

From the Rome-Berlin Axis to the Anschluss

The diplomatic counterpart of this economic-strategic program developed by Hitler in the course of 1936 was the campaign to weaken the French alliance system in Eastern Europe and to discourage the other great powers—Italy, England, and Soviet Russia—from joining France and its remaining Eastern European clients in resisting Germany's bid for hegemony in that region. Since the annexation of Austria was the first item on Hitler's agenda for Germany's continental expansion, it is no surprise that he endeavored to solidify Germany's friendly ties with Italy, the traditional guarantor of Austrian independence that had been established during the Ethiopian invasion and the early stages of the Spanish civil war. On October 26, 1936, the two governments announced the conclusion of an agreement on Italo-German cooperation that was soon being touted as the "Rome-Berlin Axis." This agreement in effect signaled the Italian leader's tacit acceptance of Germany's freedom of action in Austria in particular and Southeastern Europe in general. The reorientation of Italian foreign policy toward an accommodation with Germany reflected Mussolini's conversion to Hitler's conception of the geopolitical basis of Italo-German cooperation: the complementary expansion of Italian power southward into the Mediterranean basin and of German power eastward into the heartland of Central Europe and beyond. The formation of the Rome-Berlin Axis on this basis afforded Hitler two crucial advantages: It removed the Italian veto of Germany's annexationist designs on Austria; and it increased the likelihood of tension in the Mediterranean and North Africa between Italy and the two dominant powers in that region, Great Britain and France.

Throughout the year 1937 Hitler steadily increased the pressure on the Austrian government to align its foreign and domestic policies more closely with those of the Third Reich. In the meantime he encouraged the Austrian Nazis to step up their subversive activities in preparation for a peaceful takeover in Vienna that would lead to a voluntary unification with Germany. But when the Austrian chancellor, Kurt von Schuschnigg, authorized police raids on the headquarters of the Austrian Nazis that uncovered embarrassing evidence of collusion with their counterparts in Germany, Hitler reversed his earlier strategy for an evolutionary move toward *Anschluss* and prepared to achieve that result quickly through direct intimidation of the government in Vienna. In a meeting between Hitler and Schuschnigg at Berchtesgaden on February 12, 1938, the Führer berated the Austrian chancellor for failing to pursue pro-German policies and threatened immediate military intervention unless Schuschnigg allowed the Austrian Nazis to play a major role in his government. Though the Austrian leader acceded to this demand on the advice of Mussolini, he boldly decided to preempt Hitler's plans for a peaceful takeover of his country by seeking an expression of national support by means of a plebiscite to be held on March 13 in which the Austrian people would be asked to vote on the question of their nation's independence. Though a plebiscite conducted before the advent of the Nazi regime in Germany would probably have resulted in an overwhelming vote for unification of the two German-speaking states, anti-Nazi sentiment in Austria was sufficiently strong to prevent Hitler from risking the embarrassment of a negative vote. Thus, after securing the tacit consent of Mussolini, the Führer sent German troops into Austria on March 12, where they met no resistance from Austrian military forces. Schuschnigg's request for advice from the British and French governments



Adolf Hitler (1889–1945) with Herman Goering at Reichs Chancellery, 1938: This native Austrian has just engineered Germany's absorption of German-speaking Austria and is preparing to annex the German-speaking region of Czechoslovakia known as the Sudetenland. Both acts were cynically justified on the grounds of President Wilson's hallowed principle of national self-determination.

had revealed that neither London nor Paris was any more willing to risk a European war by intervening on Austria's behalf than was Mussolini. On April 10 a rigged plebiscite resulted in an overwhelming vote for the unification of Hitler's adopted country and the land of his birth.

Enter Imperial Japan

Germany's success in securing Italian consent for its expansionist policy in Central Europe was matched by the gradual evolution of a cordial relationship with the rising imperial power in the Far East (see p. 234). By encouraging Japanese imperial ambitions in East Asia, Germany stood to benefit from the pressure that such expansion would exert on the Asian possessions of Germany's principal antagonists in Europe.

Great Britain would be less likely to interfere with Germany's eastern policy on the continent if confronted with the simultaneous challenge to its imperial interests from Japan in the western Pacific and from Italy along its Mediterranean lifeline. The ratification of the Franco-Soviet Pact by the French parliament in February 1936 also highlighted the obvious congruity of interest between Tokyo and Berlin. In combination, Germany and Japan could restrain the Soviet Union on its European and Asian flanks to the benefit of both. Accordingly, on November 25, 1936, the two governments unveiled with much fanfare an agreement designated as the Anti-Comintern Pact. Its ostensible purpose was to promote cooperation to combat the subversive activities of the Communist International and its political apparatus in each country. But since both Germany and Japan had long since suppressed their domestic Communist parties, the agreement was widely and correctly suspected of containing secret provisions directed against the Soviet Union. With the adhesion of Italy to the agreement on November 6, 1937, the world was confronted with the nightmare of an impending global alignment of the three expansionist powers.

Germany's annexation of Austria in the spring of 1938 posed a direct threat to the security of Czechoslovakia, which faced German armies poised to strike all along the Western borders. Hitler wasted no time in laying the groundwork for his projected blitzkrieg against that country. The furious propaganda campaign that the Nazi leader unleashed against the Prague regime the following summer was directed at its alleged persecution of the three million German-speaking inhabitants of the Bohemian borderlands. The Sudeten Germans' principal grievance was the preference accorded Czech-speaking citizens in the recruitment of government employees, a discriminatory practice that engendered considerable resentment among the German-speaking minority during the Depression years and was skillfully exploited by Berlin. Fully prepared to resort to war, the Führer instructed the leader of the Sudeten German party, Konrad Henlein, to demand from the Czechoslovak government what he knew it could not grant, namely, concessions that would lead to the political autonomy of the German-speaking region as a prelude to secession and eventual annexation by Germany. The loss of the Sudetenland would deprive Czechoslovakia of its defensible frontiers and the elaborate border fortifications constructed behind them, leaving the truncated nation exposed to invasion by a German military force unimpeded by natural or artificial barriers; it would also set a precedent for similar demands by the other national minorities in the polyglot republic—the Poles of Teschen, the Hungarians in southern Slovakia and the Carpatho-Ukraine, even the increasingly dissatisfied Slovaks. The result was bound to be the dissolution of the multinational state erected in 1918.

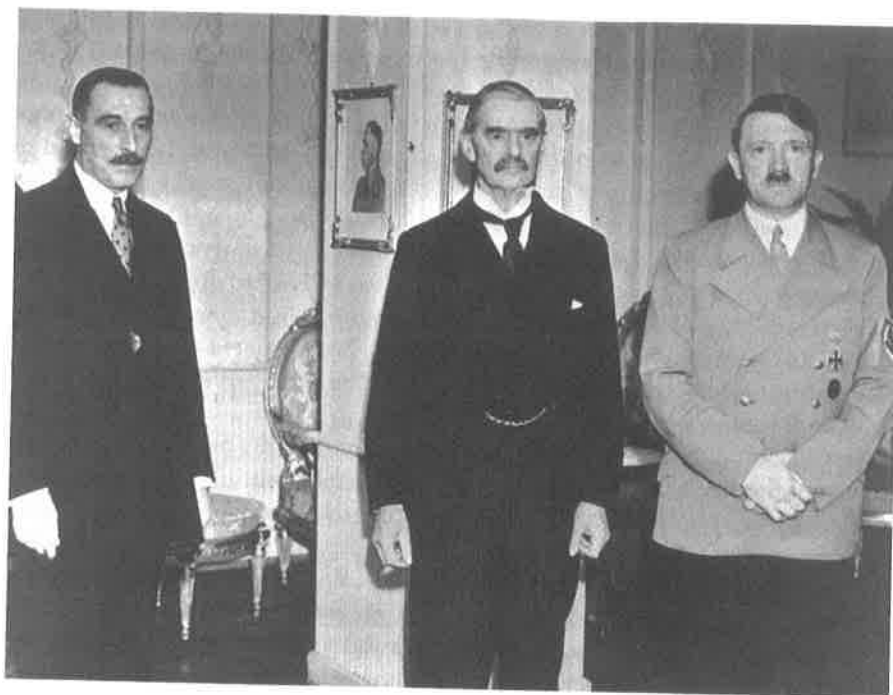
The Pursuit of Appeasement at Czechoslovakia's Expense

As German intimidation of Czechoslovakia intensified, and as it became increasingly evident that Hitler was fully prepared to resort to force in pursuit of his annexationist aims, the French and British governments were compelled to clarify their policies toward the impending crisis in Central Europe. In July the Czech minister in Paris was privately informed that France was unwilling to go to war over the issue of the Sudetenland, though it would remain publicly committed to the Franco-Czechoslovak alliance for the sake of appearances. The deplorable condition of the French air force, the refusal of Belgium to allow the transit of French troops to Germany's most vulnerable industrial

targets, and exaggerated estimates of the size of Germany's army and the strength of its Rhineland fortifications all contributed to this French failure of nerve. The British government, unaware of Paris's repudiation of its obligation to Prague, became greatly alarmed at the prospect of being dragged into a war between France and Germany over an issue of no importance to British national interests. British leaders exerted every diplomatic effort to avert a war that might bring German air attacks on British cities still inadequately protected by the anti-aircraft artillery system and radar installations then under construction. Anglo-French pressure on Prague to reach a settlement with the Sudeten party compelled Czech President Edvard Beneš to grant all of that party's main demands in a major concession on September 5. But since war rather than a political settlement on any terms was Hitler's goal, he instructed the Sudeten German party to fabricate a new list of grievances that could be exploited when preparations for the invasion were complete.

The German dictator was deprived of his goal of military conquest because of the eagerness of the British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain to take him at his word. Like many British statesmen of his generation in both major parties, Chamberlain was profoundly influenced by memories of the two major events of his younger years, the Great War and the Paris Peace Conference. He shared the widespread conviction that the great powers had blundered into a terrible war that might well have been averted by a more skillful, active diplomacy. He also believed that the victorious Allies had mistreated Germany at the peace conference by refusing to apply the principle of national self-determination to the delimitation of the defeated nation's eastern frontiers. The convergence of these two issues during the Czechoslovakian crisis of September 1938 prompted Chamberlain to make one last effort to prevent a second world war by means of face-to-face negotiations with Hitler to reach a definitive solution of what he conceded to be Germany's just grievance against Czechoslovakia. On September 15, two days after Hitler approved the Sudeten German leader's withdrawal from the negotiations with the Czechoslovak government in preparation for war, Chamberlain boarded an airplane for the first time in his life and flew to Hitler's private retreat high in the Bavarian Alps at Berchtesgaden in a frantic quest for a settlement.

He received there Hitler's demand for the transfer of the Sudetenland to Germany on the basis of national self-determination and returned to London to try to persuade the representatives of France and Czechoslovakia to accept this peaceful solution. To obtain the support of the skeptical French premier, Edouard Daladier, for this plan, Chamberlain dramatically reversed a century of British foreign policy by promising to guarantee Czechoslovakia's redrawn frontiers. The government in Prague angrily rejected the Anglo-French proposal but was quickly forced into line by the threat of an end to British peacemaking efforts and a bluntly repeated refusal of French assistance if war broke out. When Chamberlain returned to the German city of Godesberg on September 22 to inform Hitler that his demands had been accepted by all interested parties, the Führer reneged on the agreement that he himself had earlier proposed; the deteriorating political situation in the Sudetenland required *immediate* German intervention. The German retraction at Godesberg turned many British and French appeasers into hard-liners and momentarily stiffened the resolve of Chamberlain and Daladier to hold to their position even at the risk of war. France began to mobilize its army and Great Britain announced the mobilization of its fleet on September 27. In



Hitler and British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain (1869–1940) meet for the second time in Hitler's hotel room at the German city of Bad Godesberg, September 22, 1938: The man at the left is Sir Neville Henderson, the British Ambassador to Germany, who was a leading proponent of the policy of appeasement. Hitler's repudiation of the compromise reached at Godesberg led to the third (and final) meeting between the two leaders (with their French and Italian counterparts) at Munich a week later.

London and Paris trenches were dug in parks, gas masks were distributed, and children were evacuated to the countryside. Hitler ordered the attack on Czechoslovakia to begin on the morning of September 30.

Few doubted that war would eventually lead to the defeat of Czechoslovakia for the strategic and geographical reasons summarized above. The French war plan envisioned a token advance into the Rhineland to be followed by a tactical withdrawal behind the Maginot Line for the winter. The British government could only hold out the possibility of sending two underequipped divisions to the continent. The Soviet Union, whose treaty with Czechoslovakia was to enter into effect once France had come to that country's assistance, had no way of assisting its ally except by air because of the Polish-Romanian barrier and therefore did not even take the precaution of a general mobilization. As the hopelessness of Czechoslovakia's position regardless of British, French, and Russian support became apparent, the tragic absurdity of the situation began to dawn on officials in Paris and London: Czechoslovakia was about to be crushed and Europe about to be embroiled in a war over the trivial details of how and when a previously agreed-on plan of territorial transfer was to take place.

While resuming their preparations for war, therefore, Chamberlain and Daladier desperately cast about for ways to arrange a negotiated settlement. The British prime

minister persuaded Mussolini to intervene with Hitler to arrange for a final meeting to avert war. For reasons known only to himself, the Führer agreed to postpone his mobilization plans and to host a conference of the leaders of Britain, France, and Italy at Munich on September 29. His decision to stop at the brink of war may have been influenced by the hesitations of Mussolini, the reluctance of his generals, or the refusal of Chamberlain and Daladier to stand idly by if Germany attempted to settle the Sudeten crisis by military means. In any event, he had every reason to assume that his Godesberg demands would be accepted and he knew that their implementation would spell the early demise of the Czechoslovak state.

A Settlement at Munich

The Munich conference, from which both Czechoslovakia and its ally the Soviet Union were excluded at German insistence, produced an agreement that provided for the evacuation of Czechoslovak military forces from the Sudetenland between October 1 and 10 to be followed by its occupation by German troops in four stages. An international commission would administer plebiscites in disputed areas and fix the new frontier. Britain and France undertook to guarantee the redrawn borders of Czechoslovakia against unprovoked aggression while Germany and Italy promised similar guarantees once Polish and Hungarian territorial claims had been satisfactorily adjudicated. The Czechoslovak government was presented with this agreement in the form of an ultimatum on September 30 and denied even the right to submit written objections that Germany had enjoyed at the Paris Peace Conference in 1919. Abandoned by its Western allies and threatened with a war it could not hope to win if it resisted, the Prague government dutifully signed what its leaders knew to be its death warrant.

On their return to their respective capitals, Chamberlain and Daladier received euphoric expressions of public gratitude for having prevented the arcane dispute in far-off Czechoslovakia from plunging Britain and France into a war with Germany that neither nation wanted nor was prepared to fight. For those who believed Hitler's oft-repeated assurances that his objective in Eastern Europe was the absorption of territory populated by citizens of German descent, the Munich Pact promised the end of Germany's claims against what remained of Czechoslovakia—deprived of its German-speaking minority—and seemed to herald the advent of stability in the region. They ignored those passages in the Führer's speeches and writings that clearly enunciated his ultimate goal, which was not to liberate oppressed Germans from foreign rule but rather to subject the non-German peoples of all of Eastern Europe and western Russia to direct or indirect domination from Berlin. There were those in England and France who were willing to tolerate and even to encourage the diversion of Germany's expansionist energies eastward at the expense of states for which they had little concern or, in the case of Soviet Russia, considerable aversion. But the leaders of Great Britain and France who struck the bargain with Hitler at Munich did not belong to this group of enthusiastic appeasers. They appear genuinely to have believed, Chamberlain with greater confidence than the more skeptical Daladier, that the annexation of the Sudetenland would remove the last obstacle to the peaceful reintegration of Germany into the Versailles system thus modified to its benefit.

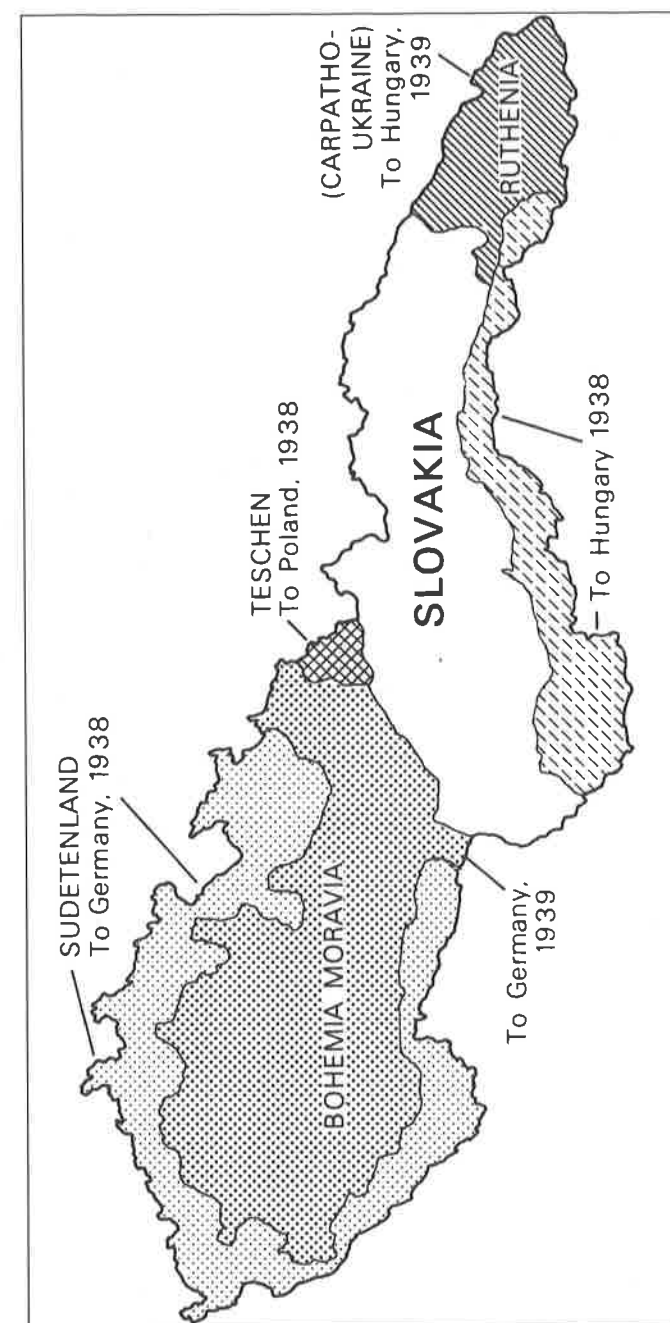
Far from securing the territorial status quo on the continent, the Munich settlement accelerated the process of disintegration that would tip the balance of power

in Eastern Europe toward Germany. The territorial amputations had condemned the rump state of Czechoslovakia to such a precarious existence as to preclude its operating as an independent political unit. Germany's annexation of the Sudetenland, together with the subsequent acquisition of the Teschen district by Poland and parts of Slovakia by Hungary, shattered the political authority of the government in Prague. The Slovaks, who inhabited the eastern region of the state and resented the politically dominant Czechs, seethed with separatist agitation that was actively encouraged by Berlin. The loss of the formidable string of fortifications along its western frontier exposed the truncated Czechoslovak state to unimpeded military invasion from Germany. Once the Munich Pact was put into effect, the political disintegration of Czechoslovakia and its absorption by Germany could have been prevented only by Hitler's willingness to abide by its terms or the determination of the Western powers to enforce them. The first possibility was ruled out by the German leader's plan to destroy Czechoslovakia preparatory to waging a war in the west to crush France and forcibly remove Britain from the continent to free German military forces for the land grab in the east that remained the ultimate goal of his foreign policy. The second prospect—that of an effective Anglo-French military deterrent to German violations of the Munich accord—was precluded by the geographical and strategic impossibility of bringing such Anglo-French military power as existed to bear against Germany.

The devastating consequences of the Munich Pact for rump Czechoslovakia were also felt in the other countries of Eastern and Southern Europe. France's willingness to sacrifice its strongest and most trusted ally in the region encouraged Czechoslovakia's partners in the Little Entente to hasten the reorientation of their foreign policies toward greater cooperation with the emerging German colossus. Shocked by France's abandonment of Prague and uneasy about threats to its own territorial integrity from Hungary and the Soviet Union, Romania resumed its rapprochement with Germany that had begun in response to earlier indications of the recession of French power in Eastern Europe. An economic agreement signed on December 10, 1938, guaranteed German access to Romanian oil (to supplement the insufficient synthetic production from domestic coal) as well as surplus wheat (to help compensate for Germany's annual shortfall in agricultural output). Yugoslavia, also subject to Hungarian revisionist demands and alarmed at the perpetual threat of Italian territorial ambitions along the Adriatic, strengthened its economic ties with Germany and solicited Hitler's restraining influence on its two revisionist neighbors. Hungary rapidly adjusted to the new political realities in Eastern Europe, dramatically demonstrating its alignment with Berlin's foreign policy by joining the Anti-Comintern Pact and withdrawing from the League of Nations. As a reward it received Germany's approval to annex Czechoslovakia's easternmost province, the Carpatho-Ukraine (Ruthenia), which contained numerous Hungarians.

The March on Prague and the Threat to Poland

The process of German economic and political domination of the smaller states of Eastern and Southern Europe was completed by Hitler's destruction of the Munich Pact on March 15, 1939. On that day the grievances of the Slovak minority against the Czech ruling elite were seized on as a pretext for the German military occupation of Prague. The western half of the country, inhabited by the Czechs, was promptly transformed into a German protectorate while the eastern half was converted into the satellite state



The Partition of Czechoslovakia, 1938-1939

of Slovakia. In response to this spectacular and effortless extension of German military power into the Danube basin, all of the states of Eastern and Southern Europe, with one important exception, were either seduced or intimidated into accepting German hegemony on the eastern half of the continent. Romania and Yugoslavia, the former allies of Czechoslovakia and clients of France, relapsed into a policy of diplomatic and economic subservience to Germany. Hungary and Bulgaria, already firmly in the German orbit, resumed their active support for Hitler's aggressive moves.

It is ironic that the single exception to this pro-German reorientation in Eastern Europe after Munich was the policy conducted by the earliest supporter and principal beneficiary of Germany's eastern revisionism: Poland. Berlin's tactical flirtation with Warsaw, inaugurated by a nonaggression pact signed in 1934 and confirmed by the two governments' collaboration in the territorial amputation of Czechoslovakia in the autumn of 1938,* reflected Hitler's intention of using Poland first as an accomplice in removing the Czech menace and later as a geographical barrier to possible Soviet interference with his planned military offensive in the west. But the government in Warsaw consistently rebuffed Hitler's demands that Poland publicly confirm its subservience to German foreign policy by adhering to the Anti-Comintern Pact. Though staunchly anti-Communist and implacably hostile to the Soviet Union, the Polish ruling elite stubbornly withheld this symbolic gesture because it would signal the end of the precarious balancing act between Germany and Russia that Poland had conducted since its rebirth as a nation after the Great War. For reasons of national pride, the Poles were unwilling to accept the same fate as the Czechs.

Poland's refusal to affirm its subservience to German foreign policy after the German march on Prague caused Hitler to revise his attitude toward Poland and therefore to reverse his timetable for European domination. With an unreliable Poland to the east, he could ill afford to resume his preparations for the war against France and Great Britain that he had originally planned to launch after removing the military threat of Czechoslovakia and obtaining that country's valuable munitions plants and raw materials for the German war machine. The Führer accordingly decided that the war in the west would have to await the prior defeat of Poland, the only recalcitrant power on Germany's eastern flank. Since the authorities in Warsaw could be neither enticed nor intimidated into acquiescing in Germany's plans for continental conquest, as all of its neighbors in Eastern Europe had been, Poland would have to be eliminated before rather than after the inevitable showdown with the Western democracies. Once the decision to attack Poland ahead of schedule was taken in the spring of 1939, the old grievances that had been deemphasized during the period of German-Polish detente were suddenly revived. The alleged maltreatment of the Germans in Danzig and the economic difficulties caused by the separation of East Prussia from the rest of the Reich once again gave rise to heated protests from Berlin. German demands for the restoration of Danzig to German sovereignty and an extraterritorial road and railroad across the corridor to East Prussia were met with the same polite but firm refusals in Warsaw that had greeted Hitler's earlier efforts to obtain Polish adherence to

* After the Munich Pact and German's annexation of the Sudetenland, Poland annexed the Teschen region with its mixed Polish and Czech population (see map on p. 161).

the Anti-Comintern Pact. Alone among the nations of Eastern and Southern Europe, Poland seemed prepared to defend its territorial integrity and national independence.

A major factor contributing to the stiffening of Polish resolve after the collapse of the Munich settlement was the abrupt change of British and French foreign policy from appeasement to resistance. Shortly after returning from Munich, Chamberlain and Daladier had taken a number of precautions against the possibility that the recent agreement to preserve the peace in Eastern Europe would come unglued. In the early months of 1939, Great Britain greatly accelerated the pace of its rearmament and finally began to formulate precise plans for the deployment of a large expeditionary force on the continent. France took steps to rectify the serious deficiencies in its air power by placing orders for warplanes in the United States after obtaining the tacit consent of the Roosevelt government. But it was the German occupation of Prague that precipitated the fundamental reversal of Anglo-French policy toward Hitler's Germany. Unlike all previous instances of German territorial expansion during the thirties, this one was executed at the expense of non-Germans and therefore could not be justified by the principle of national self-determination that Hitler had previously invoked in regard to the Rhineland, Austria, and the Sudetenland. Public opinion in Britain and France had rallied behind the Munich agreement because it was advertised by all of its signatories as the definitive resolution of Germany's nationality grievances in Eastern Europe. Its unilateral repudiation by Hitler less than half a year later produced a profound sense of betrayal in London and Paris as well as the determination not to repeat the same mistake in the future. As the principal architect of the Munich settlement, Chamberlain abruptly recalled the British ambassador to Berlin and issued a stern note of protest. On March 18, only three days after the fall of Prague, Britain and France approached the governments of the Soviet Union, Poland, Romania, Yugoslavia, Greece, and Turkey about the possibility of forming a coalition to oppose further German aggression. It rapidly became evident that the most likely victim of Hitler's next aggressive move was Poland, the only nation in Eastern Europe that had refused to align its policies with Germany and therefore denied Hitler the luxury of concentrating the bulk of German military forces in the west. In accordance with this perception, the British government took two unprecedented steps in the spring of 1939 that expressed its newfound determination to halt German aggression in its tracks. On March 31 it publicly pledged to guarantee the territorial integrity of Poland. On April 26 it announced its intention to request parliamentary authorization for the introduction of conscription. Never before had Great Britain been willing to promise military assistance to a nation in Eastern Europe and to institute a draft during peacetime. Such measures were unnecessary for France, with its existing treaty commitment to Poland and its large conscript army.

The Abortive Bid to Resurrect the Old Triple Entente

The minor powers of Southeastern Europe whose adhesion to an anti-German bloc Great Britain belatedly sought in the spring of 1939 were by then entirely unsuited for such service. Romania and Yugoslavia had drawn too close to Germany, both economically and politically, to be willing to help defend Poland, whereas Greece and Turkey were too geographically remote to do so. Only the Soviet Union was in a geographical position, and had previously expressed the willingness, to join Britain and France in a common front against Germany. But the Anglo-French overture of March 18 was

foredoomed by the refusal of Poland and Romania to be associated with the Soviet Union and the reluctance of London and Paris to press them on this point. A month later, on April 17, Stalin offered the alternative of a military alliance among France, Great Britain, and Russia—the old Triple Entente of 1914—to guarantee all of the independent nations of Central and Eastern Europe against German aggression. On the same day, however, he authorized the Soviet ambassador to Berlin to broach the subject of a Russo-German rapprochement to officials in the German Foreign Office. In short, a month after the German absorption of Czechoslovakia, the Soviet leader had simultaneously floated two trial balloons to assess the intentions of the two contending blocs that were forming in anticipation of the impending showdown over Poland. The two conflicting traditions of postwar Soviet foreign policy, the Popular Front-collective security strategy of cooperation with the Western powers to restrain Germany and the Rapallo policy of collaboration with Germany against the West, hung precariously in the balance.

Moscow had many reasons to fear the consequences of German hegemony in Europe. Hitler's brutal suppression of the German Communist party, his periodic outbursts against the menace of international communism, and the well-known project sketched in his book *Mein Kampf* and reiterated frequently thereafter for the seizure of Russian land for German agricultural development and resettlement—all of this had made a profound impression on Stalin and converted him to the cause of collective security and the Popular Front during the period 1935–38. But the refusal of the French to transform the Franco-Soviet Pact into a military alliance, the hesitation of Great Britain to commit itself to guaranteeing the territorial status quo in Eastern Europe, and the exclusion of the Soviet Union from the Munich conference left Stalin with the impression that the Western powers looked with favor on Germany's eastward expansion. Anti-Communist sentiment in the Western democracies made the London and Paris governments reluctant to respond to the numerous overtures for cooperation against Germany that had emanated from the Kremlin. The private comments of key policymakers in Great Britain and France suggest that a lack of faith in the efficacy of the Red Army, with its decapitated command structure* and its inadequate transportation facilities, together with the refusal of Poland and Romania to tolerate the presence of Russian troops on their soil, complemented ideological hostility as a motive for this cautious posture. In any case, by the time the British and French governments had overcome this reluctance to make common cause with the Kremlin against Hitler in the spring of 1939, Stalin had decided, for a number of reasons summarized presently, that the best hope for Russia to protect the security of its western frontier lay in rapprochement with rather than resistance to Germany.

The first of these reasons was the Kremlin's discovery of evidence that Hitler's plans for the destruction of Poland were preparatory to a war not against Russia but rather against the Western powers. This conclusion emerged from intelligence reports from a well-placed Soviet spy in Tokyo, which detailed the acrimonious dispute between Germany and Japan during secret negotiations to transform the Anti-Comintern Pact into a tripartite military alliance of the Axis powers. As we have seen, the Japanese steadfastly insisted that any such association be directed specifically and exclusively at the Soviet Union (their primary antagonist on the mainland of Asia), while Berlin had

* Four hundred officers from the rank of colonel up had been executed during the purges of 1937–38.

tried and failed to lure Tokyo into a military alliance aimed solely at France and Great Britain. Had the impending assault against Poland represented merely the first stage of a German invasion of Russia, a Germano-Japanese alliance against the Soviet Union would have obviously represented the most effective means of diluting Moscow's military strength by forcing it to fight a war on two fronts. Yet this was precisely the alignment that Hitler, in spite of unmistakable indications of Japanese interest, was unprepared to contemplate at this time. The announcement of the "Pact of Steel" between Germany and Italy on May 22 confirmed the breakdown of the German-Japanese negotiations and signaled Hitler's intention to direct his aggressive policies against France and Great Britain (the only powers against which Italian assistance would count).

Thus the Soviet Union could hope to escape the trauma of an immediate German invasion, which did not fit into Hitler's plan for a westward advance after the destruction of Poland. It followed that Russia had much to gain from assuming a defensive posture on its western frontier and much to lose from joining a military alliance with Britain and France that might provoke the German dictator into revising his timetable for European conquest and dispatching his forces eastward after Poland's demise. Herein lies the obverse of the sinister intention that Stalin imputed to Western leaders after Munich. An accommodation with Hitler in Eastern Europe would deflect German aggression westward. Russia could obtain considerable advantage by abstaining from a war between the capitalist powers that was likely to result in their mutual exhaustion. In the meantime, such an abstention would afford a precious breathing spell that would enable Stalin to reorganize the command structure of the Red Army that had been decimated by his own paranoid purges of 1937–38; it would also permit the gearing up of the Russian economy for the war with Germany that was bound to come once Hitler had secured his western flank by defeating France and forcibly removing British power from the continent.

It was these considerations of national advantage that determined the reversal of Soviet foreign policy in the spring and summer of 1939. On May 3 the Soviet foreign minister, Maxim Litvinov, whose Jewish ancestry and passionate advocacy of the pro-Western policy adopted in the mid-1930s rendered him inappropriate for the task of negotiating an accommodation with Nazi Germany, was abruptly replaced by Stalin's loyal henchman Vyacheslav Molotov. On May 20 the new Soviet foreign minister informed the German ambassador of Stalin's interest in exploring a "political basis" for greater Russo-German cooperation. For the next three months, as Hitler's propaganda war against Poland reached a fever pitch, the low-level discussions between the Germans and the Russians resumed their leisurely pace. In the meantime, Britain and France finally agreed on July 25 to dispatch military missions to Moscow to explore the basis of an alliance with the Soviet Union against Germany.

But the manner in which the two Western governments conducted their negotiations with the Kremlin conveyed neither a sense of urgency nor a determination to secure Soviet membership in the anti-German coalition as an equal partner. The departure of the Anglo-French negotiating team was postponed for eleven days and then sent on its way not by airplane, which would have got the mission to Moscow in a day, but rather by the slowest possible means of sea transport, a 9,000-ton passenger-cargo vessel. When it finally reached Moscow on August 11 the mission consisted of mid-level officers uncertain of their negotiating powers. When the talks got underway,



The signing of the Nazi-Soviet Non-Aggression Pact, August 23, 1939: Left to right, German Foreign Minister Joachim von Ribbentrop, Stalin, Wilhelm Gauss (legal advisor to the German Foreign Ministry who drafted the agreement), Gustav Hilger (counselor to the German Embassy in Moscow who served as interpreter), Soviet Foreign Minister Vyacheslav Molotov, and German Ambassador Friedrich Werner Count von der Schulenburg. Evidence of the "secret additional protocol" partitioning Poland and establishing a Soviet sphere of influence in the Baltic states did not come to light until after the war.

the Anglo-French delegates evaded searching questions from the Soviets about troop strength, military plans, and means of persuading Poland and Romania to permit the passage of Russian military forces across their territory. The Russians could not help but compare the desultory behavior of the British and French governments to the eagerness of Chamberlain and Daladier to fly to Munich to deal directly with Hitler. It also contrasted dramatically with the strong expressions of interest in a Russo-German rapprochement that had begun to emanate from Berlin during the first three weeks of August. The strenuous efforts by the German foreign minister, Joachim von Ribbentrop, to secure an audience with Stalin as soon as possible were prompted by Hitler's concern about the timing of the Polish campaign, which had to be completed before the onset of winter would interfere with mechanized transport and aerial operations.

Stalin's Separate Peace and the Coming of the Second World War

Stalin's decision to receive Hitler's foreign minister on August 23 marked the end of the double game that Russia had played since the spring of 1939. During the two meetings conducted in the Kremlin on that historic date, the German and Soviet representatives reached a series of understandings that were codified in two documents—one for

public consumption, the other for the confidential reassurance of the two signatories. The public document committed the two signatories to the observance of strict neutrality toward one another should either become involved in war. Hitler thereby secured Soviet acquiescence in Germany's forthcoming campaign against Poland as well as relief from the threat of a two-front war once he turned his forces westward against France and Britain. The Soviets obtained what Chamberlain and Daladier had earlier secured at Munich: the postponement of a war with Germany that their countries were at the time unprepared to fight, which afforded them precious time to upgrade their strategic capabilities as best they could. The "secret additional protocol" confirmed the geopolitical reality that had, since the end of the Great War, represented a potential basis of collaboration between Germany and Russia and an obstacle to Moscow's rapprochement with the West: While France and, belatedly, Britain, had been driven by the dictates of national interest to support the independence of the new states in Eastern Europe, Germany and the Soviet Union were impelled by the promise of territorial aggrandizement to cooperate in their destruction. Thus the two signatories secretly agreed to the fourth partition of Poland. Finland, Latvia, and Estonia—all, like the eastern sector of Poland, former provinces of the tsarist empire—were allotted to the Russian sphere of influence.* Germany recognized Russia's right to recover the province of Bessarabia, whose seizure by Romania during the Russian Revolution had never been recognized by the Soviet regime. Except for the reannexation of Bessarabia, the motive for this Soviet expansionism may be summarized in a single phrase: the quest for security. Soviet domination of Finland and the two northernmost Baltic states would reduce the vulnerability of Russia's second capital, Leningrad, by providing it with a defensive buffer in the path of the traditional northern invasion route. The recovery of the territory lost to Poland in the war of 1920–21 would restore the historic buffer between the Germanic and Russian populations in Eastern Europe.

The Nazi-Soviet Pact of August 23, 1939, sealed the fate of Poland and enabled Hitler to launch the European war he had planned since coming to power. Last minute British efforts to promote a peaceful resolution of the German-Polish crisis had no chance of success: Hitler's military timetable required the war against Poland to begin no later than early September to permit the annihilation of that country before the autumn rains could interfere with the operations of his tanks and dive bombers. He would not again be cheated out of a victorious war against a despised victim as he had been at Munich. His evasive reply to Britain was therefore designed to split the Western powers from Poland—since he preferred to engage his enemies seriatim if that could be arranged—rather than to serve as the basis for a negotiated settlement he was determined to avoid at all costs. On the eve of August 31, a fabricated border incident was used as the justification for mounting a massive armor and air assault against Poland the following morning. The British and French governments, which had previously warned Berlin that the rapprochement with Russia would not alter their determination to honor their commitment to Poland, dutifully declared war on Germany on September 3 following the expiration of their ultimatum demanding the evacuation of German forces from Polish soil. With the temporary abstention of Russia and Italy (the

* Lithuania, assigned to Germany's sphere in the Nazi-Soviet Pact, was transferred to the Soviet sphere in a subsequent agreement on September 28.

latter on the grounds of unpreparedness), only four European powers were involved in the military drama that unfolded at the beginning of September 1939 on the Polish plains. But the limited number of participants and the geographically localized theater of combat did not prevent journalists from soon referring to a second world war.

CHAPTER 5

Germany's Second Bid for European Dominance (1939–1945)



The first test of Blitzkrieg ("Lightning War"). Two tanks of the SS-Leibstandarte Adolf Hitler Division cross the Zora River during the German invasion of Poland in September 1939. The German army's successful use of tanks and aircraft to achieve rapid penetration of the Polish defenses would be repeated in the spring of 1940, when the French army was overwhelmed by this new tactic in six weeks.