

The Road to the Second World War: Rising German Aggression

The outbreak of World War II in 1939 can be seen as the culmination of two crucial, but antithetic developments. While Germany's foreign politics grew more and more aggressive, international cooperation to stop this trend grew weaker and weaker. This can be illustrated by taking a look at some of Hitler's* boldest steps and at the international reactions they evoked.

5 Generally, Hitler's steps followed his racist ideology which was applied to foreign politics once the Nazi Party* established power within the country. The aim of this ideology was to secure the survival of the "Aryan* master race" by gaining living space* in the east. This geographical direction coincided with the Nazis' view of the Slavic* people as subhuman*. Consequently, taking away their land was not seen as a crime, but was even propagated as an improvement of order and discipline in
10 former Slavic territories. Before gaining this living space, however, Hitler had to first re-unite this "master race" since the German-speaking people did not form one nation in Europe, but were rather distributed among several countries. Although this had been the case in European history for a long time, the Nazis blamed this situation mainly on the Versailles Peace Treaty*.

The Versailles Peace Treaty and the League of Nations

According to Hitler, the Treaty of Versailles had forbidden the Germans to form one state and had instead cut it into pieces. With this line of argumentation, Hitler simply added his voice to a more general revisionist movement. Due to the harsh terms of the Versailles Peace Treaty, revisionism had become widespread in the Weimar Republic and beyond. It even gained support, or at least sympathy, among some of the victorious powers of World War I. While especially France had demanded high reparations, severe cuts in German territory and military forces, and a buffer-zone at its own eastern border to Germany, some other allies did not stay so focused on keeping Germany small for long. Though
20 they all had been severely affected by the war, none of the other victorious countries had to mourn so many dead, none of them had been as devastated as France either, and none of them had had to experience the previous defeat of 1871. Consequently, the American, British, and Italian populace did not call for security and reparations as fiercely as the French did.

25 This can best be seen by the US Senate's refusal to ratify the Treaty of Versailles from the start since the Treaty deviated widely from what American President Woodrow Wilson* had suggested in his Fourteen Points*. Aiming at a "peace without victory", the Fourteen Points centred on free trade, open agreements, democracy, and self-determination. However, making Germany surrender territories with a large German population like West Prussia* or Poznan*, the Versailles Peace Treaty did not
30 abide by the Wilsonian principles on which the Germans had relied when peace talks started. Therefore, the USA finally signed a separate peace agreement with Germany in the summer of 1921, excluding the war-guilt clause* and the acceptance of the League of Nations*. These two crucial alterations reflect the general attitude prevailing in the USA in the 1920s: Germany was seen as a potential trading partner rather than as an enemy which needed to be punished. The newly elected Republican President Warren G. Harding* won the 1921 elections with the slogan "Return to normalcy". In foreign
35 politics, normalcy at that time meant isolationism. Even the Democratic President Woodrow Wilson had based his successful 1916 re-election campaign on the slogan "He kept us out of the war". He fi-

nally asked Congress to declare war on Germany in April 1917 only after U.S. neutrality had been severely challenged in early 1917 by Germany's attempt to draw Mexico into the war and by its return to unrestricted submarine warfare. But once Germany's submarines did not disturb US trade and travel any longer, Americans did not want to interfere in European politics. They were tired of sending their soldiers into far-away conflicts they did not feel affected by. Consequently, they even restrained from Wilson's idea of a League of Nations.

Though the refusal of the USA to join the League of Nations probably weakened it the most, it was not the only nation which did not join. At the start, Germany was not allowed to take part since it had started the war according to the Treaty of Versailles. Of course, their own exclusion made the Germans regard the League of Nations as a revanchist organization at first, and even after their admittance in 1926, many Germans remained sceptical towards this institution. Russia was not allowed to become a member, either, because its communist government caused fear in western Europe. Indeed, Wilson had even intended the League of Nations to be a "democratic world revolution" to counter the Communist World Revolution. Such a development was feared after the Russian October Revolution of 1917 had sparked several other socialist revolutions e. g. in Germany. So the USSR did not become a member of the League until 1934 when a sense of order had been restored to Europe and chances of a Communist world revolution had dwindled. Still the different ideological background of the USSR made it look suspicious to the western powers, making compromises very difficult to reach.

Ideological differences – though of a completely different kind – also started to make co-operation with Italy difficult since the creation of Europe's first fascist* movement by Benito Mussolini* in 1919. As prime minister, Mussolini – or "Il Duce" as he came to be called – turned Italy into a totalitarian state where he had the power to legislate by decree, where all antifascist parties were banned, and where his police were authorized to arrest political opponents without trial. Though still an official member of the League of Nations, Italy had clearly departed from its original principles of democracy and self-determination of the peoples. Once democracy within his country was crushed, Mussolini even started to build an Italian empire in the east of Africa. This enlargement of Italian territory was meant to divert the Italians' attention from the depression they were experiencing and to gain prestige in the world. Acquiring land for future settlement also coincided with Mussolini's simplistic view of population growth as an indicator of national fitness.

Mussolini probably chose Ethiopia as a playground for his ambitions for two reasons: first, Ethiopia was one of the last African countries not colonized by a European nation so military actions here would not lead Italy into conflict with any of the major powers. Secondly, Ethiopia was situated between the Italian colonies of Somaliland and Eritrea, and Mussolini planned to connect these colonies by railroad. He therefore provoked a skirmish between Italian and Ethiopian border patrols as an excuse and ordered a large scale invasion of the Empire of Ethiopia. Of course, this invasion clearly violated the rules of the League of Nations. Ethiopia, a member state itself, therefore called upon the League to settle the dispute, but the League did not manage to support the African country effectively. After its own futile attempts to stop the intruders had failed, Ethiopia was integrated into the newly founded "Italian East Africa" in 1935.

This obvious failure of the League to save Ethiopia revealed several of the organisation's inherent problems: meant to be democratic, all decisions had to be made unanimously. This made it extremely

difficult to come to a decision at all. In the case of Ethiopia, the Italian invasion began on 3rd October, and it took the League until November to condemn Italy's aggression and impose economic sanctions. In the end, these also remained largely ineffective since e. g. oil and coal were not sanctioned at all. This exposes another problem of the League. Proper sanctions against Italy would have also meant the industrial states losing a valuable trading partner – a very unpopular measure in times of global economic crises. The last possible measure against Italy – military intervention – would have harmed the member states' own interests even more and was therefore not even discussed. As the League did not have its own standing army, member states were asked to contribute some of their troops to the international forces when armed action was agreed upon. But, of course, the single governments of the member states were very reluctant to pay and sacrifice their troops to solve disputes which did not directly concern their own people.

Even if the League had solved some incidents in the first half of the 1920s, these had generally been conflicts between minor states. For example, when Greece invaded Bulgaria in 1925, the League swiftly countered the offensive. However, neither Greece nor Bulgaria could have posed a real threat to the League's big powers, Great Britain and France. In the Ethiopian crisis, the balance of power would have looked different. Italy was a more influential nation from the start, and it had been arming itself since Mussolini had come to power. Therefore, the French Prime Minister Laval* and the British Foreign Secretary Hoare* tried to pacify Mussolini by handing over a large section of Ethiopia to him. Along with the conflict, this step should also have ended the sanctions disrupting their business with Italy. In the end, the plan became public and outraged people throughout the world as it plainly illustrated that not all members of the League were treated along the same line. This dealt a last blow to the international prestige of the League of Nations. Although the organization officially still existed until 1946, it had lost its main purposes of peace-keeping and international cooperation.

Paradoxically, the actual end of the League of Nations was caused by an ill-fated attempt to counter the growing influence of Nazi Germany. As German armament and territory had increased extensively since Hitler had come into office on 30th January 1933, Great Britain and especially France were counting on Italy to help fence in Nazi Germany. Therefore, the Hoare-Laval-Pact was meant to convince Mussolini that France and Britain were friendly-minded potential allies. This idea did not seem as improbable at that time as it appears nowadays. Although he had acted as a model for Hitler's political career, Mussolini himself was not impressed with Hitler's plan of uniting the German-speaking people within Europe. Such a strategy inevitably included a takeover of Austria and would thereby bring a powerful Germany directly to Italian borders. To prevent this, Mussolini had even mobilized his troops in the 1934 July Putsch when Nazi supporters with clear instructions from Germany had killed the Austrian Chancellor Engelbert Dollfuss*. Though Dollfuss certainly shared right-wing attitudes with Hitler, he wanted his country to remain sovereign and refused German annexation. Wishing for an independent Austria as a buffer state to Germany, Mussolini supported the Austro-fascist politics of Dollfuss and his successor, Kurt von Schuschnigg*, thereby helping to contain German expansionism at that time. Surprisingly, Mussolini even remained the only leader who put his armed forces into position as a clear warning to Hitler. However, after the Hoare-Laval Pact had failed, Mussolini grew annoyed even by the weak sanctions directed against him by the League. With respect to his im-

perial plans in Africa, Hitler suddenly seemed to be a better ally than France and Great Britain since Germany had not interfered in the Ethiopian Crisis at all and it had already left the League in 1933.

Hitler's Diplomatic Revolution: Rearmament and Occupation of the Rhineland

Germany's withdrawal from the League was symptomatic of its new course in foreign politics under Hitler. The new German chancellor did not try to achieve his aims at the round table. Instead, he re-
5 solved to take action and await his opponents' response. Exploiting the slightest discord among the op-
ponents, he managed to rearm his country and to enlarge its territory in almost all directions over the
next six years. Doing so, he virtually cancelled the Treaty of Versailles. This aggressive, one-sided be-
haviour has been called a *diplomatic* revolution by some historians and it owes primarily to the fact
that Hitler did not have to resort to open warfare at this stage. Relying on the widespread fear of war
10 after the horrible experience of 1914–1918 and on the sympathy of some countries with German revi-
sionism, Hitler could trust the other countries' diplomats to give him what he asked for. International
reaction to Hitler's first goal of rearmament illustrates this attitude to some degree.

When delegates from 60 countries came together for the Geneva disarmament conference in 1933,
Ramsay MacDonald*, the British Prime Minister, presented a plan in which Germany and France
15 would have enjoyed equality in their armed forces. Though such a plan went against the military re-
strictions forced onto Germany in Versailles, it was supported by the USA. Comparing the size and
population of France and Germany, a comparable strength in their armed forces only seemed fair.
Moreover, Great Britain and the United States believed that military equality might help secure the
balance of power on the Continent in the long run. Nevertheless, negotiations finally collapsed be-
20 cause German diplomats refused to count Nazi Brownshirts* as soldiers. Causing a public outcry,
Hitler withdrew Germany from the talks although this made him look like a warmonger. MacDonald's
plan had clearly shown Hitler that German rearmament would not automatically and coherently be
sanctioned by the major powers. After immediate criticism had abated, Hitler proclaimed the creation
of a new air force and general conscription in 1935. Though Great Britain, France, and Italy reacted by
25 forming the Stresa-Front* in April 1935, nothing much came of this alliance. Officially, the three
countries rebuked Germany's rearmament and warned Hitler not to break any further treaty obliga-
tions. But, only two months later, Britain signed an agreement with Germany allowing a navy beyond
Versailles' limitations. This, of course, reinforced Hitler's opinion that he would not be sanctioned if
he continued armament. Consequently, Hitler also sent troops into the demilitarized Rhineland one
30 year later.

Designed as a buffer zone to shelter France, any military activities in the Rhineland openly viol-
ated the Versailles Treaty, and the French would have had the right to intervene. However, France re-
lied on British support to counter Hitler's invasion, but, as Hitler had cleverly chosen a Saturday
morning (7th March 1936) for his deployment, the British government could not be contacted immedi-
35 ately. Churchill* later remarked sardonically that Britain's ruling class used "to take its weekends in
the country – Hitler takes his countries in the weekends." Hitler thus managed to present the world a
fait accompli, but even if talks had been held instantly, Great Britain would most likely not have taken
action. When the British Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin* finally met his colleague Flandin*, he told
him that Great Britain was against intervention. This certainly reflected British popular opinion cor-

rectly since many Britons did not see any problem with German forces on what was German ground after all. And Hitler's move of stationing his armies along his frontiers was just a usual military strategy – or, as the influential British politician Lord Lothian* put it – Hitler was “only going into his own back garden.” Nevertheless, the image of a “back garden” reveals a severe misjudgement. Including the Ruhr Valley and cities such as Cologne, the Rhineland represented Germany's industrial centre. Remilitarizing this region, Hitler secured it against future foreign intrusion. This way, he also laid the foundation for further arms productions. These, in turn, would make the major powers shy away from later interference even more, Hitler rightly hoped. But, for the time being, Hitler did not need much of that military muscle-flexing as he could still rely on international sympathy for his next big step as well.

The Annexation of Austria

German annexation of Austria became known as the “Flower War.” This term highlights the ambiguity of the event. On the one hand, Hitler's launch of troops gave the “Anschluss” a warlike character. On the other hand, his soldiers were not met by any resisting forces, but by smiling citizens handing them flowers and waving national socialist flags. Although the party's flags uncover the invasion as a propaganda campaign in the true sense of the word, this is only one side to the story. The other side consists of the deep wish of many Austrians to be united with Germany since many Austrians felt their small country to be a “leftover” from the end of the First World War. The traditional Austro-Hungarian dual monarchy was divided into the Republic of German Austria and the Hungarian Democratic Republic. In this way, the allies wanted to foster their own security by shattering their former enemy, the Hapsburg dynasty, but the creation of these two new republics also shows the allies' attempt to spread democracy, one of Wilson's key-concepts. Moreover, the breaking up of multi-ethnic Austria-Hungary was meant to put Wilson's concepts of nationality and self-determination of the peoples into practice. Besides the Austrian and Hungarian republics, several new countries were established partly on former Hapsburg territory: Czechoslovakia, Poland, and the Kingdom of the Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes (later Yugoslavia). They were intended to give the various ethnic groups their own sovereign state, but many Austrians felt mistreated in this process. Although Point Ten of Wilson's Fourteen Points claimed that “the peoples of Austria-Hungary should have the freest opportunity to independent development,” German-speaking Austrians were not allowed to unite with Germany since adherence to the principles of self-determination and nationality might have created a state even larger than the Second German Empire*. Of course, this was not acceptable to the allies in 1918 and was seen as an imminent threat to peace.

When Hitler finally invaded Austria in 1938, he fulfilled many Austrians' understandable wish for a national identity. Though this wish was certainly not shared by all Austrians, Hitler made sure the spotlight was on the large pro-German faction. Hitler had pressured the Austrian Chancellor Schuschnigg into appointing the influential National Socialist Arthur Seyss-Inquart* Minister of the Interior. This post put a Nazi in control of the police and ensured that all opposition to the annexation would be effectively suppressed in the future. However, aware of what Seyss-Inquart's appointment really aimed at, Schuschnigg organized a plebiscite. Asking the people whether they wanted a “free and Germanic, an independent and social, a Christian and united Austria,” this plebiscite was to com-

bine several factors. In traditionally Catholic Austria, the majority was bound to vote for a “Christian” country, for example. Other words like “free” and “social” had a vague, but positive connotation and therefore were certainly voted for by most of the people, too. This way, Schuschnigg was sure to achieve large consent in his plebiscite – even if not all voters would also agree to the word “independent”. Backed by such a plebiscite, Schuschnigg could have opposed Hitler’s annexation – or at least he could have proved that Hitler was acting against the will of the people. An openly anti-democratic move should then have brought the major western powers to Austria’s side. But good links to the Austrian National Socialist Party informed Hitler of Schuschnigg’s plan. Threatening Schuschnigg with instant invasion, Hitler forced him to resign. Since Austria was officially leaderless momentarily, Seyss-Inquart called on the German army for assistance to maintain law and order. Not surprisingly, this “request” was immediately granted, and, on 12th March 1938, German soldiers entered Austria. In April, after occupation had ended, the Nazis on their part held a referendum. Though more than 90 per cent agreed to the “reunification of Austria with the German Reich of 13th March 1938”, this cannot be taken seriously: Firstly, people were only asked to agree to a step which had already been taken. Secondly, with Nazi officials and German soldiers present, the vote was not free and secret. Thirdly, the vote was not open, either, as opponents had immediately been arrested upon the arrival of the Germans. Nevertheless, Hitler used the referendum to justify the “Anschluss” in international circles.

When Hitler had started rearmament in 1935, Britain, France, and Italy united in the Stresa Front. Though nothing much came of it, they had at least sent a warning. However, when Hitler really used his armed forces for the first time in the “Anschluss” three years later, international cooperation could not even be agreed upon any longer. France, though usually worried about its own security, was diverted by a deep domestic crisis. The Great Depression had long affected France, leading the governments to run up a deficit budget. This deficit was even increased when the Popular Front’s* left-wing cabinet issued various social reforms like the 40-hour work week or paid holidays. Prime Minister Camille Chautemps* wanted to relieve the Great Depression by devaluing the Franc in order to restore exports. Additionally, he wanted to push through his deficit budget by decree. But both measures were denied by the conservative Senate. Therefore, Chautemps and his whole cabinet resigned. As the resignation occurred just two days before the “Anschluss,” France simply did not have a government to react to it officially. In Great Britain, many people saw nothing wrong with the unification of two German-speaking countries. After all, this seemed to be in accordance with the principles of self-determination and nationality long withheld from the Austrians. Generally suspicious of Versailles’ consequences, the USA shared this view. And Mussolini, who had fended off Hitler’s first strike at Austria in 1934, even sided with the German dictator now. Drawn closer after the Ethiopian Crisis, the two fascists had started to focus on their common political concepts, such as their contempt for Communism. Italy therefore joined the Anti-Comintern Pact* which Germany had signed with Japan in November 1936. Together, the three countries already planned how to distribute the territory of their mutual enemy, the USSR. Japan was to gain the Soviets’ Asian spheres, and Germany was to get Eastern Europe while Italy’s interests in the Balkans and the Mediterranean were guaranteed. Strengthened by his own alliances on the one hand and not criticized by the international community on the other, Hitler swiftly carried on with unifying all German-speaking people.

The Sudeten-Crisis and the Failure of Appeasement

The Sudetenland had been assigned to newly-founded Czechoslovakia in 1918 though it was home to approximately 3.5 million Germans. This made the area an easy target for German propaganda which could cite the rights of self-determination and nationality again. Geographically, Czechoslovakia had become encircled since the “Anschluss” because it could now be attacked from the south as well as from the north and west. Stirring clashes between Germans and Czechs, Hitler meant to speed up the incorporation of the Sudetenland. As the Czech President Benes* correctly feared, the clashes would be used as an excuse for German troops to invade and re-establish law and order. These tactics were quite comparable to Hitler’s annexation of Austria. Nevertheless, with “Case Green”* Hitler was already planning a full-scale occupation of all of Czechoslovakia. This would go far beyond the claim of reuniting all Germans. Hitler finally entered the phase of acquiring new living space from other ethnic groups.

Another crucial difference between the “Anschluss” and the Sudeten-Crisis was the reaction. Contrary to Austria, the Czechs were prepared to fend off a German attack. Heavy concrete fortifications had been constructed in the mountainous areas bordering Germany. Though not impregnable, these would have been difficult to overrun. Moreover, a comparably modern army had already been mobilized in May 1938 once “Case Green” was leaked through. As Hitler’s rhetoric took on ever more threatening dimensions and as Benes remained determined on maintaining Czechoslovak autonomy, a war seemed inevitable in September 1938. Such a war between two well-prepared nations would not be won swiftly. It therefore also posed a threat to European peace in general as it was bound to draw neighbouring countries into the conflict. Additionally, a long-lasting war in the heart of Europe was bound to evoke actions from the major powers. France had even signed an official alliance with Czechoslovakia as early as 1924. In 1935, the Soviet Union joined this alliance, promising to come to Czechoslovakia’s help as soon as France would do so. Although French aid was difficult to put to practice with Germany being located between France and its ally, some support could surely have been sent to the Czechoslovakians, thus also involving the USSR in the affair. Such a concerted action should have kept Germany at bay.

Unfortunately, international cooperation against Hitler could not be mustered once again. Great Britain’s Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain* followed Hitler’s line of argumentation that the Sudeten Germans should be granted their right of self-determination. Moreover, Germany was welcomed as a buffer against Communism. Fear of Communism might also have been the main reason for the French Premier Daladier* not to put the alliance of 1935 into practice. The Soviet Union still appeared too dubious and radical to join sides with – even if it would have been against France’s arch enemy Germany. Trying to secure peace at all costs, Britain and France preferred to accept Hitler’s ally Mussolini as a mediator in this crisis. At the Munich Conference on 29th September 1938, Mussolini only presented a paper which had originally been written by Hermann Göring*. Still, Chamberlain and Daladier signed the agreement, handing over the Sudetenland to Germany. As a result, Czechoslovakia lost 70 per cent of its heavy industry and all of its bulwarks against Germany. This was not perceived as a dangerous development by Chamberlain because Hitler declared Germany’s territorial claims to be saturated in return. This promise was interpreted by Chamberlain to bring “Peace for our time” – a

message which was welcomed by cheering crowds when he returned from Munich. These reactions illustrate public war-weariness and help to explain the appeasers' position.

5 However, no safeguards had been arranged to make Hitler keep his promise. On the contrary, Munich had even diminished chances to hold Germany in check. As neither the Czechoslovaks themselves nor the USSR had been invited to the Conference, they lost their faith in Britain and France. Additionally, the fact that the conflict was decided on behind closed doors rather than in the League of Nations further discredited this weakened organization. Since the Soviets had joined in 1934, the League might have been a platform to co-operate with them, but the western powers' solo effort at Munich convinced Stalin* that the west could not be relied on. This opinion was even underlined by
10 the fact that the French had not honoured their alliance with Czechoslovakia. Consequently, Stalin began to seek his own understanding with Hitler. Therefore, Chamberlain's success in peacekeeping turned out to be counterproductive and short-lived. With the Soviets not posing a threat in the east and the Czechs being deprived of their defences in the west, the rump of Czechoslovakia became easy prey for Hitler – and for other neighbours.

15 Formed as a multi-ethnic nation out of the old Austro-Hungarian Empire, Czechoslovakia also contained border regions populated by Magyar and Polish minorities. Taking the Munich Agreement as an example, Hungary and Poland swiftly incorporated these regions into their own states. Even the Slovaks called for semi-independence at that time. In this state of chaos, Hitler demanded the new Czech President Hacha* to invite German troops to restore order. Aware of his indefensible situation,
20 Hacha could do nothing but follow the demand. German troops occupied the rest of Czechoslovakia in March 1939. The country was transformed into the "Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia" and incorporated into the German Reich. Knowing that this fait accompli could hardly be redressed, Chamberlain officially justified the incorporation by highlighting that German troops had been invited by Hacha, but unofficially, western powers finally realized that Hitler was not trustworthy. He had broken
25 his own agreement and had invaded a non-German country. From now on, a more determined stance would have to be taken against him. So when Hitler also wanted to include Poland in his Reich, Britain and France eventually took action.

The Invasion of Poland and the Outbreak of World War II

Comparable to Czechoslovakia, Poland contained some German-speaking minorities that were not allowed to unite with their mother country. This owed to the fact that Poland had been divided up
30 between Russia, Germany, and Austria-Hungary before World War I and had only been re-established as a sovereign nation at Versailles according to Wilson's Thirteenth Point: an independent Poland should be created which should have access to the sea. This access was vital to Poland's independent development as it secured Polish trade and made sure that the country could not easily be fenced in again by its old enemies Germany and Russia. However, the Corridor connecting Poland with the Baltic
35 Sea ran through Pomerania*, a region also populated by Germans. The Corridor cut off German East Prussia* from the Reich, too. Moreover, the German port of Danzig was transformed into a "free city under the League of Nations' protection". This way, Poland would be granted a functioning harbour, and, at the same time, the German majority in the city would be recognized. Thus, the Polish Corridor was one more typical example of the ambiguous decisions of Versailles: while their access to

the sea practically fostered the Poles' right of self-determination, it, at the same time, cut short the Germans in Pomerania, East Prussia, and Danzig of this very right. Naturally, this was bound to cause trouble.

5 Looking for an excuse to interfere in Poland – an important step on his way to gaining living space in the east – Hitler stirred up these troubles. Demanding the return of Danzig and a road and railway between East Prussia and the Reich, Hitler hoped to repeat the strategy which he had successfully applied in Czechoslovakia: if the major powers still felt sympathy with the wish of all Germans to reunite after World War I, they might agree with his demands once again. Germany would not only gain the areas requested, but also a road and rail connection would break through Poland's line of defence
10 in the west, and East Prussia would function as a bridgehead for German troops within the country. As with Czechoslovakia before, it would become difficult for Poland to defend itself militarily and Hitler could then push through demands well beyond the idea of re-uniting his fellow countrymen. With the cession of Danzig and the railroad connection bound to drive Polish politics into a domestic crisis, German troops could once again be sent in as peace-keepers in a state closely linked to the Reich. But
15 with Hitler's Czechoslovakian breach of trust still in mind, both Poland itself and the major powers did not give in to him this time. Britain and France had guaranteed Polish territorial integrity as early as 31st March 1939. Backed by this promise, the Polish foreign Minister Colonel Beck* rejected all of Hitler's demands because, with a constellation like this, a German invasion of Poland seemed most unlikely.

20 Aware of growing international pressure, Hitler turned towards an unusual ally: despite official ideological differences, Hitler and Stalin signed a German-Soviet Non-Aggression Pact* on 23rd August 1939 in which both countries pledged to remain neutral if either of them were attacked by a third nation. For Russia, this pact made sure it was not caught in the middle of a dawning European conflict. Though Britain had made some attempts to sign an alliance with the Soviets, they were still not accep-
25 ted in the west. And the Polish did not even want to grant them the right to march through their country. Though this is understandable after various Russian occupations of Poland in the past, it obviously ruled out any effective alliance between them. Hitler, on the contrary, offered Stalin the eastern half of Poland permanently if he only promised his neutrality. To Hitler, eliminating Russia as a possible ally of Britain and France was so crucial because, without Russia, he thought the western powers could not
30 put their promised help for Poland into practice. France and Britain were geographically separated from Poland by the German Reich and its Italian ally. Once the USSR had made clear that it would not assist the western powers, supporting Poland automatically meant that France and Britain had to march through Germany itself. Hitler certainly hoped this prospect of a major war would shy off France and Britain and would make them return to their policy of appeasement. He thus launched a
35 full-scale invasion of Poland on 1st September. It is assumed that Hitler was not aware of starting a *world* war and that he expected to grab Poland in the way he had grabbed Czechoslovakia before. Indeed, Chamberlain made one last attempt of appeasement and suggested a conference might be held if the Germans withdrew. But, as there was no response, Great Britain sent an ultimatum, demanding Hitler to draw back his troops to the German frontier. After the expiration of the deadline on 3rd
40 September, Britain and France finally declared war on Germany.