

## What factors led to the early German successes in World War 2?

With Hitler following his grand expansionist plans, Europe had been lingering on the brink of war for years, and finally war broke out on the 1<sup>st</sup> September 1939 when Hitler invaded Poland. Almost immediately, the British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain announced that appeasement had failed and that consequently, Britain was at war with Germany. While the allies struggled to mobilise, the Wehrmacht swept across central Europe. By the summer of 1940 Hitler had control of most of mainland Europe and his army seemed invincible. The tide would soon turn against him following defeats in the battle of Britain and Stalingrad, but from 1939 to 1941 he was the uncontested despot of Europe. There were a number of contributing factors to the early success of the German army.

Significantly in the inter war period German generals had drastically rethought their tactics. They developed the Blitzkrieg tactics, which depend on speed and surprise to smash the enemy. In the first stage of a blitzkrieg attack the Luftwaffe would gain air supremacy and then the Heinkel and Stuka bombers would destroy bridges, railroads and communication links to confuse the enemy. Next, German Panzer tanks would smash through enemy defences and finally infantry units would mop up any remaining resistance. These tactics made good use of modern military technology for example, paratroopers were used for the first time in the invasion of Norway, to wreak havoc behind enemy lines. In contrast, French and British

commanders were conservative in their tactics, preferring to depend on strong fortifications than speed and surprise.

Just as important was the military who executed these plans. In the early part of the war, German military might far outmatched their allied opponents, since Hitler had begun mobilising troops far early and had introduced conscription as far back as 1935. By 1939, the German army was 750,000 men strong and also had 1 million reservists. In comparison, the French only had 80 divisions and the British only 4. The German army also had vast supplies of weapons since the economy had been armament focused since 1935. E.g. the Luftwaffe had over 4000 planes compared to 1200 French planes and 1700 planes in the R.A.F. The Kriegsmarine (German navy) also had developed agile U-boats which proved a menace to allied shipping. The strength of the German military and the comparative weakness of the allies was the major reason for her success in 1939 and 1940.

German troops began pouring into Poland at dawn on the 1<sup>st</sup> sept 1939 and had taken Warsaw by the 27<sup>th</sup> of September. One reason for their rapid success in Poland was that Poland was geographically isolated from her enemies. Although Britain and France had agreed to come to her aid, they did not actually engage the German army on the ground for the next seven months, a time sometimes known as the 'phony war' period. Hitler's clever alliance of convenience with Russia was another key factor of success in Poland. Although the two countries were completely ideologically opposed, the German foreign minister Ribbentrop had signed a pact with his soviet counterpart, Molotov. Under the terms of this surprise non-aggression pact they secretly agreed to carve up Poland between them. As a result, Poland was required to fight a German attack from the west and, at the same time, a Russian invasion from the west. This short term pact suited both Russia and Germany, though they both

foresaw an inevitable clash of ideologies. Stalin had not yet mobilised his army and Hitler did not want to fight a 'total' war on two fronts.

While Germany had been steadily building up her armies since Hitler's rise to power in '33, France and Britain were much slower. They were intent on pursuing the policy of appeasement. When Hitler invaded Poland he left only a small force to defend the Siegfried Line on the French border. But France did not take advantage of this, because they were still mobilised and were also still hamstrung by the 'Maginot mentality'. The Maginot line was a series of formidable fortifications on the French side of the franco-german border. France was not concerned with events beyond this line, and felt secure behind it. This overly defensive mindset contributed to early German successes in WW2.

Britain was guilty of a similar failure to take the initiative with regard to Norway. Norway was strategically important to the German war effort, because it sheltered much needed Swedish iron ore supplies. The British had arranged 'operation Wilfred' the planned mining of Norwegian waters, but they delayed this for a week in April 1940. This gave Hitler time to invade Denmark (which capitulated in 1 day) and Norway, again making use of Blitzkrieg tactics. The British also landed troops but they were soon defeated and the Germans seized full control of important ports like Bergen, Trondheim and Narvik. Norway would prove an important part of the German supply chain and a useful base for U-boat and Luftwaffe operations. German success here was somewhat down to allied indecisiveness.

Hitler next turned his attention towards the traditional enemy, France. He was determined to reverse the humiliating defeat of WW1. Success in France depended on sound tactic. Hitler bypassed the impregnable Maginot line by instead attacking Belgium and Holland. These

divisionary feints drew the French army and the BEF (British Expeditionary Force) north, and an armoured thrust through the Ardennes by Gen. Guderian's panzer units cut them off. Some of this 300,000 strong force were rescued by the royal navy at Dunkirk. Meanwhile, the rest of the German army wheeled around France taking the Maginot line from the rear and easily overwhelming the unorganised, localised, confused French resistance. It was a strategic masterpiece. On the 21<sup>st</sup> of June the French government capitulated. The success in France was also helped by internal division. For example, under orders from Moscow, French communists opposed the war and the right wing 'Peace Party', led by Pierre Laval, favoured surrender to Germany.

By the summer of 1940 Germany was in a very powerful position. This early success was down to a mixture of German preparedness, innovative tactics, political fumbling, allied incompetence and clever diplomacy.