weather and ground conditions. In that sense, such a campaign, if relatively successful even though undecisive, would’ve prepared the way for a final phase-two during the following summer. Even the 10 January 1940 “Mechelen incident”—in which key elements of the then-current plan fell into Allied hands due to an off-course Luftwaffe courier plane crashing near that Belgian town—which has often been cited as the reason for the change in emphasis in German planning, was something only given importance in retrospect. That is, in the third deployment directive of 30 January, the same three thrusts were retained. The only changes were that:

1) more emphasis was placed on the desirability of initial surprise; and 2) the panzer divisions’ jump off areas were moved to the west bank of the Rhine in order to reduce their final assembly time for the attack to 24 hours.

The real significance of the Mechelen incident seems to have been that it provided the final element in Hitler’s growing frustration with the army general staff, creating in him a willingness to listen to alternative ideas—even a wildly ambitious one. That an alternative planning concept for the offensive was available, and in fact had been formulated as far back as October 1939, was as yet unknown to him.

**Enter Manstein**

When he received his copy of the first deployment directive, the chief of staff of Army Group A, Erich von Manstein, saw two flaws in it. First, an offensive with a strong right wing would most likely be attacking frontally into an Anglo-French counter-advance into Belgium. Second, the farther a successful right wing advance went, the more exposed its southern flank would become to an enemy counterstroke.

Manstein’s solution was to have the point of concentration of the offensive shift south to Army Group A. He thus envisioned what was certain to be an unexpected advance by motorized forces through the Ardennes Forest, culminating in a crossing of the Meuse River in the Sedan area. That would effectively put those spearheads through the center of the overall Allied position. In Manstein’s plan, which quickly became known as the “Sickle Cut,” due to its shape when drawn on a map, the panzers would thus get between the enemy’s northern and southern force concentrations, potentially trapping one or both of them in what would amount to a huge pocket.

In one of those chance occurrences of history, Gen. Heinz Guderian, then commander of XIX Motorized Corps and, since the victorious end of the Polish campaign, the acknowledged expert on mobile warfare, was at that time billeted in the same city as Manstein. The two soon got together, and Guderian was able to confirm the feasibility of moving mechanized formations through the Ardennes, a region with which he was familiar from his First World War service.

Guderian showed enthusiasm for the plan and endorsed its employment. Manstein therefore sent seven memoranda to the Army General Staff regarding his proposal. Halder, however, didn’t pass those documents to Hitler. Halder didn’t believe in the scheme, and his solution to Manstein’s pestering about it was to have him promoted and transferred to command a corps in eastern Germany, far from the western front. Manstein’s subordinates, who quickly came to believe in Sickle Cut, were able to arrange a meeting, with the help of one of Hitler’s aides, between the dictator and their commander. The get together, on 17 February 1940, was ostensibly nothing more than a get acquainted breakfast with Hitler and five newly appointed corps commanders, including Manstein. Of course, Manstein mentioned his plan, and after breakfast was told to follow Hitler to his office. The Fuehrer listened intently as Manstein went into detail about Sickle Cut and was impressed by his arguments. Hitler was particularly receptive because it gave form and substance to his own vague thinking.
about the potential of a thrust through the Ardennes. The result of the meeting was the issuance of a fourth deploy-
ment directive on 24 February, which gave the main role in the offensive to Army Group A. Its new mission was "crossing the line of the Meuse River to face Army Group A."

Though Manstein's Sickle Cut was thus officially adopted by Hitler, the acceptance of such a radical plan by the rest of the high command wasn't automatic. The scheme was, in fact, generally condemned as crazy and foolhardy by most of that group. The idea of moving panzer and motorized infantry divisions through what was almost universally considered a militarily impenetrable forest, then to make an opposed crossing of a major river, and then rush those divisions forward from there without regard for the protection of their flanks, was too radical for many. That lack of broad acceptance, especially within Army Group A itself, resulted in a number of restrictions and obstructions being placed in the way of the plan's execution.

 Allied Planning

The French had the largest single ground force in the west, and they therefore played the lead role in Allied planning for the war. In particular, it fell to Maurice Gamelin, supreme commander of Allied forces in France, to formulate an overall plan. The resultant disposition of Anglo-French forces was therefore based on his belief the right flank while the Ardennes Forest and Meuse River effectively stopped the center. Thus he con-
centrated the best units on the left. There the plain of Flanders, so often in history an invasion route into northern France, offered ideal tank country with few natural obstacles. At the same time, though, that plain lay mostly in Belgium, which was still neutral; so Anglo-French forces were unable to deploy directly within their chosen campaign area. The Allies would have to wait for the Germans to attack before they could move in. During initial staff talks with the Belgians, the Allies had identi-
fied three possible lines they could move to secure inside Belgium once the Germans attacked. The first of them was the Scheldt Line, which would only protect the Ghent ports in the west of the country.

The second proposed position was the Albert Canal Line, which also utilized the Meuse River to the point where it flows into the canal at Maastricht. Though holding it offered protection to most of Belgium, its distance from the French border meant it was doubtful the Belgians could hold off the Germans long enough for Allied forces to reach and properly man it.

The third position was the Dyle Line, which followed that river from Antwerp to Namur, where it flowed into the Meuse River. That would protect both Brussels and the ports.

The Dyle Line offered a shorter front than the Albert Canal Line. Holding it would also work to prevent the Belgians from simply having to withdraw into their national redoubt of Antwerp, so the Allies settled on it. As the winter progressed without a German attack, Gamelin continued to tinker with the Dyle Plan. The problem was it left out the Netherlands and that country's small but potent army. On 20 March Gamelin therefore devised a new version of the plan, the Breda Variant. According to it, when the Germans attacked, French Seventh Army would rush across northern Belgium to link up with Dutch forces at the town of Breda. The fact Breda was twice as far from the French border as it was from the German didn't put off Gamelin. In giving that new task to Seventh Army – which until then was to have been held as central reserve at Rheims – he robbed the Allies of their largest and best placed strategic counterattack formation.

In fact, the Dyle Plan with its Breda Variant perfectly suited the Germans' purposes. As the bulk of the Allies' mobile forces moved into northern and central Belgium to confront the advance of German Army Group B, they would, in necessity leave only a light screen of divisions along the Meuse River to face Army Group A.

That situation has since often been described as a "revolving door"; for as the Allies advanced into Belgium they were moving further away from the German force advancing through the Ardennes. The harder the Allies pushed on their portion of the door, the quicker the German portion of it to the south would swing around behind them. In addition, the more Allied formations committed to that advancing flank the more they would be out of position in the north when the Germans crossed the Meuse.

 Panzer Group Kleist (PGK)

Manstein's Sickle Cut called for the use of panzer and motorized divi-
sions in a strategically revolutionary way. That is, in the Polish campaign the mechanized divisions had advanced in cooperation with leg-mobile infantry forces. At that time they hadn't even always formed the opera-
tional spearheads of the infantry armies of which they were a part. For the Ardennes offensive the Germans formed Panzer Group Kleist – named after its commander, a former cavalryman, Gen. Ewald von Kleist, and consisting...