

**MAYO COLLEGE GIRLS' SCHOOL
MODEL UNITED NATIONS
CONFERENCE 2017**



**BACKGROUND
GUIDE**

***HISTORIC JOINT CRISIS
COMMITTEE (AXIS)***

**MAYO COLLEGE GIRLS' SCHOOL
NATIONS**



MODEL UNITED



MCGS MUN 2017

LEARNING FROM HISTORY:

Simulating WWII

We are students of history. The greatest gift we have at our disposal is time and thus this commentary is meant to set the context for our debate. Go through this guide and make yourself well aware of the tools our side used to gain the upper hand. We shall need them...yet again.



///DECIPHERED///LIMITED ACCESS///CCNI

COMMENTARY

1939-1941

Call it “the onslaught,” the two triumphant years with which the German armed forces (the Wehrmacht) opened World War II. During this period, the Germans reeled off one decisive victory after another, a run quite unlike anything in recent memory. With its tank (panzer) formations operating as an apparently irresistible spearhead, and with a powerful air force (Luftwaffe) circling overhead, the Wehrmacht smashed every defensive position thrown in its path. The world called it blitzkrieg, or “lightning war,” but that was a term the Germans themselves never used in any formal sense. By any name, it was impressive. The opening campaign in Poland (Case White) smashed the Polish army in eighteen days, although a bit more fighting was necessary to reduce the capital, Warsaw. Equally decisive was the simultaneous invasion of Denmark and Norway in April 1940 (code-name Weserübung). Both enemy capitals, Oslo and Copenhagen, fell on day one to a well-coordinated combination of ground forces, seaborne landings, and paratroopers. Allied formations tried to intervene, got a quick taste of the Luftwaffe, and soon evacuated under heavy fire. One month later the Wehrmacht launched its great offensive in the west (Case Yellow). Here, the panzers smashed not merely the Poles or Norwegians, but the cream of the French and British armies, destroying the former and booting the latter off the continent in a frantic evacuation from the last port still in friendly hands, Dunkirk.

The pattern continued into 1941. A lightning drive into the Balkans in April overran Yugoslavia (Operation 25) and Greece (Operation Marita). When a British force arrived to help defend the latter, the Wehrmacht kicked it from one position to another and eventually drove it off the mainland altogether, forcing the British into their third forced evacuation in less than a year. Their destination this time was Crete, and here they got hit by a real thunderbolt, Operation Mercury, the first all-airborne military operation in history. The British evacuated under fire yet again, this time to Egypt, where they made the acquaintance of General Erwin Rommel in the Western Desert. There was a lot of fighting yet to come, of course, and we all know the ending. Nevertheless, we should not minimize the achievement. Two years, after all, is a long time in modern war, and the Wehrmacht had just gotten through them undefeated. It had crushed one of its two great power adversaries, and was managing to keep the other very much at bay. The Soviet Union was still an ally. The United States might as well have been on another planet. German casualties had been minimal. Indeed, a few thousand losses among the paratroopers on Crete



**MAYO COLLEGE GIRLS' SCHOOL
NATIONS**

MODEL UNITED

had led Hitler to cancel all future airborne landings. As he surveyed the strategic scene in May 1941, he believed they had become too expensive.



How soon things would change! But that is a topic for another discussion. That two year conflict in Europe from 1939–1941 was the war Hitler won.

At least three problems arise in researching the opening phases of World War II. First of all, the scholar has to be aware of the daunting task at hand. The literature on the war is enormous, larger than on any other single topic in military history, dwarfing even the American Civil War. Since the period under consideration here, 1939– 1941, forms only two years of a six year war (seven campaigning seasons, actually), one needs at the very least to begin by surveying the one-volume histories of the entire conflict. A partial list today would include Gerhard Weinberg, *A World at Arms* (1994), Williamson Murray and Allan Millet, *A War to be won* (2000), Richard Overy, *Why the Allies Won* (2005), Evan Mawdsley, *World War II: A New History* (2009), and Thomas W. Zeiler, *Annihilation: A Global History of World War II* (2011). Each of these books has unique perspectives, offers previously untapped documents on the war' s opening years, and parses the meaning of this two-year period in different ways.

If a common theme unites them, it is the notion of global war. Weinberg is the magister here. While he stresses Hitler' s role in starting the war – indeed, he was an “intentionalist” on this point even before historians had coined the term – and while he gives primacy to the European conflict, he also offers wide-ranging analysis on the global linkages between war in Europe, Africa, and Asia. The opening vignette in the preface to *A World at Arms* deals not with the German invasion of Poland; instead, it describes the battle of Kohima in 1944, where the British and Indians won a decisive victory over a Japanese army invading India, and offers satirical commentary on the Indian Nationalist, Sub has Chandra Bose (Weinberg 1994, p. xiii). Zeiler and Mawdsley take much the same approach, with both discussing Japan' s invasion of China and describing the fighting there in some detail well before the *Wehrmacht* crosses the Polish frontier. We have now moved the outbreak of the war, in other words, from the more traditional date of 1939 back to 1937. Mawdsley denies that it was “Hitler' s war” in any real sense – in fact, he uses the phrase with a question mark. While emphasizing the German role as a “thick strand of the story,” he also contends “there were other strands to the mid-century world crisis” that led to the war (Mawdsley 2009, p. 1).

There is one other common thread. On the operational plane, none of these books argues for any special German military genius. The focus now tends to be on the fog of war and on the uncertainties of combat in even the most lopsided victory. If the Germans receive praise in any particular area, it is for a flexible system of command allowing a great deal of initiative to the lower ranks, and for tactical and operational improvisation in the field. Zeiler, for example, points out the problems the Germans had coordinating their arms in Poland, and labels the Polish campaign “more of a proving ground for German armour at the tactical level rather than in a fully incorporated operation” (Zeiler 2011, p. 58). Mawdsley goes further in his demythologizing, arguing that “the Wehrmacht had stumbled upon Blitzkrieg as the



means to a rapid 'operational' solution of a strategic problem" (Mawdsley 2009, pp. 136– 137).

Rather than an inspiration born of some special German aptitude for war, in other words, it was a means by which a state that was fundamentally weaker than its adversaries might be able to punch above its weight. In the modern literature, blitzkrieg no longer swaggers onto the stage, but emerges more gradually from a matrix of German strategic weakness.

The second problem highlights an aspect of military history that should strike us as curious. Far from the received wisdom on the subject, oftentimes the losers write the history. Consider the pantheon of great captains from Hannibal to Napoleon to Robert E. Lee. They are all considered to be the most gifted commanders of their respective eras, even though each of them captained the losing squad. Never has this paradox been more evident than in the post-1945 era. What we think of as "the history of World War II" is, like all histories, actually a

"construct": take a few early impressions, mix in a few post-1945 biases – some minor and some major – and then reinforce over and over again until "truth" forms. The principle ingredient in this historiographical cocktail has been the memoir, and the master source for these memoirs has been the German officer corps. The list of books to be consulted is an imposing one. It includes Heinz Guderian, *Panzer Leader* (1952), Hans von Mellenthin, *Panzer Battles* (1956), Hans von Luck, *Panzer Commander* (1989), Erich von Manstein, *Lost Battles* (1982), Heinz Werner Schmidt (1979), *With Rommel in the Desert* (Rommel's aide de camp in North Africa), Frido von Senger und Etterlin (1989), *Neither Fear nor Hope* (dealing mainly with the Sicilian and Italian campaigns, but also containing important sections on the early years of the war), and many more. And then there is the Foreign Military Studies (FMS) series (1945–1959), published by the US Department of the Army and based upon interviews with captive German generals, most of which remain unpublished but can be consulted at various archives, especially the US Army Heritage and Education Centre (AHEC) in Carlisle, Pennsylvania. Because they did not have their personal papers or office files available to them, their testimony is not always completely reliable, and no researcher should ever rely on the FMS files without finding corroborating evidence.

The problems run even deeper than lack of documentation, however. In dealing with the delicate events of their recent past, not to mention the crimes in which they may have participated, the German generals were evasive. They left many things out altogether – their loyalty to Hitler and their enthusiasm in carrying out his racial policies, for example. They also put many things in. Indeed, the number of times that the generals claimed in their memoirs to have "stood up to Hitler" is legion. Would that it were true! Above all, however, their real reason for writing these memoirs was professional exculpation: denying responsibility for the disastrous war and shifting all blame for it onto Hitler's shoulders. In a way, Hitler was the ideal



MAYO COLLEGE GIRLS' SCHOOL
NATIONS

MODEL UNITED

alibi. He was dead, of course, and so could not speak for himself. He was also Hitler, the worst mass murderer of all time and thus unlikely to have many defenders eager to argue his brief. The generals could have a go at him as they liked, and usually went unchallenged. Another factor deserves mention. The generals were now more or less permanent



in the 1950s. There was a new cold war raging, but it might go hot at any moment, and the West wanted to know how to fight and beat the Soviet Union in an upcoming conflict, already nicknamed World War III even before it had broken out. But who had recent experience in fighting “the Russians”? Men like Guderian, Von Manstein, and Von Mellenthin – the generals of World War II. At a time when the US Army, in particular, was eager to learn as much as possible about the Soviet Union and its military establishment, memoirs like *Panzer Leader* (1952) or *Lost Victories* must have appeared like holy writ. Reputable publishing houses published these memoirs, all soon appeared in English translation, and the corporate view of the German officer corps became part and parcel of the Western interpretation of the war, even down to a not- so-subtle identification with the *Wehrmacht* , at least when it was fighting in the East against the

Red Army. Consider these passages from Von Mellenthin’s *Panzer Battles*, in which the author describes the “Psychology of the Russian Soldier”:

No one belonging to the cultural circle of the West is ever likely to fathom the character and soul of these Asiatic, born and bred on the other side of the European frontiers ... There is no way of telling what the Russian will do next; he will tumble from one extreme to the other. With experience it is quite easy to foretell what a soldier from any other country will do, but never with a Russian. His qualities are as unusual and as many-sided as those of his vast and rambling country ... The Russian is quit unpredictable; today he does not care whether his flanks are threatened or not, tomorrow he trembles at the idea of having his flanks exposed. He disregards accepted tactical principles but sticks to the letter of his field manuals. Perhaps the key to this attitude lies in the fact the Russian is not a conscious soldier, thinking on independent lines, but is the victim of moods which a Westerner cannot analyse. He is essentially a primitive being. (Von Mellenthin 1956)

How easy it is for any educated individual to read these comments and chuckle about the gullibility of our forebears. However, things might have seemed different to a US Army officer reading them in 1956 (the year the book first appeared in English translation).

Today, historians working in the archives (and likely freed from the now-obsolete prejudices of the cold war) have proven many times over that the German memoirs are at best unreliable and at worst deliberately misleading. The critical literature is vast.

For a representative sampling, one might turn to Geoffrey P. Megargee, *Inside Hitler’s High Command* (2000), a demolition not only of the German General Staff’s morality and ethics, but its very competency as a manager of modern war, as well his



**MAYO COLLEGE GIRLS' SCHOOL
NATIONS**

MODEL UNITED

next book, *War of Annihilation* (2006), which analyses the *Wehrmacht*'s operations and crimes in the Soviet Union during the first campaigning season of 1941 and Robert M. Citino, *German Way of War* (2005) and *Death of the Wehrmacht* (2007), both of which link German warmaking in the war's early years not to some special genius of the General Staff, but to long-term Prussian-German operational patterns. Russell Hart, *Guderian* (2006), offers a biography of the general that is unsparing in its criticism, and is



especially hard on his memoirs while Dennis Showalter, *Hitler's Panzers* (2009), places the rise of German mechanized warfare in a much broader and depersonalized context. Ronald Smelser and Edward J. Davies II, *The Myth of the Eastern Front* (2008), deconstruct the "cult" of the Wehrmacht that took hold in the United States after 1945, and look especially carefully at war games and popular culture. Omer Barton, *Hitler's Army* (1991), Stephen Fritz, *Frontsoldaten* (1995), and Wolfram Wette, *The Wehrmacht* (2006), all analyse the way in which Nazi ideology penetrated the German army from the generals down to the rank and file. Finally, Mungo Melvin, *Manstein: Hitler's Greatest General* (2010), offers an even-handed portrait of this field commander cum war criminal.

And yet, having stipulated the problems with the German memoir literature, we should also admit something else: it is impossible to write the history of the war without it. That is especially true when the subject is campaign history. Considering the original plan and intent, changes and improvisations made during the fighting, and evaluation of the outcome, getting the commander's view is essential to the historian. No one would try to write the history of Allied operations on D-day and the campaigns in Western Europe and Italy without using the memoirs of General Dwight D. Eisenhower (1948), General Omar Bradley (1999), General Mark W. Clark (2007), Field Marshal Bernard Law Montgomery (1958), or Winston Churchill (1948 – 1953). And yet, it is clear today that each of these memoirs contains much that is of dubious veracity. As David Reynolds has pointed out in his book *In Command of History* (2005), Churchill's memoir says far more about the times in which he was writing it – the era in which he was a failed politician trying to re-establish his bona fides – than it does about the war itself.

Just as we cannot read Churchill out of the story for that indiscretion, we cannot write the history of Case Yellow without consulting Von Manstein and Guderian, no matter how much we might object to them on moral or ethical grounds. All memoirs are self-serving; that is why people write them, after all. When the authors are describing military operations in the field – their metier – they are still excellent and reliable sources. We should simply use them with caution.

A third problem is related directly to the second. Several of the most widely read and influential analysts of the war in English – B. H. Liddell Hart (1953) and J. F. C. Fuller (1923) foremost among them – bring grave weaknesses to the table as impartial scholars. In the interwar period (1918–1939), both had been soldiers advocating reforms within the military establishment, and then, after leaving the military, they had become media pundits, generating an insistent barrage of advice to the armed forces about how to conduct themselves. It was a contentious time. World War I had been, in many ways, a low point in the history of the military art: a long, I indecisive, and incredibly bloody stalemate. The interwar era had seen heated debate in all the world's armies over the issue of "mechanization," more specifically, the role that the tank and airplane would play on the future battlefield. To their advocates, they were the weapons of the future, the only means to crack open the trenches and restore mobility.



Both Liddell Hart and Fuller spent the 1920s preaching what Fuller called a “new gospel” of mobile warfare.

Fuller was the more radical of the two men, a “military Luther” calling for a “reformation of war” (the title of his 1923 book), in which the traditional infantry and cavalry arms would disappear. The future of battle belonged to the tank, he said, with foot soldier and horseman nothing more than “interested spectators.” Liddell Hart was the more moderate figure. His concern was returning mobility, for without manoeuvre there could be no strategy. He advocated something he called the “indirect approach” (the title of a book he published in 1941), avoiding an enemy’s strength and attacking his point of weakness. The key was not so much to destroy every last man and gun of the enemy, but to attack his equilibrium, keeping him off balance by surprise and lightning manoeuvre. On the modern battlefield, Liddell Hart argued, only tanks and mechanized armies had the requisite speed.

The “prophets,” as they liked to call themselves, met with opposition from those running the army. We often caricature them as know-nothings, like the chief of the Imperial General Staff, General Archibald MontgomeryMassingberd, who once denounced a book by Fuller, then admitted he had not even read it. “It would only annoy me,” he whined. But in fact, they were probably doing the best they could with the materials they had. They were serious men who had to adhere to tight budgets and who could not waste time on fantasies like all-tank armies that had no chance of being funded.

In the aftermath of World War II, however, Liddell Hart and Fuller made absurd claims for the own importance in the interwar period, declaring that they had been instrumental in inventing a new concept of mechanized operations, that the German planners had read their works, and then had used them as the cornerstone for the invention of a radically new way of war called “blitzkrieg.” Conservatives in their own army, meanwhile, had blocked reforms at every turn, and the result was the string of defeats from 1939–1941. Liddell Hart was a particularly active campaigner on his own behalf, interviewing dozens of German generals in captivity and asking how much they knew about him back in the 1930s. In a tight spot personally and professionally (and sometimes legally), and seeking influential friends in the West, the generals were usually quite obliging, as a perusal of Liddell Hart’ s *The German Generals Talk* (1979) will indicate.

While none of this is well supported by the documentary record, it is a myth that has become well entrenched in the historical literature. It plays into so many attractive archetypes: the notion of the “young man in a hurry,” the “hidebound reactionary establishment” unwilling to admit that the world it knew was changing, and of course, the “prophet without honour in his own country.” As a result it has become nearly irresistible, and not just in Britain. The list of those claiming to be “prophets” in the interwar era, who then went on to fight and write about World War II, is international. Armour theorists like Charles de Gaulle in France (1940) and Heinz Guderian in Germany (1992) as well as airpower advocates like



MAYO COLLEGE GIRLS' SCHOOL
NATIONS

MODEL UNITED

William "Billy" Mitchell in the United States, Giulio Douhet in Italy, and Hugh Trenchard in Great Britain belong to the tribe of prophets, and all of them, as well as the numerous books about them, need to be handled with a great deal of care.

While they do discuss the war, they are often arguing about something else entirely: individual reputations and roles in a long-



settled doctrinal debate.

There are a number of good antidotes to this problem. In *Mechanized Juggernaut* or

Military Anachronism?

(1991), Richard L. DiNardo offers a fresh perspective on the armour debate, pointing out that while the *Wehrmacht* did indeed “ride” off to victory in the early years of the war, it did not do so on tanks. Horses, it turned out, still comprised a shockingly large component of its supply train. And for a work that challenges the Liddell Hart myth at every turn, John J. Mearsheimer offers both reasoned argumentation and no small amount of vitriol in *Liddell Hart and the Weight of History* (1988).

Once one has read all the single volume histories of the war, and allowed for the deficiencies of the German General Staff narrative, and worked through Liddell Hart’s special pleading, there is still one more problem: the literature on the individual campaigns themselves is monumental in its own right, and even keeping up with newly published material can be a daunting task.

Consider the Polish campaign. Embracing less than a single month of fighting, it has developed an enormous body of work. A logical place to start would be the belated “official history” commissioned by the Federal Republic of Germany’s Military History Research Office (*Militärgeschichtliches Forschungsamt*). Available in English translation today as *Germany and the Second World War* (1990), it analyses Case White in volume II, *Germany’s Initial Conquests in Europe* (Maier, Rohde, and Stegemann 1991). Labelling this “official history” is misleading, since the term usually indicates an institutional product, under-seasoned and bland, and written with the express intention of protecting reputations. Because enough time has passed since

1945, and because the Germans understandably have no desire to protect anyone involved in the planning or prosecution of the war, they have produced a meticulously researched, scholarly, and extremely critical work. The maps are also beautiful, a crucial aspect for any operational history.

Those feeling threatened by the size (and price) of these German volumes might still find use in an older work. Robert M. Kennedy, *The German Campaign in Poland, 1939* (1956), was part of the FMS series published by the US Department of the Army and based upon interviews with captive German generals. All of the problems of the FMS series mentioned above are here in abundance. Still, Kennedy’s book is worthy as a brief operational overview, and the order of battle charts and maps are quite accurate, something that is not always true in this field. Among the huge amount of popular literature written on the Polish campaign, Matthew Cooper, *The German Army, 1933–1945* (1978) takes pride of place, being especially reliable on the operational data

orders of battle, commanders, and manoeuvres. In *The Polish Campaign* (1991), Steven Zaloga and Victory Madej have produced a good revisionist work with a fundamentally different point of view drawn from Polish sources and highlighting



the Polish military. Holding a unique and indispensable place in the literature, it established what we might call the current consensus on Case White: a decisive and rapid victory for the Wehrmacht, to be sure, but not without its share of pain. And then there are the memoirs (as we have seen, virtually every German commander wrote them, even if the Poles did not get the chance), not to mention the mountain of literature generated in

the professional military journals at the time the campaign was underway, the *Military Review*, produced by the US Army Command and General Staff College at Ft. Leavenworth, Kansas, for example, or the semi-official publication of the Wehrmacht, the *Militär-Wochenblatt*. Suffice it to say, one could spend the rest of one's life reading up on Case White alone. The next great campaign of the war, the German invasion of Denmark and Norway, breaks the general pattern. It is actually less well served than it should be, perhaps a reflection of a lack of tanks and the more diffuse, smallunit nature of the fighting. Still, as the world's first "triphibious" campaign – involving land, sea, and air forces working in intimate cooperation and requiring the split-second timing of more than a dozen landings over thousand miles of Danish and Norwegian coastline – it was a signal moment for the development of modern operations. Here, Adam R. A. Claasen, in *Hitler's Northern War* (2001), has the field more or less to himself. It is a definitive portrait of German combined operations in the north, highlighting the role played by the Luftwaffe, but ranging far beyond air activity to include land and naval combat, as well as the interplay of all three arms. Another necessary work is the article by James S. Corum, "The German Campaign in Norway as a Joint Operation," in the *Journal of Strategic Studies* (1998), which not only analyses the successes of German I underservice cooperation in the campaign, but also Allied failures in the same area. And once again, there are the memoirs, in this case those of the commander in chief of the German fleet, Erich Raeder, *Grand Admiral*, reprinted in 2001. It is a start, but *Weserübung* deserves more.

When we come to the great German triumph in France and the Low Countries, however, the number of essential books rapidly curves toward infinity. Case Yellow continues to fascinate historians, and it is easy to see why. Even a brief operational précis can stir the blood. The German feint from the north acting as a "matador's cloak"; the bold panzer thrust through the forbidding Ardennes, courtesy of General Von Manstein; the Allied drive to the Dyle river in Belgium and Breda in the Netherlands, a pair of brilliant operational manoeuvres – unfortunately, for the wrong side; General Heinz Guderian's breakthrough at Sedan; the high-speed panzer drive to the English Channel and the consequent encirclement of an entire Allied force in Belgium; Hitler's problematic halt order before Dunkirk; the heroic British evacuation: the twentieth century saw few more dramatic moments.

Perhaps it is best to begin here with the victims, the French Army (and France itself). In the 1930s Marc Bloch was one of the world's most accomplished historians, a noted medievalist and one of the founders of the *Annales* school. In 1940, he was a reservist called to the colours as a logistical officer in the French 1st



MAYO COLLEGE GIRLS' SCHOOL
NATIONS

MODEL UNITED

Army. He served as honourably as anyone in the brief campaign that followed, managed to escape from the great encirclement in Flanders, evacuated France on a British vessel, returned to Brittany, and eventually became a prisoner of the Germans. He would die in captivity, but not until he had written a little book called *Strange Defeat* (Bloch 1968). It is an unparalleled work: a highly underrated campaign analysis, a dissection of French politics and society before the war, and a call to action to his compatriots. The writing is peerless, whether Bloch is describing having to use a nursery school as his headquarters ("The furniture had been designed to fit the requirements of very young children"), with predictably hilarious results, or the signs of the "staff disease" that



overtook so many officers as the campaign fell apart (“haggard eyes, badly shaven chins, a nervous restlessness which showed itself, in the early stages, as a feverish irritability over small things, and went on to assume the form of a forced calmness which deceived nobody”). Above all he captures the relentless pace of this first great mechanized campaign. Consider this passage. Bloch is administering a “semi-permanent fuel park” in the town of Landrecies, when he witnesses the following encounter:

One fine morning in May, the officer in charge ran into a column of tanks in the main street. They were, he thought, painted a very odd colour, but that did not worry him overmuch, because he could not possibly know all the various types in use in the French Army. But what did upset him considerably was the very curious route that they seemed to be taking! They were moving in the direction of Cambria; in other words away from the front. But that, too, could be explained without much difficulty, since it was only natural that within the winding streets of a little town the guides might go wrong. He was just about to run after the commander of the convoy in order to put his right, when a casual passer-by, better informed than he was, shouted – “Look out! They’re Germans!” (Bloch 1968)

Indeed, throughout the campaign, Bloch says, the Germans “kept appearing where they ought not to have appeared.”

Where *Strange Defeat* shines, however, is in Bloch’s refusal to see the disaster as a mere matter of military technique. He analyses the collapse not just of an army, but of a system and a way of life that he no longer regarded as capable of nurturing civic virtue. The French Army, after all, was nothing if not a reflection of the society that had formed and trained it. In that sense, Bloch may be seen as the godfather of the “new military history” of the 1960s, scholars who tried to place military activity within the broadest possible context of politics, economics, education, and society.

We still feel the ripples of his work. In recent times, for example, Eugenia Riesling’s *Arming against Hitler* (1996) takes up the thorny problem of French military policy in the interwar era. Historians have usually painted it as one of the great doctrinal wrong turns of all time: building the Maginot Line while the Germans were forming panzer divisions for high-speed war. Riesling argues that this is reading history backwards. Seeking the actual reasons why the French did what they did in the 1930s – rather than more chimerical notions of what they failed to do or what they should have done – she finds them in the political matrix of the Third Republic. It was, after all, a system formed originally as a reaction to Bonapartism, one that tended to distrust overly charismatic generals or overly complex operational schemes. Seen in that light, the turn to the Maginot Line and “methodical battle” made perfect political sense, and, in fact, it would be impossible to imagine the Third Republic doing anything else.



MAYO COLLEGE GIRLS' SCHOOL
NATIONS

MODEL UNITED

A reader seeking a more tightly focused operational study will find it difficult to choose just one. Early works, especially out of France, bear the stamp of their age, and they also tend to argue that the German victory was due to superior numbers and better equipment. No one believes that anymore, at least not since the publication of R. H. S.



Stolfi's seminal article, "Equipment for Victory in France in 1940" (Stolfi 1970), whose publication may be seen as the start of modern research into Case Yellow. Since then, Robert A. Doughty has described well the disastrous course of French war planning in *The Breaking Point: Sedan and the Fall of France, 1940* (1990), and Jeffrey A. Gunsburg gives us a worthy account of the fighting in the Flanders plain (i.e., not in the Ardennes) in *Divided and Conquered* (1979). Here the French gave as well as they got, and showed that their tactics and weaponry were not completely deficient. For German operations, one must start by reading Von Manstein (1982), the man who designed the operational plan, in *Lost Victories*, part two ("The Campaign in the West"). For the course of the operation, Florian K. Rothbrust, *Guderian's XIXth Panzer Corps and the Battle of France* (1990) is still an indispensable monograph, although it is essentially an essay (running to just 95 pages of text) extended by maps and documents. As always, there will be many readers who turn to Alistair Horne, *To Lose a Battle* (1969), a popular history but also an accurate and stirring narrative of the campaign.

Without doubt, however, the single most important book written on Case Yellow is Karl-Heinz Frieser, *The Blitzkrieg Legend* (2005). When first released in Germany in 1995 (original title, *Blitzkrieg-Legend: Der Westfeldzug 1940*), it caused an sensation among those who study the Wehrmacht for a living. Not only was it a detailed and comprehensive look at this most successful of modern military campaigns, it also staked out some bold, even startling, revisionist terrain that called into question all of the received wisdom about Case Yellow. Hardly the inevitable victory of a blitzkrieg-oriented army, Frieser's vision of the 1940 campaign was instead filled with chance and contingency and the fog of war on both sides. It was not simply a victory of German armour, virtually all of which was vastly inferior to that of the Allies, but rather a victory for superior doctrine. Frieser moved the discussion from hardware factors, in other words, to areas of software: planning, command and control, logistics, and information.

Frieser, for example, does not think the German army planned Case Yellow as a blitzkrieg at all. Most German staff officers had a great respect for the armies of the Western allies, and they had good reason: the last time they had faced these same adversaries they got themselves four years of bloodshed and a grinding war of attrition that Germany eventually lost. Most of them expected a replay. In fact, they were dumbfounded that Hitler had dragged Germany into a war in 1939, a conflict for which the Reich was far less ready than it had been in 1914.

The rapid and nearly bloodless victory was as shocking to the Germans, then, as it was to the Allied commanders, and it cried out for a "plausible explanation." The result was the onomatopoeic term blitzkrieg (lightning war), a supposedly new method of war-making developed in secret by the Germans (and often attributed to the military "genius" of Adolf Hitler). As Frieser points out, the term was hardly ever used in Germany, and certainly not used in any precise or doctrinal sense. It simply sounded good – at first to outsiders, and eventually to Germans alike. *Blitzkrieg* was, in effect, an *ex post facto* construction, but one of such power that it



**MAYO COLLEGE GIRLS' SCHOOL
NATIONS**

MODEL UNITED

would eventually come to blind the Germans themselves to what had happened in 1940.



But if Case Yellow was not a blitzkrieg, then what was it? Here Frieser made his most important contribution. Viewed strategically, the Germans lost World War II in September 1939, the day they invaded Poland and brought down the wrath of the Western powers, with their domination of the seas and their vast, resource-rich overseas empires. That certainly was the opinion of most German staff officers, and not even the rapid victory in Poland did much to improve their mood. There was no war plan for conflict with Britain and France, and the long-term prospects seemed hopeless. The operation plan for 1940, then, really was something new: an armoured raid, an all-or-nothing, go-for-broke gamble, a staking of the entire fate of the nation on the play of one card – the panzer thrust through the Ardennes. It was more than an operational plan, it was “the substitute for a strategic solution that the political leadership had failed to develop.” It is a point of view that has worked its way into the literature as a kind of consensus, as we saw in Mawdsley’s *World War II: A New History* (above). Case Yellow, then, went well beyond “daring” – often a good thing in a commander – into the realm of recklessness. It is perhaps a sound judgment on Hitler’s entire war. Our final entry in the literature of “the onslaught” takes us to North Africa. The fight in the desert has certainly had its share in the historiography – biographies of Rommel, detailed accounts of every major battle from El Agheila to Tunis, memoirs by all the major participants. It was, and is, a mountain of books. However, much of the literature is badly out of date, with biography still forming a major portion: Correlli Barnett, *The Desert Generals* (1982), Nigel Hamilton, *Monty* (1981–1986), John Keegan, *Churchill’s Generals* (1991), Ronald Lewin, *Montgomery as Military Commander* (1971), *Rommel as Military Commander* (1968), and many more. See also Rommel’s own memoir, based on his papers and published posthumously as *Krieg ohne Hass* (1950). Liddell Hart edited the papers in English translation as *The Rommel Papers* (1953), but for some inexplicable reason interspersed operational analysis with Rommel’s letters home to his wife. The literary marriage – unlike the real one – is not happy. These are all worthy works. The best among them manage to raise enough questions about their subject to make them worth reading. Often, however, they lapse into hagiography, and their format often prevents them from going beyond the issue of personalities. Amongst the secondary literature, the body of work by Michael Carver (chief of staff for the 7th Armoured Division during the campaign) is still essential reading: *Tobruk* (1964), *El Alamein* (1962), and *Dilemmas of the Desert War* (1986). Finally, three books deserve special mention in this crowded field: Wolf Heckmann, *Rommel’s War in Africa* (1981), for its vignettes of the desert war from the German perspective; Hans-Otto Behrendt, *Rommel’s Intelligence in the Desert Campaign* (1985), for being the only book to deal exclusively with this crucial problem; and Alan J. Levine, *The War Against Rommel’s Supply Lines* (1999), for the same reason.

The sixtieth anniversary of the battle of El Alamein was the occasion for an mini-wave of new books: Jon Latimer, *Alamein* (2002), John Biermann and Colin Smith, *Battle of Alamein* (2002), and Stephen Bungay, *Alamein* (2002). Unfortunately, they did not break any particularly new conceptual ground, nor did they jumpstart any



**MAYO COLLEGE GIRLS' SCHOOL
NATIONS**

MODEL UNITED

new school. All are fundamentally similar works. They purport to be about the battle itself; all are in fact general histories of the entire North African campaign from the Anglo-Italian



battles to Rommel's final retreat to Tunisia. None of them offers any analytical breakthrough, although they do use interviews with veterans to good effect. Indeed it is probably best to see them as the British equivalent of the American "greatest generation" genre. Latimer's work is the most scholarly. Bungay (2002) and Bierman and Smith (2002) offer solid popular histories, including a huge amount of perhaps extraneous detail on matters as wide-ranging as the identity of the real *English Patient* or a deconstruction of the desert war's greatest hit, "Lili Marlene" (Bierman and Smith, pp. 84–86). All three offer particularly vivid accounts of the crucial encounter at the position called "Snipe," where the 2nd Battalion of the Rifle Brigade decisively blunted Rommel's largest armored counterattacks on October 26th. It is difficult to recommend one of them over the others.

Rommel himself, of course, is still a hero in the West, starting with Churchill's praise of him on the Commons floor as "a great general," extending into his perceived participation in the anti-Hitler resistance, and solidified in dozens of books about his operational acumen. Today, all those aspects of his life and career are under fire by historians. Ralf Georg Reuth, *Rommel* (2005), is a recent warts-and-all biography that shows how even this revered Nazi general had an attitude toward Hitler that could only be labeled hero worship. Reuth is also highly critical of a general who cared so little for logistics or for tying his dash and drive to any meaningful strategic end. Dennis Showalter has given us a recent and typically incisive portrait in the comparative biography *Patton and Rommel* (2005), painting the latter as a "muddy boots" tactician, praiseworthy in a battalion commander but highly questionable on the level of army or army group command.

In formulating a research agenda, we must first be humble. Anyone wishing to contribute to the operational history of World War II must realize that there has been a conversation going on now for over seventy years, that even the local public libraries are filled with relevant books, and that the job is enormous. Contrary to our usual calling as historians, which demands Rankean devotion to the archival sources, mastery of the secondary literature is one key to producing original and vital scholarship in this field.

The second, and more urgent, point is the need to cut loose from the notion of military history as a sort of "after action report." For centuries, historians have confidently handed down judgments of all sorts, often based on very tendentious argumentation, on the conduct of operations. This army should have done that; that general should have done this. This division deployed in faulty formation; that captain dressed his company's battle-line improperly. We have condemned commanders for being too impetuous when they ought to have hung back, and for being too passive when they should have charged in. The history of World War II is filled with such claims. In our 1939–1941, pre-Barbarossa timeframe, for example, let us consider this partial list of obvious "mistakes":



- 1 The Polish high command's decision in 1939 to deploy along the entire length of the border, rather than concentrate around supposedly more vital points.
- 2 The French high command's decision to dispatch 7th Army north to the Dutch town of Breda in 1940, commonly referred to as "the Breda variant" of the Dyle Plan.
- 3 The British decision to intervene in Norway, which came to grief early and led to the first great British evacuation of the war.
- 4 The German decision to halt at Dunkirk, allowing the BEF to escape destruction and evacuate back to Britain.
- 5 The German decision to switch to "terror bombing" of cities during the Battle of Britain, which gave the Royal Air Force a respite in its darkest hour.
- 6 The British decision to intervene in Greece (largely with Australian and New Zealand troops), which came to grief early and led, again, to a hurried evacuation.

There are many more, and they continue to dominate our discussion of the war. It is easy to condemn all these decisions, along with the men who made them. But we should go deeper. Does not the frequency of these wrong turns actually prove that decision-making in wartime might be a great deal tougher than we like to assume, even for the professionally trained staff officer or planner? Is not the problem with this mistake-based analysis that it rests on a mistaken assumption of its own: that for every wartime conundrum, there is a clear and obvious solution? For that to be true, war would have to be a science with limited variables and quantifiable metrics of performance, success. If so, it sure has not been easy to come up with them.

Thankfully, we already have a solution to the problem, an intellectual framework for analysing these difficulties. It comes to us from Carl von Clausewitz, and although it may or may not be infallible, it is the most compelling we are likely to have for some time. War is filled with difficulties, he wrote. It is the realm of chance, of passion, and politics. It is a paradox. It may seem very simple, "but even the simplest thing is difficult."

That German failure at Dunkirk, for example, analysed and reanalysed over the years, may also have had something to do with those brave British soldiers holding the last ditches around the port's perimeter, a story ably told by Hugh Sebag-Montefiore in *Dunkirk: Fight to the Last Man* (2006). The enemy gets a vote, in other words, and at Dunkirk, the British voted "no." Perhaps it did not matter what Hitler decided to do. He was no more certain of British intentions than the British were of his.

**MAYO COLLEGE GIRLS' SCHOOL
NATIONS**



MODEL UNITED

**As we analyse these great battles, filled with courage, genius, and yes, even error,
we need to listen more carefully to the voice of the Prussian sage, and
acknowledge the complexity of War.**