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# **NORWAY AND WORLD WAR II: INVASION, OCCUPATION, LIBERATION**

**Preeti Niles**

## **INTRODUCTION**

The four century long Danish-Norwegian unified state ended abruptly in 1814 as a result of the end of the Napoleonic Wars. Following this, Norway was in a union with Sweden which lasted until 1905.<sup>1</sup> When World War I broke out, Norway, Denmark and Sweden took a conscious decision to remain neutral and work together towards their common interests.<sup>2</sup>

However, the story was different during the Second World War. Germany invaded Norway on 9 April 1940. Norwegian resistance lasted for two months after which the Nazis took total control. The arrival of an Allied military mission on 8 May 1945 led to the surrender and arrest of the German and Norwegian Nazi Party members and the consequent liberation of Norway. This paper is a study of the invasion of Norway by Germany in the Second World War. The study seeks to understand the reasons for Germany pulling neutral Norway into the war. The intentions of the Axis powers is yet another question that the study proposes to question. The persecution of Jews in Norway is also a matter for discussion in this paper. The nature of resistance offered by Norway in the early years and the politics of the appointment of Major Quisling as Prime Minister are also of interest to this study. The paper concludes with the Allied bombardment of Norway and the consequent surrender of the German and Norwegian Nazi Party.

Secret war-time documents, many of which are now in the public domain, and archival material on Norway and the Second World War, which the researcher collected on her visit to Trondheim, are the main sources for this paper. Correspondence of officials during the war years, press reports as well as standard secondary sources on World War II are the materials used in this paper.

## **INVASION OF NORWAY**

Among the great watersheds of the history of the 20<sup>th</sup> century were the two World Wars, which saw a decisive shift of global power from Western Europe to the United States and the Soviet Union.<sup>3</sup>

Norway had maintained neutrality during the First World War but had experienced major losses to its merchant fleet due to sea mines and in the post-war years saw a need to strengthen its military. However, most of these plans were not completed on time. Meanwhile in the 1930s, as tension grew in Europe, Norway endeavoured to remain

neutral and negotiated trade agreements favourable to Britain and Germany.<sup>4</sup> With major ports on the North Sea, and trade routes running through the Norwegian Leads, despite Norway proclaiming neutrality, the country became of strategic importance during the early stages of the World War II. This unique position of Norway was recognised by Britain and Germany, and both made plans for the invasion of Norway.<sup>5</sup>

While Britain claimed that they wished to lay mines in the Norwegian waters to stop the export of Swedish iron ore mines through Norway's rail terminus and port of Narvik,<sup>6</sup> Germany was anxious to ensure the supply of Swedish iron ore via Narvik.<sup>7</sup> The exchanges between Prime Ministers Chamberlain and Paul Reynaud make it obvious that dragging Norway into the war was aimed at creating a new theatre of war, thus diverting German men and material, which would have otherwise been used on another front. Also, the idea was to cut off iron ore supplies to Germany and thus put Germany in a tight spot.<sup>8</sup> Importantly, British takeover of the Norwegian merchant fleet on the outbreak of the Second World War forced Norway out of neutrality and into the Western Powers group against Germany. Britain and France forced Norway to take sides in the battle even before Germany attacked her.

The Norwegian merchant fleet saved Britain in its most difficult time, by carrying 40 % of its oil until 1942 when the US joined the war against Germany. Admittedly this was done under pressure from Britain, starting one week after the British declaration of war in September 1939, precisely as had happened during the First World War. At the same time, we might say that the merchant fleet doomed Norway, 'doomed her to be an appendix to Britain',<sup>9</sup> the greatest sea power of the period, and later to America. Of course, the specific details of the matter are still obscure, in spite of much historic research. Evidently, if Germany wanted to drag Norway into the war, Britain was equally keen on not respecting Norwegian neutrality.

It is interesting to note that Hitler pointed out in a series of directives<sup>10</sup> how important it was to prevent the English annexation of Norway. He demanded therefore the complete adherence to all orders concerning the defence of this territory.<sup>11</sup> Hitler, even if he intended to respect the neutrality of Norway in the initial days, was soon convinced that the German occupation of Norway was inevitable: 'I am informed that the English intend to land there, and I want to be there before them. The occupation of Norway by the British would be a strategic turning movement which would lead them into the Baltic, where we have neither troops nor coastal fortifications. The success which we have gained in the east and which we are going to win in the west

would be annihilated because the enemy would find himself in a position to advance on Berlin and to break the backbone of our two fronts. In the second and third place the conquest of Norway will ensure the liberty of movement of our Fleet in the Bay of Wilhelmshaven, and will protect our imports of Swedish ore".<sup>12</sup>

Despite the British Cabinet, authorizing the preparation of a plan for a landing at Narvik, the indecisiveness and consequent postponement of the date for mining the Norwegian waters to interrupt Swedish iron-ore supplies by the British and the French was catastrophic<sup>13</sup> and Hitler got to Norway first.<sup>14</sup> On 27 January 1940, Hitler ordered plans for an invasion of Norway, making it clear that he could no longer respect Norway's neutrality. Germany, anxious to ensure the supply of Swedish iron ore via the northern Norwegian port of Narvik, demanded that the Norwegians place themselves under German protection, but Norway refused to submit to the German demands.<sup>15</sup>

#### **NORWAY UNDER SEIGE**

On 9 April 1940, the German army bombarded the coast of Norway at Oslo, Bergen, Kristiansund, Trondheim and Narvik. There were also airbourne assaults on Norway's airports at Stavanger and Oslo. Despite the presence of the Royal Navy, the Germans were able to carry out the first amphibious landings of the war.<sup>16</sup> The British could but express regret: 'We were going to occupy Norway, and the Germans beat it to us by two or three days; because we wanted to stop the supply of iron ore to Germany, which was being shipped across to Narvik and then brought down in the inland waters.'<sup>17</sup>

Norway was largely unprepared for this large-scale German air and sea invasion as a result of which the German forces were very successful.<sup>18</sup> Nevertheless, naval and military operations were carried on by the Norwegian army, assisted by British and French forces. However, all counter-attacks by the Allies failed.<sup>19</sup>

Major Norwegian ports from Oslo northward to Narvik were occupied by German troops. The Germans also took over the airfields at Oslo and Stavanger. 800 aircraft kept in check Norwegian resistance at Narvik, Trondheim, Bergen, Kristiansand and Stavanger. Norwegian resistance to seaborne forces was also overrun when German troops from the airfield entered the city and overawed the Norwegian population.

The presence of British and French troops was hardly an obstacle in the German take-over of Norway. By the end of May, the German offensive in France had progressed so far that the British could not

afford commitment in Norway and 25,000 Allied troops were evacuated from Narvik. The situation was such that German advances threatened the invasion of Britain itself.

The Norwegian army planned its campaign as a tactical retreat while awaiting reinforcements from Britain. Among all German-occupied territories, Norway withstood German invasion for the longest period of time- almost a period of two months. Counter attacks by resistance groups like the Milorg, Company Linge and Osvald destroyed German warships and even made plans to halt Germany's nuclear program. Also, civil disobedience by the civilian population displayed their loyalty to the resistance movement maintaining an, 'ice front' against the Nazi occupation. But, local resistance to the Nazi occupation alongside the Allied counter attack only delayed the capture of Oslo. Realising that the resistance offered to the Germans had little military success, arrangements were made for the royal family to escape to London to establish a government- in- exile.<sup>20</sup> German plans were clear: iron ore from Sweden and naval and air bases in Norway to strike Britain when necessary.<sup>21</sup>

## POLICIES OF OCCUPATION

The national resistance led by King Haakon was unable to hold on for long. A day after the German invasion of Norway, King Haakon decided to abdicate the throne since he was unwilling to appoint Quisling as Prime Minister.<sup>22</sup> Even before the invasion of Norway, the leader of the *Nasjonal Samling* or the Norwegian Nazi Party, Vidkun Quisling had tried to convince Hitler that he had the support and resources to form a government in support of the occupying Germans.<sup>23</sup> However, Hitler had been unreceptive to the plan.

On the very first day of German invasion, Quisling made a radio broadcast declaring himself as the Prime Minister. The German authorities, not too happy, tolerated him for about a week, after which he was thrown out. However, his constant meetings with Hitler and his persuasiveness won and, in February 1942, a national government was established with Quisling as President (but with limited powers).<sup>24</sup>

In the meantime, Quisling made clear his views that since Norway supported Nazi Germany on the battlefield, there was no reason for the annexation of Norway. Quisling was opposed to having an SS brigade loyal to Hitler being installed in Germany.<sup>25</sup> Importantly, he was also opposed to Britain harbouring the Royal family, which to him was no longer a Nordic ally.<sup>26</sup>

The German occupation had dramatic consequences on the pre-war political and military elites in Norway, due to the ways in which they behaved during German rule. These elites were almost completely replaced by a younger generation of men. The occupation had no comparable effect on prewar business elites. In the light of the pre-war economic elites' extensive economic collaboration with the Germans starting immediately after the occupation, a different outcome might have been expected. One of the reasons for the lack of purges of the pre-war business elites was that very few of them were members of the Norwegian Nazi Party.<sup>27</sup>

However, it was the Jews who faced the greatest assault during the days of Nazi occupation. While Hitler's anti-Semitic policy is too well-known to bear repetition, the persecution and murder of Jews in Norway during the Second World War was largely left unstudied for several decades after the war.<sup>28</sup> The occupation of Germany saw the rise of anti-Semitism in Norway, especially in Oslo and Trondheim where the Jews operated several religious and cultural organisations as well as educational and welfare programmes.<sup>29</sup> At the beginning of occupation, there were about 2,173 Jews in Norway. While they were primarily in the business sector, owning about 400 enterprises, the rest were either professionals, craftsmen or artists. A handful were employed in the public sector or as farmers or fishermen. Immigration rules for Jews, as everywhere else in Europe after the First World War were restrictive in Norway too.<sup>30</sup>

The Jewish community of Norway was hit hard by the anti-Semitic policies. The first anti-Jewish measure was introduced just a month after the occupation, in May 1940, when the radios owned by the Jews were confiscated. Following this, the registration of Jewish property began and Jewish firms were confiscated.<sup>31</sup> After January 1942, Jews were to have a 'J' stamped on their identification papers. Arrests of Jewish men was soon followed by their being sent to concentration camps from October 1942 onwards.<sup>32</sup> Arrest, detention, deportation, murder in concentration camps, execution, suicide and fleeing the country resulted in the number of Jews in Norway falling sharply. At least 900 Jewish refugees made their way across the border to Sweden.<sup>33</sup>

## **LIBERATION OF NORWAY**

The exiled Norwegian government had become part of the Allied bloc following the German invasion on 9 April 1940. Through 1944, the government-in-exile directed the military participation of Norway on the Allied side and also made preparations for the liberation of Norway.

The arrival of an Allied military mission on 8 May 1945 led to the surrender and arrest of the German and Norwegian Nazi Party members and the consequent liberation of Norway. Despite severe losses in the war, Norway recovered quickly as its economy expanded. It joined NATO in 1949.

Five years of German occupation left its mark on the entire country. The German army had exerted control over law and order in the country and taken major decisions including deportation of Jews, Norwegian officers and university students. As the Allies closed on northern Norway for the final assault, the German soldiers decided on the scorched earth policy even shooting civilians who refused to evacuate the region.

The Allied military mission was responsible for the arrest and interment of the German and Norwegian Nazi party officials and the disarming of the SS. Quisling was arrested, tried, found guilty, sentenced to death and executed in October 1945.<sup>34</sup> Power was transferred to King Haakon and the Norwegian government-in-exile was replaced by a coalition until elections in autumn 1945.

#### NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Tor Dagne, *The History of Norway*. Instituto Politécnico de Viseu, Portugal, 1999. Also see, *The World Wars and 20th Norwegian Politics in Encyclopedia: Norway*.
2. Terje Leiren, ('A Century of Norwegian Independence', *Scandinavian Review*, Vol. 92, Spring 2005, p. 8.
3. R.D.Cornwell, *World History in the 20<sup>th</sup> century*, Longman Group, United Kingdom, 1981. Also, John Keegan, *The Battle for History: Refighting World War Two*. Vintage, New York, 2010.
4. Henrik S.Nissen, *Scandinavia during the Second World War*, Universitetsforlaget, Oslo, 1983.
5. See *Rescuing Norway*, Winston Churchill's memo to the First Lord of the Admiralty, 29 September, 1939 in *Allies And World War II*, (Archival Documents) 'It must be understood that an adequate supply of Swedish iron ore is vital to Germany, and the interception or prevention of these Narvik supplies during the winter months, i.e., from October to the end of April, will greatly reduce her power of resistance.'
6. Cf. French Prime Minister Paul Reynaud's memoirs *In the Thick of the Fight*. See, Paul Reynaud (trans. James D. Lambert), *In the Thick of the Fight, 1930-1945*, Simon & Schuster, New York, 1955. Also, Douglas Dodds-Parker, *Setting Europe Ablaze*, Springwoods Books, 1984.
7. Control of Norway would free the way to the North Atlantic, access to the Baltic Sea and German coast from the south and the Arctic Ocean and the approaches to the Soviet Union from the far north. The British Government were acutely aware of the German munition industry's dependence on Swedish iron ore, much of which was transported through Narvik and the Norwegian Leads.



8. Stephen King Hall, 'The Norwegian Campaign', *Secret History of 1939-1940 From the Archives of the French General Staff*, London, 1940. "So far as Scandinavia was concerned the operation of the Allies had two objects: (i) to land in the Trondhjem (Trondheim) area sufficient forces to sustain Norwegian resistance and produce a salutary effect on the Swedes. The basic object was to create a new theatre of war in which the Germans would use up their men, their material, and in particular their air force, and above all their reserves, especially of petrol. (2) To cut off supplies of iron ore to Germany..."
9. Einar Maseng, 'Who pulled Norway into the disaster of war?', in Arno Mong Daastol (ed.), *Historical Material on War Related Matters mainly regarding the Nordic countries*, J.M.Stenersens Forlag A.S., Oslo, 1994, 205-06.
10. Directives no. 21, 33, 37, quoted in Francois Kersaudy, *Vi stoler pa England*, (We trust England), Cappelen, Oslo, 1991, pp. 120-27 (translated from French)
11. Führer Conferences on naval affairs in *Brassey's naval Annual*, London 1948, p.263.
12. Conversation between Adolf Hitler and General Nikolaus von Falkenhorst, head of the Norwegian expedition, 20 January, 1940, (Archival Documents)
13. Stephen King Hall, op.cit., 'British plans for landings on the Norwegian coast in the third week of March 1940 were temporarily postponed. Prime Minister Chamberlain however, was by that time convinced that some aggressive action ought to be taken; and Reynaud who succeeded Daladier as the French Premier was of the same view.
14. *Ibid.*
15. Germany planned to lay mines in the Norwegian waters following which plans were to land troops at the four Norwegian ports of Narvik, Trondheim, Bergen and Stavanger.
16. Karsten Friis, *The State, the People and the Armed Forces—a Genealogical Outline of the Legitimacy of the Armed Forces in Norway*, Norwegian Institute of International Studies, No. 694 – 2005
17. Dodds-Parker was a Member of Parliament from 1945 to 1974 and participated in the Churchill and Eden Governments in his capacity as senior officer in Special Operations Executive. In his discussion of British interest in Norway during World War II, he says that the British unit, acted on Prime Minister Churchill's order, "set Europe ablaze," from 1941 onward, planning, organizing and directing the operations of saboteurs, assassins and resistance fighters across Europe from the English Channel to the Balkans. See Douglas Dodds-Parker, *Setting Europe Ablaze*, Springwoods Books, 1984.
18. Roy Arnold Prete & A. Hamish Ion, *Armies of Occupation*, Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1984, p. 145.
19. 'Norway in WWII, War and Game. Wargaming and History', *Monthly Archives*: 29 January, 2011. There was effective Norwegian resistance around Oslo, where coastal guns helped sink the newest German cruiser, DKM Bluecher. However, the capital was ultimately evacuated under heavy German assault. Norwegian troops crushed lighter numbers of German attackers at Dombås south of Trondheim, in fighting that lasted from April 14–19. British, French, and Polish troops landed on either side of Trondheim to assist, and confused fighting took place around the city. With the Germans in control of the southern half of the country and the Wehrmacht rolling through Belgium, the Netherlands, and France in late June, the Allies evacuated their forces from northern Norway.



20. Roy Arnold Prete & A. Hamish Ion, , *op.cit.* 145.
21. World War II, *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. (retrieved on October 28, 2012)
22. Crina Leon, *Socio-political Aspects of the Norwegian Monarchy*, Bulletin of the Transilvania University of Basov, Vol. 4, (53), No. 2, 2011.
23. Paul M. Heyes, *Quisling: the career and political ideas of Vidkun Quisling, 1887-1945*. David & Charles, United Kingdom, 1971, p.211.
24. Fredrik Hans Dahl, *Quisling: A Study in Treachery*, Stanton-lfe, Anne-Marie (trans), Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1999, pp.172-75
25. Oddvar K. Heidal, *Quisling: A study in treason*, Universitetsforlaget. Oslo, 1989, p. 377.
26. *Ibid.*
27. Harald Espeli, The German occupation and its consequence for the composition and changes of Norwegian business elites, *Economic History Yearbook*, Vol. 51, No. 2, 2010, pp. 107-30.
28. Raul Hilberg, *The Destruction of the European Jews*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 2003.
29. Bjorn Westlie, *Coming to Terms with the Past: The Process of Restitution of Jewish Property in Norway*. Institute of the World Congress, Policy Forum No. 12, January 1996.
30. Restrictions were either for economic reasons or on account of political concerns.
31. Berit Reisel & Bjarte Bruland, *The Reisel/Bruland Report on the confiscation of Jewish property in Norway during World War II*, 1997. (Trondheim Archives)
32. Martin Gilbert, *Atlas of the Holocaust*, Micheal Joseph Ltd., 1982.
33. At the beginning of the occupation, there were at least 2, 173 Jews in Norway. 775 of the Jews were arrested, detained and/or deported. 742 were murdered in concentration camps, 23 died as a result of extrajudicial execution, murder and suicide during the war bringing the total of Jewish Norwegians dead to at least 765, comprising 230 complete households. In addition to the few who survived concentration camps, some also survived by fleeing the country to Sweden and Britain.
34. 'The Destruction of the Norwegian Jews', *Holocaust Education & Archive Research Team*, 2012. Also see, G. Reitlinger, *The Final Solution*, Vallentine Mitchell & Co Ltd., 1953