

Hitler's Blitzkrieg on Poles In September, 1939, Started War; First Battles Recounted

Shortly before dawn on Friday, Sept. 1, 1939, the armies of Adolf Hitler, fired with their fuhrer's ambition to rule the world, smashed into helpless Poland.

Two days later, at 11 a.m.—the same fateful hour another war had ended—the tired voice of Neville Chamberlain announced to the world Great Britain would abide by her pledge to the Polish government. A few hours later France, somewhat reluctantly, followed suit.

The war that was to engulf 46 nations and sweep across

three continents and countless islands and waters had started.

To most Americans the news came with frightening suddenness. But Europeans had been listening for many months to the rising beat of the German war tom-toms. They had seen the nazi machine operate in Spain and watched it gobble up Austria, Czechoslovakia and Poland in ominous succession. They had awaited the impending blow-up with much of the subdued awe of people awaiting an eclipse of the sun.

Only the British and French governments had refused to believe Hitler would quit playing poker and draw his gun. Chamberlain had banked on appeasement, Munich; the French counted on their "impregnable" Maginot Line and the "world's finest army."

As a result, the Allies were tragically unprepared when the blow finally fell that September morning. Once again, as in 1914, they had failed to gauge the might of the German army.

For the Nazis' new Blitzkrieg—lightning war—technique had destroyed all concepts of war as the Allies knew it. With a speed that astonished the world, German armored columns sliced into Poland from five directions, isolating the bewildered defending armies.

Planes, Tanks Co-ordinate
Overhead, Hermann Goering's bomber fleets paced the advance with clockwork timing—pulverizing Polish troops, guns and supply lines, and bombing the defenders' air force out of existence before it left the ground. In key areas, the invaders were guided by fifth columnists planted many months in advance.

The Poles were geographically unable to receive aid from their Allies, and before the first week was out, Nazi mechanized columns had clamped a ring of steel about Warsaw. Hard-driving tank-plane teams were overrunning Upper Silesia, Danzig, Cracow and Lwow. The Polish government fled to England.

Even the Germans were surprised at their quick success. The Russians rolled across the Polish border from the east just in time to protect Soviet interests in Poland. On Sept. 27, Warsaw—almost obliterated by bombs—fell, ending Polish resistance and completing one of the most remarkable military campaigns in history.

Hitler now shifted his weight of arms to the west, where the Allied Generalissimo Maurice Gamelin was boasting that the Nazis were "fools" to have given him so much time to "complete our mobilization."

But for long months to come

there was to be no action.

During one of Europe's coldest winters the opposing armies huddled and looked at each other from behind their Maginot and Siegfried fortifications. In Flanders, the British rehearsed maneuvers calculated to take them crashing through the German lines when weather permitted.

Allied commentators, incredulous, dubbed the interlude a "phony war" or "sitzkrieg." The German high command used the lull to plug the last chinks in the Wehrmacht's armor, and to map final plans for conquest.

Meanwhile, Russia, fearing war with Germany, invited Finnish diplomats to Moscow to discuss a non-aggression pact. In return for a guarantee of Soviet assistance in the event of war, Russia asked the use of certain bases in Finnish border territory. Finland flatly refused to co-operate. Premier Stalin, realizing little time was left, sent Red army divisions up the Karelian isthmus, Nov. 28, 1939.

Finns Cease Struggle

The Finns proved to be no push-over. Entrenched in their Mannerheim defenses, they demonstrated their toughness in a series of pitched battles fought at subzero temperatures. For more than two months of bitter fighting they held the upper hand, exacting a heavy toll of the Red armies.

Early in February the Russians changed their tactics, shifting the entire force of their attack against relatively small key sectors, softened first by a murderous weight of explosives. Wave upon wave of determined Russian troops hurled themselves against the Finns' concrete emplacements which gradually began to crumble. Toward the end the attack was continuous day and night. On March 13, the Finns gave up the hopeless struggle. The Russians got their protective bases: the ports of Viipuri and Hangoe and the entire Karelian isthmus.

To the west, first rumblings of reawakening war were heard early in April. The British, seeking to halt German ore shipments from Sweden, started laying mines in Norwegian waters. The nazis, fearing allied landings in the area, acted quickly. Proclaiming a desire to "protect" Denmark and Norway from allied designs, German troops descended on the two neutral countries by land and by sea on the morning of April 9, 1940.

The invading forces met with little resistance in Denmark and overran the country in a matter of hours. In Norway, success was nearly as rapid. Espionage, sabotage and treachery had crippled the little Norwegian army. Landing parties occupied Oslo, Trondheim, Bergen, Stavenger and the sub-Arctic ore port of Narvik almost simultaneously.

B.E.F. Smashed in Norway
Back in England there was misguided jubilation that Hitler had dared at last to "bring the war out into the open." Expeditionary forces were dispatched to the ports of Andalsnes and Namsos—north and south of Trondheim on the central Norway coast—and to Narvik to the north. In Commons Chamberlain chortled that the nazis had "missed the bus this time."

It was the allies' first dismal blunder. The British forces were half-trained and tragically inadequate. With little air support and virtually no anti-aircraft protection, they never did succeed in getting their heavy artillery or mechanized equipment ashore. Clouds of land-based nazi aircraft and columns of armored troops smashed every effort to expand the little British beachheads. The only successes were limited ones scored by Canadian and British troops in the Narvik area. The battered relief forces finally made their escape by sea from scattered Norwegian fishing villages.

In England, the Norway debacle sealed the downfall of the Chamberlain regime. On May 10, Winston Churchill became prime minister. His first task was a stern one: that morning German panzer divisions rolled into Holland and Belgium.

Victory in Grasp

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hurriedly shipped to England 1,000,000 old Springfield rifles and many French 75's of World War I vintage. These, Churchill later revealed in an address to the U. S. congress, were virtually all the arms Britain had with which to defend herself.

Nazis Strike South
The world may never know what quirk in the German mind halted their gray-green armies at the channel and turned them south upon France.

The French, now under Marshal Maxime Weygand, threw up a temporary line along the Somme, but German mechanized thrusts, pushed under cover of blasting swarms of dive bombers, soon found and pierced its weak points. By June 10 fast rolling nazi columns had crossed the Seine and were closing on Paris.

On that day, when the war seemed as good as won for the axis, Benito Mussolini announced Italy's entry into the conflict. The triumphant nazi rolled into Paris on June 14. Three days later the aged Marshal Henri Pétain, once toasted as the hero of Verdun, asked for honorable terms of surrender.

Pétain got his terms. They were harsh, not honorable. On June 22,

in the same armistice car at Compiègne in which the first world war had ended, the nazis announced they were taking half of France and demobilizing all French military, naval and air forces. The Italians obtained disarmament of France's North African colonies.

Soviet Russia

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ceeded in breaching the defenses of battered, shattered Sevastopol. That victory coming after 245 days of almost continuous siege, seemed a signal for renewed German efforts everywhere.

Both arms of the pincers movement reached out rapidly and with frightening success. The northern arm contacted Voronezh on the upper Don July 7, bypassed the city and swung southward through the rich farming country across the river. The noose was flung about Stalingrad on Aug. 20.

The southern prong overran Rostov within a week and spilled southward over the Caucasian steppes. Maikop fell Aug. 7, and the nazis vanguards streamed into the foothills of the mountains beyond.

For Russia it seemed the most critical period in more than 14 months of war. But as the summer wore on, it assumed a strange resemblance to the summer before. The red armies hung on just as stubbornly as they had farther west, and once again Hitler seemed unable to put his finger on final success.

Fight for Streets

As October came to smoke-hung Stalingrad, a grim citizens' army was battling with its back to the Volga. It had fought the enemy first in the outlying country, then in the suburbs and finally in the rubble-choked streets of the city itself. Successful attacks were measured in terms of twisted masonry won. Now retreat was out of the question. Bridges were blasted and all ships withdrawn. The Russians still were resisting when the winds whistled down the steppes in mid-November. Then, just as Hitler was loudly promising the fall of Stalingrad, the red army struck back again. From north of the city,



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