Review Article

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Decoding Defeat

As military defeats go, the Fall of France in 1940 at the hands of Nazi Germany has few equals. German forces opened the attack on May 10 and within five days, and in three separate places, they broke through French defence lines. Thereafter the French army never managed to stabilise the front and its government decided to sue for an armistice on June 16. At the time, the swiftness and decisiveness of the defeat surprised all and sundry—including Hitler and his generals. On hearing of the decisive breakthrough at Sedan, the German dictator cried out to his staff: ‘It is a miracle, a true miracle!’ Hitler was quick to claim that the victory was due to his providential powers and his military, and that they had finally uncovered the secret of sure-fire operational success in Blitzkrieg. For the losers, matters were less straightforward. Many claim credit for wartime successes, as Tacitus observed, but the blame for its misfortunes is attached to few. The witch-hunt for the guilty party started even before the armistice was signed and has never really settled since. Over time, the political heat may have gone out of the search but, as both books under review also illustrate, the deeper reasons for the defeat remain remarkably elusive.

If such a dramatic, textbook case fails to broker agreement on the nature of the most desired outcome of war, then it may be that the phenomenon of defeat in general is not well understood. By implication, not understanding defeat also means that perhaps the road to victory in war is less direct than often believed, and involves more than simply retracing the steps of proven victors. Arguably, the study of victory should start with the understanding of defeat. Not only do wars end when the losers concede defeat, but the experience of defeat more usually leads to a deeper interrogation of causes—even though that may be undertaken more readily and easily by those not directly implicated in it. The study of victory tends to sidestep this questioning. As the German generals already showed in June 1940, it easily conflates process with effect. It is often more content with validating the process that led to obvious real-world success, than with laying bare the complicated relationship between cause and effect in war. Thus, strangely, why the Germans won has long been believed to be far clearer than why the French lost. Superior operational planning and execution is what did it for the Germans but why exactly did that ‘do in’ the French?

The analytical bar for explaining the complexities of defeat was set very high very quickly in the case of Fall of France, as it happened to have one of France’s all-time great historians as a participant-witness. Marc Bloch, who had served throughout the First World War from the first battles to the final offensives and rose from infantry sergeant to captain on a corps staff, was recalled to service on the outbreak of the Second World War. His vantage point as a staff officer, this time on the First Army staff, combined with his experience as a mature historian (whose classic *La société féodale* came out while he was mobilised), gave him a unique ability to analyse and reflect on the cataclysmic event which he found unfolding around him. The result, dashed off immediately after the event, revised in 1942 and published soon after the war, received added poignancy and authority from the fact that the Germans executed Bloch, an Alsatian Jew, in June 1944 for his role in the Resistance. Incisive, excoriating, but above all sophisticated, *L’étrange défaite* established a benchmark which later analyses have struggled to get the better of.

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2 Frieser’s main argument is that the mere copying of an operational technique that worked in the one case of France to another in the Soviet Union a year later, did not guarantee a repeat effect.