

Modern European History

Unit 9 – WWII

The War Begins Primary Sources

from *Berlin Diary*

by William L. Shirer

American journalist and historian William L. Shirer served as a radio foreign correspondent in Berlin at the outset of World War II. He kept a diary for his own pleasure but with the idea that it might be published one day.

BERLIN, September 1, later

It's a "counter-attack"! At dawn this morning Hitler moved against Poland. It's a flagrant, inexcusable, unprovoked act of aggression. But Hitler and the High Command call it a "counter-attack." A grey morning with overhanging clouds. The people in the street were apathetic when I drove to the Rundfunk [a Berlin radio station] for my first broadcast at eight fifteen a.m. . . . Along the east- west axis the Luftwaffe [the German air force] were mounting five big anti-aircraft guns to protect Hitler when he addresses the Reichstag [the lower house of the German parliament] at ten a.m. Jordan and I had to remain at the radio to handle Hitler's speech for America. Throughout the speech, I thought as I listened, ran a curious strain, as though Hitler himself were dazed at the fix he had got himself into and felt a little desperate about it. Somehow he did not carry conviction and there was much less cheering in the Reichstag than on previous, less important occasions. Jordan must have reacted the same way. As we waited to trans- late the speech for America, he whispered: "Sounds like his swan song." It really did. He sounded discouraged when he told the Reichstag that Italy would not be coming into the war because "we are unwilling to call in outside help for this struggle. We will fulfil this task by ourselves." And yet Paragraph 3 of the Axis military alliance calls for immediate, automatic Italian support with "all its military resources on land, at sea, and in the air." What about that? He sounded desperate when, referring to Molotov's speech of yesterday at the Russian ratification of the Nazi-Soviet accord, he said: "I can only underline every word of Foreign Commissar Molotov's speech."

Tomorrow Britain and France probably will come in and you have your second World War. The British and French tonight sent an ultimatum to Hitler to withdraw his troops from Poland or their ambassadors will ask for their passports. Presumably they will get their passports.

LATER. Two thirty a.m.—Almost through our first black-out. The city is completely darkened. It takes a little getting used to. You grope around the pitch-black streets and pretty soon your eyes get used to it. You can make out the whitewashed curb- stones. We had our first air-raid alarm at seven p.m. I was at the radio just beginning my script for a broadcast at eight fifteen. The lights went out, and all the German employees grabbed their gas-masks and, not a little frightened, rushed for the shelter. No one offered me a mask, but the wardens insisted that I go to the cellar. . . . No planes came over. But with the English and French in, it may be different tomorrow. I shall then be in the by no means pleasant predicament of hoping they bomb the hell out of this town without getting me. The ugly shrill of the sirens, the rushing to a cellar with your gas- mask (if you have one), the utter darkness of the night—how will human nerves stand that for long?

Questions

1. What did Shirer predict would happen as a result of Germany's surprise attack on Poland?

2. How do you know that Berliners expected a retaliatory air strike following the attack on Poland?

3. What were three facts about Germany's attack that Shirer recorded in his diary entry?

4. What were three opinions about Germany's attack that Shirer recorded in his diary entry?

Charles de Gaulle: Man of Destiny

"An anxious concern about the fate of our country came as second nature to my three brothers, my sister, and myself."—de Gaulle

Charles de Gaulle, devoted to France, fought for his nation in two world wars. In a life full of ironies, he gave ammunition to his future enemies and made life difficult for his former allies.

De Gaulle came from a family deeply involved in French history. Two relatives had fought the English during the Hundred Years' War, one of them at the famous Battle of Agincourt in 1415. Other relatives had served as king's counselors or written histories of France. His father had fought in the French army that suffered the humiliating defeat in the Franco-Prussian War in 1870.

In 1909, young Charles decided to join the army, and he entered the French military academy. He was not a good student, and the school's report judged him "average in everything but height." He stood six feet five inches tall. Soon after his graduation, World War I erupted. Captain de Gaulle led a company in the fierce Battle of Verdun. He was wounded badly and left on the field for dead. He did not die but was instead taken to a German prisoner of war camp. He tried to escape five times. After the last failed attempt, he was held in solitary confinement for four months.

After the war, de Gaulle wrote military strategy. Before World War I, the French command used the coordinated attack of masses of soldiers to win wars. When the Germans swept through the French lines during that war, thinking changed. Now, the generals emphasized defense and built a strong line of forts and artillery to protect France. After seeing the tank in the First World War, de Gaulle was convinced that it would give offensive forces the advantage and that the new defensive strategy was wrong. He pushed his views with great vigor and emotion, angering his superiors by attacking them. As a result, his career suffered. However, his strategy was read in Germany, and in World War II they used his ideas against France.

During the Second World War, de Gaulle proved himself an able field commander, but in 1940 the Germans rolled over the French army. Henri Pétain, who was in charge of the government, wanted to surrender, which angered de Gaulle.

Called by Winston Churchill “the man of destiny,” de Gaulle escaped one night on a plane to England. The next day, he made a defiant radio broadcast calling on the French to continue the fight against Germany. Some weeks later, a French military court found him guilty of treason and sentenced him to death.

With a handful of followers and a history of conflict with fellow officers, de Gaulle was not in an ideal position to lead a French government in exile. However, he established credible leadership. He used radio broadcasts to inspire the French people and kept in touch with underground fighters in France. On August 25, 1944, French troops became the first Allied forces to enter Paris. They were followed by de Gaulle himself, who was made prime minister by the legislature later that year.

De Gaulle grew disgusted with politicians, and in a year he retired. He formed a popular movement in 1947 but stayed outside the government. France reached a crisis, though, in 1958, and de Gaulle agreed to lead his nation again. He was made president and given broad powers. He ruled for a decade, creating order at home and pursuing an independent course abroad that often annoyed his former allies. He kept Britain out of the economic grouping called the Common Market (now the European Community). He angered the United States by reducing French involvement in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and made friendly gestures to Communist nations. He also criticized U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War. In these actions, de Gaulle sought to give France a larger role in world affairs. In the end, he isolated France from other nations. He retired in 1969 after losing a vote of support. He died later that year.

Questions

1. What was the driving force in de Gaulle’s life? Explain your answer.

2. Explain the two major ironies of de Gaulle’s professional life.

3. Was de Gaulle’s character better suited to the army or politics? Explain.

Winston Churchill: English Bulldog

“In 1940 Churchill became the hero that he had always dreamed of being. . . . In that dark time, what England needed was not a shrewd, equable, balanced leader. She needed a prophet, a heroic visionary, a man who could dream dreams of victory when all seemed lost. Winston Churchill was such a man. . . .”—Historian Anthony Storr

One of Winston Churchill’s ancestors was the duke of Marlborough, a hero of the wars against Louis XIV of France in the early 18th century. Churchill, between 1939 and 1945, defiantly led his nation against another European leader bent on conquest.

The son of a British lord and an American heiress, Churchill had a privileged but unhappy childhood. He was a poor student and took the entrance exam for Britain’s military academy three times before he passed. He eventually graduated in 1895. He worked as a soldier and a journalist in Cuba, India, and Egypt. He also won fame for escaping an enemy prison camp in South Africa during the Boer War.

In the early 1900s, Churchill won election to Parliament. He left the conservative Tory party and joined the Liberal party. He was branded a traitor to his class for pushing social reforms. In 1911, he was given charge of the Royal Navy. He developed a strategy for sending the fleet to Russia past Constantinople. However, during World War I his plan failed, and he was discredited. In another post, he moved to speed the development of the tank.

Churchill lost office in 1922, when new elections defeated the government he served. In the next two decades, he suffered political isolation. His views did not fit either the Liberals or the Tories. He supported himself by writing history.

During the 1930s, Churchill was back in Parliament. He often spoke out about the threat raised by Adolf Hitler. He developed a network of academics who provided him with inside intelligence. When Neville Chamberlain allowed Germany to take Czechoslovakia, Churchill was outraged. He called it “a total and unmitigated defeat.”

When Britain declared war on Germany, Churchill was put in charge of the navy again. However, Chamberlain resigned as prime minister soon after, and the 65-year-old Churchill was everyone’s choice to lead the new government. He named himself minister of defense as well. His first speech to Parliament was grim but determined: “I have nothing to offer but blood, toil, tears and sweat,” he began. He concluded by stating the government’s war goal: “It is victory, victory at all costs, victory in spite of all terror: victory however long and hard the road may be; for without victory, there can be no survival.”

In the early months of the war, Churchill carried on a correspondence with U.S. President Franklin Roosevelt, hoping to bring the United States into the war. At first, all he could win was American aid. When Hitler launched his ill-advised attack on the Soviet Union in 1941, Churchill, who was a foe of communism, quickly promised help. “The Russian danger,” he said, “is our danger.” Still, for years Churchill resisted Soviet urgings to open a second front against Germany. This led to difficulties between the allies.

Churchill participated in several wartime conferences with Roosevelt, which often included Soviet leader Joseph Stalin. Churchill had to leave the last “Big Three” meeting in July 1945 before it was finished. While there, his government had been voted out of office.

After the war, Churchill spoke against the growing power of the Soviet Union. He coined the phrase “Iron Curtain” to describe the control that the Soviets exercised over the countries of Eastern Europe. He served once again as prime minister from 1951 to 1955, but ill health forced him to retire. He died in 1965 and was given a funeral that was attended by officials from around the world.

Questions

1. Write a paragraph comparing Charles de Gaulle and Churchill.

2. How did Churchill use his eloquence to lead his country?

3. Why would the British vote down Churchill's government in 1945?
