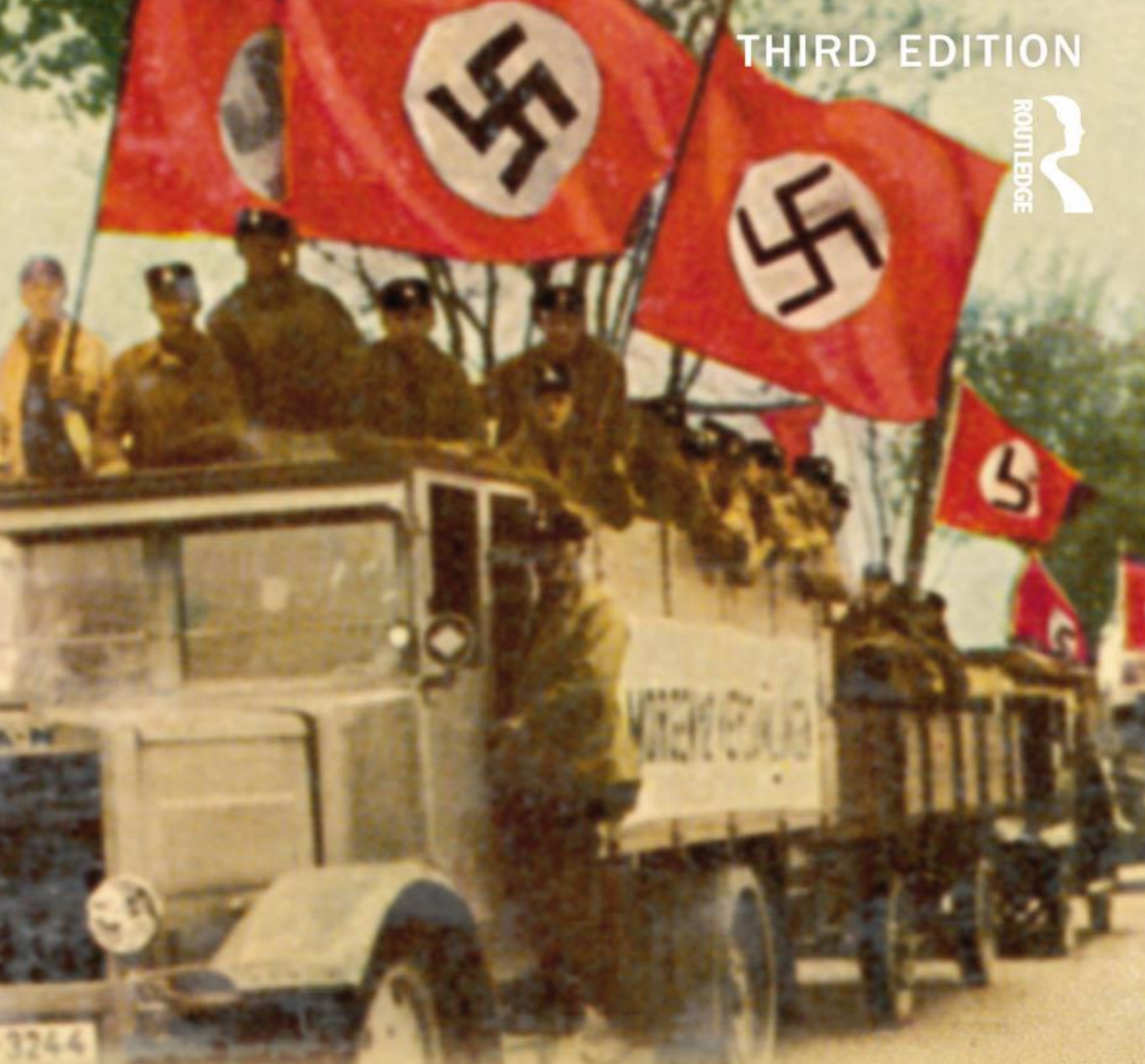


THIRD EDITION

ROUTLEDGE



# THE ORIGINS OF THE SECOND WORLD WAR IN EUROPE

P.M.H. BELL

# The Origins of the Second World War in Europe

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# The Origins of the Second World War in Europe

THIRD EDITION

P. M. H. Bell

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## Editor's Foreword

Mr Philip Bell's interpretation of the origins of the Second World War is dispassionate, uncommitted, and perhaps for that reason brilliantly unanswerable. His basic point that 'some theories wide enough to explain everything, end by explaining nothing', is made in the context of a consideration of the argument that the existence of sovereign states is a cause of wars, an argument that Mr Bell considers to be 'true but unhelpful'. If we apply the point to the long debate on the 'appeasement' of Nazi Germany in the 1930s we can see that a blanket condemnation of 'appeasement' is too imprecise to be tenable, and, indeed, explains nothing. The trouble is that vague, sweeping generalisations tend to be accepted by an ill-informed public, and build themselves up into powerful myths. Such generalisations may be accepted by the media and the public for several decades after they have been discarded by most professional historians. Most journalists seem still to think that the policy of appeasing Hitler was, in each of the relevant crises, cowardly and mistaken. They do not distinguish between the factors that were operative in 1936 from those operative in 1938, or, again, in 1939. Mr Bell shows that the British government's policy had a cowardly side to it during the Spanish Civil War, but that Chamberlain's policy in 1939 was extremely courageous. When Stalin preferred to negotiate with Hitler, Chamberlain preferred to resist Hitler by a declaration of war, encouraged, it is true, by an impatient House of Commons.

There is no space in an editor's foreword to say more on the appeasement debate. Bell's lucid account and interpretation of the diplomatic history of the 1930s demolishes many familiar fallacies, without ever becoming polemical in tone. One point on Munich is worth mentioning here: in agreement with Professor D. C. Watt and other recent authorities, Mr Bell shows that Hitler regarded the settlement as a disaster, because he wanted a short, successful war against Czechoslovakia in the teeth of the passive disapproval of Britain and France. He was not content with success at the conference table. As Bell says, he wanted war for its own sake, and with such an outlook

was perhaps unique in modern history. Ciano noted in his diary that if you offered Hitler more territory than he was demanding, he would still be disappointed, because what he wanted was war. But even this was not always true, so that even about Hitler generalisations can be dangerous.

In wanting victorious wars rather than diplomatic victories Hitler was acting not only immorally, but also irrationally. Sometimes he attacked another country because he wanted to secure resources from it, but sometimes he was already securing the resources he needed from that country without going to war. The classic example of this is his decision not to wait to eliminate Britain before invading the USSR, even though Stalin was already generously supplying him with both raw materials and manufactured products. Yet it remains true that Hitler sometimes made war pay, and while he was actually waging it, not merely after victory. Mr Bell points out that the acquisition of the vast resources of western Europe made war immensely profitable for Germany, at least in the short run. Here there is a parallel with a picture given by Dr T. C. W. Blanning in a companion volume recently published in this series, a volume on the origins of the French Revolutionary Wars. The French Directory and Napoleon, like Hitler, lived off a diet of warfare. For a country to acquire profits which could be used during the war is less common in the decades between Napoleon and Hitler. More often warfare is greedy of resources, even if victory is to bring profits after the end of hostilities. Often even a victorious power is permanently poorer after the war than it was before – as Britain has been after the two world wars. But surviving on the immediate conquests of wars had its dangers for Hitler, as Mr Bell shows. It created a ‘vicious circle in which armaments were built up to make conquests and then more conquests were necessary to expand armaments’, a process which ‘reached an explosive stage in 1939, when raw materials, labour and food were all needed to sustain the pace’.

Bell makes an important distinction between Hitler's policy in western Europe and his policy in eastern Europe. In western Europe he seemed to be living in an antiquated world of power politics, thinking, for example, of a possible alliance with Britain against France, without realising that the time was long past when the Western democracies would make war against each other. He considered also the rather more plausible idea of an Anglo-German alliance against the USSR. But his attitude to the war in western Europe, as Bell says, was one ‘which would have been easily recognisable to Bethmann-Hollweg and the German General Staff of 1914’.

In eastern Europe a far more terrible feature of Nazi policy emerged already in 1940 and 1941 – a racist policy against the Poles and the

Russians which anticipated the 1942–45 holocaust of Poles and Jews. In the discussion of the relationship between ideology and *realpolitik* with which this series has often been concerned, Nazism must presumably be considered as some monstrous kind of ideology. And if a choice must be made between two evils it must surely be concluded that the *realpolitik* of the pre-1914 world was preferable to the Nazi 'philosophy' which resulted in the death camps.

Harry Hearder

# Acknowledgements

In writing this book I have incurred many obligations, and I am happy to take this opportunity to thank those who have helped in its preparation. I am particularly grateful to Harry Hearder, the General Editor, for his invitation to contribute this volume to the series on the origins of modern wars, and for his help and encouragement in its writing. The University of Liverpool has provided research grants which have assisted my visits to various libraries.

I owe a great debt to my friends Edward Acton, David Dutton, John Gooch, and Ralph White, who read a long draft with sharp eyes and immense patience. Their wise and tactful comments have saved me from a number of errors and wrought many improvements in the text, though they bear no responsibility for the imperfections that remain. Betty Plummer, despite adverse circumstances, typed and retyped the whole book with her customary calm efficiency.

In attempting a general survey of so wide a subject as the origins of the Second World War in Europe, I am acutely conscious of my dependence on the multitude of scholars who have increased our knowledge and enlarged our understanding of the events under discussion. Some of my debts are acknowledged in the references and reading list. My gratitude to the many other writers whose work I have absorbed over the years is no less real, even though they may not be specifically mentioned.

As always, my deepest thanks go to my wife for her help and support in all that has gone to the making of this book.

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University of Liverpool*

P. M. H. BELL  
April 1985

## Publisher's Acknowledgements

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## Note to the Third Edition

The second edition of this book appeared in 1997, and once again it has been a pleasure, as well as an intellectual challenge, to take into account the results of some ten years of historical research and reflection on the origins of the Second World War in Europe, with resulting changes to the text and a revision of the list of books for further reading. I am most grateful to friends who have made suggestions for improvements and sent me copies of their books or off-prints of their articles. Michael Foot offered wise advice. Joe Maiolo gave generous bibliographical help, accompanied by some sharp insights into recent historical thinking, especially on strategy and armaments. I am also grateful to the anonymous publisher's readers who gave the book an encouraging vote of confidence, while making valuable suggestions for its improvement.

At Pearson, Heather McCallum originally suggested undertaking this further revision, while Christina Wipf-Perry and Hetty Reid have worked hard and skilfully to see it through to a conclusion. I owe them my warmest thanks.

P. M. H. BELL  
Kew, May 2006

# Abbreviations

AO	Auslandsorganisation (Foreign Countries Organisation)
DGFP	<i>Documents on German Foreign Policy</i>
NKVD	Narodny Komissariat Vnutrennikh Del (People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs)
NSDAP	Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei
OKW	Oberkommando der Wehrmacht (High Command of the Armed Forces)
PPF	Parti Populaire Français
RM	Reichsmark
SA	Sturm Abteilung (Nazi storm-troopers)
SS	Schutz Staffeln

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PART ONE

Introduction:  
Problems of  
Interpretation

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## CHAPTER ONE

# On War and the Causes of War

On 3 September 1939 the Foreign Minister of the Third Reich, Joachim von Ribbentrop, received the British Ambassador in Berlin, Sir Neville Henderson. War had just been declared between their two countries; and the Ambassador remarked that ‘it would be left to history to judge where the blame really lay’. Ribbentrop replied that ‘history had already proved the facts’. An hour later, it was the turn of the French Ambassador, Robert Coulondre, who was told that when war came France would be the aggressor, and replied: ‘Of that history will be the judge.’ Noting these exchanges, Sir Lewis Namier commented: ‘The judgement of history was invoked by all alike.’<sup>1</sup>

History has not let them down. The origins of the Second World War have exercised the minds of generations of historians, and have filled thousands of pages, without exhausting either the fascination of the subject or the stamina of their readers. The generations which experienced the war are passing away, but many of their successors remain responsive to its echoes. The history of that time is still invoked in the political debates of the present day. ‘Appeasement’ and ‘Munich’ are still words of power in the speeches of politicians and the columns of newspapers. Nazism and fascism remain current terms of political abuse. The spectre of the holocaust of Jewish lives is ever-present to modern Europeans.

We live still in the shadow of the Second World War. Its casualties, variously estimated at between 40 and 50 million dead, have left a lasting scar upon the populations of the world, and especially of Europe. Movements of populations in eastern Europe broke patterns of settlement established since the Middle Ages, so that Poles and Russians now live in territories which previously had been German for centuries. The physical ruins that littered Europe were fairly quickly repaired; but the destruction

has left its mark on many great cities. Even countries which managed to remain outside the storm of hostilities were deeply disturbed by its passage, as the history of Sweden or Switzerland demonstrates.

Events of this magnitude continue to command attention and demand explanation: and to embark upon a fresh review of the origins of the Second World War in Europe needs no apology. The scope of the enquiry is limited to Europe – a large enough arena, in all conscience, but more manageable than an attempt to comprehend the whole globe.<sup>2</sup> But Europe was not self-contained. Britain and France were great imperial powers, with possessions and commitments all over the world. The Soviet Union, equally an imperial power, included vast territories in central and eastern Asia only secured since the mid-nineteenth century. Nearly 8,000 kilometres of its land frontiers lay in Asia, compared with some 2,400 kilometres in Europe. All three powers were much concerned by the growth of Japanese power in the Far East. All three were faced by the recurrent imperial problem of the twentieth century, nationalist movements among their subject peoples – the British in India and the Middle East, the French in Syria and North Africa, the Soviets in the Caucasus and the Ukraine. For none of the three is it possible to consider their European problems, and their role in the origins of the war, without an eye on the global context.

Across the Atlantic from Europe, the USA sought for much of the 1920s and 1930s to withdraw into semi-isolation, hoping to return to the apparently secure haven of a pre-1914 normality. In the 1930s, successive Neutrality Acts were specifically designed to insulate the USA from European conflicts, and to ensure that there should be no repetition of the events of 1917, when she was drawn into the First World War. Yet Europeans could never forget or ignore the American presence over the western horizon. The activity (or otherwise) of the American economy, and the shape of American foreign policy, had profound effects in Europe. If at some point the economic and military strength of the USA were again to be mobilised, as in 1917–18, for participation in a European war, the consequences would be far-reaching. European powers held the centre of the international stage in the 1930s, but this was largely because the Americans chose to remain in the wings: and the American dimension of European affairs must constantly be allowed for.

Other complications arise from that deceptively simple name, ‘the Second World War’, which reveals problems on even a cursory inspection. It is conventional in western Europe to refer to the conflict as the war of 1939–45, just as we speak of the war of 1914–18; but the cases are very different. In 1914, Austria-Hungary declared war on Serbia on 28 July,

and within a week five of the six European great powers were at war. While it is true that the Ottoman Empire came in later in the year, and Italy not until 1915, the main war crisis was short, concentrated, and decisive. One day Europe was at peace; and then a week later most of Europe was at war, in proper form, with ultimatums and declarations of war duly delivered.<sup>3</sup> By contrast, it is far from easy to say precisely when the Second World War in Europe began. It has appeared to many observers, both at the time and since, that the conflict began in 1936, with the Spanish Civil War, which seemed to mark the outbreak of an ideological war that was already latent over most of Europe. Volunteers flocked to Spain in this belief, often projecting their own passions and hatreds on to the fierce internal antagonisms of the Spanish people. Regular forces from Germany and Italy, and 'advisers' from the Soviet Union were involved, as well as the International Brigades recruited through the Communist International. Spain became the battleground for what seemed to be a European war fought by proxy.

While the Spanish Civil War was in progress, there occurred elsewhere the German occupation of Austria in March 1938; the Czechoslovakian crisis of September 1938, when the French army was mobilised and war seemed imminent; the German seizure of Bohemia and Memel in March 1939; and the Italian invasion of Albania in April 1939. Could this properly be called a time of peace, or war? The threat of force was ever-present, even if its use was only sporadic; and it is doubtful whether a tank has to open fire for its presence to constitute a warlike act. Undeclared war is a fair description of the state of Europe in 1938–39; until finally open war broke out when Germany attacked Poland on 1 September 1939, and found an opponent willing, and even eager, to fight rather than surrender. On 3 September Britain and France declared war on Germany, though their formal declarations made remarkably little immediate difference to the situation. Their armies and air forces remained inactive in the west; while in the east Germany (assisted after a time by the Soviet Union) conquered Poland unhindered. There followed the period of the phoney war, from October 1939 to April 1940; so that a time of undeclared war was followed by a period when war was declared but not waged. There was not very much difference between the two.

War was waged in earnest in April 1940, with German attacks on Denmark and Norway; in May, with the German invasion of the Low Countries and France; and in June, with the entry of Italy, which extended the conflict to the Mediterranean. In October 1940 Italy attacked Greece; in April 1941 the Germans conquered Yugoslavia and Greece;



and finally in June 1941 they invaded the Soviet Union, the final extension of the war in Europe, which by then engulfed almost the entire Continent.

There was thus a movement from civil war and war by proxy in Spain, to local war (Germany and Poland), then to regional war (Scandinavia and western Europe), and finally to Continental war. There were spells of peace which was no peace, and of war which was remarkably unwarlike. Contemporaries were well aware that the line between peace and war, far from being sharp and clear-cut, was so blurred as to be almost invisible. On 10 November 1938, Adolf Hitler congratulated himself (and representatives of the German press, to whom he was speaking) on the tactics of propaganda, political pressure, and threat of force, which had been successfully used to 'wreck the nerves of those gentlemen in Prague . . .'.<sup>4</sup> At almost exactly the same time, in comparatively peaceful England, Stephen Tallents, the Director-General of the shadow Ministry of Information, which was being set up in the expectation of war, wrote of the 'present continental conditions, in which the boundaries between peace and war are so largely obliterated'.<sup>5</sup> Europe thus witnessed a process of change, not a sudden leap from peace to war; and an explanation of the origins of the Second World War in Europe must examine the forces which lay behind the change, as well as the events which marked the different phases of its development.

War came by stages; and as it came, it was not one single war, unitary and simple in its nature, but a number of wars, different in kind, in aims, and in methods. The war in Spain was at once a civil war between Spaniards, a war between individuals from many parts of the world, and a war involving European states. The war fought by Germany against Poland in 1939 was, in German eyes, not just a war to shift their boundary with Poland from one line to another, but was aimed at the destruction of the Polish state and the subjugation of its people; and as such it went on for several years, because this process was fiercely though clandestinely resisted. The war in western Europe in 1940, on the other hand, was more in the style of 1914 and other 'orthodox' wars between states, waged between uniformed armed forces, using recognised military methods and exercising considerable forbearance towards the civilian population, and ending, in the case of France, in an armistice which showed a calculated restraint on the German side. The label 'Second World War in Europe' is used to denote not one event, but a number of separate conflicts, different in kind as well as in date. An explanation of origins must deal with these differences.

## The origins of war and of wars

These are the tasks which a consideration of the origins of the war (or rather, wars) must face. But what is meant by 'origins' in this context? It is possible to seek the origins of the war in the events of diplomatic relations – the alliances and alignments of states, the activities of ambassadors and foreign ministers, conferences between statesmen. It may be, however, that such matters were merely superficial, eddies on the surface of a deep-running stream whose course was determined by more profound forces. If so, what were these forces? Obvious possibilities may be found in the movement of ideas and the clash of ideologies; in economic pressures and opportunities; and in changes in military technology and strategic thought. If we accept the importance of such developments, what were the links between them and the decisions of individual statesmen and the sentiments of peoples?

Tolstoy, in *War and Peace*, wrote that historians had produced various diplomatic explanations of the war of 1812 – 'the wrongs inflicted on the Duke of Oldenburg, the non-observance of the Continental System . . . the ambitions of Napoleon, the firmness of Alexander, the mistakes of the diplomats, and so on'. If this were so, then more care on the part of the diplomats, different phrasing in a note, a minor concession on the part of Napoleon – and there would have been no war. Tolstoy rejected such explanations. For Napoleon and Alexander to be able to act as they did, he believed, 'a combination of innumerable circumstances was essential. . . . It was necessary that millions of men in whose hands the real power lay – the soldiers who fired the guns or transported provisions and cannon – should consent to carry out the will of those weak individuals, and should have been induced to do so by an infinite number of diverse and complex causes.'<sup>6</sup> Substitute Hitler and Chamberlain for Napoleon and Alexander, and Tolstoy's assertion is easily transposed from the war of 1812 to the Second World War. But were Hitler and Chamberlain merely weak individuals, controlled by circumstances and waiting on the consent of the millions who seemed to be their puppets, but in whose hands the real power lay? How can we decide?

Different approaches to the problem produce different explanations. It is possible to start by trying to explain, not one single war, but the phenomenon of war in general; and much effort has been put into this search. The causes of war have long been sought, so that, once identified, they might be eliminated. In the eighteenth century it was argued that war was produced by the ambitions (or even the mere whims) of monarchs and

their courtiers; but this view foundered in the French Revolutionary Wars, fought by a republic and a people's army. In the nineteenth century, Richard Cobden and the Manchester school of liberalism held that universal peace would come through the railway, the steamship, the penny post, and free trade: when all had enough of this world's goods, none would wish to waste them in warfare, nor would there be any point in fighting to obtain a larger share. But events belied these hopes. In 1914 the postal services carried mobilisation notices, and the railways transported armies to battle. The twentieth century proceeded to provide at least its fair ration of wars, and perhaps more – one observer listed thirty between 1900 and 1964.<sup>7</sup>

Among these conflicts, it was particularly the First World War of 1914–18 that stimulated the search for the causes of war into even greater activity. Shocked by the catastrophe and determined to avoid its repetition, people scanned the period before 1914 in search of the causes of war. They found them in plenty; and for each cause of war there was a remedy. Wars – and particularly that of 1914 – were caused by armaments and arms races. The remedy, therefore, was disarmament. Wars were caused by alliances and secret diplomacy, which bound states together without the knowledge of their peoples, and turned a small quarrel into a European war. The solutions here were to avoid alliances, and to practise open diplomacy, so that peoples could restrain their governments from dangerous commitments and warlike acts. Wars were caused by the very existence of sovereign states, free (and indeed accustomed) to fight one another from time to time. Here, the answers were to create some international organisation to restrict the right to go to war, and to develop the role of international law. For socialists, wars were caused by capitalism, and by imperialism, which was the latest form of capitalism; so that capitalist states, under the influence of bankers and great industrialists, fought for markets, raw materials, and fields for investment. In the long run, the answer was to do away with capitalism, for in a socialist world there would be no war; in the short run, means might be found to share markets, investment opportunities, and resources. There were widespread theories about 'scapegoat wars' – wars to relieve conflicts within a country by turning upon an external enemy. Here the answer seemed to be that after 1914–18 anyone could see that the remedy was worse than the disease – if Russia or Germany had gone to war in 1914 as a way out of internal conflicts, they had instead landed themselves in defeat and revolution. There were theories of war by accident – that in 1914, and doubtless on other occasions, the powers blundered into a war which none of them really wanted. For this the remedy was to improve the mechanism of

international relations, so that time and opportunity were given to avoid accidents and allow good sense to prevail.

There are many difficulties with such general explanations of war. They tend to fall uneasily between determinism and free will. If wars were *really* caused by capitalism, and arose from its very nature, then how could they be avoided by creating a League of (mainly capitalist) Nations, or by merely adjusting the mechanism of the international system? Some socialists, indeed, argued with strict logic that they could not be so avoided; but most acted as though they could, partly because that was what they wanted to believe, and partly because all but the most rigid determinists recognised some scope for choice and action. Again, some theories, wide enough to explain everything, ended by explaining nothing – the argument that wars were the result of the existence of sovereign states fell into this difficulty. It was like saying that car accidents are the result of the existence of cars – which is true, but unhelpful. As an approach to the problem of the origins of the Second World War, such theories are too general to be very useful; though they should not be entirely disregarded, if only because in the 1920s and 1930s they were often taken very seriously, and so form part of the fabric of the period we are examining.

Historians have tended to deal more in particular than in general explanations; with the causes of individual wars rather than with the causes of war. But even within this pragmatic approach, there is usually to be found a pattern. Historians seek long-term causes (often called origins), identifying conditions in which war is likely or probable – long-standing territorial disputes, conflicts of interest, psychological tensions between peoples. To these they add short-term causes – specific events which bring these disputes and tensions to a head; and finally occasions of war – events which are not in themselves of decisive significance, but in particular circumstances tip the balance, or perhaps just provide an excuse for going to war. In making such analyses, historians make repeated use of analogies: the accumulation of inflammable materials, finally lit by a single spark; or a dam subjected to an increasing weight of water, and finally broken by some comparatively minor crack in the concrete; or explosive forces built up over a period of time and then touched off by the mere movement of a trigger. Behind the analogies lies a standard pattern of explanation, though with varying emphasis being placed on long-term and short-term causes. It is possible to find, for example, discussions of the coming of the First World War which deal mainly with the long term (the growth of internal tensions in Germany, or imperial rivalry between the powers, or nationalist aspirations in the Balkans); and others which deal almost exclusively

with the short term, examining exhaustively the events of July 1914. There is frequently room for dispute as to whether a particular event was a genuine cause of conflict, or merely the occasion: again looking at 1914, was the German invasion of Belgium the cause of British entry into the European conflict, or only the occasion for a step that was bound to be taken anyway?

General theories of the causes of war, and the patterns of causation woven by historians, may be very logical and intellectually coherent. But participants in events have a different perspective. Those in positions of authority or influence are profoundly conscious that they must take decisions. At specific moments they must declare war – or not; issue an order to attack another country – or not; order resistance to an attack – or not. Even those who are firmly convinced of a determinist view of life find in practice that they must choose; and do not appear to think that they are in the grip of forces outside their control. Lenin, whose theoretical works demonstrated that war was a function of capitalism and imperialism, had to choose early in 1918 whether his new Bolshevik state should launch a revolutionary war against the Germans (which was what some of his colleagues wanted) or make peace, at great cost in territory and resources. He chose peace, not on any grounds of historical determinism, but because he knew that Russia did not have the means to resist the German Army. Obviously he did not abandon his view of life and of history; and he believed he was acting to save the Revolution; but the actual decision was based on a calculation about power, and an estimate of the long-term interests of the Bolshevik cause.<sup>8</sup>

Most such decisions, indeed, involve important elements of calculation: about the balance of power; about the security and material interests of the state and its people; about prestige (which is often not just pretence or vainglory, but involves the crucial question of whether other states believe that you mean what you say); and not least about power to achieve the object in view. A vital element in choices about war and peace is usually the calculation, or at least the hope, that victory is possible. Only in the most dire of circumstances do states go to war in the face of certain defeat; and examples are hard to find. It is more usual, in hopeless circumstances, to bow to the inevitable.

Statesmen make their choices out of calculation. War is an instrument of policy. It will be used, in the crudest terms, if it seems likely to pay, in terms of material interest, profit, power, or prestige. In the 1920s and 1930s, it appeared to most statesmen in Britain and France that war was highly unlikely to pay. They had come to regard the last war, of

1914–18, as a calamity, involving human, material, and financial losses which should not again be incurred short of the utmost necessity. They were satisfied powers, anxious to preserve the status quo; but they also wanted peace and quiet. They would eventually fight in self-defence and to prevent the status quo being completely overthrown; but their optimism about the outcome of war was at a low ebb, and their belief in war as an instrument of policy was weak. The rulers of Germany and Italy, on the other hand, represented dissatisfied powers; they wanted to disrupt the status quo; and they were perfectly prepared to use war to achieve that end. Moreover, the Germans believed that war would pay in the simplest sense, by securing economic gains – raw materials, foodstuffs, cheap labour, favourable terms of trade and rates of exchange; and in some parts of their conquests, they were not mistaken. Their optimism about the outcome of war was high; and their belief in war as an instrument of policy strong.

This is not the whole story. Statesmen make calculations of interest, advantage, and power; but they respond also to emotions, to prejudices, to the assumptions which they have absorbed from their upbringing, their way of life, and their friends. They are human, not calculating machines; and this means that sometimes they respond as much by instinct as from calculation. The Belgian Crown Council, meeting all night on 2/3 August 1914 to decide how to reply to the German ultimatum demanding passage through their country to attack France, debated Belgian interests, which gave no absolutely clear guide to action, but then seem to have reached their final unanimous decision to reject the ultimatum mainly out of anger at being bullied, a sense of the country's self-respect, and (on the part of the strong pro-German group) resentment at being let down by one's friends. Again, in 1940, Churchill's resolve to continue the war against Germany despite the fall of France arose primarily from patriotic fighting instincts, which were supported by rather shaky calculations about Britain's capacity to survive and win.

When politicians take the path to war they must then assume that the people whom they claim to lead, the millions who must fire the guns and sustain the war effort, will accept their decision. What then moves the people whose role is in the long run vital for the conduct and continuance of war?

There are those who return a very simple answer to this question: the people respond to a mixture of propaganda and coercion on the part of governments, and have little choice or free will in the matter. This is in most cases too simple to correspond to reality. It is perfectly possible for a country to be taken into war against the wishes of the majority of its

people: this was the case when Italy entered the Second World War in 1940; and the results were observable in the lack of enthusiasm and determination in the Italian campaigns and war effort from 1940 to 1943, when the whole process culminated in Italy first dropping out of the conflict, and then joining in again on the opposite side. At the other end of the scale, it was also possible for large numbers of the Polish people to continue by clandestine means a struggle against Germany which their armies had decisively lost, at a time when their government was in exile and had no powers of coercion whatsoever, and very little means of propaganda. There are many cases which fall between these two extremes; but by and large governments are conscious that in war they need at least the consent, and preferably the active support, of their peoples; and this support has often been given willingly, and sometimes enthusiastically.

What motivation, then, lies behind such willingness to accept war? How have Tolstoy's all-important millions seen the question of war and its origins? If we turn to 1914 for guidance, we find in Oxford the young Llewellyn Woodward (later an eminent historian of the war) volunteering at once for the army. He did not enjoy his military training, and he was less than certain of the British case for entering the war; but he persisted because he was convinced by the argument of Socrates, that having accepted the benefit of his country's laws he had a duty to do what the state asked of him. Reflecting after fifty years, he saw no reason to have done otherwise. On the other side of Europe, far removed from the refinements of Oxford and the influence of a classical education, we find the inhabitants of a village in Montenegro, men and women alike, pouring from their houses to resist the invading Austrians, not when they crossed the new-fangled boundary which had only been there since some recent Balkan war, but when they reached a bridge which had marked Montenegrin territory for centuries – the simple defence of long-held territory by a people with a strong sense of identity. Between these two responses, the one intellectual and rarefied, the other instinctive and primitive, there lay the reactions of the millions in Europe who answered their mobilisation notices, sometimes with resignation, sometimes enthusiastically, but in any case with a degree of unanimity that surprised the military authorities, who had expected widespread opposition or evasion.

When we turn from the First World War to the Second, one point stands out clearly. There was a widespread expectation that the reactions of 1914 would *not* be repeated. With the sombre memorials to the dead of 1914–18 all over Europe, 'never again' was the natural and deep-seated response. 'I *will* not have another war. I *will not*' was not the remark of a

left-wing pacifist but of King George V, trained as a sailor and deeply imbued with the military virtues.<sup>9</sup> It was true that in the belligerent capitals in 1939 there was little enthusiasm, no cheering crowds in the main squares, no flowers for the troops at railway stations. But, however reluctantly, the peoples of Europe went to war again. They endured, quietly but with immense determination and tenacity, a war which was in many ways more terrible than that of 1914–18. To explain, even in part, why they did so must be one of the tasks of an explanation of the origins of the war; because if the instinct of ‘never again’ had prevailed in any large section of the European population, either there would have been no Second World War, or at least it would have been a different kind of war, probably at a different time.

At the end of this review of explanations of war and wars, it is interesting to see what professionals in the craft of foreign policy made of the question about half-way through what we now know to have been the period between the wars. In 1919, Lloyd George’s Cabinet in Britain decided that defence expenditure should be governed by the assumption that the country would not be involved in any major war for ten years. When this ‘ten-year rule’ was begun, and for most of its life until it was abandoned in 1932, it was meant only as a working assumption for economies in the defence budget, and did not rest on serious analysis of the international or military situation. However, in June 1931 a Foreign Office memorandum examined the assumptions on which the validity of the ‘rule’ rested; and its conclusions, though intended as a guide to the circumstances in which war would *not* break out, made in practice a guide to Foreign Office thinking on the conditions in which war could be expected.<sup>10</sup>

The memorandum concluded that there would be no major war on the following conditions:

1. That during the next ten years no two states would be involved in a dispute over a vital interest which peaceful means had failed to resolve.
2. That if two states were involved in such a dispute, one of them would be so averse to war as to abandon its vital interest rather than fight.
3. That, if both states were willing to fight, one of them would be so weak as to be unable to fight with any hope of success.
4. That an organisation existed which was willing and able to restrain the intending belligerents (i.e. the League of Nations).
5. That no situation arose which would create a war psychology.



## The way ahead

This admirable summary included many of the points raised in more theoretical discussions: the concept of vital interest; the need for some expectation of success; the need for a general acceptance of war as an instrument of policy, or of necessity; the question of whether an international body would restrain individual states; and the question of war psychology. If all the Foreign Office's conditions of peace were reversed, the result would be a prescription for the causes of war.

These general considerations provide a sketch-map for the journey ahead. We must look at the broad explanations that have been adduced for the Second World War, amounting sometimes to theories of inevitability. We must examine the underlying forces which were at work, shaping and constraining the calculations of statesmen and the feelings of peoples, and building up a momentum towards war. Finally, we must review the circumstances in which conflict became likely, and in which specific decisions for war were taken.

## References

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- 4 Hitler's secret speech to representatives of the German press, 10 November 1938, in Jeremy Noakes and Geoffrey Pridham (eds), *Documents on Nazism, 1919–1945* (London 1974), pp. 549–50.
- 5 Memorandum by Tallents, 7 November 1938, quoted in P. M. Taylor, *The Projection of Britain. British overseas publicity and propaganda, 1919–1939* (London 1981), p. 278.
- 6 L. N. Tolstoy, *War and Peace*, trans. by Rosemary Edmonds (London: Penguin Books 1957), vol. II, pp. 715–17.
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- 8 This example is drawn from Geoffrey Blainey, *The Causes of War* (London 1973), pp. 153–6.
- 9 A. J. P. Taylor (ed.), *Lloyd George: a diary by Frances Stevenson* (London 1971), p. 309.
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## CHAPTER TWO

# A Thirty Years War? The Disintegration of Europe

In 1939 and the following years there was a powerful and general sense that people were engaged, not in a second war, but rather in the second phase of a Thirty Years War, another round in a struggle against the German domination of Europe. Since 1919 Europe had moved so rapidly through an attempt at reconstruction and stabilisation into a time of renewed tension and conflict that it was hard to recognise anything which could properly be called peace. The mood was caught, lightly but exactly, by Nancy Mitford in her novel *The Pursuit of Love*, when she made her heroine Linda remark: 'It's rather sad to belong, as we do, to a lost generation. I'm sure in history the two wars will count as one war and that we shall be squashed out of it altogether, and people will forget that we ever existed.'<sup>1</sup> The somewhat featherbrained Linda was in some very weighty company. The formidable Marshal Foch, generalissimo of the Allied armies in France in 1918, had said of the Treaty of Versailles, 'This is not peace. It is an armistice for twenty years.' Churchill, in the preface to the first volume of his memoirs of the Second World War, wrote: 'I must regard these volumes as a continuation of the story of the First World War which I set out in *The World Crisis*. . . . Together . . . they will cover an account of another Thirty Years War.'<sup>2</sup> General de Gaulle, Eduard Beneš, and other notables could be added to the list. In a more straightforward way, any Belgian over the age of twenty-six in 1940, seeing the German Army marching past his doorstep for the second time in his life, could have had little doubt that a nightmarish film had got stuck, and the same events were coming round once more.

In retrospect, such views have continued to carry a good deal of conviction.<sup>3</sup> Europe was indeed wrecked by the First World War. The peace settlement which followed it had grave defects. Germany did try twice in

thirty years for the domination of Europe. Taking all this into account, a school of thought has developed which regards the Second World War as the culmination of a disintegration of the European order, begun by the First World War and continued by the abortive peace, which left the Continent in a state of chronic instability. The main lines of this interpretation will be set out in this chapter, before a rival explanation is examined.

## The effects of the First World War: psychological, material and political

The basic premiss of the ‘Thirty Years War’ thesis lies in the disruptive impact of the First World War, which shook the political, economic, and social systems of Europe to their foundations. The political and psychological damage was probably greater than the physical. It is true that casualties were very heavy: 8.5 million dead among the armed services is a generally accepted estimate, without trying to count the civilian casualties, direct and indirect. Yet, except in France, where the war losses struck a population which was already barely reproducing itself, the blow in purely demographic terms was absorbed and recovered from with less difficulty than was expected. The more lasting damage was to the mind and spirit. Many old certainties, traditional beliefs, and habits fell casualties in 1914–18. It was well said of the Kitchener armies raised in Britain that it took generations of stability and certainty to produce such a body of men; and their like would not be seen again. By 1918, there was a profound weariness and disillusionment pervading the armies of Europe which was a far cry from the fire and enthusiasm of 1914. The question repeatedly asked in German units by August 1918 was ‘*Wozu?*’ – ‘What’s it all for?’ – and this found its echo everywhere.<sup>4</sup>

The economic disruption caused by the war was also severe. There was material devastation in the areas of heavy fighting, especially in the battle zones of north-east France and Belgium. All over Europe there was unusual wear and tear, arising from the working of industry, agriculture, and transport under heavy pressure and without adequate maintenance. The men and women who did the work, often for long hours and with insufficient food, were also worn out – the European influenza epidemic of 1919 told its tale of exhaustion and lowered resistance. The end of the war saw the breakdown of transport over much of central and eastern Europe, and shortages of both coal and food, caused partly by falling production and partly by problems of distribution. Financial and monetary problems were less immediately obvious than the material destruction, but were

more lasting and insidious in their effects. Britain and France were forced to sell substantial quantities of their foreign investments to pay for the war; and other investments (notably French) were lost in the Bolshevik revolution in Russia. The Germans had their investments in enemy countries confiscated, and lost the rest of their foreign holdings at the peace. Britain borrowed heavily from the USA, and France and Italy from the USA and Britain; all ended the war with a new and heavy burden of foreign debt. There was also a great increase in internal government debts, because most war expenditure was met by loans rather than taxation. In many ways the most profound economic problem was that of inflation, the dramatic rise in prices and fall in the value of money which took place all over Europe during the war years. (In Britain, retail prices rather more than doubled between 1914 and 1918; and the position in some other countries was worse.) The confusion caused by this was the more marked after a period of generally stable prices before 1914; and the social effects spread out in all directions, to the benefit of those who could keep pace with or profit from inflation, and to the severe detriment of those who had to live on fixed incomes. In all this, it was the material damage that proved easiest to repair. Even the great scar across France and Flanders, where the battle-line had run for four years, was patched over by 1925–26 with towns and villages rebuilt and land brought back into cultivation. It was the removal of the landmark of a stable currency which had the most lasting effects, psychological as much as material.

The political effects of the war were similarly far-reaching; and again were the more shocking because they came after a long period of comparative stability. In the whole of central and eastern Europe at the end of 1918, no government remained as it had been in 1914; and over large areas there was no effective government at all. The dynasties and empires of the Habsburgs in Austria-Hungary, the Hohenzollerns in Germany, and the Romanovs in Russia had all fallen; and the regimes and states which sought to replace them were struggling to come into being amid sporadic fighting and a fog of uncertainty. Three great autocratic empires had collapsed, and the parliamentary democracies of western Europe, along with the greatest of democratic powers, the USA, were intact and victorious. But if in this sense the democracies had won, the liberalism and individualism of the nineteenth century had clearly lost during the war years. The whole nature of the war meant that state control, state initiative, and state interests had all had a field day. The individual had been subordinated to the state – in Britain, the greatest symbol of this was the introduction of conscription for the armed forces, for the first time in British history.

Paradoxically, this process was accompanied by a revulsion felt by many against their own state, caused often by disillusionment, in some cases with the war and its pretences, in others with defeat or the inadequate rewards of victory. In either event, people turned away from their own state or form of government and looked elsewhere – often to communism on the one hand or fascism on the other.

By the end of the war, Europe seemed on the verge not only of political chaos but of revolution. In Russia in 1917 there were two revolutions, with the Bolsheviks precariously established in power by the end of the year. There was a revolution of sorts in Germany at the end of 1918. The hope of revolution for some, the fear of it for others, were widespread in Europe, with Bolshevik Russia as a beacon light or a menacing glare according to one's viewpoint. In the event, both hopes and fears proved much exaggerated. The new German republic turned out to be a mild form of social democracy, with large chunks of the old regime firmly embedded within it. Elections in Britain in 1918 and France in 1919 produced substantial right-wing majorities. Yet the revolutionary atmosphere had been real enough; it was not forgotten; and it had its effects later.

## The Treaty of Versailles and its consequences

On this view, the war shook the foundations of Europe to an extent that was virtually irreparable. When the peacemakers gathered in Paris in 1919, they faced an impossible task; and in the event, it is widely argued, they proceeded to make the situation worse rather than better. The 1919 settlement, and particularly its centre-piece, the Treaty of Versailles with Germany, was criticised at the time and for the next twenty years for its harshness, its economic errors, and its inherent instability.

The accusations of harshness referred both to the terms imposed upon Germany and to the manner of their imposition. Germany lost territory. In the west Alsace and Lorraine were annexed by France (or, as the French said, were restored after wrongful seizure in 1871) and the districts of Eupen and Malmédy went to Belgium. In the east, Germany lost Posnania and parts of East Prussia to Poland; and the port of Danzig became a free city under League of Nations administration, with special rights for Poland. Plebiscites were to be held in various other areas to determine whether or not they should remain part of Germany. These resulted in part of Schleswig going to Denmark; two districts of West and East Prussia (Marienwerder and Allenstein) voting overwhelmingly to stay in Germany, which they were allowed to do; and an inconclusive vote in

Upper Silesia which ended in the Council of the League of Nations allotting to Poland rather more than the plebiscite would have allowed, and certainly more than the Germans thought due. The port of Memel was ceded by Germany for transfer to Lithuania. In all, Germany lost about 65,000 square kilometres of territory and nearly 7 million inhabitants. She also lost all her colonies, which were handed over to various of the victorious powers under the cover of League of Nations mandates. All this was not unexpected after a country had lost a long and bitter war; and it compared quite favourably with the treatment meted out by Germany to defeated Russia in March 1918. But the Germans found it harsh. They resented handing over any territory to the Poles; and they claimed that plebiscites were used arbitrarily, and usually when there was a chance of them going against Germany; they were not used at all in Alsace-Lorraine or in most of the territory lost to Poland. Moreover, when in Austria a series of unofficial plebiscites showed overwhelming majorities in favour of union with Germany, the treaty laid it down firmly that such a union was forbidden. The victorious Allies had claimed loudly that they were fighting for democracy and self-determination, but they applied these great principles selectively, or even cynically. The Germans could thus claim unfair treatment; and after a time their claims found an attentive audience in western Europe.

The harshness was also claimed to lie in the severity of the disarmament provisions imposed upon Germany. The army was limited to 100,000 men, with no tanks or heavy artillery; the navy was to have no warships of over 10,000 tonnes, and no submarines; there was to be no military or naval aviation. Not least, the German General Staff, the brain and nerve centre of the army, and for long a separate centre of power within the state, was to be dissolved. These were unusual provisions in a peace treaty, specifically designed to paralyse German strength and to break the customs and attitudes that the victors called 'Prussian militarism'. The ostensible purpose of the disarmament clauses was 'to render possible the initiation of a general limitation of the armaments of all nations'; and when no such limitation followed, the Germans could again claim to have been unfairly treated.

The same was true of two other aspects of the treaty whose impact was more psychological than practical. The first was the clause (Article 231) put at the head of the reparations section of the treaty, by which Germany was compelled to accept 'the responsibility of Germany and her allies for causing all the loss and damage to which the Allied and Associated Governments and their nationals have been subjected as a consequence of

the war imposed upon them by the aggression of Germany and her allies'.<sup>5</sup> This was almost universally referred to as the 'war guilt' clause of the treaty; though it does not use the word guilt. Such niceties were of no importance. The clause aroused deep resentment in Germany, where it was thought that equal (or greater) responsibility for the outbreak of war could be found in the actions of other countries. German historians worked hard to undermine the validity of this clause, and their claims found a ready acceptance among 'revisionist' writers in France, Britain, and the USA. Germany's case against the 'war guilt' thesis grew steadily stronger. The other aspect was the section of the treaty which provided for the trial of the former Kaiser, Wilhelm II, for 'a supreme offence against international morality and the sanctity of treaties', and unnamed persons for 'acts of violation of the laws and customs of war'.<sup>6</sup> Little followed from this. The Kaiser was safe in the Netherlands, whose government would not extradite him; and only a dozen of the lower ranks of alleged war criminals were brought to trial before a German court, which convicted six of them. But again, most Germans did not believe that their own leaders had behaved worse than those of other countries; they were merely being subjected to the spite of the victors.

To all this was added the claim that the Versailles Treaty was a 'dictated peace'. In one sense, this merely stated the obvious. The whole object of winning the war was to impose upon Germany terms which she would never accept voluntarily. Again, the claim referred more to the methods adopted than to the substance of what happened. At the Paris Peace Conference, the German delegation was simply presented with the Allied terms on a basis of take them or leave them; there was not even a show of negotiation, still less any real chance for Germany to influence the contents of the treaty while it was being prepared. The German complaints about this procedure reached a wide audience and it soon came to be thought (especially in Britain) that terms imposed in this fashion were not morally binding.

The significance of these claims about the harshness of the treaty did not lie in objective standards of fairness – there is indeed a strong case that the Treaty of Versailles was by no means crushing or vindictive<sup>7</sup> – but in the widespread and lasting impression that was created. It was natural enough that Germans should resent the fact of defeat, especially when for so much of the war they were sure that they were winning; and it was natural too for this resentment to attach to the peace settlement which registered their defeat. What was less to be expected was the extent to which the same view took hold among the victors. This was especially true of Britain, where it

spread rapidly across the whole political spectrum. In France its hold was strongest on the Left – as late as August 1939 some socialist speakers still began their remarks on foreign affairs with a ritual condemnation of the Treaty of Versailles. The stability of the settlement thus came to be undermined by both vanquished and victors alike.

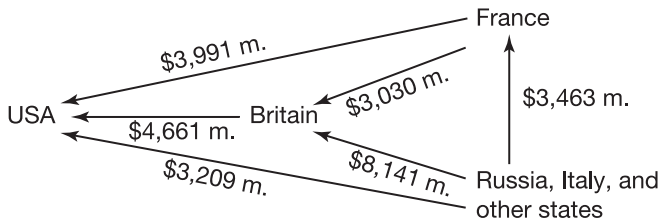
The accusation of harshness was particularly levelled at the reparations section of the treaty; and this may be best considered along with general assertions about the economic errors of the peace settlement. It was not unusual for cash payments, or indemnities, to be imposed upon the losing side in war; and a substantial indemnity was imposed on France as the defeated power at the end of the Franco-Prussian War in 1871. At the end of the First World War the victors renounced the idea of an indemnity, but claimed the right to exact ‘compensation for all damage done to the civilian population of the Allied and Associated Powers and to their property’.<sup>8</sup> The treaty itself set no figure for these ‘reparations’; but it did establish the headings under which claims could be made, including not only material destruction (under which both France and Belgium had important claims), but also payment of war pensions, an almost unlimited demand which was inserted at the request of Great Britain. The task of producing a figure for reparations, and of deciding how they were to be paid, was delegated to the Reparations Commission, a body established by the victorious allies. In May 1921 this Commission arrived at a figure of 132,000 million gold marks; though at the same time the debt was divided into three sections, represented by A, B, and C class bonds, and the C class bonds were to be held by the Commission until Germany’s capacity to pay had been established – which amounted to indefinite postponement of about 80,000 millions, or rather under two-thirds of the total.

In 1919 the young John Maynard Keynes, then at the outset of his career as the outstanding economic theorist of the twentieth century, resigned from the British delegation at the peace conference and wrote at high speed a brilliant book, *The Economic Consequences of the Peace*. With a clarity, vigour, and skill which commanded attention and induced assent, Keynes attacked the principles on which reparations were being imposed. He argued that the figures put forward by the victorious powers were too high in relation to the actual damage they had suffered; that Germany would not have the capacity to pay the amounts envisaged, especially when she was losing territory, resources, and population under other sections of the treaty; and that the problems of transfer (the actual means of payment, whether in kind, in gold, in German securities held abroad, or in foreign exchange earned by Germany) would prove to be



insuperable. Keynes maintained that reparations, on anything like the scale being considered, could not work. They would place an impossible strain on the German economy; and involve Germany in permanent balance of payments difficulties, because she would be furnishing exports for which she was not paid, or earning foreign exchange which was not for her own use but for the purpose of making reparations payments.

In such circumstances, Keynes argued, the reconstruction of the European economy and financial system, which before 1914 had functioned as a smoothly working unit, would be impossible. The system could not be restored if one of its vital parts (and Germany remained the foremost industrial power in Europe) was permanently dislocated. This situation was made worse by the entanglement of the reparations question with the problem of war debts. During the war, the European belligerents borrowed very large sums to sustain their war efforts. Russia borrowed from France and Britain; all the European belligerents borrowed from Britain; and everyone borrowed from the USA, which in the course of the war had been transformed from a debtor to a creditor country. The position at the end of the war may be represented in a diagram.<sup>9</sup>



In a strict sense, these debts had nothing to do with the peace settlement or with reparations. But not unnaturally the victorious west European powers (Britain, France, Italy, and Belgium) wished to link their debts to the USA with their reparation payments from Germany: as Germany paid reparations, so they would pay their war debts; and since the debts had been incurred in the struggle against Germany, this seemed not only convenient but just. But the USA would not agree. Having declined to ratify the Treaty of Versailles, the Americans were not receiving any reparations from Germany; and on straightforward commercial grounds they expected to be repaid their loans by the various Allied states – in the famous phrase of Calvin Coolidge, ‘They hired the money, didn’t they?’ Eventually, the British government, which was owed sums almost as large as those owed to the USA, announced (in the Balfour Note of 1 August 1922) that since the USA insisted on the repayment of war debts, Britain must do the same,

but would only insist on payment up to the level of British debts to the USA. (This would mean Britain renouncing over half her debts.) The Americans for their part set about negotiating separately with each of their debtor governments, offering flexible terms which took into account ability to pay.

War debts were also linked with reparations because they involved a transfer problem – the means by which they were to be paid. They made another distorting element in the structure of trade and payments and added to the balance of payments problems of the debtor states. They also added to the anxiety of those who were owed reparations to ensure that they were paid.

Quite apart from its general distorting and complicating effects, the reparations question also brought about a very sharp international crisis, with far-reaching consequences. In 1923 France and Belgium seized upon a German failure to make deliveries of reparations in kind to occupy the industrial area of the Ruhr, with the object (certainly as far as the French were concerned) either of making the Germans pay, or of inflicting serious damage on the German economy – contradictory aims, doubtless, but either of them satisfactory from a French point of view. The occupation of the Ruhr involved the use of force (invasion, the Germans claimed; police action according to the French) and helped to precipitate the catastrophic German hyperinflation of 1923. This inflation had little direct connection with reparations payments themselves, but a great deal to do with the way the German government chose to subsidise industry and to pay the costs of the passive resistance to the occupation by extravagant use of the printing press. Inflation was already very high in 1922 – in June 1923 the exchange rate of the mark to the dollar reached 109,966, and it then rose to the astronomical figure of 4,620,455 marks to the dollar in August.<sup>10</sup> A pay-packet was worthless before a worker got home; and anyone with assets tied to the mark (which meant anyone with savings, insurance policies, or a fixed income) saw their value vanish absolutely. The effects of this in terms of individual lives and collective confidence were far-reaching; and they later contributed to the appeal of Nazism. The Ruhr occupation and the German hyperinflation were not inevitable consequences of the reparation clauses of Versailles; but as events turned out, they were among the actual results.

Going deeper than claims about the harshness of the peace settlement or its economic errors is the judgement that it was inherently and disastrously unstable. This instability was apparent in a number of ways. The war destroyed the pre-1914 European balance, and the peace could put

nothing adequate in its place. A profound shift in the pattern of power occurred while the war was in progress. French losses and weariness were such that France became dependent, even by 1916, on the help of the British Empire; and by 1918 both were dependent on the USA, which alone could provide the economic resources and the fresh troops to defeat Germany. It was the steady flow of American doughboys, raw but enthusiastic, and with limitless reserves, that brought home to the Germans with mathematical certainty that they must lose. Before this, Germany had fought four major European enemies to a standstill, and totally defeated one of them, Russia. The lesson was that Germany was so strong in terms of population, industrial resources, organisation, and not least will-power, that four other European great powers had barely the capacity to hold her at bay; and an entirely new force from outside Europe was necessary to tip the balance.

This bleak outlook stood revealed by the facts of war. What could the aspirations of peace do to soften its outlines? It was plain by as early as 1920 that the answer was, very little. The USA, having done so much to win the war and shape the peace treaties that followed it, withdrew her strength and activity back across the Atlantic – not into ‘isolation’, which is altogether too absolute a term, but into an indifference towards the European balance of power which came only too naturally to a people who found the phrase itself distasteful. The British, surveying with a grievous sense of loss the cost in lives of commitment to a Continental war, thought it best to turn back to empire and the more hopeful patterns of former centuries, or to turn away from all power politics into some form of pacifism. Russia stood transformed by revolution, weak in armed or industrial strength, but powerful in menace to ordered bourgeois society.

No country felt this change more than France. In 1914 her position against Germany rested on her long-standing alliance with Russia and her *entente* with Britain. In the crisis of a German invasion, both came to her help, and in 1914 the Russian attack on East Prussia helped to check the German offensive in France. By 1919–20, Russia was gone, powerless and in any case unreliable, and Britain was anxious to diminish her European commitments. It was possible that the newly created League of Nations might be turned into an organisation capable of restraining German power; but this was by no means certain. The situation of France in 1919, and the severity of French attitudes towards Germany, can only be properly comprehended by grasping the facts of French weakness in comparison with 1914.

There was no European balance in 1919–20. Indeed, the precarious nature of the new creation was immediately apparent. General Smuts, a member of the South African delegation at the Paris Peace Conference,

wrote to Lloyd George, the British Prime Minister, in March 1919 that the peace treaty then being prepared would be utterly unstable. Notably, he held that Poland and Czechoslovakia, new states coming into existence in eastern Europe, would not be viable without German goodwill – and he was right. In the coming storms, he predicted, they would be the first to go under – and (except for Austria) they were. Germany remained in the centre of Europe, with (even after her losses of territory) a population and industrial resources which were bound, if allowed free play, to give her a predominant position on the Continent. The peace settlement had been harsh enough to infuriate the Germans, but not so crushing as to render them powerless. Machiavelli once advised: ‘If you see your enemy in the water up to his neck, you will do well to push him under; but if he is only in it up to his knees, you will do well to help him to the shore.’ The peace treaty did neither.<sup>11</sup>

## Eastern Europe: national minorities and disputed boundaries

All this has concentrated on France and Germany. But there was another area of instability in Europe: the whole of the eastern half of the Continent was in confusion in 1919, with consequences which persisted for the next twenty years or more. From a British point of view, eastern Europe is a long way off and hard to comprehend. Austen Chamberlain, when Foreign Secretary in 1925, remarked that the Polish Corridor was not worth the bones of a British grenadier; and his half-brother Neville, in a famous broadcast on 27 September 1938, described the crisis in Czechoslovakia as ‘a quarrel in a far-away country between people of whom we know nothing’.<sup>12</sup> Yet that quarrel brought Europe to the brink of conflict; and in 1939 British grenadiers (and many others) marched off to a war which arose, at least immediately, from the Polish Corridor. It was an area which had a way of forcing itself upon the attention even of the distant and uncomprehending British.

In 1919, the contrast between western and eastern Europe was striking. In the west, there were some minor territorial changes, but the map remained basically as it had been in 1914. In the east all was transformed. North of the Danube, the whole territory had previously been shared between the three empires of Germany, Austria-Hungary, and Russia. Now in their place there appeared no fewer than eight new or revived states: Finland, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, and Austria. To the south, in the Balkans, there was only one

new state (Yugoslavia); but most of the others were markedly different in shape, whether larger (Rumania, Greece) or smaller (Bulgaria).

It is certain that the problems created in this wholesale transformation were numerous and profound. It is arguable that they were insoluble, and that they led Europe inexorably towards war. In part, these problems were territorial, in the simple sense that there was scarcely a line on the new map that was not disputed to some degree. But in nearly every case territory was primarily important because it had become a national symbol, or because it involved conflicts of nationality. Nations are troublesome creatures. No one can define them with precision or in such a way as to command general consent; yet if a group of people feel themselves to be a nation there tends to be no limit to what some of them will do to assert their nationality. In eastern Europe, the First World War and the settlement which followed it marked the high-water mark of nationalism and separatism. Nationalist movements flourished both spontaneously and with the encouragement of belligerent states seeking to damage their opponents – Germany, for example, encouraged Polish and Ukrainian nationalism against Russia, and Britain and France supported Czech nationalism against Austria-Hungary. But while nationalist aspirations were aroused, they could not all be satisfied: they conflicted with one another, with the interests of existing states, and with the facts of history, geography, and economics, which made it impossible to draw clear and satisfactory dividing lines between the territory of one nationality and that of another.

The consequence was that eastern Europe produced a welter of conflicting aspirations and claims. Sometimes a nation was left without a state of its own, and so with a restless urge to create one. The Ukrainians were in this position (though a nominally independent Ukraine existed for a brief period in 1918–19); and their position was the more complicated because Ukrainians (or Ruthenians, as their western groupings were usually called) were divided between three separate states – Russia, Poland, and Czechoslovakia. Ukrainian nationalism was a threat to all three, and could be used as a weapon by any of their enemies, among whom Germany was the most prominent; and Ukrainian militants often found a sympathetic home in Berlin. The Croats found themselves absorbed into the new state of Yugoslavia, which was in many ways the old Serbia writ large. There was a strong Croat separatist movement, seeking an independent Croat state and finding support from Italy, an enemy of Yugoslavia, where exiled separatists were allowed to set up camps and prepare assassinations. Half-submerged were the Slovaks, theoretically partners in the new state of Czechoslovakia, but finding that in practice the Czechs came out on top;

there was again some impulse towards separatism, or at least towards autonomy within a reorganised Czechoslovak state.

In other cases, the problem was different. A nation-state was created, but many people of its particular nationality were separated from it, as was inevitable in the historical scattering of peoples across the map. The numbers involved were large, and the complaints were bitter. In all, it has been estimated that the 1919 settlement left nearly 19 million people as national minorities in nine nation-states, out of a total population of about 98 million. The position of Poland and Czechoslovakia was particularly difficult, with one person in three belonging to a minority nationality – and that counted the Slovaks as being among the majority in Czechoslovakia: the Czechs themselves did not amount to half the total population. The situation as a whole is illustrated by Table 2.1.<sup>13</sup>

All the new states claimed to be nation-states, with nationality as their only principle of legitimacy. The principle of their governments, at any rate

**TABLE 2.1.** *Minorities in the new nation-states*

<i>Country</i>	<i>Population (in millions)</i>	<i>Principal minorities</i>	
Czechoslovakia	14.7 (including 6.5 Czechs and 3.0 Slovaks)	German	3.25
		Magyar	0.7
		Ruthene	0.4
		Polish	0.07
Estonia	1.7	Russian	0.17
		German	0.017
Finland	3.6	Swedish	0.3
Hungary	8.7	German	0.5
Latvia	2.0	German	0.065
Lithuania	2.5	German	0.1
Poland	32.0	Ukrainian and Byelorussian	6.0
		German	0.8
		Magyar	1.5
		German	0.75
		Ukrainian	0.6
Rumania	18.8	Russian	0.4
		Bulgarian	0.36
		Macedonian	0.6
		German	0.5
		Magyar	0.5
Yugoslavia	14.0 (including 5.5 Serbs 4.5 Croats 1.0 Slovenes)	Albanian	0.5
		Muslim/Turkish	0.7

*Source:* Elizabeth Wiskemann, *Europe of the Dictators* (London 1966), pp. 267–8. Fontana.

at the start, was democratic. In these circumstances, national minorities were bound to remain minorities. If they were oppressed (and most thought they were) their only hope of release lay in the intervention of a 'big brother' (their own nation-state) over the border; or perhaps in rebellion or war. (It is true that the Covenant of the League of Nations included provisions for the protection of minorities, but these usually remained a dead letter.)

The result was a set of territorial disputes, rooted in questions of nationality, which festered for some twenty years after the settlement of 1919–20, and gave much force to the thesis of a Thirty Years War. One after another they broke out afresh in 1938, 1939, and 1940, precipitating repeated crises and providing at least the circumstances, and arguably the causes, of European war.

The most obvious of these involved the boundary between Germany and Poland, where resentment was particularly concentrated on the issues of Danzig and the Polish Corridor. Danzig was a city and port which had been German (or Prussian) since 1793; it was overwhelmingly German in population; and yet in 1919 it was proclaimed a 'Free City' in order to give Poland access to the sea through a port which was not in German territory. The Polish Corridor, territory formerly German but now providing Poland's access to the Baltic, and cutting East Prussia off from the rest of Germany, contained a German population amounting to 10 per cent, according to the Polish census of 1931. The Poles, on the other hand, were disappointed that their own claims to annex Danzig and almost the whole of Upper Silesia, which had at first been accepted by the Peace Conference's Commission on Polish Affairs, had not finally been upheld. More important, they were convinced that their commerce, security, and independence were all bound up with Danzig and the Corridor.

Poland was also involved in two other major frontier disputes, one with Lithuania over Vilna, the other with Czechoslovakia over Teschen. The city of Vilna had been in the Middle Ages the capital of Lithuania; but it was also the seat of a Polish university, and was considered by the Poles to be a strategic centre vital to their security. The population of the city and its surrounding district was predominantly Polish and Jewish; the surrounding district was of mixed Polish, Lithuanian and Byelorussian population. A Lithuanian state had come into being, under German influence, in 1918, and was established as an independent republic by the end of the year, just as Poland was achieving its own resurrection as a state. In 1919–20 Vilna was the object of sporadic fighting between the two countries; and in October 1920 an armistice left it in Lithuanian

occupation. It was then occupied by a local force under a Polish general; led a nominally separate life for a time; and was finally incorporated into Poland in 1922. The League of Nations took up the case, but failed to persuade Poland to give up the territory. In 1923 France and Britain recognised Vilna as part of Poland. Lithuania did not. Until 1927 the Lithuanian government maintained that a state of war with Poland still continued; and even after that no diplomatic relations between the two states existed until 1938.

Before 1918 the district of Teschen (in Polish Zaolzie) was part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. On the collapse of Habsburg authority, the district, which had a mixed population (according to the last Austrian census, 55 per cent Polish, 27 per cent Czech, and 18 per cent German), was disputed between the two new states of Poland and Czechoslovakia. An eventual award by the Allied powers at the conference of Spa (1920) was favourable to Czechoslovakia, leaving Poland with the actual town of Teschen, but allotting the important suburb of Freistadt, along with the whole of the Karvin coalfield, to the Czechs. Both sides felt aggrieved; and the Teschen dispute was one of the issues which divided Poland and Czechoslovakia in the inter-war period, resurfacing during the Munich crisis of 1938.

On the Baltic Sea lay the port of Memel, which was German in population, and up to 1918 had formed the easternmost part of East Prussia. However, it was also the only available port for the newly emerged state of Lithuania; and its position was thus closely akin to that of Danzig in relation to Poland. Under Article 99 of the Treaty of Versailles, Germany ceded Memel and its hinterland to the Allies, and agreed to accept the provisions they made for it; the understanding being that the city would be transferred to Lithuania under some special arrangement. By the beginning of 1923, the Allies had still not determined the status of Memel. Losing patience, the Lithuanians seized the port and its hinterland on 10 January 1923; and in 1924 the Allies accepted the *fait accompli* of Lithuanian control, though the city was administered as an autonomous district, with its own assembly. As with Vilna, action on the spot, not deliberation in Paris or Geneva, settled the matter; and as with all the other disputes, the issue continued to fester, this time in Germany and among the German population of the city.

Far to the south, on the edge of the Balkans, the region of Transylvania was a long-standing bone of contention between Magyars and Rumanians. The territory had been part of the Kingdom of Hungary within the Habsburg Empire; and had been promised to Rumania by the Allies as



the price of intervention on their side during the First World War. This promise was fulfilled in the Treaty of Trianon in 1920, and Transylvania, with about 1.5 million Magyars, passed to Rumania. Previous roles were reversed: the Magyars, who had been politically and socially predominant, now found themselves the underdogs. The problem was particularly intractable because a large part of the Magyar population lived together in south-east Transylvania, far removed from Hungary; and elsewhere a number of towns were mainly Magyar, forming islands in a Rumanian-populated countryside. No redrawing of boundary lines, therefore, could settle the issue to anything like the satisfaction of both sides. Relations between Hungary and Rumania were poisoned for the next twenty years, until Hitler produced a new territorial award in 1940, more favourable to Hungary, but still basically unsatisfactory to both sides.

These were the principal specific disputes. But the fact was that almost every frontier drawn in eastern Europe between 1919 and 1921 was unsatisfactory to one state or another, and sometimes to more than one at once. Poland was in particularly difficult straits. Not just Danzig and the Corridor, but the whole of the German–Polish boundary was unacceptable to Germany; while in the east the frontier with Russia laid down by the Treaty of Riga in 1921 was thought in Moscow to be far too favourable to the Poles. It was drawn at the end of a long and swaying struggle, in which Russia finally accepted defeat, and Poland secured territories which contained large numbers of Ukrainians and Byelorussians.<sup>14</sup>

Even those states which did well out of the settlement in eastern Europe were not united in defending it. In this lay the importance of the disputes between Poland and Lithuania, and even more between Poland and Czechoslovakia. By any rational calculation, these states should have made common cause to protect their gains against their enemies in Germany and Russia; but they did not. Instead, relations between them were so bad that they were willing to make common cause *with* their greater enemies against one another. Relations between Poland and Czechoslovakia were particularly embittered and irritable. The Teschen dispute was only part of the story. The two countries differed sharply in their views of the Soviet Union: the Poles were deeply hostile, on both historical and ideological grounds; while the Czechs were anxious for Soviet friendship, out of historic sympathy, and because they sought support against Germany. Many Poles took the view that the whole state of Czechoslovakia was an artificial creation, doomed to collapse at some stage.

To all except those involved, the Polish–Czech feud was obviously suicidal. The whole of the east European settlement only came about

because, in freakish circumstances, Russia and Germany had both been defeated within a year, one after the other. These two great powers had long dominated eastern Europe; indeed, they had ruled most of it. As the giants regained their strength, which was as certain as anything can be in human affairs, their dominance would be restored. If this process was to be resisted, its potential victims would have to stand together; which they were in no mind to do. Even if they had, success would not have been assured; and it is here that there lay the final and most important element of instability in the east European settlement. It was founded upon the sand; and as the tides of German and Soviet power rose from the low ebb of 1918–19, the sand would be washed away.

## The case for a Thirty Years War

It is clear enough that the European order as it stood before 1914 had disintegrated, and that its replacement rested on unstable foundations. From this premiss, it is easy, and to some degree convincing, to argue that the whole rickety edifice was likely to collapse in ruin at any time. It held out the prospect of war in a number of different guises: a war launched by Germany to re-establish her dominance in Europe (eastern or western, or both); a preventive war by France or Poland to forestall such action; or war in eastern Europe over one or more of the many points of conflict in that calamitous region. Why look further for the origins of another war in Europe?

The case appears all the stronger if, as many people believed, there was a fundamental continuity in German policy over the whole period between 1914 and 1941. Many Frenchmen never thought otherwise: if the Germans got another chance, they would try again; the only safe course was to sap their economy, keep them disarmed, and surround them with France's allies. Churchill obviously thought the same when he telegraphed to President Roosevelt during the night of 4/5 August 1941: 'It is twenty-seven years ago today that the Huns began the last war. We must make a good job of it this time. Twice ought to be enough.'<sup>15</sup> More strikingly, in the 1960s a similar view began to gain ground in Germany itself, when the writings of Fritz Fischer emphasised the elements of continuity between the war aims of Germany in the First and Second World Wars.<sup>16</sup> This raises the whole question of whether, or how far, German policy in fact embodied such continuity; or whether the advent of Hitler marked a break with the past and the start of a new era, even if it borrowed something from the old. If the continuity of German policy from one war to the next is accepted,

this seems to slot the final piece into place in the thesis of a Thirty Years War. The stable, orderly Europe of 1914, with its roughly equal balance of strength between opposing alliances, had not prevented the dynamism and the expansionism of Germany from breaking loose. It took four years of war, and the powerful advent of the USA, to defeat Germany. If Germany still had the same dynamism, the same will to expand, and was set on the same course, but was faced with a Europe in decay, with no balance of strength, and no Americans to restore the balance – if this was so, surely the die was cast, and another European war was a certainty. Only the details of time and occasion remained to be decided.

It is a powerful thesis, resting on much solid evidence and strong internal logic. Yet, in the debate on the origins of the Second World War in Europe, it is confronted by another thesis, of apparently equal cogency and consistency.

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- 5 H. W. V. Temperley (ed.), *A History of the Peace Conference of Paris*, vol. III, pp. 187, 214. The text of the treaty is printed in this volume, pp. 105–336.
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- 7 See Margaret Macmillan, *The Peacemakers: The Paris Peace Conference of 1919 and its attempt to end war* (London 2001), pp. 492–3.
- 8 Temperley, *History of the Peace Conference*, p. 214.
- 9 Reproduced from A. Sauvy, *Histoire économique de la France, 1919–1939*, vol. I (Paris 1965), p. 169. The figure by each arrow shows the approximate war debt owed by one state (or group of states) to another, in millions of dollars.
- 10 Table in Zara Steiner, *The Lights that Failed: European International History, 1919–1933* (Oxford 2005), p. 191.
- 11 Quoted in W. K. Hancock, *Smuts: the sanguine years, 1870–1919* (Cambridge 1962), p. 533; cf. pp. 510–11, 524.

- 12 C. Petrie, *Life and Letters of Sir Austen Chamberlain*, vol. II (London 1940), pp. 258–9; Keith Feiling, *Neville Chamberlain* (London 1946), p. 372.
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## CHAPTER THREE

# The Case Against a Thirty Years War: the Restoration of Europe

The arguments summarised in the previous chapter, if accepted in their entirety, lead to the conclusion that the instability of Europe after 1919 rendered the outbreak of another war almost inevitable. But, however powerful they appear, they have been widely questioned, qualified, or indeed rejected outright. It is impossible to squeeze out of our history the people and events ‘between the wars’, as though they were nothing more than the ghostly inhabitants of an extended half-time interval. Not even the most fatalistic observer would claim to trace a wholly predestined line from the situation of 1919 to that of 1939–41, leaving no liberty of choice whatsoever to the statesmen and peoples of the inter-war years. At the very least, it remains to be explained how it was that a war of some sort, inherently probable from 1919 onwards, became the specific conflicts which overtook Europe between 1939 and 1941. But it is possible to take the challenge to the ‘Thirty Years War’ thesis further than that.

## Signs of hope: Locarno, economic recovery and the League of Nations

In the late 1920s it appeared to contemporaries in western Europe that peace was at length returning to the troubled Continent. The errors which were by that time widely perceived in the 1919 settlement were thought to be not beyond remedy, and steps were taken to put some of them right, notably by changes in the method and extent of reparations payments, and by admitting Germany to a place in the normal working of European relations. It was also hoped that the instability of the Continent could be

remedied, on the one hand by the resurrection of something like the nineteenth-century 'Concert of Europe', an informal grouping of the great powers to provide a guiding influence in international affairs, and on the other by the development of the League of Nations. In practice these two devices often overlapped, because the great European powers were also the most influential members of the League. Finally, it appeared also that the economic and social disruption left by the war had been overcome: currencies were stabilised, industrial production reached and passed the levels of 1913, threats of revolution diminished, and the new states settled down. It was not outrageously optimistic to think that things were looking up.

The symbol of this change in European affairs was the Treaty of Locarno, and the group of political and economic agreements that preceded and followed it. Austen Chamberlain, the British Foreign Secretary, who played a considerable part in the achievement of the Locarno agreements, said afterwards that they marked 'the real dividing-line between the years of war and the years of peace'; and this verdict commanded widespread agreement at the time. The Treaty of Locarno itself was rather a limited measure to bear this heavy symbolic weight. Signed in London on 1 December 1925, after being initialled at the Swiss resort of Locarno on 16 October, it embodied the acceptance of the Franco-German and Belgian-German frontiers by the three states concerned, with an outside guarantee of those frontiers by Britain and Italy. The same acceptance and guarantee applied to the demilitarised zone in the Rhineland, which was imposed on Germany by the Treaty of Versailles. Under this extremely important provision, Germany was forbidden to maintain troops or construct fortifications in an area which included the whole of the left bank of the Rhine and a zone 50 kilometres wide on the right bank; and in the Locarno Treaty the German government freely accepted this limitation, which it previously regarded as only a part of the *diktat* of Versailles.

Though limited, these terms were important in themselves, as confirming the territorial settlement in western Europe on a freely negotiated basis. They were also important for what they represented. An important gain from the French point of view was the British guarantee of their frontier with Germany, which was something the British had avoided giving ever since 1919, when the proposed Anglo-American guarantee that was intended to accompany the Treaty of Versailles was allowed to lapse. This reassurance to France, which contributed to a sense of security, was the counterpart of the other main theme of this agreement, which was Franco-German reconciliation. Looking to the future, this seemed the crucial aspect of the whole affair. The formal political treaty did not

stand alone. It was buttressed by an association, perhaps amounting to friendship, between the French and German Foreign Ministers, Aristide Briand and Gustav Stresemann. The diplomatic relationship was accompanied by the activities of various private bodies, for example the Franco-German Committee, which originated with a small group of writers, politicians, and businessmen; and the *Action Catholique de la Jeunesse Française*, which threw itself into the work of reconciliation with German Catholics. In economic terms, French and German industrialists (with others from Belgium and Luxemburg) signed in September 1926 an agreement for an iron and steel cartel, regulating annual production and its division between the countries concerned. It was a time of hope in Franco-German relations.

The Treaty of Locarno was accompanied by other agreements. There was a series of arbitration treaties between Germany on the one hand and France, Belgium, Czechoslovakia, and Poland on the other, laying down that certain types of dispute between the signatories should be submitted to outside arbitration. There were also treaties of mutual guarantee between France on the one hand and Poland and Czechoslovakia on the other, which were intended to close, at least partially, the obvious gap left by Locarno, which was that it concerned only western Europe.

Locarno and its accompanying agreements, and the spirit of reconciliation which flourished with them, were only possible because in the previous year a partial settlement of the reparation problem had been reached. In 1923, with the French occupation of the Ruhr to enforce payment upon Germany, this had seemed scarcely feasible – France was firmly embarked on the course of imposing reparations, not negotiating about them. But in October of that year the French government accepted a British proposal to set up a committee of experts to consider the problem. This committee, set up by agreement between the British, French, Belgian, Italian, American, and German governments, was to consider (supposedly from a purely technical standpoint) means of balancing the German budget, stabilising the German currency, and fixing both an achievable level of reparation payments and means by which they might be made and secured. The chairman of the committee was an American banker, and Director of the US Bureau of the Budget, Charles G. Dawes; and its recommendations, made early in 1924, came to be known as the Dawes Plan. A vital recommendation was for the stabilisation of the German currency, at the rate of 20 Reichsmarks to the pound sterling, controlled by the creation of a new bank of issue, independent of the German government and run by a body of which half had to be non-Germans. The committee then went on to deal with reparation

payments. It left the total unchanged, but recommended a new scheme of annual payments starting at 1,000 million gold marks in the first year, rising to 2,500 million in the fifth and thereafter. Some variation in the annual payments was provided for in case of sharp movements in the price of gold or severe transfer problems. Payment of reparations was to be ensured by the appropriation of certain indirect taxes and bonds for the state railways for that purpose; and a Reparations Agency, including Allied representatives, was to be set up to control these arrangements. A foreign loan of 800 million marks was to be raised, partly to back the new currency, and partly to help with the payment of the first annual instalment under the new reparations scheme.

The Dawes Plan was accepted by the French government in April 1924, which was a vital first step, because the whole scheme was contingent upon French withdrawal from the Ruhr; and then by an international conference in London in July and August. The loan was raised without difficulty in October, rather more than half in the USA and a quarter in Britain, with the rest in a number of west European countries. Germany then made reparation payments regularly under the terms of the Dawes Plan. In February 1929 a new committee, under the chairmanship of another American banker, Owen D. Young, was set up to work out a definitive settlement of the reparations question. Its report, presented to the governments concerned in June, recommended a reduction of about a quarter in the total of reparations, with a rising scale of annual payments to be completed by 1988 – the first mention of a final date. The Reparations Agency was to be withdrawn, and foreign surveillance of German finances brought to an end. The proposals were accepted by the various governments; and a German payment under the new arrangement was made in May 1930.

These agreements were not in any final sense a settlement of the reparations problem. Paying reparations at all was still unwelcome to Germany; and there was still a strain on the German balance of payments. However, it was shown that in certain circumstances reparations could be paid, and indeed that they were compatible with a general recovery in European commerce and industry. In France, the index of industrial production passed the level of 1913 in 1924; in Germany, in 1926. In both countries, production continued to be high (though with some fluctuations) in the late 1920s, a tendency which was shared by nearly all European countries, eastern as well as western. Trade between France and Germany grew rapidly: French imports from Germany increased by 60 per cent between 1926 and 1930, including large quantities of coal, iron and steel, chemical products, and machine tools. French industrial growth in the period was



closely linked to German production – at the time, another sign of Franco-German co-operation.<sup>1</sup>

Economic progress was accompanied by the stabilisation of the major west European currencies. In Germany, this was a matter of replacement rather than stabilisation. In November 1923, at the height of the hyperinflation, a new currency, the Rentenmark, was introduced, based on the security of land and buildings. For a time it circulated alongside the old mark; then in August 1924, with the backing of the Dawes loan, a new Reichsmark was introduced to replace the old currency, at the rate of one new Reichsmark to 1 million millions of the old. This registered the acceptance of the obliteration of all holdings in the old currency; but it was a fresh start, and in the following years prices held steady. Austria and Hungary also had to introduce new currencies after rampant inflation. In Britain, the pound sterling was stabilised with the return to the gold standard in 1925 at the pre-war level, which placed the pound at an exchange rate of US\$ 4.86. This decision was later criticised, notably because it overvalued the pound by about 10 per cent in terms of its actual purchasing power compared with the dollar, and so made British exports over-expensive and condemned governments to rigid financial policies in order to maintain sterling at its overvalued rate. At the time, it was regarded as an essential step (psychological as much as anything else) towards the restoration of pre-war stability. Its main object was to restore stability to rates of exchange, and so to promote international trade, on which Britain was heavily dependent. In France, the franc, which had fallen seriously in terms of the pound sterling (touching 243 francs to the pound in July 1926), recovered sharply when Poincaré became Premier, and stabilised by the end of 1926 at 124 to the pound. France returned to the gold standard in 1928, fixing the new value of the franc at 65.5 milligrams of gold, as against 290 milligrams for the pre-war franc.<sup>2</sup> All this, and especially the concern with the gold standard, later came to appear very rigid and old-fashioned; but at the time it represented an attempt to get back to the well-tried mechanism of the pre-1914 system, and even more to the confidence which had sustained it.

One of the agreements reached at Locarno in 1925 was that Germany should be admitted to the League of Nations and become a permanent member of its Council. This focused attention on another great sign of hope in the 1930s: the apparently firm rooting and strong flowering of the League. Founded in 1919 under the combined impulse of Lord Robert Cecil and President Wilson, the League suffered an early blow when it was

rejected by the USA in 1920, and it was viewed with suspicion by most practitioners of the old diplomacy, who saw it, at best, as being no more than a fifth wheel on a carriage. But despite set-backs and doubts, the League began to flourish. The annual meetings of the Assembly, at which all member states were represented, allowed the smaller countries an active role in world diplomacy, an opportunity seized with zeal and success by (for example) Beneš of Czechoslovakia, Branting of Sweden, and Hymans of Belgium. The Council of the League, with its permanent membership made up of great powers (Britain, France, Italy, and Japan), acted as a successor to the old Concert of Europe. The Covenant bound all member states to submit disputes to the League before resorting to force, and so held out the opportunity of avoiding war. It also offered the prospect of stability, in that Article 10 bound all members to respect the territorial integrity and independence of others; and of peaceful change, because Article 19 held out the possibility of revising treaties which had become inapplicable.

The League settled well to its work of international administration, supplying High Commissioners for the Saar and Danzig, providing a channel for loans to Austria and Hungary, and furnishing various humanitarian services for the world at large. It began work (though with painful slowness) on the problems of disarmament. In 1926 the Council scored a success in settling a border incident between Bulgaria and Greece which had threatened to develop into war. With Germany's admission to membership in 1926, the League escaped the stigma of being merely a 'League of victors'. By 1928 every European state except the USSR was a member, and nearly every Foreign Minister attended its sessions. Notably, in the post-Locarno period, Briand, Stresemann, and Austen Chamberlain made a point of meeting at Geneva. In the late 1920s the League was at the height of its prestige, and a beacon of hope in international affairs.

## Balance sheet: achievements and flaws

All these achievements of the late 1920s had their flaws, some of which were potentially dangerous. The Locarno agreements contained serious faults and contradictions. Some were immediately apparent, certainly to those whom they affected most nearly. The treaties distinguished between Germany's western frontiers, which were voluntarily accepted by Germany and guaranteed by outside powers, and her eastern borders, which were not. The implication, which was not lost on the Poles, was that some frontiers were more firmly established than others. Other faults were temporarily concealed. By the treaties, Britain publicly guaranteed the

Franco-German and Belgian–German frontiers, but she took no steps to ensure that this guarantee could be fulfilled: there was no military commitment nor planning for the defence of any of the territories involved. David Dutton, in his biography of Austen Chamberlain, has pointed out that Locarno ‘represented the limit and extremity of British involvement in European affairs’.<sup>3</sup> Most serious of all, the agreements merely disguised a profound difference of approach between France and Germany. It was true that both Briand and Stresemann spoke the language of reconciliation; but each hoped to reconcile the other to something different. Briand wanted to reconcile Germany to the acceptance of the Versailles settlement; Stresemann wanted to reconcile France to its revision. It must be doubted whether so fundamental a contradiction could have been glossed over for long.

It also appeared in retrospect that the economic recovery of Europe was excessively dependent on American loans (see Table 3.1). The Dawes loan of 1924, which was oversubscribed in New York, was the start of a considerable flow of lending by American investors to Germany (especially to the firms of Krupps and Thyssen, and to German municipalities), and later to other European countries. In the Dawes years (1924–29), German borrowing from abroad always far exceeded her reparation payments. Hence a curious cycle of payments developed: Germany borrowed from the USA; which helped her to pay reparations to France, Britain, and Italy; and in turn these countries made payments on their war debts to the USA. When the source of American loans dried up with the stock market crash in 1929, this cycle was broken at its starting point; and with the calling in of short-term American loans, an important element in the German economic recovery was removed.

The extravagant hopes invested in the League of Nations by Western liberals and socialists, and by aspiring small states, were probably always greater than that organisation could be expected to fulfil. It was easy to exaggerate the success over Greece and Bulgaria, and ignore the League’s failure to deal with the Polish–Lithuanian conflict over Vilna. The basic

**TABLE 3.1.** *American loans to Europe (millions of dollars)*

1924	527
1925	629
1926	484
1927	577
1928	598
1929	142

Source: Charles P. Kindleberger, *The World in Depression, 1929–1939* (London 1973), p. 56.

problem presented to the League by the absence of the USA and the Soviet Union had not been resolved. There was a dangerous element of euphoria in the atmosphere of Geneva.

All this may be granted. But does it mean that all the hopes which followed the Dawes–Locarno agreements were illusory? Surely not. The case must remain hypothetical; but it is perfectly conceivable that, without the stock market crash in America in 1929, American support for the European financial system would not have been so abruptly removed, and the system might have adjusted itself gradually to a lesser dependence on US loans. It was first the great crash, and then the even greater world depression that it signalled, that cut off the hopes of recovery in their prime. All over Europe, the British Empire, and the USA, the depression had the effect of driving states (or groups of states) in upon themselves, to try to find salvation in some form of self-sufficiency. Similarly, the political contradictions underlying the Locarno agreements were real; but there was a reasonable chance that they could be resolved, as long as Germany moved towards the revision of Versailles with prudence, and with limited objectives. Britain would have accepted such movement readily and France reluctantly; but the result would have been the same. Locarno at least opened the way for Germany to resume her place as a partner in the European Concert; and after that, perhaps, by stages, to her former predominance, without encountering determined – still less armed – opposition.

In this hypothesis, then, it was the great depression which destroyed a situation offering a real chance of evolution towards a stable European peace. The depression wrecked all the gains in terms of economic stabilisation, prosperity, and material progress secured since 1924. It provoked over much of Europe a flight towards political extremes which plunged the Continent into ideological strife, and various forms of economic nationalism which generated constant friction. Above all, by destroying German prosperity and rendering 6 million Germans unemployed, it played a crucial part in the rise of Hitler to power. That, in the eyes of many, was the fatal event, the conjuring up of the demon king. In Churchill's words: '... into that void after a pause there strode a maniac of ferocious genius, the repository and expression of the most virulent hatreds that have ever corroded the human breast – Corporal Hitler'.<sup>4</sup> It then requires only one link to complete the chain: the depression brought Hitler, and Hitler brought the war. For many, like the French historian Maurice Baumont, the link presents no difficulty: 'the origins of the war of 1939 go back essentially to the insatiable appetites of Adolf Hitler'.<sup>5</sup>

A rival hypothesis to that of a Thirty Years War thus takes shape. Instead of the continuation of the First World War, arising almost inevitably out of the effects of that war and the instability of the peace settlement, there appears the outline of a successful European recovery, cut off in its prime by the great depression and its dreadful consequence, the advent of Hitler. These two broad interpretations have bred many variations, advanced with varying degrees of sharpness, and sometimes venom. Before pursuing the discussion, it may be helpful to look at some other aspects of the historical debate on the origins of the Second World War in Europe.

## References

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- 2 Philippe Bernard, *La fin d'un monde, 1914–1929* (Paris 1975), pp. 139–41.
- 3 David Dutton, *Austen Chamberlain: Gentleman in Politics* (Bolton 1985), p. 259.
- 4 W. S. Churchill, *The Second World War*, vol. I (London 1948), p. 9.
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## CHAPTER FOUR

# History and Historians

Two broad and wide-ranging explanations of the origins of the Second World War thus confront one another. Within their extensive span, one or other of these interpretations subsumes many of the other versions of the problem that have been produced; but they do not exhaust them. ‘History will judge’, chorused the ambassadors in Berlin in 1939; but the judgements of historians have been almost endlessly divergent.

### Consensus or debate?

It is often said that for some twenty years after the coming of the Second World War in Europe there was little or no debate about its origins. Hitler planned and caused the war, and that was an end of the matter. Then in 1961 A. J. P. Taylor published his book on *The Origins of the Second World War*, which by its attack on the simple ‘Hitler thesis’ opened a controversy which raged for several years. Shot and shell flew round Mr Taylor’s head, and enough fragments could be gathered up from the battlefield to make more books in the years that followed. A quarter of a century later, a group of distinguished historians still found much life and stimulus in ‘the A. J. P. Taylor debate’.<sup>1</sup>

There is some reality in this picture. The attractions of the simple assertion of Hitler’s guilt were certainly strong, and its grip was powerful. The judgement of the Nuremberg tribunal on war criminals, victors’ justice though it was, rested on an overwhelming mass of evidence. It scarcely needed to be argued that between 1939 and 1941 Germany attacked her neighbours, and not the other way about: the Dutch did not fling themselves at Germany’s throat on 10 May 1940. There was a powerful moral certainty, well expressed by Michael Howard, who fought in the war and later became one of its most distinguished historians: ‘There can have been

few people in the western world (and even fewer in the Soviet Union) who did not believe in 1945 that the war which they had fought and won had been not only necessary but in every sense “just”.<sup>2</sup> At the end of the war, political convenience was added to moral conviction. Americans, British, and Russians had all united to fight Hitler, and they could still unite to condemn him after his death. To look further than the guilt of that appalling man might raise questions about American isolation, or British appeasement, or the Nazi–Soviet Pact, which at that stage were better left, like sleeping dogs, to lie.

Common sense, morality, and expediency thus combined to reinforce the thesis of Hitler’s unique war guilt. The position presented a refreshing simplicity and certainty by contrast with the maze of conflicting interpretations which had arisen around the question of the origins of the First World War. The British historian G. P. Gooch, who spent much of his energies for some twenty years on the origins of the earlier war, was categorical about the contrast:

*While the responsibilities of the war of 1914 remain a subject of controversy, the conflict which began with the German attack on Poland on September 1st, 1939, presents few difficulties to the historian. Opinions naturally differ on the use of their victory by the Allies during the 'twenties and on Anglo-French policy in regard to the dissatisfied Powers since 1931; but the revelation of Hitler's Napoleonic ambitions in March 1939, quickly followed by demands incompatible with Polish independence, places the guilt of the new conflagration squarely on his shoulders.*<sup>3</sup>

Gooch’s point, made in 1940, had much force at that time. But it is a serious exaggeration to say that in the 1940s and 1950s the consensus was unbroken. Even to concentrate upon the role of Hitler was not a simple matter. From the time of Hitler’s rise to power onwards, there were fierce disputes as to the nature of the Nazi regime and the position of Hitler within it. Was the Nazi regime monolithic, moving as one man under the guidance of its Führer; or was it rather made up of warring groups, with Hitler balancing between them, practising the old skills of divide and rule? Was Hitler himself a Machiavellian, an ideologue, or a psychopath – or perhaps all three at once? Was he an independent agent, or merely the tool of finance capital, a new champion conjured up by the bourgeoisie to protect it against communism and revolution? What was the role of the German officer corps under Nazism – did it suffer the ‘nemesis of power’, or rather the nemesis of helplessness? Such questions had a direct bearing

on the apparently simple thesis of Hitler's responsibility for the war; and indeed it was plain from an early date that nothing to do with Hitler was at all simple.<sup>4</sup>

Moreover, the wartime alliance against Hitler did not long survive the victory of 1945; and as it broke up, so the unanimous agreement to cast the whole blame for the war on Hitler disintegrated with it. It was as early as January 1948 that the American State Department published a volume of documents on *Nazi-Soviet Relations*, drawn from captured German archives and emphasising the pre-war co-operation between Germany and the Soviet Union in a way which cast some of the blame for the outbreak of war in 1939 on Stalin as well as on Hitler. The Soviet Union followed in the same year with a volume entitled *The Falsifiers of History*, which blamed American bankers and industrialists for providing the capital to rebuild German war industries in the 1920s and 1930s, and accused Britain and France of encouraging Hitler to turn his aggressive drive towards the east.<sup>5</sup> The breakdown of Soviet-American relations and the rise of the 'cold war' thus disturbed the consensus on Hitler's sole war guilt at an early date.

The development of historical discussion about the origins of the Second World War in Europe is represented, not so much by a division into a period of consensus followed by a period of controversy, but by sets of contradictory interpretations which have flourished during the whole period since the 1930s. They have not all been continuously and equally prominent: they have come and gone, flared up and faded; but none has been absent from the discussion for very long. They march two by two like the animals into the ark. The idea of an inevitable war confronts that of an unnecessary war. The notion of a planned, premeditated war (war by blueprint, even) stands against that of war by accident or improvisation. Was it Hitler's war, brought about by the character and aims of one man, or another German war, in which Hitler was no more than a new representative of long-standing forces and ambitions? Was it at its heart an ideological war, a European civil war cutting across state boundaries and identities, or was it fundamentally an old-fashioned war between states, a war about power and material interests in which one state made a bid to dominate Europe and others eventually combined to defeat it? Let us look at these contrasting pairs.

## **Inevitable war or unnecessary war?**

The idea of an inevitable war has taken different forms. There was a widespread belief that another war was implicit in the situation which



followed that of 1914–18. The long-standing Marxist view that wars are the inevitable result of capitalism was applied to this war as to others, notably in East German works designed to show that Hitler was the instrument of capitalists and industrialists seeking to maximise their profits by controlling the markets and resources of Europe. Other historians have noted that to contemporaries, ‘from a certain time – earlier for some, later for others – war appeared inevitable; there never was a war which caused less surprise when it began’.<sup>6</sup>

Such notions of inevitability have long confronted a different view, which Churchill embodied in his phrase ‘the unnecessary war’. ‘One day’, he wrote, ‘President Roosevelt told me he was asking publicly for suggestions about what the war should be called. I said at once “The Unnecessary War”. There never was a war more easy to stop. . . .’<sup>7</sup> This sentiment was echoed by Namier:

*The issue of a crisis depends not so much on its magnitude as on the courage and resolution with which it is met. The second German bid for world domination found Europe weak and divided. At several junctures it could have been stopped without excessive effort or sacrifice, but was not: a failure of European statesmanship . . . the rest of Europe had neither the faith, nor the will, nor even sufficient repugnance, to offer timely, effective resistance. . . . Janissaries and appeasers aided Hitler’s work: a failure of European morality.*<sup>8</sup>

Both Churchill and Namier were advocates of resistance to Germany from an early date; and their argument was that at certain points the advance of German power could have been checked by the threat, or the comparatively small-scale use, of force. There thus developed the ‘lost opportunities’ school of thought. For example, German rearmament might have been prevented in its early stages, thus depriving Germany of the military strength on which all else depended. The strongest favourite among the ‘lost opportunities’ was seen in the German occupation of the Rhineland demilitarised zone in March 1936, when (it was widely asserted) a mere ‘police action’ was all that was needed. If only the French, preferably supported by Britain, had marched into the Rhineland, the Germans would have withdrawn at once, Hitler would have fallen, and all would have been well. Another opportunity, this time twofold, came to be found in the Czechoslovakian crisis of 1938. On the one hand, firm opposition to Germany by the Western powers, Czechoslovakia, and the Soviet Union might have deterred Germany altogether, or at worst have led to a war which would have been shorter and more easily won than that which

actually took place in 1939–45. Or on the other hand a mere declaration of opposition by the British government would have brought about a revolt by the German opposition to Hitler, and thus removed the dictator from power. A recent advocate of this view, Patricia Meehan, sums the case up thus: ‘The tragedy of the aborted *putsch* of 1938 is that it was the moment of maximum opportunity with the minimum risk of failure.’<sup>9</sup> A final ‘lost opportunity’ is often seen in the negotiations of May–August 1939 for an alliance between Britain, France, and the Soviet Union, which by its very existence would have deterred Hitler from going to war.

The ‘lost opportunity’ interpretation of events was in practice not too difficult to reconcile with some versions of the ‘inevitable war’ thesis. It was all a matter of dates, so that what was avoidable at one time became inevitable later. Churchill put the two views together within a couple of paragraphs. ‘Once Hitler’s Germany had been allowed to rearm without active interference by the Allies and former associated powers, a second World War was almost certain. . . . Almost all that remained open to France and Britain was to await the moment of the challenge and do the best they could.’<sup>10</sup> The same principle could be applied to other ‘lost opportunities’. This fusion of two apparent opposites became firmly lodged in British minds, largely through the influence of Churchill’s own writings, and was widely accepted as an interpretation of the origins of the war. The conflict might have been prevented at one of a variety of points, but thereafter assumed a bleak inevitability.

## Planned war or improvised war?

The next pair of opposites is made up of war planned and premeditated, and war by improvisation, or even by accident. For a long time the view was widely held that war was brought about by a carefully planned and timed programme of Nazi aggression – ‘blueprint’ was a favourite word. In part this arose from a striking appearance of regularity in German moves. In March 1935 the Versailles restrictions on armaments were thrown off and conscription introduced; and March 1936 saw the occupation of the Rhineland. After a fallow year, the series was resumed, but to a six-monthly instead of an annual rhythm: March 1938, the occupation of Austria; September 1938, the Munich crisis and the annexation of the Sudetenland; March 1939, the Prague coup and the destruction of the remainder of Czechoslovakia; September 1939, the war with Poland; April 1940, the invasion of Denmark and Norway, followed at once by the assault in the west. Once again, such an interpretation gained impetus

and authority from Churchill. 'Europe is confronted with a programme of aggression, nicely calculated and timed, unfolding stage by stage', he declared in the House of Commons on 14 March 1938; and events seemed to prove him right.<sup>11</sup> In the early stages of the war, the British public formed a strong impression of Hitler's infallibility: he knew everything and foresaw everything, and events moved at his bidding. After the war, the tale was taken up at the Nuremberg trials, where a principal charge was one of *planning* aggressive war. The point was emphasised in the title of a book by a Swiss historian, Walther Hofer, *War Premeditated* (1954); though in fact this book dealt only with the events of August 1939. In 1960 William Shirer, an American journalist and broadcaster turned historian, published his *Rise and Fall of the Third Reich* (a best-seller in Britain and the USA, and much translated), which embodied the 'blueprint' idea in its massive and powerful narrative.

It was this view that was so severely handled in A. J. P. Taylor's book in 1961. Taylor presented Hitler as a Micawber-like figure, always waiting for something to turn up, taking advantage of opportunities presented to him by others; not a planner but a coffee-house talker and dreamer; at best an opportunist and improviser. The war between Germany and Poland assumed almost the appearance of a mere accident, arising because Hitler made a slight error of timing in launching one of his diplomatic manoeuvres, putting off until 29 August a move which he should have made on the 28th.<sup>12</sup> The extreme forms of this argument have found little support; but the theme of opportunism and improvisation is another matter. Years before, in a book which was an uncompromising indictment of Hitler, Alan Bullock had noted the opportunist nature of the Führer's diplomacy in August 1939. Even in a chapter firmly entitled 'Hitler's war', Bullock described how the dictator hesitated between three courses: another Munich; a war against Poland alone; or a war against Poland which might involve France and Britain. He did not make up his mind until the British government made it up for him by declaring war.<sup>13</sup> Three years before the publication of Taylor's book, readers of the *Revue d'Histoire de la deuxième guerre mondiale* had their attention drawn to evidence of hesitation and indecision in Berlin after the Prague coup, indicating that there was no firmly established plan, with a next stage ready to be executed.<sup>14</sup> In 1963, Gordon Brook-Shepherd's book on the German occupation of Austria confirmed with ample proofs that the date and method of the *Anschluss* were forced upon Hitler by circumstances, and were not part of a pre-arranged plan.<sup>15</sup> Since then, the 'blueprint' theory of Hitler's foreign policy, the programme nicely calculated and timed, has been largely abandoned.

This has not meant, however, that the whole notion of a plan has been abandoned. Rather, it has been taken up by German historians and linked to a view of Hitler as a man with a systematic framework of thought, within which he adapted his approach to some of the demands and opportunities presented by events.<sup>16</sup> Andreas Hillgruber and Klaus Hildebrand have argued a strong case that Hitler had an outline scheme in two phases, the first to establish German control of Europe, and the second (which might well come only after his lifetime) to wrest control of the seas and world domination from Britain and the USA.<sup>17</sup> The European stage of such a programme also forms the basis of K. D. Bracher's view that 'Hitler from the very outset fixed his sights on one unchanging goal: to round off the territory of the national state, and to expand Germany's *Lebensraum* far beyond the "racial core" of the German people'; a goal which involved moving externally against the Slavs, and internally against the Jews.<sup>18</sup> While not every aspect of these positions commands universal assent, they have produced widespread agreement that Hitler's undoubted improvisations must be seen within the framework of a seriously worked out system of thought.<sup>19</sup> In this way, what appeared to be diametrically opposed interpretations have been very largely synthesised into what has emerged as a new orthodoxy.

## Hitler's war or another German war?

This leads directly to the third pair of contradictory explanations: was this Hitler's war, or (as the advocates of the idea of a Thirty Years War asserted) simply another German war, the prolongation of that of 1914–18? It is not difficult to discern the similarities between the objectives of the Kaiser's Germany, and especially the war aims pursued by Germany in both east and west during the First World War, and the aims of Hitler's Germany. In eastern Europe, the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk in 1918 placed Germany in effective control of the Baltic provinces, Poland, the Ukraine, and the Caucasus. Among the ideas considered by General Ludendorff was the planting of a German colony in the Crimea. Hitler's Germany in 1941–42 aimed at control of much the same area, though by outright domination rather than indirect means; and a German colony was briefly established in the Crimea. In central and western Europe, the zone of German political and economic control sketched out in Bethmann-Hollweg's memorandum of war aims in September 1914 was actually established after the German conquests of 1940. The Kaiser's Germany also embarked on a 'world policy', with a great navy and colonial

ambitions, which corresponded to Hitler's distant aims of a large fleet and world domination.

Against this strong evidence of continuity is the view that Hitler's personality, the nature and methods of his new regime, and the overriding demands of Nazi ideology constituted a sharp break in German policy, dated either in 1933, when Hitler came to office, or in 1938, when he finally broke the power of the conservative establishment in the Foreign Office and the General Staff. Even though some continuity with the past was maintained, the new elements were more important than the old. In particular, there is a strong case that by the 1930s the old-established German political and military leaders had grown cautious, and were by no means eager for a war of conquest. Hitler introduced a new way of thought, new men from far outside the old élites, and revolutionary new methods. Donald Watt, at the end of his massive study of *How War Came*, leaves no doubt as to his view of the role of Hitler. 'Always one returns to Hitler: Hitler exultant, Hitler vehement, Hitler indolent, Hitler playing the great commander. . . .' And again: 'Hitler willed, wanted, craved war and the destruction wrought by war' – though at that point Watt adds, 'He did not want the war he got.'<sup>20</sup>

## Ideological war or a war for reasons of state?

This contradiction, still unresolved, is closely linked with the last pair of opposite interpretations: was the Second World War in Europe a distinctively ideological war, or a war between states over issues of power, material interests, or simply survival? The ideological element in the Europe of the 1930s was unavoidable. No one could travel in Germany and Italy without observing the ostentatious display of the fascist and Nazi regimes. Few travelled in the USSR, but those who did were very vocal. The Soviet regime attracted some and repelled others with tremendous force, and added much to the ideological vibrancy of Europe. The contrast with the condition of Europe before 1914 was marked. 'Before 1914 the foreign policies of the European states all belonged to a single species. The chancelleries of the parliamentary democracies conformed to the same philosophy of civilised Machiavellianism as that of the dynastic states. . . .' Raymond Aron, who wrote these words, had no doubt of the importance of the change. It was exemplified, before the Second World War and even more after it began, by the number and significance of the 'ideological traitors' – Germans who preferred the defeat of their own country to a victory by Hitler; Frenchmen who supported a German victory out of

disillusion with the Third Republic or active sympathy with Nazism; Russians who fought with their country's enemies against Stalinism. The same phenomenon was exemplified in the resistance movements against German occupation which took shape in Europe in 1939–41. Resisters were not numerous; and they were usually patriots above all; but often they were also ideologically committed. Aron, as both a Frenchman and a Jew, wrote from the heart: 'man, without being in uniform, was defending his soul. The victory of either side signified, or seemed to signify, a conversion of souls by force.'<sup>21</sup>

The result was a situation in which there was ideological conflict between states – between the Nazi and fascist regimes and Bolshevik Russia, and between both of these and the parliamentary, capitalist democracies of Britain and France. There were also frequent cases of rebellion by individuals against the ideological character of their own country. When war came, the battle-lines often ran between fellow-citizens of the same country, as well as between one country and another. Moreover, the ideological conflicts involved ideals, values, and the whole working of political and social systems, so that the stakes of war were very high.

Against this is set the view that, despite the undoubted presence of ideological elements, the war was primarily one between states, fought for issues of national security or material gain. John Lukacs, for example, though well aware of the ideological aspects of the war, insisted that 'Hitler, Mussolini, Churchill, de Gaulle were statesmen first of all. They subordinated their philosophical and political preferences to what they thought were the interests of their states.'<sup>22</sup> Churchill and de Gaulle above all, the men who refused absolutely to come to terms with Germany in 1940, drew their convictions from a simple, old-fashioned patriotism, rooted in the past and in their view of history; and Lukacs believed that their motives were less complicated and their resistance more steadfast than in those who were impelled by ideology. Stalin too seems to have fought above all for the security and survival of his Russian empire, appealing in 1941 to Russian patriotism and the heroes of the past rather than to communism, even though millions in other countries saw him as the leader of the Workers' Fatherland. In other versions of events, the war appears primarily as a struggle for economic advantage. Germany, with a booming domestic economy and a vast programme of armaments, went to war to secure its imports of raw materials and food. The war was launched by those who were convinced it could be made to pay, and forced upon those whose economic interests were attached to the status quo, and who foresaw only economic ruin resulting from another great conflict.<sup>23</sup>

The arguments continue. They are not likely to be stilled unless some complete lack of interest or innovation supervenes, leaving the issues to congeal into some inert and uninspiring immobility. So far, there is no sign of this. 'History will judge' was the cry in 1939. Its judgements have been, and still are, multifarious and often contradictory. Two wide-ranging and conflicting interpretations still stand, in the Thirty Years War thesis on the one hand, and the explanation from the depression plus Hitler on the other. More detailed examination brings out a wide range of differing views, here marshalled into four sets of contrasting pairs. Some of these views lend support to the Thirty Years War thesis; others – notably those which stress the role of Hitler and of ideology – oppose it. Many years of ardent and industrious historical work have brought us into something of a maze. Can we find a thread which will lead us through it?

There are certainly clues which may be followed. First, it helps to remember that even widely differing interpretations are not necessarily incompatible with one another, but sometimes explain different aspects of the same events. Second, several apparent contradictions are less difficult to comprehend when we grasp firmly that we are dealing with a lengthy process, covering some five or six years, as well as with particular events. It is natural that different explanations applied, and in varying degrees, to different elements in this complex development. Third, we must examine both the underlying forces behind the process by which Europe moved from civil strife and undeclared war to local and eventually Continental war, and also the various points along that road when particular states decided, or were compelled, to go to war. The next part of the book is therefore devoted to a consideration of the underlying forces of ideology, economics, and strategy; and the final part moves to a narrative of events from the mid-1930s to 1941. In this way, while we cannot resolve all the problems and conflicts of evidence and interpretation, we can nevertheless follow a thread which offers a way through the labyrinth.

## References

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- 2 Michael Howard, *War and the Liberal Conscience* (London 1978), p. 115.
- 3 G. P. Gooch, 'The coming of the war', *Contemporary Review*, July 1940, p. 9.
- 4 The whole problem is reviewed in Pierre Ayçoberry, *The Nazi Question. An essay on the interpretations of National Socialism 1922–1975* (London 1981). For some of the questions under discussion, see e.g. R. Palme Dutte, *Fascism and Social Revolution* (London 1934); Franz Neumann, *Behemoth: The Structure and Practice of National-Socialism* (London 1942), emphasising the role of conflicting groups; J. W. Wheeler-Bennett, *The Nemesis of Power* (London 1953), on the officer corps.
- 5 US Department of State, *Nazi–Soviet Relations, 1939–1941. Documents from the archives of the German Foreign Office*, R. J. Sontag and J. S. Beddie (eds) (Washington 1948). Soviet Information Bureau, *The Falsifiers of History* (Moscow and London 1948).
- 6 Marlis G. Steinert, *Les Origines de la Seconde Guerre Mondiale* (Paris 1974), p. 15; cf. John Lukacs, *The Last European War* (London 1977), p. 25.
- 7 W. S. Churchill, *The Second World War*, vol. I (London 1948), p. viii.
- 8 L. B. Namier, *Diplomatic Prelude* (London 1950), p. ix.
- 9 Patricia Meehan, *The Unnecessary War. Whitehall and the German Resistance to Hitler* (London 1992), p. 186; see generally, pp. 113–86. Both the Rhineland and the plot of 1938 have come to look increasingly unconvincing as lost opportunities (see below, pp. 217, 240–2, 268–9); but they have left their mark on historical and popular opinion.
- 10 Churchill, *Second World War*, vol. I, p. 148.
- 11 *House of Commons Debates*, 5th series, vol. 333, col. 95.
- 12 A. J. P. Taylor, *The Origins of the Second World War* (London 1961), p. 278.
- 13 Alan Bullock, *Hitler: a study in tyranny* (London 1952), ch. 9.
- 14 O. Desbrosses, in *Revue d'Histoire de la deuxième guerre mondiale*, no. 29, Jan. 1958, pp. 84–5.
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- 18 K. D. Bracher, *The German Dictatorship* (London: Penguin Books 1973), p. 37.
- 19 See William Carr, 'National Socialism: foreign policy and Wehrmacht', in Walter Laqueur (ed.), *Fascism: a reader's guide* (London: Penguin Books 1979), p. 121.



- 20 Donald Cameron Watt, *How War Came. The immediate origins of the Second World War, 1938–1939* (London 1989), pp. 619, 623.
- 21 Raymond Aron, *Peace and War* (London 1966), pp. 298, 173.
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PART TWO

# The Underlying Forces

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# The Role of Ideology

Carlo Rosselli, the leader of the Italian Action Party, in exile in Paris, wrote in 1936: 'Beware! A European conflict is developing. We have reached the moment when the two opposed worlds, the world of freedom and the world of authoritarianism, are about to find themselves face to face.'<sup>1</sup> He was expecting a war of ideologies, and was conscious that, as a political refugee from his own land, he was already engaged in such a war. In retrospect, these views seem largely justified. Nazi Germany, and to a lesser extent fascist Italy, professed ideologies which, if put into practice, would produce dynamic, expansionist foreign policies which were certain at some stage to be opposed. The war, when it came, was to an important degree a conflict of values and ideas, in which the victors imposed a form of government, an ideology, and a culture on the vanquished. This was usually (though not always) the case with Nazi conquests; and it was also true in occupied Germany at the end of the war, when the East became a communist state and the West a liberal democracy, and the Germans themselves were re-educated to fit into the new order.

The line-up of forces was not as simple as that presented by Rosselli, with freedom facing authoritarianism. Fascism/Nazism stood opposed to parliamentary democracy; but there was also another brand of authoritarianism in communism, and the result was the emergence of a triangle of forces, each opposed to the other two, though willing from time to time to make tactical alliances with one enemy against the other. It is also clear that the role of ideology was not unique or all-embracing. States continued to pursue material interests, economic advantage, and military security. The continuities of policy imposed by history and geography could not be, and were not, simply discarded. Hitler inherited much from the Germany of Kaiser Wilhelm; Stalin from the Russia of the Tsars; and one of the most

determined and courageous opponents of Nazi Germany, Winston Churchill, embodied a deeply rooted traditional patriotism rather than any contemporary ideology. Moreover, it is given to no man to achieve an undeviating consistency in thought and action; even the most devoted zealot will change his mind or make mistakes.

Despite such reservations and complications, the role of ideology in the coming of the Second World War in Europe was significant, and any analysis which ignored it would be well wide of the mark. Ideology was a powerful force in international relations. Fascism, Nazism and communism offered ideas and systems which were attractive alternatives to liberal democracy, which faltered in face of the political and economic challenges of the 1920s and 1930s. In principle, communism had the widest appeal, because it was addressed to all workers, irrespective of nationality, and indeed there were people in all European countries whose first loyalty was to the Workers' Fatherland in the Soviet Union. Fascism and Nazism were in theory narrower in their appeal, which was to the members of a nation or a race, to the exclusion of others; but in practice they attracted followers across national borders and racial divides.<sup>2</sup> Ideology thus produced lines of division which ran within states as well as between them, so that in almost every state in Europe there were individuals and groups whose first loyalty was to an idea rather than to their country – and often to another country which embodied the idea. Ideological links and antagonisms made it difficult for governments to act solely on the basis of power politics and material interest. For example, France and Italy might well have made an alliance against Germany on power-politics lines, but ideology stood in the way – fascist Italy was anathema to French Left-wingers, while Nazi Germany was in the same ideological camp as fascist Italy. In Nazi Germany itself, the ideological claims of a master race to living space came to dominate foreign policy, and if pressed to their conclusion were certain to lead to war.

Our main concern is with the role of ideology in foreign policy and the origins of the war. But to establish this, it is necessary to examine the nature of the ideologies involved, and their roles within the various European states. Much of what follows in the next four chapters bears only indirectly on the Second World War itself; but in so far as it was an ideological war, we must examine the ideologies in order to assess their significance in its origins.

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## CHAPTER FIVE

# Italian Fascism

Fascism, which with its close relative Nazism was to play a crucial role in European affairs in the 1930s, first came to power and prominence with the rise of Mussolini in Italy in the 1920s. Italy was not in material terms a power of the first rank, and Mussolini is sometimes presented as being little more than a desperado or a mountebank. But the success of Italian fascism encouraged many imitators. It was the start of what proved to be a disruptive movement in European politics, and it deserves serious attention.

### The rise of Italian fascism

The unification of Italy achieved by 1870 was forced, hasty, and superficial. There was little in common between south and north. The Vatican maintained its opposition to the new state. Nationalists were aggrieved that Italian populations in the South Tyrol, Trieste, and Fiume still remained outside the frontiers of Italy. The First World War compounded these problems, leaving a legacy of inflation and industrial depression. Nationalists were distressed that the Paris Peace Conference denied Italy some of the gains she had been promised on her entry into the war on the Allied side. This issue came to a head over the question of Fiume. That city was not in fact one of the territories promised to Italy in 1915, but it was regarded as part of 'unredeemed Italy', and there was widespread resentment among Italians when President Wilson proposed that Fiume should become a 'free city'. Gabriele d'Annunzio, the flamboyant nationalist, airman and poet, occupied the city in September 1919 with a force of volunteers. He ran Fiume in spectacular style for over a year, and the government in Rome did not dare to dislodge him until December 1920.

At the same time, Italy was in the throes of a domestic political crisis. There were five different governments between 1919 and 1921. The pre-war politicians, of whom the most prominent was Giolitti, seemed out of their depth amid post-war problems. There was a series of strikes in northern Italy, culminating in the occupation of many factories in August–September 1920. Governments appeared unable to cope with industrial disorder, just as they were unable to deal with d’Annunzio in Fiume.

It was these circumstances that presented Mussolini with an opportunity. Born in 1883, the son of a blacksmith, Mussolini made his early political career as a militant socialist journalist, with a strong line in anti-militarism. He went to Switzerland in 1904 to avoid call-up for the army (though he later completed his military service); and he agitated against the Tripoli War of 1911–12. He became a leading figure in Italian socialism, but in 1914 he broke with his anti-militarist past, and threw himself instead into the movement for Italian intervention in the First World War, in which he served as a soldier from 1915 to 1917. When the war was over, he founded the fascist movement at a hall in Milan on 23 March 1919. He had pursued an erratic career, showing a strong taste for violence, boundless ambition, and a marked talent for journalism and propaganda; but he had yet to achieve any solid success.

The crisis of the parliamentary regime thus came opportunely for Mussolini and his so far hesitant fascist movement. D’Annunzio had aroused the militant nationalists, but his adventure in Fiume petered out, leaving his followers ready to turn elsewhere. Industrialists, property-owners, and the middle classes generally were alarmed by strikes and fear of revolution, and looked for more drastic preventive action than that being taken by the government. The opening was there. Mussolini moved to exploit it. He dropped the left-wing and republican aspects of the fascist programme. The fascists showed their strength by beating up socialists and burning their headquarters, and by marching through the streets wearing black shirts and singing ‘Giovinezza’, the song of youth that had become popular in Fiume. Mussolini’s ploy was to combine violence and displays of strength with a legal approach, using the constitutional organs of parliament, Cabinet, and the monarchy. After a prolonged period of political confusion during 1921 and most of the next year, a turning point was reached at the end of October 1922. During the night of 27/28 October, the fascist militia mobilised and seized control of several provincial towns. The government responded by proclaiming martial law and preparing to use the army to defend Rome and restore order elsewhere. The King,



Victor Emmanuel III, then changed his mind and drew back from the use of force. The Prime Minister resigned, and his successor, Salandra, offered to take Mussolini into his Cabinet. He refused, and Salandra advised the King to call on Mussolini himself to form a government. Mussolini took office on 29 October, and on the 30th the Blackshirts entered the capital – the so-called ‘March on Rome’, though most travelled by train.

Superficially, therefore, all was done in due constitutional form. Mussolini formed his administration at the King’s request; the new Cabinet included representatives of various Liberal groups and of the Catholic Party; and Mussolini presented his new government to the Chamber and Senate, and was voted full powers to make financial and administrative reforms, with only the socialists and communists voting against. The ‘March on Rome’ took place after Mussolini had become Prime Minister. But despite all this, it remained true that the atmosphere of violence and the danger of a rebellion played a crucial part in the events of 28/29 October. When Mussolini asked for parliament’s co-operation, he held out the scarcely veiled threat of his Blackshirt squads if he did not receive it. Mussolini came to power through a mixture of force and constitutionality. He liked to boast about the force, but he also made full use of his proper constitutional position. He was a fascist leader, but also the Prime Minister in a parliamentary monarchical state.

## Fascist doctrines and institutions

What was this fascism that came to power in Italy in 1922, and how did it develop? It was only one (though one of the earliest) of a number of European dictatorships which appeared in the 1920s and 1930s. At the end of the First World War the victory of the democratic and parliamentary powers, and a widespread desire to impress President Wilson (which was not wholly unconnected with hopes of American largesse), assisted in the creation of a number of new republics on ostentatiously democratic lines in central and eastern Europe, to add to the democratic states which already existed in the west and in Scandinavia. In the following years the swing away from this position was rapid and far-reaching. A list of European countries adopting various kinds of dictatorial forms of government in the 1920s and 1930s comprised the following. (The list is arbitrary, and not everyone will agree with its contents or shorthand descriptions. Some would regard Russia as the only true democracy; or Portugal as an outright fascist state. But at the very least none of these states was a parliamentary democracy.)

Russia	1917: Dictatorship of Lenin and the Communist Party
Hungary	1919: Bela Kun, communist; replaced 1920 by Admiral Horthy, conservative, claiming to be Regent for the Habsburgs
Italy	1922–25: Mussolini, fascist
Turkey	1923: Mustapha Kemal, secularising and modernising
Spain	1923: Primo de Rivera, conservative
Poland	1926: Marshal Pilsudski, military and conservative
Yugoslavia	1929: King Alexander I, monarchical-conservative
Rumania	1930–31: King Carol, monarchical-conservative
Portugal	1932: Salazar, conservative with some fascist trappings
Germany	1933: Hitler, national socialist
Greece	1936: Metaxas, conservative with some fascist trappings

This amounts to eleven states in all. What reason was there to distinguish fascist Italy from the ruck of authoritarian states which emerged in the 1920s?

Many thought there was very little reason. British conservatives, for example, tended to regard Mussolini as a man who had saved Italy from revolution, established order, and encouraged a degree of prosperity. Lord Rothermere, Winston Churchill, and *The Times* all thought of him, in their different ways, as a sensible, dependable, and perhaps even a distinguished figure. While Austen Chamberlain was Foreign Secretary between November 1924 and 1929, he met Mussolini five times. These men did not think his methods suitable for Britain; but compared to the intrigues and instability of earlier Italian politics his regime seemed sound enough for his own country, with no indication that it was particularly evil or dangerous for the rest of Europe. Others who took a much less favourable view of Mussolini and his regime still did not take him unduly seriously. The French socialist politician, Joseph Paul-Boncour (later to be Foreign Minister), called Mussolini in 1925 ‘César de Carnaval’: a mock-up Caesar – a label that has stuck.

There has been a strong tendency to represent Mussolini and Italian fascism as lacking in consistency, depth, and seriousness. In this view Mussolini was a shrewd political operator, with, in his early career, an instinctive sense for an opportunity, and a journalist’s flair for publicity and propaganda. He was full of contradictions: socialist and anti-socialist at different times; once an anti-militarist and then an almost lyrical champion of war; an anti-Catholic who reconciled the Italian state with the Vatican. He was unstable in purpose, and often more concerned with

appearance than reality. He was brutal, and cultivated an image of ruthlessness, but his violence was unsystematic and on nothing like the scale of that practised by Hitler and Stalin. The crime most often held against him was the murder of a single man, the socialist politician, Matteotti, in 1924, rather than the mass slaughter perpetrated by Hitler and Stalin. The Italian secret police, the OVRA (*Organizzazione di Vigilanza Repressione dell'Antifascismo*), had a staff of only 375 in 1940. Between 1929 and 1943, the Special Tribunal imposed only 42 death sentences for political crimes; and of these 11 were not carried out. In addition, some tens of thousands were exiled to the south of Italy or to islands – not harsh, compared to Siberia.<sup>1</sup>

Mussolini thus appears as a man who was wilful rather than resolute, a dictator whose tyranny was tempered by inefficiency and vacillation. Fascism is presented as mainly a matter of display and propaganda. Its doctrine is seen as incoherent and full of contradictions, scarcely worth taking seriously, and serving mainly to obscure the compromises with the monarchy, the generals, the Church, and the industrialists, by which the regime survived.

In such an interpretation, fascism ceases to have serious characteristics of its own, and becomes an emanation of Mussolini's unstable personality, with the addition of some spectacular conjuring tricks. But against this should be put the picture that the regime tried to project of itself, which was to a considerable degree shared by some of its most determined opponents, and which deserves serious consideration. In this picture, fascism had important characteristics which separated it from other authoritarian regimes of the day. The role of Mussolini remains crucial – it is scarcely possible to conceive of Italian fascism without him – but this does not mean that everything can be reduced to the impact of one man's personality. Let us examine the main characteristics of fascist doctrine: the cult of dynamism and its totalitarian claims.

Dynamism was a word much in vogue among fascists, who claimed to embody youth, energy, action, violence, revolution. This was particularly important in Italy, where there was little point in a new movement claiming to represent conservatism or tradition, because the Catholic Church, the House of Savoy, and the ancient cities and provinces already played that role with more conviction than any upstart was likely to muster. Fascism made novel claims. When Mussolini presented his first government to the Chamber of Deputies in November 1922, he asserted that he stood for the revolution of the Blackshirts. Fascism proclaimed the primacy of action, the ability to cut through discussion with a command or a



*The embodiment of Italian Fascism: Mussolini as the Great Leader*

Source: Bettman/Corbis

blow. D'Annunzio wrote in his *Letter to the Dalmatians* (January 1919): 'Of what value are the secrets of laborious treaties – expedients bred from weakened faith and untimely fear – compared to an upright heroic will?' Ten years before, in 1909, the Manifesto of Futurism, which contributed

much to fascist ideas and sentiments, opened with the words: 'We want to sing the love of danger, the habit of energy and rashness'; and went on to assert that 'Beauty exists only in struggle. There is no masterpiece that has not an aggressive character. . . . We want to glorify war – the only cure for the world. . . .' Mussolini, in his article on 'The doctrine of fascism' in the *Enciclopedia Italiana* (1932), wrote that up to 1919 'My doctrine . . . had been a doctrine of action.' Before the March on Rome there had been discussions, 'but – and this is more sacred and important – there were deaths'. 'Above all', he wrote,

*Fascism believes neither in the possibility nor in the utility of perpetual peace. It thus repudiates the doctrine of Pacifism – born of a renunciation of the struggle and an act of cowardice in the face of sacrifice. War alone brings up to their highest tension all human energies and puts the stamp of nobility upon the peoples who have the courage to meet it. All other trials are substitutes, which never really put a man in front of himself in the alternative of life and death.*<sup>2</sup>

Words are cheap; but sometimes men mean what they say. D'Annunzio followed words with action at Fiume. The author of the Futurist Manifesto, the poet Filippo Marinetti, volunteered for military service in the Second World War, when he was over sixty. There is evidence that Mussolini seriously intended to harden the Italian people in the fires of war. Adrian Lyttleton has summed up the heart of the matter: 'Fascism, reduced to its essentials, is the ideology of permanent conflict.'<sup>3</sup> Those who chose to ignore this, or to dismiss it as mere braggadocio, did so at their peril.

The totalitarian claims of fascism arose from its conception of the state. Mussolini wrote that 'The keystone of Fascist doctrine is the conception of the State, of its essence, of its task, of its ends. For Fascism the State is an absolute before which individuals and groups are relative.' Giovanni Gentile, one of the regime's most prominent philosophers, defined the point more sharply: '. . . for the Fascist, everything is in the State, and nothing human or spiritual exists, much less has value, outside the State. In this sense Fascism is totalitarian, and the Fascist State, the synthesis and unity of all values, interprets, develops and gives strength to the whole life of the people.'<sup>4</sup> Totalitarianism meant that the state claimed to control the totality of life, and all aspects of the activities of its citizens. Individuals, families, organised groups of all kinds (including the Church) must be subordinated to the state; and Gentile opposed the Lateran agreements of 1929 with the Vatican because they fell short of this principle.

How far, indeed, such sweeping claims could be made good in Italian conditions was very doubtful; but they were made, and influenced the nature of fascism. Its emphasis was on authority and unity. The *fasces* which were adopted as the Party symbol, and in 1926 became insignia of the state, were taken over from the symbols of authority carried by the Roman *lictors*. Parliamentary democracy was rejected because it meant legitimising conflict within the state, with political parties as the accepted embodiment of conflicting interests. Socialism, communism, or any sort of Marxist doctrine proclaimed the class struggle, which was equally impermissible in a state aiming at unity. The solution was the corporate state, in which all groups recognised their common interests, whether political or economic, and the institutions of the state were designed to impose unity, not to encourage conflict.

The political institutions of fascist Italy were designed to impose both the totalitarian claim and the demand for unity. The parliamentary system was transformed by an electoral law (1923) providing that the majority party in a legislative election should automatically secure two-thirds of all the seats in the Chamber of Deputies. A further law (1928) introduced a system of extreme simplicity: the Fascist Grand Council was to choose 400 candidates, who would be put to the voters for election (without opposition) to the 400 seats in a new Chamber. In 1939 the Chamber of Deputies was abolished altogether, and replaced by a Chamber of Fasces and Corporations, nominated from members of the Fascist Grand Council and the National Council of Corporations.

This last change emphasised the fascist claim to be evolving a new form of political and economic organisation, the corporate state, which would eliminate conflicts of interest between employers and workers. An elaborate system of corporations was set up, each made up of confederations representing workers and employers respectively in different sectors of the economy, e.g. industry, agriculture, or commerce. Much of the system remained on paper rather than being translated into practice; and government control over the workers' side was much tighter than over the employers. However, the corporate state was one of the distinctive features of Italian fascism, and attracted some favourable attention outside Italy.

While this formal structure of the new state was being set up, the rougher work of crushing opposition to the regime went ahead. Mussolini allowed individuals from other parties to remain in his government for a year or two – from the Catholic Party until 1923, Liberals until 1924. In 1924 the murder of Matteotti after a speech in the Chamber attacking fascist electoral malpractices signified that open opposition would be

ruthlessly suppressed; and opposition deputies decided to take no further part in the work of the Chamber until the rule of law was re-established – the so-called ‘Aventine Secession’. Anti-fascist newspapers were closed down or taken over; political parties opposed to the regime were dissolved; freedom of movement for individuals was curtailed by the cancellation of all passports; and severe penalties were imposed on opponents of fascism who succeeded in going abroad to continue their resistance. One of the most significant moves was also one of the earliest. In December 1922, at the first meeting of the Fascist Grand Council, the Voluntary Militia for National Safety was set up, incorporating the Blackshirt squads into a permanent organisation, whose members were paid by the state but owed allegiance only to Mussolini – a political armed force separate from the regular army. Those who, like the old Liberal statesman, Giolitti, had hoped to make use of the fascists and draw them into the parliamentary system found that they were dealing with a political force of a different kind; and when they tried to oppose it (as Giolitti did when at the age of eighty-six he spoke and voted against the electoral law of 1928) it was too late.

In outward appearance, Italy was provided with much of the structure of a totalitarian state. The Fascist Party dispensed patronage and became the way to advancement. Children from the age of eight onwards were compulsorily enrolled in fascist organisations, increasingly military in form as the child grew older. Education, and particularly the teaching of history, was directed towards the propagation of fascism and a fascist view of the past. A Fascist Institute of Culture published books and organised cultural life. Even leisure was supposed to be organised by the state. Yet behind this façade the system was not fully totalitarian, and the state did not control the totality of life. The monarchy remained a focus of loyalty and authority separate from the Party. The law of December 1925 which laid down that the head of the government was not responsible to parliament retained the power of the King to dismiss him – a provision which, to Mussolini’s surprise, was invoked in 1943. The army was allowed considerable freedom in its internal affairs and promotions. The Italian Confederation of Industry struck a bargain with the regime rather than being subjected to it. Above all, the Church retained its independent position. The Lateran Treaty of February 1929 gave many advantages to the regime through its recognition by the Vatican; but it also accepted that the Church was a separate, and to some degree a privileged, body within the state – for example, it ran its own youth movement, Catholic Action, and Catholic newspapers were the only legal source of news not controlled by the Fascist Party.

These were important limitations to Mussolini's power; and the regime ran by means of a series of compromises with what were essentially conservative elements. This meant that the dynamism of the fascist movement tended to get lost in domestic affairs, and was redirected outside Italy, into attempts to promote international fascism and into an adventurous foreign policy. If various groups were left alone in important respects, the price they paid was to let Mussolini have his own way in questions of foreign affairs and war. Notably, the army accepted, however reluctantly, Mussolini's decisions as to when and where it should fight. Fascist dynamism was real; and if it could not find expression in a totalitarian revolution at home, its energies were released abroad.

## Fascism and foreign policy: the beginnings

For opponents of fascism in the 1930s it became a truism that fascism meant war. It was a view that received much support from what fascists themselves wrote and said. Mussolini asserted the nobility of war, and its necessity as the final test of character. In a more down-to-earth way, Starace (secretary of the Fascist Party in the 1930s) used to say that war was 'like eating a plate of macaroni' – a simple, straightforward pleasure.<sup>5</sup> Mussolini's public statements were peppered with remarks about an air force which would blot out the sun, or an army of 8 million bayonets. The whole style of the regime was one of belligerence, bullying, and swagger, which at some stage was likely to find an outlet in foreign war. The Ethiopian War (1935–36), intervention in the Spanish Civil War (1936–39), the invasion of Albania (1939), and the attacks on France and Greece (1940) owed much to this motive, as well as to other calculations. John Gooch sums the matter up like this: 'Military aggressiveness was always a stated core – perhaps it is better to say *the* stated core – of Fascism.'<sup>6</sup>

These are generalisations. How far did fascist ideas affect particular foreign policy decisions? On one point there is no doubt: foreign affairs was the aspect of policy in which the fascist regime came nearest to having complete control. The professional officials and diplomats of the Foreign Ministry, even when they were not replaced by fascist nominees, exercised little influence; and the General Staff raised no serious opposition even to moves of which it disapproved. Foreign policy was that of the fascist regime; and by the 1930s that usually meant Mussolini himself.

The early years of Mussolini's foreign policy were not spectacular; nor did foreign affairs at that time hold the centre of his attention. Mussolini



took the post of Foreign Minister (as well as Prime Minister and Minister of the Interior) in 1922; and among his first acts was attendance at international conferences at Lausanne and London. In 1926 the Permanent Under-Secretary at the Foreign Ministry, Contarini, resigned; pressure was put on officials to join the Fascist Party; and members of the fascist militia were forced upon Italian embassies, despite their lack of experience, qualifications, or even good manners. But apart from such changes in personnel, continuity appeared to be the order of the day. Mussolini wanted to emphasise that Italy was a great European power; but so had his predecessors. He shared a widespread dislike of the Versailles settlement, and wanted to change it, notably at the expense of Yugoslavia. He re-established Italian authority in Libya, which had been allowed to slide during the First World War; but Libya had been conquered by the Liberal regime, which would certainly have done the same thing when it could. Only the bombardment and occupation of the Greek island of Corfu in 1923, to force Greece to make apology and reparation for the killing of an Italian member of a boundary commission on Greek soil (by unknown assailants) stood out as an exceptional and brutal act, perhaps the forerunner of a policy of action and violence. Even that was in part a failure: Mussolini wanted to maintain the Italian occupation of the island, but Britain insisted on withdrawal. As for doctrine, fascism was declared not to be for export, though this was not strictly adhered to. A press office was set up to promote fascism abroad. It seems almost certain that fascist money was used to support the Nazi Party in Germany. Mussolini may have encouraged the Munich *putsch* in 1923, and he certainly gave refuge to Goering and other fugitives after it failed.<sup>7</sup> There was also much fascist activity among Italians living abroad. For the most part, however, Mussolini chose to play the part of an orthodox European statesman rather than a fascist ideologue. He did not even break off diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union, but developed commercial ties with this ideological opponent.

A change began in the early 1930s, when the regime was firmly established at home (the tenth anniversary of Mussolini's coming to power was a landmark); and also when some fascists began to feel that the movement was losing its dynamism and settling into middle age. Fascism had begun by making a cult of youth – fine-sounding, but in the nature of things a fading asset unless perpetually renewed. Between 1930 and 1934 there was an attempt to restore the appeal to youth, and to revive the dynamism of fascism by extending it outside Italy. A number of prominent individuals lent their influence to this attempt: Guiseppe Bottai; Mussolini's younger brother Arnaldo, the editor of the newspaper *Popolo*

*d'Italia*; and Asvero Gravelli, who in 1932 published a book entitled *Toward the Fascist International*. Galeazzo Ciano, Mussolini's son-in-law and the coming man of the regime, also gave his support. The only specific result was the holding of an International Fascist Congress at Montreux in December 1934, at which parties from fifteen countries (but not Germany) were represented. The Congress showed more diversity than unity and the Permanent Committee which was set up to continue its work met only twice, in January and April 1935; after which Ciano cut off Italian government support.

It was a feeble and short-lived attempt to create a Fascist International; but various links with foreign fascist parties survived it. Considerable sums of money went to the *Heimwehr* in Austria, the Rexists in Belgium, and the British Union of Fascists. (Mussolini paid Oswald Mosley about 3.5 million lire (60,000 pounds) between 1931 and 1935, though he cut off the funds when he was told that they were going down the drain.<sup>8</sup>) In France, support was given to Déat, Marquet, and their group of dissident socialists who moved rapidly towards fascism, and to the *Francistes*; and in Spain to José Antonio Primo de Rivera, son of the former dictator and head of the Falange. It pleased Mussolini to appear as the leader of European fascism; and there was political advantage in having a prop for Italian policy in Austria, or a means of launching agitation in France.

The practical effect of these activities was limited; but the psychological influence was considerable. International fascism was seen to exist, in both open and covert forms. It was confronted by anti-fascism, in the shape of Italian exiles, notably in Paris and Spain, posing a nagging problem of which Mussolini was always aware. A conflict existed which crossed frontiers and set groups in various countries against their own governments – the outline sketch of an ideological war. It remained to be seen whether the outline would be filled in.

## Fascism in action: Ethiopia, Spain, Rome–Berlin Axis

Between 1935 and 1939 there were more substantial steps in Italian foreign policy which appeared to show fascist dynamism at work: the invasion of Ethiopia (Abyssinia), intervention in the Spanish Civil War, and the making of the Rome–Berlin Axis. What was the role of fascism in these events?

The Ethiopian War was in many ways a nineteenth-century colonial campaign waged out of due time. Mussolini's main motive appears to have

been political and personal – a demonstration of Italian power to the glory of the regime, which would revenge the defeat inflicted on the old Italy at the battle of Adowa in 1896. He added to this some wildly optimistic economic speculation about raw materials and prospects for emigration; and talk of a native army to help conquer the Sudan. How much of this was fascist? By this time, it was impossible to distinguish. The expedition might well have been contemplated by another kind of Italian government; but without Mussolini's particular brand of drive and self-confidence it is unlikely that it would have been launched. Italian prestige and the prestige of the Duce had become one and the same. Victory was a triumph for the regime; and League of Nations sanctions, imposed by 'fifty nations led by one' (Britain), became the occasion for a marked rallying of support for the war even among opponents of the regime. The war was a personal triumph for Mussolini: he pressed reluctant generals into it; replaced the first unsuccessful commander; and kept his nerve when international opposition proved more extensive than he expected. A success for Mussolini was a success for fascism. The regime imposed on the conquered areas of Ethiopia was ostentatiously fascist, with the imposition of symbols like the fascist salute, and the more substantive refusal to adopt methods of indirect rule through local chiefs.

Much of this success proved ill-founded and short-lived. The areas beyond the main towns and roads were never pacified, and the Italian Army lived as a garrison in a hostile population. The use of mustard gas and evidence of atrocities reinforced external opposition to Italy and to fascism. The cost of the war was high, and the burden of occupation heavy. But the immediate effects of victory were exhilarating. Mussolini had succeeded where the old Italy had failed. He had defeated not only the Ethiopians but the League of Nations. He abandoned his former cautious approach to foreign affairs, and looked for new worlds to conquer.

There followed, almost as soon as the Ethiopian campaign ended, Italian intervention in the Spanish Civil War. This was accident, not design. Despite an agreement with Spanish monarchists in March 1934, there appear to have been no Italian contacts with the officers who launched the revolt of July 1936; and two requests for assistance were turned down before it was decided to provide help, in the shape of twelve bombers, to be paid for in cash before delivery. The hardheaded ring of these terms indicated an important strand in Italian motivation. The most authoritative survey of the subject concludes that 'Italian intervention in Spain was motivated largely by traditional foreign policy considerations relating to Italy's political and military position in Europe and the

Mediterranean, particularly her relations with France'.<sup>9</sup> A secret agreement secured with Franco's government on 28 November 1936 provided for refusal of permission to a third power (i.e. France) to use Spanish bases, or to pass troops across Spanish territory; and for benevolent neutrality in case of war with a third power, or the imposition of international sanctions. Equally, there was little sign of Italian interest in the internal politics of the nationalist side in Spain. The most important Italian decision, dictated by a combination of chance and geography, was to aid Franco rather than other military leaders; which meant support for a reactionary rather than a fascist Spain. The Italians did nothing to promote the Falange, the most genuinely fascist movement in Spain; and merely stood by in 1937 when Franco absorbed the Falange with other political parties and brought it under his own control.

This was not to say that fascism went for nothing in Italian intervention in Spain. Mussolini often presented intervention as being ideological in character. In Majorca, the Italian forces were led by the dashing figure of Bonaccorsi ('Conte Rossi'), one of the early fascist squad leaders and a spectacular figure, who led his men on horseback and drove a fast sports car round the roads of the island. He supported the Falange, and carried out large-scale killings, variously estimated at between 1,750 and 3,000. His activities were ostentatiously fascist – unorthodox, flamboyant, brutal; and the tales about them lost nothing in the telling. Anti-fascist sources often put the number of Italians in Majorca at 12,000 or 15,000, when the actual figure was 1,200.<sup>10</sup> The impact of this episode on outside opinion was greater than that of the cautious Italian policy on the mainland, which by its nature went unobserved.

The motives of Italian intervention were also linked to fascism. Fear that a left-wing government (perhaps even revolution) in Spain would stimulate opposition to fascism in Italy was a serious consideration; and anti-fascist exiles made precisely the same calculation in reverse, hoping that victory for the republic in Spain would be a blow to Mussolini in Italy. Moreover, once intervention had begun, in support of what was expected to be a rapid *coup d'état* or a military promenade, not a three years' war, Mussolini's own prestige and that of fascism were engaged. This was particularly the case after the battle of Guadalajara (March 1937), where Italian troops, including three divisions of Blackshirts, suffered a defeat. This had to be avenged, and fascist prestige restored. When, in 1937–38, the British tried to secure the withdrawal of Italian troops from Spain, they were wasting their time. The fascist regime could not accept defeat or compromise, and had to see the war through. Péguy's maxim, 'Tout commence

en mystique, et tout finit en politique', was reversed: what started with politics was caught up in the mystique of fascism.

Before the Spanish Civil War was over, Mussolini addressed the Fascist Grand Council (30 November 1938) on the subject of what he called the 'immediate goals of Fascist dynamism'. These were Albania, Tunisia, Corsica, French territory east of the River Var (to include Nice, but not Savoy), and the Ticino canton of Switzerland.<sup>11</sup> External expansion was by this time the principal remaining object of fascist dynamism. The aims set out by Mussolini were part of a wide-ranging view of Italy's position in the Mediterranean which he had held for several years and which he expressed with increasing frequency and emphasis in 1939 and 1940: that Italy was a prisoner in the Mediterranean, shut in between Gibraltar and Suez, with Corsica, Tunis, Malta, and Cyprus as bars of the prison. In a document of February 1939 he declared that the aim of Italian policy was to break the bars of the prison, and then march either to the Indian Ocean through the Sudan and Ethiopia, or to the Atlantic by way of French North Africa. In either case, Britain and France were the enemies; and in a conflict with them, Germany would cover Italy's rear in Europe.

This calculation leads to what appeared at the time to be the crowning influence of fascism on Italian foreign policy: the alliance with Nazi Germany, the obvious ideological partner. Mussolini referred to the Rome-Berlin Axis ('around which can revolve all those European states with a will to collaboration and peace') on 1 November 1936.<sup>12</sup> The relations between the two countries became closer, until they became formal allies in the so-called Pact of Steel, signed in Berlin on 22 May 1939 – in the seventeenth year of the fascist era, as was recorded at the end of the text.<sup>13</sup>

How far did this alliance arise from the ideology of fascism and its affinities with Nazism? The two regimes had much in common, in the leadership principle (Duce and Führer both mean 'leader'), anti-communism, and hostility to parliamentary democracy. Hitler made a favourable reference to fascist Italy (though not to Mussolini personally) in *Mein Kampf*. In 1931–32, Hitler asked several times to see Mussolini, though without success; and as Chancellor he sent the Duce flattering messages. There was the making of an ideological personal alliance. Yet this was not altogether how events worked out. The first meeting between Mussolini and Hitler at Venice in June 1934 was only a partial success: Mussolini described Hitler as a buffoon, and as a gramophone with only seven tunes. But he changed his own tune by the time of his first visit to Germany in September 1937: Hitler set out to flatter and impress, and Mussolini returned intoxicated. (It was after this visit that he determined to introduce the goose-step into



*Ideology and foreign policy: the Rome–Berlin Axis in action. Hitler greets Mussolini before the Munich Conference.*

Source: Ullstein Bild/AKG Images

the Italian Army, calling it the *passo romano*.) Thereafter he never escaped from Hitler's influence – he reacted against it from time to time, as he increasingly had to take second place, but he was always drawn back by personal contact.

On the other hand, there were ideological differences, notably on the question of race and anti-Semitism. Fascist journals in the early 1930s attacked the racial theories of Nazi Germany. The Italians, after all, were obviously not a Nordic race. On one occasion an article in the *Popolo d'Italia*, unsigned but obviously by Mussolini himself, poked heavy fun at such ideas, arguing that the Lapps, because they lived further north than other peoples, must be the purest of all races. It is quite likely, as Richard Bosworth argues, that Mussolini had no strong views on race at all, except that common to most Europeans at the time – that they were superior to non-Europeans.<sup>14</sup> Jews were admitted to the Fascist Party, and over 8,000 were members in 1933. In April 1933 and February 1934, Mussolini received Chaim Weizmann, the Zionist leader, and expressed sympathy for his cause; and in April 1933 the Italian press gave much publicity to an interview between the Duce and the Chief Rabbi of Rome, who came to draw attention to the persecution of his co-religionists in Germany. After the reconciliation with the Papacy, the pagan elements in Nazi Germany were also unwelcome to the regime, as well as to Catholic Italians.

This hostility was serious. Admiration for Nazi Germany was not widespread among Italian fascists – Farinacci was one exception, as was Ciano, who later changed his mind; and anti-Semitism was rare. (The census of 1938 showed only 47,000 Jews in Italy, so there was in any case little to be anti-Semitic about.) When Mussolini took up the racial issue it marked a breach with a section of his party, and with Italian opinion as a whole. In July 1938 he published a manifesto on race, declaring that there was a pure Italian race, a branch of the Aryan race, and that the Jews were separate from it. This was followed by legislation against foreign Jews; naturalisations since 1919 were annulled, and those who were thus made aliens had to leave the country. The Italian Jews were excluded from the teaching profession, from academic, cultural, and scientific associations, and from the civil service, banks, and insurance firms. Their right to hold property or control businesses was tightly restricted. Jewish children were excluded from ordinary elementary schools, and had to attend special schools with Jewish teachers. In practice, there were many exceptions allowed, both openly (e.g. for the families of Jewish soldiers killed in the Italian Army, 1915–18, or for adherents to fascism before the March on Rome) and secretly, by the turning of a blind eye. The policy was not popular. There were protests from the Vatican and the Italian bishops; and it seems to have marked a turning of opinion against the regime – not so much on grounds of principle about anti-Semitism, but because it was

rightly seen as a symbol of subservience to Germany. Mussolini chose to demonstrate his unity with Germany by adopting the cardinal point of Nazi ideology.

Thus ideology was called in at a late date to consolidate an alliance which began with political and economic matters: German support for Italy during the Ethiopian conflict; the supply of German coal, on which Italy became increasingly dependent; and co-operation in the Spanish Civil War. Above all, the objectives which Mussolini set for his foreign policy – amounting to Italian domination in the Mediterranean – could only be attained in opposition to France and Britain, and therefore only in alliance with Germany. Mussolini was thinking along these lines before Hitler came to power, and as early as 1927 he was considering accepting *Anschluss* between Germany and Austria as the price he would pay for German support in the Mediterranean.<sup>15</sup> This alliance was consolidated by the developing personal relationship between the two dictators; assisted by the similarity in style and approach of the two regimes; and hindered by the lack of a serious racial and anti-Semitic element in Italian fascism, until Mussolini, for the sake of the alliance, decided to make good this lack.

How should the influence of fascism on Italian foreign policy, and on the movement of Europe towards war, be assessed? This question is complicated by another: how far did Mussolini follow a consistent foreign policy with defined objectives, and how far were his activities a matter of improvisation, uncertainty, posturing, and propaganda – more a means of raising the blood pressure than of pursuing an aim? In both pictures, fascism plays a part. In the first picture, the part is of fundamental importance: the fascist regime developed existing Italian policies in the Mediterranean and Africa to such an extent that they could only be achieved by a major war against Britain and France, not just by minor wars against small states. It was to this that ‘fascist dynamism’ in foreign affairs led; and Mussolini’s use of these words on 30 November 1938 was not accidental. In the second interpretation, fascism is of lesser significance, and more a matter of display and rhetoric than of stern reality.

The balance of probability has come to lie very much with the first of these interpretations. There was greater purpose and coherence in Mussolini’s foreign policy than was allowed by those who dismissed him as a fraud, or as a ‘sawdust Caesar’. Of course there were improvisations and changes of mind. But Mussolini steadily maintained certain fundamental aims: to control the Adriatic and the Mediterranean; to consolidate and extend Italy’s African empire; and to break out to the Atlantic



and Indian Oceans. These were serious and consistent geopolitical objectives. As early as March 1925 Mussolini described Gibraltar, Malta, Cyprus and Suez as 'a chain that permits England to encircle, to imprison Italy in the Mediterranean.'<sup>16</sup> And as we have seen already (see above, p. 74), he recurred to this theme repeatedly up to 1940, with occasional variations in the place names, and references to France as well as Britain as the keepers of the prison. When the German alliance and German successes in Europe provided the opportunity in 1939 and 1940, it was towards these objectives that Mussolini moved. Compared with earlier Italian governments, Mussolini both inflated the objectives and changed the methods of Italian policy. Others before him had tried to make Italy a great power, with a position in the Mediterranean and Africa; but it was a position to be shared with the other Mediterranean powers, Britain and France, and to be achieved by clever diplomacy, shifting alliances, and small wars against the Turks and Africans. Mussolini repeatedly declared that his policy must be honest; he despised the shifts of diplomacy; and he would not allow Ciano to ease him out of the Axis and resume freedom of action during the phoney war. And the end result of his policy, if it was pursued to its conclusion, was a military show-down with France and Britain.<sup>17</sup>

Italian foreign policy under fascism passed through two main phases. The first, up to 1934–35, was a period of modest activity, in which Italy acted for the most part as a normal and responsible state. In 1925 she was a guarantor of the Locarno agreements, and in April 1935 she was still a welcome partner of Britain and France at the Stresa conference, devoted to maintaining the status quo in Europe. During this period, the rest of Europe became accustomed to the presence of a fascist regime, and found that in most practical matters it made little difference. Even Stalin remarked in 1934 that the existence of the fascist regime had not prevented the establishment of good Italian–Soviet relations.

The second period was very different. From 1935 to 1940, Italy followed a policy of almost ceaseless activity and aggression – the invasion of Ethiopia, intervention in Spain, the occupation of Albania, the declaration of war on France and Britain, and the attack on Greece. Some of these actions – notably Ethiopia, Albania, and the extension of war to the Mediterranean in 1940, had serious and far-reaching consequences, so that the influence of Italy on European affairs was disproportionate to her material strength. In this active, forward policy, fascist objectives played an important part. Mussolini and his enemies both proclaimed that fascism meant war. It certainly brought European war nearer.

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- 8 Richard Lamb, *Mussolini and the British* (London 1997), p. 92.
- 9 John F. Coverdale, *Italian Intervention in the Spanish Civil War* (Princeton 1975), pp. 388–9. John Gooch, in Boyce and Maiolo, p. 42, and Robert Mallett, *Mussolini and the Origins of the Second World War* (Basingstoke 2003), pp. 87–8, take the same view.
- 10 Coverdale, *Italian Intervention*, pp. 127–50, for a description and the various figures.
- 11 MacGregor Knox, *Mussolini Unleashed, 1939–1941* (Cambridge 1982), pp. 38–9.
- 12 Kirkpatrick, *Mussolini*, p. 328.
- 13 Text of the treaty in Mario Toscano, *The Origins of the Pact of Steel* (Baltimore 1967), Appendix, pp. 405–8.
- 14 Bosworth, *Mussolini*, pp. 271–2.
- 15 Macgregor Knox, *Common Destiny: Dictatorship, Foreign Policy and War in Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany* (Cambridge 2000), pp. 124–6.
- 16 *Ibid.*, p. 119.
- 17 Denis Mack Smith, in *Mussolini's Roman Empire* and in *Mussolini* (London 1981), stresses the elements of improvisation, propaganda, and the desire to dazzle. Knox, *Mussolini Unleashed*, and *Common Destiny* are careful and convincing statements of the opposite point of view. Mallett, *Mussolini and the Origins of the Second World War*, and R. M. Salerno, *Vital Crossroads: Mediterranean Origins of the Second World War, 1935–40* (New York 2002) give solid reasons for taking the same view as Knox.

## CHAPTER SIX

# German Nazism

There has always been a strong and natural tendency to conflate Italian fascism and German Nazism under the general label of 'fascism'. The partners in the Rome–Berlin Axis proclaimed their unity. Mussolini declared in 1936 that 'between Germany and Italy there exists a community of destiny'; and Hitler said in 1942 that 'the brown shirt might perhaps not have arisen without the black shirt.'<sup>1</sup> They displayed very similar outward appearances, in their uniforms, marching columns, and propaganda. At a deeper level too they had a good deal in common, especially in what they were against: communism, liberalism, capitalism; and to a lesser extent in what they were for: the vague but potent 'leadership principle'. For many of their friends, and even more of their enemies, the identity between the two movements appeared obvious. In a study of the origins of the war they form a natural pair. They were dynamic forces, glorifying violence and war, and breaking the mould of the European order of 1919. Italian fascism was first in the field; German Nazism had greater power at its disposal. Coming together in an alliance, they provided the impulse which drove Europe towards war – thus contemporaries declared, and many have continued to believe.

In all this there is much truth; and yet it is a mistake to compound the two phenomena under the one name 'fascism'. Their sources were different, with Nazism deeply rooted in the racial theories and social Darwinism of the nineteenth century, while fascism was more recent in its origins and unconcerned with race. In the long run too their fruits were different, as was shown in their dealings with that other powerful organisation with far-reaching claims, the Catholic Church. Italian fascism came to terms with the Church and co-existed with it; but Nazism was deeply anti-Catholic, and its totalitarian claims were pressed to the point of fundamental

conflict. With Nazism one is dealing with a phenomenon more profound and far-reaching, as well as infinitely more brutal, than Italian fascism.

## The Nazi dictatorship: Hitler and the new men

There is no agreement about the origins of national socialism in Germany. Some writers (mostly non-Germans) have found its roots deep in German history, going right back to the Teutonic knights and their struggle against the Slavs, or even to the Germanic tribes which fought successfully against the Romans. Others have seen Nazism as part of a contemporary movement, whose roots were European rather than specifically German. Right across the Continent there was a reaction against industrialisation and the anonymity of the production line. The Great War, inflation, and economic depression spread their effects throughout Europe. Nazism met the psychological needs which were thus created. It gave the individual an identity and a place in a hierarchy. It restored confidence after defeat, and promised economic recovery and a stable currency. It provided German solutions to European problems, in a way that was attractive to many outside Germany.

In fact, Nazism was able to appear both revolutionary and traditional. New ideas of a 'national socialism', which appealed to the instinct for national unity as against the Marxist doctrine of class struggle, and of revolutionary dynamism, were grafted on to a sense of racial superiority and a martial tradition which went far back into German history. The graft was not wholly successful, but it produced a stronger growth than would have resulted from anything which was solely either contemporary or traditional.

It was through an alliance between the revolutionary and the conservative that Hitler and the Nazis came to power in Germany. Hitler grasped, after the failure of his *putsch* in Munich in 1923, that he must attain power legally, with the consent of the existing authorities, and above all of the army. This he did. In the Reichstag elections of July 1932, the Nazi Party polled 13.74 million votes and won 230 seats – not a majority in the country or in the Reichstag, but enough to be the largest single party. They lost ground in the elections of November 1932, dropping some two million votes and winning only 196 seats; but they still remained the largest single party in a smaller Reichstag.<sup>2</sup>

After these electoral successes, Hitler became Chancellor on 30 January 1933, through negotiations with the conservative Franz von Papen and the nationalist Alfred Hugenberg. Hitler was one of only three Nazi ministers

in the Cabinet, and the conservatives were confident they could control him. One of von Papen's friends remarked that 'We have him framed in' – which Gordon Craig rightly thought 'should be included in any anthology of famous last words'.<sup>3</sup> The conservatives thought they were using Hitler; in fact he was using them. But he still needed them, as he recognised in the splendidly staged ceremony at the Potsdam Garrison Church on 21 March 1933, when the high officers of the old imperial regime (including the former Crown Prince) gathered to mark the opening of the new Reichstag, and to see the President, Field Marshal Hindenburg, give his blessing to the new Chancellor amid all the panoply of the old regime. The black, white, and red colours of the former German Empire hung alongside the swastika banners of the Nazis, while the army and the SA (*Sturm Abteilung* – the Nazi storm-troopers) formed the guard of honour together. A new élite thus took its place alongside the old.

For some time the old and the new co-existed; but in the next few years the new élite displaced the old, sometimes by drastic methods. Only fifteen months after the ceremony at Potsdam, General von Schleicher, a former Chancellor of Germany, was murdered in his own home by Nazi gunmen. On 2 August 1934 the officers and men of the German Army took an oath of unconditional allegiance to the Führer, Adolf Hitler. This oath was devised by Generals Blomberg and Reichenau, in the belief that they were binding Hitler to the army; but in fact the opposite happened, and the army became bound to Hitler.<sup>4</sup> By 1938 the army high command and the Foreign Ministry, formerly the preserves of the old aristocracy and ruling groups, were brought under Nazi control. Other long-standing centres of influence – universities, the legal profession, industrialists' organisations – raised no opposition.

Among the new men, the one who was nearest to the old pattern was Hermann Goering, whose father was a Prussian officer and at one time Governor of German South-West Africa, and who had himself been an air force officer in the Great War. The others were outsiders, with Hitler himself as the prime example. In the days of the German Empire, Hitler rose to the rank of corporal. In the new, fluid Germany of the 1920s and early 1930s he created a powerful political party and became Chancellor, even though to conservatives he was 'neither a gentleman nor a German'.<sup>5</sup> His supporters were often young, and tended to be personally unstable. In 1934 the average age of Nazi Party members was seven years lower than that of the population as a whole, and the average age of its leaders was eight years lower than that of non-Nazi élite groups. Few of those who held leading positions in the Party had had regular jobs outside it; of those

who attended university, few completed their courses.<sup>6</sup> The drop-outs and misfits had come to power, with no traditions and no code of conduct except that learned in the struggle for power and fighting in the streets. They owed their rise to the Party and its leader. There is every sign that most of them believed in its causes, but even if they did not there was no future for them outside it.

The new élite exercised power without institutional restraints. Existing constitutional procedures were suspended rather than abolished, and no new constitution was created to replace that of Weimar. The so-called enabling law of 23 March 1933, passed in the Reichstag by 441 votes to 94 in circumstances of heavy Nazi pressure, gave the government power to impose laws without the Reichstag, and to depart from the constitution. (Technically, these dispensations were for four years.) All political parties other than the Nazi Party were suppressed. All trade unions were absorbed into the Nazi Labour Front. Other opposition was crushed by drastic methods. Ernst Roehm, head of the SA and leader of a radical faction within the Nazi Party, was murdered along with many of his associates (and others who had little or nothing to do with him) in the Night of the Long Knives, 30 June 1934. Already the camps existed to which enemies of the regime were despatched. Hitler remarked in *Mein Kampf* that authority was founded on popularity, force, and tradition; when all three were combined, it was unshakeable. Hitler and his movement were short on tradition (though he tried to make up by the ceremony at Potsdam and appeals to the Germanic past); but for much of the time strong on popularity and very strong on force.<sup>7</sup>

This did not mean that the state was monolithic and firmly structured. Various entities within the state retained some cohesion and freedom of action: the Party, the SS, the army officer corps, heavy industry, the chemical industry. Individuals set up their own bases of power and patronage. Ribbentrop first created his own private Foreign Service, and then when he became Foreign Minister tried to restore the position of the official Service which he had previously undermined. Goering accumulated offices like a demented Pooh-Bah – he was ruler of Prussia, commander of the *Luftwaffe* (1935), head of the Four-Year Plan (1936), and designated as Hitler's successor. He tried in 1938 to secure control of the army, but Hitler prevented it – such a concentration of authority would have been too great. Groups and individuals were engaged in ceaseless, though usually concealed, struggles – the *Luftwaffe* against the army, chemical industry against steel industry, Himmler against the army high command. This played into the hands of Hitler, as the only man at the top who could

resolve disputes. In that way it worked to the advantage of his personal dictatorship, but at the expense of long-term efficiency. The Nazi system was extremely good at doing certain things – it revived the economy, built aeroplanes, cars, and roads, and generated a tremendous drive. But the government of a modern state, and even more the preparation of a state for war, demands effective administration and the setting of priorities in the use of resources. Despite its real achievements, and its terrifying reputation for ruthless efficiency, Hitler's Germany failed to devise a regular system for setting priorities and was subject to damaging administrative rivalries.

In the course of time, two main views of the nature of Hitler's authority have emerged. One school of thought (often called 'intentionalist') holds that Hitler wielded supreme power within the state, and depicts the course of events in Nazi Germany as the fulfilment of his intentions. The other (termed 'functionalist' or 'structuralist') argues that policy was heavily influenced by various structural constraints, and that Hitler's own actions were restrained by the existence of semi-independent bodies within the state, and by the near-chaotic nature of the state itself. It was surely true that the new Germany was a 'dual state', in which elements of the old and new ruling groups co-existed, sometimes co-operating and sometimes in conflict. But the soundest conclusion is that adopted by Ian Kershaw: 'Hitler's power was indeed real, not a phantasm', even though that power was exercised in collaboration with other individuals and groups. In particular, in matters of foreign and military policy, it was Hitler and the new élite who called the tune. What did they set out to do?<sup>8</sup>

## Hitler and *Mein Kampf*

German Nazism was identified with Hitler. At the end of his biography, Alan Bullock concluded that 'the evidence seems to me to leave no doubt that no other man played a role in the Nazi revolution or in the history of the Third Reich remotely comparable with that of Adolf Hitler'.<sup>9</sup> His success was certainly remarkable. In 1939 he had taken Germany in six years from being a country with millions of unemployed, disarmed and subject to restrictions by various international treaties, supervised by powerful neighbours, to being the dominant military power in Europe, with the treaties torn up and unemployment almost vanished. As one of his opponents remarked, 'It is not an achievement anyone can belittle.'<sup>10</sup>

The scale of this achievement often seemed out of key with his personality and intellect. Despite his immense powers of oratory and his ability to hold a mass audience in thrall, one of his German biographers has written

that 'he coined not a single memorable phrase'.<sup>11</sup> His one published book, *Mein Kampf*, is commonly dismissed as confused and absurd. He is sometimes depicted as a madman, perhaps in a technical sense a psychopath, an abnormal personality, given to abnormal concepts and reactions. Lord Halifax, on the other hand, in his aristocratic way, claimed to have mistaken Hitler for a footman.

The danger of all such comments is that of underrating the man. A nonentity or a psychopath cut adrift from reality could scarcely have done what Hitler did. It is more realistic to agree with John Lukacs: 'The mind of Adolf Hitler was a very powerful instrument. To deduce from his awesome defects of the heart that he was wanting insight or intelligence is the commonest mistake most people make about him. Nor was he mad.'<sup>12</sup> George Orwell, unfashionable as always, wrote a review of a translation of *Mein Kampf* in March 1940, arguing that it was too easy to say that Hitler succeeded because he was backed by industrialists – 'They would not have backed him . . . if he had not talked a great movement into existence already.' It was necessary to accept the attractive power of Hitler's outlook: 'he has grasped the falsity of the hedonistic attitude to life. . . . Hitler, because in his own joyless mind he feels it with exceptional strength, knows that human beings *don't* only want comfort, safety, short working-hours, hygiene, birth-control and, in general, commonsense; they also, at least intermittently, want struggle and self-sacrifice, not to mention drums, flags and loyalty-parades.'<sup>13</sup>

In Hitler's lifetime it was safer to take him seriously than to underestimate him; and those who failed to do so paid the price. It is better not to fall into that trap, but rather to see what Hitler had to say in writings which contained what has been variously described as a programme, a world outlook, or a world picture.<sup>14</sup>

As so often, Churchill set the pattern in the immediate post-war years. He wrote of Hitler's *Mein Kampf*:

*When eventually he [Hitler] came to power there was no book which deserved more careful study from the rulers, political and military, of the Allied Powers. All was there – the programme of German resurrection; the technique of party propaganda; the plan for combating Marxism; the concept of a National-Socialist State; the rightful position of Germany at the summit of the world. Here was the new Koran of faith and war: turgid, verbose, shapeless, but pregnant with its message.*<sup>15</sup>

It was frequently said that if only British and French statesmen had read *Mein Kampf* they would have known what Hitler was going to do, and





*'Drums, flags and loyalty-parades': the Nuremberg Rally, September 1934. These massive demonstrations inspired support at home and fear abroad.*

Source: Hulton Archive/Getty Images

would not have been bamboozled by his professions of moderation in the 1930s. There was little substance in these lamentations and accusations. Western statesmen had *Mein Kampf* summarised for them and the salient elements drawn out by thoroughly competent ambassadors like Sir Horace

Rumbold and André François-Poncet. The problem was not to know what Hitler had written, but to know what to make of it.

This has remained the crucial question: what is to be made of Hitler's writings? Some forty years after the start of the war, German historians went back to Hitler's books and their background, and concluded that their substance was of real importance. Werner Maser noted the many defects of *Mein Kampf* as an account of Hitler's early life, but argued that in its pronouncements on politics and race the book was an authentic reflection of Hitler's mind and a guide to what he intended to do. On occasion, he took an almost fundamentalist view: '*Mein Kampf* in fact sets out a clear and detailed programme of the fearful catastrophe which Hitler loosed upon Germany and the world by faithfully following the declarations and forecasts in his book.'<sup>16</sup> Eberhard Jäckel, in a closely reasoned book on *Hitler's Weltanschauung*, concluded that, even if Hitler did not have in the fullest sense a 'world outlook', he had at least a 'world picture', with a 'systematic and inherent coherence'.<sup>17</sup> He draws attention to Hitler's remark in *Mein Kampf* that 'The enormous difference between the tasks of the theoretician and the politician is also the reason why a union of both in one person is almost never found.' Politics is the art of the possible, but the theoretician must demand the impossible and be content with the fame of posterity. 'In long periods of humanity, it may happen once that the politician is wedded to the theoretician.' Jäckel observes, surely with justice, that Hitler believed he was such a man.<sup>18</sup> Historians outside Germany have also concluded that before Hitler came to power he had some firm ideas on foreign policy, which were closely connected with his fundamental ideological outlook.<sup>19</sup>

It may be argued that such considerations should be discounted on the ground that after he became Chancellor in 1933 Hitler showed signs of finding *Mein Kampf* something of an embarrassment. He told Hans Frank in 1938 that if he had known he was going to become Chancellor he would not have written *Mein Kampf*. In 1940 he refused to allow pages from the original typescript of the book to be exhibited during that year's Nuremberg rally. But actions speak louder than words. In 1934 the Prussian Ministry of Education ordered that extracts from *Mein Kampf* should be included in all school-books dealing with racial questions, genetics, or demographic policy. In 1936 the Ministry of the Interior recommended that a copy of *Mein Kampf* should be provided for every couple married in a registry office in Germany, or a consulate abroad. In 1939 the Nazi Party stated it was the Party's duty to ensure that every German family should one day possess a copy of 'the Führer's fundamental

work'. In 1940 a special rice-paper edition was published for issue to the troops.<sup>20</sup> If *Mein Kampf* had become an embarrassment, these were strange measures; what they in fact indicate is the official standing of the work with the Nazi regime.

## Hitler's world picture: anti-Semitism, race, living space, struggle

What are the main outlines of the world picture that may be discerned in Hitler's writings? They may be summed up as anti-Semitism, race, living space, and the idea of life as perpetual struggle; all of which overlapped and merged with one another.

In a letter of September 1919, and in one of Hitler's earliest fully reported speeches in August 1920, he referred to the need for a rational anti-Semitism, and to the ultimate aim of the elimination of the Jews – which at that stage was left vague, but appeared to mean emigration or the deportation of Jews from Germany. In *Mein Kampf*, anti-Semitism was one of the main centres of attention, and the tone of the discussion was fierce and radical. 'There is no making pacts with Jews; there can only be the hard: either-or.'<sup>21</sup> The *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* (forged documents purporting to reveal a Jewish conspiracy to control the world) were treated as genuine. 'Elimination' began to have a ring of physical extinction about it. The *Secret Book*, which was mostly about foreign policy, ended with a few pages, largely repeated from *Mein Kampf*, about the Jews: the ultimate aim of the Jew was 'the denationalisation, the promiscuous bastardisation of other peoples. . . . The end of the Jewish world struggle . . . will always be a bloody Bolshevisation.'<sup>22</sup> On 30 January 1939 Hitler prophesied that if international Jewry forced the nations into war, the result would be the annihilation of the Jewish race in Europe; a prophecy to which he returned with a strange insistence four times in the course of 1940. Events proved that anti-Semitism was an end, not just a means. Nazi policy developed from a phase of harassment of the Jews, through deportation and concentration, to the phase of the final solution. From 1942 onwards Jews (along with Slavs and other peoples) were being transported across Europe in tens of thousands in order to be massacred, at a time when by any normal calculation Germany needed all its rolling stock for the war effort, could have used the SS guards from the camps on the battlefield, and might have exploited the victims as forced labour. But against all rational calculations, the extermination went on.

Anti-Semitism was an aspect of the racial theories which were prominent in Hitler's thought. His reflections on race in *Mein Kampf* (notably in Ch. 11) asserted the position of the Aryan race as the founders and transmitters of culture. The Aryan race itself was left undefined; but Hitler claimed it was his mission to preserve certainly the German people, and probably others linked to them, from degeneration. His principal idea of the state was as a means of preserving the race. The opposite to the Aryan, the lowest race, without true culture, merely parasitic, was the Jew – and so we are back to anti-Semitism. But the Slav too was an enemy. Among the cloudy verbiage of much of Hitler's writing, it is startling to encounter a brief, precise assertion in the *Secret Book*:

*The folkish state . . . must under no conditions annex Poles with the intention of wanting to make Germans out of them some day. On the contrary it must muster the determination either to seal off these alien radical elements, so that the blood of its own people will not be corrupted again, or it must without further ado remove them and hand over the vacated territory to its own national comrades.*<sup>23</sup>

This is very much what happened in Poland after September 1939. German policies and actions towards both Slavs and Jews during the war bear the mark of Hitler's racial theories. Ian Kershaw, in his massive biography of Hitler, emphasises that he saw 'racial struggle and survival of the fittest as the key determinants in human history' – a basic idea which, once formed, never left him. Ultimately it was Hitler's racial obsession that led to his own destruction and that of the empire he had built.<sup>24</sup>

The preservation of the race was closely bound up with the idea of living space (*Lebensraum*). This is a repeated – not to say repetitious – theme in *Mein Kampf*, the *Secret Book*, and various of Hitler's private talks after he came to power. In *Mein Kampf*, in the course of a critique of German foreign policy before 1914, Hitler argued that the basis of foreign policy must be the question of feeding a growing population. He discussed various options for dealing with this problem, rejecting out of hand the restriction of births, and dismissing the possibility of 'internal colonisation' and increasing the productivity of agriculture as inadequate. There remained only two choices: to secure new soil, and settle the superfluous millions on it ('thus keeping the nation on a self-sustaining basis'); or selling industrial products in foreign markets, and paying for imports from the proceeds. Germany had in fact taken the last course; but Hitler argued that it would be healthier to seek new terrain, noting that 'such a territorial policy cannot be fulfilled in the Cameroons, but today almost exclusively in

Europe'. He went on: 'If land was desired in Europe, it could be obtained by and large only at the expense of Russia and this means that the new Reich must again set itself on the march along the road of the Teutonic Knights of old, to obtain by the German sword sod for the German plough and daily bread for the nation.'<sup>25</sup>

Much of what followed was repetition of this theme, with or without variations.

*The foreign policy of the folkish state must safeguard the existence on this planet of the race embodied in the state, by creating a healthy, viable natural relation between the nation's population and growth on the one hand and the quantity and quality of its soil on the other hand. . . . Only an adequately large space on this earth assures a nation of freedom of existence.*

Space must be judged not only in relation to the yield of the soil, but also in terms of military and political considerations – 'the German nation can defend its future only as a world power'.<sup>26</sup> In the *Secret Book*: ' . . . the bread which a people requires is conditioned by the living-space at its disposal. A healthy people, at least, will always seek to find the satisfaction of its needs on its own soil. Any other condition is pathological and dangerous.'<sup>27</sup> He went again through the options considered in *Mein Kampf*, with the same conclusion. In an almost lapidary chapter on German aims, Hitler rejected completely a policy of having *no* aims, of deciding nothing and being committed to nothing: ' . . . just as in ordinary life a man with a fixed life-goal that he tries to achieve at all events will always be superior to those who live aimlessly, exactly likewise is it in the life of nations'. To be aimless in general was to be planless in particulars, and would turn Germany into another Poland, which was for Hitler the nadir. He rejected any attempt to secure the sustenance of the German people by peaceful economic means; and declared that the simple restoration of the German borders of 1914 was an inadequate aim from every point of view. This left only one choice: Germany must adopt 'a clear, farseeing territorial policy', abandoning the device of world trade and seeking 'sufficient living space for the next hundred years' – which 'can only be in the East'.<sup>28</sup>

It is necessary to subject the reader to some small part of Hitler's constant reiteration of this theme, to convey something of its fortissimo quality. It must be added that Hitler expounded the same theme in speech after speech between 1928 (when he composed the *Secret Book*) and January 1933 (when he came to power). After that he fell silent in public, but took up the same tale on several important private occasions. When he first

addressed military and naval chiefs on 3 February 1933 he asked how political power should be used, once gained. 'That is impossible to say yet. Perhaps fighting for new export possibilities, perhaps – and probably better – the conquest of new living space in the east and its ruthless Germanisation.'<sup>29</sup> At another meeting of the generals, after war had begun, on 23 November 1939, Hitler told them that the eternal problem was to bring German territory in line with its population; they could not commit themselves against the Soviet Union unless they had free hands in the west, and must therefore attack France and England at the earliest opportunity. Between these two occasions, other examples could be quoted.

The idea of struggle as the basis of life may be briefly dealt with. Hitler absorbed the social Darwinism of the late nineteenth century, according to which the ideas of the life and death of species and the survival of the fittest were translated into terms of states and human societies. In the *Secret Book* he wrote: 'If . . . politics is history in the making and history itself the presentation of the struggle of men and nations for self-preservation and continuance, then politics is in truth the execution of a nation's struggle for existence.'<sup>30</sup> He deduced from this the separate roles of foreign and domestic policy: foreign policy was to pursue the struggle for existence by safeguarding the necessary living space; while domestic policy preserved the force for this task, primarily in terms of the race value and numbers of the population. He believed, therefore, that domestic policy was the servant of foreign policy – a restatement in his own way of the long-standing German view of the primacy of foreign policy in affairs of state.

These main lines of Hitler's world picture were primarily set out in terms of general aims for German policy. There was also, in *Mein Kampf* and the *Secret Book*, a good deal about ways and means of achieving the aims, and specifically about the sort of alliance policy Germany should pursue. Hitler's scheme of things envisaged two enemies: Russia, as the target for living space in the east; and France, partly as the long-standing hereditary enemy, and partly to cover Germany's rear for an attack on Russia. To deal with these enemies, he proposed to seek two allies: Italy and Britain. His references to an alliance with Italy go back to 1920, before there was any question of an ideological link. Hitler was in touch with Mussolini through emissaries in 1922, and *Mein Kampf* included a brief favourable reference to Italian fascism. However, Hitler seems to have found the main basis for an alliance with Italy in power politics rather than ideology. He set the case out with some care in the *Secret Book*, arguing that Italian expansion in the Mediterranean would bring her into conflict

with France, and so into a natural alliance with Germany. For this purpose, Hitler was prepared to give up any claims to the South Tyrol (formerly Austrian, and from 1919 in Italy), where he estimated that there were 200,000 Germans: Italian friendship was worth this sacrifice, just as on her part Italy should give up her opposition to the union of Germany and Austria (the *Anschluss*). As for Britain, Hitler was highly critical of pre-1914 German policy, which had failed to choose between an anti-Russian stance, with British support, and an imperial-cum-naval anti-British stance, with Russian support. Germany had finished up antagonising both Russia and Britain. In future, it would be necessary to choose Britain as an ally against the Soviet Union, and also against France, for Hitler observed that French hegemony on the Continent in the 1920s was displeasing to Britain.

General ideas about the nature of society and of international affairs; a firm statement of German policy aims; and proposals about methods in terms of alliance policy were all to be found in Hitler's writings. To what extent did they affect the course of Nazi foreign policy?

## Nazism and foreign policy

A considerable correspondence between what Hitler wrote and what he did (for example, in terms of anti-Semitism and racial theory) has already appeared. But it is not clear how far German foreign policy under Hitler was actually governed by ideology. There is a strong consensus in support of Jäckel's contention that the outline picture that emerged from Hitler's writings formed the guidelines for his policies as actually pursued, though it had to be adapted to fit circumstances. Opportunism within the framework of a seriously (indeed tenaciously) held set of general ideas is a common way of explaining Nazi foreign policy. Wilhelm Deist, for example, wrote that Hitler pursued long-term aims with 'bewildering tactical versatility'.<sup>31</sup> But this remains a consensus between some fairly wide outer limits, even discounting the more extreme fringes. For example, Hans Mommsen argued that 'Hitler's foreign policy aims, purely dynamic in nature, knew no bounds: [a] reference to "expansion without object" is entirely justified. For this very reason, to interpret their implementation as in any way consistent or logical is highly problematic.'<sup>32</sup> On the other hand, Werner Maser has written that 'One of the decisive causes of the 1945 catastrophe was the fact that Hitler attempted to adhere rigidly to the doctrine which he had expounded in *Mein Kampf*.' Dietrich Bracher stated firmly that 'The foreign policy of the Third Reich derived directly from the ideological principles and long-range goals of National Socialism'; this applied particularly

to the 'racist and geopolitical national imperialism of *Mein Kampf*', to which 'Hitler clung . . . with almost manic obsessiveness, up to the eerie end in the bunker of his Chancellery'.<sup>33</sup> Klaus Hildebrand developed an argument which attributes to Hitler a definite foreign policy programme, in three phases: first the conquest of Europe and the Soviet Union, using an alliance with Britain; next, a conflict with the USA – the struggle of Europe against America for world supremacy; and finally, German mastery of the world, to be held through the racial superiority of the German people. Hitler saw the first of these three phases as his own central task, with the rest left to the future; but in the event, with the British failing to behave according to plan, the stage of European conquest ran directly into the second, Atlantic phase; and in the heady days of 1941 even the aim of world supremacy seemed within immediate reach.<sup>34</sup>

The arguments are not of a kind to be resolved by the available evidence; or, in all likelihood, by the accumulation of evidence in the future. They turn on assessments of Hitler's personality (a dark and murky subject), and on views of the role of planning and consistency as against chance and circumstance in human affairs, as well as on the direct evidence on Hitler's thought and actions.

There are a number of problems in the picture of Hitler adhering (with various degrees of opportunism and adaptation) to the main lines set out in his writings. One is the danger of exaggerating Hitler's control of events, even at the height of his power. Within Germany itself there were obstacles to his will, individuals and pressure groups to be squared or side-tracked; and moreover foreign policy was bound to be affected by the actions and attitudes of other states, and could not be wholly dictated by Hitler. The second is that Hitler was undoubtedly much given to presenting arguments which would be suitable to his readers (or hearers) at any given time, and was increasingly concerned to show in retrospect that he had always been consistent and always been right. Moreover, he was not deeply committed to telling the truth as a matter of principle; so it must be a matter of judgement to know when he was to be believed.

There are also lesser problems relating more to ways and means than to objectives. The policy of an alliance with Britain, much emphasised in *Mein Kampf* and the *Secret Book*, was in practice pursued with a good deal less than single-minded determination. Hitler's attitude to Britain was complex and ambivalent, more of a love-hate relationship than the plain calculation set out in his writings. The English (as Hitler usually called them) were Aryans and successful imperialists, and so commanded admiration; on the other hand he later came to see them as hate-filled antagonists.



In the early years of the Nazi regime, the presentation of Britain in German propaganda was mild and cautious – the press was instructed not to call the Labour Party Marxist, or to enquire whether Sir John Simon, the Foreign Secretary, was a Jew. Hitler was delighted with the Anglo-German Naval Treaty of June 1935, a success in relations with Britain that had eluded the Kaiser's government before 1914. Yet later he made little or no attempt to follow up British offers of negotiations. The British invited the German Foreign Minister, Neurath, to London in June 1937, and were eager for him to come; but the Germans prevaricated, and seized on a thin excuse to decline. At the Hossbach conference in November 1937, Hitler referred to Britain as a '*Hassgegner*' – 'a hate-inspired antagonist' – which was a far cry from his earlier thoughts about an alliance.<sup>35</sup> Similar questions are raised by the Nazi-Soviet Pact of August 1939, which went against the whole direction of his thought, and especially that of the *Secret Book*, where Hitler went out of his way to rule out an alliance with the USSR as making no sense in terms of either ideology or expediency. Yet it is in terms of a short-term expedient, designed to be exploited and then discarded, that the pact can be fitted into the general pattern of Hitler's aims: it is only if the agreement was meant to last that it presents real difficulties.

These problems, which arise in regarding Hitler's foreign policy as being fundamentally linked with his world picture, must be set against the problems, and indeed the dangers, of seeking to separate the two. To deny all significance to ideology in the conduct of Nazi foreign policy must imply that policy was determined either by definable material interests, or by impersonal forces which reduce men to mere puppets, or by sheer opportunism. Any such explanations raise more difficulties than they resolve, leaving unexplained the large and important areas of consistency between Hitler's writings, talk, and actions, and in particular those areas where ideology carried the day against the obvious appeal of opportunism and material interest. We are faced with a balance of probabilities rather than with certainty; but the balance lies on the side of the importance of ideology. One of the advantages that Hitler held in his conduct of foreign policy (exactly as he wrote in the *Secret Book*) was that of a man with a purpose, giving him an advantage over those (whether at home or abroad) whose main object was only to turn the next corner. Equally, one of the handicaps of those who dealt with Hitler was their failure to take him seriously in *all* his aspects. They believed that there must be a distinction between ideology and practical politics, between dream and reality. 'Surely he is a man like unto ourselves' – such seems to have been the thought of Chamberlain and Stalin, and others who dealt with Hitler. (It is true that

Chamberlain once described Hitler as 'half-mad', but he did not act on that assumption.) They dealt with him, therefore, as a realist, a calculator, an opportunist who could wait for the right moment. So he was. The trouble was that he was more. In Rauschning's striking phrase, he was 'a master tactician with a daemon'.<sup>36</sup>

A further question remains. If it is accepted that Nazi ideology played a significant part in foreign policy, and gave that policy a recognisable pattern, how far was that pattern different from that of earlier German policy? What did Nazism add to the policy already practised by the German Empire up to 1918? There was much in common between the two. Even before its coming to power in 1933, the Nazi Party attracted support from nationalists of the old Empire, members of the Pan-German League, the Navy League, and colonial societies. Hitler is known to have approved of the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk (March 1918), which brought German predominance over the whole of eastern Europe and the Ukraine. The main aspects of Hitler's policy in central and eastern Europe – union with Austria, living space in the east, and colonisation of territory by a German agricultural population, the subordination of the Slav peoples – all were under discussion in Germany before and during the First World War. Hitler picked up the ideas and events of his own time to which he was sympathetic; put them into his writings; and pursued them in action. Similarly, his actions attracted the support of conservative German nationalists – it is notable that in 1938 Carl Goerdeler, the conservative mayor of Leipzig and an important figure in the German resistance to Hitler, took it for granted that the Sudeten areas of Czechoslovakia must be incorporated into Germany. The lines of continuity were important; and Hitler owed much of his success to the support they brought him. But Nazism went further. The restoration of the old German Empire, even at its furthest extent, was not enough; and conservative nationalists found that their country was launched on a war of racial conquest with unlimited objectives that was almost certain to end in disaster. At different times from 1937 onwards, and with varying degrees of commitment, numbers of German conservatives parted company with the Nazi regime; though they failed to check its growing momentum.

## The methods of Nazi foreign policy: the expendable diplomat

'A master tactician with a daemon' wrote Rauschning of Hitler; and he explained the nature of the tactics involved, which were profoundly

different from those of orthodox diplomacy, whether of the old-fashioned nineteenth-century kind or the new style of President Wilson and the League of Nations. The Nazis applied to foreign affairs the methods of their struggle for power: 'pressure combined with sudden threats, now at one point, and now at another, in an unending activity that tires out opponents'. They aimed their subversive efforts against individual states and against the whole European order – 'the transfer of the modern technique of the coup d'état . . . to foreign affairs'.<sup>37</sup> These techniques were clearly visible in dealings with Austria in February and March 1938, when the Austrian Chancellor Schuschnigg was summoned to meet Hitler and subjected to a day of bluff and bullying which was unusual for a conference between the heads of ostensibly friendly and independent states; and then the state of Austria was taken over by a combination of external pressure and internal subversion. At the end, no one could say that the Germans had actually invaded Austria; they had been invited in as the result of the disintegration of the state from within.<sup>38</sup>

The new style was marked institutionally by a downgrading of the role of the Foreign Minister. When the Nazis came to power, diplomats and officials almost to a man stayed at their posts. To serve the state was their tradition; to provide continuity, perhaps to steady the new regime, was their function. But Hitler had a low opinion of the Foreign Ministry, and while willing to make use of it he was determined not to be dependent on it. He used parallel organisations for some aspects of foreign policy. The *Auslandsorganisation* (abbreviated to AO – Foreign Countries Organisation) of the Nazi Party was used to influence German populations in other countries; and in January 1937 this organisation was placed within the Foreign Ministry, with its head actually responsible to Hess, not to the Foreign Minister, Neurath. The AO played an important role in relations with Austria, and in dealings with General Franco at the beginning of the Spanish Civil War. Another organisation was the *Dienststelle Ribbentrop*, the 'Ribbentrop Office', which Joachim von Ribbentrop created in 1933 when he set himself up as foreign policy adviser for Hitler. He was appointed Ambassador at large in 1935, and pulled off a spectacular success in the Anglo-German Naval Agreement; and then went as Ambassador to London in 1936, whence he reported directly to Hitler rather than fitting into the normal system of the Foreign Ministry. At the same time, and just as significantly, the Foreign Ministry found itself bypassed or disregarded on vital questions – it was informed only belatedly of the decision to announce conscription in March 1935. Other illustrations of the new approach may be seen in the Nazi plan to murder the German

Military Attaché in Vienna, General Wolfgang Muff, to provide a pretext for intervention in Austria; and Hitler's later idea of producing an incident to justify an invasion of Czechoslovakia by having the German Minister in Prague, Ernst Eisenlohr, assassinated.<sup>39</sup> These plans were not carried out, but they are worth recalling. To be assassinated by one's own government had not previously been a hazard of diplomatic life; but this was the new style. Not just the Foreign Ministry, but its members, were expendable.

The new style made itself felt in other ways. The most obvious to the public eye was the surge of self-confidence, indeed arrogance, that came with Nazi methods and successes.

*No one who did not live in Central or Eastern Europe can understand the force of the impressions of Hitler's year [1938]. The Germans were now the master race. From Podolian villages to the avenues of great cities such as Budapest or Trieste or Prague, Germans, whether tourist visitors or their white-stockinged youth, walked or marched with an arrogance and self-confidence that had never been theirs before. They seemed, moreover, as if they were the incarnations of a new world: strong and contemptuous of the old bourgeois civilization of Europe, or what remained of it. They were feared and admired for this. To new generations come of age across Europe . . . National Socialism had become an object of emulation.<sup>40</sup>*

This was the new wave, the wave of the future. Behind the wave, and less publicly, there moved another manifestation of Nazi methods in foreign policy. When Austria, the Sudetenland, and Czechoslovakia were occupied, the Gestapo and the security police moved in alongside the army to gather in enemies of the state. On the one hand there was the open, flaunting appeal of vigour and success; on the other, the hidden but pervasive influence of fear.

For a long time, the tactics and methods of Nazi foreign policy contributed to its success, and enabled it to advance without war. Its potential opponents were baffled by methods far removed from the orthodox forms of European diplomacy. But eventually a revulsion set in, as much against Nazi methods as against their objectives, which were still only dimly perceived. By 1939 and 1940 the representatives of old-fashioned, bourgeois Europe had come to the conclusion that Hitler and his Nazis simply could not be trusted. There was no point in negotiating with them: the only thing was to fight them and get rid of them. Thus it was that, while the aims of national socialism, if seriously meant, were almost bound to bring about a great war at some time, it was its methods that did much to decide when that war came about.

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## CHAPTER SEVEN

# Parliamentary Democracy: France and Britain

France and Britain were not the standard-bearers of an ideology in the same way as Italy and Germany. They were pluralist states, and within their frontiers could be found parties representing all points on the political spectrum, from extreme Left to extreme Right, as well as groups representing all kinds of special interests. Yet all this diversity was founded, if not on an ideology, then on a theory and system of political life: parliamentary democracy, along with the liberties associated with it – freedom of speech, of the press, and of association. The system worked differently in the two countries. France under the Third Republic practised a form of parliamentary government, in which the National Assembly, and especially the Chamber of Deputies, was more powerful than the Cabinet. There were many political parties represented in the Chamber; governments rested on unstable combinations between them; and during the 1930s the average life of a ministry was about six months. The British system was Cabinet government, in which in normal circumstances the Cabinet controlled the House of Commons through a disciplined and stable party majority. In the 1930s there were only two major parties, Conservative and Labour, though Liberals of various kinds retained a foothold. From 1931 to 1940 Britain was ruled by a coalition, the National Government, made up of Conservatives, National Labour, and National Liberals. It was a very stable government (though there were changes of Prime Minister on two occasions); and it was dominated by the Conservatives, who provided the vast majority of its parliamentary support.

Despite these differences, the two countries had much in common, which they felt increasingly as parliamentary democracies became a scarce, and apparently endangered, species. They shared many attitudes and assumptions; and it is necessary to ask how far these contributed to a

situation in which European war was likely or even probable. The prevalent attitude on foreign policy in both countries was a combination of a widespread revulsion against war, attachment to the League of Nations, and support for disarmament. This outlook made war almost unthinkable; and it did much to explain why France and Britain acquiesced for so long in the advance of German power, to the point where it probably could not be checked *without* war. So, by an unhappy paradox, devotion to peace and international conciliation helped to create the conditions for war. Later, at a point which cannot be precisely dated because the change came at different times for different individuals and groups, these attitudes were reversed. Other assumptions about the values of parliamentary democracy, or socialism, or political morality, began to prevail, and provided what can properly be called an ideological element in the decision to resist the advance of Nazism and fascism – even though that advance had previously been accepted and even assisted.

These developments can be seen in both France and Britain, though in different ways and with varying degrees of intensity.

## France

### ‘Morts pour la France’: the slaughter of the First World War

A profound longing for peace, sometimes emerging as pacifism in the strict sense of the total rejection of war or any use of force, exercised a pervasive influence in France during the 1920s and 1930s. It drew its strength from a range of sources, of which the most important was also the simplest: the experience of the First World War. The total of killed for metropolitan France (excluding overseas territories) amounted to approximately 1.3 million, which constituted 10.5 per cent of the active male population when war began: the figure for Britain was 5.1 per cent.<sup>1</sup> The names of those killed were inscribed on war memorials all over France – no village was without its sombre reminder: ‘Morts pour la France’. (The socialist administration of Lille, in a symbolic shift from patriotism to the abstractions of pacifist thought, changed the wording, so that the great memorial in the centre of the city read ‘Morts pour la Paix’ – died for peace.) The impact was greater in France than elsewhere (particularly in Germany) because the casualties struck a population which was already static and ageing. The effect was heightened by the dramatic fall in the number of births during the war, producing a deficit against ‘normal’ totals of perhaps 1.4 million



births. The years 1915–18 were those with the fewest births, and their consequences moved inexorably through French life: small classes in schools, a drop in those entering employment, and a fall in the numbers available for conscription when this generation reached military age.

The figures and the war memorials spoke for themselves. France could not afford another conflict like that of 1914–18. Less obvious but just as profound were the psychological effects. These were felt particularly deeply in the countryside, where the rural population reacted against war in a way unknown before 1914. They resented both the government which had sent their fellow-peasants to the slaughter, and the industrial workers who had escaped too easily from the trenches to the factories. When Daniel Halévy visited central France in 1920, he reported bitterness at the inequality with which the tax on French lives had been imposed: everyone had had a chance of avoiding it, except the peasant. By 1934 he found that these feelings had sharpened:

*The war assuredly counts for much in this sombre mood which has gripped the peasants. They speak little of its tortures but they forget nothing, and there lies at the bottom of their embittered hearts a desire for vengeance. This is one of the schools of hatred in which the young have been taught. 'They will lead you to the slaughter' the father tells his son. 'I let myself be led, I've been through it. Don't you go.'*<sup>2</sup>

Revulsion against war was strong among the peasants who had formed the backbone of the sorely tried French infantry; but it was not confined to them. Before 1914 there was already a significant degree of anti-militarism in the French socialist and syndicalist movements, which affected industrial workers. This continued in the 1920s and 1930s, and also took deep root in other organisations, especially those representing primary school teachers – a respected and influential profession. The effects were cumulative and pervasive. French reservists obeyed the mobilisation order in 1938 (at the time of the Munich crisis), as they did again in 1939; but it was in a spirit of grim resignation. They would go through with it; but twice in twenty-five years was too much.

This widespread, instinctive reaction against war, born of personal or family experience, was reinforced by an intellectual and literary current. The decade 1919–29 saw a stream of novels and plays which were in effect overwhelmingly anti-war. They followed the success of what remains the most famous of such books, Henri Barbusse's *Le Feu* (translated into English as *Under Fire*). First serialised in weekly parts in a left-wing journal, then published as a book in 1916 and awarded the Prix Goncourt,

*Le Feu* sold 230,000 copies by February 1919. Many such books followed – over 150 war novels in the 1920s.<sup>3</sup> They were well received, in terms of both reviews and sales; and as early as the winter season of 1919–20 anti-militarist plays drew great applause in Paris theatres. In the late 1920s the number of books fell away, to revive again in the 1930s under the looming shadow of another war, with an emphasis on the theme of desertion or refusal of service, and on the horrific, catastrophic nature of the next war – air bombardment, chemical warfare, the collapse of civilisation. There appeared also, in André Malraux's *L'Espoir* (1937), a novel about the Spanish Civil War, a revival of the theme of heroism, a call to arms in a just cause; but that was about another country, and a different kind of war, and it was against the stream.

The main political home of French pacifism was in the Socialist Party. During the First World War the party had been divided between supporters of the war and advocates of a compromise peace, with a further small group which proclaimed 'revolutionary defeatism', the acceptance of defeat in war to provoke revolution at home. During the 1920s, these past differences of view were submerged beneath a general programme of disarmament and reduction of military service, which sufficed while there was no serious danger of war. During the 1930s traditional pacifism, represented and led by Paul Faure, revived in strength. Humanitarian and optimistic in nature, its supporters believed that peace could be achieved through disarmament, and by negotiation with Hitler. They argued that it depended on France whether German expansion (inevitable in itself) was peaceful or warlike, because if all his claims were rejected, Hitler would *have* to use the only method left to him, which was war. A more extreme form of pacifism found expression in the writings of Félicien Challaye, a socialist philosopher. One of his books, published in 1933, summed up his position in its title: *Pour la paix désarmée, même en face d'Hitler – For disarmed peace, even in face of Hitler*. He argued that foreign occupation was preferable to war; and that the price of war was always greater than that of remaining at peace. These views were adopted by the so-called 'integral pacifist' wing of the Socialist Party, led by Jacques Pivert; they did not form a majority even among socialist militants, but they were active and influential.

Another important influence working in the same direction was the *Syndicat National des Instituteurs* (National Union of Primary Teachers), which in 1937 had about 100,000 members out of the 130,000 primary teachers in France. These teachers played an important role not only in the schools, but as secretaries in town halls throughout France, and above all

as respected representatives of socially acceptable attitudes. In the 1880s and 1890s the primary teachers had been deeply patriotic; before 1914 there was some move towards anti-militarism; and after the war the majority moved towards pacifism, for which the union's weekly journal was increasingly used as a vehicle. In August 1936 the union's annual congress approved a resolution demanding the immediate annulment of the war guilt clause of the Treaty of Versailles; unilateral disarmament, including reduction of military service from two years to twelve months or six; and arrangements with other unions for a general strike as soon as mobilisation was proclaimed, for whatever reason. On 26 September 1938, at the height of the Czechoslovakian crisis, the secretary-general of the union, along with a representative of the postal workers, drew up an appeal to the country – 'We do not want war', which received 150,000 signatures in three days, and was specifically noted by the Premier, Daladier, before he went to Munich.

It is impossible to assess the precise weight of these different elements in the revulsion against war; but their combined significance was profound, and coloured all French thought and action in the 1930s. Towards the end of the decade, in 1938 and 1939, there came signs of a change: but until then the momentum of the pacifist movement was unchecked.

## The League of Nations and disarmament

This movement was linked, though to a markedly lesser degree in France than in Britain, with the appeal of the League of Nations and disarmament as means for the promotion of peace. The League of Nations was the central feature of Briand's long years as Foreign Minister from 1926 to January 1932. He was a regular attender at Geneva, and a fervent believer in the promotion of peace through League oratory. The speech in which he welcomed the admission of Germany to the League of Nations became famous. 'Away with rifles, machine-guns, and artillery. Make way for conciliation, arbitration, and peace.'<sup>4</sup> It was Briand who took the initiative for the Kellogg–Briand Pact (signed by the USA and France, February 1928) renouncing war as an instrument of national policy; a pact to which practically every country in the world adhered, and which may stand as a symbol of the attempt to attain peace by wishing for it. The Socialist Party also became a firm supporter of the League, after a period of hesitation and division as to how far the League was merely a cover for the great powers and for bourgeois capitalism. As early as 1921 the socialist leader Léon Blum described the League as the embodiment of the civilised world; and

his colleague Marcel Sembat called it the only effective means of preventing war.

One of the main objects of the League of Nations was to promote disarmament. The cause of disarmament lay at the heart of French socialist thought and sentiment on international affairs, especially between 1930 and 1934, a period dominated by the Geneva Disarmament Conference. In the four months from November 1930 to February 1931, Blum published thirty-six articles in the socialist daily *Le Populaire*, which he edited, on the subject of disarmament; and he reprinted them, with only minor changes, in a book, *Les Problèmes de la paix* (1931).<sup>5</sup> For Blum, all the problems of the day would be solved by disarmament – security; the revision of the Versailles settlement; and not least economic problems, for disarmament would create confidence, diminish attempts at self-sufficiency, open the way to freer trade, and liberate for constructive purposes funds which were tied up in military budgets. It was the philosopher's stone which would turn base metal into gold. At that stage, Blum was in opposition, and did not have to cope with translating such aspirations into practice. But those who held office also pursued the theme of disarmament, and hoped that it would contribute to the security of France. Edouard Herriot and Joseph Paul-Boncour (at the time Premier and Foreign Minister respectively) prepared in October 1932 a French plan to put to the Disarmament Conference. Presenting this plan to the *Haut Comité Militaire*, a joint body of politicians and generals, Herriot argued that the defence of a country did not reside solely in soldiers and guns, but in the strength of its position in law. General Weygand, the head of the French Army, replied that it was his duty to defend the frontiers by force, not with words; on which Paul-Boncour commented afterwards – 'Lack of imagination'.<sup>6</sup> Was it lack of imagination on the part of the soldier, or perhaps too much imagination on the part of the politician? Either way, the comment illuminates the strength of the idea of disarmament among French politicians.

This discussion has so far dealt mainly with parties and organisations of the Left; but the revulsion against war was not a left-wing monopoly. In the mid-1930s, rejection of war came also to be the stock-in-trade of much of the French Right. When the German Army moved into the demilitarised zone of the Rhineland on 7 March 1936, the French press and organised opinion, from Left to Right, was unanimous: there must be no war. The communists accused the Right of wanting war; the socialists accused the government of provocation by manning the Maginot Line; but at the same time the Right proclaimed that peace must prevail and denounced the Left for wanting war. Right-wing newspapers claimed that France was being

drawn by its pact with the USSR (signed in 1935) into a German–Soviet quarrel. Charles Maurras, leader of the *Action Française* and formerly the embodiment of right-wing patriotism and anti-German sentiment, wrote: ‘And above all, no war. We do not want war.’<sup>7</sup> Similarly, during the Czechoslovakian crisis of 1938, opposition to war was found as much on the Right as on the Left. By that time, there was more division of opinion, but it was not along party lines, or along the old Left–Right divide: there were pacifists and advocates of resistance on both Right and Left. In part, this new pacifism of the Right arose from hatred of the Soviet Union and communism, and fear of being drawn into war on the side of the Soviets; which leads to another aspect of French attitudes towards foreign policy: the complications and confusions introduced by ideology.

## The impact of foreign ideologies: fascism, Nazism, communism

The central threat to France was recognised to be Germany, the old enemy, from 1933 under new and dangerous management. One simple reflex action to meet such a threat was to build up French armaments and to seek powerful allies. But a policy of armaments was hard to pursue in a country devoted to peace; and the search for allies was hampered at almost every turn by the ideological sympathies and antipathies of the French. Hardly ever could French politicians (even if they wanted) devise and carry through policies based solely on grounds of power politics and French interests.

France was divided. This was scarcely new: France had been divided since 1789, between the party of movement and the party of order, the Red and the Black, Left and Right. But each generation lived out the conflict in a new form, and that of the 1930s was particularly virulent. This was partly because political tensions were heightened by economic distress; partly because of the presence of outside powers (fascist Italy, Nazi Germany, communist Soviet Union) with which the extremist parties were identified; and partly because of a natural tendency to make political judgements largely in terms of one’s enemies – those who saw the main enemy as fascism were drawn towards the communists, while those who were most fiercely anti-communist were drawn to fascism. There was a strong tendency to simplify the issues, and lump all one’s enemies together under one label. To the Left, everyone on the Right was a fascist – even if, like Maurras, he remained a reactionary monarchist, though an admirer of Mussolini. To the Right, everyone on the Left was a Bolshevik, even if, like

Blum, he had broken with the communists in 1920 and was completely devoted to the parliamentary system.

The extremists on the Right went out of their way to court publicity and demonstrate their strength. The small fascist groups of the mid-1930s were conspicuous and noisy – the *Francistes* wore blue uniforms and went in for ritual and display, and the *Solidarité Française* had bands of street fighters modelled on Nazi storm-troopers and fascist *squadristi*. Jacques Doriot's *Parti Populaire Français* (PPF) was much stronger than either: it had a big working-class following in Paris, which Doriot brought with him from his years as communist mayor of St Denis, and could claim its own intellectual and writer in Drieu la Rochelle. Colonel de la Rocque's *Croix de Feu*, strong in numbers and with a basis as an ex-servicemen's organisation, was not strictly fascist, but certainly on the Right, and conspicuous through its great gatherings and torch-light parades. The strength and potential danger of the Right were dramatically demonstrated in the great riots of 6 February 1934, one of the traumatic 'days' of French history, when the *Croix de Feu*, *Action Française*, and fascist leagues came near to storming the Chamber of Deputies.

These groups on the far Right of French politics, whether in any strict sense fascist or not, were easily and often correctly identified as sympathetic to foreign powers. Their admiration for Mussolini was unstinted and unalloyed. He showed the power of leadership (so lacking in the shifting combinations of French politics); he imposed order; he crushed the Left. Sometimes, as in the case of the *Francistes*, this approbation was reinforced by the receipt of funds from Italy, but was none the less real for that. The case of Hitler and the Nazis was less clear-cut, because the Right was torn between traditional opposition to Germany and admiration for a vigorous, authoritarian, and anti-Bolshevik regime. The *Action Française* newspaper was at first dismayed by Hitler's hostility towards France in his writings, and published some of the more belligerent passages from *Mein Kampf* as a warning to its readers. On the other hand, Gustave Hervé greeted Hitler's rise to the Chancellorship with acclamation, as saving Germany from the Red tide. In 1937 Alphonse de Chateaubriant visited Hitler and returned full of praise for the Führer's vibrant personality and high ideals, which he proceeded to pour out for the benefit of his readers for some years to come. Favourable French reactions to the Nazi regime were cultivated by Ribbentrop's private office and by other German organisations, working through the *Comité France-Allemagne* and a number of ex-servicemen's organisations and pacifist groups. Here, the appeal was not to ideological sympathies, but simply to the memory of war and the need for reconciliation;

but the result was still to promote sympathy with Nazi Germany. The German government also took the straightforward course of paying a few French journalists to slant their articles in a pro-German direction.<sup>8</sup>

On the extreme Left, the most formidable group was the Communist Party. The communists (unlike the right-wing groups) contested elections, so their support in the country could be measured. They did badly in the election of 1932, with only ten deputies elected on some 700,000 votes (in the second round). In 1936, on the wave of support generated by the Popular Front and their conversion to a patriotic stance, the communists polled 1.5 million votes and won seventy-two seats. At the same time there was a massive increase in membership of the Party, from about 28,000 in 1932 to about 330,000 at the end of 1936.<sup>9</sup> The party appeared the most anti-fascist in the Popular Front; the most committed to the republican cause in Spain; and the most zealous in attacking capitalism. It also had the support of intellectuals (André Gide, André Malraux, Romain Rolland, and others), which was important among some sections of French society.

The communists were therefore prominent. They were also, despite their new-found patriotism, obviously Soviet-controlled and Stalinist. The Popular Front policy itself (the union of all left-wing parties against fascism) had to wait officially for the word from Moscow, and Doriot, who broke away from the party to form the PPF, was denounced for advocating a Popular Front only two months before it was formally adopted. The adulation of Stalin began in 1934, with a resolution at the Party Congress praising the genial artisan of success, the watchful pilot, the steely Bolshevik, and the world leader of the revolutionary struggle. Thereafter, such an address became obligatory at each Congress. By a process of assimilation the same treatment was given to Maurice Thorez, who took the title of Secretary-General of the Party (Stalin's position in the USSR). He had a ghosted autobiography published (1937), with all errors and deviations from the party line written out; and was made the object of a similar cult to that of Stalin – though of course the pedestal was lower. At the very time when the Communist Party opened itself to contacts with socialists and radicals in the Popular Front, it congealed completely in its internal structure and discipline. It was not surprising that its opponents described it as a foreign army encamped on French soil, aiming to make France into Stalin's soldier in western Europe; or that this accusation came with particular force from the PPF, led by Doriot, who had been a leader of the Communist Party and knew how it worked.

The extreme parties of Right and Left were bitterly opposed to one another and to the political system which functioned in the no man's

land between them. They were also aligned closely with foreign powers, whether Italy, Germany, or the USSR. The effects of these divisions on French foreign policy were extensive and damaging. In May 1935 the French government, represented by the Foreign Minister of the day, Pierre Laval, signed in Moscow a treaty of alliance with the Soviet Union, negotiations for which had been pursued on and off since 1933. Such an alliance was perfectly designed to bring out the complicated divisions of French opinion. The communists supported it, even though at one time they had claimed to oppose the whole idea of alliances and national security. Equally, a group on the Right, represented in the Chamber by Louis Marin and André Tardieu, and in the press by *Le Matin*, *Le Journal des Débats*, and other papers, opposed it, both on foreign policy grounds (it would push the states of eastern Europe, especially Poland, into Germany's orbit), and on grounds of domestic politics, because it would strengthen the communists in France. Others on the Right, the *Action Française* and the fascist journal *Je suis partout* also opposed the alliance. But this did not mean that there was a simple split between Left and Right. The 'realist' Right, represented among the press by *Le Figaro* and *L'Echo de Paris*, and a majority of right-wing deputies, supported the alliance, on straightforward anti-German grounds and in the belief that it would have little effect on the communists in France. The socialists were divided. Some supported the pact on grounds of French security or of the defence of the Revolution; others opposed it on grounds of revolutionary defeatism and total pacifism. The socialist leader, Léon Blum, hesitated for some time. In 1934 he was still primarily an advocate of the League of Nations, and opposed to any alliance policy; at the end of that year he said in the Chamber that French security could not be assured by pacts or increased military strength. But in April 1935 (after German rearmament was openly proclaimed in March) he declared that the guarantee of peace lay in unity of action between the Western democracies and the USSR, and came down in favour of the pact – with the rather curious rider that it was an 'open' pact, which the Germans could always join if they wished.

These contorted divisions did not prevent one Foreign Minister, Barthou, carrying on negotiations with the USSR in secret, nor another, Laval, from signing the treaty. But they did mean that the alliance received varying degrees of support from different ministries; that it had an uncertain welcome from the Chamber and Senate, where eventually it would have to be ratified; and that its fulfilment was likely to be half-hearted.

The same was true, for different reasons, of an agreement with Italy, which was another possible anti-German move. Paul-Boncour took up the



idea of a *rapprochement* with Italy in January 1933, but encountered difficulties. He was the author of the contemptuous phrase, ‘César de Carnaval’, to describe Mussolini, which made a bad start. In the Chamber the socialists were almost unanimously opposed to Mussolini. (Blum had a particular aversion for him, and as late as 1933 regarded him as a greater danger to peace than Hitler.) When Italy was mentioned, some socialist usually raised the name of Matteotti, the Italian socialist murdered in 1924. The communists too were consistently hostile to fascist Italy. The Right and Centre favoured an agreement; so that on this issue, unlike that of a Soviet alliance, the division was on straightforward lines. But the moral issues were not simple, as was seen in the reactions to the Franco-Italian agreement of January 1935 by Blum in *Le Populaire* and Georges Bidault in the Catholic *L’Aube*. Blum approved the settlement of disputes, but cried shame to see a French minister as the guest of the murderer of Matteotti. Bidault saw no shame in an agreement with a dictator when peace was at stake; and observed that France had negotiated with Stalin despite the repression in the Soviet Union. The Italian attack on Ethiopia later in 1935, in defiance of the League of Nations, compounded the difficulties by forcing a split in the Right when France was forced to choose between Italy and Britain. The victory of the Popular Front in the French elections of April–May 1936 confirmed the break with Italy; the socialists and communists were consistently hostile to Mussolini, and he to them. Agreements across such an ideological divide were not impossible, as the Nazi–Soviet Pact was to show; but they needed both a very powerful impulse from circumstances, and more freedom to practise *realpolitik* than was available in the French political system.

Repeatedly French governments found that the requirements of power politics, which pointed towards alliances with the USSR or Italy (or both), were impeded by ideological conflicts which crossed the dividing line between foreign and domestic policy. This would have been less important if France had been ruled by strong, stable governments capable of absorbing or overriding ideological conflicts; but this was not the case. Governments were short-lived; the Chamber of Deputies had to be won over to any policy which was to issue in a treaty; and it was only too easy for foreign policy to be paralysed.

## Resolving on war; the role of Léon Blum

Revulsion against war and the results of ideological divisions weakened the French reaction to the growth of German power in the 1930s, and thus

helped to promote the conditions in which war might come. But in themselves they would not produce war – indeed they made it unlikely that a French government could commit the country to another great conflict. For that to happen, at least something in these attitudes had to change: revulsion against war had to be in some measure overcome, and internal disunity patched up to a sufficient extent to allow a declaration of war. To see how this came about, it is useful to trace the evolution of French socialist opinion, and particularly the opinion of Léon Blum. Blum was a figure with an appeal and a significance wider than that of the party he led. In 1936 he described himself to a German visitor as a Frenchman, a socialist, and a Jew; and he always regarded himself as the heir to Jaurès, the great French socialist assassinated in 1914, who had himself combined socialist beliefs with deep love of his country. Blum's evolution towards a reluctant acceptance of the necessity of war had an importance greater than the simply personal.

At the end of the 1920s Blum, along with most French socialists, was committed to the League of Nations, disarmament, revision of the unjust parts of the Versailles settlement, and opposition to all alliances. He did not absolutely reject the use of force in self-defence, but he was profoundly opposed to war in almost any circumstances. In 1930–31 he argued in favour of unilateral disarmament by France (differing from the majority in his own party, which preferred simultaneous disarmament). The rise of Hitler did not immediately disturb him, because he regarded Nazism as merely a more virulent form of nationalism, and thought it less dangerous than Italian fascism. He remained a passionate advocate of disarmament, believing that if other powers did not build up their armaments, Germany would not increase hers.

When the Geneva Disarmament Conference of 1932–34 finally broke down, the French Socialist Party split into different tendencies. One supported a policy of resisting the fascist and Nazi states by means of alliances. Another held to the older policies of avoiding alliances and seeking peace by means of concessions. A third clung to absolute pacifism, arguing that even foreign occupation was preferable to war. Blum came gradually to adopt the first of these positions. In 1935 he supported the Franco-Soviet Pact (though he had long opposed all alliances); and he advocated sanctions against Italy over Ethiopia. Up to 1934 he refused to vote for military credits, and in 1935 he voted against the extension of conscription from one year to two. But thereafter he began to support the military credits, and as Premier in 1936–37 he doubled the sums devoted to rearmament.



*Léon Blum: Idealist in politics. Frenchman, socialist and Jew – under threat in all three identities.*

Source: Roger-Violet/Topfoto

The Czechoslovakian crisis of 1938 evoked some final hesitations. Most of the time, Blum opposed sacrificing Czechoslovakia to Germany; but at the end of September he wavered, and advocated a compromise solution in order to avoid war. After Munich, he shared the general sense of relief, writing: ‘We can go back to work and sleep soundly again. We can enjoy the beauty of the autumn sun.’<sup>10</sup> On 4 October he and his party voted for the Munich agreement. After that he reverted to a policy of firmness, from which he did not again depart. He advocated armaments and alliances against Hitler. At the Socialist Congress at

Montrouge in December he carried a resolution supporting the defence of France against 'any attack which threatened its integrity, sovereignty and independence'.<sup>11</sup> In 1939 he supported French commitments to Poland and military conversations with the Soviet Union. On 2 September 1939 Blum and the Socialist Party voted for war credits. It was a far cry from his earlier position.

Frenchman, socialist, and Jew: all three identities for which Blum stood were threatened by the rise of Nazi Germany. The triple threat brought the full horror of the twentieth century home to a man who was deeply imbued with the optimism of the nineteenth. Not all Frenchmen, or socialists, or perhaps even Jews, followed the same agonised pilgrimage as Blum; but many did, in their own individual ways. In 1938–39 there was a steady hardening of French resolution, and a firm though reluctant determination to face war if need be. Jean-Louis Crémieux-Brilhac has traced this painful evolution, and demonstrated the striking firmness of French opinion as a whole in August and September 1939.<sup>12</sup> Naturally, divisions remained, and even this new determination was tinged with a deep pessimism. But without this profound shift of opinion, articulate on the part of Léon Blum, wordless and instinctive in others, there would not have been the resolution to go to war at all.

## Britain

For most of the period between the wars, Britain was of smaller importance in European affairs than France. In political, strategic, and above all psychological terms, Britain was not a Continental power. In the mind's eye, the narrow waters of the Straits of Dover became a great divide; isolationism was strong; and there was a widespread feeling that never again should Britain send a great army to fight in Europe. Britain had suffered much less than France in the First World War – about 750,000 dead (about 950,000 when Dominion and Empire casualties were added); but the impact on a profoundly unmilitary country was still formidable, and there was a strong disinclination to repeat the experience. If that was the price of a Continental commitment, the British would prefer not to pay it.

Despite all this, Britain could not contract out of Europe. She was one of the victors of 1918; one of the makers of the 1919 settlement; a guarantor of the Locarno agreement; and an important element in the European economy. Moreover, several European states, and especially France, regarded British policy in Europe as of crucial importance. For

these reasons, British attitudes and sentiments remained important in European affairs; and for a short time in 1939–40 they were decisive.

As with France, we may begin with general attitudes towards international relations, and the atmosphere of the inter-war period. The picture was broadly similar to that in France, but the shades of emphasis were different. Support for the League of Nations came first, followed by pacifism (absolute for a few, and a general revulsion against war for many). The two combined to feed a widespread belief in disarmament as a means of securing peace. All these sentiments crossed party boundaries. They were more firmly established in the Labour and Liberal Parties than among the Conservatives, but even so, few Conservatives cared to damn the League of Nations out of hand, or openly advocate heavy armaments.

## The League of Nations, pacifism and disarmament

Belief in the League of Nations was the nearest thing to an ideology in Britain between the wars. The League of Nations Union, which existed to promote the League's cause in the country, was under royal patronage, which was the sign of being wholly respectable and above party; its committee was drawn from all three parties; and it had just over 400,000 subscribers in 1931.<sup>13</sup> It was allowed, and indeed encouraged, to propagate its views in schools. On one occasion, in the so-called 'Peace Ballot', it organised a widespread canvass of public opinion in which the immense number of 11.5 million people expressed their support for the League. They voted almost unanimously for continued British membership of the League and for general disarmament; nearly as heavily for the abolition of military aircraft and prohibiting the private manufacture of armaments; and for economic sanctions against a country which insisted on attacking another. Military sanctions (the current euphemism for war) were less readily approved of; but 8 millions were still in favour of them, at least in principle.

In terms of party politics, Labour was by the end of the 1920s the most ardent supporter of the League, after (as in France) a period of hesitation as to whether it was not merely a League of victors and of capitalist states, and therefore to be shunned. The League came to be regarded as an important step towards internationalism, and as a safeguard against any return to the alliance system which (it was believed) had led to war in 1914. As late as June 1936, when the Minister for War, Duff Cooper, made a speech in Paris about Franco-British friendship, the leader of the Labour Party,

Clement Attlee, complained that the speech made no reference to the Covenant of the League of Nations – Labour was not prepared to accept, in any form, a military alliance with France. The League was also a natural focus for the remnants of the Liberals, embodying as it did, in new guise, the old Gladstonian ideals of mediation, arbitration, and the Concert of Europe.

What of the supposedly hard-headed realists of the Conservative Party? Whole-hearted League enthusiasts were doubtless few in its ranks. Lord Robert Cecil, a highly individual Tory, did as much as any single man to found the League, and he remained devoted to it; but he was not characteristic of his party. Austen Chamberlain, the sober and respected Foreign Secretary of 1924–29, made a point of going to Geneva, but at least in part this was to keep an eye on Cecil. However, Stanley Baldwin, who had a shrewd eye for popularity, thought it best in 1935 to establish a Minister for League of Nations affairs; and Anthony Eden, who took this post, the brightest rising star in the Conservative Party, saw in the League a passport to public favour as well as sound international thinking. The League made much sense in terms of foreign policy, as a place where influence could be exercised and negotiations pursued; it was also reckoned to be an electoral asset which should on no account be thrown away. A Conservative Party official wrote to Baldwin on 1 August 1935 that they might lose the next election if the bulk of the Liberal vote went to Labour; and no political issue was more likely to influence the Liberal vote than ‘the question of peace and war and the future of the League of Nations’.<sup>14</sup> Besides which, there was always the possibility that the vision of collective security might actually materialise. In 1935, at the time of the Ethiopian crisis, Neville Chamberlain, who was far from being a Leagueomaniac, agreed that sanctions against Italy should be tried, in the hope that the League might yet be vindicated; and he believed that Britain should give a lead, and not let the issue go by default.

Here lay an important strand of thought – or rather of belief – which was shared across all parties. Between the wars it was an article of faith in Britain that the country had a special moral role as a leader in world affairs; and that other countries would naturally follow whatever direction the British chose. It was a remnant of the complete self-confidence of the Victorian era; and it remains mildly astonishing that in the Ethiopian crisis the fifty members of the League of Nations did indeed consent to be led by Britain – until, alas, they all fell into the ditch. The British retained as their heritage from the nineteenth century a rather specialised form of moral conscience and a remarkable faith in their own power of leadership. The

two together gave a particular quality and tenacity to faith in the League of Nations. As late as April 1938 the deputy editor of *The Times* could write with confidence that ‘the British people is more League-minded than any in the world’; and he was probably right.<sup>15</sup>

In strict logic, support for the League was incompatible with absolute pacifism, because the Covenant of the League included the use of military sanctions against an aggressor. Naturally enough, strict logic was often defied, and pacifists usually supported the League, as offering the best chance of general peace. Pacifists in the absolute sense were in any case a small, though active, minority. The largest pacifist group of the 1930s, Canon Dick Sheppard’s Peace Pledge Union, began with 50,000 postcards accepting the uncompromising statement: ‘We renounce war and never again, directly or indirectly, will we support or sanction another.’ The maximum membership of the Union was reached *after* war had begun – 136,000 in April 1940.<sup>16</sup> These were impressive figures; and presumably the activist core was surrounded by a larger number of sympathisers. In a much more general sense, almost the whole population was united in the desire to promote peace and avoid any repetition of the events of 1914–18 and the as yet unfathomable dangers of aerial bombardment. Revulsion against war was as widespread and profound in Britain as in France, and it was nourished by a stream of war (or anti-war) literature by Sassoon, Graves, Blunden, and others.

Disarmament was the link that bound the League and revulsion against war together. ‘I give you my word there will be no great armaments’, Baldwin told the British electorate in 1935, even when appealing for a mandate for limited rearmament.<sup>17</sup> Disarmament was one of the major principles of Labour foreign policy; and Arthur Henderson ended his political life as Chairman of the Geneva Disarmament Conference of 1932–34. The National government too, despite many accusations to the contrary, pursued the aim of a disarmament agreement throughout the conference, trying repeatedly to reconcile the positions of France and Germany – which in effect meant allowing German armaments to increase while seeking to diminish those of France. When this failed, the government went ahead with a separate Anglo-German Naval Agreement in 1935, and sought persistently for an agreement to restrict air bombardment. Governments, of course, pursued disarmament for a variety of reasons, many of them to do with financial economy and political self-interest; but the degree of commitment to disarmament as a means of securing peace should not be underestimated, nor should the force of public opinion that was concentrated on this issue.

## Crises in ideology and foreign policy

The element of confusion imparted by ideology to the conduct of foreign policy was much less in Britain than in France. There were several political conflicts in Britain, and a good deal of bitterness over questions of unemployment and the means test. There was some overheated language. Even Attlee, who is not usually associated with extremism, wrote in 1937 that ‘MacDonaldism is . . . in its philosophy essentially Fascist. MacDonald himself uses the same phrases that may be found in the mouths of Hitler and Mussolini.’<sup>18</sup> But even so Britain was much less seriously divided than was France. All the major parties, and almost every member of the House of Commons, continued to accept the rules of the political game. There were, it is true, groups in the country which wanted some completely different political system. There were the communists, supported by numerous and influential fellow-travellers. There was Sir Oswald Mosley and his British Union of Fascists; and a strange assortment of enthusiasts, eccentrics, and extremists who have been neatly summed up as ‘fellow-travellers of the Right’.<sup>19</sup> But in 1935 the British electorate was invited to vote for parties led by Mr Baldwin and Mr Attlee – safe, unexciting, middle-of-the-road men; and they did so in their millions. The votes given to the extreme parties were derisory in number. The British reaction to years of economic depression, high unemployment, and a European crisis which produced one authoritarian regime after another, was to return Stanley Baldwin with a comfortable majority. It was not a step along the road to revolution.

During the 1930s British governments had substantial (indeed up to 1935 overwhelming) majorities in the House of Commons, and firm backing in the country. If they knew their course in foreign policy, and cared to press on with it, then short of a political earthquake they could do so. The kind of paralysis induced in French foreign policy by ideological divisions would not occur at Westminster. Yet the political assumptions which underlay British policy, whether we dignify them with the name of ideology or not, still created problems, which were strikingly revealed during the Ethiopian crisis of 1935–36.

When in October 1935 Italy attacked Ethiopia, a fellow-member of the League of Nations, a number of possible courses were open to the British government. The French, with Laval as Prime Minister, wanted to retain Italy as an ally against Germany, and were willing to pay for this alliance by handing over large areas of Ethiopian territory to Mussolini; and the British went some way down this path in preparing the Hoare–Laval



agreement of December 1935. If they had been willing to pursue this course with sufficient determination and ruthlessness, it might have produced results. On the other hand, if they wished to oppose Italy, then bold action – to close the Suez Canal, and risk a battle with the Italian fleet and air force – might well have done the trick. The government went part-way down this path by reinforcing the Mediterranean fleet. But both these courses were essentially nineteenth-century in character – the cynical diplomacy of imperialism, or the threat of sea power and the mailed fist. Neither fitted with the attitudes of the League, collective security, and the new morality. Moreover, the crisis occurred just after the declaration of the results of the ‘Peace Ballot’, and just before a general election. Not surprisingly, neither course was followed to its conclusion. The British government went instead for half-hearted League action – economic sanctions against Italy, but excluding oil; with the result that Italy was infuriated but not stopped, and Ethiopia was encouraged but not saved. It was a clear case of British policy being caught between the old attitudes and the new, and falling with a bump between two stools. If the Ethiopian crisis marked a step towards European war (which it surely did), then British attitudes contributed much to its development.

Less dramatically, and indeed much less decisively, political attitudes did something to obscure, or to blunt the edge of, British reactions to Nazi Germany. There was first the question of whether there should be any reaction on ideological grounds at all. Geoffrey Dawson, the editor of *The Times*, wrote in a leading article in August 1937:

*The notion that there can be no dealing with National Socialism (or for that matter with Bolshevism) has found no countenance in these columns. . . . The distinction which it has always drawn is between the internal affairs of Germany (which are her own concern) and those national activities – due to some extent to the character of her rulers – which may threaten the peace and security of other countries or strike at the world-wide freedom of religious belief.<sup>20</sup>*

This was the traditional attitude of British governments and the Foreign Office – that the internal affairs of other states were their own concern. It appeared the only safe rule: after all, no one wanted German intervention in, say, the affairs of Northern Ireland. The consequence of these lines of argument was that the coming to power of the Nazis should not fundamentally affect British policy towards Germany. But there were those who thought otherwise. Attlee said in the Commons on 13 April 1933 that Britain should not countenance ‘the yielding to Hitler and force what was

denied to Stresemann and reason'.<sup>21</sup> In February 1938 Ernest Bevin, the trade union leader, put the matter bluntly (as was his wont):

*I have never believed from the first day when Hitler came to office but that he intended at the right moment and when he was strong enough, to wage war in the world. Neither do I believe, with that kind of philosophy, that there is any possibility to arrive at agreements with Hitler or Mussolini.*<sup>22</sup>

On the whole, the government held to the first view, which appeared to be practical as well as traditional – after all, there were so many dictatorships in Europe that one could scarcely take issue with them all. But as early as July 1934 Neville Chamberlain wrote of the murder of Dollfuss, the Austrian Chancellor: 'That those beasts should have got him at last . . . makes me hate Nazi-ism, and all its works, with a greater loathing than ever.'<sup>23</sup> Eventually, such feelings were to gain the upper hand, and contributed to a change in policy.

At the time of the German take-over of Austria in March 1938, the reaction of the Labour and Liberal press was muted because Schuschnigg's regime was regarded as fascist, the heir to the one that had crushed the Austrian socialists in 1934. Again, according to one's prejudices, Czechoslovakia was either a model democracy or a random collection of nationalities under Czech domination – 'a medley ruled by a minority'.<sup>24</sup> Poland presented more severe problems from an ideological point of view. In 1939 when the British guarantee was given, Poland was a military dictatorship, frequently anti-Semitic, and oppressive in its treatment of national minorities. As the editor of the *Manchester Guardian* had remarked earlier, 'I don't see why, if we trounce the Germans for their abominable behaviour, the Poles should be allowed to get away with it.'<sup>25</sup>

## The Soviet problem

The most serious ideological problems of all arose in connection with the Soviet Union. Conservative opinion was universally hostile to communism, which was the declared enemy of 'bourgeois democracy' and capitalism. Neville Chamberlain's correspondence was sprinkled with phrases which showed the depth of his distaste for the Soviet regime. The Labour Party included many admirers of the Soviet Union, though the leadership would never countenance communist affiliation to the party. Of course it was possible to argue for a Soviet alliance on grounds that had nothing to do with ideology. Labour and Liberal leaders did so in 1939; so did

Churchill, with his long record of anti-Bolshevism; so, in the Cabinet, did Samuel Hoare and others. But the problem was not easy, as a summing up by a very shrewd journalist demonstrates:

*We ought, I think, to be critical about Russia. We need her and it isn't the time for polemics against her. But we must not, in my opinion, refer to her as a democracy – she is more tyrannically governed than even Germany is. The number of people done to death in Germany runs into thousands – in Russia into tens of thousands. Altogether, the terror in Russia is such that persons living even under the Nazi terror could hardly conceive of such a thing. But we cannot afford to be particular about our allies, though we must, I think, always remain particular about our friends.*<sup>26</sup>

As in the case of France, the simple calculations of power politics, which pointed towards a Soviet alliance, were obscured by problems arising from ideology and morality. A somewhat abstract discussion on ideology within the Foreign Office in 1938 was brought to a close by Cadogan, the Permanent Under-Secretary, with the comment that discussing whether fascism or communism was more dangerous to Britain was like determining the relative disagreeableness of mumps and measles; but at that moment fascism was more dangerous, 'because it is the more efficient, and makes more and better guns and aeroplanes'.<sup>27</sup> The point was well made; but not everyone took such a brisk, no-nonsense approach to the problem. It was more common for those of conservative views to take the view that if Nazis and fascists were opposed to communism, then there was something to be said for them. Hitler's Germany, until it became an obvious danger to British security, possessed the considerable attraction of being a powerful enemy of Bolshevik Russia.

The effect of these ideological issues on the course of British policy was limited. In the general matter of relations with Germany, the policy which became known as 'appeasement' arose from hard considerations of strategic and economic interests, as well as from the soothing climate of opinion represented by the League, pacifism, and disarmament, or from anti-Bolshevik zeal. Among specific questions, Ethiopia and the problem of a Soviet alliance were those which suffered the most from ideological complications; policy towards Austria and Poland was not seriously affected by the character of their governments. However, the effect should not be discounted. Ideological considerations played some part in Britain's acceptance of the growth of German (and to a lesser degree Italian) power which was so marked a characteristic of the 1930s, and which itself paved the way for the coming of war.

## The acceptance of war: reluctant but resolute

Ideology also played some part in the reversal of British policy, and in the decision that the growth of German power must be resisted. A significant part of this development may be traced through changes in the Labour Party's attitude to war. In the 1920s and early 1930s, Labour was profoundly anti-militarist and in the broad sense pacifist. Attlee, who had volunteered for the army in 1914 and had an outstanding war record, said in the House of Commons in 1923, 'Personally, I think the time has come when we ought to do away with all armies and all wars.'<sup>28</sup> In 1926 the Party Conference accepted without demur a resolution in favour of opposition to war 'including the refusal to bear arms, to produce armaments, or to render any material assistance'.<sup>29</sup> From 1931 to 1935 the party was led by George Lansbury, an absolute pacifist. A change began in 1935, when the Party Conference agreed to support war if necessary in support of League sanctions against Italy. This marked the end of any commitment to complete pacifism, and Lansbury ceased to lead the party. But for some time this change of view did not emerge as support for British rearmament. Distrust of the government, arising from the Hoare-Laval Pact and its pusillanimity over the Spanish Civil War, was too strong for that. Up to 1936 Labour continued to vote against the Service estimates in Parliament; and in 1937 they shifted only as far as abstaining. Labour opposed the Munich agreement, but did nothing to provide the military means to resist Germany. It was only at the eleventh hour that Labour awoke fully to the realisation that the greatest danger lay not in armaments but in Britain's lack of them.

By September 1939, however, the conversion was complete. When Germany attacked Poland, Attlee was convalescing after illness. Arthur Greenwood, acting as leader in his absence, telephoned him. 'Put all pressure you can on the P.M.', said Attlee. 'We've got to fight.' On 2 September that was what Greenwood did. He asked in the Commons how long the government was going to hesitate about going to war; and then went to see Chamberlain in his room to tell him that unless war was decided on by the next day it would be impossible to hold the House in check.<sup>30</sup> In fact, the government was waiting for the French, not hesitating or hankering after appeasement as Greenwood thought; but that does not matter. The point was that the Labour Party, with hardly a dissentient voice, saw its duty as being to force a reluctant government into war. This remarkable development was in large part due to the conviction that Nazi Germany threatened not only British material interests and the balance of power, but the whole

way of life in which Labour believed. Instinctive patriotism, which was still powerful in the Labour Party, combined with ideological conviction to make Labour a force for war.

The same was true for the Conservative Party, and across the country as a whole. At bottom, most Conservatives had never abandoned their traditional concern with the balance of power and British security. 'Appeasement' never meant peace at *any* price. When it was ended, and the decision was taken to resist the further growth of German power, it was not only on traditional grounds, but also on grounds of ideology – indeed of conscience. It was notable that *The Times*, which for so long extended the benefit of every doubt to Germany, proclaimed in its leader columns after the German occupation of Prague in March 1939 that Germany no longer sought the protection of a moral case; the expansion of national socialism meant the expansion of 'political tyranny, cruel police methods, and a new kind of paganism'.<sup>31</sup> Chamberlain too saw the issue in moral as well as power-political terms. He was a loyal and upright man, and in March 1939 he felt that he had been double-crossed. Even more, the growth of Nazi power now palpably threatened the whole system in which he had spent his life and to which he was devoted – Parliament, the rule of law, the workings of business, the rules of decent behaviour. For many others, who might not see their lives or values in such terms, it was still true that Hitler was going too far, and would have to be stopped.

Britain entered the war in September 1939 reluctantly, but with a degree of unanimity that would have been inconceivable even a year earlier. Indeed, at the start of the 1930s it must have seemed doubtful whether the British people would go to war at all, unless directly attacked. Such near-unanimity could never have been achieved on the old grounds of power politics and the control of Europe. It was the product of the fusion of these long-standing traditions with a newer but powerful reaction against the excesses of Nazi ideology. It mattered little that what was considered evil in 1939 paled into insignificance in comparison with later monstrosities, and that the British people had scarcely begun to understand their adversary. The important point was that they had begun.

What part did the ideological attitudes and divisions in the parliamentary democracies of France and Britain play in the movement towards war? They contributed to this movement in two very different ways. First, for several years the concern of the French and British peoples (and their political leaders) with peace and disarmament left an easy path for the advance of Germany and Italy, beyond any point where it might have been resisted

without large-scale war. Ideological divisions, especially in France, and a deep-seated hostility to Bolshevism which encouraged some sympathy for Nazism and fascism in both countries, helped in the same direction. The democracies thus gave an opportunity to their enemies, which was fully and ruthlessly exploited in ways which led in the long run towards war.

Second, as the two democracies slowly came to grips with the new situation created by the advance of hostile powers, an element of genuine ideological conflict between democracy and Nazism/fascism emerged. We have already noted, at the end of the previous chapter, that the methods of Nazi Germany produced a revulsion among the adherents of an older morality. In both France and Britain, opposition to Germany arose out of ideological revulsion as well as from motives of patriotism and calculations about power. In the circumstances of the 1930s, this combination eventually produced a firmer determination to go to war than could have been secured on any narrower ground of national self-interest. France and Britain were eventually impelled into war for reasons which combined power politics with ideology: German expansion and Nazi domination both had to be resisted.

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## CHAPTER EIGHT

# Soviet Communism

Of all the European states, Bolshevik Russia most obviously conceived of itself in ideological terms, and gave ideological explanations for everything it did. As such, the state set up by Lenin and the Bolsheviks in 1917 was a new and profoundly divisive element in world affairs. The regime called itself a dictatorship of the proletariat, dedicated at home to the building of socialism and abroad to the promotion of revolution.

In 1918–19, and even into 1920, the Bolsheviks believed that European revolution was imminent, and indeed necessary for their own salvation. They set out to hasten it: by propaganda; by organisation, through the Communist International (Comintern), founded in 1919; and, when the opportunity offered, by force. In 1920 the Bolshevik armies drove Polish forces out of the Ukraine and pursued them across the ethnic frontier of Poland in the hope of carrying revolution into Germany. The invasion failed, and the Red Army was driven back by the Poles after a decisive battle outside Warsaw; but the episode was alarming to European governments.

At the same time, and to their surprise, the Bolsheviks found that they had to conduct an orthodox foreign policy. Germany was still at war with Russia, and a peace had to be negotiated. Trotsky, the Commissar for Foreign Affairs, attempted a new, revolutionary style of diplomacy, but came up against the rock-like opposition of the German high command, which insisted on dictating its own terms in the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk (March 1918). Later, the war with Poland also had to be brought to a negotiated end, by the Treaty of Riga in 1921. In 1920–21 treaties were signed with Turkey, Afghanistan, and the Baltic and Scandinavian states, with which some form of normal relations was found to be necessary. Thus Bolshevik foreign policy assumed a form which it was long to maintain: a dual relationship with the rest of the world, in which the Bolsheviks



set out with one hand to subvert other governments, and with the other to develop normal relations with them.

Meanwhile, the rest of the world reacted to this new phenomenon of a revolutionary state. When the Bolsheviks took Russia out of the war against Germany, the response of the Allied powers was to try to restore an eastern front and to keep certain areas (e.g. the Caucasian oil-fields) out of German control. British, French, Japanese, American, and Canadian forces were despatched to various parts of the old Russian Empire. This intervention continued after the end of the war in Europe, and Allied troops supported anti-Bolshevik forces in their attempts to overthrow the revolutionary regime. This intervention was small in scale, half-hearted in spirit, and divided in purpose. The French hoped to restore the unity of the Russian Empire, while the British encouraged separatist movements. The Japanese wanted to impose their own control on Vladivostok and the Maritime Province, while the Americans tried to obstruct them. The whole operation came to a ragged and unsuccessful end between 1919 and 1922. Nonetheless, foreign intervention made a lasting impression on Bolshevik minds. The capitalist and imperialist powers had tried to strangle the revolutionary regime at birth, and the new state acquired a form of siege mentality.

Relations between the new regime in Russia and the rest of the world got off to a thoroughly bad start. In part this was due to circumstances; but it was also due to a deep ideological conflict. Bolshevik Russia and other states, especially the homes of advanced bourgeois capitalism, were opposed to one another because they represented opposite philosophies and ways of life. The Bolsheviks were as much opposed to the governments of the Netherlands or Switzerland, which posed no military threat, as to those of Britain or France, whose troops fought in Russia. An old Bolshevik declared in all seriousness in 1935 that 'world revolution is our religion.'<sup>1</sup> This hostility was reciprocated, and Bolshevik Russia was the outcast of Europe. This divide could be bridged for powerful reasons of *realpolitik* or economics; and the first country to build such a bridge was Germany, which in the 1920s developed open economic and clandestine military links with Russia. But the divide remained, and introduced into European affairs a source of suspicion, tension, and conflict unknown since the wars of the French Revolution.

## Stalin and Stalinism

In 1922 the new state took the name of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, asserting its ideological claims in its very nomenclature. The

relations between the USSR and the outside world, and the mixture of repulsion and attraction with which the Bolshevik regime was regarded, cannot be understood without some discussion of the nature of that regime.

During the 1920s, the USSR settled into a new shape. After the death of Lenin in January 1924 there was a prolonged struggle for power, in which Stalin emerged as the victor by December 1927. His great rival Trotsky was exiled in January 1929; and Stalin's fiftieth birthday on 21 December of the same year was marked by a new form of adulation – fulsome tributes in the press, floods of congratulatory telegrams, the display of countless pictures, the renaming of towns. The USSR not only had a new leader, but a new cult.

The century of the common man thus received another recruit. Mussolini was the son of a blacksmith; Hitler of a minor customs official; Stalin of a worker in a shoe factory. Each became dictator of his country – a career open to talent. Stalin probably wielded greater power than did Hitler; he certainly exercised it for longer. His name became synonymous with the whole character of his rule, so that we speak of Stalinism in the same way as we speak of Nazism or fascism. As with the other great dictators, there are paradoxes and puzzles about his character, notably the contrast between what is often described as a colourless personality and the scale and monstrosity of his deeds. Colourless he may have been; and it is often remarked that he made no profound contribution to communist theory. He did not need to. Stalin was a practical man, and his political ability left everyone standing. He outmanoeuvred his Bolshevik opponents in the late 1920s, and later destroyed them – even Trotsky, far away in Mexico. During the Second World War, he persuaded a series of foreign statesmen, none of them political simpletons, that he recognised, or even sympathised with, their points of view. He convinced Churchill that they were both realists, who could strike a bargain which would be kept; Roosevelt that he understood the language of international agreement; de Gaulle that he took him seriously as a world statesman.

It is frequently asked – though with no certainty of there being an answer – where the balance lay between Stalin's socialism and his realism. He is often referred to as a 'Red Tsar', but how far was he a tyrant who happened to speak the language of Marxism–Leninism, and how far a Marxist–Leninist who happened to take the form of a tyrant? Khrushchev, in the speech of February 1956 in which he denounced Stalin's cult of personality and some of his misdeeds, still concluded that Stalin believed that all his measures were necessary for the interests of the working class and the victory of socialism. Adam Ulam, in his biography of Stalin, also wrote

that he was ‘a true believer: to his mind capitalism was doomed’; and its end would come through the military and industrial strength of the Soviet Union.<sup>2</sup> Roy Medvedev, in his powerful indictment of Stalin from the point of view of a Soviet Marxist, repeatedly appealing to Lenin as the source of unquestionable truth, held the opposite view. Stalin’s mind was formed in a Marxist mould; and he wrote and spoke the language of Marxism; but he was not truly a Marxist, because he lacked the basis of conviction and moral principle which lies in devotion to the happiness of all working people.<sup>3</sup> The questions remain open. Was Stalin concerned with power for its own sake, or power to transform the Soviet Union into an efficient vehicle for the advancement of socialism? If Stalin wrote and spoke like a Marxist all his adult life, how far was it possible for him not to think like a Marxist, or at least to see the world through Marxist spectacles? With a man who lived so secretive a life, and rarely if ever let down his guard, it is difficult to tell; but Richard Overy’s recent conclusions command respect. In Overy’s view, Stalin took his Marxism seriously, and never wavered from ‘the central issue of creating a communist society.’<sup>4</sup>

The regime created by this grim and enigmatic man had four major characteristics: the concept of ‘socialism in one country’; the collectivisation of agriculture; rapid industrialisation; and repression. All were accompanied by the process, common to the great dictatorships of the 1930s, by which the leader was elevated into a sort of god. The singular aspect of the cult of Stalin was the degree to which he was worshipped outside the USSR, in countries where coercion could play little part and there was ample access to non-Stalinist sources of information. In France, for example, that home of the intellect and rational enquiry, Stalin’s death in 1953 was still mourned as that of a hero and superman.

The concept and practice of socialism in one country, taken up by Stalin in 1925–26, recognised that there was likely to be a prolonged wait before revolution spread to the more advanced industrial countries. There would be an extended period of co-existence between the new socialist state and its capitalist opponents; and meanwhile the socialist society must be built. The collectivisation of agriculture, forced through with extraordinary rapidity and brutality between 1929 and 1934, was a crucial element in this process. The human cost was enormous – the death-toll certainly ran into millions; and the economic gain was doubtful – there was a great famine in 1932–33, and grain production in 1935 was only marginally above that of 1928, even on Soviet figures.<sup>5</sup> But the political and psychological results were formidable: rural society was shaken to its foundations;

the control of the state was forcibly imposed upon the peasant population; and the Soviet Union began to make its name abroad for large-scale economic planning and modernisation. Industrialisation ran alongside collectivisation, with greater economic success. The first Five-Year Plan (1928–32) was followed by two others. The statistics claiming their triumphant fulfilment took the form of percentage increases which cannot be checked; but certainly heavy industry (iron and steel) and fuel production (coal, oil, electricity) developed rapidly, and new industries, notably chemicals, were started from scratch. The Soviet Union became, with exceptional rapidity, a great industrial state. Not least in importance from the point of view of prestige, the process included a number of dramatic projects: the Dnieper dam, the White Sea Canal, the creation of a new city at Magnitogorsk in the Urals.

These changes were accompanied and enforced by a vast system of repression, directed against both individuals and whole categories of the population – kulaks, the intelligentsia, subject nationalities. The great empire of the camps, later made famous under the name of the Gulag Archipelago, grew in numbers in the 1930s. In 1935 there were 725,483 prisoners in the Gulag, and 240,259 in labour colonies. In 1938 these figures had risen to 996,367 and 885,203 respectively – a grand total of over 1.8 million.<sup>6</sup>

The most extraordinary manifestation of repression was the great wave of purges that swept the USSR between 1936 and 1938. The purges took several forms. The most spectacular were the public show trials, which have been well likened to great theatrical productions. In August 1936 eight major political figures, including the old Bolsheviks Zinoviev and Kamenev, along with some lesser figures and four junior officers of the NKVD, were put on trial in Moscow. All confessed abjectly to a variety of crimes – the murder of Kirov (a close colleague of Stalin and Communist Party boss in Leningrad, shot on 1 December 1934), conspiring with Trotsky to seize power, plotting to assassinate Stalin. Sentences of death were passed, and it was announced that they were carried out within twenty-four hours of the end of the trial. (The NKVD officers, though only there to make false confessions, were shot with the rest.) The second show trial was in January 1937, with the Deputy Commissar for Heavy Industry, Pyatakov, and sixteen others accused of the systematic wrecking of Soviet industry as part of a plot by Trotsky to restore capitalism in the USSR, with help from Germany and Japan. All were found guilty, but only thirteen condemned to death. Finally in March 1938 another ‘old

Bolshevik', Bukharin, was put on trial, along with twenty others (including Yagoda, former head of the NKVD). Eighteen were sentenced to death, three to prison.

The second great element was the purge of the army. On 11 June 1937 it was announced in Moscow that eight members of the Soviet high command, including Marshal Tukhachevsky, Deputy Commissar for Defence, had been charged with treason. They were tried, condemned to death and executed on the same day. On 12 June *Pravda* carried the terse summary: 'For espionage and betraying their country: The firing squad.'<sup>7</sup> This was followed by purges which continued into 1938, and in some cases beyond. The whole existing high command, a high proportion of senior officers, and some 35,000 junior officers, were purged.<sup>8</sup> The operation was accomplished with astounding ease. While Hitler had to work hard, and exploit folly on the part of a senior officer, to remove two generals and put others on the retired list, Stalin simply swept away half the officer corps of the Red Army. When it came to dealing with the military men, the Führer came some lengths behind the Red Tsar.

These operations were only the tip of the iceberg. In less spectacular fashion, the purge fell heavily on the Communist Party. The NKVD itself was purged, and two of its heads (Yagoda and Yezhov) fell victims. In the Ukraine in 1937 and 1938 the whole government and party were purged twice over. Foreign communists in Moscow were killed; and the NKVD stretched its arm abroad, notably to Spain during the Civil War, and to France. Many were swept in for no particular reason. Estimates of total casualties vary from a low figure of 400,000–500,000 executions and 4–5 million arrests, 1936–39, to figures of about 1 million executions and 7 million arrests. Another figure estimates a total of 10 million deaths, counting 1 million executions and about 1 million deaths per year in the camps for nine years.<sup>9</sup>

The motives behind the great purges remain obscure. Stalin may have been seeking the security of total control over his country, with no vestige of independent initiative or organisation surviving. It may be that he genuinely feared political opposition from the army, or the resumption of the old contacts with the German General Staff. Whatever the motives, the effects of the purges on the Soviet position in world affairs were far-reaching. For a period of three years, and perhaps longer, the Soviet Union was so racked internally, and its military organisation so disrupted, that it was gravely weakened as a power. It could contemplate war only in the case of absolute necessity, or in very favourable circumstances against a weak opponent.

## The Soviet Union and its foreign supporters: the 'great light in the east'

Stalinism was a regime of terror, which by 1939 far outstripped either Nazism or fascism by the simple measurement of casualties caused among the people of its own country. At that date, in sheer destructive capacity, Stalin made Hitler look a mere beginner. Moreover, the main features of Stalinism were essentially inward-looking. The Soviet Union was a fortress of socialism in one country, fighting its own internal battles and building its own industrial base.

But despite these characteristics, the Soviet regime attracted powerful support outside its own frontiers. This sprang from faith: the conviction that the Soviet Union was the Workers' Fatherland, and the home of the only successful proletarian revolution so far achieved. Many believed that communism was the best (or even the only) way forward for mankind, and during the 1930s Stalin became by common consent the leading communist. More, he was a father-figure, at once stern and reassuring. This faith was fostered and directed by the disciplined organisation of the Communist International (Comintern). This body was set up in Moscow in 1919, and its Second Congress in 1920 laid down the Twenty-one Conditions which had to be accepted by all parties affiliated to it. A powerful form of central control was created; and the overriding duty of all communist parties was declared to be to protect existing socialist states – which meant in practice the Soviet Union, because no others emerged.

Through this combination of faith and organisation there emerged communist parties which followed whatever line of policy was laid down in Moscow, with effects which were felt across Europe and played no small part in the coming of the Second World War. In the 1920s and 1930s Comintern proclaimed that the main enemies of communism were the social democratic parties, often denounced as 'social fascists'. In Germany, the communists pursued a tactical co-operation with the Nazis against the social democrats, and so indirectly helped Hitler come to power. Then in 1935 the Comintern line was changed to the formation of a Popular Front against fascism, and the social democrats became allies. In France, the Communist Party, after years of denouncing militarism and conscription, supported the two-year conscription law of 1935 after the signature of the Franco-Soviet Pact. Later, the policy of the Popular Front and anti-fascism was itself overthrown after the Nazi-Soviet Pact of August 1939. This reversal was a severe trial for many communists, but after a period of confusion and heart-searching, discipline usually



*Stalin: benevolent father-figure for communists and fellow-travellers.*

Source: Bettman/Corbis

prevailed, and the parties (though not all their members) fell into line behind the new policy.

The obedience that carried the communist parties through these drastic changes was reinforced, and the attraction of communism to outsiders was

strengthened, by many of the circumstances of the 1930s. The economic depression, with its attendant mass unemployment, seemed to demonstrate that capitalism was not only evil but also a failure. Over against the dire spectacle of capitalism in disarray stood the shining contrast of the Soviet Union, with its planned economy and a society where all worked together for the common good. Moreover, it appeared in the late 1930s that only the Soviet Union and the communists were really determined to oppose fascism. The Spanish Civil War (1936–39) threw this aspect of communist virtue into particular prominence, and increased the attraction of communism for all those who were inspired by the struggle of the Spanish Republicans against what appeared to be the massed forces of fascism. Much the same was true with regard to general British and French policies towards Germany and Italy. If Chamberlain, Daladier and appeasement were the best that the parliamentary democracies could offer, then many turned (whether in hope or despair) to Stalin.

The Soviet Union thus drew on a substantial body of support outside its own borders. The hard core was made up of committed communists, disciplined and determined, willing if need be to go underground, to betray their own countries, and even to die for the cause. Outside that core were the fellow-travellers and sympathisers, vitally important for propaganda purposes, because they seemed to offer independent endorsement of the Soviet regime. The prestige – and the gullibility – of western intellectuals were considerable assets to Stalin in his dealings with the outside world.

All this had far-reaching effects on international affairs. The Soviet government could rely on an organised body of support in every other European country to promote its interests. (It could also rely on certain well-placed individuals to provide valuable intelligence.) Equally, every other European government knew that a group of its own citizens owed its primary allegiance to a foreign state, and was working to overthrow the existing social and political order. Relations with the Soviet Union were thus bound to be difficult in themselves, and a contentious issue in domestic politics. Even when calculations of power politics made it expedient to form an alliance with the USSR (for example, the Franco-Soviet treaty of 1935), it could only be an uneasy partnership. Indeed, there were bound to be obstacles to any close relations with the Soviets. It was natural for European states, and especially the great imperial powers, Britain and France, to regard Soviet communism as their sworn enemy – for so it was. From this fact of life some took the short step to the belief that the enemies of communism were your friends, and that fascist Italy and Nazi Germany were useful bulwarks against Soviet influence. Once this notion took root,



it was hard to accept that the Nazi regime was itself a threat, nearer and more dangerous than the Soviet Union. Even when this threat was recognised, the background of hostility to the Soviets could not be instantly dispelled or ignored, but remained to hamper diplomacy – as was shown in the British and French negotiations for a Soviet alliance in the summer of 1939.

Ideological conflicts, and the presence of committed adherents of the Soviet system in all countries, therefore affected the foreign policies of almost every European state. How far did ideology affect the foreign policy of the Soviet Union itself?

## Ideology and Soviet foreign policy

Every state and regime is subject to the influences of geography and history. The Soviet Union, with all its Marxist–Leninist ideology and its revolutionary claims, occupied roughly the same geographical area as the old Tsarist Russia, and perforce inherited its concerns and constraints. The Dardanelles and Bosphorus still linked the Black Sea with the Mediterranean; and the USSR took a leading part in negotiating the Montreux Convention on the straits (1936), which gave her a generally favourable position, especially on the question of the passage of warships through the straits. The Soviet Union still sprawled across two continents, with one extremity in Europe and the other on the Pacific; and when Stalin met Anthony Eden in March 1935 he showed his visitor a map, with Germany on one side, Japan on the other, and the USSR in between.

A purely ideological foreign policy was out of the question for the USSR – any illusions on that score were shed by the time the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk was signed in March 1918. Much of Soviet foreign policy, especially under Stalin, was hard-headed and cautious in the extreme, going for material gain if it was available, and bargaining with great toughness. At another meeting between Stalin and Eden, in December 1941, Stalin remarked that a declaration of principle was algebra, but a treaty was arithmetic – and he preferred arithmetic. This does not mean that ideology was abandoned, or had no influence, especially on attitudes to the world outside the Soviet Union; for the question is above all one of the spectacles through which that outside world was seen. Lenin, at whose name every knee in the communist camp continued to bow, left his successors with important assumptions about the nature of international relations.

The most significant was his view of the nature of war. Lenin read Clausewitz, and accepted his view that war was the continuation of policy.

Moreover, he believed that the existence of capitalist states meant that they were in a state of war with socialist states; and that capitalism, and its most extreme stage, imperialism, inevitably produced war between capitalist states themselves. It followed that two types of war were virtually inevitable: war between capitalist and socialist powers, as seen in the wars of intervention against the Bolsheviks; and wars between imperialist powers, usually over markets and fields for investment, as in the First World War. The second type of war was bound to weaken the capitalist states and assist the advance of socialism, as in fact it did in 1914–18; and in logic it was therefore in the interest of a socialist state (the Soviet Union, in practice) to keep out of a capitalist and imperialist war as long as possible, allowing the imperialists to destroy one another. This analysis had lasting effects on Soviet policy, as Silvio Pons concludes: ‘The concept of war as the inevitable consequence of inter-capitalist conflicts became firmly embedded in the Bolshevik mentality, and . . . exercised a long-standing influence on Soviet foreign policy and on the communist movement.’<sup>10</sup>

Lenin also believed that, strictly speaking, no lasting alliance was possible between socialist and capitalist states. They were fundamentally opposed to one another, so that socialists must consider all bourgeois capitalists as enemies, just as the capitalists would regard them as enemies. This did not rule out particular arrangements for specific purposes – the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk, the Treaty of Rapallo with Germany in 1922, the scheme under which Germany developed weapons in the USSR; but they could not be expected to be permanent. (There was nothing singular, or even particularly Bolshevik, in this: Palmerston held that Britain had no perpetual allies – only her interests were eternal.) The making of such particular arrangements was a matter of tactics; and Soviet negotiators were naturally expected to drive the hardest possible bargain.

Lenin attached much weight to this kind of ideological analysis, and yet he also behaved in foreign affairs as a hard-headed realist, operating within the limits of the possible and the expedient. Much the same seems to have been true of Stalin. We cannot tell how fully he remained committed to the ideology, but he used the language, and it is probable that he was influenced by its thought-forms. Above all, he was unavoidably cast for the role of leader of world socialism, and as such he had to be seen to lead it. Yet at the same time he was a realist, with a power base to protect; and he had to be cautious, for that base was not yet of great strength. The result was a foreign policy in which ideology and realism were always mixed, and could always be reconciled with one another, because after all the power base and the Workers’ Fatherland were one and the same.

Ideological analysis resting on the belief in the hostility of all capitalist states was prominent in 1927–28, when Stalin publicly referred to the threat of a new imperialist war. He claimed that various events in 1927 (the British raid on the Soviet trade mission in London, and subsequent rupture of diplomatic relations; the French request for the recall of the Soviet Ambassador in Paris; the assassination of the Ambassador in Warsaw) were all parts of a single plot, designed to culminate in an attack on the USSR by the imperialist powers. The same assertion followed the first of Stalin's show trials, in 1928, when mining engineers at the town of Shakhty in the Don Basin were accused of sabotaging coal production on the instructions of foreign capitalists. (The only evidence was their confessions; five were shot.) Stalin claimed in a speech of 1929 that such 'bourgeois wrecking' was proof that the capitalists were preparing new attacks on the Soviet Union.

How far such claims were believed, even by Stalin, must be open to doubt. Those were the days of the struggle against Trotsky, and the 'war scare' was used to denounce those who sought to divide the country in the face of an outside threat. Equally, there was little sign of the capitalists keeping the Soviet Union in a state of siege, or blockade. Relations with Germany were good, in political, commercial, and military terms. After the Treaty of Rapallo, over 2,000 German engineers and technicians went to work in Soviet industry. Junkers, the German aircraft firm, had a factory at Fili, near Moscow; and Krupps were making guns in factories in central Asia. Despite the Shakhty trial, in 1929 the USSR still had technical agreements with many German and American firms, and Standard Oil won a contract to build an oil refinery at Batum. As Lenin predicted, the capitalist search for profits caused firms to contribute to building up the Soviet economy; and the Soviet authorities were willing to allow them to do so.

The assumption of capitalist hostility continued to exist; but for practical purposes it seems unlikely that an actual attack was expected, and economic co-operation was the order of the day. The same was true of Italy, the first fascist power, with which Soviet relations were good in the 1920s. During the first Soviet Five-Year Plan large orders for industrial equipment were placed in Italy; and for its part the Italian government, despite its declared hostility to communism, guaranteed the long-term credit arrangements which firms offered to their Soviet customers. Early in 1934, addressing the Seventeenth Communist Party Congress in Moscow, Stalin remarked that the Soviets were far from enthusiastic about the new fascist regime in Germany, but pointed out that fascism in Italy had not prevented the establishment of excellent relations with that country. As

late as July 1940, Molotov, the Soviet Foreign Minister, told the Italian Ambassador in Moscow that their two countries could co-operate on a simple geographical basis, with the Soviet Union maintaining its legitimate rights in the Black Sea and Italy doing the same in the Mediterranean.<sup>11</sup>

Despite all this, the rise of fascism and Nazism presented a serious ideological problem to the Soviet regime, and the answer produced had important effects on policy. As early as 1922 Comintern publications identified fascism as a manifestation of monopoly capitalism. It was easy to find in the writings of Marx and Engels the view that the bourgeoisie sometimes protected its interests by renouncing the direct exercise of power in favour of a dictator – Louis Napoleon was Marx's case in point. The parallel with fascist dictatorships seemed simple: fascism corresponded to a phase in the decay of capitalism; the bourgeoisie was trying to prolong its existence and protect its profits by bringing in a dictator; fascist leaders were paid by, and were the instruments of, big business. For a long time in the 1920s and early 1930s this theory was accompanied by the view that the bourgeoisie was also in alliance with the social democrats, who were themselves in league with the fascists. In November 1923, for example, the German Communist Party declared that the true fascists were not in Munich, where Hitler had just attempted his *coup d'état*, but in Berlin, where the social democrats were in alliance with the military fascists of the German Army. In 1928 Thaelmann, the German communist leader, described the German government as a 'social-fascist gang'; which was at the time a conventional term of abuse for the social democrats.

As late as 1930–33, facing the rapid rise of Hitler, the communists accepted that the Nazis had revolutionary aims, but refused to regard them as the greatest danger. The Nazi movement, which was the symptom of the decay of capitalism, bore within itself the seeds of its own destruction. Even when Hitler came to power, the Comintern line was that he was merely hastening the coming of the proletarian revolution; and the Night of the Long Knives, when Hitler crushed his rivals in the SA, was greeted as a demonstration that the Nazi movement was tearing itself apart. If all this was true, then Nazi ideology was only so much mumbo-jumbo and mystification to cover the nakedness of the Nazi alliance with big business and monopoly capitalism; and so it came about that the communists, looking at Nazism through their own ideological spectacles, misunderstood its nature as much as did the bourgeois liberal statesmen of France and Britain. Moreover, if a change of attitude and policy were to be made, and an alliance against Nazism/fascism attempted, the communists would have to get themselves out of an ideological box. Social democrats could no

longer be social fascists, but would have to become allies *against* the fascists. How could this be done?

The answer was found by redefining fascism, at the Seventh Congress of Comintern, held in Moscow in August 1935 to proclaim the new doctrine of the Popular Front against fascism. The Secretary-General, Dimitrov, described fascism as the open dictatorship of the most reactionary, chauvinist, and imperialist elements of finance capital; which allowed it to be deduced that social democrats and even bourgeois liberals did not fall into this category. The former simple rule that fascism amounted to finance capital, the bourgeoisie, and their accomplices was tacitly abandoned.

These contortions, and in particular the long struggle against the social democrats/social fascists, showed both the real effect of ideology on Soviet and Comintern policy, and the way in which that effect could be reversed for tactical reasons. They were developments which influenced the movement towards war in two different ways. First, the division on the Left of European politics, and notably the long feud between communists and social democrats in Germany, assisted the rise of fascism in general and of Hitler in particular. Defeated and disgruntled German socialists claimed after 1933 that without Stalin there would have been no Hitler: which is doubtless an exaggeration, but not wholly without substance. Second, the swing to the Popular Front against fascism was one of the elements which helped to move left-wing opinion in Europe towards the idea of war. For those who took their line from Moscow, war in defence of one's own country and a bourgeois social order was anathema; but war to protect the Soviet Union was an imperative.

From the point of view of the Soviet government (which in the last resort meant Stalin), ideological influences on foreign policy appear to have diminished during the 1930s. Ideological analysis of the international situation naturally continued. In his speech to the Eighteenth Communist Party Congress in Moscow, on 10 March 1939, Stalin's discussion of the European position was authentically Leninist. He distinguished between the aggressive capitalist powers (Germany, Italy, and Japan) and the non-aggressive capitalist powers (Britain, France, and the USA); but he was conscious that all were capitalist first and foremost. The non-aggressive powers were as great a threat as the aggressive ones, because they were playing a waiting game, hoping that the forces of Nazism and communism would become engaged in war and exhaust one another. Indeed, Stalin had more to say about Britain and France than about Germany; he argued that the Western powers had, in the Munich agreement, yielded Czech territory

to Germany as an inducement to the Germans to attack the USSR, and that their policy amounted to an encouragement of the aggressor states.

This was both orthodox Leninism and a plausible interpretation of the facts. But, though we cannot see into Stalin's mind, there is every sign that his foreign policy in the late 1930s was dominated by a cautious, and sometimes ruthless, realism. The great purges and the pursuit of industrialisation were presumably decisive in this: while they were in progress, foreign war was unthinkable unless it was absolutely forced upon him. (When it was so forced, in the Far East, by the danger of Japanese encroachment on Soviet territory in 1938 and 1939, the Red Army stood and fought, in large-scale and notably successful actions.) Stalin took precautions against a German attack – the Franco-Soviet Pact (signed on 2 May 1935), and the Popular Front policy adopted by Comintern in the same year. But both stopped carefully short of advocating or preparing war against Germany. The alliance with France was not followed up by a military convention, or even serious military conversations, and this was not just the fault of France. The Comintern Congress that adopted the Popular Front stopped short of calling for war against fascism; the object was the limited one of preventing European states from remaining neutral, or even joining Germany in a possible war between Germany and the Soviet Union.

Stalin said in January 1934 that the advent of the Nazi regime in Germany, though unwelcome, need not preclude good relations. He tried to keep open a line to Berlin, making approaches through the press attaché at the Soviet embassy in Berlin in 1935, and through David Kandelaki, a trade representative in Berlin (and reputedly a boyhood friend of Stalin), in the same year. Soviet policy in the Spanish Civil War showed no profound commitment. It was not until 4 October 1936, two and a half months after the war began, that Stalin sent a telegram to the Spanish Communist Party expressing his support for the republic. Most Soviet aid to the republic was channelled through Comintern, allowing the government to adopt a position of reserve and to adhere to the non-intervention agreement. Soviet military 'advisers' were sent to Spain, but no regular units as in the case of Germany and Italy. In so far as there was ideological involvement in Spain, it was as much against Trotskyists and anarchists as against fascists; and the NKVD extended the purges from its home ground to Spain, where Spanish and other foreign communists were their targets. The Soviet attitude during the Czechoslovakian crisis of 1938 was similarly cautious. The Nazi-Soviet Pact of August 1939 was a stroke of *realpolitik*, coming to terms with the highest bidder. It is often described as a denial of ideology; but this is not so – it was perfectly compatible with an ideological

stance. All capitalist and imperialist states were enemies, and there was no reason to regard the Anglo-French imperialists as more favourable to the Soviet Union than the Germans.

The Nazi–Soviet Pact, despite its horrifying appearance and the shock it created, was the result of a marriage between Leninist ideology and political opportunism. As such, it was in line with much Soviet foreign policy between the wars, which followed a double line of realism and ideological commitment. When one asks how far the ideological element contributed to the coming of war in Europe, the answer seems to be three-fold. First, the very existence of communism and its international organisation, Comintern, introduced a degree of permanent discord in Europe. The liberal democracies (France, Britain, and the smaller states) had a declared enemy within their own boundaries as well as in a foreign state; and it was natural for them to seek ideological allies in fascism and Nazism, underestimating the threat to themselves inherent in those regimes. It was also difficult to deal with the USSR simply on a basis of power politics: an alliance with her was seen also as an alliance with communism. Second, the excessively simple and blinkered communist interpretation of Nazism, and long insistence that the social democrats/social fascists were the greater enemy, helped to open the way to the Nazis in Germany, and almost certainly caused Stalin to underrate the danger posed by Nazi Germany in international relations. This was almost a mirror-image of Western attitudes, based on ideological misconceptions and hopes of ‘appeasement’. Third, the Nazi–Soviet Pact, which was at least compatible with Soviet ideology and well within a Leninist analysis of the European situation, helped to create the circumstances for a war between the capitalist and imperialist states, which should in theory have been favourable to the interests of the Soviet Union and of communism. These influences were of real significance; but it is hard to think that they place Soviet communism high among the ideological forces pressing towards war in Europe.

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# Economic Issues and the Coming of War

During the Second World War there was a widespread belief that the great depression of the early 1930s had played a crucial part in causing the war, and prescriptions for future peace often concentrated on trying to eliminate economic problems. These views on the economic origins of the war comprised three principal arguments. First, it was held that the depression of 1929–35 destroyed the atmosphere of confidence and *détente* that flourished in Europe after 1925, and created in its place fierce economic nationalism and cut-throat competition for the shrinking amount of world trade. Second, the social and political tensions engendered by the depression brought Hitler to power in Germany at the head of an aggressive and self-confident dictatorship, and at the same time sowed dissension within Germany's likely opponents. France in particular was riven by internal disputes which were exacerbated by the depression; and in Czechoslovakia the Sudeten Germans, in their economic distress, looked across the border to Germany for support. Third, there was a strong feeling, voiced for example by Cordell Hull, the American Secretary of State, that the closed trading systems of the 1930s led towards war. Too many states were trying for self-sufficiency, and saw the raw materials or food supplies which they needed at the mercy of the policies of other governments and the vagaries of foreign exchange. Some countries then sought to break out and secure their own positions by force of arms: Germany and Japan went to war to conquer zones of economic control, in which they could safeguard their own imports and fix their own rates of exchange, free from the uncertainties of foreign trade.

In the lengthening perspective since the end of the war, and after another severe depression following the oil price shock of late 1973, which brought economic difficulties and social strains but left international

stability largely undisturbed, these analyses have not always carried the same conviction. But there remains a powerful school of argument that the Second World War in Europe had significant economic origins.

We must therefore examine the impact of the economic depression in the early 1930s; ask how far it created the preconditions for a European war; and analyse the links between economic issues and the actual coming of war. The issues involved were sometimes technical, concerning currency exchange rates and international clearing agreements; but their effects were practical and down-to-earth, touching the livelihood of millions. These were matters which had a more immediate (though not necessarily in the long run a more profound) influence than ideology on the daily lives of whole peoples.

## CHAPTER NINE

# The Great Depression and International Relations

### The onset of the great depression

Economic analysis is by no means an exact science, and economists have produced an array of different explanations of the great depression, and why it proved so widespread, deep-seated, and long-lasting. There is, however, common consent that the onset of the depression dated from 1929. In that year, a number of economic indicators in various industrial countries took an ominous turn; notably in Germany, where unemployment rose to 1.9 million in the summer, and the USA, where car production fell sharply between March and September and building slackened off. Moreover, the harvests of 1929 in almost all kinds of agricultural produce were exceptionally good, resulting in a glut on the market which brought a sharp fall in prices, and therefore in the incomes of farming communities. To these signs of economic depression were added the abrupt and far-reaching effects of the collapse of the New York stock market in October 1929 – ‘the Great Crash’, in which share prices began to move downwards on 3 October and fell with dizzying speed on the 24th. This marked an almost total loss of business confidence in the USA, from which recovery was extremely slow. The immediate results were a sharp drop in American spending (because millions lost their savings and their incomes) and investment (for which there were neither the funds nor the confidence). There was a widespread move to get resources out of company shares and other forms of investment, and into ready cash. Mortgages were foreclosed and loans called in – including overseas loans, which had already diminished markedly during 1928. The consequences of the stock market crash were thus immediately felt abroad, and became rapidly more acute as the USA reduced its imports, and later its exports.

The effects of these events were cumulative and interlocking. Agrarian depression began in 1929 with a fall in agricultural prices, which was particularly sharp for cereals, and especially wheat, of which there was substantial overproduction in relation to demand. In the USA and Canada there was some attempt to meet this problem by stockpiling; but in Australia and Argentina there was neither the storage capacity nor the financial resources to attempt such a policy, and growers simply had to sell as best they could, driving prices down still further. The Soviet Union was just embarking on its policy of financing rapid industrialisation by pushing up wheat exports. Caught in the trap of falling world prices, the USSR found that to sustain even a modest value for its exports, their volume had to be greatly increased. In 1931, Soviet exports of wheat were 2.29 million tonnes, at a value of \$150 million; in 1932, the amount was more than doubled to 5.22 million tonnes, but the value remained the same.<sup>1</sup> So the Soviet Union too pushed its grain on to the world market, lowering prices still further. The consequences were severe for all wheat-producing countries; and particularly so in eastern Europe.

In the 1920s, most of the new states of eastern Europe had embarked on 'land reform' – the expropriation of the estates of large landowners and the distribution of land among small peasant farmers. (This was often a nationalist measure. The peasant farmers were usually of the dominant nationality, the great landowners often aliens – in the Baltic states, for example, Germans.) The consequences in most cases were economically disastrous, notably in terms of the yield and quality of wheat. Rumania (where the estates of Magyar landowners were expropriated) never exported more than 270,000 tonnes of wheat in any single year in the 1920s, though its average exports (from a smaller area) in 1909–13 had been 1.33 million tonnes a year.<sup>2</sup> In consequence it was difficult even in favourable circumstances for east European countries to compete on world markets with their exports of wheat. The continuous fall in wheat prices from 1929 to 1932 was catastrophic for those farmers who produced for export; even when they could find a market, their income was slight. They were forced to join those who already practised subsistence farming, or merely local sale or exchange. Large numbers of the agricultural population were reduced to subsistence, barter, and poverty. The consequence was that the rural economy, which was predominant over most of eastern Europe, ceased to provide customers for other goods and services, so that industry, shopkeepers, the professions, and all providers of services suffered severely. Government revenue from taxation declined, forcing reductions in expenditure and even cuts in the civil service, that backbone of the state and

fount of patronage for politicians. Moreover, without the foreign currency produced by agricultural exports, the states of eastern Europe could not service the debts they had contracted during the growth years of the 1920s.

Other crucial elements in the depression were the collapse of international trade, and the crisis in credit and banking. The collapse of trade was dramatic. The total imports of seventy-five countries, valued in US dollars, fell as shown in Table 9.1.<sup>3</sup> Since everyone's import was another man's export, the contraction in the volume of trade was severe. The consequence in industrialised countries, where the recourse to subsistence

**TABLE 9.1.** *Value of imports of seventy-five countries in US\$, 1929–33*

January 1929	2,997.7 million
January 1930	2,738.9 million
January 1931	1,838.9 million
January 1932	1,206.0 million
January 1933	992.4 million

*Source:* Charles P. Kindleberger, *The World in Depression, 1929–1939* (London 1973), p. 171. Allen Lane.

agriculture available in eastern Europe was not open, was large-scale unemployment, amounting in 1932, in approximate figures, to 3 million in Britain, 6 million in Germany, and 13 million in the USA. Industrial recession brought a sharp fall in demand for raw materials for industry: the same was true for a wide range of primary products – timber, for example, suffered from the decline in building.

As prices of all commodities (foodstuffs, raw materials, and industrial goods) fell, business profits declined or vanished, share prices collapsed, and demand for services dwindled. Pressure grew on the banking system and all arrangements for credit. Banks and other creditors found it impossible to secure repayment of loans, or even sometimes the payment of interest. Some banks had lent very heavily; and some had themselves borrowed in order to conduct their business, and were being pressed for payment. There were occasional bank failures towards the end of 1930; and the crisis came in May 1931 with the failure of the Credit-Anstalt Bank in Austria, when for the first time an important and well-established bank could not meet its obligations because its own debtors could not meet theirs. After this, confidence was shaken, and there were runs on banks all over central and eastern Europe. Pressure was particularly severe in Germany, where memories of the great inflation of 1923 were vivid – the terms of the problem were different in 1931, but what mattered was that people had seen their savings and assets wiped out once, and had no wish

to see it happen again. There were heavy withdrawals of gold from the Reichsbank in June, and in July the Darmstaedter National Bank had to close its doors. Several countries tried to check runs on banks by declaring 'bank holidays', and to prevent the movement of capital abroad by freezing deposits, imposing exchange controls, and delaying payments to foreign creditors. Such suspensions of payments were usually followed by the negotiation of agreements to resume them only out of a favourable balance of trade, i.e. by reducing imports from and increasing exports to the country concerned. Since every country was trying to do this at the same time, the result was to reduce international trade still further, and to channel much of what there was through a system of bilateral clearing arrangements, negotiated between states determined to control their external payments.

In many ways, the collapse of credit had the greatest impact of all the elements in the depression, because everything in the economic system – farming, industry, commerce, government activity – depended on credit. It also had profound effects on international currency exchanges. In 1931 and 1932, under the pressure of runs on the banks and the demand for gold, one government after another took its currency off the gold standard. The former monetary unity of most of the world, based on the gold standard, broke down.

The world rapidly divided into three main currency groups. First there were the countries which took their currency off the gold standard, devaluing considerably to try to assist their exports, and to reduce the pressure on the banking system and their gold reserves. Britain took this course (though out of necessity rather than choice) in 1931, and was soon followed by the Dominions (except Canada), Japan, several South American states, and a number of countries in central Europe. The USA left the gold standard and devalued in 1933, accompanied by Canada. Second, there was the Gold Bloc – countries which held their currencies on the gold standard, and maintained free exchange of currency. This group began to take shape in 1931, and came formally into existence in 1933. It was made up of France, Belgium, the Netherlands, Switzerland, and Luxemburg, with Italy as a partial member. (The Italian government kept to the gold standard, but did not operate free exchange of currency.) The Bloc began to split up with Belgian devaluation in 1935, and came to an abrupt end when the French, Swiss, Dutch, and Italians all devalued their currencies in rapid succession in September and October 1936.

Third, there were the countries which practised various forms of exchange control and blocked-currency regulations. These included the USSR (which had always operated such measures), Germany, and eventually some twenty

other countries. The German arrangements were both remarkably complicated (there were at least thirteen different varieties of 'blocked marks' in 1936) and particularly important, because of Germany's economic and commercial significance; and they will be examined later in this chapter. But in practically all cases the principles of the clearing arrangements and blocked-currency accounts were the same. A firm in country A exporting its products to country B was obliged to spend its earnings in that country, whether there was anything it wanted to buy or not; if it made no such purchase, then its earnings remained, in country B's currency, in a blocked account. In these circumstances it mattered little whether a currency remained formally attached to gold (as some did) or not; its exchange was not free, and its export was forbidden except with government permission.

Naturally, these practices invited retaliation from firms which were losing their export earnings, and countries which were losing foreign exchange. Retaliation took different forms, notably blocking foreign earnings in one's own country, and the imposition of quotas on foreign trade. Such measures were widespread. Countries in the Gold Bloc took their own protective action against cheap imports from states which had devalued – for example, France imposed quotas on goods from Britain, which after the devaluation of sterling were cheap in terms of French francs. The whole complicated and fragmented set of devices caused constant friction, and imposed a series of restrictions on international trade.

The last chance (at best a slim one) of finding a way out of these difficulties by means of a general agreement on exchange rates and terms of trade was the World Economic Conference which met in London in June–July 1933. Such hopes as there were for the success of this conference were ended by President Roosevelt's determination to float the dollar, and his rejection of even a temporary stabilisation of the dollar against sterling for the duration of the conference. If such a temporary arrangement could not be reached, it was plain that a permanent agreement on exchange rates was out of the question. The conference broke up, and the USA devalued shortly afterwards. Nothing was left but an economic free-for-all, dominated by the search for self-sufficiency, sometimes within a single country, sometimes within an area or group of countries.

## Reactions in Britain: devaluation, tariffs and imperial preference

Britain, as a major industrial and commercial country, was rapidly affected by the collapse in world trade; and in 1931 the country faced both



a financial and a political crisis. Ramsay MacDonald's Labour government, without an overall majority in the House of Commons, clung to the economic and fiscal orthodoxies of free trade and a balanced budget, and found itself squeezed between falling revenue from taxation and rising expenditure, not least in unemployment payments. Sterling was on the gold standard, and British gold reserves came under heavy pressure as the European banks began to collapse from May 1931. Turning to American bankers for a loan, the government found itself unable to accept the terms they insisted on, involving an assurance of a balanced budget through reduction of government expenditure, including unemployment benefit. The Labour government fell in August, and was replaced by a coalition, or National government, dominated by the Conservatives, though including some Liberal and Labour members, and retaining MacDonald as Prime Minister. The Labour Party split, with the great majority rejecting the coalition and going into opposition. The National government, under various Prime Ministers (MacDonald, Baldwin, and Neville Chamberlain) remained in existence for the rest of the decade, becoming steadily less National and more Conservative with the passing years.

The new government began with the declared intention of defending the exchange rate of sterling and staying on the gold standard. Within a month of taking office it was compelled to devalue by continuing pressure on the gold reserves, culminating when news of the refusal of duty by a number of crews in the fleet at Invergordon (after a reduction in pay clumsily introduced among the economy measures) shook the remaining foreign confidence in sterling. If the Royal Navy was not safe, what was? Britain went off the gold standard on 21 September 1931. Within a few days the pound fell against the dollar by 25 per cent, and by the end of the month by 30 per cent (from \$4.86 to \$3.25). Since sterling was at the time still the most important international currency, this was a severe blow to international financial dealings, and of course to all those who were holding their assets in sterling. It was a long step towards economic nationalism and international confusion; but from a purely British point of view it allowed sterling to reach a realistic level on the foreign exchanges. Early in 1932 the pound began to rise again, and by the end of March reached \$3.80. At that point the government began to use the device of an Exchange Equalisation Account to hold the pound roughly at that level; but made no attempt to return to gold. The effects were somewhat favourable to British exports, notably to countries which stayed on the gold standard. At the same time, in February 1932, the bank rate was reduced from 6 per cent to 2 per cent, encouraging domestic borrowing,

which had a stimulating effect, especially on house-building; and the resulting semi-detached houses, in their avenues and crescents, are still to be seen up and down the land.

The other element in government policy, deliberately adopted in this case, was one of protective tariffs and imperial preference. In February 1932 the British government introduced a duty of 10 per cent on all imports except most raw materials and food, and a number of items imported from the Empire. In April the duty on manufactured goods was increased to 20 per cent, and in some cases more; and the trend in the following years was upwards. At the Ottawa Conference in July–August 1932 Britain agreed to give preference to foodstuffs imported from the Dominions, in return for preference for British manufactured goods in Dominion markets. The preferences were usually secured by raising the rates on foreign goods rather than by lowering them on Dominion goods; and they extended to some foodstuffs, notably wheat, butter, eggs, and cheese. Britain also imposed import quotas on foreign meat and bacon. The results were slender in terms of the volume of British trade but considerable in terms of its direction. Britain moved towards greater self-sufficiency within the Empire and Commonwealth, at the expense of trade outside it.

In economic terms, some substantial recovery followed these measures. The effects of devaluation on exports were real though short-lived, being overtaken by retaliatory measures by the countries of the Gold Bloc, and by devaluations by the Americans and others. Protection of the home market and low interest rates assisted domestic recovery; and by the end of 1934 Britain became the first major industrial country to surpass 1929 figures for industrial production. The recovery was patchy, with the old industries (textiles, coal, and shipbuilding) remaining stagnant, and other areas (cars, chemicals, light engineering, consumer durables, and house-building) making progress. Unemployment, which reached a high point of approximately 3 million at the end of 1932, declined to 1.7 million by the beginning of 1937; this was still just over 11 per cent of the insured population.<sup>4</sup>

Despite these substantial unemployment figures and the other strains of the depression, the normal processes of British political life continued to work. There was some movement towards political extremes. Small fascist groups sprang up, of which the most prominent was Sir Oswald Mosley's British Union of Fascists; but there was never the slightest chance of them winning a seat in Parliament, still less of posing a serious threat to the government of the country. The Communist Party won a seat in the House

of Commons in the general election of 1935; and the widespread admiration for the Soviet Union which found expression in fellow-travelling was stimulated by the depression. The apparent breakdown of capitalism and the dreary waste of unemployment made the great light in the east shine ever more brightly. But the movement for a Popular Front made little progress, and the Labour Party resolutely rejected affiliation by the Communist Party. The general election of 1935 returned a solid Conservative majority, despite a substantial Labour recovery. But this basic political steadiness went along with some profound and bitter divisions. The Labour Party and trade unions found the government's economic policies wholly inadequate; and resentment against its administration of unemployment relief was deep and long-lasting. (The term 'means test' retained its bitter flavour long after the 1930s were past.) There was little chance of a bipartisan approach on any aspect of policy, whether economic or foreign; and there were those on the Left who thought that Baldwin and Chamberlain were enemies as dangerous as Hitler – and much nearer.

Government policies to cope with the depression had direct consequences on foreign policy. A Foreign Office memorandum put to the Cabinet in December 1931 warned that a high protective tariff along with imperial preference would separate Britain from European affairs and diminish British influence on the Continent. Such effects, however, were not unwelcome: isolation from Europe was by no means an unpopular prospect, and in any case considerations of foreign policy were firmly subordinated to those of economics. The consequences for foreign policy followed their predicted course. In 1933 and 1934 the Foreign Office urged the importance of Britain providing a market for bacon, eggs, butter, and timber from the Baltic states and Poland, which might otherwise come into the economic orbit of either Berlin or Moscow. Similarly, it was argued that Britain should buy cereals and other farm produce from Hungary and Yugoslavia, to prevent them from becoming over-dependent on the German market. In both cases the government refused, partly because it was tied by the Ottawa agreements, and partly because it disliked allowing political considerations to interfere with economic policy. In 1934, Vansittart, the permanent head of the Foreign Office, advocated competing with German influence in Austria by allowing tariff preferences for various Austrian exports, but his proposals were rejected by the Board of Trade and the Treasury. This attitude persisted for some years, and helped to open the way for German economic influence in central and eastern Europe.

## Delayed impact in France

The position of France differed considerably from that of Britain. France was much less dependent on foreign trade, and was therefore largely sheltered from the immediate effects of the depression, and able to operate from a position of strength, taking the lead in the Gold Bloc. As it developed, French economic policy had three main strands. First, France kept its currency on the gold standard, giving it a very high exchange rate when Britain and the USA devalued in 1931 and 1933 respectively. This was almost a psychological necessity, because adherence to the gold standard had become 'an article of faith in French political life', but it created serious difficulties for French exports, which had to contend with a severe price disadvantage in many markets, as well as the tariffs with which most countries protected their own producers.<sup>5</sup> Failure of exports led to problems in paying for imports; though this was not so grave for France as for some other countries because of the balance of the French economy – the country remained, for example, largely self-sufficient in food. The problem of imports was met by the second element in French policy: the imposition of quotas on imports, and a system of imperial preference more far-reaching and effective than the British equivalent. In July and August 1931 import quotas were introduced arbitrarily on nearly all agricultural products, followed later by quotas on industrial products which were usually negotiated with the countries concerned. French colonies were exempt from these quotas, and also had considerable tariff advantages over foreign countries. The third aspect of economic policy was deflation at home – the attempts to meet the problem of the price of French exports by reducing domestic costs. In fact, the wholesale price index fell by about a quarter between 1931 and 1935 (from 462 to 347: 1914 = 100); though this was more the result of low commodity prices throughout the world than of direct government policy. At the same time wages were reduced by about 12 per cent; and government expenditure was also cut.<sup>6</sup>

The worst effects of the depression struck France later than other countries. Agricultural production kept up, but income fell, with serious results for the domestic market. Industrial output showed two low points, in 1932 and 1935, with only a modest upturn in between. Foreign trade suffered drastically, with both exports and imports down by more than half in 1935 from the levels of 1930.<sup>7</sup> The number of registered unemployed never reached substantial figures compared with Britain or Germany – the maximum was about 500,000 in February 1935. The official figures were misleadingly low, partly because large numbers of foreign workers were

dispensed with, and partly because many townspeople who were out of work did not register, but simply went to live with relatives in the countryside. Conscription for the army also kept the figures lower than those in Britain. But even when all allowances were made, unemployment did not appear to be at crisis level.

The internal political effects of the depression, however, were more severe in France than in Britain. Under the Third Republic, governments had never been stable or long-lived – before 1914, their average life had been about a year. In the 1930s, this span shortened drastically, and a period of chronic ministerial instability set in, as a direct result of France's economic problems. Government revenue fell with the decline in foreign trade and domestic prices; yet governments were committed to balancing their budgets. They were therefore compelled to reduce expenditure, which meant holding down the service estimates, and also attacking civil service pay, pensions, and payments to ex-servicemen. In practice, measured against the movement of prices, these reductions did not damage spending power; but in psychological terms this made no difference. Payments made, for example, to the severely disabled from the First World War were reduced in cash terms; and the outcry may easily be imagined. The result was that successive Ministers of Finance proposed reductions in government expenditure, only to have them rejected in the National Assembly; and governments were repeatedly brought down on their financial measures. There were three changes of government in 1932, four in 1933, two in 1934, and two in 1935 – a total of eleven in four years. It appeared that the political system of the Third Republic, which had passed the stern test of war with flying colours, was breaking down under the less dramatic but more divisive strains of economic difficulty.

The combination of economic stagnation and political paralysis produced in France a marked movement towards political extremes. The fascist and conservative Right flourished in the middle 1930s. Their numbers were uncertain, but they thrust themselves into the public eye and showed their strength on the streets in the riots of 6 February 1934. On the Left, the Communist Party revived in 1935 and 1936, partly through the effects of the depression, and partly through the attraction of Popular Front slogans. On both Right and Left, opposition grew against the existing regime, which seemed unable to grapple with the country's problems.

The worst point in France's difficulties – the lowest level of foreign trade, the highest in unemployment, the resort to economic government by decree – came in 1935, at the time when the British economy was beginning to recover, and in Germany the Nazis were well established and

producing a striking improvement in the German economy. At that stage, France made her own bid for change and improvement – the Popular Front. The Popular Front's programme was more social than economic in content – the forty-hour week without reductions in wages and holidays with pay were two important items. The government intended to end deflation, keep up expenditure on pensions and payments to ex-servicemen, and increase revenue by tackling tax evasion; they also hoped that extra purchasing power from higher wages would stimulate demand. They were pledged not to devalue the franc. In economic terms this programme failed entirely. Industrial production remained stagnant. Wages rose in money terms, but fell in purchasing power: in the two years from April 1936 to April 1938, the retail price index rose by 46 per cent.<sup>8</sup> The wave of left-wing euphoria that accompanied the Popular Front victory – strikes, occupation of factories, demonstrations – alarmed investors and produced a flight of capital abroad, which in turn put pressure on the franc. This compelled the government to devalue on 26 September 1936. The devaluation was accompanied by a joint statement by the French, British, and United States governments, expressing their desire to minimise the disturbance to exchange rates caused by the French action – in less veiled language, Britain and the USA agreed not to retaliate by devaluations of their own currencies. The effects of the French devaluation were short-lived, because rising production costs soon cancelled them out. In general, the stagnation of the French economy continued, and no recovery was visible until the end of 1938. At the same time, the extreme fear of the Left aroused by the Popular Front victory embittered still further the political divisions within France.

These economic conditions and policies had various consequences for foreign policy. As with Britain, there was a conflict between economic and foreign policy in central and eastern Europe. France had a network of alliances with Poland, Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia, and Rumania; and it was in her interests to strengthen these alliances by economic links. From 1934 onwards, the French Foreign Office was aware of the growth of German economic influence, and urged commercial concessions to combat it. But the preference given to imports from the French colonies (especially cereals) allowed little room for manoeuvre; and in any case the tendency of French commercial policy was to reduce imports. In December 1936 France agreed to make a purchase of wheat from Yugoslavia at a lower tariff rate than usual; but the Ministry of Agriculture insisted that this must not become a precedent. Another important influence of economics on foreign policy lay in the dependence on Britain and the USA, which was marked, in however veiled a manner, by the three-power statement on

French devaluation. The independence of the early 1930s, when France was leader of the Gold Bloc and in a stronger economic position than Britain, was over. Devaluation would offer no advantages if the British and Americans retaliated by lowering their own exchange rates; and two further devaluations in 1937 and 1938 emphasised the degree of French dependence on Anglo-American co-operation.

## Italy: fascism faces the depression

In Italy, the fascist state was put to the test by the depression. Parts of Italian agriculture remained very close to subsistence farming and so felt little effect; but the modern industry of the north and the banking system were seriously damaged – the more so since the Italian economy was already in difficulties in the late 1920s. There was a severe fall in foreign trade. Imports were valued at 21,303 million lire in 1929, and only 7,432 million in 1933; and exports fell in the same period from 14,767 million lire to 5,991 million. Industrial production also declined by one-third between 1929 and 1932.<sup>9</sup> At the same time, earnings from Italian shipping and remittances home from Italian emigrants (notably in the USA) diminished, as did income from tourism; all of which contributed to a serious balance of payments problem. Unemployment was high, with 1,132,000 registered unemployed in December 1933. This figure was almost certainly too low, and in the winter of 1933–34 1.75 million families were registered for the free state distributions of flour, rice, and milk. The state took action to reduce the figures in 1934, when the working week was reduced from forty-eight hours to forty, with an accompanying drop in earnings.<sup>10</sup> Under these pressures, a number of firms went into bankruptcy and banks failed. Government revenue fell, and expenditure rose; and budget deficits were serious between 1931 and 1934. The fascist economy was in as much difficulty as others; and the Italian people were subjected to unemployment, a lowering of wages, and rising prices.

In face of these difficulties, Mussolini rejected for a long time the devaluation of the lira. In 1926–27 he had declared ‘the battle of the lira’, fixed its value at 92.46 to the pound sterling, and held to the gold standard. His own prestige and that of the regime were committed to maintaining this very high rate of exchange, which as other currencies were devalued put up the price of exports and made life difficult for foreign visitors. This policy was accompanied from 1934 onwards by high customs duties, which severely restricted imports other than of vital raw materials (which were subsidised) and some foodstuffs. For some commodities, a system of



*Fascism tackles the Depression: Mussolini driving a tractor during the 'Battle for Grain'.*

Source: Ullstein Bild/AKG Images

import licences was introduced. In 1934 also strict exchange controls were imposed. These measures were presented as an attempt at self-sufficiency, for which the Italian economy was almost wholly unsuited. Mussolini made great play with 'the battle for grain' (he liked to present economic questions in military terms); and indeed Italy became self-sufficient in wheat, though at the expense of other crops, and only by using imported fertilisers. Other measures included a search for oil in the valley of the River Po, and for bauxite in the south. Eventually, when the Gold Bloc disintegrated and its other members devalued, Italy followed suit with a drastic 41 per cent devaluation on 5 October 1936, which had a stimulating effect on exports and thus eased the purchase of imports.

In 1935 the Italian economic position was further complicated by the attack on Ethiopia, and the League of Nations sanctions that followed. The war was not primarily waged for economic reasons (despite talk of Ethiopia's potential resources of raw materials); but it had a number of economic consequences. The war provided a stimulus for industry, and production increased; and mobilisation for the army brought down the unemployment figures. On the other hand, the budget deficit was pushed



up sharply in 1936, having been almost eliminated in 1935. League sanctions, often dismissed as totally ineffectual because they were half-hearted and failed to halt the Italian conquest of Ethiopia, had serious adverse effects on the Italian economy. The cost of imports went up, because they often had to be obtained from unusual suppliers or through states which did not apply sanctions; many foreign banks ceased to extend credit to the Italian government or firms; and governments blocked Italian accounts in their countries. One result was to give an added impulse to the idea of self-sufficiency; another was to push Italy into greater dependence on imports from Germany, which did not apply sanctions.

In 1934 Italy and Germany concluded an agreement by which all payments for trade between the two countries were to go through a single clearing account, in which export and import payments were to be kept in balance. The exchange rate between the two currencies was fixed at a rate favourable to Germany; and also 7.5 per cent of German exports to Italy were to be paid for in currency freely usable in international exchange – sterling, dollars, or Swiss francs. These terms were favourable to Germany; and in a further economic agreement of December 1937 Italy undertook to import industrial goods from Germany, and to pay for them in part by sending 30,000 agricultural workers to Germany in 1938, an arrangement which emphasised Italy's subordinate role as a mere provider of labour. Italy became particularly dependent on imports of coal from Germany. In 1932 over half Italian coal imports came from Britain; in 1936 the figure was reduced to 1 per cent, and the bulk of supplies (over 7 million tonnes) came from Germany. In 1938 the Germans agreed to increase this to 9 million tonnes. In that year, Italy drew 42.4 per cent of its European imports from Germany (including Austria), against only 3.6 per cent from France and 10.2 per cent from Britain. This was a marked change from the position ten years earlier, when the British and French shares together considerably exceeded the German and Austrian.<sup>11</sup> This was no small element in the making of the Rome–Berlin Axis, and in the subordination of Italian policy to Germany.

## Germany: the advent of Hitler

Germany suffered particularly badly under the effects of the depression. The economic prosperity of the late 1920s was supported by short-term American loans, and the recall of this capital after the crash of 1929 had disastrous results. There was a rapid and continuous fall in industrial production from 1929 to 1932. A banking crisis of 1931 saw one big bank

fail completely, and the government had to declare a number of 'bank holidays'. Unemployment, which averaged about 11 per cent even in the years of prosperity, rose from 2.4 million in March 1930 to a peak of 6 million (30 per cent) in May 1932.<sup>12</sup> The severity of these effects was made worse by the policy of strict deflation applied by the government headed by Chancellor Heinrich Brüning, who refused any devaluation of the mark, insisted on balanced budgets, and tried to reduce prices.

Brüning fell from office in May 1932, to be succeeded in rapid succession by Papen and Schleicher, and in January 1933 by Hitler. In a simple yet accurate sense it is permissible to see the advent to power of Hitler as the most far-reaching political consequence of the depression. There was a close psychological link between the great inflation and the great depression: the large numbers of Germans with savings, insurance policies, or fixed incomes, who had seen all such assets wiped out once, cast round desperately for someone who could save them from a repetition of such events. They needed someone to offer them confidence; and Hitler at that stage was a most tremendous generator of confidence. Moreover, a number of German industrialists and bankers, who until 1929 showed no interest in the Nazi Party, began to offer it financial support during the years 1929–32, though usually hedging their bets by contributing also to the funds of other parties. The Nazi Party, which enjoyed only modest success in the late 1920s, flourished in the depression, at the same time as the trade unions, which might have been its most serious opponents, were weakened and demoralised by mass unemployment. Without the particular circumstances of the depression in Germany, it is at least likely that Hitler would have remained a fringe figure in German politics.

In the few months before Hitler came to power, the Papen and Schleicher governments reversed Brüning's policies, and began to encourage credit, increase government spending, and undertake public works. These were policies advocated by a number of critics of Brüning's government, including the trade unions as well as the Nazis. In the first instance, Hitler did nothing to change these policies. He did not put Nazis in charge of economic affairs. The Economics Minister was Hugenberg, the leader of the Nationalist Party, with an economic expert from the same party as the State Secretary; and Hjalmar Schacht, with his reputation as 'the man who saved the mark' after the collapse of 1923, was recalled as President of the Reichsbank in March 1933 as a guarantee, by his very name, that the government would maintain the value of the currency.

Hitler's own economic ideas, as developed in the 1920s, were fairly simple. It was the business of government to ensure for its people the best

conditions for their life and development; and one vital condition was a secure food supply. To import large quantities of food meant putting the state and its people at the mercy of the world economy, the terms of trade, and the sale of exports. Hitler rejected this as a long-term policy, arguing that Germany must produce her own food on her own soil; since that was inadequate for a growing population, the solution was to conquer new territory in eastern Europe and above all in the USSR. The events of the depression bore out at least part of these ideas, demonstrating the unreliability of the world economy and the difficulty of paying for imports with exports. In a speech to the Industrial Club of Düsseldorf in January 1932, carefully designed to appeal to the audience of industrialists and businessmen gathered to hear him, Hitler argued that exporting countries, faced with declining markets, could only compete with one another by cutting prices; but in the long run they must protect themselves by aiming at self-sufficiency, which would itself be precarious if their area was insufficient. Germany, therefore, before organising a vast internal market, must gain more territory.

The idea of self-sufficiency was far from being peculiar to Hitler. It was practised within the British and French empires; and to a considerable degree it was also the policy of President Roosevelt, seeking to base recovery on the vast internal market of the USA. In Germany in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries extremely rapid industrialisation put the country in the position of being dependent on foreign trade, with a fear in many hearts that Germany could be strangled through this dependence, unable to feed its population or to keep its factories turning. The Allied blockade in 1914–18 brought such fears to life; and Germany was forced to rely on her own sphere of control in eastern and central Europe. By 1932–33, even those industrialists and entrepreneurs who were most committed to international trade and the world market were compelled to acknowledge that markets were being closed everywhere, and to turn to a German sphere which seemed marked out for her by history and geography. The idea of world trade was everywhere giving way to that of self-sufficiency and closed economic systems.

Hitler had one key economic idea, which he shared with almost everyone in the country: there must be no open inflation which would awaken fears of another disaster like the hyper-inflation of 1923. If some degree of inflation could not be prevented, it must be disguised from public view. Hitler was sure he could achieve these aims, because fundamentally he believed that economics would bend to his will. As Goering put it in 1936: 'We do not recognise the sanctity of some of these so-called economic

laws. It must be pointed out that trade and industry are servants of the people, while capital also has a role to play as the servant of the economy.' There is a story that once, in an argument with Schacht, Goering banged the table and shouted: 'if the Führer wishes it, then two times two is five'.<sup>13</sup> In the long run, such doctrine proved difficult to sustain; but in the short run it produced some surprising results.

At the end of 1932 and in the first part of 1933 the German economy began to pick up; industrial production rose, and the total of unemployed fell. By the autumn of 1933, this very recovery was creating difficulties for German foreign trade and the balance of payments. As the domestic economy improved, imports rose; but exports did not keep pace, because of the increase in domestic demand, the high exchange value of the mark, and the imposition of trade barriers by other countries. It became increasingly difficult to pay for imports and service the country's foreign debts. In October 1933 the new State Secretary at the Economics Ministry, Hans Posse, put forward proposals for a changed trade policy, of importing mainly from countries which were prepared to purchase equivalent amounts of German exports. If the USA and the British and French empires obstructed German exports, the answer was to concentrate on markets close at hand where German economic influence could be predominant; which meant primarily the countries of south-east, central, and northern Europe. These proposals were adopted by the German Cabinet on 4 October 1933; and there followed trade treaties and clearing agreements with Hungary (February 1934) and Yugoslavia (May 1934). These followed a common pattern. Germany undertook to import agricultural produce, and the other countries lowered their tariffs on German industrial goods, which they paid for from the proceeds of their exports. The terms were favourable to Germany, because in the circumstances of the time the Hungarians and Yugoslavs were happy to be assured of any market for their farm produce. Germany also hoped for political advantage, by weaning Hungary away from Italian influence and Yugoslavia away from France. A similar agreement was signed with Rumania in March 1935. There followed a marked increase in German trade with all three countries, and the junior partners became more dependent on it; though this was less true for Rumania than for the others.

The consequences for Germany's total foreign trade, however, were limited. During 1934 the balance of trade deteriorated sharply, showing an excess of imports over exports of 284 million marks against an export surplus of 667 million in 1933.<sup>14</sup> Schacht became Economics Minister in July 1934 (retaining his position as President of the Reichsbank); and in

September he introduced his 'New Plan' for German foreign trade, based on the principles of buying nothing that could not be paid for by foreign exchange earned by German exports, and of making imports conform to national needs as decided by the government. All imports were subject to licences, which were used to differentiate between essential and non-essential items, with raw materials and food classified as essential. Whenever possible, imports were to be bought only from the countries which were willing to accept German goods in return; and any foreign exchange involved was to be paid into a clearing account, and not used freely by the exporting country.

This policy was not wholly welcome to German industrialists, who mostly believed that in the long run their future lay in trade with other industrial economies, and who wished to work out ways of re-entering the markets of the British Empire and the USA. Schacht himself regarded the New Plan as a temporary expedient, to be abandoned when world economic conditions improved. He was willing to seek raw materials and food in south-east Europe; but recognised that this policy could not create a self-sufficient system. As regards food, the Danubian states could provide cereals, meat, and dairy products which would go far to meet German needs. Of raw materials, Germany produced only coal and potash in sufficient quantities within her own borders. South-east Europe could provide oil (Rumania), bauxite (Yugoslavia and Hungary), nickel (Greece), chromium (Yugoslavia, Greece, and Turkey), and antimony (Czechoslovakia), in which Germany was entirely lacking; and make up a sufficient balance of timber, pyrites, and graphite. But this was far from enough to meet all Germany's needs – it was calculated that German industry needed in all thirty-five raw materials, of which thirty-three had to be imported.<sup>15</sup>

In these circumstances, the New Plan and links with south-east Europe could offer only partial advantages; but these were still worthwhile. In 1934 and 1935 German rearmament began to get under way. The import controls of the New Plan were used to give priority to items needed for armaments; and for some commodities the Danubian states formed a good source of supply. German imports of bauxite (the raw material for aluminium) rose from almost nil in 1933 to 981,000 tonnes in 1936, largely to feed the new aircraft production programmes; and rather over half these imports came from Hungary and Yugoslavia.<sup>16</sup> In the long term, too, south-eastern Europe offered sources of supply which were close to Germany and immune from naval blockade in time of war.

In the short term, the New Plan was successful in shifting the balance of trade in favour of exports. From an import surplus of 284 million marks

in 1934, Germany developed an export surplus of 111 million in 1935 and 550 million in 1936.<sup>17</sup> This success was only temporary. Germany's need for imports was increasing rapidly. Domestic recovery pushed up demand, and armaments production required increasing quantities of raw materials. Germany began to be faced with the question of whether the rearmament drive could be continued at its existing (or indeed increased) momentum, or whether it would be better to pause, consolidate, and find some long-term solution to the problem of paying for imports and finding foreign exchange. At that point Hitler himself intervened seriously in economic questions for the first time. A new Four-Year Plan was launched, under the direction of Goering; there was a struggle for the control of the German economy between Goering and Schacht, with various groups in support of each; and the economy was set on a course which was more dominated by questions of armaments than hitherto. It was also a course which led to steadily deepening difficulties, which will be examined in the next chapter.

## Eastern Europe

The countries of eastern Europe suffered severely from the economic depression. Nearly all were heavily dependent on agriculture, and therefore suffered from the fall in agricultural prices, which ruined many farmers and smallholders. Moreover, the foreign investments which had been so important to east European countries in the 1920s dried up, and were sometimes withdrawn, with the onset of the depression. (Czechoslovakia, with its strong industrial base and less dependence on foreign investment, was an exception in both these respects, and suffered less severely.) In these circumstances, governments reacted in similar fashion across the region, imposing higher tariffs and strict quotas on imports, controlling currency exchange values, and establishing bilateral trade agreements to secure markets for exports. As we have seen (above, pp. 161–2), the principal partner in such bilateral agreements was Germany, which secured in the mid-1930s an increased share of trade with Hungary, Yugoslavia, Rumania and Bulgaria. The Hungarians tried to escape from German predominance and to keep open other outlets for their exports by concluding a triple trade treaty with Italy and Austria in March 1934; but they found that this did not secure enough markets, and so in 1935 they had to turn to Germany after all.<sup>18</sup>

The social and political effects of the depression were felt throughout eastern Europe. Rural populations suffered severely; so did civil servants

who lost their jobs when governments reduced their spending; and so did graduates who could not find jobs when they left university. Everyone blamed the government, as the natural scapegoat; many also blamed minority populations, especially the Jews. Nationalism, already strong in the 1920s, developed a sharper edge, and the disunity which constantly afflicted the region grew worse.

Recovery from the depression was uneven and slow, beginning in some countries in 1933, while the countries of the Gold Bloc were beginning their decline. In 1934 and 1935, industrial production, exports, and prices in several European countries were moving upwards, and by the end of 1936 and early 1937 raw material prices were demonstrating the extent of the recovery in demand – the price of tin rose by 50 per cent in six months, while copper, lead, and zinc doubled in price.<sup>19</sup> What had been a world surplus of raw materials was replaced quite suddenly by an excess of demand over supply; and with several European countries in the process of rearmament, questions arose about access to raw materials, especially on the part of Germany and Italy in Europe, and Japan in the Far East. In the new circumstances created by economic nationalism and self-sufficiency, the revival of world trade lagged behind that of industrial activity; the League of Nations index of industrial activity (1929 = 100) stood at 111.3 in 1936, but that for world trade only at 85.9.<sup>20</sup> Recovery took place in semi-insulated compartments, which were in some ways restrictive; but their advantages were shown in 1937, when the USA suffered a further very serious depression (with unemployment back to 13 million). This American relapse had serious effects in the primary producing countries, but much less so in Europe, which had to a considerable extent protected herself.

The great depression itself did not lead directly to war, which came about after economic recovery was well under way. The influence of the depression on the origins of the war was indirect, and to a large degree intangible, though no less real for that. It destroyed the positive and encouraging economic and political developments of the years between 1924 and 1930. Franco-German co-operation and ‘the spirit of Locarno’ fizzled out. No more was heard of economic collaboration, and the World Economic Conference of 1933 broke up in disorder and recrimination. Self-preservation through some form of economic nationalism became the order of the day, and a climate of opinion was created in which conflict was both more likely and more acceptable by 1934 or 1935 than it had been in 1929 or 1930. Above all, the depression generated fear: fear that the mechanism of international trade would not deliver the necessary raw

materials or foodstuffs, fear about jobs and livelihoods, fear of other states' policies – sometimes fear of one's own government's policies. If wars begin in the minds of men, it is fair to say that men's minds were shaken and disturbed by the effects of the depression.

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## CHAPTER TEN

# Economic Problems and the Coming of War

**W**ar came to Europe when the depression was passing; indeed, preparation for war gave a stimulus to the economy of a number of countries. Economic recovery brought its own problems; and we must now ask how far the new economic pressures of the late 1930s provided motives for states to go to war.

### **Britain, France, Italy and the Soviet Union**

In the case of Britain, all the major economic influences were against war, and especially against war with Germany. The First World War had done irreparable damage to Britain's economic position, and there was every reason to believe that another major conflict would repeat the dose, probably with fatal results. Britain lived by imports of food and raw materials, which had to be paid for, mostly by exports or the provision of services. War meant that the import bill would go up, to sustain the war economy, while the ability to pay that bill would go down, because industry and services were directed to military purposes. It was correctly foreseen that within about a year of sustained war effort, Britain would no longer be able to pay for her imports. In the previous war, this crisis had been staved off by borrowing in the USA; but in the late 1930s this option appeared to be firmly closed. American neutrality legislation, put into permanent form in 1937, forbade altogether the export of implements of war to belligerent powers, and the export of other materials could not be financed by loans or credits. In addition, the Johnson Act (1934) forbade any government which had defaulted on its debts to the USA (which included Great Britain) to raise loans in that country. The door was not merely shut; it was locked and bolted.

To make military preparations for war also presented economic difficulties. There were budgetary restrictions on the amount of money allocated to the armed services; limited physical resources, in terms of factory space, equipment, and skilled manpower; and difficulties in meeting the bills for imports, because between 25 and 30 per cent of the cost of armaments lay in the price of imported raw materials. In addition to these constraints there was the wider question of the nature of the economy and how it was to be run. The British government wished to preserve a market economy, and to avoid forms of compulsion which would arouse the opposition of industrialists and dislocate normal business activity. Rapid rearmament, on the other hand, would be best achieved through a command economy, in which the government set priorities and gave orders. In Britain in the late 1930s, such a course was ruled out as both economically and politically unacceptable.

All this applied to war, and preparations for war, in general. When the question turned to war with Germany in particular, there were further economic reasons against it. Germany was an important market for British exports – the fifth in terms of value in 1938, just ahead of the USA.<sup>1</sup> As a result of the Anglo-German Payments Agreement of 1934, revised after the *Anschluss* with Austria in 1938 on favourable terms for Britain, this market was fairly stable; and Germany also took considerable amounts of British coal and textiles, offering an outlet for sectors of the economy that remained in depression. In late 1938 and early 1939, negotiations were in progress for a coal cartel, by which German and British producers would agree on a division of markets between them. The British government continued to believe, right up to 1939, in the importance of restoring Germany to her central place in the European trading system.

They believed, too, that German economic anxieties could and should be assuaged by offering guaranteed access to raw materials outside Europe. In 1937 and early in 1938, the British were willing to explore the possibilities of returning to Germany some of the colonies lost in 1919. They put this suggestion to France in April 1937, with the slightly embarrassing condition that the French would have to provide the major share of territory to be restored, because the Dominions would not budge from their mandates, and there were insuperable (though unexplained) reasons against the return of Tanganyika. The French were naturally sceptical about such proposals. In March 1938, Britain put to Germany a complicated proposal by which territory over a large part of central Africa (most of which did not belong to Britain) might be brought into a form of joint trusteeship, in which Germany could share – thus resuming her place as a

colonial power without actually having any colonies. Such proposals were too thin to be taken seriously. Access to colonies could not meet German problems about raw materials, because the most important raw materials (coal, iron, petroleum, cotton) were hardly produced in colonies at all; the great exception was rubber, with 96 per cent of world production coming from colonial sources in 1936.<sup>2</sup> No one, however, proposed to cede Malaya to Germany. The proposals did not offer Germany very much. If in return she gave serious undertakings of good behaviour in central and eastern Europe, and accepted a limitation on armaments, these would be disproportionate concessions. However, it was significant that the British were willing to make even token economic moves to assure Germany of their goodwill; and they expected to get a response from the 'sensible men' in Berlin, notably Schacht, who himself took the question of colonies far more seriously than Hitler did.

In other respects, economic relations between the British and German governments during the 1930s were mainly good. The British recognised that the Anglo-German Payments Agreements of 1934 and 1938 provided Germany with foreign exchange which was used to finance rearmament, but still believed that the balance of advantage lay with Britain. In November 1937 an Austrian proposal for the abolition of exchange control by the Danubian states, aimed at diminishing German influence in the area, received a hostile reception from Chamberlain, who thought it would imperil the general settlement with Germany which was his ultimate goal. Only in May 1938 did the government begin to examine possible economic actions against Germany, setting up an Inter-Departmental Committee on South-East Europe for this purpose. The results were not great, though they did mark a change of emphasis in British policy: a loan to Turkey, credits to Greece and Rumania, and the purchase of 200,000 tonnes of Rumanian grain in October 1938. After the Munich agreement, British influence in much of south-eastern Europe inevitably collapsed, though in Rumania Britain and France kept up a successful economic defence against Germany for a prolonged period.

Despite these late changes, the general British position was that the economic interest of the country benefited from good relations with Germany, from restraint in rearmament, and from the avoidance of war. Only the threat of total German economic control over Europe was likely to change that assessment. Much the same was true of France. The stagnation of the French economy that was evident from April 1936 to April 1938 persisted for the next six months. Two further devaluations of the franc (July 1937 and May 1938) failed to have more than a fleeting effect on industrial

production, which was held back by internal constraints, and mainly by trade union insistence on the forty-hour week. In November 1938, Daladier appointed Paul Reynaud as Minister of Finance, and embarked on a new economic policy. Credit was eased; and the forty-hour week was relaxed by means of exceptions for armaments industries and their suppliers, so that from October 1938 to June 1939 the average working week rose from 39.2 hours to 41.9, and in armaments factories it reached 50 or even 60 hours. In the same period, industrial production rose by 20 per cent, and unemployment fell by 10 per cent (to about 380,000). An attempted general strike against these measures in November 1938 was a failure. The upturn came belatedly, leaving France acutely conscious of industrial weakness in face of Germany – by the end of 1938 German steel production was almost four times greater than that of France.<sup>3</sup> There was every reason in economic terms for France to avoid a confrontation with Germany, and to seek at least a breathing-space to allow economic recovery to develop.

France, like Britain, showed a growing tendency to dispute German economic predominance in eastern Europe, though only after the basis of French influence there had vanished almost beyond recall. In September 1936 there had been a Franco-Polish agreement for a French loan of 2,000 million francs, of which 800 millions were to be spent on French armaments; but by January 1938 practically none of these had been delivered, and the French government admitted to the Poles that it could not meet its commitments. The Czechoslovakian crisis brought French influence to a very low ebb; and it seemed reasonable to think that France had chosen to abandon eastern Europe to Germany. However, in 1939 this movement was checked, and France took up the cudgels in Rumania, with considerable success; though without changing its central premiss that on economic grounds it preferred to avoid, or at least postpone, a war with Germany.

France and Britain were both on the defensive, in economic as well as other terms. The position of Italy was in many ways different. Italian policy was expansionist, as its moves into Ethiopia (1935–36) and Albania (1939) showed; but only a part of the impulse behind this expansion was economic in nature, and even then more in theory than in practice. From 1935 onwards Mussolini talked a good deal about self-sufficiency, which would be based on an economic zone in Africa and the Balkans. But in fact little progress was made. There was little time or opportunity to explore the resources of Ethiopia; Libyan oil remained untapped; Albania offered limited possibilities; and Italian aspirations in Yugoslavia were kept firmly in check by Germany, which had taken control of much of Yugoslavian

trade, and had no wish to see it disturbed. Italy made herself self-sufficient in wheat, and developed enough bauxite mining to secure an adequate supply of aluminium. Otherwise, she remained heavily dependent on imports, not least of oil and raw materials for the armaments industry.

There was some possibility of conquering or controlling sources of raw materials – there were minerals in the Balkans, and oil in the Middle East if Italy were to replace Britain as the predominant power there; and such ideas formed part of Mussolini's aspirations to become the principal Mediterranean power. But though the aspirations were there, the economic power to make them good was not. Steel production in 1938 was only 2.3 million tonnes, and coal a mere 1.5 million tonnes. Most imports were sea-borne, with (in 1939) about 80 per cent coming from outside the Mediterranean, and therefore subject to naval blockade. Italy imported 3–4 million tonnes of oil per year, by sea. Imports of coal came mostly from Germany, also by sea; though it was found in 1940 that some 12 million tonnes of coal could be moved in the year by rail, using lines through Austria and Switzerland.<sup>4</sup> From a strictly economic point of view, Italy had some motive for expansion by war and conquest, but insufficient capacity to carry it out. In terms of profit, neutrality in the war that actually began in 1939 offered substantial advantages, with Italy being able to benefit from transit trade to Germany to avoid the Allied blockade, and with the belligerents seeking to buy Italian exports. Such simple calculations of profit and loss, however, did not come high on Mussolini's order of priorities; and when he went to war, it was not primarily for economic reasons.

The Soviet Union was in the paradoxical position of devoting a large part of its economic efforts to armaments, yet having the strongest economic reasons for remaining at peace. According to official Soviet figures, armament expenditure increased from 5.4 per cent of expenditure under the first Five-Year Plan to 26.4 per cent during the first three years of the third Plan.<sup>5</sup> Soviet production of weapons (tanks, guns, and aircraft) reached high figures in the late 1930s, though the development of new types was held back by the purges and by Stalin's arbitrary decisions. At the same time, heavy industry had developed very rapidly, at the expense of agriculture and consumer goods, and it was in the process of being dispersed so that a proportion was beyond the Urals, far distant from any European attack. But this did not mean that the Soviet economy was prepared for war. Growth in the crucial iron and steel industry was painfully slow (only 3 per cent, 1938–41)<sup>6</sup>; and the processes of change were still under way. The immense economic and social dislocation wrought by collectivisation, industrialisation, and the purges had not yet been overcome. The

Soviet Union needed a long period of peace to recuperate, and in economic terms there was no better indication of this than the price that Stalin was willing to pay for an agreement with Germany. The economic agreement signed with Germany late in 1939 was favourable to the Germans, and was executed more faithfully on the Soviet side than the German (see below, pp. 180–1, 341). Economic considerations combined with others to confirm the Soviet desire to keep out of war, except when Soviet territory was at stake (as in the Far East), or when a walk-over was expected (as with Finland).

## Germany

The exception to this catalogue of states which for economic reasons would prefer to avoid war lay in Germany, less because the German economy was fully prepared for war (certainly general and prolonged war) than because Germany was going through a severe economic crisis, of which one possible solution was a war of conquest. The process was circular. The economic crisis itself was largely caused by the extreme pace of German rearmament. One way out would have been to slacken that pace; when that was rejected, Germany was in a position where she was arming in order to expand, and then had to expand in order to continue to arm. One belief was crucial, and totally at variance with all assumptions made in the liberal democracies: that war could be made to pay.

In the course of 1936, difficulties accumulated in the German economy. There was a problem of food supply, partly because restrictions on the import of animal fodder had resulted in the widespread slaughter of pigs and cattle in the winter of 1935–36. (This was the background to one of Goebbels's most famous remarks, on 17 January 1936, about guns and butter. His actual words may need to be recalled: 'We can do well without butter, but we must have guns, because butter could not help us if we were to be attacked one day.')

<sup>7</sup> The Germans had, in fact, gone short of butter and other dairy and pork products during that winter; and it was Hitler's intention to make good these shortages without cutting back on armaments – not to choose between the two. There was pressure on raw materials, which were important for the rearmament drive; and an increasing problem of securing foreign exchange to pay for imports whose cost could not be met by exports. At home, there was a shortage of labour in some sectors of the economy. All this, in the normal workings of supply and demand, meant pressure for prices to rise.

In these circumstances, Schacht (who since 1935 had combined the posts of Economics Minister and President of the Reichsbank, and been

effectively in control of the German economy) recommended that the time had come for consolidation: to slow down the pace of rearmament and increase exports, allowing freer multilateral trade by relaxing the tight restrictions of his own New Plan. He received support in this from Colonel Georg Thomas, the head of the Economics and Armaments Section of the War Ministry, who favoured a slower, long-term programme of armaments in preparation for a long war; from the banks; and from the steel and coal industries, which wanted to get back to a wider trade system. Hitler would not accept such proposals, refusing to allow any pause in rearmament, and indeed seeking to accelerate it. In this he was supported by Goering and the *Luftwaffe* high command; important elements in the Nazi Party; industrialists in the sectors concerned with aircraft, motor cars, machine tools, and chemicals; and some members of the army high command.

In August 1936 Hitler intervened with a memorandum on the Four-Year Plan which he had drafted in person – a rare event.<sup>8</sup> He restated his basic aims and principles. Germany was overpopulated, with neither the food nor the raw materials necessary for her needs. ‘The definitive solution lies in an extension of our living space, that is, an extension of the raw materials and food basis of our nation.’ But in the meantime various steps were necessary to tide Germany over until this definitive solution could be attained. At present, Germany could not afford enough imports to meet all her needs. It was impossible to increase exports to pay for more imports; and equally impossible to reduce imports, because to do so would hamper rearmament. It was therefore necessary to produce in Germany, at whatever cost, synthetic rubber and oil, and to mine German iron ore, even of poor quality, in order to release foreign exchange to pay for food and for those raw materials that could not be produced at home or in substitute form. Nearly four years of Nazi rule had gone by without making progress with such a programme. (The first synthetic oil contract had in fact been signed in December 1933, but Schacht had held it back, because he regarded the necessary investment as uneconomic.) Hitler concluded: ‘There has been time enough in four years to find out what we cannot do. Now we have to carry out what we can do. I thus set the following tasks: I. The German armed forces must be operational within four years. II. The German economy must be fit for war within four years.’

This was not in strict terms a plan for self-sufficiency. When Hitler announced the Four-Year Plan publicly at the Party Congress in September 1936, he carefully said that Germany must be independent of foreign countries for those materials that she could produce herself, either by



chemical means or by mining; this would reserve foreign exchange for food and materials which could *not* be so produced. It was rather a policy of preparing for war, which alone could bring about the definitive solution set out in his memorandum, though not in his public speech. Goering was appointed Commissioner for the Four-Year Plan by a decree of 18 October 1936; and he defined the objects of the plan as being to increase self-sufficiency while continuing rearmament at a rapid pace. The production of synthetics was to be pursued, with the aim of meeting by 1939 all the oil needs of the mobilisation plan, 50 per cent of the rubber needs, 30 per cent of the textiles, and 33 per cent of the animal fats. Domestic production of iron ore in the Salzgitter area was to be increased, to meet 50 per cent of mobilisation needs by 1939.<sup>9</sup> Food production was to be further improved, and controls over the movement of labour were tightened.

In October 1936 Goering set up an organisation to implement the plan, made up of six main divisions; though as so often in the Third Reich there was much friction and overlapping of responsibilities. Schacht remained as Economics Minister until November 1937, and continued to oppose the self-sufficiency aspects of the Four-Year Plan, with the support of business circles, the banks, and large parts of the steel industry. In particular he objected to the development of the Hermann Goering Iron and Steel Works, set up to exploit German iron ore, which he thought to be a wasteful and inefficient organisation. His struggle was unavailing, for Goering had Hitler's backing, as well as that of the industries which did well out of the plan, notably I. G. Farben in chemicals, which was heavily involved in the synthetics programme, and the aircraft firms. Schacht's value to the regime lay mainly in his reputation as an opponent of inflation at home, and his contacts abroad – as long as some co-operation was sought from foreign industries and banking, Schacht was useful. After he resigned from the Economics Ministry, Germany declined to take part in a world raw materials conference at Geneva, which Schacht had wished his government to attend: a co-operative approach to the problem of raw materials was thus openly ruled out. Schacht remained as President of the Reichsbank; but his successor as Minister of Economics, Walther Funk, was Goering's nominee. The struggle for control of the German economy, which had been going against Schacht from 1936, was finally decided.

Goering might say that, if the Führer wished it, two times two made five: but they did not. The proclamation of a plan and victory over its opponents did not mean that the facts of Germany's economic situation disappeared. The facts came home, even for the *Luftwaffe*, which Goering favoured, and for the synthetics programme, which was the centre-piece of

the new policy. In 1937 and 1938 Germany was short of aluminium, steel, and labour to meet the various demands that were being made on the economy. At the end of 1936, the requirement of aluminium by aircraft manufacturers to meet the *Luftwaffe's* programmes was 4,500 tonnes per month, of which only half was available. In 1937 the three armed services together asked for 750,000 tonnes of steel per month, but received only 300,000. Steel production remained at the same level as 1936 (about 19.8 million tonnes a year), while demand went up, and no systematic order of priorities for its use was worked out. The same problem hit the synthetic oil programme, which in 1938 required 120,000 tonnes of steel per month for construction purposes; the actual allocation was 42,000 tonnes, though in February 1939 Goering undertook to bring the deliveries up to the level required. Synthetic oil also depended on coal, which was the basis of the process. In July 1938 it was estimated that 20,000–30,000 extra miners would be needed in the next three years, but in fact there was a shortage of labour in the coal-fields. This was part of a wider problem of manpower: in October 1938 the Economic and Armaments Office of the War Ministry estimated that by March 1939 Germany would be short of 600,000 workers in industry and 1 million in agriculture.<sup>10</sup>

Even for the *Luftwaffe*, production of aircraft fell back, though not by much; and monthly output did not reach the level of March 1937 again until May 1939. As for synthetic oil, it was recognised in July 1938 that production would meet only 20 per cent of needs by 1939, as against the original target of 100 per cent.<sup>11</sup> When, in October 1938, Hitler set out a new armaments programme which involved a fivefold increase in the size of the *Luftwaffe*, which would require the building of 47,500 aircraft by spring 1942, the resources to carry it out were simply not available – neither raw materials, steel, fuel, nor manpower. The fuel supply for the force envisaged would have used up 85 per cent of the total world production of aviation fuel. It was to that sort of directive that the divorce between the Nazi regime and economic reality led.

Even well short of this type of fantasy, however, Germany faced a serious economic problem, which may be summed up in terms of food, raw materials, and foreign exchange. Hitler's exposition of Germany's situation at the so-called Hossbach Conference on 5 November 1937 was largely about economics. Food consumption in Germany was increasing, which meant reliance on imports, often from overseas. There was a danger that any year might bring a food crisis that could not be met by the available foreign exchange. In the event of war, overseas sources of supply would be subject to British blockade. The only remedy, Hitler went on, lay

in the acquisition of greater living space, starting with Czechoslovakia and Austria, which would provide food for between 5 and 6 million people, if the compulsory emigration of 2 million from Czechoslovakia and 1 million from Austria could be accomplished.

This was only a partial statement of the problem, omitting the question of raw materials and the strains imposed by rearmament. The proposed remedy was dubious, because neither Austria nor Czechoslovakia was a major food producer. Even in 1939, after absorbing Austria and Czechoslovakia, Germany remained dependent on imports for 20 per cent of its foodstuffs; and supplies from south-east Europe, under Germany's influence, could not meet all her needs. The raw material situation was worse. In 1939 Germany depended on imports for 33 per cent of her raw materials; and the proportion was much higher in particular cases – 66 per cent for oil, 70 per cent for copper, 85–90 per cent for rubber, and 99 per cent for aluminium. Roughly half of Germany's normal supplies of raw materials would be subject to Anglo-French naval blockade.

The foreign exchange position was getting steadily worse. In 1938 Germany's trade balance was unfavourable (imports totalled 6,051.7 million RM, against exports of 5,619.1 million). This was reversed in 1939 (exports 5,222.2 million; imports 4,796.5 million) but this still left many imports that had to be paid for in foreign exchange, which was running short. By September 1939, reserves of gold and foreign exchange amounted to only 500 million RM. The annexation of Austria and Czechoslovakia had brought some temporary easing of the problem (Austria had 305 million RM in reserves of gold and foreign exchange), but in the longer term they were a liability, because both needed imports from outside Germany, and both cut down their exports after the occupation in order to meet German demands.<sup>12</sup>

## German supply problems: oil and iron ore

Under the terms of the Four-Year Plan, the production of synthetic materials and domestic German iron ore was meant to cope with such problems. The synthetics programme proved in the long run a remarkable success; but in the short term it failed to achieve the over-optimistic targets set for it in 1936. Self-sufficiency in oil within eighteen months was Hitler's aim in 1936; by 1937 the date was put off until 1940; and then it vanished into the future. Production reached 2.3 million tonnes in 1939, or approximately a quarter of estimated mobilisation needs; and 5.7 million tonnes in 1943, or about half Germany's supplies for that year. The programme was

extremely expensive, demanding heavy capital investment, a big construction programme, and the use of 4 tonnes of coal and 8–10 tonnes of lignite to produce 1 tonne of oil.<sup>13</sup> As for iron ore, German domestic production increased after 1936, but it was expensive and of poor quality, unsuitable for high-quality steel products. These two commodities, oil and iron ore, exemplified Germany's problems. In 1937 Germany imported oil from the sources given in Table 10.1,<sup>14</sup> which shows that 65 per cent of Germany's oil imports came from the American hemisphere, a pattern which had also prevailed for the previous three years.

**TABLE 10.1.** *German oil imports, 1937*

<i>Country of origin</i>	<i>Amount (tonnes)</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
Mexico and Neth. West Indies	1,796,000	42
USA	1,000,000	23
Rumania	520,000	12
USSR	301,000	7
Others	690,000	16
Total	4,307,000	

*Source:* Philippe Marguerat, *Le III Reich et le pétrole roumain, 1938–1940* (Geneva 1977), p. 19. Institut des Hautes Etudes Internationales.

These sources would be immediately cut off in time of war by naval blockade. Middle East oil was under British control; the Soviet Union seemed likely to be among Germany's enemies. This left Rumania as the only significant source of oil not subject to blockade or enemy control. With synthetic production lagging, and demand rising, the importance of Rumanian oil was increased. Total Rumanian production in 1937 was 7.1 million tonnes; but most of this went to other markets.

The Germans therefore set themselves to increase their purchases of oil from Rumania, and to secure their source of supply by tightening their hold on the Rumanian economy. Their starting-point was unfavourable. German investment in Rumania in 1938 amounted to about 1 per cent of the total share capital; British and French to about 16 per cent. In the oil industry, British, French, Belgian, and Dutch capital totalled 45 per cent of investment, German a mere 0.2 per cent. Germany's only advantage was as a market for Rumanian exports; in 1938 Germany took 26.5 per cent of Rumanian exports, against 22.4 per cent going to Britain and France together. On the other hand, only 15 per cent of Rumanian oil exports went to Germany, against 25 per cent to Britain and France together. Moreover, the possession of oil, a highly saleable commodity, put Rumania in a

stronger position than other countries of south-eastern Europe, which were much more dependent on the export of agricultural produce.<sup>15</sup>

In November 1938 Germany opened an economic offensive against Rumania, designed to secure a new trade agreement which would adapt the Rumanian economy to German needs, and secure a large increase in oil exports to Germany. The Rumanian government resisted, with encouragement from Britain, which set out in autumn 1938 to use economic weapons to obstruct German influence. In September 1938 an Anglo-Rumanian clearing agreement was signed, involving a devaluation of the Rumanian currency against sterling, leading to a sharp rise in Rumanian exports to Britain. In October, the British government agreed to buy 200,000 tonnes of Rumanian grain, despite opposition from the Treasury and the Board of Trade: the first occasion that Britain allowed political considerations to predominate in a deal of this kind. During the winter of 1938–39, the British were generally successful in blocking German efforts to increase imports of Rumanian oil. In March 1939, however, the situation changed. Germany occupied Czechoslovakia, and was able to apply heavy pressure on Rumania, leading to a trade agreement on 23 March which met nearly all their demands. From April to August 1939 Rumanian exports to Germany increased sharply, including a rise in the supply of oil.<sup>16</sup>

The British did not give up. They gave a political guarantee to Rumania in April 1939 (see below, p. 298) and made a new economic agreement in July, extending a credit of £5 million, and undertaking to buy another 200,000 tonnes of grain at the next harvest. When war broke out between Britain and Germany in September 1939, the British successfully bought up oil on the Rumanian market, to the detriment of Germany. In March 1940 Germany imported only 45,000 tonnes of oil from Rumania, while Britain took 130,000 tonnes, or nearly 44 per cent of Rumanian exports, to which France added a further 6 per cent. Germany responded with economic and political pressure, and a new German-Rumanian agreement in March 1940 put imports of oil up to 104,000 tonnes in April. Then on 27 May 1940 a further oil agreement, signed in the full flood of German military victory in western Europe, was highly favourable to Germany. By August, German imports of oil were up to 187,000 tonnes, and British down to 6,000 tonnes.<sup>17</sup>

The story is instructive. When the weapons used were economic, the conflict between Germany and Britain for Rumanian exports, and especially for oil, was evenly balanced. The definitive German success was brought about by military action, not in Rumania itself, which the Germans did not want to invade for fear of damage to the oil installations,

but in the Low Countries and France. When Germany controlled almost the whole Continent, Rumania was in no position to hold out, and British purchasing power lost all effect. The Germans wanted secure access to a large share of Rumanian oil exports: the lesson of these events was that the only certain way to attain it was by force.

German imports of iron ore posed rather different problems, with a much lower proportion of the sources being subject to naval blockade or likely enemy control. In 1938 German imports were as shown in Table 10.2.<sup>18</sup>

**TABLE 10.2.** *German iron-ore imports, 1938*

<i>Country of origin</i>	<i>Amount (in 1,000 tonnes of iron content)</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
Sweden	5,395	52.1
France	1,517	14.6
Norway	671	6.5
Newfoundland	561	5.4
Luxemburg	553	5.1
Spain	542	5.0
Spanish North Africa	398	3.8
French North Africa	340	3.3
Others	408	3.9

*Source:* Martin Fritz, *German Steel and Swedish Iron Ore, 1939–1945* (Göteborg 1974), p. 34. Gothenberg University: Institute of Economic History.

In the event of war with Britain and France, Newfoundland, France, and French North Africa would become enemy territory, and their supplies cut off. During the Spanish Civil War, Germany put much effort into establishing a share in the control of mining companies in Spain; but this proved something of a blind alley. When the Civil War was over, General Franco proved resistant to German economic domination. A German trade delegation went to Spain in June 1939, but did not secure an economic agreement until December; and even this was immediately followed by economic agreements between Spain and France (January 1940) and Britain (March 1940). Between September 1939 and June 1940 the Anglo-French blockade curtailed all German trade with Spain, and in 1940 German imports of iron ore from Spain totalled only 1,000 tonnes. By the time a land route to Spain was opened up by the fall of France, Germany had other sources of iron ore at her disposal, and even at their maximum in 1942 German imports of Spanish ore did not attain pre-war levels.<sup>19</sup>

The key to German imports of iron ore lay not in Spain but in Sweden. Here, from August 1939, Germany held many advantages. After the

Nazi–Soviet Pact of August 1939, German influence was predominant in the Baltic. When war began, the Swedish government undertook to maintain normal pre-war deliveries of iron ore to Germany, which would keep supplies at a high level, though not necessarily high enough to meet wartime demands. The British meanwhile disputed the German position by trying to buy up Swedish iron ore and by using their control over the oceanic trade routes to put pressure on the Swedish government. In terms of economic pressure, the balance as between Germany and Britain was only marginally in favour of Germany. The decisive push was given by German military action, not directly against Sweden, but by the German occupation of Norway in April–May 1940, which largely cut Sweden off from the outside world. Invasion of Sweden was unnecessary to give Germany effective control of Swedish exports. Finally, military victory in western Europe in May–June 1940 brought Germany physical control of the ore-fields of Lorraine and Luxemburg.

In both these cases, of oil and iron ore, Germany's shortage of raw materials and lack of foreign exchange with which to pay for imports was dealt with by conquest – not of the countries most involved (Rumania and Sweden), but of most of the rest of Europe, so that German predominance was firmly established.

In 1939, however, there was another solution available for problems of raw materials and food: a deal with the Soviet Union. The USSR possessed more of the commodities Germany needed than did the countries of south-east Europe; and communications with it could not be affected by naval blockade. In December 1938 the German government approached the Soviet government with a request for 300 million RM worth of raw materials and agricultural produce over the next two years, to be supplied in return for manufactured goods. In February 1939 the Soviets offered 200 million RM worth, and the talks were still going on when, on 20 May, Molotov stated that there would have to be a new political basis before they could go any further. The nature of the negotiation was changed, and the road opened to the Nazi–Soviet Pact of August.

The importance of Soviet economic resources to Germany grew plainer as the likelihood of war with the Western powers increased in the summer of 1939. War with Britain and France would mean that German imports from across the oceans would be cut off by naval blockade. In August 1939, the War Economy staff of the Wehrmacht pointed out forcibly that Germany could only be made secure against blockade through economic co-operation or amalgamation with the USSR.<sup>20</sup> There was thus a powerful economic incentive for Germany to come to an agreement with the

Soviet Union in 1939. How long the Germans would remain content with co-operation rather than seizing control of Soviet resources was another matter.

## War and economics in German policy

In sum, German policy had created a vicious circle. Hitler embarked on rapid rearmament, with the intention of gaining territory either by threat of force or by actual conquest. The rapid rearmament itself created a crisis of raw materials and foreign exchange, which made the acquisition of territory necessary to keep rearmament going. This circle might have been broken by accepting a pause in rearmament, but Hitler had no intention of taking that course. He was preparing for war, and had no intention of slowing down. But the evidence, carefully reviewed by Richard Overly and Ian Kershaw, does not indicate that the problems of the German economy actually drove Hitler into war in 1939. Economic growth had slowed down, but the economy remained basically stable, and there was no danger of unrest among the workforce. Hitler's basic motivation for going to war was political: 'The final war crisis was a product of diplomatic and political forces largely detached from economic calculation.'<sup>21</sup>

Even so, there remained a link between economics and war, because Hitler maintained the long-term aim of resolving Germany's economic problems by territorial expansion – in simple terms, by conquest. And in the event, when the Germans went to war, they found that the successful use of force dealt with their immediate economic problems. They secured access to Rumanian oil and Swedish iron ore. They conquered the ore-fields of Lorraine. They captured stocks of all kinds of materials, including large quantities of oil. They gained control of a vast pool of manpower – already by August 1940 about a million foreigners were working in Germany. They dealt with their foreign exchange problem either by straightforward plunder or by compelling occupied countries to accept an overvaluation of the Reichsmark and by fixing their own prices for commodities. In France, for example, Germany levied occupation costs of 20 million RM per day, with the mark overvalued against the French franc by some 50 per cent in terms of the dollar exchange rate of each currency in June 1940; and the Germans were then able to pay for their imports from France without difficulty. At least in the short run, war was made to pay.

The great depression unsettled Europe, and set the great powers in pursuit of self-sufficiency. Recovery in the late 1930s did not restore harmony, and



indeed produced its own difficulties in the form of widespread balance of payments problems. In most states, however, economic difficulties did not lead towards war. In France and Britain in particular, economic factors held back the pace of rearmament, and both these countries believed that war would be economically damaging. Much the same was true of Italy, where neutrality was likely to be more profitable than war. Only for Germany did it seem likely that war would pay in an economic sense; and then only on the assumption that the Nazi rearmament programme was to be pursued unchecked, and the balance of payments problems which it created should be resolved by force. The decisions which lay behind these assumptions were matters of politics rather than economics.

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# The Role of Strategy and Armed Force

There is a close relationship between foreign policy and strategy. In principle, the two should be kept in line with one another, so that it is certain that an important interest in foreign policy can be sustained by force if necessary, and that the armed services are able to perform the tasks which foreign policy may impose upon them. If this alignment is not maintained, so that for example foreign policy commitments far exceed the military capacity to sustain them, or foreign policy demands offensive action of an army capable only of defence, then trouble follows. Moreover, armed strength was closely linked to economic capacity and public morale, so that 'the yardstick of power had become a nation's ability to mobilise its whole economy and population for total war.'<sup>1</sup>

In the case of states considering going to war, these matters assume a sharper and more crucial form. A state may be encouraged to resort to force by confidence in its armed strength and expectation of victory. Equally, the fear of defeat and destruction may often deter a country from risking war. In most circumstances, a precondition for war is that each side believes that it can win, or at least avoid defeat; though in desperate straits governments may decide that on certain issues their country must fight, and the armed forces must simply conform, whatever they think of the chances of success.

These issues had a powerful effect on international relations during the 1930s. The actions of states were frequently influenced by the condition of their armed forces and by calculations of the likely outcome of a conflict. The next two chapters examine the armed forces of the principal European powers, and the influence of strategic issues on foreign policy.

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## CHAPTER ELEVEN

# Armed Forces, Strategy, and Foreign Policy (1): France and Britain

### Foreign Policy and War

War has long been regarded as an instrument of policy. If certain aims are considered vital and cannot be attained by diplomatic, economic, or other means, then at some stage force must be used to secure them. It is a less familiar idea that peace, as well as war, is linked with power and the presence of force. Raymond Aron has described peace as

*the more or less lasting suspension of violent modes of rivalry between political units. Peace is said to prevail when the relations between nations do not involve the military forms of struggle. But since these peaceful relations occur within the shadow of past battles and in the fear or the expectation of future ones, the principle of peace . . . is not different in nature from that of wars: peace is based upon power. . . .<sup>1</sup>*

These concepts were still soundly based in the 1920s and 1930s and were indeed particularly relevant in the period between 1938 and 1940, when the borderline between peace and war was blurred and the two merged into one another. But in many minds they had ceased to carry conviction. People were indeed in the shadow of past battles; and it was reasonable to ask whether warfare of the 1914–18 kind was entirely serviceable as an instrument of policy. Were the costs and potential dangers of war – the mobilisation of manpower and the economy, the casualties both military and civilian, the possibility of total disruption in politics and society – commensurate with the aims of policy? Frequently, it

did not seem so. If the interest at stake was not immediately crucial, then the price likely to be demanded by war was hard to equate with the objects of policy. What was the use, for example, of fighting another war like that of 1914–18 to prevent the frontier between Czechoslovakia and Germany being moved from one line to another? The idea of war as an instrument of policy was in such circumstances unconvincing.

At the same time, the idea of war and peace as a continuum, and that peace as much as war was dependent on military power, was repugnant to many minds. The First World War appeared as a gigantic aberration, the nemesis which followed the granting of too much power and too many resources to military men. Peace was seen as entirely different from war, in legal, practical, political, and perhaps above all in moral terms. There was a strong belief that peace, far from being based on power, could only be secured by the limitation or even elimination of military force.

Such views were at their strongest in France and Britain, the principal European victors of 1918. In both countries, the predominant weight of both opinion and sentiment was opposed to the sterner views of the relation between war and policy, and the dependence of peace upon power. Peace was assumed to be the natural relationship between states; there was a strong hope that it could somehow be made self-sustaining; and the idea of war as a means of policy was rejected as both irrational and repugnant. Professional military men had lost much of their prestige and influence. The two great civilian leaders of the First World War, Clemenceau and Lloyd George, had little respect for generals, as Lloyd George made clear in his widely read war memoirs. It was true that the French and British armies had emerged victorious, and their leaders enjoyed a moment of glory at the victory parades of 1919; but the conviction grew that they had not waged the war efficiently, imaginatively, or with sufficient regard for the lives of their men. They had been surprised by the problems of modern warfare, and had failed to master them. Even when they had won, there was no agreement as to how victory had been achieved. Was it a victory for attrition, wearing down the German Army, as the orthodox western-front generals advocated? Was it the result of the naval blockade and economic warfare? Was it a success for new weapons and techniques, notably the tank? Was it simply a victory for the Americans? What *were* the lessons of the Great War?

In the post-war period, generals and admirals were uneasily aware that they were in an era of new machines and new techniques, whose full significance had not emerged. The German submarine campaign of 1917 had inflicted devastating losses on merchant shipping. But had the

submarine then been mastered by the convoy system? It was not fully clear. The tank had made its appearance, with sometimes startling effects; yet it was a primitive weapon, slow, cumbersome, and much subject to mechanical failure. Some theorists were willing to make great claims for it as the weapon of the future, round which armies should be built; but others were sceptical, and thought in terms of infantry, guns, and a balanced force. As for air power, the most dramatic new development of the First World War, sweeping prophecies were made by its advocates. The Italian writer Giulio Douhet, in a book published in 1921, claimed that aircraft would decide the next war in a few days, by bombing attacks on both civilian and military targets. Governments would be compelled by their peoples to sue for peace.<sup>2</sup> In Britain, Hugh Trenchard, founder of the Royal Air Force and Chief of the Air Staff 1919–29, made equally strong claims, both out of genuine belief and out of the need to promote his new service. Yet the evidence on which these vast claims were based was limited and fragile. The British Independent Air Force, set up in 1918 as a bomber force, dropped only 550 tonnes of bombs in 239 raids between June and November 1918, with results which could be described as no more than a nuisance to the enemy. In German raids on London by Zeppelins and aircraft, only 1,127 people were killed, though the psychological and political effects were far greater than such numbers might imply.<sup>3</sup> Projections made from such evidence were of dubious value. Uncertainty prevailed, and fear of the new weapon often had free rein.

Technical uncertainty was accompanied by a new political and economic climate. Disarmament was the watchword of the day. Even the Royal Navy, the embodiment of British power and the focus of national pride, was subjected to international disarmament agreements, the Treaty of Washington (1922) for capital ships, and the Treaty of London (1930) for cruisers. While the Geneva Disarmament Conference of 1932–34 was in session, neither the British nor the French government felt that it could increase any of its service estimates. The whole position of the armed forces in a political climate dominated by the idea of disarmament was one of considerable difficulty. The same was true of the economic climate. Even in the comparative prosperity of the late 1920s the services, in both France and Britain, were subjected to strict budgetary limitations; and in the period of the depression controls were very tight. The service departments were well accustomed to the struggle between themselves, as spenders of public funds, and the Ministry of Finance and the Treasury, as the keepers of the purse. At no time had the services been accustomed to a free hand in financial terms; but in the 1920s and most of the 1930s they



were subjected to far tighter restrictions than before 1914, when their prestige was higher and views of their role and value were firmer and clearer.

Yet among all these uncertainties and difficulties, the armed forces were still expected by their governments to fulfil traditional roles. They had to ensure the safety of the national territory; protect and keep order in the empire; and secure the sea-lanes that linked the two and carried sea-borne trade. These tasks assumed different proportions for France and Britain. For the French, the defence of the homeland was by far the greatest demand on resources, and the French Army had to plan for a Continental war before all else. The empire, important as it was, came second, and sea-borne trade third. For the British, the homeland had to be defended, which was the task of the navy and air defence. The sea-lanes were equally crucial, because without them industry would run down and the population starve. The army's major task was the imperial commitment, notably in India and the Middle East. (It is a striking fact that in 1938 there were more British troops deployed in Palestine to cope with an Arab revolt than were available to be despatched to France if war arose out of the Czechoslovakian crisis.) No government proposed that these tasks should be abandoned; only that they should be performed with limited resources and in an atmosphere of scepticism about the effectiveness and morality of the use of force.

All these considerations affected the development of the French and British armed forces, their strategic doctrines, and their influence on foreign policy. The services (with the exception of the new air arm) were much shaken in their self-confidence by the experience of 1914–18. Their strategic doctrines had to cope with changes in weaponry and techniques of war whose effects were uncertain and little understood, in political circumstances which demanded simultaneous obeisance to the new concepts of disarmament and to the old demands of domestic and imperial security. In these circumstances, it is not surprising, or even remarkable, that the advice given by French and British service chiefs to their governments tended to err on the side of caution.

## France

### The French armed forces

These problems were much in evidence in the development of the French armed forces between the wars. The basis of French military power remained the army, which was mainly raised by a system of compulsory service, with contingents of conscripts passing through a period of training

with the army and then going into the reserve, to be mobilised in case of need. There was also a force of regular soldiers, including the officer corps and most of the non-commissioned officers. Like nearly all armies based on conscription, the French Army was therefore made up of three elements: the regulars, conscripts serving their time with the colours, and reservists, back in civilian life but liable to recall.

During the 1920s, the period of military service in France was progressively reduced. Immediately after the victory of 1918 it stood at three years; in 1921 it was reduced to two years; in 1923 to eighteen months; and in 1928 to one year. At that time, the annual contingent of conscripts was 240,000, and the regular element was fixed at 106,000. Because of the shortfall in the birth-rate during the First World War, it was easily predictable that in 1936 and for four years to come, the annual contingent would amount on average to only 120,000 – half the number provided for by the military law of 1928.<sup>4</sup> In March 1935 the Chamber of Deputies therefore amended the law to extend the period of service to two years, starting with the class to be called up in October. By October 1937, the conscript contingent would again reach 240,000.

To bring the army up to its full strength required the mobilisation of the reserves, which took millions of men out of their civilian employment, with all the economic and social disruption that that entailed. This process did not at once produce a fully effective fighting force, for many of the reservists required a prolonged period of training, and the whole army had to undergo a difficult adjustment. All this must be remembered when we consider the crises of 1936, 1938, and 1939, when the French either contemplated or carried out general mobilisation. It was a process which on the one hand disrupted the social and economic life of the country, and on the other produced for a time an army which was in the throes of reorganisation and retraining. It was not an easy course to take; and in some circumstances it might not prove effective.

The total mobilised strength of the French Army in September 1939 was 110 divisions, of several kinds – infantry, Alpine, fortress, cavalry, light mechanised, armoured, North African and colonial. This army was in the process of being re-equipped. In September 1936, the Popular Front government, despite its strong anti-militarist tendencies, judged the position of the country to be so serious as to demand a substantial armaments programme. A scheme was accepted for the ordering of 6,600 anti-tank guns (mostly the small 25 millimetre gun, but some 600 larger); and 3,200 tanks, mostly light, but including over 400 heavy tanks (Type B), and over 300 mediums (Somua), which were both very good, well-armed vehicles.

There was at this stage little problem with finance – some 31 billion francs were spent on rearmament between September 1936 and September 1939; but there were problems in French industry, which could not immediately cope with a flood of orders. There were also many difficulties within the army itself: for example, it took four years to move from a first proposal to modify the Somua medium tank to the actual placing of an order. But both army and industry made great efforts, and in September 1939 the French had a total strength of just over 4,500 tanks, including many of good quality.<sup>5</sup>

What was this force intended to do, and what strategic doctrines did it profess? From the end of the First World War, it was the working assumption of the French high command that they would at some time have to fight another war with Germany. They recognised that in such a war France would be at a disadvantage in terms of numbers and industrial capacity. France therefore would need allies, and must think in terms of a long war, in which the German economy could be undermined by blockade and outmatched in production as it had been in 1914–18. At the start of a war, France would have to stand on the defensive, with no repetition of the disastrous assault of 1914 in Alsace–Lorraine. Offensive operations could be considered only in the long term, when Germany would be overcome by the forces of a great coalition.

The necessity for a prolonged defensive found physical expression in the Maginot Line, a great system of fortifications on the Franco-German border, which was discussed from 1925 onwards and decided upon in 1929. It was not strictly speaking a continuous line, but a system of fortified zones, the strongest of which faced northwards from the Rhine to Luxemburg and the southernmost corner of Belgium. A series of forts and blockhouses ran along the Rhine, south to the Swiss border. The fortifications were not extended along the Franco-Belgian border to the sea, partly because the terrain was difficult and the cost would have been very great, but also because until 1936 France was allied to Belgium, and could scarcely fortify their common frontier, with the clear implication that in the event of war the Belgians would be left to their fate.

After the disaster of 1940, the Maginot Line was much criticised; but at the time its main purposes were entirely sensible. Psychologically, it offered the promise of using steel and concrete to save lives – an appealing prospect after the blood-letting of 1914–18. Economically, it protected Alsace and Lorraine, with their deposits of iron ore. Strategically, it was intended to act as a ‘force multiplier’, in that it could be held by comparatively small forces, leaving most of the French Army free for operations elsewhere, and particularly for an advance into Belgium. On the debit side,

the Maginot Line was a very expensive undertaking, which consumed an increasing share of the defence budget in the early 1930s. But on balance the case for the Maginot Line was strong.<sup>6</sup>

In principle, the need for mobility and a concept of offensive warfare was appreciated in the French Army in the 1930s. In 1930 General Weygand, the Chief of Staff, began to mechanise a number of divisions, and set out to form a light armoured division. In 1933 he insisted that the army must have manoeuvrable forces as well as fortress troops. In 1936 a new set of strategic instructions for the army emphasised the importance of taking the offensive, and laid down that tanks should be used in independent units as well as in conjunction with the infantry. The creation of armoured divisions was under discussion in 1937, though only one such formation was in existence by September 1939. The ideas of attack and manoeuvre were alive in the manuals and in terms of theory. In practice, they were heavily outweighed by commitment to the defensive. The investment made in the Maginot Line, and the public attention that was focused upon it, created a weight of assumptions from which the army could not escape. The whole force of French emotions, more powerful than theory, was concentrated upon defence. Moreover, the sort of army produced by the one-year service of the early 1930s was inadequately trained for rapid offensive operations. Despite the theories and the manuals, the French Army was in practice committed to the defensive. The consequences for French foreign policy were far-reaching.

What of the new air arm? An Air Ministry was created in 1928 to administer the air forces, but for operational purposes they remained under the control of the army and navy; and an independent air force was set up only in 1933. At that stage, it possessed just over 1,000 first-line aircraft, with a similar number in reserve, but its planes dated from the 1920s. Efforts at re-equipment began in 1933 with a scheme (Plan I) to produce just over 1,000 new aircraft. From 1936 onwards, other schemes followed with bewildering rapidity. Plan II (November 1936) aimed at the delivery of 2,400 aircraft by June 1940. By January 1938 the Air Ministry had already reached Plan V, which set a target of 2,600 first-line aircraft, plus reserves, by April 1941.

Targets were one thing, production quite another. Official figures for annual deliveries of aircraft to the French Air Force oscillated round the 500 mark between 1935 and 1938, before attaining over 2,000 in 1939. The air force came low in the government's order of priorities, receiving only a small proportion of the defence budget up to 1938.<sup>7</sup> The aircraft industry was still in many ways craft-based, with a multiplicity of small

firms. (There were twenty separate firms making cockpits, for example.) The Popular Front nationalised the industry, with improvements which were marginal at best. A change to mass production was begun in 1938, but was slow to get under way.

The Air Ministry programmes, therefore, produced only small results up to 1939. In September 1939 the French Air Force had about 700 fighters in squadron service, with another 450 in reserve; but only just over 300 were of modern type, and these were of poorer quality than their German or British counterparts. The bomber force was in even worse condition: 125 in squadron service, with another 50 in reserve, all slow and obsolescent. No modern bomber was in sight, and effectively the French had no bombing capacity.<sup>8</sup>

No clear doctrine had been developed on whether the main role of the air force was to act as an auxiliary to the army and navy, or whether it was to operate independently. A bomber manual of 1939 referred both to intervention in a land battle and to attacks behind enemy lines; but since the aircraft necessary for either sort of operation did not yet exist, this was of slight significance.

The late 1930s thus saw the French Air Force at its lowest ebb. It was in the first years of existence as an independent service, and without a coherent strategic doctrine. Its programmes of re-equipment had yet to produce results. For a few years, which could scarcely have come at a worse time, French air power virtually ceased to exist.

The navy, on the other hand, was strong and of high quality. Its five battleships were elderly, but most of the other ships were modern and powerful, including two new battle-cruisers, an aircraft-carrier, 18 cruisers, over 50 destroyers, and over 70 submarines. The main fleet was designed to match Italy in the Mediterranean; and in the 1930s the French battle-cruisers were also designed to be crushingly superior to the German 'pocket battleships'. The navy was the best of the three French armed services. Assuming co-operation with the Royal Navy, the prospect of war at sea presented France with the least of its problems in the 1930s; though it was far from certain that there would be enough strength to cope with a simultaneous threat from Japan in the Far East, Italy in the Mediterranean, and Germany in the North Sea and Atlantic.

## French strategy and foreign policy

In the late 1930s, then, the French had a strong navy, a very weak air force, and an army which was strong in numbers but was essentially limited to a

defensive role. The consequences which followed from this situation for French foreign policy were profound, though they were not always faced with honesty or clarity. Much of French foreign policy between the wars was in principle based on a network of alliance with east European states – Poland, Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia, and Rumania. The hope was that these allies would help to protect France against Germany; but in practice it was more likely that France would have to protect them. To help Poland or Czechoslovakia against a German attack, France's only move would be an offensive across the German border in the west – yet how could this be done with an army which was defensive in its nature, and how did it fit in with a concept of war based on a long conflict, not a sharp attack? In fact, it could not be done unless the French Army was completely reorganised. Foreign policy and strategy were completely out of step, as was painfully clear in the crises over Czechoslovakia in 1938 and Poland in 1939. The problem of bringing them into step was beyond the capacity of French governments to solve. To reorganise the army to provide a force capable of rapid offensive action was impossible on social and political grounds. (De Gaulle's suggestion for a professional élite armoured force would have put too much power into the hands of the officer corps and was politically unacceptable.) To scrap the east European alliances, once made, and resign all influence in that area, was almost impossible in terms of French prestige and self-respect, though they came very close to this drastic step in autumn 1938. This problem was fundamental, insoluble, and fatal.

The French tried to improve their parlous strategic position by seeking new allies against Germany. An Italian alliance appeared to offer advantages. Italy's military strength and geographical position were of great importance to France: General Gamelin said repeatedly during 1935 that it depended on the attitude of Italy whether or not fifteen French divisions could be stationed on the German rather than the Italian border. There were also common frontiers between the two countries' colonies in Africa, where Italian friendship or hostility could affect French interests. The Franco-Italian military agreement of June 1935 was thus seen as a great coup. The three French Chiefs of Staff went to Rome to conclude this agreement, which provided for a mutual guarantee of common frontiers in the Alps and Africa, and in the event of war with Germany the despatch by Italy of nine divisions to France, and by France of a corps to the Italian–Yugoslav border. There was also a separate agreement between the air staffs, made in May and supplemented by further conversations in Paris in September, providing for co-operation in the event of German air attack on either country.

The satisfaction with which the French staffs greeted these agreements was matched by their chagrin when the Ethiopian crisis of 1935–36, and in particular the British insistence on sanctions against Italy, virtually destroyed them. For some time the French hoped that something might be salvaged, and some part of the agreements revived (Mussolini at least referred to them as being still in existence); but this proved vain. In 1936 Gamelin reflected grimly that fifteen French divisions which might have faced Germany must now be deployed in the Alps: would the British, he wondered, make up the difference?

French views of the importance of Italy were to some extent based on overestimates of the strength of the Italian services, and especially the air force; but even so, considerable strategic advantages had been lost as the price of maintaining good relations with Britain. A British alliance was the crucial element in the French scenario of a long war to be won by an economically superior coalition. In these expectations, British sea power and economic potential played vital roles, outweighing the paucity and uncertainty of a British military intervention on the Continent. In April 1936 the French Deputy Chief of Staff, General Schweisguth, on a visit to London, reported that, if the British decided to intervene in a Continental war at all, which was not certain, they might be able to send two divisions to the Continent, without air support. There would be a two-week delay between the decision to send them and their actual departure; and then another week or two before they could be operational.

The British Army was therefore a very doubtful asset. But in 1938 and 1939, as the French became acutely conscious of their weakness in the air, they began to place increasing reliance on the support of the RAF. In Air Staff talks from November 1938 onwards, the French sought promises of the rapid despatch of British aircraft to France in the event of war. The British, through their own weakness, had less to offer than the French wanted; but the French need was so great that they were thankful for small mercies.

Strategic considerations played less part than might have been expected in French relations with other allies or potential allies. Military contacts with Poland languished from 1934 until the eve of war in spring 1939; and the French Air Staff did not speak to their Polish opposite numbers between September 1937 and May 1939, when the French made a hollow promise to base five bomber groups in Poland in the event of war. Military contacts with the Soviet Union were inhibited by ideological considerations, by service reluctance to give the Soviets any information, and by the purges, which cast doubt on the effectiveness of the Red Army. The French

Army had conflicting reports on the fighting capacity of the Red Army after the purges; the air staff retained a good opinion of the Soviet Air Force; but in any case close co-operation was not pursued.

In all these matters, the dominant features were France's need for allies, and the considerations forced upon her by the concept of a long war starting with a defensive phase. Britain was the key ally, because of her economic strength, sea power, and long-term military potential. In French eyes, the British were exasperatingly short-sighted about European affairs; they had to be cajoled, threatened, or deceived into a Continental commitment; but as long as Germany was the enemy, they could not be dispensed with. When it appeared (as it often did) that in the late 1930s France yielded too much of the initiative to Britain, and appeared to follow the British even though it was a case of the blind leading the sighted, we must remember this fundamental strategic background.

All this presupposed that Germany was the enemy; and the other great influence of strategic thinking upon French policy came from French estimates of German power. In the late 1930s, these tended to be pessimistic, exaggerating German strength. This was particularly the case in March 1936, at the time of the German occupation of the demilitarised zone in the Rhineland. The *Deuxième Bureau* (French military intelligence) produced what proved to be generally accurate information on the German Army as a whole, and on the forces which entered the Rhineland – seven divisions and a total of about 60,000 men, including some armed police units. But when the Army General Staff reported to the government, it added to these figures about 235,000 from paramilitary formations (SA, SS, Labour Front), saying that these constituted another fifteen divisions, though the *Deuxième Bureau* had specifically mentioned these men and considered their military value practically nil. It is not clear why this was done – it may well have been simply a 'worst case' appreciation to be on the safe side; or it may have been designed to discourage any pressure for an attack on the Rhineland, for which the army had no plans ready. In any case, it produced an extremely pessimistic estimate of German strength.

By 1937 the *Deuxième Bureau* had grasped the developing German conception of a war of movement, using tanks and close air support. After the German occupation of Czechoslovakia in March 1939, French military intelligence reported that the Germans had made a great haul of equipment, including 600 very good tanks and 4,000 guns.<sup>9</sup> (In the campaign of 1940, when France was defeated, three of the ten German Panzer divisions were mainly equipped with Czech-built tanks.) Another report of March 1939 assessed that Germany could concentrate 30 divisions in the west in



three to four days, and could overrun Holland and Belgium in a day or two. The events of 1940 were to show such estimates to be a shade pessimistic, but not too wide of the mark. In July 1939 the French General Staff put the number of German divisions on general mobilisation at 120 to 130. The actual figure was 103. The French could muster 86 divisions, so the estimate made the disproportion of strength rather greater than it actually was.<sup>10</sup>

As to the air, from 1937 onwards French Air Force Intelligence had a strong tendency to overestimate the strength of the *Luftwaffe*. In that year, French intelligence reports were roughly correct on German aircraft production, but too high on aircraft in squadron service. In summer 1938 the French estimated German operational strength at 2,760 aircraft, mostly of recent design, which was certainly an exaggeration. But even though the French overrated German strength, they knew their own weakness only too well. Peter Jackson, in his detailed study of the subject, writes starkly that: 'Unbelievable as it may seem, in September of 1938 the French air force possessed less than 50 modern warplanes.'<sup>11</sup> Such a figure spoke for itself.

It might have been expected from all this that the French military leaders would advise their government against a war with Germany, on the grounds that it would invite disaster. But in 1939 this was not the case. The French General Staff continued to believe in the superiority of the defence over the attack, and advised the government that the army was prepared to protect the country, sustained by the fortifications of the Maginot Line, by recent progress in rearmament, and by the hope of British assistance, which became steadily more likely as the year went on. The German Army was technically excellent, but its morale was thought to be dubious. Daladier received reports on German public opinion daily, and built up misleading hopes of unrest and disaffection among the people. The Poles were expected to hold out for some months; and if Italy came in on Germany's side, France could take the offensive against her. When ministers met military leaders for a review of the situation on 23 August 1939, with the Polish crisis boiling up, the Air Minister estimated that French and British fighter strength was roughly equal to that of Germany and Italy (which, surprisingly enough, was correct); though the commander of Home Air Defence said bluntly that he was not ready for war. Gamelin estimated that Polish resistance would keep Germany occupied until spring 1940, by which time British forces would begin to arrive in strength. On the whole, it was a confident review, and there was no hesitation on military grounds in supporting a declaration of war on behalf of Poland.

There was considerable inconsistency between these views and the earlier pessimistic trend of French estimates of German strength. When put on the spot, the French military leaders were naturally reluctant to say that they had failed in their duty and the country could not be defended. But the key element in the advice tendered by the French soldiers was that they were ready for *defence*. This was what they had been preparing for, and they believed that their preparations were adequate. They recognised that they were open to air attack; but with British help, and if the process of mobilisation could be safely completed, German bombing was not likely to prove fatal. At the end of August 1939 therefore, French military opinion was sufficiently confident to accept war, though it was by no means eager for it. It was a somewhat surprising conclusion to a decade of weakness and self-doubt; but when it came to the point the soldiers believed they could do the defensive part of their job. To take the offensive would be another matter; but they did not intend to do that for a long time.

## Great Britain

### The British armed forces

Britain was, by long tradition and in accordance with her interests as an island state, primarily a maritime power. During the 1920s and 1930s, the Royal Navy remained one of the strongest fleets in the world, roughly comparable with that of the USA. It had serious problems: financial restrictions; the terms of various naval agreements, which affected the numbers, tonnage, and design of warships; the unresolved question of the role of air power in maritime war; and world-wide commitments to protect trade and empire, which had grown beyond the unaided strength of the navy even in its palmy days. New construction of warships was limited, and the fleet was impressive in size but ageing in composition.

In September 1939, the Royal Navy consisted of 12 battleships and 3 battle-cruisers, the newest of which dated from 1927, and most from the First World War. There were 6 aircraft-carriers, only one of them new; 68 cruisers and 201 destroyers and sloops including a larger proportion of newer ships; and 69 submarines. Substantial programmes for the expansion of the fleet were adopted in 1936 and following years; so that at the outbreak of war 5 battleships, 6 carriers, 21 cruisers, and 50 destroyers were being built.<sup>12</sup>

The British Army was the only European army made up entirely of regular soldiers, with no conscripted element. (Conscription had been

introduced in 1916, but abandoned in 1920.) This produced a force 197,000 strong in January 1938, including the British component of the Indian Army; to which should be added another 190,000 Indian troops. The total strength was thus 387,000, which at first sight compared favourably with the size of the French Army actually with the colours. But there were none of the reserves which were automatically produced by a system of conscription (some were provided by the Territorial Army); and the army was widely dispersed, its major tasks being imperial defence and policing. In January 1938 its distribution was as in Table 11.1.<sup>13</sup>

**TABLE 11.1.** *Distribution of the British Army, 1938*

<i>Station</i>	<i>Approx. total</i>	<i>Infantry battalions</i>
Home	107,000	64
India and Burma	55,000	47
<i>plus Indian Army</i>	190,000	
Middle East and Mediterranean	21,000	18
Far East	12,000	8
West Indies	2,000	1

*Source:* Brian Bond, *British Military Policy between Two World Wars* (Oxford 1980), pp. 118–19. OUP.

In the crisis of September 1938 Britain was in a position to send only two divisions to France in the event of war. When war came in 1939, four divisions were sent as the basis of the new British Expeditionary Force, fewer in number and less well trained than its predecessor of 1914. The French put 84 divisions into the field, and the Germans 103; which puts the British military contribution into perspective.

In February 1939, under the pressure of events in Europe, the British government decided in principle to create a field force of thirty-two divisions twelve months after the outbreak of a war in Europe. This was, of course, a decision which would take a very long time to implement, in terms both of manpower and equipment; and it had little immediate effect on British armed strength. The same was true of the decision, announced in April 1939 and put into legislation in May, to introduce conscription in peacetime, for the first time in British history. It was a very limited measure: full-time service was to be for six months only, and 80,000 out of the 200,000 conscripts expected each year were to go into anti-aircraft units; conscripts were not to serve abroad unless war broke out. The first contingent was not called up until August 1939, so the measure had little practical effect before war broke out.

The Royal Air Force was the newest of the three services, but in the 1930s, with the acute fear of bombing which prevailed in both civilian and military circles, it attained a position of priority, so that in 1938 and 1939 expenditure by the Air Ministry was greater than that by either the Admiralty or the War Office.<sup>14</sup> The size of the RAF was kept down in the 1920s, and no increase was embarked on until 1934, when it became clear that the Geneva Disarmament Conference had failed. There then followed, in rapid succession, a series of plans for expansion, each setting a new and higher target. The actual growth in numbers was less than that aspired to, but still considerable. In March 1934 the first-line strength of the RAF at home was 605 aircraft. At the end of September 1938, at the time of the Munich crisis, it had reached 1,102; and at the beginning of September 1939, 1,377. (Aircraft stationed overseas, and with the Fleet Air Arm, raised these totals to 977, 1,642, and 1,996 respectively.)<sup>15</sup> This increase in numbers was accompanied by an improvement in quality, so that by September 1939 most of the fighters were new Hurricanes and Spitfires, though the bomber force was still largely made up of older types.

The considerations governing the strength of the British armed forces were partly the tasks they were expected to perform and the strategic doctrines professed by the different services; but still more decisive were the constraints of finance and economics. The first question was one of budgeting: how much of the government's resources were to go to the armed forces, and how were those sums to be divided between them? In August 1919, the Cabinet laid down that the service departments, in preparing their estimates of expenditure, should assume that there would be no major war for ten years – the 'Ten-Year Rule'. In 1928, while Churchill was Chancellor of the Exchequer, it was agreed that subject to review once a year, the ten-year period should be extended on a day-to-day basis. In March 1932 the Chiefs of Staff recommended that, as a result of the Japanese occupation of Manchuria in 1931–32, the ten-year assumption should be abandoned. The Cabinet accepted this in principle, but there was no actual increase in expenditure until the Disarmament Conference broke down in 1934. A five-year rearmament programme was agreed on in February 1936; and in 1937 the Treasury imposed a system of financial 'rationing' to settle priorities between the three services. In April 1938 the Royal Air Force was allowed to order as many aircraft as industry would build, without financial rationing; and after the Munich crisis of September 1938 rationing went into abeyance for the other two services as well.

Budgetary restrictions were only part of the constraints on rearmament. Small armaments industries faced problems of manpower, factory

space, and machine tools if they were to expand rapidly. Such problems might have been dealt with more effectively if the government had been willing to impose its political will and transfer to a command economy, but this it would not do. Both in accordance with its own economic ideas and in deference to the wishes of industrialists, the British government tried to avoid controls and direction, even when civilian demand impeded the process of rearmament. The government also moved very carefully in relation to the trade unions, whose restrictive practices obstructed change, particularly in the aircraft industry. Above all, the government believed that the demands of rearmament had to be kept in balance with the normal needs of the economy. It was necessary to avoid inflation, and so to limit borrowings; to maintain a satisfactory balance of trade, and so to keep up exports; and to be prepared to sustain the effort of rearmament for a long period. Even in the event of war, the accepted wisdom was that victory would go to the country with the strongest economy and the greatest staying power. A stable economy was therefore seen as the fourth arm in warfare, which might actually be weakened by over-hasty rearmament.

In all these calculations, the position of the USA loomed ominously in the background. In the previous war, only heavy borrowing had enabled the British to sustain their imports from America, but this was now excluded under the American neutrality legislation. To sustain a great war without imports from the USA was impossible; but in the late 1930s it was equally impossible to borrow dollars to pay for those imports. The British faced an impasse.

Economic restraints did much to decide the size of the armed forces Britain possessed. What were these forces intended to do, and what strategic doctrines informed their development? Long tradition laid three tasks upon the navy: to bring the enemy's fleet to battle; to protect the country's sea-borne trade; and to strangle the enemy's economy by means of blockade. In a war against Germany, the enemy's surface fleet was not expected in the late 1930s to pose a serious problem. Sea-borne trade was crucial, and it was hoped that convoys would succeed in protecting it. Blockade (recently given the more elevated name of economic warfare) was expected to be a crippling, if slow-acting, offensive weapon, cutting off German supplies of vital raw materials, and so opening the way to victory. The problem with all these tasks was that there might be two or three enemies – Germany, Italy, and Japan were likely opponents; and the fleet's strength would then be stretched far too thinly over the globe.

The role of the army was mainly imperial, as its dispositions bore witness. If Britain were to be involved in a European war, there was a powerful school of thought that she should proceed on a policy of 'limited

liability', and engage only small land forces on the Continent, putting her main effort into sea and air warfare and into the economic sustenance of a coalition. This was seen as a return to traditional British strategy after the costly and largely fruitless aberration of the First World War. A classic statement of this view was put to the Cabinet by Neville Chamberlain on 5 May 1937, just before he became Prime Minister: 'He did not believe that we could, or ought, or, in the event, would be allowed by the country, to enter a Continental war with the intention of fighting on the same lines as in the last.'<sup>16</sup> A paper by Thomas Inskip, Minister for the Co-ordination of Defence, accepted by the Cabinet in December 1937, placed British strategic objectives in order of priority: (1) the protection of the home country against air attack; (2) the safety of the trade routes; (3) the defence of British territories overseas; and (4) co-operation in the defence of the territories of any allies we may have in war.<sup>17</sup>

The attraction of such a strategy from a British point of view is clear enough. For the French, however, who were to be assisted on a basis of limited liability, the prospect was far from attractive. They would be expected to sustain the battle on land, and to pay the price in blood. In December 1938, an officer on General Gamelin's staff told the British military attaché in Paris that France needed from Britain 'un effort du sang', an effort of blood – an ominous phrase, which grated unhappily on British ears.<sup>18</sup>

The doctrine of limited liability undermined French confidence in Britain, and helps to explain their sense of grievance against the British at this time. But it was also highly questionable whether it had any true advantage for the British themselves. In a reappraisal of the strategic position on 20 February 1939, when the threat posed by German power had become more immediate, the Chiefs of Staff pointed out that it was hard to say how the security of the British Isles could be maintained if France was forced to surrender, and therefore even self-defence 'may have to include a share in the land defence of French territory'.<sup>19</sup> It was at this point that the Cabinet decided in principle to create a large army of thirty-two divisions in the event of war on the Continent. They recognised, doubtless belatedly, that even in terms of British security and self-interest there was no alternative. A Continental commitment, not limited liability, was the only realistic military policy.

The Royal Air Force, like the army, had an important imperial role, as a cheap and effective method of imposing order and conducting frontier warfare. In European affairs in the 1930s, its main function was linked to a theory of deterrence: that the existence of a bomber force would deter another country (i.e. Germany) from attacking Britain. This theory was not backed by the possession of adequate aircraft, or reliable means of

bombing accurately; but it was clung to for want of anything better to replace it. The expansion schemes of 1934–38 provided for a greater proportion of bombers than fighters, and this began to be changed in 1938 mainly because fighters were cheaper to produce than bombers. The government was also able to claim that, by building up a fighter force, it was doing something to protect the civilian population against air attack; though it could not mention the development of radar, which for the first time held out the possibility of intercepting the enemy bomber in flight.

The Air Staff's emphasis on the power of the bomber coincided with and reinforced a widespread popular fear of bombing attack. In October 1936 the Joint Planning Committee of the Chiefs of Staff (on which the RAF representative was Group Captain Arthur Harris, later the head of Bomber Command during the war) submitted a report which argued that by 1939 Germany would be able to deliver a series of knock-out air attacks on Britain from the first day of a war. It estimated that there might be 20,000 casualties in London in the first 24 hours, rising to 150,000 within a week. (In the event civilian casualties in Britain during the whole of the Second World War, from bombing and other bombardment, amounted to just under 147,000.) This was a 'worst case' scenario, and of course the Chiefs of Staff were not averse to giving the government a jolt which might produce more funds; but even so they broadly accepted the picture of danger from the air.<sup>20</sup> Naturally enough, politicians who saw the report were much impressed. Earlier, in 1934, Stanley Baldwin had said in the House of Commons that 'the bomber will always get through' – a simple phrase which was never forgotten. The impression on the public mind was reinforced by popular literature and films, and by the newsreels of the Spanish Civil War. The result was that both the government and large sections of the public were thoroughly alarmed at the prospect of air attack.

## British strategy and foreign policy

The effects on foreign policy of the state of British armaments and strategic thinking were far-reaching. The fundamental problem was the disparity between Britain's commitments and her resources. The commitments were almost literally world-wide. The British Empire was at its greatest extent. The Dominions, though asserting their independence of the mother country, still relied on her for protection. Australia and New Zealand, Malaya and Singapore, the Middle East and Mediterranean, western Europe and the British Isles were all under some kind of threat as the 1930s went on. In 1937 the Chiefs of Staff produced a gloomy review of Britain's enemies:



*'The bomber will always get through' (Baldwin, 1934). It did – German bomber over London, September 1940. Fear of air attack was a powerful element in appeasement.*

Source: Corbis

Japan in the Pacific, Italy in the Mediterranean, and Germany in western Europe. Their conclusion was that until rearmament was further advanced, it should be the first task of foreign policy to diminish the number of Britain's enemies. The policy of 'appeasement' should never be appraised without recalling this sternly realistic recommendation. To reach an accommodation with Italy in the Mediterranean; to avoid confrontation with the Axis powers over the Spanish Civil War; to find the basis of a settlement with Germany; to make only the most cautious response to Japanese aggression in China – all this followed in large part from the need to diminish the number of one's enemies.



What of Britain's friends? The almost inevitable result of the concept of 'limited liability' was at best an ambiguous attitude to France. On the one hand, the British took the link with France almost for granted – if there was to be another war, Britain and France would be allies. But, on the other, for a long time the British refused to translate this assumption into any form of specific commitment. There were no staff talks between the two countries until the end of 1935, when the British suddenly pressed for conversations in the crisis over Italy and Ethiopia; and these were dropped by January 1936. There were staff meetings after the German occupation of the Rhineland, but they could make little headway when British strategic priorities put help to allies last in the line. As late as November 1938 the Chiefs of Staff were opposed to pursuing talks with the French in too much detail, for fear of being committed to a French war plan over which they had no control. A note from the Air Staff for RAF representatives in talks with French officers (15 June 1938) laid down that the words 'ally' or 'allies' should never be used, either verbally or in writing. It was a fair summing up of the British attitude; and if the British would not treat the French as allies, they had no reason to expect anything better in return.

Next, what were British views of their most dangerous enemy? Estimates of German strength moved rapidly in the 1930s from complacency to excessive pessimism. In the early stages of open German rearmament, from 1935 onwards, the War Office tended to be sceptical of reports of the rate of growth of the German Army, largely on the ground that it could not envisage the British Army growing at such speed. Between 1936 and 1938, however, military intelligence changed tack, and produced inflated estimates of German strength. In July 1938, in the midst of the Czechoslovakian crisis, the War Office estimated that the Germans could mobilise 88–90 divisions, when the actual figure was 75. In July 1939, military intelligence put the number of German divisions available for immediate mobilisation at 99; in deference to French information this was raised to 120–130; the actual figure was 103. The number of German tanks was put in September 1939 at 5,000, including 1,400 medium tanks; the actual figure was 3,000 including only 300 mediums, the rest being light tanks.<sup>21</sup>

Land warfare was not seen as primarily a British problem; and estimates of the German Air Force were of more immediate significance. Early estimates tended to be low. In 1934, when the German Air Force had a total of 550 aircraft, the Air Ministry put the figure at 350, and thought it would reach 480 in 1935. The Air Staff could not believe that the Germans, notoriously efficient by their very nature, would accept anything less than the highest standards of training, support services, and reserves;

and therefore their progress was bound to be slow. Hitler's public announcement in March 1935 of the existence of the *Luftwaffe* came as no surprise; but his claim in April 1935 that Germany had already achieved parity with Britain in air strength was regarded with scepticism.<sup>22</sup>

At that time, the Air Staff was right about current German strength, but wrong about future expansion. At the end of 1936 and the beginning of 1937, this complacency came to a sudden end, and estimates of German strength rose rapidly, until they became substantially exaggerated. It is possible to compare actual German strength in August 1938 with RAF estimates in September, the month of the Munich crisis (Table 11.2).<sup>23</sup> The overestimate of the combat-ready bomber force was almost twofold, and fed the fear of air bombardment which profoundly affected British policy at the time of Munich. At the time this fear was almost entirely misplaced. In September 1938 the commander of *Luftwaffe* Fleet 2, General Felmy, reported to the German Air Staff that bombing operations against England without advanced airfields in the Low Countries were impossible. The *Luftwaffe* had no aircraft with sufficient range, nor crews with adequate training, for

**TABLE 11.2.** *German air strength and British estimates, 1938*

	<i>German air strength</i> <i>August 1938</i>		<i>British estimates</i> <i>September 1938</i>	
	<i>Total</i>	<i>Combat-ready</i>	<i>Total</i>	<i>Combat-ready</i>
Fighters	643	453	810	717
Bombers	1,157	582	1,235	1,019
Dive-bombers	207	159	247	227

*Source:* Edward L. Homze, *Arming the Luftwaffe: the Reich Air Ministry and the German Aircraft Industry, 1919-39* (Lincoln, Nebraska 1976), p. 241. Nebraska University Press.

the purpose. The Ju88 was only adopted as a suitable aircraft for bombing operations against Britain in the course of 1938, and after a series of design problems a mere 18 of this type had been produced by September that year.<sup>24</sup> But, as is often the case, beliefs were more important than facts.

It is easy to see why the British government preferred to avoid war in 1938. It faced too many enemies; its resources were overstretched; it shrank from a Continental commitment on land; and it was afraid of sudden bombing attack from the air. What is less easy to see is why the same government, only the next year, went to war, not with a light heart, certainly, but with a modest confidence that they could win.

The answer appears to lie in various estimates that were current in 1939. The first was a steady confidence in the French Army. The Chief of

the Imperial General Staff, Lord Gort, thought highly of the fortifications of the Maginot Line, the fighting capacity of the troops, and the talents of the high command; and it seems that the British did not look too closely for possible weaknesses.<sup>25</sup> Second, there was a belief that Britain was turning the corner in the matter of air power. Desmond Morton, who ran the Industrial Intelligence Committee, predicted in February 1939 that British aircraft production would overtake German by the autumn – which proved to be correct; and the air attaché in Berlin reported in the same month that he thought Germany had reached the peak of its rearmament – which proved incorrect. At the same time, radar stations were coming into operation, and Hurricane and Spitfire fighters were reaching the squadrons, raising hopes for the first time that the bomber might *not* always get through. The third was the estimate by British economic intelligence that the German economy could not sustain a long war. Reports made by the British embassy in Berlin, from 1936 to 1939, all indicated an economy under strain, with the iron and steel industry working at full capacity and a shortage of skilled labour. Reports from German opposition sources in September 1938 and January 1939 pointed in the same direction: the financial position was desperate, manpower and transport were under strain, and Schacht knew that chaos lay ahead. This information led to two conclusions. First, it was likely to mean further adventures in foreign policy. As the Berlin embassy put it in May 1939: ‘Sooner or later further territorial expansion will be necessary’, because Hitler would have either to accept limitations on self-sufficiency or go to war. But second, if Germany went to war she would do so with her economy already fully stretched; and unless she made great gains in resources in the first twelve or eighteen months, she must run into serious difficulties. A Chiefs of Staff strategic assessment of 20 February 1939 held, on the economic side, that ‘Germany, if favoured by fortune, might maintain her industrial resistance for about a year’.<sup>26</sup> This optimism was not universal. The Industrial Intelligence Committee indicated that Germany had substantial stocks of raw materials; and a Treasury paper in July 1939 pointed out that Germany had established power over neighbouring countries, so that payment for her imports in case of war was unlikely to pose serious problems. The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Simon) told the Cabinet on 5 July that Germany was *better* prepared for a long war than Britain.<sup>27</sup>

None the less, the favourable reports were strong enough to encourage those who were ready to believe them. Intelligence reports, like other sources of information, tend to be believed when they tell the listener what he wants to hear. Up to February and March 1939, intelligence about

German strength gave ample support to a policy of seeking a settlement with that country. At that time, for reasons which were only partially related to the military balance, British policy changed; and there were enough indications in the intelligence material to give the change of policy some backing. In part the indicators proved correct – the corner had been turned in the air, though only just; in part they were quite wrong – the German economy, with the help of all the loot of 1940, had plenty of life in it, and was to show more staying power than anyone predicted. At the time, there seemed to be enough good news to sustain the spirits of those who, however reluctantly, decided that they had taken enough from the Germans. Notably, Neville Chamberlain came to feel, as he wrote to one of his sisters on 5 February 1939, that ‘they [the Germans] could not make nearly such a mess of us now as they could have done, while we could make much more of a mess of them . . .’.<sup>28</sup> This was crudely put, and proved to be well wide of the mark, but it was a clear sign that there was a new confidence in the air.

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- 5 The most recent figures for French tank strength are in Ernest R. May, *Strange Victory: Hitler’s Conquest of France* (New York 2000), p. 476; for quality comparisons with German tanks, p. 478. See also Robert J. Young, *In Command of France: French foreign policy and military planning, 1933–1940* (Harvard 1979), pp. 166–73, 185–90; J. A. Gunsburg, *Divided and Conquered: the French High Command and the defeat of the West, 1940* (London 1980), pp. 39–40; Chapman, *Why France Collapsed*, pp. 66–8 and Appendix A. There is a valuable brief analysis of French strategic thought in Robert A. Doughty, ‘The illusion of security: France 1919–1940’, in Williamson Murray, MacGregor Knox and Alvin Bernstein (eds), *The Making of Strategy* (Cambridge 1994), pp. 466–97. Martin Alexander, *The Republic in Danger: General Maurice Gamelin and the politics of French defence, 1933–1940* (Cambridge 1992) gives a large-scale survey.

- 6 See Martin Alexander, 'In Defence of the Maginot Line', in Robert Boyce (ed.), *French Foreign and Defence Policy, 1918–1940* (London 1998), pp. 164–94; May, *Strange Victory*, pp. 120–1.
- 7 Deliveries of aircraft to French Air Force: 1934–197; 1935–494; 1936–570; 1937–422; 1938–533; 1939–2,227. Air force expenditure as a percentage of the defence budget: 1934–12.3; 1935–18.8; 1936–18.0; 1937–18.0; 1938–23.0. Patrick Fridenson and Jean Lecuir, *La France et la Grande-Bretagne face aux problèmes aériens, 1935–mai 1940* (Vincennes 1976), pp. 31, 43.
- 8 The assessment of the size of the French Air Force in 1939–40 is a notorious quagmire – Robert Young has rightly remarked that counting aeroplanes is an art form rather than an exact science. See Gunsberg, *Divided and Conquered*, p. 75; Fridenson et Lecuir, *La France et la Grande-Bretagne, passim*; Young, *In Command of France*, p. 163. By May 1940 the French Air Force mustered a total of some 2,400 fighters and 1,160 bombers, though very large numbers were held in the rear and never got into action during the Battle of France. See Kale-Heinz Frieser, *The Blitzkrieg Legend: The 1940 Campaign in the West* (Annapolis, Md 2005), p. 45.
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- 10 F. H. Hinsley, *British Intelligence in the Second World War*, vol. I (London 1979), pp. 75–6.
- 11 See Jackson, *France and the Nazi Menace*, Chapters 7 and 8, pp. 207–97; the quotation is from p. 275. Cf. Gunsburg, *Divided and Conquered*, pp. 53, 76. For actual German strength, see below, pp. 218–19, 282.
- 12 S. W. Roskill, *The War at Sea 1939–1945*, vol. I (London 1954), p. 50 and Appendix E; the building programmes are detailed in S. W. Roskill, *Naval Policy between the Wars*, vol. I (London 1968), Appendix C. The figures include the Dominion navies.
- 13 Brian Bond, *British Military Policy between Two World Wars* (Oxford 1980), p. 98, map and table, pp. 118–19.
- 14 **TABLE 11.3. British defence expenditure, 1938–39**

	Admiralty (Actual expenditure; in thousands of £)	Air Ministry	War Office
1938	127,295	133,800	121,361
1939	149,339	248,561	243,638

Source: G. C. Peden, *British Rearmament and the Treasury 1932–1939* (Edinburgh 1979), Appendix III, p. 205. Scottish Academic Press.

- 15 Sir Peter Masefield, 'The Royal Air Force and British military aircraft production, 1934–1940', published in French translation in Comité d'Histoire de la 2e Guerre Mondiale, *Français et Britanniques dans la Drôle de Guerre* (Paris 1979), pp. 411–56, table on p. 426. Note that the definition used is the strictest definition of first-line aircraft: serviceable aircraft in operational squadrons with trained crews. It is an excellent definition, but it makes comparison with other statistics and other countries difficult.
- 16 Quoted in P. J. Dennis, *Decision by Default: peacetime conscription and British defence, 1919–1939* (London 1972), p. 98.
- 17 Quoted in Peden, *British Rearmament and the Treasury*, pp. 134–5.
- 18 Quoted in Michael Howard, *The Continental Commitment* (London: Pelican Books 1974), p. 128.
- 19 Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 129.
- 20 Uri Bialer, *The Shadow of the Bomber* (London 1980), pp. 128–32.
- 21 Hinsley, *British Intelligence*, vol. I, pp. 62, 76; Wesley K. Wark, *The Ultimate Enemy. British intelligence and Nazi Germany, 1933–1939* (Oxford 1986), p. 101.
- 22 Wesley K. Wark, 'British intelligence on the German Air Force and aircraft industry, 1933–1939', *Historical Journal*, 25 (3) (Sept. 1982), 627–48.
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- 25 Martin Alexander and William Philpott, 'The Entente Cordiale and the Next War', *Intelligence and National Security*, vol. 13, No. 1, Spring 1998, pp. 72–3.
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- 27 For a review of intelligence assessments in Britain, France and Germany on the eve of war, see below, p. 311.
- 28 The varying British assessments of German strength in 1939 may be followed in Wark, *The Ultimate Enemy*, pp. 70–3, 122, 183–4, 211–22. Chamberlain's letter is quoted in John Charmley, *Chamberlain and the Lost Peace* (London 1989), p. 159.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

# Armed Forces, Strategy, and Foreign Policy (2): Italy, Germany, and the Soviet Union

In Britain and France, there were grave doubts as to whether war was still an instrument of policy, and little understanding that war and peace were part of a single process. In Italy, Germany, and the USSR a very different view prevailed. It is true that they dressed up their attitudes to war in different ways. The Soviets created a Red Army, with people's commissars alongside the officers, and spoke of peoples' wars. The fascist and Nazi regimes talked in exalted and cloudy terms of the purifying and ennobling nature of war. Strikingly, a strong tide of nationalist, martial books and films was running in Germany even before the Nazis came to power. This began in 1929, and reached two high points in 1930 and 1933.<sup>1</sup> For all three totalitarian states, force was something to be used without inhibitions as an instrument of policy. It might be in the service of ideology, to carry revolution across Poland on the bayonets of the Red Army. It might be a straightforward border conflict: Stalin had no hesitation in fighting a serious battle with the Japanese in the summer of 1939 on the frontiers of Outer Mongolia. It might be a war of colonial conquest, such as the Italians waged in Ethiopia; or of conquest nearer home, like the German invasion of Poland. Moreover, Hitler was a master of the fluid tactics of subversion and undeclared war, blurring the line between peace and war.

In all three states, force was simply regarded as part of life, and was used whenever it was thought necessary or advantageous. This had an important effect on their foreign policies.

## Italy

There was a striking contrast between some of Mussolini's claims for the Italian forces and the reality. In 1927 Mussolini claimed that he could mobilise an army of 5 million men, and by 1936 his slogan was 'eight million bayonets'. In practice, when Italy went to war in June 1940, the mobilised strength of the army was 1.6 million. Similarly, Mussolini asserted in 1927 that he would build an air force whose planes would blot out the sun. In 1939 he claimed to have 8,500 aircraft; the Air Ministry figure was 3,000; and an enquiry carried out by the sceptical Naval Staff could not find even 1,000.<sup>2</sup> The disparities were bizarre, but the consequences of both the inflated claims and the exiguous reality were very serious.

The Italian Army was based on conscription with a cadre of regular soldiers. The period of military service was fixed in 1923 at eighteen months; but in 1926 this was amended to six months for those with family commitments or for men with a brother already serving in the army. Conscripts were largely drawn from the rural population, and were often barely literate and ill-suited to the demands of mechanised warfare. Up to 1937, the main body of the army was made up of thirty-eight infantry divisions, each comprising three regiments. In that year, General Pariani proposed to reduce this complement to two regiments, aiming at greater manoeuvrability in the expectation of further campaigns in Africa. Reorganisation began in December 1938, and by 1940 the army included 73 of the smaller infantry divisions instead of the 38 larger ones. The change disrupted the army at what proved to be a crucial period.

In 1940 the Italian Army also included three armoured divisions, but these were more formidable in name than in fact. Their main equipment was a light tank, thinly armoured and armed only with machine-guns. A new medium tank was in production, but only a few were in service. A programme to modernise the artillery was begun in 1937, but made only slow progress. Production of heavy guns in 1939 was only seventy per month, and much of the artillery remained of the 1914–18 vintage. The supply and transport services were weak.<sup>3</sup>

The air force was always the pride of the fascist regime, and projected a suitable image of modernity and dynamism. Its aircraft competed successfully for records in speed and altitude. It produced spectacular displays, such as a formation flight across the Atlantic. However, during the Ethiopian crisis of 1935–36 it appeared that the air force was unready for a European war, and a programme of expansion was begun. Between 1935 and 1939,



8,700 combat aircraft were ordered, but actual production fell far short of these figures. The Spanish Civil War proved a drain on resources, with over 700 aircraft being sent to Spain and some losses being incurred. In September 1939 the Italian Air Force had 1,796 combat-ready aircraft, including 783 bombers and 594 fighters, plus another 325 aircraft in East Africa.<sup>4</sup> Effort was dispersed among too many types of aircraft; and the planes themselves were often unsatisfactory. When Italy entered the war in June 1940, many of the fighters were still biplanes, and none were equal in performance to the British Hurricane and Spitfire. The main strike aircraft was a three-engined medium bomber, the Savoia-Marchetti S79, which was to prove more successful as a torpedo-bomber than against land targets.

The best equipped of the Italian services was the navy. In June 1940 the Italian fleet comprised 4 battleships, 7 heavy cruisers, 12 light cruisers, 125 destroyers and torpedo boats, and 113 submarines. Numerically, the fleet compared well with British and French naval forces in the Mediterranean, and had the geographical advantage of a central position.<sup>5</sup>

Some of the defects in the equipment of the army and air force arose from weaknesses in Italian industry, but some arose from lack of proper direction. The motor-car industry, for example, was perfectly capable of producing a good medium tank if specifications and orders had been provided in good time. There was a lack of direction and consistency in Italian strategic policy, despite the fascist regime's claims to provide drive and decisiveness. In theory, there was ample machinery for central direction. Mussolini himself held the three posts of Minister for the Army, Navy, and Air Force from 1925 to 1929, and again from 1933 onwards. General Badoglio, as Chief of the General Staff, gave advice to Mussolini on the affairs of all three services. In practice, this apparent centralisation produced little co-ordination. For Mussolini to hold all three service ministries as well as being head of the government simply meant that he did none of the work properly, and no inter-service staff was developed to give substance to Badoglio's position.

None of the three Italian services had a clear set of strategic principles to guide its development. From 1925 onwards the main task of the army was conceived as a defensive war in northern Italy against France and Yugoslavia. In 1937 General Pariani, the new Army Chief of Staff, took up a proposal made by his predecessor in 1936 to create motorised divisions and assault brigades, but by 1940 this change had not gone far, and the attempt to graft an offensive element on to a basically defensive system does not appear to have succeeded. The air force hesitated between ideas

of strategic bombing and co-operation with the army. The navy had a large number of submarines, but no plan for making use of them. For a long time it had regarded the French fleet as its main rival, and it developed no plans for a war against France and Britain together.

There was in fact a wide gap between foreign and strategic policy. The Rome–Berlin Axis was likely to lead to a war alongside Germany against Britain and France, but no strategy for such a war was developed. If, on the other hand, foreign policy was to be adapted to the actual state of Italy's armed forces, then the intervention in Spain, especially the despatch of over 700 aircraft from an inadequate air force, was ill-judged. The Italian forces were ill-prepared for serious war in Europe and the Mediterranean in 1940. Badoglio was cautious and pessimistic, and he advised Mussolini against going to war in 1940, but was overruled. Mussolini did not anticipate a serious war, but a military promenade, for which Italian preparation was doubtless adequate.

Yet it is dangerous to be too preoccupied with the faintly absurd air that envelops Italian military policy and preparations. The Italian forces scored real successes during the 1930s. They conquered Ethiopia more rapidly than most observers expected. In Spain, they sustained a defeat at Guadalajara; but this was less serious than republican propaganda made out, and afterwards they fought with some success, notably round Bilbao. Moreover, for a long time the appearance of Italian strength was more important than reality. The French set great store by their military agreements with Italy in 1935. The British Mediterranean fleet withdrew from Malta to Alexandria in 1935, during the Ethiopian crisis, for fear of Italian air attack. In 1937–38 Italy was courted by both Britain and Germany, partly because of the valuation put upon her armed forces. As long as Mussolini kept up a balancing act, and allowed himself to be courted by all and sundry, all was well; the error was to come down on one side and commit himself to war. Mussolini himself predicted in 1930 that the Second European War would break out between 1936 and 1940, and that Italy could play a decisive role in it. 'Because of its geographic and historical position, if Italy will know how to remain alone, it will be the arbiter of the huge conflict. . . . That day Italy will be truly great.'<sup>6</sup> Looking back, it is easy to see the gap between image and reality in the Italian armed forces, and to recognise that Mussolini deceived himself in thinking that he could intervene with decisive weight. But he was not the only one to be deceived, and the fact that others took Italian strength at Mussolini's valuation played some part in the coming of the war.

## Germany

### The German armed forces

No one smiled at the German armed forces. The German Army and the *Luftwaffe* swept all before them and conquered almost the whole of Europe between 1939 and 1941. The German Navy, the weakest of the services, launched an astonishing sea-borne invasion of Norway, and then fought a long and often successful submarine campaign in the Atlantic. Indeed, there was for a long time a tendency to exaggerate the quality and degree of preparedness of the German war machine. It was more than a match for its opponents, failing only in the air over Britain in autumn 1940 and then at the last stretch in Russia in the winter of 1941–42. Despite this remarkable record, the German forces had more weaknesses than appeared on the surface; which explains the profound ambiguities in German attitudes towards the prospect of war in the late 1930s. On the one hand, Hitler and the Nazi leadership were full of confidence and daring; on the other, many of the professionals in the Army General Staff were doubtful and cautious. Both had sound reasons for their views, though it was Hitler who emerged triumphant, to the extent of making the more cautious among the generals appear hidebound, if not actually cowardly.

The German Army expanded with extraordinary rapidity between 1933 and 1939.<sup>7</sup> The restrictions imposed by the Treaty of Versailles had been secretly evaded under the Weimar Republic, which prepared outline plans for trebling the size of the army from 100,000 to 300,000. In December 1932 these plans were set in motion, and by 1935 Germany's seven infantry divisions had been translated into twenty-one. On 16 March 1935 the Nazi government announced the reintroduction of conscription, with the term of service set at one year. (It was extended to two years in August 1936.) At the same time, the army was reorganised into thirty-six infantry divisions, involving serious problems of administration and training. In October 1935 the first three armoured (Panzer) divisions were created, in rudimentary form and equipped only with light tanks.<sup>8</sup>

Expansion and reorganisation were pressed forward at a great pace. By the middle of 1939 the army consisted of a total of 103 divisions, 52 active and 51 reserve, including 86 infantry and 6 armoured divisions. There were 730,000 men under arms in the peacetime army, and mobilisation brought the total to 3.7 million.<sup>9</sup> In this enlarged army, all the officers except about 3,200 remaining from the pre-1933 force, were recruited under the Nazi regime.<sup>10</sup> (This simple fact placed a serious obstacle in the way of

any military plot against Hitler, though it is usually left unmentioned by writers on 'lost opportunities'.) The sheer speed of the expansion brought its difficulties. The army's equipment fell short of its commanders' requirements. The armoured divisions in September 1939 were mainly equipped with light tanks, and only about 300 of the 3,200 armoured vehicles were the new and well-armed medium tanks. Even by the time of the German invasion of France and the Low Countries in May 1940, only about a quarter of their tanks were medium tanks.<sup>11</sup> There were also problems of personnel, notably in the officer corps, which grew headlong in six years to over 100,000 with inevitable defects in training and integration. The German Army of 1939–40 fell short in equipment, training, and cohesion of the standards of its predecessor in 1914. That despite these limitations it won such extraordinary victories was a tribute to the way it was handled and to its fighting powers – the armoured divisions in particular rose far above the deficiencies of their equipment. It was also a reflection upon its opponents.

The pace of the German Army's expansion remains astonishing, and its defects and deficiencies were of secondary importance. When Germany's neighbours often exaggerated the size of the German Army in their intelligence reports, this was not unnatural, because the rate of change was such that the exaggeration of one year tended to become the truth of the next. The central fact stood out with stark clarity: Germany moved in six years from being one of the weakest land powers in Europe to being one of the strongest.

The same was true, with very similar qualifications, of the German Air Force. Under the terms of the Versailles Treaty, Germany was forbidden all military aircraft, but this restriction was clandestinely evaded on a small scale throughout the Weimar period. Notably, there was a useful scheme of collaboration with the USSR, where the Germans operated an aircraft factory and a training base. The results were valuable without being substantial. In February 1932 the German Army possessed 228 aircraft, 36 military and 192 converted civilian planes. The aircraft industry was tiny, employing only 3,200 workers at its lowest point in 1932, with firms going out of business in the depression.<sup>12</sup>

This situation was transformed by the Nazi regime. The *Luftwaffe* was the Nazi service *par excellence*. The Nazi leaders included airmen, Goering and Hess; and Hitler grasped both the popular appeal and the potential power of the air arm. The new government determined at once to set up an independent air force and a separate Air Ministry. Through government orders and finance (mainly disguised at the start – out of 30 million RM for airframes, 26.6 million appeared under the unemployment relief

programme), the aircraft industry grew at a prodigious speed, and by mid-1936 it employed nearly 125,000 workers.<sup>13</sup>

In 1933 the new Air Ministry embarked on a programme to build 1,000 aircraft. This was rapidly superseded, and the 'Rhineland Programme' of July 1934 aimed to produce 4,021 aircraft by the end of September 1935, with an emphasis on bombers – 822, as against 245 fighters. By the time the existence of the *Luftwaffe* was publicly announced on 10 March 1935, nearly 2,500 aircraft had been delivered. Of these, a large proportion were trainers, and many of the combat planes were obsolescent models. But it was a remarkable start, and the basis had been laid for mass production.<sup>14</sup>

Thereafter, new production programmes succeeded one another with bewildering speed. During 1936 there were as many as three in the year. After a very steep rise between 1933 and 1935, actual production levelled off at an average of between 5,000 and 5,500 aircraft per year in 1936–38. During this period, there were problems in production with the introduction of new types, and shortages of raw materials. In 1938 there was a slight fall in aircraft production (from 5,606 in 1937 to 5,235 in 1938), and government pressure to increase production was stepped up. On 8 July Goering held a conference of aircraft manufacturers at his country estate at Karinhall, telling them that they must get on to a war footing and concentrate on producing fewer types of aircraft in longer runs. In August the Air Ministry introduced yet another new programme (Plan 8), aiming at the production of over 3,700 fighters and over 3,000 bombers in the next eighteen months. Within two months this was superseded. On 14 October Goering announced Hitler's new armaments programme, including a fivefold increase in the size of the *Luftwaffe*, requiring the production of 45,700 aircraft by spring 1942. (This programme, an interesting sequel to the Munich agreement, referred specifically to building long-range bombers to operate against England.) The resources for such a prodigious expansion were simply not available, and in practice the plan was quietly set aside in favour of more modest, though still considerable, objectives.<sup>15</sup>

On 5 August 1939, with war with Poland very close, Goering held a conference with his principal *Luftwaffe* officers, and worked out with them a plan to prepare the air force for a general European war in 1942, notably to achieve higher production by concentrating on only four types of combat aircraft, two bombers and two fighters. Orders to this effect were given in September, development projects were sharply reduced, and the *Luftwaffe* staked its future on four types, of which two (the He177 and Me210) were untried and proved to be failures.

As events turned out, the *Luftwaffe* had to face general European war before 1942. In September 1939, to wage real war on Poland and phoney war with Britain and France, the Germans had a first-line strength of 3,374 combat aircraft, of which 75 per cent were serviceable. Transports and seaplanes raised the total to just over 4,000.<sup>16</sup> The quality of the force was at this stage good. The principal fighter was the excellent Me109.<sup>17</sup> The medium bombers were the Do17 and He111, the latter being a particularly adaptable and successful aircraft; and the Ju87 dive-bomber had been effective in Spain and was to be so again in Poland and France. In May 1939 a *Luftwaffe* staff paper argued that Germany was the only country with a conception of total aerial warfare, both offensive and defensive. By May 1940 the German Air Force would have a decisive lead over its British and French rivals, but its advantage would not last long.<sup>18</sup> For the *Luftwaffe*, therefore, 1939–40 was a favourable opportunity to go to war.

The German Navy received the lowest priority among the three services in the allocation of resources. Moreover, Hitler assured Admiral Raeder, the commander of the navy, in 1935 that war was not to be expected until 1944, and construction planning proceeded accordingly. At the outbreak of war in September 1939, the strength of the navy stood at 2 battle-cruisers, 3 pocket battleships, 6 cruisers, 17 destroyers, 17 torpedo-boats, and 56 submarines. Of these last, only 26 were ocean-going vessels, capable of operating in the Atlantic; and only 46 out of the total were actually operational. On the other hand, Hitler's armaments proposals of October 1938 included large-scale naval building, and early in 1939 a plan (Plan Z) was adopted which was to provide Germany, over a period of years, with a powerful battle-fleet, 4 aircraft-carriers, and about 250 U-boats. Most of this was abandoned when war came, to concentrate on what could be completed quickly. However, two formidable battleships, the *Bismarck* and the *Tirpitz*, had been laid down in 1936 and were nearing completion.<sup>19</sup> It was a fleet which was not yet ready for surface operations in the North Sea (though it was to achieve some daring successes in the Norwegian campaign in 1940). Nor was its submarine arm yet adequate for sustained warfare against commerce in the Atlantic.

The doctrines of war professed and practised by the German armed forces have been the centre of keen interest ever since the striking victories of 1939–41 attracted both admiration and the desire to explain how they came about. For a long time the explanation was that the German Army had whole-heartedly put into practice ideas of mobile armoured warfare, including the tactical use of the dive-bomber as flying artillery. Such ideas were widely current between the wars, starting in Britain with J. F. C.

Fuller and Liddell Hart; propounded rather vaguely by de Gaulle in France; taken up by the Red Army in the forming of mechanised brigades; and brought to fruition in Germany through the advocacy of General Guderian. The Germans concentrated their tanks in Panzer divisions, capable of rapid movement and deep penetration into enemy territory; and in the campaign of 1940 their armoured divisions outnumbered the French by ten to four – of which the fourth was only being formed in the course of the battle.

In substance, this remains the key to the German success, even though the victory of the ‘armoured idea’ within the army was much less complete than was once thought. A more traditional strategy, emphasising manoeuvre but retaining the key role of the infantry, persisted alongside the new ideas. There was a strong school of thought which advocated the use of tanks primarily in support of the infantry. The German Army of 1940 was mainly modelled on that of 1914, and comprised a large proportion of horse-drawn transport. Karl-Heinz Frieser has emphasised the limitations of the *Blitzkrieg* concept in the conduct of the Battle of France in 1940, when the Germans owed much of their success to improvisation and French mistakes.<sup>20</sup>

*Luftwaffe* doctrine was also less clear-cut than has often been assumed. The Nazi government decided at once in favour of a separate air force; but what was to be its role? An early answer was put forward by Robert Knauss, a pilot in the First World War and later a *Lufthansa* official, who prepared a memorandum in May 1933 for Erhard Milch, State Secretary at the Air Ministry, and a key figure in the new *Luftwaffe*. Knauss saw the immediate problem as that of deterring France and Poland from attacking Germany during the early stages of her rearmament, and he proposed the rapid building of 400 heavy bombers to act as a deterrent. Milch agreed in principle, but the scheme posed too many practical difficulties, not least that the creation of a heavy bomber force could only be a slow process.

The result was a compromise. The Germans sought the deterrent effect of a bomber fleet, but tried to secure it with the types of aircraft it had to hand. The idea of a heavy bomber force was not entirely abandoned. General Walther Wever, the first head of the Air Staff, had read *Mein Kampf* and prepared seriously for a war with Russia by putting in hand in 1934 a project for a ‘Ural-bomber’, capable of reaching the furthest points of European Russia. Two prototype four-engined bombers were produced, but their development was suspended in 1937 after Wever’s death, and the project never achieved significant priority. Messerschmitt began work on an ‘Amerika-bomber’ in 1939, opening up some far-reaching possibilities which were never pursued.

The *Luftwaffe*’s thinking on the conduct of air war, set out in a manual of 1936 prepared under Wever’s supervision, was based on the concept of

a balanced air force equipped for a number of roles. The *Luftwaffe* would secure air supremacy by destroying an enemy air force and aircraft industry, bomb centres of war production and communications, and give direct support to the army and navy in battle. During the next few years, an emphasis on direct support for the army developed more by chance and experience than as a matter of theory. The *Luftwaffe*'s first officers mostly came from the army. The experience of the Spanish Civil War showed the value of close air support for ground troops. (The bombing of cities was spectacular, but of no great military importance.) Existing types of aircraft were well adapted to support the land forces. It therefore came about that, though the first intention was to create a balanced air force with a strategic bombing component, what actually developed was a force directed mainly towards co-operation with the army, though with functions much wider than that of providing 'flying artillery', which caught so many eyes in 1940.

German military and air doctrines were thus less clear-cut and coherent than was widely believed at the time of their greatest successes, when everything seemed to point to a highly developed system of armoured attack with close air support. There was a good deal of compromise and much difference of opinion. None the less, it was still the case that Germany possessed, in the period 1938–41, an army and air force which were far better adapted to offensive warfare than those of any other European country; and this had significant effects on German foreign policy.

The *Luftwaffe* in particular played a vital role in foreign policy by providing Germany with the power to threaten. For some time, the very existence of the *Luftwaffe* was as far as possible concealed, so as not to provoke intervention from foreign powers; but from the moment of the open announcement of its existence in March 1935, this caution was replaced by the diametrically opposite policy of exaggerating German air strength. Hitler started this with his claim to have already reached parity with the RAF in March 1935, and thereafter everything possible was done to display the *Luftwaffe*. Its planes appeared at international air shows; they flew past at party rallies and at the Berlin Olympics; they were written up, with official encouragement, in foreign aviation journals; they were shown off to foreign visitors – Balbo, Lindbergh, Vuillemin. Goering told his officers in 1936 that the important thing was 'to impress Hitler and enable Hitler, in turn, to impress the world'.<sup>21</sup>

The world was only too ready to be impressed. Lindbergh was overwhelmed by what he saw, and with the prestige of his Atlantic flights behind him, he proceeded to overwhelm others. The British were already afraid of the bomber, and their fears were easily exploited. During the Spanish Civil War, the bombing of Guernica on 26 April 1937 was not





*Terrifying symbol of German power: dive-bomber in action.*

Source: Bettman/Corbis

publicised by the Germans, but by the opponents of General Franco, whose propaganda seized on the episode as a symbol of German brutality and the power of the bomber. The Germans thus reaped the benefits of terror spread by their enemies.

The greatest triumph of the menace of the *Luftwaffe* came in the Czechoslovakian crisis of 1938. At the time, the British Air Staff believed the combat-ready German bomber force to be twice its actual strength. Neville Chamberlain, flying back from one of his meetings with Hitler, looked down on London and its defenceless inhabitants, whom he sought to preserve from the horrors of air attack. In large part, Munich was a victory for the terror which the Germans inspired by displaying the *Luftwaffe* with panache, and letting their opponents' nerves do the rest. The method was highly successful, and it may in the long run have tempted Hitler to overreach himself. He appears to have relied heavily on air power in deciding to go to war in 1939 and to extend that war in 1940; and it may well be that he did not grasp the deficiencies which lay behind the *Luftwaffe's* fearsome appearance. He got most of his information and impressions from Goering, who was certainly not given to underestimating the force that he commanded. An interesting symptom of this was the order, on 24 May 1940, to leave the closing of Dunkirk and the destruction of the British Expeditionary Force to the *Luftwaffe*. This order was the result of a direct intervention by Goering on the 23rd, when he telephoned Hitler to insist that his air force would destroy the BEF. Goering told Milch, when he had secured agreement to this plan: 'The *Luftwaffe* is to wipe out the British on the beaches. . . . The Führer wants them taught a lesson they will never forget.'<sup>22</sup> There was no question of Hitler wanting to allow the British to get away – he wanted them destroyed, but agreed to let the *Luftwaffe* do it. In doing so, he overrated its power: it failed to do the job, with far-reaching consequences. Similarly, and on a larger scale, it seems at least likely that an overestimate of German air power predisposed Hitler to take risks in 1939 and 1940, and so played a part in bringing about the war.

In relation to the army, the evidence is that Hitler did not proceed from calculations of military preparedness, still less from the advice of the General Staff, but from his own convictions as to what the army should be made ready to do. Shortly after becoming Chancellor, in February 1933, he addressed a meeting of high-ranking army and navy officers, and outlined his general ideas with surprising frankness: to get rid of the Versailles settlement, and then to go for the conquest of living space in the east, which would be ruthlessly Germanised. For all this, large-scale rearmament would be necessary. The service chiefs welcomed rearmament, but appear to have thought that war in the east was a long way off, and that they could impose a cautious approach on Hitler.

In this they were mistaken. During the next few years, Hitler pushed his generals into a series of rapid moves, brushing aside their caution. The

high command thought the occupation of the Rhineland in March 1936 was too risky. When the Spanish Civil War began, Generals Blomberg and Fritsch opposed German intervention, on the ground that it would risk a European war for which Germany was not ready. During the Czechoslovakian crisis, General Beck was strongly opposed to Hitler's policy, which he again believed was courting general war when Germany was unprepared; and he urged General Brauchitsch, the Commander-in-Chief, to organise collective opposition by senior officers. (This was when Hitler exclaimed, 'What kind of generals are these which I as head of state may have to propel into war? By rights I should be the one seeking to ward off the generals' eagerness for war.')<sup>23</sup> There was one exception to this rule – the *Anschluss* with Austria in March 1938. On 10 March Hitler asked for an operational plan for an occupation of Austria. None had been prepared, but the army staff set to work to produce one in short order. There were no objections, even from Beck. The *Anschluss* was part of German sentiment, and was welcome even to otherwise cautious generals.

By the time the attack on Poland came round, the opposition of the generals was over. Nothing succeeds like success. Hitler had delivered the goods so often when the generals had warned of failure and danger that they could no longer sustain the role of Cassandra. Moreover, Hitler had by 1939 established complete control over the German high command. The process started on the Night of the Long Knives on 30 June 1934, when amid the purge of the SA two army generals (von Schleicher and von Bredow) were murdered, without investigation and without protest from their fellows. There followed in August 1934 the oath of unconditional obedience to Hitler in person, taken by all members of the army, after which the officer corps in particular was bound to Hitler by its own old-fashioned code of honour.

Much later, in February 1938, Hitler exploited the indiscretion of General Blomberg in marrying a former prostitute, and a false charge of homosexuality brought against General Fritsch, to get rid of both these officers. They had both been at the so-called Hossbach Conference on 5 November 1937, at which Hitler had set out his ideas for expansion, and both had expressed doubts. Fritsch was replaced as Commander-in-Chief by Brauchitsch, who has been neatly described as 'an anatomical marvel, a man totally without backbone'.<sup>24</sup> Hitler also took the opportunity of these changes to reorganise the command structure. The Ministry of War was abolished, and the *Oberkommando der Wehrmacht* (OKW – High Command of the Armed Forces) put in its place. Hitler became Supreme Commander of the Armed Forces, with authority to issue orders to all

three, and the wholly pliable General Keitel became his Chief of Staff. Keitel's younger brother became head of the Army Personnel Office, which gave Hitler a means of influence over appointments within the army. In all these ways, an institutional control over the army was added to the psychological effects of repeated success. By 1939 there was no question of caution on the part of the high command having any restraining effect on German policy.

### What sort of war?

Where was this policy leading, and what was the object of the headlong increase in the German armed forces that has been described? It was possible to want rearmament simply to restore Germany's prestige and security, and to re-establish the status of the armed forces in German society. If this was all that Hitler wanted, he did not need to part company with Schacht by pushing rearmament at such a hectic pace nor to force his own ideas upon a cautious General Staff. Hitler wrote and said repeatedly that he needed rearmament in order to go to war, and his actions were suited to his words. The only question worth asking is what *sort* of war was intended as the object of the forced march of German rearmament. On this, there have been divided opinions.

One view is that Hitler sought a series of short wars, to be fought and won by rapid movement – the strategy we have come to call *Blitzkrieg*. In January 1937 the British military attaché in Berlin reported that the development of the German military machine suggested just such an intention – short wars with limited objectives, probably in eastern Europe but possibly in the west as well. In retrospect, some historians have put forward a general picture of German policy, in which a *Blitzkrieg* strategy was matched by a *Blitzkrieg* economy.<sup>25</sup> Short wars would deal with the weaker powers around Germany, which could be picked off one by one; and short wars would also suit the state of the German economy, because they could be waged on existing stocks of oil and raw materials, and would pay for themselves by capturing new stocks and sources of supply. This scenario has the virtue of corresponding with what actually happened between September 1939 and mid-1941, when Germany won a whole series of rapid victories and captured vast territories and quantities of booty. In this thesis, Germany was preparing for the sprint, not the marathon, and in fact won one sprint after another.

This view confronts another, supported by weighty evidence, that Hitler constantly envisaged and was preparing for a long and large-scale

war – even a war of continents.<sup>26</sup> Hitler repeatedly stated that this was his intention – in one example out of many, he told a gathering of service chiefs in May 1939 that Germany must prepare for a war of 10–15 years' duration. This intention was matched by practice. The programmes for synthetic oil and rubber were long-term in their nature. The naval programme of 1939, which set out to build both a battle-fleet and a large submarine force, was geared to a naval war to be waged in 1943 or 1944. Plans for the *Luftwaffe* in 1939 envisaged a large-scale war no earlier than 1942. On this view, Hitler was preparing both the economy and the armed forces for a long war, probably between 1942 and 1944; but then got himself into a general war at a time and place which he had not expected.

Of these two interpretations of German policy, the second is the more convincing. And yet, in the context of the origins of the Second World War, we should recognise that the two are not entirely exclusive of one another. Wilhelm Deist has argued strongly that Hitler envisaged *both* short wars *and* a long war for living space.<sup>27</sup> He also expected quick results even from long-term projects – for example, the synthetic oil programme was at first intended to make Germany self-sufficient in oil by as early as 1939. He anticipated rapid victories in the attacks he launched against Poland in 1939 and the western powers in 1940 – though even he was surprised when France was defeated in a mere six weeks. This encouraged an almost unlimited optimism; and in the planning for an attack on the Soviet Union in 1941, the time-scale for victory grew shorter and shorter as time went on. Moreover, German armaments, though being prepared for a large-scale war, were also remarkably effective in the short run. They gave Germany, for a brief but vital period in 1938–41, the ability to terrify some of her opponents, to strike with great speed, and to crush one country after another. The historical debate as to the nature of German policy is interesting and important. But when we put ourselves back into the circumstances of the time, what matters most is what the Germans could *do*. They had the power to strike terror and win quick victories; and in the possession of that power, and the will to use it, lies a major explanation of the coming of war in Europe.

## The USSR

During the 1930s, the Soviet Union maintained very large armed forces. In 1935 the Red Army had a peacetime strength of some 940,000 men. It included 90 infantry (or rifle) divisions, and 16 cavalry divisions. (These

latter were almost entirely horsed cavalry, and were actually increased to 30 divisions by 1941 – the Red Army was the only European army to retain so large a cavalry force.) Its armour included at least 3,000 tanks (some estimates went as high as 10,000), organised into heavy tank brigades and mechanised brigades, some of which were grouped into mechanised corps. These very large numbers of tanks were sustained by factory production which, according to Soviet figures, ran at over 3,000 per year between 1935 and 1937. The tanks themselves were mostly light, and many were obsolescent. The medium tanks of the period, designed with several gun-turrets, proved unwieldy and unsatisfactory. The highly successful T-34 medium tank only came into production in 1940, and about 1,000 were with the armoured units in June 1941.<sup>28</sup>

The Soviet Air Force was not a separate service like the RAF or the *Luftwaffe*, but an extension of the army under military command. Its numbers were very large, outstripping any other European air force in the late 1930s: in 1938 it comprised about 5,000 aircraft, with production figures of about 4,000–5,000 per year in support. Most of its aircraft, however, were obsolescent. Many of the fighters were biplanes; a four-engined bomber whose prototype flew in 1936 encountered serious problems, and began to come into service only in 1940. The same was true of modern types of fighters and ground attack aircraft, which were delivered to units only in small numbers during 1940.<sup>29</sup>

The doctrines professed by the Soviet armed forces were an uneasy combination of technical and ideological considerations. In 1929, for example, a staff paper emphasised the importance of equipment, weaponry and manpower, but the Central Committee of the Communist Party insisted on the supremacy of political orthodoxy – all future wars would be class wars and must be fought accordingly. Strategic theory therefore stressed the importance of the offensive, which it was assumed would be assisted by risings of the proletariat in countries at war with the Soviet Union. When the USSR was attacked, the Red Army would move at once to the offensive and win a decisive victory at low cost in casualties. In 1934 the requirements of this strategy were met by dividing the Red Army into two parts: a partly mechanised ‘shock army’, including tanks, aircraft and parachute troops; and a mass infantry army. By 1939 seven mechanised corps were in existence; but during that year, applying what were taken to be the lessons of the Spanish Civil War, these corps were broken up and the tanks dispersed to support the infantry. The German victories of 1940 brought a rather laggardly reconsideration of this policy, and in late 1940–41 mechanised corps were reconstituted, on the model of

the German Panzer divisions. This change, which could not be accomplished rapidly, was actually in progress when the German blow fell in June 1941.<sup>30</sup>

The capacity of the Red Army to take the offensive to which it was theoretically dedicated was also limited by the effects of the great purges, which swept away the high command and part of the officer corps, leaving a shaken staff structure manned by inexperienced officers. Moreover, the standard of training of the army was poor, a fault recognised after the disasters of the Finnish campaign of 1939–40, when the Soviet infantry suffered heavy losses in mass attacks. The results were seen in new training directives and a new code of discipline in the summer of 1940.

Soviet foreign policy was only partially inhibited by considerations of strategy. The Red Army remained an instrument of policy, even in the direst period of the purges. Soviet territory, even in far distant parts of the empire, was defended with tenacity and success. In July–August 1938 a serious battle was fought against the Japanese round Lake Khasan, about 110 kilometres south-west of Vladivostok, even though the Soviet commander in the Far East, Marshal Blyukher, was actually removed from his post in the course of the action; he was sent to Moscow and later shot. Between May and September 1939 an even bigger battle, involving up to 35 Soviet infantry battalions, 500 tanks, and 500 aircraft, was fought at Khalkin-Gol, near the border with Manchuria and Outer Mongolia.<sup>31</sup> After some reverses and heavy casualties, the Soviet forces won an important victory, and drove the Japanese back across the frontier. In September 1939 the Red Army occupied eastern Poland, against minimal opposition. At the end of November, it attacked Finland to secure territorial gains, this time with disastrous results in the short run, though victory was eventually secured by weight of numbers and reorganisation.

The army, therefore, though weakened by the purges and ill-judged changes in its mechanised forces, was used with success to defend, and sometimes to extend, Soviet territory. Despite these successes, the army was of dubious value for large-scale offensive purposes outside the frontiers of the Soviet Union, and for participation in a general European war except in self-defence. In 1939 the prospect of a war on two fronts, against Japan in the Far East (where battle was already joined) and Germany in Europe, was certainly unwelcome; and the influence of this simple calculation on the making of the Nazi–Soviet Pact should not be underrated. The state of the Soviet armed forces, and the strategic problems of the USSR, made it much more desirable to stay out of a European war than to enter one.

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- 13 *Ibid.*, pp. 109–10.
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- 15 For figures in this paragraph, see Homze, *Arming the Luftwaffe*, pp. 157–8, 222–6; Cooper, *German Air Force*, pp. 76–80.
- 16 Cooper, *German Air Force*, pp. 92–3. This total included 1,179 fighters, 1,176 bombers, and 366 dive-bombers.



- 17 Strictly, this aircraft should be referred to as the Bf109 (Bayerische Flugzeugwerke); but popular usage in Britain has long referred to it as the Me109, and it seems best to keep to this.
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- 26 See Overy, *War and Economy in the Third Reich*, especially pp. 177–9, 189–95, 233–56; and Frieser, *Blitzkrieg Legend*, chapters 1 and 2.
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- 29 Erickson, *Road to Stalingrad*, pp. 34–5; Seaton, *Russo-German War*, pp. 86–7.
- 30 See the succinct analysis of Soviet strategic thought in Earl F. Ziemke, ‘Strategy for class war: the Soviet Union, 1917–1941’, in Murray, Knox and Bernstein (eds), *Making of Strategy*, pp. 498–533.
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PART THREE

The Coming of War,  
1932–1941

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# Introduction

The underlying forces at work in Europe in the 1930s explain much of the instability and violence of the period. They produced a form of ‘continental drift’ towards war, and lay behind the growth of conflict which characterised the years 1936–41. Competing ideologies created confusion within states and brought a dangerous turbulence into international affairs. In particular, Nazi Germany professed – and very largely practised – an ideology which exalted war and set objectives which could only be achieved by war. The same was true, though to a lesser degree, of fascist Italy. Nazi Germany, in pursuit of rapid rearmament to achieve expansionist aims, ran itself into an economic impasse from which war offered (at least in the short term) an escape. Germany also possessed at the end of the 1930s the only army and air force in Europe capable of taking the offensive, and the confidence and ruthlessness to use them – which was another result of its ideological drive.

In all this there was much that was leading towards war, and ample reason for the sense of fatality and inevitability which hung over Europe by 1939. But this is far from being the whole story. No one behaved as though everything was decided by underlying forces. Men took decisions, often in agonised uncertainty, and only rarely did they believe that they had no choice before them. Events occurred which were unexpected and accidental. It is time to change our point of view, and turn to the course of events during Europe’s long drawn out descent into war.

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

# From Peace to the Eve of War, 1932–1937

At the opening of the 1930s there was no doubt that Europe was at peace. The economic depression was severe, but the friction it generated fell far short of any impulse towards war. In the Far East, the Japanese army occupied Manchuria at the end of 1931; but Manchuria was far away, China had never settled down to an orderly existence, and there seemed no good reason to expect this episode to have more than local consequences. After 1941 and the great war in the Pacific, it was often argued that such a view was complacent and mistaken, and that the road to the Second World War, even in Europe, started with the Japanese occupation of Manchuria, which set off a chain reaction of aggression. There seems little substance in this argument. It was several years before Japan moved again to attack China in 1937, and any effect on Mussolini over Ethiopia or Hitler over the Rhineland can only have amounted to marginal encouragement to do what they intended to do anyway. The Manchurian episode did not endanger the peace of Europe.

European peace rested upon two foundations. The first was the international co-operation which marked the late 1920s, as demonstrated in the Locarno treaties and the heyday of the League of Nations. Even those who wished to change the status quo thought in this period in terms of negotiation, not force. The second was the harsher reality that the preponderance of power and prestige lay with the states which wished to maintain the settlement of 1919, and principally with France. In this situation, prestige was as important as power: as long as the reputation of the French Army and faith in French will-power remained intact, the European system set up in 1919 could be sustained.

Between 1932 and 1937 both these foundations were progressively undermined. The Locarno treaties were broken, the League of Nations

discredited, and French influence in Europe was replaced by that of Germany. How this came about may be illustrated by examining a number of significant events: the Disarmament Conference of 1932–34, the Ethiopian crisis of 1935–36, the German occupation of the Rhineland in March 1936, and the first stages of the Spanish Civil War in 1936–37. Through all these events ran the theme of the revival of German power and growth of German armaments, and the reaction of France and Britain to these developments.

## The Geneva Disarmament Conference, 1932–34

In retrospect, the Geneva Disarmament Conference of 1932–34 wears an air of slightly farcical unreality, heavily tinged with cynicism. Its oratory was interminable and empty. Its attempts to distinguish between offensive and defensive weapons were absurd – as a British delegate observed with some asperity, it largely depended which end of the weapon one was standing at. Participants attempted, with transparent ingenuity, to restrict armaments of which they possessed none or for which they had no use. Yet despite all this, the conference was the focus of widespread hope and aspiration, and it had important effects on international affairs.

The British government was the prisoner of the Disarmament Conference and the disarmament idea. In 1932 the government agreed in principle to abandon the assumption that no major war was expected for ten years, but it also decided that while the Disarmament Conference was in session no action would be taken to rearm. It was politically impossible to begin rearmament during the conference. Instead, the British laboured tirelessly to find the basis for an agreement on arms limitation, which meant primarily in their view reconciling the positions of France and Germany, by bringing French armaments down and allowing German armaments to rise. When Germany first left the conference, at the end of 1932, Britain played the leading part in wooing her back with a formula that accepted German equality of rights in armaments in a system which would provide security for all nations, an important step towards acknowledging German claims. The British later proposed an increase in the German Army from 100,000 to 200,000, while the French Army would be reduced, and then agreed that Germany should have an air force half the size of the French. Public respectability was thus conferred on the idea of German rearmament, which was already secretly under way, as the British government well knew. By the time it was openly proclaimed in March 1935, it had already been discounted in advance.

The French government too, under pressure from domestic opinion and reluctant to isolate itself from Britain, made considerable concessions during the conference. Following Britain's lead, the French abandoned their long-standing insistence on security as the precondition for disarmament, putting in its place the idea of verification to ensure that an agreement was being observed. It is true that by this means they hoped to ascertain the extent of existing German rearmament, but it also meant an implicit acceptance that rearmament could not be prevented. Only as late as April 1934 did the French government declare that the latest German budget showed a clear intention to rearm, and therefore France would not discuss the recent German proposals for a 'disarmament' agreement.

This brought the Disarmament Conference to an end, but by that time a good deal of damage had been done. The first fifteen months of the Nazi regime coincided with the last phase of the conference, which offered excellent cover for the first risky stages of German rearmament. Neither Britain nor for a long time France would risk the opprobrium of torpedoing the conference by denouncing Germany. Even when the Germans finally left the conference in October 1933, the British spent another six months trying to tempt them back. The cover was perfect, and the first steps in the restoration of German power were taken while all eyes were fixed firmly on the illusory hopes of the Disarmament Conference.

## The Ethiopian crisis, 1935–36

Even when disarmament failed, the League of Nations still represented the other great hope of the 1920s: peace through collective security. This hope foundered in the Ethiopian crisis of 1935–36, which ironically might not have been a serious issue at all without the existence of the League. Before 1914 it was customary for European states to occupy parts of Africa, and under pre-1914 rules, if Italy secured the consent of Britain and France as the major colonial powers, there was no reason why she should not conquer Ethiopia. But since 1920 new rules were supposed to apply. Ethiopia was a member of the League of Nations, and so a crisis arose.

Ever since the defeat of an Italian Army at Adowa in 1896, revenge for this humiliation had been in Italian minds. Mussolini began to consider an invasion of Ethiopia in 1925; plans took definite shape in 1932, with autumn 1935 as a likely date; and at the end of December 1934 the Duce laid down that the Italian objective must be nothing less than the total conquest of the country. The year 1935 appeared to offer favourable circumstances for the Italian enterprise. In 1934 there had been an attempted

Nazi coup in Austria, but it had been defeated, and the country had settled down (see below, p. 253). Laval visited Mussolini in January 1935 and signed the Rome accords, which settled a number of African questions that had long been at issue between France and Italy. The conversations between Mussolini and Laval (which sometimes took place without others being present) also dealt with Ethiopia. Laval always claimed that in these talks he offered Mussolini a free hand in that country only in economic matters, but for his part Mussolini believed that he had been given a *completely* free hand; and the evidence now available strongly supports Mussolini's contention. At any rate, after Laval's visit relations between the two countries became close, with Franco-Italian military agreements in May and June 1935, envisaging co-operation in a possible war against Germany.<sup>1</sup>

On 11–14 April 1935 there was a conference between Italy, France, and Britain at Stresa, to discuss the recent announcement of German rearmament and the position of Austria. By this time, the build-up of Italian forces in East Africa was obvious. Ethiopia was discussed by officials outside the formal sessions, and a British representative gave a diplomatically phrased warning that the consequences of an invasion could not be foreseen. However, the Italians secured a copy of an assessment by an inter-departmental committee in June 1935, concluding that no vital British interests in Ethiopia or neighbouring countries obliged Britain to resist an Italian conquest. With this document in his hands, Mussolini might reasonably assume that the British government would not oppose him. He had no grasp of the significance of League sentiment in Britain, or of the range of influences which could be brought to bear upon a British Cabinet. His information was correct, but its context was inadequate.

On 3 October 1935 the Italian invasion of Ethiopia began. Britain and France met it with a two-sided (not to say two-faced) policy. First, on British initiative, and not least because a general election was impending in Britain, the League was mobilised to condemn Italian aggression. On 18 November a limited range of economic sanctions was imposed on Italy (to the surprise of some British ministers, notably Neville Chamberlain, who had expected that sanctions would only be investigated and found to be useless). The sanctions that were in fact applied were sufficient to cause considerable difficulties for the Italian economy, and no small damage to the countries which applied them, but they did not include an oil embargo. This was partly because the USA was an important supplier of oil to Italy, and also because an oil sanction might lead to war, which was not a risk the British wanted to take; though they took the precaution of moving



naval reinforcements to the Mediterranean. In these measures, France was a reluctant participant, delaying sanctions for as long as possible, and temporising over British requests to use French naval bases in the event of hostilities.

The second line of policy was in practice preferred by both countries. This was to negotiate a settlement with Italy at the expense of Ethiopia. Talks on such a project were pursued by officials in Paris, culminating in an agreement between Sir Samuel Hoare, the British Foreign Secretary, and Laval on 8 December 1935. In broad terms, the proposal was that Ethiopia should cede a large area to Italy outright, with another area reserved for Italian economic influence and exploitation. A rump Ethiopian state would survive, receiving as compensation a strip of British Somaliland giving access to the sea. These terms were to be put to Mussolini, Haile Selassie (Emperor of Ethiopia), and to the League. In fact, they were rapidly leaked to the French press, and when news of them reached Britain they were denounced by the League of Nations Union, by MPs, and by some Conservative stalwarts in the constituencies, a combination of pressure group and parliamentary opinion which was sufficient to persuade the government to draw back. Hoare resigned as Foreign Secretary, and the proposals were abandoned.

The Italians pursued their invasion of Ethiopia, using aircraft and mustard gas to secure a quicker victory than was generally expected. The capital, Addis Ababa, was occupied in May 1936, and Mussolini proclaimed King Victor Emmanuel as Emperor of Ethiopia.

The reasons why Britain and France followed their ambiguous policy were clear. The British wanted a League policy, to please the electorate and Parliament, and also, in the case of some individuals, out of genuine attachment to the League. But they also wanted to avoid a breach with Italy, and had no wish to court a naval war in the Mediterranean when they were nervously conscious of weakness in the Far East. They were also acutely aware that oil sanctions against Italy could not succeed without the support of the United States, which was not forthcoming. The French had every reason to maintain the military agreements which they had only just reached with Italy, and yet they dared not break with Britain. The reasoning seemed sound, but the results were disastrous. There was enough *realpolitik* to undermine the League, and enough League sentiment to nullify the *realpolitik*. Neither line was pursued to a successful conclusion. The British felt that the French had let them down, and the leaking of the Hoare–Laval plan was not easily forgotten. The French felt that the British, in a fit of morality and Leagueomania, had lost them a valuable

Italian alliance. Anglo-French relations collapsed at a time when their solidity was sorely needed.

Mussolini, on the other hand, won a great success. He defeated not only Ethiopia but the League, and above all the British. He was at the peak of his popularity at home; he was convinced of the strength of his army; and he looked round for new worlds to conquer. Moreover, he embarked on a reversal of alliances. In December 1935 Italy refused to ratify the Rome agreements with France made in January that year; and Mussolini was personally embittered against the British by their opposition to his invasion of Ethiopia, limited though it was. The League's economic sanctions caused Italy to develop new trade links with Germany, and from being a likely member of an anti-German coalition Italy moved towards a partnership with the Germans. It was a turning-point in European affairs, and the turn was towards war.

## **Germany marches into the Rhineland, March 1936: a crisis and its consequences**

With the Ethiopian crisis persisting, and dissension rife between Britain, France, and Italy, Germany was presented with an opportunity to move into the demilitarised zone of the Rhineland. This zone was set up under the Treaty of Versailles, and reaffirmed by the Treaty of Locarno, with Britain and Italy acting as its guarantors. What exactly their guarantee entailed was not precisely defined, but in any case it was inoperative by early 1936. As early as January 1935 the British Cabinet had concluded that the demilitarised zone was not a vital British interest; and in February 1936 Mussolini assured Hitler that he would not join in any action under the Locarno Treaty. The opening for Germany was there for the taking. A pretext of sorts was presented in February 1936 when the French Chamber of Deputies ratified the Franco-Soviet Treaty signed in May 1935. Germany claimed that the terms of this treaty were incompatible with those of Locarno, which had thus been rendered null and void.

It had been the fixed intention of all German governments to do away with the demilitarised zone when it became possible to do so, partly because it was an affront to German sovereignty and self-respect, and partly because it left the Rhineland exposed to attack. For some time, France and Britain had been expecting Germany to open negotiations to bring the zone to an end. Hitler chose instead to act, and on 7 March 1936 troops moved into the Rhineland. But at the same time he offered negotiation, in the shape of a set of new proposals: non-aggression pacts with

France and Belgium, the limitation of air forces, new demilitarised zones on both sides of the Franco-German border (which if accepted would have meant the French dismantling large parts of the Maginot Line). The mixture of military *fait accompli* with diplomatic smoke-screen was masterly, and the temptation for nervous and peace-loving governments to examine the offers was overwhelming.

All turned on the response of the French and British governments to the German move. Much later comment on the crisis has assumed that an immediate military response was simple, and would have been rapidly successful, perhaps even leading to the fall of Hitler. 'Police action' was a favourite phrase, implying the brushing away of a screen of German forces, ready to retreat at the sight of French uniforms. Hitler later remarked that if the French had marched, the Germans would have had to withdraw, their tails between their legs. Closer examination, however, reveals a different picture.

The German forces which moved into the former demilitarised zones consisted of about 10,000 men, organised into 12 infantry battalions and 8 groups of artillery. There were also 22,700 armed police, who on 8 March were incorporated into the army as 21 further infantry battalions. These units were formed into 4 new infantry divisions, and after the end of March further forces moved in to form 2 more divisions in the zone. Behind these forces lay the rest of the German Army, made up of 24 infantry and 3 Panzer divisions, not as yet fully trained or equipped since the great expansion of 1935.<sup>2</sup> The *Luftwaffe* was strong in numbers but not yet supplied with modern aircraft.

The German forces which moved into the Rhineland zone were not large. Most of them were deployed on the east bank of the Rhine (where the demilitarised zone extended to a depth of 50 kilometres), and in bridgeheads on the west bank. Only 3 battalions advanced well beyond the river itself, to Aachen, Trier and Saarbrücken, towards the frontiers of the Low Countries, Luxemburg and France respectively. It has often been assumed that if the French had intervened, the German troops would have withdrawn without a fight. In the words of the most authoritative German account, this assumption is 'altogether unfounded'.<sup>3</sup> In fact, in the event of a French intervention, the three forward battalions were instructed to co-operate with the existing frontier troops and conduct a fighting retreat, using prepared obstacles to obstruct the French advance. The river itself would then be defended. It was in any case always unlikely that Hitler would simply have allowed the French to occupy the whole zone, which included part of the Ruhr industrial area on the east bank of the Rhine;

or that German troops would passively abandon territory they had just entered with much flourish and display.

It was therefore entirely sensible for the French to be prepared for serious action, not a military promenade, if they moved to expel the German forces. The *Deuxième Bureau* (Military Intelligence) correctly judged that ‘German forces could not be compelled to leave the zone without a fight.’<sup>4</sup> But they then went on to exaggerate the problem by producing a grossly inflated estimate of the German forces in the Rhineland zone. They gave an accurate figure for the army units, but added 235,000 auxiliaries, supposedly organised into 15 further divisions (see above, p. 197). The General Staff then insisted, on the basis of these figures, that it could not take even limited action to occupy part of the Rhineland without a partial mobilisation of the reserves, involving calling up a million men in seven days.

The French high command thus added its own self-induced difficulties to a perfectly real military problem. To mobilise a million reservists would have the temporary effect of decreasing the fighting power of the army, by producing a mass of men who would have to be organised and equipped. Moreover, mobilisation would have serious social and economic effects on the country when a general election was due to be held in two months’ time. The existing government, under Albert Sarraut, was acknowledged to be only a stop-gap until the elections, which the Popular Front coalition was expected to win. In such circumstances, it would have needed a bold and determined government, confident of parliamentary and popular support, to call up a million men and launch a serious military operation – in effect, go to war.

The government was neither bold nor determined. Sarraut was no Poincaré or Clemenceau, but a run-of-the-mill politician of the later Third Republic. In the country, the almost unanimous view of the press on 8 March and the following days was to renounce the idea of war, or action of any kind, except (in the socialist papers) an appeal to the League. The same message came from trade unions, ex-servicemen’s organisations, and the political parties. Left and Right each accused the other of wanting war. In fact, neither did: there must be no war over the Rhineland.

The government turned to Britain. The Foreign Minister, Flandin, went to London on 11 March to ask for British support for actions which he speciously claimed to be planning against Germany. He met no encouragement from either the Foreign Secretary, Anthony Eden, or the Prime Minister, Baldwin. The almost unanimous view of the British press and the political parties was that the Germans had only moved into their own

territory – ‘their own back garden’ was a phrase with much homely appeal. The government had long expected the remilitarisation of the Rhineland, and did not think it would vitally affect British interests. Eden’s reaction, when he heard the news of the occupation along with Hitler’s proposals for new pacts, was to try for a fresh agreement with Germany. So far from wishing to support the French in any immediate action against Germany, he was anxious to restrain them, and prevent them from spoiling the apparent opportunity of coming to terms with Hitler. Eden therefore told Flandin, on his visit to London, that they should examine Hitler’s proposals carefully; though he also offered some modest reassurance to France by agreeing to military staff talks. This response allowed Flandin to return to Paris and add one more reason for inaction to those which already existed: the British would not move. As Eden explained to the House of Commons on 26 March: ‘It is the appeasement of Europe as a whole that we have constantly before us’.<sup>5</sup>

So the crisis passed. The French Army limited its actions to cancelling leave and moving some units to the frontier to man the Maginot defences. On the diplomatic side, the British government, in consultation with France, put various questions to Germany to elucidate the meaning of Hitler’s offers of new agreements. There was no reply. Meanwhile, the Germans pressed on with the fortification of their frontier with France.

The Rhineland occupation has been rightly seen as a crucial point in the move towards war. It is often presented as the great ‘might have been’: the last chance to stop Hitler without war. This puts the issue wrongly. The opportunity open to France was to stop Hitler *by war*, not without war. It would have been necessary to invade German territory, and to fight the German forces if, as seems probable, they resisted. It is true that this war would have been fought in more favourable military circumstances than the later one; and if the French had shown boldness and determination it could surely have been won. But the political circumstances rendered such a course almost impossible. The ‘might have been’ on which so many regrets and recriminations have been lavished was not seriously considered by anyone, and if attempted would have been universally condemned by politicians and public in both France and Britain. Cardinal Pacelli, the Vatican Secretary of State and later to become Pope Pius XII, told the French Ambassador to the Holy See, on 16 March, that if the French had moved 200,000 troops into the Rhineland they would have done everyone a great service. It was stern advice, but there was no chance that it would be followed.

The real weight of the event lay not in any ‘might have been’, but in its actual consequences. Of these, some of the most important were felt in

Germany, where Hitler came increasingly to believe in his own infallibility. 'I go with the certainty of a sleepwalker along the path laid out for me by Providence', he told a large audience in Munich on 14 March, a week after the troops moved into the Rhineland.<sup>6</sup> A plebiscite was held on 29 March to approve the occupation. The result – a 99 per cent Yes vote – was certainly contrived, to say the least; but even so there was no doubt that the successful venture in the Rhineland produced a great surge in Hitler's popularity. After a difficult winter of food shortages and general discontent, this was an important political result of the Rhineland coup. Militarily, the Germans were able to start work on the Siegfried Line, covering the frontier with France and so closing the door which the demilitarised zone had been intended to keep open.

France suffered precisely the opposite strategic consequences. The demilitarised zone had been the last safeguard left from the 1919 settlement. On 30 April 1936, General Gamelin told his government that if (he really meant when) the Germans fortified the Rhineland, the French Army would be unable to invade Germany. The Germans could hold the frontier with comparatively few troops, while in the east they attacked Czechoslovakia or Poland. The defensive organisation of the French Army had already undermined the basis of French alliances in eastern Europe, and now that basis was vanishing completely. There was an even more fundamental result: France's complete lack of will to maintain the 1919 settlement had been openly exposed. If France would not fight over the Rhineland, the immediate guarantee of her own security, would she go to war at all?

The Rhineland coup also had consequences for other countries, and most ominously for Belgium. On 6 March, the day before the German occupation, the Belgian government renounced its alliance with France, and in October it declared a policy of 'independence', claiming neutral status without going back to the full juridical neutrality of pre-1914 years. France was now faced with a hopeless dilemma. To fortify the Belgian frontier was extremely expensive, and would abandon Belgium to a German invasion; yet to leave it unfortified meant laying open the north-eastern frontier of France. The Belgians, for their part, had apparently decided that they were better off without any alliance with France; yet the tacit assumption behind their 'independence' was still that the French would come to their help in the event of a German attack. It was an illogical position. The danger of a German invasion was not diminished, but if the French came in as rescuers they would do so without preparation. The new position of Belgium added to the instability of western Europe, and played into the hands of Germany.

## The Spanish Civil War: intervention and non-intervention

Less than five months after the German occupation of the Rhineland, civil war broke out in Spain. The causes of this conflict were deeply rooted in Spanish history; the issues at stake were complicated; and each side in the war was divided within itself. The right-wing (or nationalist) side was largely made up of monarchists, the officer corps, and the Catholic hierarchy; but the monarchists were split between Alfonsists and Carlists, and the small Fascist Party, the Falange, claimed to be revolutionary and modernising rather than reactionary. On the Left, supporting the republican government of Spain, were socialists, anarchists, and a small Communist Party, all opposed to one another in various ways. There were also strong separatist movements in Catalonia and the Basque country, which in general supported the Left and the republic.

The war began with a military rising to overthrow the republic and its Popular Front government, brought to power by a general election in February 1936. The revolt began in Spanish Morocco on 17 July 1936, and spread to Spain the next day. Its object was a rapid seizure of power, but the republican government put up a determined resistance, holding on to Madrid, Barcelona, and large parts of central and western Spain. The result was that an attempted *coup d'état* became a civil war which lasted nearly three years, until the end of March 1939. It was a bloody struggle, in which both sides committed atrocities, and whose deep-rooted complexities tended to be hidden by a smoke-screen of slogans and propaganda. Supporters of the republic claimed to be fighting against a fascist dictatorship in defence of democracy or socialism (or both). Nationalists presented themselves as the champions of order and Christian civilisation, at grips with red revolution and a communist plot.

Such views were at best gross simplifications, but they met with ready support outside Spain, where there was a strong inclination for people to project their own fears and hopes upon the Spanish Civil War. Outsiders created the war in their own image, and saw it as an extension of their own struggles. The conflict drew in individuals by a magnetism of idealism and commitment which can exert its attractive power even now. But of itself this did not mean that the Spanish Civil War was bound to become a European crisis. Indeed, in many circumstances the governments of Europe would doubtless have been content to allow the Spaniards to pursue their internecine feuds alone. In the event, a number of foreign governments took a very different line, and outside intervention in the war began at an early date.

It began in the first instance because Spaniards asked for it. On 20 July 1936 General Franco, anxious to get his rebel forces across the straits from Morocco to Spain and finding the sea controlled by republican warships, asked Mussolini for aircraft, and was refused. On the same day, the Spanish government asked France for the sale of aircraft, arms, and ammunition – a perfectly proper request, which the French accepted in principle. The nationalists tried again. On 22 July General Mola sent emissaries to both Italy and Germany, this time successfully. Ciano, the Italian Foreign Minister, received the Spanish mission on 25 July, and three days later agreed to send a dozen aircraft. (They actually flew from Cagliari on the 30th, though only nine arrived in Spanish Morocco – two crashed, and one had to land *en route*, in French Morocco.) Hitler, who was attending the Wagner festival at Bayreuth, also agreed (on 25 July) to send twenty Ju52 transport planes to Spanish Morocco. Ten arrived between 29 July and 9 August, and played an important part in ferrying rebel troops to Spain.<sup>7</sup> Foreign intervention had begun.

The Italian contribution to the nationalist camp was at first in terms of equipment – by 1 December 1936, 118 aircraft, 35 light tanks, some artillery and machine-guns, and 16.5 million rounds of small-arms ammunition had been sent. In December, the Italians offered to send troops, and by February 1937 there were nearly 49,000 Italian soldiers in Spain. During the whole war, a total of nearly 73,000 Italian troops served in Spain; and Italy provided 759 aircraft, 157 tanks, 1,800 guns, and 320 million rounds of small-arms ammunition.<sup>8</sup> In a war fought at a fairly low level of technology and supply, this was a considerable contribution.

The motives behind it were mixed. There appear to have been no previous contacts with the officers who led the rising of July 1936, though in 1934 Mussolini had promised aid to monarchist emissaries who visited him in Rome. Intervention was seen as a move against France, and as strengthening Italy's strategic position in the Mediterranean, but nothing systematic was done to follow up this idea. Italian troops landed on Majorca in 1936, but the island was not turned into an Italian base. In terms of ideology, intervention was seen more as defending fascism at home in Italy rather than promoting it in Spain. A Popular Front victory in Spain, with Italian anti-fascists prominent, would be a dangerous precedent. Within Spain, the Italians understood clearly that they were giving aid to conservative generals, not to Spanish fascists, and they did little to further the cause of the Falange. Above all, intervention became a matter of prestige. What began as small-scale help for a supposedly rapid coup became a commitment to a long and dreary war; but Mussolini's reputation



and that of Italian fascism were at stake, and retreat was impossible. The Italians made little attempt to press economic demands, except in the simplest sense of trying to secure payment for their aid – not always with success. The whole Italian operation in Spain was carried out with surprisingly little precise result being sought. What was attained was simply the aim of victory for the side that Mussolini had backed.

German intervention began with the provision of transport aircraft in July 1936. At the end of October, the Germans offered to send a combat force to Spain, on condition that it should be under a German commander, responsible directly to Franco. The Condor Legion began to arrive in Spain in November 1936. Its main contribution was in the air, and a total of some 600 aircraft were sent to Spain. At its greatest strength, in autumn 1938, the Legion's air component consisted of 105 aircraft, including 45 modern fighters, 45 medium bombers, and 3 dive-bombers. The Legion also had a small force of light tanks, of which 200 were sent in all, anti-aircraft guns, and support units.<sup>9</sup> The contribution of this compact and efficient body was out of all proportion to its size.

Hitler's first quick decision at Bayreuth, which began the intervention, seems to have been motivated by a desire to prevent what he saw as a Bolshevik regime controlling Spain. The despatch of the Condor Legion seems to have owed something to sheer pique. Ciano, the Italian Foreign Minister, visited Berlin in October 1936, and showed Hitler British documents obtained by Italian intelligence in which Eden described Germany as being ruled by a band of adventurers. Hitler at once suggested that Germany and Italy should go over to the offensive against the democracies, and they agreed forthwith to increase their help to Franco. But pique was very much accompanied by calculation. The Condor Legion's operations gave the German Air Force combat experience and an opportunity for self-advertisement. In terms of foreign policy, Hitler was happy to see the war kept going. It provided an opportunity to consolidate the alliance with Italy, and it appeared to open wide possibilities of war between France and Italy, or of civil strife in France. Moreover, the Germans insisted that they should receive precise economic concessions in return for their aid, notably in the shape of a measure of control over the Spanish iron-ore mines. The last deliveries of German aid, at the end of 1938, were made in return for specific concessions on German holdings in Spanish mining companies.

The other great power to intervene on a substantial scale was the Soviet Union, which provided assistance to the republican government. The first shipment of rifles and ammunition left the Soviet Union on 18 September

1936, and arrived on the 26th, followed in October by about 100 aircraft and 100 tanks, with some 500 specialist troops. Soviet tanks were in action at Madrid at the end of October, and the first fighter aircraft (flown by Soviet pilots) on 4 November. Shipments of equipment were frequent up to March 1937, diminished after that date, and ended in the middle of 1938. The total aid sent is uncertain, but probably amounted to about 1,000 aircraft, 900 tanks, 1,500 guns, and large quantities of small arms and ammunition. Soviet personnel in Spain, mainly tank and aircraft specialists, probably did not number more than 1,000 at any one time. Soviet military advisers were very important in the republican armies. Most republican generals had a Soviet officer on their staffs, and General Pavlov, the Soviet tank commander in Spain, sometimes led his units in action. The advisers themselves were watched by the NKVD, whose operations in Spain were controlled by Alexander Orlov.<sup>10</sup>

Soviet assistance to the republic also took the indirect form of the International Brigades, units of volunteers recruited and organised through the machinery of the Comintern and individual communist parties. Most passed through France, where a barracks was set up at Perpignan, and the French Communist Party formed a shipping company, *France-Navigation*, to provide sea transport from Marseilles. Numbers serving in the Brigades probably reached a total of between 25,000 and 35,000, with perhaps 15,000–18,000 in Spain at any one time. This was not a large force, but its psychological impact was considerable. The Brigades went into action in defence of Madrid in November 1936, and by the time they were withdrawn from Spain in November 1938 they had played a substantial military role as well as creating one of the legends of the twentieth century.<sup>11</sup>

Soviet motivation, as so often, was enigmatic. The ideological dimension was surely important: this was the era of the Popular Front movement, and it was presumably impossible for the Soviet Union and the communist parties to stand idly by in the Spanish struggle. Stalin was the acknowledged leader of the international proletariat, and he had to act as such. That the Soviet Union was the only great power to help the republic became, in fact, a crucial propaganda asset for the communists. In strategic terms, Spain was too far distant to matter much to the Soviet Union. It may be that after the Franco-Soviet Treaty of 1935 Stalin preferred France not to face the enemy on the Pyrenees; but since neither the French nor the Soviets chose to make much of their alliance, this motive appears no more than tenuous. It may well be that, like Hitler, Stalin was content to see the Spanish Civil War continue, absorbing some of the attention of the capitalist states in a far-distant corner of Europe. The great purges in the Soviet

Union presumably occupied most of Stalin's attention from 1936 to 1938, and Spain was probably only of peripheral interest to him. At any rate, he provided enough help to keep the republic going, but not enough to enable it to win. He pulled out in the autumn of 1938, and at an early stage he secured payment by getting most of the Spanish gold reserves (worth about \$US 500 million) sent to the Soviet Union at the end of October 1936.<sup>12</sup> Meanwhile, as a by-product of intervention, he used the presence of the NKVD in Spain to eliminate Trotskyists, anarchists, and other enemies.

All this intervention in the Civil War went on while the powers concerned were parties to a non-intervention Agreement, and members of a non-intervention Committee were meeting regularly in London. This macabre piece of play-acting may be explained by looking at the policies of France and Britain.<sup>13</sup>

France was closely concerned with events in Spain, both as a geographical neighbour and because in 1936 both countries had Popular Front governments. When approached for help by the Spanish government on 20 July 1936, the French Premier, Léon Blum, at once agreed in principle and asked for a list of what was needed. During the next few days, the French government changed its mind no fewer than three times, ending during the night of 8/9 August by forbidding the despatch of war material or even civil aircraft to Spain. On 1 August the government decided to propose to other states a general policy of non-intervention, and by 15 August this emerged as a formal Franco-British proposal for a Non-intervention Agreement. Other governments accepted, and the Non-intervention Committee held its first meeting in London on 9 September. During this period of vacillation, aid of various kinds in fact passed through France to Spain: 38 aircraft were sent during the week of 2–9 August, and a further 56 afterwards.<sup>14</sup> The border was opened occasionally during 1937 and 1938, and the government turned a blind eye to the transit camps of the International Brigades. In general, however, the policy of non-intervention, once begun, was adhered to.

It was a policy which ran counter to Blum's personal sentiments and his first reaction. It was not a decision reached primarily on strategic grounds, though the strategic arguments were marginally in favour of it. In support of intervention was the likelihood that a nationalist victory might produce a hostile government in Spain, which might allow the use of Spanish territory by the enemies of France. On the other hand, intervention would use up military resources needed by the French armed forces, risked spreading the war, and might force the nationalists into a hostility which was by no

means inevitable. The French General Staff believed that the nationalists would win, but that after victory they would get rid of all foreign forces and follow their own policy. The main impulse for non-intervention, however, came from French internal politics. Blum rapidly found that his Cabinet was split on the issue, and the stability of his government was in jeopardy when it had barely been in existence for two months. Blum was also afraid that intervention might bring France itself to the brink of civil war, which in view of the country's internal divisions was not a groundless fear. In addition, he was afraid of alienating Britain, whose government was opposed to intervention; though this factor was not so important as has sometimes been argued.

The balance was thus tipped in favour of non-intervention. In the event, it appears that most Frenchmen were relieved to see their country stand aloof from the war, though the communists and some socialists agitated vociferously for action on behalf of the republic, and much of the Right was ardently pro-nationalist. The non-intervention policy was sustained in the Chamber of Deputies without undue difficulty, despite the fact that the Non-intervention Agreement was openly flouted by Germany, Italy, and the USSR. To abandon it would risk domestic difficulties, and perhaps also a confrontation with the Axis powers which France had good reason to avoid. It seemed better to pretend that the agreement was working, or could somehow be made to work better in future.

The position of the British government was very similar, though its motivation was different. The sympathies of the government lay mainly with the nationalists, who seemed more likely to protect British commercial interests and investments in Spain. For this purpose, a British diplomatic agent was appointed to Franco's government at an early stage, though formal recognition was only given (by Britain and France together) in February 1939. The main considerations behind British policy, however, were political and strategic. First, the British government was anxious that the war should not spread, and produce a general European conflict. Second, as a part of a wider policy, British sights were set from mid-1936 to 1939 on improving relations with Italy, and perhaps detaching her from Germany. Third, the British were anxious to ensure that whatever Spanish government emerged victorious from the Civil War should be at least benevolently neutral towards Britain. Put in crude terms, this meant a wish not to fall out with the likely winner, which the British government expected to be the nationalists. As a policy, it was perhaps ignoble, and it certainly required a great deal of pretence; but it was far from being unreasonable.<sup>15</sup>

On these grounds, the British government seized eagerly on the proposal for a Non-intervention Agreement, and held on to it despite all adversities. Baldwin defended British policy by analogy with a dam: a leaky dam, holding back at least some of the potential flow of arms to Spain, and preventing the war from spreading from Spain to the rest of Europe, was better than no dam at all. To keep up the pretence of the Non-intervention Agreement involved all kinds of shifts and expedients, smacking of hypocrisy and cowardice. For example, the German and Italian fleets were brought into the non-intervention patrol, even though their countries were blatantly interventionist. The government had to contend with the unease of some of its own supporters as well as the anger of the Labour opposition, which advocated allowing the republican government to purchase arms in Britain.

Only once did the British and French depart from their complaisant attitude towards Axis activities in Spain. In August 1937 there were several attacks on merchant ships heading for republican ports by so-called 'pirate' submarines, which were well known to be Italian. On 1 September an Italian submarine fired a torpedo at a British destroyer, HMS *Havock*, but missed. At this point, the British and French governments called a conference of interested states (except Spain) at Nyon. Italy and Germany declined the invitation, and in their absence the conference (10–14 September) agreed that British and French warships should patrol the western Mediterranean and attack any unidentified submarine forthwith. The attacks ceased, but the moral effect of the Anglo-French show of strength was weakened by their agreement almost immediately afterwards to allow Italy to join in the antisubmarine patrol. Moreover, the Italian submarine campaign had been suspended on 4 September, before the conference met. Eden probably knew this, and so could be sure that he was pushing at an open door. The effects of the conference were less clear-cut than they appeared at the time.<sup>16</sup>

There was widespread apprehension that the Spanish Civil War might at any moment spill over and precipitate a general European conflict. The Italian submarine campaign and the attack on HMS *Havock* provided a sharp demonstration of how this might come about. What would have happened if the *Havock* had been hit, or if her depth-charges, dropped in retaliation, had sunk an Italian submarine? The same sort of thing might have happened in the land campaigns, where it was perfectly possible that Italian or German forces could have engaged Soviet tanks and their crews. War by the extension of some such incident in Spain or off the coast seemed a distinct possibility. Such fears were intensified by the emotions

which gathered round the war. For anti-fascists all over Europe, the Spanish War, and in particular the siege of Madrid, became the symbol of their struggle against the enemy; and some people hoped rather than feared that the war would touch off a wider conflict. With so many regarding the Civil War as a European war by proxy, there was always the possibility that it might turn into a European war in reality.

Much of this now appears exaggerated, even fanciful. The Spanish Civil War produced much high drama and emotion, but it did not precipitate a European war. Neither Germany nor the USSR had anything at stake in Spain that was worth fighting a European war about, and they made their contributions to the conflict in carefully measured doses. Italy was more deeply committed, because Mussolini's prestige was at stake, and he might have been willing to go to any lengths to maintain it. But Italy alone was unlikely to produce a European war out of the Spanish conflict; and in any case the Italian side never looked like losing. By the end of 1937 Spain was ceasing to be a major international issue – the Nyon conference of September 1937 was the last flurry of diplomatic activity on a Spanish question. As the serious movement towards a European war gained momentum in 1938 and 1939, Spain was only on the periphery of affairs, and the Civil War came to an anti-climactic end five months before hostilities began in Poland. In the European war that followed, the Axis powers received less help from Spain than they looked for. Franco had accepted their help, and paid for it when he had to, but he always sought to protect Spanish interests as he saw them. In the wider war, he gave help to the Axis powers in a limited fashion, but continued to put Spanish interests first.

Was the whole furore over Spain, then, merely much ado about nothing? In European terms, and if the issues could be reduced to cold fact, probably so. But beliefs are every bit as important as realities. War was a reality in Spain, and an atmosphere of war spread to much of Europe. Fears of general war emanating from Spain had their own weight, especially in France and Britain. This was not all. Spain made war respectable again. Many a formerly anti-militarist socialist felt that the defence of the republic was more important than pacifism. André Malraux, a French left-wing writer who fought for the republic, depicted in his novel *L'Espoir* (1937) anarchist troops making Homeric speeches before going out to certain death against Italian tanks. Heroism, and even heroics, were back in fashion. When a republican commander in Madrid was asked where his men should retreat if they had to, he replied 'To the cemetery', a phrase which was reported at the time, and has been remembered since, with admiration. They were brave words; but if they had come from Haig



*War as heroic adventure again: anarchist militiamen waving flags and rifles during the Spanish Civil War, Barcelona, 1937.*

Source: Hulton-Deutch Collection/Corbis

during the First World War they would have been treated differently. The spell cast by the war has not yet lost its power; have there been any anti-war novels or films about the Spanish Civil War?

At the more sober level of diplomacy, the Spanish War introduced a further element of discord. It brought Italy and Germany closer together. It was an obstacle to the improvement of relations between Italy and France or Britain. The prominent role of the International Brigades and the communist agitation about Spain throughout Europe revived the vision of international communism, to the exhilaration of some and the terror of others. The ill-scripted play-acting of the Non-intervention Committee, and the weakness, verging on cowardice, of the British government, inspired neither trust in potential friends nor fear in likely enemies. If at any time in the late 1930s an anti-German coalition might have been constructed – which is by no means certain – then events in Spain were quite sufficient to prevent it.<sup>17</sup>

## The growth of German power

In the background to all these events lay the development of German policy and power in the first years of the Nazi regime. The early stages of

Hitler's foreign policy were cautious. On 3 February 1933, when he had just come to power, he told a meeting of generals that the first phase of rearmament would be dangerous: if France possessed real statesmen, she would not allow Germany time to recover her strength, but attack at once. To avoid such reaction, Hitler was prodigal in his public assurances of peaceful intentions, notably in speeches to the Reichstag on 23 March and 17 May 1933. He supported his words with ample evidence of a constructive policy. In May 1933 Germany renewed the Treaty of Berlin with the Soviet Union (originally signed in 1926) without fuss or delay. In July the government concluded a concordat with the Vatican, regulating the position of the Catholic Church in Germany – though the sceptical might have observed that it was signed three days after the Catholic Centre Party had been dissolved. In the summer of 1933 Germany took part in negotiations for a Four-Power Pact with Italy, France, and Britain. These did not come to fruition, but they allowed the Nazi regime to demonstrate its goodwill and to be accepted among the powers of Europe. The most spectacular development in German policy was the signature on 26 January 1934 of a non-aggression treaty with Poland. This was a bombshell, but of a peaceable kind. Previously, hardly a German politician could have been found who accepted the 1919 frontier with Poland. Stresemann and Brüning certainly meant to change it when they could. Yet Hitler confirmed it, and charmed away a persistent source of friction in European affairs. He was able to claim a brilliant success for direct diplomacy rather than the cumbersome workings of the League of Nations, and for some years he was able to point to the agreement with Poland as the way in which things should be done. That the treaty weakened the Franco-Polish alliance, and provided excellent cover for Nazi activities in Danzig, were matters less remarked on at the time.

Against this list of constructive achievements were set two adventures of a potentially dangerous and disruptive kind. In October 1933 Germany announced its resignation from the League of Nations and departure from the Disarmament Conference. This appeared to involve some risk of retaliation from France or Britain, but Hitler rightly predicted that after some protests the western powers would renew their attempts to negotiate with Germany about armaments. The move was popular in Germany, and was confirmed by a plebiscite on 12 November. In theory, it should have diminished German respectability in the international community; but in practice it did not. The other adventure was in Austria. On 25 July 1934 Austrian Nazis broke into the Chancellery in Vienna, shot the Chancellor, Dollfuss, and proclaimed over the radio that he had resigned. Other members of the government rallied, and the assassins had to



surrender. Outside Vienna, the Austrian army and police defeated risings in five of the nine provinces. Mussolini at once declared his support for Austrian independence, and had troops already on manoeuvres in the Alps to back up his point. The coup failed. No one doubted German complicity in these events. Bands of Austrian Nazis were based in Bavaria; and when Dolfuss's assassins surrendered they unsuccessfully asked for safe conduct to the German border. Hitler strenuously declared his innocence, and it was doubtless true that strictly in terms of government activity Germany was not involved. But in terms of party conspiracy things were very different. There is clear evidence that Hitler expected the coup which was attempted on 25 July, and anticipated that the Austrian government would be overthrown by the end of the day. The German and Austrian Nazis worked closely together, and the whole enterprise, with its use of violence combined with propaganda, was a portent of the Nazi style in foreign policy. If Europe had been alert, much might have been learned from it. Moreover, the defeat of the rising showed that determined opposition, even in a small country, could check Nazi aggression; a lesson which seems to have been largely ignored at the time and forgotten later. In the event, Hitler managed both to live down the attempted coup and to survive its defeat.<sup>18</sup> The respectable and aristocratic von Papen was sent as Ambassador to Vienna to soothe Austrian susceptibilities; and German policy settled down to attain the *Anschluss* by more patient methods.

Despite these two episodes, the Nazi regime made an essentially cautious and peaceable start in its foreign policy. It became more daring and assertive in 1935 and 1936. In January 1935 Hitler secured the last advantage to be expected from the Versailles Treaty, when the plebiscite in the Saar prescribed in that instrument produced an overwhelming vote for reunion with Germany. There was nothing further to be gained from the treaty, and Hitler was free to discard it if he could do so with impunity. He proceeded to do so with boldness and rapidity, though always under the cover of professions of goodwill and offers of negotiation. In March 1935 Hitler proclaimed the introduction of conscription and the existence of the *Luftwaffe*, which enabled German rearmament to move ahead more rapidly, with no need for concealment. This step was accompanied by a meeting between Hitler and the British Foreign Secretary, Simon, in Berlin in March, and followed by the conclusion of the Anglo-German Naval Agreement in June 1935.<sup>19</sup> This was a striking success for German diplomacy, demonstrating that Germany, while having no truck with the Geneva approach to disarmament, was willing to make a specific

agreement on arms limitation. The contrast with the pre-1914 Anglo-German naval race was made much of. Moreover, like the non-aggression pact with Poland in 1934, the Anglo-German Naval Treaty emphasised the isolation of France. In March 1936 there came the daring coup of the occupation of the Rhineland, covered by a smoke-screen of plausible diplomatic proposals; and later in the year Germany intervened in Spain, while virtuously adhering to the Non-intervention Agreement. Both ventures were successful, though the German generals had thought they were too risky. Success breeds success, and the momentum of Nazi foreign policy was building up.

In his writings, Hitler had looked to alliances with Italy and Britain to bring Germany out of isolation and prepare the way for an advance in eastern Europe. By the end of 1937 an alliance with Italy was in the making. The set-back of the failed coup in Austria in 1934 was made good by an Austro-German agreement in July 1936, in which Germany recognised Austrian sovereignty and Austria acknowledged that it was a German state – an imprecise but potentially far-reaching phrase. Italy accepted this agreement, and its support for Austria progressively diminished. As early as January 1936 Mussolini told the German Ambassador in Rome that he would have no objection if Austria became in practice a German satellite. In April 1937 the Austrian Chancellor, Schuschnigg, visited Rome, and was told that Italy could no longer defend Austria militarily, and his only hope lay in following a Germanic policy. Shortly before this, on 1 November 1936, Mussolini had spoken publicly about the existence of a ‘Rome–Berlin Axis’. It was true that the value of an Italian alliance to Germany was open to question – for example, German generals had a low opinion of the Italian army. But Hitler had no such doubts. As Donald Watt has written, ‘Mussolini’s role as Hitler’s indispensable ally rested in Hitler’s mind and there alone.’<sup>20</sup> For German foreign policy as it was then conducted, that was quite enough.

German policy towards Britain was less clear-cut. Sometimes Hitler worked hard at building up relations with Britain. He met Eden in 1934 and Simon in 1935, and he angled for an invitation to go to London to see Baldwin. He also received a stream of unofficial visitors, including Lloyd George, Lord Allen of Hurtwood (a pacifist Labour peer), and Ward Price, an influential journalist. After each visit, Hitler reaped a goodly harvest of praise for the qualities of his character and the peaceable nature of his intentions. Equally the British government showed itself eager to negotiate with Germany, especially on questions of armaments and economics. To all appearances, an agreement with Britain, if not an alliance,

was there for Germany to take. But in the event Hitler never pressed his overtures beyond the stage reached in the Naval Agreement of 1935; and sometimes when the door to something further seemed open he made no move to go through it. In 1937 the German Foreign Minister, von Neurath, accepted an invitation to visit London; but it appears that the German government made no serious preparations for his visit, which was called off on the flimsy pretext of an almost certainly non-existent torpedo attack on a German cruiser off Spain. If an agreement with Britain was so firmly on Hitler's agenda, as he himself had written earlier, such behaviour is hard to explain. However, in the short run this German hesitation had no serious consequences. British policy was favourable towards Germany, and played almost as much into German hands as if an alliance had existed.

During the whole of this period, and especially after March 1935, German military strength developed at a remarkable rate (see above, pp. 216–26). By the end of 1937 the army had achieved the first stage of its expansion, and the strength (and even more the reputation) of the *Luftwaffe* was formidable in relation to any of its possible opponents. Germany had become, in a mere four years, the strongest military power in Europe.

## The decline of France

The rise of Germany was matched by the decline of France, which at the beginning of 1933 still retained a position of some strength, but by the end of 1937 had fallen into weakness and passivity. In part this was the result of internal problems – social and political conflicts, unstable governments, and a worsening economic situation. But in part the decline came from a failure to grapple with the problems presented by the rise of Germany. Only Louis Barthou, who was Foreign Minister from February to October 1934, made a determined effort to cope with these problems. Barthou had no doubt that the policy of conciliation practised by Briand and continued through most of the life of the Disarmament Conference must be abandoned. French security was at stake: it could no longer be attained through the League, so it must be sought by alliances. Barthou set himself to revive France's alliances with Poland, Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia, and Rumania. He recognised that an alliance with Italy would be useful. Above all, he sought an alliance with the Soviet Union. Though sternly anti-communist within France, he would have no truck with the view that Germany was preferable to the USSR on grounds of ideology: power

politics and geography were what counted for Barthou. He visited Warsaw in April 1934 to try to repair the Polish alliance, and to encourage the Poles to improve their relations with the Soviet Union. He toured other east European capitals to promote his idea of an eastern pact, which was designed to draw in the USSR as a guarantor in eastern Europe on the lines of the Locarno treaties in the west. It may well be that these efforts were foredoomed to failure because they sought to reconcile the irreconcilable: the states of eastern Europe had no wish to be guaranteed by the Soviet Union, a prospect which they regarded as somewhat akin to the sheep being guaranteed by the wolf. But at least Barthou knew his own mind, and tackled the problems with a courage and energy often lacking in others. He was also willing to treat the British with a brusqueness that had not been seen since Poincaré's time, and to disregard their tendency to obstruct any improvement in Franco-Soviet relations.

On 9 October 1934 King Alexander of Yugoslavia, on a visit to France, was assassinated by an agent of Croat terrorists. Barthou, who was riding in the same carriage, died of his wounds. His successor as Foreign Minister was Laval, who replaced Barthou's clear-cut policy with a series of half-measures. He reached agreements with Italy in January 1935 and the following months, but under pressure from Britain, he threw them overboard during the Ethiopian crisis. He signed a treaty with the Soviet Union in May 1935, but then took it through a long and unnecessary process of discussion by parliamentary committees and ratification by Chamber and Senate. He hoped to use his agreement with both countries not so much *against* Germany as to pave the way for an agreement *with* Germany. Moreover, he reaped the results which were almost bound to follow a treaty with the USSR: dismay and distrust on the part of eastern European states, with the exception of Czechoslovakia. The result was a confusion and uncertainty in which France was thrown back into dependence on Britain, with unhappy results.

From the French point of view, British foreign policy was at its worst in 1935. In March the Foreign Secretary, Simon, went ahead with a visit to Berlin immediately after Germany announced its open rearmament. In June Britain concluded the Naval Agreement with Germany without consulting France, even though French interests were directly involved. In October and November Britain led France into the fiasco of sanctions against Italy over Ethiopia. Laval was later to gain a reputation for being pro-German; but in 1935 it was the British who were far ahead of him in going to meet the Germans and playing into their hands. But however unreliable or ill-judged British policy might be, the French at this stage

found their dependence on Britain inescapable. The alternative of throwing French policy into reverse, seeking the best available terms from Germany, and accepting the consequences, was a course that was not yet seriously contemplated.

The German remilitarisation of the Rhineland in March 1936 marked both a strategic and a psychological surrender by France; and there was no recovery later in the year. The advent of Blum's Popular Front government placed a further, ideological, barrier in the way of restoring relations with Italy. An attempt to revive the Little Entente in eastern Europe found Yugoslavia and Rumania reluctant to offend the Germans or to court economic reprisals from them. Relations with the Soviet Union were not developed. The Soviets pressed hard for military conversations, and the French finally agreed in November 1936; but in practice they continued to stall by making sure that the talks contained little substance.

By 1937 France was reduced to almost complete passivity. The Foreign Ministry watched the growth of German power with a clear-sighted fascination, unwilling to accept but unable to prevent it. Old allies in eastern Europe were cool. Italian friendship had been thrown away, and that of the USSR had not been fully secured. The British were unreliable. The French knew they needed allies, but in practice they were grievously alone.

By the end of 1937 the state of Europe had changed profoundly from that of 1932. The balance of power and prestige had swung decisively away from the states which supported the status quo of 1919, and particularly France, towards those which sought change, notably Italy and Germany. Of these two powers, Italy was the more obviously active. Mussolini was positively happy to be seen using force, whether in Ethiopia or in Spain. After the Dollfuss crisis of 1934, when Italy acted for the last time to maintain the status quo in Austria, every Italian move was a blow to the stability of Europe: in particular, it was no small matter to outface and effectively destroy the League of Nations. The Italian role in these years, and the damage inflicted on Europe, was out of proportion to Italy's actual weight among the powers. But though Italy was the more active, Germany was by far the more formidable of the two revisionist states. By 1937 Germany had become in terms of land and air power the strongest country in Europe. The economy was booming. The Nazi leaders were full of confidence, well justified by a record of almost unbroken success. In political, military, and psychological terms, Germany held the initiative in Europe, and the events of the next few years developed from what her rulers, and above all Hitler, chose to do with it.

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- 16 See William C. Mills, ‘The Nyon Conference: Neville Chamberlain, Anthony Eden and the appeasement of Italy in 1937’, *International History Review*, vol. 15, 1993, No. 1, pp. 1–22.
- 17 Willard C. Frank, ‘The Spanish Civil War and the coming of the Second World War’, *International History Review*, 9 (1987), pp. 368–409, reviews the whole issue of how far the Spanish War contributed to the outbreak of European war.
- 18 See the account of the whole episode in Gottfried-Karl Kindemann, *Hitler’s Defeat in Austria, 1933–1934* (London 1988). David Irving, *Goebbels. Mastermind of the Third Reich* (London 1996), p. 193, provides further evidence that Hitler was aware of preparations for the coup.
- 19 The terms of this agreement fixed total naval tonnage at the ratio of Britain 100, Germany 35, and gave Germany the right to build up to equality in submarine tonnage, though she undertook not to exceed 45 per cent without giving notice.
- 20 Donald Cameron Watt, *How War Came. The immediate origins of the Second World War, 1938–1939* (London 1989), p. 409.

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

# War Postponed, 1938

### The *Anschluss*: Germany takes over Austria

On 11 March 1938 the government of the Republic of Austria was taken over by nominees of Germany as a result of pressure from Berlin. The next day, German troops entered the country, with bands playing and bedecked with flowers. On the 13th, Hitler announced the annexation of Austria to Germany. Within two days, a sovereign state, guaranteed several times over by treaties and declarations, and previously supported by Italy, France, and Britain, disappeared from the map. Not a shot was fired: it was a parade, not an invasion. No one even thought of going to war. Yet by its circumstances, its methods, and its consequences, the German annexation of Austria marked an important step towards war in Europe.

The new Austria created in 1919 had never been sure of its identity. In 1919 the majority of its citizens had wished to join Germany, but were explicitly forbidden to do so by the Treaty of Versailles. After 1933 the settlement of 1919 was in decay, and *Anschluss* (union) with Germany looked increasingly possible. But it would now mean accepting Nazism, and the two main Austrian political parties, the conservative Christian socials and the social democrats, both removed *Anschluss* from their programmes. Most Austrians, however, retained an ambivalent attitude towards Germany, and their sense of separate national identity remained uncertain.

Internally, the country was racked by ideological strife. In the early 1930s both the Christian socials and the social democrats maintained private armies, the *Heimwehr* and the *Schutzbund* respectively; and the *Heimwehr* developed into a form of Austrian fascism. In February 1934 the conservative Chancellor, Dollfuss, attacked the socialists in their



strongholds in the blocks of workers' flats in Vienna, bombarding them with artillery in what amounted to a limited civil war. But the Austrian right wing was itself deeply divided, and in July 1934 the Austrian Nazis assassinated Dollfuss in the course of an abortive *coup d'état*. After this, the new Chancellor, Kurt von Schuschnigg, sought to uphold his position against both Nazis and socialists, both of whom looked abroad for support. The Austrian Nazis had firm bases across the border in Germany. Socialists and communists in exile published news-sheets, and received rather amorphous support from left-wing opinion. To maintain its position in these circumstances, Schuschnigg's government depended heavily on Italian support, which had been powerfully demonstrated at the time of the Dollfuss coup. But in 1936 and 1937 Mussolini diminished his support for Austria, and stopped supplying arms to the Austrian army. In April 1937 Mussolini told Schuschnigg that he could no longer undertake to defend Austria by force. On 6 November 1937 the Duce told Ribbentrop, the German Foreign Minister, that he accepted that Austria was a German country; that the question would have to be resolved at some time; and that if a crisis arose Italy would take no action. With that declaration, Austria's external support was removed.

The Austrian government was thus left alone to face both internal discord and pressure from Germany. After the failure of the Nazi coup in Vienna in July 1934, the official German policy became one of 'evolution' towards *Anschluss*. Von Papen was appointed Ambassador in Vienna to promote this policy, and in July 1936 an Austro-German agreement appeared to stabilise relations between the two countries. Germany recognised the full sovereignty of Austria; each government agreed not to intervene in the internal affairs of the other; and Austria agreed to be guided by the principle that it was a German state. Secret clauses included an amnesty for Nazis in prison in Austria, and provided for the entry into Schuschnigg's Cabinet of Glaise-Horstenau and Guido Schmidt – neither of them Nazis, but both acceptable to Hitler. It was an unusual start to a policy of non-intervention in internal affairs. In practice, the clandestine links between the German and Austrian Nazi Parties continued. In January 1938 the Austrian police discovered a plan for Austrian Nazis to carry out acts of provocation (including the murder of the German Military Attaché, General Muff) so that when the situation seemed out of control the German government would intervene and impose a new government, in which the Nazis would take a half-share. At the same time, the police collected 14 tonnes of propaganda printed in Germany for the Austrian Nazis, and piled up at Salzburg railway station. The more formal organs of

the German state were not necessarily informed of these activities – indeed, it would be necessary to keep the Ambassador in ignorance of his likely fate. There is evidence that Hitler was involved in the details of these plans, including the plan to have the military attaché assassinated.<sup>1</sup> The whole conspiratorial scenario was characteristic of clandestine foreign policy under the Nazi regime.

In the event, German pressure took a different form. On 7 January 1938 Schuschnigg was invited to visit Hitler at Berchtesgaden, where he eventually made his way on 12 February. There followed a remarkable display of Hitler's techniques of intimidation. Schuschnigg was subjected over several hours to verbal assault, psychological pressure, and threat of invasion. Hitler put ten demands, including the appointment as Minister of the Interior (and therefore in charge of the police) of the Austrian Nazi Seyss-Inquart. Schuschnigg signed a protocol including these points, and was given three days to have them confirmed by the President of Austria. He left Berchtesgaden battered, dazed, and humiliated. When it is asserted (as it sometimes is) that at this stage Hitler was following an 'evolutionary' course, by which the *Anschluss* with Austria would come about gradually, it is necessary to remember the interview of 12 February 1938. Schuschnigg would have been glad to be spared this form of 'evolution', which in fact meant being bullied into sacrificing his country's independence.

At the last moment, the Austrian Chancellor tried to resist Hitler's pressure. On 9 March he announced a plebiscite, to be held on the 13th, asking Austrians to vote on whether they wanted 'a free and German, an independent and social, a Christian and united Austria'. Everything pointed to a massive 'Yes' vote. Socialist Party leaders, after an agony of doubt, instructed their members to vote 'Yes'; and in an extraordinary gesture of unity the former head of the socialist *Schutzbund* met the Catholic mayor of Vienna to discuss ways of resisting the Nazis. It seemed at last that Austrian identity and independence were to be asserted, overriding the pull of internal discords.

Hitler had secret news of the plebiscite before it was announced in Austria. He thought briefly of trying to stop it, and then turned on 10 March to military action. The army had no plans ready for an attack on Austria, only a sketch for 'Operation Otto', prepared in case of a Habsburg restoration. But the staffs (including General Beck and other anti-Nazis) set to work with a will to improvise a plan. In the event, no invasion was needed – telephone calls proved sufficient.

The single day of 11 March settled the issue. Hitler opened with a demand that the plebiscite be postponed. When this was yielded, Goering

telephoned Vienna with the demand that Schuschnigg must resign and be replaced as Chancellor by Seyss-Inquart. This was resisted for a time, until Schuschnigg announced the resignation of his whole Cabinet except Seyss-Inquart, who remained as Minister of the Interior and the only minister still in office. On this, Goering issued a verbal order for German troops to cross the frontier, with Hitler signing the written instruction at 8.45 p.m. At 9.40 an invitation purporting to come from Seyss-Inquart in the name of a provisional government was received in Berlin, and treated as conferring legitimacy on the planned operation.

German forces entered Austria early on 12 March, in an ostentatiously friendly manner. Hitler followed later in the day, and was welcomed by cheering crowds at Linz, where as a boy he had gone to school. It appears to have been the heady atmosphere that decided Hitler to proclaim next day the annexation of Austria, rather than adopt some half-way house such as a protectorate. There was a darker side to the occupation. Behind the army with its bands and flags there came the Gestapo. Himmler and Heydrich arrived in Vienna on 12 March. There were 10–20,000 arrests, ranging from Schuschnigg himself to Socialist Party members and Jews. The Defence Minister in Schuschnigg's Cabinet was murdered.

Austria's former protectors made no move. Mussolini was given no notice of events, but stood by his word and earned Hitler's heartfelt gratitude. France and Britain delivered separate protests in Berlin (France was actually without a government on 11 March); but they had long expected the *Anschluss*, which was thought to be inevitable and in principle right. In Britain in particular there was a widespread belief that the enforced separation of Germany and Austria had been among the errors of Versailles; and the Labour Party found it hard to sympathise with Schuschnigg's regime, the heir of those who had crushed the socialists in February 1934.

The danger of a European war arising out of the Austrian crisis was almost nil. Virtually the only possibility of conflict would have arisen from Austrian resistance to the German occupation: even a token struggle would have stripped away the veneer of legitimacy and the atmosphere generated by flowers and welcoming crowds. But it is hard to believe that brief and sporadic fighting would have provoked intervention by France, still less Britain; and the Austrians were in no real position to sacrifice themselves to awaken the rest of Europe.

War was therefore nowhere in sight; and yet the *Anschluss* was a long step towards it. German methods – subversion, the threat of force, the novel device of dictating orders to a foreign government by telephone – sank into the consciousness even of those who chose to ignore them at the

time, and began the process by which Nazi tactics finally became intolerable. Moreover, the appearances created by the *Anschluss* eventually overtook the reality, with far-reaching consequences. In reality, Hitler had not planned the events of 11 March 1938. He was certainly set on destroying Austrian independence, and was well on the way to doing so; but Schuschnigg's desperate call for a plebiscite produced a crisis which Hitler did not expect. He was compelled to improvise. In retrospect, however, the *Anschluss* became the first in a six-monthly series of crises, creating the impression of a plan and a programme, and so producing a view of Nazi policy which in the long run did much to build up resistance to it. The effect of German actions was cumulative, and Austria began the process of accumulation.

## The Czechoslovakian crisis

The effects of the German occupation of Austria were felt at once in Czechoslovakia, where the long-standing difficulties of this multinational state were brought to a head and became a part of a great European crisis which in September 1938 brought the Continent to the brink of war.

The nationalities problem of Czechoslovakia may be illustrated by the census figures of 1930. These gave a total population of 14,730,000, made up as shown in Table 14.1:

**TABLE 14.1.** *Nationalities within Czechoslovakia, 1930*

Czechs	7,447,000
Germans	3,218,000
Slovaks	2,309,000
Magyars	720,000
Ruthenes	569,000
Poles	100,000
Others	266,000

*Source: Bulletin of International News, vol. XIII, p. 747. Royal Institute of International Affairs. (Figures rounded to the nearest thousand.)*

The bulk of the German population lived in a horseshoe-shaped area along the frontiers with Germany and Austria, though there were also substantial concentrations in the cities of Prague, Brno, and Bratislava. The Magyars lived mainly in a long, thin zone along the Hungarian frontier, and the Poles were gathered round Teschen.

Conflicts between different nationalities were chronic, and in some cases acute. The Slovaks had developed a national consciousness during

the nineteenth century, and found their position in the state anomalous. Technically, they shared with the Czechs the status of ‘people of the state’, as distinct from minorities. In practice, posts in the civil service and the professions tended to be taken by the better-educated Czechs, and the long-standing religious division between Protestant Bohemia and Catholic Slovakia remained sharp. A Slovak separatist movement, led by a Catholic priest, Andrew Hlinka, gained the support of up to about half of the Slovak electorate. Among the minorities, the Magyars and Poles looked to their national states across the border; but the main problems were associated with the Germans, who in 1919 had abruptly lost a position of predominance and become a subordinate minority, discriminated against in education, jobs, and the distribution of public funds. During the 1920s there were signs that they might absorb this sudden reversal of fortune and adapt to the new political system. Conservative Germans co-operated with the Czech Agrarian Party, and in 1929 German social democrats took office in a coalition government. The Weimar Republic in Germany assisted this process by advising Sudeten Germans to accept the new state, and giving no encouragement to those who rejected it.

This process of assimilation was checked in the early 1930s by the economic depression, in which the German industrial areas tended to blame the government in Prague for their misfortunes, and by the growth of ideological conflict. The Nazi successes in Germany in 1932–33 were welcomed by nationalists among the Sudeten Germans, and both the Nationalist and the Nazi Parties began to attract increasing support. These parties threatened both the parliamentary system and the internal cohesion of the state, but the Czechoslovak government proved insufficiently resolute to defeat them. In October 1933 both parties were suppressed, but shortly afterwards a new party, the Sudeten German *Heimatsfront*, was formed, under the leadership of Konrad Henlein. This was an obvious replacement for the former Nazi Party, but it was allowed to continue – the government had struck once, but did not continue the work of repression.

Henlein’s new party was an immense success. In the parliamentary election of May 1935 it polled nearly 1.25 million votes, more than any other single party.<sup>2</sup> Henlein demanded the removal of all discrimination against the German population, and claimed that Germans should be appointed to the civil service in proportion to their numbers – he put the figure at 31,000 posts. The government, under President Beneš, held that a democratic state could not entrust its administration to representatives of a totalitarian party. Early in 1937 Henlein began to demand autonomy for the German areas, which the government refused, partly because it was

impossible to hand over parts of the country to an alien political system, and even more because any concessions to the Germans would be demanded by the Slovaks, Magyars, and Poles, and would end in the disintegration of the state.

The impasse was complete. The government had tried coercion but abandoned it. The only concessions which would meet the demands of Henlein's party would truncate the parliamentary system and threatened to dissolve the state. The *Anschluss* in Austria sharpened the conflict, providing a fillip for Henlein's party, whose membership rose from 550,000 to 1.31 million between February and May 1938.<sup>3</sup> The internal crisis of the Czechoslovakian state was coming to a head. Even as a domestic problem, it was hard to see how it could be resolved.

## Hitler and the Sudeten Germans

Why did the internal problems of Czechoslovakia bring about a European crisis and threaten general war? The main answer lay in the links between the Sudeten question and Nazi Germany. From the early 1930s the Sudeten German nationalists and Nazis were in contact with the German Nazi



'What's Czechoslovakia to me anyway', Low's view of the Czechoslovakian crisis, 1938.

Source: David Low/Evening Standard 18/7/1938/Associated Newspapers/Solo Syndication and Centre for the Study of Cartoons and Caricature, University of Kent.

Party, and in 1935 the latter provided a large subsidy for Henlein's election expenses. On 28 March 1938 Henlein conferred with Hitler, and summarised his position (with Hitler's approval) as being that 'We must always demand so much that we can never be satisfied'.<sup>4</sup> Notably, Henlein agreed to keep in reserve a suggestion of Hitler's that he should ask for German regiments with German officers within the Czech Army – something which the Czech government was bound to refuse. On 24 April 1938 Henlein made a number of demands for autonomy in a speech at Karlsbad (including the right to practise and propagate Nazi ideology): these demands had been prepared at a meeting in the German Foreign Ministry on 29 March. German influence on Henlein's party and its policy was thus significant, and was becoming predominant.

German (which in effect meant Hitler's) intentions towards Czechoslovakia early in 1938 were not absolutely clear-cut; but the degree of uncertainty amounted to no more than whether the state should be destroyed in the near or the rather more distant future, and whether this end should be attained by war or some lesser form of pressure. At a conference with his service commanders and Foreign Minister on 5 November 1937 (the so-called 'Hossbach Conference'), Hitler spent a good deal of



*Hitler at army manoeuvres with his Military Adjutant Col. Hossbach, who took notes at the 'Hossbach Conference', 5 November 1937.*

Source: Ullstein Bild/AKG Images

time on Czechoslovakia. He asserted that Germany must go to war to solve her problems of living space no later than 1943–45; and that in favourable circumstances (the involvement of France in serious domestic strife or war with another power) Germany could act earlier to secure the overthrow of Czechoslovakia and Austria and so remove the threat to her flank in the event of war in the west. Hitler believed that Britain, and probably France too, had already tacitly abandoned Czechoslovakia and were reconciled to that question being ‘cleared up’ by Germany. Generals Blomberg and Fritsch were less certain, emphasizing that French and British enmity must not be incurred. Blomberg stressed the strength of the Czech fortifications, though Fritsch declared that he was already studying means of overcoming them. Neither general objected to the principle of Hitler’s aims – only to the timing.<sup>5</sup>

This conference was followed by the issuing of a new general directive (7 December 1937) by the High Command of the Armed Forces (OKW), giving Operation Green (an attack on Czechoslovakia) priority over defence in the west, and laying down that the main emphasis in mobilisation planning was to be placed on this operation. No date, even approximate, was fixed. Planning for an attack on Czechoslovakia went forward, and on 21 April Hitler discussed the plan with General Keitel, rejecting the idea of an invasion with no shred of justification in favour of a lightning attack to take advantage of some incident, such as the assassination of the German Ambassador in Prague. (Ambassadors, as we have seen before, were considered expendable.) By August the General Staff had produced a plan to cut Czechoslovakia in two at its narrowest point, but Hitler criticised this on 3 September, emphasising the political and psychological importance of a drive on Prague by all available armoured forces. The result was a somewhat unhappy compromise between these two concepts.

Were these plans meant to be carried out, or were they preparations for an eventuality which might or might not materialise? There are many indications that Hitler wanted war against Czechoslovakia in 1938, both to destroy the state in one blow and to demonstrate German power. He later expressed regret that he did not fight, and in 1939 was determined that no peacemaker should come along to deprive him of a war. General Beck, who was alarmed by the risk of war with the western powers, had no doubt that the plans were to be carried out. On the other hand, Hitler later boasted of the success of his war of nerves, which had given him a bloodless victory.

Whatever the exact state of Hitler’s intentions (which may well have fluctuated), there can be no doubt that the ultimate German objective was



the destruction of Czechoslovakia. From the meeting of 5 November 1937 onwards, Hitler repeatedly stated this intention: all that varied was the likely date. Beck himself did not oppose this aim; he was only dismayed by the risk of general war. Equally, there was an almost universal belief, in Germany and other countries, that Germany *would* go to war over Czechoslovakia.

## European reactions: France, Britain and the Soviet Union

In these circumstances, the prospect of European war seemed imminent. If Germany set out to destroy Czechoslovakia by force, using the Sudeten issue as a pretext, and the Czechs resisted, then other powers seemed bound to be drawn in. Czechoslovakia had an alliance with France dating back to 1924, reaffirmed by another treaty in October 1935, and supported by a limited air convention signed on 1 July 1935. She also had an alliance with the Soviet Union, signed in 1935, though this was to become operative only when the French treaty had already been activated. If France went to war, then it was likely that Britain, however reluctantly, would be drawn in. The Czechs had ample forces to act as a trigger for these alliances: an army of thirty divisions after mobilisation, well equipped by a modern armaments industry, and with incomplete but substantial fortifications begun in 1936. Czech resistance to a German invasion might not be prolonged, but if it was determined there would be no walk-over.

This was the situation in principle, and the dangers of general war were obvious. In practice, there were many reasons to think that the scenario would not be played out according to this script. It was highly unlikely that France would go to war in support of Czechoslovakia, if only for the simple reason that the French shrank from an unequal contest. The French intelligence services produced gloomy reports on the military balance. (See above, p. 198.) When the government consulted Gamelin, the Chief of Staff, as to whether the Army could advance to the help of Czechoslovakia, he replied flatly that there could be no attack at all until the covering forces were in position, and even after general mobilisation there could be no strategic offensive against Germany for two years. Political assessments of the situation were equally gloomy. French Ambassadors and Foreign Office officials were mostly against war and in favour of concessions to Germany, because they were sure that France would be virtually isolated if she attempted resistance. Poland was hostile to Czechoslovakia, and on 22 May Beck (the Polish Foreign Minister) reserved his position in the event

of war; though he did propose consultations with the French – an offer which was not taken up. Britain declined to commit herself to fight for Czechoslovakia, though accepting that she might be drawn in; and in any case could produce only two divisions for a land war. Only the Soviets claimed they would stand by their treaty with Czechoslovakia if France did so first; but they were not believed, and in any case the Red Army could only get into action through Poland or Rumania. The French faced the prospect of having to go to war with Germany virtually alone: the nightmare of French foreign policy since 1871.

The Cabinet itself was divided. Bonnet, the Foreign Minister, was desperate to avoid war, and determined to put pressure on Czechoslovakia to make concessions. Reynaud and Mandel took the opposite stance, and advocated resistance even at the risk of war. Daladier, the Premier, hesitated between the two courses, realising only too clearly that the whole future of France and of Europe was at stake, not just the boundaries of Czechoslovakia, and yet finally shrinking from the calamity of war. In these circumstances, French policy became paralysed, leaving the initiative to Britain.

British policy thus attained a crucial importance which was unusual for a country which had for some years cultivated a detachment from European affairs in general and from eastern Europe in particular. The government, under the leadership of the Prime Minister, Neville Chamberlain, accepted its central role with remarkable energy and self-confidence. Chamberlain was a man of great ability, drive, and courage, determined to impart a sense of direction to British foreign policy which he rightly felt had been lacking under his predecessor, Baldwin. His policy was not in any strict sense personal – his views were shared by, rather than imposed on, his Cabinet, and despite later claims there was only scattered opposition within the Foreign Office, where the Permanent Under-Secretary, Cagodan, was in broad agreement with the Prime Minister.

The main lines of Chamberlain's policy were determined partly by the psychological, economic, and strategic considerations which have been discussed in earlier chapters, and partly by his own ideas and beliefs. Chamberlain shared with a particular intensity in the widespread revulsion against war, though he was by no means an absolute pacifist. He also believed (along with many British people) that Germany had justifiable grievances against the Versailles settlement, which could be met by moderate revision of that settlement. He was convinced that Hitler could be satisfied by comparatively modest changes, peacefully arrived at; and he could not believe that any government actually *wanted* war. Chamberlain

therefore viewed the Czechoslovakian crisis of 1938 in this light, and sought both to resolve the specific crisis without war and to advance towards a permanent European settlement. War would be fatal, because it would mean the ruin of his whole policy, and – very simply – because it seemed highly likely that Britain would lose. Chamberlain was well aware of the poor state of British defences, and deeply imbued with a fear of aerial bombardment. He certainly shared the view, expressed by Cadogan in his diary on 16 March 1938: ‘We *must* not precipitate a conflict now – we shall be smashed.’<sup>6</sup>

The main lines of British policy on Czechoslovakia were laid down during 1937, while Eden was Foreign Secretary, starting before Chamberlain became Prime Minister in May of that year. Britain made repeated representations at Prague to urge the Czechs to remedy the grievances of the Sudeten Germans by meeting as many of Henlein’s demands as possible. (Henlein himself visited London twice in 1935 and again in October 1937, making a favourable impression and being well received even by such anti-German figures as Vansittart and Churchill.) On 19 November 1937 Lord Halifax, a prominent British minister, soon to become Foreign Secretary, met Hitler at Berchtesgaden and took the initiative in explaining how the European order might be altered by peaceful means, offering the specific examples of Danzig, Austria, and Czechoslovakia as presenting opportunities for change. When the French Premier and Foreign Minister of the time (Chautemps and Delbos) visited London on 28–30 November 1937, Chamberlain told them that British public opinion was strongly opposed to being drawn into war over Czechoslovakia and believed that the Sudeten Germans had not been fairly treated. Eden hoped that Delbos would advise the Czechs to make concessions to the Sudeten Germans. Thus the policy which culminated in the Munich agreement of September 1938 was outlined nearly a year earlier.

When the Czechoslovakian crisis sharpened at the end of March 1938 British policy took on two main aspects: to continue to urge the Czech government to make concessions to Henlein, and later to Germany; and to warn the German government that if war arose out of the Sudeten issue, and France was involved, Britain might or would also be drawn in. The two aspects were far from being given equal weight. The pressure on Czechoslovakia was always strong and finally became intense, but the warnings to Germany were muted and lacking in conviction. As the British repeatedly said among themselves, it was unwise to threaten what you could not carry out, and they did not believe that they could fight Germany with any chance of success. At the same time, the British thought it

necessary to restrain France from pursuing her obligations to Czechoslovakia, and from stiffening Czech opposition to the Sudetens. (In fact, such restraint was quite unnecessary, though Daladier often sounded bellicose.) The British were also determined to exclude the Soviet Union from the diplomacy of the crisis. Chamberlain believed that the USSR was trying to involve Britain in a war with Germany; and he was also convinced that to bring the Soviets into the negotiations would drive away Hitler, who was too anti-Bolshevik ever to deal with Stalin. The British aimed at a negotiated settlement, and therefore any co-operation with the Soviet Union must be avoided. Such calculations were added to the cumulative effects of twenty years of ideological conflict and distrust, and produced a firm determination to keep the Soviets at arm's length.<sup>7</sup> The preponderant line of British policy thus emerges as the search for a settlement by putting pressure on Czechoslovakia to meet first Henlein's and then Hitler's demands.

What of the Soviet Union, which like France was in formal alliance with Czechoslovakia? On 17 March 1938 the Commissar for Foreign Affairs, Litvinov, made a public proposal that interested powers should consult together about practical measures to preserve peace. This proposal was rejected by the British government, and not pursued even by the French, still technically in alliance with the Soviet Union. Thereafter, Litvinov affirmed from time to time that his country would in case of need carry out its obligations and aid Czechoslovakia, as long as France did so first. In May and June some Soviet aircraft were flown to Czechoslovakia through Rumanian (and sometimes Polish) air space.

These assurances and actions enabled the Soviet Union to claim to have been Czechoslovakia's only true friend in the crisis. But the assurances were never put to the test. Even if France had gone to war in support of Czechoslovakia, which was highly unlikely, it was by no means clear what the Soviet Union would or could have done. For the Red Army to reach Czechoslovakia, or to engage the Germans at all, it would have to pass through Poland. (The roads and railways across Rumania were quite inadequate.) The Red Army itself was in the throes of the purges, and most foreign military observers doubted its capacity for offensive action outside its own borders. In the Far East, the army was already (in July and August) fighting to protect Soviet territory against the Japanese. The evidence relating to Soviet military preparations in September 1938 is inconclusive. Army units in the military districts of Kiev and Byelorussia were brought to a state of readiness, but it seems likely that this move was directed against Poland rather than in support of Czechoslovakia. The Red Air

Force had a large number of aircraft (precise figures of 246 bombers and 302 fighters have been quoted) in a position to fly to Czechoslovakia. It remains impossible to tell what these various forces would actually have been ordered to do. If France did not fulfil its obligations, it seems clear that the Soviet Union would not have intervened unilaterally; and when Beneš put this very question to the Soviets he received evasive replies. All in all, it seems virtually certain that Stalin would not have gone to war over Czechoslovakia, with or without France, unless he believed that vital Soviet interests were at stake, which they were not.<sup>8</sup> One definite threat, made on 23 September, to denounce the Soviet–Polish Non-Aggression Pact of 1932 if Poland violated Czech territory, was not carried out when the Poles occupied Teschen. There would have been no point in such a gesture.

The policies and interests of France, Britain, and the Soviet Union therefore made it unlikely that they would in practice go to the help of Czechoslovakia. The Czech position was much weaker than its formal alliances indicated; and the likelihood of a European war arising out of the Czechoslovakian problem was correspondingly diminished. This seemed indeed to be the position during April 1938. Henlein, in a speech at Karlsbad on 24 April, set out eight demands for Sudeten German autonomy which stopped just short of a claim for complete separation, though if fully executed they seemed likely to lead to the disintegration of Czechoslovakia.<sup>9</sup> The British government believed what it wished to believe: that the speech offered a basis for settlement within Czechoslovakia. At a conference in London on 28–29 April the British and French leaders agreed that both countries should urge the Czechs to do their utmost to meet the demands of the Sudeten Germans, while Britain would also approach Berlin to find out exactly what the Germans wanted. All seemed set for a negotiated solution favourable to Henlein and Hitler.

## The ‘May crisis’

But then, with pressure being exerted on Czechoslovakia but not yet producing any solid effect, there erupted the so-called ‘May crisis’, apparently revealing an immediate threat of war. On 19, 20, and 21 May there were widespread rumours of German troop movements in areas to the north of the Czech border. At that time, German plans for an invasion were not ready, and there was no intention of launching an attack, though some army units were engaged in manoeuvres. But the situation appeared critical. Local elections were in progress in Czechoslovakia, bringing out all the

strains of the nationalities problem. Two Sudeten Germans were shot by a Czech officer near the border with Germany. On 21 May Ribbentrop told the British Ambassador in Berlin that there had been 100 German casualties in the Sudetenland, and that if such provocation continued the German people would intervene as one man. Only ten weeks earlier there had been German political pressure on Austria, and reports of German troop movements, and the *Anschluss* had come about within a couple of days. On 20 May the Czech government called up one class of reservists; though it was widely reported that they had mobilised two classes, and they were much condemned for being provocative.

In fact, there was no danger of a German attack, and therefore none of a European war. But the danger of war *appeared* to be real, and that was quite enough. Twice, on 21 and 22 May, Britain asked Germany to exercise patience, but also warned that if war arose over Czechoslovakia, France would stand by her obligations and there could be no certainty that Britain would not be drawn in. On 21 May Bonnet, the French Foreign Minister, stated publicly that France would act if German troops entered Czechoslovakia. When the alarm had subsided, Chamberlain wrote privately (on 28 May) that there was no doubt that Europe had been on the brink of war: Germany had made all preparations for a coup, and had only drawn back when warnings from Britain and France convinced her that the risk was too great. Despite all the French and British reservations, indeed their determination not to become involved in war over Czechoslovakia, they had suddenly, willy-nilly, come to the brink. From that time onwards, they redoubled their efforts to resolve the crisis, and increased their pressure on the Czechs to make concessions.

The May crisis had dramatic effects within Germany, which increased the likelihood of war. On 21 May, in the midst of the crisis, General Keitel submitted to Hitler a draft directive for Operation Green against Czechoslovakia, which opened: 'It is not my intention to smash Czechoslovakia by military action in the immediate future without provocation, unless an unavoidable development of the political conditions within Czechoslovakia forces the issue, or political events in Europe create a particularly favourable opportunity. . . .' But the events of the crisis infuriated Hitler, who had been accused of an aggression which he was not yet intending, and had been humiliated by appearing to yield to Anglo-French pressure. On 30 May a new directive was prepared: 'It is my unalterable decision to smash Czechoslovakia by military action in the near future. It is the business of the political leadership to bring about the suitable moment from a political and military point of view.' Support from Hungary and

Poland was anticipated; French intervention was thought unlikely; Soviet air support for the Czechs appeared probable. The German military action must be speedy, energetic, and bold. The date for the execution of this directive was fixed at 1 October 1938 at the latest.<sup>10</sup>

The determination to crush Czechoslovakia was not new, but the setting of a date gave the situation a new aspect. Four months gave time for a diplomatic solution if one could be found or forced. Meanwhile, military preparations went ahead, with increased emphasis on speed and surprise. Events henceforth developed under the shadow of impending military action.

## Pressures on Czechoslovakia; Chamberlain's visits to Hitler at Berchtesgaden and Godesberg

Negotiations continued between the Czech government and the Sudeten German Party, without success. The British and French grew impatient, and applied increased pressure on the Czechs. In July the British government forced upon the Czechs a so-called 'independent' mediator, in the shape of Lord Runciman, a former Liberal Cabinet minister, who arrived in Prague on 3 August to bring his persuasive powers to bear upon the Czech government. The French acted more forcefully. On 20 July Bonnet told the Czech Minister in Paris bluntly that France would not go to war over the Sudeten question. She would declare her support in public, to help the Czechs to negotiate; but on no account should the Czech government believe that France would stand by them if war broke out. German pressure continued to build up in rather a different fashion. Throughout August there were frequent reports (this time well founded) of German military preparations and troop movements. Divisions were brought up to a war footing, and work on the western defences (the Siegfried Line) was hastily pressed forward. By the end of the month, the French *Deuxième Bureau* was certain that the German Army was mobilising in readiness for war against Czechoslovakia, with a thin covering force in the west.

The long-drawn-out crisis reached its climax in September, when in rapid succession war seemed imminent, was apparently averted, became once again all but inevitable, and finally was conjured away by the last-minute expedient of the Munich conference. This extraordinary switch-back began on 5 September, when Beneš, the Czech President, suddenly produced his 'Fourth Plan', which met nearly all the demands put by Henlein at Karlsbad. Rather than accept, the Sudeten Germans staged an incident in the town of Moravska-Ostrava, in which two of their

parliamentary deputies were arrested, and then used this as a pretext to break off negotiations. The German Nazi Party rally in Nuremberg was in progress at the time. On 12 September Hitler addressed the rally, proclaiming his support for the Germans in Czechoslovakia, who would not be left defenceless. That night there were riots in the main towns of the Sudeten areas, giving the appearance of a general rising against the government. The Czech Army restored order, and on the 15th Henlein fled to Germany.

The combination of Hitler's speech and the Sudeten German riots convinced Neville Chamberlain that war was imminent, and on 13 September he took the dramatic step of asking for a personal meeting with Hitler to find a solution before it was too late. He did not consult the French, but merely informed Daladier of what he was doing. Daladier too was convinced that the crux had come, and was desperately looking for something which would save France from being confronted with her obligations. He would have preferred a threepower meeting to an Anglo-German tête-à-tête, but had no option but to accept Chamberlain's decision. Chamberlain flew to meet Hitler at Berchtesgaden on 15 September. Hitler declared that he was ready to risk war to incorporate the Sudeten Germans into Germany, and Chamberlain rapidly expressed his willingness to agree in principle to the transfer of the Sudeten areas, though he would have to consult his Cabinet and the French. (The Czechs, whose territory was at stake, were not mentioned.) If this concession were carried through, the issue of principle was settled. All that remained to be worked out were the methods and timing of the transfer, and the limits of the territory concerned. It appeared that the issue had been reduced to whether the British and French Cabinets would agree to the cession of the Sudetenland to Germany (which was highly likely), and whether the Czechs could be coerced into acceptance (which was also likely). If so, then the corner was turned and peace was saved.

All went smoothly. Chamberlain carried his Cabinet with him. Daladier and Bonnet went to London on 18 September and agreed to the principle of the cession of the Sudetenland, in return for a reluctant British acceptance of an international guarantee for the remnant of Czechoslovakia. On the 19th the French Cabinet approved the proposals, which were then put to the Czechs. The Czech position was appalling. To accept meant, almost certainly, the dismemberment of their country, because it was clear that the Sudeten issue could not stand alone, but would be followed by Polish, Magyar, and Slovak demands. To reject the proposals meant war and invasion, to be faced without help from France or Britain. After a first impulse to



refuse the terms, Beneš virtually asked for the most extreme Franco-British pressure to be brought to bear, which was duly done in the shape of a statement that if the refusal were maintained France and Britain would leave the Czechs to their fate. On 21 September the Czech government yielded, and on the 22nd the Prime Minister, Hodza, resigned and was replaced by General Syrový, a change which symbolised acceptance of the new situation.

To all appearances, the situation was saved and the way was clear. Chamberlain had secured what Hitler had said he wanted, and on 22 September he returned to Germany with what he believed to be a settlement in his pocket. But the switchback suddenly took another plunge. Since the Berchtesgaden meeting, Hitler had taken steps to undermine any agreement. On 17 September he set up in Germany the so-called Sudeten German Free Corps, to make attacks and create incidents in Czechoslovakia. He encouraged Hungary and Poland to press the claims of their own minorities in Czechoslovakia – the Poles indeed had already claimed that any concessions made to the Sudeten Germans should automatically be extended to Teschen. The basis was thus laid for fresh complaints and fresh demands, which were at once produced when Hitler met Chamberlain at Godesberg on 22 September. Chamberlain arrived with his agreed concession: the Sudetenland was to be transferred to Germany. Hitler said at once that this was no longer enough. He brought out the Polish and Hungarian claims for territory, and Slovak demands for autonomy; and he used the pretext of unrest in Czechoslovakia to assert that Germany must occupy the Sudeten areas at once. He produced a prepared map with the zone of occupation marked on it. The next day, Hitler presented Chamberlain with a paper demanding German occupation of the area between 26 and 28 September, though as an apparent concession he agreed that the date should be put back to 1 October – the date set on 30 May for the invasion of Czechoslovakia.

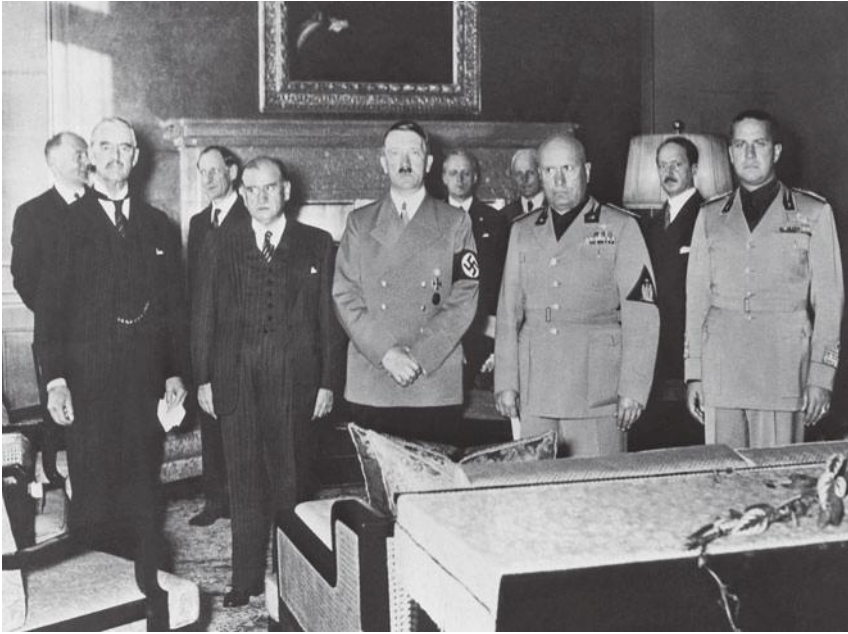
Chamberlain agreed to pass on the new terms, and when he returned to London on 24 September he was prepared to advocate acceptance. But on 25 September Halifax came out against them, and the Cabinet in general supported him. On the 25th and 26th Daladier and Bonnet again came to London, and agreed to a proposal by Chamberlain to send an emissary to Berlin with a combined warning and last-minute appeal for a settlement. Chamberlain for his part undertook that Britain would go to war if France fought over Czechoslovakia. This remarkable departure showed how the situation had changed. Despite the deep reluctance of both the French and British governments, on 26 September war seemed imminent. The French began to mobilise, and on the 28th the British mobilised the fleet. The war

crisis had come. Superficially, it arose over a question of the timing and method of the transfer of territory that had already been agreed on, but this was not the substantive issue. For the British and French, the question was not the ownership of a strip of land or the status of 3.5 million people, but Hitler's intentions. Was he aiming at limited objectives, which would allow a lasting settlement to be reached, or at something more far-reaching? Hitler's high-handed methods and sudden production of new demands at Godesberg had changed the situation, and made it seem that, despite deep Anglo-French reluctance, he must be resisted.

## The dénouement: the Munich conference

At this point, Hitler decided not to press on to his real objective, the destruction of Czechoslovakia, but to accept for the time being his stated aim of securing the Sudetenland. During 27 and 28 September proposals for a conference came from several directions, notably from Chamberlain, President Roosevelt, and Mussolini, who knew that Italy was not ready for war and sought instead the laurels of a peacemaker. On the 28th Hitler agreed to a conference, which met at Munich on the 29th. The powers represented were Germany, France, Britain, and Italy. Czechoslovakia was excluded, and no one thought of inviting the Soviet Union. Mussolini, ostensibly acting as mediator, produced as a basis for discussion a set of terms drafted in Berlin; and by 2 a.m. on 30 September the conference reached an agreement. Sudeten German territories, depicted on an accompanying map, were to be ceded to Germany, with provision for plebiscites in doubtful areas. The final frontier was to be fixed by a committee representing the four Munich powers plus Czechoslovakia. German occupation was to begin on 1 October and be completed by the 10th. Polish and Hungarian claims were to be settled within a specified time. British and French guarantees of the new Czech frontiers were to be given at once, with German and Italian guarantees to follow. These terms were presented to the Czechs, who accepted them. In practice, the outcome was not in doubt after Hitler had agreed to a conference. War was averted.

How near did Europe come to war in September 1938, and why was it avoided? The imminence of war is a matter of assessing intentions. Did Hitler seriously intend, up to 27 September, to invade Czechoslovakia? Would France and Britain have fought rather than accept the Godesberg terms, or in face of a German attack? Neither question can be answered with absolute certainty. Up to 27 September the German military preparations



*Suits and uniforms at the Munich Conference, 29 September 1938. Front row, left to right: Chamberlain, Daladier, Hitler, Mussolini, Ciano.*

Source: Bettman/Corbis

were moving ahead with every sign of determination. Assault forces were moved up to the frontier that day; mobilisation was fixed for the 28th; and the attack was to be launched on the 30th. The indications are that Hitler was not bluffing, but rather that he stepped back on 28 September. His generals were reluctant to fight; Goering was opposed to war; and Mussolini could not be relied upon. Armoured units passing through Berlin were watched by crowds in a dismal silence. The Czech Army had mobilised, making surprise unlikely and so diminishing the chance of a lightning victory. The mobilisation of the Royal Navy made it appear that the British might go to war. All these considerations seem to have contributed to Hitler's change of mind. If he had pursued his earlier course, and launched the invasion, then it is hard to see that France and Britain would have been left with any alternative but to declare war. Their actions on 26 and 27 September pointed clearly in that direction: notably the French mobilised their army and, against all their inclinations, felt bound to fight. In all probability, therefore, war was very close indeed – two days away on 28 September.



*Chamberlain returns from Munich, waving the Anglo-German agreement on ‘the desire of our two peoples never to go to war with one another again’.*

Source: Hulton Archive Getty Images

## The significance of the crisis: war postponed

That war came so close was primarily the result of German initiatives and actions. It is true that internal divisions and problems in Austria and Czechoslovakia were open to be exploited, but they only reached the point of the extinction of Austria and the disintegration of Czechoslovakia through German pressure, exerted from both without and within. The diplomatic initiative often lay with other powers, especially Britain, where Chamberlain worked ceaselessly to resolve the crisis without war; but the strategic initiative lay throughout with Germany, both in the general sense that everyone was reacting to German pressure and in the narrower sense that by September the German military preparations for an attack on Czechoslovakia were the most threatening element in the situation. 1938 was Hitler’s year. By subversion, threat of force, and unorthodox diplomacy he secured a remarkable growth in German territory and power. Without his actions, there would have been no war crisis in 1938.

As Germany mainly created the crisis, so the avoidance of war was largely the result of a German decision. At the last minute, Hitler held back from an invasion of Czechoslovakia. In this he was greatly assisted by Chamberlain, who pursued his negotiations with the utmost energy and tenacity, determined to ensure that Hitler should secure what he said he wanted: the cession of the Sudetenland. France too played an important part, virtually abandoning her alliance with the Czechs and pressing them to surrender. In the final stages, Mussolini played a role which no one else could have filled: as a fellow-dictator he was acceptable to Hitler as an intermediary, and as an ally he was willing to stage-manage the Munich conference to Germany's advantage. Finally, the Czech government held a last choice in its own hands. If the Czechs had been prepared to be bloody, bold, and resolute, refused the terms produced at either Berchtesgaden or Munich, and then fought in self-defence, they might well have brought war down upon Europe, as the Poles did the following year. Instead they yielded: Europe had a year's respite, and Prague remained intact when Warsaw lay in ruins.

In September 1938, everyone stepped back in the last resort from the act of war. Britain and France shrank from war for all sorts of general reasons which have been sufficiently discussed, and also because they were afraid that they would lose, or at least sustain such damage as to make the effort self-defeating. This fear arose largely from their view of German air power. General Vuillemin believed that the French Air Force would be defeated within a fortnight – a view which he urged upon Daladier on the eve of the Premier's departure for Munich. In Britain the Air Staff produced estimates in September 1938 which roughly doubled the size of the effective German bomber force (1,019 instead of 582).<sup>11</sup> The *Luftwaffe* thus won one of its greatest victories without going into action.

The reluctance of the Czechs to opt for almost certain suicide by triggering off a general war may be readily understood. It was Hitler's last-minute refusal to take the risk of war, and to opt instead for the lesser gain from a conference, that was surprising. Counsels of caution, both from the professional soldiers and from Goering, prevailed. Hitler speedily regretted this decision, and became angry that he had (as he saw it) been deprived of a war against Czechoslovakia. He resolved not to repeat such an error over Poland in 1939 – and did not do so.

The future was bleak. In avoiding war over Czechoslovakia, both Germany and the western powers made it more certain the next time. There would certainly be a next time. After Munich, Germany was stronger than before in power and self-confidence. Unless the German

advance was checked by some extraordinary display of self-restraint, which was not to be expected and was certainly not forthcoming, it would simply be resumed with greater impetus than before. If opposed, Hitler would go to war with all the more determination because he had not done so in September 1938. On the other hand, for Britain, and to a lesser degree for France also, Munich represented the limit of the policy of concession. Peace at any price was never the policy of Chamberlain or his Cabinet, whatever impression they may have given and whatever intentions may have been attributed to them. They would not buy peace at the price of German domination of Europe and the threat to British interests and independence that that implied, nor would they accept forever methods of unrestrained subversion, bullying, and coercion. Hitler's claim that he sought only territory inhabited by German-speaking peoples was accepted, but was regarded as setting a limit in terms of both power and morality. When that limit was overstepped, British policy, and with it the European situation, would change.

## References

- 1 Gerhard L. Weinberg, *Germany, Hitler and World War II* (Cambridge 1995), pp. 104–5.
- 2 *Bulletin of International News*, vol. XIII, p. 749. The next highest vote was 1,177,000 for the Agrarian Party.
- 3 Keith Robbins, *Munich 1938* (London 1968), p. 210.
- 4 *DGFP*, series D, vol. II, no. 107.
- 5 *DGFP*, series D, vol. I, no. 19, the 'Hossbach Memorandum', 10 November 1937. The controversy which once surrounded this document, and the meeting which it recorded, has now been resolved. See Ernest R. May, *Strange Victory: Hitler's Conquest of France* (New York 2000), pp. 42–5; Ian Kershaw, *Hitler*, vol. II, *1936–1945: Nemesis* (London 2000), pp. 46–51, which both regard Hossbach's notes as authentic. Cf. Gerhard L. Weinberg, *The Foreign Policy of Hitler's Germany: Starting World War II, 1937–1939* (London 1980), pp. 34–42.
- 6 David Dilks (ed.), *The Diary of Sir Alexander Cadogan, 1938–1945* (London 1971), p. 63. Chamberlain's attitudes and policies have been shrewdly reassessed in David Dutton, *Neville Chamberlain* (London 2001), especially pp. 200–2, and R. A. C. Parker, *Chamberlain and Appeasement: British policy and the coming of the Second World War* (London 1993); see especially pp. 11, 75, 79.

- 7 It is often argued that British (or at any rate Chamberlain's) hostility to the Soviet Union caused the government to adopt a deliberate policy of turning Germany eastward in the hope that the two totalitarian powers would fight one another and allow Britain to watch from the side-lines. There were indeed speculations along these lines by individuals, but Chamberlain seems to have been insufficiently ruthless or devious to pursue such a policy. Shortly after the end of the Czechoslovakian crisis, the British devoted their best efforts to restricting German expansion in eastern Europe, though without abating their suspicions of the USSR.
- 8 On this difficult question, see Igor Lukes, 'Stalin and Czechoslovakia in 1938–39: An Autopsy of a Myth', *Diplomacy and Statecraft*, vol. 10, Nos. 2 and 3, July–Nov. 1999, pp. 13–47; Williamson Murray, *The Change in the European Balance of Power, 1938–1939* (Princeton, NJ 1984), pp. 237–8; Dmitri Volkogonov, *Stalin. Triumph and Tragedy* (London 1991), p. 348; Jonathan Haslam, *The Soviet Union and the Struggle for Collective Security in Europe, 1933–39* (London 1984), pp. 189–94; Gerhard L. Weinberg, William R. Rock and Anna Cienciala, 'The Munich crisis revisited', *International History Review*, 11 (1989), pp. 670–1.
- 9 The Karlsbad demands were: (1) full equality of rights and status for the German and Czech peoples; (2) recognition of the German population as a legal entity; (3) recognition of a specific German territory; (4) full autonomy for that territory; (5) legal protection for Germans living outside it; (6) the removal of injustices imposed since 1918; (7) German officials to administer German territory; (8) the right to profess and disseminate the Nazi world outlook.
- 10 *DGFP*, series D, vol. II, nos. 175, 221.
- 11 Edward L. Homze, *Arming the Luftwaffe: the Reich Air Ministry and the German aircraft industry, 1919–39* (Lincoln, Nebraska 1976), p. 241.

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

# Decisions for War, 1939

### After Munich

The immediate results of the Munich agreement were disastrous for Czechoslovakia. The provisions which might have mitigated its severity were disregarded: the international committee supervising the execution of the terms accepted the German claim that the Austrian census of 1910 should be the basis for their calculations, and 51 per cent German population in that year should constitute preponderance. Thus Germany secured as much territory as possible. Then the claims of Poland and Hungary had to be met. Throughout the Czechoslovakian crisis, Poland had insisted that any concessions made to the Sudeten Germans should also be extended to the Polish population in Teschen. After the Munich Conference the Poles were afraid that Germany might soon annex the remainder of Czechoslovakia, and so they stepped in with an ultimatum to Prague on 30 September. Polish troops occupied the Teschen area between 2 and 12 October 1938. Hungary laid claim to a long strip of territory on the southern frontier of Czechoslovakia, and also the whole province of Ruthenia. On 2 November 1938 the Axis powers ruled on these claims in the Vienna Award, which allotted the southern strip to Hungary but left Ruthenia in Czechoslovakia.

While these territorial changes were taking place, the structure of the state was being transformed. In November a new federal system of government was set up, with autonomous administrations in Bohemia-Moravia, Slovakia, and Ruthenia. In Slovakia, the National Front rapidly became the only political party, while the Ukrainian Rada controlled Ruthenia. Only in Bohemia-Moravia did the vestiges of parliamentary democracy remain briefly in existence. In the new hyphenated state of Czecho-Slovakia,





*After Munich: Hitler's welcome in the Sudetenland.*

Source: Hulton Archive Getty Images

German influence was predominant. Hitler received the new Foreign Minister, Chvalkovsky, on 14 October, and told him bluntly that he would destroy his country in twenty-four hours if it did not follow the German line. The Slovak National Front was under German influence, and Ruthenia had a tight economic agreement with Germany. The Vienna Award of 2 November was made without consultation with France or Britain, and without protest or comment from them, which indicated with apparent finality that the western powers had abandoned all interest in Czechoslovakia, and probably in eastern Europe as a whole. The balance of power in eastern Europe had tilted decisively in Germany's favour.

The price paid to secure the Munich agreement was a heavy one. What did Britain and France hope for in return? They certainly sought a respite in which to gather their strength, and both countries pressed on with rearmament. But for a short time Chamberlain hoped for much more. At a private meeting with Hitler after the Munich conference, he had secured a joint declaration expressing the desire of their two peoples never to go to war with one another again. He believed that the Czechoslovakian settlement opened the way for further agreements with Germany, and so for a

wider European settlement, though precisely what practical steps could be taken in this direction were unclear. Cadogan suggested going back to the question of colonies, which were Germany's only avowed territorial aim and apparently the only issue still outstanding between the two countries. In view of Hitler's earlier lack of interest in the matter, this did not seem hopeful; and in any case the predominant opinion in the Foreign Office was that Hitler would not be content with his recent gains in Europe. At the least he was expected to extend German economic predominance in south-east Europe and the Baltic states, while one gloomy and far-sighted official argued that Germany and Italy, with their dynamic ideologies, were not normal states with specific grievances but predators who would greet every concession with fresh demands.

The hopes for a wider agreement with Germany lacked substance from the start, and by mid-November they had faded away altogether. Relations between Germany and Britain, far from improving, worsened rapidly after Munich. As early as 9 October Hitler made a violently anti-British speech, followed by others denouncing Churchill and Eden as warmongers who might yet control British policy. The *Kristallnacht* attacks on Jews and Jewish property on 9–10 November brought universal condemnation in the British press, with equally strident reaction from Hitler against interference in Germany's internal affairs. On 14 November Halifax told the Foreign Policy Committee of the Cabinet that he had secret information that Hitler regarded the Munich agreement as a disaster because it had prevented a display of German strength. He now regarded Britain as Germany's worst enemy, was trying to break up the Anglo-French alliance, and was using Japan to harry Britain in the Far East. On 16 November Chamberlain explained to the Cabinet that the colonial question could only be dealt with as part of a general settlement, which was clearly impossible in existing circumstances.

There remained from the post-Munich optimism only the prospect of improving relations with Italy. The Anglo-Italian agreement on Mediterranean affairs of 16 April 1938 was brought into effect on 16 November. (This was supposed to await the departure of Italian troops from Spain, but partial withdrawal was taken to be sufficient.) Chamberlain and Halifax visited Mussolini in Rome on 11–14 January 1939. Mussolini liked being courted, but was not impressed by his visitors – 'These . . . are the tired sons of a long line of rich men, and they will lose their empire', he remarked.<sup>1</sup> Chamberlain came home pleased with his welcome, and convinced that there was no great sympathy between Mussolini and Hitler. There were no practical results.

The relief afforded by Munich was thus short-lived, and early in 1939 the British government found the prospects steadily more alarming. In January and February they received a series of disturbing reports predicting German moves against Memel, Poland, Czechoslovakia, or the Ukraine, and, in the west, against the Netherlands and possibly Switzerland. These last were taken very seriously, and had far-reaching consequences. On 1 February 1939 the Cabinet agreed that Britain must go to war if Germany invaded either Holland or Switzerland: the Netherlands would pose a direct threat to British security, and Switzerland would be an unmistakable signal of an attempt to dominate Europe by force. There were also reports from Rome of the secret call-up of reserve officers, and the accumulation of alarms caused Chamberlain to declare in the House of Commons on 6 February that ‘... any threat to the vital interests of France from whatever quarter it came must evoke the immediate co-operation of Great Britain’.<sup>2</sup>

This was the firmest statement of support for France made by a British government for a very long time, and it was accompanied by a reversal of British attitudes towards a military commitment in Europe. On 1 February the Cabinet agreed to open detailed staff talks with France. The proposal was made on 3 February, the first round took place between 29 March and 4 April, and the discussions continued at frequent intervals thereafter. Even more important, a paper by the Chiefs of Staff on 20 February argued that British security was bound up with that of France, and that home defence might have to include taking a share in the defence of French territory. The Cabinet accepted this proposition, and with it the principle that in the event of war Britain should create a large, Continental-style army. It was the end of the doctrine of limited liability.

British policy was thus in the process of change in February 1939. The previous assumption had been that Hitler’s aims were limited. It was now believed that the next German move against another state would signify that their aim was the domination of Europe – the phrase recurred more than once in discussion and correspondence. There was not the slightest hesitation in deciding that any such attempt must be opposed. The countries about which there was immediate alarm were in western Europe, but once accepted, the principle held good for the Continent as a whole. The policy of ‘appeasement’ had never meant peace at any price, but the acceptance of limited German advances. If German aims in fact knew no limits, then the British government would resist them, by war if necessary. This change in view was already under way in February 1939, though it did not become publicly apparent until March.

French policy after Munich continued to be uncertain and ambiguous. On 6–7 December 1938 Ribbentrop went to Paris to sign a Franco-German declaration, similar to that produced by Chamberlain after Munich, vaguely aspiring to good relations and consultation. Ribbentrop later maintained that during this visit Bonnet had agreed that eastern Europe was a German sphere of influence. Bonnet consistently denied this; but whatever was said, all recent French actions pointed to the *de facto* acceptance of German predominance in eastern Europe. This acceptance, however, was not unconditional. France still maintained economic interests in the Balkans, and an economic mission visited Rumania, Yugoslavia, and Bulgaria in November 1938. There was a tacit assumption that German predominance in eastern Europe should be exercised with restraint. And in the background the army command believed that war with Germany was virtually certain, and Gamelin set out to make up the loss of thirty Czech divisions, preferably by securing a firm commitment from the British and persuading them to introduce conscription.

Towards Italy, French policy was much firmer. On 30 November 1938 there was an organised demonstration in the Italian Chamber, with chants of ‘Tunis, Corsica, Nice, Jibuti’. Daladier replied with a firm declaration that France was determined to maintain all her territory; and in January 1939 he made well-publicised visits to Corsica and Tunisia. British persuasion to find some concessions to sweeten relations with Italy was firmly rejected; and while Daladier allowed an unofficial mission by Baudouin, a director of the Bank of Indo-China, to go to Rome, he declined to follow it up.

In the five months after Munich, and before what is often seen as the turning point of March 1939, the British government lost hope of a general agreement with Germany, and moved instead towards a determination to resist a German attempt to dominate Europe by force, and towards a new position of support for France. France, though internally divided and conscious of her weakness, was firm in opposition to Italian claims and still nurtured an underlying conviction that the growth of German power must at some time be checked. It was already clear by February 1939 that Britain and France would be unlikely to repeat the pattern of 1938.

## The Prague coup and its consequences

The key question after Munich concerned German policy. Would Germany be content to digest her recent gains, or seek further expansion? There was no serious doubt as to the answer, either in the long term or the short. In October 1938 Goering, under Hitler’s instructions, set out a

new armaments programme, including the impossible aim of quintupling the *Luftwaffe* by spring 1942. The development of the army was pressed forward, and in January 1939 the large-scale 'Z plan' for the navy was agreed on, to be completed by 1943–44. These preparations were directed towards large-scale war in three or four years' time, with Britain as a principal enemy. In the short term, German policy pursued two aims: the annexation or subjection of the remnants of Czecho-Slovakia, and negotiations with Poland to bring her into dependence on Germany.

Hitler privately declared his intention of annexing the rump of Czechoslovakia almost as soon as the Munich agreement was signed, and plans for an unopposed military occupation began to be worked out on 10 October 1938 and were completed by the 21st. In the same month Goering assured visiting Slovak politicians of German support for an independent Slovakia. On 12 February 1939 Hitler met Béla Tuka, leader of the Slovak National Party, and told him that the Slovaks should declare independence at once. German pressure was also at work in Ruthenia. Of the purpose of German policy there was no doubt, though in the event the final stages of the break-up of Czecho-Slovakia came so quickly that they took Hitler by surprise. As with Austria, the actual timing of the German take-over was decided by the victim. On 6 March President Hacha of Czecho-Slovakia dismissed the government of Ruthenia; on the night of the 9th/10th he did the same to the Slovakian government; and on the 10th he proclaimed martial law.

This convulsive attempt to preserve the unity of the state in fact precipitated its downfall. Hitler acted quickly. He invited the deposed Slovak Premier, Tiso, to Berlin, with the clear intimation that refusal would be met by immediate German invasion. Tiso arrived in Berlin on 13 March, and was presented with a declaration of Slovak independence which he agreed to put to the Slovak Parliament. It was accepted on the 14th, despite the doubts of some deputies. The Czechs were dealt with immediately afterwards. On 12–13 March the German press was full of stories of Czech attacks on the Germans still living in Bohemia. The Czech President and Foreign Minister asked for a meeting with Hitler to beg him to spare the existence of their state. Hitler received them in the small hours of 15 March, and told them that the German Army would enter their country at 6 a.m. the same day. (In fact, some units crossed the border during the night.) Their only choice, he explained, was between resistance, which would be crushed at once, and a peaceable occupation. Goering threatened to bomb Prague. President Hacha broke down under the threats, and signed a paper placing the fate of the Czech people in Hitler's hands.

On 15 March German forces occupied Bohemia and Moravia. On the 16th the provinces were declared a Protectorate of Germany, with the former Foreign Minister, von Neurath, as Protector. The SS moved in, responsible not to Neurath but to Himmler in Germany, a provision which spoke volumes as to the true nature of the new regime. The newly 'independent' Slovakia signed a treaty accepting German protection, including the stationing of German troops in the country. As for Ruthenia, Hitler disregarded an appeal for German protection and instead allowed Hungary to occupy the province, fulfilling an aspiration which Hungarian governments had cherished since 1919. The Hungarian Army moved in on 15 March.

The remains of the former state of Czechoslovakia were thus removed from the map in the space of two days, 14–15 March 1939. Shortly afterwards, on 23 March, Germany annexed Memel, a German city seized by Lithuania in the far-distant days of 1923. Orders to prepare for this had been issued on 21 October 1938, and in December local elections had played into the hands of the Nazis. The German ethnic claim to Memel was strong and its absorption into Germany had long seemed likely; but the impact of the occupation was still considerable. All over eastern Europe the disputes stored up after the First World War were flaring up, and the states created in the post-war settlement were crumbling away.

Between Czecho-Slovakia and Memel lay Poland, the other major object of German policy in the winter of 1938–39. Germany and Poland were divided by historic enmity, and after 1919 German resentment against the very existence of an independent Poland was strong. The new frontiers of 1919 cut East Prussia off from the rest of Germany, and placed about 800,000 Germans in Poland. The Free City of Danzig was overwhelmingly German in population (96 per cent in 1919), and after 1933 its internal administration was run by the Nazi Party, which (in alliance with another German party) controlled the Volkstag; but its foreign relations and customs regulations were controlled by Poland. This was a complicated arrangement, liable to create friction even with goodwill on all sides, which was rarely forthcoming. More important, Danzig represented a fundamental issue: for Germany, it was a matter of historic right and a German population; for Poland, it was a guarantee of access to the sea and a symbol of security.

These difficulties between the two countries were to some extent kept within bounds by the German-Polish agreement of 1934. On a number of occasions, notably in 1935 and 1937, Germany held out to the Poles the prospect of developing this agreement into an alliance against the Soviet

Union, by which Poland might acquire territory in the Ukraine. More than once Hitler told the Polish Ambassador in Berlin, Lipski, that European solidarity ended at the Polish–Soviet border, where both Asia and Bolshevism began. Despite a hearty dislike of Bolshevik Russia, the Poles did not take up these suggestions, preferring to retain their independent position between their two great neighbours.

Between October 1938 and January 1939 the Germans took the matter up again in a number of conversations between Hitler and Ribbentrop on the one side and Lipski and Beck on the other. On 24 October 1938 Ribbentrop put to Lipski proposals for a new German–Polish agreement. Danzig should be incorporated in Germany, and a German-controlled road and rail link with East Prussia be established – a corridor across the Corridor. In return, Germany would guarantee her frontier with Poland, and extend the 1934 Non-Aggression Pact for twenty-five years. Finally, Poland should join the Anti-Comintern Pact, signed between Germany and Japan in 1936 and extended to Italy in 1937.<sup>3</sup> In Warsaw, Beck at once saw the crucial nature of this last proposal. To adhere to the Anti-Comintern Pact would mean a breach with the Soviet Union and the end of Poland's balanced position. It would signify unqualified entry into the German camp, which would quickly lead to subordination to Germany. Beck ruled this out totally. When the Polish reply to Ribbentrop's proposals was eventually delivered on 19 November, it rejected the annexation of Danzig, referred evasively to consultations on the road and rail link, and did not even mention the Anti-Comintern Pact. Hitler himself then repeated the proposals when Beck visited Berlin on 5–6 January 1939. He emphasised that a strong Poland was a necessity for Germany because every Polish division engaged against the Soviet Union saved a German division. (This was presumably not encouraging from Beck's point of view.) Beck was non-committal in his comments. Again, on 26 January, Ribbentrop went to Warsaw and pressed for a decision, but without success.

The Poles would never agree to be absorbed into the German sphere of influence, even if the only alternative was to become Germany's next victim. Nazi Germany had encountered a new and surprising phenomenon: a neighbouring state which could not be bullied. The Poles, unlike the Austrians or the Czechs, would fight for their territory, their independence, and their honour. Beck put the matter thus to a meeting of senior officials in the Foreign Ministry on 24 March 1939. Poland had established 'a straight and clear line. . . . Below this line comes our Polish *non possumus*. This is clear: we will fight.' The line comprised the territory of Poland, but

also any imposed solution over Danzig, because Danzig was a symbol, and Poland would not join those other states which allowed themselves to be dictated to. Hitler had not yet met determined opposition. 'The mighty have been humble to him, and the weak have capitulated in advance. The Germans are marching all across Europe with nine divisions; with such strength Poland would not be overcome.'<sup>4</sup> Such confidence was in military terms reckless, and Poland's moral position was rendered dubious by her recent seizure of Teschen from Czechoslovakia. But even if Polish judgement and morality were open to question, their courage was not; and from Polish courage and self-confidence there arose a crucial element in the European situation in 1939. Under pressure from Germany, Poland would fight rather than yield.

In mid-March 1939 there were thus two crises in Europe. One was open: the break-up of Czecho-Slovakia. The other was largely concealed: the German demands upon Poland. Then, in the course of a frantic fortnight, the effects of the Czech crisis rebounded upon the Polish crisis, and a new European situation took shape.

## British and French reactions: the guarantees to Poland

News of the German occupation of Prague and the break-up of Czecho-Slovakia reached London in the morning of 15 March. The first British reaction was one of passive acceptance. The Cabinet agreed that there was no possibility of effective opposition, and that the Munich guarantee would not be carried out. Chamberlain observed, accurately if cynically, that the state to which the guarantee had been given no longer existed. In the House of Commons he expressed his regret, but added: 'do not let us on that account be deflected from our course. Let us remember that the desire of all the peoples of the world still remains concentrated on the hopes of peace.'<sup>5</sup> Yet another extension of German power was apparently to be accepted with only token protest.

Two days later Chamberlain gave another speech, in Birmingham. He still defended Munich, and the hope behind it, that with goodwill and understanding it was possible to resolve differences by discussion. But then the tone changed.

*The events which have taken place this week in complete disregard of the principles laid down by the German government itself seem to fall into a different category, and they must cause us all to be asking ourselves: 'Is*



*this the end of an old adventure, or is it the beginning of a new? Is this the last attack upon a small State, or is it to be followed by others? Is this, in fact, a step in the direction of an attempt to dominate the world by force? . . . No greater mistake could be made than to suppose that, because it believes war to be a senseless and cruel thing, this nation has so lost its fibre that it will not take part to the utmost of its power in resisting such a challenge if it ever were made.<sup>6</sup>*

The change was remarkable. What brought it about?

Part of the answer was that the change had been coming for some time, with the alarms of January and February which had caused the government to strengthen its commitment to France. It was already assumed that the issue was becoming one of the domination of Europe by force, though this had not yet emerged in public. The reaction of 15 March was thus more a reflex repetition of old formulae, while that of the 17th reflected the thinking of the last two months. Partly, too, Chamberlain was jolted into his forceful speech by a number of events between the 15th and 17th. There was a marked shift of opinion in the Conservative Party and the press. On 16 March the Foreign Affairs Committee of the Conservative Party advocated the introduction of national service, the formation of an all-party coalition, and even an alliance with Russia. Constituency party organisations showed their dismay at Chamberlain's speech in the House of Commons. *The Times*, previously a pace-maker for appeasement, was indignant about the Prague coup. Halifax urged on Chamberlain both the party political problems and the likely collapse of Britain's position in Europe if the coup were meekly accepted. There was also a sudden scare over Rumania on 16–17 March, when the Rumanian Minister in London, Tilea, produced an alarming story of a German near-ultimatum to his country over a demand for a monopoly on exports. Halifax had just seen Tilea when he helped Chamberlain make changes to his speech on 17 March. By the next day the story had been denied by the Rumanian government, and was thought dubious by the British intelligence services, but by then it had had its effect – the atmosphere after Prague was such that any reports of German aggression were bound to be taken seriously.

All these influences played their part. But the major explanation of Chamberlain's speech at Birmingham is probably the simplest: it had sunk in that he had been deceived. Hitler had departed from his declared principle of claiming only territories with German populations. Moreover, the blow was very personal: Chamberlain regarded the Munich agreement as above all his own achievement, and its repudiation struck home all the

harder. This was not merely a matter of vanity, but of something very stern in Chamberlain's character. Churchill, who for so long opposed Chamberlain's policy towards Germany, wrote rightly that Hitler had misjudged his man: 'He did not realise that Neville Chamberlain had a very hard core, and that he did not like being cheated.'<sup>7</sup>

On 18 March Chamberlain showed this hard core when he spoke to the Cabinet. Up to a week ago, he said, the government had believed it was possible to get on better terms with the dictatorships, whose aims were believed to be limited. He had now concluded that Hitler's attitude made this impossible. 'No reliance could be placed on any of the assurances given by the Nazi leaders.' His speech at Birmingham was a challenge to Germany as to whether or not she intended to dominate Europe by force. In this explanation, he struck two notes which were to characterise British policy for the next twelve months and more: resistance to German domination of Europe, and the conviction that Hitler could no longer be trusted. The first represented a long-standing principle in British foreign policy, going back to the wars against Louis XIV. The second was a largely instinctive reaction, belated but profound, against the methods and tactics of the Nazi regime, and of Hitler in particular. In this way the issues were simplified and personalised in a way which corresponded to an increasing feeling among the British people: something must be done to stop Hitler. During the next few days, and equally in the next few months, there was much in British policy that was hurried, muddled, and ill-conceived. Chamberlain still did not believe that war was inevitable, and continued to hope that it could be avoided by a mixture of deterrence and negotiation. But if the worst came to the worst, the British would fight.

Principles and instincts were one thing; what to do was quite another. All attention was concentrated on eastern Europe, where it was not normally thought necessary for Britain to be involved. As the Rumanian scare died away, Poland seemed the most likely victim for the next German move, for which the pretexts in Danzig and the German minority were ready-made. The British also suffered from an acute, though hidden, fear that Poland might succumb to German influence: Beck had visited Berlin in January, and negotiations were known to be under way, which might well, so far as the British knew, succeed. To counter these dangers, some urgent British action seemed required. The first response, on 20 March, was a device which required only a low level of commitment: a proposal that Britain, France, Poland, and the Soviet Union should issue a joint declaration that if there were a threat to the independence of any European state they would consult immediately on the steps to be taken. This was

unacceptable to the Poles, who refused any alignment with the USSR just as resolutely as they refused an alliance with Germany. In any case, it was too indefinite to meet the exigencies of the situation.

Something more definite was required, and the government considered the far-reaching step of a guarantee to Poland. Halifax put the arguments to the Foreign Policy Committee of Cabinet on 27 March:

*We were faced with the dilemma of doing nothing, or entering into a devastating war. If we did nothing this in itself would mean a great accession to Germany's strength and a great loss to ourselves of sympathy and support in the United States, in the Balkan countries, and in other parts of the world. In those circumstances if we had to choose between two great evils he favoured our going to war.*

Chamberlain said specifically that if Poland declined to accept a conditional guarantee, 'we should be prepared to give her the unilateral assurance as regards the Eastern Front seeing that our object is to check and defeat Germany's attempt at world domination'.<sup>8</sup> The argument was clear and emphatic: to secure Britain's position in the world, and to check the German advance, there must be a firm guarantee to Poland, even at the risk of war. That there occurred at this point another scare of an imminent German attack on Poland hastened Britain into action, but did not fundamentally alter the position.

On 30 March Britain offered Poland a guarantee of her independence, which was at once accepted. Before it was announced, the Foreign Policy Committee considered but rejected a suggestion that it should be limited to cases of unprovoked aggression. It was thought that German techniques of aggression were such that Poland might be driven in self-defence to some action which could be construed as provocative: German tactics in Austria and Czechoslovakia had left their mark.

Chamberlain announced in the House of Commons on 31 March that, while consultations were going on with other governments:

*In order to make perfectly clear the position of His Majesty's Government in the meantime before those consultations are concluded, I now have to inform the House that, during that period, in the event of any action which clearly threatened Polish independence, and which the Polish Government accordingly considered it vital to resist with their national forces, His Majesty's Government would feel themselves bound at once to lend the Polish Government all support in their power.<sup>9</sup>*

The French government joined in this guarantee.

The precise significance of the guarantee has been much debated. It referred to Polish independence, not integrity, and thus left open the possibility of frontier changes; and in consequence it has been regarded as little more than appeasement under another name, with every chance of another Munich. On the other hand, it has been seen as making war virtually inevitable, by throwing down a challenge which Germany was bound to take up. Its real significance lay between these two extremes, and was publicly explained by Chamberlain on 19 May. Britain was trying to create 'an assurance against forcible aggression, which may not, and we hope never will, arise'; or, in another phrase, 'a peace front against aggression', which would avoid the outbreak of war.<sup>10</sup> The guarantee was designed as a deterrent, and if the deterrent worked, the guarantee would not have to be carried out. The trouble with this concept was that, after a prolonged series of concessions to Germany, the guarantee in itself carried little conviction and was an inadequate deterrent. Only the most determined military preparations by Britain and France (the introduction of conscription in Britain, and rapid supplies for the Polish Army and Air Force) might have conveyed a sufficient warning to check Hitler in his stride. As it was, the guarantee was enough to bring Britain and France into a war over Poland, but not enough to deter Hitler from launching one.

It is clear that the guarantee was issued without serious consideration of its military aspects; and indeed the British government had neither the intention nor the capacity to protect Poland militarily. The follow-up to the guarantee was no more than half-hearted on the British side. Beck visited London on 4–6 April, and offered to transform the one-sided guarantee into an Anglo-Polish alliance, but the negotiations on terms then dragged on until the end of August. At the end of April Poland asked Britain for a loan of £60 million to purchase military equipment. The British offered a loan of £5 million as long as France did the same, plus £8 million in export credit guarantees – by July, only the latter had been agreed on. A British service mission went to Poland in May, and General Ironside, Inspector-General of Overseas Forces, followed in July; but nothing was done to follow up these contacts. The French behaved in a similar fashion. In May a draft agreement was prepared to bring the existing Franco-Polish alliance into line with the new guarantee, but the signature of this agreement was delayed until 4 September. There were staff conversations in Paris on 15–17 May, and agreement was reached that in the event of a German attack on Poland or Danzig the bulk of the French Army would begin offensive action on the fifteenth day of hostilities. But Gamelin held that this agreement was subject to the conclusion of a

political agreement – which was held up. The truth was, of course, as the French staff had just told their British counterparts, that France could not envisage a serious land attack on Germany without long preparation. Neither France nor Britain was prepared to come directly to the assistance of Poland, whose salvation would only be achieved after final victory. The major point, for Britain and France alike, was that these were not the actions of states preparing urgently for certain war. The British and French both hoped that gestures of deterrence would suffice. They would not.

## Italy annexes Albania: the French and British reactions

On 7 April 1939 Italy enlarged the area of tension by landing substantial forces to occupy Albania. This country had long been under Italian political and economic influence, and in some circumstances the action might have been seen as little more than consolidation. But three weeks after the Prague coup and a fortnight after the German occupation of Memel, with the air full of rumours of war, the event assumed a very different aspect. It indicated a degree of co-ordination between Germany and Italian plans far greater than was actually the case. It was a palpable breach of the Anglo-Italian agreement of April 1938, brought into operation only the previous November. It was accompanied by reports of an imminent Italian assault on the Greek island of Corfu. Altogether the situation was highly alarming, and not for the first time Mussolini had thrown in Italy's comparatively modest weight at a moment when it carried maximum significance.

The British and French response was far-reaching. British attention was fixed on Greece, while France insisted on extending any guarantees to Rumania, not because it was under threat from Italy but because it had been left out earlier. Daladier took the initiative in these moves, but he was followed willingly by Chamberlain, who thought that Mussolini was behaving like 'a sneak and a cad'.<sup>11</sup> On 13 April Britain and France issued public guarantees to both Greece and Rumania, in the same terms as that to Poland. They thus extended their commitments in eastern Europe with astonishing prodigality. In the space of a fortnight (31 March–13 April) they had undertaken obligations in an area stretching from the Baltic to the Mediterranean, most of which they had apparently abandoned only a few months before. On the other side, Italy had taken a step towards war in the Mediterranean. The logical consequence was a tightening of links with Germany, and negotiations for an alliance were taken up in April 1939.

Vital lines had been drawn. German and Italian advances in Czecho-Slovakia, Memel, and Albania, accompanied by alarms about Holland, Switzerland, Rumania, Poland, and Greece, had pushed Britain and France into crucial commitments. In western Europe, they would certainly fight in the event of any German or Italian attack. In the east, they staked all on deterring Germany (and to a lesser degree Italy) from any further advance, in the hope that in the time thus gained the immediate problems might yet be resolved. If deterrence failed, here too they were committed to war. It was quite certain that the Poles at any rate would not let them out by yielding to German pressure.

The principal question, therefore, was whether Germany would be deterred. There was no sign that she would. On 3 April, four days after the British guarantee to Poland, a directive by Keitel instructed the German armed forces to prepare for an attack on that country at any time from 1 September. On 6 April the negotiations with Poland which had been going on since the previous October were broken off. In the directive for Operation White (11 April), Hitler emphasised that Poland was to be isolated before being attacked. On 23 May Hitler addressed the service commanders, partly on the long-term armaments programme, still aimed at completion by 1943–44, and partly about Poland. The real objective was not Danzig, but to secure living space and food supplies. There would certainly be war: ‘We cannot expect a repetition of Czechia. There will be war.’ Poland was to be isolated, and war with Britain and France avoided; though Britain, as Germany’s main enemy, would have to be fought sooner or later.<sup>12</sup>

Preparations for an attack on Poland thus went ahead with the utmost speed. German diplomacy worked intensively to secure the help, or at least the neutrality, of small states which were politically or economically important in preparing for war: Sweden, Hungary, Rumania, Yugoslavia, Bulgaria, Turkey; and achieved much success. Among the great powers, Germany had worked in 1938 to create a triple alliance with Italy and Japan, which would paralyse Britain by pressure in Europe, the Mediterranean, and the Far East. Japan proved recalcitrant, insisting on an agreement directed solely against the Soviet Union, while Germany wanted it to be against all other powers; and in 1939 the Germans went instead for an alliance with Italy alone. After a rapid negotiation, the so-called Pact of Steel was signed in Berlin on 22 May. This alliance was not even nominally defensive in its terms, and represented a virtually complete Italian acceptance of a German draft. Ciano stressed in discussion that war should not break out before 1943, because Italy was not ready; but Ribbentrop was

evasive on this point, and the text made no reference to the question at all. Germany secured the Italian alliance while retaining entire freedom of action.

With Italy secure (at least on paper), Germany moved to the next stage in the isolation of Poland and the undermining of the Anglo-French position by bidding for an agreement with the Soviet Union; but that belongs to a later stage in the narrative. Meanwhile, in May 1939 the German course was set for war with Poland, and its momentum was unchecked. The Anglo-French guarantees were failing to deter.

## Negotiations for a triple alliance: France, Britain, USSR

If anything was to add to their power, it would have to be the support of the Soviet Union. A firm military alliance between France, Britain, and the USSR offered the best, and perhaps the only, chance of confronting Hitler with circumstances in which he would not risk war. The negotiations for such an alliance between April and August 1939 therefore assumed a crucial importance. Their main lines were simple, though the details were sometimes complicated. The three powers started in April from widely different positions. Britain proposed that each should give separate, unilateral guarantees to Poland and Rumania. France suggested a Franco-Soviet treaty, binding both to go to the assistance of Poland and Rumania. The Soviet Union proposed (17 April) a three-power treaty of mutual assistance, binding all three to go to the help of the states on the western border of the USSR, and accompanied by a military convention. In the following months, the French moved with increasing urgency, and the British with painful slowness, towards the Soviet position, which the Soviets maintained, with the occasional addition of further demands.

The British began by rejecting the idea of a three-power treaty (8 May), and then accepted it in principle (24 May) – when it was at once agreed by France. The negotiations which followed encountered several obstacles. The British sought to introduce into the proposed treaty a reference to the moribund League of Nations, to which the Soviets successfully objected. There was dispute as to which states should be nominated for assistance, and whether they should be named publicly. It was eventually agreed to name, in a secret protocol, Finland, Estonia, Latvia, Poland, Rumania, Turkey, and Belgium; the USSR refused to include Holland and Switzerland. The British wished to conclude a political agreement first, and then proceed to a military convention; the Soviets insisted that the two

should be signed and come into force simultaneously, and they gained their point. Finally, there was a problem over the definition of 'indirect aggression'. All agreed that states should be protected, not only against armed invasion, but against subversion and pressure on the Austrian model; but the British jibbed at granting the Soviets freedom to intervene in neighbouring states on conditions which they themselves laid down. No agreement had been reached on this matter when negotiations were broken off.

Such was the pattern of the political negotiations. It was not until 23 July that the British accepted that military talks should begin with a view to simultaneous signature of political and military agreements. The French nominated their delegation on the 24th, the British after a further ten days. The delegations then travelled to Moscow by ship and train, which took some time. (Rather too much is often made of this point. The direct route, by land or air, across Germany was not available, and other air access to Moscow was not easy.) The French were instructed to secure the signature of a military convention in the minimum of time, the British to proceed slowly. Neither delegation was at first armed with plenipotentiary powers. Neither was over-eager to trust the Soviet General Staff with confidential military information, and so they sought to keep discussion on the plane of general principles, while the Soviets wanted to talk about precise intentions. The talks got off to a foreseeably difficult start, and rapidly came to a halt when the head of the Soviet delegation, Marshal Voroshilov, asked on 14 August whether Poland would accept the entry of Soviet troops before the event of a German attack. The Poles would not; and they declined to budge, despite urgent French persuasion, explaining simply that if the Red Army entered Polish territory it would stay there. In desperation, the French government on 21 August instructed its military delegation to agree that Soviet forces might enter Poland. Voroshilov asked whether Polish agreement had been secured. The answer could only be no, and the talks broke down.

Meanwhile, a parallel negotiation was in progress between Germany and the Soviet Union. This too moved slowly, until the final phase, when it suddenly careered along like an express train to a successful conclusion. The early stages of the German-Soviet *rapprochement* remain in some obscurity. On 10 March 1939 Stalin indicated to the Eighteenth Party Congress that he had no preference for either of the opposing blocs among the capitalist states; and it may be that Hitler responded to this hint when he handed Ruthenia to the Hungarians instead of occupying it himself, thus signalling that he did not intend to use the weapon of Ukrainian nationalism against the Soviet Union. If so, this diplomacy by sign-language led nowhere for some time.



The first definite move appears to have come from the Soviet side. On 17 April the Soviet Ambassador in Berlin told the permanent head of the German Foreign Ministry, Weizsäcker, that there was no reason why relations between their two countries should not be put on a normal footing and even improve further. (There is some doubt as to whether the Ambassador intended this to be a serious political initiative, an attempt to revive economic negotiations, or no more than an empty gesture.)<sup>13</sup> On 3 May Litvinov, the Soviet Foreign Minister who had been associated with a policy of collective security against Germany, and was also a Jew, was removed from office and replaced by Molotov. At once the German press ceased its routine attacks on the Soviet Union and Bolshevism. On 30 May the Germans decided to reopen negotiations for an economic agreement, which had been tried without success earlier in the year. These continued into July, with no sign of haste on either side. The Germans then began to make the running, and switched the emphasis to political questions; at the end of July, Hitler and Ribbentrop prepared outline proposals for an agreement based on the partition of Poland and the Baltic states. As August went on, the Germans grew desperate. Hitler was then working to a deadline of 26 August for his attack on Poland (which was later changed), and needed an agreement before that date. On 12 August, under German pressure, the Soviets indicated that they were ready for political negotiations, to take place in Moscow. On 19 August an economic agreement was signed, and Molotov agreed to receive a visit by Ribbentrop on the 26th or 27th. This would not do, and on the 21st Hitler sent a personal message to Stalin that Ribbentrop must arrive in Moscow on the 23rd at the latest. This amounted to an ultimatum, and Stalin agreed within two hours.

Ribbentrop duly arrived, and on 23 August a non-aggression pact between Germany and the Soviet Union was signed. If either became involved in war, the other would give no help to the enemy; nor would either join any group directed against the other. A clause, customary in such treaties, allowing withdrawal if one signatory attacked a third country, was omitted; and the pact was to come into effect immediately upon signature. This allowed for the German attack on Poland which was by then imminent.

The published treaty was accompanied by a secret protocol providing, in the event of what was referred to as a territorial transformation taking place in Poland, for the partition of that country along the line of the rivers Pisa, Narew, Vistula, and San. This allocated to the Soviet Union all the Byelorussian and Ukrainian provinces of Poland, as well as the province of



*The Nazi-Soviet Pact, 23 August 1939. Molotov signing, Ribbentrop and Stalin beaming.*

Source: Hulton Archive Getty Images

Lublin and part of that of Warsaw. Germany was to take the western part of the country, though the possibility of retaining a small remnant of a Polish state was kept open at this stage. Elsewhere, the USSR was to have a free hand in Finland, Estonia, and Latvia; and Germany in Lithuania. In

Rumania, Soviet interest in the province of Bessarabia was recognised by Germany. Other Balkan matters were left vague.<sup>14</sup> Some of these territorial provisions were to be altered later, and important economic arrangements were also to follow.

The Nazi–Soviet Pact ended the Anglo-Franco-Soviet negotiations, and removed all possibility of a triple alliance which might have been strong enough to deter Hitler from an attack on Poland. In asking why one set of negotiations failed and the other succeeded, the two must be taken together.

In terms of method, the British conduct of their negotiations was so slow and inept as to invite failure. The French tried hard but without success to instil a sense of urgency. Behind the British attitude lay their long-standing distrust of the Soviet Union and Bolshevism, sentiments which were particularly strong in Chamberlain himself, who in May was virtually coerced by his Cabinet to take up negotiations for an alliance. The British were unconvinced of the value of a Soviet alliance in the aftermath of the purges, which had gravely weakened the Red Army. Moreover, they were rightly afraid that such an alliance would alienate most of the states in eastern Europe, and perhaps drive them into the arms of Germany: if they were to be eaten by the one or the other, most preferred to take their chance with Germany rather than the USSR. Above all, Poland would not enter an alliance with the Soviet Union at any price. When the British committed themselves to Poland, they to all intents and purposes ruled out an alliance with the USSR unless they threw the Poles overboard first. All this led the British to try to get the advantages of negotiations without the onus of an alliance, and to hope that Germany would be impressed by mere display. This was an illusion which the French, alarmed by news of German military preparations, did not share.

Delaying tactics were not the monopoly of the British, and the Soviets played the same game when it suited them. The Deputy Foreign Minister, Potemkin, was due to attend the Council of the League at Geneva on 15 May, and there to meet Halifax; he did not do so, even though the meeting was deferred until the 21st to suit his arrangements. In the military talks, if somehow the French could have done the impossible and delivered Polish acceptance of the Red Army, another condition about naval operations in the Baltic was ready to be produced. In their tactics, the Soviets were much assisted by good intelligence – it is likely that they knew of the main British negotiating positions before they were put forward, and they certainly knew of Hitler's timetable for war in August.

So much for methods and tactics; but the key to success and failure lay in the substance of the negotiations. The Soviets held a central position,

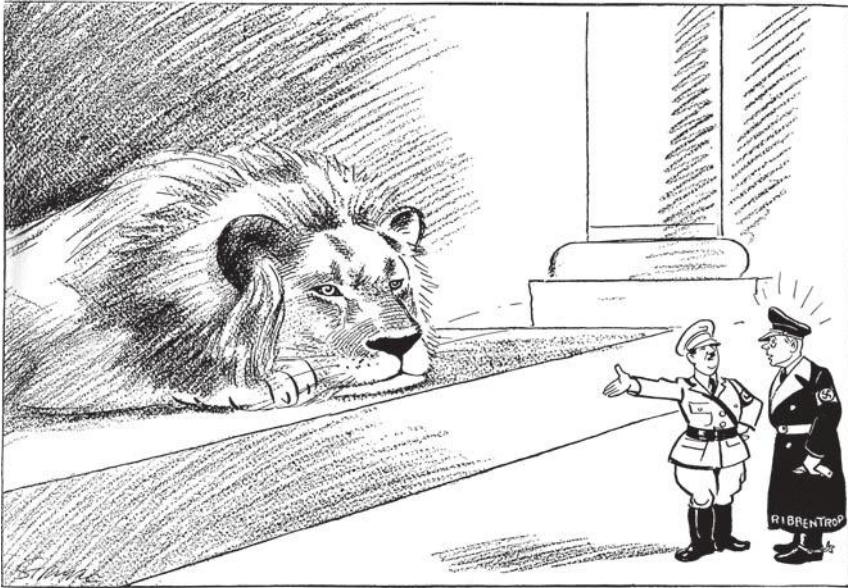
and could judge which set of talks would better serve their interests. We may assume two points about these interests. First, Stalin intended to keep out of a European war if at all possible, especially since the Soviet Union was already engaged in conflict with the Japanese in the Far East.<sup>15</sup> Second, he wanted to gain territory and a sphere of influence in eastern Europe, to increase Soviet security. The British and French offered nothing substantial under either heading. An alliance with them *might* deter Germany from going to war, but if it did not would certainly involve the Soviet Union in conflict at once. The British were not prepared to pay the price for this risk, and accept that the band of states from Finland to Rumania should become a Soviet sphere of influence. In 1938 they had sacrificed Czechoslovakia to Germany, but in 1939 they had too recently taken up the stance of guarantor of small states to hand over a whole batch to the Soviet Union. It is true that necessity knows no law, but in this case the necessity was not thought sufficiently pressing. Only the French were finally willing to pay part of the price, and offer to sacrifice the Poles; but the Poles proved unwilling victims, and in any case it was too late.

The Germans on the other hand were able to meet both Soviet interests. Instead of a risk of war, they could offer certain neutrality. In terms of territory and spheres of influence, they came bearing gifts, ready to carve up Poland and to yield at once when Stalin asked for the whole of Latvia to be in his sphere instead of only a part, as Ribbentrop at first proposed. Moreover, the Germans could deliver the goods forthwith, whereas the British and French could deliver nothing.

Between the two sides, the Soviet choice could scarcely be in doubt. It is only surprising that so much obloquy has been heaped upon Stalin's head for making the best deal that he could get, and that so much criticism has been levelled at the British for their dilatoriness when nothing could have enabled them to match the German offers. The competition was decided on substance, not on method.

## The final crisis

The Nazi–Soviet Pact was a decisive event. The Anglo-French deterrent against Germany, feeble from the start, was now completely undermined. The way was open for a German attack on Poland, for which preparations were being pressed ahead at breakneck speed. The haste with which the German negotiations with the Soviet Union were conducted showed the intense urgency of people working to a deadline. The invasion of Poland had to be launched before the autumn rains. On 14 August Hitler told senior



"BUT YOU TOLD ME IT WAS STUFFED!"

*Strube cartoon: 'But you told me it was stuffed!'. Hitler did not believe Britain could summon up the resolution to fight; but he was wrong to blame this error on Ribbentrop.*

Source: Strube/Daily Express 4/9/1939

officers that he meant to deal with Poland in a quick war. He was sure even then that the Soviets would stand aside, and he did not think that the British would fight; if they and the French did intervene, Germany would stand on the defensive in the west. On 22 August he addressed another conference of senior commanders in particularly brutal terms. The aim of the war against Poland was not to reach certain lines but the wholesale destruction of Poland.

In the morning of 25 August, Hitler was still expecting the British and French governments to be shaken by the Nazi-Soviet Pact. 'What news do you bring of Cabinet crises?' he asked Otto Dietrich, who monitored the foreign press for him.<sup>16</sup> There was no such news, but even so Hitler pressed on, and confirmed that afternoon that the attack on Poland was to begin at 4.30 a.m. on the 26th, after propaganda preparations which were no longer thought to be important – no one would question the victors. At that point, he was surprised by two developments. Britain and Poland, undeterred by the Nazi-Soviet Pact, signed a treaty of alliance; and Mussolini went back on his obligations and announced that Italy would not go to war. In desperate haste, the orders for invasion were

countermanded during the night of the 25th/26th. However, this was not cancellation but postponement: Hitler's aim was to gain a little time to detach Britain from Poland. On 25 August he made an extraordinary proposal to the British for a general settlement, and even an alliance, after the Polish problem was solved. But by now this overture was recognised by the British Cabinet as merely a divisive ploy, and it was disregarded. In the event, the German delay was only short, though it was used to great military effect – no fewer than 25 extra German divisions became available during the six extra days.<sup>17</sup> The last possible date to start the invasion of Poland in order to finish the campaign in good weather was set at 2 September, and Hitler did not wait until then. At 6.30 a.m. on 31 August the order was issued for attack on 1 September, to be carried through even if war with France and Britain resulted. The offensive opened at 4.45 a.m. on 1 September 1939.

Hitler was a man in a hurry, and was determined on war with Poland to a timetable which he set himself. The six-day delay from 26 August to 1 September was no more than a pause. Ciano grasped the reality of the situation when he met Ribbentrop and Hitler in Germany on 11–13 August: the decision for war was certain, and the Germans would fight even if they were offered more than they asked for. What lay behind this driving haste? In personal terms, Hitler was much exercised by fear of an early death, whether by disease or assassination, and the necessity to accomplish his aims before he was struck down. Economic pressures were strong: the vicious circle in which armaments were built up to make conquests and then more conquests were necessary to expand armaments reached an explosive stage in 1939, when raw materials, labour, and food were all needed to sustain the pace. An economic agreement with the Soviet Union would do much to help; but so would war, not least by striking terror among those, like the Rumanians, who were being recalcitrant under other forms of pressure. The military situation was favourable, particularly in the air, so that even a general war could be risked. Hitler banked heavily on air power, and while the *Luftwaffe* of 1939 had serious limitations, and was still being built up for a general war in 1942, it was far superior to any other air force. Hitler drew his main impressions of air power from the ebullient Goering, and may well have been unaware of the *Luftwaffe*'s weaknesses; but even if he knew of them there was still a lead which offered an opportunity for war in favourable circumstances which might not recur.

For all these reasons Hitler pressed on towards war with Poland. He expected the British and French to remain neutral, partly because he was

misled by the general tone of the British press as reported by his advisers, and partly because he accepted Ribbentrop's view that the British were bluffing. He was therefore momentarily shaken when the British stood firmly by their commitment to Poland, so that he found himself on the brink of a general war instead of the anticipated single combat with the Poles. His plan to isolate Poland, which seemed to have gone well, misfired at the last moment. But even this had to some extent been discounted in advance, and provision had been made for a defensive posture in the west. Hitler was set on war with Poland, and the only way in which such a war might have been avoided was for the Poles suddenly to cave in and accept all German demands without fighting. Polish determination was such that this was virtually impossible; and in any case it was almost certain that this time Hitler would not allow any peacemaker to deprive him of his war. A German-Polish war was as certain as anything can be in human affairs. Hitler was also prepared to risk war with the western powers, though this might have been avoided if Britain and France, contrary to their undertakings, had chosen to abandon Poland to her fate. Despite some appearances to the contrary, that was highly unlikely.

During the evening of 25 August some senior British officers were canvassing the odds for and against war. Lord Gort offered 5 to 4 against, and General Ironside 5 to 1 on. Neither was anywhere near right. The odds on war were by then overwhelming. It is true that there were flurries of last-minute activity. On 29 August Germany demanded that a Polish representative should come to Berlin within twenty-four hours to receive German terms relating to Danzig and the Corridor. A document setting out the German demands was prepared on 30 August. It comprised sixteen points, including the annexation of Danzig by Germany, a corridor across the Corridor, a plebiscite in the Corridor area to be held in twelve months' time, and a later exchange of populations. The port of Gdynia was to be recognised as Polish, thus leaving Poland with access to the sea. The substance of this was of little importance: it was never intended to be accepted, and it was not put to the Polish Ambassador until 1 September, when it was too late. It was intended to drive a wedge between Britain and Poland by demonstrating German reasonableness.

Nothing came of these proposals. The British were willing to go part-way down this road: Halifax thought there was something in the idea of an exchange of populations, and Chamberlain at one point thought mistakenly that the Poles might accept the annexation of Danzig by Germany. But the Poles had no intention of following the examples of Schuschnigg and Hacha and accepting a summons to be bullied by Hitler, and on this

occasion the British did not try to coerce them to do so. In marked contrast with their conduct in 1938, the British did not apply to Beck the sort of pressure they had brought to bear upon Beneš; though they did urge the Polish government to delay full mobilisation on the grounds that it would impede negotiations.

There were other last-minute attempts at peacemaking. A Swedish businessman, Dahlerus, flitted between Berlin and London without achieving anything, except perhaps confirming Hitler in his belief that the British would still give way. On 31 August Mussolini tried his hand and proposed a conference, to be held on 5 September; but in contrast to 1938 his role as peacemaker was no longer in the script. He persisted with the proposal even after the German attack on Poland had begun, and had some success with Bonnet; but the British insisted that a precondition for a conference must be the withdrawal of German forces from Poland, which was inconceivable.

The only significant question in these manoeuvres did not concern war between Germany and Poland, which was certain. It was whether Britain and France would stand by Poland. At the time, and for a long time afterwards, such was the suspicion that gathered round the motives and personality of Chamberlain that it was widely believed that he sought another Munich at the expense of Poland, and that he was propelled into war only by the wrath of the House of Commons. It is true that in July 1939 there were secret conversations in London between Wohlthat, an official of the German Economics Ministry, and British officials, including Sir Horace Wilson, who was a close confidant of the Prime Minister. These talks sought to revive the idea of a general Anglo-German settlement, and referred to the possibility of a peaceful settlement of the Danzig question. However, they were not pursued. It is also true that Chamberlain hoped to the last for peace, and that there was a long delay between the German attack on Poland and the British declaration of war, which seemed to indicate an attempt to evade British commitments. On 2 September, a day and a half after the German assault began, Britain had still not declared war or even sent an ultimatum to Berlin. The anger of the House of Commons broke round Chamberlain's head that evening, and the surprising figure of Sir John Simon, formerly a dedicated appeaser, led something like a Cabinet revolt against Chamberlain's delay in sending an ultimatum.<sup>18</sup> But the principal reason for the delay was not a search for another Munich, but the unavowable one of trying to keep in step with the French in going to war.

In France, Daladier had asked the Permanent Committee for National Defence on 23 August whether they could stand by and watch the



disappearance of Poland and Rumania. The committee, made up of senior ministers and service chiefs, agreed that they could not. The French government as a whole did not move from this stance during the days that followed. They were certain that Britain intended to stand by her guarantee to Poland, and therefore that to negotiate with Germany would mean acting alone, which was out of the question. France had finally come to the end of the line of concessions, and had virtually no choice but to fight. The fascist politician Marcel Déat asked, in a newspaper article which later became famous, whether Frenchmen should die for Danzig, but the government knew that Danzig was not the issue. The choice, as Gamelin said, was between going to war now, at the side of Poland, and being attacked later when Poland had been eliminated. Bonnet, indeed, thought otherwise, and tried to pursue Mussolini's idea of a conference, asking as late as 3 September whether the Germans would not make a merely symbolic partial withdrawal in Poland and so allow the meeting to take place. But Bonnet's attitude was not widely shared. Jean-Louis Crémieux-Brilhac has demonstrated the striking difference between the nervousness and doubts of many of the politicians in Paris and the firmness of French opinion as a whole. Daladier gave a determined lead in favour of war, and the French people followed, reluctantly but steadily.<sup>19</sup> The Council of Ministers, meeting on 31 August, was firm in its support for Poland, and general mobilisation was ordered on 1 September. The high command, however, was anxious to complete the process of mobilisation before declaring war, and it was a combination of this desire with Bonnet's last-minute stalling in the hope of a conference that caused delay in a French declaration.

The hesitations on both sides of the Channel were only superficial. Both governments, however reluctantly, knew that they had no choice. The long line of concessions to Germany had come to an end, and they could go no further. On 3 September 1939 both Britain and France declared war on Germany, though they did not manage to do so together: the British declaration was at 11 a.m., the French at 5 p.m.

For the Poles, who had fought alone for two and a half days, this was rather late, but none the less welcome for that. Crowds took flowers to the British and French embassies in Warsaw – the only echo of the enthusiasm with which some had greeted the coming of war in 1914. Everywhere else, the mood was one of silent resignation. Even in Germany, where Nazi propaganda had been hard at work on warlike themes for several years, the streets were quiet. Yet this resignation was accompanied by a profound determination. In France, the most commonly heard remark was 'Il faut en finir' – We've got to finish with it. In Britain, replies to a Gallup Poll

question at the end of September showed 89 per cent in favour of fighting until Hitlerism was done away with – a remarkable figure, though the wording was vague. In Germany, the mood was sober. Official reports described public opinion as being ‘calm and self-possessed, but depressed and apathetic’. People were said to be obeying the call to war ‘in reluctant loyalty’.<sup>20</sup> Events were to prove that the German people would sustain the conflict tenaciously, in defeat as well as in victory. The war was nowhere welcome or popular in any gaudy or flag-waving sense, but it was widely felt to be inevitable. Countries where many still remembered the last great war accepted the burdens of another with something akin to fatalism.

War became increasingly inevitable as 1939 went on, a development which was strengthened by a striking similarity in the strategic intelligence assessments made in Germany, Britain and France. German intelligence reports from sources in Paris and London confirmed Hitler in his belief that France and Britain would not go to war in support of Poland, and therefore that a war on Poland could be localised. British and French intelligence agencies, for their part, took a more optimistic view of the military balance than they had done in 1938, and so encouraged the governments and political leaders to be firmer than they might otherwise have been, and to believe that Germany might yet be deterred from going to war. Each side thus misconceived the intentions of the other, giving rise to an optimistic frame of mind which in the event contributed to the outbreak of war.<sup>21</sup>

When war came, it was a surprise to hardly anyone. It could only have been avoided in one of three ways. First, Germany might have chosen to settle for her gains of 1938 in Austria and Sudetenland, consolidate her new position, and allow Europe a period of calm, or at least of respite. Second, if Germany chose otherwise and continued to press for expansion (which was what happened) then her potential opponents in France, Poland, Britain, and the USSR might have combined together in a coalition so formidable and forbidding that Germany would have been deterred from further adventures by fear of the consequences. Peace might thus have been preserved by threats and the deployment of superior force. Third, those same potential opponents, individually or together, might have decided to accept German expansion, yield with as much grace as possible, and get the best terms they could for themselves. War might thus have been avoided by acquiescence in German demands. In the event, none of these things came about. Germany pressed on. The grand alliance against her never materialised. The Soviet Union struck a bargain with Germany, but Poland, Britain, and France did not. War was expected, and war came.

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- 16 D. C. Watt, *How War Came. The Immediate Origins of the Second World War* (London 1989), pp. 464–5.
- 17 Militärgeschichtliches Forschungsamt, *Germany and the Second World War*, vol. II, *Germany's Initial Conquests in Europe* (Oxford 1991), p. 77. The military advantage in the postponement has been very little noticed.
- 18 David Dutton, *Simon. A political biography of Sir John Simon* (London 1992), pp. 279–82.
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Peter Jackson, *France and the Nazi Menace: Intelligence and Policy Making, 1933–39* (Oxford 2000), pp. 337–8, 379, on the change in public mood.

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## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

# The Expanding War, 1939–1940

Accounts of the origins of the Second World War in Europe usually end with the German invasion of Poland and the British and French declarations of war on Germany at the beginning of September 1939. Later developments are treated as being simply consequent upon these events, or as part of the war and therefore separate from its origins. This mode of presentation focuses attention sharply on the Polish–German conflict and the British and French reactions to it; and in this perspective theories of a European war arising largely by accident assume considerable plausibility. True, there was nothing accidental about Hitler’s attack on Poland, which he pursued with single-minded determination. But when he began that war, he did not expect Britain and France to join in, and when they did so he found himself in a wider war at a time and in circumstances he had not envisaged, and well before German military preparations for a general war were complete.

For the events of 1–3 September 1939, this interpretation holds good. But to narrow the focus of our attention in this way is misleading. In the simplest geographical sense, the four powers which went to war in September 1939 made up only a part of Europe and a minority of its population. Moreover, it seemed likely for a time that the conflict would remain localised between Germany and Poland, with Britain and France as little more than spectators, striking belligerent attitudes but abstaining from serious fighting. If this situation had persisted, then the events would not have constituted a Second World War, or indeed a European war of any significance. They might well have passed as a War of Polish Partition, another brief if bloody passage in the troubled history of eastern Europe. There was a long way to go before it became clear that there was indeed to be a major European war, with world-wide connotations. The question of

why the German–Polish War was followed by other conflicts, merging to become what we call the Second World War, is a necessary part of our enquiry.

To end the story in September 1939 is to assume that Hitler's attack on Poland revealed the essence of his ambitions, rather than being an episode (albeit an important one) in a long process of German expansion. To stop in 1939 is to endow the actions of Britain and France with a greater and more active role in the coming of war than they actually deserve. The British and French declarations of war have given the date of 3 September 1939 a symbolic significance, but they represented only a brief seizure of the initiative by states which for the most part responded to the pressure of others. In Italian policy, abstention from the conflict of September 1939 was an isolated and uncharacteristic part of the whole story, which can only be fully understood if we take up the thread and follow it through to the events of 1940. In the vital matter of German–Soviet relations the events of August and September 1939 marked only a temporary halting-place; and the greatest single issue in European politics remained in suspense until the German attack on the Soviet Union in June 1941. In all these ways, to bring down the final curtain in September 1939 is to leave the play without its last act and its denouement.

There is another reason for pressing on with the enquiry. It is only between late 1939 and 1941 that it becomes possible to apply the test of events to the questions we have already raised about Germany's motives and intentions, which are crucial to any interpretation of the origins of the war. What sort of wars did the Germans wage, and what use did they make of their victories? This test is not infallible, because intentions are rarely carried out to the letter, and actions often have unforeseen consequences. But it is still important to see how far Germany under the Nazis did what it had said it intended to do; and this involves looking well beyond September 1939.

## **The course of events, 1939–40: Germany conquers half Europe**

The events of 1939–40 may be briefly described. The Germans won a rapid and overwhelming victory in Poland. Their armies reached the outskirts of Warsaw as early as 8 September, though the capital then held out until the 27th. On 17 September the Soviet Union joined in the conflict, and invaded Poland from the east. The Polish defence crumbled swiftly, and the last fighting ended on 5 October, only five weeks after the German attack

began. On 6 October, in a speech to the Reichstag, Hitler made a vague 'peace offer', holding out the possibility of the restoration of a small Polish state and claiming that Britain and France had no reason to continue the war. Daladier rejected these proposals on 10 October, and Chamberlain on the 12th: neither would accept a peace based on a recognition of German conquests, with the certain prospect of more to come.

There followed a prolonged pause in military operations. Britain and France stood on the defensive in the west, though they toyed with various ideas for diverting the war to other parts of Europe, by opening a Balkan front, by bombing the Soviet oil-fields at Baku to reduce German oil supplies, or by launching a Scandinavian campaign to cut off German imports of iron ore from Sweden; but they pursued none of these speculations to the point of action. Hitler, for his part, sought no pause, but was compelled to accept one. As early as 27 September, before the fighting in Poland was over, he told the commanders of the three services that he intended to attack in the west at an early date, to smash France to pieces and bring England to her knees. On 18 October he signed a directive for Operation Yellow, an attack on France through Luxemburg, Belgium, and the Netherlands. His generals were reluctant, needing time to regroup after the Polish campaign and conscious of the deficiencies in their forces. They urged postponement until the spring, but Hitler would not allow it. On 25 October he set the date for the offensive at 12 November, and postponed it only because of adverse weather conditions. Throughout the autumn and winter new dates were repeatedly set, and fresh postponements imposed by the weather. The purpose never wavered: only the date was in doubt.

In the event, the winter imposed a pause even on Hitler. When operations resumed, they took the unexpected direction of a German invasion of Denmark and Norway on 9 April 1940. Denmark was occupied without resistance, but fighting went on in Norway for two months. The great German offensive in western Europe opened on 10 May, with astonishing success. The Panzer divisions moved with a speed and boldness which far outweighed deficiencies in their equipment, while the *Luftwaffe* acted as flying artillery in close support of the army. In a few days the Germans broke through the Ardennes and reached the Channel coast. Whatever 'Blitzkrieg' meant to the German command earlier, it made its name and its mark in May–June 1940.

The Dutch were defeated in less than a week, the army capitulating on 15 May, though the Queen and government went to Britain to continue the war. Belgium held out for just under three weeks. The army surrendered on 28 May; the King chose to remain with his people, but

the government went to London. The greatest stroke was the defeat of France in a mere six weeks. The Germans entered Paris on 14 June. On 16 June the government headed by Paul Reynaud resigned, and a new government under Marshal Pétain asked for an armistice in the early hours of the 17th. By this time, Italy had entered the war (on 10 June), and the French signed armistices with Germany on 22 June and Italy on the 24th. The terms were severe but not catastrophic, leaving a French government in existence, about one-third of the country unoccupied, and the empire and the fleet intact. A new exchange rate between the mark and the French franc was fixed, highly favourable to Germany. By the end of June, all was over.

## Poland partitioned: racial policy in action

The nature of these campaigns and the uses to which the victories were put revealed much about German policy and objectives. The case of Poland was particularly instructive. For a brief period, Hitler appeared to contemplate the retention of a residual Polish state. The former German Ambassador in Warsaw, Moltke, prepared a scheme for a satellite state on 25 September; Hitler mentioned the possibility to Ciano on 2 October; and he referred to it publicly in his speech to the Reichstag on 6 October. But this idea was abandoned even while it was being discussed. On 27–28 September Ribbentrop made a second visit to Moscow, during which the German and Soviet governments concluded a Treaty of Friendship, and agreed on revisions of the lines of partition laid down in the agreement of 23 August. Lithuania was transferred from the German to the Soviet sphere of influence, and in return the Polish province of Lublin and part of the province of Warsaw, previously allotted to the USSR, went to Germany. The new line through Poland gave the predominantly Polish areas to Germany, and the rest, with a large Polish minority among Ukrainian, Byelorussian, and Lithuanian populations, to the USSR. Both the Germans and the Soviets agreed to suppress any Polish agitation directed against the other state; and with that agreement, any satellite Polish state under German control was effectively ruled out, because it might offer cover for anti-Soviet activities.<sup>1</sup>

Hitler's true intentions for Poland emerged swiftly. Fighting ceased on 5 October, and on the 8th Hitler annexed to Germany northern and western areas of Poland which had been German territory in 1918.<sup>2</sup> On 12 October the rest of the territory occupied by Germany was organised as the Government-General of Poland, with Hans Frank as Governor of what



was rapidly to become an SS state. In the territories annexed to Germany, a policy of total Germanisation was begun at once. A list was drawn up of Germans resident in these former Polish territories, and a few Poles deemed capable of being Germanised. The remainder – the vast majority – were deprived of the normal rights of citizenship. They could not own property, form associations, receive education beyond the primary level, or be employed in any managerial capacity. At a conference on 2 October with Hans Frank and Martin Bormann, Hitler emphasised that the Poles must have only Germans as their masters. All Polish leaders and members of the intelligentsia were to be executed. There must be no mixture of blood between Germans and Poles. The elimination of the Polish élites began at once; and in the long term all Poles thought to be a threat to Germany or unfit for Germanisation were to be deported to the Government-General or to Germany, for eventual extermination. The Government-General too was in the long run to be Germanised, and meanwhile was to serve as a reservoir of manpower for Germany, paid at cheap rates and fed on small rations. It was also used as a depository for Jews. From the beginning of October Jews in the annexed territories were rounded up and sent to the Government-General, and Hitler directed that the Jews of Vienna were to be treated in the same way. A decree of 26 January 1940 confined Jews in the Government-General to their places of residence – effectively, to ghettos in which they were confined. Mass extermination followed from 1941 onwards.

These actions put into practice the proclaimed racial doctrines of Nazism. In the 1920s Hitler had written of his intention to remove Poles from areas annexed to Germany and replace them with Germans. In August 1939 he told his service commanders that the object of war with Poland was not to reach certain lines but to destroy the people (see above, p. 306). This is exactly what he set out to do from the very beginning of October 1939, even before the fighting had ended in Poland and his ‘peace offer’ was made in the Reichstag. The war in Poland, and above all the occupation policy, was a racial conflict against the Poles and the Jews; and the driving force behind it was Nazi ideology.

In the Soviet-occupied part of Poland, an elaborate charade of elections and petitions to enter the Soviet Union preceded formal annexation of the area in November 1939. The NKVD moved in to deport ‘politically and socially dangerous’ persons to Siberia or Central Asia; and it is probable that over a million people, most of them Poles, were forcibly removed. The Ukrainians and Byelorussians, on the other hand, were allowed the use of their languages for official purposes.

## The new Europe: German policy in the west

What of the policies pursued by Germany elsewhere? We have seen that Hitler was determined upon an attack in the west even before the Polish campaign was over, and pressed on with his plans despite the reluctance of his generals. His ‘peace offer’ of 6 October was fraudulent. He spoke of the restoration of a small Polish state when that had already been ruled out; and he emphasised that he had always wanted friendship with Britain and France at the same time as he said in private that his aim was a final military settlement with the western powers, amounting to their destruction. Certainly by this stage, and probably before, Hitler was firmly set on achieving predominance, not just in Poland, but in Europe as a whole.

The Scandinavian campaign of April–May 1940 was a side-show in this grand design, conceived as a riposte to Allied plans rather than undertaken on German initiative. The Germans were determined to secure their supplies of iron ore from Sweden, and at first sought to do so by means of a war-trade agreement with the Swedes, fixing the level of purchases at slightly under the total for 1938. During the winter of 1939–40 the western Allies considered various ideas for disrupting this traffic. During the Soviet war with Finland (November 1939–March 1940),<sup>3</sup> they prepared to send an expeditionary force to the ore-fields under the cover of helping the Finns. The British also considered mining the Norwegian coastal waters through which the ore trade passed in the winter months, when the direct route across the Gulf of Bothnia was frozen. Reports of these projects reached Germany, and in response plans for the occupation of Norway were put in hand during December 1939. In February 1940 the British destroyer *Cossack* boarded a German vessel, the *Altmark*, in Norwegian territorial waters, and released British prisoners being clandestinely taken to Germany. At this, the Germans decided to move, and in March and early April 1940 German preparations for an invasion of Norway and British plans to sow mines in Norwegian waters went ahead simultaneously. The British began to lay mines on 5 April; the Germans launched their attack on Denmark and Norway during the night of the 8th/9th. The Germans occupied Norway, and were then able to apply irresistible pressure on Sweden. In July 1940 the Swedes had little choice but to allow German troops rights of transit across their country, and to accept a new trade agreement favourable to Germany. A campaign with a limited but important economic objective had been successfully concluded.

The German objectives in the west were on a different scale. Germany aimed at predominance in Europe, and victory over France secured it. To

what end? What was Germany to do with the fruits of victory? One thing became clear at once: German policy was not following a 'blueprint'. The speed of the victories took everyone by surprise – the German high command, government ministries, even Hitler himself. So far from there being any detailed programme ready to be put into operation, nothing was prepared. As the surprise faded, however, some lines of approach quickly emerged.

The element of continuity with the German aims of 1914–18 was very strong in western Europe. What the German victories secured, this time with astonishing speed, was an opportunity to put into effect the western aspects of Chancellor Bethmann-Hollweg's programme of September 1914. The German Army occupied the Low Countries and most of France, and the economies of all these countries passed under German control. The old objectives of *Mitteleuropa* had been achieved. It remained to be seen how this great area should be organised and exploited.

At the end of May and the beginning of June 1940, papers prepared in the German Foreign Ministry envisaged a zone of very tight control, comprising the Netherlands, Belgium, Luxemburg, Norway, and Denmark. The Danubian states were thought to be already closely bound to Germany, and Sweden and Finland were to be drawn into the same position. These discussions were brought up short by Goering, who thought they were trespassing on his prerogatives in economic policy, and were followed by further proposals drawn up in the Economics Ministry. These envisaged an inner ring of states in western Europe and the Danube valley very closely bound to Germany; an outer ring, including Sweden, Finland, and Switzerland, treated separately but still associated with Germany; and others, including the USSR, Italy, France, and Britain, not belonging to the German bloc but in close relations with it. German industrialists working through the *Reichsgruppe Industrie* and the giant chemical firm of IG Farben also produced a number of proposals for the economic organisation of Europe, concentrating on the advanced economies of western Europe and Scandinavia rather than upon the east or the Balkans, and seeking to suppress competition and secure markets. Hitler himself made no definite statement on the question of economic organisation, but he frequently referred to it, especially when talking to visiting foreign statesmen, between autumn 1940 and spring 1941. His basic theme was that other countries should accept specialisation of functions in the service of the German economy, providing agricultural produce, raw materials, and fuel in return for German industrial goods. Rumania, for example, was to give up its own industries and concentrate on the production of cereals and oil, while Norway would supply not only Germany but much of Europe with hydroelectric power.

Countries occupied by Germany or under German influence were in fact compelled to accept trade agreements on German terms, as Denmark, Sweden, and Finland all did before the end of 1940. In France, occupation costs were set at 20 million marks per day, which was well above the actual cost of the operation, and the surplus was used to make purchases from the whole of France. The occupied countries were also used to provide labour, at cheap rates or without pay at all. This did not amount to a fully coherent economic policy, uniformly applied. In Lorraine, for example, German industrialists moved in to take over factories and amalgamate the area with the Saar and Ruhr for the profitable production of both iron and steel; but the government chose instead to concentrate on the production of iron ore, and deliberately ran down steel production to about one-third of its capacity by the end of the year. Eastern Europe brought out grave discrepancies between economic needs and Nazi racial policy. Poland, and later the Ukraine and the Baltic states, should have provided Germany with large quantities of agricultural imports, especially cereals. In practice, Nazi rule in these territories reduced them to ruin, and no attempt was made to encourage the population to sustain agricultural activity, so that food production fell drastically, and the chance of economic gain was thrown away. What might have happened in the long term, if the area had been systematically Germanised and colonised, remains unknown; but in the short run the economic and racial elements in Nazi ideology came into conflict, and the racial element prevailed.

Over much of Europe, however, an outline economic organisation took shape. It was accompanied by a new political order, partly provisional, but much of it intended to be permanent. By the end of 1940 the new Greater Germany had taken into full sovereignty Austria, the Sudetenland, a large part of Poland, Alsace-Lorraine, Luxemburg, and Eupen-Malmédy (formerly in Belgium). Germany exercised direct rule through Governors-General in Bohemia-Moravia and the Government-General of Poland. Slovakia was a Protectorate, with its government under close German control. The German Army occupied two-thirds of France, Belgium, the Netherlands, and Norway, pending political decisions as to their future. Denmark was also occupied, but with its own government still functioning. The German Empire, like most empires, was not wholly systematic in its administration; but it was of formidable strength, and in the Gestapo and SS it possessed a powerful binding force.

In the western and northern parts of the empire, the ideological element was much less prominent than in Poland. In France and the Low Countries the German Army was in charge, with the SS only in the background, and

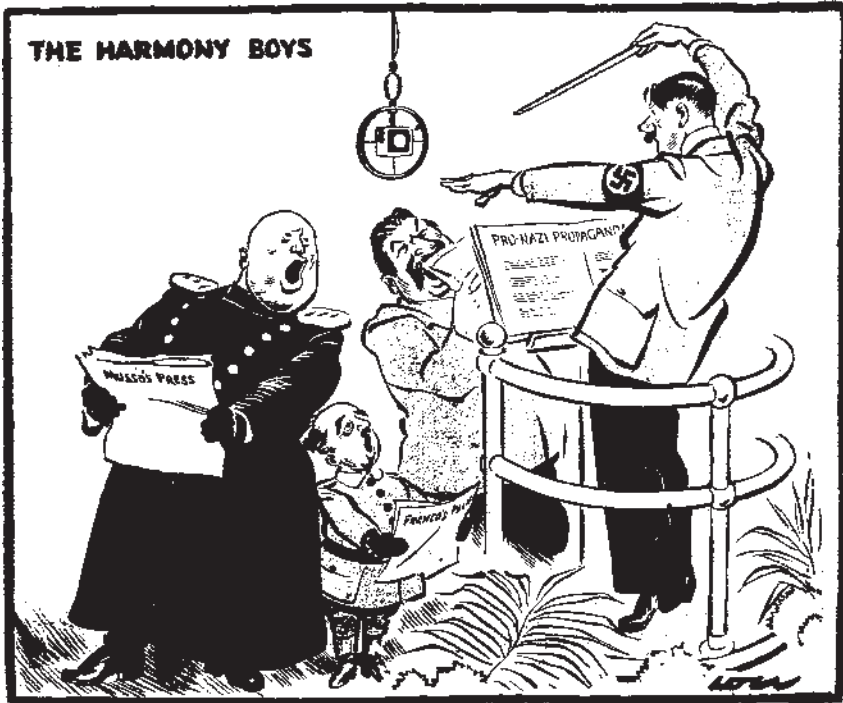
conduct towards the civilian population was correct and restrained. Only in Alsace–Lorraine, effectively annexed to Germany on 15 July 1940, was a policy of Germanisation and deportation applied. Otherwise the peoples of western Europe were not at this stage subjugated, transported, or massacred in the same way as the Poles. There were, however, ideological aspects to the war, even in the west. In Norway, the Germans tried to install in power Vidkun Quisling, the Norwegian Nazi with whom they had long been in touch. In the Netherlands, Belgium, and France the German victories brought a sharp revival in the fortunes of fascist or near-fascist parties which had been in decline since 1936. Many, of course, merely hastened to the help of the victor in the hope of a share in the spoils; but there were also those who genuinely believed that Nazi Germany represented the wave of the future, and threw in their lot with it out of conviction. In France, the parliamentary regime of the Third Republic was widely discredited and held responsible for the country's defeat and disgrace. Pétain preached the need for national regeneration under an authoritarian form of government. Although the war in the west was far removed from the ruthless racial struggle waged in Poland, it still appeared inevitable that the German conquests must be followed by ideological adaptation.

While Europe was being organised, what was to be the next step in German policy? The first question was what to do about Britain; and on this Hitler displayed great uncertainty. One possibility was to make peace on compromise terms, leaving the British Empire, or most of it, intact. Several of Hitler's remarks, private and public, indicated that he expected the British to ask for terms. He told his entourage at the end of May 1940 that he would grant peace to England at the price of the colonies seized from Germany in the First World War, or perhaps simply in return for recognising German predominance in Europe. He told an American journalist on 13 June that France was already beaten and he would soon reach an understanding with England. On 13 July he remarked to General Halder that a military victory over Britain would merely break up the British Empire for the benefit of Japan, the USA, and others; and there was no point in shedding German blood for that end. After the armistice with France, Hitler was apparently waiting for the British to approach him, and he was disappointed to hear nothing from London. He made a sightseeing visit to France, put off a speech scheduled for 8 July, and finally made a vague appeal for peace in a speech to the Reichstag on the 19th. He mentioned no terms, even in outline, but merely asserted, not for the first time,

that he had never intended to harm the British Empire, and that he could see no reason why the war should go on.

There is no proof, but it may well be that at this point Hitler would have offered terms leaving the British Isles and most of the empire untouched; though the long-term prospects would have been a different matter. He seems to have been genuinely disappointed by the British resistance, which he attributed to the influence of world Jewry – ‘If London did not act as expected, it meant that “the Jew” had won over “the Briton”.’<sup>4</sup> He was then faced by the question of how the British were to be defeated. The German staffs had no plan ready for an invasion of the British Isles, and Hitler did not order them to prepare one until 2 July. Even when under way, the planning was half-hearted. Hitler’s directive for Operation Sealion (16 July) stated, with an unaccustomed note of uncertainty: ‘I have decided to prepare a landing operation against England and, if necessary, to carry it out.’<sup>5</sup> An opposed sea-borne landing was notoriously one of the most difficult of military operations, and one of which the German services had no experience. Counsels were divided and preparations uncertain. The one point on which all agreed was that the key lay in air superiority, which was never quite achieved. After prolonged hesitation, the plan was tacitly abandoned on 17 September by the face-saving device of postponing the date for fixing a date for the invasion.

As the prospects for an invasion receded, the Germans looked round for other means of defeating the British. One was a Mediterranean campaign, drawing Spain into the war and closing the straits of Gibraltar in the west, while reinforcing the Italians in Libya for an attack on the Suez Canal in the east. These projects were actively pursued between August 1940 and the end of the year, but were obstructed by evasiveness on the part of both Spain and Italy. In September Franco named his price for entry into the war as the whole of French Morocco, part of Algeria and the French Cameroons, and some territory in the Pyrenees. Hitler went personally to meet Franco at Hendaye on 23 October, and was presented with requests for supplies and military equipment so extensive that they could not be met. There is much evidence that Franco regarded himself as being in the Axis camp (which was after all the winning side), and that he was willing to enter the war, but only on his own terms, which were not forthcoming.<sup>6</sup> Hitler’s Directive No. 18 of 12 November 1940 still referred to bringing Spain into the war and mounting an attack on Gibraltar, but nothing materialised. Franco confined himself to providing limited assistance to the Axis powers. Meanwhile, Germany twice offered, in August and October, to send forces to help the Italians in Libya, but Mussolini



Cartoon, 'The Harmony Boys'. Low's perception of Hitler's motley collection of supporters – Mussolini, Franco and Stalin.

Source: David Low/Evening Standard 2/5/1940/Associated Newspapers/Solo Syndication and Centre for the Study of Cartoons and Caricature, University of Kent.

prevaricated, and Hitler did not press the matter, though he instructed an armoured division to stand by for North Africa. This plan eventually took shape in the despatch of Rommel's Afrika Korps to Tripoli in February 1941; but the general plans for a full Mediterranean campaign were never followed up.

Another possibility was to bring together, in a grand diplomatic design, a combination of powers comprising Spain, Vichy France, the Soviet Union, and Japan, as well as the Axis powers, which would be so formidable as to compel a British surrender. Hitler had been at work off and on since 1938 to secure an alliance with Japan, and on 27 September 1940 a fresh bout of negotiations was brought to a successful conclusion with the signature of the Tripartite Pact between Germany, Italy, and Japan. The three participants recognised each other's spheres of influence in Europe and the Far East, and the treaty was openly designed to threaten both the USA and Britain. In October 1940 Hitler pursued his diplomatic efforts through



*Hitler and Franco meet at Hendaye, 23 October 1940. Despite the smiles, Franco sat on the fence.*

Source: Ullstein Bild/AKG Images



meetings with Franco and Pétain, but with little tangible result. Franco, as we have seen, remained reticent, and though Pétain agreed in principle to collaboration with Germany (and so endowed the word with a new and pejorative meaning), the ways and means were left to be worked out in the future. The roles of Spain and France in the general coalition remained sketchy and insubstantial.

That left the Soviet Union. Molotov was invited to Berlin for talks with Hitler and Ribbentrop on 12–13 November 1940. Hitler talked sweepingly of the break-up of the British Empire – an estate in bankruptcy, as he put it; and Ribbentrop presented a draft agreement for the division of large parts of the world into German, Italian, Japanese, and Soviet spheres of influence. Molotov for his part was dismayingly precise, asking stern questions about Finland, Rumania, and Bulgaria, where Germany appeared to be trespassing on the Soviet sphere of influence already agreed on in 1939 (see below, pp. 342–3). However, he took Ribbentrop's proposals back to Moscow, and on 25 November produced a reply expressing agreement in principle, though requiring far-reaching conditions. German troops should be withdrawn from Finland at once; the Soviet Union was to negotiate a treaty with Bulgaria permitting the establishment of a Soviet base there; there should be another Soviet base in Turkey, at the straits into the Mediterranean; and Japan must renounce all claims to coal and oil concessions in northern Sakhalin. The proposed Soviet sphere in the grand partition of the world should be more clearly defined as lying between Batum, Baku, and the Persian Gulf. Many of these demands were to remain consistent elements in Soviet policy over the next five years, and there is no need to doubt the seriousness of the reply; but in the event the exchange stopped at that point. The Germans never answered the Soviet note, though the Soviet government reminded them of it a number of times.

With this, the negotiations for a grand coalition stretching from Madrid to Tokyo by way of Moscow came to an end. They had not got very far, and even the Tripartite Pact with Japan, which was their most solid achievement, proved less effective than Hitler hoped. However, all these schemes for the defeat of Britain came to assume a secondary importance as 1940 came to an end. Hitler's mind had already moved to an attack on the Soviet Union, a project never far from his thoughts. He began talk of it to his generals in late July 1940, and he even thought of launching the attack that autumn, until he was persuaded that this was impossible. Planning and practical preparations went forward from August onwards, until in December all was sufficiently ready for Hitler to issue his directive for Operation Barbarossa. The significance of this will be examined in

Chapter 17. It is enough to note here the speed with which Hitler turned towards an attack on the Soviet Union, long before other prospects had been exhausted, or even fully tried.

What emerges from German policies after the victories of summer 1940 to illuminate the origins of the war? There was no ‘blueprint’. There were no plans ready for the invasion of Britain or for the organisation of a conquered Europe. Hitler hesitated, uncertain what to do with his victory. Yet through the hesitation, and almost *because* there were no plans, the main impulses behind German policy emerged with great clarity. Economic demands had to be met: the supply of Swedish iron ore had to be secured. In the general economic and political organisation of central and western Europe, the influence of ideas about *Mitteleuropa*, going back to the First World War and earlier, was strong. Hitler shared these ideas and began to put them into practice; but for him they were not enough. He had no clear idea about how to deal with the recalcitrant British, and his heart was never in a Mediterranean campaign. Always in the background there was the idea of an attack on the Soviet Union. The compass needle of Nazi policy swung erratically in the summer and autumn of 1940, but it came to rest pointing east.

The forces behind the expansion of Germany stand out clearly in the light of that expansion itself in 1934–40. In Poland, the themes of race and living space were predominant, and the most extreme theories of Nazi racial doctrines were unhesitatingly put into practice. In the west and north, the war was one which would have been easily recognisable to Bethmann-Hollweg and the German General Staff of 1914, fought to establish German political and economic domination. The new, Nazi, elements in German policy marched side by side with the old; though with the growing success of the regime the Nazi element grew steadily more powerful.

## Reactions to the German victories: Italy joins the war

The German victories confronted almost every state in Europe with choices, and their responses both extended the scope of the war and further illuminated its nature. Of all the powers that had remained neutral in 1939, Italy was the only one to make a deliberate choice to enter the war. In September 1939 Mussolini declared Italy a ‘non-belligerent’, in the hope that this would sound better than being merely neutral. In practice, he recognised that his country, despite seventeen years of fascist rule, was not

ready to fight. During the next few months Italy followed no fixed policy. Ciano thought that the war would be long and that the British would eventually win it, and he therefore tried to keep Italy out and to promote a negotiated peace. Mussolini lent some support to these efforts, and in a letter of 3 January 1940 tried to persuade Hitler that the restoration of a small Polish state under German tutelage would make a starting-point for peace. This made no headway, and the role of peacemaker proved both unproductive and humiliating – for two months Hitler did not even trouble to reply to Mussolini’s letter. On the other hand, the prospects for war were still unpromising, and in January 1940 Marshal Badoglio advised Mussolini that Italy would not be ready for war that year, nor fit to take the offensive until 1942.

Despite this advice, Mussolini now saw that there would be no compromise peace, and he did not believe that Italy could afford to stay out of the war until it ended. A reversal of alliances was impossible: as a fascist he could not join the democracies, and only the German alliance would enable Italy to attain her goals in the Mediterranean. In a memorandum of 31 March 1940 Mussolini concluded that Italy’s only course was to wage a war parallel to that of Germany, and break free from her imprisonment in the Mediterranean. The problem was not whether to fight, but when and how. As to when, he set no date; as to how, he acknowledged that the main lines of strategy on land must be defensive in Europe and Libya, with local offensives from Ethiopia, but at sea the navy must launch an all-out attack. The comments on this memorandum from the service chiefs were not encouraging. Badoglio thought that action on *all* land fronts would have to be defensive, and the Chief of Naval Staff, Admiral Cavagnari, reported that the navy was not strong enough to take the offensive in either the eastern or western Mediterranean.

This cautious military advice was never likely to be heeded, because Mussolini was thinking essentially on political, not military, lines. In any case, the issue was decided by the German victories of April and May 1940. When Hitler wrote on 9 April with his rather belated announcement of the invasion of Norway, Mussolini said that he could not stand by with folded arms while others made history. On 13 May, three days after the Germans opened their offensive in the west, he told Ciano that the Allies had lost the war. Italy had already suffered enough dishonour, and he would declare war within a month. At a conference with service chiefs on 29 May he said that any date after 5 June would be suitable, and after consultation with Hitler 10 June was fixed upon. On that day, Italy declared war on France and Britain.

Mussolini's decision was a personal one. He refused to be restrained by the caution of Ciano, who had grown disillusioned with the German alliance, or by the pessimism of the generals and admirals. There was evidence in the police reports of the time that some sections of the Italian population favoured war, but at best the nation was divided on the issue. It is a clear example of a deliberate and individual choice for war, with no question of accident, or of war being forced upon Italy. Why did Mussolini make this choice?

His most prominent motive was an extremely simple opportunism. He remarked more than once in May and June 1940 that he needed a few thousand casualties to allow him to take his seat at the peace conference; and since the war, to all appearance, was almost over, he had to move quickly. But there was more to it than that. Mussolini had spoken repeatedly of Italy's need to break out of her imprisonment in the Mediterranean, and he had long sought a sphere of influence in the Balkans. War seemed to open the way to both objectives. Moreover, his own personal prestige and that of the fascist regime were at stake. He believed that to remain neutral would be to admit failure to prepare for war, and so accept humiliation. To fight, on the other hand, would give the fascist regime a new impetus and strengthen Mussolini's hand against internal opposition. In the event, during the next three years, the exact opposite happened. The fate of the fascist regime indeed proved to be bound up with the war, but not in the way that Mussolini hoped.<sup>7</sup>

The Italian declaration of war had far-reaching results. It extended the existing conflict to the Mediterranean, and resulted for a time in the waging of a separate and parallel war, as Mussolini claimed – a third war to follow the two in Poland and western Europe. It was the culminating point in a series of events through which Italy had played a considerable part in destabilising Europe – Ethiopia, Spain, and Albania marked the earlier stages. It was almost the end of the road for Italian influence, which was at its greatest when Italy was courted on all sides and when her military strength was not too severely tested. Once at war, Italian weakness rapidly became apparent, and Italy sank to become merely a junior partner in the Axis.

## Reactions to the German victories: choosing sides

On the other side of the conflict, a number of states made choices during 1939 and 1940 which brought out their views of the nature of the war and

what was at stake in it. The first, and in many ways the most striking, case was that of Poland. As we have seen, Poland disappeared from the map, and the Polish people were ground between the upper and nether millstones of Germany and the Soviet Union. The Polish response was to continue the war. The government that began hostilities went to Rumania in September 1939, and its members were interned; but the President of the Republic delegated his powers, and on 30 September a new government was formed in Paris under General Sikorski. Warships had escaped, new army and air force units were formed, and Polish forces continued to fight, as they did for the next six years. In Poland itself, before the end of September, a clandestine resistance movement began to take shape in opposition to both the German and the Soviet occupations. For the Poles, in exile and at home, the issue at stake was nothing less than the existence of their nation, and the war was so important that it was not to be ended even by apparently total defeat. The pattern thus set of a government in exile continuing the war and an internal resistance movement maintaining opposition to an occupying power was later widely followed, and became a characteristic feature of the Second World War in Europe.

The German victories of April–June 1940 placed before several governments the choice of whether to leave their countries and continue the war from abroad, or to take the more usual course of staying at home, asking for terms, and continuing to administer the country, if necessary under foreign occupation. The crisis first came in Denmark, where in an extremely short time in the early hours of 9 April 1940 the government had to decide whether or not to resist the German attack. Seeing no chance of successful resistance, the government refused to declare war, and accepted German occupation. The possibility of going into exile was not considered. In Norway, invaded at the same time, events turned out differently. The Norwegian forces resisted from the start; and Hitler made what proved to be the capital error of trying to install Quisling, the Norwegian Nazi leader, as the head of a new government. German parachute troops also tried but failed to capture King Haakon. Quisling's government proved a flop. The King remained at liberty; he and his government refused all negotiations with the Germans; and at the end of April they decided to go to Britain to continue the war. The ideological element, and perhaps the precedent of Austria in 1938, here led Hitler into a significant political failure. In the Netherlands, Queen Wilhelmina, who was determined that neither she nor her country should be bullied into submission, sailed for England on 13 May, followed by her ministers. When the Prime Minister later showed signs of wishing to seek a negotiated peace, he was speedily

removed and replaced by a man of sterner stuff. In Belgium, counsels were divided. King Leopold saw it as his duty to stay with his army and his people, but the government went to London and pursued the war.

The most significant of all these decisions was made in France. By the middle of June 1940 it was clear that organised resistance to the German armies could no longer be maintained, and the French government had to choose between asking for an armistice and going abroad (to Algiers or London) to continue the struggle. On 16 June Paul Reynaud, who advocated continued resistance, resigned as Premier, and was replaced by Marshal Pétain, who at once asked for an armistice and peace terms. In part his decision arose from a simple determination to remain on the soil of France and with the French people; but it also reflected a belief that it was possible to save something from the wreck and establish a place for France in a German-dominated Europe. Reynaud thought this was an illusion. They were not dealing with someone like the Kaiser in the previous war – ‘Hitler is Gengis Khan’, as Reynaud once exclaimed.

The division between Pétain and Reynaud reflected a profound difference of view on the nature of the war and the forces behind it; and the same question arose in each of the invaded countries. The governments which chose to accept defeat believed that the consequences would be tolerable. Those who chose exile believed on the contrary that occupation by Hitler’s Germany represented a fundamental challenge which must be resisted to the end. That this latter view was so widely (though by no means universally) held and acted upon was an indication of the forces which lay behind the war, and especially their ideological element.

The British faced a similar choice, though in a less acute form. The likelihood that France would surrender was borne in upon the British government before the end of May 1940, and raised the question of whether Britain should also seek terms. The War Cabinet rejected the idea after long and tense discussions on 26, 27, and 28 May, and the question was not reopened at the actual time of the French armistice at the end of June, when it was largely taken for granted in the government, Parliament, and the press that the war should be continued. The pacific mood of the 1930s had vanished almost completely: when the Germans were at Calais, there were few who wished to see them at Dover. The coalition government under Churchill represented a unity of feeling based on a combination of instinctive self-defence, patriotism, and ideological opposition to Nazism. In the disastrous circumstances of 1940, the British resolve to continue the war was a demonstration of the depth and significance of the reasons for which it had been begun, and for which it would be carried through.

The German victories of 1940, and above all the fall of France, also showed in a flash that the war was far more than merely European in its significance. In the Far East, Japan was presented with a tremendous opportunity. The defeat of France and the Netherlands left their Far Eastern possessions (Indo-China and the Dutch East Indies) open to attack; and the apparently impending collapse of Britain promised to offer even wider prospects. In the Atlantic, the USA faced dangers far more immediate and acute than most Americans had ever envisaged. The fall of France might well allow German influence to be extended to the French colonies in the Caribbean. If the Germans seized the French fleet, and if, worse still, the British surrendered and handed over the Royal Navy, the command of the Atlantic might pass into German hands. Many Americans, including President Roosevelt, also saw Nazi ideology as a long-term challenge to American democracy. The USA, so long set on creating for itself an iron-clad neutrality, came increasingly to realise that its own interests and security were bound up with the fate of Europe, and extended its help to Britain as the first line of American self-defence.

The crisis of 1940 revealed much about the nature of the war, and therefore also about its origins. It was an ideological war, most plainly in Poland, though there were ideological elements also in the war in western Europe, which was more obviously a war about power and economic predominance. It was a war brought about by two expansionist powers, Germany and Italy, not working to detailed preconceived plans, but still pursuing long-held objectives. Mussolini could have remained neutral in 1940, but chose instead to make a bid for his Mediterranean aims. Hitler stood at the end of 1940 as the master of most of Europe, but this was still not enough. He was determined upon the invasion of the Soviet Union, which was to complete the process by which almost the whole of Europe was swept into war.

## References

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- 2 The population of those areas comprised 8.9 million Poles, 600,000 Germans, and 600,000 Jews (Ciechanowski, in *Poland Since 1863*, p. 214).
- 3 The Soviet Union demanded territorial concessions from Finland and the use of the Finnish base at Hangö, and attacked Finland in pursuit of these aims on 30 November 1939. The Finns resisted with unexpected tenacity and success, and did not surrender until 12 March 1940, when the Soviets imposed a harsher version of their original terms.
- 4 Jürgen Förster, in Militärgeschichtliches Forschungsamt, *Germany and the Second World War*, vol. IV, *The Attack on the Soviet Union* (Oxford 1998), p. 33.
- 5 H. R. Trevor-Roper (ed.), *Hitler's War Directives 1939–1945* (London 1964), p. 34.
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## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

# Germany and the Soviet Union, 1940–1941

In the early hours of Sunday, 22 June 1941, Germany invaded the Soviet Union. The forces engaged on both sides were larger than in any previous campaign; the distances and areas involved were vaster; and the stake was nothing less than the existence of the two greatest European powers of the time. Alongside Germany fought her east European allies and satellites, Finland, Rumania, Hungary, and Slovakia, soon to be joined by three Italian divisions and the Spanish Blue Division. Hitler had said that when he attacked the USSR the world would hold its breath. It did. The climax of the long movement towards total European war had come.

These events obviously had the most profound effects upon the course and outcome of the Second World War. It is equally true, though rather less obvious, that they also have a fundamental bearing on the question of the origins of the war. Why did Hitler attack the Soviet Union? If it was the fulfilment of all his dreams and thoughts from at least the composition of *Mein Kampf* onwards, then all the events of the previous years must be seen in this perspective. The annexation of Austria and Czechoslovakia, the offers of alliance to Poland and then the attack upon her, appear as preparations to open the way to the ultimate goal. The offensive in the west and the defeat of France removed the threat to Germany's rear and allowed a concentration of forces in the east. All was part of a grand design, with improvisations and uncertainties here and there, but moving always in the same direction. If, on the other hand, the attack on the Soviet Union was largely a response to the pressures of war – an indirect means of defeating the British, or a response to Soviet obduracy in eastern Europe – then our perspective on the origins of the war is quite different. The grand design becomes less obvious or less influential, and may even be relegated to the status of mere talk.

Most of the questions raised in the different interpretations of the origins of the war – war by accident or war premeditated, an ideological war or war over power, Hitler’s war or the continuation of the First World War – reach their logical conclusion in the events of 1941, which represent the final question mark over the origins and nature of the war. It is true that the questions involved cannot be answered with complete certainty or finality, turning as they do on interpretations of motive where we can only assess degrees of probability. But equally the bearing of the events of June 1941 on the origins of the war is such that to ignore them is to leave a whole area of explanation unexplored.

## **A long-formed intention: Hitler and the Soviet Union**

The military preparations for the offensive against the Soviet Union were lengthy. As early as 3 July 1940 General Halder set his staff to work on a plan for an attack on the Baltic states and the Ukraine. On 31 July Hitler told a meeting of senior commanders that he intended to smash the Soviet Union with one blow in Spring 1941. Operational plans in different forms were prepared in September and November. The movement of troops to the east, and the preparation of supply depots and training camps, began that autumn. General Halder presented a completed plan to Hitler on 5 December 1940, and Hitler signed Directive No. 21 for Operation Barbarossa on 18 December: ‘The German Armed Forces must be prepared to crush Soviet Russia in a quick campaign even before the end of the war against England.’ Preparations were to be completed by 15 May 1941.<sup>1</sup>

Not all plans are carried out – the directive of November 1940 for an attack on Gibraltar, for example, came to nothing. The absolute certainty of an attack on the Soviet Union cannot, therefore, be assumed on the basis of the military plans alone. But the scale of the military preparations, and the time and energy devoted to them, put the planning for Barbarossa in quite a different category from that for Gibraltar. Certainly from December 1940 onwards it was clear that this was no mere contingency plan, but, short of something extraordinary, would be put into effect. The question is why?

One answer is that it was the fulfilment of a long-formed intention. Alan Bullock concluded firmly in his biography of Hitler, published in 1952, that: ‘Hitler invaded Russia for the simple but sufficient reason that he had always meant to establish the foundation of his thousand-year Reich by the annexation of the territory between the Vistula and the

Urals.<sup>2</sup> Some forty years later, a German historian, drawing on a vast body of evidence which had become available in the meantime, reached essentially the same conclusion. 'Operation Barbarossa was not a campaign like those that preceded it, but a carefully prepared war of annihilation', whose origins lay in Hitler's world view and political aims: living space, race, economic autarky and world power.<sup>3</sup> This interpretation has been generally accepted, and the evidence for it may be found throughout Hitler's writings and talks to Nazi and service leaders over a long period. His mind appeared to be firmly set in this mould by the 1920s, and the longer his dictatorship lasted the less open he was to new ways of thought.

By 1940 it is probable that the mould was unbreakable. Hitler took up other ideas – an invasion of Britain, a move through Spain, a Mediterranean campaign, a grand alliance to include the USSR – but he dropped them again. To an attack on the Soviet Union he constantly returned. Even when things went wrong, as in Mussolini's ill-judged and unsuccessful attack on Greece at the end of October 1940, Hitler's plans to cope with the problem went ahead alongside the plans for the USSR – his directive for the invasion of Greece, Operation Marita, was signed on 13 December 1940, and that for Barbarossa on the 18th. When other opportunities appeared, glittering and apparently within easy reach – as they did in the Middle East in February 1941, when the capture of the Suez Canal and an Arab revolt against the British were in the offing – Hitler was not interested in pursuing them. He insisted that there must be no large-scale operations in the Mediterranean until the USSR had been defeated. Hitler was often an opportunist, but he was only interested in certain opportunities, and a campaign in the Middle East was not among them.

German objectives in eastern Europe had obvious links with the victories of 1918, when the German armies had defeated Russia and occupied the Ukraine and the Caucasus. This continuity was not repudiated by the Nazis, who were happy to share the mantle of Ludendorff. But by 1941 the impulse inherited from imperial Germany was far outweighed by current ideological concerns, to the grave detriment of German policy. During the First World War the Germans had made skilful and successful use of the grievances of the non-Russian nationalities, encouraging separatist movements and working closely with the government of a newly declared Ukrainian state. In 1941 the same opportunity was present, and was partially recognised. In western Europe in 1940–41 the Germans sought contacts with Flemish and Breton separatists. In the east, the *Abwehr* had long supported Ukrainian nationalists, and at least one staff paper during the planning for the attack on the USSR envisaged setting up a puppet

government in the Ukraine. The extent of the opportunity was shown by the welcome frequently received by the German forces as they advanced into the Ukraine in the summer of 1941. But the Germans this time made no claims to come as liberators. When Ukrainian nationalists set up a provisional government in Lwow at the end of June 1941, the Germans at once suppressed it. They came as the master race, and in so doing they threw away a political weapon of the highest value.

Hitler insisted that the war with the Soviet Union would be one of ideology and race. He rejected the army's proposals for the military administration of conquered territory, laying down instead in a directive of 13 March 1941 that Himmler as head of the SS was to be responsible for 'special tasks' in the occupied zone. The SS, prosecuting the struggle between opposing systems of government and belief, were to liquidate the Jewish-Bolshevik intelligentsia and the Bolshevik commissars. On 31 March 1941 Hitler gave verbal orders that persons in these categories were to be placed outside the normal rules of war and shot on capture. On 6 June the so-called 'commissar order', that all Soviet military commissars captured on the eastern front were to be killed as soon as taken, was actually put in writing. It was freely accepted that millions of the people of the conquered territories would suffer the same fate as the commissars, by the more indirect means of famine. At a meeting of State Secretaries on 2 May 1941 it was agreed that all the German forces must be fed from the USSR by the third year of the war, and that the consequence of this was that millions of Russians would have to starve. A directive by Goering's economic staff on 23 May confirmed this: the food-producing areas of the USSR were to supply German needs, which would unavoidably mean famine for the urban populations normally fed from these sources.<sup>4</sup>

When the campaign began, Hitler's absorption in it speedily became complete, and its visionary aims dominated his talk, in which he pictured a Soviet Union colonised with German towns, linked by great roads and separated from the native population, who would be kept in outer darkness. He hardly left his specially constructed headquarters in East Prussia, except to make forays to a command post in the Soviet Union itself. Germany, and even his old haunts in Bavaria, were rarely visited. It was the final sign of his obsession with the east.

Even in his obsession, it seems that Hitler was visited by doubts and hesitations. When he wrote to Mussolini to announce the invasion, Hitler referred to months of anxious pondering, and of winning through to a decision. He even seems to have had some premonition of ill-fortune, and on the night before the attack he said: 'I feel as if I am pushing open the

door to a dark room never seen before, without knowing what lies behind the door.<sup>5</sup> But despite such signs, it seems clear that Hitler moved against the USSR under the impulse of a long-cherished idea. Richard Evans summed the matter up effectively when he concluded that the invasion of the Soviet Union ‘was from the beginning an ideologically motivated war of total subjugation and extermination’.<sup>6</sup>

This may not, however, have been his only motive, and it was certainly not the sole explanation advanced by Hitler himself. In the summer of 1940 his most common argument was that it was necessary to attack the Soviet Union in order to defeat Britain. He told his senior commanders on 31 July 1940: ‘England’s hope is Russia and America. If hope on Russia is eliminated, America is also eliminated. . . . Russia is the factor on which England is mainly betting. . . . Should Russia, however, be smashed, then England’s last hope is extinguished.’<sup>7</sup> Hitler said much the same, in one form or another, to various foreign statesmen – to Teleki, the Hungarian Prime Minister, for example, on 20 November 1940. In March 1941, speaking to the commanders involved in Operation Barbarossa, he stretched the point so far as to claim the existence of a secret agreement between the USSR and Britain, which held the English back from making peace. Despite much repetition, however, the logic of the argument remained elusive. Halder in particular was uncertain as to how exactly the defeat of the Soviet Union would bring about a British surrender, writing in his diary on 28 January 1941: ‘Barbarossa: Purpose not clear. We do not hit the British that way.’<sup>8</sup> The British had gone to war despite the signing of the Nazi–Soviet Pact; they had maintained their resistance in the summer of 1940 in the face of Soviet hostility; and there seemed no good reason for them to change their position. If it were the main German objective to strike at Britain, there were other more effective ways of doing so. To conquer the oil supplies of the Middle East was one way. To cut off all assistance from the USA (which meant far more to Britain than did the USSR) would have been more deadly still. But these objectives were not pursued. The argument is not decisive, for it remains possible that, however misguidedly, Hitler believed his own explanation. But it is reasonable to look elsewhere for more substantial motives.

## German–Soviet relations, 1940–41: political friction and economic co-operation

In late 1940 and early 1941 there was increasing friction between Germany and the Soviet Union in eastern Europe, calling into question the working

and advantages of the Nazi–Soviet Pact. In June and July 1940, in the aftermath of the fall of France, Stalin moved to secure his grip on the three Baltic states of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, placed in the Soviet sphere of influence by the agreements of 1939. Soviet troops had been stationed on their territory since October 1939; in late June 1940 Soviet-controlled governments were imposed; and in July all three asked to be incorporated in the Soviet Union. Their request, needless to say, was granted. Hitler claimed to be shocked by this – perhaps he really was, because he did not like others to play his own game, and the Soviet move could have no adversary in view except Germany.

However, this move was not in breach of the 1939 agreements: Stalin was only annexing territory which had formerly been in his sphere of influence. But there then developed friction which directly impinged on the agreements. On 23 June, Molotov announced to the German Ambassador in Moscow that the Soviet Union proposed to occupy at once the Rumanian provinces of Bessarabia and Bukovina. The USSR had declared its interest in Bessarabia during the hasty negotiations of August 1939. Bukovina had not been mentioned though Ribbentrop had made vague remarks about the lack of German political interest in the Balkans generally. This was never in fact the case: German interest in Rumanian oil was strong, and an economic agreement of 27 May 1940 brought Rumania firmly under German influence. The Germans persuaded the Soviets to limit their occupation to the northern part of Bukovina, but then advised Rumania to accept a Soviet ultimatum of 26 June. But these events rankled in Berlin, and when on 30 August Hitler delivered a ruling (the Second Vienna Award) transferring most of Transylvania from Rumania to Hungary, he accompanied this further diminution of Rumanian territory with a guarantee of what remained. This guarantee was obviously directed against the Soviet Union, and Molotov protested about it, both at the time and during his visit to Berlin in November 1940.

The position of Rumania had been left vague in the German–Soviet negotiations of 1939; but there could be no doubt that Finland was placed in the Soviet sphere of influence. During the Soviet–Finnish War of November 1939–March 1940, Germany had respected this agreement, and had done nothing to impede, and something to assist, the Soviet campaign. By the summer of 1940, Germany was no longer content with this position. German conceptions of an attack on the Soviet Union, from the end of July 1940 onwards, always included the participation of Finland on Germany's side, which meant that it was necessary to detach that country from the Soviet sphere. On 24 July a German–Finnish trade treaty was

signed, and in September 1940 Germany negotiated an agreement for the passage of German troops through Finland to north Norway. The Soviets were not informed beforehand, and were understandably perturbed. Molotov pressed this matter hard on his visit to Berlin in November. Hitler agreed that Finland was the primary concern of the USSR from a political point of view, but he stressed Germany's economic interest in Finnish nickel and timber. He insisted that Finland was not occupied by German troops, who were only passing through. Molotov repeatedly pointed out that the existing German–Soviet agreements placed Finland in the Soviet sphere of influence, and remarked ominously that the Soviet government had the right to deal with the Finnish question. In the event, Finland continued to move into the German camp, and the Soviets did not make good this threat.

Further friction developed over Bulgaria, a country not specifically mentioned in the Nazi–Soviet agreements, though vaguely included in Ribbentrop's airy expressions of lack of interest. In November 1940 the Soviet Union proposed to issue a guarantee to Bulgaria, and warned the Bulgarian government against seeking German support. The Bulgarians refused the guarantee, only to be offered (25 November) a mutual assistance pact, which would include Bulgaria in the Soviet security zone. Again the Bulgarians refused, keeping Germany informed throughout and receiving her tacit support. On 25 November also, the Soviet note to Germany about proposed spheres of influence, following Molotov's conversations in Berlin, stipulated the establishment of a Soviet base in Bulgaria. The Soviet claims on Bulgaria were thus made absolutely clear; and yet on 28 February 1941 German troops entered the country, with the consent of the Bulgarian government. The challenge could not have been more direct.

At the same time, between November 1940 and March 1941, Germany made a series of diplomatic moves which emphasised her influence all over eastern Europe. On 20 November 1940 Hungary adhered to the Tripartite Pact between Germany, Italy, and Japan: Rumania followed on 23 November, and Slovakia on the 24th. The Tripartite Pact was openly directed against the USA, and its fifth Article declared that it did not affect the signatories' existing relations with the Soviet Union; but whatever the wording, there was no doubt that for east European countries to join the Pact was to declare for Germany rather than the USSR. In December 1940 there were staff conversations between Germany and Finland, and on 31 December the two countries signed a treaty of friendship. Finally, on 28 February 1941, having accepted the entry of German troops, Bulgaria too joined the Tripartite Pact. Of these moves, those involving Finland,

Rumania, and Bulgaria were of particular significance, and certain to be resented by the Soviet Union.

German–Soviet relations were thus under considerable strain, and it was open to question how long the pact between the two countries would survive. In these circumstances, the economic aspects of German–Soviet relations were also at risk. After a difficult start in the winter of 1939–40, when there was some very tough negotiating between the two sides, economic relations had been good, and had worked favourably for Germany. A commercial agreement signed in February 1940 provided that the Soviet Union should supply Germany during the next year with 1 million tonnes of cereals, 1 million tonnes of oil, and substantial quantities of cotton, phosphates, iron ore, and chrome ore. The Soviets also agreed to make purchases in third countries on Germany's behalf, and to transport goods from the Far East along the Trans-Siberian railway. The supplies of rubber that reached Germany by this route were particularly valuable. In return, the Soviet Union was to receive specimens of German industrial and military technology – tanks, aircraft, armour plate, mines, torpedoes, locomotives, and machinery for the oil industry. The chief German economic negotiator, Schnurre, noted that the Soviet Union had agreed to deliveries greater than were justified on economic grounds alone, and would have to provide them at the cost of her own economy.

At the beginning of April 1940 the Soviet Union suspended oil and grain deliveries, to make sure that the Germans made their own deliveries in time; which was a sharp reminder to the Germans that Stalin could turn the tap off at will. However, the flow of Soviet exports later increased, and a new agreement was signed in April 1941.<sup>9</sup> Germany secured substantial advantages from these arrangements. She was largely freed from the pressure of the Allied naval blockade; most of her needs for raw materials and foodstuffs were met; and supplies of oil from Rumania were supplemented to an important degree. The question by early 1941 was whether to continue this arrangement, which was working well but involved the risk that at some time, if relations deteriorated too far, the Soviets could cut off supplies; or to conquer the Soviet Union and so bring the grain and raw materials of the Ukraine and the oil of the Caucasus directly under German control. If the Germans chose war, they would have to face the problem of how to prosecute it without the benefit of the supplies they were accustomed to draw from the Soviet Union; to which the only answer was to ensure that the war would be short and victory swift. General Thomas warned that the oil installations of the Caucasus would have to be seized intact. The case for going to war to gain physical control of the supplies



which so far had come by agreement was significant, but by no means overwhelming.

It is clear that there was friction between Germany and the Soviet Union over much of eastern Europe in late 1940 and early 1941. The initiative for this lay mostly on the German side, with the encroachment of German influence in Finland, Rumania, and Bulgaria. In a phrase borrowed from another context, the German–Soviet agreements had proved to be an uneasy alliance between the sand-dune and the sea – with Germany as the sea. But was this friction, and the questions which it raised for the long-term prospects of economic co-operation, the principal cause of the great German assault of June 1941? There is a serious case to consider. From the time of Molotov’s visit to Berlin in November 1940 onwards, it became clear that Stalin was not going to play the role Hitler expected of him, either in eastern Europe or in the partition of the world. In these circumstances, Hitler may well have decided on a military solution for his strategic and economic problems – this was, as Bernd Stegemann has pointed out, ‘always his first choice when policies proved unsuccessful’.<sup>10</sup> Yet in itself the friction with the Soviet Union in eastern Europe, though serious, might well only have produced more German demands, to reinforce their strategic position and secure their supplies. As a reason for all-out war, it only carries conviction in conjunction with Hitler’s ideological imperatives.

## Hitler and ‘Soviet hostility’

Hitler claimed when he went to war with the Soviet Union that Stalin had been preparing to attack Germany; and sometimes he added to this the assertion that the USSR entertained secret relations with Britain. There is much evidence to contradict these claims. In the summer of 1940, though Stalin moved rapidly to establish his control over the Baltic states, Bessarabia, and northern Moldavia, his diplomatic demeanour towards Germany was impeccable. He offered his congratulations to Germany on the defeat of France, and issued an official communiqué (23 June) emphasising the good relations between the USSR and Germany. When Britain sent a new Ambassador to Moscow, Sir Stafford Cripps, to improve Anglo-Soviet relations, he was received only formally by Stalin, who made sure that he passed on his account of the meeting to the Germans. Stalin even told Cripps that he saw no danger of the hegemony of any one country in Europe – which on 1 July 1940 implied either blindness or untruth. For the next months, Cripps tried in vain to see even Molotov.

Later, in November 1940, Molotov's visit to Berlin was not a success from the German point of view, and he was obstinately precise and difficult in asking questions about Finland and Rumania when Hitler wanted to talk sweepingly about the partition of the world. But the visit was not a complete failure: Molotov bore away the German proposals for the arrangement of vast spheres of influence, and returned a reply within a fortnight, stating conditions which were severe, but could have been a basis for discussion. It was the Germans who then broke off the exchange, despite a number of Soviet enquiries about a reply (see above, p. 326).

As 1941 advanced, the German Ambassador in Moscow, Schulenberg, was certain that the USSR had no intention of attacking Germany, and his view was confirmed by all Stalin's actions in May and June. Deliveries of goods under the economic agreements were stepped up in the weeks before the German attack. On 8 May the Soviet news agency Tass denied stories of Russian troop concentrations on the country's western border. On 9 May the Soviet government withdrew its recognition from the governments of Norway, Belgium, and Yugoslavia, and expelled their representatives from Moscow. On 12 May they recognised the government set up by Rashid Ali, who had rebelled (with German support) against the British domination of Iraq. On 3 June Soviet recognition of the Greek government, recently defeated by Germany and now in exile, was withdrawn. Finally, on 14 June Tass put out another statement in the Soviet press, denying foreign newspaper allegations that Germany had presented territorial and economic demands to the Soviet Union. The statement went on to affirm that Germany was observing the 1939 agreement as fully as was the Soviet Union. Recent transfers of German forces to the east must be connected with other matters having nothing to do with Soviet-German relations. This was almost a plea to Germany to join in the denial, or to open negotiations if indeed there were demands to be made. Germany made no reply. All these Soviet actions, diplomatic and economic, indicated that Stalin was anxious to remain on good terms with Germany.

As for an Anglo-Soviet agreement to attack Germany, the prospect was beyond the bounds of possibility. It is true that the British tried on a number of occasions to draw Soviet attention in general terms to the German danger, and to warn Stalin specifically of an impending invasion. But Stalin dismissed these warnings, believing that the British were trying to provoke hostility, or even a war, between the Soviet Union and Germany.<sup>11</sup> So far from co-operating with Britain, Stalin was deeply distrustful of British intentions; and in May 1941 the astonishing flight of the

Nazi leader Rudolf Hess to Britain reinforced his suspicions. Of Soviet–British collaboration there was not the slightest trace.

## Barbarossa as a pre-emptive strike: was Stalin planning to attack Germany in 1941?

There remains the possibility that Stalin was secretly preparing an attack on the Germans in summer 1941, which Operation Barbarossa was designed to pre-empt. This view was expounded at length by Viktor Suvorov (Vladimir Rezun) in a book called *Icebreaker: Who Started the Second World War?*<sup>12</sup> Suvorov based his argument partly on the equipment, make-up and doctrine of the Soviet armed forces, which were all offensive in nature – for example, tanks suitable for offensive operations, airborne troops trained for attack, and a military doctrine which inculcated an aggressive outlook and spirit. He also cited evidence that in spring 1941 large Soviet forces were moving into the western military districts of the country, towards the frontier areas. He finally asserted, though without precise evidence, that the date for a Soviet assault had been fixed for 6 July 1941.

Suvorov's book has been generally dismissed, often with contempt. Two expert authorities have dismissed it as 'flimsy and fraudulent' and 'totally unfounded'<sup>13</sup>; but the issues involved are somewhat complicated and require examination. Evan Mawdsley's careful analysis of the evidence now available on Soviet war planning shows that three plans were prepared, in September 1940, March 1941 and May 1941 respectively. The first two envisaged an offensive into German-held Poland and into Germany itself, but only as a *counter-offensive* after an initial German attack on the Soviet Union. The third plan, drawn up in May 1941, envisaged a sudden surprise attack against the Germans, as a pre-emptive strike; but it gave no indication as to a date. This plan was approved in principle by Timoshenko, the Commissar for Defence, and Zhukov, the Chief of the General Staff. It is probable that it was seen by Stalin, but there is no evidence that he approved it or ordered its implementation. On the contrary, all the evidence shows that Stalin neither wanted nor expected war in 1941. He did not want it, because the Soviet forces were in the midst of a large-scale re-organisation. He did not expect it, because he simply could not believe that Germany would attack the Soviet Union before Britain was defeated or made peace. Moreover, he resolutely refused to take any action which might be construed as provocative towards the Germans – for example, when on 11–12 June 1941 Zhukov and Timoshenko asked

permission to move forces into more forward positions, Stalin refused. Even the orders issued on 22 June, when the German attack was in full swing, insisted that Soviet troops should not cross the border into German-held territory.<sup>14</sup>

In sum, therefore, there was a Soviet plan in May 1941 which envisaged a pre-emptive strike against Germany; but there is no evidence that Stalin intended to put this plan into operation, and much that he did not. In any case, there is no sign at all that Hitler was afraid of such an attack. In 1940 he had confidently massed almost all the German forces in the west, leaving only a screen in the east. When he addressed senior officers on 30 March 1941 on the coming war in the east, he gave no indication that Germany was threatened by the Red Army.<sup>15</sup> The planning for Operation Barbarossa was well under way late in 1940 and early 1941, long before the Soviet plan of May 1941 was drafted; and both Hitler and the high command displayed an immense confidence in Germany's offensive powers, rather than any fear of a Soviet attack.

The conclusion must be that, while the Soviet high command at one stage considered a pre-emptive strike, Stalin did not take this idea up, and in any case Hitler was not afraid of such an attack. The *Icebreaker* thesis has no substance.

Why did Hitler invade the Soviet Union? No final answer emerges. Too much depends upon the dubious enterprise of searching the murky depths of Hitler's mind and personality. To lay exclusive emphasis on preconceived ideas of race and living space may be to produce too rigid a theory of inevitability. On the other hand, to appeal to opportunism or to the undoubted friction in German–Soviet relations seems inadequate. 'Opportunism' by itself does not explain why some opportunities were taken and others were let slip; and the attack on the Soviet Union was prepared over too long a period of time to be properly described as opportunist. Friction with the Soviet Union, over Finland, Rumania, and Bulgaria, and generally over spheres of influence as defined in 1939, certainly existed, but so far Germany was having the best of it and under little pressure to take extreme action. The German sphere of influence in eastern Europe was being steadily enlarged, while the economic arrangements with the Soviet Union still held good and operated increasingly to Germany's benefit. In these circumstances, immediate self-interest would surely point to maintaining this advantageous relationship. If the war with Britain was dominant in German thinking, the economic agreement with the Soviet Union allowed Germany to nullify the effects of the British

blockade, and offered more tangible advantages than the hazardous and uncertain prospects of war.

In this balance of probabilities, ideological motives and the long-established mould of Hitler's thought carry more weight than the immediate circumstances of 1940–41, which seem sufficient to confirm a mind already made up but inadequate in themselves as a basis for decision. This view is reinforced by what happened in the campaign, which was fought, in Robert Cecil's words, 'not in the way most likely to lead to victory, but in the manner most consistent with Hitler's ideological preconceptions'.<sup>16</sup>

If this is so, then the German invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941 stands as the culminating point of two of the underlying forces making for war in the 1930s and early 1940s: ideology and economics. The racial obsessions of Nazism, its hostility to Bolshevism, and its determination to conquer living space and sources of raw materials, were worked out over the whole period, and took final shape in the great war in the east. To these may be added the third underlying force: strategy and military thought. A misleading over-confidence in the German military machine, fed and bloated by the astonishing victories of 1940, was an important impulse behind the attack. Of course, particular decisions still had to be made at points all along the line; but the impulse of the underlying forces was such that for Germany to escape from them would have required very determined action indeed: nothing short of internal revolution and complete transformation in thought and action. This never looked like happening. The German attack on the Soviet Union was the culmination of the whole process leading the continent of Europe into war; and to understand that process properly it must be seen as a whole.

## References

- 1 Quoted in Alan Bullock, *Hitler: a study in tyranny* (London 1952), p. 625.
- 2 *Ibid.*, p. 651.
- 3 Jürgen Förster, in Militärgeschichtliches Forschungsamt, *Germany and the Second World War*, vol. IV, *The Attack on the Soviet Union* (Oxford 1998), pp. 1245–6.
- 4 The preparations for securing living space, and the detailed orders which were to translate Hitler's ideological intentions into practice, are set out in *ibid.*, pp. 481–513.
- 5 Quoted in Joachim Fest, *Hitler* (London: Penguin Books 1977), p. 961.

- 6 Richard J. Evans, *In Hitler's Shadow. West German historians and the attempt to escape from the Nazi past* (London 1989), p. 58.
- 7 Halder's diary, in *DGFP*, series D, vol. X, p. 373.
- 8 Quoted in Militärgeschichtliches Forschungsamt, *Germany and the Second World War*, vol. IV, p. 284.
- 9 *Ibid.*, pp. 115–16, 127, 191–9; and see also Nikolai Tolstoy, *Stalin's Secret War* (London 1981), pp. 108–9.
- 10 Bernd Stegemann in Militärgeschichtliches Forschungsamt, *Germany and the Second World War*, vol. II, *Germany's Initial Conquests in Europe* (Oxford 1991), p. 29.
- 11 See Gabriel Gorodetsky, *Grand Delusion: Stalin and the German Invasion of Russia* (New Haven 1999), pp. 155–78; cf. Geoffrey Roberts, *The Unholy Alliance: Stalin's Pact with Hitler* (Bloomington, Indiana 1989), p. 208.
- 12 Viktor Suvorov, *Icebreaker: Who Started the Second World War?* (London 1990). Suvorov was the pseudonym of Vladimir Rezun, a former officer in Soviet military intelligence.
- 13 Gorodetsky, *Grand Illusion*, p. x; David M. Glantz, *Stumbling Colossus: The Red Army on the Eve of World War* (Lawrence, Kansas 1998), p. xiii.
- 14 Evan Mawdsley, 'Crossing the Rubicon: Soviet Plans for Offensive War in 1940–1941', *International History Review*, vol. 25, No. 4, Dec. 2003, pp. 818–65, and especially pp. 855–6, 864–5. See also Gorodesky, *Grand Delusion*, p. 279.
- 15 Jürgen Förster and Evan Mawdsley, 'Hitler and Stalin in Perspective: Secret Speeches on the Eve of Barbarossa', *War in History*, vol. 11, No. 1, 2004, pp. 65, 69.
- 16 Robert Cecil, *Hitler's Decision to Invade Russia, 1941* (London 1975), p. 167.

# Conclusion

. . . though I know it [writing history] is all very right and necessary, I have often wondered at the person's courage that could sit down on purpose to do it.

CATHERINE MORLAND, in Jane Austen, *Northanger Abbey*

To sit down on purpose to summarise the origins of the Second World War in Europe requires all the temerity wondered at by Miss Morland. The story is still unfolding, with new evidence constantly coming to light, and historians skirmishing vigorously about the interpretation of events. What seems firm ground today may be undermined tomorrow, and the clearest of guiding lights may prove on close investigation to be a will-o'-the-wisp. Even with the fullest evidence, historians have only limited vision into the minds and motives of their fellows, and the decisions reached by individuals must often remain difficult to explain; while the links between such individual decisions and the underlying forces at work in the background are even harder to establish with any degree of certainty.

These difficulties are real enough, and it is more than merely a cautious historian's ritual to say that all conclusions are provisional; but it remains tempting to reflect on what emerges from this study.

We started by examining the view that between 1914 and 1945 Europe passed through a Thirty Years War, of which the so-called Second World War was only the final phase. This interpretation carries much weight, in two notable respects. First, eastern Europe emerged from the wreckage of the First World War and the ensuing settlement in a profoundly unstable condition, with potential conflicts lurking in half a dozen different areas. Moreover, in the period between 1919 and 1922 the countries of eastern Europe made very different assessments about the use of force from those then current in the war-weary west. The Bolsheviks fought and won a civil war, and established their authority by force over much (though not all) of the old Russian Empire. The Poles defeated a Russian invasion at the battle

of Warsaw in 1920, and then reaped the fruits of victory by pushing their frontier eastward at the Treaty of Riga in 1921. They also seized Vilna and held it in defiance of Lithuania; while the Lithuanians for their part occupied Memel. Rumanian forces intervened in Hungary in 1919 to overthrow the Bolshevik government of Bela Kun and stake a claim to Transylvania. While in France and Britain men counted their dead and meditated on the futility of war, the peoples of eastern Europe counted their gains and losses and observed the efficacy of force. It is not wholly surprising that, some years later, war was resumed in eastern Europe.

The second, and even weightier, point in the Thirty Years War thesis is that in 1918–19 Germany was beaten but not destroyed. Despite military defeat and political revolution, the country retained much of its old identity, resources, and aspirations. Under the surface, and among important groups in the population, there persisted the will to try again for the dominance of Europe that was so nearly achieved in 1914–18.

In both these respects, the causes of a renewed (rather than a brand new) conflict were present in the consequences of the First World War and its aftermath. Here lay the origins of the later crises over Czechoslovakia, Danzig, and Poland. Here too lay one of the springs of German expansionism, and a likely cause of conflict. A war of some sort was a likely consequence of these conditions; but in themselves they did not provide a complete explanation of the war which engulfed Europe between 1939 and 1941, which was not simply a repetition or continuation of that of 1914–18. In the simplest sense, the sides were different, with Italy fighting alongside Germany rather than with the Allies, and the Soviet Union (until June 1941) practising a neutrality favourable to Germany instead of being one of her main opponents. In a more profound sense, the issues at stake in 1939–41 were more complicated and far-reaching than those of 1914–18, because the Continent itself had been transformed, politically and economically, in the intervening years.

The conflict which developed in Europe between 1939 and 1941 arose from three major elements: the expansionist urge of Germany and Italy; the willingness of other powers to accept their expansion for so long that it became impossible to check it without major war; and the eventual determination, on the part of these same powers, to resist that expansion even at the cost of war. All three elements may be largely explained by the underlying forces that were at work in Europe.

In Germany, the forces making for expansion were given an immense new impulse by the advent to power of Hitler and the Nazi Party, with an ideology based on ideas of racial superiority and the overriding demand



for living space. Moreover, under the Nazi regime Germany achieved both domestic economic recovery and a rapid rate of rearmament, which together generated a great demand for imports, and hence an acute balance of payments problem. Since Hitler rejected any pause in the headlong pace of rearmament, an immediate solution to this problem appeared to lie in conquest, to secure direct control over sources of food and raw materials and to impose favourable terms of trade on other countries. Considerations of ideology and economics thus combined to generate a powerful drive for territorial expansion, whose specific timing was largely determined by strategic issues. After starting from a position of marked inferiority, Germany rapidly built up an army and air force which by 1938 were capable of taking the offensive against her neighbours. But this advantage would probably be short-lived: in a few years her potential adversaries would catch up, so that if expansion were to be achieved a brief strategic opportunity, lying somewhere between 1938 and perhaps 1943, would have to be seized.

In Italy, the fascist regime brought a new drive and self-confidence to the pursuit of long-standing aspirations in the Mediterranean and Africa. Previous Italian policy had been limited in its aims and cautious in its methods, depending largely on skilful diplomacy and juggling with alliances. Under Mussolini, Italy took a much more adventurous course, pursuing prestige, great-power status, and territorial expansion, and courting direct confrontation with France and Britain, her former allies in the First World War. In this new course, the aims and spirit of fascism played an important part, generating a belligerence and self-confidence which eventually outstripped the limits of Italian strength. But, for a brief period in 1940, Italy too appeared to be presented with a strategic opportunity which had to be seized before it passed.

In France and Britain, on the other hand, the underlying forces tended strongly against war. Both the prevailing views of politicians and the popular mood were opposed to the use of force as an instrument of policy, and were often against the idea of war at all, except as a last resort. The economic difficulties of both countries, so far from providing any impulse towards conflict, enhanced the desire for peace. For Britain in particular, large-scale war seemed bound to lead rapidly to bankruptcy through inability to pay for the country's imports. In terms of strategy and military calculation, neither France nor Britain thought in terms of opportunities to be seized, but of calamities to be avoided. Neither was capable of taking the offensive in a European war, and both went in mortal fear of air attack by a *Luftwaffe* which they assumed to be all-powerful.

In the USSR the situation was different, in so far as both communist theory and Soviet practice fully accepted the idea of war and the use of force. During the 1930s, however, the internal effects of Stalinism (collectivisation of agriculture, the great purges, and a forced march towards industrialisation which was still far from being completed) made the Soviet Union very chary of becoming involved in a major war. The Soviet economy remained backward in comparison with that of Germany, and the armed forces, though strong in numbers, were only dubiously capable of taking the offensive outside the boundaries of the state. On all these counts, it seems highly likely that the USSR was disposed to avoid a large-scale conflict if it was at all possible.

The underlying forces at work in Europe thus combined to produce two markedly different groups of powers. Germany and Italy were active and adventurous, and sought to disrupt the status quo for their own advantage. France, Britain, and the Soviet Union were passive and cautious. France and Britain were whole-hearted supporters of the status quo: they possessed all the territory they could desire, and wished only to be left in peace to enjoy it. The Soviet Union had no attachment to the status quo as such, whether territorial or ideological, but for the time being it could afford no adventures. The initiative in international affairs, from at least 1935 onwards, thus lay with Germany and Italy, who exploited it with great energy, brutal methods, and considerable skill. For a long time, their potential opponents (and potential victims) acquiesced in the advance of German and Italian power, seeking agreements which they hoped would satisfy those ambitious states without serious damage to their own interests. The Anglo-German Naval Treaty of 1935, the Hoare–Laval proposals over Ethiopia, the Anglo-Italian Mediterranean agreement of April 1938, the Munich conference, and the Nazi–Soviet Pact of August 1939, all formed part of this pattern. The particular actions of the different states were separate and unco-ordinated, but all were governed by the same guiding idea. While these events were taking place, it may be that opportunities were lost to check the German and Italian advance without war: by imposing oil sanctions against Italy in 1935, for example, or by the French Army advancing resolutely into the Rhineland in 1936. This may be so; or the result might merely have been to start a different kind of war at an earlier date. We cannot tell. What is certain is that, once the advance of the active powers had reached a certain point, it could only be checked – if at all – by a major war.

That the advance would at some stage be opposed admitted of no serious doubt. Even in France and Britain, the policy of ‘appeasement’ never meant the pursuit of peace at any price. When it came to the crunch,

both countries would fight to preserve their vital interests, their status as great powers, and their long-established forms of government and social organisation. In eastern Europe, the bold and determined Poles would yield neither territory nor independence; and no one could expect the Soviet Union to surrender either its land or its ideological identity without a struggle. If the drive of the expansionist powers, and especially Germany, was maintained, it was bound at some stage to be opposed; and from that opposition a great war would almost certainly arise.

The basic elements of an explosive international situation were thus present in Europe during the late 1930s. But the exact course of events was by no means predetermined. Different peoples and governments made widely varying assessments of the situation, and much depended on the decisions (and hesitations) of individual statesmen. Hitler, while showing a broad and powerful consistency of purpose, still drew back from attacking Czechoslovakia in September 1938 and hesitated briefly over going to war with Poland at the end of August 1939; while in the summer of 1940 he cast around for some months, uncertain what to do after his spectacular victories. In Italy, Mussolini wavered on the brink in August 1939 and during the winter of 1939–40, and then made his personal choice for war in May–June 1940. In Britain, Chamberlain and his government believed in 1938 that it was possible to meet Germany's ambitions while preserving British security; but by February–March 1939 they had concluded that Germany's real aim was the domination of Europe, which they could not accept. French governments, often short-lived and always conscious of the weakness and divisions of their country, suffered for a long time a paralysis of will; but they were eventually driven, however reluctantly, to the same conclusion as the British. In the USSR, Stalin followed his own judgement as to the interests of his country and played for safety by means of the Nazi–Soviet Pact. He continued, to the last moment, to hope that security could be maintained by co-operation with Germany, before finding – almost too late – that it could not. Even among the smaller powers, the scope for varying responses to the developing crisis was repeatedly manifested. In September 1938, for example, Czechoslovakia yielded to the combined pressure of Germany, France, and Britain, and chose to accept the disastrous Munich settlement; but in 1939 Poland stood firm against all comers, and fought rather than yield to German threats. The underlying forces remained much the same over the period under examination; but evaluations of their significance, and responses to them, varied widely, so that no theory of inevitability holds good for all the different participants in these great events.

In one important respect – and despite the length of this book – the explanation of the war is extremely simple, and historians have been prone to weave too many mystifications about it. Of the two expansionist powers, Italy was not by herself strong enough to risk or embark on a great war. Germany was; and unless German expansion halted of its own accord without breaching the limits set by the vital interests of other strong and determined states, then war was bound to come. German expansion did not halt, and certain choices were therefore presented to other countries in straightforward terms. In 1939 the Poles fought because they were attacked, and they went on fighting rather than accept the destruction of their state and the enslavement of its people. Britain and France fought because they finally felt that Germany had gone too far, and also because the issues posed by the growth of German power had become sharply personalised. Hitler was out to dominate the Continent, and to impose upon it his own particular brand of tyranny. He had demonstrated beyond a peradventure that he could not be trusted, and that agreements with him were futile. He therefore had to be defeated and his regime overthrown: it was not clear how, but it had to be done. Later, in 1940 and 1941, in the continuing – indeed by then the headlong – advance of German power, one state after another faced the question of whether to yield or resist; until finally the Soviet Union was compelled to fight by the simplest and most brutal imperative – invasion.

In all this there is no mystery. But all depended on the fateful premiss that German expansion would not halt unless it was forcibly resisted. Historical discussion of the origins of the Second World War in Europe still concentrates on certain fundamental questions. Why did Germany pursue a policy of expansion with such determination and ferocity? Why did other powers at first accept that expansion and later oppose it? In these questions interest shows no sign of slackening. At the time, after all, they were matters of life and death for many millions of people.

# Chronology

## 1918

- 3 March Treaty of Brest–Litovsk, Germany and Bolshevik Russia
- 11 November Armistice on Western Front, Germany and Western Powers

## 1919

- 18 January Paris Peace Conference opens
- 4 March Founding of Communist International (Comintern), Moscow
- 28 June Versailles Treaty signed
- 12 September D'Annunzio seizes control of Fiume

## 1920

- 19 March US Senate rejects Treaty of Versailles
- 14–16 August Battle of Warsaw – Poles defeat Bolshevik invasion

## 1921

- 18 March Treaty of Riga, Poland–Russia

## 1922

- 6 February Washington Treaty on naval disarmament
- 16 April Treaty of Rapallo, Germany–Russia
- 28 October Mussolini becomes Prime Minister of Italy – later Duce and dictator

## 1923

- 11 January French occupation of Ruhr begins
- 31 August Italy bombards and occupies Corfu

June–November	German hyper-inflation
<b>1924</b>	
April	Dawes Plan on reparations
<b>1925</b>	
16 October	Locarno Treaties concluded (signed in London, 1 December)
<b>1926</b>	
24 April	Treaty of Berlin, Germany–Soviet Union
10 September	Germany enters League of Nations
<b>1928</b>	
27 August	Kellogg–Briand Pact to outlaw war
<b>1929</b>	
11 February	Lateran Treaty, Italy – The Vatican
August	Young Plan on reparations
29 October	‘Black Tuesday’ – collapse on New York Stock Exchange
<b>1930</b>	
14 September	<i>Reichstag</i> elections in Germany – 107 Nazis elected
<b>1931</b>	
11 May	Failure of <i>Credit-Anstalt</i> Bank, Austria
18 September	Mukden Incident, Manchuria – beginning of Japanese occupation
21 September	Britain leaves gold standard
<b>1932</b>	
2 February	Disarmament Conference opens at Geneva
21 July–20 August	Ottawa Conference on Imperial Preference
<b>1933</b>	
30 January	Hitler becomes Chancellor of Germany
12 June–27 July	World Economic Conference in London
14 October	Germany leaves League of Nations and Disarmament Conference

## 1934

- 26 January German–Polish Non-Aggression Pact  
 29 May Disarmament Conference ends  
 30 June Night of the Long Knives, Germany  
 25 July Nazi *putsch* in Austria fails; murder of Dollfuss  
 2 August Death of Hindenburg; Hitler later becomes *Fuehrer* as well as Chancellor  
 18 September Soviet Union enters League of Nations  
 9 October Assassination of King Alexander of Yugoslavia and Louis Barthou in Marseilles  
 5–6 December Wal Wal incident, Ethiopia

## 1935

- 7 January Mussolini–Laval talks in Rome  
 13 January Plebiscite in the Saar – vote for reunion with Germany  
 16 March Germany introduces conscription  
 11–14 April Stresa Conference – Italy, Britain and France  
 2 May Franco–Soviet Mutual Assistance Treaty (ratified, February 1936)  
 16 May Czechoslovakian–Soviet Mutual Assistance Treaty  
 18 June Anglo–German Naval Agreement  
 3 October Italian invasion of Ethiopia begins  
 8 December Hoare–Laval agreement on Ethiopia; at once leaked to the press

## 1936

- 7 March German troops enter Rhineland demilitarised zone  
 May End of war in Ethiopia  
 17–18 July Spanish Civil War begins  
 9 September First meeting of Non-Intervention Committee on Spanish War  
 1 November Rome–Berlin Axis proclaimed

## 1937

- 7 July War breaks out between Japan and China  
 5 November Hossbach Conference – Hitler and service chiefs  
 19 November Halifax visits Hitler at Berchtesgaden

## 1938

- 11–13 March *Anschluss* – Germany annexes Austria

24 April	Henlein's Karlsbad demands on Czechoslovakian government
19–22 May	'May Crisis' over Germany and Czechoslovakia
3 August	Runciman mission to Czechoslovakia begins
5 September	Beneš announces 'Fourth Plan', meeting most of Karlsbad demands
12 September	Hitler's speech at Nuremberg Rally
15 September	First Hitler–Chamberlain meeting, at Berchtesgaden
22–23 September	Second Hitler–Chamberlain meeting, at Godesberg
29–30 September	Munich Conference – Germany, Italy, Britain and France
9–10 November	<i>Kristallnacht</i> in Germany – attacks on Jews and Jewish property

### 1939

15 March	Prague coup – Germany occupies Bohemia and Moravia; Hungary occupies Ruthenia
23 March	Germany occupies Memel
28 March	End of Spanish Civil War
31 March	British and French guarantees to Poland
7 April	Italy annexes Albania
13 April	British and French guarantees to Greece and Rumania
22 May	Pact of Steel – alliance between Germany and Italy
May–September	Battle of Khalkin–Gol, Japan–Soviet Union (Manchurian border)
23 August	German–Soviet Non-Aggression Pact
1 September	Germany invades Poland
3 September	Britain and France declare war on Germany
17 September	Soviet Union invades Poland
30 November	Soviet attack on Finland – start of Soviet–Finnish War (Winter War)

### 1940

12 March	End of Soviet–Finnish War
9 April	German attacks on Denmark and Norway
10 May	German offensive in the West
10 June	Italy declares war on France and Britain
22–24 June	French armistices with Germany and Italy
27 September	Tripartite Pact – Germany, Italy, Japan



- 23 October Hitler meets Franco at Hendaye
- 24 October Hitler meets Pétain at Montoire – agreement on ‘collaboration’
- 28 October Italy attacks Greece
- 12–13 November Molotov’s visit to Berlin – meetings with Hitler and Ribbentrop

**1941**

- 6 April German attacks on Yugoslavia and Greece
- 22 June Operation Barbarossa – German invasion of Soviet Union

# Who's Who

**Baldwin, Stanley (1867–1947)** Conservative statesman. Prime Minister, 1923–4, 1924–9. Lord President of the Council in MacDonald's National Government, 1931–5. Prime Minister of National Government, 1935–7. Widely trusted political figure in the 1920s and most of the 1930s; later blamed for failing to start British rearmament early enough or on a sufficient scale.

**Beneš, Eduard (1884–1948)** Worked with Tomas Masaryk to set up an independent Czechoslovakia, 1918. Foreign Minister of Czechoslovakia, 1918–35, and a prominent figure at the League of Nations. President of Czechoslovakia, 1935–8; resigned after Munich Agreement.

**Blum, Léon (1872–1950)** First Socialist Prime Minister of France, as head of the Popular Front government, 1936–7; again Prime Minister for a month, March–April 1938. Idealist and near-pacifist; advocate of disarmament, but gave strong impetus to French rearmament, 1936. Deeply unpopular on the French Right, partly because he was Jewish; target of the propaganda slogan 'Rather Hitler than Blum'.

**Bonnet, Georges (1889–1973)** Radical politician. Infantry officer during First World War. Minister of Finance, 1937–8; Foreign Minister, April 1938–September 1939; Minister of Justice, September 1939–March 1940. Principal French advocate of appeasement, 1938–9, and especially during the Czechoslovakian crisis of 1938.

**Chamberlain, Neville (1869–1940)** Conservative statesman and member of an important political family (son of Joseph Chamberlain, half-brother of Austen Chamberlain, Foreign Secretary 1924–9). Chancellor of the Exchequer, 1931–7; Prime Minister, 1937–May 1940; Lord President of the Council, May–October 1940. A man of strong political will and great determination; the leading British advocate of appeasement.

**Churchill, Winston (1874–1965)** Statesman and war leader. In opposition in the 1930s, and an opponent of appeasement; but widely distrusted after an erratic political career. First Lord of the Admiralty in Chamberlain's government, September 1939–May 1940; Prime Minister, May 1940–1945. Resolute opponent of Hitler in 1940.

**Ciano, Galeazzo (1903–44)** Leading Italian Fascist, and son-in-law of Mussolini. Minister of Propaganda, 1935; Foreign Minister, 1936–43. A strong advocate of the Axis with Germany, but later changed his mind, and opposed entry into war in 1940.

**Daladier, Edouard (1884–1970)** French statesman; Radical Socialist. Infantry officer, First World War. Prime Minister, 1933, 1934, 1938–40. Minister for War in Popular Front government, 1936–7, and along with Premiership 1938–40. Signed Munich Agreement on behalf of France, 1938; reluctantly but firmly committed to war in 1939.

**D'Annunzio, Gabriele (1863–1938)** Italian writer (futurist poet and playwright), airman, adventurer and eccentric. Served in air force during First World War; lost an eye in action. Seized control of Fiume, 1919, and ruled the city until 1920. Precursor of fascism, and later an ardent supporter of Mussolini.

**Dollfuss, Engelbert (1892–1934)** Chancellor of Austria, 1932–4. Suspended parliamentary government and attacked the Socialists in Vienna, February 1934. Assassinated during the failed Nazi *putsch* of July 1934.

**Eden, Anthony (1897–1977)** Conservative statesman. Infantry officer during First World War. Minister for League of Nations Affairs, 1935. Foreign Secretary, December 1935–February 1938 – resigned. Dominions Secretary, September 1939–May 1940. Minister for War in Churchill's government, before returning as Foreign Secretary in December 1940. As Foreign Secretary in late 1930s practised a policy of appeasement, but later acquired a high reputation as an opponent of that policy.

**Franco, Francisco (1892–1975)** Spanish soldier and dictator. Youngest general in Spanish Army, 1926. Commander of rebel forces and head of Nationalist government during Spanish Civil War, 1936–9. *Caudillo* (leader) of Spain, 1939–75. Wished to take Spain into Second World War on Axis side in 1940, but in fact played a waiting game and avoided a decision.

**Goebbels, Joseph (1897–1945)** Nazi propagandist, orator and organiser. Minister of Propaganda in Nazi Germany, 1933–45, and a leading figure

in wartime government. Committed suicide in Hitler's Berlin bunker, 1945.

**Goering, Hermann (1893–1946)** Nazi leader and multiple office-holder. Air ace during First World War. President of *Reichstag*, 1932. Under Hitler, held several posts, including Air Minister, Director of Four-Year Plan (1936), and War Minister (1938). Committed suicide in prison, 1946.

**Guderian, General Heinz (1888–1954)** German soldier. Leading exponent of mechanisation and armoured warfare in 1930s; commander of armoured forces in Poland, 1939, and France, 1940.

**Halifax, Lord (Edward Wood) (1881–1959)** Conservative statesman. Infantry officer during First World War. Viceroy of India, 1926–31. Lord President of the Council, 1937–8; Foreign Secretary, February 1938–December 1940; Ambassador in Washington, 1940–6. An advocate of appeasement, but changed his mind in September 1938.

**Himmler, Heinrich (1900–45)** Nazi leader. Head of SS, 1929–45, and head of all German police services, 1936–45. One of the most ruthless Nazi leaders, and principal organiser of the extermination of the Jews. Committed suicide, 1945.

**Hindenburg, Field Marshal Paul von (1847–1934)** German soldier and statesman. Chief of the General Staff, 1916–18. President of the Weimar Republic, 1925–34; appointed Hitler as Chancellor, January 1933.

**Hitler, Adolf (1889–1945)** Leader and inspirer of German Nazi Party. Served in First World War, with the rank of corporal; Iron Cross. Attempted *putsch* in Munich, 1923; imprisoned, and while in prison dictated *Mein Kampf*, published 1925. Led Nazi Party to electoral successes, and appointed Chancellor, 30 January 1933. Head of state, with title of *Fuehrer*, 1934. Dictator and war leader of Germany until 1945. Committed suicide in Berlin bunker, 30 April 1945.

**Hoare, Samuel (1880–1959)** Conservative statesman. Secretary of State for India, 1931–5. Foreign Secretary, 1935; resigned over Hoare–Laval Pact relating to Ethiopia. First Lord of the Admiralty, 1936–9. Ambassador to Spain, 1940–5. Closely associated with Neville Chamberlain in the policy of appeasement.

**Laval, Pierre (1883–1945)** French politician, and one of the most controversial French political figures of the 1930s and the Second World War. Started his career as a Socialist, and moved well to the Right. Prime

Minister, 1931–2, 1935–6. Foreign Minister 1932, 1934–6, and again in the Vichy government under Pétain. In 1935, made relations with Italy a priority; 1940–44, a strong advocate of collaboration with Germany. Executed for treason in 1945, after failing to commit suicide.

**MacDonald, James Ramsay (1886–1937)** Labour statesman, and first Prime Minister of a Labour government in Britain, 1923. Prime Minister of Labour government 1929–31, at the time of the onset of economic depression; then head of National government, 1931–5. Much concerned with the Disarmament Conference, 1932–4, and influenced the early stages of the policy of appeasement.

**Mussolini, Benito (1883–1945)** Fascist leader and dictator of Italy. Socialist militant before First World War, then became ardent nationalist and advocate of Italian entry into war. Served in the Army during the war. Prime Minister and Duce, 1922–43, ruling with a mixture of dynamism, propaganda and pretence. Concluded Lateran agreements with the Vatican, 1929. Took Italy into the Axis alliance with Nazi Germany, and into the Second World War in June 1940, with disastrous results. Summarily executed by Italian partisans, 28 April 1945.

**Pétain, Marshal Philippe (1856–1951)** Marshal of France and hero of First World War. Exercised strong influence on French military policy, 1920s and early 1930s. Appointed as minister in Reynaud's government, May 1940; Prime Minister, 16 June. Concluded armistices with Germany and Italy. Head of Vichy government, 1940–44. Met Hitler at Montoire, October 1940, and adopted policy of 'collaboration', but left it largely undefined.

**Ribbentrop, Joachim von (1893–1946)** Nazi politician and diplomat. Wine merchant; joined Nazi Party in 1932, and became Hitler's adviser on foreign policy. Negotiated Anglo-German Naval Agreement, 1935. German Ambassador in London, 1935–8. Foreign Minister, 1938–45. Took leading role on the German side in negotiating the Nazi-Soviet Pact, August 1939. Tried at Nuremberg, condemned to death and executed, 1946.

**Roosevelt, Franklin D. (1882–1945)** American statesman; President (Democrat) of United States, 1933–45. Launched New Deal to bring USA out of the depression. In foreign policy, followed a policy of neutrality and non-involvement in European affairs for most of the 1930s. Sent telegram to Chamberlain after Munich: 'Good man'. Later moved cautiously towards opposition to Nazi Germany.

**Stalin, Joseph (1879–1953)** Communist leader; Soviet dictator and statesman. Head of Soviet government, 1924–53, and for most of that time the unquestioned leader and idol of European communists. Adopted policy of Socialism in one country in late 1920s, in opposition to Trotsky. Transformed Soviet economy by collectivisation of agriculture and rapid development of heavy industry; carried out great purges and repression, 1930s. Concluded Non-Aggression Pact with Germany, August 1939, securing Soviet control over much of eastern Europe. Taken by surprise by German assault, 22 June 1941.

# Further Reading

The following is a selection from the mass of material on the origins of the Second World War in Europe. It is related to the topics dealt with in this book, and is restricted to books available in English. The arrangement is inevitably somewhat arbitrary, so that, for example, a book dealing with Nazi Germany may be placed under either 'Ideology' or 'Germany'.

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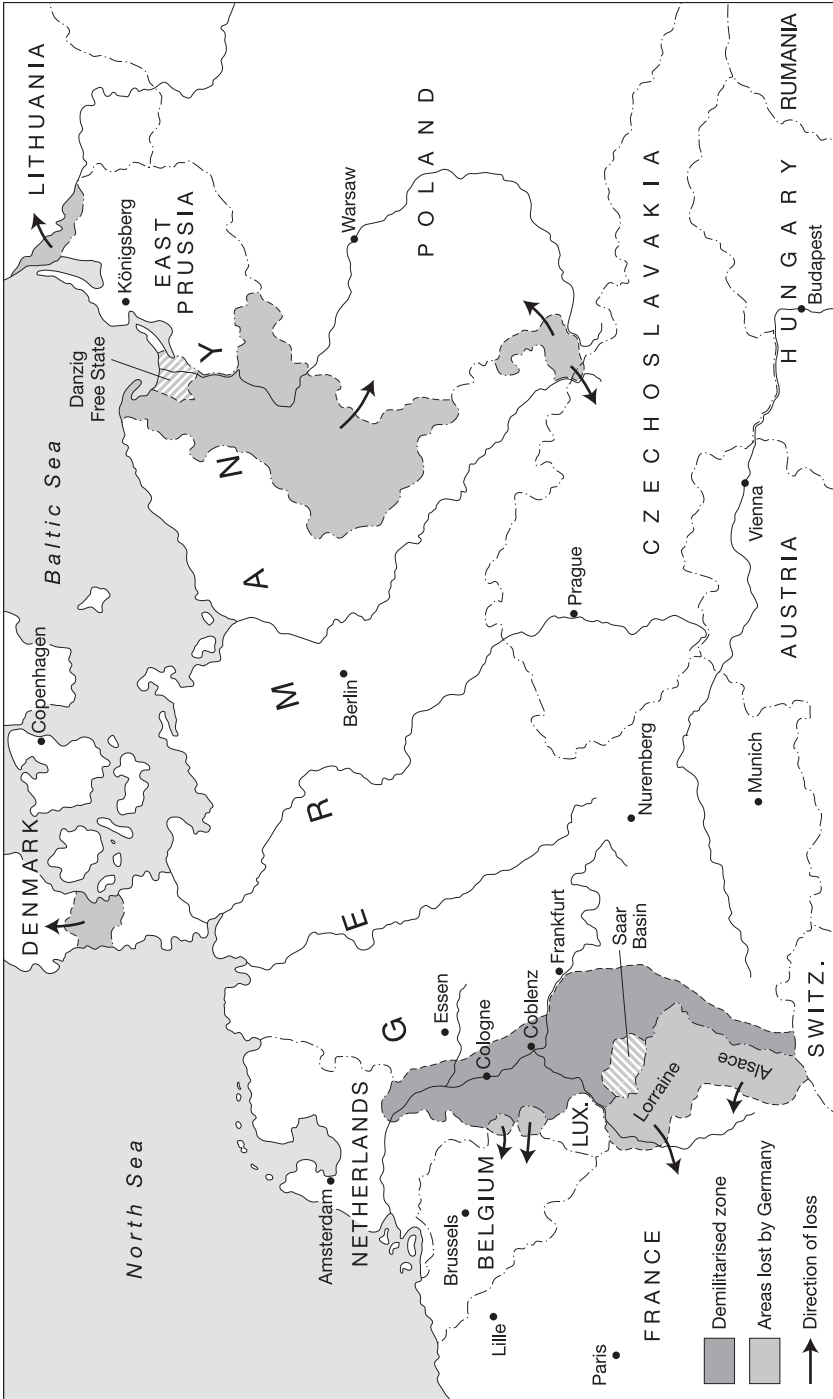
# Maps

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**MAP 1** Europe in 1919, showing changes from 1914

Source: 'Europe Between the Wars' by Martin Kitchen (Longman, 2006)



**MAP 2** *Germany and the Treaty of Versailles*

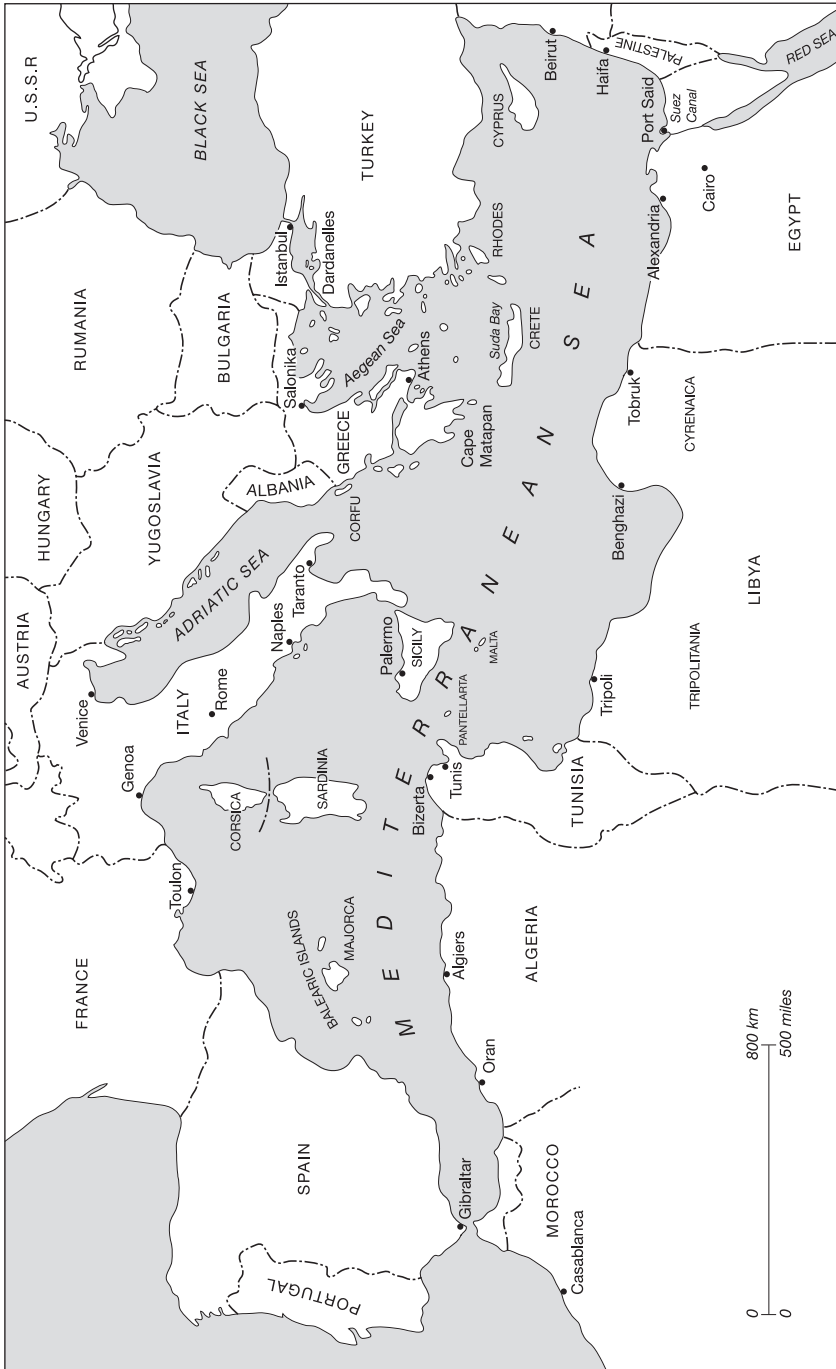
Source: Sally Marks, *The Illusion of Peace* (Palgrave, 2003), p. viii.



**MAP 3** *Eastern Europe, 1921–38*

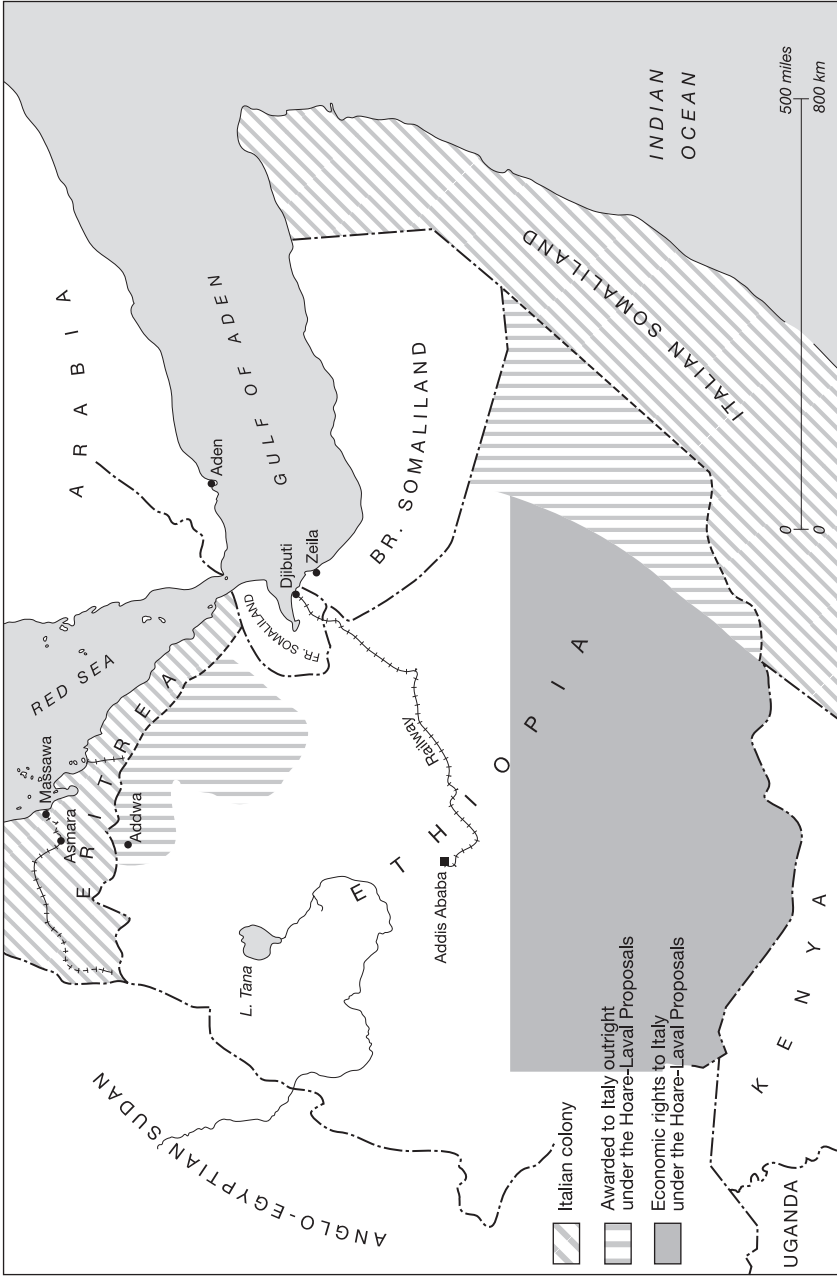
Source: Sally Marks, *The Illusion of Peace* (Palgrave, 2003), p. ix.





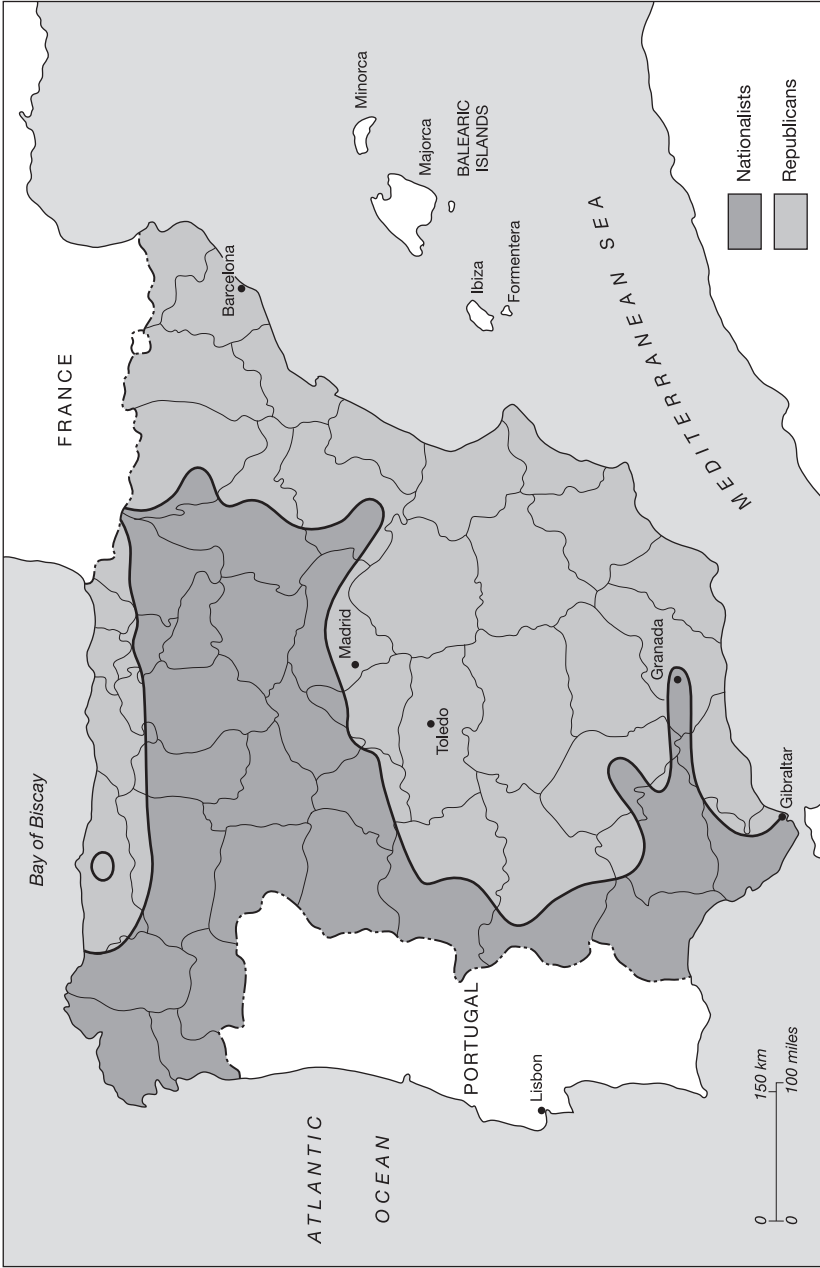
**MAP 4** *The Mediterranean in the 1930s*

Source: Michael Simpson, ed., *The Cunningham Papers. vol. I* (Navy Records Society, 1999), p. 12.

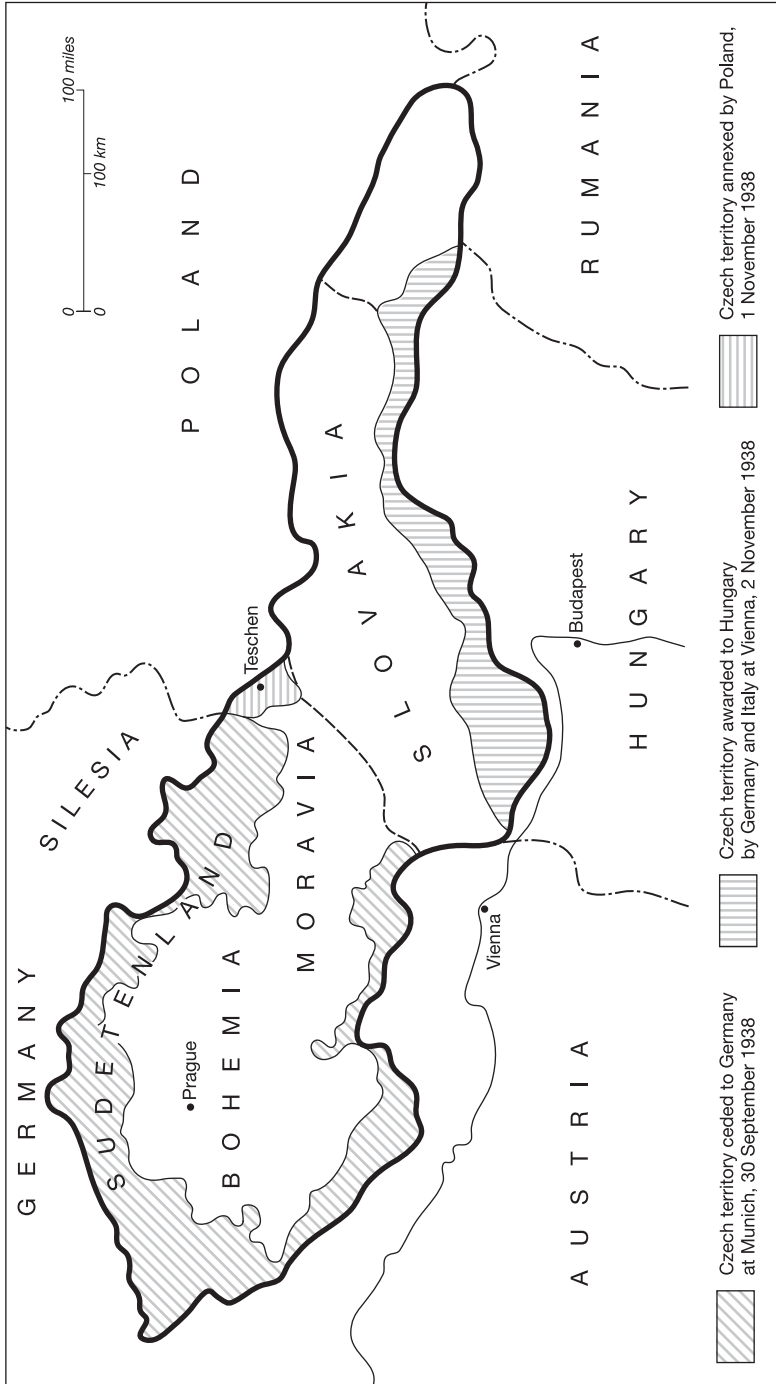


**MAP 5** Ethiopia (Abyssinia), showing the Hoare-Laval proposals of December 1935

Source: A. J. Barker, *The Civilising Mission: The Italo-Ethiopian War, 1935-6* (Cassel, 1968), p. 195.



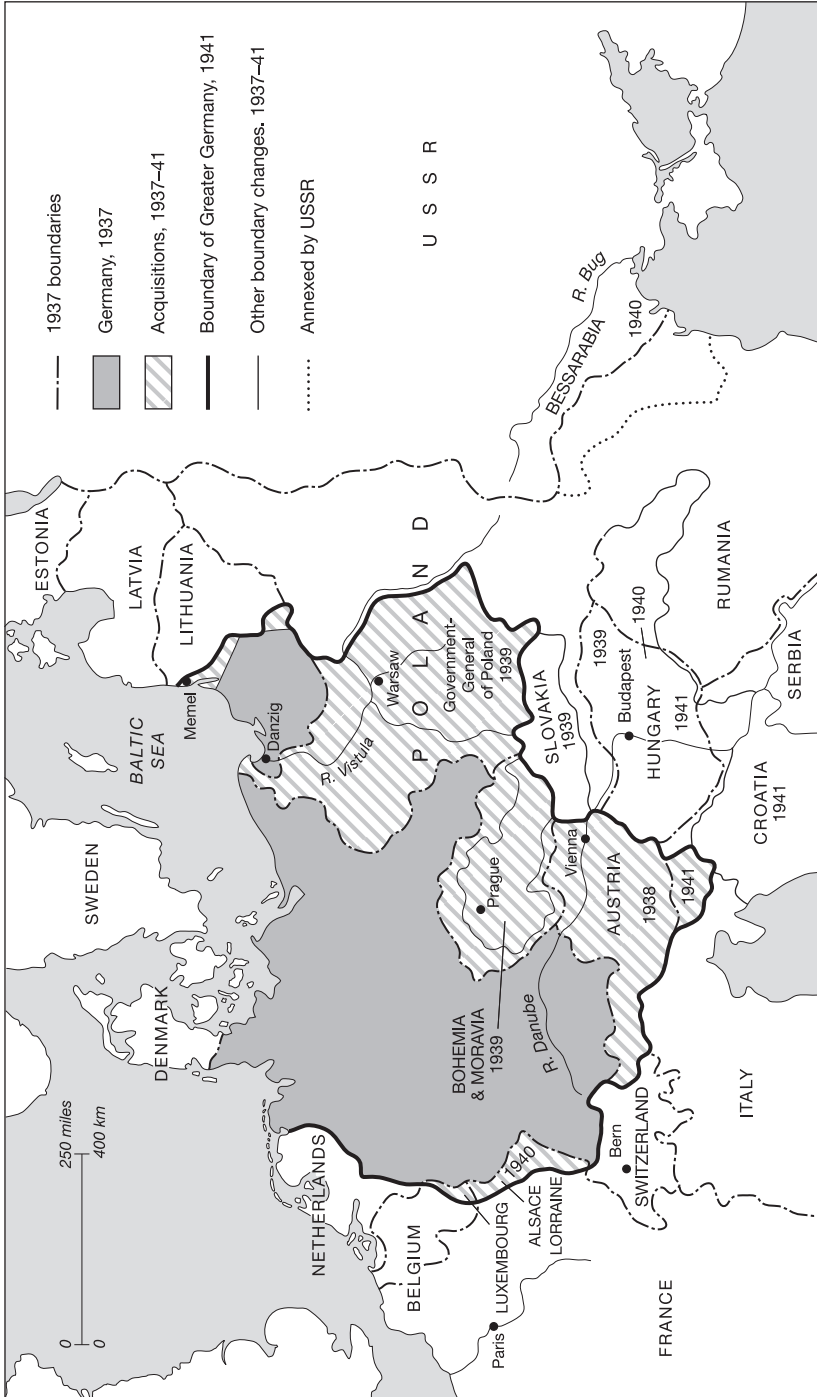
**MAP 6** *The Spanish Civil War: the division of Spain, August 1936*  
Source: Hugh Thomas, *The Spanish Civil War*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition (Pelican Books, 1977), p. 402.



**MAP 7** *Czechoslovakia in 1938, showing the territories ceded to Germany at Munich, and to Hungary and Poland later*



MAP 8 The partition of Poland, 1939



**MAP 9** *The expansion of Germany, 1937-41*

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