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How the Nazis took Europe's northern flank by surprise in 1940

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One morning 44 years ago, on April 9, 1940, two paralyzed nations were overrun by a lightning surprise invasion carried out by marginal forces of Hitler's Wehrmacht. Thus began what became for the neutral states of Denmark and Norway five years of horrifying Nazi occupation and terror, amid a world conflagration fueled by the mental inertia and cowardice among the Western Allies that prevented prompt counteraction at a time when the Nazi menace could still have been safely contained.

Today, while timid Western officials talk and act as if competing to bring a Red Army surprise strike down upon their wholly unprepared nations, almost everyone looks the other way as the Kremlin pushes through one obvious measure of war preparation after another, ranging from forward positioning of new missiles and omnipresent deployments of the Red Navy to psychological conditioning of the Soviet military and population.

At the outset of World War II, the policy pursued by British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain of Munich 1938 fame was outdone, on a smaller scale, by the neutral countries of Denmark, Norway, and Sweden—the latter avoiding direct occupation only by giving Hitler everything he wanted without putting up a fight.

Blindness in Scandinavia

The reason Denmark could be defeated, and Norway surrender decisive controlling positions, within a few hours of Nazi aggression was not the awesome power of Hitler's military machine, nor was it the armadas of spies and fifth columnists allegedly making up a significant portion of the Danish and Norwegian populations.

Although the Wehrmacht was vastly superior to the Danish and Norwegian armed forces combined, the actual invasion forces were quite modest. And although traitors and Nazi collaborationists were a factor in running the five-year occupation, as testified by the name of Norwegian Nazi leader Vidkun Quisling becoming synonymous to the word "traitor," indigenous fascists were kept in the dark about the invasion until after the fact.

The secret behind the success of the Nazi blitzkrieg on Europe's northern flank is simply the Scandinavians' refusal to acknowledge the impending danger.

Immediately after the brief Polish campaign, in September 1939, the High Command of the Wehrmacht looked for other options than an immediate attack against the West. Grand Admiral Erich Raeder's High Command of the Navy, in particular, viewed Norway as the key to victory at sea, based on the bitter lessons of the successful British naval blockade during World War I. Moreover, control of Norway's coast was indispensable for securing shipments of Swedish iron ore from the ice-free northern Norwegian port of Narvik.

Allied interest in Norway dated at least from September 1939, when the British Naval Minister, Winston Churchill, urged that Britain lay a minefield in Norwegian waters to prevent free passage of iron ore destined for the Third Reich. Later, during the 1939-40 Finnish-Soviet Winter War, Allied preperations were made to seize the Swedish ore fields under the pretext of Allied assistance to Finland.

On Jan. 23, 1940, Hitler ordered staff preparations for an invasion of Norway to continue under his personal guidance, with the code name "Weser Exercise." On Feb. 22, Lt. Gen. Nikolaus von Falkenhorst was officially appointed the commanding officer of the invasion forces, and the decision was made to occupy Denmark as well.

Neutrality at any cost

Both Norway and Denmark spent their last days and hours of peace ignoring the danger unfolding around them. Determined to maintain their neutrality at any cost, they were indeed to pay a high price for their refusal to recognize the evidence of an impending knockout blow. For despite Hitler's insistence on secrecy, leaks were abundant. By late March, both Oslo and Copenhagen were receiving word of what was to come.

As pointed out in a 1974 book by Richard Petrow, *The Bitter Years,* the Norwegian government without exception discounted several memoranda filed by Norwegian officials

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in Berlin, reporting Wehrmacht troop concentrations in northern ports and unusually heavy naval activity in the North Sea and the Baltic. The reports concluded that Hitler must be preparing a strike north.

Denmark refused to believe even more detailed information, originating with Maj. Gen. Hans Oster, chief assistant to Abwehr head Admiral Wilhelm Canaris. At the end of March, the Dutch military attaché in Berlin, Col. G. J. Sas, was informed by Oster that Hitler was planning to invade Denmark and Norway and possibly Sweden as well—information immediately passed on to Copenhagen through the Danish naval attaché in Berlin, Captain Kjolsen. As the report met with total silence, an angry and amazed Kjolsen traveled home to report in person and stress the reliability of the information. Arriving on April 4, five days before the invasion, Kjolsen was summarily told that his information could not be correct.

On the same day, another Danish intelligence officer, Major Hans Lunding, who ran an agent network in the Third Reich out of southern Jutland, reported Wehrmacht units advancing toward the Danish border, and that he was forced to conclude that Denmark was about to be invaded. The Danish government would not believe it.

Also on that day, in front of the noses of the Danish government, the battalion commander responsible for the capture of Copenhagen, a Wehrmacht major, arrived in the Danish capital on a personal reconnaissance mission, dressed in civilian clothes and posing as a businessman. After carefully selecting a suitable landing area in the port district, the major proceeded to the Citadel, a fortress overlooking the harbor and the site of the Danish General Staff headquarters, where he was kindly given a guided tour by an unsuspecting Danish sergeant, knowledgeably pointing out the communications center, the barracks housing, the Guards Regiment, and the two main gates of the fortress.

What the governments did

On April 8, the day before the invasion, Lunding filed an urgent message saying that a Danish agent had reported that Wehrmacht divisions were scheduled to cross the border "at four o'clock," the only ambiguity being whether that meant 4 p.m. on April 8 or 4 a.m. on April 9. When Hitler's tanks had not crossed the border by 4 p.m. on April 8, Lunding again desperately called Copenhagen to report that they were certainly coming at four o'clock the following morning.

By now, the Danish General Staff could no longer ignore the stream of warnings from its intelligence officers, and it urgently requested permission to mobilize. The Danish cabinet refused.

After repeated phone calls from Danish Army officers, the cabinet reluctantly authorized a state of alarm for southern Jutland, but still refrained from a total mobilization—in fear of provoking Hitler.

At the same time, off the coast of southern Norway, a Polish submarine sank the transport ship *Rio de Janeiro* on the afternoon of April 8. The survivors, Wehrmacht soldiers in full combat dress, told their Norwegian rescuers that they were on their way to aid the Norwegians against the British.

When hearing about the sinking, Grand Admiral Raeder's naval staff assumed that the element of surprise had now been lost, and that fierce resistance would meet the invasion force everywhere along the Norwegian coast. Within hours, however, it was clear that nobody in the Norwegian leadership was prepared to draw the only possible conclusion from the unmistakeable evidence at hand.

Only at 1 a.m. on April 9 were orders issued to activate the mines at the mouth of the Oslo fjord—too late, as Hitler's warships had already entered the fjord—and shortly thereafter, Lt. Col. R. Roscher Nielsen, chief of the operations section of the Norwegian General Staff, was awakened and informed that fortresses guarding the entrance of the Oslo fjord had been attacked. Yet the Norwegian government was still debating at 2:30 a.m. whether to order the mobilization of Norway's four reserve divisions. When they finally decided to act, they set April 11 as mobilization day—two days after the attack!

The result of appeasement

As news of the sinking of *Rio de Janeiro* was discussed at the royal table in Amalienborg Castle in Copenhagen, on the evening of April 8, one guest suggested that Denmark too might be in danger. With a smile, King Christian X replied that he didn't "really believe that," after which he set off, in a "confident and happy mood," according to a member of his personal guard, to attend a performance of *The Merry Wives of Windsor* at the Royal Theater.

While the king enjoyed the play, a newspaper correspondent phoned his chief editor in Copenhagen to report that he could hear the rumble of Hitler's tanks moving into position. Major Lunding too could hear the preparations, but could only wait for 4 a.m. The first Wehrmacht tanks crossed the border punctually at 4:10 a.m., five minutes before Hitler's order of 4:15 a.m.

The rest was a foregone conclusion. Denmark's position was hopeless, militarily but above all psychologically. Terrified by the Third Reich, the country had pinned its hope for peace not on the strength of its armed forces and the tenacity of a mobilized citizenry, but on repeated solemn declarations of neutrality. As World War II started in September 1939, Denmark had begun to reduce its troop strength, cutting its ground forces by more than 50% in six months, in order not to provoke Hitler.

Meeting token resistance or none at all, the invasion forces had the king surrender his country a few minutes before 6 a.m., and all resistance ended by 8 a.m., less than four hours after the invasion began. During the same morning hours, all of Norway's major ports were conquered, although the occupation of the entire country took days, not hours.