

**INTERWAR FRANCE  
(1919-1939): THE  
MAGINOT LINE**



# INTERWAR FRANCE (1919-1939): THE MAGINOT LINE

## Description

Through the use of various primary and secondary sources, students in this lesson will identify, understand and be able to explain the basic design and structure of the Maginot Line, why the French constructed the Maginot Line in the 1920s and 1930s, and whether the line ultimately succeeded or failed in what it was designed to do when the war came in 1940.

## Subjects

European History  
World History  
Engineering

## Grade Level

11-12

## Duration

90 minutes

## Tour Links

- Maginot Line Hackenberg, Veckring
- Ouvrage Schoenbourg, Alsace Dept.
- Maginot Memorial, Verdun
- Fort Fermont, Longuyon
- Various forts along the Maginot Line

## Essential Questions

- What was the Maginot Line? Who was Maginot? Why did he come up with the plan for the line?
- How did France engineer and build the Maginot Line? Why were the plans for the line changed a number of different times over the Interwar period (1919-1939)?
- Was the Maginot line effective when World War II came in 1940?

# Academic Summary

## SECTION V

### ALSACE-LORRAINE

The HIGH CONTRACTING PARTIES, recognizing the moral obligation to redress the wrong done by Germany in 1871 both to the rights of France and to the wishes of the population of Alsace and Lorraine, which were separated from their country in spite of the solemn protest of their representatives at the Assembly of Bordeaux

Agree upon the following Articles:

#### Article 51

The territories which were ceded to Germany in accordance with the Preliminaries of Peace signed at Versailles on February 26, 1871, and the Treaty of Frankfurt of May 10, 1871, are restored to French sovereignty as from the date of the Armistice of November 11, 1918.

The provisions of the Treaties establishing the delimitation of the frontiers before 1871 shall be restored.

#### *Treaty of Versailles, 1919*

We could hardly dream of building a kind of Great Wall of France, which would in any case be far too costly. Instead we have foreseen powerful but flexible means of organizing defense, based on the dual principle of taking full advantage of the terrain and establishing a continuous line of fire everywhere.

*Andre Maginot, French Minister of War, Speech before the French Parliament, 10 Dec 1929*

In the early morning hours of 10 May 1940, German Wehrmacht troops from the 5th Infantry Division and the 2nd Army crossed the German-Belgian border and began the invasion of Western Europe. These troops were only the vanguard of a much larger strike force of over 3 million soldiers. Over 5000 Luftwaffe fighters and bombers and seven divisions of panzer tanks screamed ahead in support of the ground troops. The invasion of France had begun. Back in Berlin, the Fuhrer and his generals directed the blitzkrieg.

The strategy was simple. Quick lightning strikes would cripple Belgium within days, rapidly overwhelming Allied forces along the way. Reaching the sea and then turning towards Paris, the Wehrmacht would then capture the French capital and force the French government to surrender before the French Army could even move out of its defensive positions along the Franco-German border. In many ways, it was a modern version of the Schlieffen Plan of 1914. The keys to success were the superior quickness of the German army, the lack of resistance in Belgium and an understanding of French strategy. German spies had reported that by the spring of 1940, most of the French army was barricaded in the Maginot Line, ready, willing and able to take on the Wehrmacht. Hitler and his generals knew any direct attack on the French line would be futile, so they decided instead to go around it.

The Maginot Line had been designed and built as France's response to the horrors of trench warfare on the Western Front in the Great War a generation earlier, when the German army had thrust through Belgium and into France in the early weeks of the war in 1914 with the objective of capturing Paris, only to be stopped at the Marne River. Over the next four years, both armies fought through horrific conditions and mass casualty rates until Nov 1918 when the Germans finally agreed to an armistice. The subsequent Treaty of Versailles (1919) gave two provinces on the border back to

France: Alsace and Lorraine, both of which had been in German hands since the end of the Franco-Prussian War of 1871. Both provinces took on an almost mythical status for the French people. After the Great War, the government in Paris convinced itself that it had to heavily fortify Alsace-Lorraine in anticipation of the next war. Marshal Joffre, the “hero of the Marne,” and Marshal Petain, the “Lion of Verdun,” came up with an idea of building a series of impenetrable forts along the border with Germany. In an attack, French forces would then be able to hold off German forces indefinitely if necessary, sparing France from the type of destruction it saw on the Western Front. Eventually, the plan reached War Minister Andre Maginot, who also had experience on the Western Front (as an enlisted man), who in turn convinced the French Parliament to pay for it, which is why the line today bears his name. Maginot and the engineers envisioned that the defensive line would stretch from the Swiss border to the English Channel (with the exception of the section of the border running through the Ardennes Forest (thought to be impenetrable by French commanders in the 1930s), with a separate extension along the Franco-Italian border known as the “Alpine Line”. An alliance with Belgium in 1920 allowing French troops to operate in the Low Countries in the event of any upcoming German attack made construction of a Belgian line unnecessary, or so the government in Paris thought. Construction of the main line in Alsace-Lorraine began in 1930 and was largely completed by 1939.

The Maginot Line was an engineering marvel for the time, and consisted of a series of underground forts connected by railroads, electricity and telephone lines. Thousands of soldiers could man their posts along the line, almost impervious to enemy attack. Anti-tank obstacles extended for hundreds of miles along the border. Supply lines ran back as far as Paris and other major cities, allowing the French army to resupply garrisons with a continuous flow of munitions and food. Infantry shelters, built deep underground and designed to hold hundreds of troops each, ensured there would be plenty of men available to repulse any attack. When the main line was finished in 1939, it was the largest defensive fortification ever built in Europe and second only to the Great Wall of China in size. Unfortunately for the French, by 1939 the strategy of war had passed them by and the Maginot Line was almost useless.

The French government was shocked when, fearing a repeat of 1914, Belgium declared its neutrality in 1936 in response to Hitler’s decision to rearm Germany in violation of the Versailles Treaty. Over the next three years (1936-39), the French scrambled desperately to extend the line to the English Channel, but funding was short and the line in that area was spotty at best by the time of the German invasion in 1940. Perhaps the biggest problem was that while French strategy was based on the Great War, German strategists developed a plan using modern aircraft and panzer divisions in support of their troops.

When the invasion came in 1940, French troops were locked into strong defensive positions along the Maginot Line. With the exception of a diversionary attack by a few divisions along the line to keep French forces occupied, the Wehrmacht simply went around France’s impenetrable wall. German armored units punched through the Ardennes and surrounded the French army. The German blitzkrieg plowed through Belgium quickly, forcing the British government to evacuate their forces from Dunkirk less than three weeks into the attack. The French High command was reeling from the shock of the offensive and mounting French losses. Defeatism quickly set in, and by mid-June the French were finished. They signed an armistice with Germany on 25 June.

In the end, the Maginot Line, unbroken by attack, had been useless in defending France. Maginot died in 1932, so he never lived to see its failure. After the war, the

French army reoccupied the line for a while in defense against an anticipated Soviet attack on Western Europe, but by the late 1960s most of it had been abandoned. Today, with the Soviet Union no longer a threat after the collapse of the communism in Eastern Europe, much of the Maginot Line is in ruins, with the exception of the underground bunker at Hochwald (in Alsace) that functions as an emergency command center for the French Air Force.

Through the use of various primary and secondary sources, students in this lesson will identify, understand and be able to explain the basic design and structure of the Maginot Line, why the French constructed the Maginot Line in the 1920s and 1930s, and whether the line ultimately succeeded or failed in what it was designed to do when the war came in 1940.

## Objectives

1. Students will identify, analyze, understand and be able to explain the basic design and structure of the Maginot Line.
2. Students will identify, analyze, understand and be able to explain why the French government constructed the Maginot Line in the 1920s and 1930s.
3. Students will identify, analyze, understand and be able to explain whether the Maginot Line ultimately succeeded or failed in what it was designed to do when war came in 1940.

## Procedures

### I. Anticipatory Set

- Writing / Question: How was the French psyche affected by the horrors of trench warfare on the Western Front in the Great War? (5 min)
- Handouts – Copies of the primary sources and readings from the websites listed. (5 min)

### II. Body of Lesson

- Lecture / PPT – Fall of France (15 min)
- Video – Maginot Line (30 min)
- Independent Activity – Students read the sources and articles about the Maginot Line, taking notes as necessary. (20 min)
- Suggestion: Have the students read some of the articles for homework to prepare for class discussion.
- Suggestion: Break students into groups and assign different articles to each group.
- Suggestion: AP/Advanced students should concentrate on primary sources.
- Group Activity – Socratic Discussion: What was the basic structure of the Maginot Line? Why was it built? In the end, did the line work as it was supposed to? (15 min)

### III. Closure

- Assessment – Essay / DBQ: Explain in detail the basic design and structure of the Maginot Line, why the French constructed the Maginot Line in the 1920s and 1930s, and whether the line ultimately succeeded or failed in what it was designed to do when the war came in 1940.

## Extension

### **On tour: Maginot Line Hackenberg, Veckring**

While on tour, students in France can visit the Hackenberg fortification and museum in Veckring, where they can see for themselves a great example of a fortress on the Maginot Line. Constructed as the largest fortress on the line, Hackenberg was one of the first to be built in the early 1930s and was considered a prototype for the remainder of the Maginot Line. It took almost six years to complete the structure, and it was delivered to military commanders in 1936. French troops in the fortress participated in the Battle of France and surrendered to the Germans three days after the government in Paris surrendered. Four years later, American troops under General George Patton recaptured Hackenberg during the Battle for Moselle River. The fortress is located just outside Veckring in the Lorraine region on the German border. It is easy to find, as the road to the fortress is marked by a large American WWII tank. The price for the hour tour is reasonable (9 Euros for age 17+ and 4 Euros for under 16).

# Web Links

## Lesson Plan Websites

- [en.tracesofwar.com/article/5724/Maginot-Line---The-Schoenenbourg-Fort.htm](http://en.tracesofwar.com/article/5724/Maginot-Line---The-Schoenenbourg-Fort.htm)  
Traces of War: Maginot Line (website)
- [www.themagnotline.info/](http://www.themagnotline.info/)  
The Maginot Line (website)
- [www.lignemaginot.com/accueil/indexen.htm](http://www.lignemaginot.com/accueil/indexen.htm)  
The Maginot Line: Fortress Schoenenbourg (website)
- [www.historylearningsite.co.uk/maginot\\_line.htm](http://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/maginot_line.htm)  
The Maginot Line (website) – from the History Learning Site (UK). Good basic information for all students.
- [www.messynessychic.com/2013/12/06/art-at-war-lost-frescoes-of-the-maginot-line/](http://www.messynessychic.com/2013/12/06/art-at-war-lost-frescoes-of-the-maginot-line/)  
Art at War: Lost Frescoes of the Maginot Line (website). Great website showing some of the art from the walls of the Maginot Line, much of which were done by the soldiers themselves, that really shows the human side of war and the troops who defended the line.
- [mysite.verizon.net/vzev1mpx/maginotlineatwar/](http://mysite.verizon.net/vzev1mpx/maginotlineatwar/)  
Maginot Line at War 1939-1940 (website). Dedicated not to the line's construction or purpose, but rather to the men fighting on both sides in 1940.
- [www.fsgfort.com/uploads/pdfs/Public/Kaufmann%20F33%20Pb.pdf](http://www.fsgfort.com/uploads/pdfs/Public/Kaufmann%20F33%20Pb.pdf)  
The Maginot Line: A Basic Primer (academic paper). Great information on the Maginot line for advanced students and those interested in the engineering it took to construct the line. Highly recommended for AP/Advanced students.
- [www.slideshare.net/Mr.J/fall-of-france](http://www.slideshare.net/Mr.J/fall-of-france)  
Fall of France (PowerPoint)
- [www.teachingchannel.org/videos/choosing-primary-source-documents?fd=1](http://www.teachingchannel.org/videos/choosing-primary-source-documents?fd=1)  
Reading Like a Historian: Primary Source Documents (video). Great 2-minute video on how to incorporate primary sources into the Common Core and history classes. From Shilpa Duvoor of Summit Preparatory Charter High School in Redwood City, CA. Highly recommended for teachers.
- [www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z0a1SJx5auA](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z0a1SJx5auA)  
WWII in Color: Maginot Line (video). Very brief (2-minute) video on the Maginot Line.
- [vimeo.com/57146669](http://vimeo.com/57146669)  
Modern Marvels: The Maginot Line (video). 35-minute video from the History Channel. Perhaps a little long for some in-class viewings, but it is well worth it. Highly recommended for all students and teachers.

## Background Information

- [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Maginot\\_Line](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Maginot_Line)  
Maginot Line – Wikipedia article
- [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Andre\\_Maginot](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Andre_Maginot)  
Andre Maginot – Wikipedia article
- [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Battle\\_of\\_France](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Battle_of_France)  
Battle of France (1940) – Wikipedia article
- [www.passports.com/group\\_leaders/on\\_the\\_road/france/country\\_profile](http://www.passports.com/group_leaders/on_the_road/france/country_profile)  
On the Road: France – from Passports Educational Travel

## Other Relevant Passports Lesson Plans

- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/czech/munich-accords-of-1938](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/czech/munich-accords-of-1938)  
Interwar Europe – Munich Accords of 1938
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/france/interwar-france-maginot-line](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/france/interwar-france-maginot-line)  
Interwar France – The Maginot Line
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/germany/interwar-europe-remarque-all-quiet](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/germany/interwar-europe-remarque-all-quiet)  
Interwar Europe – Remarque: All Quiet on the Western Front
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/italy/interwar-europe-rome-berlin-pact-of-steel-1939](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/italy/interwar-europe-rome-berlin-pact-of-steel-1939)  
Interwar Europe – Pact of Steel: The Rome-Berlin Axis Alliance
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/poland/interwar-europe-nazi-soviet-pact-of-1939](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/poland/interwar-europe-nazi-soviet-pact-of-1939)  
Interwar Europe – NAZI-Soviet Pact of 1939: Dividing Poland
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/austria/interwar-europe-anschluss-of-1938](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/austria/interwar-europe-anschluss-of-1938)  
Interwar Europe – Austro/German Anschluss
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/germany/great-war-schlieffen-plan](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/germany/great-war-schlieffen-plan)  
Great War (1914-1918) – Germany: Schlieffen Plan

## Key Terms

- Alsace-Lorraine
- Andre Maginot
- Defensive fortifications
- Fall of France (1940)
- Fortress
- Great War
- Maginot Line
- Treaty of Versailles



