

EVENTS LEADING TO THE SECOND WORLD WAR

6.4 Five Steps to War

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Step 1: German rearmament

The Depression of 1929–32 increased the support for extremist parties in Germany. As a result, in 1933, Hitler came to power. Hitler took Germany out of the League of Nations and started to **rearm**. In 1935 he introduced **conscription** and started to build up Germany's armed forces. In 1935 Britain signed an agreement with Hitler which said that Germany could build a navy up to one third of the size of Britain's.

Anglo-German 1935 naval agreement

Step 2: Remilitarization of the Rhineland

In March 1936 Hitler sent German troops back into the **Rhineland** – the 1919 Treaty of Versailles had banned them from this area. Hitler's generals had orders to withdraw if they were challenged – but no one did challenge them. There were mild protests from Britain; but many argued that the Rhineland was German territory and Hitler could do what he liked with it. Even the French were not motivated to take action. The League of Nations was trying to deal with Italy's invasion of Abyssinia and was powerless to stop Hitler. The League was fast showing itself to be totally ineffective.

Source A

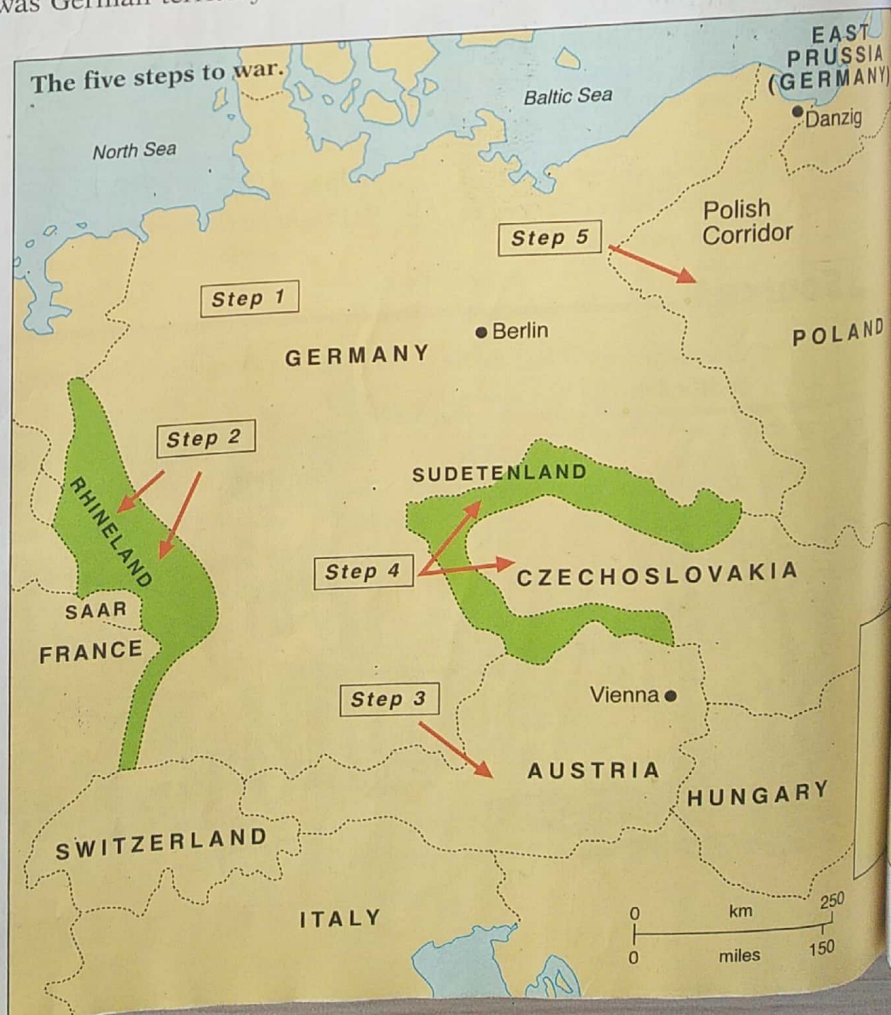
During the 1930s both Britain and France were keen to avoid war. Memories of the First World War were still fresh and many thought the Germans were the unfair victims of Versailles. Appeasement seemed to make sense for Britain, which was suffering from the Depression and whose armed forces needed strengthening. For his part Hitler was confident Britain and France would not help Poland.

From Nigel Kelly, 'The Second World War', 1989.

Source B

Hitler made his aims clear in *Mein Kampf*. He intended to unite all German-speaking peoples and to build an empire. This foreign territory, which he called *Lebensraum* – living space – would probably be in eastern Europe. It would be wrong to think that Hitler had a detailed master-plan to take over Europe. Events did go his way in 1936–39, but they were not planned. He was helped by France's weakness and Britain's reluctance to consider war. It would also be wrong to think of Hitler as a power-crazed maniac; he showed great care and skill in using the opportunities which came his way.

From Christopher Culpin, 'Making History', 1984.



Step 3: The Anschluss

Hitler made no more demands for two years. He did, however, send his forces to help Franco in the **Spanish Civil War**. Then, in March 1938 he demanded that **Austria** should be joined with Germany in an **Anschluss** or union. Austria, Hitler said, was German speaking and so should become part of a 'Greater Germany'. German troops marched into Austria unchallenged.

Step 4: The Sudetenland and Czechoslovakia

In the summer of 1938 Hitler said that the **Sudetenland**, a German-speaking area of Czechoslovakia, should also be joined to Germany. Because of an agreement made in the 1920s, Britain and France were pledged to defend Czechoslovakia if it objected. The British began to prepare for war. People began to dig air-raid shelters and gas-masks were given out.

Some British politicians argued that force should be used to stop Hitler. Others, like **Neville Chamberlain**, the Prime Minister, favoured **appeasement** (see Unit 6.5). He believed that if Hitler was given this territory he would be satisfied and would make no more demands. On 30 September 1938 Chamberlain signed the **Munich Agreement** with Hitler, giving Germany the Sudetenland. The Czechs were not allowed any say in the matter. Chamberlain said it was 'peace with honour'.

In March 1939 Hitler invaded the rest of **Czechoslovakia**. This invasion broke the Munich Agreement. Chamberlain realized that his policy had failed. Britain speeded up its rearmament programme and the government called up men between the ages of twenty and twenty one for military training.

Step 5: Poland

In August 1939 the **Nazi-Soviet Non-Aggression Pact** was announced. Germany and the Soviet Union agreed not to go to war and to split Poland between them. (Poland had gained land from Germany and Russia under the Treaty of Versailles.) Hitler invaded Poland on 1 September 1939. Britain and France asked him to withdraw or they would declare war. Hitler ignored this request. On 3 September 1939 Britain declared war on Germany.

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| Step 1 | Germany started to rearm, 1934-5 |
| Step 2 | Hitler sent troops into the Rhineland, 1936 |
| Step 3 | Hitler joined Austria to Germany (the <i>Anschluss</i>), March 1938 |
| Step 4 | Hitler took the Sudetenland, October 1938, and the rest of Czechoslovakia, March 1939 |
| Step 5 | Hitler invaded Poland, 1 September 1939 |

Source C

The 48 hours after the march into the Rhineland were the most nerve-racking in my life. If the French had marched into the Rhineland we would have had to withdraw, for the military resources at our disposal would have been wholly inadequate for even a moderate resistance.

Adolf Hitler speaking in the late 1930s.

Questions

Section A

- 1 Draw a timeline of the main events from 1929 to 1939.
- 2 What examples are there in the text of Hitler breaking the terms of the Treaty of Versailles?

Section B

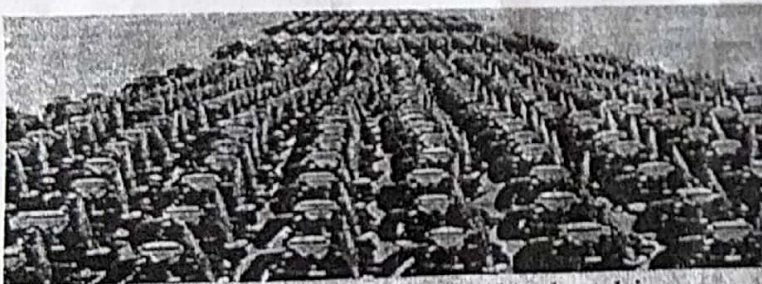
- 3 Explain how the following factors might have been causes of the Second World War:
 - the Treaty of Versailles
 - the Depression
 - Hitler's coming to power
 - the Munich Agreement
 - the Nazi-Soviet Pact.
- 4 Give one **long-term** and one **short-term** cause of the war and explain your choice.
- 5 Draw a cause-and-effect diagram showing the causes of the war and how they were linked together.
- 6 Both the League of Nations and Britain might have stopped Hitler taking territory. Why didn't they?
- 7 'Hitler and Hitler alone caused the Second World War.' Do you agree or disagree with this statement? Give reasons for your answer.

Reasons for appeasement

There were many reasons why Chamberlain appeased Hitler, but here are the main ones:

1. The **British people wanted peace** - they would not have supported a war in 1938.
2. Many of **Hitler's complaints appeared reasonable** at the time - especially about the Treaty of Versailles.
3. **Chamberlain wanted a strong Germany** to serve as a barrier against expansion by communist Russia.
4. **Britain's armed forces were not ready for a war**, and they could not have helped Czechoslovakia anyway.
5. **Many people admired Hitler** - in 1938, the American magazine 'Time' declared him 'Man of the Year'.
6. Chamberlain remembered the **slaughter of World War One** - he thought another war would destroy civilisation.

Invasion of Czechoslovakia



German troops march into Czechoslovakia

On 15 March 1939, German troops marched into Czechoslovakia. They took over Bohemia, and established a protectorate over Slovakia.

Hitler's invasion of Czechoslovakia was the end of appeasement for several reasons:

- it proved that Hitler had been lying at Munich
- it showed that Hitler was not just interested in a 'Greater Germany' (the Czechs were not Germans)
- on 17th March, Chamberlain gave a speech saying that he could not trust Hitler not to invade other countries
- on 31st March, Chamberlain guaranteed to defend Poland if Germany invaded