

## The Road to World War II

### Why Wasn't Hitler Stopped?

By Klaus Wiegrefe

**World War II began 70 years ago when Germany invaded Poland on Sept. 1, 1939. It would last six years and claim millions of lives. But the Allies missed several opportunities to stop Hitler in the run-up to the war.**

*Editor's note: This is part one of a SPIEGEL article about the beginning of World War II. You can read part two [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.*

It is Aug. 25, 1939, and Adolf Hitler's official apartment in Berlin's Old Reich Chancellery is decorated with the usual floral arrangements, including magnificent bouquets at the entrance to the garden room. But on this Friday Hitler, normally an admirer of summer blossoms, has no interest in flowers.

The dictator, wearing a brown jacket and black trousers, seems worn out. His shoulders slump forward and his deep-set eyes wander restlessly around the room. The Nazi leader is nervous.

At the German-Polish border, about 150 kilometers (94 miles) east of Berlin, 54 German divisions, or about 1.5 million soldiers, are about to take up their positions, and 3,600 armored vehicles and more than 1,500 airplanes are ready to embark on the operation known as "Case White" -- the invasion of Poland on the following day. All the German forces need to move forward is an order from the Führer.

But is this the right time for Hitler to attack? How will Paris and London, Warsaw's allies, react? And how will Hitler's confederate, Italian dictator Benito Mussolini, position himself? Italy is considered an important major power, capable of tying up British naval forces in the Mediterranean. But will Il Duce, who was only given a vague forewarning of Germany's imminent invasion of Poland the day before, play along?

#### 'An Artist by Nature'

There is so much activity in Hitler's quarters that it has come to resemble a command post. A few dozen senior Nazi Party members are there, as are a few officers, and they are constantly making calls on telephones perched on windowsills, chairs and tables. Several pairs of glasses are scattered around so that the nearsighted dictator always has a pair to hand. Hitler is constantly going into the music room or the garden room to confer with individual officials. Two SS guards take pains to ensure that no one disturbs the conversations.

Shortly before lunch, one of the dictator's aides asks the officers how much time Hitler has left before giving the order to invade. Until 3 p.m., the commanding generals reply.

A drum roll in the forecourt of the New Reich Chancellery announces the arrival of the British ambassador, Sir Neville Henderson. The British diplomat already knows the way to Hitler's office, located in a room to the side of the enormous marble gallery, which, at 146 meters (480 feet), is exactly twice as long as the room it is modeled after, the famous Hall of Mirrors in the Palace of Versailles. The grand approach to Hitler's office is intended to intimidate visitors on their way to see the dictator.

But on this day Hitler is not trying to intimidate Henderson, but rather to tempt him with an offer. The Third Reich, he says, is prepared to guarantee the existence of the British Empire and come to the aid of the British wherever such help is needed. In return, Hitler wants London to accept the invasion of Poland.

Near the end of the meeting, the Führer seems to become sentimental, saying that he is, after all, "an artist by nature, and not a politician." Once the Polish question is resolved, he says, he will pursue "the life of an artist."

The diplomat has hardly left the room before Hitler gives the order to attack. It is 3:02 p.m.

### **A Heavy Blow**

Three hours later, the news arrives from London that Great Britain has demonstratively signed a military alliance with Poland that had been agreed to several months earlier. Could it be that the British are not bluffing, after all?

A short time later, the Italian ambassador delivers a letter from Mussolini, who writes that he is not prepared to take part in a war. A stone-faced Hitler dismisses the diplomats and spends the next hour pacing back and forth, railing against his unfaithful ally.

"The Führer is brooding," notes propaganda chief Joseph Goebbels. "This was a heavy blow to him."

At approximately 7 p.m., Hitler issues a new order: "Stop everything immediately."

The Wehrmacht manages to pull it off. Even though the war machinery has already been activated, the invasion is stopped. But one special unit, whose mission is to capture a strategically important railroad tunnel in southern Poland, doesn't receive the news in time. After encountering almost no resistance, the soldiers capture a railroad station, returning only the next day. A German delegation issues an official apology for the "incident," noting that it must have been the work of an "insane" person.

War seemed to have been averted. Or had it?

### **'Long Live War'**

Europe in the summer of 1939. According to Ernst von Weizsäcker, then a senior official in the German Foreign Ministry and the father of later West German President Richard von Weizsäcker, the dictator at the head of the strongest military power on the continent was "not a man of logic or reason."

What an understatement.

Nikolaus von Vormann, a young officer, became a member of the Führer's entourage. He was present when Hitler met with his most trusted advisers over lunch or in the evenings, and he noted, with some surprise, that the Reich chancellor's opinion at 11 a.m. was often "completely different from his views at noon or 1 p.m." Hitler, at the time, was vacillating between wanting to invade Poland -- even if it meant triggering a world war -- and postponing the campaign.

There was only one option that was apparently unacceptable to Hitler: permanent peace.

A veteran of World War I who had seen the tattered bodies of his fellow soldiers lying in the trenches, and who had been the victim of a poison gas attack himself, Hitler never recovered from the defeat. A proponent of social Darwinism, he defined politics as the "conduct and process of the historical struggle for the life of nations." Without war, there was stagnation, and stagnation, Hitler believed, was tantamount to ruin. "Long live war -- even if it lasts from two to eight years," he proclaimed. A man who was so regaled by death and doom was incapable of promoting peace.

### **The Invasion Begins**

On Sept. 1, 1939, Hitler's indecisiveness ended. The Wehrmacht had invaded neighboring Poland at dawn. Before the invasion, members of the SS, wearing Polish uniforms, had staged border incidents, and the bodies of murdered concentration camp inmates were presented to the global public as the victims of Polish aggression.

Shortly before 10 a.m. Hitler, feigning outrage, hoarsely announced to the Reichstag: "As of 5:45 a.m., we are now returning their fire." But not even the time was correct. The German invasion had begun an hour earlier.

Two days later, the German invasion had turned into a world war. In addition to Great Britain and France, Commonwealth members Australia, India and New Zealand declared war on the Third Reich, followed by South Africa and Canada soon afterwards.

But that was only the beginning. The war was to rage for another 2,194 days. By the end, Germany was at war with 54 nations. A total of 110 million soldiers fought between Murmansk and Marseille, Tokyo and Tobruk, using weapons that ranged from flamethrowers to folding shovels, hand grenades to machine guns.

The inferno Hitler had unleashed led to an escalation of violence unprecedented in the history of mankind. About 60 million people were killed, more than half of them women, children and the elderly. Six million people died in the Holocaust alone.

### **The Roots of War**

Like a massive earthquake, Hitler's war forever destroyed a world order with Europe at its center. After 1945, the United States became the world's principal driving force. The shift of Poland's borders to the West, the Soviet Union's dominance of Eastern Europe, which would last until 1989, and the partition of Germany -- none of this would have happened without World War II.

And at the root of it all was a man who -- if one is to believe his contemporaries -- was just 1.75 meters (5 foot 9 inches) tall and who weighed a mere 70 kilograms (154 pounds), a man whose guttural pronunciation betrayed his Austrian origins: Adolf Hitler, born in the town of Braunau am Inn.

But is it possible for one man, no matter how powerful a dictator, to set the entire world on fire? For some time, there have been growing doubts about the previously generally accepted view, and the consensus today is that the situation was far more complex than once believed. It remains indisputable that World War II would not have happened without Hitler. But it is also clear that a number of factors helped to turn the Nazi leader's war fantasies into reality.

One of those factors was the compliance of conservative elites in the military, the civil administration and the world of business. They did not share Hitler's crude concept of racial superiority, and many of them feared a war with the Western powers. Nevertheless, they dreamed of acquiring global power and had aspirations to create a Greater Germany that would, at the very least, dominate Eastern Europe. They included men like Franz Halder, the commander-in-chief of the army, who announced in the spring of 1939 that his men had to overrun Poland and would then, "filled with the spirit of having emerged victorious from enormous battles, be prepared to either oppose Bolshevism or be thrown to the West."

### **Mouthpiece of the Nationalist Masses**

Ardent support among the German public was another contributing factor to Hitler's success. Far from being an unpopular despot, Hitler was the "mouthpiece of the nationalist masses," as his biographer Ian Kershaw writes, and the dictator was intoxicated by the enthusiasm he generated among Germans. Indeed, the hubris that eventually led to his demise was only made possible by the interaction between the Führer and the people.

This conclusion is not weakened by the absence of scenes of celebration on streets and at railway stations at the beginning of the war. We now know that the mood quickly shifted after the first victories. Despite the millions killed in World War I, the Germans had not become radical pacifists. Instead, they merely wanted to avoid an overly high death toll.

On Sept. 20, the American journalist William Shirer wrote, in Berlin: "I have still to find a German, even among those who don't like the regime, who sees anything wrong in the German destruction of

Poland." As long as there were no significant losses, Shirer wrote, "this will not be an unpopular war." It was an apt prognosis.

Finally, the long-term consequences of World War I prepared the ground for catastrophe. Various powers sought to revise the postwar order and sheer anarchy soon prevailed. Italy's fascists, Japan's military leaders, the Soviet Union under Josef Stalin, even the military regime in Poland -- all of these powers aspired to build zones of influence or empires, and to do so they cooperated, at one time or another, with the Nazis. Even democrats in Great Britain and France appeased the German dictator for far too long, albeit mainly for an honorable reason: to save the peace.

### **Isolated**

Of course, it all started with the Germans. When Hitler became chancellor of the Reich in 1933, it had been less than a generation since the end of World War I, and yet Germany's own role in that war remained unexamined. Disappointed by defeat and resentful over the provisions of the Treaty of Versailles, Germans of all classes and political stripes yearned to correct these perceived wrongs. Revisionism, as the German historian Rolf-Dieter Müller notes, was "the most powerful force" in the country.

At this time, the Third Reich was isolated internationally. Democrats in London, Paris and Prague kept their distance, as did fascist Italy and the Soviet Union. Initially Hitler even feared that neighboring countries could launch a pre-emptive war against Germany.

But his concerns were exaggerated. It soon became clear just how fragile the postwar order was. Ironically, the military junta in Poland, a country that would suffer more than any other during World War II, entered into what the German-Polish historian Frank Golczewski calls a "junior partnership" with Hitler. In 1934, Warsaw and Berlin signed a non-aggression pact, opening up Hitler's options in the East. The Polish regime, for its part, took advantage of the arrangement to exert pressure on neighboring countries.

Hitler, at first, found himself in the unfamiliar situation of having to rein in the Foreign Ministry and military officers. His generals wanted a faster and more comprehensive military buildup than the dictator felt was opportune from the standpoint of foreign policy.

In this context, contemporaries were taken aback by the breathtaking speed with which the Third Reich shook off the constraints of Versailles. On March 10, 1935, Aviation Minister Hermann Göring let it be known that he was in command of an air force, and less than a week later Hitler announced the introduction of compulsory military service to increase the size of the Wehrmacht to 550,000 men. Both actions were clear violations of the Treaty of Versailles, which had stipulated an extensive disarmament of Germany.

The European victors in World War I -- Great Britain, France and Italy -- had long recognized that the terms of Versailles stood in the way of lasting peace. Who knows how the history of the 20th century would have progressed if the Allies had conceded all the things to the unpopular Weimar Republic that they would later grudgingly accept when Hitler simply helped himself.

### **Restraining Hitler**

In the spring of 1935, Mussolini invited British Prime Minister Ramsay MacDonald and French President Pierre-Étienne Flandin to talks at the chic Grand Hotel in Stresa, on Lake Maggiore in Italy. Taking advantage of the propaganda value of the summit, the vain Mussolini arrived by speedboat at the Art Nouveau building, located directly on the magnificent lakeside promenade. By the end of the meeting, the Italian schoolteacher, the Scottish pacifist and the mustached Frenchman vowed to take "all appropriate steps" to punish Hitler's future encroachments.

Il Duce was particularly outraged by the attempts of Austrian Nazis to assume power in Vienna. He called for a "punitive expedition" against Berlin. "Everyone who is gathered here knows that Germany intends to conquer everything from here to Baghdad," he said.

But Mussolini had his own aspirations, which included his dream of the rebirth of a Roman empire that was to include Abyssinia, or modern-day Ethiopia. A few months after Stresa, he attacked the African kingdom, an act that permanently damaged his relationships with other countries, particularly Great Britain.

Hitler turned the situation to his benefit with diabolical skill. He secretly supplied the Africans with weapons to prevent an early Italian victory. At the same time, he offered the internationally isolated Mussolini economic and military aid.

In early 1936, the Führer had the Italians where he wanted them. Mussolini, anxious to secure Germany's backing, declared the so-called Stresa Front "dead and buried once and for all" and gave Hitler to understand that he would have no objections to Austria becoming a satellite of Germany. Soon afterwards, Mussolini began referring to a Rome-Berlin Axis.

Without Italian protection, Austria was at the mercy of pressure from the Third Reich. Once Austria had fallen into Germany's sphere of influence, Czechoslovakia's strategic situation deteriorated. And once Hitler had taken care of Prague and Bratislava, it became next to impossible to successfully defend Poland, non-aggression pact or not.

"The Führer is pleased," Goebbels noted.

### **'There Never Was a War Easier to Prevent'**

Nevertheless, the German Reich remained vulnerable on its Western border, a circumstance that would later prompt Hitler's great rival, Winston Churchill, to say: "There never was a war in all history easier to prevent by timely action" than World War II.

A provision of the Treaty of Versailles applied in western Germany that Foreign Minister Gustav Stresemann had expressly accepted in 1925. It stipulated that there were to be no German tanks, garrisons or air bases in the Rhineland and within a zone extending 50 kilometers east of the Rhine River. This made it possible for the French army to occupy the Ruhr region, where the Third Reich produced much of its weaponry, without significant casualties. This was seen as an intolerable situation, not just by the Nazis, but also by almost all senior German military officers and diplomats.

On March 7, 1936, Germany was ready to change the status quo. Before dawn, the first freight trains, loaded with field artillery and draft horses, began rolling toward the eastern bank of the Rhine. But Hitler was taking a decidedly cautious approach, sending only about 30,000 soldiers into the demilitarized zone and allowing only 3,000 men to cross the river and advance to the border. The soldiers were under orders to avoid combat with the French at all costs, and to remain ready at all times to retreat within an hour.

The French, for their part, did nothing in response. While residents of the Rhineland and Saarland regions cheered on the troops, the French cabinet met in Paris. Prime Minister Albert Sarraut was determined not to allow the Germans to take control of the zone "unilaterally." As he would later report, he was one of very few people in France to hold this view. The people, the parties and his fellow politicians were all still traumatized by World War I, which was waged largely on French soil.

### **'I Have Never Really Endured Such Fear'**

When French Chief of Staff Maurice Gamelin, choosing his words carefully, told the cabinet that a French advance would likely encounter the greatest German resistance, probably leading to war, and that France was not prepared for an offensive campaign, the cabinet members nodded approvingly and decided to leave the next move up to the British. Only if they joined in would the French take an active role, they concluded.

But London wasn't about to play along. If the French were unwilling to make a move, why should Britain send its sons to risk their lives?

At the time, French intelligence arrived at an absurd estimate of 295,000 German troops in the Rhineland. The specialists had included members of the SS, SA and other Nazi organizations in their count. Today, we know that a single division would have been sufficient to drive out Hitler's soldiers.

"I have never really endured such fear ... If the French had been truly serious, it would have been the greatest possible political defeat for me," Hitler later told a confidant.

### **A Triumph for Hitler**

Instead of the failure he feared, it was a triumph for Hitler -- and what a triumph it was. The Germans celebrated their Führer like a messiah. In a new Reichstag election on March 29, 1936, which was only moderately manipulated, close to 99 percent of the electorate voted for the Nazi Party. Even Goebbels was surprised.

Hitler had always felt intoxicated by the adulation of his supporters. The occupation of the Rhineland, as Kershaw writes, "substantiated Hitler's hubris." On March 14, 1936, the chancellor told an ecstatic crowd in Munich: "I go with the certainty of a sleepwalker along the path laid out for me by Providence."

He soon proclaimed to his generals that he had reached the irrevocable decision that Germany would have to act "by 1943-45 at the latest" to secure its *Lebensraum* ("living space"). Did this mean that the die had been cast? Was it still possible to avert war?

A massive military buildup had already been underway for some time. It took the Third Reich to the brink of bankruptcy, because its tanks and bombers had been paid for with borrowed money. But Hitler, a dilettante when it came to economic issues, was undaunted by economic constraints. In his world, it was will and not skill that triumphed.

However, the dynamics of the arms buildup also accelerated the rate of aggression. As raw materials and hard currency became increasingly scarce, a growing number of officials in Berlin began casting a covetous eye on Austria and Czechoslovakia -- on their gold and foreign currency reserves, their mineral resources and the Czechoslovak weapons factories.

### **An Historic Mission**

Even the small group of men led by Weizsäcker and Army Chief of Staff Ludwig Beck, which was increasingly critical of the regime and included some who would later join the July 20 plot to assassinate Hitler, joined in the widespread German consensus that there was a "Czechoslovak problem (possibly also an Austrian problem)" that "had to be rectified," as Beck put it.

All the same, after 1945 Weizsäcker managed to argue that the group had been opposed to a world war, and that it supported diplomatic pressure instead of tanks and bombs. Weizsäcker compared the approach he advocated toward Prague to a "chemical process of dissolution."

It should be noted that Hitler already had plans to subjugate the two neighboring countries, but not until the 1940s. Now he decided to drop all pretense of restraint.

A now-legendary scene unfolded at Hitler's mountain estate near Berchtesgaden in the Bavarian Alps. The Führer had summoned Kurt von Schuschnigg, the Austrian chancellor and member of the Christian Social Party who ruled Vienna with dictatorial powers. Hitler wanted Schuschnigg, a devoutly Catholic lawyer with the appearance of an accountant, to finally accept Austrian Nazis into his cabinet.

At first, the two chancellors discussed the magnificent view. Yes, Hitler said dreamily, "this is where my thoughts mature." But then he brusquely changed the subject and said: "But we haven't come together to talk about the nice view and the weather."

Hitler told the Austrian that he was on an "historic mission," and that Schuschnigg should not delude himself into thinking that he could stop him "for so much as half an hour." "Who knows," the German

chancellor said ominously, "perhaps I shall be suddenly overnight in Vienna: like a spring storm. Then you will really experience something!"

### 'One Reich, One Führer'

Like any born gambler, Hitler loved to bluff. When Schuschnigg periodically excused himself to consult with his advisers, he heard the Nazi leader -- apparently beside himself with rage and determined to go to war -- shouting for Wilhelm Keitel. Keitel, the head of the Wehrmacht's high command, hurried to see what the Führer wanted. Hitler took him behind closed doors and said: "Nothing at all. Sit down." The two men chatted for a while, and then Keitel was dismissed.

Meanwhile Schuschnigg, waiting in the other room, feared the worst -- and eventually agreed to Hitler's ultimatum.

On March 11, the Nazis finally brought down the Austrian chancellor. That afternoon, after being bombarded by Hermann Göring with repeated threats of war in several telephone conversations, Schuschnigg resigned. The Wehrmacht marched into Austria the next day, without a single shot being fired.

It was the result of gangster tactics, and yet the people applauded.

When Hitler crossed the border near his hometown of Braunau at about 4 p.m., the jubilant crowd was so thick that his motorcade was almost brought to a standstill. The masses on both sides of the street could hardly be subdued, as they shouted ecstatically "Heil Hitler" and "one people, one Reich, one Führer."

*Read part two of this article [here](#).*

*Translated from the German by Christopher Sultan.*

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