

Preparations for war against Poland

After the German occupation of Prague on 15 March 1939, in violation of the Munich Agreement, the British government abruptly abandoned the appeasement policy it had pursued in the Czech crisis. Britain extended an unconditional guarantee of support to Poland in case Germany should use force to gain its territorial demands. Members of Chamberlain's government had begun to realize that Hitler was aiming for more than merely a rectification of Versailles or the restoration of the 1914 German borders. Hitler responded to Britain's show of support for Poland by officially repudiating the non-aggression pact he had signed with Poland in 1934 and the naval treaty with Britain in 1935. On 11 April 1939 he gave the order to prepare an attack on Poland with a target date of 26 August. On 22 May he signed a formal military alliance (the Pact of Steel) with Italy to gain Italian support against France and England. To overcome Italian apprehensions he told them that war would not come before 1942-43.

One day later, on 23 May 1939, he summoned the heads of the three branches of the Wehrmacht and their chief aides to the Chancellery to inform them that war with Poland was likely to lead to war with the West and to give them some guidelines for preparing for this prospect. The minutes of the meeting were taken by Lt. Col. (and later General) Rudolf Schmundt, who had replaced Col. (later General) Friedrich Hossbach as his chief military adjutant in January 1939. Like the Hossbach Memorandum (Doc. 4.10), this document, though somewhat disjointed, reveals more of Hitler's true aims than his public speeches, which were always geared toward achieving maximum propagandistic effect. Hitler candidly admitted that the return of Danzig was not Germany's true objective in the struggle with Poland. The true objective was territorial expansion, to which England would regrettably, from Hitler's point of view, never agree. Hence war with England could not be avoided in the long run even if the Western powers stayed out of the war against Poland, and the military would have to prepare accordingly. Although he claimed to have learned valuable lessons from the failures of the First World War, Hitler apparently, still believed that after the conquest of France Germany could defeat England by imposing a naval and air blockade.

4.16 Minutes of a conference on 23 May 1939

TOP SECRET

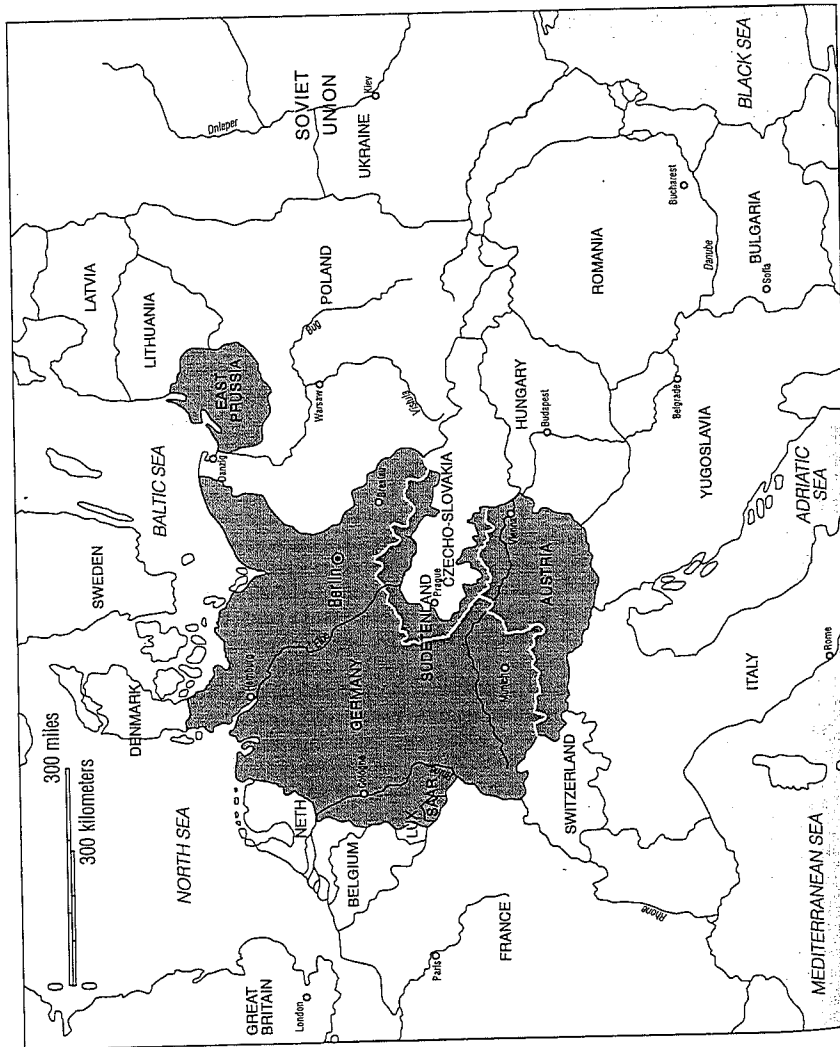
Place: The Führer's Office, New Reich Chancellery

Present: The Führer, Field Marshal Goering, Grand Admiral [Erich] Raeder, General [Walther] von Brauchitsch, General [Wilhelm] Keitel, General [Erhard] Milch, General [Franz] Halder, General [Karl Heinrich] Bodenschatz, Rear Admiral Schniewindt, Colonel [Hans] Jeschonnek, Colonel [Walter] Warlimont, Lieutenant Colonel [Rudolf] Schmundt, Captain Engel, Lieutenant Commander Albrecht, Captain von Below.

SUBJECT: INSTRUCTIONS ON THE POLITICAL SITUATION AND FUTURE AIMS

The Führer defined as the purpose of the conference:

- I Analysis of the situation.



Map 2 The German Reich, 1 January 1939

- 2 Definition of the tasks for the Wehrmacht arising from the situation.
- 3 Clarification of the consequences of these tasks.
- 4 Ensuring the secrecy of all decisions and work resulting from these consequences.

Secrecy is the precondition for success.

The Führer's observations are paraphrased below:

Our present situation must be considered from two points of view:

- 1 The actual development of events from 1933 and 1939.
- 2 The permanent and unchanging situation in which Germany finds itself.

In the period 1933–1939 progress was made in all areas. Our military situation improved enormously.

Our situation in regard to the rest of the world has remained the same.

Germany had dropped from the circle of great powers. The balance of power had been effected without Germany's participation. This equilibrium is disturbed when Germany's demands for the necessities of life make themselves felt, and Germany reemerges as a great power. All demands are regarded as "encroachments."

The English are more afraid of dangers in the economic sphere than of the simple threat of force.

A mass of 80 million people has solved the ideological problems. So, too, must the economic problems be solved. No German can evade the creation of the necessary economic conditions for this. The solution of these problems demands courage. The principle by which one evades solving the problems by adapting oneself to circumstances is unacceptable. Circumstances must rather be adapted to aims. This is impossible without invasion of foreign states or attacks upon foreign property.

Living space proportionate to the size of the state is the basis of all power. One may refuse for a time to face the problem, but finally it is solved one way or another. The choice remains between ascent or decline. In 15 or 20 years we shall be compelled to find a solution. No German state can evade the question longer than that. We are at present in a state of patriotic fervor, which is shared by two other nations: Italy and Japan. ...

Poland will always be on the side of our adversaries. In spite of treaties of friendship, Poland has always had the secret intention of exploiting every opportunity to do us harm.

Danzig is not what it is about at all. It is a question of expanding our living space in the East and of securing our food supplies, as well as the settlement of the Baltic problem. Food supplies can be expected only from thinly populated areas. Over and above the natural fertility, thoroughgoing German cultivation will enormously increase the surplus.

Colonies: Beware of gifts of colonial territory. This does not solve the food problem. Remember – blockade.

If fate forces us into conflict with the West, possession of extensive areas in the east will be advantageous. We can rely even less on record harvests in time of war than in peace.

The population of non-German areas will perform no military service and will be available as a source of labor.

The Polish problem is inseparable from conflict with the West. Poland's internal power of resistance to Bolshevism is doubtful. Thus Poland is of doubtful value as a barrier against Russia. It is questionable whether military success in the West can be achieved quickly. Questionable, too, is the attitude of Poland.

The Polish government will not resist pressure from Russia. Poland sees danger in a German victory in the West and will attempt to rob us of victory. There is therefore no question of sparing Poland, and we are left with the decision to attack Poland at the first suitable opportunity.

We cannot expect a repetition of the Czech affair. There will be war. Our task is to isolate Poland. The success of this isolation will be decisive.

Therefore, the Führer must reserve the right to give the final order to attack. There must be no simultaneous conflict with the Western powers (France and England).

If it is not certain that a German-Polish conflict will not lead to war with the West, then the fight must be primarily against England and France.

Fundamental principle: Conflict with Poland – beginning with an attack on Poland – will only be successful if the Western Powers keep out of it. If this is impossible, then it will be better to attack in the West and to deal with Poland at the same time.

The isolation of Poland is a matter of skillful politics.

Japan is a weighty question. Even if at first for various reasons it showed little interest in collaborating with us, it is nevertheless in Japan's own interest to take the initiative in attacking Russia in good time.

Economic relations with Russia are possible only when political relations have improved. A cautious trend is apparent in press comment. It is not impossible that Russia will show itself to be disinterested in the destruction of Poland. Should Russia continue to oppose us, our relations with Japan may become closer. If there were an alliance of France, England, and Russia against Germany, Italy, and Japan, I would be constrained to attack England and France with a few annihilating blows.

The Führer doubts the possibility of a peaceful dispute with England. We must prepare ourselves for the conflict. England sees in our development the foundation of a hegemony which would weaken England. England is therefore our enemy, and the conflict with England will be a life-and-death struggle. What will the struggle be like?

England cannot finish off Germany and subjugate us with a few powerful blows. It is imperative for England that the war be brought as near to the Ruhr basin as possible. It will not be sparing with French blood (West Wall!!).¹⁷ The possession of the Ruhr basin will determine the duration of our resistance.

The Dutch and Belgian air bases must be occupied by armed force. Declarations of neutrality must be ignored. If England and France intend the war between Germany and Poland to lead to a conflict, they will support Holland and Belgium in their neutrality and make them build fortifications in order finally to force them into cooperation.

Belgium and Holland will, albeit under protest, yield to pressure. Therefore, if England intends to intervene in the Polish war, we must occupy Holland with lightning speed. We must aim at securing a new defense line on Dutch soil up to the Zuider Sea. The war with England will be a life-and-death struggle.

The idea that we can get off cheaply is dangerous; there is no such possibility. We must then burn our bridges, and it is no longer a question of justice or injustice, but of life or death for 80 million people.

Question: Short or long war?

Every country's armed forces or government must aim for a short war. The government, however, must also be prepared for a war of 10 to 15 years' duration.

¹⁷ The West Wall (also known as the Siegfried Line) was constructed on the frontier with France in 1938–39.

History shows that people always believed that wars would be short. In 1914 the opinion still prevailed that it was impossible to finance a long war. Even today this idea still persists in many minds. But on the contrary, every state will hold out as long as possible unless it immediately suffers some grave weakening (e.g., the Ruhr basin). England has similar weaknesses. England knows that to lose a war will mean the end of its world power.

England is the driving force against Germany. Its strength lies in the following:

- 1 The British themselves are proud, courageous, tenacious, firm in resistance, and gifted as organizers. They know how to exploit every new development. They have the love of adventure and bravery of the Nordic race. Quality is lowered by dispersion. The cross-section of Germans is higher.
- 2 It is a world power in itself. It has been constant for 300 years. Extended by the acquisition of allies. This power is not merely something concrete, but must also be considered as a psychological force embracing the entire world. Add to this immeasurable wealth, with accompanying creditworthiness.
- 3 Geopolitical security and protection by strong sea power and a courageous air force.

England's weaknesses:

If in the World War we had two additional battleships and two cruisers, and if the Battle of Jutland had begun in the morning, the British fleet would have been defeated and England brought to its knees. It would have meant the end of the World War. It was formerly not enough to defeat the fleet; landings had to be made in order to defeat England. England could provide her own food supplies. Today that is no longer possible.

The moment England's food supply is cut she is forced to capitulate. The import of food and fuel depends on protection by the fleet.

Attack on England by air will not force England to capitulate in one day. But if the fleet is destroyed, immediate capitulation will be the result.

There is no doubt that a surprise attack can lead to a quick decision. It would be criminal, however, for the government to rely entirely on the element of surprise.

Experience has shown that surprise may be nullified by:

- 1 Betrayal to persons outside the circle of military experts.
- 2 Mere chance, which may cause the collapse of the whole enterprise.
- 3 Human incompetence.
- 4 Weather conditions.

The date for attack must be fixed well in advance. Beyond that time, however, the tension cannot be endured for long. It must be borne in mind that weather conditions can render any surprise intervention by navy and air force impossible.

In drawing up plans of attack these unfavorable conditions must be borne in mind.

- 1 An effort must be made to deal the enemy a significant or a final decisive blow right at the start. Considerations of right and wrong, or treaties, do not enter into the matter. This will only be possible if we are not involved in war with England on account of Poland.
- 2 In addition to plans for a surprise attack, preparations for a long war must be made, while opportunities for England on the continent are eliminated.

The army will have to hold positions essential to the navy and air force. If Holland and Belgium are successfully occupied and held, and if France is also defeated, the fundamental conditions for a successful war against England will have been secured.

England can then be blockaded at close range by the air force from western France while the navy with its submarines can extend the range of the blockade ...

The experience of the World War make the following strategic considerations imperative:

- 1 With a more powerful navy at the outbreak of the war, or a wheeling movement by the army towards the channel ports, the end would have been different.
- 2 A country cannot be defeated by an air force. It is impossible to attack all objectives simultaneously, and the lapse of time of a few minutes leaves time for defensive counter-measures.
- 3 The unrestricted use of all resources is essential.
- 4 Once the army, in cooperation with the air force and navy, has taken the most important positions, industrial production will cease to flow into the bottomless pit of the army's battles and can be diverted to benefit the air force and the navy.

The air force must therefore be capable of taking these positions. Systematic preparations for the attack must be made. Studies to this end are of the utmost importance. The aim will always be to force England to its knees. Any weapon is only of decisive importance in winning battles as long as the enemy does not possess it.

This applies to gas, submarines, and the air force. It would be true of the latter, for instance, as long as the English fleet had no available counter-measures; this will no longer be the case in 1940 and 1941. Against Poland, for example, tanks will be effective as the Polish army possesses no counter-measures.

Where effectiveness can no longer be definitively determined, its place must be taken by the elements of surprise and inspired deployment. That is the plan of attack.

[Hitler then gave some more specific instructions for how the plan of attack was to be drawn up by the general staff.]

We shall not be forced into a war, but we shall not be able to avoid one.

Secrecy is the decisive requirement for success. Our objective must be kept secret even from Italy or Japan ...

The close combination of the services for the study of the problem in its entirety is important ...

The staff must include men with great imaginative powers and the best technical knowledge, as well as officers of sober and skeptical judgement.

Working principles:

- 1 No one must be informed who does not have to know.
- 2 No one may learn more than he has to know.
- 3 When must the person concerned know at the latest? No one may know of a matter earlier than is necessary for him to know it.

At the request of Field Marshal Goering the Führer decrees that

- (a) the various services shall decide what construction is to be undertaken;
- (b) there shall be no alterations in the shipbuilding program;
- (c) the armaments programs are to be geared to 1943 or 1944.

Certified as correct for the record
[signed] Schmundt, Lt. Col.

I shall give a propagandist reason for starting the war, no matter whether it is plausible or not. The victor will not be asked afterwards whether he told the truth or not. When starting and waging a war it is not right that matters, but victory.

Close your hearts to pity. Act brutally. Eighty million people must obtain what is their right. Their existence must be made secure. The stronger man is right. The greatest harshness.

Swiftness in making decisions is necessary. Firm faith in the German soldier. Crises are due solely to leaders having lost their nerve.

First requirement: Advance up to the Vistula and the Narev. Our technical superiority will shatter the nerves of the Poles. Every newly formed active Polish force is to be destroyed again immediately. A continuous process of attrition.

New German frontier delimitation according to sound principles and possibly a protectorate as a buffer state. Military operations will not be influenced by these considerations. The wholesale destruction of Poland is the military objective. Speed is the chief thing. Pursuit until complete annihilation.

Conviction that the German Wehrmacht is equal to all demands. The order for the start of hostilities will be given later, probably Saturday morning.

Source: US Department of State Publication 6462, *Documents On German Foreign Policy 1918-1945, Series D (1937-1945), Vol. VII, The Last Days of Peace* (Washington DC: US Government Printing Office, 1956), pp. 205-6 [Doc. 193]

The Nazi-Soviet Non-Aggression Pact

After the Munich Conference, to which the Soviet Union had not been invited despite its treaties of mutual assistance with France and Czechoslovakia, Stalin drew the logical conclusion: the Western powers were determined to avoid war with Germany. The Munich Agreements also effectively ended the mutual assistance pacts between the USSR, Czechoslovakia, and France. As a result the Soviets cautiously turned away from their policy of seeking collective security with the West, a policy they had been pursuing under Commissar for Foreign Affairs Maxim Litvinov (1876-1951) since 1934. The replacement of Litvinov, who was Jewish, by Vyacheslav Molotov (1890-1986) on 3 May 1939 sent the Germans a clear signal that Stalin was interested in coming to some kind of agreement to avoid war. In August 1939 Hitler seized the opportunity to sign a non-aggression treaty with the USSR in the hopes of thereby deterring Britain and France from fighting to defend Poland, but also to overcome the reluctance of the Army General Staff, which had informed him that the German army was not prepared to fight a war on two fronts.

Their mutual interest in partitioning Poland (the eastern portion of which was populated by a majority of Ukrainians and White Russians) provided the basis for a Nazi-Soviet understanding. The Non-Aggression Pact contained a secret protocol (not discovered by the Western powers until 1945) dividing eastern Europe into spheres of influence. On 28 September 1939, after the conquest of Poland, a further secret Treaty of Demarcation modified some of the terms of the secret protocol to the Non-Aggression Pact, notably by allotting Lithuania to the Soviets in return for additional Polish territory. The Nazi-Soviet Non-Aggression Pact set the stage for the German invasion of Poland on 1 September 1939.

4.21 Treaty between Germany and the Soviet Union, 23 August 1939

The Government of the German Reich and the Government of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, guided by the wish to strengthen the cause of peace between Germany and the USSR and starting from the basic provisions of the Treaty of Neutrality concluded between Germany and the USSR in April 1926, have reached the following agreement:

Article 1. The two contracting parties undertake to refrain from any act of violence, any aggressive action, or any attack against one another, whether alone or jointly with other powers.

Article 2. In case either of the contracting parties should become the object of warlike acts on the part of a third power, the other contracting party will not support that third power in any form.

Article 3. The governments of the two contracting parties will in the future continuously remain in contact with each other for consultation in order to inform each other about questions affecting their mutual interests.

Article 4. Neither of the two contracting parties will participate in any grouping of powers that is indirectly or directly aimed against the other party.

Article 5. Should disputes or conflicts arise between the contracting parties regarding questions of any kind, the two parties will clear away these disputes or conflicts solely by means of friendly exchanges of views or if necessary by arbitration commissions.

Article 6. The present Treaty is concluded for a period of ten years with the provision that unless one of the contracting parties renounces it one year before the end of this period the duration of the validity of this treaty is to be regarded as automatically prolonged for another five years.

Article 7. The present Treaty is to be ratified within the shortest possible time. The ratification documents are to be exchanged in Berlin. The Treaty becomes effective immediately upon signature.

SECRET ADDITIONAL PROTOCOL

On the occasion of the signature of the Non-Aggression Treaty between the German Reich and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, the undersigned plenipotentiaries of the two parties discussed in strictly confidential conversation the question of the delimitation of their respective spheres of interest in Eastern Europe. These conversations led to the following result:

- 1 In the event of a territorial and political transformation in the territories belonging to the Baltic states (Finland, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania), the northern frontier of Lithuania shall represent the frontier of the spheres of interest both of Germany and the USSR. In this connection the interest of Lithuania in the Vilna territory is recognized by both parties.
- 2 In the event of a territorial and political transformation of the territories belonging to the Polish state, the spheres of interest of Germany and the USSR shall be bounded approximately by the line of the rivers Narev, Vistula, and San.

The question of whether the interests of both parties make the preservation of an independent Polish state seem desirable and how the frontiers of this state should be drawn can be definitively determined only in the course of further political developments.

In any case both governments will resolve this question by means of a friendly understanding.

- 3 With regard to south-eastern Europe, the Soviet side emphasizes its interest in Bessarabia. The German side declares complete political disinterest in these territories.