

The History of the Twentieth Century

Episode 341

“A Crime against the Future”

Transcript

[music: Fanfare]

Even as the war against Britain dragged on, Adolf Hitler was planning the real war, the war he wanted—the war against the Soviet Union.

Welcome to *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

[music: Opening Theme]

Episode 341. A Crime against the Future.

On July 31, 1940, Hitler held a meeting at the Berghof, his mountain retreat, at which the commander of the German Navy, Admiral Erich Raeder, briefed a group of Army commanders on preparations for Operation Sea Lion, the German invasion of Britain.

After Raeder finished and left, Hitler addressed the Army commanders on a different topic: the USSR. Hitler told his generals that the reason the British obstinately refused to make peace with Germany was that they were hoping for support from Russia or America. If Russia were eliminated, it would be the end of Britain’s hopes, because Japan, now free of the threat to its west, could concentrate its attention on the United States. The Americans would have their hands full with Japan and would not be able to give significant support to the British.

Therefore, the elimination of the Soviet Union was a crucial step toward Germany’s final victory. It was too late to move against the USSR this year, Hitler told them, but the Army should make preparation for war against the Soviets by May of 1941.

There is no sign that anyone in the Army High Command, the OKH, resisted this new strategic directive, not as they had when Hitler ordered an offensive against France. By this time, the generals were convinced Hitler was more than just a blustering politician; he was a shrewd strategist who had chosen the right move every time. There was no reason to doubt his insights now.

It was also true that the generals shared Adolf Hitler's contempt for the Soviet Union, and especially the Red Army. It was well known that the Bolsheviks had executed some of their most skilled and seasoned officers during the purges. The Red Army's performance against the Finns in the Winter War a few months earlier had been pure Keystone Cops. And some of these commanders had gotten first-hand looks at the modern Red Army in Poland last fall, and what they had seen did not impress them. Russian soldiers were ill-equipped, poorly trained, and slovenly. They contrasted sharply with Germany's skilled, disciplined, and modern military. German Army planners predicted the Red Army could be defeated in two to four months.

Hitler and his government were unhappy with Stalin's moves against Finland, the Baltic States, and Romania. Never mind that Germany had explicitly ceded these lands to Russia, or that the Soviets had been scrupulous about delivering everything they had promised in the trade agreements with Germany. Stalin had his own grievances with Germany, and they had more basis in fact. Germany was not keeping up its end of the bargain in those trade agreements. The Tripartite Pact made many in the Soviet government wonder if the USSR was the target of that treaty, and the movement of German troops into Romania in early October seemed downright hostile.

Foreign minister Ribbentrop issued an invitation for Soviet foreign minister Molotov to come to Berlin to discuss future relations between the two nations. Molotov accepted the invitation and arrived on November 11.

In between was the US Presidential election of 1940, in which Franklin Roosevelt won a convincing victory. In Berlin they were rooting for Wendell Willkie, but the Nazis took comfort in the fact that in the final days of his campaign Roosevelt had been forced to promise that he would keep America out of the war. The German Foreign Office's assessment was that Roosevelt's administration was already doing everything it could to assist Britain, and therefore there was no reason to worry about increased US involvement in the war in the foreseeable future.

Molotov participated in two days of talks with Ribbentrop and Hitler. I already mentioned this meeting briefly in episode 328, when I told you the British made it a point to bomb Berlin while Molotov was there, forcing Molotov and Ribbentrop into a bomb shelter, where Molotov proceeded to taunt Ribbentrop over the latter's claims that the British were all but defeated.

The British had bombed Berlin on that day for precisely this reason, to offer a persuasive rebuttal to any German claim that the war practically over. And it worked. There can be no doubt Molotov got the point.

When Molotov met with Hitler, he came prepared with a series of specific questions which he presented to the *Führer*. Did Germany stand behind the August 1939 non-aggression agreement? How did the Tripartite Pact relate to the Soviet Union? Was Germany willing to recognize the Soviet Union's legitimate interests in the Baltic Sea, the Black Sea, and in the Balkans?

Hitler and Ribbentrop assured Molotov that the Tripartite Pact was in no way directed against the Soviet Union and made their pitch for the USSR to join. Italy and Germany would rule Europe, Japan would rule the Far East, and the Soviet Union would be granted a free hand to move south, into Iran and British India. The world's four pre-eminent modern powers would form a global coalition that would pick apart the empires of the failing capitalist democratic states.

Molotov told Hitler that the Soviet Union might be interested in joining the Tripartite Pact, provided it would be treated as an equal partner with Germany, Italy, and Japan, but more clarity was needed about the goals of the Pact, especially in East Asia, where the USSR and Japan had overlapping interests.

As far as Romania went, Hitler told Molotov that Moscow needed to understand that Germany was engaged in a life-or-death struggle and the Romanian oil fields were vital to its military. With regard to Finland, Germany accepted that Finland was in the Soviet sphere of influence, but Hitler noted that Germany received vital exports of wood and nickel from Finland.

It appears the most fruitful portion of these talks came while Ribbentrop and Molotov were sitting in the bomb shelter under the Foreign Office during a British bomber attack. I suppose those are the kinds of conditions that encourage bonding. Molotov told Ribbentrop that the passages out of the Black Sea, controlled by Turkey, and out of the Baltic Sea, now controlled by Germany through its occupation of Denmark and Norway, were vital Soviet interests. The USSR also had vital interests in Turkey and Bulgaria and no small degree of interest in Hungary and Romania besides. Molotov asked about German policy toward all those countries, as well as Yugoslavia, Greece, and Sweden.

Ribbentrop gave him no concrete answers, but assured Molotov that their two nations could surely work everything out provided they stood not chest to chest, but back to back in support of each other's aspirations.

After Molotov and his delegation returned to Moscow, Hitler heaved a sigh of relief. In his view, Molotov had tipped Stalin's hand. He had designs on Finland and the Balkans. The Soviets clearly could not be talked out of their European ambitions, and letting the Bolsheviks move deeper into Europe would be a catastrophe.

Just days later, Hitler ordered the construction of a new *Führer* headquarters in the east, similar to the Eagle's Nest, from which he had directed the offensive against France. A site was chosen in East Prussia, eight kilometers east of the town of Rastenburg. Hitler approved, and ordered that the headquarters complex be ready by April 1941. It would be called Wolfsschanze in German, and in English is usually referred to as the Wolf's Lair.

[music: Wagner, *Lohengrin*]

On December 18, 1940, Hitler made war against the Soviet Union official German policy with the issuance of *Führer* Directive Number 21. In it, Hitler instructed the military that the elimination of the Soviet Union was to proceed at once, before Britain was defeated. The German Army would advance into Russia, surrounding and destroying Red Army units as it went, and advance east as far as a line from the Soviet port of Archangel on the Arctic coast south and west to Astrakhan, where the Volga River empties into the Caspian Sea. At that point, Soviet resistance would be largely eliminated; any remaining military capacity in the Ural region would be within the reach of Luftwaffe bombers. The attack on the Soviet Union would need to be planned carefully, but also with the utmost secrecy. It would be codenamed “Operation Barbarossa.”

For those of you listening who are history buffs—which, I assume, is all of you—I will note that Barbarossa is a reference to the Holy Roman Emperor Frederick I, who reigned for 35 years in the twelfth century and was known as Redbeard, which in German is Rotbart and in Italian is Barbarossa.

Frederick I is regarded as one of the greatest of the Emperors. He participated in the Second Crusade, and later, died while leading an army overland through Asia Minor on his way to take part in the Third Crusade. He drowned while crossing a river, at the age of 67. By some accounts, he was crossing the river on horseback while wearing armor; he fell off, or the horse threw him off, and the armor weighed him down. Of course, at the age of 67, it’s entirely possible that some sudden medical crisis, like a stroke or a heart attack, may have played a role.

A legend grew up around Frederick I, which claimed that he was not dead, but merely sleeping, and would rise again one day to lead Germany into a golden age. This legend became tied to German nationalism in the 19th century, especially after the unification of Germany in 1871.

The choice of Barbarossa as the codename for the invasion of the Soviet Union was no coincidence. Hitler had been planning this war since the day he became chancellor. To Hitler, the war between Germany and the USSR would not be merely a war; it would be an ideological struggle between German National Socialism and Jewish Bolshevism. The elimination of Bolshevism was a necessary step to clear the path for Germany to take its rightful place as the world’s greatest and most powerful nation.

But this war would be about more than eliminating the Communists. It would also clear vast new territories in the east, territories to be settled by Germans. Germany was a geographically small nation, a net importer of raw materials to supply its industry and of food to feed its people. The sprawling lands of the western Soviet Union, the Baltic States, Belarus, and especially Ukraine, would become the breadbasket that would feed Germany and all of Europe. The Caucasus would supply Germany with the petroleum it lacked, and Russia’s mineral wealth would be available for the taking. Germany would expand and settle the East in the same manner that the Americans had expanded and settled their West. Like the United States, Germany would become a

continental state, economically self sufficient, and no longer vulnerable to naval blockades. With Russia out of the way, Britain would fall, and the new self-sufficient continental Germany would become the economic equal of the United States, able to compete with the Americans, and if necessary, subdue them.

Yes, this truly would lead Germany into a golden age. The reference to Frederick I seemed apt.

Hitler spent most of the first three months of 1941 planning his war against Russia. His confidence in victory was based on two ideological premises: the racial superiority of Aryan Germans over the Slavic peoples of the East, and the ideological superiority of National Socialism over Bolshevism. This war would be merely the last chapter of the centuries-old conflict between the German people and the Slavic people, in which the Germans were the defenders of civilization and culture against the barbaric and violent Slavs, and Germans would win this battle because German soldiers would fight more competently than their Slavic counterparts because they were of superior racial stock. National Socialism would insure that Operation Barbarossa would be planned and executed with a degree of skill and organization the Bolsheviks could not match.

On Sunday, March 31, 1941, Hitler convened a meeting of 200 senior officers in the Army, Navy, Luftwaffe, and the Wehrmacht command to review the coming operation, and he gave them one of his typical two-and-a-half-hour-long harangues. First he outlined the economic argument for German expansion to the East. Then he outlined the ideological argument. Then he declared that the war in the East must be conducted ruthlessly. This was not like the war in the West, he told them. It could not be fought with chivalry. In particular, the Red Army's political commissars were not to be treated as prisoners of war. There would be no trials, no courts martial. They were to be shot on sight. So were Communist Party members. German soldiers in Russia would be exempt from prosecution for crimes committed against civilians, as they had been in Poland. Without the Communist Party network to bind together the Soviet state, the USSR would disintegrate, and the Slavic-Asiatic threat to Germany would be eliminated forever. He told his officers, "It would be a crime against the future of the German people, if I did not seize this opportunity."

Hitler would make this policy official with the *Kommissarbefehl*, the Commissar Order, issued shortly before Operation Barbarossa began. In this detailed order, Hitler declared that principles of humanity and international law would not apply. He would defend this order by noting that the USSR had never signed the Hague Conventions or the Geneva Convention of 1929, and therefore Germany, which had signed them, was entitled to disregard those restrictions in the conduct of its war against the Soviets.

And what did the military officers in the audience make of this? There was no pushback from the military against Operation Barbarossa or against Hitler's call for ruthlessness, not even to the same degree to which they'd resisted the Western Offensive of 1940, because their confidence in

Hitler was now far greater. They guy clearly knew what he was doing, and the Battle of France had proved the Wehrmacht was the world's foremost military. As Hitler himself had said, if they could defeat France in six weeks, imagine how easily Russia would fall. The Red Army seemed undisciplined, poorly trained and led, and armed with obsolete weapons. And they had all followed the Soviet campaign against Finland.

Stalin was now rebuilding the Red Army, and in many cases even bringing back officers who had been removed during the purges, but these officers would be rusty, and they would be taking command of soldiers they didn't know, and who didn't know them. Given time, the Red Army could work through these problems, but Hitler didn't intend to give them time.

Hitler's famous declaration that "[w]e only have to kick in the door and the whole rotten structure will come crashing down," seemed like a fair assessment of the state of the USSR.

The planning and the orders and the preparation for Operation Barbarossa were underway, even as Germany conducted its war against Britain.

[music: Wagner, *Lohengrin*]

On Friday, May 9, 1941, as the final preparations for Operation Barbarossa were underway, Hitler left Berlin for the Berghof to enjoy a weekend of rest and relaxation, but history had other ideas. Early on Sunday morning, May 11, a man named Karlheinz Pintsch arrived and told the staff at the Berghof he needed to speak to the *Führer* immediately about an urgent matter. Hitler was still asleep and had to be roused for this meeting.

Pintsch worked under the Deputy *Führer*, Rudolf Hess, who was second in line to succeed Hitler, after Hermann Göring. When Hitler appeared, Pintsch handed him an envelope and explained that his boss had instructed him to deliver it. Hitler opened the letter, read it, and let out a wordless shout so loud everyone in the Berghof heard it. Then he began calling out, "Get me Bormann immediately!"

It seemed that in the late afternoon of the previous day, Saturday May 10, Deputy *Führer* Hess had boarded an Me-110 long-range fighter alone and flown off toward the North Sea. Shortly before midnight, British radar picked up the plane in northern England. Hess flew on into Scotland and was spotted and pursued by the RAF until he parachuted out of the plane just moments before it ran out of fuel and crashed.

As the letter delivered to Hitler explained, Hess had taken it upon himself to attempt to negotiate a peace deal between Germany and Britain, the peace that everyone in Germany wanted, Hitler included, but no one had been able to reach.

Rudolf Hess had celebrated his 47th birthday two weeks earlier. Hess had served as an infantry soldier in the First World War. Afterward, in 1919, he enrolled at the University of Munich to study history and economics. It was at university that Hess enrolled in a course taught by Karl

Haushofer, a professor of international relations who also had served as a brigade commander during the war. It was Haushofer who first introduced Hess to the concept of *Lebensraum*, a word Haushofer had coined. This was the idea that Germany needed to expand into Eastern Europe to remain competitive with imperial powers like France and Britain, or countries with large land areas, like Russia or the United States.

In 1920, Hess joined the NSDAP, and became close to Adolf Hitler. It was Hess who first introduced Hitler to the concept of *Lebensraum*, and Hitler would make it a core component of Nazi ideology. Hess was an Old Nazi, who had participated in the 1923 putsch in Munich and was sentenced to prison for it, as was Hitler. In prison, Hess assisted Hitler in the writing of *Mein Kampf*. After they were released, Hitler made Hess his private secretary.

Hess had an interest in aviation. He got his pilot's license in 1929. He owned three airplanes and flew regularly.

When Hitler became chancellor, Hess was made Deputy *Führer*, or Leader, of the NSDAP, and later, of the nation. All the while, Hess remained in touch with his old teacher, Professor Haushofer. The professor's wife was half-Jewish; Hess pulled strings to protect her and her family, and their son, Albrecht. The professor himself was a supporter of the Nazis. He had his own monthly program on German radio during which he lectured on international affairs; kind of a primitive form of podcast, when you think about it.

The late Thirties marked the peak of Hess's influence. As Hitler gradually lost interest in domestic affairs, Hess took over many of those matters, but once the war broke out, Hess was getting brushed aside as Hitler and the other top leaders in his government concentrated on prosecuting the war, a subject over which Hess had no particular expertise or authority.

In August 1940, as the Battle of Britain was on and a German invasion still planned, Hess met with his old mentor, Karl Haushofer, who remember was regarded in Germany as an expert in international relations. Haushofer told him that he believed that the British King George VI wanted to make peace with Germany but that Winston Churchill was standing in the way. Haushofer suggested that if a message could be sent to the King to inform him that Germany was prepared to make peace, the King would be emboldened to dismiss Churchill as prime minister and replace him with someone willing to negotiate. Haushofer further suggested that the Duke of Hamilton was their best prospect. As an aristocrat, the Duke, who was 37 years old at the time and had inherited the title just months earlier, would have access to the King. Four years earlier, the Duke had visited Germany, during the Olympics, and had met both Albrecht Haushofer and Rudolf Hess socially during that visit.

Haushofer put out a feeler in the form of a letter to the Duke, but the letter was intercepted by MI-5, the British counterintelligence service.

Hess did not act immediately, but there is evidence he was mulling all this over from autumn of 1940 through spring of 1941. By spring, Hess was aware of the coming attack on the Soviet Union, and the danger of Germany becoming trapped in another two-front war, and that may well have been the final straw that persuaded Hess to act, in the hope that Germany might achieve peace in the West before war began in the East.

That's an educated guess; no one knows for certain what Hess was thinking.

Just before midnight, Hess landed on a farm in Scotland, south of Glasgow. He was discovered within minutes by a farmer named David McLean. Hess, who spoke some English, identified himself as Alfred Horn and told McLean he had an important message for the Duke of Hamilton. Hess had sprained his ankle in the parachute landing, so McLean helped him back to his cottage and called the Home Guard.

The Home Guard took Hess into custody. He was taken to a nearby Army barracks, where they treated his ankle injury. Hess continued to insist he needed to speak to the Duke of Hamilton. The Duke, it turns out, was serving in the RAF at the time and in fact was on duty while the RAF were tracking and intercepting Hess's plane. Hamilton met with Hess on Sunday morning, at about the same time Hitler was at the Berghof, shouting and demanding to see Martin Bormann. Once Hess was face to face with Hamilton, he confessed his true identity and told Hamilton he was on a humanitarian mission to end the war.

Hamilton telephoned Churchill, who was weekendening at Ditchley Park in Oxfordshire, to tell him about Hess. Churchill was unwilling to allow the sudden appearance of Germany's Deputy *Führer* in Scotland to ruin his weekend. He told Hamilton, "Hess or no Hess, I am going to watch the Marx Brothers."

On Monday, Hamilton proceeded to London, where he met with Churchill and the Cabinet. Hamilton was sent back, along with an official from the Foreign Office and a translator, for a further discussion of Hess's mission. Hess offered the British peace on behalf of Hitler, but his offer contained nothing new; Britain could have peace with Germany and maintain its Empire, in exchange for giving Germany a free hand in Continental Europe. This was the very same deal Churchill and his government had rejected nearly a year ago.

Back in Germany, no one knew any of this. So far, the British had kept Hess's arrival secret. In Berlin, they only knew that Rudolf Hess had stolen a fighter and flown off over the North Sea. Had he made it to his destination and was now in British custody? Or had he crashed in the water? The Luftwaffe leadership were certain Hess must have crashed; flying to Britain at night like that would have been a demanding mission for the best of pilots.

Hitler had more faith in Hess's piloting; he believed Hess was alive and in British custody. He worried that the British would drug Hess and have him put on the wireless to repeat whatever Churchill wanted him to say. There would be no way to deny whose voice it was. Hitler also

worried that no one would believe Hess acted alone; everyone would think Hitler had sent him. And indeed, many did. Some still think so in our time.

Hitler abolished the position of Deputy *Führer* and handed Hess's responsibilities over to Martin Bormann. He ordered that if Hess ever attempted to return to Germany, he should be shot on sight. Foreign minister Ribbentrop was dispatched to meet with Benito Mussolini to assure him that Germany was not engaged in any kind of secret diplomacy with the British; Hess had acted alone.

The German government broke silence first. On Monday evening, a statement was read on German radio announcing that Rudolf Hess had stolen a Luftwaffe plane. His intended destination was unknown, but it was believed he had crashed somewhere. He had left behind a note, the contents of which showed evidence of mental illness.

On Tuesday, the BBC announced that Hess had parachuted into Scotland and was in custody. On Wednesday, Hitler released a statement acknowledging that Hess had flown to Britain in an attempt to arrange an armistice with the British, but reiterated that he was mentally ill, possibly delusional.

From the outside, it might appear that the Nazi government was falling apart, what with its number two guy skipping the country. Hitler met with Party leaders at the Berghof to reassure them that everything was under control. In Britain, Churchill also had to deny that his government was involved in any kind of secret, backchannel negotiation with Berlin.

Karl Haushofer was interrogated by the Gestapo and placed under house arrest; his son Albrecht was imprisoned. Hess's brother Alfred was stripped of his membership in the Nazi Party.

We'll have to stop there for today. I thank you for listening, and I'd especially like to thank Žiga and Thibault for their kind donations, and thank you to Tom for becoming a patron of the podcast. Donors and patrons like Žiga and Thibault and Tom 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.

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I'm pleased to be able to tell you that a short story of mine appears in the recently 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.

And I hope you'll join me next week, here on *The History of the Twentieth Century*, as Adolf Hitler takes a break from planning the destruction of the USSR, in order to plan the destruction of Greece. Operation Marita, next week, here, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

Oh, and one more thing. Rudolf Hess was held prisoner for the rest of the war. He was repeatedly questioned by British Intelligence. Hess suggested at one point that Jewish mind control was affecting the thinking of Churchill and other British leaders, causing them to feel hatred toward Germany. He was in constant fear of being poisoned, and often asked to switch his meal with one of his guards'. He was evaluated by psychiatrists, who concluded that he was not insane but was mentally unstable, with paranoid tendencies. Please note that if he had been found mentally ill, under international law, he should have been repatriated to Germany.

He was tried at Nuremburg and sentenced to life in prison. The Soviet judge dissented, saying he believed Hess should be executed. It was widely believed among the Soviets that Hess' failure back in 1941 to divulge the information that an attack on the Soviet Union was imminent made him culpable in that attack.

Rudolf Hess spent the rest of his life in prison. Hess, his family, and his supporters continued to argue that he had done nothing wrong, and that it was the British government that was guilty of war crimes by its refusal to negotiate with Hess, which would have shortened the war and saved millions of lives.

After 1966, every inmate at Spandau Prison had either died or been released, except Rudolf Hess. The Soviets in particular refused all proposals that he be released early, and Spandau Prison remained in operation for an additional 21 years because of this one inmate, so long that a conspiracy theory arose to the effect that the single prisoner in Spandau was not Rudolf Hess but an imposter, or someone whose identity the Allies wished to keep secret. Genetic testing eventually debunked these claims.

Hess made multiple suicide attempts while in custody from as early as 1942. He was finally successful on August 17, 1987. He died at the age of 93.

[music: Closing Theme]