

Strange Victory: Hitler's Conquest of France

By Prof. Ernest R. May

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A dramatic narrative-and reinterpretation-of Germany's six-week campaign that swept the Wehrmacht to Paris in spring 1940.

Before the Nazis killed him for his work in the French Resistance, the great historian Marc Bloch wrote a famous short book, Strange Defeat, about the treatment of his nation at the hands of an enemy the French had believed they could easily dispose of. In Strange Victory, the distinguished American historian Ernest R. May asks the opposite question: How was it that Hitler and his generals managed this swift conquest, considering that France and its allies were superior in every measurable dimension and considering the Germans' own skepticism about their chances?

Strange Victory is a riveting narrative of those six crucial weeks in the spring of 1940, weaving together the decisions made by the high commands with the welter of confused responses from exhausted and ill-informed, or ill-advised, officers in the field. Why did Hitler want to turn against France at just this moment, and why were his poor judgment and inadequate intelligence about the Allies nonetheless correct? Why didn't France take the offensive when it might have led to victory? What explains France's failure to detect and respond to Germany's attack plan? It is May's contention that in the future, nations might suffer strange defeats of their own if they do not learn from their predecessors' mistakes in judgment.

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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review
The collapse of France before the German onslaught of 1940 was not, as many historians have argued, the result of the Wehrmacht's absolute superiority or the terrible fury of blitzkrieg. Indeed, writes Ernest May in *Strange Victory*, France had more soldiers in the field than did Germany, their arms were evenly matched in many categories and superior in many others, and the German army was far from fearless. What carried the day for the Nazi invaders was a greater imaginativeness in planning. France and its allies "made no effort to understand how or why German thinking might differ from theirs," did not allow for surprise, believed that their defenses would shield them, and in any event paid little attention to the intelligence that their spies brought them, including irrefutable evidence that German forces were massing along the little-defended border with Lorraine, avoiding the heavily fortified (and, May allows, highly effective) Maginot Line.

The Allies soon overcame their lack of common sense, May continues in this penetrating study, while in the wake of his French victory, Adolf Hitler "became so sure of his own genius that he ceased to test his judgments against those of others, and his generals virtually ceased to challenge him." The outcome is well known. Still, May suggests, Hitler's comeuppance does not diminish the lessons to be learned from the fall of France--notably, that bureaucratic arrogance, a reluctance to risk life, and a reliance on technology over tactics will quickly lose a battle. Students of realpolitik, no less than history buffs, will find much to engage them in May's book. --*Gregory McNamee*

From Publishers Weekly
The book's title inverts Marc Bloch's classic Strange Defeat because, for Harvard historian May, it is the German victory that requires explanation. In this provocative analysis, May argues that the French and British defeat in 1940 was a consequence of neither moral decay nor military ineffectiveness. In the late '30s, the Wehrmacht was still a network of improvisations, by no means the formidable instrument of later mythmaking. After Poland had fallen, Hitler demanded an immediate attack on France, and his generals balked; an "encounter battle" in central Belgium was what the French expected and were prepared to fight. Instead, the Germans famously developed an alternate design, based on a thrust through the Ardennes. May argues convincingly that a major factor in the offensive's reorientation was the German army intelligence service's justified conviction that the French and British high commands would respond slowly to a large-scale surprise. More than enough evidence was available to turn French and British eyes to the Ardennes in the spring of 1940. But since 1933, May argues, generals and politicians on both sides of the English Channel had failed to read German intentions and German decision-making processes. Instead, they sacrificed thought to habit, and put unexpected events into preconceived models. This well-written book, suitable for general readers as well as specialists, offers no easy counterfactuals, no check lists for future guidance, but it illustrates the importance of common senseAits presence and its absence. (Aug.)
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From Booklist
Conventional wisdom has held that the defeat of France in just six weeks was the result of German military superiority, poor French military leadership, and the divisiveness and moral rot that permeated the Third Republic. Harvard historian May, in a provocative and engrossing work, provides persuasive evidence that each of these factors has been given unjustified credence. In fact, in most areas, the French army was superior to the German in manpower and equipment. The "defeatism" that supposedly infected French political leaders has been exaggerated. Even the oft-ridiculed Maginot Line could have served as an effective defense. Why, then, did the Germans win such a devastatingly rapid and "strange" victory? Essentially, May

asserts, the French were outthought and outgeneraled at the tactical level. At several critical points, disastrous decisions by French field commanders undermined sound strategic planning. Military and history buffs should find this work especially attractive, but the smoothly flowing narrative and avoidance of overly technical jargon will allow general readers to appreciate this fresh look at an old controversy. *Jay Freeman*
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Alva Sexton:

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