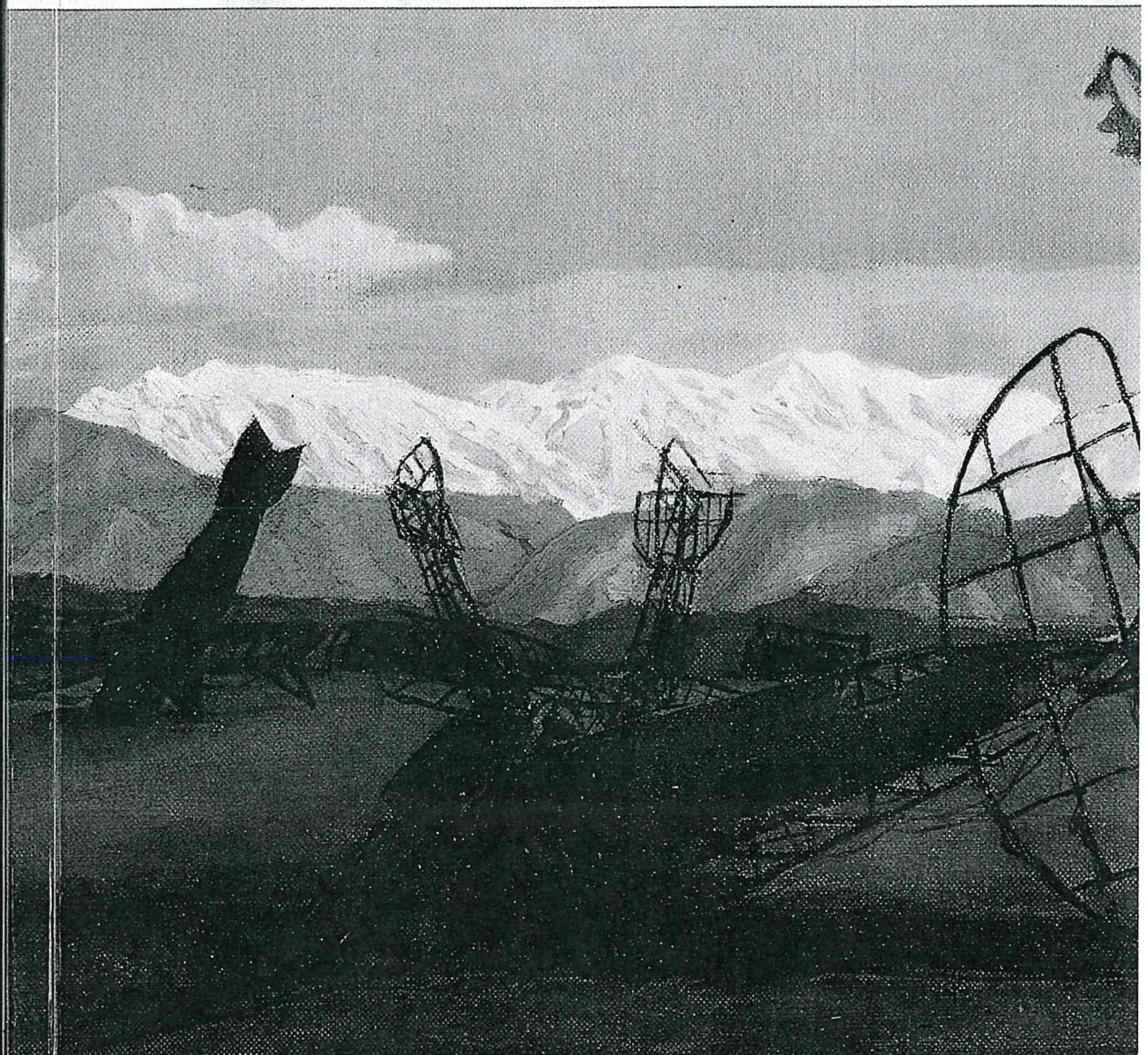


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War and Peace: International Relations 1878–1941

THIRD EDITION



David G. Williamson

 **HODDER**
EDUCATION

8

The Countdown to War in Europe 1937–41

POINTS TO CONSIDER

The core of this chapter covers the crucial period from March 1938 to September 1939. It begins with Hitler's plans for expansion and then looks at the succession of crises which start with the *Anschluss* and end with Britain's and France's declaration of war on Germany. It then briefly traces the spreading conflict in Europe up to June 1941.

In dealing with these events this chapter focuses on:

- Hitler considers his options
- The arms race: Britain, France and Germany 1936–9
- Britain, France and appeasement
- The *Anschluss* and the destruction of Czechoslovakia
- The Anglo-French guarantees and attempts to construct a peace front
- The race to gain the support of the USSR
- The outbreak of war
- The spreading conflict, June 1940 to June 1941

Key dates

1938	March 12	German occupation of Austria (<i>Anschluss</i>)
	May 20–22	Rumours that Germany was about to invade Czechoslovakia
	September 8	Sudeten Germans broke off negotiations with Prague
	September 15	Chamberlain visited Hitler at Berchtesgaden
	September 22–23	Chamberlain at Bad Godesberg
	September 28	Hitler accepted Mussolini's plan for four-power talks
	September 29–30	Four-Power Conference at Munich
1939	March 15	Germany occupied Bohemia and Moravia
	March 23	Lithuania handed over Memel to Germany
	March 31	Anglo-French guarantee of Poland

	April 7	Italian occupation of Albania
	April 13	Anglo-French guarantee of Greece and Romania
	April 14	Anglo-French negotiations with USSR started
	April 28	Hitler terminated Anglo-German Naval Agreement and Non-aggression Pact with Poland
	May 22	Pact of Steel signed in Berlin
	August 23	Nazi-Soviet Pact
	September 1	Germany invaded Poland
	September 3	Britain and France declared war on Germany
1940	June 10	Italy declared war on Britain and France
	June 22	Fall of France
	September 27	Tripartite Pact signed by Germany, Italy and Japan
1941	June 22	German invasion of Russia

1 | Hitler Considers his Options

By the autumn of 1937 Hitler had virtually dismantled the Europe created by the Locarno and Versailles Treaties. The Spanish Civil War (see page 150) and the Sino-Japanese War (see page 190) distracted his potential enemies, while Italy was drawing ever closer to Germany. In August 1936 he had initiated the Four-Year Plan for preparing the German economy for war by 1940. He was thus in a favourable position to consider options for a new and more aggressive phase of foreign policy.

The Hossbach Memorandum

On 5 November 1937 Hitler called a special meeting which was attended by his Commanders-in-Chief and Foreign and War Ministers. The account of the meeting was written down by Hitler's adjutant, Colonel Hossbach. Hitler told them that what he had to say was so important that it was to be regarded as 'his last will and testament'. He stressed that his overriding aim was to acquire *Lebensraum* within Europe rather than colonies in Africa, at the latest by the period 1943–5, but indicated that he would move against Czechoslovakia and Austria before this date if France were distracted either by a civil war or by hostilities with Italy.

At the **Nuremberg trials** after the war in 1946 the Allies claimed that Hossbach's memorandum showed that Hitler had drawn up a detailed timetable for war, but the historian A.J.P. Taylor was more sceptical. He argued that the meeting was not really about foreign policy but about the allocation of armaments between the German armed services. Today few historians agree

Key question
What light does the Hossbach Memorandum shed on the aims of Hitler's foreign policy?

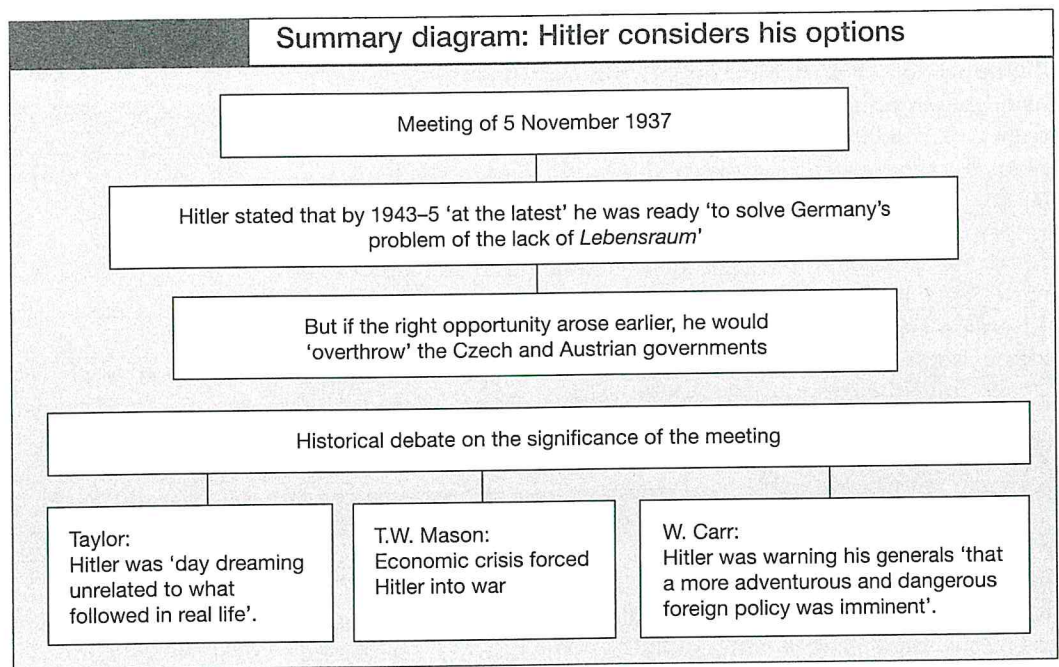
Nuremberg trials
The trials of German war criminals in Nuremberg.

Key figure

Alfred Jodl
(1890–1946)
Chief of the Operations Staff of the German Armed Forces High Command. At Nuremberg trials in 1946, sentenced to death and hanged as a war criminal.

with Taylor's conclusions that Hitler's exposition was for the most part 'day dreaming unrelated to what followed in real life' and that he was in fact 'at a loss what to do next even after he had the power to do it'. The consensus of research still favours the historian William Carr's view that Hitler was warning his generals 'that a more adventurous and dangerous foreign policy was imminent'. It was significant, for instance, that a month later **General Jodl**, the Chief of the Operations Staff, drew up plans for an offensive rather than defensive war against Czechoslovakia.

Summary diagram: Hitler considers his options



Question
What does the
document shed
on the aims of Hitler's
policy?

Key question
In what ways did the
experiences of the
First World War
influence the arms
race of the period
1936–9?

2 | The Arms Race: Britain, France and Germany 1936–9

It was not until 1935 that the scale of German rearmament became clear. Inevitably this triggered an arms race with Britain and France. Unlike in 1914, there was no calm assumption that the next war would be soon over. All three countries, learning from the First World War, expected a long struggle. Even though the tank and aeroplane had restored mobility to the battlefield, most military experts still thought in terms of First World War tactics. The French built the Maginot line, which was an enormous series of concrete fortifications along their frontier with Germany, while the Germans built the *Westwall* along the east bank of the Rhine.

An important lesson from the First World War was that the armed forces needed so much equipment that the economy and the workforce had to be totally mobilised in order to supply them.

Nuremberg trials
trials of
war
criminals in
Nuremberg.

Key term

The nation which could most efficiently supply and finance its armed forces in a long, protracted struggle would in all probability win the war. In all three countries rearmament caused major financial problems.

Germany

By 1936 Germany was already finding it difficult to finance rearmament. Hitler, however, brushed aside complaints from **Hjalmar Schacht**, his Economics Minister, and appointed **Göring** to implement the Four-Year Plan which was to prepare Germany for war by 1940. Through raising taxes, government loans and cutting consumer expenditure, military expenditure nearly quadrupled between 1937 and 1939. An ambitious programme for the production of **synthetic materials** was also started to beat the impact of a British blockade. By August 1939 the *Luftwaffe* had 4000 frontline aircraft and the strength of the army had risen to 2,758,000 men. In January 1939 Hitler also announced plans for the construction of a major battle fleet to challenge Britain.

Despite the initial target of 1940 set by the Four-Year Plan, the German rearmament programme was planned to be ready by the mid-1940s. In the meantime, as the historian Richard Overy observes, ‘Hitler pursued a policy of putting as much as possible in the “shop window” to give the impression that Germany was armed in greater depth than was in fact the case’.

The pace of German military expansion created concern in both France and Britain, which in turn both embarked on major rearmament programmes.

France and Britain

France

In France rearmament caused considerable economic and social problems. Between 1936 and 1938 the franc had to be **devalued** three times to help pay for rearmament. In November 1938 a general strike was called in Paris in protest against wage cuts and the decline in living standards caused by diverting resources to rearmament. The pace of French rearmament was slowed by the weakness of their economy, but even so military expenditure had increased six times between 1936 and 1939.

Britain

In Britain too rearmament caused considerable financial strain, which Neville Chamberlain (see page 162) feared might ‘break our backs’. Nevertheless in 1936 a Four-Year Plan for rearmament was unveiled in which priority was given to the navy and air force. A key part of the programme was the construction of a bomber striking force. The programme was accelerated when Chamberlain became Prime Minister in 1937 and increased funds were also made available for the army. Between 1936 and 1939 expenditure on armaments increased from £185.9 million to £719 million. On 22 February 1939 the government authorised aircraft production ‘to the limit’ regardless of cost.

Key question
How did Germany prepare for war 1936–9?

Hjalmar Schacht (1877–1970)
As President of the *Reichsbank* and Economics Minister he played an important part in financing German rearmament 1933–5. After disagreements about the pace of rearmament he was dismissed in 1937.

Key figure

Key question
What problems did the French and British rearmament programmes face 1936–9?

Hermann Göring (1893–1946)
Nazi leader and First World War air ace. In charge of the *Luftwaffe* and the Four-Year Plan. Committed suicide in May 1945.

Key figure

Synthetic materials
Objects imitating a natural product but made chemically.

Devalue
Reduce the value of.

Key terms

Key question
 What was the impact of the arms race on the diplomatic situation?

The impact of the arms race on the diplomatic situation

The German rearmament programme would not be completed until the mid-1940s. This would not, however, stop Hitler from waging a limited war against Czechoslovakia or Poland if he believed that Britain and France would stand aside.

The British and French programmes, on the other hand, were planned to be ready by 1939-40. Neither Britain nor France wanted war, and both were ready to seek agreement with Nazi Germany to prevent it, but if there was no option but war, then 1939-40 was the best possible date for it to occur. Beyond that date both countries would find it increasingly difficult to maintain the high level of spending that their armament programmes demanded.

Key question
 How did Germany prepare for war 1936-9?

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 (1877-1970)
 President of the Reichsbank and Economics Minister played an important part in financing German rearmament 1933-5. After disagreements about the pace of rearmament he was dismissed in 1937.

Key figure

Key question
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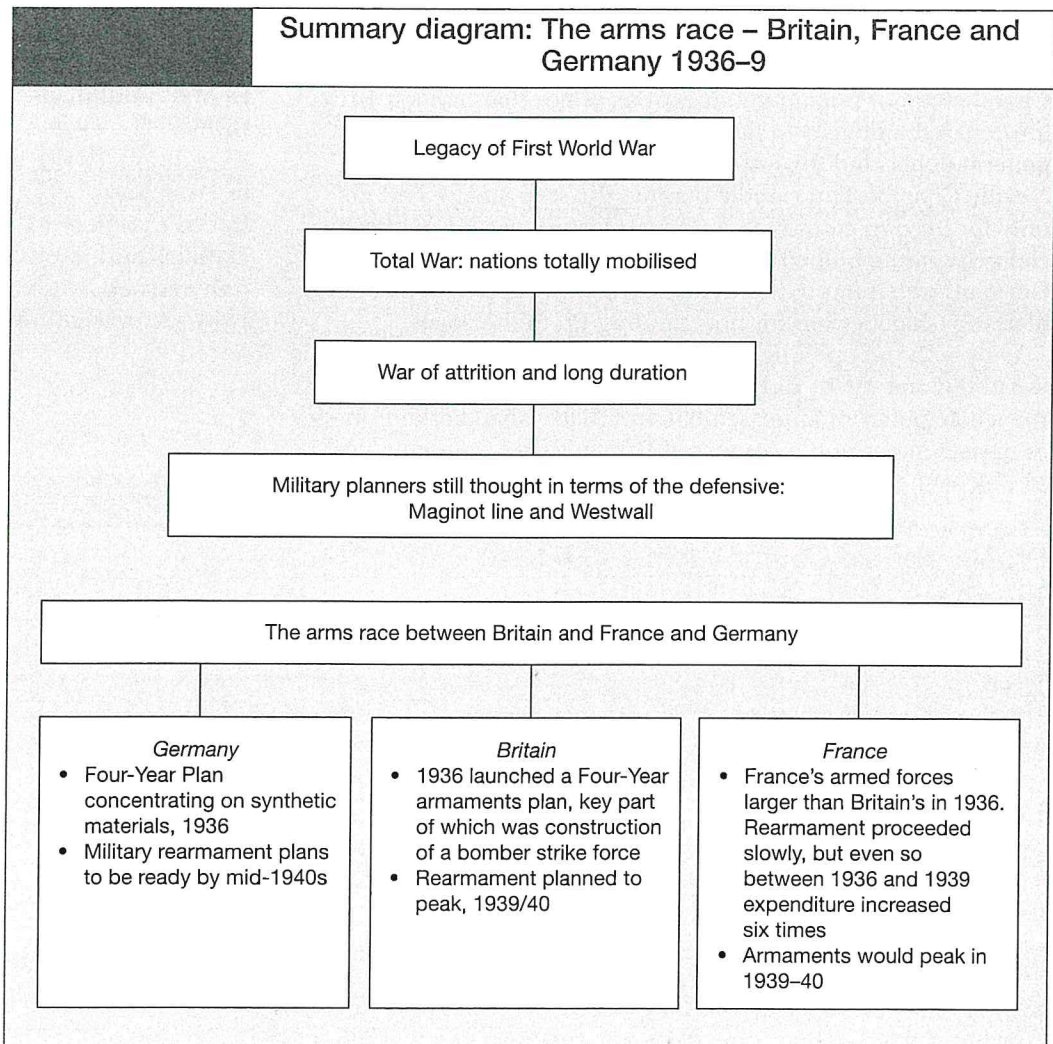
Ernst Göring
 (1893-1946)
 Nazi leader and World War air commander. In charge of Luftwaffe and Four-Year Plan. Committed suicide May 1945.

Key figure

Artificially produced synthetic materials
 Objects imitating a natural product but made chemically.

Key terms

Summary diagram: The arms race – Britain, France and Germany 1936-9



3 | Britain, France and Appeasement

Appeasement: the historical debate

Essentially appeasement was a realistic policy for the rulers of the large and vulnerable British Empire. It was based on the assumption that a willingness to compromise would avert conflict and protect the essential interests of the empire (see page 8). With Hitler, however, it completely failed to achieve any lasting settlement and appeared in retrospect to be a cowardly policy of surrender.

In the first 20 years after the defeat of Hitler, historians on both the right and left scornfully dismissed Chamberlain's appeasement policy. They were heavily influenced not only by Winston Churchill's memoirs, but also by a brilliant pamphlet, *Guilty Men*, which was written by three left-wing journalists, including Michael Foot, later a leader of the Labour Party. It was published in July 1940, just a few weeks after the fall of France and the evacuations from **Dunkirk**. It bitterly accused Chamberlain of pursuing a disastrous policy that had left Britain unprepared militarily to face the dictators. In the eyes of the general public and for historians on both the left and right, Neville Chamberlain rapidly became the scapegoat – and not only for his own countrymen. French historians and politicians claimed that he bullied them into appeasement, while some Germans were tempted to excuse their own support for Hitler by blaming Chamberlain for not standing up to the Nazis.

Only with the opening up of the British and French archives in the 1960s and 1970s did it gradually become possible to reassess the whole policy of appeasement and place Chamberlain's policy of appeasement in the context of Britain's slow economic decline as well as the global challenges facing the British Empire.

Key questions

Why and how did Chamberlain launch a policy of appeasement in the autumn of 1937?

What are the historical arguments about appeasement?

Dunkirk

In May 1940 the British Expeditionary Force in France was forced to retreat to Dunkirk and was only rescued by a risky sea evacuation.

Key term

Profile: Neville Chamberlain 1869–1940

- 1915–18 – Lord Mayor of Birmingham
- 1918 – Entered parliament
- 1923–9 – Minister of Health
- 1931–7 – Chancellor of the Exchequer
- 1939–40 – Prime Minister
- 1940 – Died

Chamberlain was an energetic politician, who had been a very successful Minister of Health and Chancellor of the Exchequer. When he became Prime Minister he was determined to solve the German problem and avoid plunging Europe into war. He took control of British foreign policy and marginalised the Foreign Office. He believed that he would be able to come to an agreement by a direct man-to-man discussion with Hitler. He was convinced that German grievances could be met through a policy of appeasement. Even though he reluctantly realised that war was probable after Hitler's seizure of Bohemia in March 1939, he never completely abandoned appeasement.

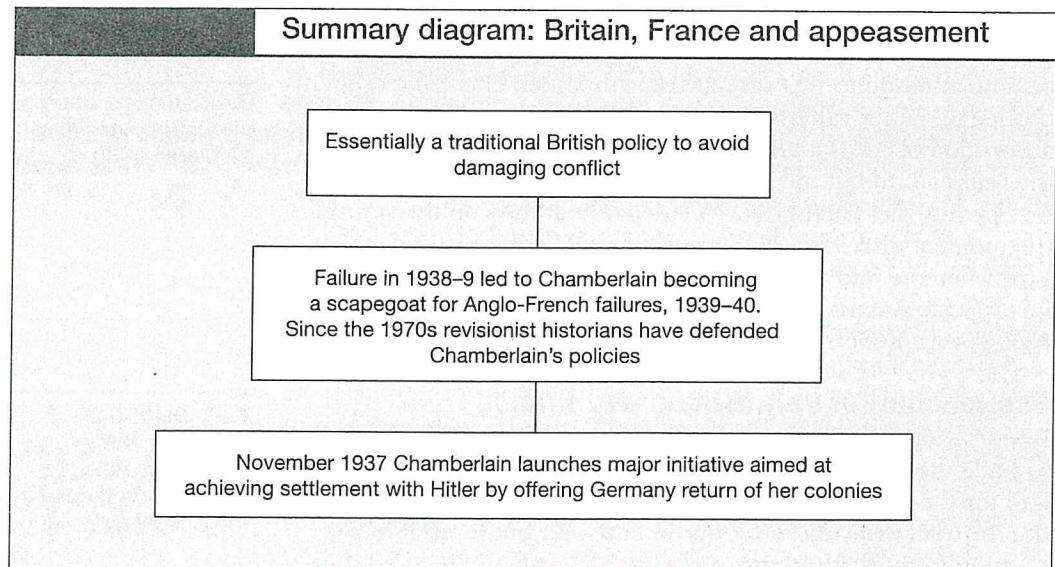
R.P. Shay, in his study of British rearmament in the 1930s, argues that Chamberlain had to maintain a balance between rearming and balancing the budget, so that if war came Britain would have enough money to buy vital materials and equipment from the USA. By the end of the 1980s revisionist historians were arguing that Chamberlain's policy was essentially determined by Britain's economic weakness and that he had no other option but to attempt to appease Germany, if the Empire was to be preserved. John Charmley even argued that Churchill was the real 'guilty man' by fighting a war that could only end in the dissolution of the Empire and bankruptcy. This revisionist line was, however, strongly challenged by R.A.C. Parker who insisted that 'after the *Anschluss* [see page 164] in March 1938 Chamberlain could ... have secured sufficient support in Britain for a close alliance with France, and a policy of containing and encircling Germany, more or less shrouded under the League of Nations covenant'.

Key question
 What did Chamberlain hope that his appeasement policies would achieve?

Chamberlain and appeasement

In the autumn of 1937 Chamberlain launched a major initiative aimed at achieving a settlement with Hitler. He hoped to divert German expansion in eastern Europe by offering Germany colonies in Africa. In late November an Anglo-French summit was held in London where this policy was more fully explored. Chamberlain won over the French to this policy and by March 1938 he was ready to negotiate a package of colonial concessions with Berlin, but the gathering pace of German expansion signalled first by the *Anschluss* and then by the destruction of Czechoslovakia made this approach irrelevant.

Summary diagram: Britain, France and appeasement



Questions
 How did Chamberlain launch a
 rearmament in the
 early 1930s?
 What were the
 arguments
 for appeasement?

Key term

1937 the
 rearmament
 was
 a result of
 the
 evacuation.

4 | The *Anschluss* and the Destruction of Czechoslovakia

In November 1937 Hitler had outlined a possible scenario involving civil war in France or a Franco-Italian war (see page 158), which would enable him to annex Austria and dismember Czechoslovakia without fear of international intervention. He was able to achieve these aims in 1938–9, even though the circumstances that he had predicted never in fact came about. Both the *Anschluss*, and the eventual destruction of Czechoslovakia do indeed show Hitler's ability to adapt his tactics to the prevailing circumstances while steadily pursuing his overall aims.

The *Anschluss*

The annexation of Austria had long been a key aim of Nazi foreign policy, but Hitler did not plan the actual events that enabled him to achieve it. The crisis was ultimately triggered when **Schuschnigg**, the Austrian Chancellor, alarmed by the activities of the Austrian Nazis, requested an interview with Hitler. Hitler welcomed the chance to achieve an easy diplomatic success by imposing on Schuschnigg an agreement which would not only have subordinated Austrian foreign policy to Berlin but also have given the Austrian Nazi Party complete freedom. However, Schuschnigg then decided unexpectedly to regain some room for manoeuvre by asking his countrymen to vote in a referendum, which he planned to hold on Sunday 14 March, for a 'free and German, independent and social, Christian and united Austria'.

The German army occupies Austria

The immediate danger for the German government was that if Schuschnigg's appeal was endorsed by a large majority, he would be able to renounce his agreement with Hitler. Confronted by this challenge, Hitler rapidly dropped his policy of gradual absorption of Austria and not only forced Schuschnigg to cancel the referendum but on 12 March ordered the German army to occupy Austria. Then Hitler decided, apparently on the spur of the moment after a highly successful visit to the Austrian city of Linz where he had attended secondary school as a boy, to incorporate Austria into the *Reich* rather than install a satellite Nazi government in Vienna.

The reaction of Italy, Britain and France

Besides violating the Treaty of Versailles, which specifically forbade the union of Germany and Austria (see page 96), Hitler had for the first time invaded an independent state, even though the Austrian army did not oppose him, and put himself in a position from which to threaten Czechoslovakia. Why then did this not bring about a repetition of the Stresa Front that was briefly formed in 1934 against German aggression (see page 139)? Although Chamberlain was in contact with the Italian government, and in April concluded an agreement aimed at

Key question

What did Hitler initially hope to achieve in his talks with Schuschnigg?

Kurt von Schuschnigg (1897–1977)

Chancellor of Austria 1934–8. He was imprisoned by the Nazis after the *Anschluss*.

Key figure

Key question

Why did Hitler decide to invade Austria?

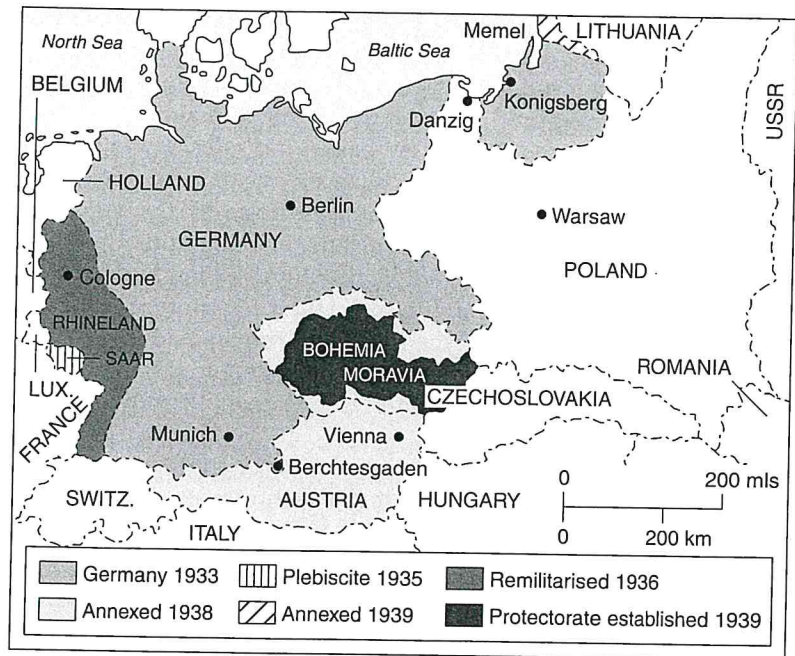
German occupation of Austria (*Anschluss*): 12 March 1938

Key date

Key question

What was the reaction of Italy, Britain and France to the *Anschluss*?

Central Europe showing German expansion from 1935 to August 1939.



lowering the tension in the Mediterranean, essentially Mussolini had decided as long ago as 1936 that Austria was a German sphere of interest. Not surprisingly therefore, on 11 March, he backed Hitler's decision to invade Austria. Both Britain and France protested to Berlin but neither had any intention of going to war over Austria. Indeed, the French were paralysed by an internal political crisis caused by the resignation of **Camille Chautemps'** ministry, and between 10 and 13 March did not even have a government.

The initial reaction of the British government was to hope that the storm would blow over and that talks could resume with Berlin on a package of possible colonial concessions (see page 163), which had already been handed to the German government on 3 March. These concessions were, after all, aimed at distracting Berlin from pursuing its ambitions in central Europe. Whether Chamberlain really believed that Hitler could be bought off is hard to say. Privately he wrote that 'it was now clear' that force was the only argument that Germany understood, but publicly he was not yet ready to draw the logical conclusion from this and confront Hitler. Was he gaining time for his country to rearm or was he seriously giving peace one more chance?

Key figure
Camille Chautemps
 (1885-1963)
 Served in several French governments and was Prime Minister three times.

Key question
 What did Hitler hope to achieve by exploiting the nationalism of the Sudeten Germans?

The Sudeten crisis

The annexation of Austria with the minimum of international protest greatly increased the vulnerability of Czechoslovakia to Nazi pressure, as it was now surrounded on three sides by German territory. Hitler had long regarded Czechoslovakia, with its alliances with both France and Russia, as a strategic threat to Germany which would eventually have to be eliminated. It is

Question
 Hitler initially
 achieve in his
 1933?

Key figure

1937-8. He
 1934-8. He
 1934-8. He
 1934-8. He

Question
 Hitler decide
 Austria?

Key date

occupation
 (Anschluss):
 1938

Question
 the
 Italy,
 France to
 1938?

however, arguable that in April 1938 Hitler was by no means sure how he was to carry out this aim. He certainly played with the idea of launching a sudden attack on Czechoslovakia if a major crisis were to be triggered, for instance by the assassination of the German ambassador in Prague. An easier and safer way to bring about the disintegration of Czechoslovakia was to inflame the nationalism of the **Sudeten Germans**. Czechoslovakia was a fragile state undermined by an ethnically divided population. Its unity was particularly threatened by the three million Sudeten Germans and the two million Slovaks. Hitler therefore specifically instructed **Konrad Henlein**, the Sudeten German leader, to keep making demands for concessions which the Prague government could not possibly grant if it wanted to preserve the unity of Czechoslovakia.

In the aftermath of the *Anschluss* both Britain and France were acutely aware of the growing threat to Czechoslovakia. Britain was unwilling to guarantee Czechoslovakia and yet realised that it might well not be able to stand aloof from the consequences of a German attack on it. Chamberlain told the Commons on 24 March that if fighting occurred:

it would be well within the bounds of possibility that other countries, besides those which were parties to the original dispute, would almost immediately become involved. This is especially true in the case of two countries like Great Britain and France, with long associations of friendship, with interests closely interwoven, devoted to the same ideals of democratic liberty and determined to uphold them.

The French, unlike the British, were pledged by two treaties signed in 1924 and 1925 to consult and assist Czechoslovakia in the event of a threat to their common interests (see page 118). In reality the French were in no position to help the Czechs. The Chief of the French Air Staff, who was in charge of operational planning, made no secret of his fears that the French air force would be wiped out within 15 days after the outbreak of war with Germany. The French government was therefore ready to follow the British lead in seeking a way of defusing the Sudeten crisis before it could lead to war.

The May crisis

The urgency of this was underlined by the war scare of the weekend of 20–21 May 1938, when the Czech government suddenly partially mobilised its army in response to false rumours that a German attack was imminent. Hitler, warned by both Britain and France of the dangerous consequences of any military action, rapidly proclaimed the absence of any mobilisation plans. Yet far from making Hitler more reasonable, this incident appears to have had the opposite effect, as he immediately stepped up military preparations for an invasion and set 1 October as a deadline for ‘smashing Czechoslovakia’. Taylor sees this as bluff and argues that ‘Hitler did not need to act. Others would do his

Sudeten Germans

Ethnic Germans who had been settled in the Sudetenland since the thirteenth century.

Key term

Konrad Henlein (1898–1945)

Leader of the Sudeten German Nazis and later Nazi *Gauleiter* of the Sudetenland.

Key figure

Rumours that Germany was about to invade Czechoslovakia: 20–22 May 1938

Sudeten Germans broke off negotiations with Prague: 8 September 1938

Key dates

Key question

What was the significance of the May crisis?

work for him.' There were certainly, as we have seen, powerful forces working for the disintegration of the Czech state, but most historians do not dismiss Hitler's plans so lightly. It is more likely that he was just keeping his options open, as Bullock argues, to the 'very last possible moment'.

Meanwhile, France and Britain were redoubling their efforts to find a peaceful solution. The Anglo-French peace strategy aimed to put pressure on both the Czechs and the Sudeten Germans to make concessions, while continuing to warn Hitler of the dangers of a general war. In early September, **Beneš**, the Czech Prime Minister, responded to this pressure by granting almost all Henlein's demands. As this threatened the justification for Hitler's campaign against Czechoslovakia, Hitler immediately instructed Henlein to provoke a series of incidents which would enable him to break off the talks with Beneš.

Chamberlain intervenes

On 12 September 1938 Hitler's campaign moved into a new phase when, in a speech at the Nuremberg rally, he violently attacked the Czechs and assured the Sudetens of his support. Both Britain and France desperately attempted to avoid war. **Daladier**, the French Prime Minister, suggested that he and Chamberlain should meet Hitler, but Chamberlain seized the initiative and flew to see Hitler on 15 September at Berchtesgaden. There he agreed, subject to consultation with the French, that Czechoslovakia should cede to Germany all areas which contained a German population of 50 per cent or over. This would be supervised by an international commission. Hitler also demanded that Czechoslovakia should renounce its pact with Soviet Russia. When Chamberlain again met Hitler at Bad Godesberg on 22 September, after winning French backing for his plan, Hitler demanded that the German occupation of the Sudetenland should be speeded up so that it would be completed by 28 September. Nor was it to be supervised by any international commission. Why Hitler should suddenly have changed his mind has puzzled historians. Taylor argued that Hitler was anxious to avoid accepting Chamberlain's plan in the hope that the Hungarians and Poles would formulate their own demands for Czechoslovakian territory and that he would then be able to move in and occupy the whole state under the pretext of being 'a peacemaker creating a new order'. On the other hand it is possible that Hitler had no such elaborate plan in mind and merely wanted to eliminate Czechoslovakia once and for all through war. At this stage Chamberlain's peace initiative seemed to have failed. France and Britain reluctantly began to mobilise, although both powers still continued to seek a negotiated settlement.

Key figure
Edvard Beneš
 (1884-1948)
 A leader of the Czechoslovak independence movement before 1918, then Minister of Foreign Affairs and President 1935-8 and 1945-8.

Key question
 Why did it appear that Chamberlain's peace initiative had failed after the Bad Godesberg meeting of 22-23 September 1938?

Key dates
 Chamberlain visited Hitler at Berchtesgaden: 15 September 1938
 Chamberlain at Bad Godesberg: 22-23 September 1938

Key figure
Édouard Daladier
 (1884-1970)
 A radical French politician and Prime Minister 1938-41.

Key term
Sudeten Germans
 Ethnic Germans who had been settled in the Sudetenland since the nineteenth century.

Key figure
Konrad Henlein
 (1898-1945)
 Leader of the Sudeten German Party and later *Gauleiter* of the Sudetenland.

Key dates
 ... that ... was about ...
 ... Slovakia: ... May 1938
 ... Germans ... negotiations ...
 ... 1938

Key question
 ... as the ...
 ... of the ...
 ... ?

The Munich Agreement

In retrospect it is often argued that the French and British should have gone to war and called Hitler's bluff. Chamberlain's critics particularly stress that Russia was ready to come to the help of Czechoslovakia, but at the time offers of Russian help seemed to the British, French and even the Czechs to be unconvincing. As neither Poland nor Romania would allow Russian troops through their territory, how could they help Czechoslovakia? It is thus not surprising that Chamberlain and Daladier warmly welcomed Mussolini's last-minute proposal on 28 September for a four-power conference in Munich.

The next day, under pressure from his generals and from Mussolini, who both dreaded a premature war, Hitler reluctantly agreed to delay the occupation of the Sudetenland until 10 October and to allow an international commission to map the boundary line. He also consented, together with Britain, France and Italy, to guarantee what remained of the independence of Czechoslovakia and signed a declaration which affirmed the desire of Britain and Germany 'never to go to war with one another again'. This was supplemented by a similar declaration signed by Ribbentrop, Hitler's Foreign Minister, in Paris in December.

It is too simple to call Munich a triumph for Hitler. He had, it is true, secured the Sudetenland, but arguably he had been cheated of his real aim, the destruction of Czechoslovakia, which apparently was now about to be protected by an international guarantee. Germany seemed to be in danger of being enmeshed in just the sort of international agreement Hitler had always hoped to avoid. However, even the most revisionist of historians would be hard put to call Munich a great victory for Chamberlain. Arguably he did buy more time for rearmament, but to the outside world Munich seemed to be a major defeat for Britain and France. The British ambassador in Tokyo reported that 'the Japanese reaction ... is that we are prepared to put up with almost any indignity rather than fight. The result is that, all in all, our prestige is at a low ebb in the East ...'

The destruction of Czechoslovakia

The argument that Hitler merely responded to events is hard to sustain when his foreign policy from October 1938 to March 1939 is analysed. His main priority remained the destruction of Czechoslovakia. On 21 October 1938 the German army was ordered to draw up fresh plans for military action. Simultaneously Hitler dangled the bait of territorial gains at the expense of the Czechs in front of the Hungarians, Poles and Romanians in order to enlist their support. German agents were also sent into Slovakia to fuel agitation against Prague. In practice Britain and France were already beginning to recognise Czechoslovakia as a German sphere of influence. The German representatives were allowed to dominate the international commission that was to map out the new frontiers after the secession of the Sudetenland

← **Key question**
Was the Munich Agreement a triumph for Hitler?

Hitler accepted Mussolini's plan for four-power talks: 28 September 1938

Four-Power Conference at Munich: 29–30 September 1938

Key dates

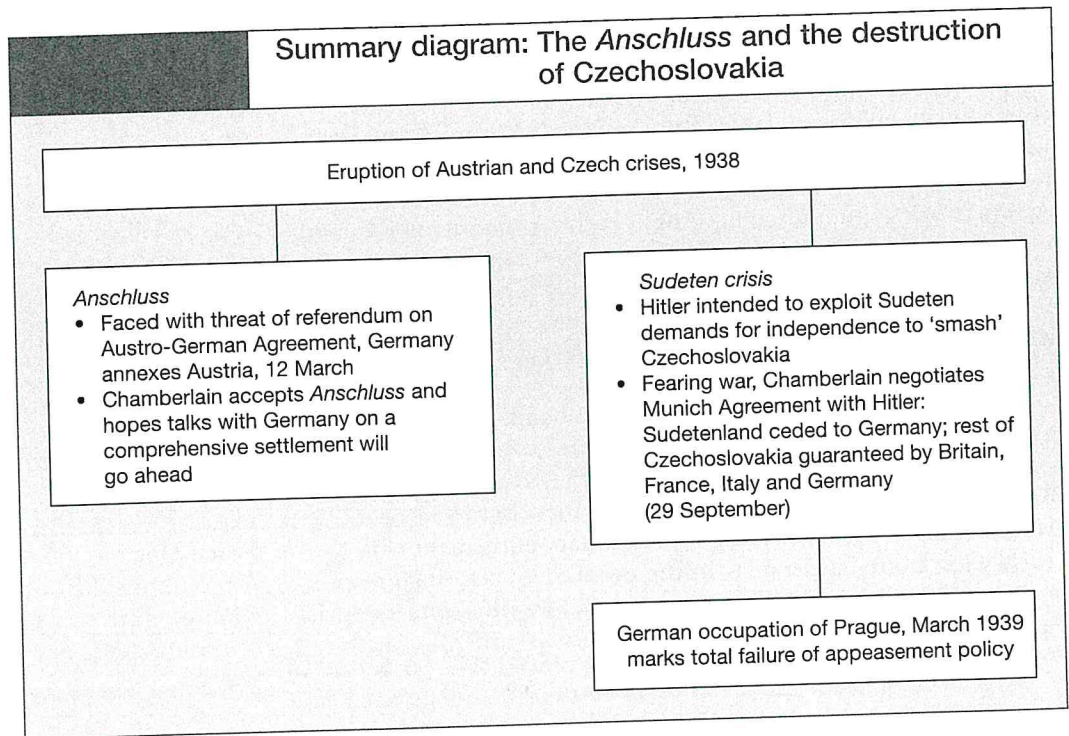
← **Key question**
Why was Hitler allowed by Britain and France to destroy Czechoslovakia?

and neither power protested when Germany refused to participate in finalising the terms of the joint guarantee of Czechoslovakia in February 1939.

On 6 March 1939 the Germans were given the opportunity finally to dismember Czechoslovakia. When the Czechs suddenly moved troops into Slovakia to crush local demands for independence, which the Nazis of course had helped to stir up, Hitler persuaded the Slovaks to appeal to Berlin for assistance. On 14 March 1939 the Czech President, Emil Hácha, was ordered to travel to Berlin where he was ruthlessly bullied into resigning the fate of his country into 'the hands of the *Führer*'. The next day German troops occupied Prague, and Slovakia was turned into a German protectorate. This action was to precipitate a major diplomatic revolution in Europe.

Key date
Germany occupied Bohemia and Moravia: 15 March 1939

Summary diagram: The *Anschluss* and the destruction of Czechoslovakia



Key question
Why did Britain and France guarantee Poland, Greece and Romania?

5 | The Anglo-French Guarantees and Attempts to Construct a Peace Front

In 1925 the British Foreign Minister had declared that the defence of the Polish corridor was not worth the bones of one British grenadier (see page 112), yet on 31 March 1939 Britain broke decisively with its traditional foreign policy of avoiding a Continental commitment, and, together with France, guaranteed Poland against a German attack. In many ways it appeared a foolhardy and contradictory gesture as both Britain and France lacked the military power to defend Poland and had already tacitly written off eastern Europe as a German sphere of

Question
The Munich Agreement a triumph or a disaster?

accepted Chamberlain's plan for power talks: September 1938
Power conference at Munich: 29-30 September 1938

Key dates

Question
Why did Hitler demand the Sudetenland by Britain and France to destroy Czechoslovakia?

influence. What caused this U-turn was the speed and brutality of the German occupation of the Czech province of Bohemia, which clearly indicated that Hitler could no longer be trusted to respect treaties and guarantees. It is also important to stress that, in the spring of 1939, the French economy and with it French self-confidence had made a strong recovery. Thus a tougher policy towards Hitler increasingly appeared to the French government to be a realistic option.

Britain was initially stampeded into this revolutionary new policy by panic-stricken rumours on 17 March that Hitler was about to occupy Romania and seize the oil wells there. Access to these would greatly strengthen the German war industry and enable it to survive any future British naval blockade. At first Britain aimed to contain Germany by negotiating a four-power pact with France, Russia and Poland, but given the intense suspicion with which Russia was viewed by Poland and the other eastern European states this was not a practical policy. Yet when Hitler went on to force Lithuania to hand back the former German city of Memel to the *Reich* on 23 March, it became even more vital to deter Hitler by any means possible. Thus, Chamberlain and Daladier had little option but to announce on 31 March 1939 an immediate Anglo-French guarantee of Poland against external attack. The Polish guarantee was, however, seen as merely the first step towards constructing a comprehensive security system in eastern Europe. Chamberlain hoped to buttress it with a series of interlocking security pacts with other eastern European and Baltic states.

When, on 7 April, Mussolini invaded Albania a similar wave of panic among the eastern Mediterranean states galvanised Britain and France to guarantee both Greece and Romania. In May, Britain considerably strengthened its position in the eastern Mediterranean by negotiating a preliminary agreement with Turkey for mutual assistance 'in the event of an act of aggression leading to war in the Mediterranean area'. By July both Bulgaria and Yugoslavia were beginning to gravitate towards the Anglo-French 'peace bloc'.

The German reaction to the British guarantee

In October 1938, and then again in January and March 1939, Hitler unsuccessfully sounded out the Poles about the return of Danzig, the construction of a road and rail link through the corridor and about joining the Anti-Comintern Pact. In return the Poles were offered the eventual prospect of acquiring land in the Ukraine. Essentially Hitler wanted to turn Poland into a reliable satellite, but given the fate of Czechoslovakia it was precisely this status that the Poles finally rejected in March 1939. The Anglo-French guarantee of Poland, far from deterring Hitler, convinced him that Poland would have to be eliminated, even if this meant war with Britain and France. On 23 May Hitler told his generals:

Lithuania handed over Memel to Germany: 23 March 1939

Anglo-French guarantee of Poland: 31 March 1939

Italian occupation of Albania: 7 April 1939

Anglo-French guarantee of Greece and Romania: 13 April 1939

Hitler terminated Anglo-German Naval Agreement and Non-Aggression Pact with Poland: 28 April 1939

Key dates

Peace bloc

A group of states committed to opposing aggressor powers.

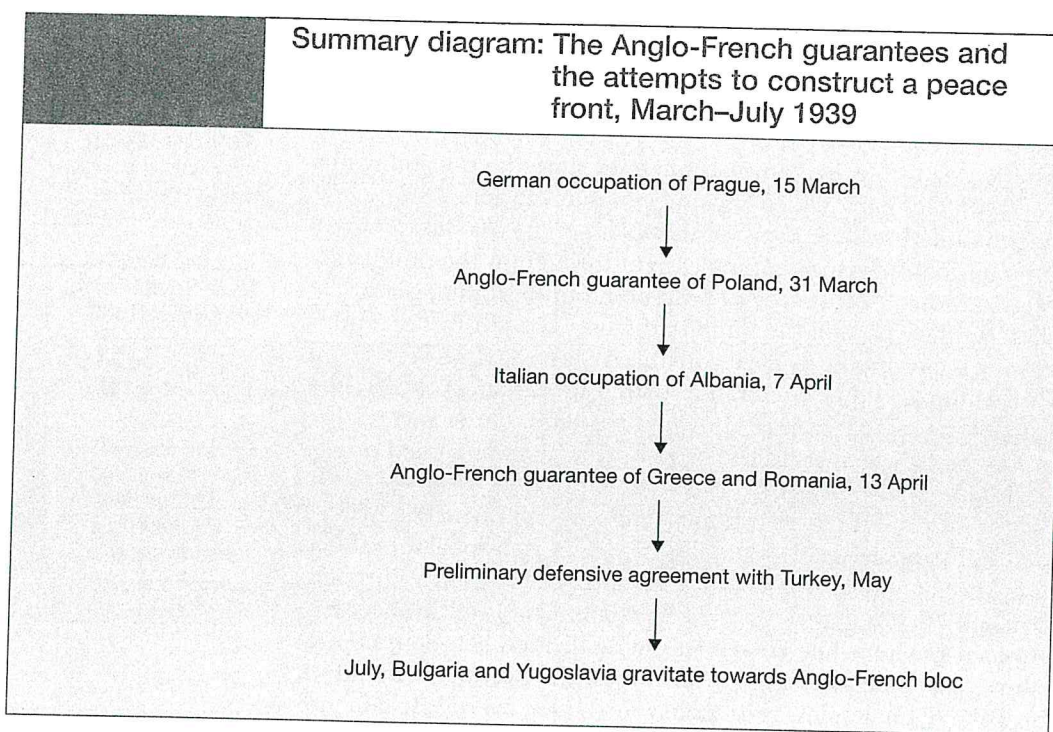
Key term

Key question

Why did Hitler decide that Poland had to be destroyed?

Poland will always be on the side of our adversaries ... Danzig is not the objective. It is a matter of expanding our living space in the east ... We cannot expect a repetition of Czechoslovakia. There will be fighting. The task is to isolate Poland ... Basic principle: conflict with Poland, beginning with the attack on Poland, will be successful only if the West keeps out. If that is impossible, then it is better to attack the West and finish off Poland at the same time. It will be a task of dexterous diplomacy to isolate Poland ...

Summary diagram: The Anglo-French guarantees and the attempts to construct a peace front, March-July 1939



Key dates

Poland handed over to Germany: 1 March 1939
 Anglo-French guarantee of Poland: 31 March 1939
 German occupation of Czechoslovakia: 15 March 1939
 Anglo-French guarantee of Greece and Romania: 13 April 1939
 German ultimatum to Poland terminated: 28 April 1939

Key term

Peace bloc
 group of states committed to opposing aggressor powers.

Key question
 Why did Hitler decide to attack Poland to be destroyed?

Key questions

Why did Britain, France and Germany begin negotiations with the USSR in the summer of 1939?

Why did Germany want an alliance with the Soviet Union?

Key date

Anglo-French negotiations with USSR started: 14 April 1939

6 | The Race to Gain the Support of the USSR

Origins of the Nazi-Soviet Pact

Once war against Poland seemed inevitable, it made good sense for Hitler to ensure the support or at least neutrality of the USSR. As soon as victory was assured over Poland and the Western democracies, Soviet Russia could in due course be dealt with. Britain and France also needed a pact with Russia to build up their 'peace front'. Stalin was now in the enviable position of being able to play off Hitler against Chamberlain and Daladier.

Protracted negotiations between Russia, Britain and France began in April 1939, but both sides deeply mistrusted each other. Stalin's demand that Russia should have the right militarily to intervene in the affairs of the small states on its western borders if they were threatened with internal subversion by the Nazis, as Austria and Czechoslovakia had been in 1938, was rejected outright by the British. They feared that the Russians would use

the threat of Nazi indirect aggression as an excuse to seize the territories for themselves. Stalin, on the other hand, was equally suspicious that the democracies were attempting to manoeuvre the Russians into a position where they would have to do most of the fighting against Germany. The British delegate, William Strang (1893–1978), reported:

... if we do not trust them, they equally do not trust us. They are not, fundamentally, a friendly power; but they, like us, are driven to this course by force of necessity. If we are of two minds about the wisdom of what we are doing, so are they.

The Nazi–Soviet Pact

The Russians thus had ample time to explore the possibility of a pact with Germany, which became genuinely interested in negotiations once the decision was taken on 23 May to prepare for war against Poland. Right through to the middle of August Moscow continued to keep both options open, but by then the slow pace of the military discussions with Britain and France seems finally to have convinced Stalin that an agreement with Hitler would be preferable. With only days to go before the start of the military campaign against Poland, Hitler was ready to accept Stalin's terms and the Nazi–Soviet Pact was signed on 23 August.

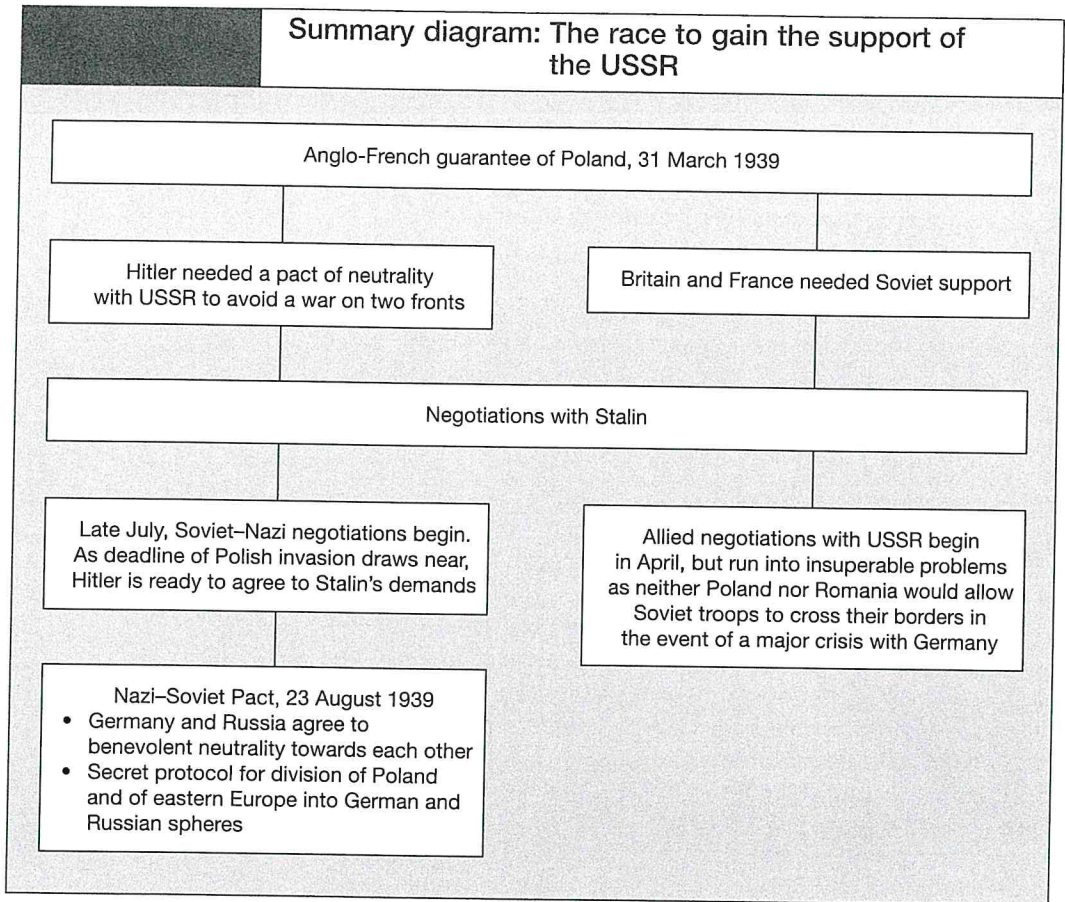
Not only did the pact commit both powers to benevolent neutrality towards each other, but in a secret protocol it outlined the German and Russian spheres of interest in eastern Europe: the Baltic states and Bessarabia in Romania fell within the Russian sphere, while Poland was to be divided between the two. Above all, by neutralising Soviet Russia, the pact made an attack on Poland a much less risky policy for Hitler, even if Britain and France did try to come to its rescue.

Given the deep and often justified suspicions of Soviet Russia in Britain, France and the eastern European states, the Nazi–Soviet Pact was the most likely outcome from the tangle of negotiations that took place in the summer of 1939. It did, however, make a German attack on Poland almost inevitable.

← Key question
Why was the
Nazi–Soviet Pact
signed?

Nazi–Soviet Pact:
23 August 1939

Key date



Key question
What signs were there that appeasement was not yet dead?

7 | The Outbreak of War

On 22 August 1939, on the eve of the signature of the Nazi-Soviet Pact, Hitler boasted that:

Key term
Autarchy
Economic self-sufficiency.

To be sure a new situation has arisen. I experienced those poor worms, Daladier and Chamberlain, in Munich. They will be too cowardly to attack. They won't go beyond a blockade. Against that we have **autarchy** and the Russian raw materials. Poland will be depopulated and settled with Germans. My pact with the Poles was merely conceived of as a gaining of time ... After Stalin's death – he is a very sick man – we will break the Soviet Union. Then there will begin the dawn of German rule of the earth.

Key date
Pact of Steel signed in Berlin: 22 May 1939

The omens did indeed look good for Hitler. Although he had failed to convert the Anti-Comintern Pact (see page 152) into a military alliance against Britain and France, he had in May concluded the Pact of Steel with Italy by which Mussolini rashly agreed to support Germany militarily. Privately Mussolini had been assured that Hitler had no intention of going to war for at least three years!

9 | The Key Debate

What were the causes of the Second World War?

Was the Second World War inevitable? Was it essentially a continuation of the First World War or an entirely different conflict which competent diplomacy could have prevented? In 1918 the Germans were defeated but not destroyed. Germany still remained potentially strong and ultimately capable of making a second attempt at dominating Europe. In that sense the Treaty of Versailles, which humiliated but did not permanently weaken Germany, could well be seen as the 'seed bed' of the Second World War. Arguably, the chain of crises that started with the German remilitarisation of the Rhineland and ended in the German attack on Poland owed its origins to the Versailles settlement. Does it therefore follow that Versailles made the Second World War inevitable?

Stresemann, Briand and Austen Chamberlain appeared for a time to be able to make the settlement work after modifying the reparation clauses. Nevertheless, it was clear that a revived Germany would still demand its drastic revision, as indeed Stresemann was already beginning to do by the late 1920s. In that sense, there was a natural continuity of aims between the Weimar Republic and the Third Reich. Yet despite Taylor's attempts to portray Hitler as a normal politician, his coming to power in January 1933, which was made possible by the catastrophe of the Great Depression, did make a crucial difference. He gave a new and powerful impetus not only to German revisionism but to German demands for *Lebensraum* in eastern Europe based on the doctrine of racial superiority. It was this that prompted him to invade Russia in 1941 leaving an undefeated Britain supplied by the USA on his other front.

To a certain extent the horrendous figure of Adolf Hitler obscures the fact that the British and French governments went to war to maintain their position as great powers rather than to wage a crusade against the evil force of Nazism. There is no doubt that Hitler's successes in eastern Europe in 1938–9 did threaten to destabilise the whole continent. After the German occupation of Bohemia, the British and French governments believed that they had no choice but to oppose Hitler if they wished to maintain any influence in Europe. Of course, they still kept the door open to negotiations, and pursued the increasingly vain hope of a general settlement with Germany, but essentially Britain and France were ready to risk war in 1939. Indeed the British Treasury was beginning to argue that Britain's financial position would decline after 1939, and that if war had to come, it was preferable sooner rather than later. In France, Daladier had steadied the economy and the aeronautical industry was rapidly expanding in early 1939.

It does seem, therefore, that Britain and France went to war in 1939, as they did in 1914, to contain Germany and safeguard their own Great Power status. Arguably, then it was a continuation of the same struggle, even though Italy and Japan were later to join Germany, and the USSR only became an ally of Britain after the German invasion of June 1941. As in 1917, the USA again became Britain's key ally, but only entered the war as a result of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in December 1941 (see page 194).

Some key books in the debate

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