

CHAPTER 34

The Coming of the Second World War

TIME LINE

- 1922 The Washington Conference produces an agreement on naval disarmament
- 1924 The adoption of the Dawes Plan ends the Ruhr crisis
- 1925 Germany, France, Great Britain, and Italy sign the Locarno Pact
- 1928 Over sixty nations sign the Kellogg-Briand Pact
- 1929 The Young Plan eases Germany's reparations burden
- 1931 Japan invades Manchuria
- 1933 Adolf Hitler withdraws Germany from the League of Nations and the Disarmament Conference
- 1935 Hitler denounces the disarmament clauses of the Treaty of Versailles
Italy invades Ethiopia
- 1936 Germany remilitarizes the Rhineland
The Spanish Civil War begins
Germany and Italy form the Rome-Berlin Axis
- 1937 Japan attacks China
- 1938 Germany annexes Austria
The Munich Conference awards the Sudetenland to Germany
- 1939 Hitler destroys Czechoslovakia
Great Britain and France pledge to aid Poland
Germany and Italy sign the Pact of Steel
Germany and the Soviet Union sign a Nonaggression Pact
Germany invades Poland

During the early 1920s, France's fear of a resurgence of German power contributed to tension in European international relations. This tension gradually eased, however, and an atmosphere of optimism prevailed during the second half of the decade. Nevertheless, few of the serious problems left by the peace settlement of 1919-1920 had been solved, and the 1930s proved to be a decade of intensifying crisis.

Soon after taking power in 1933, Adolf Hitler seized the initiative in foreign affairs and met remarkably little resistance from Great Britain and France. The French failure to resist Germany resulted in large part from their awareness of their own relative weakness. France believed it could act to contain Hitler only with the full support of the British. In Great Britain, however, there was a

VIAULT

widespread belief that the Treaty of Versailles had been unduly harsh and that it should be revised in Germany's favor. In addition, in both of the Western democracies intense memories of the carnage of World War I created a powerful desire to do everything possible to avoid another conflict.

The French Search for Security

The French search for security in the face of a possible German resurgence was the central issue in European international relations during the 1920s. In their pursuit of security, the French established a new system of alliances, signing treaties with Belgium in 1920 and Poland in 1921.

The Little Entente

The Eastern European states of Czechoslovakia, Rumania, and Yugoslavia created the Little Entente in the early 1920s. The French then formed ties with the Little Entente states, signing alliances with Czechoslovakia in 1924, Rumania in 1926, and Yugoslavia in 1927.

Relations with Germany

In January 1923, French troops occupied the Ruhr valley, following the Germans' default on their reparations payments. In the mid-1920s, however, tensions between France and Germany eased. The Dawes Plan of 1924, an agreement on reparations, ended the Ruhr crisis, and the Young Plan of 1929 further reduced the conflict over reparations. In the Locarno Pact of 1925, Germany and France agreed to recognize the permanence of their frontiers, and Germany entered the League of Nations the following year. In 1930, the Allies ended their occupation of the Rhineland (see Chapter 32).

The Kellogg-Briand Pact

The signing of the Kellogg-Briand Pact of 1928, officially known as the Pact of Paris, suggested to many the dawning of a new age of international harmony. Some sixty countries ultimately signed this treaty, which bore the names of the American secretary of state and the French foreign minister, pledging to renounce war as an instrument of national policy. Events would soon demonstrate how little this noble renunciation meant.

Disarmament in the 1920s

The question of disarmament attracted considerable attention during the postwar decade.

The Washington Conference

The Washington Conference of 1921-1922 produced the Five Power Treaty, which limited capital ships (battleships) in a tonnage ratio of 5:5:3 for Great Britain, the United States, and Japan, and 1.67:1.67 for France and Italy. The Five Power Treaty slowed the naval race, even though it did not place any limits on lesser categories of ships.

The London Conference

At the London Conference of 1930, Great Britain, the United States, and Japan achieved limited agreements on the construction of cruisers, destroyers, and submarines, but France and Italy refused to participate in the accord.

The Geneva Conference

An international conference on the limitation of land armaments met in Geneva, Switzerland, in February 1932. By this point, the international situation had already begun to deteriorate, and the Geneva Disarmament Conference failed to produce any agreements prior to its collapse in 1933.

The Manchurian Crisis

In September 1931, Japan invaded Manchuria, a region of northeastern China. Charging Japan with aggression, the Chinese appealed to the League of Nations. When a League investigating committee condemned the Japanese use of force, Japan responded by withdrawing from the League of Nations. Having conquered Manchuria, the Japanese reorganized it as the puppet state of Manchukuo.

In the Manchurian crisis, the League of Nations faced and failed the first major test of its ability to take action against aggression. Many observers later regarded the Japanese takeover of Manchuria as the opening round of World War II.

In 1937, Japan attacked China proper, beginning a war that would continue until Japan's final defeat in 1945.

Hitler's Early Foreign Policy

VIAULT

A downturn in European international relations began soon after Adolf Hitler came to power in Germany in January 1933. At first, Hitler had to proceed with caution; Germany was not yet strong enough to risk provoking a strong response from Great Britain and France.

Charging that the World War I allies were not willing to treat Germany as an equal, Hitler withdrew Germany from both the League of Nations and the Geneva Disarmament Conference in October 1933. The German leader expressed his commitment to the cause of peace, however, and pledged to cooperate with other countries if they were prepared to recognize German equality.

Attempted Nazi Coup in Austria

In July 1934, Austrian Nazis attempted to seize power in Vienna. The attempt failed, although Engelbert Dollfuss (1892-1934), the Austrian chancellor, was killed. Kurt von Schuschnigg (1897-1977) took office as Dollfuss's successor. The strongest reaction to the events in Austria came from Benito Mussolini, the Italian dictator. Mussolini sent troops to the Austrian border and was prepared to intervene if necessary, believing that if Austria were joined with Germany, Italy's interests would be threatened. Hitler, however, denied any involvement with the events in Austria.

The Coming of the Second World War 471 German Rearmament

In March 1935, Hitler moved more boldly, flouting the disarmament clauses of the Treaty of Versailles by reintroducing military conscription and proclaiming the existence of a German air force, both of which were prohibited by the treaty. The League of Nations condemned Hitler's actions in April.

The Stresa Front and the Anglo-German Naval Treaty

Concerned about Germany's intentions, British, French, and Italian representatives met at Stresa to discuss the possibility of joint action to contain Hitler. Nothing substantial came of this so-called Stresa Front, however. Instead, the British sought to win Hitler's agreement to a limitation of German naval expansion. The Anglo-German Naval Treaty of June 1935

provided that Germany would limit its navy to 35 percent of the British fleet. While this accord provided reassurances to the British, their acceptance of Germany's abrogation of the disarmament clauses of the Treaty of Versailles angered the French.

Italian Aggression in Ethiopia

In October 1935, Mussolini embarked on a war of aggression against Ethiopia. In the 1890s, Italy had attempted to conquer Ethiopia but had been defeated at the Battle of Adowa in 1896. Seizing Ethiopia would avenge that defeat.

League of Nations Action

In response to the Italian attack, Ethiopia's Emperor Haile Selassie (r. 1930-1974) appealed to the League of Nations, which branded Italy as an aggressor. The League also imposed limited economic sanctions on Italy, placing an embargo on the shipment of some goods to Italy. However, no embargo was placed on oil, which Italy desperately needed to continue its aggression. Having failed to take any effective action against Italy's aggression, the League of Nations, in effect, ceased to function. By May 1936, the Italians had completed their conquest of Ethiopia.

Remilitarization of the Rhineland

In March 1936, Hitler remilitarized the Rhineland, thereby violating the terms of both the Treaty of Versailles and the Locarno Pact.

The German dictator took a chance by moving his troops into the Rhineland. At this point, the French could have forced a German withdrawal. But Hitler was proved correct in his belief that the French-and the British, as well-were unlikely to take any action other than to protest.

The Spanish Civil War

In July 1936, a civil war broke out in Spain, marking a culmination of several years of unrest in that country.

Left-Right Conflict

In 1931, a Spanish republic had been proclaimed, replacing the monarchy of King Alfonso XIII (r. 1886-1931). While Spain's liberals and radicals supported the republic, it was vigorously opposed by conservative

VIAULT

elements, including the landowners, industrialists, the army, and most of the Roman Catholic Church. Hostility between the republic's supporters and opponents intensified, and each side carried out acts of violence against the other.

In February 1936, the left-wing Popular Front won the parliamentary election. While relatively moderate elements controlled the republican government, ultraradical supporters of the Popular Front increased their violent attacks on conservative political leaders and the Catholic Church, provoking violent retaliation from the conservatives.

Nationalist Revolt

As Spain degenerated into increasing chaos, the leaders of the army launched a revolt against the republican government in July 1936. General Francisco Franco (1892-1975) soon emerged as the leader of the rebels, who were known as the Nationalists.

Great Britain and France joined in urging a policy of nonintervention in Spain, but Italy and Germany began providing aid to the Nationalists, while the Soviet Union assisted the Loyalists, the supporters of the republic.

Franco's Victory

The Nationalists gradually increased their control of Spain. In early 1939, they captured Barcelona and Madrid, the last two Loyalist strongholds, and Franco became Spain's dictator. The victory of Franco and the Nationalists was generally regarded as a victory for Hitler and Mussolini and a defeat for the cause of the democracies.

The Rome-Berlin-Tokyo Axis

Anglo-French opposition to Italy's aggression in Ethiopia had enraged Mussolini and encouraged him to draw closer to Hitler, as did the fact that both Italy and Germany supported the Nationalist cause in Spain. In October 1936, Germany and Italy proclaimed the formation of the Rome-Berlin Axis. While this was not a formal alliance, it clearly indicated the shift in Italian foreign policy.

In November 1936, Germany and Japan signed an agreement known as the Anti-Comintern Pact, in which they pledged to cooperate in opposition to

Communism and the activities of the Communist International (the Comintern). Italy joined the Anti-Comintern Pact in November 1937, thereby bringing the Rome-Berlin-Tokyo Axis into being. This represented the creation of a powerful bloc opposed to the maintenance of the international status quo.

German Annexation of Austria

In early 1938, Hitler moved against Austria. In mid-February, he summoned Austrian Chancellor Schuschnigg to his retreat at Bechesgaden in the Bavarian Alps. He bullied the Austrian leader, forcing him to grant amnesty to imprisoned Austrian Nazis and to appoint Arthur Seyss-Inquart (1892-1946), an Austrian Nazi, as minister of the interior. On March 9, Schuschnigg scheduled a plebiscite to give the Austrian people an opportunity to express their support of independence. This action enraged Hitler, who demanded that Schuschnigg postpone the plebiscite. In the face of mounting German pressure, Schuschnigg resigned. Seyss-Inquart became chancellor and invited German troops to enter Austria. On March 13, the German annexation (*Anschluss*) of Austria was proclaimed. A plebiscite in April produced an overwhelming majority in favor of the Anschluss. Once again, the Western democracies took no action.

The Czechoslovak Crisis **Sudeten German Demands**

Soon after his absorption of Austria, Hitler turned his attention to Czechoslovakia, encouraging discontent among the German-speaking minority of the Sudetenland, located along the Czechoslovak border with Germany. In April 1938, the pro-Nazi Sudeten German party, led by Konrad Henlein (1898-1945), issued the Karlsbad program, demanding autonomy for the Sudetenland. When the Czechoslovak government refused to make concessions to the Sudeten Germans, Nazi-inspired demonstrations increased.

During the summer of 1938, the Czech crisis intensified. On September 7, acting on orders from Hitler, the Sudeten Germans broke off negotiations with the Czech government. On September 12, Hitler demanded the right of self-determination for the Sudeten Germans and threatened intervention in

VIAULT

Czechoslovakia. The following day, Henlein called for the German annexation of the Sudetenland.

Chamberlain's Meetings with Hitler

In an effort to resolve the crisis, British prime minister Neville Chamberlain (1869-1940) proposed a meeting with Hitler. Chamberlain pursued a policy of appeasement, based on the mistaken belief that Hitler's demands were fundamentally just and that, if these demands were satisfied, Hitler would act as a responsible statesman and peace in Europe would be assured. Chamberlain's error was his failure to realize that Hitler's lust for conquest was incapable of being satisfied and that

The Coming of the Second World War 475 to give way in face of his demands would serve only to increase his appetite.

Berchtesgaden

On September 15, 1938, Chamberlain flew to Germany and conferred with Hitler at Berchtesgaden. During this meeting, Hitler demanded the German annexation of the Sudetenland. If this demand was not met, he threatened to go to war against Czechoslovakia.

Following this meeting, Chamberlain consulted with the French, convincing them to abandon their alliance with Czechoslovakia, and then began efforts to persuade the Czech government to give way to Hitler's demands. The French doubted the wisdom of Chamberlain's appeasement policy, but they were also concerned about France's relative weakness. They believed they had no choice but to follow Britain's lead. If they did not, and if war with Germany resulted, the French feared that the British would not support them.

Bad Godesberg

Chamberlain returned to Germany and met with Hitler on September 22 at Bad Godesberg on the Rhine. The British prime minister was shocked to discover that Hitler now had further demands. Germany's annexation of the Sudetenland would not be sufficient. Hitler insisted that Germany's forces enter the Sudetenland no later than October 1 and that the Czechs, when they

withdrew, leave all their installations intact. In addition, the claims of Poland and Hungary against Czechoslovakia must be satisfied.

The Munich Conference

Czechoslovakia refused to give way to Hitler's demands, and for a few days, war seemed inevitable. In a final, desperate attempt to preserve peace, Chamberlain asked Hitler for another meeting. At Mussolini's suggestion, Hitler invited Chamberlain, Premier Edouard Daladier of France, and the Italian dictator to meet with him in Munich.

The Munich conference convened on September 29, 1938. Great Britain and France faced the choice of either sacrificing Czechoslovakia or risking war. They decided to sacrifice Czechoslovakia. The Munich agreement, signed in the early hours of September 30, granted Hitler's demand for the immediate annexation of the Sudetenland. The statesmen at Munich did not consult Czechoslovakia, which had no choice but to accept the decision. Later adjustments gave the Teschen region of Czechoslovakia to Poland, while Hungary acquired southern Slovakia and Ruthenia.

Hitler's Destruction of Czechoslovakia

In mid-March 1939, Hitler destroyed what was left of Czechoslovakia. Germany established its control over the western provinces of Bohemia and Moravia, while Slovakia became a separate puppet state. Hitler's action angered Chamberlain, who belatedly recognized that the German dictator's aggressive desires had no limits. Abandoning the policy of appeasement, Great Britain and France now pledged to come to the aid of Poland in the event of a German attack.

Mussolini's Conquest of Albania

Mussolini was jealous of Hitler's gains and sought to achieve a success of his own. On April 7, 1939, the Italians invaded Albania and soon conquered this small country. In May, Italy and Germany signed a full military alliance, which Mussolini dubbed the Pact of Steel.

The Polish Crisis and the Outbreak of War **German Demands on Poland**

VIAULT

In April 1939, soon after his destruction of Czechoslovakia, Hitler ordered his military chiefs to prepare for an attack on Poland by September 1. Hitler began to make demands that he believed Poland would not accept: the return of the free city of Danzig to Germany, new access routes to East Prussia across the Polish Corridor, and improved treatment of the German minority in Poland.

As German pressure on Poland mounted during the spring and summer, Great Britain and France made a halfhearted attempt to form an alliance with the Soviet Union. On the one hand, the British and French wanted Soviet assistance in the event of war with Germany. On the other hand, the Western powers feared an expansion of Soviet power and Communism in Eastern Europe, and Poland was unwilling to allow Soviet troops into its territory. The Soviets, for their part, remained suspicious of the intentions of the Western powers.

German-Soviet Nonaggression Pact

As negotiations between the Soviets and the Western powers lagged, German-Soviet talks got under way. On August 23, 1939, Germany and the Soviet Union signed a Nonaggression Pact, which is often called the Hitler-Stalin Pact. A secret agreement accompanying the pact provided that, in the event of war between Germany and Poland, the Soviets would receive eastern Poland and a sphere of influence in Eastern Europe in return for their neutrality.

The Soviet commitment to remain neutral meant that Hitler did not face the danger of war on two fronts. With this threat removed, the German dictator could begin his war.

Declarations of War

On September 1, 1939, Germany invaded Poland. Two days later, on September 3, Great Britain and France fulfilled their guarantees of Poland and declared war on Germany. The Second World War had begun.

The outbreak of war in September 1939 marked the end of what has been called “the twenty years’ truce.”

The peace settlement following World War I had created much dissatisfaction, especially in Germany and Italy, while in Asia, Japan continued to harbor aggressive designs on China. Great Britain and France, the major European Allies of World War I, bore the primary responsibility for maintaining the post-World War I peace settlement. Their failure to cooperate in meeting this responsibility contributed to the outbreak of a new and greater world c o n j k t . Nevertheless, when war came, it came as the result of the deliberate aggression of the Axis powers, Germany, Italy, and Japan.