

The History of the Twentieth Century

Episode 321

“Blood, Toil, Tears, and Sweat”

Transcript

[music: Fanfare]

The inability of the British armed forces to hold off the German invasion of Norway triggered calls for the resignation of Prime Minister Chamberlain as Britain faced its gravest danger in centuries.

Welcome to *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

[music: Opening Theme]

Episode 321. Blood, Toil, Tears, and Sweat.

Today we continue the narrative from last week, about the German invasion of Norway. Unlike the case of Denmark, the Norwegian government refused German surrender terms and resisted the invasion, with assistance from Britain and France.

Unfortunately for the Norwegians, the initial German assault on their country had come as a complete surprise and Norway was unprepared. As you know from last time, the assault on Oslo was delayed long enough to evacuate the King and the Norwegian government, but the city fell. Elsewhere, the Germans successfully landed troops at Norway’s most important ports.

Recall as well that Norway had had next to no time to mobilize, and the sudden occupation of Norway’s major cities disrupted most of the mobilization effort. One place where mobilization was successful was in the town of Voss, in central Norway, where soon after the invasion, the Norwegian Fourth Division assembled. Voss lies along a crucial railway, the Bergen Line, which runs from Bergen on the North Sea Coast to Oslo in the east. A portion of the Fourth Division was ordered east along the line to delay the German advance from Oslo, while the remainder hunkered down in Voss to hold off a German advance from Bergen.

But once again, German mastery of the skies foiled their defense. In particular, the Luftwaffe bombed Voss mercilessly and captured the town on April 26.

The Royal Navy had given up on offensive action in southern Norway, where German bombers based on land dominated the skies, and chose instead to intervene farther north, where Norway dwindles into a narrow strip of rugged coastline hundreds of kilometers long. In the north there was no German presence apart from the soldiers who'd landed at Trondheim and Narvik. German forces in the south were spending the first weeks of the invasion subduing Norwegian resistance and hadn't yet had the opportunity to march north and secure land communication to the isolated German garrisons in those towns, and the Royal Navy had cut off supply and reinforcement by sea, so the Allies focused on securing northern Norway, and in particular evicting the Germans from Trondheim and Narvik.

To that end, the Navy landed British and French ground forces along the coast at points north and south of both towns, the plan being to surround and capture them while Norwegian forces to the south prevented—or at least delayed—German attempts to advance north by land to relieve the besieged towns. Allied troops landed at all four points from April 14-19.

British troops successfully landed south of Trondheim at Åndalsnes, but the Germans were able to drop a small paratroop unit at the railway junction at Dombås and block Allied use of the railroad for a crucial five days. North of Trondheim, British and French troops landed at Namsos and advanced to the town of Steinkjer, but by this time the Germans had advanced sufficiently to bring both Åndalsnes and Steinkjer into range of Luftwaffe bombers, which pummeled Allied positions, forcing the Allies to withdraw. By April 24, Trondheim was securely in German hands.

Farther north, British, French, and Polish units landed at points north and south of Narvik and began advancing on that town, along with the Norwegian Sixth Infantry Division. Two RAF squadrons, equipped with Gloster Gladiators and Hawker Hurricanes were based at a Norwegian military airfield to provide them with air cover.

And as you know from last week's episode, Adolf Hitler was made sufficiently nervous by Allied moves against Narvik that he panicked and ordered the German force there to retreat into Sweden, until he was talked out of it. I find this moment interesting because Adolf Hitler's admirers—and there are still a few of those around, regrettably—praise him for his courage and will, while his critics see him as a blind zealot, but here we see a Hitler who is neither. Here he is simply a frightened man. Yes, Adolf Hitler can be frightened.

Anyway, by May 2, as the Allies were withdrawing from Åndalsnes, the Allied force south of Narvik was taking up positions at Bodø and Mo I Rana in a last-ditch attempt to hold off a German advance from the south long enough to take Narvik and maintain Allied control over at least the northernmost regions of Norway.

That same day, which was a Thursday, in London, the news of the Allied withdrawal from Åndalsnes was greeted with alarm. It's hard to imagine in our time, knowing what we know is coming, but on May 2, 1940, Norway was the front line in the war against Germany. Germany

had had its way in Poland and in Denmark, but Norway, with Allied assistance, was actually putting up a fight, even if the frontier between Germany and France had remained quiet. Government statements concerning the situation in Norway had been optimistic, even as the Germans secured their hold over most of the country. But when word came that the British were withdrawing from one of the Allies' few toeholds in the country, well, that was hard to interpret as anything but evidence of defeat. In the House of Commons that day, Opposition Leader Clement Atlee asked if the Prime Minister would make a statement on the situation in Norway. Chamberlain begged off, on the grounds that to talk about the situation in Norway just now would reveal details of ongoing operations, possibly to the detriment of the soldiers involved. He asked that debate over the situation in Norway be postponed until the following Tuesday, May 7. Atlee and Liberal Party Leader Archibald Sinclair agreed to the postponement.

Over the weekend, everyone found out what exactly the ongoing operation in Norway was. It was the evacuation of French and British troops from Namsos, the other half of what was meant to have been the two pincers that would squeeze the Germans out of Trondheim. In the great map of Scandinavia that hung in the Prime Minister's office at Number Ten, the little colored pins that represented Allied forces in Norway were being pulled out and put away in their little boxes.

There was now no Allied military presence in Norway south of the region around Narvik, which is quite far north. The Allies had apparently ceded most of Norway to the Germans and were struggling to hold onto the little bit that was left.

By the time Tuesday the 7th came around, the question of what the hell was going on in Norway was *the* question. Parliament and the public had been told that things had been going well in the intervention in Norway, which as far as most people knew, Britain had initiated.

The two members of the government under the most pressure were the prime minister and Winston Churchill. For Churchill, this was beginning to feel like Gallipoli all over again. Churchill never felt Gallipoli was a failure; to him it was more of a missed opportunity. He continued to believe that the great strength of the British military, backed by the Royal Navy, was its ability to strike anywhere at any time, which must of necessity keep Britain's enemies guessing.

Prime Minister Chamberlain began the debate with a speech defending the government. It was perhaps the worst speech he ever gave. It was weak and defensive. At one point, Chamberlain seemed to blame Britain's lackluster military response on complacency among the British people. At another, he insisted that the Allies still held the advantage in Norway, a comment that drew derisive heckles, including repeated calls that the government had "missed the bus," a sarcastic reference to Chamberlain's claim a month earlier that Hitler had missed the bus.

Then came Clement Atlee's turn, as Leader of the Opposition. Atlee quoted previous optimistic assessments of the Norway campaign by Chamberlain and Churchill and accused the government of presenting far too rosy a picture, which would inevitably lead to a disappointment such as the

country was now experiencing. “It is said that in this war hitherto there has never been any initiative from our side, and it is said also that there is no real planning in anticipation of the possible strokes that will be taken against us...Norway follows Czechoslovakia and Poland. Everywhere the story is ‘too late.’ The Prime Minister talked about missing buses. What about all the buses he and his associates have missed since 1931? They missed all the peace buses but caught the war bus.”

Then it was Archibald Sinclair’s turn. He echoed the accusation that British conduct of the war was reactive and improvised, rather than “working to long and carefully matured plans.”

The debate went on. A key moment came when Sir Roger Keyes, a Tory MP who was also a retired Royal Navy admiral came to the Commons in his naval uniform and spoke in what was at first a defense of the Navy, but soon evolved into a denunciation of government policy, the first by a member of the government’s own Party: “I want to make it perfectly clear that it is not [the Navy’s] fault that the German warships and transports which forced their way into Norwegian ports by treachery were not followed in and destroyed as they were at Narvik. It is not [the Navy’s fault] that the enemy have been left in undisputable possession of vulnerable ports and aerodromes for nearly a month, have been given time to pour in reinforcements by sea and air, to land tanks, heavy artillery, and mechanized transport, and have been given time to develop the air offensive which has had such a devastating effect of the morale of Whitehall. If they had been more courageously and offensively employed they might have done much to prevent these unhappy happenings and much to influence unfriendly neutrals...One hundred and forty years ago, [Lord] Nelson said, ‘I am of the opinion that the boldest measures are the safest,’ and that still holds good today.”

When Sir Roger finished, the Commons applauded, and here was a turning point in the debate. It was no longer about Norway; now it was about the government’s conduct of the war in general.

Soon after, Conservative Leo Amery took his turn to speak. Amery was a personal friend of both Chamberlain and Churchill, and also staunchly anti-Nazi. It had been Amery who called for Labour to “speak for England,” last September. It was after 8:00 that evening when Amery rose to speak, and most of the House had left to eat dinner. By some reports, there were only about a dozen members present. But as word got out that Amery was speaking, Members, including Neville Chamberlain, began returning to the House to hear what he had to say. He began with an anecdote:

“I remember that many years ago in East Africa a young friend of mine went lion hunting. He secured a sleeping car on the railway and had it detached from the train at a siding near where he expected to find a certain man-eating lion. He went to rest and dream of hunting his lion in the morning. Unfortunately, the lion was out man-hunting that night. He clambered on to the rear of the car, scrambled open the sliding door, and ate my friend. That is in brief the story of our initiative over Norway.”

He went on to offer a detailed criticism of the British war effort so far, and called for the formation of a National Government, including Labour and the trade unions, to strengthen the British commitment to the war. “Somehow or other we must get into the Government men who can match our enemies in fighting spirit, in daring, in resolution, and in thirst for victory. We are fighting today for our life, for our liberty, for our all; we cannot go on being led as we are.”

Amery concluded by reciting Oliver Cromwell’s famous denunciation of the Long Parliament: ““You have sat too long here for any good you have been doing. Depart, I say, and let us have done with you. In the name of God, go.””

The Opposition benches cheered. It was the greatest speech of Amery’s political career, and one of the most famous Parliamentary speeches ever given. Harold MacMillan later said that this speech “destroyed the Chamberlain government.”

Debate went on till nearly midnight; then the House adjourned until the next day, Wednesday, May 8. When Clement Atlee asked for this debate, he had not intended to have it lead into a division of the House, which is to say, a vote testing the confidence of Parliament in the government, but after yesterday’s debate, in which a number of Conservatives denounced the government in strenuous terms, he decided to call such a vote on Wednesday.

One of Wednesday’s speakers was David Lloyd George, fifty years a Member of Parliament, prime minister during the last war, and Britain’s representative at the Paris Peace Conference. Lloyd George criticized the run-up to the war and the government’s conduct of it.

“Is there anyone in this House who will say that he is satisfied with the speed and efficiency of the preparations in any respect for air, for Army, yea, for Navy? Everybody is disappointed. Everybody knows that whatever was done was done half-heartedly, ineffectively, without drive and unintelligently. For three or four years I thought to myself that the facts with regard to Germany were exaggerated by the First Lord, [Winston Churchill,] because the then Prime Minister – not this Prime Minister – said that they were not true. The First Lord was right about it. Then came the war. The tempo was hardly speeded up. There was the same leisureliness and inefficiency. Will anybody tell me that he is satisfied with what we have done about aeroplanes, tanks, guns, especially anti-aircraft guns? Is anyone here satisfied with the steps we took to train an Army to use them? Nobody is satisfied. The whole world knows that. And here we are in the worst strategic position in which this country has ever been placed...I say solemnly that the Prime Minister should give an example of sacrifice, because there is nothing which can contribute more to victory in this war than that he should sacrifice the seals of office.”

It fell to Winston Churchill to conclude the debate with a defense of the government. Churchill took full responsibility for the actions of the Navy and the Admiralty and complained that a vote on the conduct of the war now, so soon after the recent setback in Norway, would be hasty and precipitate.

When the vote was taken, the government won 281-200. That's not great when your government is supposed to have a margin of 213, but 41 Tories voted against the government and a further sixty or so abstained, hence the shrunken margin of victory. Had this been a more peaceful time and a dispute over a more conventional issue, Chamberlain and his government might have collected the victory and moved on.

But in time of war, it counted as a stinging defeat. Chamberlain was heckled as he left the chamber, while Opposition MPs and the Tories who had voted with them sang "Rule, Britannia!" That evening, Chamberlain went to Buckingham Palace to inform the King that he was going to attempt to form a new government, a national government of all parties to conduct the war.

[music: Arne, "Rule, Britannia!"]

Winston Churchill had gone into the debate expecting to be tarred with the same brush as in the aftermath of Gallipoli. But the Commons' complaint against the government wasn't that it had been reckless, but that it had been timid. The House wasn't opposed to the intervention in Norway; it was disappointed that the intervention hadn't come sooner and been more forceful.

Another way to put it would be that the attitude of the House of Commons had come around to something very much like the attitude of Winston Churchill. And most the House knew, or could guess, that it had been Churchill behind the intervention in Norway, but the slowness and timidity of its execution was pure Chamberlain.

The next day, Chamberlain made inquiries with the leadership of the Labour Party. He wanted to know whether Labour would agree to join a government of national unity, and whether they would accept him, Neville Chamberlain, as prime minister of that government. Labour's answers to those two questions were yes, and no.

If Chamberlain had to go, there were two obvious candidates to succeed him. One was Winston Churchill, the clear favorite among those who believed that British conduct of the war had been too timid and wanted to see the Allies take the initiative for a change. The other was Lord Halifax, the foreign secretary, the favorite among government insiders. Halifax had a reputation as a perceptive observer of international affairs, shrewd but level-headed. He was the preferred choice of Chamberlain himself, who was no doubt still stinging from Churchill's pre-war criticisms of his government. Halifax was also the personal favorite of the King.

The key figure who did not believe Halifax to be the better choice was Halifax. On the morning of the 9th, Chamberlain called Halifax and Churchill into a meeting with him in the Cabinet Room to discuss who might succeed him as prime minister. By some accounts, Chamberlain may have been hoping to persuade Churchill to yield to Halifax, but Halifax yielded first.

You may recall Lord Salisbury, who was prime minister in the early years of the podcast—I mean, of the twentieth century. Salisbury was a member of the House of Lords. Since then,

Britain has had a run of seven prime ministers from the Commons, and in the here and now modern world of 1940, it was a legitimate question whether a member of the Lords could still effectively lead a government that had to answer to the other body, the House of Commons. Halifax thought not, and said so. And there we are. It's going to have to be Churchill.

Halifax had another reason for stepping back and ceding the premiership. He recalled the Cabinet of the last war, when Herbert Asquith was prime minister, but the most energetic work of winning the war was being done by David Lloyd George. Similarly, Halifax believed that if he were PM, he would have no choice but to put Churchill in an important Cabinet position, possibly as minister of war, which in his view would make Churchill the Lloyd George of this war, and himself the Asquith, destined to be shunted aside. Better just to go ahead and give it to Winston in the first instance.

And so it was that Lord Halifax, the same person who as Viceroy of India opened negotiations with Mohandas Gandhi and in so doing, elevated Gandhi to the position of indisputable leader of the Indian nationalist movement, made the decision that would elevate Winston Churchill to prime minister.

That afternoon, Chamberlain, Churchill, and Halifax met with Clement Atlee and Arthur Greenwood, the Leader and Deputy Leader of the Labour Party. The Labourites were agreeable to a coalition government, but the final decision required the approval of Labour's executive committee. As it happened, the Labour Party was gathering in Bournemouth for its yearly conference. The executive committee was already gathered there; Atlee and Greenwood agreed to visit Bournemouth, consult with the committee, and telephone the committee's decision within 24 hours.

Early the next morning, before dawn, and before Chamberlain received Labour's reply, in Brussels, the police were going from hotel to hotel, inquiring if any Belgian military personnel were among the guests, and if so, to awaken them immediately. Across the city, taxi cabs were summoned to collect bleary-eyed Belgian Army officers and deliver them to headquarters. At dawn, the citizens of Brussels awoke to the sound of anti-aircraft guns.

The Germans were invading Belgium. And the Netherlands. And Luxembourg. And France. The Sitzkrieg was over. The Blitzkrieg had begun.

Needless to say, developments on the Continent on May 10 and afterward are important enough to deserve their own episode, or four, so stick a bookmark in that story for now, and let us focus the rest of today's episode on events in London. Winston Churchill, who was at this moment still First Lord of the Admiralty, sat in a breakfast meeting along with Oliver Stanley, the War Secretary, and Samuel Hoare, the Secretary of Air.

At 8:00 that morning, the War Cabinet met. Chamberlain chaired the meeting and explained that in view of the crisis on the Continent, he thought it best to remain as prime minister for the time being.

But as word got out of Chamberlain's decision, opposition appeared at once, even within the Conservative Party. Shortly after the War Cabinet meeting, Kingsley Wood, an old political ally of the prime minister's and the government's previous Secretary of Air, came to see Chamberlain at Number Ten. Chamberlain explained to Wood his decision, that in view of the emergency, he should remain as PM. Wood told him bluntly that the opposite was in fact the case. The emergency in France was all the more reason why Britain needed a unity government immediately.

That afternoon, the War Cabinet met again and received dire news. German paratroopers had landed behind Allied lines in the Netherlands and in Belgium. The outlook was grim, especially for the Netherlands. A discussion followed over what action to take to guard against the possibility of German paratroop landings in Britain.

As this discussion was proceeding, a messenger entered the Cabinet Room with a note for the prime minister. Chamberlain read it, but kept its contents to himself until the discussion over German paratroopers was finished. Then he told the War Cabinet the news: the Labour Party executive committee had given its answer, and it was the same answer: yes, the party would be willing to participate in a unity government, but not one led by Neville Chamberlain.

An hour later, Chamberlain arrived at Buckingham Palace to offer the King his resignation. The King asked Chamberlain's advice on who should succeed him. Chamberlain suggested Winston Churchill.

Soon after, Churchill received the call to come to the Palace. When he met with the King, the King asked him, "I suppose you know why I have sent for you?"

Churchill, who knew full well, replied, "Sir, I simply couldn't imagine why."

The King told him, "I want to ask you to form a government."

Neville Chamberlain broke the news to the nation over the wireless:

[sound clip: chamberlain resignation announcement]

Churchill organized a multiparty War Cabinet. He was in the unusual position of being prime minister without being Party Leader, so that meant the actual Conservative Party Leader, Neville Chamberlain, needed to be in the Cabinet. Churchill wanted to make him Chancellor of the Exchequer, but the Labour Party wouldn't agree to that, so he was made Lord President of the Council. Labor Party Leader Clement Atlee was made Lord Privy Seal, and later Deputy Prime Minister. Arthur Greenwood, Labour's deputy leader, was made a minister without portfolio.

Liberal Party Leader Sir Archibald Sinclair became Secretary of State for Air, Conservative Anthony Eden became war minister, and the Labour Party's Albert Alexander succeeded Churchill as First Lord of the Admiralty. Churchill assumed the role of Minister of Defense for himself, and kept Lord Halifax as foreign secretary. David Lloyd George was offered the post of minister of agriculture, but declined.

On Monday the 13th, Churchill spoke to the House of Commons for the first time as prime minister, in a special session called to ratify the new national unity government. He described it as "a Government representing the united and inflexible resolve of the nation to prosecute the war with Germany to a victorious conclusion."

He spoke only briefly, but the speech became famous for this simple, earthy declaration: "I have nothing to offer but blood, toil, tears, and sweat." Churchill went on to say:

We have before us an ordeal of the most grievous kind. We have before us many, many long months of struggle and of suffering. You ask, what is our policy? I will say: It is to wage war, by sea, land, and air, with all our might and with all the strength that God can give us; to wage war against a monstrous tyranny never surpassed in the dark, lamentable catalogue of human crime. That is our policy. You ask, what is our aim? I can answer in one word: It is victory, victory at all costs, victory in spite of all terror, victory, however long and hard the road may be; for without victory, there is no survival.

Inspiring words, and Parliament voted unanimous support for the new Government, but privately, in discussions in the War Cabinet, came frank admissions that the situation was grim. Britain itself was in peril, in greater peril than it had ever been during the previous war. At Lord Halifax's suggestion, Churchill cabled Benito Mussolini, leader of neutral Italy, with a plea to maintain friendly relations, coupled with a vow that Britain would go on fighting no matter the circumstances, and expressed hope for assistance from the United States.

He also sent a cable to U.S. President Franklin Roosevelt with the same theme: Britain would fight on, no matter what, but he warned that if the United States remained aloof from the conflict for too long, in his words, "You may have a completely subjugated Nazified Europe established with astonishing swiftness."

A few days later, Churchill inquired of Roosevelt the possibility of Britain taking possession of some fifty inactive US Navy destroyers, leftovers from the last war. Roosevelt's advisers counseled against the idea, out of fear that Britain would soon be defeated, and the destroyers would fall into the hands of Nazi Germany. US Ambassador Joseph Kennedy advised the State Department that, whatever Churchill's rhetoric, it was likely Britain would soon seek a negotiated settlement with Germany.

As prime minister, Churchill found himself in an awkward political position. He was not the Leader of his own Party, and it's questionable whether at this moment he could have won a

majority in a Tory leadership vote. His support among Labour and the Liberals depended on what their leaders made of him. At the moment, he was prime minister the simple reason that he was the only person acceptable to the leaders of all three parties. How long he remained prime minister would depend on how long he remained acceptable, and whether he could earn the loyalty of their parties, and the loyalty of the nation.

Nine days after becoming prime minister, Churchill made his first radio address to the nation since assuming the office. He spoke of “groups of shattered states and bludgeoned races: the Czechs, the Poles, the Norwegians, the Danes, the Dutch, the Belgians—upon all of whom the long night of barbarism will descend, unbroken even by a star of hope, unless we conquer, as conquer we must; as conquer we shall.”

The speech inspired all who heard it; even Stanley Baldwin wrote Churchill a letter of praise.

But wait a minute. I know the question you’re asking. *In that litany of shattered states, did I hear Churchill include the Dutch and the Belgians?*

You did, for in the time Britain went through its Cabinet shakeup, triggered by reversals in Norway, Germany began its offensive in the West, and the situation was deteriorating from fearful to direful to terrifying.

But that is the topic of next week’s episode. We’ll have to stop here for today. I thank you for listening, and I’d especially like to thank Robert for his kind donation, and thank you to David for becoming a patron of the podcast. Donors and patrons like Robert and David 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 turn to the Continent and observe the execution, at last, of the German Western offensive. Plan Yellow, next week, here, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

Oh, and one more thing. In the United States, there was significant resistance to aiding Britain, even within the Roosevelt Administration. Roosevelt went to Congress for an increased military appropriation, but there were those who argued that America’s arms should be saved for

America's defense. Nevertheless, US military stores were inventoried in an effort to identify surplus material that could be sold to the British.

Adolf Hitler well understood the need to keep the United States out of the war. In June, he gave an interview to a reporter for the Hearst newspapers, and set aside his usual anti-American rhetoric to praise America's policy of non-interference in European affairs and endorse the Monroe Doctrine. "America for the Americans and Europe for the Europeans—that is my motto," the *Führer* promised.

[music: Closing Theme]