

On **7 March 1936 Hitler ordered German troops to march into the demilitarised Rhineland**. This was a breach not only of the Treaty of Versailles but also the Locarno Agreement that Stresemann had negotiated. Hitler once again calculated it was worth the risk as he thought Britain and France would be reluctant to intervene. The French army could quite easily, at this stage, have prevented the reoccupation of Rhineland. The French generals grossly overestimated German strength and Britain's policy was increasingly one of appeasement towards German demands to revise the Treaty of Versailles. Hitler overruled his own generals who had advised against the move on the grounds that the French army was too powerful.

Hitler's confidence in his own ability and the wisdom of his strategy knew no bounds and his foreign policy actions now became even more radical and ambitious. **The League of Nations had also shown itself to be powerless**. Hitler also reinforced his position by signing **the Rome-Berlin Axis with Mussolini in 1936**, followed by the **Anti-Comintern Pact with Italy and Japan** to oppose the Soviet Union and all that it stood for.

In 1936-7 key decisions were made by Hitler and other Nazi leaders to prepare for a war of aggression. **Rearmament was given top priority in Germany's economic plans** and in a high-level conference with his military commanders in November 1937 Hitler emphasised his determination to acquire *Lebensraum* in the east. He was prepared to take risks in further challenges to the Versailles settlement as Britain and France had not put up serious opposition so far.

In 1938 Hitler ordered the Nazi Party in Austria to wreck the government of Dr Schuschnigg with demonstrations, processions and protests. When Schuschnigg announced that he would hold a referendum on Austria's future, Hitler ordered the German army to the Austrian border in March 1938, as he could not risk a 'no' vote. Once again, Hitler's army generals advised against the action but Hitler's assessment of the reaction of Britain and France was correct, neither intervened to stop this major breach of the Treaty of Versailles. Without backing from the west, Schuschnigg resigned, being replaced by a Nazi, Arthur Seyss-Inquart. The new leader then asked Hitler to send troops into Austria to 'restore order'.

This was a major victory for Hitler, again boosting his confidence and personal prestige. Strategically it also meant that Czechoslovakia's defences in the west were now completely out-flanked. All Britain and France did was to protest.

Hitler had never respected the new country of Czechoslovakia and there was a long-standing grievance over the position of 3.5 million Germans living in the Sudetenland region of western Czechoslovakia since the country had been created at the Paris Peace Settlement in 1919. The Sudeten Germans felt victimised and a strong local Nazi Party exploited these grievances. Hitler intended to destroy the state of Czechoslovakia and, at the very least, annex the Sudetenland.

The German army was ordered to draw up plans to attack Czechoslovakia and Hitler stepped up the pressure with threatening speeches demanding self-determination for the Sudeten Germans. Neither Britain nor France were keen to support Czechoslovakia in resisting German threats. The British Prime Minister, Neville Chamberlain, played a key role in negotiating a peaceful solution to the crisis. Hitler demanded that the Czechs give up the Sudetenland by 1 October or face attack.

Chamberlain assumed the role of peace maker and flew to meet Hitler on three occasions in Munich in meetings at which the Czechs were not even present. **On 29 September at Munich, Britain, France, Italy and Germany made an agreement to solve the problem – the Munich Agreement:** The Sudetenland was handed to Germany in return for guarantees about the new frontiers of Czechoslovakia.

Hitler's army generals had come close to removing him from power, so worried were they by the possibility of a military reaction from Britain and France. Hitler then chose to negotiate with Britain and France, perhaps influenced by last-minute doubts, such as the reluctance of his ally Mussolini to go to war. Chamberlain was impressed by the agreement with Hitler in which Hitler also promised never to go to war again with Britain. Hitler, by contrast, was annoyed and felt he had been cheated of his war despite his success in gaining the Sudetenland, winning more prestige within Germany and once again proving his generals wrong.

Within weeks of the Munich settlement, Hitler had already made plans to attack what was left of Czechoslovakia. On 15 March 1939, German troops entered the Czech capital, Prague, and Hitler annexed Bohemia and Moravia to Germany on the grounds they once been ruled by a German emperor. Czechoslovakia had now been pulled to pieces and was now effectively under German control.

Once more, Hitler had reckoned that Britain and France would not oppose his actions but this time he had miscalculated. Neville Chamberlain immediately gave a guarantee (which was not expected by Hitler) to Poland, as the presumed next target for Hitler's aggression, that its territories would be protected. Chamberlain also significantly increased rearmament in Britain and introduced conscription in the summer of 1939.

Hitler was enraged by the British guarantee and gave instructions to his generals to prepare for an attack on Poland. He realised that there was now a huge risk of a general war over Poland and he showed his political skill in wrong-footing his opponents. Secret negotiations were begun with the USSR which Hitler knew also had territorial ambitions in Poland and no great regard for a country which had defeated the Soviets in 1920-1. **Hitler made a non-aggression pact with the USSR in late August 1939 and agreed a cynical division of Poland.** *Lebensraum* and anticommunism were temporarily forgotten in his haste to destroy Poland. He thought that once Britain and France knew about his pact with the USSR, it would deter them from helping Poland.

He ordered his armies to attack Poland on 1 September 1939, confident that neither Britain nor France would intervene because of his agreement with the Soviet Union. He was genuinely surprised when Britain and France did not back down and was even more annoyed when his ally Mussolini refused to join in. **Nevertheless, the German attack went ahead and on 3 September 1939 Britain and France declared war on Germany. The Second World War had begun.**