

JULIAN JACKSON

THE FALL OF FRANCE

The Nazi Invasion of 1940



'excellent' Max Hastings, *Sunday Telegraph*

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The Fall of France in 1940 is one of the pivotal moments of the twentieth century. If the German invasion of France had failed, it is arguable that the war might have ended right there. But the French suffered instead a dramatic and humiliating defeat, a loss that ultimately drew the whole world into war.

This exciting new book by Julian Jackson, a leading historian of twentieth-century France, charts the breathtakingly rapid events that led to the defeat and surrender of one of the greatest bastions of the Western Allies. Using eyewitness accounts, memoirs, and diaries to bring the story to life, Jackson not only recreates the intense atmosphere of the six weeks in May and June leading up to the establishment of the Vichy regime, but he also unravels the historical evidence to produce a fresh answer to the perennial question--was the fall of France inevitable. Jackson's vivid narrative explores the errors of France's military leaders, her inability to create stronger alliances, the political infighting, the lack of morale, even the decadence of the inter-war years. He debunks the "vast superiority" of the German army, revealing that the more experienced French troops did well in battle against the Germans. Perhaps more than anything else, the cause of the defeat was the failure of the French to pinpoint where the main thrust of the German army would come, a failure that led them to put their best soldiers up against a feint, while their worst troops faced the heart of the German war machine.

An engaging and authoritative narrative, *The Fall of France* illuminates six weeks that changed the course of twentieth-century history.

The Fall of France: The Nazi Invasion of 1940 Details

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Mark says

A high level of detail about the various "causes" of the French defeat. A rather dense read, however.

Jonathan says

Why did France collapse in 1940? How is it that what many considered the best army in the world folded up under German attack, whereas in 1914 they had managed to hold and eventually defeat their ancient enemies? And it's not like they didn't fight: their casualty figures prove that. While this question has been examined before, Professor Jackson takes a fresh look at the issue, probing the military, political, diplomatic and social aspects of what happened that terrible summer. He also delves into the long-term effects of the defeat on French and World history, and how various historians have themselves treated this contentious historical puzzle. An excellent and absorbing work; not to be missed by those interested in the history of France or the Second World War.

Chris Oler says

Read this about ten years ago and there are several excellent reviews. Was the French army that bad, or were the Germans that good? The answer to both questions is "no."

Particular attention is paid here to the political environment in France between the wars. 'Toxic' is not an overstatement and you need only see political cartoons of the era for evidence.

France also suffered from a dearth of military leaders ready to take initiative. Professor Jackson points out the vulnerability of the German flanks and how very few commanders made an effort to engage. One of the few highlighted was Charles De Gaulle.

A particular point in the book I found compelling was how a relative few number of men, fairly well-organized, were able to hold the Germans up at Sedan. Had mobile forces been available to reinforce them (rather than in Belgium), Jackson gives you the sense that the German advance would have ended there.

All-in-all, this book provides a much better understanding of how French resistance collapsed so quickly. As Jackson relates in the book, the German officers, touring Paris, seemingly found it difficult to believe they were there. It was a worthy read.

David says

Book is a bore!!

Craig says

Detailed look at the Battle of France in May and June of 1940 and specifically France's failures as a nation to prepare for the German assault. Does a nice job of looking at the political and cultural challenges facing France between the wars but really excels in the military nuts and bolts of the French disastrous campaign against the Germans.

Mac says

Thorough but the writing is a little dry.

Dale says

Not a detailed narrative of the Battle of France, but rather an analysis of one of the most shocking events of the 20th Century: the collapse and surrender of France after six weeks of combat in 1940.

As makes sense of such a complex event, there is no single cause, but Jackson boils it down to a few problems:

1. France was unprepared. Though war had been declared almost nine months previously, the French military and government estimated that the Republic would not be ready for sustained military operations before 1941. French mobilization and production was beginning to bear fruit (especially in warplanes) in May 1940, but that proved to be too late.
2. French plans were deficient. It's something of a cliche' to argue that French commanders were preparing to re-fight the First World War, but that is not exactly correct. French equipment was in some respects superior to the German (tanks, for example) and the French Army was less dependent upon horse transport (!) than the Germans.

The problem was, the French were determined not to re-fight World War I, but rather wanted to ensure that the battles did *not* take place on French soil--hence flinging its best forces to head off the Germans in Belgium. In the meantime, the Germans hurled their most mobile forces at France's weakest troops, with catastrophic results for the latter.

3. French command and control broke down. Mental paralysis set in as soon as the Germans reached Sedan, and the French were never able to regain their mental equilibrium back. Jackson offers multiple reports of French commanders suffering breakdowns as the enormity of the problem hit them. The French were not alone in that--the British under Lord Gort had similar problems.

The upshot is that the Allies were never able to offer timely or sufficient countermeasures, and the battle spun out of control quickly.

4. Lack of effective political leadership. France lacked a figure who could rally the people and command the

military effectively. French politics prior to WWII was a polarized see-saw contest between left and right that made national unity difficult. France needed a Churchill, but did not have one.

A very worthwhile and thought provoking study.

Anthony Giacalone says

Capable handling of the 1940 Western campaign but then sort of wanders off during the final third of the book. Overall good stuff though.

R.M.F Brown says

It's always been assumed that Nazi Germany's invasion of the Soviet Union in 1941, was the pivotal moment of World War Two. Considering the losses in men, material, and prestige, suffered by the Wehrmacht, it's hard to argue against that...

And yet, Jackson does just that.

For Jackson, the pivotal moment of WW2 is not June 1941, but the fall of France in 1940. Widely considered to have the world's most powerful army, the defeat of France changed forever the strategic balance, transforming a European conflict, into a global one.

With France knocked out, Hitler could then fight the only war he ever wanted - one against the Soviet Union. With France still in the conflict, Hitler would never have made the mistake of fighting on two fronts, as the Germans did in the Great War.

France's defeat left Britain up the proverbial creek without a paddle. Emboldened, Mussolini launched a campaign against Britain's African empire, stretching Britain's resources thin, and pushing her into the arms of the USA, something Britain had taken pains to avoid.

On a more global scale, Japan was able to acquire France's Asian possessions (Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia) without a shot being fired, and emboldened the Japanese to push for more...all the way to Pearl Harbour

So why did France fall? Victims of hidebound defence strategy, or German brilliance.

The answer is neither. Various opportunities presented themselves to halt the Germans dead in their tracks, but whether through lethargy, reluctance, or poor communications, France failed to capitalise.

The mistrust between the French and the British forever simmered beneath the surface, and it's typical of relations at the time, that Britain pulled the plug and headed for Dunkirk, without even to consult the French.

On the German side, we see a military machine that was far from being the slick, ruthless weapon of supposed German superiority.

Traffic jams in Luxembourg presented a massive opportunity for the Allies to inflict a crippling blow, but fortunately for the Germans, the Allies never capitalised. We see a nervous Hitler unwilling to push on and consolidate German gains, and finally, we see Guderian, disobeying orders, a move that was to have far-reaching consequences of splitting the Allied army in two, and winning the day for the Germans...

French society is analysed, and to his credit, Jackson doesn't search for easy answers, but instead provides a complex picture of a divided society.

Jackson concludes that no one factor was responsible for France's defeat, be it Germans, French society, or the weakness of the French army, or lack of fighting spirit.

Rather, it was a perfect storm of all these conditions, and the book is all the more better for it.

Jur says

Great book, covering the historiography of the French defeat in 1940 and the various explanations given for it.

Military: Jackson shows that the strategic plan and response of the French High Command were deeply flawed, but that many units gave good account of themselves.

Anglo-French Alliance: Very warm in 1940, but quickly deteriorated under the stress of defeat

French defeatism: overrated. Mostly an immediate excuse for the failings of generals which served the Vichy governments retrenchment of the old order.

French political division: the French right was slow in recognising that Hitler was a greater danger than the left. French governments from 1936 tried to catch up, but faced difficult balancing act.

The defeat immediately became very much politicised under Vichy and remained so after the war, serving different interests in the postwar revival.

Lorraine says

I must admit that I struggled with the first 100 pages finding it very dense and dry but, recognizing that it was necessary ground to cover, I slogged through it. It got easier after that and by the last 100 pages, I could not get enough. I found it to be only as judgmental as was necessary in context and always balanced. This was a book I needed to read as I had serious questions after reading Antony Beevor's "Second World War". I especially liked the discussion of other books on the subject by other historians and I loved the follow-up through to Vichy and the deGaulle era.

Carl says

An excellent study of the political, social, industrial, and military reasons for the collapse of France in 1940, only let down - in my humble opinion - by the latter chapters detailing post-war France.

Gram says

A fine attempt by historian Julian Jackson to explain the failure of France's politicians and military in the years leading up to and during Nazi Germany's invasion and the subsequent collapse of the French army in 1940. Jackson is a leading authority on 20th Century France and - in less than 300 pages - manages to give the reader a fascinating insight into the machinations of French politicians and military leaders, desperately trying to form alliances throughout Europe while trying to avoid all out war with Nazi Germany. He shows that Germany was far from being militarily superior to the French Army, which - despite popular myth - battled valiantly to prevent defeat against a German invader which had the advantage of major surprise (attacking the weakest sector in France's defences through the forests of The Ardennes) and even a good deal of luck. French military leaders were partly to blame for the defeat but, given a little more luck and good judgement, they could have ended the 2nd World War before it really began.

Liam says

The fall of France in 1940 was one of the turning points of the 20th century. Jackson goes to some length to explain the result this military defeat, a defeat that was not inevitable, had on the postwar French view of the "decadent thirties" The understandable preference for studies of the resistance rather than the defeat.

Sue Law says

An interesting analysis of the fall of France in 1940. Jackson starts with 3 sections looking at the military, the politics and ordinary French people from 1930 to 1940. He then looks at some of the proposed explanations to see how they fit with the history (hint: most of them don't) and provides his own conclusion. The last section looks at the longer term consequences of the fall, both for the development of WWII and for the post-war world.
