

Germany's western border in order to draw off German divisions from the east as soon as the Wehrmacht marched.

Hitler's calculations were different. He believed, correctly as it turned out, that the French would not move against him in the west, which he left defended by only forty-four divisions – to oppose the nominal hundred of the French army – and that the British could do little to hurt Germany during the brief span of time he intended the Polish campaign to fill. He had the advantage of being mobilised, whereas the British and French were not. He had the even more important advantage of deploying superior numbers and immeasurably superior equipment against the Poles. The German Army Group North and South together numbered some sixty-two divisions, of which six were armoured and ten mechanised, supported by 1300 modern combat aircraft. Although the Poles had begun to mobilise in July as war became imminent, they had not fully deployed all their men by 1 September. Together they formed forty divisions, of which none was armoured; the few Polish tanks were old, light models, sufficient to equip only a single brigade; and half the 935 aircraft of the air force were obsolete.

— The campaign in Poland —

Hitler nevertheless still needed a pretext to attack. He was briefly deterred on 25 August by the news that Britain had entered into a formal alliance with Poland which guaranteed protection against aggression by a third party, and a few days of inconclusive diplomatic sparring followed. On 28 August, however, he formally abrogated the 1934 non-aggression pact with Poland, signed at a time when her army far outnumbered the Wehrmacht, and on the evening of 31 August received news of Polish aggression near the Silesian border town of Gleiwitz; the incident had in fact been carefully staged by his own SS. Next morning, at 4.45 am, his tanks began to cross the frontier. Since it was Hitler's pretence that Germany had been attacked by Poland, he issued no declaration of war.

By the end of 1 September the Polish air force had largely ceased to exist, many of its aircraft having been caught on the ground and destroyed by the Luftwaffe, which also bombed Polish headquarters, communications and cities. All the Wehrmacht ground forces made rapid progress. On 3 September the French and British governments delivered separate ultimatums demanding the withdrawal of German troops from Poland; both ultimatums expired that day and a state of war therefore existed between them and Germany. By that date, however, the Fourth Army advancing from Pomerania had made contact with the Third advancing from East Prussia and had cut off the 'Polish Corridor' to Danzig and Gdynia, Poland's outlet to the sea. By 7 September, after a Polish attempt to stand on the line of the river Warta, west of Warsaw, had failed, the Tenth Army had

Above: German infantrymen take cover behind a Panzer Mark III on the outskirts of Warsaw, 25 September 1939. **Below:** Horse-drawn German artillery in Poland. Most German artillery remained horse-drawn until the end of the war.





Hitler in Poland, September 1939. On his left is Rommel, then the commander of the Führer's escort battalion, and on his right is Keitel, his chief of staff.

advanced from the south to within thirty-six miles of the capital, while the Third Army, driving down from the north, was on the river Narew, twenty-five miles away. There was now a German change of plan. It had been expected that most of the Polish army would be entrapped west of the Vistula, on which Warsaw stands. By rapid disengagement, however, large numbers of troops got across the river and marched to concentrate on the capital to fight a defensive battle there. The German commanders therefore ordered a second and deeper envelopment, aimed at the line of the river Bug, a hundred miles east of Warsaw. While it was in progress, the one and only crisis for the Germans occurred. The Polish Poznan Army, one of those entrapped west of the Vistula, turned and attacked the German Eighth and Tenth Armies from the rear, inflicting heavy casualties on the surprised 30th Division in the first impact. A bitter encirclement battle ensued, ending with the capture of 100,000 Polish troops on 19 September.

Warsaw had been encircled by 17 September; in an effort to reduce its garrison's resistance by terror, it was heavily bombed until 27 September, when the defenders finally capitulated. All hopes of escaping eastward into the remote and difficult country bordering the Pripet Marshes were ended when the Red Army, after appeals for assistance from the Germans on 3 and 10 September, finally moved its White Russian and Ukrainian Fronts across the frontier on 17 September. Some 217,000 of the 910,000 Poles taken prisoner in the campaign fell into Russian hands. By 6 October all Polish resistance had ended. Some 100,000 Poles escaped into Lithuania, Hungary and Romania, whence many would make

their way to France and later Britain, to form the Polish armed forces in exile and continue the struggle – as infantrymen in the Battle of France, as pilots in the Battle of Britain, and later on other fronts – until the last day of the war.

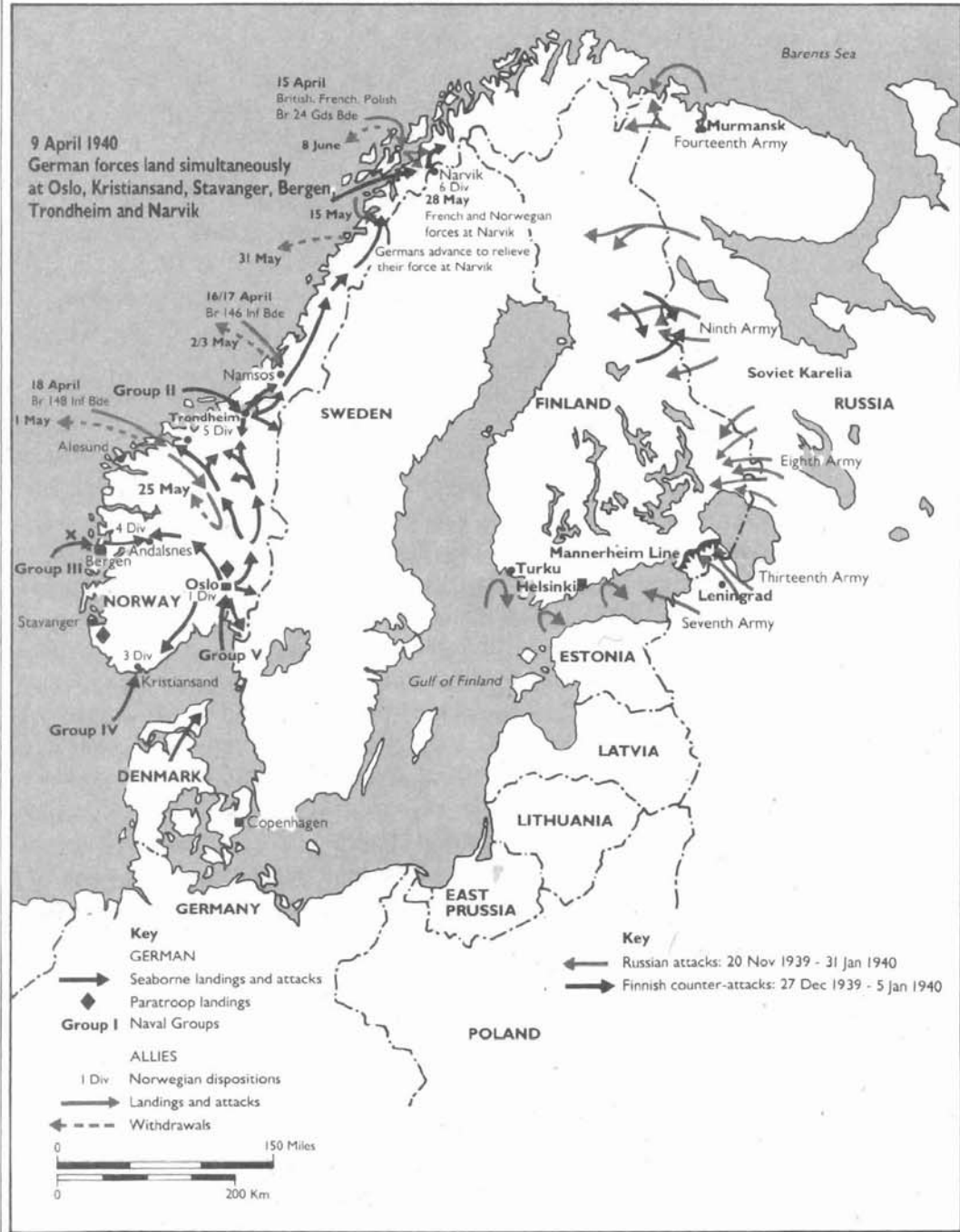
At the conclusion of the campaign the Wehrmacht, which had suffered 13,981 fatal casualties in Poland, immediately began to turn its victorious divisions westward to man the Siegfried Line or West Wall and prepare for a campaign against the British and French, who had made no attempt at all to divert German forces, except for a small flurry of activity between 8 September and 1 October known as the 'Saar Offensive'. The only immediate military outcome of the Polish campaign lay not in the west but in the east. There Russia at once capitalised on the terms of the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact to demand basing rights for its troops in Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia, a manoeuvre which eventually led to the annexation of all three countries to the Soviet Union in June 1940.

— The Winter War —

Stalin also moved against Finland, though with altogether less convenient results. Finland had been Russian territory between 1809 and 1917; when it won its independence after fighting against Russian and local Bolsheviks during the Russian Civil War, it had obtained a frontier demarcation which Stalin decided ran too close for strategic comfort to Leningrad and the Soviet Baltic ports. On 12 October 1939, a week after Latvia had signed its dictated treaty, the Soviet Union confronted the Finnish government with demands for naval basing rights and the cession of a large strip of Finnish territory in the Karelian isthmus leading to Leningrad. The Finns stonewalled until 26 November, when the Soviet Union staged a border incident. On 30 November the Russians attacked with four armies, deploying thirty divisions; for this blatant act of aggression they were expelled from the League of Nations on 14 December. The Soviet Union was eventually to commit a million men to the campaign. The Finns, though their total mobilised strength never exceeded 175,000, fought back with skill and success. Perhaps the most warlike of all European peoples, and certainly the hardiest, the Finns made circles around their Russian attackers in the snowbound wastes of their native forests, employing so-called *motti* or 'logging' tactics to cut off and encircle their enemies, who were regularly disorientated and demoralised by a style of warfare for which their training had not prepared them. While the main strength of the Finnish army defended the Karelian isthmus on the Mannerheim Line, named after the country's commander-in-chief, who had won the war of independence in 1918, independent units attacked, encircled and destroyed Soviet divisions on the long eastern flank between Lake Ladoga and the White Sea.

In December the Finns actually counter-attacked from the Karelian isthmus, after a series of operations by the Soviets described by Mannerheim as 'similar to a performance by a badly directed orchestra'. By January, however, the Russians had taken the measure of their opponents, recognised their own underestimation of the Finns' military prowess,

THE RUSSO-FINNISH WAR (1939-40) AND THE CAMPAIGN IN NORWAY



and brought up sufficient forces to overwhelm them. During February they broke their way through the Mannerheim Line by main force, inflicting casualties which the Finnish government recognised its tiny population could not bear. On 6 March it treated for peace and on 12 March signed a treaty which conceded the demands Russia had made in October; they had lost 25,000 dead since the war had begun. The Red Army, however, had lost 200,000, of whom perhaps the majority had died of exposure while surrounded or out of touch with base. The experience of the 'Winter War', which would be renewed as the 'Continuation War' after June 1941, conditioned the Soviet Union's carefully modulated policy towards Finland when the issue of peace came round again.

Finland had briefly been an inspiration to all enemies of the Axis powers, with which, following the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, the Soviet Union was identified during 1940. Britain and France had even considered affording her military assistance, and winter-warfare units from both countries were earmarked to join the Finnish army; fortunately for the future of Soviet-Western relations, the Finns had sued for peace before they were sent.

— The Scandinavian campaign —

The end of the Winter War did not, however, terminate Anglo-French military involvement in northern Europe. According to the German navy, which kept a close watch on Scandinavian affairs, Western military assistance for Finland would most probably have passed through Norway, and in doing so would not only have violated Norwegian neutrality but menaced German access to the Kiruna-Gällivare iron ore fields in Sweden which supplied Germany's war economy with a vital commodity. Hitler's Grand Admiral, Erich Raeder, was in any case anxious to acquire north Norwegian bases from which to operate against the Royal Navy, and therefore urged Hitler throughout the autumn and winter of 1939 to pre-empt the Allies by authorising an intervention in Norway. Preoccupied by his plans for the forthcoming attack in the west, Hitler would not allow his interest to be aroused, though in December, after Raeder had arranged for the Norwegian Nazi leader, Vidkun Quisling, to be brought to Berlin, he did authorise OKW to investigate whether Norway would be worth occupying. In mid-February his indifference was dissipated by a blow to his pride.

At the outbreak of the war the *Graf Spee*, one of Germany's 'pocket battleships', had undertaken a commerce-raiding campaign against British merchant shipping in the South Atlantic but had eventually been cornered off the coast of Uruguay by three British cruisers. Its commander had been forced to scuttle it at Montevideo after the Battle of the

The Red Army's lamentable performance in the 'Winter War' against Finland encouraged both Hitler and western strategists to write off the Soviet Union's capacity to resist a future German invasion. In their view it would be all over within a matter of weeks.

River Plate on 13 December 1939. The British people were heartened and Hitler consonantly infuriated by this humiliation of the German surface fleet. On 16 February Hitler was even more outraged when the *Altmark*, a supply ship which had tended the *Graf Spee* during its cruise, was intercepted by HM Destroyer *Cossack* in Norwegian territorial waters and 300 British merchant seaman taken by the *Graf Spee* were liberated. He at once decided that Norwegian territorial waters must be denied to the British for good, preferably by invasion and occupation, and instructed General Nikolaus von Falkenhorst, a mountain-warfare expert, to prepare a plan. Falkenhorst quickly concluded that it would be desirable also to occupy Denmark as a 'land bridge' to Norway, and by 7 March Hitler had assigned eight divisions to the operation. Intelligence then indicated that Allied plans to intervene in Norway, providing the legal pretext for aggression on which Hitler normally insisted, had been called off. Raeder nevertheless succeeded in persuading him that the operation was strategically necessary and on 7 April the transports sailed.

Denmark, quite unprepared for war, almost unarmed and with no suspicion that Germany harboured hostile intentions against her, surrendered under the threat of an air bombardment of Copenhagen on the morning of the troops' landing on 9 April. The Norwegians were also taken by surprise. They were, however, ready to fight and at Oslo the ancient guns of the harbour fort held the invaders at bay – sinking the German cruiser *Blücher* – long enough for the government and royal family to escape and make their way to Britain. The survivors of the small Norwegian army then gathered as best they could to oppose the German advance up the coast towards the central cities of Andalsnes, Trondheim and Namsos, and to counter the German landing in the far north at Narvik.



German infantrymen advancing behind a Panzer Mark II in Norway, May 1940. The Norwegians, with British and French assistance, bitterly resisted the German invasion after recovering from Hitler's surprise attack.

They did not, however, have to fight alone. Because of the preparations made to intervene in Finland, both the British and the French had contingents ready to move and debark. Between 18 and 23 April 12,000 British and French troops were put ashore north and south of Trondheim and advanced to meet the Germans who were making their way north from Oslo up the great valleys of the Gudbrandsdal and the Osterdal. The Germans defeated the leading British brigade in the Gudbrandsdal on 23 April and compelled it to withdraw by sea from Andalsnes, then made contact with their own landing party at Trondheim and forced the evacuation of the rest of the Allied troops through Namsos on 3 May.

In the north the fortunes of war swung the other way. The German navy suffered a serious defeat in the two battles of Narvik, fought on 10 and 13 April between a superior British force and the destroyers transporting General Eduard Dietl's mountain troops. Ten of the destroyers, with a high proportion of Dietl's force, were sunk in the Narvik fiords. Dietl escaped ashore with only 2000 mountain infantry and 2600 sailors with whom to oppose 24,500 Allied troops, including the resolute Norwegian 6th Division. He found himself besieged in Narvik from 14 April onwards and was eventually forced to break out and retreat to the Swedish border, which he reached at the end of May. The collapse of the Allied front in France, however, then brought the campaign to an end, since both the French and the British ordered their troops home through Narvik to replace the losses suffered in the *Blitzkrieg* battles with the Wehrmacht which began on 10 May.

Dietl, though in many respects the least successful of the German generals of 1939–40, was to become Hitler's favourite; his death in an aeroplane crash in June 1944 was regarded by the Führer as a wounding personal tragedy. By then he had come to regard Dietl as irreplaceable and he attempted to conceal the news of his death from the Finns, among whom Dietl had established a towering reputation during the Finnish 'Continuation War' of 1941–4, lest it discourage them further at a time when defeat by the Russians again stared them in the face. Hitler liked Dietl because he argued with him in an explosive, soldierly way that perhaps reminded the Führer of his own army service. He liked him even more because at Narvik he had rescued him from humiliation. So alarmed had Hitler been by the miscarriage of the landing that he had been on the point of ordering Dietl to escape into Sweden and intern his soldiers rather than risk having to surrender them to the British. He had eventually been dissuaded from sending the signal, and in any case Dietl's dogged conduct of the siege and retreat made it unnecessary. Dietl was the model of what Hitler wished every German soldier to be, the type he had looked forward to recruiting and training in thousands from the moment he embarked on the creation of the Wehrmacht. The proof of his quality was his snatching of victory from the jaws of defeat in the mountains of north Norway in June 1940, and so sustaining unblemished the record of German military success since the beginning of the war. To the campaign simultaneously unfolding in the west, however, not even a Dietl could have added a jot to the dimensions of German victory. There *Blitzkrieg* seemed a magic which had taken possession of the army itself.