

**WORLD WAR II  
(1939-1945): FALL OF  
FRANCE 1940**



# WORLD WAR II (1939-1945): FALL OF FRANCE 1940

## Description

Through the use of various primary and secondary sources, students in this lesson will identify, understand and be able to explain the Fall of France 1940, how the French army had been lulled into a false sense of security in the years leading up to the German invasion and how the German army used “blitzkrieg” methods to subdue the French in only six weeks.

## Subjects

European History, World History

## Grade Level

11-12

## Duration

90 minutes

## Tour Links

- Maginot Line Hackenberg, Veckring
- Various forts along the Maginot Line
- Arc de Triomphe, Paris

## Essential Questions

- Why did the German Army attack France in May 1940?
- Why was the French Army caught off guard and unprepared for the German Army's advance in 1940?
- What was the German Army's strategy for defeating France in 1940? Was this strategy effective when the attack came?
- How did the French army respond to the German attack? Why did France fall so quickly? What happened to the British army fighting in Belgium?
- Where was the capitulation of France signed?

## Academic Summary

### **Armistice Agreement (excerpts), Compiègne, 22 Jun 1940**

#### ARTICLE I.

The French Government directs a cessation of fighting against the German Reich in France as well as in French possessions, colonies, protectorate territories, mandates as well as on the seas.

It [the French Government] directs the immediate laying down of arms of French units already encircled by German troops.

#### ARTICLE II.

To safeguard the interests of the German Reich, French State territory north and west of the line drawn on the attached map will be occupied by German troops.

As far as the parts to be occupied still are not in control of German troops, this occupation will be carried out immediately after the conclusion of this treaty.

#### ARTICLE III.

In the occupied parts of France the German Reich exercises all rights of an occupying power. The French Government obligates itself to support with every means the regulations resulting from the exercise of these rights and to carry them out with the aid of French administration.

All French authorities and officials of the occupied territory, therefore, are to be promptly informed by the French Government to comply with the regulations of the German military commanders and to cooperate with them in a correct manner.

It is the intention of the German Government to limit the occupation of the west coast after ending hostilities with England to the extent absolutely necessary.

The French Government is permitted to select the seat of its government in unoccupied territory, or, if it wishes, to move to Paris. In this case, the German Government guarantees the French Government and its central authorities every necessary alleviation so that they will be in a position to conduct the administration of unoccupied territory from Paris.

#### ARTICLE IV.

French armed forces on land, on the sea, and in the air are to be demobilized and disarmed in a period still to be set. Excepted are only those units which are necessary for maintenance of domestic order. Germany and Italy will fix their strength. The French armed forces in the territory to be occupied by Germany are to be hastily withdrawn into territory not to be occupied and be discharged.

These troops, before marching out, shall lay down their weapons and equipment at the places where they are stationed at the time this treaty becomes effective. They are responsible for orderly delivery to German troops.

#### ARTICLE V.

As a guarantee for the observance of the armistice, the surrender, undamaged, of all those guns, tanks, tank defense weapons, war planes, anti-aircraft artillery, infantry weapons, means of conveyance, and munitions can be demanded from the units of the French armed forces which are standing in

battle against Germany and which at the time this agreement goes into force are in territory not to be occupied by Germany.

The German armistice commission will decide the extent of delivery.

#### ARTICLE VII.

In occupied territory, all the land and coastal fortifications, with weapons, munitions, and apparatus and plants of every kind are to be surrendered undamaged. Plans of these fortifications, as well as plans of those already conquered by German troops, are to be handed over.

Exact plans regarding prepared blastings, land mines, obstructions, time fuses, barriers for fighting, etc., shall be given to the German High Command. These hindrances are to be removed by French forces upon German demand.

#### ARTICLE XI.

French commercial vessels of all sorts, including coastal and harbor vessels which are now in French hands, may not leave port until further notice.

Resumption of commercial voyages will require approval of the German and Italian Governments.

French commercial vessels will be recalled by the French Government or, if return is impossible, the French Government will instruct them to enter neutral harbors.

All confiscated German commercial vessels are, on demand, to be returned [to Germany] undamaged.

#### ARTICLE XVIII.

The French-Government will bear the costs of maintenance of German occupation troops on French soil.

#### ARTICLE XXIII.

This armistice agreement becomes effective as soon as the French Government also has reached an agreement with the Italian Government regarding cessation of hostilities.

Hostilities will be stopped six hours after the moment at which the Italian Government has notified the German Government of conclusion of its agreement. The German Government will notify the French Government of this time by wireless.

#### ARTICLE XXIV.

This agreement is valid until conclusion of a peace treaty. The German Government may terminate this agreement at any time with immediate effect if the French Government fails to fulfill the obligations it assumes under the agreement.

This armistice agreement, signed in the Forest of Compiègne, June 22, 1940, at 6:50 p.m., German summer time.

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 move out of its defensive positions along the Franco-German border. In many ways, it was a reworked 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. 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 by a heroic French rally at the First Battle of the Marne. 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. After the war was over, the French government convinced itself that it had to heavily fortify the German border 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 any upcoming attack, French forces would thus be able to hold off German forces indefinitely, sparing France the type of destruction it went through from 1914-1918. Eventually, the fortification plan reached the desk of French War Minister André Maginot, who also had experience on the Western Front (as an enlisted man). He convinced the French Parliament to pay for it, which is why the line came to bear 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, it was the largest

defensive fortification ever built in Europe. The French government, army and population at large was led to believe that the Maginot Line would protect them from any aggressive moves coming from Germany. Unfortunately for the French, by 1939 the strategy of war had passed them by and the Maginot Line was almost useless. Perhaps the biggest problem was that while French strategy was based on looking back to 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.

On 14 Jun 1940, German troops occupied Paris, declared an "open city" the day before by its military governor. The French government had fled south ahead of the German advance, but was by then on the run. The French High command was quickly reeling from the shock of the offensive and mounting French losses. Three days later, Henri-Philippe Petain, the French hero of the Great War, assumed the position of premier. Defeatism quickly set in, and by mid-June the French were finished. They signed an armistice with Germany on 22 June. Under the peace treaty, France agreed to allow the German high command to occupy Northern France (including Paris) and the Atlantic Coast. "Free France" under Marshall Petain would govern about 1/3 of the country from Vichy, a small city in South-Central France. The Germans would occupy France until its liberation after the D-Day invasion in 1944.

Through the use of various primary and secondary sources, students in this lesson will identify, understand and be able to explain the Fall of France 1940, how the French army had been lulled into a false sense of security in the years leading up to the German invasion and how the German army used "blitzkrieg" methods to subdue the French in only six weeks.

## **Objectives**

1. Students will identify, analyze, understand and be able to explain the Fall of France in 1940.
2. Students will identify, analyze, understand and be able to explain how and why the French army had been lulled into a false sense of security in the years leading up to the Germany invasion of 1940.
3. Students will identify, analyze, understand and be able to explain how the German army used "blitzkrieg" methods to subdue France in only six weeks.

## Procedure

### 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 (30 min)
- Video – France Surrenders (10 min)
- Independent Activity – Students read the sources and articles about the Fall of France, taking notes as necessary. (20 min)
- Suggestion: Have the students read some of the articles at home 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: Fall of France (20 min)

### III. Closure

- Assessment – Essay / DBQ: Explain in detail the Fall of France 1940, how the French army had been lulled into a false sense of security in the years leading up to the German invasion and how the German army used “blitzkrieg” methods to subdue the French in only six weeks.

## 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 Patten 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

- <http://avalon.law.yale.edu/wwii/frgearm.asp>  
Armistice (surrender) of France, 22 Jun 1940 (primary source)
- [http://news.bbc.co.uk/onthisday/hi/dates/stories/june/14/newsid\\_4485000/4485727.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/onthisday/hi/dates/stories/june/14/newsid_4485000/4485727.stm)  
On this Day: German Troops Enter Paris (primary source) – from the BBC archives
- [www.eyewitnesstohistory.com/francedefeat.htm](http://www.eyewitnesstohistory.com/francedefeat.htm)  
France in Defeat 1940 (primary source)
- [www.eyewitnesstohistory.com/francesurrenders.htm](http://www.eyewitnesstohistory.com/francesurrenders.htm)  
France Surrenders 1940 (primary source)
- [www.ausa.org/publications/ilw/Documents/lwp\\_55wmorgan\\_fall20of20france.pdf](http://www.ausa.org/publications/ilw/Documents/lwp_55wmorgan_fall20of20france.pdf)  
The Fall of France and the Summer of 1940 (academic paper) – from Lt. Col. Thomas D Morgan, USA Retired, United States Institute of Land Warfare. Highly recommended for AP/Advanced students.
- [www.calvin.edu/academic/cas/gpa/facts01.htm](http://www.calvin.edu/academic/cas/gpa/facts01.htm)  
The Battle of France (primary source) – from the German Library of Information in New York, this newsletter, published after the Fall of France in 1940, gives an official German account of the French campaign and a summary of Nazi arguments against the Treaty of Versailles. Highly recommended for AP/Advanced students.
- [www.theatlantic.com/infocus/2011/07/world-war-ii-axis-invasions-and-the-fall-of-france/100098/](http://www.theatlantic.com/infocus/2011/07/world-war-ii-axis-invasions-and-the-fall-of-france/100098/)  
World War II: Axis Invasions and the Fall of France (primary sources – photographs). Outstanding website with primary source photographs from the Atlantic magazine. Highly recommended for use in all classes.
- [www.bbc.co.uk/history/worldwars/wwtwo/fall\\_france\\_01.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/worldwars/wwtwo/fall_france_01.shtml)  
The Fall of France (website) – from the BBC
- [www.bbc.co.uk/history/worldwars/wwtwo/launch\\_ani\\_fall\\_france\\_campaign.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/worldwars/wwtwo/launch_ani_fall_france_campaign.shtml)  
Animated Map: The Fall of France (website) – from the BBC, this is an animated map that follows the progress of the German Army in France from the invasion of Belgium to the Fall of France
- [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.
- [http://oldmagazinearticles.com/WW2\\_Fall\\_of\\_France\\_1940\\_pdf](http://oldmagazinearticles.com/WW2_Fall_of_France_1940_pdf)  
Teamwork Did It: The Blitzkrieg (primary source) – from the American Legion Weekly, this primary source comes from the time before America entered the Second World War. It was written after German officers who participated in the Battle of France were interviewed by American journalists.
- [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=Jve60OM2drE](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Jve60OM2drE)  
France Surrenders / Terms of Surrender (video) – excerpt from the US government propaganda series “Why We Fight”, this 6-minute video is appropriate for in-class showings.
- [www.youtube.com/watch?v=pK\\_AQjXmfiA](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pK_AQjXmfiA)  
World War Two: Fall of France (video). This video, produced by PolyGram Video International in 1994 as part of an extensive documentary series on the Second World War, has been shown on both the BBC and PBS. At 2 hours, it is too long for most in-class showings, but is well worth watching. Using primary source video footage from both sides, the video details the Fall of France. Highly recommended for all students, especially AP / Advanced, as an out-of-class assignment in preparation for in-class discussions.
- [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/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/england/winston-churchill-speeches-during-the-blitz](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/england/winston-churchill-speeches-during-the-blitz)  
World War II (1939-1945) – Churchill’s Speeches
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plan/england/second-world-war-st-paul-stands](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plan/england/second-world-war-st-paul-stands)  
World War II (1939-1945) – St. Paul’s Stands against the Blitz
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/france/world-war-ii-fall-of-france-1940](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/france/world-war-ii-fall-of-france-1940)

World War II (1939-1945) – Fall of France 1940

- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/poland/nazi-invasion-of-1939](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/poland/nazi-invasion-of-1939)  
World War II (1939-1945) – German Invasion of Poland 01 Sep 1939
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/england/miracle-at-dunkirk-1940](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/england/miracle-at-dunkirk-1940)  
World War II (1939-1945) – Miracle at Dunkirk 1940
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/germany/world-war-ii-operation-barbarossa](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/germany/world-war-ii-operation-barbarossa)  
World War II (1939-1945) – Operation Barbarossa: German Invasion of Russia
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/russia/world-war-ii-stalingrad](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/russia/world-war-ii-stalingrad)  
World War II (1939-1945) – Stalingrad: Turning Point of the War

### **Key Terms**

- Alsace-Lorraine
- Defensive Fortifications
- Fall of France (1940)
- Fortress
- Maginot Line
- Marshall Petain

