

The History of the Twentieth Century

Episode 325

“After the Fall”

Transcript

[music: Fanfare]

After the French armistice was signed, the French carried on as best they could. French colonial governments tried to work out what to do, while everyone waited for the inevitable British capitulation.

But the British were not ready to make nice.

Welcome to *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

[music: Opening War Theme]

Episode 325. After the Fall.

The armistice and the end of fighting in France came as a relief to most French people. In Paris, during the weeks of the German offensive, the radio kept claiming French victories, but the streams of refugees flowing into Paris from the northeast told a different story. The first to come were Belgians. Then came French refugees, from Hainaut and Sedan, from St. Quentin and Arras, from Abbeville and Amiens, places increasingly near to Paris itself.

Germany's Radio Stuttgart broadcast bulletins in French for French consumption, and it was crowing about German victories. Many French soon realized that Radio Stuttgart's account of the war was closer to the truth than was their own government's, and more and more people tuned in. Radio Stuttgart took to reading out long lists of the names of French soldiers taken prisoner, which made it required listening for any French family who had lost contact with a loved one in uniform. That was a lot of French families.

The French government denied rumors it would be evacuating Paris right up to the day it evacuated Paris. As the German Army drew nearer, French newspapers reminded everyone of every accusation made against German soldiers in the last war, recounting lurid tales of barbarism, of torturing men, raping women, and bayoneting children for sport.

Hundreds of thousands of Parisians became refugees themselves in the final days, fleeing Paris by car if they could, on foot if they couldn't. Family members lost touch with each other in the chaos. Tens of thousands of children were separated from their parents, either accidentally, or because desperate parents unable to flee themselves begged other refugees to take their children

with them. Train stations were mobbed. SNCF, France's state-owned rail company, ran as many trains out of Paris as they could, and even at that, every car was jammed full of people, far in excess of capacity. The cars were locked and made no stops for hours, until they were far away from Paris, their passengers lacking access to food, water, or toilets.

Paris was declared an open city, and the Germans marched in peacefully, except for that one incident I mentioned last time, in which someone took a few shots at German soldiers bearing a flag of truce. The German loudspeaker trucks told Parisians to stay indoors, but as the soldiers arrived, some looked out their windows, or opened the front door and stood on the porch. A few brave souls came out onto the sidewalk to watch the Germans march past. No one shot at them. No harm befell them.

The healthy, well-fed, and well-disciplined German soldiers with their shining young faces were as far removed from the brutish hordes of French propaganda as could have been imagined. In fact, they were cleaner and better-behaved than were the French soldiers who had fled from them. Parisians were surprised at how unexpectedly polite and courteous the German soldiers were. When German soldiers visited a Parisian shop, they did not loot it. They stood in line and waited their turn, politely, and paid for what they took.

France's collapse had been so swift, it had left the French stunned. In truth, the Germans were pretty stunned, too. The Wehrmacht briefly considered a triumphal military parade through Paris, perhaps with the *Führer* in the reviewing stand, but dropped this idea when someone pointed out that such a display would make a tempting target for RAF bombers. The parade would have to wait until after the British capitulated.

Because the city had seen no fighting, it was undamaged. Gas, water, and electric services were uninterrupted. The Métro still ran, albeit on a reduced schedule. Gradually, the shops began to reopen. Those that had remained closed because their owners had fled the city had their inventory confiscated by Parisian authorities and sold to the public.

Three days after the occupation of Paris, Philippe Pétain, now the French prime minister, announced that the French government would seek an armistice, news that shocked France all over again. I already described to you the terms of the armistice; France, like Denmark, but unlike Poland, Norway, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, or Belgium, would be able to keep its own government, although more than half the country, including Paris, would become a military occupation zone administered by the Wehrmacht. French police and other government employees in the occupied zone would remain at their posts, but were now required to take orders from the German military, which greatly benefited the Germans by sparing them the cost of policing France themselves.

Another benefit the Germans got was the exchange rate between French and German currency imposed by the armistice, which substantially favored the Germans. Those oh-so-polite German

soldiers didn't loot French shops overtly. They used their overpowered Reichsmarks to buy up food and clothing and all manner of French consumer goods at very attractive prices.

French industry retooled to serve German needs. French stockpiles of arms and supplies and raw materials were confiscated by the Wehrmacht. Food rationing allotted the French half the meat German citizens were permitted. This, it was explained, was compensation for the starvation Germans had endured in the last war, but the German authorities promised that it would last only until the British were subdued. So far, every nation that had gone to war against Germany had lasted no longer than a few weeks; it was widely assumed in Germany and in France that the British would fare no better and that the war would be over by autumn.

Nearly two million French were prisoners of war in Germany. The armistice agreement said nothing about them. They would remain prisoners until the war was over. Hopefully, that would be soon.

You may be wondering about the fate of Alsace-Lorraine, that territory that went from French to German to French again over the space of fifty years. Germany did not formally annex Alsace-Lorraine, which would have violated the armistice agreement, but administration of those lands was assigned to German government entities. The speaking of French was banned and young men in the region were conscripted into the German Army, meaning that Alsace-Lorraine was *de facto* German territory, even if not *de jure*.

It was up to the French government to choose where it would be seated. Paris was still officially the capital; it lay in the German occupation zone, which didn't necessarily mean the government could not return there, but the Pétain government chose instead to relocate to the resort town of Vichy. Vichy had plenty of hotel space, which was going unused because of the war and was therefore available as temporary government offices. The Pétain government spurned larger cities in the unoccupied zone, like Toulouse and Lyon, because those places were home to many liberals and leftists.

Most of the world recognized the Pétain government as the legal government of France, including the Vatican, Switzerland, China, the Soviet Union and the United States. Even Canada and Australia maintained diplomatic relations with the government in Vichy. As for Britain, well, let me come back to that.

Hardly anyone in France heard Charles de Gaulle's BBC broadcast of June 18, in which he called on the French to continue the fight against Germany. As word of de Gaulle's declaration gradually spread throughout France, the most common reaction was something like, "If *you* want to keep on fighting the Germans, be our guest." Most of the French military personnel in Britain at the time of the armistice elected to return home rather than join de Gaulle, who was a minor military and political figure, and not well known. In fact, it was widely believed that "de Gaulle" was a pseudonym, a *nom de guerre* chosen by this obscure Army officer because it presented a

patriotic evocation of the ancient name for France, that is, Gaul. That a self-appointed French Resistance leader would actually be named “de Gaulle” seemed too cute to be plausible.

At first, the governments of all of France’s colonial possessions remained loyal to the government in Vichy. So long as there was an active government in France, supported by the National Assembly, there seemed no reason to question its legitimacy. Nearer colonial possessions in Africa and the Americas would remain loyal to the government in France, for now. But the call of de Gaulle began to elicit doubts. These doubts first took root in the French territories most distant from Metropolitan France, that is, in France’s colonial holdings in India, including the enclave around Pondicherry, and in French Polynesia in the South Pacific.

The Governor General of French Indochina was persuaded to support de Gaulle, but that merely led to his quickly being relieved of his position. Japan put pressure on Indochina to embargo trade across its border with China, which was virtually the only route left through which China could receive imports and military supplies from overseas; in September, French colonial officials in Indochina agreed to close the border. They also agreed to allow Japanese soldiers and air units to be stationed around Hanoi to enforce the embargo.

The sight of the French government in Indochina caving in to the Japanese encouraged neighboring Thailand to invade Indochina in October, seeking to recover territory France had seized from it in the 19th century on behalf of Laos and Cambodia. After four months of hostilities, Japan brokered an agreement which ceded to Thailand portions of the Laotian provinces of Champassak, Saiyabuli, and Luang Prabang and the Cambodian provinces of Battambang, Pailin, Siem Reap, Banteay Meanchey, Oddar Meanchey, and Preah Vihear. That sound you hear is my teeth grinding, because these ceded Cambodian provinces included major Khmer cultural monuments, including the most famous Cambodian cultural treasure, the temple complex of Angkor Wat, which is to Cambodia what the pyramids are to Egypt. Did I ever mention that my family is part Cambodian? I’ll tell you about that some time.

The Governor General of French India declared those territories would continue the struggle against Germany. In the South Pacific, the New Hebrides would declare for the Free French, bringing New Caledonia along with them, and in a September referendum in Tahiti, voters there chose overwhelmingly to support Free France. The loss of these Pacific island territories seemed insignificant in 1940, but by 1942, they would be playing a critical role in the war against Japan. But I’m getting ahead of myself.

[music: Liszt, *Fantaisie romantique sur deux mélodies suisses*]

On June 23, 1940, after the armistice was signed, but before it went into effect, Adolf Hitler visited Paris for the first and only time in his life. Accompanying him was his favorite architect, Albert Speer. Hitler’s visit was unannounced; he came early in the morning and only stayed three

hours, because the *Führer* did not want to draw gawking crowds and create a stir, as he put it. He was chauffeured around the city through empty streets on a sightseeing trip that included the Eiffel Tower, the Arc de Triomphe, the tomb of Napoleon, and the Opéra Garnier, a magnificent building Hitler had studied in his younger days as an art student. Later, Hitler discussed with Speer their plans to remake Berlin into a magnificent new capital, to be renamed Germania, a city that would rival or exceed Paris, a grand new capital Hitler planned to build, fit to serve as the seat of government for the grand new empire Hitler planned to build. Germania, projected to be completed by 1950, was to be Adolf Hitler's final triumph. This war was all but over, and as for the next one, the conquest of the Soviet Union, well, that same day Hitler told his Wehrmacht chief, Wilhelm Keitel, that after defeating France, "a campaign against Russia would be child's play."

On July 6, Hitler returned to Berlin for the first time in two months and enjoyed a reception reminiscent of a Roman triumph. His route from the train station to the Chancellery was covered with flower petals and lined with cheering Berliners who had turned out in the hundreds of thousands to welcome the *Führer* home. But the celebration was about much more than Hitler; it was an expression of German relief that the war against France had concluded much more quickly and at a far lower cost than most Germans had imagined. Estimates of the number of Germans soldiers likely to fall in a war against France ran into the millions; actual losses were less than 50,000. Germans had been led into this war reluctantly, but now the war seemed all but over and Germany remained virtually unscathed. What a difference from the previous war!

The German military leadership had been skeptical of Hitler's involvement in military matters, but his low opinion of the French military had been proven essentially correct, and his plan for an armored thrust through the Ardennes revealed as a work of genius. Their doubts dissipated and they embraced Hitler's leadership with enthusiasm.

Even Hitler's detractors—Germans at home and abroad who opposed the Nazis—despaired of ever breaking the Nazi grip on the German government. Even they had to admit that Hitler had accomplished the seemingly impossible, and the public loved him for it.

Predictably, all this acclaim went straight to Hitler's head. In the early days of his rule, he'd had to work around nervous bureaucrats in the German Foreign Office who had resisted his foreign policy moves, decisions that had led to the remilitarization of Germany, the *Anschluss*, and the breaking of the shackles of Versailles. He had seen the diplomatic map more clearly than officials who had spent their lives studying and practicing diplomacy. Now he had led the German military more ably than its most senior veteran military officers. Soon he would boast that "I am a commander against my will. I have only gotten involved in military affairs because there is no one better at it..."

There yet remained the problem of Britain. Most everyone figured a British capitulation was inevitable. Britain had gone to war to prevent the occupation of Poland; by now it was clear that

the Wehrmacht could go wherever it pleased in continental Europe and there was nothing the British could do about it. For his part, Hitler was reluctant to attempt a military conquest of Britain. Occupying Britain just didn't figure into his plans. Hitler saw the fall of Britain as a net negative for Germany, since in his view, it would trigger the dissolution of the British Empire. The Empire would be swallowed up and the Dominions forced to ally with other powers, probably the United States or Japan, and he saw that outcome as harmful to German interests. Better Britain's empire remain intact.

Meanwhile, in Westminster, Prime Minister Churchill and his government faced their own problems, chief of which was this now common perception that Britain could not and would not carry on the war against Germany alone. A close second was the matter of the French Navy. Though defeated, France maintained a substantial naval force in the western Mediterranean and controlled the North African coast from Tunis west through Algeria, past Spanish Morocco and on to the Atlantic. If the Germans or Italians got control of those ships, a combined Franco-Italian naval force might be strong enough to force its way into the Atlantic, where it could base at say, Casablanca, and together with the German Navy stationed in Norway, present a serious threat to the Royal Navy and to British shipping in the North Atlantic.

You'll recall that in the final days before the fall of France, French leaders had asked the British to be released from their pledge not to pursue a separate peace with Germany. Britain's final offer was to agree, on condition that the French Navy be sent to British ports or otherwise made inaccessible to the Axis. The French had never accepted that condition, although the French naval chief, Admiral Darlan, had given his personal assurance that France would maintain the independence of its fleet. But once it became clear that Darlan had been a voice for capitulation in the French government, Churchill no longer trusted his assurances. The armistice agreement stated that France would be permitted to retain control over its Navy, but the world by now had had all too many opportunities to gauge the value of German promises.

Much of the French fleet was at Toulon, on the Mediterranean coast of France, where it was protected by heavy shore batteries. Some French ships were docked in Britain or at Alexandria in Egypt. A substantial French naval force, including four dreadnought battleships and six destroyers, was docked at Mers-el-Kébir, in northwestern Algeria, near Oran. On the night of July 2, a Royal Navy force comprised of two battleships, the battlecruiser HMS *Hood*, the aircraft carrier *Ark Royal*, two cruisers, *Arathusa* and *Enterprise*, and eleven destroyers, under the command of Admiral Sir James Somerville, left Gibraltar under what Churchill himself had told Somerville would be "one of the most disagreeable and difficult tasks that a British Admiral has ever been faced with."

On the morning of July 3, the Royal Navy executed Operation Catapult. In Alexandria the British and French naval commanders cut a deal under which French ships would remain in the port until the end of the war. In Britain, French naval vessels docked in Plymouth and

Portsmouth were boarded and seized by British sailors. In one case, the crew of a French submarine resisted, leading to three British deaths and one French death.

But the main theatre of Operation Catapult was Mers-el-Kébir. To the French naval force docked there, commanded by Admiral Marcel Gensoul, Admiral Somerville sent an ultimatum offering the French four options. The first was to join with the Royal Navy and continue the fight against the Germans. The second was to bring their ships to a British port to be interned until the end of the war. The third was to sail the ships to a French port in the Western Hemisphere, naming Martinique in the West Indies as one possibility, or to the United States. The fourth was to scuttle their ships. If the French refused all four options, Somerville warned, he would use force to ensure the French ships could not fall into German or Italian hands. The deadline for an answer was 3:00 that afternoon.

Admiral Gensoul replied that the French Navy would never allow its ships to be taken by the Germans or Italians, but if the British attempted to use force, the French Navy would defend itself.

When the deadline grew near, Somerville ordered planes from *Ark Royal* to drop mines across the harbor entrance, hoping this would help persuade Gensoul. The two admirals did agree to extend the deadline to 5:30 to allow for further negotiation. Gensoul warned the British that to open fire on the French Navy was an act of war.

Meanwhile, the British Admiralty sent an urgent message to Somerville. Communication intercepts had revealed the French Navy was sending reinforcements to Mers-el-Kébir from Algiers and Toulon. Time was running out.

Just before 6:00 that afternoon, the British battleships opened fire with their main guns. The French battleships *Dunkerque* and *Provence* were seriously damaged. *Bretagne* suffered the worst. British shells found the French battleship's magazine, which exploded. *Bretagne* capsized and sank, taking just under a thousand French sailors to their deaths. About 300 French sailors aboard other ships were killed and a similar number wounded. The French battleship *Strasbourg* and three destroyers escaped to the open sea.

The French government in Vichy was outraged. Admiral Darlan ordered the French Navy to attack Royal Navy vessels on sight, but the Cabinet rescinded that order. They seriously considered declaring war on Britain, but judged that would be futile and settled for breaking diplomatic relations and ordering French bombers to attack the British naval base at Gibraltar in retaliation. That attack did only modest damage.

It has to be said that some of the resentment the new French government felt toward the British may have been based on embarrassment. The British in general and Churchill in particular pressed forward with a conflict that seemed impossible to win. Their dogged persistence cast the

capitulations of French leaders, including Pétain and Weygand and Darlan in a sharply unflattering light.

Churchill would later describe Operation Catapult as “the most hateful decision...in which I have ever been concerned.” But it had its upside. It made a powerful statement that Britain was determined to fight. Adolf Hitler had been contemplating making a public peace offer to Britain; after Operation Catapult, he changed his mind and determined to prosecute the war against the UK. We’ll talk more about that in future episodes. In Washington, President Roosevelt had had doubts about Britain’s willingness to continue the war, many of which were communicated to him by Joseph Kennedy, the US Ambassador to the Court of St. James. Now Roosevelt was convinced.

On July 10, a week after the attack, the French National Assembly met in Vichy. At the urging of former prime minister Pierre Laval, the combined Senate and Chamber of Deputies voted 569 to 20 to grant extraordinary powers to Marshal Pétain, including all legislative, judicial and diplomatic powers, as well as the power to write a new constitution.

The Third Republic was dead. In its place, Pétain declared himself *chef de l’Etat francais*, or chief of the French State and appointed Laval vice president. The French State would abandon the French revolutionary motto *Liberté, Egalité, Fraternité*, and replace it with the much more fascist-friendly *Travail, Famille, Patrie*, that is, Work, Family, Fatherland. Marianne, the French emblem of liberty, was replaced with recently canonized Joan of Arc who, of course, had fought the English. On the other hand, the revolutionary tricolor was retained as the French flag, and “La Marseillaise” as the national anthem.

Pétain and his government were made up of right-wing reactionaries who believed that France’s defeat could be blamed on the failings of the Third Republic and particularly on the leftist Popular Front government that had ruled from 1936-38. The Pétain government moved against those deemed “undesirables,” in other words, the usual targets: immigrants, leftists, Romani, Jews, and LGBT people. Many were interned in concentration camps. French laws banning anti-Semitism were repealed.

Food was in short supply in France, partly because Germany was confiscating a large portion of French agricultural production, but also for lack of labor and supplies to keep French farms operating. The official ration provided 1000 calories per day, which is not enough for a human being to survive. An active black market sprang up, where prices were high and anyone involved in buying or selling food was liable to arrest and prosecution. Women were discouraged from working and encouraged to have children. Abortion was made a capital crime.

[music: Liszt, *Fantaisie romantique sur deux mélodies suisses*]

So why did France fall? This is a complicated question with many answers. Let us begin by dismissing any talk that the French government and military were weak or cowardly. France fought hard, and went down fighting.

It would be more persuasive to argue that France was betrayed by leading figures in its government and military. Many French would argue that the Pétain government was unconstitutional and illegal. The events that led to French capitulation, which included the resistance of deputy prime minister Pétain, Army chief Weygand and Navy chief Darlan to evacuating the government from France and continuing the war from French colonies abroad and their push to ask the Germans for terms, acts which forced Paul Reynaud's resignation, amounted to something resembling a military coup against the Reynaud government.

Even so, one has to concede that France's desperate position on the battlefield made this military coup possible—if that's what it was. So why was the French military defeated so quickly?

Part of the explanation lies in the superiority of German tactics, and in particular in the shrewd use of modern weapons such as aircraft and tanks to support a style of mobile warfare that allowed German units to break through French lines and move rapidly in the French rear before forward French forces had time to react.

This style of warfare is known as combined arms. It emerged from the lessons learned at huge cost during the First World War and embraced technologies developed since then.

It is sometimes said that the Germans developed a new style of warfare dubbed *Blitzkrieg*, and that this new type of fighting caught Allied armies off guard and unprepared. This isn't exactly right. The word *Blitzkrieg* certainly sounds convincingly German—it comes from *Blitz*, meaning lightning and *Krieg*, meaning war, hence, lightning war—but this term was not coined by the German military and was not in common use in German military circles at the time. No one knows for certain where this word comes from, but it is entirely possible it was coined by *Time* magazine in the United States. It certainly fits with *Time*'s editorial predilection for coining new words.

German military strategy had embraced rapid movement to outmaneuver and encircle enemy forces rather than meeting them head on since before there was a Germany. The German military traditionally granted a great deal of discretion to lower-ranking officers on the front lines, allowing for a nimble fighting force that could quickly take advantage of opportunities as they appeared. This was the key to Prussia's defeat of the French Army in 1870 and was the basis of Germany's failed strategy against France in 1914.

“Blitzkrieg” is simply that time-honored German strategy with the addition of tanks and airplanes. You might argue that the French missed an opportunity to observe German tactics during the fall of Poland and learn from that experience. But the German war against Poland was waged with early German tanks, called Panzer Is and Panzer IIs. These were small, light vehicles

good mostly for training. The German Army that invaded France in 1940 had replaced these earlier tanks with the much more formidable Panzer IIIs, not previously seen in combat.

In general, Germany benefited from the timing of the war. It had begun its rearmament in 1933, so by 1940, the front line units of the Wehrmacht were widely equipped with the latest weapons. Britain and France, by contrast, had begun rearming more recently. In 1940, their front line units were equipped with a mix of older arms with just a sprinkling of the newer, more modern weapons that were beginning to come off the assembly lines.

In the air, Luftwaffe planes were, on average, superior to their opponents, and German pilots had gained valuable experience in Spain and Poland and Norway. The French had tanks, and their tanks were quite good, but the French made the mistake of distributing their tanks among infantry units, while the Germans created specialized armor formations. The decision to spread out the French tanks was based on the idea that the French military's role would be defensive, not offensive. But this also meant that French tanks could move no faster than the infantry formations they were a part of, so when the German armored formations sliced through the French rear, the French could not respond quickly.

The introduction of modern radios onto the battlefield complemented the German tradition of giving field officers broad latitude. Officers on the front line could call in artillery or aircraft strikes as soon as they spotted a worthwhile target, and the strike would come within the hour, as opposed to the French, who had to send their requests up the chain of command and hope for the best. General Gamelin actually refused to have telephones in his headquarters. Messages had to come and go on paper.

But even with all these advantages, the Germans would have been unlikely to prevail in the West so decisively if it had not been for the "left hook," the armored advance through the Ardennes that caught the Allies by surprise and trapped the best military units of three countries. And the credit for that has to go to Adolf Hitler, who championed the plan. At the risk of sounding like a Nazi propagandist, I will concede how remarkable it was that Hitler, whose own military experience was limited to that of an enlisted soldier, spotted that opportunity.

On the other hand, it was also a huge gamble. A gamble that paid off, but a gamble nevertheless. Germany defeated France in six weeks and with the lightest of casualties, but the offensive into France had been expensive in terms of those very tanks and airplanes that made the victory possible. Germany lost a quarter of its air force and about a third of its tanks in those six weeks. Now, this is a price well worth paying for a rapid victory, but if the left hook had failed, if the front lines had stabilized and the conflict settled down into a war of attrition as had happened in 1914, Germany would have been at a distinct disadvantage in numbers of these crucial weapons, while Britain and France each would have been able to build greater numbers of new tanks and planes faster than the Germans could have replaced theirs. It's hard to see how Germany could have prevailed in those circumstances.

And before you give Hitler too much credit as a master strategist, consider this: he wanted to go to war against France in November 1939, immediately after the fall of Poland. Bad weather and resistance from the military postponed the Western offensive, and that proved to be a huge windfall for Germany. If the 1939 offensive had begun when Hitler wanted, the Germans would have been fighting with those older tanks and without the Ardennes offensive, which hadn't been conceived yet, and that would have led to disaster for Germany.

So maybe don't credit Hitler; credit the weather.

We'll have to stop there for today. I thank you for listening, and I'd especially like to thank Suzanne for her kind donation, and thank you to Jon for becoming a patron of the podcast. Donors and patrons like Suzanna and Jon 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. You know, there once was a time when I would have accepted advertising in this podcast, but my donors and patrons have convinced me it's not necessary. Nowadays I do receive the occasional sponsorship offer, but I always turn them down.

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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. I suggested Belgium as a possibility. Does that 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. There's just one week left in the survey period, so if you're interested, please 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 Winston Churchill said, the Battle of France is over; the Battle of Britain is about to begin. The Battle of Britain is special for two reasons. First, it is one of the few occasions in history when a military engagement was named before it even began. Second, it will be the first military engagement in history conducted in the air. And for that second reason, before I get into an account of the battle, first I want to step back and survey changes in aircraft technology since the First World War, including the question of why First World War aircraft were biplanes, while Second World War

aircraft were monoplanes. Most of them, anyway. War in the Air, next week, here, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

Oh, and one more thing. The Fall of France represents the first, and so far only, historical example of a large, modern, industrialized, democratic state capitulating so quickly to a foreign enemy, and it raised fears in many other democratic nations, especially the United States. For one thing, it seemed to confirm the view that fascist states were more “modern” and better organized than the older liberal democratic states, and thus that fascism was the wave of the future and democracy was obsolete.

Some in 1940 saw in the Fall of France evidence that fifth columnists had played a role; that is, fascist sympathizers within France had undermined French resistance from within and facilitated the German victory. There’s not much evidence this was in fact the case, unless you want to count Pétain and Weygand and Darlan as fifth columnists (which is tempting), but this was a view taken seriously at the time and in the US it led to a certain amount of paranoia regarding fascist subversion from within, which is sometimes called the “Brown Scare,” analogous to the “Red Scare” of 1919.

When the Germans took control, they pushed for a widespread confiscation of firearms in France. Advocates for more liberalized laws on firearms often point to this as evidence that gun restrictions are inherently authoritarian. You sometimes hear this generalized as “the first thing dictators do is go for the guns, because they know that gun ownership is a threat to their power.”

The truth is more complicated than that. The Germans had a great fear, almost a paranoia, about civilians in occupied countries attacking German soldiers. We saw that in the First World War, when attacks on civilians in Belgium, including summary executions, were common, based on wild claims that made it sound as if virtually everyone in Belgium was a bloodthirsty killer, bent on murdering German soldiers. These stories made German soldiers on occupation duty fearful, and trigger happy.

So while it is true that the Germans confiscated firearms in occupied France, you have to remember that this is why they did it: because of this great fear, mostly imaginary, of civilian attacks on soldiers. If you try to generalize this into some universal principle that “dictators always take the guns,” then you’d also have to account for the fact that the Nazi government in Germany actually *loosened* gun laws there.

Anyway, the German confiscation of guns in France was something less than a resounding success. Out of an estimated three million firearms held by civilians in France at the time, the Germans were only able to confiscate about 800,000, or 27% of the total. Most French gun owners merely hid them away until France was liberated.

[music: Closing War Theme]