

Hitler's Foreign Policy (1933–39)

Hitler's Foreign Policy had three major aims:

1. To Destroy the Impositions of the Hatred Treaty of Versailles
2. To Unite All Germans Into a Single Nation (Pan-Germanism)
3. To Gain 'Lebensraum' (or living space) for the German People in the east. For Hitler this meant an invasion of the Soviet Union (which would also facilitate the destruction of the Marxist/Jewish threat).

Let's examine each one of these aims in a little more detail. Once we understand the essential nature of each, we will be free to examine the major events of Hitler's foreign policy between 1933-39 in chronological order (and be able to place each event into one, or more, of the three categories mentioned above).

To Destroy the Impositions of the Hatred Treaty of Versailles Following the defeat of Germany in the First World War, her leaders were forced to sign the Treaty of Versailles. The German army was limited to 100,000 men; a German airforce was strictly banned by the treaty; the navy was limited to a small number of surface battleships and was not allowed to possess any submarines at all. Germany was also forcibly deprived of much of her territory in Europe and all of her overseas colonies. With her European territorial losses, Germany also lost the right of government over many millions of Germans and her prime industrial areas. The defeated German leaders were also forced to accept total blame for the war (the War Guilt Clause 231) and were made to pay heavy reparations as compensation to the victors.

Hitler, along with many others, felt that the treaty was a 'diktat' imposed on a Germany who had never really been beaten in the field of battle and had not been represented at the Paris Peace Conference. Germany's surrender was viewed as a Jewish/Marxist conspiracy perpetrated by a gang of 'November Criminals' who became the leaders of the Weimar Republic. Hitler played on these myths in order to gain power. Once in power he was determined to undo the Treaty of Versailles, to restore lost German pride, and to make the Fatherland 'great' again.

To Unite All Germans Into a Single Nation (Pan-Germanism) Although Hitler was an Austrian rather than a German, as far as he was concerned Austria and Germany were one and the same. They shared a common language, a common 'Aryan' racial ancestry, and common historical and cultural roots. Although the unification of Germany and Austria (Anschluss) was forbidden under the terms of the Treaty of Versailles, it was Hitler's fondest dream to bring the country of his birth into the German Reich where he felt it truly belonged.

There were also over 3 million 'Germans' living in the new nation of Czechoslovakia following its creation in 1919. Also, many Germans now lived in Poland following the territorial changes imposed by Versailles. Indeed, a 'Polish Corridor' actually split Germany in two. Hitler's dream was 'ein Volk, ein Reich, ein Führer' ('one people, one state, one leader'). The fulfillment of Hitler's dream, or course, could only be achieved by an aggressive foreign policy.

To Gain 'Lebensraum' for the German People According to Hitler, Germany needed 'living-space' for her rising population. The acquisition of new land would be utilised for food production and would also bring raw materials and new industrial resources to expand the German economy. Also, vast numbers of foreign 'slaves' could be put to work for the benefit of the Third Reich.

The area best suited for German expansion was to the east – Poland and the Soviet Union. As Hitler stated in Mein Kampf in 1924:

"And so we National Socialists consciously draw a line beneath the foreign policy tendency of our pre-War period. We take up where we broke off six hundred years ago. We stop the endless German movement to the south and west, and turn our gaze towards the land in the east. At long last we break off the colonial and commercial policy of the pre-War period and shift to the soil policy of the future. If we speak of soil in Europe, we can primarily have in mind only Russia and her vassal border states."

[Adolf Hitler, Mein Kampf, D. Watt (ed.), (Hutchinson, 1977), p. 598]

Besides Lebensraum, the conquest of Soviet Russia would allow the final destruction of Marxist Communism and the eastern Jews in one strike.

As Ian Kershaw states:

Table 2: Hitler's Foreign Policy (March 1933–39)

Year	Destruction of Treaty of Versailles	Pan-Germanism	Lebensraum	Treaties and Alliances
1933				Hitler withdraws Germany from the World Disarmament Conference and from the League of Nations.
1934	Hitler gives secret orders for the expansion of the armed			Ten Year Pact with Poland
1935	March — Hitler reintroduces conscription June — Anglo-German Naval			
1936	March — Hitler reoccupies the Rhineland			Hitler intervenes in Spanish Civil War October — Rome-Berlin Axis November — Hitler signs Anti-Comintern Pact with Japan
1937				Italy joins Anti-Comintern Pact with Germany and Japan.
1938		March — Anschluss with Austria September — Munich Conference, Czech Sudetenland given to Germany		
1939			March — Hitler invades Czechoslovakia September — Germany invades Poland	May — Germany and Italy sign the Pact of Steel. August — Nazi-Soviet Pact

“By 1941 the vision of an ultimate showdown with Bolshevism as a twin ‘crusade’ to win ‘living space’ and to eradicate the Jews was grim reality.”

[Ian Kershaw, Hitler, (Longman, 1991), p. 143]

However, such ‘living space’ could only be acquired through war.

NOTE: All of the above aims are mentioned frequently by Hitler in his book *Mein Kampf* (written in 1924).

Let’s now examine the major events of Hitler’s foreign policy between 1933–39 whilst keeping the three broad categories of foreign policy aims firmly in mind.

5.1 German Rearmament

Hitler felt that the restrictions placed upon German military forces by the Treaty of Versailles were shameful and totally unfair.

In his book *Mein Kampf* he raged:

“The Treaty of Versailles is engraved on the minds and hearts of the German people and burned into them. Sixty million people will find their souls aflame with a feeling of rage and shame. Then the people will join in a common cry: ‘We will have arms again.’ ”

When Hitler came to power in 1933 he was determined to rearm the Fatherland.

In October 1933, he withdrew Germany from the World Disarmament Conference and from the League of Nations on the grounds that France would not agree to German equality of armaments.

In 1934, just a year after coming to power, Hitler gave secret orders for the expansion of the armed forces. They were:

1. The German army was to be trebled in size from its limit of 100,000 men to 300,000.
2. The navy was to build two ‘pocket battleships’ and six submarines (submarines were not allowed under the terms of Versailles).
3. Hermann Göring was to create an air force and secretly train pilots (the Treaty of Versailles specifically forbade the existence of a German air force).

In March 1935, Hitler openly announced the reintroduction of conscription (enforced military service). This was Hitler’s ‘public’ breach of the Versailles treaty.

He announced to his generals, and the rest of the world, that he would build up the German army to 36 divisions

(about 600,000 men).

No action was taken against Hitler. The League of Nations could do nothing without military intervention (which its member countries were not willing to countenance).

The Stresa Front (Britain, France and Italy) condemned Hitler’s actions, but did nothing. The Stresa Front first met in April 1935 (at Stresa, in Italy) to discuss their common interest in halting German designs on unification with Austria.

5.2 The Anglo-German Naval Agreement (18th June 1935)

Hitler now pulled a very shrewd master-stroke in getting Britain to agree to his illegal expansion of the German navy. Hitler, realising how frail the Stresa Front was, ‘dangled a carrot’ in front of the British and so detached them from the Stresa Front.

Hitler offered to limit the strength of the German navy to 35% of that of the British.

The British eagerly accepted and the Anglo-German Naval Agreement was signed on 18th June 1935 (without Britain consulting her French and Italian allies).

The British felt that since the Germans were already breaking the Treaty of Versailles by building up a fleet, it might as well be limited.

But without consulting Italy and France, Britain and condoned German rearmament. France was particularly horrified.

The Stresa Front soon collapsed and freed Hitler from the fear of encirclement.

5.3 Escalation of German Rearmament (1935–39)

The reate of German rearmament quickly gathered momentum following the Anglo-German Naval Agreement.

By the end of 1938 the Germans had 21 large ships (including battleships, cruisers and destroyers) and many more under construction.

They could also boast the possession of 47 U-boats (submarines).

They also had a large air force of over 2000 aircraft and an army 15 division strong (about 800,000 men in total).

By 1938, German expenditure on rearmament had reached 17.2 billion Reichmarks (1,710 million); more than twice that of Britain and France put together.

In 1938, arms expenditure accounted for 17% of the German GNP (Gross National Product). In the USA, in the same year, arms expenditure accounted for only 1% of the GNP; and 8% in Britain.

5.4 German Re-occupation of the Rhineland (7th March 1939)

The Treaty of Versailles had declared the German Rhineland a Demilitarised Zone.

No German troops were allowed within 50 kilometres of the River Rhine.

On 7th March 1936, in defiance of the treaty, German troops marched into the Rhineland.

This was an outright breach of both the Treaty of Versailles and the Locarno Treaty.

Hitler, however, justified his actions by declaring that a recent pact between France and Russia (signed in March 1935, but not ratified by the French Senate until 27th February 1936) broke the Locarno agreement.

Hitler took a wild gamble, and it paid off. No-one lifted a finger to stop him.

Hitler later commented:

“The 48 hours after the march into the Rhineland were the most nerve-racking in my life. If the French had then marched into the Rhineland we would have had to withdraw with our tails between our legs, for the military resources at our disposal would have been wholly inadequate for even a moderate resistance.”

But the French did nothing. The French government wanted to take military action, but the French High Command warned against it. They would have had to march alone – without British support – for the British felt that the Germans, in the words of Lord Lothian, were ‘only going into their own back garden’.

The British had shied away from the risk of war, and the French would not contemplate action without British support.

5.5 A Year of Alliances (1936)

In 1936, Hitler made several important alliances. They were:

1. He sent help to right-wing nationalist leader General Franco in the Spanish Civil War.
2. He made an agreement with the Italian Fascist dictator Mussolini; the Rome-Berlin Axis.
3. He made an alliance with Japan in the Anti-Comintern Pact.

Let's examine each one in more detail:

5.5.1 The Spanish Civil War (1936–38)

In 1931, King Alfonso XIII of Spain was overthrown and the country declared a Republic.

In July 1936, civil war broke out in Spain.

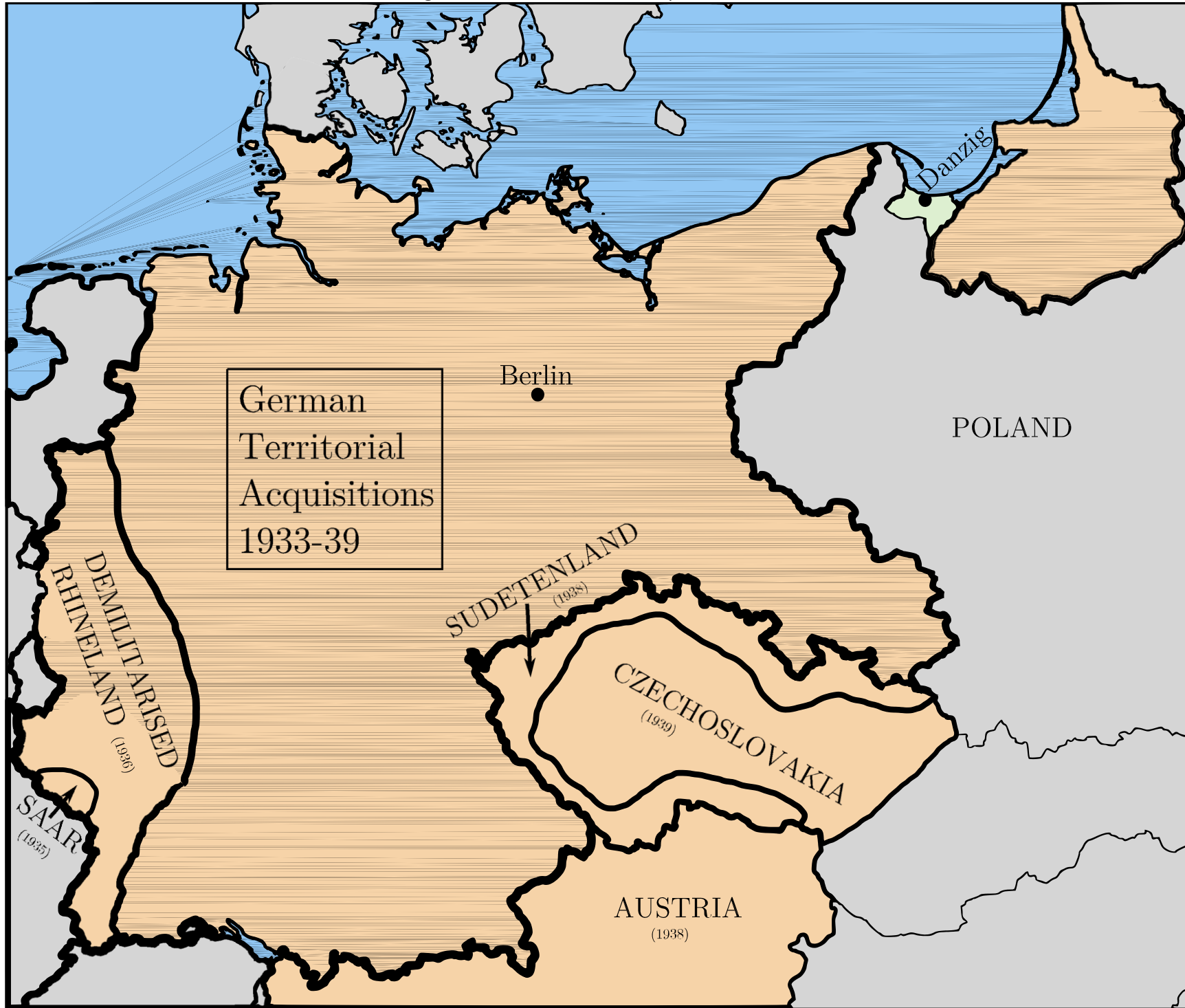
General Franco – an ultra-conservative nationalist, but not a Fascist – attacked the recently elected Spanish government; the Popular Front alliance of Communists, Socialists and Anarchists.

Hitler saw this as an ideal opportunity to both strike a blow against communism and to test his new weapons in

a combat situation.

Hitler also hoped, if Franco was victorious, to gain him as an ally for a Nationalist/Fascist bloc comprised of Germany, Italy and Spain.

Figure 4: German Territorial Acquisitions (1933-39)



He decided, therefore, to send military aid to support Franco's Nationalist rebels.

Hitler sent his best air force unit — the Condor Legion — to try out methods of bombing towns and cities from the air (the terrible destruction of the Basque town of Guernica in 1937 offers grisely proof that they soon mastered the technique.)

Hitler, of course, wanted Franco to win in the end; but his major concern was to prolong the conflict as long as possible. This would distract France and also help to draw the Italian dictator Mussolini (who was also supporting Franco's Nationalists with Italian soldiers) closer towards Germany.

Britain and France adopted a non-interventionist policy.

The French Prime Minister Leon Blum, although he supported the Spanish Republicans, felt unwilling to intervene in fear that French fascists would start a civil war in France.

The British government were worried that the conflict in Spain might escalate into a major European war. This was the last thing they wanted. They also believed that any British naval activity off the Spanish coast, in the western Mediterranean, might lead to clashes with Italian forces. This would be a disaster as the British still clung to the faint hope of keeping good relations with Mussolini.

Hitler learned two vital lessons from his involvement in the Spanish Civil War. They were:

- That the Western democracies (particularly Britain and France) were not willing to oppose the aggressive tactics of Germany and Italy.
- That his air force could successfully terrorise civilian populations.

5.5.2 The Rome-Berlin Axis (October 1936)

Italy, who had been an ally of Britain and France against Germany in the First World War, began to grow cool in her relations with her former allies and began to be drawn closer to Hitler's Germany.

There were several reasons:

- Mussolini, who was at first wary of Hitler and his designs on Anschluss with Italy's neighbour Austria, was angered by Britain's undermining of the Stresa Front by her signing of the Anglo-German Naval Agreement, in June 1935, without consulting her Stresa allies.
- Mussolini was outraged by the British and French reaction to the Italian invasion of Abyssinia (or Ethiopia) in October 1935. The Italian dictator blamed Britain and France for their parts in the imposition of economic sanctions by the League of Nations in response to the Italian invasion. The credibility of Britain and France became even more strained in Mussolini's eyes over the affair of the Hoare-Laval Pact. The British Foreign secretary Hoare made a secret deal with the French Prime Minister Laval in which they promised Mussolini two-thirds of Abyssinia (a larger part than he had already captured) if he would call off the invasion. When news of the secret deal became public, the British and French were forced to withdraw their offer due to public outrage. Mussolini was extremely angered by the whole Abyssinian affair.

Hitler, on the other hand, had not criticised the invasion of Abyssinia and refused to apply sanctions against Italy.

No wonder Mussolini felt hostile towards Britain and France and warmer towards Nazi Germany.

- Mussolini and Hitler shared common ideological links. They were both right-wing nationalist/fascist dictators with a common hatred of Marxist communism. They each shared a mutual distrust of the French. Both of them were willing to engage in aggressive foreign policies in search of living space. Sooner or later they were bound to become allies. The actions of the British and French simply pushed them together sooner rather than later.

In October 1936, Hitler's and Mussolini's new-found friendship was formalised in the Rome-Berlin Axis.

The Rome-Berlin Axis was an 'understanding' that Germany and Italy should work closely together in foreign affairs. It was not a military treaty.

But a full military alliance was eventually to come.

On 21st May 1939, the Italian and German foreign ministers signed the famous **Pact of Steel**.

The Pact of Steel committed the contracting parties to come to each others' aid, if attacked by outside hostile forces,

'with all its military forces on land, sea, and in the air.'

5.5.3 The Anti-Comintern Pact (November 1936)

In November 1936, Hitler won a valuable ally in the east.

He signed the **Anti-Comintern Pact** with Japan.

The Comintern (or Communist International) was an organisation set up by Lenin in 1919 with the aim of helping to set up communist parties in other countries outside Russia.

Japan, an enemy of Communism in China, saw Hitler's Germany as a natural ally against the spread of Marxist Communism.

Italy joined the Anti-Comintern Pact a year later in 1937.

5.6 Anschluss with Austria (March 1938)

A unification (or **Anschluss**) between Germany and Austria was strictly forbidden under the terms of the Treaty of Versailles.

Nevertheless, for Adolf Hitler — An Austrian by birth — **Anschluss** was one of his fondest dreams. The incorporation of Austria into the German Reich was one part of Hitler's scheme for the creation of a Greater or Pan-Germany which sought to bring all German-speaking peoples of Europe together under a single flag in one Fatherland.

The 7 million German-speaking Austrians were Hitler's first target.

In 1934, Austrian Nazis attempted to overthrow the government in Vienna and force a union with Germany.

The Austrian Chancellor Engelbert Dollfuss, a right-wing dictator, was murdered by Austrian Nazis and left to bleed to death on his office floor.

But the Italian leader Mussolini, fearful of a German takeover in neighbouring Austria, sent troops to the southern frontier of Austria with Italy. at the Brenner Pass, as a warning to Hitler not to interfere.

There is no direct evidence that the attempted coup d'état was orchestrated by the German government, but Hitler took note of Mussolini's warning and the Austrian Nazis' attempted take-over failed.

Following the assassination of Dollfuss, the Austrian chancellorship was taken over by Dr. Kurt von Schuschnigg under the protective eye of Mussolini.

In 1936, Hitler sent Franz von Papen to Vienna as German ambassador in order to plot the overthrow of the von Schuschnigg regime.

Throughout 1937, the Austrian Nazi party held massive propagandist parades, engaged in terrorist bomb attacks on public buildings, and engaged in the normal Nazi tactic of beating up all the opposition.

On 12th February 1938, Hitler summoned von Schuschnigg to meet him at Berchtesgaden (the Fuhrer's mountain retreat).

For two hours Hitler stormed, raved and threatened the Austrian Chancellor with invasion if he did not submit to

German

demands. Hitler

demand:

- That the ban imposed on the Austrian Nazi party be lifted.
- That imprisoned party members be released.
- That three Austrian Nazis were to be given seats in the Austrian cabinet: Seyss-Inquart as Minister of the Interior; Glatze-Horstenau as minister of War; and Fischbok as Minister of Finance.
- Austria was to be tied closely both economically and militarily to Germany.

This was the first step towards total **Anschluss** as far as Hitler was concerned. Schuschnigg reluctantly signed the Agreement put before him.

He then returned to Vienna and began to carry out Hitler's demands.

During the ensuing weeks the Austrian Nazis began to tighten their grip and it was clear that they would soon be

in total control of the country.

Von Schuschnigg then took a brave but desperate gamble.

On 8th March 1938 he ordered that a plebiscite was to be held asking the Austrian people whether they wished to remain independent or be united with Germany.

The plebiscite was scheduled for Sunday 13th March.

Von Schuschnigg believed that if the vote went against unification with Germany then Hitler would not dare to invade

(and it would prove once and for all that the majority of Austrians did not want

Anschl~~u~~ss). Hitler was furious and threatened to invade immediately if the plebiscite was not called off.

Schuschnigg asked Britain, France and Italy for help but Italy was now an ally of Hitler's under the Rome-Berlin Axis and would not intervene. Britain and France dare not risk another war and did nothing.

Schuschnigg resigned and the Austrian Nazi puppet of Hitler's Seyss-Inquart became the new Chancellor of Austria.

Seyss-Inquart immediately sent a telegram to Hitler (on Hitler's instruction) asking the Germans to 'help restore

order' and proclaimed the Anschl~~u~~ss.

During the night of 11th-12th March 1938, German troops marched into Austria and made a triumphant entry into

Vienna (where Austrian Nazis welcomed them with joy).

By 13th March 1938, the day originally scheduled for Schuschnigg's fated plebiscite, the German-Austrian Anschl~~u~~ss was fait accompli.

Behind the army came the SS (Schutzstaffel, literally 'protection squad') and the Gestapo (Geheime Staatspolizei or

'Secret State Police') who dealt with all opposition in the usual manner. A special concentration camp was set up at

Mathausen and was soon

full.

A month after the German invasion Hitler held his own plebiscite which resulted in a 99.75% vote in favour of the Anschl~~u~~ss.

But who would have dared to vote against it?

This was Hitler's greatest success so far. He had achieved his great desire of Anschl~~u~~ss without opposition. Indeed, he had made it look like the Austrian government welcomed the Nazi occupation and the plebiscite appeared to show the approval of the Austrian people. He had kicked a great big hole in the Treaty of Versailles, enhanced his own image as a successful decisive leader, and brought glory to the German nation in the process. All this and Anschl~~u~~ss too!

5.7 The Czech-Sudetenland Crisis

The new state of Czechoslovakia came into being in 1918 under the terms of the Paris Peace Treaties and contained about 14 million people.

3 million of these lived in the northern German-speaking Sudetenland area (once part of Austro-Hungary).

After the successful incorporation of Austria into the Reich, Hitler now cast greedy eyes on the Sudetenland and longed to free the Sudeten Germans from Czech rule.

He also hated the Czech and Slavik people whom he regarded as subhuman (Untermenschen).

The taking of Austria also made Czechoslovakia more vulnerable to attack from Hitler, and the Czech state was now surrounded on three sides by hostile Nazi forces.

But the greatest danger to the freedom of Czechoslovakia came from within — from the Sudeten Germans

themselves. They were inspired by the Anschl~~u~~ss with Austria and they too wanted to be part of the great German Reich. Konrad Henlein, a physical education teacher and leader of the Sudeten Germans, said in 1936:

"As Germans in the Sudeten provinces. . .we feel ourselves members of the great cultural community of Germans in the whole world."

Hitler, therefore, did not create the Sudeten crisis, but he did do his best to stir up tension between the Sudeten Germans and the Czechs (which was not too difficult to achieve as the Sudeten Germans felt they were discriminated against by the Czech people).

A Nazi propaganda campaign was launched against the Czechoslovakian President Dr. Benes. The Sudeten German Party, led by Konrad Henlein, was ordered to demand self-government for the German-speaking minority. The situation grew tense.

On 12th September 1938, in a speech at Nuremberg, Hitler launched a venomous attack on the Czechs and demanded self-determination (self-rule) for the Sudeten Germans.

Hitler's speech inspired a revolt in the Sudetenland which was only quelled after two days of savage fighting and the imposition of martial law.

Britain and France were extremely worried.

If Hitler invaded Czechoslovakia, Europe might be plunged into another war.

France had treaty obligations with Czechoslovakia (dating from Locarno in 1925) and would be morally bound to intervene if Hitler invaded.

The French cabinet were split over whether they should honour their obligation to the Czechs or no should the Germans attack.

The Czechs, who had a small but well-equipped army and good fortifications, were prepared to make a stand against Hitler with the support of France and Britain.

But Britain wanted to avoid war at almost any cost.

Britain had made it quite clear to the French Prime Minister Daladier as early as April 1938 that Britain would not support France in a war against Germany.

The French did not relish the idea of having to fight without British support.

The British and French, therefore, decided to try to appease Hitler.

This appeared a reasonable course of action to many of the politicians involved as they felt that there was some justification for Hitler's demand for self-determination for the Sudetenlanders.

As the situation grew more tense, the French government sent a message to the British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain urging him to make the best deal he could with Hitler concerning the crisis in Czechoslovakia.

It was to this end that Chamberlain prepared for the first of his three historic flights to Germany (and his first time ever in an aeroplane).

5.7.1 The Meeting at Berchtesgaden (15th September 1938)

Chamberlain met Hitler at Berchtesgaden on 15th September 1938.

Hitler insisted that nothing less than secession of the Sudetenland to Germany would suffice (based on the principle of self-determination).

Chamberlain replied that he could agree to nothing without consulting the French and his own government; but

'personally' he recognised the principle of the detachment of the Sudetenland area.

Chamberlain then got Hitler to promise that Germany would refrain from military action until the two leaders had again conferred.

He then returned to Britain to consult his cabinet.

Speaking a day or two later, Chamberlain said of Hitler:

"In spite of the hardness and ruthlessness I thought I saw in his face, I got the impression that here was a man who could be relied upon when he had given his word."

The British Prime Minister received his cabinet's approval to Hitler's plan (with the added benefit to Hitler that a plebiscite would not be necessary).

Chamberlain then persuaded the French government to agree to Hitler's demands.

The Czech government was then informed by Chamberlain that unless it accepted Hitler's

proposals: "His Majesty's government will take no further interest in the fate of the country."

Deserted by his allies, Dr. Benes was forced to accept Hitler's demands.

Chamberlain was convinced that the situation had been settled.

5.7.2 The Meeting at Godesberg (22nd–23rd September 1938)

Chamberlain met Hitler for a second time at Bad Godesberg, in the Rhineland on 22nd September 1938. Chamberlain was amazed to find that the Fuhrer had now increased his demands.

Hitler now demanded the complete incorporation of the Sudetenland into the German Reich, and a military occupation of the area, by October 1st.

He stated that the Sudetenland would be his last territorial claim in Europe.

At another meeting between the two leaders, on the evening of 23rd September, Chamberlain was even more dismayed to find that Hitler confronted him with a new time limit for the Czech evacuation of the Sudetenland — to begin at 8 a.m. on 26th September (three days hence) and to be completed by 28th September.

Chamberlain could hardly believe Hitler's duplicity and flew back to London immediately — angry, shocked and bewildered.

But the British cabinet refused to yield to Hitler's increased demands.

The Czechs, too, would not tolerate a military occupation of the Sudetenland. Europe looked poised upon the brink of war!

In a radio broadcast at this time Chamberlain lamented:

“How horrible, fantastic, incredible it is that we should be digging trenches and trying on gas masks here because of a quarrel in a far away country between people of whom we know nothing.”

5.7.3 The Munich Conference (29th September 1938)

Following Hitler's increased demands at Bad Godesberg, war seemed unavoidable.

Then a miracle happened.

On 28th September (the day that Hitler's ultimatum to the Czech government ran out), the Italian leader Mussolini

intervened in a last ditch attempt to avert a war. At Chamberlain's request, Mussolini persuaded Hitler to agree to a

24 hour delay in mobilising his troops and suggested to Hitler that he should meet the leaders of Britain and France again in the hope of finding a last minute solution to the crisis.

Hitler agreed — as long as Mussolini (his ally) acted as mediator.

Consequently, the four leaders — Mussolini, Hitler, Daladier and Chamberlain — met in Munich on 29th September 1938.

This was the famous Munich Conference; held in the Fuhrerhaus in the Koenigsplatz.

Dr. Benes — the leader of Czechoslovakia — whose country's fate was hanging in the balance was not even invited to the conference.

Neither were the Russians, who had a co-agreement with the French regarding the defence of Czechoslovakia against

German aggression.

Mussolini laid 'his' plan before the assembled meeting; a plan which had actually been concocted hastily by the Germans the day before.

After much discussion, Britain and France agreed with Hitler (and Mussolini) that the Sudetenland was to be handed over to Germany immediately.

Hitler had got exactly what he had been refused at Godesberg.

All four men present 'guaranteed' the future freedom of the rest of Czechoslovakia.

On 30th September 1938, Hitler and Chamberlain signed a 'piece of paper' promising never to go to war with one another again.

Chamberlain returned to Britain a hero. War had been averted. Chamberlain talked of 'peace in our time'.

But the cost to poor Czechoslovakia was tremendous.

She lost 70% of her heavy industry and her best fortifications (as they were situated mainly in the borderland

Sudeten area).

The Sudetenland contained coal and copper mines, power stations, factories (including the Skoda arms works, the largest in Europe) and much good farming land. The Sudetenland was also Czechoslovakia's most important area for defence. It was separated from Germany by the Bohemian Alps and a massive chain of fortresses.

Czechoslovakia was now even more vulnerable to German attack than she had been before. To make matters worse, Poland took the opportunity to seize Teschen.

Poor little Czechoslovakia had been betrayed.

Benes resigned.

But, appeasement appeared to have succeeded in averting war (and that was all the British and French really cared about).

However, the great tragedy of the Munich fiasco was that Germany had invaded the rest of Czechoslovakia within six months (as Hitler had always meant to do).

Chamberlain now realised that Hitler was impossible to appease and must be stopped by force.

5.8 Hitler Invades Czechoslovakia (March 1939)

Throughout the winter of 1938–9, Hitler made plans for the takeover and final destruction of the Czech state.

Apart from his racial hatred of the 'inferior' Czech people (who were also allies with Germany's enemies, Russia and France), Hitler cast greedy eyes on the gold and foreign currency reserves in Prague.

Czechoslovakia also represented the first step towards Lebensraum in the East.

The German propaganda machine invented stories of Czech atrocities against German minorities in Czechoslovakia.

Hitler assured Germany that such 'unfortunates' would not remain unprotected for long.

In the spring of 1939, Hitler began to amass troops on the Czecho border.

On 14th March 1939, Dr. Hacha (who had succeeded Benes as President) took a train to Berlin.

His object was to try to save his country from invasion.

Hacha, and his Foreign Minister, were kept waiting until 1.15 a.m. before being ushered into the presence of Hitler, Göring, and five others.

After a long speech from Hitler, Hacha was told that a German army would invade Czechoslovakia at 6 a.m. — less than four hours hence.

Göring then warned Hacha that if the Czech army resisted Prague would be bombed. Hacha fainted.

On revival, Hacha telephoned his government and instructed them not to resist. He then was forced to sign an agreement asking Hitler to 'protect' his people.

It read as follows:

Berlin, March 15th, 1939

At their request, the Führer today received the Czechoslovak President, Dr. Hacha, and the Czechoslovak Foreign minister, Dr Chvalkovsky, in Berlin in the presence of foreign Minister von Ribbentrop. At the meeting the serious situation created by the events of recent weeks in the present Czechoslovak territory was examined with complete frankness.

The conviction was unanimously expressed on both sides that the aim of all efforts must be the safe-guarding of calm, order and peace in this part of Central Europe. The Czechoslovak President declared that, in order to serve this object and to achieve ultimate pacification, he confidently placed the fate of the Czech people and country in the hands of the Führer of the German Reich. The Führer of the German Reich. The Führer accepted this declaration and expressed his intention of taking the Czech people under the protection of the German Reich and of guaranteeing them an autonomous development of their ethnic life as suited to their character.

At 6 p.m. on 15th March 1939, German troops poured into Bohemia and Moravia; in the western part of Czechoslovakia.

The following day, 16th March, Hitler extended his 'protection' over Slovakia.

With Hitler's permission, Hungary occupied Ruthenia (in the eastern tip of Czechoslovakia).

Poland took the rest.

Czechoslovakia had ceased to exist as an independent state.

Neither Britain nor France made the slightest move to save it, though at the Munich Conference they had solemnly guaranteed Czechoslovakia against future aggression.

But the British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain had learned a valuable lesson.

Hitler had assured Chamberlain that the Sudetenland would be his last territorial demand in Europe. Now he had taken over 'non-German' Czechoslovakia.

Hitler could not be trusted and appeasement had not worked.
In 12 months Hitler had taken both Austria and Czechoslovakia.
Who would be next?

Everyone knew that it would be Poland.

On 31st March 1939, just sixteen days after Hitler had entered Prague, the British Prime Minister told the House of Commons:

"In the event of any action which clearly threatened Polish independence and which the Polish Government accordingly considered it vital to resist with their national forces, His Majesty's Government would feel themselves bound at once to lend the Polish Government all support in their power. They have given the Polish Government an assurance to this effect. I may add that the French Government have authorised me to make it plain that they stand in the same position in this matter."

Following the invasion of Czechoslovakia, Hitler snatched the port of Memel from Lithuania (which was another breach of the Treaty of Versailles).

Poland's turn was soon to come!

5.9 Poland's Turn Next

As William L. Shirer notes:

"Even more than France, Poland was the hated and despised enemy in the minds of the Germans. To them the heinous crime of the Versailles peacemakers had been to separate East Prussia from the Reich by the Polish Corridor, to detach Danzig and to give to the Poles the province of Posen and part of Silesia," [Shirer, *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich*, p. 212]

Not only would an invasion of Poland bring back these lost territories to Germany, but it would also provide Lebensraum in the east, and a future stepping-stone into Soviet Russia.

It was rather a surprise, therefore, to the German people and everyone else, when Hitler signed a Ten-Year Nonaggression Pact with Poland in January 1934.

The Ten-Year Nonaggression Pact, however, had several advantages to Hitler. They were:

1. It would draw Poland away from its traditional ally France.
2. Polish neutrality would make it easier for Germany to make territorial claims in Europe in the future (particularly against Czechoslovakia).
3. It suited Hitler's purpose to make outward displays of peace whilst secretly planning to rearm; to 'talk peace' whilst planning war.

The Ten-Year Nonaggression Pact with Germany had bought Poland time.

But with the Nazi takeover of Czechoslovakia and Memel that time had run out.

Poland now found herself flanked by the German army; in the south along the Slovak border and in the north on the frontiers of Pomerania and East Prussia.

No wonder Poland was anxious to look to Britain and France for protection.

In April 1939, in a speech to the Reichstag, Hitler told the assembly that reports that Germany intended to attack

Poland were "mere inventions of the international press".

Yet, only three weeks before, Hitler had given written orders to his military commanders to prepare for the destruction of Poland by September 1st "at the latest".

Hitler also claimed (in the Reichstag speech of April 1939) that Poland had broken the Polish-German nonaggression pact in making its agreement with Britain (March 1939).

He told the Reichstag:

"Therefore, I look upon the agreement... as having been unilaterally infringed by Poland and thereby no longer in existence."

One major obstacle, however, still stood in the way of a German invasion of Poland — the might of Soviet Russia. Russia was bound to view a German invasion of Poland as a threat to her own security.

Hitler knew, therefore, that if he invaded Poland he would probably have to fight Britain, France, and Russia simultaneously (a war on two fronts).

Russian neutrality, however, (if it could be gained) would only mean the possibility of war on a single front. Hitler, therefore, turned his attention towards negotiations with the Russians during the summer of 1939.

The British were also attempting at this time to win the support of Russia in the event of a war with Germany. The outcome shocked Europe.

On 22nd August 1939, much to the consternation of Britain and France, Hitler and Stalin announced the formation of the **Nazi-Soviet Pact**.

They promised not to go to war with each other for a period of 25 years.

They also secretly agreed to invade Poland jointly and divide it between them. The Nazi-Soviet pact cleared the path for a German takeover of Poland.

Hitler had achieved a master-stroke.

He could now invade Poland with Russian approval and help instead of fearing Russian reprisals. The Pact also had advantages for Stalin. They were:

1. Stalin had bought time for the Soviet Union to strengthen herself against the likelihood of a future German attack.
2. The annexation of Polish territory to Russia (which was to follow) would put extra distance between Germany and the Russian interior and so create a buffer zone. If the Germans had been allowed to take the whole of Poland then the reverse would have been the case.
3. Stalin had the advantage that Britain and France would have to fight Germany first (and therefore weaken Germany before Russia had to face her).

5.10 The Nazi Invasion of Poland

At 4.45 a.m. on 1st September 1939 German tanks rolled into Poland.

At 11.15 a.m. on 3rd September 1939, Chamberlain broadcast to the British nation:

“This morning the British Ambassador in Berlin handed the German Government a final note stating that unless we heard from them by eleven o’clock that they were prepared at once to withdraw their troops from Poland, a state of war would exist between us. I have to tell you now that no such understanding has been received and that consequently this country is at war with Germany.”

The French declared war on Germany at 5 p.m. the same day. Appeasement had failed.

Chamberlain told the House of Commons:

“Everything that I have worked for, everything that I had hoped for, everything that I have believed in during my public life, has crashed in ruins.”

