

## PUTTING A STOP TO THE HEARSAY ABOUT THE MAGINOT LINE.

Hardly a month goes by without some publication or other citing the allegedly disastrous Maginot Line, as yet another example of one of France's 20<sup>th</sup> century failures and faint-heartedness. So let's talk a little about this famous line of fortifications to set the record straight on some of the fallacies that have been in circulation for the last sixty years or so.

It is considered the done thing to make out from this succession of concrete underground structures the conclusive failure of all permanent fortified systems, the illustration of France's navel-gazing and the demonstration of how cowardly the great military leaders were during the inter-war period.

These assertions are mainly spurious and fairly pathetic if the truth be known.

Let us dispel the notion that any permanent fortified system is bound to be a failure.

At the time (and as had been going on for four thousand years) everybody built fortifications, starting with the Germans on the Siegfried Line, and others in Belgium, Czechoslovakia, Russia, Finland, Sweden, Italy just to name a few.

Then the fact that armies have breached or got around a fortified system does not make it a failure. It all depends on the mission<sup>1</sup> it was set. Then the fact that armies have breached or got around a fortified system does not make it a failure. It all depends on the mission<sup>2</sup> it was set. Its very presence forces the enemy to concentrate its efforts on breaking through a particular point or getting around it. To its credit, the fortified line liberates free areas for maneuver for friendly infantry forces and by the same token restricts the number of potential directions of engagement. The best illustration of this, and a recent one at that, is the opportune use of the Séré de Rivière fort curtains throughout

the First World War<sup>3</sup>, or the triumphant use of the Maginot Line along the Alps in 1940 (that we tend to forget too easily).

Its purpose was to stop an Italian invasion by compensating for their forces seven times greater than ours and enabled the French government to negotiate armistice talks with Mussolini from a position of strength

Now, we come to the concept itself: why build a Maginot Line?

Haunted by the August 1914 "surprise invasion" and the dreadful losses suffered in the first three months' fighting<sup>4</sup>, the French government of 1920 and its high command decided to erect an almost unbroken fortified line with a five-fold mission to:

- protect North East France from a lighting attack – primarily the provinces that had been returned to France in 1918, and the mining and industrial resources of the northern departments that had been occupied for four years then laid waste by the retreating Germans<sup>5</sup>. It would at the same time cover the mobilization of the forces;
- save on manpower. The situation was dramatic with perfectly obvious mobilization capacity forecasts for the forthcoming twenty years showing critical undermanning<sup>6</sup>. So fortifications deploying no more than a few thousand men, they would construct an "invasion retention wall" that would be effective within just a few days of a crisis blowing up. Troops could thus be mustered for general mobilization with the benefit of its cover and without the fear of being taken by surprise.
- to offer the infantry support points for its offensive or defensive maneuvers as in the previous system (the Séré de Rivière line, constructed from 1874 – 1913). We recall that this principle was already current from Vauban's time in the 17th century;
- to channel the invasion in the worst-case scenario, that of the fortifications being

<sup>1</sup> Apparently only one of all the coherent systems was designed to keep out the enemy completely: the Great Wall of China (there were *seven* of them, in fact).

<sup>2</sup> Apparently only one of all the coherent systems was designed to keep out the enemy completely: the Great Wall of China (there were *seven* of them, in fact).

<sup>3</sup> The Séré de Rivière line consisted of five curtains separated by spaces where the 1914 German army actually engaged (for example in the Battle of the Trouée de Charmes).

<sup>4</sup> Some 300,000 men lost.

<sup>5</sup> Factories destroyed, mines flooded and set on fire, with their surface equipment razed.

<sup>6</sup> The birth rate for 1918 matches that of 1938.

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breached, in specific directions, enabling the infantry to counter-attack the rear-guard<sup>7</sup>.

Thus we must make a point of remembering that the Maginot Line (just like any other fortified system cannot be dissociated from mobile units intended to complement it. That explains why the army would be imagined as motorized or "mechanized" as they used to say<sup>8</sup>.

France was forced to start constructing a similar line along the Alps from 1935 onwards because of heightened tension with Italy<sup>9</sup>.

### How the "line" was formed and organized.

The line was made up of two quite distinct formations: the north-eastern part (from the Swiss border to Luxembourg) and the Alpine part (from Nice to the Tarentaise mountains). In the Northeast, fifty-seven "major forts" (manned by over 300 troops) were strung out at roughly eight-kilometer intervals, as close as possible to the borders and each within cannon range of each either side for mutual support. Interspaced between them were the "interval forts" with less powerful artillery, and behind these, lightly defended "section shelters" for the "interval troops" to fend off local counterattacks. A typical "major fort" like the one at Simserhof (fortified sector of Bitche, 1000 men) had a number of different components: the entrance blocks (men and equipment), the barracks with electricity powerhouse, the emergency munitions stores (isolated from the barracks and the powerhouse), a long tunnel (about one kilometer long) and the combat blocks, whose arms were obviously trained towards the outside. The latter housed the forward munition stores. Each structure was partitioned off and fitted with overpressure devices to disperse combat gases.

In the Alps the "major forts" which never had more than 300 men billeted there, were built much more closely together because of the terrain. Furthermore, only the accesses to the mountain passes were defended.

<sup>7</sup> Like beheading a snake emerging from a burrow.

<sup>8</sup> Here again we dispel another fallacy: that the 1940's German army was fully motorized. Of about three million men massed to the West, only ten light divisions, that is one hundred thousand troops were motorized. The rest were on horseback.

<sup>9</sup> We recall that Italy was our ally in the 1914-18 war, and vacillated between the Axis and the democracies right up to 1935.

A remarkable underground telephone network, backed up by a radio network linked all the forts all the way along the Line, undisturbed by combat.

### France's "navel-gazing" and the "cowardice of the great military leaders".

The financial resources available for the war effort virtually dried up with the development of major "Never Again"-type propagandist campaigns, the new budget policies of the Twenties and the economic crisis in the Thirties. One of the outcomes of all this was that the planned mechanized divisions were not formed<sup>10</sup>. To make matters worse because of these same budget considerations the Maginot Line was nibbled at both ends, as it were.

This first affected its length, the official line being so as not to rub up the Belgians the wrong way. The Line came to a stop at Longuyon instead of continuing on to the North Sea as originally planned.

Then in the very substance of its works, as the number of "combat blocks" was reduced. In some cases that meant only half or a third of those planned were actually built. In fact only one of the major northeastern forts was completed to plan. That was not so for the others, some of which did not even have their "entrance blocks" fully clad<sup>11</sup> by the time war was declared. The same went for the Alps<sup>12</sup>.

The savings made on the forts' accessory defenses meant that the number of intermediate forts had to be increased and used up excessive numbers, which ran totally counter to one of the lines the basic concept was meant to serve.

At the same time, and to silence the howls of criticism against the military budget spending cuts, the authorities reassured the nation by duping it into believing that it was protected behind its "impenetrable fortified wall". Historians have recorded the protests

<sup>10</sup> Besides, the political authorities were very dubious about allowing powerful, mobile elite troops to exist, as they thought they might be tempted to use their strength to seize power. One again we see that certain political families sacrifice the future fuelled by their unfounded fears of the perennial myth of the seditious army. It took the strength of character of a certain Weygand to form four under-equipped (and with good reason) "mechanical divisions" almost covertly.

<sup>11</sup> A block is made up of "concrete work" and cladding inserted into it (armored pillboxes for observation or firing, hoppers, blackout turrets).

<sup>12</sup> From the Restefond Pass road (in the Haute Provence Alps) you can clearly see ten or so unfinished armored pillboxes still waiting to this day to be fitted out.

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of various generals-in-chief, primarily Pétain and Weygand, whose (deference oblige) secret notes to the government are now in the public domain<sup>13</sup>. Gamelin was also criticized on this score<sup>14</sup>. In his defense we are bound to admit that the situation was already compromised by the time he assumed high command.

We should also remember that France had a working population of forty million in 1939, who worked a forty-hour week. The German Empire's eighty million inhabitants worked sixty hours a week, complete with new manufacturing equipment<sup>15</sup>.

Finally we should remember that the French military command had received orders forbidding it from drawing up offensive plans against Germany<sup>16</sup>.

At the same time, Manstein successfully convinced Hitler of the superiority of his inspired plan to launch a two-pronged invasion of France: through Belgium getting around the Maginot Line to decimate the French mechanized battle corps, then by making a succession of staggering blows and deep incursions from the Somme to reach our country's vital parts.

### The Maginot Line put to the test.

Without delving into the details of the May-June 1940 campaign, which is unfortunately for us probably the most inspired of modern times, it has to be remembered that wherever the Maginot Line was attacked<sup>17</sup>, and even if some secondary constructions capitulated nowhere was it actually breached. As for the North-East Line; its major forts held out everywhere despite being attacked almost systematically from the rear and deprived of all their surface support troops<sup>18</sup>. La Ferté (near Longuyon) where a

fort yielded is often mentioned<sup>19</sup>. The rareness of this example demonstrates how solid the rest were<sup>20</sup> as only nine interval forts were taken in all. Army units who rejected the June 25 armistice only surrendered on the express, written order of officers whose authority came from French headquarters<sup>21</sup>. Some of them blew up their installations, others locked them up or welded their exits. Many of them were to receive "battle honors" from the German troops.

In the Alps the nine major passes giving access to France were blocked by a system that combined the Maginot and Séré de Rivière lines<sup>22</sup>. It came under attack on June 20, (that is three days after the request for armistice from Germany and although all the interval and reserve troops had been dispatched to the North-East<sup>23</sup>). The defense line remained intact and the few garrisons that had been surrounded also left their forts after the armistice with battle honors, as can be seen in the famous photograph depicting the withdrawal by the small unit of the *Redoute ruinée*<sup>24</sup> above Modane.

### What conclusion can we come to ?

What has been perpetrated about the Maginot Line for over sixty years is one of the most barefaced lies in the history of the twentieth century. This lie is convenient for many and was used to taint men who were still fighting on June 25 (seven days after General De Gaulle's Appeal)<sup>25</sup>. It is also used every which way to soil the memory of the then prominent leaders. Research of secret documents of the time show how unsubstantiated the shame poured on them was in their strategic approach to war, their reading of the tactical problems, in their sense of discipline or loyalty to the country's legitimate governors or the nation's best

<sup>13</sup> For more about this read the remarkable "Pétain, the soldier", by Guy Pedroncini, Perrin, 1998.

<sup>14</sup> Brilliantly intelligent (he had been Joffre's head of operations at General Headquarters) but with no decision making capacity, and partly chosen by the political authorities for this reason. He was a "man of consensus".

<sup>15</sup> It is one of the unexpected consequences of the "reparations" demanded of Germany in 1919 that obliged it to hand over complete factories to the allies. They rebuilt completely new ones, whereas the allies only had old German equipment...

<sup>16</sup> Read General Beaufre's memoirs. They are eloquent.

<sup>17</sup> On the Rhine, on the Ardennes borders, in Lorraine and the Alps.

<sup>18</sup> On June 12 (the day the French front line collapsed) the high command gave the order to withdraw the interval troops to the south. In doing so it sought to deploy manpower to reform infantry divisions. This order did not have the desired effect as it was given too late.

<sup>19</sup> Through toxic gases from the firing stagnating - the intermediate structures were not equipped (for budgetary reasons) with a powerful ventilation system or overpressure system to deal with combat gases.

<sup>20</sup> We also know of the fall of the Welschoff fort, (in the Bitche sector) whose entrance block was subjected to five consecutive days of 88-caliber cannon fire. The Simserhof artillery fired over 30,000 rounds to protect this and the neighboring forts, saving the Petit-Rederching fort that was attacked in the same way.

<sup>21</sup> The forts had six months' worth of supplies.

<sup>22</sup> The Alpine forts are gems of ingenuity and as for the Séré de Rivière structures, many of them stylish.

<sup>23</sup> By then there were only a few units of Alpine Army skiing scouts to defend an immense frontier and counterattack in the intervals.

<sup>24</sup> Which is a post on the Séré de Rivière.

<sup>25</sup> Such as Chaban-Delmas, future Prime Minister who was then serving as a reserve lieutenant in a fort above Nice.

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interests. Lastly this lie releases the politicians from the responsibilities that were well and truly theirs when it comes to budgets, preparing for the war, or building viable alliances supported by effective military resources<sup>26</sup>. As we all know they all have to go hand-in-hand.

On the other hand, the ultimate consequences of the uncontrolled budget hikes, the doctrinal swings, that ended in deceiving the nation about the strength of its army or the effectiveness of its means of dissuasion would have given a lot of food for thought.

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<sup>26</sup> Let's not shy away from ruffling preconceived notions and say straight off that Munich had no option but to turn out as it did from the time the allied military resources prevented them from coming to Czechoslovakia's aid and even less from beating German in 1938. When you cannot afford to go to war, you parley. Even if it's with the Devil. Churchill's outcry that we had "chosen dishonor to avoid war, but that we would have both it and the dishonor of war" is moving. He is not any the less responsible for it. A year later, it was perhaps for the sake of honor that war was declared on Germany to save Poland. We had no more resources than before and no more regrettable than our chin-wagging the "Lauter offensive" in Sarre did not save Warsaw or even Paris a few months later. President Mitterand was criticized in 1981 for having said that France "would do nothing if the Soviets invaded Warsaw". Did we have the resources to do so? At least this man had learned something from history.

