

The History of the Twentieth Century

Episode 335

“Pay Him in His Own Coin”

Transcript

[music: Fanfare]

As Adolf Hitler labored to string together a diplomatic coalition opposed to Britain, Mussolini strove to prove that Italy was something more than Germany’s junior partner.

Welcome to *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

[music: Opening War Theme]

Episode 335. Pay Him in His Own Coin.

In episode 328, we looked at the Battle of Britain, the air war in the skies of Great Britain, which began as an effort by the Luftwaffe to assert air supremacy over the island as prelude to an invasion. When it became clear that was impossible, the bombing continued anyway, now as an attempt to cow the British into talking peace terms.

Last week, I told you about what else was going on at the same time. Britain and Italy were fighting in Africa, and Germany was pursuing diplomatic efforts in Eastern Europe that brought Hungary, Romania, and Slovakia into the Axis alliance as signatories to the Tripartite Pact, which also included Japan.

But I have more to say about both topics; that is, German diplomacy and Italian military actions, and that’s what we’ll be discussing today. First, the Germans: foreign minister Joachim von Ribbentrop had conceived a diplomatic strategy to create a “Continental Bloc,” a broad alliance of European nations that would oppose Britain and help deter the United States from involvement in the war. Bringing the Eastern European nations of Hungary, Romania, and Slovakia into the Axis alliance was part of that strategy. Ribbentrop hoped ultimately to include Spain, France, and perhaps even the Soviet Union into his Continental Bloc.

Let’s consider Spain. The Spanish Civil War ended in April 1939, just months before the Second World War began, and it left the winners, the Nationalist government under Francisco Franco, deeply indebted to Italy and Germany, in both a fiscal and a moral sense, and ideologically, the Franco government was sympathetic to the Axis. But the Civil War had left Spain in no

condition to get involved in a world war, so when the war began in September, Franco's government adopted a policy of neutrality.

So did Mussolini's Italy, as you'll recall. But once it became clear that France was going to fall, Mussolini jumped into the war so as not to miss out on the spoils. A similar thought process was going on in the mind of Francisco Franco. Less than a week after German soldiers entered Paris, the Spanish ambassador in Berlin passed on a message from Franco, offering to join the war, under certain conditions.

Franco's conditions read like a Spanish wish list: Gibraltar, of course, and French Morocco, and the port city of Oran in western French Algeria. Oran had once been Spanish territory, from 1509 until 1708, and again from 1732 to 1792; now Franco wanted it returned to Spain. Oh, and how about French Cameroun, while you're at it.

Hitler brushed aside Franco's offer in June. This was the time when most people thought the fall of France would quickly lead to a British capitulation, so Hitler saw no need in indulging Franco.

Two months later, though, when it became clear the British had no intention of giving in, Hitler began to take interest in the idea of a Spanish alliance. Together, Germany and Spain could take Gibraltar, which would deny the British the use of the Western Mediterranean, in accordance with Alfred Jodl's "periphery strategy."

And following the British attack on the French fleet at Mers al Kébir, near Oran, the Pétain government in Vichy was plenty upset with the British, which raised hopes in Berlin that the new "French State," as it called itself, could also be persuaded to join the war against Britain.

But the diplomatic problems here were thorny. Italy was already in the war, and it already had claims against France for the formerly Italian territories of Savoy, Nice, and Corsica and for French Tunisia. Mussolini had been willing to table these claims for the sake of a French armistice, but any final peace deal with France would have to satisfy Mussolini. And now Franco wanted Morocco and Oran? And Cameroun, which must have annoyed Hitler, since Cameroun was a former German colonial territory that he intended to reclaim for Germany.

The French would never agree to all those concessions, Mussolini's plus Franco's, and any attempt to force Pétain into agreeing to them would likely lead to French authorities in North Africa simply refusing to go along, possibly even defecting to Charles de Gaulle's "Free French" movement and inviting in the British, which would make the war situation worse, not better.

But Hitler was prepared to give it a try, "to promise [the Spanish] everything they want, even if we cannot deliver it," in his own words. On September 16, 1940, the Spanish interior minister, Ramón Serrano Suñer, who was also Franco's brother-in-law and soon to become the Spanish foreign minister, visited Berlin for two days of talks with Ribbentrop and Hitler.

What Hitler didn't know was that the head of the Abwehr, German military intelligence, Admiral Wilhelm Canaris, having seen the atrocities in Poland, was by this time already secretly turning against the Nazis and the war. Canaris had visited Spain in July to reconnoiter the approaches to Gibraltar. He reported to the German military that Gibraltar might possibly be taken, but that the British could compensate for its loss by seizing a port in Morocco. He advised interior minister Serrano against joining the Axis and assured him that Germany would under no circumstances invade Spain. A Spanish general is also said to have queried an Italian general with whom he'd grown friendly during the Civil War, whether he thought it would be in Spain's interest to join the war. The Italian general reportedly replied, "We're trying to get out of it."

So Serrano must have come to Berlin already skeptical of any deal with Germany. In their talks, Ribbentrop told Serrano that Germany would try to take Morocco from France in the eventual peace treaty, and then hand it over to Spain, provided Germany be granted a share of Morocco's valuable exports of manganese and phosphates, and be permitted to retain naval bases on the Moroccan coast, as well as in the Canary Islands. These would be necessary to defend the approaches to the Mediterranean against the British and the Americans.

Serrano rejected Ribbentrop's proposal. The next day, he met with Hitler. Hitler told him that the war against Britain was already decided, and without getting into the specifics of these conflicting German, Spanish, and French claims, described to Serrano the military plan drawn up by the OKW, codenamed Operation Felix, under which the German Army would move into Spain to capture Gibraltar for the Spanish and take up defensive positions to repel a potential British invasion. Hitler proposed a face-to-face meeting between himself and Franco to iron out details of the agreement, and Franco consented.

A few days later, at the signing ceremony for the Tripartite Pact in Berlin, Hitler complained to Italian foreign minister Ciano that the Spanish were far more interested in what they could get out of the Axis than in what they could contribute to it.

But let us turn briefly to Africa. On September 23, the British began Operation Menace, which was an attempt to seize the port of Dakar in Senegal, then part of French West Africa. The British had several reasons to take an interest in Dakar. One was that Charles de Gaulle had taken an interest in it; he believed he could persuade the French military forces garrisoning Senegal to join his Free French movement.

Any French colony that could be flipped to abandon the government in Vichy and support the Free French would have propaganda value, naturally. Beyond that, Dakar was the best port in that region of West Africa; it could offer valuable assistance to the Royal Navy. And Dakar was where France's newest battleship, *Richelieu*, had fled during the Fall of France, and it had taken with it the gold reserves of France, Belgium, and Poland. Both the ship and the gold could aid the British cause.

The British sent a substantial naval force to support Operation Menace, under the command of Admiral Sir John Cunningham, which included the aircraft carrier *Ark Royal*, the battleships *Resolution* and *Barham*, and the heavy cruiser *Australia*, flagship of the Royal Australian Navy, along with four other cruisers, ten destroyers, and transports carrying a brigade of Royal Marines and a unit of the French Foreign Legion. Cunningham's orders were to transport Free French representatives to Dakar to negotiate for a peaceful transfer of control, or, failing that, to take Dakar by force.

Three aircraft took off from the deck of *Ark Royal* on September 23, piloted by three French officers, who landed their planes at the Dakar airport, but they were immediately taken prisoner. One of these officers was carrying a list of Free French sympathizers in Dakar; French authorities arrested everyone on the list. A boat carrying Free French representatives approached the port, but it was fired on and withdrew.

Over the following two days, British naval forces fired on Dakar, and Dakar fired back. An attempt to land French troops by stealth failed. *Richelieu* had been damaged in an earlier British attack, part of Operation Catapult back in July, and was unable to move, but the battleship could and did fire its guns. The British did some further damage to *Richelieu*, but their own main ships, *Resolution*, *Barham*, and *Australia*, also took damage. *Resolution* had to be towed to Cape Town; it would be out of service for a year.

Operation Menace failed and it damaged the reputation of Charles de Gaulle. This was his first opportunity to demonstrate that his Free French movement meant something and could make a difference in the war, and the demonstration had produced only embarrassment.

De Gaulle would score a modest success two months later, in French Equatorial Africa. There three of the four colonies that made up French Equatorial Africa joined with the Free French: Chad, Ubangi-Shari, and the French Congo. Unfortunately, the fourth colony, Gabon, remained loyal to Vichy, and it included Libreville, the main port through which the otherwise landlocked French Equatorial Africa communicated with the rest of the world. De Gaulle traveled to French Equatorial Africa and led an attack by Free French forces that secured Gabon. Now the Free French controlled all of French Equatorial Africa and de Gaulle hoped this would open up the possibility of a Free French attack north from Chad into Italian-controlled Libya.

The capture of French Equatorial Africa helped salvage de Gaulle's reputation, a little, although French Equatorial Africa was farther away and less helpful to the Allied cause than Senegal might have been.

Meanwhile, back in Europe, on October 4, Hitler and Mussolini held a meeting at the Brenner Pass, to discuss the question of how Spain and France might be drawn into an Axis coalition. Mussolini agreed that Franco's demands were unreasonable, and would have to be negotiated down before agreement would be possible; Hitler, for his part, pledged that Germany would not sign a peace treaty with France without Italian participation.

Hitler spent two weeks in Berlin and at the Berghof, then rode his private train to Tours in France for a meeting with French deputy prime minister Pierre Laval. Laval told Hitler he personally believed that cooperation with Germany was France's only option and was trying to convince President Pétain of this. Hitler told Laval that Britain's days were numbered and that how favorable the terms of the final peace agreement would be to France depended upon the degree to which France would contribute to the effort against Britain.

That night, Hitler's train carried him to the French resort town of Hendaye, which lies at the southern end of the French Atlantic coast, close to the Spanish border. The following afternoon, he would meet with Francisco Franco. Hitler laid out for Franco how he wanted a continental alliance against Britain, which, he said, would shorten the war. But overlapping French and Spanish claims stood in the way. Hitler urged Franco to drop his specific demands, promising in return only that Spanish claims would be considered in the final peace agreement. He promised Franco that the same German airborne units that had stunned the Allies with their rapid seizure of the Belgian Fort Eben-Emael would be deployed to take Gibraltar, which would then immediately be handed over to Spain.

Franco expressed doubt over whether Britain could be so quickly beaten and suggested that even if Great Britain itself were occupied, the British war effort would continue from Canada. There was also the United States to consider. The Civil War had wrecked the Spanish economy and Spain could not consider entering the war unless Germany supplied grain shipments to ease Spanish food shortages, as well as modern weapons for the Spanish Army. As for Gibraltar, Franco told Hitler that Spanish national pride would not accept a Gibraltar captured for Spain by a foreign army.

Seven hours of talks produced nothing more than a secret agreement in which Spain would enter the war at a future date of its own choosing, and Germany made only a vague pledge of additional territories in Africa. Both dictators left the meeting frustrated. Hitler remarked to Mussolini that he would prefer to have three or four teeth pulled rather than sit through another meeting with Franco, while Franco confided to his foreign minister of the Germans, "These people are unbearable."

On the return trip to Germany, Hitler stopped off in France once again, this time to meet with both Laval and President Pétain himself. Hitler again made his pitch for French cooperation against Britain. Pétain said he was interested, but would have to consult with his government. Laval noted that there was much France could do to aid Germany short of declaring war on Britain and that such aid could be decided upon on a case by case basis.

Overall, the summit meetings with Franco and Pétain were a disappointment to Hitler. All he had gotten out of Franco was a vague promise to enter the war someday, and from Pétain and Laval he had not even gotten that much.

As Hitler rode his train back to Berlin, he received shocking news. At once he ordered the train diverted to Florence for an emergency meeting with Mussolini.

[music:

You almost have to feel sorry for Benito Mussolini.

Almost.

The end of October 1940 marked the eighteenth anniversary of the March on Rome and his accession to the Italian premiership. Back then, he was a vigorous 39-year-old. Now, he was 57, the age when the aches and pains become impossible to ignore; the Bermuda Triangle of life, as monologist Spalding Gray once put it.

Did he ever wonder if he should have retired before this? If he had retired in say, 1937, after fifteen years in office, he likely would have been remembered as a great Italian hero, but it wasn't enough. He wanted more. And here we are.

Italy had simply not been ready for the Second World War. Germany and Britain had spent the previous five years rebuilding and modernizing their armed forces. Italy had spent them on military adventures: in Ethiopia, then Spain, then Albania. These foreign wars had stretched the Italian military and the Italian economy to their limits.

This was the reason Mussolini had warned Hitler before the Pact of Steel was signed that Italy would not be ready for war until 1942. Hitler had assured Mussolini that he planned no move against Poland. Mussolini signed, and Hitler promptly moved against Poland.

Mussolini had tried to stay out of the war, but as German soldiers closed on Paris, in the excitement of the moment, he had to choose. Be a part of this glorious day, or sit with hands folded while others write history. For Mussolini this was no choice at all. Better to live one day as a lion than a hundred years as a sheep, am I right? Italy had territorial claims against France, and Mussolini meant to do more than count on German charity.

But the Germans signed an armistice with France and deferred the final peace treaty, meaning Italy's claims were on the table, but no one could say whether they would ever be recognized, or even how long Italy would have to wait for that to be determined. Meanwhile, the British still controlled Gibraltar and the Suez Canal, meaning that Italy was bottled up in the Mediterranean Sea, at least for the time being, unable to import goods and materials from beyond Europe, which meant they were heavily dependent on the Germans.

But Mussolini was a true believer in Operation Sea Lion, and hoped the fall of Great Britain to the Germans would free Italy from its Mediterranean prison. He volunteered Italian soldiers and airplanes for the invasion, but Hitler was noncommittal.

Meanwhile, the Italians were fighting the British in Africa. I told you about those battles last week, including the September Italian offensive into Egypt that advanced as far as the Bedouin town of Sidi Barrani, forcing the British back to their railhead at Mersa Matruh. But then Rodolfo Graziani, the Italian commander in North Africa called a halt to the offensive. Graziani had not wanted to begin the offensive in the first place, and he was not satisfied with the result. Sure, the Italians had advanced about 100 kilometers into Egypt, which looked nice on the maps in Rome, but what had the offensive actually accomplished? Nothing, except extend the already stretched Italian supply lines 100 kilometers longer, and that last 100 kilometers was nothing more than a bumpy dirt road—more of a track, really—from the Libyan border to Sidi Barrani.

So Graziani halted his offensive and ordered his soldiers to dig in and defend what they had already taken. He told Rome the British defenders at Mersa Matruh were fully supplied, and his army would have to be as well, before he could think of attacking them. This would take months, owing to the supply difficulties, which I described to you last time.

In Rome, Mussolini and his Chief of Staff, General Pietro Badoglio, envisioned the conquest of Egypt in three stages. Stage one, the advance to Sidi Barrani, was already complete. Stage two would be the next offensive, which would capture Mersa Matruh and would begin as soon as the Army was resupplied. Afterward, Mussolini figured the rest would be easy, because then Alexandria would be within range of Italian bombers based at Mersa Matruh, which would force the Royal Navy's Mediterranean Fleet to abandon its base there, which would in turn allow the Italian Navy to support Italian land forces as they marched on to the Nile. Mussolini insisted that Italians would be able to cope with the desert climate better than Englishmen, who were accustomed to cold and damp.

My sources don't say how Mussolini figured Italian bombers based in Mersa Matruh were going to get the fuel, arms, and spare parts they would need, nor whether they considered the fact that British bombers would be able to fly from Alexandria to Mersa Matruh just as easily as Italian bombers could fly the other way. But that was the plan.

The Italians were also asking the Germans for help in North Africa. For the Italians, "help" meant giving them German tanks and aircraft, to be operated by Italian personnel. Hitler and his military didn't care for that idea. They were willing to send a couple of armored divisions to North Africa to assist, and some air units to defend the Italians and help bomb Alexandria. The Italians said yes to the air units, but no to the armored divisions, assuming that if German Army units got involved in the fighting, the Germans would want to take command of the whole operation. You know how *they* are. Anyway, the Italians ran the math on how long it would take them to ship a German armored division to North Africa, and the answer that came back was several months. Eventually they whittled that down to 45 days.

So Mussolini and his military were one step into this three-step plan to take Egypt. Step two would begin after Graziani's army was resupplied.

Beyond Egypt, Mussolini had designs on the Balkans, especially Yugoslavia and Greece, two nations that had long been thorns in his side. He wanted to invade Yugoslavia, with an eye to claiming Slovenia and Croatia for Italy. He figured the newly resurgent Hungary, now that it had thrown off the yoke of the Treaty of Trianon, would be willing to help, in exchange for a share of Croatia. And there was Bulgaria, which was friendly with Italy and would likely also be interested in a slice of Yugoslavia.

But the experience of the First World War showed that an Italian Army could spend years just fighting its way across the Isonzo River. Remember how there were twelve Battles of the Isonzo during that war? It would simplify matters a great deal if the Germans would allow Italian Army units to transit the territory of the former Austria, which would allow the Italians to open a much broader front in the north.

The Italians broached the topic of transit rights with the German military. The Germans reacted to the idea of Italy invading Yugoslavia with horror. They said no to the transit rights and pressed the Italians to drop the whole idea.

And then there was Greece. Greece was a nation with a history of collaboration with the British, and it was practically on Italy's doorstep. Indeed, now that Italian troops occupied Albania, Greece was well within reach. Mussolini well remembered his humiliation when Italy landed troops on the Greek island of Corfu, back in 1923, but then the League of Nations forced them to withdraw, episode 254. When the Italians consulted the Germans on this matter, once again the Germans did their best to discourage an attack on Greece. The German military urged the Italians to stay focused on Egypt.

But on October 12 came two developments that were very worrisome. With the passage of time, the prospects of a successful Operation Sea Lion were becoming remote. On October 12, Hitler issued orders redeploying some German Army units to the East, which strongly suggested he was giving up on the invasion. This was also the day that the Germans moved troops into Romania to protect those Romanian oil fields and train the Romanian Army.

This irked Mussolini. Remember he had this vision of a new Roman Empire, and so he saw everything south of Hungary as Italy's for the taking. The Germans were interested in an eastern empire, or so Hitler had always told him. The Mediterranean region was for Italy. Now, Hitler was infringing on his turf, and he had done so without any consultation, or even advance notice. Mussolini told his son-in-law/foreign minister, "Hitler keeps presenting me with *faits accomplis*. Now I shall pay him back in his own coin."

And then there was the fact that, with Operation Sea Lion apparently no longer in the works, the British would soon realize their home island was no longer in danger. This would free up British land, naval, and air units. And where were the British going to deploy those newly available units? Egypt, obviously, which would put the battle plan there at risk. Beyond that, the British would likely rely on their chummy relationship with Greece to deploy air and naval forces there,

within striking distance of the Italian Navy's main port at Taranto. To *il Duce's* way of thinking, this was a critical risk that had to be addressed.

He ordered the Italian military to attack Greece on October 26, exactly two weeks after German troops entered Romania. His military leaders figured it would take twenty divisions to subdue Greece, and getting them into position would take time. Italy and Germany both had demobilized a portion of their militaries after the Fall of France; such large armies were no longer needed when Britain was the only threat. In Italy's case, military mobilization had hit the civilian economy hard; soldiers were needed back home to work the factories and harvest this year's crops. Now some of these demobilized units would have to be remobilized and shipped to Albania, where they could strike south. This would take three months.

Not good enough, said Mussolini. You have two weeks.

On October 15, Mussolini and Badoglio and senior military officers met to hash out the details of the Greek invasion, in a military strategy session that will go down in history as one of the goofiest of all time. Italy had only six divisions in Albania. No matter, the generals said. The Greeks were weak and demoralized, ruled as they were by a military dictator no one wanted, while the Italian Army was just spoiling for a fight. The first step would be to advance south from Albania into the Epirus region of northwestern Greece. Italian troops could be shipped by sea and landed at the port of Arta to support the main invasion.

From there, Athens would be within striking distance, and perhaps a division or two could be spared to move east and take Salonika before the British got any bright ideas. Maybe the Greeks would take advantage of the opportunity to rise up against their own government.

Marshal Badoglio was the only naysayer. He agreed that Italy could take the Epirus, but doubted the Italian Army could advance any farther without substantial reinforcement, and if the invasion only secured Epirus, then it was not worth doing. But the generals under him fell all over each other to tell Mussolini what he wanted to hear. Most likely they believed that their path to promotion and glory lay along the route into Greece. When Badoglio pointed out that marching from Epirus to Athens would involve crossing over the Pindus mountain range, with peaks reaching above 2,000 meters, one of the generals opined that this wouldn't be too much of a problem, as there were plenty of mule tracks that ran across the mountains. Mussolini assured his generals that he would recruit Bulgaria to attack the Greeks and open up a second front.

The meeting broke up after 90 minutes. Mussolini asked, "Are we sure of victory?" and got voices of approval all around.

The Italians would be crossing those mountains with winter setting in. I know that they say revenge is a dish best served cold, but I don't think that was ever meant as a military maxim. Why was it that no one in the room could see what a crazy plan this was?

So here we are. It's been a long time and many of you have been asking me about this; it's time to dust it off. So I'll pause here for a moment to recognize Mussolini's conceiving and executing one of the worst military plans in the entire history of armed conflict by bestowing this week's Kaiser Wilhelm II Award for Making an Ass out of Yourself to Benito Mussolini.

[sound effects: bell and cheers]

Anyway, the crazy plan was put into motion, and the Germans were not informed. The German military did pick up that the Italians were deploying for an offensive against Greece, but assumed this would not begin before spring of next year. I mean, who would be so crazy as to advance into mountain positions in the winter?

Finally, an Italian Air Force officer blabbed the plan to his German liaison, the liaison told the OKW, and the OKW told Hitler, which brings us back to the moment when Hitler was riding his train back home to Berlin, and then, upon receiving this news, ordered it diverted to Florence for a meeting with Mussolini.

Many historians assume Hitler was rushing to Italy to attempt to talk Mussolini out of the invasion. Maybe that's so, but we have no hard evidence. The two dictators met in Florence on October 28, just hours after the invasion of Greece had already begun. So if Hitler had intended to try to stop it, he was too late.

And if he had reservations about the invasion, he kept them to himself. The meeting with Mussolini was cordial, although Hitler privately predicted that the Greeks would prove better soldiers than the Italians. Hitler offered Mussolini the use of an airborne division and an air transportable division to assist in the conquest of Greece, and especially its Aegean islands. He brought Mussolini up to speed on the talks with Pétain and Franco, and assured his nervous ally that the peace deal between Germany and Russia was purely a matter of convenience and did not represent any kind of policy shift in Berlin, although the Soviet foreign minister Vyacheslav Molotov would be coming to Berlin for talks, and Hitler hoped to persuade the USSR to join with Germany, Italy, and Japan in the grand confrontation with the Western liberal capitalist democracies.

Two weeks from now, I'll tell you about those talks, and about the Italian invasion of Greece, but we'll have to stop here for today.

We'll have to stop there for today. I thank you for listening, and I'd especially like to thank Matthew for his kind donation, and thank you to Jacob for becoming a patron of the podcast. Donors and patrons like Matthew and Jacob 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, you are most welcome; just visit the website, historyofthetwentiethcentury.com and click on the PayPal or Patreon buttons.

The podcast website also contains notes about the music used on the podcast. Sometimes it's my own work, sometimes it's licensed, but many times, the music you hear here is free and downloadable. If you hear a piece of music on the podcast and you would like to know more about it, including the composer, the performers, and a link to where you can download it, that would be the place to go. While you're there, you can leave a comment and let me know what you thought about today's show.

I'm pleased to be able to tell you that a short story of mine appears in the just-released fantasy anthology, *Artifice and Craft*. It's a collection of stories about magical artifacts. It is available as an ebook or a paperback at Amazon, Barnes and Noble and Kobo.

Next week is a bye week for the podcast, but I hope you'll join me in two weeks' time, here on *The History of the Twentieth Century*, as we continue this story of German diplomatic maneuvers and see what happens when Mussolini's imperial dreams meet cold, rugged reality. όχι, in two weeks' time, here, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

Oh, and one more thing. It's been a while since the name of Kaiser Wilhelm II has come up in the podcast, so let's catch up a bit. In autumn of 1940, the Kaiser was 81 years old and still very much alive. He'd been living in exile in the Netherlands since his abdication. He was still an extraordinarily wealthy man, who lived a life of leisure. He published his memoir which, like every other First World War memoir, argued that he was not to blame for the war. He spent much of his time hunting or chopping wood.

In the early days of Nazi rule in Germany, Wilhelm was hopeful that the Nazis would restore the German monarchy and grant the crown to his grandson, Prince Wilhelm. Once it was clear that Hitler had no interest in any such thing, he became a critic of Nazism.

I already mentioned to you that after Kristallnacht, the former Emperor said, "For the first time, I am ashamed to be a German." This although he was vocally anti-Semitic himself.

A month later, he gave an interview in which he was asked what he thought of Hitler. He had a one-word reply: "Nichts!" "Nothing!"

He elaborated, saying of Hitler, "There's a man alone, without family, without children, without God. Why should he be human? Oh, without a doubt he's sincere, but this very excessive sincerity keeps him apart, out of touch...He builds legions, but he doesn't build a nation. A nation is created by families, a religion, traditions; it is made up out of the hearts of mothers, the wisdom of fathers, the joy and exuberance of children...[Today Germany is] an all-swallowing State, disdainful of human dignities and the ancient structures of our race, [which] sets itself up in place of everything else."

Of the Nazi Party he said, "For a few months I was inclined to believe in National Socialism. I thought of it as a necessary fever, and I was gratified to see that there were, associated with it for

a time, some of the wisest and most outstanding Germans. But these, one by one, [Hitler] has got rid of, or even killed...Papen, Schleicher, Neurath, and even Blomberg. He has nothing left but a bunch of shirted gangsters!”

Despite these feelings, Wilhelm admired Hitler for leading Germany to victory in the Western campaign of early 1940. When the Germans attacked the Netherlands, Winston Churchill offered Wilhelm sanctuary in Britain. Wilhelm declined. When the Netherlands surrendered, Wilhelm sent Hitler a telegram in which he wrote, “I congratulate you and hope that under your marvelous leadership the German monarchy will be restored completely.” Upon reading the telegram, Hitler was heard to remark, “What an idiot!”

[music: Closing War Theme]