

4. WORLD WAR II

The Road to War

By the late 1930s, the European balance of power was, at best, precarious. Under Hitler and the Nazis, the Germans had openly violated the Treaty of Versailles and had pledged to expand their frontiers at virtually any cost. Likewise, Mussolini's Fascists had acted aggressively both in Europe and overseas to make Italy an imperialist power.

Despite those threats to European and world peace, however, the democracies of western Europe did little to stop Nazi and Fascist expansion. They were unable or unwilling to stop the spread of totalitarianism until a major conflict became inevitable.

The leaders of both Great Britain and France seriously underestimated the threat that totalitarianism posed to the peace of Europe. In the final analysis, both countries determined that other factors outweighed the necessity of taking strong, united action against Hitler and Mussolini.

For their part, the British were hampered in the late 1930s by the economic problems that continued to plague that country. Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain, a Conservative who took office in 1937, continued the policies of balanced budgets and low taxes to try to spur economic development.

In this atmosphere of belt-tightening, the British were reluctant to make any large expenditures on defense. To justify the lack of increases in military spending, Conservatives downplayed the threat from dictatorships on the European continent.

Chamberlain in particular thought that Britain could cooperate with dictatorships as well as democracies in Europe. He initiated a policy of making some concessions to Nazi demands in the hopes of curbing Hitler's appetite for German expansion. This policy came to be called appeasement.

Some British leaders also justified appeasement by contending that the British should be concerned with France as well as Germany. These officials came to believe that the Germans had indeed been cheated in the Treaty of Versailles and that French efforts to stringently enforce

the treaty showed that they wanted to dominate Europe. These leaders thought that both Germany and France posed significant, if not equal, threats to the peace of Europe.



A British statesman and prime minister from 1937-1940, Neville Chamberlain pursued the policy of appeasement toward Fascist and Nazi nations. He was forced to resign in 1940 due to the failure of his policies.

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French foreign policy in the immediate postwar period *was* dominated by a fear of Germany. The French believed that they had to insist on strict enforcement of the Versailles treaty to guarantee their own safety.

But during and after the period of the Popular Front, the leftist coalition that came to power under Leon Blum in 1936 shifted the emphasis in French foreign policy.

The Popular Front had been established to economically revitalize France and to send a message of French opposition to fascism and nazism. But one important reason the Popular Front fell apart was that conservatives in France believed that it was serving the interests of communism rather than the interests of France.

These conservatives believed that communism posed a significantly greater threat to France than nazism did. After all, the Nazis did not call for revolution; on the contrary, they suppressed it. French conservatives thought the best way to protect France would be to keep the Communists out of power and keep the French out of war with Germany.

By the late 1930s, neither the British nor the French could stand firm in their rejection of fascism and nazism. The only goal the two countries had in common was a desire to avoid war with the totalitarian leaders at almost any cost.

Meanwhile, fascism and nazism continued to gain strength. This strength was particularly evident in the Spanish Civil War, which broke out in 1936.

Spain had been a troubled area for years. In 1931 the Spanish monarchy was overthrown and a republic was established. From the beginning, the republic led a precarious existence. Leftist groups wanted to enact a wide-ranging reform program and conservatives wanted to restore the monarchy.

In 1936 all of the leftist parties in Spain united in a popular front and won control of the Spanish government. In response, the Spanish army revolted and civil war erupted.

Both the leftists and the rightists in Spain immediately asked the European countries for help in fighting the war. Mussolini and Hitler quickly responded,

providing the rightists with arms and airplanes. The Soviets provided some aid to the leftists, but not enough to offset the Nazi and Fascist efforts.

The French and the British did almost nothing to help the leftists. Both countries tried to convince other European nations to stay out of the struggle. When that failed, they worked for an international resolution of the dispute and provided some aid to the leftists.

Using the aid of Hitler and Mussolini, the Spanish rightists formed a Fascist party under the leadership of General Francisco Franco. The rightists gradually gained the upper hand in the civil war and took complete control of the Spanish government in 1939.

With his efforts clearly succeeding in Spain, Hitler moved forward with his plans to expand Germany in central Europe. In February 1938 he demanded that the Austrian Nazis be included in the Austrian government. On March 12 he sent troops into Austria and annexed the country to Germany, saying that the independent Austrian government could no longer keep order. Mussolini declared his support for Hitler's actions.

Franco brought the Spanish Civil War to an end in 1939 and became Spain's rebel leader. Though Fascist in origin, Franco's party remained neutral in World War II, and pro-Western after the war.



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This Czechoslovakian woman is forced to recognize the occupation of her homeland by German forces in 1938.

The western powers did nothing except voice protests over the annexation. Neither the British nor the French were willing to risk a war over the issue. Since many of the Austrians did appear to want to be part of Germany, the British and the French were willing to let the action pass in the hopes that Hitler would be satisfied with this expansion of German territory.

Hitler, however, had only begun. Later in 1938 he made his move on Czechoslovakia.

Ever since Czechoslovakia had been made independent after World War I, it had contained a large German population. Hitler demanded that Germans living in the Sudetenland in western Czechoslovakia be allowed to form their own independent country by October 1, 1938. The Czechs protested that this would deprive them of their fortifications along their border with Germany.

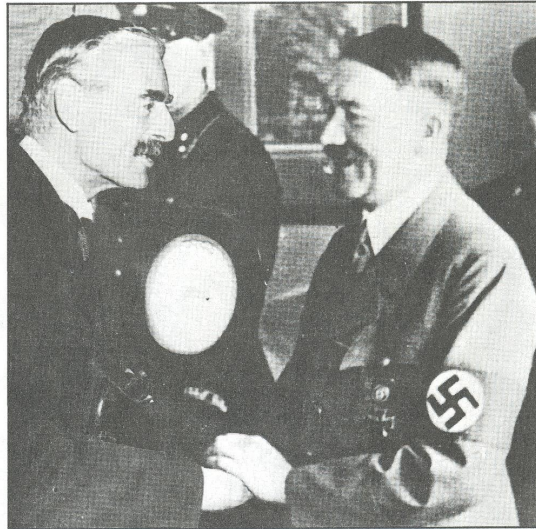
Because Czechoslovakia was allied to France, the French and the British became concerned about the possibility that Hitler would invade the country. In September 1938 Hitler invited British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain and French Prime Minister Edouard Daladier to attend a conference in Munich to discuss the Czechoslovakian question. Mussolini was also invited to attend. Soviet leaders were not invited, and the Czechs were not allowed to participate in the negotiations.

At the Munich Conference, Chamberlain and Daladier decided to try one last time to appease Hitler. His proposal for the Sudetenland was accepted, though independence was delayed until October 10.

The British and French leaders knew that if Hitler wanted to start a war, they were ill-prepared to defend themselves. They hoped that once Hitler achieved his goals in Czechoslovakia, his expansionist desires would finally be curbed. Chamberlain returned to Britain and announced that he believed the great powers had negotiated "peace for our time."

In fact, Hitler was now on the verge of starting a general European war. In March 1939 Nazi troops moved into a defenseless Czechoslovakia and took over the entire country. Appeasement had failed, and World War II was imminent.

Hitler and Chamberlain negotiated a complex plan for the phased German occupation of western Czechoslovakia in 1938. The plan, known as the Munich Pact, was nullified by a German invasion of Czechoslovakia in March 1939.



4. WORLD WAR II: REVIEW

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A. True or False

DIRECTIONS: Read each of the following statements. If the statement is true, mark "T" in the space provided. If the statement is false, mark "F" in the space and change the statement to make it true.

- _____ 1. Both Great Britain and France underestimated the strength of totalitarian movements before World War II.
- _____ 2. The British had to justify their increases in defense spending during the 1930s.
- _____ 3. Some British people thought that France was as much a threat to peace in Europe as Germany.
- _____ 4. French conservatives thought that nazism was a greater threat than communism.
- _____ 5. The Popular Front in Spain was led by Francisco Franco.

B. Fill in the Blank

DIRECTIONS: Fill in the missing word or words.

- 6. _____ became prime minister of Great Britain in 1937.
- 7. The policy of making concessions to Nazi demands to try to curb Hitler's appetite for German expansion was called _____.
- 8. The leftist coalition that came to power in France in 1936 was called the _____.
- 9. In March 1938 the Nazis annexed _____ to Germany.
- 10. The Munich Conference in 1938 discussed problems involving _____ and _____.

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C. Cause/Effect Relationships

DIRECTIONS: Write the cause or causes of each of the following Western European reactions to Nazi and Fascist expansion.

11. The British downplayed the threat of the expansion of nazism.

CAUSE: _____

12. Chamberlain initiated a policy of appeasement. (List two)

CAUSES: _____

13. The French were not united in their opposition to Hitler.

CAUSE: _____

14. Britain and France did not take action against Germany after Austria was annexed. (List two)

CAUSES: _____

15. Chamberlain and Daladier accepted Hitler's proposal for the Sudetenland at the Munich Conference. (List two)

CAUSES: _____

