

## The Maginot Line

France had suffered appalling damage to both men and buildings in World War One. After Versailles in 1919, there was a clear intention on the part of the French that France should never have to suffer such a catastrophe again. Senior figures in the French military, such as Marshall Foch, believed that the German anger over Versailles all but guaranteed that Germany would seek revenge. The main thrust of French military policy, as a result, was to embrace the power of defense.

As head of the armed forces, Marshall Petain commissioned a number of teams to come up with a solution to the French dilemma. Three schools of thought developed:

- 1) That France should adopt a policy of offense as opposed to defense. One of the main supporters of this was Charles de Gaulle. He wanted France to develop an army based on speed, mobility, and mechanized vehicles. There were few who supported his ideas, as many in the military saw them as aggressive and likely to provoke a response, as opposed to guard against a German attack.
- 2) France should base its military in a line of small heavily defended areas from which a counter attack could be launched if required. Marshall Joffre favored this idea.
- 3) France should build a long line of fortifications along the whole French/German border which would cut France off from German access. Marshall Petain favored this idea.

Petain had come out of World War I with much respect, and with his backing, the idea of a long and deep defensive barrier gained political support. Petain was supported by Andre Maginot, the Minister of War.

In 1929, Maginot attained money from the government to build a defensive barrier along the German border. He overcame any opposition to his plan very simply – the fortification, he argued, would end any chance there was that France would suffer the terrible bloodshed of 1914 -1918 should there ever be another war. The need for a defensive front increase in 1930, as French troops that had occupied the Rhineland as part of the Versailles Treaty, had to leave the area that bordered onto France.

Maginot had a number of sound military arguments on his side:

- The Line would hinder any German attack for so long that most of the large French army could be fully mobilized to counter the attack.
- The troops stationed in the Line would also be used to fight against the invading Germans should they get through any one part of the Line and attack them from the rear.
- All the fighting would take place near to the French/German border so that there would be minimal damage to property in the villages and cities of France.
- The Ardennes in the north would act as a natural continuation of the man-made Line as it was considered impenetrable, so the Line need not go all the way to the English Channel.

Work on the Maginot Line started in 1930 when the French government gave a grant of 3 billion francs for its building. The work continued until 1940. Maginot himself died in 1932, and the line was named after him in his honor.

### **What and where was the Maginot Line and its defenses?**

It was not a continuous line of forts as some believe. In some areas, it was nothing more than a series of outposts as the steep geography of the region and the Rhine River provided its own defense between France and Germany. The Line comprised of over 500 separate buildings but was dominated by large forts (known as 'ouvrages') which were built about nine miles from each other. Each ouvrage housed 1000 soldiers with artillery. Between each ouvrage were smaller forts which housed between 200 to 500 men depending on their size. There were 50 ouvrages in total along the German border. Each one had the necessary fire power to cover the two nearest ouvrages to the north and south. They were protected by reinforced steel that was inches deep and capable of taking a direct hit from most known artillery fire. The smaller forts were obviously not as well armed or protected as the ouvrages, but they were still well built. They were further protected by minefields and anti-tank ditches. Forward defense lines were designed to give the defenders a good warning of an impending attack. In theory, the Maginot Line was capable of creating a massive continuous line of fire that should have devastated any attack.

## How the Maginot Line was supposed to work?

The planned line had two purposes. It would halt an invasion long enough for the French to fully mobilize their own army, and then act as a solid base from which to repel the attack. Any battles would thus occur on the fringes of French territory, preventing internal damage and occupation. The Line would run along both the Franco-German and Franco-Italian borders, as both countries were considered a threat; however, the fortifications would cease at the Ardennes Forest and not continue any further north. There was one key reason for this: when the Line was being planned in the late twenties, France and Belgium were allies, and it was inconceivable that either one should build such a massive system on their shared boundary. This did not mean that the area was to go undefended, for the French developed a military plan based around the Line. With large-scale fortifications defending the south-eastern border, the bulk of the French army could gather at the north-eastern end, ready to enter - and fight in - Belgium. The joint was the Ardennes Forest, a hilly and wooded area which was considered impenetrable.

In 1936 Belgium declared itself a neutral country alongside Luxembourg and the Netherlands, effectively severing its previous allegiance with France. In theory, the Maginot Line should have been extended to cover this new border, but in practice only a few basic defenses were added.

## What other design elements were considered important?

Crucially, the Line was more than simple geography and concrete: it had been designed with the latest in technological and engineering know-how. The larger forts were over six stories deep, vast underground complexes that included hospitals, trains and long air-conditioned galleries. Soldiers could live and sleep underground, while internal machine gun posts and traps repelled any intruders.

The fortifications on the northeast frontier included twenty-two huge underground fortresses and thirty-six smaller fortresses, as well as many blockhouses and bunkers. The French placed most of their largest fortresses in the northeast because of their desire to protect the large population, key industries, and abundant natural resources located near the Moselle valley. The first attack by the Germans against the Maginot line itself occurred on May 16, 1940.

## How did Germany invade France?

The Nazi plan to invade France, the Sichelchnitt (cut of the sickle), involved three armies, one facing Belgium, one facing the Maginot Line, and another part-way between the two, opposite the Ardennes. The southernmost division had the unenviable task of advancing through the Line, but they were simply a diversion, whose mere presence would tie-down French troops and prevent their use as reinforcements. On May 10<sup>th</sup>, 1940, the German's northern army attacked the Netherlands, moving through and into Belgium. Parts of the French and British Army moved up and across to meet them and resist the attack in Belgium.

The key difference was the German army group in the middle, which advanced across Luxembourg, Belgium, and then straight through the Ardennes. Hundreds of thousands of German troops and 1,500 tanks crossed the supposedly impenetrable forest with ease, using roads and tracks. They met little opposition, for the French units in this area had almost no air-support and few ways of stopping the German bombers. By May 15<sup>th</sup>, this group was clear of all the defenses, and the French army began to wilt. The advance of the northern and central groups continued until May 24<sup>th</sup>, when they halted just outside Dunkirk. By June 9<sup>th</sup>, German forces had swung down behind the Maginot Line, cutting it off from the rest of France. Many of the fortress troops surrendered after the armistice, while others held on with little success before being captured.

## What became of the Maginot Line?

The allies themselves had to cross the defenses in late 1944, as German troops used the Maginot fortifications as focal points for resistance and counter attack. This resulted in heavy fighting around various areas along the fortifications.

But the defenses did not simply disappear after the Second World War. Some forts were modernized, while others were adapted to resist nuclear attack. However, by the 1970s, most were unused and fell into decay.

