

The History of the Twentieth Century

Episode 320

“Operation Weserübung”

Transcript

[music: Fanfare]

In Spring 1940, Winston Churchill was still pushing his plan for a British military intervention in neutral Norway to block the Germans from using Norwegian waters as a means of avoiding the British blockade of Germany.

In Berlin, Adolf Hitler was all too aware of British interest in Norway and was considering a plan to intervene first.

Welcome to *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

[music: Opening War Theme]

Episode 320. Operation Weserübung.

Today’s story begins where the previous episode left off: in February 1940, when the Royal Navy first became aware that the German supply ship *Altmark* was en route back to Germany, via Norwegian coastal waters.

As you know from that episode, *Altmark* had accompanied and supplied the German pocket battleship *Admiral Graf Spee* during that ship’s raids of British merchant shipping in the South Atlantic in late 1939. *Graf Spee* got involved in a battle with three British cruisers in December 1939 and fled to Montevideo, where the captain ordered his ship scuttled.

But *Altmark* escaped and began making its way back to Germany alone. She proceeded north through the open waters of the Atlantic Ocean, steering clear of the British Isles and on into the Norwegian Sea. There, *Altmark* turned east until it reached the territorial waters of neutral Norway, then began following the Norwegian coastline southward, toward home.

Altmark was far from the only German ship to take advantage of Norway’s neutral waters. German freighters regularly hauled high-grade Swedish iron ore from the northern Norwegian port of Narvik to German steel mills, which in turn fed the German tank and arms factories that supplied the German war machine.

And as you also know from last week's episode, the free passage of German ships through Norwegian waters, right under the noses of the Royal Navy, as it were, was a source of great frustration to the Admiralty and its First Lord, Winston Churchill. Churchill had already brought to the British War Cabinet proposals to mine Norwegian waters as a means of forcing the German merchant ships into international waters, where they would be fair game for the Navy, as well as proposals to land troops at Narvik and seize the port to deny its use as a transfer point for those iron ore shipments.

The Cabinet would not approve either of these plans. Their concern was, of course, that either of these actions would violate Norway's neutrality. Under international law as it stood at the time, it was not a violation of Norway's neutrality to use Norwegian territory to convey iron ore to Germany, nor was it a violation for German ships to pass through Norwegian waters.

Since none of these activities were inconsistent with Norway's status as a neutral country, none of them constituted an act of war against Britain, under international law. On the other hand, if British warships entered Norwegian waters to seize German ships, or fire on them, or lay mines, those acts would be a violation of Norwegian neutrality. Norway would be justified in declaring war on Britain and joining the German side.

It was also awkward from a political standpoint. Britain and France had declared war on Germany in response to German aggression against Poland. They also condemned Germany's violation of the Munich Agreement and occupation of Czechoslovakia. That was the moral justification for this war. But if the Allies invaded neutral Norway for the sake of their own military imperatives, how was that any different?

The Allies were hoping for support in their war against Germany from European neutrals—states that had chosen not to participate in the war. Not yet, anyway. The biggest and most important neutral was Italy, which had stayed out of the conflict so far despite having signed a formal alliance agreement with Germany less than a year ago.

As for smaller nations, well, on January 20, 1940, Winston Churchill gave an address on the wireless in which he praised Finland for its plucky resistance to Soviet aggression while condemning neutral nations for their cowardice. He said of them, "Each one hopes that if it feeds the crocodile enough, the crocodile will eat him last." The governments of four European neutrals—Norway, Denmark, the Netherlands, and Switzerland—protested Churchill's remarks, although the French government praised them as "timely and carefully phrased."

And then there was the case of Belgium. Belgium had been one of the Allies in the last war and had signed an alliance with France in 1920, but had withdrawn from that alliance in 1936 and resumed its historical stance of neutrality. After the British Army moved an expeditionary force into France in late 1939, the British government queried the Belgian government about allowing the BEF to preposition on Belgian soil against the coming German offensive. The Allies expected to see a replay of 1914. But the Belgian King refused, on the grounds that if Belgium

neutrality was to be violated, let the Germans violate it first, so there could be no doubt who was the aggressor, while allowing the British Army onto neutral Belgian soil could be viewed as a provocation.

Norway was in a similar situation. The Norwegian government declined British requests to allow land or naval operations in Norwegian territory. This decision was not based on abstract arguments about how it might be perceived by Germany; it was based on very real warnings from the German government, to Norway and to Sweden, that Allied armed forces in their territory would draw a German military response.

But the way the Germans were using Norway's territorial waters, as a bypass around the Royal Navy blockade, chafed at Winston Churchill and the Admiralty. The framework of the international law of neutrality is meant to bar a neutral nation from adopting policies that unduly advantage one side of a conflict over the other. A neutral that does so forfeits its claim to the protections of neutrality. But in this instance, the Norwegian bypass was doing the German Navy a big favor, with no corresponding advantage for Britain. Norway might have been technically in compliance with international law, but was violating its spirit. That at least was the British view.

All of these concerns, this irritation, came to a head in February 1940, when the British spied *Altmark* heading home through the Norwegian bypass. Apart from all the other frustrations, the Royal Navy believed that *Altmark* was holding some 300 British merchant sailors, prisoners captured by *Graf Spee* during its raiding campaign in the South Atlantic. *Altmark* was no passenger ship; it was a supply tender, a sort of military freighter. It did not have the proper facilities to house hundreds of prisoners. They were undoubtedly being kept in appalling conditions.

Yet international law said that *Altmark* had the right to pass and Norway should honor it. In response to British complaints, the Germans denied that *Altmark* was holding prisoners. Norwegian naval officers inspected the ship and agreed that they found no sign of captives. Not that it mattered. International law would have permitted the transport of prisoners through neutral waters. The British had transported prisoners through the Panama Canal, for example.

But even an Englishman can only endure so much. On February 15, the Royal Navy destroyer *Cossack* intercepted *Altmark*, which was being escorted by three Norwegian torpedo boats. *Altmark* fled into the Jøssingfjord and the Norwegians moved to block the British ship. The captain signaled the Admiralty for instructions; the orders he received in reply came direct from Winston Churchill, instructing him to board *Altmark*, free the prisoners, and take possession of the ship. If the Norwegian Navy should intervene, *Cossack* was ordered to defend itself as necessary.

The Norwegians declined an invitation to participate in a joint Anglo-Norwegian inspection of the ship, noting that they had already inspected *Altmark*. That night, *Cossack* entered the fjord in pursuit of *Altmark*. The German ship had passed deep into the fjord until it got itself stuck in ice.

As *Cossack* approached, its powerful searchlights playing over the dark form of its adversary, the Germans got their ship unstuck and tried to ram *Cossack*. The British ship turned to evade, and when the two vessels were side-by-side, the British grappled *Altmark*. *Cossack*'s first officer jumped over the railings, calling "Follow me!" British sailors took the bridge, ordered the ship to reverse, and ran it aground. Shots were exchanged. Eight German sailors were killed in the fighting. Some jumped overboard and fled the ship into a Norwegian winter night, some reportedly in their underwear, as they had been in their bunks when the British boarded.

The boarding party opened a hatch and called down into the hold, "Any Englishmen here?" The prisoners called back, "Yes!" Someone in the boarding party famously responded, "Well, the Navy's here," to cheers from below.

The *Altmark* incident was a major boost to British morale and "The Navy's here!" became something of a catchphrase in a war in which precious little was going on and the two sides were showing an almost palpable distaste for the idea of, you know, actually fighting each other.

It seemed there were only two leaders in Europe who took the war seriously and were determined to engage the enemy. One was Winston Churchill, First Lord of the Admiralty, head of the only British service branch that was actually engaging the enemy.

The other was Adolf Hitler.

[music: Nordraak, "Ja, vi elsker dette landet."]

The *Altmark* incident infuriated Adolf Hitler. One day, the British preach pieties about how they go to war to defend the rights of weaker nations; the next day they flagrantly violate those rights themselves.

I told you last time that Hitler created a special group within the OKH, the Army High Command, to plan for the occupation of Norway, an action code-named *Weserübung*, the *Weser Exercise*. Now, in the aftermath of the *Altmark* incident, Hitler authorized what was now called *Operation Weserübung* on March 1.

This was an unusual process. Adolf Hitler, who had no direct involvement in the campaign in Poland, was now becoming a much more active military commander, bypassing the heads of the *Wehrmacht* and the Army to order plans and schedule operations without their input.

The Winter War between the Soviet Union and Finland ended just a couple of weeks later, on March 13. The end of that conflict reduced the likelihood of Allied intervention in Scandinavia, but Hitler ordered that *Weserübung* proceed in any case. It was intended to be a peaceful occupation of both Denmark and Norway to pre-empt Allied intervention, but the German forces involved were instructed that, should they meet resistance, they should respond in kind.

Hitler confided to Goebbels that the kings of those two countries could stay if they liked, but once Germans secured control, they would not be leaving. Norway and Denmark were Nordic countries and were meant to be part of Germany.

The commanders of the Army and the Luftwaffe were already demonstrating their lack of enthusiasm for the coming Western offensive; in their minds, peeling off six Army divisions and substantial air assets for a side operation just before the main event smacked of madness. But the Navy chief, Admiral Raeder, was as enthusiastic as Hitler was. April 9 was set as the date the operation would begin.

And as Hitler set the operation into motion, he had no idea that in London, Winston Churchill was pushing his own plan for Norway. Churchill, of course, was equally unaware of Hitler's plans.

On February 29, the day before Hitler authorized Operation Weserübung, Winston Churchill was sitting in a Cabinet meeting, listening to Prime Minister Chamberlain explaining that he had sounded out the leaders of the Labour Party, Clement Atlee and Arthur Greenwood, on the possibility of British military action in a third country, and the Labour leaders told him they would regard such an action as unjustified. Chamberlain also expressed fears that taking action against a neutral country would antagonize the United States. The Cabinet voted once again to postpone any action, over the objections of Churchill, who told the Cabinet it should have been done three months ago and reiterated his claim that denying Germany the use of Swedish iron ore was the single most effective measure available to hasten the defeat of Germany.

On March 12, the War Cabinet finally voted to authorize intervention in Norway. But later that same day came the news of the peace agreement between Russia and Finland. Neville Chamberlain gave the order to halt the military operation. Churchill declared the repeated British failure to act a "major disaster."

But Churchill persevered, and so did the First Sea Lord, Admiral Pound, and the other service chiefs, who continued to request permission to take action to block those ore shipments. On March 28, the War Cabinet finally voted to approve the operation. It would begin with minelaying in the approaches to Narvik, followed by the Royal Navy seizing control over Norwegian territorial waters along the North Sea Coast, and then landing ground forces to take control over Narvik.

As preparations were made for the British operation, confidence grew in the War Cabinet. On March 30, Churchill gave a radio address to the nation hinting at, as he put it, "an intensification of the struggle." Three days later, Prime Minister Chamberlain gave a speech to the National Conservative Union in which he confidently declared that Hitler had "missed the bus."

In fact, that very same day in Berlin, Hitler was receiving confirmation from General Falkenhorst, commander of the ground forces assigned to Operation Weserübung, Navy chief

Raeder, and Luftwaffe commander Göring, that all three services were ready. The first German ships left port the next morning, bound for Norway, with Weserübung scheduled to begin on April 9.

The British were entirely unaware of the German operation. Two days later, on April 5, a Royal Navy force led by the battlecruiser HMS *Renown* left Scapa Flow to begin what the British called Operation Wilfred, the mining of Vestfjorden, the approach to the port of Narvik. On April 8, the mines were laid and the British government sent a diplomatic note to the Norwegian government informing them of the operation. In Berlin, Adolf Hitler was delighted. The British had just handed him a justification for the occupation of Norway that was already under way.

Meanwhile, in the North Sea, the British destroyer *Glowworm* had detached from the force led by *Renown* to search for a crew member lost overboard. In the morning fog of April 8, *Glowworm* stumbled upon a German detachment, led by the heavy cruiser *Admiral Hipper*, which was escorting German troops to the port of Trondheim. *Glowworm* was outgunned and heavily damaged, but managed to ram *Admiral Hipper* before sinking along with 109 of her crew. Forty British sailors were rescued by the Germans.

Weserübung also included the occupation of Denmark, which was seen by the Germans as necessary to support the operation against Norway, and also to insure German control of the Baltic Sea. Before dawn on April 9, the German ambassador to Denmark asked for a meeting with the Danish foreign minister and informed him that German soldiers were occupying Denmark to defend it against an Allied invasion. The German government demanded that Denmark not resist the occupation; if it did, the Luftwaffe would bomb Copenhagen.

Even as the German demands were being communicated, German paratroops had already taken control of two airfields on the northern tip of the Danish mainland. Luftwaffe fighters strafed the small Danish Air Force, destroying most of its planes on the ground. German soldiers landed at Copenhagen and were advancing on the Royal Palace, as German bombers dropped leaflets over the city, demanding capitulation.

The Danish King Christian X, his military commanders, and the Danish Cabinet were all but unanimous. At 6:00 that morning, just hours after the German campaign began, Denmark agreed to the German demands.

The operation did not go nearly so well for the Germans in Norway. To begin with, in the afternoon of April 8, the German cargo ship *Rio de Janiero*, which was secretly carrying German soldiers and was bound for the Norwegian port city of Bergen, was torpedoed and sunk by a Polish submarine, *Orzeł*, which had escaped the fall of Poland and was now serving with the Royal Navy. About 200 of the 380 Germans aboard *Rio de Janiero* died.

The Norwegian government was aware of this incident and was aware that many aboard the German ship were wearing German Army uniforms. The Norwegian Cabinet ordered a partial

mobilization of Norway's armed forces, but this meant merely that reservists would be notified by mail of their activation. No public declaration was issued; the Norwegians were not aware of the scale of the operation the Poles had stumbled across.

They would soon find out. Before midnight, even before the Danish King and government were issued Germany's demands, a German Navy force led by the heavy cruiser *Blücher* was making its way up the Oslofjord, escorting two thousand German soldiers on their way to occupy the Norwegian capital.

But the German flotilla was spotted by a Norwegian torpedo boat, which signaled the fortification of Oscarsborg, which commands a narrow chokepoint along the way to Oslo. *Blücher* was spotted. Oscarsborg turned first its searchlights on the German cruiser, then its guns and torpedoes. By dawn, *Blücher* had capsized and sunk, and *Lützow*, the pocket battleship formerly known as *Deutschland*, had taken serious damage. German casualties are not known for certain, but it's likely that hundreds died. The German ships unloaded their troops there at the edge of the fjord, some distance south from the city.

The German plan for a rapid surprise strike on Oslo had been frustrated. The German soldiers did indeed proceed north on foot and occupy the city, but the delay gave the Norwegians sufficient time to evacuate King Haakon VII, the Royal Family, the Cabinet, most of the Storting, Norway's parliament, and Norway's gold reserve from the capital before the Germans arrived.

But apart from stumbling into a hornet's nest at the Oslofjord, the German invasion went pretty smoothly. The Luftwaffe swept Norwegian combat aircraft from the skies, while German bombers attacked a number of Norwegian towns, including Elverum, Namsos, Åndalsnes, and Narvik. In some cases they bombed targets of military significance; in other cases, they bombed civilians. German paratroopers landed at and seized multiple airfields.

German naval vessels sank several Norwegian ships defending their home waters, and German troops were successfully landed at Norway's major port cities: Bergen, Stavanger, Egersund, Kristiansand, Trondheim, and Narvik, where 2,000 German mountain infantry came ashore.

The King and the government fled to the town of Hamar, and then, after deciding Hamar was not secure, on to Elverum. In Oslo, the German occupation forces took control over the Oslo facilities of the Norway Broadcasting Corporation, known by its Norwegian initials NRK. At 7:30 that evening, the Germans put Vidkun Quisling on the air to declare that the government of Norway having abandoned the country, which wasn't true, he was assuming the position of prime minister and appointing a cabinet to govern Norway. Among his first acts as "prime minister" was to cancel the mobilization order that had been issued by the real government and to order all Norwegian armed forces to surrender to the invading Germans.

This accomplished approximately nothing. Both orders were ignored, much to the displeasure of the Germans, who were hoping Quisling might actually be useful. German troops sent north from Oslo to attempt to capture the King met resistance and were forced to turn back. The next day, the German ambassador to Norway, Curt Bräuer, traveled north to meet with the King and communicate Germany's demands. The King was asked to appoint Quisling prime minister, essentially ratifying his claim to the office, and order an end all Norwegian resistance. Bräuer reminded the King that his brother, the King of Denmark, had capitulated to Germany for the sake of his country's welfare and advised King Haakon to do the same. If he refused, all Norway would suffer for his obstinacy.

Long time listeners may remember that I introduced King Haakon to you all the way back in episode 38, when I told you the story of how in 1905, Norway unilaterally voted to dissolve the union with Sweden and became fully independent. Back in those days, the major powers of Europe favored monarchies, so Norway chose to make itself into a constitutional monarchy and offered the Norwegian crown to the then-32-year-old Prince Carl of Denmark. Prince Carl was the grandson of the Danish King Christian IX, and the son-in-law of the British King Edward VII; what more can you ask from a king?

Prince Carl became King Haakon VII of Norway. Less than a year later, his grandfather, King Christian IX, passed on and left the Danish crown to King Haakon's father, who reigned in Denmark as Frederick VIII until his own death in 1912. Afterward, King Haakon's older brother reigned in Denmark as King Christian X, so that's how it came to be that the kings of Denmark and Norway were brothers, in case you were wondering.

King Haakon was attentive to his new subjects. Norway is a country with a small population and an informal and egalitarian spirit, making it perhaps not the easiest place in the world to walk into as an outsider and expect everyone to start bowing and addressing you as "Your Majesty." King Haakon navigated this difficult path with grace and poise, and he was the living symbol of Norway's newfound independence. Now, 35 years later, the King was a beloved figure. He and the Queen had one child, Crown Prince Olav, now 36 years old and a father himself.

So in 1940, King Haakon, a grandfather and 67 years old, at a stage of life at which most people step down from their day jobs to play with their grandchildren and start history podcasts, found himself facing the biggest challenge of his life.

After the meeting with the ambassador, the King met with the Cabinet and reported to them the German demands. He told the Cabinet that the final decision over whether Norway should resist or surrender was a grave one, and responsibility for taking it should lie with the elected government, not with the King. However, the King went on to say that for himself, he could not accept them. It would be a breach of his duties as king to appoint Quisling prime minister, knowing full well that Quisling did not have the confidence of the Storting or of the Norwegian

people. But neither would he stand in the Cabinet's way. Therefore, should the Cabinet choose to accept the German terms, he would abdicate.

The Cabinet voted to reject the German surrender terms, unanimously. The Germans were informed by telephone, and that night, the portion of NRK still under Norwegian control broadcast the news of the Cabinet's decision and called upon all Norway to resist the German invasion as far as possible.

In response to the government reply, the Luftwaffe began bombing the town where the King and the Cabinet were staying. There were at that point only about 25 kilometers from the Swedish border, but the Swedish government refused to offer sanctuary. So the King and Cabinet fled the Luftwaffe and the advancing Germans and headed west, toward the North Sea coast, where they were taken aboard the Royal Navy cruiser *Glasgow* and transported to the town of Tromsø, in the far north of the country, which would serve, for now, as the provisional capital of free Norway.

In truth, there was little that small, unprepared Norway could do to resist the German force of six divisions, plus naval and air units, arrayed against it. The Royal Navy attempted to move against the German force at Bergen with elements of the Home Fleet, including the aircraft carrier *Furious*, but land-based Luftwaffe bombers forced a withdrawal after sinking the British destroyer *Gurkha*.

German control over airfields along the coast of southern Norway had made British naval intervention impossible, so the Royal Navy focused its attention on northern Norway, and in particular the crucial port of Narvik. The flotilla of five destroyers that had mined the approaches to Narvik was sent back to harry the ten German destroyers that had escorted the German landings there. In the naval battle that followed, The British sank two German destroyers and a number of supply ships, while the Germans sank two British destroyers and badly damaged a third. The commanders of both naval forces were killed in the fighting.

The British Admiralty wasn't satisfied with that result; with southern Norway lost and the Germans on the move, the Allied side needed a win, so just three days later, the Royal Navy returned with a larger force of nine destroyers, led by the battleship *Warspite* and including air cover from the carrier *Furious*. The eight surviving German destroyers were low on fuel and ammunition. While *Warspite* kept the shore batteries engaged, and its catapult plane sank a U-boat, the destroyer flotilla sank three of the German destroyers; the crews of the other five scuttled their vessels, a much more satisfying win for the British. For the Germans, it meant the loss of nearly half of the German Navy's already-too-few destroyers.

On land, the 2,000 German mountain infantry had surprised the Norwegians and taken Narvik, with the assistance of the Norwegian commander on the scene, who refused to defend the town. But following the defeat of those German destroyers, the occupiers of Narvik were isolated, though now also reinforced by more than 2,000 German sailors who no longer had ships and

were getting a crash course in how to be a soldier. With sea supply cut off by the Royal Navy, the Germans had no choice but to relieve Narvik by land, which meant marching north to secure hundreds of kilometers' worth of Norway's long, rugged, crinkly coastline. And north of Narvik was Tromsø, Norway's provisional capital, now reinforced with British and French troops preparing to march south.

For the rest of April, the long, skinny part of Norway would be the front line between Germany and the Allies, and both sides would be watching it nervously. In Berlin, Adolf Hitler was taking a personal interest in the plight of the German garrison in Narvik, his mood swinging from confidence to despair, and the moods of his commanders swinging right along with him. At one point, Hitler decided Narvik was a lost cause, and ordered the Germans there to retreat east, across the border, and allow themselves to be interned by Sweden. You can imagine how the OKW reacted to that. Wehrmacht chief of staff Alfred Jodl managed to talk the *Führer* out of this rash move, advising him, "One should only give up something when it is lost."

Hitler remained nervous. April 20, his fifty-first birthday, came and went with little fanfare, a stark contrast to the big deal his fiftieth birthday had been made into last year.

On the Allied side, the reaction to events in Norway was—

Ah, but that is a story for next week's episode. I thank you for listening, and I'd especially like to thank Mike and Daria for their kind donations, and thank you to Richard for becoming a patron of the podcast. Donors and patrons like Mike and Daria 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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And I hope you'll join me next week, here on *The History of the Twentieth Century*, as we look to the Allied response to Germany's invasion of Norway. I have nothing to offer you but blood, toil, tears, and sweat, next week, here, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

Oh, and one more thing. You probably already know that Vidkun Quisling's surname has become a synonym for traitor, in the Scandinavian languages and in English. We English speakers pronounce it *quisling*.

This usage appeared almost immediately after his failed attempt to take control of the Norwegian government. An early adopter was the British newspaper *The Times*, which editorialized that “[t]o writers, the word quisling is a gift from the gods. If they had been ordered to invent a new word for traitor...they could hardly have hit upon a more brilliant combination of letters.” The usage was further popularized by Winston Churchill and it is still in common use today, long after the death of him who inspired it.

[music: Closing War Theme]