



Your current position:

[History on the Net](#) > [Authentic History](#) > [1930-1939](#) > [the road to war](#) > germany: 1919-1939

## The Road to War: Germany: 1919-1939

### Part 1: Post WWI



#### The Weimar Republic

WWI fighting ended with the armistice of November 11, 1918. Post-war peace was achieved with the abdication and exile of Kaiser Wilhelm II, the creation of the Weimar Republic, and German acceptance of the Treaty of Versailles. The Weimar constitution created a semi-presidential system in which power was divided between the president, a cabinet and a parliament. The office of chancellor was appointed by the president and was basically the chairman of the Reichstag (the parliament). To secure the peace, the Weimar Republic accepted punishment inflicted on them by the Allies, including mass reductions in the size of their military, payment of war reparations, reduction of territory, and

acceptance of the "war guilt" clause. Almost from the start, the Weimar Republic came under attack from within. Right-wing extremists, meanwhile, used their political power to oppose any democratic system, and to blame the country's WWI defeat on a conspiracy between socialists and Jews. Although the moderate government maintained power, violence erupted on the streets between the left and right. It was a rough start for this democracy.

#### War Reparations

As the loser, Germany was forced to pay for the war. In 1921 these "reparations" were set at 269 billion Marks, or roughly 32 billion dollars—a staggering sum. Some economists argued against such a big bill, and predicted that it would take Germany until 1988 to pay it. Later that year the sum was reduced to 226 billion Marks, still considered an astronomical amount by many observers. Reparations came in a variety of forms, including coal, steel, intellectual property (eg. the trademark for Aspirin) and agricultural products. In 1923 Germany defaulted on its ability to deliver further amounts of coal and steel. In response, French and Belgian troops occupied the Ruhr River valley inside the western border of Germany, the center of the German coal and steel industries. The German people passively resisted the occupation (workers and civil servants refused orders and instructions from the occupation forces), thus leading to a further strain on Germany's economy and contributing significantly to inflation (a rise in the prices of goods & services). When the government began printing more money to pay its debts, it created astronomical "hyperinflation", the worst ever seen in the history of civilization.

The buying power of German money simply disintegrated. The statistics to the right, which compare the value of the German Mark (the basic unit of currency) with the American dollar, illustrate the point. By the end of 1923, a life savings of a hundred thousand Marks would not buy a loaf of bread. In November, the government started printing new marks called Rentenmarks, which simply lopped off all of the zeros from what the old money was worth. This helped stabilize things, but there remained the

#### The German Mark v. the U.S. Dollar

1914: \$1 = 4 Marks  
 1921: \$1 = 75 Marks  
 02/1923: \$1 = 48,000 Marks  
 10/1923: \$1 = 440,000,000 Marks (440 million)  
 11/1923: \$1 = 4,200,000,000,000 Marks (4.2 trillion)

problem of reparations. In 1924, a payment plan was worked out and Germany's economy improved. However, it made the German economy, as well as the economies of the rest of Europe, dependent on the United States. A cycle of loans was created: The U.S. loaned money to Germany, which then made reparations to other European nations, which then used the money to pay off their debts to America. Therefore, any problems with the U.S. economy could severely hurt Germany and the rest of Europe.



#### The Nazi Party

The far-right group pressuring the Weimar Republic was the Socialist German Workers' Party (NSDAP, hereafter referred to as the Nazi party). The Nazis evolved from Germany's working class. They blamed capitalism, the ruling class, liberalism, communists, and trade unions for the nation's problems, all of which, they claimed, were connected with Jewish conspiracy. They demanded that all Jews be deprived of German citizenship. Intensely nationalist, Nazis wanted all German peoples united under one nation (this was a revival of the "Greater Germany" idea which had been disregarded back in 1871, when a unified "Lesser Germany" was created out of the northern kingdoms, led by Prussia, leaving out Germans of the Austrian empire).

One of the main supporters of these ideas was Austrian-born Adolf Hitler, who had been a corporal in the German army during WWI. By 1923 Hitler had skillfully increased Nazi Party membership from 3,000 to 15,000, and had organized a private army of mostly ex-soldiers, the SA (also called storm troopers, or "brownshirts" because of the color of their uniforms) to attack his political opponents. They appropriated the swastika, an ancient symbol frequently used in Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism, which had become popular in the Western world as a symbol of good luck.



[The Brownshirts & Hitler](#), date unknown



[The swastika as a good luck symbol \(4 examples\)](#)

#### The Beer Hall Putsch

That fall, in Munich, Hitler engineered a revolt against the Weimar Republic. The revolt came to be known as the Beer Hall Putsch, because it was launched from a beer hall, which were commonly used as places to debate politics and hold political meetings. The uprising was quickly put down. The Nazi party was ordered to disband, and Adolf Hitler was arrested. During the trial, in which Hitler's words were reported almost verbatim in the press, Hitler moderated his tone, even dropping his usual anti-Semitism. He based his defense on his selfless devotion to the Volk (the people) and the need for strong action to save them. Hitler was convicted of treason and sentenced to five



[Defendants in the Beer Hall Putsch trial \(Hitler is 4th from the right\)](#)

years in prison. He stayed in a reasonably comfortable cell and was allowed lengthy visitations. This was a customary

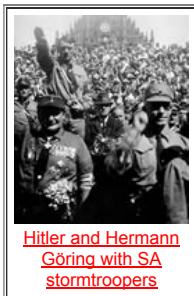
sentence for people whom the judge believed to have had honorable, but misguided motives. Because of Hitler's impressive performance at trial, he was pardoned by the Bavarian Supreme Court after serving only 8 months in prison. While in prison he wrote *Mein Kampf* (My Struggle), his blueprint for the future of Germany. Relying on old superstitions and stereotypes, Hitler scapegoated Jews as the main cause of Germany's woes. He called on Germans to repudiate the humiliating Treaty of Versailles; he advocated Pan-German nationalism (a unification of all Germanic peoples), and for *lebensraum* (living space) for Germany by



Photo of Hitler, taken 12/20/24, the day he was released from prison

conquering territory to the east (in Russia) as the only means out of the country's economic situation. Once released from prison, Hitler successfully persuaded the German government to lift the ban on the Nazi party, and then turned his energies to gaining political power through legal means. The episode had taught him that taking power by force was not the way to do it. He became determined to win over the hearts and minds of the people.

**Part 2: 1928-1935: Hitler's Rise to Power**



Hitler and Hermann Göring with SA stormtroopers

The Nazi party remained a fringe party into the 1928 elections. That year they polled just 810,000 votes, or 2.5% of the vote. But they gained ground. In 1929 the American stock market crashed. American banks recalled money from Europe, and cancelled the loans that made it possible for Germany to pay reparations. Spending cuts and tax hikes, put into effect by emergency decree, had the result of increasing unemployment in Germany by 2.1 million. Subsequently, in the September 1930 elections, the Nazi party polled 6.5 million votes, or 18.3% of the vote. Nazi party representation in the *Reichstag*, Germany's parliament, expanded from 12 seats to 107, making them the second largest party.



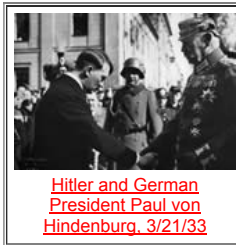
Newspaper on the crash of the U.S. stock market, October 1929

By 1932 the German economy was a disaster. Unemployment was up to 6 million, German banks were put under government control, and there was an epidemic of German bankruptcies. Finally, on June 1, 1932, Chancellor Brüning was ousted, and replaced by Franz von Papen. The cabinet which Papen formed had virtually no support. To gain the Nazis as allies, he repealed his predecessor's ban on the SA (the "brownshirts"). During Hitler's rise to power, the SA had functioned as his private militia, which he used to intimidate rivals and disrupt the meetings of competing political parties. With the ban against the SA lifted, riots between the SA and Communists quickly erupted on the streets of Berlin in June 1932, resulting in more than 400 street battles and 82 deaths. This destabilization was crucial to Hitler's rise to power, in part because it convinced many Germans that once Hitler became chancellor, the endemic street violence would end. Papen called for an election for July 1932, hoping to get a majority in the *Reichstag*. Instead,



Franz von Papen

the Nazi party received 13.5 million votes, 37% of all votes cast, and more than any other party had received. Political maneuvering by President Hindenburg and von Papen prevented Hitler being offered the chancellorship, but after the November 1932 elections, von Papen felt he had no choice but to offer Hitler the chancellorship. Papen believed he could do so while still isolating Hitler. He was wrong.



Hitler and German President Paul von Hindenburg, 3/21/33

**Hitler Appointed Chancellor**

On January 30, 1933, President Paul von Hindenburg appointed Hitler Chancellor of Germany. The German people celebrated with a torchlight vigil. This key appointment allowed Hitler, over the next year and a half, to consolidate power. Another key event was the February 27, 1933 arson attack on the *Reichstag* building, where the German parliament met. The Nazis blamed communists, and then pressured President Hindenburg to pass an emergency decree which suspended civil liberties and authorized mass arrests of communists, including all of the Communist parliamentary delegates. With them gone and their seats empty, the Nazis gained even more power. In March 1933 the Nazis in the *Reichstag* passed the **Enabling Act**, which allowed Hitler's government to deviate from the



Hitler Youth poster (2 versions)

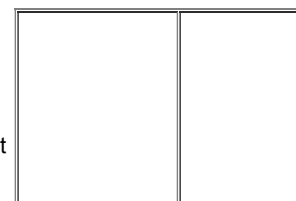
constitution as necessary. They outlawed labor unions, imposed press censorship, and banned all other political parties. The Nazis established a secret police force called the *Gestapo*, sent political opponents to concentration camps, and, required all children 10 years of age and older to join Nazi youth organizations.

Hitler's appointment as chancellor, followed by the suppression of all political parties except the Nazis, did not end brownshirt violence. With no Communist party meetings to disrupt, the stormtroopers became aimless and would sometimes riot through the streets after a night of drinking. They would attack citizens on the streets, and then attack the police who were called to stop them. Complaints of "overbearing and loutish" behavior by stormtroopers became commonplace. The Foreign Office even complained of instances where brownshirts manhandled foreign diplomats. The stormtroopers' behavior disturbed the German middle classes and other conservative elements in society, especially the *Reichswehr*, (the German Army).

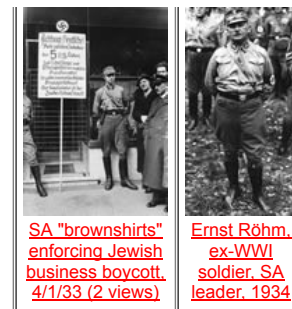
Matters came to a head in June 1934 when President Hindenburg, who had the complete loyalty of the Army, informed Hitler that if he didn't do something about the SA, he would dissolve the government, declare martial law, and declare an end to the "Hitler experiment".

**The "Night of the Long Knives"**

Without the support of the *Reichswehr*, Hitler possessed absolute power only in theory. He felt he had little choice but to comply. In what became known as the "Night of the Long Knives"



Hitler ordered the *Schutzstaffel* (SS) (an elite military force which evolved out of Nazi party security forces and Hitler's personal body guards), and the *Gestapo* to assassinate many of the leading brownshirts. Hitler also used the moment to purge his political enemies both in and outside the Nazi party. At least 85 people were purged, from June 30 to July 2, 1934, although the death toll may actually have been in the hundreds. Hitler took to the airwaves to justify the killings, arguing



SA "brownshirts" enforcing Jewish business boycott, 4/1/33 (2 views)

Ernst Röhm, ex-WWI soldier, SA leader, 1934

that the dead had been guilty of treason against the state, that they were "poisoning of the wells in our domestic life". Hitler's cabinet then approved a measure declaring the acts justified self-defense. While some Germans were shocked by the killings, many others saw Hitler as the one who restored "order" to the country. The army voiced their approval. The ailing President Hindenburg died on August 2, 1934. The Nazi-controlled *Reichstag* consolidated the offices of president and chancellor, and declared Adolf Hitler as *Führer und Reichskanzler* (Leader and Reich Chancellor). After the "Night of the Long Knives" and Hindenburg's death, the *Reichswehr* accepted Hitler's leadership. Hitler further cemented his relationship with them by announcing plans to illegally rearm the nation, and to increase the size of the *Reichswehr*, which was renamed the *Wehrmacht*. Upon Hindenburg's death, the oath taken by a German soldier was changed from one of allegiance from the German Constitution to one of personal loyalty to Adolf Hitler.

### The Economy

By 1935, Germany had become a fascist state. The government exercised total control over all political, economic, and cultural activities. Within the economic sector, unemployment in Germany was epidemic. Early Nazi work creation programs, however, tended to benefit the rural areas rather than the cities where they were most needed. One work program that occupies a special place in Nazi mythology is the construction of the autobahns. These gigantic roads constructed across Germany were more about rearmament than about job creation. Only a tiny fraction of the predicted jobs actually materialized, but the roads had critical military value and became a symbol of German reconstruction. Significant energy was devoted to the construction of apartments for the overcrowded cities, but again, these programs had small effects on overall employment.

### The "Volk" Products

In some cases, Hitler's government put people to work developing and manufacturing "Volks" products (the people's). In Hitler's Germany, the worker was celebrated for their contribution to German history (and for their racial purity). And yet, throughout the 1900s, Hitler had been frustrated that the average German worker did not have access to the same products that had become commonplace in industrialized America—things like the refrigerator, the radio, and the automobile. In fact, this had contributed to Germany's longstanding sense of inferiority, and was tied to the Nazi belief in the "stab-in-the-back legend" about why Germany had surrendered in WWI. To fix this problem, Hitler's Third Reich made it its mission to use the authority of the regime to streamline industrialization in order to create standardized, simple versions of key consumer products. According to the propaganda, these products would allow the "Volk" (the people) to achieve an immediate higher standing of living.

The first Volk product to be announced was the *Volksempfänger*, the "people's radio". The set, the VE 301, was introduced in 1933 and was available on the installment plan. Clearly, with this product, Hitler's intentions went beyond an expression of dedication to the people. In 1933, only 24% of the nation's population had radios. That year, Hitler appointed Joseph Goebbels, the organizer of the Nazi election campaigns from 1930-1933, his Minister of Propaganda. Goebbels had a talent for manipulating media and imagery, and he was among the first to recognize the power of radio as a tool of propaganda. Clearly, the "people's radio" was intended to place more Germans within the

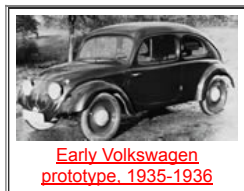


The Volksempfänger VE 301 (2 views)

Volksempfänger poster

Joseph Goebbels, 1932

sound of Hitler's voice. To limit the ability of Germans to hear alternate points of view, the VE 301 did not have shortwave capabilities, and it became illegal for Germans to listen to foreign broadcasts. The VE 301 continued to drop in price throughout the 1930s, and by 1938 nearly 70% of Germans who worked in the cities owned a radio. The countryside was penetrated only after a cheaper radio was introduced in 1939. After that, radio ownership almost doubled in 2 years.



Early Volkswagen prototype, 1935-1936

Hitler took a personal interest in the automobile, and he made it his mission to make them available to average Germans. In 1933 there was only 1 car for every 37 households in Germany, and the vast majority of these were owned by businesses. Most of the gains made after that were due to investments in the German automobile industry by General Motors of Detroit. Even so, the cost of the cheapest German car, at about 1,450 Reichsmarks, was still too high for it to be within reach of the average



Hitler inspects a Volkswagen, 1937

German. In 1934 Hitler announced plans to build the *Volkswagen*, "the people's car," at a cost of 1,000 Reichsmarks. Two big German car companies, Daimler-Benz, and Auto Union, agreed to fund the project, headed by Ferdinand Porsche. By 1935 they were road testing the first Beetle, but Porsche's engineering failed to get the cost of the car down to the 1,000 Reichsmarks Hitler had demanded. Hitler then made the decision that the car would not be built in any of the existing automobile plants. Instead, the state would build the largest production plant in the world, even larger than Henry Ford's River Rouge factory in Detroit, paid for at state expense. To pay for the vehicles, customers were required to make a weekly deposit of at least 5 Reichsmarks into an account, on which they received no interest. Once the account balance had



reached 750 Reichsmarks, the customer would receive delivery of a new Volkswagen. The first year it was offered, 1939, 270,000 people signed up for the program. However, not a single VW was ever delivered to a civilian customer. After 1939, the entire output of the half-finished factory was set aside for official government use, and once the war began, the factory was converted to production of military equipment. The entire concept of the "people's car" was a huge flop. Only after WWII did the Volkswagen find a niche in mass-consumption.

**Why? Lebensraum**

None of Hitler's meddling with the economy had anywhere near the effect as did his illegal rearming of the nation. But rearming was certainly about much more than job creation. At this point, it might be useful to discuss the overall "why?" question about Hitler and the Nazis. Why did they rearm and start a war? Was it about resources? About killing Jews? Can we just easily dismiss Adolf Hitler as an evil madman? Such explanations are often given and taken too hastily. Nazi perceptions of history and their political views have been discussed above. What's important to understand is how those perceptions created the vision that Hitler had for Germany.

Hitler's longstanding assessment of Germany's future during his rise to power was that Germany's potential was limited by its geographic boundaries. He believed that Germany's limited supply of raw materials, its densely packed population, and its limited agricultural capacity would never allow for an economy that could rival those of other industrialized nations, or provide the general population with an American-style standard of living. Hitler's assessment was that the territory of Germany was not sufficient to support an agricultural population as existed in Germany in 1933 at standards of living anywhere near those of the cities. German scientists concluded that in order to achieve anything like self-sufficiency, Germany would have to add an

additional 17-20 million acres of empty farmland to their territory. Hitler reasoned that the only way out of this situation was to obtain sufficient *Lebensraum* (living space) for the German people. This, in fact, had been Germany's main goal in WWI, which they had intended to be a limited war to open up expansion in the East. Allied strategy for subduing Germany seemed to bear out that conclusion. During the war, the British and French blockade of Germany resulted in an epidemic of chronic malnutrition in the Germany and Austria that was widely blamed for killing at least 600,000 people. In comparison, France, Great Britain, and the United States controlled huge tracts of agricultural territory and dominated the shipping lanes. With Germany defeated in WWI, the Allies considered the issue of

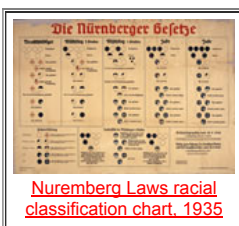


*Lebensraum* closed. As far as they were concerned the distribution of European land, resources, and population, which had preoccupied much of the politicking and war of the previous two centuries, was permanently settled. The Allies were delighted to have ended up with a status quo that had Germany dependent on them for food imports, even though that dependence, combined with 1920s hyperinflation and 1930s depression, caused further food-related suffering for the German people.



One of Hitler's most basic objectives, therefore, was to show that the issue of land, resource, and population distribution had not been settled. For some foods, Hitler would conquer the farmlands of Denmark to the north, and France to the west. For permanent living space, he would turn to the east--to Poland, the Ukraine, and Russia. And Hitler had made it clear in *Mein Kampf* that there could be no talk of incorporating the local

population of Eastern Europe into the Reich. The local populations would have to be rearranged. Some would be allowed to stay as slave labor on German settlement farms. Others, especially the "rootless" wandering Jews and gypsies the Nazis perceived as the historic threat to the rooted Germanic farmer of legend, would be eliminated. And the SS would be the vanguard, a wall of racial purity sweeping east, behind which the German peasant farmer could colonize. Anti-Semitism was thus an important component of Hitler's political program. In the 1920s, Hitler had taken a personal interest in the burgeoning Eugenics movement in the United States, which advocated for a purification of the human race by continuously culling out the bottom ten percent of society (which, by their definition, included non-Whites, Jews, the poor, and the mentally and physically handicapped).



By 1935 fascist Germany had the power to make eugenics state policy. First, Hitler had to deal with German Jews. He began by restricting their rights as Germans, while gradually moving toward restricting their rights as human beings. The 1935 Nuremberg Laws outlawed interracial marriages, restricted property rights, and barred Jews from the civil service, the universities, and all professional and managerial occupations. Anti-Semitism erupted into violence on the night of November 9, 1935, now called *Kristallnacht* (the night of broken glass). That night, 7,500 Jewish owned businesses were looted and destroyed, 200 synagogues were burned, and more than 20,000 Jews were sent to concentration camps.

**Part 3: Breaking Away**

To carry out Hitler's mission, he had to rearm Germany, in violation of the Treaty of Versailles. In the summer 1933, Hitler made the decision to stop making reparations payments. A few months later he announced that Germany was withdrawing from the League of Nations, and would no longer participate in any military disarmament discussions. These were clear signals of where

Germany was headed, but few outsiders seemed willing to understand. Germany was soon engaged in a gigantic program of industrial military output. The plan was that by the end of 1937, Germany would have a standing army of 300,000 men, organized into 21 divisions, which in wartime could be increased



to 63 divisions. This was the defensive phase of the plan. Offensive capability would be added between 1938 and 1941. This plan set into motion a timetable for Hitler's aggression. In order to meet the 21 division goal in 1937, Germany would have to implement conscription (forced military service) for German men within two years. Yet this was a violation of the Treaty of Versailles, which might prompt France into invading. If France invaded, they would easily cripple Germany's industrial capacity, mostly located in the Ruhr, part of the Rhineland along the border with France which had been demilitarized as part of the Treaty. This meant that Hitler must remilitarize the Rhineland before they could realistically prepare for war.



Map of Ruhr, Germany

### Remilitarization of the Rhineland

Hitler sent the troops in on March 7, 1936. He seems to have anticipated the worst. The reoccupation was carried out with minimal force, and many were sent in on bicycles with orders to retreat if met with any French resistance. But the action took place on a weekend, and the French were further distracted by their election season. This worked to Hitler's advantage. The French president did not want to start a war with Germany in the middle of an election. The French and British both vigorously protested Hitler's actions, but that's all. There was no military response, no threat of military response.



Map: The Rhineland

The policy of **appeasement**, giving Hitler a little of what he wanted in order to avoid another World War, was reinforced by Hitler's behavior after the Rhineland remilitarization. The Nazi regime seemed to enter into a period of relative respectability. In the summer of 1936, Berlin successfully hosted the Olympics, where the Nazi press even gave ample and fair coverage of the successes of the Black American track and field star, Jesse Owens. At the World's Fair in Paris the following year, the German pavilion was one of the biggest attractions. And Hitler was demonstrating that the German economy was a model of recovery and reform. Unemployment was down, productivity was up, and life was returning to normal for Aryan Germans. Even the regime's anti-Semitism had been toned down, if only temporarily. This lack of any real response from the Allies demonstrated to Hitler their lack of political will, and likely emboldened him to further action. With the Western border now secure and the vital industrial Ruhr under protection, Hitler could turn his attention to his next goal—unifying all Germanic Europeans.



Map: The Anschluss with Austria, 3/12/38

### The Anschluss: Germany annexes Austria

Unification of Germany and Austria had been one of Hitler's first goals in creating an empire of Germanic peoples. The move had the support of many Austrians—both Nazis and non-Nazis. The Austrian Chancellor Kurt Schuschnigg was against unification with Germany and planned a referendum on the issue. He believed the Austrian people would vote to maintain their independence. On March 11, the Austrian Nazi party executed a coup and canceled the referendum. Power was quickly transferred to Germany, and German troops crossed the border to enforce the *Anschluss* ("link up"). To give their actions the appearance of legitimacy, the Nazis then held a direct vote, asking the people to ratify what had already been done. They claimed that the Austrian people approved the *Anschluss* with 99.73% of the vote. In one bloodless stroke, Hitler united most of the German peoples of the old Reich and the old Austrian empire as "Greater Germany," succeeding where the Austrians had failed back in 1866.

### The Czechoslovakia Crisis & Munich Agreement, September 1938

Hitler next set his sights on the Sudetenland of Czechoslovakia. After the *Anschluss*, Czechoslovakia now bordered Greater Germany on three sides. As in Austria, many citizens in the Sudetenland were German people who advocated for union with Germany. Negotiations took place over the summer. Czechoslovakia had a well-trained army, but was reluctant to fight against Germany without Western help. France, however, was particularly unprepared for war, and so it was up to British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain to take the diplomatic lead. Chamberlain felt that many of the grievances of Sudeten Germans were legitimate, and he believed that Hitler's demands on future territory could be appeased by negotiating a settlement of the Sudeten question favorable to German aims. Czechoslovakian president Edvard Beneš resisted these efforts, however, and tensions increased.

The real crisis began on September 12. A British push for mediation failed when frustrated German Sudetens withdrew from the negotiations, sparking violence and riots. The following day, President Beneš attempted to restore order by declaring martial law in the Sudetenland. Karl Henlein, the Sudetenland leader, fled to Germany. At 6 p.m. on the 15th, Henlein gave Beneš an ultimatum: either return the Sudetenland to a state of normalcy, or there would be "further developments" (war). Beneš rejected the ultimatum and the standoff continued. Late in the day British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain announced that he would go to Germany to meet with Hitler. Chamberlain & Hitler met at *Berchtesgaden*, the German leader's mountain retreat, to try and find a solution. They agreed that the matter of German unification with the Sudetenland should be put to a vote. France agreed. But Czechoslovakia resisted the idea, and threatened war with Germany. France and England gave the Czech government 24 hours to accept the vote.

Finally, on the 21st, Czechoslovakia gave in. The next day, however, Hitler made new demands—that the ethnic claims of Germans in Poland and Hungary must also be satisfied. Czechs took to the streets in outrage. They were angry not just at Germany, but at their own government for being so weak. They demanded and received a new government, which quickly mobilized for war. Meanwhile, the Soviet Union announced they were ready to defend Czechoslovakia. Czech President Beneš, however, refused to go to war with Germany without the support of England and France.

But the West did not want war, despite Hitler's breach of the previous deal. Chamberlain appealed to Hitler on the 28th for a personal conference. Chamberlain flew to Germany and met Hitler in Munich, with the chiefs of the governments of France and Italy also in attendance. The Czechoslovak government was neither invited nor consulted. On September 29, the **Munich Agreement** was reached, and it was signed by Germany, Italy, France, and the United Kingdom in



[British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain announces the Munich Agreement. 9/30/38](#)

the early morning hours of the 30th. According to its terms, the German army was to occupy the Sudetenland by October 10, and an international commission would decide the future of other disputed areas. The Czechoslovak government, having been betrayed by the West, felt they had no choice but to swallow the agreement. On September 30 after some rest, Chamberlain went to Hitler and asked him to sign a peace treaty between the United Kingdom and Germany. After Hitler's interpreter translated it for him, he happily agreed. When Chamberlain arrived back in London, he

and waved the piece of paper and declared that he had achieved "peace for our time." The assembled crowd roared its approval. It proved to be a hollow achievement. After a series of political maneuvers involving Slovakia, Bohemia, and Moravia, German armies entered Prague, Czechoslovakia and proceeded to occupy the rest of the country. Again, no one stopped them. Czechoslovakia became a protectorate of the Third Reich. Hitler was now prepared to set his sites to the East, toward Poland.



[Map: The Partition of Czechoslovakia](#)



[Cartoon: Wonder How Long the Honeymoon Will Last?](#)

#### Stalin and Hitler as Friends?

Hitler had further territorial ambitions in Poland. Germany was wary, however, of losing Soviet imports. After Czechoslovakia, both France and Great Britain attempted negotiations with Russia that would provide security to Poland in the event of a German invasion, but these negotiations did not meet with Stalin's approval. The main sticking point was the refusal of Poland to allow any Soviet troops on Polish soil. Meanwhile, the Soviets and Germans entered into secret negotiations. Despite intense animosity between fascism and communism, the two found common ground in anti-capitalism. Germany and the Soviet Union first worked out an economic deal. Then, in a secret protocol, they agreed to divide up Poland into German and Soviet spheres of influence. The agreement was signed on August 23, 1939. This came as a shock to the allies, who had based their dealings with Hitler in

part on the assumption that the threat of war with Russia would help keep Hitler in check. With this agreement in place, Hitler was ready to make further demands concerning territory lost to Poland after WWI, in anticipation of launching a war to the East.

**The Crisis Over Poland:** The original German plan for Poland called for an invasion on August 26. However, on August 25, Poland and England signed the Polish-British Common Defense Pact, committing England to the defense of Poland. Meanwhile, the new Allies suggested that they were willing to continue negotiations with Hitler, which had the effect of postponing the German invasion. On the 26th, Hitler tried to dissuade England and France from getting involved in the upcoming war. Hitler believed that the Allies would not go to war over Poland, but would negotiate a settlement after Poland has been defeated. On August 29,

Germany issued one last diplomatic offer with these demands: The "free city" of Danzig was to be returned to Germany (Gdynia would remain with Poland), and within a year there was to be a plebiscite in the Polish Corridor, based on residency as it was in 1919. An exchange of minority populations between the two countries was proposed. These terms had to be accepted by noon the next day. When Polish Ambassador Lipski went to see German Foreign Minister Ribbentrop on the 30th, he announced that he did not have the full authority to sign the agreement, and Ribbentrop dismissed him. It was then broadcast that Poland had rejected Germany's offer, and negotiations with Poland came to an end. Poland's forces were mobilized and then ordered to demobilize, dramatically reducing Polish defenses when the attack came early the next day.



[Map of border changes made to Germany and Poland after WWI](#)

On September 1, 1939, the German *Wehrmacht* invaded Poland. Although the military had been the beneficiary of Germany's industrial efforts, it was not a fully modernized machine (perhaps a reflection of the limitations of the Germany economy).  
More



[Hermann Göring](#)

than half of German soldiers went to war on foot, and a large part of the army's supplies were mobilized by horse. Much of German military power was concentrated in armor (especially tanks), and in the *Luftwaffe* (Air Force), under the command of WWI flying ace Hermann Göring. Hundreds of thousands of Germans has been employed in the aircraft industry. Germany entered the war with a relatively poor army, but with superior numbers of tanks and aircraft, including some of the best machines in existence at that time. Within days of the German invasion of Poland, both England and France responded by declaring war on Germany. For the second time in the century, the major of powers of Europe were at war.

[| top |](#)

Last modified October 14, 2013