

PRIMARY SOURCE *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. What thoughts did Shirer record in his diary about Germany's attack on Poland on September 1, 1939?

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 translate 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 curbstones. 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?

from William L. Shirer, Berlin Diary: The Journal of a Foreign Correspondent (New York: Knopf, 1941), 197–199.

Discussion Questions

Clarifying

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. **Distinguishing Fact from Opinion** What were three facts about Germany's attack that Shirer recorded in his diary entry? What were three opinions he wrote down?

Excerpt from *Berlin Diary: The Journal of a Foreign Correspondent 1934-1941* by William L. Shirer. Copyright © 1941, renewed 1968 by William L. Shirer. Reprinted by permission of Don Congdon Associates, Inc.