

The History of the Twentieth Century

Episode 318

“The Calm Before the Storm”

Transcript

[music: Fanfare]

Adolf Hitler wanted to begin the German western offensive as soon as possible, but the winter weather of 1939 kept getting in his way.

Then a copy of the battle plan fell into the hands of the Belgians.

Welcome to *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

[music: Opening War Theme]

Episode 318. The Calm Before the Storm.

Last week, I told you about the Winter War between Finland and the Soviet Union. Today, I want to return to the main event, as it were, the war between Germany on the one hand and France and Britain on the other, the war that some are already calling World War II.

There are a couple of things I mentioned in last week’s episode that you need to keep in mind for today. One is that the reason the Winter War attracted as much international attention as it did was that the rest of the world was primed for another Great War, but, once Poland was subdued, the war went quiet.

When war was declared, *Time* magazine in the United States reported on a shortage of maps of Europe and map pins. I wonder how many people besides me remember map pins. I still have a few in my attic. They were small pins, like thumbtacks, but with small, round plastic tops that came in an assortment of colors, and one of their main uses was to represent the positions of military units on a wall map. Today they exist only in virtual form in applications such as Google Maps, but apparently back then a lot of people were preparing to follow the war news day by day on maps in their homes. Except there was no news. The French military made a brief incursion into the Saarland, which the Germans did not oppose; then the French got nervous and pulled back.

The second thing I'm calling your attention to is the fact that the winter of 1939-40 was an unusually cold one in Europe. This is the short answer to the question of why, despite the declarations of war, no actual war had broken out on the Western Front.

It was not because of any reluctance on the part of Adolf Hitler. On October 9, 1939, just as the fighting in Poland was dying down, Hitler sent his military leaders a memo calling for an attack in the West, as soon as possible, preferably by mid-November. He had a number of arguments in support of this move. With Poland defeated and the Soviet Union signing a non-aggression agreement, Germany's eastern flank was secure, meaning Germany could take on the Western powers without fear of another two-front war.

But time was not on Germany's side. Germany was ready for war, but Britain and France were not. Every day of delay was one more day for Germany's enemies to prepare. And although the Soviet Union was no threat today, Stalin could not be trusted. Would he continue to abide by the agreement a year from now? Two years from now? And then there was the United States, which was neutral, but there was a vocal anti-Nazi sentiment in some quarters in that country, and given time, who could say what would happen?

It's striking to consider that the German military command, which went along with Hitler's policies in Poland of mass deportations and the deliberate infliction of poverty and misery upon millions of Poles with hardly a voice raised in protest, resisted his call to take the war to the West.

There was a case to be made for doing nothing. The French and the British had only declared war for the sake of supporting Poland. Now that Poland was defeated, was there anything left to fight over? Maybe they could be persuaded to back down, to accept what can't be changed and rescind their declarations of war. But Hitler thought this improbable. You didn't have to look any farther than the fact that Neville Chamberlain had just recruited Germany's most vocal enemy in the British Parliament, Winston Churchill, into his government as First Lord of the Admiralty to see that backing down was the last thing on his mind.

Many of Germany's older military leaders were veterans of the Great War and took it as a given that an all-out offensive in the West would quickly bog down into a long and bloody war of attrition, just as it had 25 years ago, a war that would likely exhaust Germany sooner than its adversaries. The French Army was formidable, and never more so than when they had British backing. And even if France could be defeated, there was no plausible strategy for forcing the British to capitulate.

The commander of the German Army, Walther von Brauchitsch and his chief of staff, Franz Halder, both tried to talk Hitler out of an attack. Hitler awarded them both a newly created medal, the Knight's Cross of the Iron Cross, for the successful campaign in Poland, but refused to take their advice on the next stage of the war. Hitler ordered an attack in the West, Plan Yellow, to begin on November 12.

Von Brauchitsch and Halder were sufficiently worried about the outcome of the war to meet privately and raise once again the question that had come up a year ago, when Hitler ordered an invasion of Czechoslovakia: the possibility of a military coup to remove the dangerously unstable *Führer* from power before he led Germany to destruction. They batted the idea around, but in the end decided they were more afraid of the consequences of a coup than they were of the consequences of a war.

On Wednesday, November 8, just days before the Western offensive was slated to begin, Adolf Hitler was doing what Adolf Hitler did every year on that date: he was on his way to Munich to commemorate the sixteenth anniversary of the Munich beer hall putsch of 1923. The schedule for these annual commemorations was always the same: Hitler would give a speech in the hall of the Bürgerbräukeller before a dinner crowd of the so-called “old fighters;” that is, early members of the Nazi Party. The speech typically began around 8:00, and, Hitler being Hitler, lasted until around 10:30.

Hitler flew to Munich that afternoon, arriving at the Bürgerbräukeller a bit late, and used his speech to denounce war-mongering British politicians, Winston Churchill chief among them, for refusing to accept Germany’s rightful claim to the status of Great Power and thus forcing Germany to go to war. Typical Hitler stuff. The crowd ate it up.

The duration of the speech, though, was not typical Hitler. He spoke for barely an hour and left the Bürgerbräukeller immediately afterward. This was because fog was in the forecast, and Hitler’s plane was not expected to be able to take off early tomorrow morning as planned. He needed to be back in Berlin first thing Thursday morning, and since his plane was grounded, he would have to take an overnight train from Munich, scheduled to depart at 9:30.

Hitler’s train made a stop at Nuremberg just after midnight, and there was a message waiting for him. Less than ten minutes after he left the Bürgerbräukeller, a powerful bomb had gone off. It had been concealed inside a pillar near the lectern where he had spoken, and it had clearly been intended to kill him. Only the last-minute schedule change had spared his life.

Hitler could hardly believe this news. He wondered if it was some kind of bad joke. But a phone call to the chief of the Munich police confirmed the truth. The explosion had destroyed the pillar, causing part of the building to collapse. In all, eight people were killed and several dozen injured, some requiring hospitalization. Among the injured was Friedrich Braun, Eva’s father.

The following morning in Berlin, Hitler met with the leaders of the Reich. They all congratulated him on surviving the assassination attempt and agreed that it must have been divine providence that had spared him. It was widely believed that the attempt was the work of the British secret service. Hitler ordered Heinrich Himmler to organize an investigation.

That same day, November 9, in the Netherlands, two British military intelligence officers, Major Richard Henry Stevens and Captain Sigismund Payne Best, working undercover, were preparing

to meet with a man they believed to be a German Army officer seeking to negotiate peace terms with Britain after the Army deposed Adolf Hitler. The meeting was scheduled for 4:00 that afternoon in the Dutch town of Venlo, which lies on the German border. In fact, the meeting was to be held at a café that stood just meters from German territory.

The German they were to meet with was not a German Army officer. He was actually *Sturmbannführer* Walter Schellenberg a counter-intelligence officer from the *Sicherheitsdienst*, the SD, which was the intelligence arm of the SS.

That morning, following the meeting with Hitler in which there was widespread agreement that British intelligence must have been behind the assassination attempt, Himmler ordered the SD to take these two British intelligence officers into custody. At 4:00 a car arrived at the café, carrying the two British officers, along with their driver and a Dutch intelligence officer named Dirk Klop. SD agents met them. The two British agents came armed, but were taken by surprise and subdued. All four were spirited across the nearby border into German territory, although Dirk Klop was shot in the head and died of this wound. The body was tagged with a German name, cremated, and buried in a cemetery in Düsseldorf.

As the days passed, the Gestapo investigation collected surviving parts from the bomb, which were determined to have been of German origin, sourced locally, evidence which suggested the assassin was a German. The Gestapo publicized a RM 500,000 reward for information leading to the arrest of the perpetrator and was deluged with leads.

One of the leads was a German man named Georg Elser. A German border patrol had arrested Elser near Konstanz on the night of the bombing. Elser had been discovered lurking in the dark along the border fence that separated Germany from Switzerland. The arresting officers discovered in his possession wire cutters, detonator parts, and a picture postcard of the interior of the *Bürgerbräukeller*. When the officers learned of the bombing, they turned him over to the Gestapo in Munich.

Further investigation linked Elser to the purchase of several items that went into the bomb, and a server from the *Bürgerbräukeller* identified him as that strange customer that had been coming in every night for months, but who always sat alone and only drank one beer each night.

The Gestapo interrogated and tortured the 36-year-old and after a few days of this, he confessed. Elser was a working man, a carpenter with socialist leanings who had voted Communist back in the days when Germany still held elections. All the evidence suggested Elser acted alone. He visited the *Bürgerbräukeller* almost every night for two months prior to the bombing, where he would linger until closing time and hide out in the beer hall after everyone else had gone home. There he labored a few hours every night, cutting a door into the pillar, then hollowing out a space in which he planted his homemade bomb. The evidence showed Elser acted alone, but that wasn't what the Nazis wanted to hear, and so the public was told the bombing was a British plot. German newspapers showed photographs of Elser alongside Stevens and Best, the two captured

British intelligence agents. They had overseen the plan, according to the official line, and Otto Strasser, the former Nazi leader who had broken with Hitler and left the country, episode 267, was the intermediary who had guided Elser. The fact that the two British agents were operating on Dutch soil was publicized and the claim was made that Dutch neutrality was a sham; the Dutch were actually working with the British, and had committed an act of war against Germany.

Similarly, on the Allied side, the accusation was made that the Nazis had engineered the bombing for propaganda purposes. You'll recall I talked about this sort of thing in connection with the Reichstag Fire of 1933, episode 270, but again here, as there, the evidence pointed to a single person acting alone. Georg Elser told the Gestapo he had done it to prevent the bloodshed of another world war. In other words, this 36-year-old socialist carpenter had shown more dedication and more courage than the entire Wehrmacht high command. Alas that he failed.

[music: Wagner, *Die Walküre*]

As the investigation of the bombing unfolded, Hitler's deadline for opening the offensive in the West came and went. I said that the winter of 1939-40 was unusually cold. This was bad news for Stalin and bad news for Hitler. The offensive had to be postponed until the weather outlook improved.

It was postponed until December, but December brought unseasonably early snowstorms. Early January saw record low temperatures. In Germany, coal was in short supply. Schools and offices had to close and Germans shivered in their homes. "Nothing like continual cold to lower your morale," wrote American journalist William Shirer.

But it did nothing to shake Hitler's confidence. The forecast predicted better weather to come, so Hitler set January 17 as the new date to begin Plan Yellow. But it was still not to be. On January 10, a German Luftwaffe officer, Major Erich Hönmanns, was piloting a Messerschmitt 108 courier plane to Cologne on a foggy morning. He lost his bearings and inadvertently strayed across Dutch territory and then engine trouble forced him to make an emergency crash landing just across the border in Belgium. Hönmanns was not hurt, nor was his passenger, Major Helmuth Reinberger, who served with a German parachute unit, but it was only after they climbed out of the crashed plane that Reinberger revealed to Hönmanns that he was carrying a copy of the invasion plan. He tried to burn it with his cigarette lighter but failed, and the two were taken into custody by Belgian border guards.

The plans were partially burnt, but enough survived to indicate a German attack through Belgium and the Netherlands was imminent. The Belgian government shared what they knew with the Dutch, the French, and the British. They also felt obliged to inform the German government of what they had found. German foreign minister Joachim von Ribbentrop, with his unfortunate tendency to blurt out the truth, told the Belgians that it didn't matter because those plans were obsolete.

They were. That was because the Belgians and the Dutch responded to this information by cancelling all leaves for soldiers in their respective armies, which the Wehrmacht high command interpreted as evidence they knew too much. Also, the weather was not clearing up as expected. The offensive would have to wait until spring.

But apart from the question of when the offensive was to start, there was also debate over what the offensive should look like. From the early days of the war, last autumn, the Wehrmacht's plan for an offensive in the West was to send the German Army's most powerful and most mobile units through northern Belgium to strike quickly and deeply into France and end the war at a stroke.

But the *Führer* was not 100% satisfied with this plan. From the beginning, he was pointing out its obvious flaw: this was nothing more than an updated version of the old Schlieffen Plan which Germany had relied upon back in 1914. Remember the Schlieffen Plan? Good times.

Now, the technology of war has changed drastically since 1914, the most obvious change being that tanks and trucks and aircraft are now in common use. You may recall I remarked back in episode 131 that Imperial Germany might have been much better off when the war started in 1914 had they taken all the money and resources they put into building dreadnought battleships that contributed very little to the German war effort, and put it into trucks instead, so that the German Army could have ridden into Belgium and France instead of marching on foot. The extra speed might have made the difference between the Schlieffen Plan failing and succeeding.

So if you buy my argument from episode 131, you could say that this time it will be different. This time, Germany has the trucks and it also has armored units that can form the spearhead of the German advance. It's a plausible argument and it's the one the Army high command was making.

On the other hand, you could also argue, as Hitler did, that if you adopt the very same strategy you used 25 years ago, you might possibly lose the element of surprise, not to mention that it didn't even work the first time. You know that saying that the definition of insanity is doing the same thing over again and expecting a different result? It's sometimes misattributed to Albert Einstein, but appears to have originated with Alcoholics Anonymous. By that definition, rerunning the Schlieffen Plan was insanity.

Hitler raised an alternative possibility: instead of directing the main attack through the open country of northern Belgium, as had been done in 1914, how about sending it through Luxembourg and southern Belgium? Here was the chink in France's armor, the gap between the Maginot Line to the south and the cream of the French Army, deployed to the north. An advance here might catch the Allies by surprise. Even better, if the Allies sent their best units into Belgium, expecting to confront the Germans there, this southern advance could circle north and potentially surround and trap them, something like what the Prussians had accomplished in 1870 in their glorious victory at Sedan.

This represented a change in Hitler's leadership style since the campaign against Poland. Then, Hitler had consulted regularly with his military commanders and toured the front lines, but he spent his time listening, not giving orders. He'd left military matters to military experts.

Now though, he was feeling more confident and demanding a degree of involvement in discussions of strategy. The military had to listen to him—he was the *Führer*, after all—but although his idea made a superficial sort of sense, it was burdened with all kinds of complications, the most important of which was the fact that the terrain through this region where Hitler wanted a lightning offensive was entirely unsuitable. This swath of land, running from northeastern France through southern Belgium and Luxemburg and on into Germany, is known as the Ardennes. It is a land of forested ridges and rolling hills, separated by valleys through which run swift-flowing rivers, most notably the Meuse, which makes a formidable obstacle all on its own.

This is not a terrain which lends itself to rapid advance. There are roads, but the roads are narrow and motor vehicles would find it difficult to leave them. Even after the front-line vehicles had threaded their way through this tortuous terrain, supply vehicles would have to move back and forth through the hills, again and again, to keep the front line units supplied.

No doubt about it, it would be a dicey prospect. So the Army command listened to Hitler politely, then pointed out all these problems and stuck to their original plan.

But the ground began to shift in January, especially after the German battle plan, or at least a piece of it, had fallen into Allied hands. That alone was a good reason to consider revising it. And then there was the 50-year-old Lieutenant General Erich von Manstein, the chief of staff of Army Group A, which was the group assigned to the Ardennes sector. As early as October 1939, von Manstein was issuing memos advocating pretty much the same idea, though developed in more detail. At first, the high command dismissed von Manstein's proposal as "egotistical," since it amounted to centering the whole Western offensive on his own army group at the expense of everyone else. Von Manstein was transferred east to shut him up.

But after the incident in Belgium, Army chief of staff Halder began to reconsider von Manstein's proposal. More important, Hitler's adjutant, Colonel Rudolf Schmundt, learned about the von Manstein plan and noticed immediately how closely it tracked with what Hitler was advocating. He reported this to Hitler, and Hitler arranged a breakfast meeting with von Manstein at the Chancellery on February 17. This was behind the backs of von Manstein's superiors, including Halder, and was highly improper, but Hitler was impressed with von Manstein's ideas and ordered the Army to adopt them.

The new Plan Yellow incorporated von Manstein's, and Hitler's, thinking. The northernmost German army group, called Army Group B, would begin the campaign with a rapid thrust westward from Düsseldorf into northern Belgium and the southern Netherlands, toward Antwerp and Dunkirk, on the North Sea coast. This resembled the Schlieffen Plan and was exactly what

the Allies were expecting. The French had been determined since 1920 that the next war, if it came, would be fought in Belgium, not northern France, and this determination was well known. As soon as Army Group B began advancing into Belgium, the French Army and its British allies would likely advance to meet it on Belgian soil.

But the advance of Army Group B would be no more than a feint. The real offensive would be undertaken by Army Group A, farther south, through the Ardennes, where the French had positioned their weakest units, and on into the open country of northern France, where it would turn northwest and advance to the English Channel roughly along the Somme River valley, trapping the cream of the French Army in Belgium, surrounded and cut off from retreat or resupply.

If all went well, instead of this war being a replay of the last war and bogging down into static front lines, it would look more like a replay of 1870, when the Prussian Army surrounded the cream of the French Army at Sedan and captured Napoleon III, effectively winning the war in one bold stroke just weeks after it had been declared.

If all went well. And if the offensive ever got started. In early March, US Undersecretary of State Sumner Welles, who was close to President Roosevelt, came to Europe at the President's direction to meet with the leaders of the warring nations and explore the possibility of a peaceful settlement. This was bad news for the German leadership; they were just about ready to begin this long-delayed Western offensive and the last thing they wanted was peace talks. Hitler and the Nazi leadership told Welles that Germany wanted peace, but only after Britain and France abandoned their goal of destroying Germany. When Welles met with the *Führer* himself, Hitler treated him to one of his characteristic harangues on the subject of the Allies' malicious intentions.

But the Germans were worried about the Italians. Relations between Germany and Italy were still chilly, following Italy's refusal to enter the war when Germany invaded Poland. Back in January, Mussolini had sent Hitler a letter urging him to make peace with the Western Allies and focus instead on defeating the Soviet Union. Mussolini wrote, "The solution to the question of [German] living space lies in Russia and nowhere else!" As for the Allies, Mussolini offered to help negotiate a peace based on the restoration of some form of independent Polish state.

In other words, Mussolini's letter demonstrated how poor a grasp Mussolini had of Hitler's goals and intentions. In reality, Hitler had in no way given up on his ambition to destroy the Soviet Union and resettle Germans in the East, and he was already beginning that project, which meant giving up Poland was a non-starter. As for France and Britain, defeating them was a prerequisite to taking on the USSR, which in Hitler's mind was the real war, the war he wanted.

But once Sumner Welles came calling, officials in Berlin became nervous that Mussolini might raise some of this with Welles, which might lead to the American negotiator prying Italy away from Germany and leaving Berlin diplomatically isolated. So Hitler sent his foreign minister,

von Ribbentrop, to Italy in March to deliver a long-overdue reply to January's message from *il Duce*. The reply was an amicable one. Ribbentrop told Mussolini that the Americans were only trying to play for time on behalf of Britain and France. A Western offensive is coming, Mussolini was advised, although he was not told when or where, he was told that sooner or later Italy was going to have to join the war. Mussolini told Ribbentrop that Italy stood by Germany and promised to enter the war when Italy was ready. The two also agreed to a face-to-face meeting between Mussolini and Hitler in the near future.

The two dictators held that meeting less than two weeks later, on March 18. They each traveled by rail to the Brenner Pass, where Hitler boarded Mussolini's train for a two-and-a-half hour meeting at which, as usual, Hitler did almost all of the talking. He boasted of the triumph of the Polish campaign and of preparations for the coming offensive, though he would not say when or where. At the end of Hitler's monologue, Mussolini spoke for a few minutes to reaffirm his alliance with Germany and his pledge to enter the war, though, he noted, he reserved to himself the right to decide when that would take place.

Mussolini was less than thrilled by this meeting. He went home resentful of how Hitler had dominated the conversation; he had had a number of issues he wanted to discuss but couldn't get a word in. What a change from their first meeting in 1934, when Hitler had been the junior member of the partnership, coming hat in hand to Venice to seek Mussolini's blessing. It was clear that now, Hitler regarded Mussolini as the junior partner.

Hitler, on the other hand, returned to Berlin triumphant, convinced of Mussolini's loyalty and that Italian intervention in the war was near. In the West, spring had almost arrived and the offensive could soon begin.

But there was one final problem Hitler needed to address first. As you know from last week's episode, this period, the winter of 1939-40, saw the Winter War in Finland. And as you also know, the British and the French had been pushing Norway and Sweden to allow Allied military units onto their territory.

This threatened an important German strategic interest: imports of Swedish iron ore, which were an essential raw material for the manufacture of armaments in Germany. Germany could not allow that supply of ore to fall into Allied hands. There was also the matter of transporting the ore to Germany. Most of the year, Swedish iron ore came to Germany aboard ships that crossed the Baltic Sea, where they were beyond the reach of the Allied naval blockade. These ore shipments were often carried in Swedish freighters and sometimes escorted by Swedish naval vessels, much to the irritation of the Allies.

But during the winter months, the northern Swedish port of Luleå, the source of these shipments, ices up. When this happens, the ore is shipped westward by rail across northern Sweden and on to the Norwegian port of Narvik, and from there it travels by sea to Germany.

These winter shipments were potentially vulnerable to the Royal Navy blockade. The British and French began blockading Germany as soon as the war began, just as had been done in 1914. This time, the blockade was far less effective, owing to Germany's non-aggression agreement with the Soviet Union. This agreement allowed Germany to import agricultural products and raw materials from the USSR over land and out of reach of the blockade.

But these Swedish iron ore imports were an exception. The winter shipments might be vulnerable to Allied interdiction; even worse, and as you know from last week, the British and French were contemplating occupying Narvik in Norway and northern Sweden, officially to open a line of communication to Finland, but also with an eye to blocking those ore shipments, and possibly taking possession of the iron ore mines.

The ore situation was brought to Hitler's attention by the commander of the German Navy, Admiral Erich Raeder, after the war began. Raeder also observed that German control of Norway would not only secure the Swedish iron ore shipments, but Norway's famously crinkly coastline would provide excellent bases for the German Navy, allowing German ships to bypass the British North Sea blockade and allowing German submarines easier access to the North Atlantic trade routes.

In December 1939, Hitler met with Norwegian politician Vidkun Quisling. In 1933, shortly after Hitler had taken power in Germany, Quisling had founded a far-right political party in Norway, known as the Nasjonal Samling, which you might translate as the "national union" or "national gathering." The party was seen from the beginning as fascist, or quasi-fascist, and was shunned by other Norwegian political parties and, it must be said, by most Norwegian voters. In 1939, after six years, Quisling's party had about 2,000 members and had not been able to claim even a single seat in the Norwegian parliament.

What was discussed at this meeting is not recorded, but afterward, Hitler ordered the German Army to study how it might occupy Norway. A special staff was created within the OKH, the Army High Command, and they began drafting a plan, code-named *Weserübung*, which means the Weser Exercise, Weser being the name of a river in Germany.

But that is a story for a future episode. We'll have to stop there for today. I thank you for listening, and I'd especially like to thank Morgan for their kind donation, and thank you to Richard for becoming a patron of the podcast. Donors and patrons like Morgan and Richard 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 and click on the PayPal or Patreon buttons.

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about it, including the composer, the performers, and a link to where you can download it, that would be the place to go. While you're there, you can leave a comment and let me know what you thought about today's show.

And I hope you'll join me next week, here on *The History of the Twentieth Century*, as we cross the front lines to see what's happening in Allied capitals. Guess who is in the British government once again after a decade in political exile. Winston Is Back, next week, here, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

Oh, and one more thing. Erich Hönmanns and Helmuth Reinberger were interned following their capture in Belgium. Back in Berlin, they were tried *in absentia* and sentenced to death for mishandling secret information. They were handed over to the British and held prisoner in Canada. Both of them were repatriated for health reasons, Hönmanns in 1943 and Reinberger in 1944. Upon their return to Germany, they were both tried again. Hönmanns the pilot was acquitted; he passed away in Cologne in 1969. Both of his sons were killed in the war. Reinberger was discharged from the Luftwaffe and assigned to the Volkssturm. I have not been able to determine when or where he died.

The two British intelligence officers, Major Stevens and Captain Best, were held in the German concentration camps at Sachsenhausen and Dachau until they were released at the end of the war. Best published his memoir in 1950. Stevens died in 1967 at the age of 73 and Best in 1978 at the age of 93.

Georg Elser was also held at the Dachau concentration camp. He was never tried, but was executed on Hitler's orders in April 1945 at the age of 42.

[music: Closing War Theme]