

The Road to World War II

How Appeasement Failed to Stop Hitler

By Klaus Wiegrefe

In the years leading up to World War II, Britain and France underestimated just how determined Adolf Hitler was in his lust for conquest. The failure of Neville Chamberlain's policy of appeasement meant war was inevitable.

Editor's note: This is part two of a SPIEGEL article about the beginning of World War II. You can read part one [here](#). You can also read an [accompanying interview](#) with former German President Richard von Weizsäcker about his personal experiences as a soldier in World War II.

A few days after returning from Vienna, Hitler, beaming with joy, told Goebbels "Czechoslovakia is next." Goebbels noted in his diary: "The Führer is wonderful. A true genius."

To Goebbels and Hitler, European dominance seemed within their grasp. Eighteen months later, they would take the final step into World War II.

Hitler met with Konrad Henlein, leader of the Sudeten German Party. In 1919, the Allied victors had incorporated Sudetenland, which had formerly been part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, into Czechoslovakia. However most Sudeten Germans rejected the newly formed nation, which discriminated against them. Particularly hard-hit by the Great Depression, many Sudeten Germans became increasingly enthusiastic about the chancellor in neighboring Germany.

In March 1938 Henlein, referring to the government in Prague, told Hitler: "We must always demand so much that we can never be satisfied."

Hitler's ambitions, of course, extended beyond the Sudetenland. He used the escalating crisis in Czechoslovakia, instigated with Henlein's help, as an excuse to invade, and said that it was his "staunch desire to wipe Czechoslovakia off the map." The Wehrmacht received orders to be prepared for an invasion by no later than Oct. 1. Henlein's Sudeten German Party took on the task of provoking a growing number of incidents, and soon his supporters were engaging in gun battles with government soldiers in the region bordering the German Reich.

'Force Is the Only Argument'

Europe was already consumed by fears of an approaching war. Insurance companies in London were no longer issuing policies with coverage against war damage.

British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain noted: "It is perfectly evident surely now that force is the only argument Germany understands."

And yet, in the end, no one came to the defense of Czechoslovakia, the only true democracy east of the Elbe River. Why not? Paris and Moscow were allied with Prague. However, neither of the two major powers could prevent a German invasion. The Soviets would have had to traverse Poland and Romania to reach Czechoslovakia, but both countries refused to allow Soviet troops to cross their territory. And France, which still had the option of attacking the Third Reich from the West, deferred to London once again.

As a result, in the summer of 1938 all eyes were on Prime Minister Chamberlain who, despite his 69 years, was inexperienced when it came to foreign policy. With his upturned collar, Homburg hat and watch chain, he seemed like a relic of the 19th century. Nevertheless, behind Chamberlain's old-fashioned appearance lay a serious determination which led Hitler to call him a "crazy old bastard."

Chamberlain, the conservative product of a family of politicians, was part of a large faction that sought to appease Germany by fulfilling its wishes, provided they appeared legitimate and were not enforced with violence.

Appeasement was a policy that fed on emotions as well as intellect, at least with Chamberlain. The British prime minister had lost his beloved cousin in World War I. From then on, he advocated the basic principle of all pacifists: Wars have no winners, only losers.

Looking the Other Way

As a former chancellor of the exchequer, Chamberlain was also keenly aware that the weary empire was stretched too thin, facing, as it did, challenges from Italy in the Mediterranean, from Japan in the Far East, and from Germany and the Stalinist Soviet Union in continental Europe.

Under these circumstances, it was tempting to appease the Third Reich at least by accommodating its demands. By 1938, several thousand people had fallen victim to Nazi terror. But most of them were communists and social democrats, making it easier for London's conservative establishment to look the other way. In the Soviet Union, on the other hand, Stalin's thugs had murdered more than a million people. Chamberlain could easily imagine cooperating with a more moderate Hitler to stabilize Central Europe against communist influences.

For this reason, the premier was willing to give the Germans free rein in dealing with the Sudeten "problem." In fact, he could even argue that the existing borders were not in keeping with the frequently invoked principle of self-determination.

The appeasers were later accused of have lost their moral compass. Critics are quick to point to the servility of British diplomats, which Hitler secretly derided, and the contempt with which many appeasers spoke of Eastern Europe.

But there was more to London's soft stance toward the Nazis. Even though a generation had passed since the "Great War," the majority of Britons shied away from another war. Great Britain's dominions, like South Africa, Australia and Canada, were also reluctant to sacrifice their soldiers on Europe's battlefields for the Sudetenland. From the standpoint of domestic policy, there was no alternative to Chamberlain's course.

'I Know that England Will Remain Neutral'

Historians have since realized that the military situation for the Western Allies was far from hopeless. Hitler had exposed western Germany by moving troops eastward for the invasion of Czechoslovakia. In addition, Germany's gasoline reserves were barely sufficient for a four-month military campaign. Significantly, senior German military officials feared a world war. A small group, which included Beck and Weizsäcker, even planned to stage a coup in the event that war broke out.

But while Hitler shrugged off his generals' warnings -- "I know that England will remain neutral," he said -- the worst-case scenarios being painted by British and French experts played into the hands of those politicians who wanted to avoid war at all costs.

The West, at the time, was as puzzled over Hitler's personality and goals as it is today over the motives and plans of Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. Could a determined approach deter Hitler and thus preserve the peace? Or would Western resoluteness merely encourage Hitler's fanatical supporters to rally behind him, making it more difficult for him to make compromises?

In early September, as the signs of a German attack increased, Chamberlain decided to meet with Hitler in person, apparently in the belief that he, and he alone, could develop a reasonable relationship based on trust.

The premier met with the Führer twice, first on Sept. 15, 1938, at Hitler's mountain retreat near Berchtesgaden, and a week later at the Hotel Dreesen in Bad Godesberg, near Bonn. He was not overly impressed by his host; in a letter to his sister, Chamberlain wrote that Hitler looked "entirely undistinguished" and would not stand out in a crowd.

Serious Miscalculation

To Hitler's amazement, Chamberlain, a democrat he despised, proved to be unbending. Admittedly, the British premier did agree, together with the French, to urge the Czechs and Slovaks to give up the Sudetenland. But Chamberlain was unwilling to yield on the remainder of Czechoslovakia, and he made it clear to Hitler that if Czechoslovakia were attacked, Great Britain and France would side with Prague. Hitler could have it all -- just not with violence. The two men parted ways without having reached a conclusive agreement.

By that point, Chamberlain should have rethought his strategy, since Hitler's stance must have raised the question as to why he would risk a military conflict if he were merely interested in Sudetenland, a concession that the West had already made. But after his first meeting with Hitler, the premier noted: "Here was a man who could be relied upon when he had given his word." The Reich chancellor's intentions were "limited," Chamberlain said. Rarely had a statesman made such a serious miscalculation.

Of course, Hitler's analysis of the situation was also off the mark. He raved, threatened and set ultimatums -- the usual performance. On the evening of Sept. 26, he whipped up 20,000 of his supporters at Berlin's Sportpalast arena. In response, the crowd chanted: "Führer, command us! We will follow you!"

For the first time, however, people proved to be unimpressed by such performances. Hitler's announcement that there would be war by the following week if the British maintained their position was at risk of backfiring on him.

The dictator was pressured from all sides -- by advisers, ministers and military officers -- not to hazard the leap into the dark. Even leading Nazis like Göring could not understand why Germany should go to war for something it could have for nothing.

'I Cannot Wage a War with These People'

To impress foreign diplomats, Hitler ordered a division to conduct a parade in Berlin on the afternoon of Sept. 27. The Führer expected a flood of public enthusiasm, similar to the response in 1914. Instead, he was forced to look on as passersby ducked into entryways or stared at the soldiers in icy silence.

It was the "most striking demonstration against the war that I've ever seen," wrote Berlin-based US journalist William L. Shirer. Hitler turned away from the parade and said: "I cannot wage a war with these people yet."

When Mussolini, under pressure from Chamberlain, argued for a peaceful solution the next morning, the dictator complied. "We have no starting point for war," noted a disappointed Goebbels, one of the few hawks in the Nazi leadership.

Twenty-four hours later, the Allies met in Munich with Hitler and Mussolini, who sought to position himself as a European peace broker, to sign an agreement. Under the plan, Czechoslovakia was to return the Sudetenland to the Third Reich. A few days later the Polish junta attacked defenseless Prague with what Churchill called "the hunger of a hyena" and annexed a disputed region. In return for the Sudetenland, the Führer vowed to renounce all use of violence.

In London, the residents of the British capital greeted their prime minister with ovations, calling him "good old Neville" and singing "For He's a Jolly Good Fellow."

A Disaster for the West

Munich 1938. The meeting of the statesmen seemed to have become a symbol of a great day in European history, of a willingness to make compromises and promote peace, and of reason and political foresight.

But from the standpoint of military strategy, the appeasement policy proved to be a disaster for the West. Without the natural barrier of Sudetenland and deprived of the system of border fortifications there, Czechoslovakia had become impossible to defend.

Politically speaking, however, Chamberlain's willingness to compromise eventually contributed to the demise of Nazi Germany, because the prime minister's concessions left no doubt as to the Germans' sole culpability for any further escalation.

Hitler had not taken things too far yet, and everything could still have ended peacefully -- without the invasion of Poland, without Stalingrad and without the bombing of Dresden.

But in the early morning hours of March 15, 1939, German tanks rolled through a late winter snowstorm sweeping across Bohemia and Moravia. Because resistance would have been a lost cause, the government in Prague ordered its own soldiers to lay down their arms.

'The Most Beautiful Day of My Life'

Hitler triumphantly referred to the invasion by his troops as the "destruction of the remains of Czechoslovakia." The western portion of the republic was incorporated into the Reich as the "Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia," while Slovakia became a satellite state within the German empire.

"Children, now each of you give me a kiss here and here," called out an exuberant Hitler to his secretaries, pointing to his cheeks. "This is the most beautiful day of my life!" The British, on the other hand, called it "the rape of Prague." In their view, the German soldiers had defiled the golden city on the Vltava River.

Within hours, the euphoric enthusiasm millions of Britons had shown for the appeasement policy turned into outrage and, bit-by-bit, fierce resistance.

In a major speech he gave in his native Birmingham, Chamberlain warned that "no greater mistake could be made than to suppose that, because it (Great Britain) believes war to be a cruel and senseless thing, this nation has so far lost its fiber that it will not take part, to the utmost of its power, in resisting such a challenge."

Now the prime minister introduced conscription. Now he was prepared to negotiate with the hated Soviet Union. And now Great Britain and, in its wake, France voiced a guarantee for Hitler's former junior partner, Poland. Intelligence agents had reported that Germany was preparing an attack on Warsaw.

But was it still possible to deter Hitler?

The Goal of Lebensraum

April 1939. The Nazis had ruled Germany for more than six years, and if their supreme party leader had died then and not six years later, the Germans of that generation would have viewed him as one of the greatest men in history. The so-called disgrace of Versailles had been completely wiped out, and the Reich was more powerful than ever before.

But Hitler wasn't satisfied. His true goal, with British acquiescence and Poland's help, was to invade the Soviet Union to acquire *Lebensraum* ("living space") for the Aryan race.

But ever since Munich, he was increasingly convinced that a war with Britain had to be taken into consideration. And the Poles, for their part, did not submit to the wishes of the Führer.

Hitler had offered them a "permanent settlement" of relations, a non-aggression pact that would remain in place until 1959, at which time Warsaw would join forces with him to fight the Soviets. He also wanted to regain control over Danzig (today Gdansk), which was under the protection of the League of Nations, and to create an extraterritorial road and railroad line from the heart of the Reich

to East Prussia, that is, a corridor of sorts through the Polish Corridor. Compared with Hitler's other demands, this was downright restrained.

'I Shall Brew Them a Devil's Drink'

To his amazement, the Polish military junta and Foreign Minister Józef Beck, who tended to be overly confident, rejected his offer. The idea of redrawing Poland's borders was intolerable for the agitated Polish public. And, of course, the Poles, alarmed by the Prague coup, feared that they could be next.

In this situation, Beck accepted the surprising British and French offer of a mutual assistance pact, "between two taps of his finger against his cigarette," as a British diplomat wrote, describing the scene.

Hitler was furious when he heard the news. Beside himself with rage, he banged his fists against his marble desktop in the Reich chancellery and cursed Great Britain with such ferocity that a flabbergasted eyewitness told a confidant: "I have just seen a madman. I still can hardly believe it."

Hitler's rant ended with a threat: "I shall brew them a devil's drink."

A few days later, he signed the orders approving the operation known as "Case White" -- the invasion of Poland. The Wehrmacht was to be prepared to attack Germany's eastern neighbor by no later than Sept. 1, 1939.

Courting the Soviet Union

In light of anti-Polish sentiment within the population, as well as among senior diplomats and military officials, Hitler could depend on his plans being met with approval. For many Germans, Poland was "an illegitimate child" of the hated Treaty of Versailles, in the words of British historian Richard Overy. In July 1939, Eduard Wagner, who would later become the quartermaster-general of the German army, noted: "We hope to take care of the Poles quickly and, frankly speaking, we are looking forward to it." Now the ball was in the Western powers' court.

Hitler was full of confidence. The British and the French, he reasoned, would ultimately accept an invasion of Poland. "The men I met in Munich will not enter into a new world war," he said. He was so convinced that this was true that he did not even order preparations to be made for a campaign against France. Indeed, Germany lacked the ammunition, tanks, bombers, ships and trained soldiers to do so. Initially, Hitler planned to attack Poland, and Poland alone.

This was the state of affairs five months before the beginning of World War II. It is difficult to say what would have happened next if officials at the Foreign Ministry in Berlin had not gained the impression, given the situation, that Germany stood a chance of making some kind of deal with its archenemy, the Soviet Union.

It was a preposterous idea at first glance. Hadn't Hitler made it unmistakably clear to the world, in his 782-page manifesto "Mein Kampf," that the Soviet Union was the main target of his lust for conquest? Not surprisingly, the dictator's enthusiasm remained muted when his ministers proposed the idea.

But he allowed them to establish contacts and generate interest in rapprochement. When a suspicious Moscow diplomat mentioned "Mein Kampf" to his German counterpart, the German diplomat replied: "Oh that, that's out of date." The Soviets, he said, "should not take it seriously."

Testing the Waters

Whether it was Stalin or Hitler who sought rapprochement first remains disputed to this day. "If it is possible, we go on the offensive. If it is not, we wait," Stalin's foreign minister, Vyacheslav Molotov, would later say, clearly expressing the cynical principle of Stalin's foreign policy.

In the Soviets' eyes, both the West and the Nazis were class enemies. But because the latter seemed more dangerous, Stalin had made several offers to the West in the 1930s to take part in the

containment of the Third Reich. But the British Conservatives, the champions of anti-communism in the Western world at the time, consistently rebuffed his advances. It was only in April 1939, after the Prague coup, that London and Moscow began cautiously testing the waters of cooperation.

A Soviet offer to form an alliance had been on the table since April 17. It was a classic mutual assistance pact, combined with the West's promise to rush to the aid of all countries along the western Soviet border, between the Arctic Ocean and the Black Sea, in the event of German aggression. That included the Poles.

But Chamberlain could not bring himself to shed his mistrust. Russia, he wrote to his sister, only wanted "other people" to fight the Germans.

Protecting Poland

The British prime minister also faced a dilemma. Although Poland feared the Germans, it also feared the Soviets, and it was determined not to allow the Red Army onto its territory. Polish Foreign Minister Jozef Beck argued: "Once the Russians have entered our country, they won't leave again so easily."

This fear of the Soviets was justified, as we know today. Experts estimate that several hundred thousand people fell victim to Russian atrocities after the Red Army invaded eastern Poland in 1939.

On the other hand, Poland could not be defended without Soviet help. This led Chamberlain's domestic political rival, David Lloyd George, to demand that London issue an ultimatum to Warsaw. "Unless the Poles are prepared to accept the only conditions with which we can successfully help them," he said, "the responsibility must be theirs."

But could London take such a position in good conscience? Britain had, after all, opposed the Third Reich to protect Poland from the Nazi despot's unpredictability. How, then, could London demand that Warsaw put its trust in the savage Stalin?

Chamberlain played for time, hoping he could stall the Russians without turning them "against us."

A Big Swamp

The Germans took a decidedly different approach. In Berlin, German officials repeatedly remarked to diplomats at the Soviet embassy that Berlin was prepared to talk to Moscow at any time, and that it was merely waiting for a sign.

Hitler was running out of time. As of September, he said, Poland would turn into "a big swamp, becoming wholly unsuited for any military action."

The closer the scheduled date of the invasion came, the more anxious he became. "The success of the isolation (of Poland) will be decisive," the World War I veteran stressed, anxious to avoid another war on two fronts.

And how better to guarantee the neutrality of the Western powers than with a fourth partition of Poland by Moscow and Berlin? If that happened, London and Paris would find themselves confronted with two major powers, the Soviet Union and the Third Reich.

'A German-Russian Understanding'

On July 26, the Germans put their cards on the table. Karl Schnurre, an expert on Russia and the Nazi regime's special envoy, invited the Soviet Chargé d'Affaires Georgei Astakhov to a meeting at the luxury restaurant Ewest in Berlin. War with the British was inevitable, the German told Astakhov. "What can we offer in return?" Schnurre asked. "Neutrality and, if Moscow wishes, a German-Russian understanding over mutual interests...from the Baltic Sea to the Black Sea."

Two weeks later, Astakhov submitted his detailed report to Moscow on how the Germans imagined the future order of Eastern Europe: The western part of Poland would fall to the German Reich, while everything else but Lithuania would go to Stalin.

Stalin greedily snapped at the large amounts of land Hitler was offering him, and in no way did he attempt to dissuade the Germans from invading Poland. This made him their accomplice. And the fact that the Germans had assured him extensive shipments of raw materials enabled Stalin to defuse one of Britain's most powerful weapons, the naval blockade.

By that point war was only a few days away. On the afternoon of Aug. 23, 1939, Foreign Minister Joachim von Ribbentrop landed at the Moscow airport, where the swastika banner flapped in the wind alongside the Soviet flag, with its hammer and sickle. A cheerful Stalin received his guest at the Kremlin. The Nazi felt as if he were "among old party comrades."

That evening, Ribbentrop and his Soviet counterpart, Molotov, signed a non-aggression pact and a secret supplementary protocol dividing Eastern Europe into German and Russian "spheres of influence."

A Pact with Satan

The Germans were in such a hurry that not even a clean copy of the agreement was prepared. Plain sheets of paper without headers were used. And whoever typed the documents must have had limited typing skills: The Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact is full of typos.

Hitler, uninterested in a lasting friendship, wasn't bothered by the makeshift nature of the agreement. He wanted the "pact with Satan," as he called it, because it would help clear the way for war. "Now Poland is in the position where I want it to be," the Nazi dictator said gleefully. He was convinced that the arrangement would keep Britain out of the war.

But Hitler had miscalculated, and so had many Germans, as historian Overy writes. They believed that an invasion of Poland "made sense" because it would "resolve" the open issues, according to Overy.

On Sept. 3, 1939, British Ambassador Nevile Henderson announced that London would enter the war unless the Wehrmacht called off the invasion within hours and withdrew.

The Führer was stone-faced when he heard the news, as his interpreter reported. Then he turned to Foreign Minister Ribbentrop, "with a furious look in his eyes," and asked: "What now?"

It was the last opportunity to stop World War II. But it was missed.

The Slaughter Begins

A short time later, the dictator was in high spirits once again, boasting that the British had always been warmongers. "The Führer is very confident," Goebbels noted.

In the end, many conclude that although the Western powers failed with their attempts at appeasement and turned the Italian Fascists and the Soviets into Hitler's accomplices, the only thing that could have prevented the inferno in September 1939 was if Hitler had been overthrown. But there was neither an uprising nor a coup.

On the evening of Sept. 3, the Führer boarded a special train that took him to a spot near the front. He wanted to be as close to the action as possible.

It was there that the slaughter was already in full swing, the slaughter that would not come to an end in Europe until May 8, 1945 -- and that Hitler had so fervently hoped for.

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