



any leaders, he was a solitary political adventurer representing no major school of political thought. His philosophy, as expressed in *Mein Kampf*, ranged from the banal to the fantastic and consisted of a popularized repackaging of right-wing, radical, conventional wisdom. Standing alone, it could never have launched an intellectual current that culminated in revolution, as had Marx's *Das Kapital* or the works of the philosophers of the eighteenth century.

Demagogic skill catapulted Hitler to the leadership of Germany and remained his stock in trade throughout his career. With the instincts of an outcast and an unnerving eye for psychological weaknesses, he shunted his adversaries from disadvantage to disadvantage, until they were thoroughly demoralized and ready to acquiesce to his domination. Internationally, he ruthlessly exploited the democracies' guilty conscience about the Treaty of Versailles.

As the head of government, Hitler operated by instinct rather than analysis. Fancying himself an artist, he resisted sedentary habits and was constantly and restlessly on the move. He disliked Berlin and found solace in his Bavarian retreat, to which he would repair for months at a time, though he quickly grew bored even there. Since he disdained orderly work procedures and his ministers found it difficult to gain access to him, policymaking occurred in fits and starts. Anything consistent with his flashes of frenetic activity thrived: anything requiring sustained effort tended to languish.

The essence of demagoguery resides in the ability to distill emotion and frustration into a single moment. Graufying that moment and achieving a mesmeric, nearly sensual relationship with his encourage and the public at large became Hitler's specialties. Abroad, Hitler was most successful when the world perceived him as pursuing normal, limited objectives. All his great foreign policy triumphs occurred in the first five years of his rule, 1933-38, and were based on his victims' assumption that his aim was to reconcile the Versailles system with its purported principles.

Once Hitler abandoned the pretense of rectifying injustice, his credibility vanished. Embarking on naked conquest for its own sake made him lose his touch. There were still occasional flashes of intuition, as in his design of the campaign against France in 1940 and in his refusal to permit a retreat in front of Moscow in 1941, which would almost certainly have caused a collapse of the German army. However, Hitler's seminal experience seems to have been Germany's defeat in World War I. He never ceased to recount how he first learned of it while bedridden in a military hospital, partially blinded by mustard gas. Ascribing Germany's collapse

CHAPTER TWELVE

The End of Illusion:

Hitler and the

Destruction of Versailles

Hitler's advent to power marked one of the greatest calamities in the history of the world. But for him, the collapse of the house of cards which represented the Versailles international order might have proceeded in a peaceful, or at least noncatastrophic, fashion. That Germany would emerge from that process as the strongest nation on the Continent was inevitable: the orgy of killing and devastation that it unleashed was the work of one demonic personality.

Hitler attained eminence through his oratory. Unlike other revolution-

to treachery, a Jewish conspiracy, and lack of will, he would for the rest of his life insist that Germany could be defeated only by itself, not by foreigners. This line of thinking transmuted the defeat of 1918 into treason, while the failure on the part of Germany's leaders to fight to the end became a staple of Hitler's obsessive rhetoric and mind-numbing monologues.

Hitler always seemed strangely unfulfilled by his victories; in the end, he only seemed able to realize his image of himself by overcoming imminent collapse through sheer willpower. Psychologists may find therein one explanation for his conducting the war in a manner that seemed to lack a strategic or political rationale until Germany's resources had been squandered and Hitler could finally, and still unyieldingly, fulfill himself by defying the world in a bomb shelter in the encircled capital of his almost completely occupied country.

Demagogic skill and egomania were two sides of the same coin. Hitler was incapable of normal conversation, and either engaged in long monologues or lapsed into bored silences when some interlocutor managed to seize the floor—and at times even dozed off! Hitler was wont to ascribe his, in truth, nearly miraculous rise from Vienna's netherworld to unchallenged rule over Germany to personal qualities unrivaled by any contemporary. Thus, a recital of his rise to power entered the deadening liturgy of Hitler's "table talks" as transcribed by his disciples:²

Hitler's egomania had deadlier consequences as well; he had convinced himself—and, what is more significant, his entourage—that, because his faculties were so unique, all his goals had to be accomplished in his own lifetime. Since, on the basis of his family history, he had estimated that his life would be relatively short, he was never able to permit any of his successes to mature, and pushed forward according to a timetable established by his assessment of his physical powers. History offers no other example of a major war being started on the basis of medical conjecture.

When all was said and done, Hitler's startling early successes amounted to an accelerated harvesting of opportunities which had been created by the policies of the predecessors he despised, especially Stresemann. Like the Peace of Westphalia, the Treaty of Versailles left a powerful country confronting a group of much smaller and unprotected states on its eastern border. The difference, however, was that while this had been intentional at Westphalia, quite the opposite was true of Versailles. Versailles and Locarno had smoothed Germany's road into Eastern Europe, where a patient German leadership would in time have achieved a preponderant

position by peaceful means, or perhaps even have had it handed to it by the West. But Hitler's reckless megalomania turned what could have been a peaceful evolution into a world war.

At first, Hitler's true nature was obscured by his seeming ordinariness. Neither the German nor the Western European establishment believed that he really meant to overturn the existing order; even though he announced his intentions to that effect often enough. Tired of harassment by the ever-growing Nazi Party, demoralized by the Depression, and political chaos, a conservative German leadership appointed Hitler as Chancellor, and tried to reassure itself by surrounding him with respectable conservatives (there were only three Nazi Party members in Hitler's first Cabinet of January 30, 1933). Hitler, however, had not come all that long way to be contained by parliamentary maneuvers. With a few brusque strokes (and on June 30, 1934, a purge assassinating a number of rivals and opponents), he made himself dictator of Germany within eighteen months of taking office.

The Western democracies' initial reaction to Hitler's ascendancy was to accelerate their commitment to disarmament. Germany's government was now headed by a chancellor who had proclaimed his intention to overthrow the Versailles settlement, to rearm, and then to engage in a policy of expansion. Even so, the democracies saw no need for taking special precautions. If anything, Hitler's accession to power strengthened Great Britain's determination to pursue disarmament. Some British diplomats even thought that Hitler represented a better hope for peace than the less stable governments which had preceded him. "[Hitler's] signature would bind all Germany like no other German's in all her past,"³ British Ambassador Phipps wrote exuberantly to the Foreign Office. A British guarantee for France was unnecessary, according to Ramsay MacDonald, because, if Germany broke a disarmament agreement, "the strength of world opposition to her cannot be exaggerated."⁴

France, of course, was not reassured by such soothing pronouncements. Its chief problem still remained how to find security. If Germany rearmed and Great Britain refused a guarantee, if world public opinion were really all that decisive in dealing with violators, why should Great Britain be so reluctant to give a guarantee? Because "public opinion in England would not support it," replied Sir John Simon, the Foreign Secretary, thus making explicit France's nightmare that Great Britain could not be relied on to defend what it would not guarantee.⁵ But why would the British public not support a guarantee? Because it did not consider such an attack likely, replied Stanley Baldwin, head of the Conservative Party and in all but name leader of the British government:

If it could be proved that Germany was rearming, then a new situation would immediately arise, which Europe would have to face. . . . If that situation arose, His Majesty's Government would have to consider it very seriously, but that situation had not yet arisen.⁶

The argument was endlessly circular and endlessly contradictory: a guarantee was both too risky and unnecessary; after achieving parity, Germany would be satisfied. Yet a guarantee of what Germany presumably was not challenging would be too dangerous even though the condemnation of world opinion would stop a violator in its tracks. Finally, Hitler himself put an end to the evasions and the hypocrisy. On October 14, 1933, Germany left the Disarmament Conference forever—not because Hitler had been rebuffed but because he was afraid that German demands for parity might be met, thereby thwarting his desires for unrestricted rearmament. A week later, Hitler withdrew from the League of Nations. In early 1934, he announced German rearmament. In separating itself from the world community in this way, Germany did not suffer any visible damage.

Hitler had clearly laid down a challenge, yet the democracies were uncertain as to what it really meant. By rearming, was Hitler not in fact implementing what most members of the League had already conceded in principle? Why react before Hitler had in fact committed some definable act of aggression? After all, was that not what collective security was all about? In this manner, the leaders of the Western democracies avoided the pain of being obliged to make ambiguous choices. It was much easier to wait for some clear demonstration of Hitler's bad faith because, in its absence, public backing for strong measures could not be relied on—or so the leaders of the democracies thought. Hitler, of course, had every incentive to obscure his true intentions until it was too late for the Western democracies to mount effective resistance. In any event, the democratic statesmen of the interwar period feared war more than they feared a weakening of the balance of power. Security, argued Ramsay MacDonald, must be sought "not by military but by moral means."

Hitler skillfully exploited such attitudes by periodically launching peace offensives that were deftly geared to the illusions of his potential victims. When he withdrew from the disarmament talks, he offered to limit the German army to 300,000 men and the German air force to half the size of that of France. The offer diverted attention from the fact that Germany had scrapped the limit of 100,000 established at Versailles while seemingly agreeing to new ceilings that could not be reached for several years—at which point those limits, too, would no doubt be jettisoned.

France refused the offer, declaring it would look after its own security. The haughtiness of the French reply could not obscure the reality that France's nightmare—military parity with Germany (or worse)—was now upon it. Great Britain drew the conclusion that "disarmament had become more important than ever. The Cabinet announced: "Our policy is still to seek by international cooperation the limitation and reduction of world armaments, as our obligations under the Covenant and as the only means to prevent a race in armaments."⁷ Indeed, the Cabinet reached the extraordinary decision that the best option was to bargain from what, by its own estimate, was turning into a position of weakness. On November 29, 1933—six weeks after Hitler had ordered the German delegation to leave the Disarmament Conference—Baldwin told the Cabinet:

If we had no hope of achieving any limitation of armaments we should have every right to feel disquietude as to the situation not only so far as concerns the Air Force, but also the Army and Navy. [Britain was] using every possible effort to bring about a scheme of disarmament which would include Germany.⁸

Since Germany was rearming and the state of British defenses was, in Baldwin's own words, disquieting, a greater British defense effort might indeed have seemed to be in order. Yet Baldwin took exactly the opposite approach. He continued a freeze in the production of military aircraft, which had been instituted in 1932. The gesture was intended "as a further earnest of His Majesty's Government's desire to promote the work of the Disarmament Conference."⁹ Baldwin failed to explain what incentive Hitler would have to negotiate disarmament as long as Great Britain was engaging in unilateral disarmament. (A more charitable explanation for Baldwin's actions is that Great Britain was developing new models of aircraft, having nothing to produce until these were ready, Baldwin was making a virtue out of a necessity.)

As for France, it took refuge in wishful thinking. The British Ambassador to Paris reported: "France has, in fact, fallen back on a policy of extreme caution, she is opposed to any forceful measures which would savour of military adventure."¹⁰ A report to Edouard Daladier, then Minister of War, shows that even France had begun to lean toward League orthodoxy. The French military attaché in Berlin proclaimed disarmament as the most effective way of containing Hitler, having convinced himself that more dangerous fanatics than Hitler were lurking in the wings:

It seems that there is no other way for us than to reach an understanding which will contain . . . at least for a while, Germany's military devel-

opment... If Hitler is sincere in proclaiming his desire for peace, we will be able to congratulate ourselves on having reached agreement; if he has other designs or if he has to give way one day to some fanatic we will at least have postponed the outbreak of a war and that is indeed a gain.¹¹

Great Britain and France opted to let German rearmament unfold because, quite literally, they did not know what else to do. Great Britain was not yet prepared to give up on collective security and the League, and France had become so dispirited that it could not bring itself to act on its premonitions: France dared not act alone, and Great Britain refused to act in concert.

In retrospect, it is easy to ridicule the fatuousness of the assessment of Hitler's motives by his contemporaries. But his ambitions, not to mention his criminality, were not all that apparent at the outset. In his first two years in office, Hitler was primarily concerned with solidifying his rule. But in the eyes of many British and French leaders, Hitler's truculent foreign policy style was more than counterbalanced by his staunch anti-communism, and by his restoration of the German economy.

Statesmen always face the dilemma that, when their scope for action is greatest, they have a minimum of knowledge. By the time they have garnered sufficient knowledge, the scope for decisive action is likely to have vanished. In the 1930s, British leaders were too unsure about Hitler's objectives and French leaders too unsure about themselves to act on the basis of assessments which they could not prove. The tuition fee for learning about Hitler's true nature was tens of millions of graves stretching from one end of Europe to the other. On the other hand, had the democracies forced a showdown with Hitler early in his rule, historians would still be arguing about whether Hitler had been a misunderstood nationalist or a maniac bent on world domination.

The West's obsession with Hitler's motives was, of course, misguided in the first place. The tenets of the balance of power should have made it clear that a large and strong Germany bordered on the east by small and weak states was a dangerous threat. *Realpolitik* teaches that, regardless of Hitler's motives, Germany's relations with its neighbors would be determined by their relative power. The West should have spent less time assessing Hitler's motives and more time counterbalancing Germany's growing strength.

No one has stated the result of the Western Allies' hesitancy to confront Hitler better than Joseph Goebbels, Hitler's diabolical propaganda chief. In April 1940, on the eve of the Nazi invasion of Norway, he told a secret briefing:

Up to now we have succeeded in leaving the enemy in the dark concerning Germany's real goals, just as before 1932 our domestic foes never saw where we were going or that our oath of legality was just a trick... They could have suppressed us. They could have arrested a couple of us in 1925 and that would have been that, the end. No, they let us through the danger zone. That's exactly how it was in foreign policy too... In 1933 a French premier ought to have said (and if I had been the French premier I would have said it): "The new Reich Chancellor is the man who wrote *Mein Kampf*," which says this and that. This man cannot be tolerated in our vicinity. Either he disappears or we march!" But they didn't do it. They left us alone and let us slip through the risky zone, and we were able to sail around all dangerous reefs. *And when we were done, and well armed, better than they, then they started the war!* [Italics in original.]¹²

The leaders of the democracies refused to face the fact that, once Germany attained a given level of armaments, Hitler's real intentions would become irrelevant. The rapid growth of German military strength was bound to overturn the equilibrium unless it was either stopped or balanced.

This in fact was Churchill's lonely message. But in the 1930s, the lead time for recognizing prophets was still quite long. So the British leaders, in a rare show of unanimity extending across the entire political spectrum, rejected Churchill's warnings. Starting from the premise that disarmament, not preparedness, was the key to peace, they treated Hitler as a psychological problem, not a strategic danger.

When, in 1934, Churchill urged that Great Britain respond to German rearmament by a buildup in the Royal Air Force, government and opposition leaders united in scorn. Herbert Samuel spoke on behalf of the Liberal Party: "It would seem as if he were engaged not in giving sound, sane advice... but... in a reckless game of bridge... All these formulas are dangerous."¹³ Sir Stafford Cripps put forward the Labour Party's case with supercilious sarcasm:

One could picture him as some old baron in the Middle Ages who is laughing at the idea of the possibility of disarmament in the baronies of this country and pointing out that the only way in which he and his feudal followers could maintain their safety and their cows, was by having as strong an armament as possible.¹⁴

Conservative Prime Minister Baldwin made the rejection of Churchill unanimous when he informed the House of Commons that he had not "given up hope either for the limitation or for the restriction of some

kind of arms." According to Baldwin, accurate information about German air strength was "extraordinarily difficult" to obtain—though he did not reveal why this should be so.¹⁵ Nevertheless, he was confident that "[i]f it is not the case that Germany is rapidly approaching equality with us,"¹⁶ Baldwin felt "no ground at this moment for undue alarm and still less for panic." Chiding Churchill's figures as "exaggerated," he stressed that "there is no immediate menace confronting us or anyone in Europe at this moment—no actual emergency."¹⁷

France sought shelter behind an accumulation of halfhearted alliances by transforming the unilateral guarantees of Czechoslovakia, Poland, and Romania of the 1920s into mutual defense treaties. It meant that those countries would now be obliged to come to France's assistance even if Germany chose to settle scores with France before turning east.

It was an empty, indeed a pathetic, gesture. The alliances were logical enough as French guarantees for the weak new states of Eastern Europe. But they were not suited for serving as the sort of mutual assistance treaties which would confront Germany with the risk of a two-front war. They were too weak to rein in Germany in the East; offensive operations against Germany to relieve France were out of the question. Underscoring the irrelevance of these pacts, Poland balanced its commitments to France with a nonaggression treaty with Germany so that, in case of an attack on France, Poland's formal obligations would cancel each other out—or, more precisely, they would leave Poland free to choose that alignment which promised it the greatest benefit at the moment of crisis.

A new Franco-Soviet agreement signed in 1935 demonstrated the magnitude of France's psychological and political demoralization. Before World War I, France had eagerly sought a political alliance with Russia and did not rest until that political understanding had been turned into a military pact. In 1935, France's position was strategically far weaker and its need for Soviet military support nearly desperate. Nevertheless, France grudgingly concluded a political alliance with the Soviet Union while adamantly rejecting military staff talks. As late as 1937, France would not permit Soviet observers to attend its annual maneuvers.

There were three reasons for the aloof behavior of French leaders, all of which surely magnified Stalin's congenial distrust of the Western democracies. The first was their fear that too close an association with the Soviet Union would weaken France's indispensable ties to Great Britain. Second, France's Eastern European allies, situated between the Soviet Union and Germany, were not prepared to permit Soviet troops to enter their territory, rendering it difficult to find a subject for meaningful Franco-Soviet staff talks. Finally, as early as 1938, French leaders felt so intimi-

dated by Germany that they feared staff talks with the Soviet Union might, in the words of then Prime Minister Chamberlain, "produce a declaration of war by Germany."¹⁸

France thus ended up in a military alliance with countries too weak to help it, a political alliance with the Soviet Union with which it dared not cooperate militarily, and strategic dependence on Great Britain, which flatly refused to consider *any* military commitment. This arrangement was a prescription for a nervous breakdown, not a grand strategy.

The only serious moves France made in response to growing German strength were in the direction of Italy. Mussolini was not exactly a devotee of collective security but he had a clear sense of Italy's limitations, especially where Germany was concerned. He feared that German annexation of Austria would lead to a demand for the return of the South Tyrol, which was ethnically German. In January 1935, then Foreign Minister Pierre Laval concluded what came close to being a military alliance. Agreeing to consult each other in the event of any threat to the independence of Austria, Italy and France initiated military-staff talks in which they went so far as to discuss stationing Italian troops along the Rhine and French troops along the Austrian frontier.

Three months later, after Hitler had reintroduced conscription, an approximation of an alliance among Great Britain, France, and Italy seemed to be developing. Their heads of government met in the Italian resort of Stresa, where they agreed to resist any German attempt to change the Versailles Treaty by force. It was a minor historical irony that Mussolini should have hosted a conference to defend the Versailles settlement since he had long been a critic of Versailles, arguing that the treaty had short-changed Italy.

Stresa was to be the last time that the victors of the First World War considered joint action. Two months after the conference, Great Britain signed a naval accord with Germany, which showed that, where its own security was concerned, Great Britain preferred to rely on bilateral deals with the adversary rather than on its Stresa partners. Germany agreed to limit its fleet to thirty-five percent of Great Britain's for the next ten years, though it was granted the right to an equal number of submarines.

The terms of the Naval Treaty were less significant than what they revealed about the state of mind of the democracies. The British Cabinet surely realized that the naval agreement in effect acquiesced to the German abrogation of the naval provisions of the Versailles Treaty, and thereby, at a minimum, went against the spirit of the Stresa front. Its practical effect was to establish new ceilings on a bilateral basis—ceilings,

moreover, at the outer limit of Germany's capacity to build—a method of arms control that was to become increasingly popular during the Cold War. The naval agreement also signified that Great Britain preferred to conciliate the adversary rather than rely on its partners in the Stresa front—the psychological framework for what later came to be known as the policy of appeasement.

Soon thereafter, the Stresa front collapsed altogether. An adherent of *Realpolitik*, Mussolini took it for granted that he had a free hand for the kind of colonial expansion that had been routine prior to World War I. Consequently, he set about carving out an African empire in 1935 by conquering Abyssinia, Africa's last independent nation, and, in the process, avenging an Italian humiliation by Abyssinian forces dating back to the turn of the century.

But, whereas Mussolini's aggression would have been accepted prior to World War I, it was now being initiated in a world that was in thrall to collective security and the League of Nations. Public opinion, especially in Great Britain, had already castigated the League for "failing" to prevent Japan's conquest of Manchuria; in the interim, a mechanism for economic sanctions had been put in place. By the time Italy invaded Abyssinia in 1935, the League had an official remedy for such aggression. Abyssinia was, moreover, a member of the League of Nations, though only as the result of a rather curious reversal of circumstances. In 1925, Italy had sponsored Abyssinia's admission to the League in order to check presumed British designs. Great Britain had acquiesced reluctantly, after arguing that Abyssinia was too barbaric for full-fledged membership in the international community.

Now both countries were hoist by their own petard: Italy, by engaging in what had, by any standard, been unprovoked aggression against a member of the League; Great Britain, because it faced a challenge to collective security and not just another African colonial problem. To complicate matters, Great Britain and France had already conceded at Stresa that Abyssinia lay within Italy's sphere of interest. Laval was to say later that he had had in mind a role for Italy similar to that of France in Morocco—that is, one of indirect control. But Mussolini could not be expected to understand that France and Great Britain, having conceded this much, would sacrifice a near-alliance against Germany over the distinction between annexation and indirect control over Abyssinia.

France and Great Britain never came to grips with the reality that they faced: two mutually exclusive options. If they concluded that Italy was essential to protecting Austria and, indirectly, perhaps even to helping maintain the demilitarized Rhineland it had guaranteed at Locarno, they would have needed to come up with some compromise to save Italy's

face in Africa and to keep the Stresa front intact. Alternatively, if the League was indeed the best instrument for both containing Germany and for rallying the Western public against aggression, it was necessary to pursue sanctions until it had been demonstrated that aggression did not pay. There was no middle ground.

Yet the middle ground was exactly what the democracies, no longer having the self-confidence to define their choices, sought. Under British leadership, the League machinery of economic sanctions was activated. At the same time, Laval privately assured Mussolini that Italy's access to oil would not be disrupted. Great Britain pursued essentially the same course by politely inquiring in Rome whether oil sanctions would lead to war. When Mussolini—both predictably and untruthfully—answered in the affirmative, the British Cabinet had the alibi it needed to combine its support for the League with an appeal to the widespread dread of war. This policy came to be expressed in the slogan "all sanctions short of war."

Later, Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin was to say somewhat wistfully that any sanctions that were likely to have worked would also have been likely to lead to war. So much, at any rate, for the notion that economic sanctions provide an alternative to force in resisting aggression—an argument that would be repeated some fifty years later in the United States over the issue of how to deal with Iraq's annexation of Kuwait, albeit with a happier outcome.

Foreign Secretary Samuel Hoare understood that Great Britain had derailed its own strategy. To resist the impending German threat, Great Britain's leaders should have confronted Hitler and conciliated Mussolini. They did just the opposite: they appeased Germany and confronted Italy. Grasping the absurdity of this state of affairs, Hoare and Laval devised a compromise in December 1935: Italy would receive Abyssinia's fertile plains; Haile Selassie would continue to rule in the mountain fastness which was the historical site of his kingdom; Great Britain would contribute to these compromises by giving landlocked Abyssinia access to the sea via British Somalia. Mussolini was fully expected to accept the plan, and Hoare was to present it for League approval.

The Hoare-Laval plan came to naught because it was leaked to the press before it could be placed before the League of Nations—an extraordinarily rare event in those days. The resulting cry of outrage forced Hoare to resign—the victim of seeking a practical compromise in the face of an aroused public opinion. Anthony Eden, his successor, speedily returned to the cocoon of collective security and economic sanctions—without, however, being willing to resort to force.

In a pattern that would be repeated in successive crises, the democra-

cies justified their aversion to using force by vastly overestimating the military prowess of the adversary. London convinced itself that it could not handle the Italian fleet without French assistance. France went along halfheartedly and moved its fleet to the Mediterranean, further jeopardizing its relationship with Italy as a Locarno guarantor and a Stresa partner. Even with this overwhelming accumulation of force, oil sanctions were never invoked. And ordinary sanctions did not work rapidly enough to prevent Abyssinia's defeat—if indeed they could have worked at all.

Italy's conquest of Abyssinia was completed by May 1936, when Mussolini proclaimed the king of Italy, Victor Emmanuel, as emperor of the newly named Ethiopia. Less than two months later, on June 30, the Council of the League of Nations met to consider the *fait accompli*. Haile Selassie sounded the death knell of collective security in a forlorn personal appeal:

It is not merely a question of a settlement in the matter of Italian aggression. It is a question of collective security, of the very existence of the League; of the trust placed by States in international treaties; of the value of promises made to small states that their integrity and their independence shall be respected and assured. It is a choice between the principle of equality of States and the imposition upon small Powers of the bonds of vassalage.¹⁹

On July 15, the League lifted all sanctions against Italy. Two years later, in the wake of Munich, Great Britain and France subordinated their moral objections to their fear of Germany by recognizing the Abyssinian conquest. Collective security had condemned Haile Selassie to losing *all* of his country rather than the half he would have lost under the *Realpolitik* of the Hoare-Laval plan.

In terms of military power, Italy was not remotely comparable to Great Britain, France, or Germany. But the void created by the aloofness of the Soviet Union turned Italy into a useful auxiliary in maintaining the independence of Austria and, to a limited extent, of the demilitarized Rhineland. As long as Great Britain and France had appeared to be the strongest nations in Europe, Mussolini had supported the Versailles settlement, especially since he profoundly distrusted Germany and at first disdained Hitler's personality. His resentment over Ethiopia, coupled with his analysis of the actual power relationships, convinced Mussolini that persistence in the Stresa front might end up compelling Italy to bear the full brunt of German aggressiveness. Ethiopia therefore marked the beginning of Italy's inexorable march toward Germany, motivated in equal parts by acquisitiveness and fear.

It was in Germany, however, that the Ethiopian fiasco left the most lasting impression. The British Ambassador in Berlin reported: "Italy's victory opened a new chapter. It was unavoidable that in a land where power is worshipped England's prestige would sink."²⁰ With Italy out of the Stresa front, Germany's sole remaining obstacle on the road to Austria and Central Europe was the open door provided by the demilitarized Rhineland. And Hitler wasted no time slamming it.

On the morning of Sunday, March 7, 1936, Hitler ordered his army into the demilitarized Rhineland, marking the overthrow of the last remaining safeguard of the Versailles settlement. According to the Versailles Treaty, German military forces were barred from the Rhineland and a zone of fifty kilometers to the east of it. Germany had confirmed this provision at Locarno; the League of Nations had endorsed Locarno; and Great Britain, France, Belgium, and Italy had guaranteed it.

If Hitler could prevail in the Rhineland, Eastern Europe would be at Germany's mercy. None of the new states of Eastern Europe stood a chance of defending themselves against a revisionist Germany, either through their own efforts or in combination with each other. Their only hope was that France could deter German aggression by threatening to march into the Rhineland.

Once again, the Western democracies were torn by uncertainty over Hitler's intentions. Technically, he was merely reoccupying German territory. Simultaneously, he was offering all sorts of reassurances, including the offer of a nonaggression treaty with France. Once again, it was argued that Germany would be satisfied as soon as it had been conceded the right to defend its own national borders, something every other European nation simply took for granted. Did British and French leaders have the moral right to risk their peoples' lives in order to maintain a so blatantly discriminatory state of affairs? On the other hand, was it not their moral duty to confront Hitler while Germany was not yet fully armed, and thereby possibly save untold lives?

History has given the answer; contemporaries, however, were tormented by doubt. For, in 1936, Hitler continued to benefit from his unique combination of psychotic intuition and demonic willpower. The democracies still believed that they were dealing with a normal, if somewhat excessive, national leader who was seeking to restore his country to a position of equality in Europe. Great Britain and France were absorbed in trying to read Hitler's mind. Was he sincere? Did he really want peace? To be sure, these were valid questions, but foreign policy builds on quicksand when it disregards actual power relationships and relies on prophesies of another's intentions.

With his uncanny ability to exploit his adversaries' weaknesses, Hitler chose precisely the right moment to reoccupy the Rhineland. The League of Nations, bogged down in sanctions against Italy, was far from eager to take on a confrontation with another major power. The war in Abyssinia had driven a wedge between the Western Powers and Italy, one of the guarantors of Locarno. Great Britain, another guarantor, having just recoiled from imposing oil sanctions against Italy at sea, where it was dominant, would surely be even less eager to risk ground warfare for a cause which involved no violation of national boundaries.

Though no country had a bigger stake in a demilitarized Rhineland than France, none was more ambivalent about resisting Germany's violation of it. The Maginot Line bespoke France's obsession with the strategic defensive, and the military equipment and training of the French army left little doubt that the First World War had quenched its traditional offensive spirit. France seemed resigned to await its fate behind the Maginot Line and to risk nothing beyond its frontiers—not in Eastern Europe or, for that matter, in the Rhineland.

Nevertheless, the reoccupation of the Rhineland represented a bold gamble on Hitler's part. Conscription had been in effect for less than a year. The German army was far from ready for war. Indeed, the small advance guard entering the demilitarized zone was ordered to conduct a fighting retreat at the first signs of French intervention. Hitler, however, compensated for his lack of military strength with ample psychological daring. He flooded the democracies with proposals hinting at his willingness to discuss troop limitations in the Rhineland and to bring Germany back into the League of Nations. He appealed to widespread distrust of the Soviet Union by claiming his move was a riposte to the Franco-Soviet Pact of 1935. He offered a fifty-kilometer demilitarized zone on both sides of the German frontier and a twenty-five-year nonaggression treaty. The demilitarization proposal had the double virtue of hinting that permanent peace was only the stroke of a pen away, while neatly demolishing the Maginot Line, which backed up against the German frontier.

Hitler's interlocutors did not require a great deal of encouragement to adopt a passive stance. A convenient alibi here and there suited their preference for doing nothing. Ever since Locarno, it had been a cardinal principle of French policy never to risk war with Germany except in alliance with Great Britain, though British assistance was technically unnecessary so long as Germany remained disarmed. In the single-minded pursuit of that goal, French leaders had swallowed countless frustrations and supported many disarmament initiatives which, in their hearts, they knew to be ill-conceived.

France's overwhelming psychological dependence on Great Britain may explain why it made no military preparations, not even when the French Ambassador in Berlin, André François-Poncet, warned on November 21, 1935, that a German move on the Rhineland was imminent—a full three and a half months before it actually occurred.²¹ Yet France dared neither to mobilize nor to undertake precautionary military measures lest it be accused of provoking what it feared. France also did not raise the issue in negotiations with Germany because it did not know what to do if Germany ignored its warnings or declared its intentions.

What is nearly inexplicable about France's conduct in 1935, however, is why the French general staff made no provisions whatsoever in its own internal planning even after François-Poncet's warning. Did the French general staff not believe its own diplomats? Was it because France could not bring itself to leave the shelter of its fortifications even in defense of the vital buffer zone represented by the demilitarized Rhineland? Or did France already feel so utterly doomed that its primary goal had become to defer war in the hope that some unforeseeable change would occur in its favor—though it would no longer be able to bring such a change about by its own actions?

The towering symbol for this state of mind was, of course, the Maginot Line, which France had constructed at huge cost over a period of ten years. France had thereby committed itself to the strategic defensive in the very year when it had guaranteed the independence of Poland and Czechoslovakia. A sign of equal confusion was the incomprehensible French decision to stop construction of the Maginot Line at the Belgian frontier, which belied all the experiences of the First World War. For, if a Franco-German war was indeed possible, then why not a German assault through Belgium? If France feared that Belgium would collapse if it indicated that the main line of defense excluded that country, Belgium could have been given the choice of agreeing to the extension of the Maginot Line along the Belgian-German frontier, and, if this were rejected, the Maginot Line could have been extended to the sea along the Franco-Belgian frontier. France did neither.

What political leaders decide, intelligence services tend to justify. Popular literature and films often depict the opposite—policymakers as the helpless tools of intelligence experts. In the real world, intelligence assessments more often follow than guide policy decisions. This may explain the wild exaggeration of German strength that blighted French military estimates. At the time of the German reoccupation of the Rhineland, General Maurice Gamelin, the French Commander-in-Chief, told civilian leaders that Germany's trained military manpower already

equaled that of France, and that Germany had more equipment than France—an absurd estimate in the second year of German rearmament. Policy recommendations flowed from this flawed premise of German military might. Gamelin concluded that France must not undertake any military countermeasures without general mobilization, a step which its political leaders would not risk without British support—not even though the German force entering the Rhineland numbered about 20,000, while the French standing army could count on 500,000 even without mobilization.

Everything now came back to the dilemma which had bedeviled the democracies for twenty years. Great Britain would recognize only one threat to the European balance of power—the violation of France's borders. Determined never to fight for Eastern Europe, it perceived no vital British interest in a demilitarized Rhineland serving as a kind of hostage in the West. Nor would Great Britain go to war to uphold its own Locarno guarantee. Eden had made this clear a month before the occupation of the Rhineland. In February 1936, the French government finally roused itself to inquire of Great Britain what its position would be if Hitler carried out what François-Poncet had reported. Eden's treatment of the potential violation of two international agreements—Versailles and Locarno—sounded like the opening of a commercial bargain:

... as the zone was constituted primarily to give security to France and Belgium, it is for these two Governments, in the first instance, to make up their minds as to what value they attach to, and what price they are prepared to pay for, its maintenance.... It would be preferable for Great Britain and France to enter betimes into negotiations with the German Government for the surrender on conditions of our rights in the zone while such surrender still has a bargaining value.²²

Eden in effect took the position that the best that could be hoped for was a negotiation in which the Allies, in return for giving up established and recognized rights (and in which Great Britain refused to honor its own guarantee), would receive—what exactly? Time? Other assurances? Great Britain left the answer regarding the *quid pro quo* to France, but conveyed by its conduct that fighting on behalf of solemn obligations in the Rhineland was not part of the British strategy.

After Hitler marched into the Rhineland, Great Britain's attitude became even more explicit. The day after the German move, the British Secretary of State for War told the German Ambassador:

... though the British people were prepared to fight for France in the event of a German incursion into French territory, they would not

resort to arms on account of the recent occupation of the Rhineland. ... [Most of them [the British people] probably took the view that they did not care "two hooos" about the Germans reoccupying their own territory.]²³

Great Britain's doubts were soon extended even to countermeasures short of war. The Foreign Office told the American chargé d'affaires: "England would make every endeavour to prevent the imposition of military and/or economic sanctions against Germany."²⁴

Foreign Minister Pierre Flandin pleaded France's case in vain. He presciently told the British that, once Germany had fortified the Rhineland, Czechoslovakia would be lost and that, soon after, general war would become unavoidable. Although he was proved right, it was never altogether clear whether Flandin was seeking British support for French military action or developing a French alibi for inaction. Churchill obviously thought the latter, noting dryly, "These were brave words; but action would have spoken louder."²⁵

Great Britain was deaf to Flandin's entreaties. The vast majority of its leadership still believed that peace depended on disarmament, and that the new international order would have to be based on reconciliation with Germany. The British felt that it was more important to rectify the mistakes of Versailles than to vindicate the commitments of Locarno. A Cabinet minute of March 17—ten days after Hitler's move—noted that "our own attitude had been governed by the desire to utilize Herr Hitler's offers in order to obtain a permanent settlement."²⁶

What the Cabinet had to say *sotto voce*, the Opposition felt quite free to put forward without restraint. During the course of a debate on defense matters in the House of Commons that same month, it was declared by Labour member Arthur Greenwood:

Herr Hitler made a statement sinning with one hand but holding out the olive branch with the other, which ought to be taken at face value. They may prove to be the most important gestures yet made.... It is idle to say these statements were insincere.... The issue is peace and not defence.²⁷

In other words, the Opposition clearly advocated the revision of Versailles and the abandonment of Locarno. They wanted Great Britain to sit back and wait for Hitler's purposes to become clearer. It was a reasonable policy as long as its advocates understood that every passing year would increase exponentially the ultimate cost of resistance should the policy fail.

It is not necessary to retrace step by step the path by which France and Great Britain attempted to transform strategic cross into political gold, or upheaval into an opportunity for the policy of appeasement. What matters is that, at the end of this process, the Rhineland was fortified, Eastern Europe had fallen beyond the reach of French military assistance, and Italy was moving closer to providing Hitler's Germany with its first ally. Just as France had been reconciled to Locarno by an ambiguous British guarantee—whose virtue in British eyes had been that it was less than an alliance—so the abrogation of Locarno elicited the even more ambiguous British commitment to send two divisions to defend France should the French border be violated.

Once again, Great Britain had skillfully dodged a full commitment to defend France. But what exactly did it achieve? France, of course, saw through the evasion but accepted it as a halfhearted British step toward the long-sought formal alliance. Great Britain interpreted its pledge of two divisions as a means of restraining France from undertaking a defense of Eastern Europe. For the British commitment would not apply if the French army invaded Germany in defense of Czechoslovakia or Poland. On the other hand, two British divisions were not remotely relevant to the problem of deterring a German attack on France. Great Britain, the mother country of the balance-of-power policy, had totally lost touch with its operating principles.

For Hitler, the reoccupation of the Rhineland opened the road to Central Europe, militarily as well as psychologically. Once the democracies had accepted it as a *fait accompli*, the strategic basis for resisting Hitler in Eastern Europe disappeared. "If on 7 March you could not defend yourself," asked the Romanian Foreign Minister, Nicolae Titulescu, of his French counterpart, "how will you defend us against the aggressor?"²⁸ The question grew increasingly unanswerable as the Rhineland was being fortified.

Psychologically, the impact of the democracies' passive stance was even more profound. Appeasement now became an official policy, and rectifying the inequities of Versailles the conventional wisdom. In the West, there was no longer anything left to rectify. But it stood to reason that, if France and Great Britain would not defend Locarno, which they had guaranteed, there was not a chance of their upholding the Versailles settlement in Eastern Europe, which Great Britain had questioned from the beginning and had explicitly refused to guarantee on more than one occasion—the last time in the undertaking to send two divisions to France:

By now, France had abandoned the Richelieu traditions. It no longer

relied even on itself, but sought surcease from its dangers through German goodwill. In August 1936, five months after the reoccupation of the Rhineland, Dr. Hjalmar Schacht, Germany's Economics Minister, was received in Paris by Léon Blum—Socialist Party head and now Prime Minister of a Popular Front government. "I am a Marxist and a Jew," said Blum, but "we cannot achieve anything if we treat ideological barriers as insurmountable."²⁹ Blum's Foreign Minister, Yvon Delbos, was at a loss as to how to describe what this meant practically, other than "making concessions to Germany piecemeal in order to stave off war."³⁰ Nor did he explain whether this process had a terminal point. France, the country which, for 200 years, had fought innumerable wars in Central Europe in order to control its own fate, had retreated to grasping at whatever security could be wrung out of trading piecemeal concessions for time and to hoping that, along the way, either German appetites would become satiated or some other *deus ex machina* would remove the danger.

The policy of appeasement which France implemented warily, Great Britain pursued eagerly. In 1937, the year after the Rhineland was remilitarized, Lord Halifax, then Lord President, symbolized the democracies' moral retreat by visiting Hitler's aerie at Berchtesgaden. He praised Nazi Germany "as the bulwark of Europe against Bolshevism" and listed a number of issues with respect to which "possible alterations might be destined to come about with the passage of time." Danzig, Austria, and Czechoslovakia were specifically mentioned. Halifax's only caveat related to the method by which the changes would be accomplished: "England was interested to see that any alterations should come through the course of peaceful evolution and that methods should be avoided which might cause far-reaching disturbances."³¹

It would have taxed the comprehension of a less determined leader than Hitler why, if it was prepared to concede adjustments in Austria, Czechoslovakia, and the Polish Corridor, Great Britain would balk at the method Germany used to make those adjustments. Having yielded the substance, why should Great Britain draw the line at procedure? What possible peaceful argument did Halifax expect could convince the victims of the merits of suicide? League orthodoxy and the doctrine of collective security had it that it was the *method* of change which had to be resisted, but history teaches that nations go to war in order to resist the *fact* of change.

By the time of Halifax's visit to Hitler, France's strategic situation had deteriorated even further. In July 1936, a military coup led by General Francisco Franco had triggered the Spanish Civil War. Franco was openly supported by large shipments of equipment from Germany and Italy;

soon thereafter, German and Italian "volunteers" were dispatched, and fascism seemed poised to spread its ideas by force. France now faced the same challenge Richelieu had resisted 300 years earlier—the prospect of hostile governments on all its borders. But unlike their great predecessor, the French governments of the 1930s dithered, unable to decide which they feared more—the dangers they were facing or the means needed to redress them.

Great Britain had participated in the wars of the Spanish succession early in the eighteenth century, and against Napoleon in Spain a century later. In each case, Great Britain had resisted the most aggressive European power's attempt to draw Spain into its orbit. Now it either failed to perceive a threat to the balance of power in a fascist victory in Spain or it perceived fascism as a lesser threat than a radical left-wing Spain tied to the Soviet Union (which seemed to many to be the most likely alternative). But, above all, Great Britain wanted to avoid a war. Its Cabinet warned France that Great Britain reserved the right to remain neutral if a war should result from French arms deliveries to republican Spain—even though, under international law, France had every right to sell arms to the legitimate Spanish government. France waffled, then proclaimed an embargo on arms shipments while periodically acquiescing in its violation. That policy, however, only demoralized France's friends and cost France the respect of its adversaries.

In this atmosphere, French and British leaders met in London on November 29–30, 1937, to chart a common course. Neville Chamberlain, who had replaced Baldwin as prime minister, came straight to the point. He invited discussion of the obligations inherent in France's alliance with Czechoslovakia. This is the sort of query diplomats initiate when they are looking for loopholes in order to escape honoring their commitments. Presumably, the independence of Austria was not even worth talking about.

French Foreign Minister Delbos responded in a manner which conveyed that he had understood the implications of the question very well indeed. Treating the Czech issue in terms of juridical rather than political or strategic considerations, he confined himself to a strictly legal exegesis of France's obligation:

... this treaty engaged France in the event of Czechoslovakia being a victim of an aggression. If uprisings among the German population occurred and were supported by armed intervention from Germany, the treaty committed France in a manner to be determined according to the gravity of the facts.³²

Delbos did not discuss the geopolitical importance of Czechoslovakia or the impact which France's abandonment of an ally would have on his country's credibility in maintaining the independence of other countries in Eastern Europe. Instead, he stressed that France's obligations might or might not apply to the one realistic existing threat—unrest among Czechoslovakia's German minority backed by German military force. Chamberlain grasped at the proffered loophole and turned it into a rationale for appeasement:

It seemed desirable to try to achieve some agreement with Germany on Central Europe, whatever might be Germany's aims, even if she wished to absorb some of her neighbours: one could in effect hope to delay the execution of German plans, and even to restrain the Reich for such a time that its plans might become impractical in the long run.³³

But if procrastination did not work, what was Great Britain going to do? Having conceded that Germany would revise its eastern borders, would Great Britain go to war over the timetable? The answer was self-evident—countries do not go to war over the rate of change by which something they have already conceded is being achieved. Czechoslovakia was doomed not at Munich but at London, nearly a year earlier.

As it happened, Hitler had decided at about the same time to sketch his own long-term strategy. On November 5, 1937, he called a meeting of his war minister, the commanders-in-chief of the military services, and his foreign minister and treated them to a candid exposé of his strategic views. His adjutant, Hossbach, kept a detailed record. No one present had cause to complain afterward that he did not know in which direction his leader was heading. For Hitler made it clear that his aims went far beyond an attempt to restore Germany's pre-World War I position. What Hitler outlined was the program of *Mein Kampf*—the conquest of large tracts of land in Eastern Europe and in the Soviet Union for colonization. Hitler knew very well that such a project would encounter resistance: "German policy [would] have to reckon with the two hateful antagonists England and France."³⁴ He stressed that Germany had stolen a march on Great Britain and France in its rearmament but that the advantage was transitory and would diminish at an accelerating rate after 1943. War, therefore, had to start before then.

Hitler's generals were disturbed by the vastness of his plans and by the imminence of their execution. But they timidly swallowed Hitler's designs. Some military leaders toyed vaguely with the idea of a coup, once Hitler had given the actual order to go to war. But Hitler always moved too fast. His stunning early successes deprived his generals of the moral

justification (in their eyes) for such a step—not that making coups against constituted authority had ever been a speciality of German generals.

As for the Western democracies, they did not yet grasp the ideological gulf that separated them from the German dictator. They believed in peace as an end, and were straining their every nerve to avoid war. Hitler, on the other hand, feared peace and craved war. "Mankind has grown strong in eternal struggles," he had written in *Mein Kampf*; "and it will only perish through eternal peace."³⁵

By 1938, Hitler felt strong enough to cross the national boundaries established at Versailles. His first target was his native country of Austria, which had been left in an anomalous position by the settlements of St. Germain in 1919 and Trianon in 1920 (the equivalent of Versailles for the Austro-Hungarian Empire). Until 1806, Austria had been the center of the Holy Roman Empire; until 1866, it had been a leading—for some, *the* leading—German state. Expelled from its historic role in Germany by Bismarck, it had shifted its emphasis to its Balkan and Central European possessions until it lost them as well in the First World War. A one-time empire shrunk to its small German-speaking core, Austria had been prohibited by the Treaty of Versailles from joining Germany—a clause which stood in obvious defiance of the principle of self-determination. Even though *Anschluss* with Germany remained the goal of many on both sides of the Austro-German border (including Stresemann), it was again blocked by the Allies in 1930.

Thus, the union of Germany and Austria had about it that sense of ambiguity so essential to the success of Hitler's early challenges. It fulfilled the principle of self-determination while undermining the balance of power, which statesmen were less and less willing to invoke to justify the use of force. After a month of Nazi threats and Austrian concessions and second thoughts, on March 12, 1938, German troops marched into Austria. There was no resistance, and the Austrian population, much of it deliriously joyful, seemed to feel that, shorn of its empire and left helpless in Central Europe, it preferred a future as a German province to being a minor player on the Central European stage.

The democracies' halfhearted protests against Germany's annexation of Austria hardly registered moral concern while shying away from any concrete measures. As the death knell of collective security was sounded, the League of Nations stood silent while a member country was swallowed by a powerful neighbor. The democracies now turned doubly committed to appeasement in the hope that Hitler would stop his march once he had returned all ethnic Germans to the fatherland.

Destiny chose Czechoslovakia as the subject of that experiment. Like

other successor states of Austro-Hungary, it was nearly as multinational as the Empire had been. Out of a population of some 15 million, nearly a third were neither Czech nor Slovak, and the Slovak commitment to the state was shaky. Three and a half million Germans, close to a million Hungarians, and nearly half a million Poles were incorporated into the new state. To exacerbate matters, these minorities dwelled in territories contiguous to their ethnic homelands, which rendered the claim that they should rejoin their mother countries even more weighty in light of the prevailing Versailles orthodoxy of self-determination.

At the same time, Czechoslovakia was politically and economically the most advanced of the successor states. It was genuinely democratic and had a standard of living comparable to Switzerland's. It maintained a large army, much of whose excellent equipment was of domestic Czech design and manufacture; it had military alliances with France and the Soviet Union. In terms of traditional diplomacy, therefore, it was no easy matter to abandon Czechoslovakia, in terms of self-determination, it was equally difficult to defend it. Emboldened by his successful remilitarization of the Rhineland, Hitler began in 1937 to threaten Czechoslovakia on behalf of its ethnic Germans. At first, these threats were ostensibly to pressure the Czechs into granting special rights to the German minority in "Sudetenland," as the German propaganda dubbed that territory. But in 1938, Hitler turned up the heat of his rhetoric by intimating that he intended to annex Sudetenland into the German Reich by force. France was committed to protecting Czechoslovakia, as was the Soviet Union, though Soviet help for the Czechs had been made conditional on prior French actions. Moreover, whether Poland or Romania would have allowed Soviet troops to traverse their territory in defense of Czechoslovakia remains very doubtful.

From the start, Great Britain opted for appeasement. On March 22, shortly after the annexation of Austria, Halifax reminded the French leaders that the Locarno guarantee applied only to the French border and might lapse if France implemented its treaty commitments in Central Europe. A Foreign Office memorandum warned: "Those commitments [the Locarno guarantee] are, in their view, no mean contribution to the maintenance of peace in Europe and, though they have no intention of withdrawing from them, they cannot see their way to add to them."³⁶ Great Britain's sole security frontier was at the borders of France; if France's security concerns extended any further, specifically, if it tried to defend Czechoslovakia, it would be on its own.

A few months later, the British Cabinet sent a fact-finding mission to Prague under Lord Runciman to explore possible means of conciliation.

The practical consequence of that mission was to advertise Great Britain's reluctance to defend Czechoslovakia. The facts were already well known: any conceivable conciliation would have required some dismemberment of Czechoslovakia. Munich, therefore, was not a surrender but a state of mind and the nearly inevitable outgrowth of the democracies' effort to sustain a geopolitically flawed settlement with rhetoric about collective security and self-determination.

Even America, the country most identified with the creation of Czechoslovakia, dissociated itself from the crisis at an early stage. In September, President Roosevelt suggested holding a negotiation on some neutral ground.³⁷ Yet, if American embassies abroad were reporting accurately, Roosevelt could have had no illusion about the attitudes which France, and even more so Great Britain, would bring to any such conference. Indeed, Roosevelt reinforced these attitudes by making the statement that "the Government of the United States . . . will assume no obligations in the conduct of the present negotiations."³⁸

The situation was as if made to order for Hitler's talent in waging psychological warfare. Throughout the summer, he worked to magnify hysteria about an imminent war without, in fact, making any specific threat. Finally, after Hitler had engaged in a vicious personal attack on the Czech leadership at the annual Nazi Party rally in Nuremberg in early September 1938, Chamberlain's nerves snapped. Though no formal demands had been made and no real diplomatic exchanges had taken place, Chamberlain decided to end the tension on September 15 by visiting Hitler. Hitler showed his disdain by choosing Berchtesgaden as the meeting place—the location in Germany farthest from London and the least accessible. In those days, traveling from London to Berchtesgaden required an airplane trip of five hours, in what turned out to be Chamberlain's first flight, at the age of sixty-nine.

After enduring several hours of Hitler's ranting about the alleged mistreatment of the Sudeten Germans, Chamberlain agreed to dismember Czechoslovakia. All Czechoslovak districts with populations that were more than 50-percent German were to be returned to Germany. The details were to be worked out at a second meeting in a few days' time, at Bad Godesberg, in the Rhineland. It was symptomatic of Hitler's negotiating style that he termed this subsequent locale a "concession"; though much closer to London than the first site, it was still well within Germany. In the interval, Chamberlain "persuaded" the Czechoslovak government to accept his proposal—"sadly" so, in the words of the Czech leaders.³⁹

At Bad Godesberg on September 22, Hitler raised the ante and made it clear that he sought the abject humiliation of Czechoslovakia. He would

not agree to the time-consuming procedure of district-by-district plebiscites and frontier demarcations, demanding instead the immediate evacuation of the entire Sudeten territory, the process to start on September 26—four days later—to be completed in no more than forty-eight hours. Czech military installations were to be left intact for the German armed forces. To weaken the rump state even further, Hitler demanded border rectifications for Hungary and Poland on behalf of their own minorities. When Chamberlain objected to being presented with an ultimatum, Hitler snidely pointed to the word "memorandum" typed on top of his presentation. After hours of acrimonious argument, Hitler made another "concession": he would give Czechoslovakia until 2:00 p.m. on September 28 to reply, and until October 1 to begin withdrawing from the Sudeten territory.

Chamberlain could not bring himself to inflict such a total humiliation on Czechoslovakia, and French Prime Minister Daladier drew the line even more adamantly. For some days, war seemed imminent. Trenches were being dug in British parks. This was the period in which Chamberlain made the melancholy comment that Great Britain was being asked to go to war for a faraway country about which it knew nothing—this from the leader of a country which had fought for centuries on the approaches to India without blinking.

But what was the *casus belli*? Great Britain had already accepted the principle of Czechoslovak dismemberment along with self-determination for the Sudeten Germans. Great Britain and France were approaching the decision to go to war not in order to sustain an ally but over the few weeks' difference in the rate at which it would be dismantled and a few territorial adjustments which were marginal compared to what had already been conceded. Perhaps it was just as well that Mussolini took everybody off the hook right before the deadline by proposing that a conference already being planned between the foreign ministers of Italy and Germany be expanded to include the heads of government of France (Daladier), Great Britain (Chamberlain), Germany (Hitler), and Italy (Mussolini).

The four leaders met on September 29 in Munich, the birthplace of the Nazi Party, the sort of symbolism victors reserve for themselves. Little time was spent on negotiations: Chamberlain and Daladier made a halfhearted attempt to return to their original proposal, Mussolini produced a paper containing Hitler's Bad Godesberg proposal. Hitler defined the issues in the form of a sarcastic ultimatum. Since his deadline of October 1 had caused him to be accused of proceeding in an atmosphere of violence, he said that the task at hand was "to absolve the action of such a charac-

ter."⁴⁰ In other words, the sole purpose of the conference was to accept Hitler's Bad Godesberg program peacefully before he went to war to impose it.

Chamberlain and Daladier's conduct over the previous months gave them no real choice but to accept Mussolini's draft. Czech representatives were left languishing in anterooms while their country was being dismembered. The Soviet Union was not invited at all. Great Britain and France assuaged their guilty consciences by offering to guarantee the remaining fragment of disarmed Czechoslovakia—a preposterous gesture coming from nations which had refused to honor the guarantee of an intact, well-armed fellow democracy. It goes without saying that the guarantee was never implemented.

Munich has entered our vocabulary as a specific aberration—the penalty of yielding to blackmail. Munich, however, was not a single act but the culmination of an attitude which began in the 1920s and accelerated with each new concession. For over a decade, Germany had been throwing off the restrictions of Versailles one by one: the Weimar Republic had rid Germany of reparations, of the Inter-Allied Military Control Commission, and of Allied occupation of the Rhineland. Hitler had denounced the restrictions on German armaments, the prohibition against conscription, and the demilitarization provisions of Locarno. Even in the 1920s, Germany had never accepted the Eastern frontiers, and the Allies had never insisted that it accept them. Finally, as so often happens, decisions cumulatively developed their own momentum.

By conceding that the Versailles settlement was iniquitous, the victors eroded the psychological basis for defending it. The victors of the Napoleonic Wars had made a generous peace, but they had also organized the Quadruple Alliance in order to leave no ambiguity about their determination to defend it. The victors of World War I had made a punitive peace and, after having themselves created the maximum incentive for revisionism, cooperated in dismantling their own settlement.

For two decades, the balance of power had been alternately rejected and ridiculed; the leaders of the democracies told their peoples that, henceforth, the world order would be based on a higher morality. Then, when the challenge to the new world order finally came, the democracies—Great Britain with conviction, France with doubt tinged by despair—had no recourse but to drain the cup of conciliation to demonstrate to their peoples that Hitler could not in fact be appeased.

This explains why the Munich agreement was greeted with such wild acclaim by the vast majority of its contemporaries. Franklin Roosevelt was among those congratulating Chamberlain: "Good man," he said.⁴¹ The

leaders of the British Commonwealth were more effusive. The Prime Minister of Canada wrote:

May I convey to you the warm congratulations of the Canadian people, and with them, an expression of their gratitude, which is felt from one end of the dominion to the other. My colleagues and Government join with me in unbounded admiration at the service you have rendered mankind.⁴²

Not to be outdone, the Australian Prime Minister said:

Colleagues and I desire to express our warmest congratulations at the outcome of the negotiations at Munich. Australians in common with all other peoples of the British empire owe a deep debt of gratitude to you for your unceasing efforts to preserve the peace.⁴³

Strangely enough, all of the eyewitnesses to the Munich Conference concurred that, far from triumphant, Hitler was morose. He had wanted war, which he regarded as indispensable to the realization of his ambitions. He probably needed it for psychological reasons as well; nearly all of his public utterances, which he viewed as the most vital aspect of his public life, related in one way or another to his wartime experiences. Even though Hitler's generals strongly opposed war—to the point of fitfully planning to overthrow him should he make a final decision to attack—Hitler left Munich with the sense of having been cheated. And, by his own inverted reasoning, he may well have been right. For had he managed to contrive a war over Czechoslovakia, it is doubtful that the democracies could have sustained the sacrifices necessary to win it. The issue was too incompatible with the principle of self-determination, and public opinion was not sufficiently prepared for the almost certain initial reverses of such a war.

Paradoxically, Munich turned into the psychological end of the line for Hitler's strategy. Until then, he had always been able to appeal to the democracies' sense of guilt about the inequities of Versailles; afterward, his only weapon was brute force, and there was a limit to how much blackmail even those most afraid of war would accept before taking a stand.

This was especially true of Great Britain. By his conduct at Bad Godesberg and at Munich, Hitler used up the last reserves of British goodwill. Despite his fatuous statement of having brought "peace for our time,"

when he returned to London, Chamberlain was determined never to be blackmailed again, and launched a major rearmament program.

In fact, Chamberlain's conduct in the Munich crisis was more complex than posterity has depicted it. Wildly popular in the wake of Munich, he was ever after associated with surrender. The democratic public is unforgiving in the face of debacles, even when these result from carrying out its own immediate wishes. Chamberlain's reputation collapsed once it became clear that he had not achieved "peace for our time." Hitler soon found another pretext for war, and by then Chamberlain could not even garner credit for having managed the process by which Great Britain was able to weather the storm as a united people and with a restored air force.

In retrospect, it is easy to disparage the often naïve pronouncements of the appeasers. Yet most of them were decent men earnestly seeking to implement the new dispensation contrived by Wilsonian idealism under the cloud of general disillusionment with traditional European diplomacy, and the pervasive sense of spiritual and physical exhaustion. In no previous period could a British prime minister have justified an agreement, in the way Chamberlain had Munich—as a "removal of those suspicions and those animosities which have so long poisoned the air"⁴⁴—as if foreign policy belonged to a branch of psychology. Still, these views had all sprung from an idealistic effort to transcend the legacies of *Realpolitik* and European history by appealing to reason and justice.

It did not take Hitler long to shatter the illusions of the appeasers, thereby hastening his own ultimate downfall. In March 1939, less than six months after Munich, Hitler occupied the rump of Czechoslovakia. The Czech portion became a German protectorate; Slovakia was designated a technically independent state, if a German satellite. Though Great Britain and France had offered to guarantee Czechoslovakia at Munich, that pledge was never formalized, nor could have been.

The destruction of Czechoslovakia made no geopolitical sense whatsoever; it showed that Hitler was beyond rational calculation and bent on war. Deprived of its defenses and of its French and Soviet alliances, Czechoslovakia was bound to slip into the German orbit, and Eastern Europe was certain to adjust to the new power realities. The Soviet Union had just purged its entire political and military leadership and would not be a factor for some time. All Hitler had to do was wait, because, with France in effect neutralized, Germany would eventually emerge as the dominant power in Eastern Europe. Waiting, of course, was what Hitler was emotionally least capable of doing.

The British and French reaction (spearheaded by London) of drawing

the line made equally little sense in terms of traditional power politics. The seizure of Prague changed neither the balance of power nor the foreseeable course of events. But in terms of the Versailles principles, the occupation of Czechoslovakia marked a watershed because it demonstrated that Hitler sought the domination of Europe and not self-determination or equality.

Hitler's blunder was not so much to have violated historic principles of equilibrium as to have offended the moral premises of British postwar foreign policy. His transgression was to incorporate non-German populations into the Reich, thereby violating the principle of self-determination, on behalf of which all his previous unilateral exactions had been tolerated. Great Britain's patience was neither inexhaustible nor the result of a weak national character; and Hitler had, at last, fulfilled the British public's moral definition of aggression, if not yet the British government's. After a few days of hesitation, Chamberlain moved his policy into line with British public opinion. From that point on, Great Britain would resist Hitler not in order to comply with historic theories of equilibrium, but, quite simply, because Hitler could no longer be trusted.

Ironically, the Wilsonian approach to international relations, which had facilitated Hitler's advances beyond what any previous European system would have considered acceptable, after a certain point also caused Great Britain to draw the line more rigorously than it would have in a world based on *Realpolitik*. If Wilsonianism had prevented earlier resistance to Hitler, it also laid the foundation for implacable opposition to him once its moral criteria had been unambiguously violated.

When Hitler laid claim to Danzig in 1939 and sought modification of the Polish Corridor, the issues at hand were essentially no different from those of the year before. Danzig was a thoroughly German town, and its free-city status flew as much in the face of the principle of self-determination as had adjudication of the Sudeten territory to Czechoslovakia. Though the population of the Polish Corridor was more mixed, some adjustment of borders that was more responsive to the principle of self-determination was quite possible—at least theoretically. Yet what had changed beyond Hitler's comprehension was that, once he had crossed the line of what was morally tolerable, the same moral perfectionism which had formerly generated pliability in the democracies transformed itself into unprecedented intransigence. After Germany occupied Czechoslovakia, British public opinion would tolerate no further concessions; from then on, the outbreak of the Second World War was only a matter of time—unless Hitler remained quiescent, which, for him, proved psychologically impossible.

when he returned to London. Chamberlain was determined never to be blackmailed again, and launched a major rearmament program.

In fact, Chamberlain's conduct in the Munich crisis was more complex than posterity has depicted it. Wildly popular in the wake of Munich, he was ever after associated with surrender. The democratic public is unforgiving in the face of debacles, even when these result from carrying out its own immediate wishes. Chamberlain's reputation collapsed once it became clear that he had not achieved "peace for our time." Hitler soon found another pretext for war, and by then Chamberlain could not even garner credit for having managed the process by which Great Britain was able to weather the storm as a united people and with a restored air force.

In retrospect, it is easy to disparage the often naive pronouncements of the appeasers. Yet most of them were decent men earnestly seeking to implement the new dispensation contrived by Wilsonian idealism under the cloud of general disillusionment with traditional European diplomacy, and the pervasive sense of spiritual and physical exhaustion. In no previous period could a British prime minister have justified an agreement, in the way Chamberlain had Munich—as a "removal of those suspicions and those animosities which have so long poisoned the air"⁴⁴—as if foreign policy belonged to a branch of psychology. Still, these views had all sprung from an idealistic effort to transcend the legacies of *Realpolitik* and European history by appealing to reason and justice.

It did not take Hitler long to shatter the illusions of the appeasers, thereby hastening his own ultimate downfall. In March 1939, less than six months after Munich, Hitler occupied the rump of Czechoslovakia. The Czech portion became a German protectorate; Slovakia was designated a technically independent state, if a German satellite. Though Great Britain and France had offered to guarantee Czechoslovakia at Munich, that pledge was never formalized, nor could have been.

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DIPLOMACY

Before that momentous event could come to pass, however, the international system received one more shock—this time from the other great revisionist power it had ignored throughout most of the turbulent 1930s—Stalin's Soviet Union.