

CHAPTER ONE

How a Second World War Happened

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As a prisoner of war in December 1945, German Field Marshal Ritter von Leeb mused in his diary about the lessons of the Second World War on the way Germany should prepare for and conduct World War III that he evidently assumed Germany would fight against essentially the same enemies as in the conflict that had just ended (Meyer 1976, p. 80). The record of Germany since 1945, whether in two states or as one, suggests that this anticipation was not widely shared. There was concern about the Cold War possibly turning into open conflict, but the idea of Germany once again taking on France, England, Poland, the Soviet Union, and the United States proved limited to a minority so tiny that it would have been hard to find. After the First World War, however, the idea of another war was by no means so inconceivable to a considerable number of Germans as one might have expected after the enormous casualties and costs of that war. How did that come to be?

In order to try to understand the origins of the Second World War, it would be best first to define the war that carries that name. The conflict between Japan and China that Japan initiated in 1931 by occupying the Chinese territory of Manchuria and that broke into open conflict in July 1937 needs to be seen as a local conflict in a series initiated by Japan in 1894 against China and in 1904 against Russia. It is true that in 1941 Japan joined the war Germany had begun in 1939 on the assumption that Germany would win. This was Japan's chance to profit from Germany's victory at the expense of the countries with which it had been allied in the First World War; but this action by Japan would not have occurred had not Germany started the new conflict. Similarly, the war of Italy against Abyssinia/Ethiopia in 1935–1936 has to be seen as a resumption of Italian colonial warfare conducted earlier against the same country and subsequently against the Ottoman Empire. When Italy joined the Second World War in the summer of 1940, it was also in anticipation of profiting from a German victory that appeared to be imminent. The critical point is that without the initiative of Germany there would have been no Second World War, and it is therefore the origins of that initiative that need to be examined.

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Before one examines the 1919 peace settlement's implications for future German choices, there is a critical feature of the war itself that must be mentioned. The wars of the German states against Denmark in 1864, the war of Prussia against Austria and other German states in 1866, and the war against France in 1871–1872 had all been fought on the territory of the other country. Similarly, with minimal exceptions, the First World War had seen fighting and destruction everywhere but in Germany. There was thus, and would be until well into the Second World War, the tacit assumption by most Germans that war was something that took place elsewhere. There had been, and might well be once again, privations at home, but the physical destruction of modern war was something that occurred in the cities and countryside of Germany's enemies. It would be in the Second World War that the Germans received substantial reeducation, as the terminology went at the time, on this point.

Several features of the peace settlement of 1919 at the end of the First World War require careful attention. The defeat of the Russian Empire by Germany and Austria-Hungary with the subsequent defeat of the latter powers by the Allies opened the way for the independence of a series of countries from Finland to Poland, while a Bolshevik regime triumphed after assistance from Germany in what was left of the prewar Russian Empire. The defeat of Austria-Hungary and the Ottoman Empire led, *not* as after prior wars to these empires losing pieces of territory, but in their dissolution. This in turn led to the independence of additional states in eastern Europe and to British and French control of portions of the Middle East. Whatever the merits and demerits, justice and injustice, of the boundaries of the newly independent – and in the case of Serbia greatly enlarged – states, for the first time in over a century, Russia was separated from Germany and the successor states of Austria-Hungary by a revived Poland and a tier of newly independent countries.

A second aspect of the peace settlement was that although the German Empire had been defeated it was not broken up. The newest of the European great powers, less than half a century old in 1918, was seen by the peacemakers as a basic unit in the context of a settlement based on the principle of nationality. It was obliged to return territory to several of its neighbors taken from them in the past; but with the most minimal exceptions, these had not been under German control for long. In places where there were doubts about the national affiliation of the local population, plebiscites were scheduled to be followed by the allocation of territory based on the vote.

A third aspect of enormous long-term significance that was integrally related to the national principle was the refusal of the American and British representatives at the peace conference to agree to detaching the Rhineland from Germany to secure France from future invasion by Germany. Since this decision would leave France and Belgium open to attack, the French were reassured by defensive alliance treaties with the United States and Britain in case of such an attack – the assumption or at least hope being that the existence of these treaties would discourage Germany from trying.

The fourth especially significant aspect of the peace settlement was that the United States refused to ratify it, refused to join the League of Nations created by that settlement, and refused to ratify the treaty with France that had been that country's security compensation for leaving the Rhineland with Germany. The American refusal led to a British refusal, so that the major ally most weakened by the war was deprived of either form of security against German attack.

The fifth aspect of the peace settlement was the fiercely strong negative reaction to it by Germany. This reaction was the product, primarily, of two strongly held beliefs and a failure to recognize any of the advantages of the peace treaties for Germany. One belief deliberately sponsored by the military leaders who had brought about Germany's defeat by their poor strategy, excessive territorial ambitions, and insistence on a total victory, was that Germany

had actually not been defeated at all. It had lost its chance of victory by what came to be called the stab-in-the-back by traitorous elements at home. Those elements, variously identified as socialist, communists, and Jews, had deprived Germany of the fruits of its massive exertions in the war. The other belief was the widely shared view that Poles were some east European variety of cockroach who had no ability to have and maintain a state. The very idea of returning territory to such a state, of having the nerve to ask people whether they considered themselves Poles or Germans – as if there could be any theoretical equivalence between them – looked preposterous and insulting to most Germans. The substitution for the east–west corridor through Polish territory arranged by Frederick the Great in 1772 to connect his Prussian and Brandenburg lands of a north–south corridor as had existed in prior centuries looked to most Germans as a deliberate affront to their dignity.

The advantages of the peace settlement for Germany, which most did not recognize until they were lost in the Second World War, were several. The possibility that being separated from the Soviet Union by a Poland that had its own serious disputes with that country might be a good thing occurred to few Germans until Russian forces came to Berlin in 1945. The willingness of the Allies to allow Germany to remain united similarly did not look like a good thing until 1945, any more than the limitation of occupation to a portion rather than all of the country. A German general captured in Tunisia in 1943 was overheard commenting to other captured generals in February 1945 that they would jump for joy if Germany could obtain another Treaty of Versailles (Neitzel 2007, p. 137). The recognition of reality came too late (Weinberg 1995, ch. 1).

Ironically, the man who wanted to lead Germany and obtained the opportunity to do so held and advocated a view of the peace settlement different from that of most Germans. In his speeches and his writings, Adolf Hitler always denounced those who wanted to reclaim what Germany had lost by the peace treaty as stupid “Grenzpolitiker,” border politicians, as compared to his brilliant self, the “Raumpolitiker,” the politician of space (Jäckel 1980). What Germany needed was certainly *not* the snippets of land lost by the 1919 treaty; securing their recovery would mean wars costing large numbers of lives for land that would still leave Germany without the agricultural space on which to raise the food it needed. What Germany really needed was hundreds of thousands of square kilometers of land on which to settle farm families who would grow the food Germany needed and raise the children who would provide soldiers for added conquests of land until the whole earth was occupied by the racially superior Germans. There would be a demographic revolution on the globe, and the killing of all Jews would be a central portion of that event (Heuss 1932).

Designated chancellor of Germany by President Hindenburg at the end of January 1933, Hitler quickly consolidated his powers. He explained to the country’s military leaders a few days after becoming chancellor that all democratic and pacifist trends would quickly end and that rearmament would enable the country to conquer vast lands in the east and their ruthless Germanization (Müller 2001; Weinberg 2010, pp. 23–35). Many of the military convinced themselves that he meant Polish territory, but Hitler never considered Poland as important as they did. To him, that country’s lands were always subordinate to the expected destruction of the Soviet Union, a state easier to conquer in his eyes because of the fortunate replacement of the old Germanic elite by the Bolshevik revolution that left incompetents ruling a racially inferior Slavic population. That was where the first major installment of living space for Germany would be found.

The rearmament program initiated in 1933 built on the prior secret violations of the peace treaty’s restrictions on Germany’s military but looked beyond them to the wars Hitler expected to fight. Relatively minor expansion of Germany’s armed forces would suffice for a

first war against Czechoslovakia, a campaign that before or after the annexation of Austria would solidify Germany's position in central Europe as well as provide the population and industrial basis for further expansion of the military. The major armaments expansion would be needed for the defeat of France, and by late 1934, of England (Weinberg 1995, ch. 6). It would be safe to turn east against the Soviet Union once the Western powers had been crushed, but that war required no special weapons because of the weakness of a country that Germany had defeated even before the stroke of good fortune of the Bolshevik Revolution. It was the fourth war against the United States which called for new weapons. It, too, was a weak country – the converse of belief in the stab-in-the-back legend was that America's military role in the First World War had made no difference – but the country was distant and had a large navy. If, for the war with France, one needed tanks and single-engine dive-bombers and for the war with England a substantial navy and two-engine dive-bombers, war with the United States implied an intercontinental bomber and super-battleships. Since these would take years to design and build, it is easy to understand why in 1937, when the weapons for war against France and England were getting into production, Hitler gave the directives to begin work on the ones for war against the United States.

In 1937, the American government was continuing to develop what was called "neutrality legislation," a subject that belongs into the framework of the reaction of other countries to the new regime in Germany and of the way the Germans tried to deal with those reactions. In a world that looked back with horror at the human losses and massive destruction of what was called "the Great War," the shocked reaction abroad was dealt with by the pretense that the new regime wanted only peace. To make sure that no one moved against Germany before it was ready, Hitler took steps to reassure those most alarmed. There were a nonaggression pact with Poland, a renewal of the credit agreement with the Soviet Union, and a concordat with the Vatican (Weinberg 2010, chs. 2–4). All would be broken by Germany when Hitler thought the time ripe, but in only two respects did the new regime move drastically.

At what looked like the earliest opportunity, Germany left the Disarmament Conference then in session and withdrew from the League of Nations. The idea of being on an equal status with other countries in the League, including having like any other great power a permanent seat on the League's Council, was too much to expect of a state destined to lead and control the world. As for Austria, Hitler believed that it should be annexed promptly and tried to accomplish this by economic pressure from the outside and political pressure from the Nazi Party inside the country. When this effort did not produce prompt results, he ordered a July 1934 coup in Vienna by which a Nazi stooge, Anton Rintelen, would replace Austrian Chancellor Engelbert Dollfuss, who was to be killed. Not only did the coup fail, though Dollfuss was murdered, but the attempt caused trouble with the one country that Hitler had long hoped to bring to Germany's side: Italy.

Hitler admired Benito Mussolini, the dictator of Italy, and had hoped for an alignment with Italy even before the latter's assumption of power (Pese 1955). The Italian government, however, preferred a small and weak Austria on its northern border rather than a large and strong Germany. Far from being a reversal of the lengthy struggle of Italians against Austria to attain unification, this interest in Austrian independence was caused by fear that a revived Germany might demand the southern Tyrol with its substantial German minority that Italy had acquired by the peace treaty with Austria and perhaps the port of Trieste on the Adriatic that Italy had also obtained in 1919. The breach between Italy on the one hand and Britain and France on the other – when those two opposed Mussolini's attack on Abyssinia – very voluble reassurances from Berlin about the South Tyrol, and parallel intervention on the side of Francisco Franco in the Spanish Civil War from July

1936 to April 1939 opened the way for a rapprochement between Italy and Germany, a development also hastened by Mussolini's visit to Germany in 1937 and Hitler's visit to Italy in 1938. It was Mussolini who coined the term "Axis" for this relationship after his visit to Germany. From his point of view, an alliance with Germany looked like the best and perhaps the only way to gain the imperial expansion he hoped to attain at the expense of France and England (Mallett 2003).

If this was the way Italy reacted to the new regime in Germany, how about the other major European powers? The Soviet Union altered its prior line, set by Josef Stalin, that the worst enemies of communism were the social democratic parties of central and west European countries in favor of a new line that called for a common front against fascism. In practice, however, this made little difference. The Soviet Union was in the throes of collectivization of agriculture and the first five-year plan, and hence in no position for an active foreign policy. On the contrary, Stalin made periodic efforts to make an arrangement with Nazi Germany – which were ignored by Berlin – and did what he could to appease the Japanese in the Far East. Once famine and industrialization had simultaneously reduced the rural population and shifted many of the survivors into new industries, Stalin ordered a massive purge of the military, administrative, and economic leadership, thereby weakening the country internally and reducing its already limited attractiveness as any state's prospective ally (Weinberg 2010, ch. 3).

France had been terribly weakened by the First World War. Its major effort to insist on the terms of the peace treaty by occupation of the Ruhr in 1923 had led instead to a breach with its wartime allies as the British opposed this action and the United States evacuated its zone of occupation in the Rhineland (Schuker 1976). The French government subsequently tried to develop a system of alliances with potential victims of German aggression like Poland and Czechoslovakia, and even added one with the Soviet Union to this project, but there was always a realization behind these efforts that without the support of Britain and, hopefully, also the United States, there was realistically little that could be done to restrain Germany. France itself was too weak to cope with its powerful eastern neighbor and had been exhausted by its efforts in what an excellent study has called its "Pyrrhic Victory" in 1918 (Doughty 2005). This would become dramatically evident when the possibility of a German attack on France's Czechoslovak ally became a prospect in 1938.

Great Britain had been one of the victors of the First World War, but the overwhelming desire to avoid any further commitment in Europe had several origins that combined to make for a strong determination to stay out of war. In the first place, there was the enormous human cost of the war. It was not only that hundreds of thousands had died, but that the class nature of England, with commissions in the army originally reserved for the upper classes, assured that a disproportionate percentage of the children of the ruling elite lost their lives. Herbert Asquith, the prime minister when Britain went to war, had lost a son; Andrew Bonar Law, the first postwar prime minister, had lost two sons. Those at the top of British society knew all too well what modern war was likely to mean.

There had also been a reversal of the military relationship of Britain to its empire in the First World War from prior conflicts. In earlier wars, soldiers from Britain had been sent out to defend – and hopefully add to – its colonial possessions and to cope with powers attempting to control Europe. In the First World War, this situation was reversed. Troops from the empire, especially Canada, Australia, India, and New Zealand, and to some extent from African colonies, had been needed to fight the Central Powers. If Britain were ever to become involved in a European war again, such forces would again be needed – but would they be available? This issue, it should be noted, would arise in dramatic form in the 1938 crisis over Czechoslovakia.

There was, furthermore, something of a reversal in still another facet of Britain's role in wars with European powers. Before 1914, the British had often assisted their allies with financial subsidies that helped the latter finance their war efforts. This occurred again in the First World War, but this time it had been more in the form of borrowing from the United States on behalf of allies whose credit was not good enough for massive borrowing. This meant, in effect, that when the war ended, it was Britain that owed large sums to the United States in addition to having exhausted its own accumulated savings to help finance the enormous expenses of the war.

As if this financial problem was not enough, the whole economy of the island kingdom was so dramatically affected by the exertions of the war and the loss of markets and investments abroad that the country was in something of a depression throughout the postwar years even before the Great Depression hit. Under these economic burdens, postwar Britain was anything but the "land fit for heroes" hoped for during the years of fighting (Johnson 1968).

One final factor affected the calculations of all in leadership positions in London. The fact that the First World War had developed out of a conflict between Austria-Hungary and Serbia suggested that almost any war in Europe, whatever the location and whatever the issue in controversy, might very well draw Britain in. Under these circumstances, it looked to many that the best way to avoid Britain becoming involved in another war was to try hard to keep war from starting anywhere in Europe. The origin of the concept of appeasement, of trying to settle difficulties peacefully even at substantial sacrifices, should be seen as a reflection of the belief based on the experience of 1914 that any conflict on the continent, even between countries in which Britain had no special interest, would draw in Britain regardless of the issue that had precipitated the fighting.

In the United States, the public was very much disturbed by reports of events in Germany, but the dismay over the evident turn of a people thought highly civilized toward barbarism only accentuated the desire to avoid war. The widespread disillusionment with the results of what was increasingly considered a mistaken entry into the First World War fed the effort to avoid any possibility of repetition. The so-called neutrality legislation of the 1930s might well have kept the United States out of the First World War had it been in effect in 1914; but its existence in the 1930s served to discourage France and Britain from vigorous opposition to Germany since it told them that if their policies led to war with that country, they could not count on any material or financial support from the United States. President Franklin Roosevelt kept carefully informed about developments inside Germany but recognized that the people of the country were strongly opposed to any support for prospective victims of Germany. Furthermore, both the President and the American people were aware of the fact that there were other dangers possibly looming from Japan in East Asia as that country embarked on ever more violent expansionist policies.

A major element in the situation of Britain, France, and the United States was that all had effectively disarmed after the First World War. Britain had dissolved its huge wartime army and maintained a land force about the size of that specified by the peace treaty for Germany. By the mid-1930s, much of it was committed to the mandate of Palestine acquired by Britain from the Ottoman Empire, reduced in 1922 to less than a quarter of its original size, and wracked by an Arab revolt against British rule and Jewish immigration. There was a small British air force, and the Royal Navy was restricted by a series of naval agreements. In the 1930s, there was a minimal effort at rearmament, especially in the air, but this was heavily contested. In what would be the last election before the Second World War, that of 1935, the Labour Party opposition pictured Neville Chamberlain as a warmonger for his support of a minimal program to

rebuild the country's armed forces (Shay 1977). France similarly initiated a minimal rearmament program in the 1930s, but such steps also met with substantial opposition (Kiesling 1996). It was hoped that a line of fortifications, named the Maginot Line after one of its early sponsors, would protect the country from a German invasion, but this procedure with its obvious emphasis on defense hardly inspired confidence in the smaller countries of east and southeast Europe in French willingness to come to their aid if attacked by Germany. In the United States, a small program to rebuild the navy began in the mid-1930s; but a major effort to create an air force did not start until the end of 1938, while the country waited to start putting an army together until 1940, the year it also concluded that facing dangers from across both the Atlantic and the Pacific Oceans, it actually needed a "Two-Ocean Navy."

It was in this context of major powers unwilling and unprepared to respond forcefully to Germany's openly breaking what remained of the peace settlement's restrictions that the Nazi regime moved forward. In order to fool the British government into postponing any serious rebuilding of its navy, Hitler had his favorite diplomat, Joachim von Ribbentrop, sign a naval agreement in the summer of 1935 that he had instructed the German Navy to violate beforehand, perhaps an innovation in German diplomacy since the country in the Nazi years usually broke treaties *after* signing them. The breach over Italy's invasion of Abyssinia between the British and Italian guarantors of the 1925 Locarno settlement of the Rhineland issue suggested to Hitler that this was the time to violate that treaty by remilitarizing the Rhineland. When doing so, he promised publicly to return to the League and to arrive at a replacement treaty, but he made certain thereafter that nothing of the sort occurred. Every effort, especially by the British government, to find a way to develop a new settlement for European security including the new Germany was carefully and deliberately sabotaged by Hitler. When a formal proposal, including concessions on colonies, had been developed by the government of British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain and was presented to him in March, 1938, Hitler promised a written response – but never found the time to write one. Only in the imagination of some historians was the German leader seriously interested in an agreement with London.

As German rearmament went forward, there were major and practically interminable disputes within the German civilian and military leadership about priorities in the allocation of human and material resources, but until 1938 there were no significant differences over the general direction of preparing the country for war. The ability of the country to try out its new weapons on the side of Franco in the Civil War in Spain provided a welcome opportunity to replace the one that had in the 1920s been provided – ironically enough – by the Soviet Union. From the perspective of Berlin, the longer the war in Spain lasted, the better. Enough aid would be sent to Franco to keep him from losing, but a concentration of international attention on the conflict in Spain was seen as an advantage not to be lost by more massive assistance and a quick victory of the Nationalists (Weinberg 2010, pp. 221–233, ch. 19).

If a lengthy fight inside Spain looked advantageous to the German government, the one Japan started with China in 1937 did not. German interests in China were considerable. There were German military advisors to the Chinese Nationalist government as well as substantial economic ties important for German rearmament. While this led most in the German military and diplomatic leadership to favor China, Hitler looked to Japan as a country that, like Italy, could attain much of the imperial expansion it wanted only at the expense of its First World War allies. When a serious German effort to mediate the conflict between Japan and China in the winter of 1937–1938 foundered on Japanese intransigence, Hitler ordered the German position in China

abandoned in the hope of an alignment with Tokyo. There would be almost interminable difficulties in the relationship between Germany and Japan, but eventually the authorities in Tokyo would plunge their country toward disaster on the assumption that Germany would win the new war (Weinberg 2010, chs. 5, 13, 20).

A critical issue for German policy was the time pressure under which Hitler believed the country was laboring. The personal element in this was his own oft-expressed view that he was not likely to live long and hence needed to initiate the first of his wars as soon as possible. The practical element was his recognition of the likelihood that the aggressive policy of Germany would spur others to their own rearmament policy. That rearmament would necessarily involve standardization on weapons systems initiated later than those of Germany and hence possibly better than the ones put earlier into production by Germany. Furthermore, in the existing situation of the 1930s, these rearmament programs of others would have a larger economic base than Germany's. In this context of his time perspective, Germany needed to initiate the first of its planned wars just as soon as possible and then utilize the larger population and material base gained by it to move toward the big wars that were to follow. It was the latter of these elements that Hitler shared with his top military and diplomatic advisors in November of 1937. Austria and Czechoslovakia would be annexed, and bigger conflicts would necessarily come soon thereafter before the German advantage in the armaments field had been eroded (Weinberg 2010, pp. 312–318; Maiolo 2010).

At that meeting, the minister of war, Werner von Blomberg, army commander in chief, Werner von Fritsch, and the foreign minister, Constantin von Neurath, raised no questions about a possible annexation of Austria but indicated doubts about an invasion of Czechoslovakia that they thought likely to bring on a wider war. In a comprehensive reshuffling of the government and high command, Hitler in early February 1938 rid himself of all three. Foreign Minister Neurath was replaced by Ribbentrop, a change that also fit Hitler's preference for Japan rather than China since that was the view of the new foreign minister. It was no coincidence that in his February 20 speech, Hitler included the switch in German foreign policy by announcing recognition of the puppet state of Manchukuo that the Japanese had established (Weinberg 1957). As for the military side, Hitler himself assumed the position of Blomberg. There would be no minister of war; instead a hard-working but totally subservient Wilhelm Keitel would be his main assistant in running the German armed forces. As new commander in chief of the army, Hitler carefully picked Walther von Brauchitsch, a general who could be described as an anatomical marvel, having no backbone whatever(!), and enabled to marry an enthusiastic Nazi wife by a special subvention from Hitler. Hitler's experience with this form of bribery may have played a role in his subsequently providing vast secret bribes to all higher German military leaders and other high officials to assure unswerving devotion (Ueberschär and Vogel 1999; Goda 2000).

The combination of the recently developed closer relationship with Italy with a new military structure inside Germany emboldened Hitler to push for the annexation of Austria. He summoned the Austrian Chancellor Kurt von Schuschnigg to meet him in February 1938, browbeat him into concessions; and then, when the latter tried to reassert Austrian independence by announcing a plebiscite inside the country, ordered the German army to invade Austria. Schuschnigg refused to order the Austrian army to fight although the advancing German units had lots of breakdowns and other problems. Large portions of the Austrian public cheered the invaders, and masses of people in Vienna demonstrated their enthusiasm for Hitler when he arrived. The head of the Austrian Catholic church, Theodor Cardinal Innitzer, welcomed the German leader, while many Viennese citizens vented their hatred for their Jewish neighbors in violence, looting, and humiliating measures.

The domestic impact of the annexation of Austria was extremely favorable for Hitler and his regime: the German public was enthusiastic about what looked like the realization of a dream many had long held, and the Austrian gold reserve assisted a government wrestling with the costs of a vast rearmament program. In an election on April 10, 1938, of the sort that jokers at the time suggested might have its results stolen from the Ministry of Propaganda ahead of time, the population affirmed its support for the annexation and the list of nominees. This would be the last election of its type; the term of the Reichstag then elected would be extended to January 30, 1947 (Weinberg 2010, p. xii).

The international aspects of the annexation also proved favorable for the Nazi regime. Mussolini's quiet acquiescence in the absorption of Austria by Germany enormously increased Hitler's regard for him, a regard the German leader retained until the bitter end. No country was about to go to war for the independence of a people who evidently did not want it. The prospective next victim of Germany, Czechoslovakia, saw its southern border now controlled by Germany. Hungary and Yugoslavia saw a weak Austria replaced by a strong Germany on their border. Most Austrians would only learn by seven years of being part of Germany that they might be better off in a separate country.

Although the geographical position of Germany for an invasion of Czechoslovakia was substantially improved by the annexation of Austria, Hitler's determination to attack that country provoked some resistance from within the German military. The chief of staff of the army, General Ludwig Beck, was alarmed that Germany's action would lead to a general war that the country was likely to lose. He was unable to persuade the new commander in chief, Brauchitsch, of this and resigned, becoming a key figure in the internal opposition to the regime and losing his life in the failed plot of July 20, 1944. Hitler and his more enthusiastic supporters in the military moved forward with plans to attack in the fall 1938. Influenced by the incident that had touched off the First World War, Hitler contemplated arranging the assassination of the German minister to Czechoslovakia (as he had earlier mulled over an assassination of the German ambassador or military attaché in Vienna as an incident to use for invading Austria). Instead, the German minority inside Czechoslovakia – that was expected to provide the population basis for additional divisions of the German army – would be utilized in two ways. Endless propaganda about the alleged mistreatment of the minority that was probably the one best treated in Europe (unlike the worst treated one in the South Tyrol) would provide a way of discouraging the Western powers from coming to the aid of the attacked state. They were instructed in March to raise demands of the Prague government so that a deadlock would develop. Simultaneously, a group of hoodlums selected from the minority would stage a series of incidents of which Germany would utilize one as the pretext for invasion at a time of its choosing, but without risking disclosure by not letting the provocateurs know which one would be selected. It was the fact that the latter ran out of incidents before the end of the crisis that would lead the German government to adopt a different procedure when initiating war against Poland in 1939 (Weinberg 2010, ch. 24).

A further way in which Hitler hoped to keep the attack on Czechoslovakia from leading to a general war before he believed the country ready for it was the trumpeting of Germany's developing fortifications on its western border. Although warned by military advisors that the Westwall or Siegfried Line was, in fact, not adequate, the public emphasis on its alleged strength might assist – as indeed it did – in restraining any thoughts in France of coming to the aid of the country's Czechoslovak ally (Weinberg 1978, pp. 24–40).

The reaction of the government of Czechoslovakia was to try to defuse the situation by concessions to the demands of the German minority, referred to as the Sudeten Germans

after a mountain chain along the border. When in May there appeared to be signs of an imminent German attack, the country moved to a partial mobilization, but otherwise tried to remain calm in the face of provocations. In August, Prague offered very extensive concessions, but by that time the issue was moving out of Czechoslovakia's control.

By July, the government of France had decided that it could and would not fight for Czechoslovakia over the issue of the Sudeten Germans, and so informed the Prague government secretly, a move that contributed to the willingness of the latter to make concessions (Weinberg 2010, pp. 587–588). When asked by the British how they would act to rescue Czechoslovakia if it came to war, the French military explained that since they did not see their way to assaulting the German fortifications in the west or striking at Italy – which they assumed would join Germany – in the Alps, they intended to invade Libya from Tunisia (p. 545). This approach to the military situation did not encourage the authorities in London.

The British government had seen all its efforts to find a new European settlement that included Germany and maintained the independence of the latter's neighbors thwarted by Germany. The emphasis on the issue of the Sudeten Germans by Berlin led the Chamberlain government to pressure Czechoslovakia to make maximum concessions. Although Winston Churchill in public attacked the government, in private he assured the Czechs that if he were in office, he would follow the same policy (Kral 1968, p. 144).

An important factor in the London government's approach was the messages they were receiving from the governments of the Dominions of Canada, the Union of South Africa, and Australia that they would not join England in war over the Sudeten question. In this context, Chamberlain decided to try to save the situation by flying to see Hitler to work out a way to avoid another general war (Weinberg 2010, ch. 25). Hitler was surprised but felt unable to refuse to meet the British Prime Minister. When they met at Berchtesgaden, Hitler insisted on the annexation of those parts of Czechoslovakia inhabited largely by Germans, a demand he assumed would not be met and could thus provide the excuse he wanted to go to war under circumstances in which the German home front would be united while France and Britain might stand aside. He was not concerned about the Soviet Union, which had no common border with Czechoslovakia and was in the process of decapitating its military.

When, to Hitler's astonishment, Chamberlain obtained the agreement of the Prague government to the demand for territorial cession as the British leader told him when they met again at Bad Godesberg, he quickly raised his demands so that he could still turn to military action. This revelation of Germany's real aim quickly brought about a double reversal in the international situation. In the first place, the London government now shifted to a willingness to go to war and expected the French government to go along, however reluctantly. Simultaneously, Hitler decided not to go to war after all. Several factors influenced his abrupt change. After his May visit to Rome, he felt confident that Mussolini would lead Italy into war on Germany's side. He now learned that the Italian dictator was unwilling to take his country, still engaged massively in Spain and unprepared for a wider conflict, into war but instead urged a conference to settle the issue peacefully. Hitler was also influenced by signs that the German public was not enthusiastic about a new war that appeared likely to be general and by advice from some of his political and military advisors that war at this time was not the best idea. He now reluctantly agreed to a conference at which Germany's ostensible demands rather than its real aims would be met.

At Munich on September 29, 1938, the leaders of Germany, Italy, Britain, and France met and signed an agreement that imposed on Czechoslovakia the cession of the borderlands

inhabited predominantly by people of German cultural background. There was worldwide relief at the avoidance of another world war that had looked – quite correctly – as about to break out. The agreement appeared to be a great and bloodless victory for Germany and a terrible loss of territory for Czechoslovakia since most of the country's fortifications were there, along with a blot on the reputation of Britain and France. Since the Germans were determined to break the agreement and occupy the now defenseless Czechoslovakia anyway – as they did in March 1939 – the actual impact would be different. Having agreed under pressure to cede the territory, Czechoslovakia would receive it back at the end of the war with Allied agreement to the expulsion of its German inhabitants. The slogan of the Sudeten Germans had been “Heim ins Reich,” home into the Reich. They would get their wish, but not the way they had anticipated.

In the weeks after the Munich agreement, Hitler greatly regretted having called off the invasion of Czechoslovakia. He blamed others in the German military and civilian leadership for what he considered their cowardice, when it was he himself who had drawn back rather than put their dire predictions to the test. He determined never to make a similar mistake again. His “lesson of Munich” was under no circumstances to draw back again, and the moves of Germany that produced war in 1939 were largely framed by his determination not to be trapped into negotiations again. Plans for the destruction of Czechoslovakia were ordered immediately after the Munich conference and would be implemented in March 1939. In the meantime, other measures went forward to make certain that war would come that year.

In the winter of 1938, Hitler made his intention clear to others in the German government and media that war would be started in 1939. At a gathering of representatives of German newspapers on November 10, 1938, he deplored the extent to which the German public had believed the regime's protestations of peaceful intentions that had been designed to fool the outside world while Germany prepared for war. The obvious relief of so many at the peaceful resolution of the Munich crisis – a relief publicly demonstrated by the masses of Germans who had cheered Chamberlain – had to be countered by a propaganda effort to lead the German public to call for war. This would be the major mission of the press in the coming months (Treue 1958).

The other major domestic action taken at the same time as instructing the press to raise public enthusiasm for war was a great anti-Jewish pogrom ordered by Hitler on November 9 and implemented in the following days. The political assassination of the leader of the National Socialist Party in Switzerland by a Jew in 1936 had been met by instructions to government and party agencies to refrain from anti-Jewish acts, and was instead marked by naming a German Labor Front cruise ship for the victim (Kropat 1997, p. 9). The shooting of a junior diplomat in the German embassy in Paris in what was essentially a private quarrel was utilized for a nationwide pogrom against the country's remaining Jewish population. Synagogues were burned or smashed, stores and apartments looted, a huge fine levied, Jewish children expelled from schools and other restrictions imposed. Most important from the regime's point of view was the deportation to concentration camps of over thirty thousand Jewish men who would be released when accepted for immigration into another country. There was massive Nazi Party and popular participation in the pogrom that marked a stage in the persecution of Jews looking toward what became known as the Holocaust synchronized with the move toward war (Steinweis 2009).

From Hitler's perspective, war against the Western powers in 1939 presupposed a quiet situation on Germany's eastern borders. In the winter of 1938–1939, German diplomacy was directed toward assuring this. Of the three countries along the border, German diplomacy succeeded with Hungary and Lithuania but failed with Poland (Weinberg 2010, ch. 26).

Rewarded with the easternmost portion of Czechoslovakia when Germany occupied most of it in March, 1939, Hungary moved firmly into the German camp. There had been signs of this earlier, but Hitler always retained some suspicion of the Hungarian government because of its reluctance to go to war on Germany's side in the 1938 crisis. Lithuania was never in a position to challenge the Third Reich and ceded to it the Memel territory it had acquired through the 1919 peace treaty.

German-Polish relations were supposedly governed by a nonaggression pact, but Hitler wanted certainty that Poland would not intervene when Germany fought France and Britain. This meant not merely that Poland would have to make specific practical concessions but would signify subordination by joining the Anti-Comintern Pact. The Polish government was willing to make concessions to Germany in serious negotiations on specific issues, including a partition of the Free City of Danzig that would give Germany the city itself and most of the population and land (Weinberg 1995, ch. 9). The leaders of the revived independent Poland were certainly anti-Communist but would not subordinate independence to anyone. If necessary, they would fight even in a hopeless situation rather than sign away independence the way the Czechs had done after making all the specific concessions Germany had demanded.

It was under these circumstances that Hitler decided, in January 1939, that Poland had to be attacked first, whether or not any other country came to its aid. He hoped none would, but he wanted to crush Poland before turning to the attack on France and Britain. As he explained to his military leaders, an isolated campaign against Poland was preferable, but if the Western powers intervened, that would not affect basic policy. Since he set the invasion of Poland for the fall, a winter would intervene before there was serious fighting in the west (Weinberg 2010, chs. 27–28). To make certain that he would not be trapped again in negotiations as had happened, he believed, in 1938, there would be no negotiations with Poland in the summer of 1939. Instead there would be endless propaganda about the awful way the Poles treated the German minority, and the incidents to excuse invasion would be arranged to occur *inside* Germany by the German police with the corpses of concentration camp inmates dressed in Polish uniforms to prove war was Poland's fault (Runzheimer 1962).

During the same months that Hitler decided that no one was going to cheat him of war this time, the British and French changed their policy. As they recognized in the winter that the cession of Czechoslovak territory was not Germany's last demand as Hitler had proclaimed, rumors of a German strike at the Low Countries brought agreement that the next time Germany attacked any country that defended itself, they would come to its assistance. The German seizure of the remainder of Czechoslovakia in March 1939, hardened this resolve: whether in western Europe or in eastern Europe, a German move would be resisted. Guarantees were given publicly to Poland and Romania, and efforts were made to bring the Soviet Union into an arrangement that would offer defense to victims of German aggression. Lengthy negotiations carried out largely in public led nowhere since the Soviet Union was secretly negotiating with the Germans for the opposite result: the carving up of Poland and other countries of eastern Europe.

During the 1930s, Soviet leader Josef Stalin had repeatedly sounded out the German government about a return to good relations, but Hitler invariably waved off any such arrangements. The Soviet Union had no common border with either Austria or Czechoslovakia and hence was, in his view, of no possible help in his plans to annex both. The situation, as he decided to attack Poland, was different. From his point of view, if the Soviets would join in the destruction of Poland – with which they had a very long border – that would not only hasten that campaign but also provide a common border across which shipments from the Soviet Union itself or from other states could reach a Germany that the Western powers thus

could not effectively subject to a blockade. An agreement with the Soviet Union might even discourage them from aiding Poland, but in any case, there would not be a blockade as he fought them either at the same time as Poland or in the following year. Since he assumed that after victory in the west his forces would quickly crush the Soviet Union, whatever was conceded to Stalin now would be quickly retaken when the time came.

Once it became clear to both sides in tentative contacts during the summer of 1939 that each was interested in an agreement that would divide eastern Europe between them, German Foreign Minister von Ribbentrop was sent to Moscow to work out the details. His instructions allowed him to grant, essentially, anything that Stalin might demand and even include possible concessions that Stalin did not think to ask for. Since the Germans were going to seize it all later, from their perspective it made little difference what was yielded to Stalin as long as he was willing to help Germany crush Poland and defeat its enemies in the west before it became his turn to fall to German might.

During the summer of 1939, accordingly, there were no negotiations between Germany and Poland. The Germans prepared to attack that country and organized the incidents designed as an excuse, this time inside Germany. Mussolini was not at all interested in a war that he expected would be general; in fact he believed he had received German assurances that there would be several more years for him to prepare Italy. The Japanese were concentrating on their war with China and concerned about their relations with the Soviet Union that had involved border hostilities the year before and did again in 1939. Hence, a war with the Western powers was not on their current agenda. The British tried to discourage Germany from war by emphasizing that they would indeed enter the war if Germany attacked Poland. For the first time in peacetime, the British parliament voted for conscription with all Labour and Liberal Party members opposing the building up of an army. Furthermore, the attitude of the governments in the Dominions was moving in the same direction as that in London: Germany was going too far, and if it came to war, it would not be about alleged mistreatment of German minorities but about Germany's determination for domination at least of Europe and most likely of the world. There was a lesser but still significant hardening of attitudes in France.

In the last days of August 1939, there was some agitated diplomatic activity, but the clearest indication of what was afoot was the removal of German ambassadors from London, Paris, and Warsaw in the last days of peace – an indication of Hitler's fear that at the last moment some "Saukerl" (perhaps the equivalent of SOB) might push for compromise and peace. He used this expression when orienting his military leaders on August 22 about the forthcoming war and its nature as one of annihilation rather than the mere shifting of boundaries. In those final days, Hitler did put off the invasion for a few days but then did not utilize the last day that he had told the army chief of staff was available. War sooner rather than later was his view; and to assure a united home front, he prepared what looked like moderate demands on Poland that he could publish after declaring them lapsed.

Germany opened hostilities with a terror bombing attack on an undefended Polish community early on the morning of September 1 (Böhler 2005). On Germany's refusal of a British demand to end hostilities, Britain and France declared war on Germany, followed by Canada, Australia and New Zealand with the Union of South Africa doing so a bit later while Eire remained neutral. The Soviet Union would join in the attack on Poland two weeks later after arriving at a truce with Japan, while the latter and Italy waited to see how the war would go before committing themselves. The American government had formally asked the belligerents to refrain from bombing civilian targets and was answered by a German bomb dropped on its Warsaw embassy grounds. The world was again involved in a war that would spread to most countries on the globe.

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