

## GERMAN AGGRESSION IN EUROPE, 1935 - 1939

After being granted dictatorial powers in 1933, Adolph Hitler and the Nazi party moved towards fulfilling their promise to the German people that they would “tear up” the hated Treaty of Versailles. From 1935 until the official outbreak of World War II in Europe in September of 1939, Hitler violated the agreement bit by bit. In response, Germany, France and the United States, as well as the League of Nations, did nothing to stop the illegal actions.

Despite the Versailles Treaty’s prohibition on German re-armament and limits on the size of its military, in 1935, Hitler enacted the first military draft since World War I and began to greatly increase the size of the army. He also organized the German Luftwaffe (air force). The western powers, pre-occupied with economic hardship at home and with little stomach to risk a conflict with Germany with memories of the devastation of World War I still fresh, did nothing to enforce the provision of the Treaty.

In 1936, Hitler again took action. He sent German troops into the Rhineland. The Versailles Treaty had required that this border area between France and Germany be de-militarized. Hitler had ordered his military commanders to withdraw their troops if the French showed any signs of position. Although the French considered taking action, they could not get the British to support them. Consequently, nothing was done. Hitler now controlled the Rhineland, an area rich in coal and iron, resources need by German industries and for the building up of the Nazi war machine. Neither France nor Britain wanted to go to war again so soon after the end of World War I. Their economies were weak, and they had not re-built their military forces.

In 1938, after having expanded German war industries and military forces, Hitler annexed Austria – an action known as the Anschluss. This German speaking country increased Germany’s size and power considerably. Although the Treaty of Versailles prohibited the union of Germany and Austria, no one took any action against Nazi Germany.

Next, Hitler turned his sights to the country of Czechoslovakia, a small democratic nation that had emerged from the break-up of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. More than 3 million Germans lived among the 15 million Czechs. The German-speaking population was centered mainly in the Sudetenland in western Czechoslovakia on the German border. In 1933, Hitler had sent Nazi agents into the Sudetenland to stir up riots against the Czech government. Unrest continued for several years. Then, in 1938, Hitler demanded that the Sudetenland Germans be given the right to decide whether they would remain part of Czechoslovakia or unite with Germany. He backed up his demands with the threat of invasion.

To prevent war, a conference was held in the German city of Munich in September 1938. Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain of Britain and Premier Edouard Daladier of France met with Hitler and Benito Mussolini, the dictator of Italy. Czech government officials were not allowed to attend the meeting but were forced to accept the result. The participants in the Munich Conference decided to give the Sudetenland to Germany. In return, Hitler promised that he would not attempt to take over any more territory in Europe. This policy of Britain and France was known as “appeasement,” – in other words, giving into Hitler’s demands to avoid war. This policy confirmed the dictator’s belief that the democratic nations were too weak and frightened to stop him. In March 1939, Hitler broke his promise and invaded the rest of Czechoslovakia. Once again, France and Britain did nothing.

In August 1939, Hitler negotiated an agreement with Josef Stalin known as the German-Soviet Non-Aggression Pact. In the treaty, the two countries agreed publicly that they would not wage war against each other for 10 years, and privately to divide the country of Poland between them. The next month, Germany invaded Poland. Because Poland had signed defense treaties with both Britain and France, those two countries then declared war on Germany. World War II had officially begun.

\*League of Nations – world organization created after World War I to prevent war by settling disputes peacefully or through the collective action of the organization.

The Road to World War II in Europe

Provision of the Versailles Treaty	German Action (give year)	Response of Britain and France	Why did France and Britain take the action
Germany was required to shrink the size of its military to a small defensive force			
The Rhineland, a region of western Germany on the border of France, was considered a "de-militarized" region, with Germany forbidden from maintaining troops near the French border.			
Austria and Germany were forbidden from uniting			
The independent country of Czechoslovakia was created.			
The independent country of Poland was created.			

Could World War II in Europe have been prevented? Explain.