

# The History of the Twentieth Century

## Episode 324

### “Plan Red”

#### Transcript

[music: Fanfare]

The German left hook had destroyed the Allied armies in Belgium. The fall of Paris was now inevitable. Was the fall of France?

Welcome to *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

[music: Opening War Theme]

Episode 324. Plan Red.

Last time, I described to you Operation Dynamo, the evacuation of the British Expeditionary Force from Dunkirk. Today, we're going to look at what came next, and to begin, I invite you to consider the position of the recently appointed commander of the French Army, General Maxime Weygand.

The situation is dire. The French units that charged into Belgium to meet the Germans have been destroyed; the soldiers have either been taken prisoner or are in England; either way, their arms and equipment are gone. They represented close to half of the French Army, about fifty divisions, and the better half at that.

What remained amounts to 64 French Army divisions, plus a single British division that avoided the encirclement. With these units, Weygand had to organize a defensive line from Sedan to the English Channel, a distance of nearly a thousand kilometers, against an advancing army of 142 divisions. The French soldiers were in a state of shock over what had befallen them; the Germans were drunk with success and setting their sights on Paris. Overhead, the RAF was gone and the Luftwaffe dominated the sky. The screams of a Junkers 87 dive bomber delivering its munitions to a target on the ground was the very last sound heard by too many young French soldiers, while the survivors learned to fear that awful mechanical cry.

Um, sound effect warning, I guess...

[sound effect: Ju-87 siren]

On the plus side, the French had also learned their artillery guns and their tanks were superior to German weapons. They were beginning to learn how to use this to their advantage, though they had far fewer guns and tanks than before.

Given France's difficult position, the decision was made also to evacuate Narvik in Norway. The crucial port had been taken by British, French, and Polish forces just days earlier, but now they were needed in France. On June 7, the Royal Navy heavy cruiser HMS *Devonshire* transported the Norwegian Royal Family and government from Tromsø to London. *Devonshire* escaped attack that day, but the German battlecruisers *Scharnhorst* and *Gneisenau* sank the nearby British aircraft carrier HMS *Glorious* and its two escorting destroyers, for a loss of more than 1500 sailors. As was the case with Poland and the Netherlands, Norway would never capitulate to the Germans, and its government would continue to operate in exile.

The project of organizing the defense of France was further hampered by the flood of weary, frightened refugees flowing west and south into France from the front lines, an estimated eight million of them. First came columns of automobiles with household goods tied to their roofs; behind them came refugees on foot, leading horse-drawn carts, and behind them, carts drawn by people who didn't have horses, or those carrying their last possessions on their own backs.

It would be uncharitable to compare these desperate people to a swarm of locusts, but their impact on the French countryside was not much different. The first wave of motor vehicles drained all the gas stations dry, until cars had to be abandoned by the side of the road. The later waves consumed all the hay and forage and stripped every shop of every last morsel of food, down to the last baguette.

On June 5, the day after the Dunkirk evacuation ended, Hitler ordered the beginning of the second phase of the Western offensive, which aimed to finish off the Allies, codenamed Plan Red. He told his generals it would only take four to six weeks. They were skeptical, but Hitler's estimate proved too conservative, if anything.

Meanwhile, in Rome, Benito Mussolini was getting restless. He told his son-in-law, the foreign minister, "It is humiliating to remain with our hands folded while others write history." In May, after the German offensive in the West began, Mussolini's government told the Germans that Italy would enter the war on June 5. This news was received with little enthusiasm in Berlin. Everyone from Hitler on down saw the offer as a transparent attempt by Mussolini to claim a share of the credit for a victory won entirely by Germany. Hitler asked Mussolini to delay the declaration for five days; Mussolini agreed.

In the first days of Plan Red, the German advance was slow and costly. It was the same story as in the last war: the advancing front line drew the Germans farther and farther from their sources of supply and reinforcement, while bringing the French nearer to theirs. Some French soldiers fought bravely, putting their superior arms to good use, but there was still the Luftwaffe to contend with. Other French units were crumbling, as their soldiers gave in to despair. There are

reports of French soldiers discarding their rifles, abandoning their positions, and heading off to the nearest town, where they would get drunk and wait for baffled German soldiers to come and take them prisoner.

French Colonel Charles de Gaulle, who seemed like the only officer in the French Army who knew the proper way to use tanks, was promoted to general on June 1; on June 5, the day Plan Red began, Prime Minister Reynaud appointed him to the government as an under-secretary in the war ministry, tasked with coordinating the French military with the British. General Weygand, who was 73 years old, opposed the appointment on the grounds that the 49-year-old de Gaulle was “a mere child.” De Gaulle was immediately dispatched to Britain to ask Churchill’s government that the whole of the RAF be committed to the battle in France. Churchill refused, pointing out that ten fighter squadrons were already serving in France and that British aircraft production could barely keep pace with their losses even now; the rest of the RAF had to be held in reserve for the defense of Britain itself. De Gaulle told Churchill that personally he fully understood the British position. The French relocated their own air force to North Africa, ceding control of French skies to the Luftwaffe.

On June 10, Churchill flew to France to consult with the French government. This was also the day Italy joined the fight, declaring war on France and Britain. And on this day, the French government evacuated Paris and relocated to the Loire River valley. Paris was declared an open city. Winston Churchill received news of these developments as he was preparing to board his flight; his plane had to be redirected to the new location of the French government. His reaction was reportedly, and I quote, “What the hell?”

The following day, Churchill met with the leaders of the French government and found them divided. Prime Minister Reynaud and Charles de Gaulle were all for continuing the fight, even if a substantial portion of France, including Paris, were occupied by the Germans. On the other hand, Deputy Prime Minister Pétain and General Weygand were convinced the battle for France was over; it was time to ask the Germans for terms.

Churchill tried to convince the French to stay in the fight. He told them a Canadian division would be arriving in France that very day, and the first of the evacuated British divisions would be back on French soil next week. A second division was ready except that it lacked artillery guns. If the French had any to spare, it could also return to the fight. And don’t forget, the Allied units recently withdrawn from Narvik were on their way.

The naysayers were not convinced. Churchill promised that if France could hold out until spring of 1941, Britain would by then be able to provide 25 divisions, which would be made available to the French military command to use as they saw fit. Weygand told him there was no hope of holding out that long. Well then, Churchill said, give it another four weeks and see how many divisions Britain and Canada could supply by then. Weygand told him that the fight was no longer a matter of weeks or days, but of hours.

Churchill would not give up. He proposed a determined defense of Paris, one that would cost the Germans weeks and thousands of lives to overcome. The French leaders regarded this suggestion with horror. Pétain told him that turning Paris into a ruin would accomplish nothing. In fact, Paris had already been declared an open city, meaning that the French pledged not to station troops there or to defend it. Under international law, that also meant the Germans were free to occupy the city, but not attack it.

Next, Churchill spoke of a nationwide French guerilla resistance, supported by Britain, that would grind down the German war machine. Pétain could hardly believe what he was hearing. That would mean the destruction of the entire country. Bizarrely, Pétain and Weygand spoke of the danger that the Communists would take advantage of widespread guerilla warfare to begin their own uprising.

Churchill had one last proposal: a redoubt in Brittany. The remaining French Army would retire to the peninsula and hold it against the Germans, with assistance from Britain and with the addition of French colonial forces, until enough British and Canadian troops could be sent to turn the tide. Only de Gaulle showed any interest in that idea.

Churchill returned to Britain on the 12<sup>th</sup>, but was back in France on the 13<sup>th</sup> at Reynaud's request. In the interim, the French government had moved to Tours, and that was where Churchill met them. Reynaud told Churchill that his government would soon ask the British government to release it from the pledge not to enter into a separate peace with Germany. Churchill begged Reynaud to put off any such talk for as long as possible. Even another week would help. Churchill dangled the prospect of the United States entering the war and Reynaud agreed to wait. Churchill spoke of the French government and Navy relocating to North Africa and continuing the war from there, even if metropolitan France should fall.

Later in the day, the French Cabinet met. General Weygand, though he was not a member of the government, demanded that France ask for an armistice. He told the Cabinet that Communists had already taken control of Paris. The interior minister, Georges Mandel, who was Jewish and was one of the Cabinet's most ardent supporters of continuing the war, telephoned the prefect of police in Paris and quickly determined this was not true. Then Marshal Pétain, the deputy prime minister, spoke. He also demanded an armistice and rejected any suggestion that the French government leave the country, telling the Cabinet that even if they left, "I will remain with the French people to share their pain and suffering."

In other words, Pétain had declared that, no matter what the rest of the Cabinet might decide, he intended to negotiate with the Germans. This might have been a good time for Reynaud to fire him; instead, the Cabinet agreed only to relocate once again, this time to Bordeaux, but otherwise to wait for a response from the American government before taking any final decision.

So what was going on in Paris? Well, for starters, the city's Standard Oil Company refinery was in flames, at the request of the French military and the US government, so that it would not fall

into German hands. The first German soldiers entered Paris, just a few, advancing under a flag of truce, but they were fired upon. An angry German commander ordered an artillery barrage on the city in retaliation, but he was talked out of it by the US ambassador, William Bullitt, whom we've met before on the podcast. Bullitt negotiated the peaceful transfer of control to the German Army, who moved into Paris early in the morning of the 14<sup>th</sup>. German loudspeaker trucks patrolled the city, advising Parisians to remain indoors. By the end of the day, a German flag, complete with swastika, was flying from the top of the Arc de Triomphe and German soldiers were parading down the Champs Élysées and the Avenue Foch, named after the military commander who had led France to victory in 1918.

British general Alan Brooke landed at Cherbourg on the 13<sup>th</sup>, to oversee the return of the British Expeditionary Force to France. He met with Weygand, the French commander, the next day, the day Paris fell. Brooke was anticipating bad news, but everything he saw and heard exceeded his most pessimistic expectations. He contacted his superiors in London, in the Army and the war ministry, to report that the situation was hopeless, that Churchill's idea of setting up an Allied redoubt in Brittany was unworkable and he recommended withdrawing the BEF.

His superiors in the Army got the message and suspended the transfer of British troops to France. Plans were developed to evacuate the British Army once again, this time from ports in Normandy and Brittany. But Winston Churchill, just returned from France, rejected any talk of withdrawal. There followed a long and difficult phone call between the prime minister and General Brooke. Churchill emphasized to Brooke the importance of raising French morale and keeping France in the fight. Brooke told him that sending the British Army back to France would be "throwing away good troops to no avail." Churchill accused him of cowardice. An angry Brooke retorted that he understood the desire to make the French feel better, but, it is impossible to make a corpse feel anything, and the French Army was, for all intents and purposes, dead. Churchill relented and agreed to the withdrawal of the British Army.

The next day was June 15, a Saturday. In Bordeaux, where the French government was now located, Prime Minister Reynaud presided over a Cabinet meeting. If members of the Cabinet were opposed to the idea of the government withdrawing to North Africa to continue the resistance from there, he suggested France follow the lead of the Dutch; that is, the Army would surrender, but the French Navy would continue to resist, supported by France's colonial empire and its troops. Pétain was initially supportive of this idea, but General Weygand persuaded him that it would be shameful.

On Sunday, June 16, Deputy Prime Minister Pétain told the Cabinet that if France did not ask for an armistice, he would resign. This was a serious threat, as Pétain's resignation would likely bring down the government. Pétain was persuaded to wait until hearing President Roosevelt's reply to French requests for assistance. In London, the British government was informed that France was on the brink. The British War Cabinet voted to release France from its pledge not to

seek a separate peace, subject to one qualification: that French Navy ships relocate to British ports, where they could be kept out of reach of the Germans.

The request was perfectly understandable. If France left the war, Britain would be fighting alone, protected from Continental invasion, as always, by the English Channel. But the ships of the French Navy, combined with the German Navy and the power of the Luftwaffe might very well negate the British advantage and leave England open to invasion. Of course, there was no mechanism by which the British could force French compliance with this demand, and in Bordeaux, the French government rejected it. Admiral Jean Darlan, commander of the French Navy, argued that the fleet must be kept in its home waters to defend France and its colonial empire.

Even as these discussions were under way, so was the newest battleship in the French Navy, *Richelieu*. Work on this ship had just been completed yesterday, the 15<sup>th</sup>, in Brest. At dawn on Sunday the 16<sup>th</sup>, *Richelieu* fled Brest to avoid capture by the Germans. There had not been time to fully arm the guns or to bring a full crew aboard, but there was time to load *Richelieu* with the French gold reserve, which had been removed from Paris before the Germans got there. The Luftwaffe attacked *Richelieu*, unsuccessfully. The battleship and the French gold reserve, would escape to the port of Dakar in French West Africa.

In London, a member of the French mission to Britain came up with a wild card of an idea: the British and French governments would declare their two nations merged, into a Franco-British Union. The governments and militaries of the two nations would be combined; all British subjects would become citizens of France and vice versa.

This was a dramatic proposal, perhaps a desperate one. The advantage it offered was that a German occupation of metropolitan France would not change the war situation. The Franco-British Union would still be at war with Germany. The French Army and Navy could be evacuated to Britain to continue the fight. Despite its radical nature, the proposal was approved by the British War Cabinet with minimal debate. As soon as it was approved, Winston Churchill and Charles de Gaulle telephoned Reynaud to break the news. If the French Cabinet agreed, they would all meet together tomorrow in Brittany as the cabinet of the new Franco-British Union.

Reynaud needed to hear some good news. President Roosevelt's reply had just come through from Washington. While it included vague assurances of American support for France, there were no concrete specifics, and Roosevelt's message warned that military aid to France would require Congressional approval.

Reynaud convened a Cabinet meeting at 5:00 and announced the British proposal. To his shock and disappointment, most of his ministers opposed the idea. It was a British trick to steal France's colonies. It would reduce France to the status of a Dominion, like Canada or Ireland. Pétain dismissed it as "marriage with a corpse."

All this unexpected resistance crushed what was left of Reynaud's spirit. He went to the French President, offered his resignation, and recommended that Marshal Pétain be appointed to form a government that would negotiate an armistice. The President was unhappy with Reynaud's suggestion, but followed it. Just before midnight, Prime Minister Pétain convened his new cabinet, which voted to ask the Germans for armistice terms.

[music: Debussy, *Reverie*]

Charles de Gaulle had flown back to Bordeaux that same night and arrived to discover that France had a new government and he was himself no longer a minister. Because he was an active duty military officer, de Gaulle was subject to orders from the new government or from General Weygand. Knowing this, he strove to keep his return to France secret until he had a chance to talk to Reynaud, telling him he intended to return to Britain and continue the struggle against Germany. Reynaud paid him 100,000 francs from a secret government fund.

They tried to get Georges Mandel, the French interior minister who had been an outspoken voice in the Cabinet for continuing the fight, to leave for Britain with de Gaulle, but Mandel refused. He was Jewish and he feared that if he fled the country while people like Pétain and Weygand remained, he would seem a coward, a Jewish traitor abandoning France in its hour of need. So he stayed. That decision cost him his life. He would be arrested by the new French government and ultimately executed, in July 1944.

De Gaulle flew back to London the following morning, even as Prime Minister Pétain gave a radio address to the French nation, in which he announced that the government was requesting an armistice.

Also that day, June 17, the British Army began evacuating France for a second time, known as Operation Aerial. That afternoon, the Cunard ocean liner *Lancastria*, requisitioned by the British government, was returning to England. *Lancastria*, built to carry 2,200 passengers, was carrying more than 6,000 British soldiers and civilians home from France when it was attacked by a squadron of Luftwaffe bombers. The ship was struck multiple times and sank in about twenty minutes. German fighters strafed survivors in the water and rescuers attempting to reach them.

About 2,400 were rescued. The exact number who died in the sinking is unknown, as no one knows how many were aboard, but estimates of the death toll range from 4,000 to 7,000, making the sinking of *Lancastria* the worst disaster in British maritime history. News of the sinking was kept from the public; Winston Churchill remarked that the British public was getting enough bad news for one day.

With Charles de Gaulle back in England, Churchill approved some government funds to be spent on a public relations project to build de Gaulle's image. On June 18, at 10:00 at night, the BBC broadcast a four-minute speech by General de Gaulle. It was short and it was late and not many people heard that original broadcast, but a lot of people heard about it; it was one of the most

important and influential speeches of the war. In it, de Gaulle told his country that the fighting was not over. France had fallen, but this was a world war. France had its Empire, its alliance with Britain, and its friendship with the United States. He vowed the fight would go on and invited French people, military and civilian, to come to Britain and be a part of it. “Whatever happens,” he concluded, “the flame of French resistance must not be extinguished and will not be extinguished.”

De Gaulle had no legal authority to give this speech or make this declaration. Arguably, he was guilty of mutiny at least, and maybe treason. But from this speech and around Charles de Gaulle would develop a competing French government. If the actual French government in Bordeaux would not go into exile to continue the fight, then this alternative government would, alongside the governments now of Poland, Norway, Luxembourg, the Netherlands and Belgium.

It was a day for landmark speeches. Earlier that evening, Winston Churchill gave a speech of his own. Two weeks precisely after giving the “Never Surrender” speech, in the aftermath of the Dunkirk evacuation, the second-greatest of his career, he gave the greatest speech of his career, once before the House of Commons that afternoon, and then repeated that evening over the BBC. In it he said:

*The Battle of France is over. The Battle of Britain is about to begin...Hitler knows he will have to break us in this island or lose the war. If we can stand up to him, all Europe may be free and the life of the world may move forward into broad, sunlit uplands. But if we fail, then the whole world, including the United States, including all that we have known and cared for, will sink into the abyss of a new Dark Age, made more sinister, and perhaps more protracted, by the lights of perverted science. Let us therefore brace ourselves to our duties, and so bear ourselves that, if the British Empire and its Commonwealth last for a thousand years, men will still say, “This was their finest hour.”*

Forgive me. I can’t read it aloud without getting choked up.

It was a long, hard day for Churchill, and he was worn out. Those who heard the speech both times, in the Commons and over the wireless, lamented that the second time, his delivery was far inferior.

It didn’t matter. The words struck a chord with the British public. They touched something deep in the British soul.

That same day, June 18, Adolf Hitler met with Benito Mussolini in Munich to discuss the armistice terms to be offered to France. Mussolini came into the meeting with a list of Italian demands: Italy wanted France to cede Nice, Savoy, the island of Corsica, and Tunisia: all of Italy’s longstanding territorial grievances against France. And how about a piece of the French Navy?



Hitler rejected every one of these demands. He would not even allow an Italian representative at the armistice meeting.

The inescapable fact was that the Italian offensive against France in the south, along their mutual border, had failed to contribute meaningfully to the French collapse, despite a substantial Italian numerical advantage. Italian forces had advanced a few kilometers into French territory, then got bogged down in inconclusive combat with the French Army. The Italians lost more than 600 soldiers killed and nearly 5,000 wounded. Many of the Italian wounded were victims of frostbite while fighting under Alpine conditions. French losses were far smaller.

Mussolini found it humiliating. It was becoming increasingly difficult to maintain even the pretense that the Axis was an alliance of equals.

Hitler wanted a relatively moderate armistice agreement. Make the terms too harsh, and the French might go de Gaulle on him and decide to keep up the fight. Germany lacked the military means to secure the French Navy or France's colonial territories. If these could not be brought under German control—and they could not be—then the next best thing would be to keep them out of the hands of the British. The way to achieve this was to allow an independent French government to continue, albeit one whose actions would be sharply circumscribed by Germany.

To begin with, about 60% of French territory would be subjected to German military occupation, including Paris and the full French coastline along the English Channel and the Atlantic Ocean all the way to the Spanish border. French ports would be made available to the German Navy.

Paris would remain officially the capital of France, although the French government would be seated in the city of Vichy, a resort town previously known principally for its hot springs; one of those places rich people used to go to “take the cure,” as they used to say. But from now on, the name Vichy will most often be associated with the French government that sat here during the war.

Some civilian government functions would be maintained by the French government even in the occupied zone, and the French government would reimburse Germany the cost of the German occupation. The armistice agreement set the exchange rate between francs and Reichsmarks at 20:1, meaning France would be paying the German government 400 million francs per day. By the way, the prewar exchange rate was about 15:1. France would be permitted to maintain an army of 100,000 soldiers—the same number the Treaty of Versailles had allowed Germany. On the plus side, France would retain the French Navy and full control over its colonial possessions. Hitler guessed those were two points on which the French would not yield, and he was probably right about that.

Though the terms might have been moderate, Hitler chose the venue for the armistice signing ceremony deliberately to rub the noses of the French in their own humiliation. The ceremony would take place at precisely the same location in the Compiègne Forest as had the armistice

ceremony of November 11, 1918, which we talked about in episode 170. And not only at that location, but in the very same railroad carriage that was used in 1918. The carriage was kept in a museum near to, but not exactly at, the location of the 1918 ceremony. Hitler had the carriage placed on the same spot on the tracks prior to his arrival on June 21.

When Hitler arrived that afternoon, he and his entourage paused for a moment before the memorial stone the French had erected at the scene and read the engraved words: *Here on the eleventh of November 1918 succumbed the criminal pride of the German Reich, vanquished by the free peoples which it tried to enslave.*

Hitler and his entourage took their places in the railroad car. Hitler sat in the same chair in which Marshal Foch had sat. Then arrived the French delegation, led by General Charles Huntziger. The Germans stood when the French entered the car, then everyone sat.

General Wilhelm Keitel, commander of the Wehrmacht, read out the preamble of the German armistice terms, which described the choice of location as “an act of restorative justice.” Once the reading of the preamble was completed, Hitler got up and left the car, leaving it to Keitel to read out the actual armistice terms. Huntziger protested that the terms being offered France were far harsher than the ones the Germans had received in 1918. Keitel told him the terms were non-negotiable; take them or leave them.

Even so, it took another day of discussion to hammer out the details. The armistice was signed around sunset the following day, June 22. It took effect on June 25.

The armistice did not cover the question of custody of French prisoners-of-war; there were nearly two million of those. This was just the armistice agreement; it was generally understood that a final treaty ending the war would be signed later. Yes, the British were still officially at war with Germany, but it was widely believed in Germany and in France that despite Mr. Churchill’s rhetorical bluster, Britain would have no choice but to come to terms with Germany sooner or later, and most likely sooner.

We’ll have to stop there for today. I thank you for listening, and I’d especially like to thank David for his kind donation, and thank you to Phillip for becoming a patron of the podcast. Donors and patrons like David and Philip 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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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.

Here's some exciting news: I've been approached by a travel company called TrovaTrip about partnering to create a *History of the Twentieth Century* tour. We're still in the early stages of planning this and nothing is set in stone yet, not even where this tour would be going. My first thought was Belgium, because Belgium has historical sites related to both the First and Second World Wars. It also has a Congo museum. And beer.

But again, nothing is final yet. We've put together a survey to help gauge interest, so if the idea of a History of the Twentieth Century tour interests you, please take a few minutes to fill out the survey form and let us know. Does Belgium sound like a good idea to you? Or do you have a different suggestion? There's a part of the survey where you can express your opinion on that as well. The survey is only to gauge interest; it does not obligate you to anything. The link to the survey is on the podcast website, [historyofthetwentiethcentury.com](http://historyofthetwentiethcentury.com). The survey period is just two weeks, so if you're interested, don't delay. Fill out the survey form and let us know.

And I hope you'll join me next week, here on *The History of the Twentieth Century*, as we examine the reverberations following the French collapse. After the Fall, next week, here, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

Oh, and one more thing. After the armistice ceremony, Hitler ordered the railway car moved to Berlin, where it was put on display alongside fragments of the monument stone, which had been broken up. As for the armistice site, which the French call the Glade of the Armistice, Hitler ordered that razed, especially the monument that displayed a sculpture of a German eagle lying dead, impaled by a sword. Only the statue of Ferdinand Foch was allowed to stand. Hitler felt satisfied with the image of Marshal Foch towering over...an empty field.

In 1944, the railroad carriage was moved out of Berlin for its protection. In 1945, it was set on fire by the SS to prevent its capture by the United States Army.

After the war, the Glade of the Armistice was restored by the French, with German POWs conscripted for some of the labor. The manufacturer of the original carriage donated another car manufactured at the same time and identical to the first, and in our time, this car is now on display at the Glade of the Armistice, along with a few metal fragments salvaged from the original.

[music: Closing War Theme]

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