

# The History of the Twentieth Century

## Episode 314

### “Here We Go Again”

#### Transcript

[music: Fanfare]

Flush with victory from the occupation of Czechoslovakia, Hitler resorted to the very same tactics, this time against Poland. He expected a similar outcome.

He got a world war.

Welcome to *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

[music: Opening Theme]

Episode 314. Here We Go Again.

I’ve realized that it’s been a very long time since I’ve had anything to say about the nation of Albania. I told you the story of Albania gaining its independence from the Ottoman Empire all the way back in episode 71. That was in 1912, on the eve of the Great War. But since then, Albania has only received occasional passing mention here. In particular, I didn’t say anything about postwar Albania during our 1919 World Tour, a deplorable oversight. You would have thought that in a 40-episode series, I could have found a few minutes to talk about Albania, but evidently not.

Albania was overrun by Austrian troops during the war, then recaptured by the Allies following the collapse of Bulgaria, shortly before the war’s end, episode 167. Afterward, Albania was occupied by Italian and Serbian soldiers.

The British and French had promised to make Albania an Italian protectorate as one of the inducements offered to get Italy to join the war, but the Paris Peace Conference refused to fulfill that promise and others, which induced the Italians to walk out for a while and later complain that their war victory had been “mutilated.” Paris negotiators considered a plan to partition Albania between Greece, Italy and Yugoslavia—or The Kingdom of the Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes, as it was known at the time. But Woodrow Wilson put the kibosh on that plan as well, and in the end, Albania was restored as an independent state in 1920.

But whether or not Albania could be considered a state was a matter open to question. I may not have said much about Albania, but we’ve certainly talked about the fractious Balkan region on

this podcast. The combination of rugged terrain and indifferent Ottoman rule produced a divided land, where people felt more loyalty to their clan, their local community, and their faith community than they did to one or another of the nations that claimed them as subjects. This was as true in Albania as anywhere else in the Balkans. The nation was divided into clans and communities suspicious of one another. Add to that a culture in which men typically went about armed and blood feuds were part of the fabric of life and then consider that Albania was occupied by foreign armies for five of its first eight years of independence, and you do not have a formula for stable governance.

I won't trouble you with the various attempts to form an Albanian government from 1920-24. I'll just say there were a few, and then in 1924 a left-leaning group seized power. This sparked a reaction in neighboring Yugoslavia, where former White Russian military commander Pyotr Wrangel was living in exile. Remember him? We last met him in episode 187, when he and his army evacuated the Crimea at the end of the Russian Civil War.

Well, they settled in Yugoslavia for a time. Wrangel kept his forces together; he was hoping to preserve a nucleus for an anti-Bolshevik Russian force that would one day renew the fight. They intervened in Albania to depose the leftists and reinstall the government those leftists had overthrown, now led by a 30-year-old Albanian politician named Ahmet Zogu. Zogu was a Muslim, the son of a pasha who had ruled over a portion of Albania in the Ottoman days.

Zogu reconvened the Albanian parliament, which obediently proclaimed him President of Albania and adopted a new constitution giving the new President wide-ranging powers that made him effectively a military dictator. In a country where blood feuds were part of the fabric of life, it is said that Zogu had about 600 outstanding against him, and he survived dozens of assassination attempts.

He ruled with a heavy hand. The press was heavily censored, opposition parties banned, and Zogu's political opponents, of whom there were many, had a tendency to disappear. Internationally, since Albania was wedged between Greece and Yugoslavia, two countries that both had designs on it, Zogu turned to Mussolini's Italy for support.

Zogu had a good relationship with Mussolini. Albania supported Italian foreign policy, and Italian loans kept Zogu's government going and funded economic development. In 1928, three years into his seven-year term as President, Zogu had the Albanian parliament vote to make Albania a monarchy, install him as Zog I, King of the Albanians, and then dissolve itself.

King Zog I was not taken very seriously by the other crowned heads of Europe. As you know if you've been listening to this podcast since the early days, the many European monarchs of the early twentieth century were all related following generations of intermarriage. Although he was born into an aristocratic family and therefore arguably a reasonable candidate to be the monarch of Albania, he was not part of this huge extended royal family that the other European rulers belonged to; they looked down on him as a self-appointed pretender.

The Albanian economy never was very strong; when the Great Depression hit, the small nation was devastated. The government couldn't pay its debts to Italy. Italy already had a strong presence in Albania; Italian teachers taught in Albania's Catholic schools and Italian officers trained the Albanian Army. Now the Italians wanted even more concessions, like control of the nation's telegraph and electric companies, a customs union between Albania and Italy, Italian to be taught in the schools, and permission for Italians to settle in Albania.

King Zog refused these Italian demands and for a few years his kingdom tried to make a go of it without Italian support. Overtures to other countries went unanswered, and in 1938, Zog went back to Mussolini and agreed to those demands and more in exchange for more Italian loans.

Mussolini was following the Hitler *Anschluss* playbook. Work to bind Albania closer and closer to Italy, and unification becomes inevitable. Albania lies just across the Strait of Otranto from southern Italy. The Strait is just 72 kilometers wide, and defines where the Adriatic Sea meets the Ionian Sea. In ancient times, this was Rome's gateway to Greece and Asia Minor. Roman armies heading east would march south through Italy to Brundisium, then cross the strait by ship. Mussolini spoke of reestablishing the Roman Empire. Perhaps once again, Albania would be the first stopover of an Eastern campaign.

Yes, everything was moving along nicely, and sooner or later, unification was inevitable, and most likely without the need to resort to military pressure.

But a couple of things happened that forced Mussolini's hand. The first, in 1938, was King Zog's wedding. His new wife was Roman Catholic, the daughter of a Hungarian count and his American wife. That in itself represented Albania drifting away from its Italian orbit, but even worse, Queen Geraldine soon became pregnant. If Zog were permitted to found a native Albanian royal family, that would represent a serious obstacle to unification.

The second event was Germany's move to annex what was left of independent Bohemia and Moravia in March 1939. Mussolini had been a party to the previous fall's Munich Conference and had backed Hitler's position all the way. Now Hitler had violated the agreement reached at that conference, with Italian support mind you, and without so much as consulting with Mussolini beforehand. Way to treat your friends, Adolf!

But two can play at that game. On April 5, Queen Geraldine gave birth to a baby boy, Prince Leka, now heir apparent to the Albanian crown. Two days later, on April 7, which was Good Friday in 1939, Italy invaded Albania. A naval task force led by the battleships *Giulio Cesare* and *Conte di Cavour* escorted some 20,000 Italian soldiers across the strait. The Albanian Army of 15,000 was poorly equipped and riddled with Italian military instructors who did their best to sabotage attempts at a response to the invasion, and offered no serious resistance. What resistance did appear was sporadic, mostly local police and armed civilians, who were quickly brushed aside.

By the end of the first day, the Italians held all of Albania's ports. King Zog and his wife and infant son fled the country for Greece and later Turkey, taking with them most of Albania's gold reserve.

On April 12, the Albanian parliament voted to depose Zog and named Vittorio Emanuele III King of the Albanians, a title he would hold alongside those of King of Italy and Emperor of Ethiopia. Albania was still technically an independent nation, albeit in personal union with Italy, but that didn't stop Mussolini from declaring an Italian Empire.

Mussolini had not bothered to notify Adolf Hitler of his impending move against Albania, and privately Hitler was angry over this, although he conceded that he hadn't given Mussolini advance notice on Bohemia and Moravia either. He told his advisers that giving notice to an Italian was like giving it to the newspapers.

Whatever hard feelings these two occupations had created between Hitler and Mussolini, they did not prevent their two nations from signing a formal alliance agreement in May 1939. This alliance agreement was initially conceived as a three-way pact that would include Japan, but the Japanese were primarily interested in an anti-Soviet alliance. With Czechoslovakia dispatched, though, Hitler was already contemplating his next move, against Poland, and therefore was primarily interested in an alliance against the French and the British. They had pledged to go to war to defend Poland; Hitler believed the two Allied powers would be too cowardly to follow through, but an alliance with Italy added an extra margin of safety. Last fall, during the Sudetenland Crisis, the British and the French had been too afraid to go to war against Germany alone. How much more would they fear a German-Italian alliance?

On the Italian side, and again notwithstanding their disagreements, Mussolini saw the advantages of an alliance, although he warned Hitler that it would take another three years or so before Italy would be ready to fight the Allies.

In order to smooth the way for this new and closer relationship with Germany, Mussolini changed his position on German racial policies. Previously, Mussolini had been dismissive of Nazi anti-Semitism. Indeed, Mussolini himself had had a Jewish mistress. But in 1938, Italy passed a race law similar to Germany's Nuremberg Laws. Like the Nuremberg Laws, the new Italian law withdrew Italian citizenship from Jewish Italians and barred them from a number of occupations. It also banned marriage or sexual relations between Italians and people of Jewish or African ancestry.

The new German-Italian alliance was dubbed the Pact of Steel. The Germans had suggested calling it the pact of blood, which sounded pretty cool in German, but it sounded nasty in Italian, so Pact of Steel it was.

[music: Wagner, "Funeral March" from *Siegfried*]

We did talk about Poland in some detail during our 1919 World Tour, in episodes 179 and 180. The reemergence of a Polish state like a phoenix from the ashes of old Poland, which had been partitioned out of existence in 1795, made a dramatic change in the map of Europe.

Poland was not a Great Power, but it was firmly in the category of second-tier powers; on the level of a Spain or a Turkey. Poland was one of five new nations that had broken free of the Russian Empire in the latter days of the Great War, the others being Finland, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, but Poland was by far the largest, with a population greater than the other four put together. Sad to say, despite the postwar optimism in the West that cast the end of the war as a victory for democracy over autocracy, only one of these five nations maintained a functioning democratic government by 1939; that would be Finland. Poland, like the Baltic States, had sunk into a right-wing authoritarianism.

And the new Poland suffered from the same problem as the old Poland: its awkward geography, wedged between two Great Powers, with a terrain that provided little in the way of natural defenses. In 1939, Nazi Germany to the west and Soviet Russia to the east were both totalitarian states, and strongly ideological ones, at that.

So what was Poland's ideology? Not fascism or Communism, to be sure, but not liberalism or democracy, either. Poland's ideology was Polish nationalism. Poland's ideology held that the elimination of the old Polish nation had been an historic injustice that had sought to deny Poland's indisputable right to exist as a homeland of the Polish people, in accord with the principle of self-determination. Foreign rulers had tried to erase not only Poland, but Polish identity. They had failed. They must never be permitted to try again.

Sounds good, but this nationalist theory runs up against a serious real-world problem. Poland is a multicultural nation. Only about two-thirds of the population is made up of ethnic Poles. The remainder consists of roughly five million Ukrainians, three million Jews, and one million Belarusians. In 1939, Poland had the second-largest Jewish population in the world; only the United States had a larger one. And Poland had the second-largest Ukrainian and Belarusian populations in the world; only the Soviet Union had larger ones.

Poland's western boundary had been defined at the Paris Peace Conference and was part of the Treaty of Versailles. Poland's eastern boundary had been defined by the 1921 Treaty of Riga, which had ended the war between Poland and the Soviet Union. As you know, the man who led Poland to independence and through the war with the Soviet Union, Józef Piłsudski, had hoped to create not only an independent Poland but to revive the old Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth together with the Ukrainians and create a federation that would also include Belarus and the Baltic States and stretch from the Baltic Sea to the Black Sea.

In some sense, the Treaty of Riga marks the real end of the Great War. Piłsudski did not get his grand federation; what he did get was this multicultural Poland, wedged between two bigger and

stronger nations who'd had Poland's borders, and Poland's existence, thrust upon them against their will and resented it.

Even within Poland, Piłsudski's grand ambition had come to be seen as overreaching. Only a miracle, the Miracle at the Vistula, had preserved Poland's independence in the war against the Bolsheviks. Afterward, Poland's 1921 constitution sharply limited Piłsudski's powers as President of the Republic. So he resigned. His successor was assassinated just two days after being sworn in.

Piłsudski went into retirement, officially, but political instability convinced him that Poland needed a stronger—read authoritarian—government. In May 1926 Piłsudski led a military coup that overthrew the elected government. Afterward, Poland retained its constitution and went through the motions of democracy, but Piłsudski held the real power.

Since the powers of the presidency had been limited, Piłsudski declined the office and served instead as war minister, officially just one member of the cabinet, but in fact he ran the country. The political movement he led was called *Sanacja*, which is Polish for *healing*, and was comprised mostly of military officers; only ethnic Poles need apply.

The Polish government's relationship with its internal ethnic minorities deteriorated. Piłsudski consented to those non-aggression agreements with both the USSR and Germany in the early Thirties. Then in 1935, Piłsudski died of liver cancer at the age of 67, but *Sanacja* kept on going and becoming increasingly authoritarian. Relations with Poland's ethnic minorities became even more strained. Piłsudski had favored a policy of cultural assimilation for Poland's minorities; after his death, the government's attitude shifted toward encouraging emigration, particularly in the case of Jewish people, and incidents of anti-Semitic violence escalated.

It might seem paradoxical, but the Polish government also supported the Zionist movement and the creation of a Jewish state in Palestine. That was because the government wanted to increase Jewish emigration, contrary to the policy of the British, who administered Palestine and were sharply curtailing Jewish immigration in that country.

The most important figure in determining Polish foreign policy was the nation's foreign minister, Józef Beck. Beck was born in 1894. His family was Protestant, which is unusual in Poland. He studied engineering and joined the Polish Legions during the Great War, where he fought alongside Piłsudski, who made him foreign minister in 1932, when he was just 38 years old. Beck remained foreign minister through Piłsudski's death and still held the post in 1939.

Polish foreign policy as we have seen it in previous episodes was largely Beck's handiwork. Poland was a nation with a large population, about 35,000,000, and an Army of nearly 300,000. The country had a domestic arms industry; it even exported military aircraft to other nations. All this made Poland a serious military power, at least on paper, though its military was

underdeveloped in many areas. For instance, the Polish Army was still heavily dependent on cavalry and horse-drawn supply.

Foreign Minister Beck felt Poland was big enough and strong enough to play a leading role in Eastern European affairs. As we have seen, he favored a policy of even-handedness between Poland's large neighbors, Germany and Russia; amicable toward both, aligned with neither. Given its size, he saw Poland the natural leader of a coalition of the smaller nations between Germany and Russia, but he was never able to achieve this vision. Italy had been moving closer to Germany for years until finally signing the Pact of Steel. Hungary likewise. Yugoslavia was not interested in aligning with Poland, though Romania and Poland signed alliance agreements. Poland's territorial claims against Czechoslovakia made an alliance there impossible, which is unfortunate because such an alliance might have made a big difference.

Nor did the British and French governments feel any special warmth toward Poland. The Western democracies saw Poland as a prickly and uncooperative authoritarian state with a distasteful streak of anti-Semitism, though France did have a military alliance with Poland, signed in 1921 and still in effect, meant to restrain Germany by threatening a two-front war.

When I spoke a few minutes ago about Polish minorities, I left out one small but very important minority group: Germans. Beck frequently complained that the Little Treaty of Versailles, which Poland signed back in 1919, required Poland to respect the rights of its German minority—Czechoslovakia had a similar treaty commitment—and yet there was no comparable commitment to respect the rights of Polish minorities in Germany or Russia, or for that matter, in Czechoslovakia.

And so, in 1938, when Hitler began making a diplomatic issue out of the treatment of ethnic Germans in Czechoslovakia, Poland generally supported him and made its own complaints about the treatment of ethnic Poles. When German soldiers moved into the Sudetenland, Polish soldiers moved into Cieszyn.

You also know that as late as January 1939, Hitler and Ribbentrop were still making overtures to the Polish government, inviting Poland into an anti-Soviet alliance. Beck rejected this latest offer, as he had the earlier ones. It went against his policy of even-handedness toward Germany's neighbors. Vague German offers to award Poland territorial gains in Belarus and Ukraine following a successful war against the Soviet Union were not enough of an inducement to persuade Beck either to assent to Germany's claim on Danzig or to surrender the Polish Corridor. Abandoning Poland's access to the sea and then going to war with the USSR would have left Poland heavily dependent on Germany.

You also also know that Poland's final *nope* in January 1939 persuaded Hitler to lean the other way and open talks with the Soviet Union, which ultimately led to an agreement in August.

As Germany was making these overtures to the USSR, the German government was also ramping up claims of Polish mistreatment of its small German-speaking minority, which amounted to about 700,000 people, in Poland proper and in the Danzig Free State. This was nowhere near as large a German minority as in Czechoslovakia, but nevertheless, Hitler felt confident he could use the same strategy with Poland and achieve the same result: German occupation and the end of Polish independence, without a single shot fired. Hitler judged that the French and the British were too afraid to go to war, in which judgment he was completely wrong. He further judged that even in the unlikely event that France and Britain did go to war, they would be unable to give Poland any meaningful assistance before it was overrun by the Wehrmacht, after which time, the German military would be free to turn its attention westward, in which judgment he was essentially right.

On March 21, just a week after Germany's surprise occupation of what had been left of Czechoslovakia, Foreign Minister Ribbentrop summoned the Polish ambassador in Berlin and reiterated Germany's earlier proposal: Danzig to be reincorporated into the Reich, Poland to cede the Corridor, or at the very least permit a German-controlled rail line and autobahn to connect East Prussia to the rest of Germany. In return for these concessions, Poland would be compensated later with territories taken from the Soviet Union. For all Hitler's confident assurances to his subordinates that the tried-and-true method—his words—that had gained them Czechoslovakia would work again in Poland, the truth was that the entire world understood full well what he was up to. Józef Beck told his subordinates at the foreign ministry in Warsaw that concessions to Hitler accomplished nothing, and that Poland's only choice was, in his words, to “bare our teeth at the Germans.”

Ribbentrop also invited Beck to come to Berlin personally to negotiate, but Beck knew all about the crude treatment former Austrian Chancellor Schuschnigg and former Czechoslovak President Hacha had received during their peace missions. He declined. Ribbentrop warned the Polish ambassador that Germany would regard any Polish military action against Danzig as an attack upon the German Reich. In Warsaw, Beck summoned the German ambassador to warn him that Poland would regard any German attempt to unilaterally change the status of Danzig as an act of war against Poland.

On March 31, Adolf Hitler was riding a night train to the North Sea port of Wilhelmshavn when he received news from London. British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain, addressing the House of Commons earlier that day, had pledged that if Poland came under threat, Britain would render assistance. Within a few weeks, the British government would add guarantees for Greece and Romania. The following day, April 1, Hitler attended the ceremonial launching of Germany's latest battleship, *Tirpitz*, sister ship to the already-launched *Bismarck*. In a speech later that day, Hitler castigated the British government, accusing it and Poland of joining together in a strategy of encirclement of Germany, just as the Allied powers had in the years leading up to the Great War. In the coming months, this would be the central argument of German propaganda: that Western support of Poland amounted to an attempt to strangle Germany.



Afterward, Hitler boarded the *Robert Ley*, one of the cruise ships operated by the German government's "Strength through Joy" program. He cruised with the ship for three days, delighting the other passengers. To outward appearances, Hitler was enjoying a brief vacation. He even consented to pose for photographs with his fellow passengers. What none of the other passengers knew, though, was that while he was on his brief vacation cruise, he had issued a directive to the Wehrmacht High Command: Prepare for a surprise attack on Poland to begin on or after September 1, designated Plan White.

Hitler left the *Robert Ley* at Hamburg on April 4 and returned to Berlin to meet with military commanders in person. There was no sign of the resistance the military had shown when Hitler first proposed an attack on Czechoslovakia. Poland's army was less well trained and equipped than Czechoslovakia's had been, and besides, Hitler had already proved he knew what he was doing.

April 20 was Hitler's fiftieth birthday and there was a grand national celebration, but Hitler was privately fuming over a message he and Benito Mussolini had received on the 14<sup>th</sup> from the President of the United States. Following the German and Italian moves into Czechoslovakia and Albania, respectively, Roosevelt made an appeal to the two dictators to embrace peaceful negotiations and resume arms reduction talks with the West. Roosevelt specifically listed 31 nations in Europe and the Near East and asked Hitler and Mussolini to pledge not to attack any of them.

Privately, Hitler described Roosevelt's message as "impertinent" and "stupid." On April 28, he gave a two-and-a-half hour speech before the German Reichstag, meant as a retrospective on his six years in power. He touted the domestic accomplishments of Nazi rule and boasted that he had restored Germany's pre-war borders, and had done it without resorting to violence. No more could be asked of any single individual, he claimed. Then he lit into Franklin Roosevelt. He claimed to have asked the governments of each of the 31 nations Roosevelt had named whether they felt threatened by Germany. Every one of them, he boasted, had replied in the negative, with the exception, he added disdainfully, of nations such as Syria, which could not reply because they were already under occupation by the military forces of the Western democracies.

He also renounced Germany's 1934 non-aggression pact with Poland and the 1935 Anglo-German Naval Agreement, on the grounds that Poland and Britain had taken a hostile stance against Germany. Hitler had always understood the Anglo-German Naval Agreement to include an implicit pledge by the British not to meddle in Germany's Continental affairs in exchange for Germany's agreement not to challenge the Royal Navy, but clearly the British no longer understood it that way, if they ever had. Very well, then, we'll just tear it up.

In May, Germany and Italy signed the Pact of Steel, which I already talked about. Under the terms of this agreement, the alliance between the two countries would come into force even if one of them embarked on an aggressive war, and the situation regarding Poland was very much

on the Italians' minds, hence Mussolini's warning that Italy was still three years away from being ready to go to war with the Western powers. The Germans assured the Italians that no action against Poland was being contemplated, which was a lie.

Hitler spent the summer at the Berghof, his mountain retreat, apart from a few public appearances. To the casual observer, nothing seemed out of the ordinary. In June he received the prince regent of Yugoslavia on a state visit and attended a welcome-home ceremony for the crews of the Condor Legion, returning victorious from the Spanish Civil War. He went to Vienna for Reich Theatre Week, where he attended a performance of a new Richard Strauss opera, *Friedenstag*, which means *Day of Peace*. Irony doesn't get any heavier than that.

In July, he announced a state ceremony to be held at the Tannenberg Memorial in East Prussia on August 27, the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of that crucial Great War battle. He also announced September's annual Nuremberg Rally. The theme this year would be "Rally for Peace." These don't count as irony, though. These are deliberate attempts at misdirection.

Later in July, Hitler attended the Wagner festival in Bayreuth, as was his annual custom. The British ambassador to Germany, Sir Neville Henderson, was also at the festival, but Hitler declined to speak with him. He did attend a dinner that also included Diana, Lady Mosley, the wife of British fascist leader Sir Oswald Mosley. Lady Mosely confidently asserted that Britain was entirely unprepared to go to war. No doubt Hitler found great satisfaction in this, as it confirmed his own opinion.

Hitler spent the first half of August at the Berghof, while the German propaganda machine ratcheted up its campaign calling out the supposed persecution of ethnic Germans in Poland. Ethnic Germans in Poland were encouraged to instigate conflicts with Polish authorities; when the Poles cracked down, it all became grist for Joseph Goebbels' propaganda mill.

On August 12, Hitler ordered the Wehrmacht to invade Poland in two weeks; that would be August 26, a Saturday. Hitler loved to unleash his surprises on Saturdays. He had done so in the Rhineland, in Austria, and in Czechoslovakia; now he meant to in Poland as well. He advised his military commanders that he still regarded intervention by France or Britain unlikely, but warned it could not be ruled out. Still, he said, Germany would not be able to make any further gains without accepting some degree of risk. The High Command told Hitler that Poland could be defeated in three weeks. Possibly less.

They were confident, but the government and military in Italy were becoming distinctly nervous. The Pact of Steel required consultations between Berlin and Rome before beginning any conflict, but the official line from Berlin was still that the Germans had no plan to attack Poland. On the other hand, Italy's military attaché in Germany, General Efasio Marras, told his superiors that Germany was absolutely poised to begin a war. Bank on it.

So the Italian government proposed a meeting between Mussolini and Hitler, their first since last fall's Munich Conference. Mussolini planned to use the meeting to try to talk Hitler down from war with Poland and to propose instead another international conference. But in Berlin, Hitler instructed the Foreign Office that this time there must be no last-minute peace talks. Nothing could be allowed to interrupt or postpone the coming invasion.

Undeterred, the Italian foreign minister and Mussolini's son-in-law, Count Ciano, traveled to Salzburg to confer with German foreign minister Ribbentrop at Ribbentrop's country estate. Ciano told Ribbentrop that an attack on Poland would inevitably blow up into a general war in Europe, which would be a disaster for everyone. Ribbentrop dismissed Ciano's concerns, telling him that the *Führer* was determined and assuring him the Western powers were bluffing. The meeting did not end amicably. Ciano wrote in his diary that the Germans "have deceived and swindled us."

Ribbentrop did not tell Ciano that one of the reasons for his optimism was the negotiations already beginning between Germany and the Soviet Union over a non-aggression agreement, which I told you about last week.

On August 22, Hitler summoned the highest-ranking commanders of the Wehrmacht, about fifty of them, to the Berghof. They arrived in civilian clothes so as not to attract attention. In the Great Hall of his mountain retreat, Hitler laid out his case for war in a two-hour speech. Originally, he told the generals, he had intended to strike west first, to neutralize the threat from France and Britain, before turning east. But circumstances had changed. The existence of Poland had become intolerable, and it was time to act.

The Allies would likely not intervene. Their rearmament programs had not advanced far enough to threaten Germany, which was all the more reason for Germany to strike now. Also the leaders of the Western democracies were cowardly and weak. He had observed this first hand, in Munich.

Then Hitler became uncharacteristically frank. No German leader would ever again have the degree of authority and popular support he held at this moment, but that could end at any time. He was mortal. All it would take was one criminal or lunatic with a gun, and the opportunity would be gone forever. Then he acknowledged Germany's precarious financial state. German rearmament had been hideously expensive and had been financed with creative accounting, but that kind of thing can only get you so far. The bills were now coming due and Germany had no means to pay them. Economic disaster loomed. The gold reserves seized from Austria and Czechoslovakia had postponed the day of reckoning, but the only permanent solution was war. This was another way of saying that Germany would repay its debt with wealth looted from its neighbors.

He ended his speech with the biggest surprise of all: Germany and the Soviet Union were about to sign a non-aggression agreement. The benefit to Germany was obvious. The Reich could not

be surrounded and starved into submission as it had been in the last war, because a British naval blockade could not prevent imports of food and strategic materials from Russia.

The Wehrmacht commanders left the meeting convinced. Hitler's only remaining concern was that some last-minute diplomatic proposal might slow him down, as it had last year when he was poised to strike Czechoslovakia. His worst fear became reality that same day, when the British ambassador delivered a personal message from Prime Minister Chamberlain. In this letter to Hitler, Chamberlain reiterated Britain's commitment to Poland and declared that war between Britain and Germany would be catastrophic. He told Hitler he could not see any disagreement between Germany and Poland that could not be resolved through negotiation.

The following day, Sir Neville Henderson came to the Berghof to receive Hitler's reply. Hitler told him Germany could not sit idly by as the Poles viciously persecuted hundreds of thousands of fellow Germans. The British government had rebuffed Germany's peace offers and instead chosen to give Poland a blank check, and now the Polish government was unleashing terror upon its German minority, subjecting them to violence, forced displacement, and internment in concentration camps, secure in the knowledge that Britain had vowed to protect it from German retribution. Germans could tolerate these crimes no longer and would act. If Britain chose to defend these Polish outrages, then it better be prepared to wage a long and bloody war.

According to a German Foreign Office official present at the time, as soon as Henderson left to convey that message to London, Hitler slapped his own thigh, laughed, and predicted the British government would fall that very night.

When news of the German-Soviet Non-Aggression Pact became public, many were surprised, although Hitler expressed disappointment that it had not produced the kind of political shock wave in the West that he had hoped. Neville Chamberlain did not resign. His government did not fall. Indeed, he gave another speech to the House of Commons, reiterating British support for Poland.

Hitler flew to Berlin, where he met Ribbentrop, just returned from Moscow and ready to brief him on the details of his meetings with Stalin and the Soviet government. The next day, August 25, he sent a message to Benito Mussolini, who was unhappy over not being consulted over this matter, either. Hitler emphasized to Mussolini the importance of the agreement, telling him it had completely changed the situation in Europe and constituted a major victory for the Axis. He also advised Mussolini that an attack on Poland was imminent and that he expected Italy to honor the Pact of Steel.

Then he summoned the British ambassador for a meeting that was far more cordial than the one at the Berghof. He told Sir Neville that he had thought it over, and while the situation in Poland was still unacceptable, in the spirit of the newly signed agreement with the USSR, he was prepared to make a similar agreement with Britain: a non-aggression pact between Germany and not only Britain but its Empire as well. Germany was even prepared offer a pledge to come to the

defense of the British Empire, should it be threatened by any other power. Moreover, Germany would reaffirm its western borders and was prepared to take part in a renewed international effort to reach an arms reduction agreement.

After their meeting, Henderson was barely out the door before Hitler gave the order to begin the invasion tomorrow morning, August 26, at 4:30 AM. Later in the afternoon, he met with the French ambassador, Robert Coulondre. He told the ambassador that he had no ill will toward France, but Germany could tolerate Polish oppression no longer. Coulondre replied that in the event of war, France would stand alongside Poland.

Shortly after that meeting came the news that Britain and Poland had signed a formal alliance agreement. And soon after that, the Italian ambassador arrived to deliver Mussolini's reply to Hitler. In that reply, Mussolini reminded Hitler of his earlier warning that Italy would not be ready to go to war for three more years; that is, until 1942. Italy was simply not prepared for a major war in Europe, not unless Germany was able to provide Italy with sufficient quantities of the arms and strategic materials it would need to go to war with the Allies.

The Italians were betraying Germany again, just as they had in 1914. That was the mood in the Chancellery. The one-two punch of the news from London and then from Rome had changed everything. At 7:30 that evening, a depressed Adolf Hitler called off the invasion. Hermann Göring asked Hitler if the war was off. Hitler told him no, but first they had to do something about the British.

The next day, Saturday, August 26, there was no war, but the German government called up its reservists and announced rationing of food and war-related materials. Tomorrow's ceremony at the Tannenberg Memorial was cancelled, along with September's Nuremberg Rally. Anti-aircraft guns began to appear atop buildings in Berlin.

The British ambassador flew to London to present Hitler's proposal to the Cabinet. The French ambassador returned with a letter from French Prime Minister Edouard Daladier, reaffirming France's commitment to Poland. The Italian ambassador brought a message from Rome, a follow-up to *il Duce's* earlier letter, a specific list of what the Italian military would require from Germany in exchange for support in a war against the Allies. The Italians deliberately made their demands so huge there would be no way Hitler could agree to them.

On Monday, August 28, Hitler set a new date for the Polish invasion: this coming Friday, September 1. Also on Monday, Ambassador Henderson returned from London to deliver the British government's response to Hitler's proposal.

It seemed Chamberlain and his government had one last trick up their sleeves. They replied that the British government had received assurances from the Polish government of their willingness to open negotiations with Germany to resolve all the outstanding differences between them.

Once those negotiations had concluded, Britain was prepared then to negotiate the terms of Hitler's proposed Anglo-German agreement.

The British reply flummoxed Hitler. If he said no, then he would be the one who rejected a peace offer and went to war. He spent all day the next day, Tuesday August 29, crafting a reply to the British proposal. That evening, he summoned the British ambassador to present it. It began with the usual recitation of supposed Polish offenses against ethnic Germans, then declared that Germany was willing to agree to the British proposal, provided that a Polish official authorized to enter into an agreement with Germany present themselves here in Berlin no later than August 30. That was to say, tomorrow.

Henderson told Hitler that sounded very much like an ultimatum. Hitler replied with an angry harangue. While the British dawdled and talked about peace, Germans in Poland were being butchered. Perhaps the British government didn't care how many Germans died, but the German government certainly did.

At this point, Sir Neville lost it and shouted at Hitler in return that he had had his fill of listening to the *Führer's* ridiculous accusations. Hitler calmed down, expressed a generic hope that peace between Germany and Britain was still possible, and sent the ambassador on his way. Soon after, the Italian ambassador returned with a message from Mussolini, offering to facilitate negotiations between Germany and Britain. Hitler told the Italian ambassador that he was already in direct contact with the British government and sent him on his way.

On August 30, Hitler drew up a list of proposals to present to the Polish representative. Since no one in the German government expected a Polish representative to show up before the deadline, Hitler's list was relatively reasonable: its key points were German sovereignty over Danzig, a referendum on the future of the Polish Corridor, and an international commission to investigate the treatment of ethnic Germans in Poland.

No Polish representative came, but at midnight, Sir Neville Henderson appeared at the German Foreign Office to deliver a message to Ribbentrop. The British government could not in good conscience recommend to the Polish government that it comply with the German demand to present a negotiator immediately. Rather, the British government suggested to the German government that they begin negotiations in the customary manner, by presenting a proposal to the Polish ambassador in Berlin. Ribbentrop reacted angrily. He shouted at Henderson, then read the *Führer's* proposal to him, noting how reasonable it was. When Henderson asked for a copy to deliver to the British Cabinet, Ribbentrop refused, telling him it didn't matter anymore; Hitler's generous offer had expired at midnight, when no Polish representative had appeared.

Afterward, Ribbentrop went to the Chancellery to report to Hitler and Göring. A gloomy Hitler conceded there was no way to pry apart the new Anglo-Polish alliance. When Göring remarked that he still couldn't believe Britain would actually go to war over Poland, Hitler told him, "When an Englishman ratifies a treaty, he does not break it twenty-four hours later."

The Polish ambassador spent the following day, August 31, at the Foreign Office, seeking a meeting with Ribbentrop. Ribbentrop kept him waiting until 6:00 that evening, then, when they met, asked the ambassador if he had come with authority to negotiate. When the ambassador told him no, Ribbentrop sent him away.

At 9:00 that evening, announcers on German radio read out Hitler's proposal to Poland, then told the German public that Poland's refusal to send a negotiator constituted a rejection of Germany's generous peace offer.

Even as these broadcasts were going out over the airwaves, a team of SS commandos dressed in Polish Army uniforms were on their way to the city of Gleiwitz, population about 75,000, at the eastern tip of German Silesia, near the Polish border. That night, they seized control of the radio station in Gleiwitz and used it to broadcast an anti-German propaganda message in Polish.

The commandos had also brought with them several prisoners from the SS-run concentration camp at Dachau. The prisoners had been drugged and dressed in Polish Army uniforms. As the commandos withdrew from the site, they shot the prisoners and left their bodies behind as "evidence" that the Polish Army was behind the raid.

At 4:45 AM, the German pre-dreadnought battleship, *Schleswig-Holstein*, in Danzig harbor, began shelling the Polish Army garrison in Danzig. Up and down the German-Polish border, German soldiers tore down the crossing gates and advanced into Poland. Overhead, hundreds of Luftwaffe planes roared into Polish skies. The town of Wieluń, near the German border, was bombed and strafed, for no apparent reason and despite the fact that there were no military targets present. Hundreds of civilians died.

At 10:00 that morning, Hitler appeared at the Kroll Opera House to address the German Reichstag. He was wearing a gray German military uniform. He reiterated his claims of German peace overtures repeatedly rejected in Warsaw and London. He told the Reichstag that Polish troops had made attacks at the radio station in Gleiwitz and in more than a dozen other places, all attacks which were actually perpetrated by the SS. As of this morning, he told the assembly, Germany was striking back. He pledged to wear his military uniform until Germany achieved victory and reminded the Reichstag that Friedrich the Great had gone to war with a much smaller state against a much larger coalition of enemies and had prevailed, because he had always kept heart. He called on the Reichstag and the German people to do the same.

Later that day, Hitler signed a decree incorporating Danzig into the German Reich. Joseph Goebbels instructed the German press not to use the word "war" in their coverage of the conflict. Germany was merely taking self-defense measures in response to a Polish attack.

The governments of France and Britain ordered a general mobilization that same day. Their ambassadors both handed messages to Ribbentrop at the German Foreign Office. Both messages

warned that unless Germany withdrew its troops from Polish territory, their respective governments would declare war.

On September 2, Benito Mussolini offered a peace proposal: an immediate cease-fire followed by an international conference. Hitler held off on replying, hoping that German forces could first establish control of Danzig and the Polish Corridor. Once those were in German hands, then he might agree to the cease fire. But the British government responded to Mussolini's proposal with a statement that German withdrawal must be a precondition to any negotiation.

That night, the British Cabinet met and drafted an ultimatum, which Ambassador Henderson delivered the following morning, September 3. Unless the German government agreed by noon, Berlin time, to cease hostilities and withdraw German forces from Polish territory, Britain would declare war. Since Ribbentrop refused to see Henderson, the ultimatum was handed to a translator. Ribbentrop and the translator delivered it to Hitler at the Chancellery, where the translator translated it for both of them. Hitler said to Ribbentrop, "Now what?"

Herrmann Göring said, "If we lose this war, heaven have mercy upon us."

Fifteen minutes after the British deadline, Neville Chamberlain announced the war over the BBC to the British people and to the world via the Empire Service. Soon after, the French ambassador in Berlin delivered a similar ultimatum. This one expired at 5:00 PM.

[historical recording: Neville Chamberlain announces war.]

For the second time in a generation, Europe was at war.

We'll have to stop there for today. I thank you for listening, and I'd especially like to thank Kathleen for her kind donation, and thank you to Hannah for becoming a patron of the podcast. Donors and patrons like Kathleen and Hannah help cover the costs of making this show, which in turn keeps the podcast available free for everyone, so my thanks to them and to all of you who have pitched in and helped out. If you'd like to become a patron or make a donation, just visit the website, [historyofthetwentiethcentury.com](http://historyofthetwentiethcentury.com) and click on the PayPal or Patreon buttons.

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And I hope you'll join me next week, here on *The History of the Twentieth Century*, as we wrap up the Jazz Age with an assessment of lessons learned in the interwar period. That's next week, here, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*.



Oh, and one more thing. It's notable to contrast the reaction of the German public to the news that their nation was now at war in 1939 to that of 1914. In 1914, there was a widespread acceptance among ordinary Germans of the view that war was inevitable and that the Entente powers were deliberately pursuing a strategy of encircling and suffocating Germany. When war came, cheering crowds saw the soldiers off to the front lines. It was only after it became clear that the duration of the Great War was to be measured not in weeks or months, but years, that public enthusiasm waned.

After this British declaration of war, Hitler released a public statement that declared, "The Germany of the year 1939 is no longer the Germany of 1914!" This was true in a sense Hitler never intended. The German people, having lived through one world war, had no interest in fighting another one. Only the Nazi faithful showed any enthusiasm. American journalist William Shirer walked the streets of Berlin that afternoon and reported "no excitement, no hurrahs, no cheering, no throwing of flowers..."

The peak of Hitler's popularity had come following the *Anschluss* in 1938. If he had died then, had been assassinated or felled by some illness, he might well have been remembered as a great German leader, one who had rebuilt a shattered nation, his legacy marred only by some unfortunate attitudes toward race and ethnicity and a tendency toward authoritarian excess.

Hitler was popular precisely because he had accomplished so much for Germany without going to war, and his economic policies, which had led Germany from depression to full employment. What the average German did not realize was that when Hitler spoke of peace and signed international agreements, it was all for the sake of appearances, a way of buying time for his rearmament program. Nor did the average German realize that the widespread German prosperity had been built on a huge invisible debt, incurred to pay for that same rearmament.

Both of these popular policies were in truth privately intended to prepare Germany for war. Hitler wanted war. He gambled Germany's future on it. Germany needed this war to pay for its military ambitions. Had Hitler not started a war in 1939, the likely alternative would have been a fresh economic crisis that might well have brought down Nazi rule.

War was the endgame all along, and was the truest and purest expression of Nazi values. War would free Adolf Hitler from the need to pose as a peacemaker, a reasonable statesman with whom one could strike a deal. It would free him to unleash the Nazi id upon a world that could scarcely imagine what that would mean.

[music: Closing Theme]