**SUMMARY DIAGRAM**Hitler and Nazi Germany
1933–8

2 Germany's foreign policy: 1933–5

▶ **Key question:** How successful was Germany's foreign policy between 1933 and 1935?

Germany's economic, political and military weakness before 1935 meant that foreign policy was carefully considered. Germany's economy was fragile, but recovering (see above), and, politically, Hitler was still consolidating power over the government, his party and the military. With a small military before 1935, Germany was not a threat to any significant European state. In addition, Italy, France and Britain, acting as the world's Great Powers, worked against Germany, restricting its ability to significantly affect world affairs.

Nazism and foreign policy

Nazism, primarily based on the beliefs and writings of Hitler, included many points, some of which changed through time. Many of these thoughts were not new and were either borrowed or expanded on by the Nazis. These beliefs included:

- The Treaty of Versailles must be completely undone.
- All Germans should live in an expanded Germany: **pan-Germanism**.

KEY TERM

Pan-Germanism An idea from the early nineteenth century that all German-language speakers should live in the same country.

What were the main beliefs in Nazism that may have influenced foreign policy?



KEY TERM

Treaty of Brest-Litovsk

A treaty signed between Russia (soon to be the Soviet Union) and Germany and Austria-Hungary in early 1918 in which Russia left the First World War, turning over huge territories to Germany and Austria-Hungary that would include today's countries of Poland, Ukraine, Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia and Finland, containing one-third of Russia's population and farmland and half its industry.



According to Source F, why did Hitler oppose democratic governments?

- Communism was a real threat to civilization and should be eradicated.
- Germany must have *lebensraum*, or living space (see page 106), in eastern Europe for more food and land for settling.
- Non-Germans were inferior racially to Germans, who were born to conquer and rule others (although certain Germans were also 'undesirable' or were labelled as non-German, such as disabled people, homosexuals and Jews).
- Democratic states were fundamentally weak and greedy.

All German governments since 1919 had wanted to undo the Treaty of Versailles and regain territory lost to Poland; the Locarno Treaties (see page 147) are a great example of how previous governments worked diplomatically to regain losses from the First World War. The idea that all Germans should live in Germany came from the nineteenth century. Previous German governments also feared communism and had suppressed communist uprisings. Living space was also an old idea. During the First World War, Germany defeated Russia and gained control of much of eastern Europe in the **Treaty of Brest-Litovsk** in March 1918. This treaty was later reversed by the nations that defeated Germany in the same year.

SOURCE F

Excerpt from Hitler: *Diagnosis of a Destructive Prophet* by Fritz Redlich, published by Oxford University Press, Oxford, UK, 1999, p. 103. Redlich was a prominent psychiatrist who was dean of the Yale University School of Medicine, USA, and author of works on the medical and psychological state of Hitler.

It was the complete denial of the rule of the majority, which Hitler considered the rule of the stupid and incapable masses and their representatives. According to Hitler, the ideas of democracy and equality were promoted by Jews in order to destroy a nation. 'There must be no majority decisions,' he said ... 'surely, every man will have advisors by his side, but the decisions will be made by one man.'

Racism was also not a new concept, but the Nazis made it state policy. Laws institutionalized racism in Germany, for example, with Jewish Germans now denied citizenship.

Most importantly, Hitler indeed believed that Western democracies, such as France and Britain, were fundamentally weak. This weakness was the result of the very nature of democracy in which political parties had to compromise and listen to their public to be elected. This was a contrast to Germany and Italy, both of which were ruled by dictators who had little need to pacify the public or various interests. They saw their system as stronger in that they could act quickly and decisively, based on a single philosophy or overall goal.

The Polish–German Non-Aggression Pact, January 1934

Poland was far more powerful in military terms than Germany in 1934. It was also allied to France (see page 144) and was fully aware that Germany desired to regain territories granted to Poland in the Treaty of Versailles. Poland felt that with its large army and its alliance with France, it had nothing to fear from Germany. Poland also did not want to be drawn into a conflict with Germany in support of France; its main focus was the Soviet Union. This led to an agreement between Germany and Poland.

In January 1934, in the Polish–German Non-Aggression Pact, each state guaranteed that it would not attack the other for a period of ten years. It also led to:

- recognition by Germany of Poland's borders
- better diplomatic relations to discuss disputes
- increased trade between the two states.

For Germany, this treaty meant that it did not need to fear Polish military intervention, even when rearmament programmes began (see page 144). In addition, it clearly weakened the alliance between France and Poland in that France could no longer assume that its partner was inherently hostile to Germany, which had been a threat to both states up to that point. More trade between Poland and Germany benefited both states; Poland was a source of food and metals that the German economy desperately needed (see page 143).

Poland's primary enemy was the Soviet Union, with which it had fought a successful war that ended in 1920, effectively doubling the size of Poland. In the 1920s and 1930s, Poland continued to work against the Soviet Union by encouraging revolts and independence movements there, all unsuccessful. The second Five Year Plan of the Soviet Union (see page 111) was already in progress and the future industrial, and therefore military, might of the Soviet

Why did the Polish–German Non-Aggression Pact have major support in both Poland and Germany?

SOURCE G

Excerpt of a memo from State Secretary B.W. von Bülow to German Chancellor Hitler, August 1934, quoted in *Documents on Nazism 1919–1945* by Jeremy Noakes and Geoffrey Pridham, published by University of Exeter Press, UK, 1995, p. 662. Noakes is a professor of history at the University of Exeter, UK. Pridham is a senior research fellow in politics at the University of Bristol, UK.

In judging the situation we should never overlook the fact that no kind of rearmament in the next few years could give us military security. Even apart from our isolation, we shall for a long time yet be hopelessly inferior to France in the military sphere. A particularly dangerous period will be 1934–5 on account of the reorganization of the Reichswehr [German army].

What is the message conveyed in Source G?



Union needed to be observed and potentially opposed if Polish independence was threatened. The treaty with Germany allowed Poland to deploy its armies in the east of the country, where any Soviet invasion would naturally occur.

International response: France

While the British response to the Pact was muted, France was outraged. The alliance between France and Poland had clearly been weakened, but France had also been reminded that Poland would pursue whatever policy was in its own interest without consulting France or regarding France's needs. There was little that France could do, but one result may have been to draw France somewhat closer to the Soviet Union (see page 147), which was now ending its isolation in response to the Pact as well.

International response: Soviet Union

The Soviet Union initially worked with Nazi Germany, although the German Communist Party had been abolished and most of its members imprisoned and many executed in the Nazi state. The reasons for abandoning German communists were pragmatic. In 1922, Germany and the Soviet Union signed the **Rapallo Treaty**, which established diplomatic relations between the states and allowed trade and diplomatic co-operation. Shortly afterwards, the states started to co-operate militarily on a limited scale, such as weapons development and testing. While Germany needed Soviet supplies such as wheat and metals, the Soviets, in the midst of mass industrialization, needed German machinery and tools. The Soviets worked to maintain relations with Germany throughout 1933.

Co-operation between the two states collapsed with the Polish–German Non-Aggression Pact. Poland and the Soviet Union had no diplomatic relations and considered each other as their main enemy. The Pact meant that the Polish military could concentrate on its border with the Soviet Union and perhaps even attack it in the future. The earlier co-operation between Germany and the Soviet Union meant that there had always been a possibility of an alliance between the two to oppose Poland and perhaps seize territories that both believed belonged to them (see pages 111 and 151). It was now feared that Germany and Poland might even create an alliance to seize parts of the Soviet Union together.

The Soviet reaction to the Pact was to join the League of Nations in 1934. It had previously condemned the League as simply a tool for Britain and France to maintain their empires and as a means of promoting the business interests of capitalist countries. It now sought to support the concept of collective security, although this idea had already been damaged by the Manchurian Crisis (see page 54). In addition, Stalin ordered Comintern (see page 159) to alter its language and mission. Instead of advocating revolution, it now promoted peace, democracy and anti-fascist governments. Communist groups were ordered to co-operate with non-fascist political



KEY TERM

Rapallo Treaty Treaty signed in 1922 by the Soviet Union and Germany in which each renounced all claims against the other, recognized the other diplomatically and agreed to co-operate economically.

parties in order to oppose fascist groups and governments; this happened in Spain, France and other countries almost immediately. The Soviet response to Japanese, German and Italian anti-communist dictatorships was to build positive relations with other countries, most of which distrusted the Soviets and opposed communism, leading to limited success.

Austria 1934

A goal of many in Austria and Germany after the First World War was to unite the two countries. This was a step towards creating a larger Germany, a goal of many nationalists since the nineteenth century so that there would be one state for all Germans. Perhaps more importantly for Hitler, Austria was his original homeland, not Germany. By merging the two states, he would be, in a sense, more German. Fortunately for Hitler, Austria was a politically divided, weak state that had recently experienced severe fighting between **paramilitaries** representing different political factions. Many in Austria may have desired the stability that the Nazi Party had brought to Germany through *Gleichschaltung* (see page 141). An Austrian branch of the Nazi Party had been active until it was banned in 1933.

In June 1934, Hitler met Mussolini and tried to convince him that Austria should become a German **satellite state**. Italy was a major political and military power and shared a long border with Austria. When Mussolini rejected this idea, which contradicted his own plans for central and eastern Europe (see page 117), Hitler gave the Austrian Nazis strong, unofficial encouragement to stage a coup a month later. During the failed coup, Austria's head of state, Chancellor Engelbert Dolfuss, was assassinated.

Mussolini was determined to keep Austria as a buffer state between Italy and Germany. He may have also been eager to demonstrate to Britain and France that Italy was a powerful and important ally. He immediately mobilized troops on the Italian–Austrian frontier and forced Hitler to speak against the coup, which then promptly failed. Hitler was unable and unwilling to risk military intervention in Austria, not least because he did not have complete control of the army (see page 142). Any military action against Austria might also cause other states to intervene, since the merging of Austria and Germany was in the Treaty of St Germain-en-Laye (see page 105).

The failed annexation of Austria was a setback for Hitler, but it is impossible to know the general reaction to this in Germany; the state controlled all media, and opposition parties that might have protested had been banned by *Gleichschaltung*. What was clear, however, is that Germany was weak in 1934 and unable to affect international affairs to its liking. Germany's efforts to take over Austria, however, meant that relations between Germany and Italy were strained at best; Italy was determined to co-operate with Britain and France to keep Germany weak and under control.

← What factors prevented Germany successfully supporting a coup in Austria in 1934?

KEY TERM

Paramilitaries Military units that operate outside official control of a government.

Satellite state A state that is closely associated with another and is unable to act independently in many areas such as in economic or foreign policies.

What was the importance of the Saar Plebiscite for Germany?

→ Saar Plebiscite 1935

The Saar was an iron- and coal-rich region of Germany that bordered France. It was placed under the administration of the League of Nations after the First World War and France was allowed to operate and prosper from its coalmines. This was done to compensate France for coalmines destroyed by Germany in northern France during the war.

The League of Nations held a plebiscite in the Saar in January 1935 in which residents of the Saar could vote to rejoin Germany, remain under League administration or merge with France. Over 90 per cent of voters indicated that they wished to rejoin Germany. This vote was celebrated in Germany and Hitler seems to have believed that it indicated support for his policies and government.

SOURCE H

Excerpt from *Germany, 1871–1945: A Concise History* by Raffael Scheck, published by Berg, New York, USA, 2008, p. 174. Scheck is an associate professor of history at Colby College, Maine, USA.

One success that had more to do with the legacy of the peace treaty than Hitler's foreign policy was the return of the Saar district to Germany. The Treaty of Versailles had separated it from Germany for fifteen years. A popular vote should then decide its future. The population of the Saar district, having never consented to French rule, voted overwhelmingly for return to Germany in January 1935. This both reflected and increased Hitler's popularity among Germans. In March 1935, Hitler felt safe enough to reintroduce general conscription. This blatant violation of the peace treaty did not provoke a punitive French attack, but it prompted France and Britain to form a closer alignment with each other and with Italy. At a conference in the Italian town of Stresa in April, the three powers condemned Germany's step and emphasized that treaties were sacrosanct. This so-called Stresa Front was too little to impress Hitler, however, much as Mussolini's alignment with France and Britain displeased him.



What was the importance of the Saar Plebiscite, according to Source H?

What was the effect of the Anglo-German Naval Treaty on international diplomacy?

→ Anglo-German Naval Treaty, June 1935

While Mussolini continued to build up forces to invade Abyssinia (see page 119), both Germany and Britain had been as busy as France in breaking up the unity of Stresa (see page 118) by concluding the Anglo-German Naval Treaty in June 1935. This completely contradicted the declarations at Stresa made just two months before.

Britain believed that it had achieved a diplomatic victory because the treaty would limit the German navy to only 35 per cent of the size of the British navy while Britain began massive rearmament (see page 148). In the British view of the treaty, Germany would always have a small fleet that could never challenge the British for control of the seas militarily or threaten their merchant fleet. This had the added advantage of tying down Germany by allowing it to use its limited resources and expensive raw material imports on ships that would never be able to challenge Britain's substantial navy.

The Anglo-German Naval Treaty must be seen in the context of British diplomacy, which worked to treat Germany as a state with legitimate concerns (see page 110) yet limit its overall power so that it could not challenge Britain.

SOURCE I

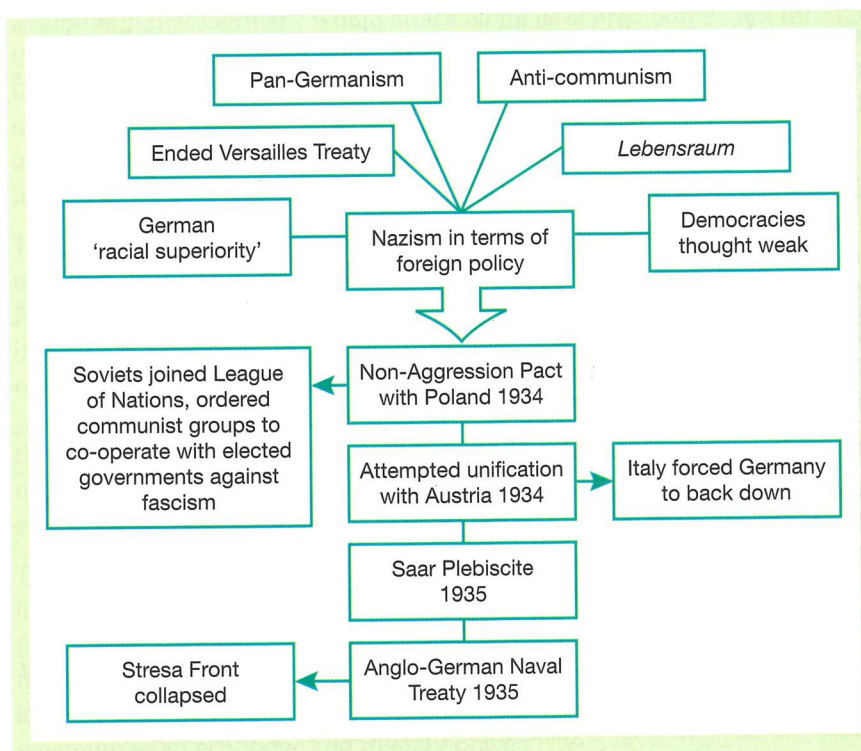
Excerpt of a letter from British Foreign Secretary Sir John Simon to King George V of the United Kingdom, February 1935, quoted in *Sir Gerald Fitzmaurice and the World Crisis: A Legal Adviser in the Foreign Office 1930–1945* by Anthony Carty, published by Springer, USA, 2000, p. 179. Carty is a law professor at the University of Aberdeen, UK.

The practical choice is between a Germany which continues to rearm without any regulation or agreement and a Germany which, through getting a recognition of its rights and some modification of the Peace Treaties, enters into the comity [community] of nations and contributes, in this and other ways, to European stability.

According to Source I, what was the value of Britain making agreements with Germany?



Italy and France, however, believed that German rearmament had been encouraged and the Treaty of Versailles had been violated with British consent. This brought France and Italy temporarily closer together and in mid-1935 there were talks about mutual military co-operation in case of war with Germany. The Stresa Front was severely damaged as a result of the diplomacy of France and Britain, but collapsed completely with the Italian invasion of Abyssinia and economic sanctions placed on Italy (see page 122).



SUMMARY DIAGRAM

Germany's foreign policy 1933–5

3 Germany's foreign policy: 1936–9

▶ **Key question:** How successful was Germany in achieving its foreign policy aims between 1936 and 1939?

With rising economic and military strength, Hitler was able to conduct a more assertive foreign policy. It helped that Britain was sympathetic to many German demands, especially that Germans should live in Germany. In addition, Britain and France were often divided on how to respond to Germany's actions, and few states were willing to work diplomatically with the Soviet Union for any purpose, much less the isolation of Germany. Finally, Italy's relationship with Britain and France was permanently damaged by the Abyssinian Crisis (see page 119), preventing a united front against Nazi Germany while giving Germany the chance to gain a diplomatic partner.

Why, despite the Locarno treaties, was there no effective opposition to Germany's remilitarization of the Rhineland?

Remilitarization of the Rhineland, March 1936

The Rhineland was a large strip of German territory that bordered Belgium, France and Luxembourg. This zone was demilitarized at the end of the First World War to create a buffer between Germany and its western neighbours so that if there was a future war, France and Belgium would be warned far ahead of time. Germany saw the demilitarized zone as a vulnerability since France could potentially invade Germany with no resistance until French armies were deep inside the country. Being unable to control its territory was also a national humiliation.

It seems that there were plans by Germany to potentially reoccupy the Rhineland in 1937, but the favourable diplomatic situation created by the Abyssinian Crisis persuaded Hitler to act in March 1936. In December 1935, the German army was ordered to start planning for this reoccupation. Meanwhile, German diplomats began to make a legal justification for such action by arguing that the Franco-Soviet Treaty of Mutual Assistance was contrary to the Locarno treaties (see page 147) and therefore allowed German to alter the agreements as well.

SOURCE J

Excerpt from *The Origins of the Second World War* by A.J.P. Taylor, Penguin Books, London, UK, 1961, pp. 129–30. First published in 1961 by Hamish Hamilton, this book has been most recently reprinted by Penguin Books in 2001. Taylor was a British historian who wrote many books on European history and was a lecturer at many British universities.

Hitler's excuse was the French government's ratification of the Franco-Soviet pact on 27 February 1936. This, he claimed, had destroyed the assumptions of Locarno; not much of an argument, but a useful appeal no doubt to anti-

? According to Source J, what made the reoccupation of the Rhineland by Germany possible?

Bolshevik feeling in Great Britain and France. The actual move on 7 March was a staggering example of Hitler's strong nerve. Germany had literally no forces available for war. The trained men of the old Reichswehr [German army] were now dispersed as instructors among the new mass army; and this new army was not yet ready. Hitler assured his protesting generals that he would withdraw his token force at the first sign of French action; but he was unshakably confident that no action would follow.

The reoccupation of the Rhineland did not take the French by surprise. They had been brooding on it apprehensively ever since the beginning of the Abyssinian affair.

Crucial to the success of Hitler's plan was the attitude of Italy. Mussolini was isolated from Britain and France because of Italy's invasion of Abyssinia and this assured Hitler that Mussolini would not co-operate with the British and French in opposing the remilitarization of the Rhineland.

German troops entered the Rhineland on 7 March 1936. To reassure France that they did not intend to violate the Franco-German frontier, they were initially few in number and lightly equipped.

International response: France and Britain

France did not move to intervene, partly because the French border had not been violated and there was little support in either France or Britain for preventing Germany from controlling its own territory. The French army had planned only for defensive war against future German aggression with the assumption that Germany would attack along its shared border, not through the demilitarized Rhineland; there were no military plans for opposing Germany anywhere other than at the French border. The French government refused to fight Germany alone and Britain made it clear that it was unwilling to go to war over the Rhineland. Military spending, however, was increased.

The British government did reassure France that in the event of an unprovoked German attack on French territory, it would send troops to France. British public opinion was convinced that Hitler was merely walking into 'his own back garden'. In fact, the British government was pleased at the reoccupation of the Rhineland because it removed a major German grievance against Britain and France and meant that France could no longer threaten Germany with invasion. Britain hoped that Germany would now be more co-operative; many in Britain saw Germany as a bulwark against communism (see page 108).

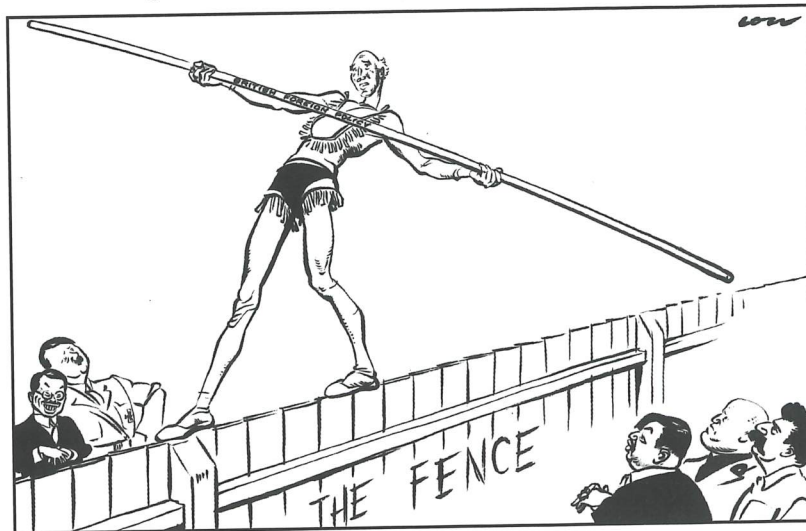
The remilitarization of the Rhineland was a triumph for Hitler, and, as an internal French foreign ministry memorandum of 12 March 1936 stressed (see Source L below), there was a feeling in Europe that Germany was now the centre of European power. It was clear that the Treaty of Versailles was no longer being followed or would not be altered further. Germany was emerging as an economic and military power.



According to Source K, what was Britain's foreign policy in 1935?

SOURCE K

'Delicate Process.' A cartoon by British cartoonist David Low depicting the British government balancing on a fence with Hitler on one side, and the leaders of France, Italy and the Soviet Union on the other, published in the *Evening Standard* newspaper on 10 April 1935.



SOURCE L

Excerpt from a memorandum for the foreign minister from René Massigli, Deputy Political Director of the French Foreign Ministry, 12 March 1936, quoted in *The Foreign Policy of France from 1914 to 1945* by J. Néré, published by Routledge, London, UK, 2002, p. 337. Massigli was a senior French diplomat who was secretary-general of the Conference of Ambassadors from 1920 to 1931 and by 1937 political director in the French foreign ministry. Néré is a historian of modern French history.

A German success would likewise not fail to encourage elements which, in Yugoslavia, look towards Berlin ... In Rumania this will be a victory of the elements of the Right which have been stirred up by Hitlerite propaganda. All that will remain for Czechoslovakia is to come to terms with Germany. Austria does not conceal her anxiety. 'Next time it will be our turn' ... Turkey, who has increasingly close economic relations with Germany, but who politically remains in the Franco-British axis, can be induced to modify her line. The Scandinavian countries ... are alarmed.



What is the origin and purpose of Source L?

What was the main advantage for Germany of creating a relationship, even if just on paper, with Italy and Japan in 1936?

Germany ends diplomatic isolation, 1936

The invasion of Abyssinia led to severely strained relations between Italy and its former diplomatic partners: Britain and France. Italy and Germany, both isolated diplomatically, now began a closer diplomatic relationship to end this state of affairs and challenge British and French domination of international affairs. Germany was clearly an anti-communist state, leading to further opportunities to end its isolation from international affairs.

The Rome–Berlin Axis, October 1936

In October 1936, a new diplomatic relationship between Germany and Italy was announced. This became known as the Rome–Berlin Axis, indicating the desire or dream of this new diplomatic alignment that world affairs be determined by the governments of Italy and Germany, not London and Paris, the capitals of Britain and France. This was a clear announcement that Britain and France were no longer to be the states that determined international affairs and events and that Italy and Germany were instead to replace them in importance.

SOURCE M

Speech by Benito Mussolini in Milan, Italy, 1 November 1936, quoted in *The Causes of the Second World War* by Anthony Crozier, published by Blackwell Publishers, UK, 1997, p. 121. Crozier was a history lecturer at Queen Mary College, University of London, UK.

The Berlin conversations have resulted in an understanding between our two countries over certain problems which have been particularly acute. By these understandings ... this Berlin–Rome line is ... an axis around which can revolve all those European states with a will to collaboration and peace.

What, according to Source M, was the purpose of the Berlin–Rome Axis?



The Anti-Comintern Pact, November 1936

Hitler's government agreed with Japan in November 1936 to oppose the Soviet-sponsored organization Communist International. This organization was responsible for supporting communist groups around the world, which included groups in Spain that were fighting German-sponsored Nationalists (see page 160) and the Chinese Communist Party that fought Japan in China (see page 67). The agreement did not specifically mention co-operative work against the Soviet Union, but this was clearly implied. The Pact was primarily symbolic for both Japan and Germany in that it was a declaration that neither was diplomatically isolated and that they would co-operate in future international diplomacy. Being against communism was something most world governments could claim, so it was also a cause which most governments would not oppose or become alarmed about. Italy joined the Pact in November 1937.

Anschluss, March 1938

After the failed attempt to take control over Austria in 1934, Germany boycotted Austrian goods and raw materials. This severely weakened Austria's economy, which had already been extremely strained by the Great Depression.

Nevertheless, Hitler's government wanted Austria to merge with Germany. Austria had hundreds of factories, large government reserves of gold, workers for factories and natural resources such as iron and magnesium. Italy, the state that had opposed Germany's first attempt to annex Austria in 1934 (see page 117), indicated as early as January 1936 that there would be

← **What was the international reaction to Germany's annexation of Austria?**

Spanish Civil War 1936–9

In 1936, the Spanish army essentially revolted against the elected government. The Nationalists (the army, supporters of the Catholic Church and other conservatives) fought the Republicans (a group that included socialists, republicans, anti-church groups and communists). Germany and Italy supported the Nationalists, while the Soviets backed the Republicans. Britain and France supported neither side and insisted on an arms embargo. Germany and Italy agreed to the embargo, but continued to support and even fight for the Nationalists.

As the Republicans were gradually destroyed, the Soviets grew more convinced that Britain and France believed in their own security far more than they did in collective security (even though Spain belonged to the League of Nations). Further, the Soviets understood that Britain and France opposed communism more than fascism and so they could not be reliable partners to oppose the policies of fascist states.

Germany primarily provided supplies to Nationalist forces, although German-piloted aircraft did participate in some of the battles of the war. Germany's primary desire was to prolong the Spanish Civil War since Spain lay along France's southern border. Germany hoped that France might eventually become involved in the conflict, which would mean a reduction of military forces along their shared border, and perhaps a diplomatic weakening of France generally. Historian A.J.P. Taylor went so far as to say that Hitler was disappointed when the Spanish Civil War ended with a Nationalist victory in 1939, since that ended the possibility of France becoming mired in the conflict.

no future objections to *Anschluss*, the German word for connection or annexation that came to represent the merger of Germany and Austria; this concession allowed the Rome–Berlin Axis to form that same year (see page 159). By 1938, Germany was in a much stronger economic and military position to effect any merging of these states.

Austria worked to prevent annexation by trying to negotiate with Germany. In February 1938, Hitler demanded that the Austrian government appoint an Austrian Nazi Party member, Arthur Seyss-Inquart, as minister of public security; this ministry was in charge of all police. In addition, all jailed Nazi Party members had to be released. Austria complied, only to have Hitler publicly denounce Austrian independence, stating that millions of Germans were suppressed by being separated from Germany.

Austria's Chancellor Kurt Schuschnigg decided to undermine Germany's argument that Austrians wanted to merge with Germany. A plebiscite was scheduled for 13 March in which voters would decide whether the two states should join. Schuschnigg had led a single-party state up to this point and in

order to gain support for Austrian independence allowed the formation of labour unions and opposition political parties. He also increased the voting age to 24 as he felt younger people were more likely to support unification with Germany and to sympathize with the Nazi Party generally.

SOURCE N

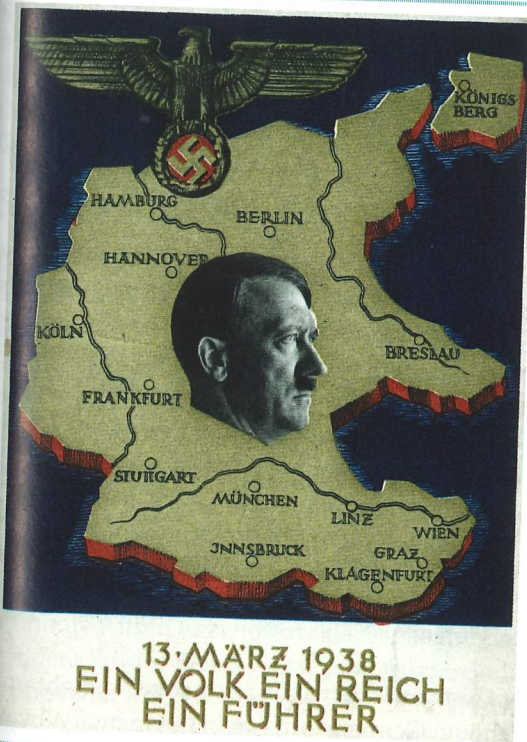
Excerpt from *Modern Germany Reconsidered, 1870–1945* by Gordon Martel, published by Routledge, New York, USA, 1992, p. 185. Martel is a professor emeritus in the Department of History at the University of Northern British Columbia, Canada.

Moreover, as Hitler came to understand, neither the French nor the British were willing to fight to maintain the provisions of the peace settlement of 1919 [Paris Peace Conference] that violated the nationality principle to Germany's disadvantage. This British government in particular signaled as much to Hitler in November 1937 when [Foreign Minister] Lord Halifax, visiting Hitler, referred to Danzig, Austria and Czechoslovakia as 'questions which fall into the category of possible alterations in the European order', and added that Britain's interest was 'to see that any alterations should come through the course of peaceful evolution'. And, indeed, the new British Prime Minister, Neville Chamberlain, had decided to accept the realization of Germany's goals through negotiation in an attempt to avoid war. The French government had also written off Austria and was weakening in its commitment to Czechoslovakia – partly, though not exclusively, because of Chamberlain's attitude.

According to Source N, what was British policy towards Germany in November 1937?



SOURCE O



'One People, One Empire, One Leader.' A German propaganda poster showing German and Austria as one country, with a symbol of the Nazi Party and depiction of Hitler in the centre, 13 March 1938.

What may be one reason Hitler is depicted in the centre of Source O?



Hitler's government announced in Germany that riots had broken out against Schuschnigg's government and that there was a need for German forces to enter Austria to restore order. Schuschnigg was commanded to turn over all authority to Austrian Nazi Party officials or face an invasion on 11 March. Schuschnigg resigned as chancellor to prevent bloodshed and was replaced by Seyss-Inquart. Seyss-Inquart immediately sent a message to Germany's government, asking for Germany's military to restore public order, although there was no disorder in Austria.

On 12 March, German forces entered the country and on 13 March, Austria was officially annexed to Germany in violation of the Treaty of St Germain-en-Laye. An April plebiscite confirmed the annexation, with over 99 per cent of voters approving. Since German troops had been invited to enter Austria by its legal government and the voters had apparently approved the merger of the two states, the practically defunct League of Nations did not react.

International response: Britain and France

The international response to *Anschluss* was muted, primarily because France was more concerned with Spain (see page 160). Britain's Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain noted in a speech that British officials had indicated their displeasure over Germany's action to the German government. He also stated that there was next to nothing Britain or any other country could have done to prevent the annexation.

Many in Britain and France continued to believe that a strengthened Germany would be useful in any future conflict against what they perceived as the real threat: communism and therefore the Soviet Union. Additionally, few could see the point of preventing Germans living in Germany even if this came through expansion. Britain and France could have done little militarily since there were no plans of any type and neither had sufficient military might to force any changes; Germany was surely aware of this.

Appeasement

The policy of working with Germany to ease various conditions of the Treaty of Versailles, as well as allowing it to absorb German areas such as Austria, is known primarily as appeasement. Appeasement is often seen as giving Hitler the impression that Britain and France were eager to allow him to do whatever he wanted in central and eastern Europe so that they could avoid war. Some historians continue to hold that this has some truth. Most modern historians see the policy of appeasement as much more complex and based on diplomatic strategies from earlier periods. The British government in the late 1930s saw appeasement as normal diplomacy. It believed that negotiating made a lot more sense than threatening Germany militarily, especially since Britain did not have the military capability to attack Germany until 1939.

In addition, many saw most of Germany's demands as reasonable, right up until 1 September 1939. Why should Germans not live in Germany? Why not

renegotiate borders that were artificially, in some cases, created only in 1919? While the British government may have seen these demands as reasonable, there may be some truth in the claims that Hitler viewed Britain and France as weak as a result of negotiating. Hitler, however, believed long before that these states were fundamentally weak simply because they were democratic.

International response: Soviet Union

The Soviet Union could also only protest as its government was in disarray. A series of **purges** began within the Soviet government in 1934. These intensified so that in the period 1937–8 at least 700,000 people were executed and approximately 1,500,000 were imprisoned. Many people in the ministry of foreign affairs had been killed in the purge, including many ambassadors, heads of departments, secretaries and deputy ministers. What this meant was that experts on various foreign issues were now mostly dead, along with those who had worked to build relations with France and Britain to oppose Germany's foreign policy.

Although France and the Soviet Union had signed an agreement in 1935 to mutually assist each other (see page 147), this agreement had meant little; no military talks ever occurred, which meant that any use of force against Germany was unlikely or even impossible. France was also divided by weak coalition governments (see page 104) and many in France were completely opposed to communism (see page 109). The British government was clearly reticent about working with the Soviet Union as they were more sympathetic to Germany. Part of this sympathy was based on a fear of communism generally and the Soviet Union in particular. The purges shocked many in both Britain and France and reminded them of what they viewed as the destructive, dangerous nature of communism. The purges helped ensure that neither Britain nor France would work with the Soviets to oppose Germany.

Sudeten Crisis, October 1938

With Germany's annexation of Austria, there was renewed agitation by Germans in Czechoslovakia to be included in an expanding, prosperous Germany. Over 3 million Germans lived in Czechoslovakia and the main German political party, the **Sudeten German Party**, demanded autonomy for the Sudeten area of Czechoslovakia, where most of the Germans lived. Excited about *Anschluss*, many saw an opportunity for the Sudetenland to join Germany in a way similar to what had happened in Austria.

Konrad Henlein, head of the Sudeten German Party, met Hitler in Berlin at the end of March 1938. A week later he presented a list of demands called the Karlsbad Programme. The main aim of the demands was German autonomy within Czechoslovakia. While the Czechoslovak government of President Edvard Beneš was willing to give Sudeten Germans more rights, it was not willing to allow self-government; this was seen as practical independence. The world, after witnessing the recent annexation of Austria,

KEY TERM

Purge The removal of people, through loss of work, imprisonment or execution, who were deemed a threat by Soviet government authorities.

Sudeten German Party

A German political party in Czechoslovakia in the 1930s that was closely allied to and adopted many of the ideals of the Nazi Party of Germany.

← To what extent was the Sudeten Crisis resolved for the benefit of Germany, Britain and France?

understood clearly that Germany was using Henlein's party as a tool to take control of the Sudeten.

The Sudeten was critically important for Czechoslovakia's advanced economy as it was a source of metals and other mined products. In addition, bordering Germany, the Sudeten was the location of the main defences against an invasion from Germany. If the government were to lose control over the Sudeten, the country would be defenceless in the face of invasion. To demonstrate its determination not to lose control of its territory, the country's military was partially mobilized for war at the end of May, when it seemed Germany might attack. No attack occurred, but Czechoslovakia had demonstrated that, unlike Austria, it was willing to fight.

International response

Unlike the earlier issue with Austria, foreign states were involved with the Sudeten Crisis from the start. Czechoslovakia had alliances with France and the Soviet Union. Only a minority of its population was German, unlike Austria. Again unlike Austria, Czechoslovakia had a modern, well-equipped military and its industrial capacity was important. If the country's industries and mineral resources were added to those of Germany, it would only expand its already impressive economy and allow further, faster rearmament. Understanding the international response is critically important to overall understanding of the outcome of the Sudeten Crisis.

France

France had a military alliance with Czechoslovakia and therefore was alarmed at the possibility of war. Its eastern European alliances (see page 144) had been created by the French government to apply pressure on Germany so there would be no future attack on France. France had never planned for the alliance to mean that they might have to defend a state in central Europe. There was no possibility of France intervening militarily as it was engaged in developing the defensive Maginot Line (see page 147) and producing weapons; France was not ready for a confrontation. France reached out to Britain to help resolve the crisis.

Soviet Union

Meanwhile, the Soviet Union and Czechoslovakia had had a mutual defence treaty since 1935. This was aligned with the mutual assistance treaty between France and the Soviet Union. If France moved to fulfil its military obligations to Czechoslovakia as part of the Little Entente treaties signed in 1921, then the Soviets, in support of France, would also help Czechoslovakia if it were attacked.

The Soviets pledged to support Czechoslovakia if France would move militarily to prevent an attack on the country by Germany. This gesture was mostly a hollow one since the French government did not intend on going to war over Czechoslovakia, nor did it want to co-operate with the communist Soviet state. In addition, with the purges in the Soviet military (see page 163)

and the fact that a powerful Poland stood between the Soviet Union and Germany, France was aware that Soviet pledges were essentially meaningless.

Britain

As with the Rhineland and Austria, many in Britain believed that there was little reason for Germans not to live in Germany. Germans, like other minority populations in Czechoslovakia, were certainly discriminated against and so there was some sympathy with German demands. Britain, like France, was simply not willing to go to war over the borders of any central or eastern European state. In the midst of substantial rearmament, Britain, even if willing, was not yet in a position where pressure could be applied to Germany.

Massive pressure, however, was placed on the government of Czechoslovakia to agree to the demands of Henlein and his party in the hope that this would indeed prevent an outbreak of war.

A continuing crisis

In July, France informed Czechoslovakia's government that France would not go to war to prevent the loss of the Sudeten. Britain sent a minister, Lord Runciman, to demand that the government comply with as many of the Sudeten German demands as possible. While the Czechoslovak government considered how to respond, Germany mobilized 750,000 troops to conduct manoeuvres on their mutual border in an attempt to force more concessions. Finally, in early September, Czechoslovakia's government gave in to most Sudeten demands.

This did not resolve the situation as Henlein was under orders from Hitler to prevent any overall agreement. It was critical that no resolution be found so that the Sudeten would have to be occupied by Germany's military in order to quell disturbances, as had happened in Austria. Therefore a crisis was created when two prominent members of the Sudeten German Party were arrested during violent demonstrations. Falsely claiming that Czechoslovakia had committed various atrocities against Germans in the country, Henlein ended all talks with the government. Hitler soon announced that Czechoslovakia should be broken up as a state and that there were plans to exterminate all the Germans living in the country.

On 13 September, British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain flew to Germany to discuss the Sudeten Crisis directly with Hitler. He hoped that a reasonable solution could be found to the crisis so that war could be averted. After the meeting he returned to Britain to meet French Prime Minister Édouard Daladier. Both Chamberlain and Daladier agreed that areas of Czechoslovakia that held populations that were more than 50 per cent German should be ceded to Germany. This was initially rejected by Czechoslovakia, but by 21 September the Czech government had decided that this was the only way to avoid war.

SOURCE P

? According to Source P, what type of help is Britain offering Czechoslovakia?

'Hozda [sic]: What! No passport? No paper? Nothing to declare? Runciman: Only this olive-branch – made in Birmingham [UK] – slightly used.' A cartoon captioned **'Wonderful Visit'** by British cartoonist David Low depicting Czechoslovakian leaders Hácha (Hozda here) and Beneš, Henlein and Lord Runciman, published in the *Evening Standard* newspaper on 29 July 1938.



Almost immediately, Hitler made new demands. Areas of Czechoslovakia that held large Hungarian and Polish populations should be given to Hungary and Poland. He also stated that German troops should immediately occupy the Sudeten. Britain and France rejected these new demands and the countries began to prepare for war.

Hitler realized that he may have overstepped the mark; he did not desire war with Britain and France, not to mention Czechoslovakia. Yet, he did not back down as he believed that Britain and France would eventually capitulate; he ordered the army to prepare to invade the Sudeten, finally settling on 1 October for this to occur.

Munich Agreement, 30 September 1938

Mussolini was also alarmed as Italy was Germany's ally and might be dragged into a conflict for which it was clearly not prepared. Mussolini called for a meeting between the leaders of Italy, Germany, Britain and France. This was held in Munich, Germany, on 28 September; Czechoslovakia was not invited to attend, nor was the Soviet Union. An agreement was reached in the early hours of the next morning. The Munich Agreement stated, among other things:

- Germany was to receive the Sudeten from Czechoslovakia.
- German troops would occupy the Sudeten in stages between 1 and 10 October.
- Plebiscites would be held to determine in which country residents wished to be citizens.
- German troops were to be released from Czechoslovakian military service.
- An international commission would resolve disputed areas.

Czechoslovakia was bluntly informed by Britain and France that if it did not implement the Munich Agreement, it would fight Germany alone. Czechoslovakia complied.

SOURCE Q

Excerpt from *Hitler's Generals*, edited by Correlli Barnett, published by Grove Press, New York, USA, 1989, p. 6. Barnett is a military and economic historian and former professor at Cambridge University, UK.

By means of his 'shop-window' rearmament and his well tuned rantings about the terrors that would ensue if Germany were not accorded her just deserts, Hitler achieved his greatest diplomatic triumph at Munich in 1938, when Chamberlain persuaded France to abandon her ally Czechoslovakia, and the two democracies handed him the Sudetenland, which happened to contain the powerful Czech frontier defences. The Munich Agreement radically altered the strategic balance of Europe in Hitler's favour, opening the way to his final occupation of Czechoslovakia in March 1939, which in turn uncovered the southern flank of his next victim, Poland. But Munich marked not only Hitler's triumph over Chamberlain and Daladier, but also over the leadership of the German Army.

Results of the Sudeten Crisis

Also on 30 September, Chamberlain succeeded in obtaining Hitler's agreement to what is known as the Anglo-German Declaration. This was a statement that Germany and Britain would not go to war to resolve problems. Instead, each state pledged to consult the other over issues that might lead to conflict and to resolve those through dialogue.

France

The French public was predominately in favour of the Munich Agreement and large crowds greeted Daladier, since war had been avoided. Yet, France was weakened by the Sudeten Crisis. Czechoslovakia, one of its main allies, had been sacrificed for France's own safety and this sacrifice could only strengthen Germany in the long term. France had proven to the Soviets that the mutual assistance guarantee had little value and could not be relied on if Germany attacked the Soviet Union. France had aligned its policies with those of Britain during the crisis although Britain continued to refuse to agree to a permanent military alliance; this would soon change (see page 172), but France for the time being assumed that no alliance would be forthcoming. In short, an isolated France had no choice but to follow where

According to Source Q, what was the significance of the Munich Agreement?



Britain led diplomatically. France's government was well aware of its increased insecurity and increased military spending by 300 per cent in November 1938. In addition, France and Germany signed the Franco-German Declaration in December 1938, pledging to peace and respecting each other's borders (see Source X on page 180).

SOURCE R

Excerpt from the Franco-German Declaration of 6 December 1938, located at The Avalon Project: Documents in Law, History and Diplomacy, which is sponsored by Yale Law School in New Haven, Connecticut, USA.

Acting in the name and by order of their respective Governments, [ministers] agreed on the following points at their meeting in Paris on December 6, 1938:

- 1. The French Government and the German Government fully share the conviction that pacific and neighbourly relations between France and Germany constitute one of the essential elements of the consolidation of the situation in Europe and of the preservation of general peace. Consequently both Governments will endeavour [work] with all their might to assure the development of the relations between their countries in this direction.*
- 2. Both Governments agree that no question of a territorial nature remains in suspense [unresolved] between their countries and solemnly recognize as permanent the frontier between their countries as it is actually drawn.*
- 3. Both Governments are resolved, without prejudice to their special relations with third Powers, to remain in contact on all questions of importance to both their countries and to have recourse to mutual consultation in case any complications arising out of these questions should threaten to lead to international difficulties.*

Britain

The British public was also enthusiastic about avoiding war and proud of its government's role in resolving the crisis. Britain had negotiated what seemed to be a permanent settlement and had accomplished this while not fully rearmed and without any significant allies. Britain was aware, however, that France was now quite isolated and might work to reach some agreement with Germany to save itself from a future conflict. Furthermore, Germany had come close to using its military to force a resolution to the crisis, and so British rearmament continued, now at an accelerated pace.

Soviet Union

The Soviet Union had been ignored, neglected and dismissed throughout the entire crisis. More than ever, the Soviet government realized that Britain and France were willing to accommodate fascist states such as Italy and Germany (and Spain after May 1939). The main fear was that Britain and France would not oppose Germany if that state attempted a major attack on the Soviet Union; they might even join with Germany in that event. It certainly did not escape the Soviets that their military was in a terrible state as a result of recent purges (see page 163).



According to Source R, how will Germany and France resolve any foreign policy problems that develop between them?

The Soviet Union was aware of its isolation, faced with Japan in the east (see page 39) and an ever-strengthening Germany in the west.

Germany

It is clear that Hitler was relieved that war with France and Britain had not erupted over the Sudeten Crisis. He had gambled that Britain and France would back down and they did. He had been, it seems, prepared for a short war with Czechoslovakia if necessary. After the annexation of the Sudeten, his military experts inspected Czechoslovakia's fortification systems and decided that it was fortunate that war had not occurred because victory might not have been achieved swiftly, or perhaps at all, as the defences were quite formidable.

SOURCE S

'We thank our leader.' A postcard celebrating annexation of the Sudeten with Germany, depicting Henlein and Hitler, December 1938.



What message about Germany is conveyed by Source S?

?

Hitler's popularity soared in Germany as a result of the annexation of the Sudeten and because war was avoided. This popularity saved him from a plot by military officers to assassinate him and end Nazi government; the plotters feared public reaction as he was now proclaimed a great hero. Meanwhile, Czechoslovakia was dismantled rapidly:

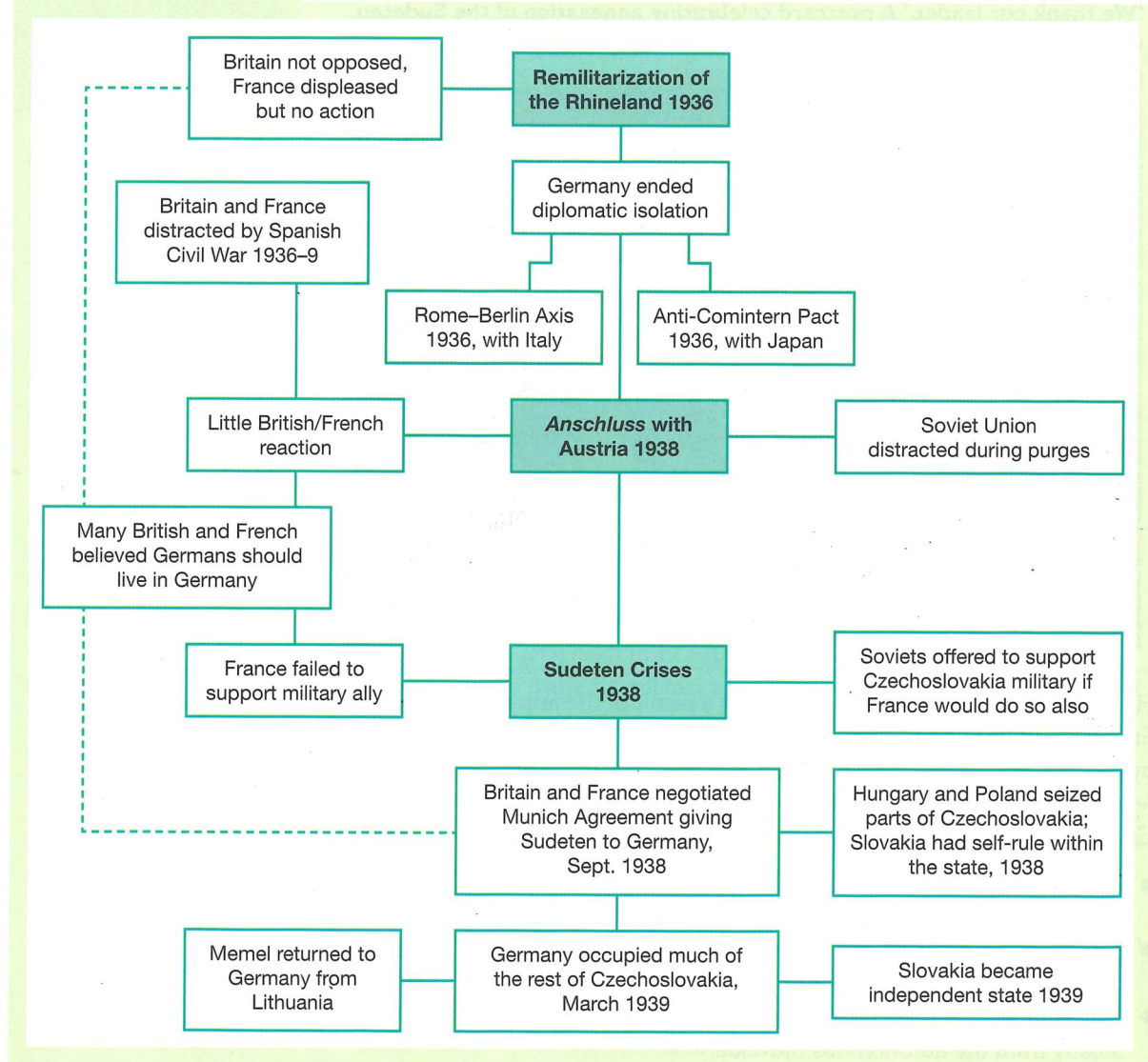
- 2 October: Poland seized Těšín (Teschen in German and Cieszyn in Polish) with approval from Germany.
- 6 October: Slovakia, which occupied most of the eastern areas of the country, was granted autonomy.
- 2 November: Hungary received a large strip of southern Czechoslovakia, mostly from the autonomous Slovakia.

- 20 November: Germany was granted rights to construct a highway across its territory to link eastern parts of Germany with Vienna.

On 14 March 1939, Czechoslovakian President Emil Hácha was summoned to meet Hitler in Berlin. He was told that either Czechoslovakia would be invaded by Germany immediately or he could agree, as the country's leader, to becoming a part of Germany with some autonomy over its own affairs. He signed over the country's independence to prevent a futile war and Slovakia was declared an independent country allied to Germany. Territories that had been taken from Germany, such as Memel, which Lithuania had seized in 1923, were now returned. The Munich Agreement, with all its hopes for peace, was completely undone in only six months.

SUMMARY DIAGRAM

Germany's foreign policy 1936–9



4 The final crises and outbreak of war 1939

▶ **Key question:** Why did a multinational war erupt in Europe on 3 September 1939?

Poland was created at the end of the First World War and included large parts of what had been Germany. Importantly, the port city of Danzig, with an almost completely German population, was removed from Germany and made into a semi-autonomous city state ruled by the League of Nations. This was done to give Poland access to the Baltic Sea, which would allow it to develop trade and a viable economy. Land to the west of Danzig was also granted to Poland and became known as the Polish Corridor. Both the Corridor and the Free City of Danzig separated a large province of Germany, East Prussia, from the main body of the country.

While many Germans were probably indifferent about the annexation of Austria or Czechoslovakia, neither of which had ever been part of the German state before 1938 and 1939, they certainly were not indifferent about the possibility of reacquiring parts of Poland which had been part of Germany just twenty years previously. After successes in Austria and Czechoslovakia, Hitler's government was under pressure to obtain the Polish Corridor and Danzig, if not more.

Polish Crisis 1938–9

As early as October 1938, just after the German occupation of the Sudeten, Germany requested negotiations with Poland regarding the building of rail and road links between the main part of Germany and East Prussia. If Poland agreed, Germany would agree to a 25-year non-aggression pact. Poland would be compensated with territory elsewhere, perhaps Memel (see the map on page 111) or other parts of Czechoslovakia. Poland and Germany had had relatively friendly relations since the implementation of the non-aggression agreement in 1934 (see page 151) and Germany allowed Poland to also help participate in the dismantling of Czechoslovakia. There were even suggestions that Poland and Germany should be allies within the Anti-Comintern Pact to oppose the Soviet Union. Germany now demanded that the League of Nations return Danzig to its control as well, something that required Poland's agreement and co-operation.

Of all German requests for territory, asking for access through the Polish Corridor and control of Danzig was the most logical of its demands. Both had only twenty years before been part of Germany and most of the residents in the Corridor and Danzig were Germans. Danzig has its own locally elected government and it too was dominated by the Nazi Party. Whether or not German demands were rational, the British and French

← What issues caused the Polish Crisis and why was resolution of these seemingly impossible?

public, however, were outraged, having been led to believe that Germany territorial requests ended with the Munich Agreement. There were overwhelming demands that their governments should not negotiate away Polish or League territory and confront Germany if required. Britain, afraid that an isolated France might make a diplomatic arrangement for its own security that would then isolate Britain, announced in February 1939 that Britain would support France militarily. This was the alliance that France had sought since the end of the First World War.

Guarantee of Poland's borders, March 1939

Poland, a heavily armed state, very simply stated that it was not interested in negotiating away any territory and eventually informed the League of Nations that if Germany attempted to annex Danzig, Poland would go to war to prevent this. Britain and France made a public, verbal declaration that they would guarantee Poland's borders on 31 March 1939. It was hoped that this would cause Germany to negotiate any changes in borders and not use military force. The declaration reinforced the decision by Poland's government not to negotiate since it was through negotiation that both Austria and Czechoslovakia had lost their independence. Poland believed that the British and French guarantee made it highly unlikely that Germany would attack. There was an agreement that Poland and Britain would begin talks to create a formal military alliance along the same lines as the alliance between Poland and France (see page 144).

Britain and France were now in an ever-strengthening position with regard to armaments. It was in the autumn of 1939 that both countries, if working together, would surpass the production and stockpiles of weapons of Germany and be able to field large, well-equipped armies, fleets of ships and thousands of aircraft. In April, Britain began conscripting soldiers as part of its military build-up. This dominance would mean that if Germany attacked Poland or France, it would have the option to respond militarily. It was with this in mind that Poland's borders were guaranteed. Britain now worked to create an anti-fascist network of alliances so that any conflict between it and Germany would drag other countries into the conflict. Mutual assistance agreements were signed with Greece and Romania after Italy's invasion of Albania (see page 131) and later with Turkey.

Although they proclaimed an alliance with Poland, both Britain and France refused to send weapons or supplies as they argued that nothing could be spared during their own rearmament. When Poland asked for loans to buy weapons elsewhere, both nations stated that their own financial problems prevented this. Both Britain and France feared that arming Poland would either lead to Poland attacking Germany in a pre-emptive strike or provoke Germany into attacking Poland. Regardless of the reasons, failure to supply Poland with armaments meant that Poland was not as well prepared for war as it could have been. Formal military talks between Poland and Britain were only finalized on 25 August 1939.

Britain and France negotiate with the Soviet Union

Britain and France finally made overtures to the Soviet Union. They presented the case that it was in the Soviet Union's best interest to help prevent a war between Germany and Poland. Britain and France pointed out that a war could be prevented if the Soviet Union would join their anti-German coalition because surely Germany would pause if faced with war by Britain, France, Poland and the Soviet Union.

SOURCE T

Excerpt from *The History of Poland* by M.B. Biskupski, published by Greenwood Press, Connecticut, USA, 2000, p. 93. Biskupski is a prominent historian on central European history and a professor at Central Connecticut State University, USA.

In the last months of peace, the Germans and the Western powers pursued some understanding with the Soviets in anticipation of imminent hostilities: the Germans to avoid a major conflict in the east and to isolate Poland, assuming Western inactions; the allies to present Hitler with so daunting a prospect of a two-front war that he would quail, or, if the worst came, have a major eastern foe in the form of the Soviet Union. For their part, the Soviets hoped for mutually destructive struggle among capitalist states and had little interest in rescuing Britain and France from the German threat, certainly none in aiding the despised Poland. Soviet negotiations with the West were pointless from the start and were conducted in bad faith. The Soviet insistence that their troops be allowed complete discretion to enter Polish territory should they join against the Germans, which the Poles rejected as compromising their sovereignty, was never a serious issue despite the attention later given to it by many historians. The Soviets raised the issue merely to draw the Western powers, isolate Poland, and up the ante in their simultaneous negotiations with Germany.

The only enticement that Britain and France had to offer was that they would agree to preserve the borders of eastern Europe as they currently stood, in mid-1939. From the British and French perspective, the Soviets should be thankful that they were now being made part of international diplomacy and that they should appreciate that Britain and France would finally go to war against Germany, whose Nazi Party opposed communism and was a long-term threat to the Soviet Union. The Soviets, however, had lost territory at the end of the First World War, from which various states had been created. These included Finland, Poland, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and part of Romania. The Soviets believed that these should be returned to the Soviet Union at some point in the future. What Britain and France expected was for the Soviets to essentially endorse these old losses and fight to preserve these small states.

To further complicate alliance talks, Poland refused to allow any Soviet army to cross into its territory to fight Germany in the event of war, even if Germany had already invaded Poland. Poland was more concerned with the Soviets than with Germany. This meant that in the case of any war, the

Why were negotiations with the Soviet Union over Poland bound to fail, according to Source T?



Soviets would only be able to fight Germany in Poland if they received Polish permission. Since this permission was unlikely to be granted, the Soviets would be left to fight Germany only when the Germans were close to the Soviet border or already in their territory. This seemed irrational and unfair, and was proof to the Soviets that they were only a tool to be used, not a real alliance partner. Negotiations were not helped by the British and French, who continued to send low-level diplomats instead of important officials who could make decisions; this insulted the Soviet leadership. Negotiations continued until Germany and the Soviets announced that they had come to a separate agreement (see page 175).

Germany's response

Hitler never believed that Britain and France would actually go to war over Poland. Part of this belief stemmed from his earlier success over the Sudeten Crisis, and part was based in his thoughts on democratically elected governments (see page 150). He continued to believe throughout the crisis that the citizens of those countries would oppose any military intervention and that fear of war made these states fundamentally weak.

SOURCE U

Excerpt from *The Road to War* by Richard Overy and Andrew Wheatcroft, published by Penguin Books, London, UK, 1999, pp. 64–5. Overy is a prominent modern historian and professor at Exeter University, UK. Wheatcroft is a professor at City University London, UK.

On 3 April Hitler definitely resolved to attack Poland and bring the disputed territories, rich in coal and agricultural resources, into the Greater Reich [German Empire] by force. On 23 May he called the military together again to his study in the Chancellery [office]. 'The Pole is not a fresh enemy,' he told them, 'Poland will always be on the side of our adversaries ... It is not Danzig that is at stake. For us it is a matter of expanding our living-space in the east and making food supplies secure' ...

... The war could be isolated only, Hitler continued, as 'a matter of skilful politic.' His experience of Western appeasement in 1938 convinced him that neither Britain nor France would seriously fight for Poland. This conviction dominated Hitler's thinking throughout the crisis which led to war. The decision to attack Poland can only be understood in the light of this conviction. The war with the West, if it came to war, would come not in 1939, but in three or four years as planned, 'when the armaments programme will be completed.' ...

... Hitler saw the contest with the West as a contest of wills: 'Our enemies have men who are below average. No personalities. No masters, men of action ... Our enemies are little worms. I saw them at Munich.' Democracy had made the west soft.



Why did Hitler believe that any conflict with Poland would be limited, according to Source U?

In April, just weeks after the announced British and French guarantee of Poland and at the time Britain began conscription, Hitler ordered Germany's army to prepare plans for an invasion of Poland; this plan was called Case White. These plans took into consideration only Poland's forces and not those of Britain and France. On 28 April, Germany withdrew from the Polish–German Non-Aggression Pact (see page 151) as another way to threaten Poland so that it would negotiate away its territory; Poland did not respond.

Pact of Steel, May 1939

Germany also responded to British and French pressure by creating a formal alliance with Italy. The Rome–Berlin Axis (see page 159) had only been a statement of mutual support. The Pact of Steel required each state to:

- follow similar, closely co-ordinated foreign policies
- support the other in war
- make war plans together
- work together economically
- co-ordinate their press, news and other propaganda.

Historians such as A.J.P. Taylor have successfully argued that the Pact of Steel was essentially meaningless. There was little co-ordination of foreign policy and no mutual war plans. There was practically no economic co-operation either. It may be that Germany never intended on this alliance amounting to much other than to increase temporary pressure on France, which shared a border with Italy, and Britain. Italy's navy in the Mediterranean was large and could challenge British forces there. It may have been hoped that Britain and France, fearing a larger war, would force Poland to concede territory.

Nazi–Soviet Pact, 23 August 1939

Meanwhile, Germany began secret discussions with the Soviet Union. These talks essentially called for Germany and the Soviet Union not to fight each other, while allowing Germany to do whatever it wanted diplomatically, and otherwise, with the parts of Europe that had not belonged to the former Russian Empire, which the Soviets hoped to reclaim. Secret parts of the agreement made it clear that the parts of Poland that once belonged to Russia were now to be reabsorbed into the Soviet Union. This document, the Treaty of Non-Aggression between Germany and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (Soviet Union), commonly known as the Nazi–Soviet Pact, was signed on 23 August 1939, one week before Germany declared war on Poland on 1 September. Germany now had no fear of Soviet intervention on behalf of Poland and was convinced that Germany would now fight Poland without any outside interference.

What diplomatic initiatives failed to prevent the invasion of Poland by Germany?

→ Invasion of Poland, 1 September 1939

Throughout the crisis, Poland refused all negotiations. Britain and France, although working to prevent war by guaranteeing Poland's borders, hoped that Poland would grant Germany rail and road connections through the Polish Corridor and allow Danzig to rejoin Germany. This would not only prevent an immediate war, but also remove obstacles to future conflict. They also felt that it would help Poland by removing hundreds of thousands of Germans who did not want to be part of the country. Yet Poland refused and both Britain and France pledged that Germany would not be allowed to use war to settle conflicts, in line with the Locarno Treaties (see page 147) and the recent Anglo-German Declaration signed in Munich (see page 167).

Mobilization, 21 August 1939

Hitler had earlier ordered the military to create plans for Poland's invasion (see page 175). On 21 August, he ordered the military to begin mobilization for the implementation of Case White, the invasion plan, for 26 August. The announcement of the Nazi-Soviet Pact on 23 August removed any possibility of the Soviet Union intervening.

Invasion delayed, 25 August 1939

The 26 August invasion, however, was delayed. On 25 August, two separate issues emerged that caused Hitler to pause. These were:

- Britain and Poland announced that they had signed a formal military alliance, replacing the earlier verbal promises of mutual support.
- Mussolini asked to be released from obligations imposed by the Pact of Steel made just months earlier (see page 175).

Mussolini had hitherto been a supporter of Germany, hoping that by attaching his country to a powerful ally it too could benefit. It was hoped that a weakened, frightened France, for example, might grant Italy the island of Corsica and other southeastern French provinces; perhaps Italy could also obtain French colonies. Yet, it was clear that there was a real danger that Italy could be dragged into a war it was not prepared for and suddenly find itself facing the full might of Britain and France in Africa and the Mediterranean. Hitler granted Mussolini's request and the Pact of Steel was moderated so that Italy could play a supporting role but not yet a military or economic role.

On 25 and 26 August, Britain and France continued to work to prevent war. In talks with Britain's ambassador to Germany, Germany demanded that its military be allowed to move against Poland without interference. Germany pledged to respect the borders of the British Empire in return. This was an implicit threat to Britain and was immediately rejected. France's appeal for a negotiated settlement was also rejected.

On 28 August, Britain issued a formal warning to Germany not to violate Poland's borders. To underline the seriousness of the warning, all British ships in the Baltic and Mediterranean seas were ordered to leave those areas. The British government instituted emergency rationing of food and essential supplies. Hitler was still not convinced that Britain would go to war over Poland and Germany's forces continued to move into position for the invasion.

On 29 August, Germany made a final diplomatic gesture, perhaps to satisfy Britain and demonstrate that Hitler was reasonable to some degree. The offer was for the Polish government to send a representative with the authority to sign treaties to Berlin on 30 August. In this meeting, Poland would be required to agree that Danzig should be returned to German control, as well as the Polish Corridor – a new demand as earlier only transportation links through this land had been requested. Poland sent an ambassador to meet the German government on 31 August, but as he did not have authority to sign treaties for his government, the meeting ended almost immediately. Germany's radio stations announced that Poland had rejected negotiations.

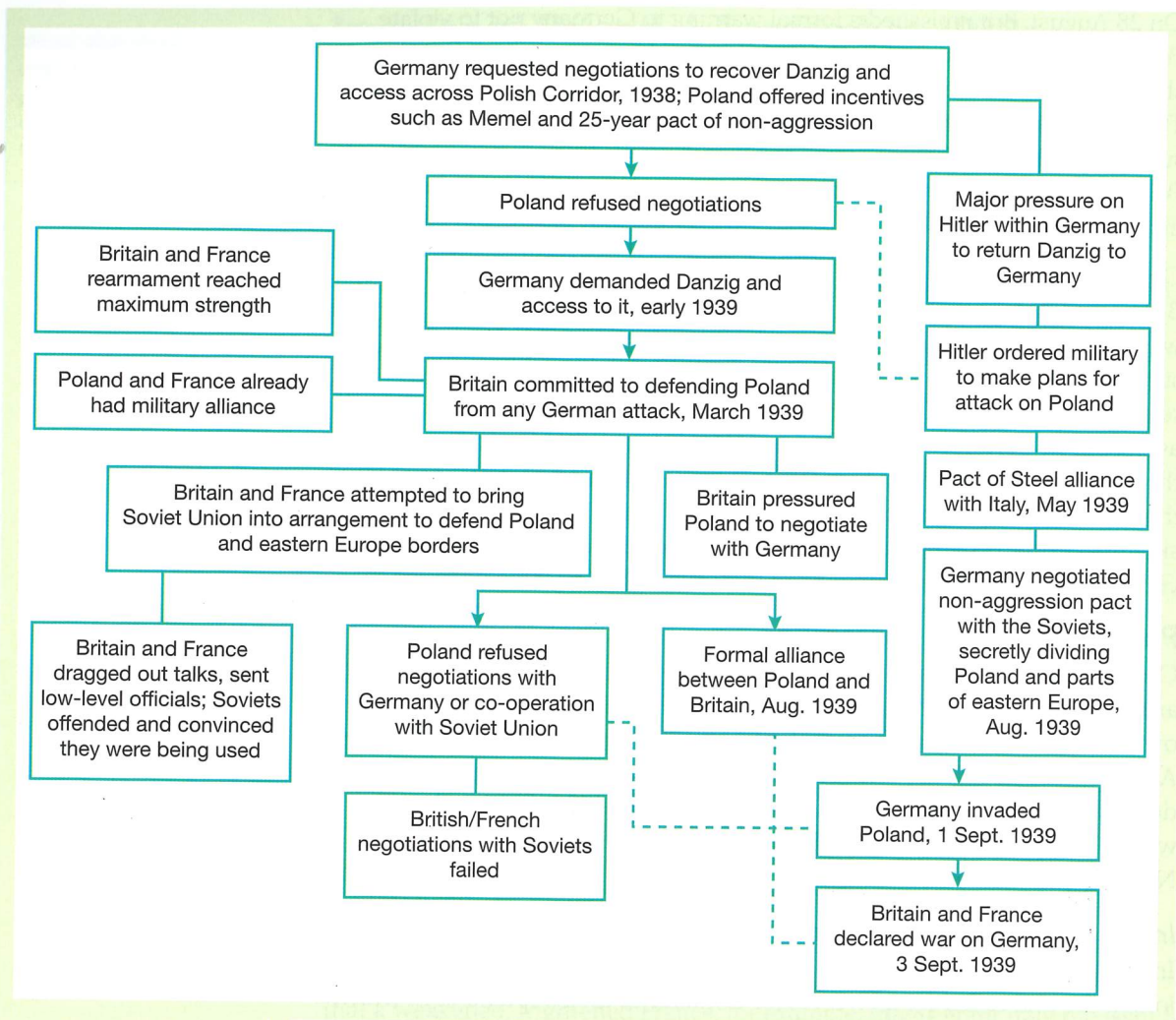
Poland invaded, 1 September

On 1 September, a massive invasion of Poland began. Three large German armies attacked from the north, west and south of the country, numbering over 1.5 million men, and a smaller, Slovakian army entered from the south. Aircraft bombed military and civilian positions, disrupted roads and railways, destroyed bridges and attacked factories. Thousands of civilians were killed within hours as German bomber aircraft attacked towns and cities. Danzig's Nazi Party government announced that it was now merging with Germany.

International response to the invasion of Poland

Immediately, Britain and France called for a cessation of hostilities. Italy joined too and called for a Five-Power Conference on 2 September in which Germany, Italy, Britain, France and Poland would meet to resolve the crisis. Britain agreed to the meeting, but insisted that Germany remove itself from Poland as a condition. Germany rejected this demand.

On 3 September, both France and Britain declared war on Germany. By all accounts, Hitler was shocked as he never expected either country to come to the aid of Poland. The declaration of war meant that a localized war between Poland and Germany would now be a European war. He had gambled that neither Great Power would be willing to risk war and possible defeat over the borders of an eastern European state; he lost. What would become the Second World War in Europe and north Africa had begun.



SUMMARY DIAGRAM

The final crises and outbreak of war 1939

5 Key debate

▶ **Key question:** Who should be blamed for the outbreak of an international war in Europe in September 1939?

Since 1939, historians have debated who and what caused the Second World War in Europe. A few of those arguments are presented here.

Germany and Hitler

Historian A.J.P. Taylor wrote in *The Origins of the Second World War* that the world blamed Hitler and his policies because he was gone, and someone in Germany had to be found guilty for causing the war that left millions dead