The Jewish section of the central cemetery in Vienna receives bodies in closed caskets from the Nazis on a daily basis. They ordered to bury them immediately. Opening the caskets is severely punished...

The inmates of the Jewish orphanage at Türkenschänzle—there are 70 orphans between the ages of 6 months and 14 years—have been evicted. The orphanage has been seized. Even the clothes supplied by the orphanage were taken away from the children.

The Gestapo demands that 25,000 Jews emigrate by the end of 1938. Raids on Jewish homes continue. Above all, money, jewelry, silver dishes, and rugs are taken. Every Jew wanting to emigrate from Austria has to provide a confirmation that all taxes have been paid and that he will never return to Austria or Germany, respectively. They are also forbidden from taking cash with them.

This rapid destruction of Jewish life in Austria would become a model for the rest of Europe's Jews soon to be within the grasp of Nazi rule.

*Overview of the Persecution of Jews in Central European Countries,* in Jürgen Matthäus and Mark Rosman, eds., *Jewish Responses to Persecution, Volume I, 1933–1938* (Lanham, Md., 2010), pp. 286–287. By permission of AltaMira Press. Desider Friedmann would be deported from Dachau to Theresienstadt concentration camp in 1942, and then, along with his wife Elsa, to Auschwitz in 1944, where they both died.
Anschluss with Austria considerably improved Germany’s strategic position in central Europe. German power was now in direct contact with Hungary and Yugoslavia, where Germany was already making economic inroads. Western Czechoslovakia, where that country’s important resources were located, was now surrounded on three sides. Hitler was in a position to pursue the next objective discussed at the November 5, 1937, conference—the destruction of Czechoslovakia, an industrialized republic of considerable economic strength.

Hitler’s demands on Czechoslovakia focused on the supposedly intolerable living conditions of the 3 million Germans in Czechoslovakia, who were concentrated mostly in the mountainous northwestern border area adjoining Germany and Austria. The Sudetenland, Sudeten German opposition to Czech rule crystallized about the person of Konrad Henlein, leader of the Sudeten German Party. A right-wing nationalist political party similar in ideology to the Nazis, naturally, Hitler and the Nazis threw their support behind Henlein and his party. Hitler urged Henlein to make demands so extreme that the Czech government could never satisfy them. By keeping constant pressure on the Czechs, Henlein could create conditions for German intervention and ultimately the complete freedom of the Sudetenland. Hitler was well aware that the Sudetenland also contained Czechoslovakia’s most important frontier fortifications and significant industrial resources. Without it, Czechoslovakia was defenseless.

Hitler realized that the solution of the Czech problem might require military action. He had already on December 7, 1937, set in motion Operation Green, a German military plan for an attack on Czechoslovakia. In a new directive on May 30, 1938, Hitler stated that it was his “unalterable decision to smash Czechoslovakia by military action in the near future.” But Hitler also emphasized that Germany would not march until he was certain France and Britain would not intervene. Since Hitler was determined to resolve the Czech question by October 1, another European diplomatic crisis loomed large in the summer of 1938.

By that time, Hitler was convinced, with good cause, that France and Britain would not use force to defend Czechoslovakia. On paper, the Czech Republic seemed well supported by parts of France and the Soviet Union. Yet the French made it clear that they would act only if the British supported them. Chamberlain, however, informed the French premier, Édouard Daladier, that if Hitler and the Germans wished to destroy Czechoslovakia, he did not see how they could be stopped from doing so. Soviet support depended on French backing, which became increasingly doubtful because of the lack of British support and increasing French suspicion of the Russians. Besides, Soviet military support of Czechoslovakia depended upon the movement of its troops through Poland, and it was highly unlikely that the Poles would ever voluntarily permit Soviet passage through their country.

By late August, under British pressure, the Czech government had acceded to Henlein’s requests for autonomy for the Sudeten Germans. The Germans then increased their pressure on the Czechs. During a meeting with Prime Minister Chamberlain on September 15 at Berchtesgaden, Hitler demanded the cession of the Sudetenland to Germany and indicated his readiness to risk “world war” to achieve it. Chamberlain convinced his own government and the French government to accede to Hitler’s wishes. Pressure was placed on the Czechs, who reluctantly accepted Hitler’s (and the British and French) demands. When Chamberlain returned to Germany to announce Czechoslovakian agreement to Hitler’s terms, Hitler made a new demand—that the Germans be allowed to occupy the Sudetenland by October 1 and take over all its military installations. Chamberlain became angry and the Czechs refused the new demand, deepening the crisis. Suddenly war became a genuine possibility. Even the German public became fearful. Some officers, led by Colonel Hans Oster, became so alarmed at the threat of a war they felt unprepared to fight that they began to plot the overthrow of Hitler.

To defuse the crisis, Mussolini suggested a conference of the British, French, Italians, and Germans at Munich. Neither the Czechs nor the Russians were invited. Agreement was reached on a peaceful solution to the crisis. It was basically simple. All of Hitler’s demands were met. The Sudetenland was to be occupied by German troops between October 1 and October 10. The latter was Hitler’s only concession, since the Germans had originally demanded complete occupation on October 1. The Munich Conference was the high point of Western appeasement of Hitler. Czechoslovakia, a democracy abandoned by its democratic friends, surrendered the Sudetenland to its enemy. Although Britain and France guaranteed the new boundaries of Czechoslovakia, the new Czech state was morally wounded. In losing the Sudetenland it lost one-third of its population, much of its industrial capacity, and, most important, virtually all of its frontier fortifications.

Upon his return to Britain, Chamberlain made the infamous boast that the Munich agreement meant “peace in our time,” since Hitler had promised him that this was his last demand and that all future problems could be settled by talks. Unfortunately Chamberlain, like scores of German politicians before him, believed Hitler’s promises. The real victor of the Munich Conference was Hitler. Despite the fears of his generals and diplomats, he had once again been proved right. The Western democracies were weak and would not fight, just as he had predicted. The generals’ plot collapsed. German public fears evaporated. It was easier to believe that the Führer was infallible. As one general wrote in his diary, “The hope remains that the incredulous, the weak, and the doubtful people have been converted and will remain converted.” Unfortunately for Germany, Hitler was now convinced that he was infallible. And he was certainly prepared to make more demands.

Hitler never intended to abide by the Munich agreement. Only three weeks after the Munich Conference, he commanded the German military to prepare for the final destruction of the Czechoslovak state. After the German occupation of the Sudetenland, the new Czech state was plagued with internal discord and foreign pressures. Hungary and Poland laid claims to Czech territory, and with German encouragement the large Slovak minority demanded and was granted autonomy within a Czech-Slovak union. By the beginning of 1939, Hitler was planning to create enough disorder in Czechoslovakia to justify a German occupation on the pretext of preventing anarchy. The Slovaks were pressured by Hitler to declare their independence on March 14. German troops were then sent into Slovakia to prevent a Czech response to this move. Demoralized, the president of Czechoslovakia, Emil Hácha, traveled to Germany to negotiate with Hitler. Hitler demanded that the elderly, ill, and politically inexperienced Hácha sign an agreement accepting a German protectorate.

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5Quoted in International Military Tribunal, Trial of the Major War Criminals, vol. 28 (Nuremberg).
over the remaining Czech provinces of Bohemia and Moravia. If he failed to do so, Hitler promised that Germany would invade the provinces and ruthlessly bomb the capital city of Prague. Hacha capitulated, giving Hitler his "legal" cover for German occupation. On the morning of March 15, German troops marched into Bohemia and Moravia. That evening Hitler arrived in Prague and declared that he would go down in history as the greatest German of them all. Czechoslovakia had ceased to exist.

By this act, Hitler had moved completely beyond the boundaries of simply revising the Treaty of Versailles. After all, the Czechs were not Germans clamoring to be reunited with the motherland. It was apparent that Hitler's promises were worthless. Public pressure quickly produced a change of attitude in France and Great Britain. They gave military guarantees to Poland, Romania, Greece, and Turkey. Of course, the only really important power that could help to contain Nazi Germany was the Soviet Union. Consequently the Western powers initiated political and military negotiations with the Soviets. An alliance with the Soviet Union would mean the encirclement of Nazi Germany, but the West's distrust of the Soviet regime made such an alliance virtually impossible. Chamberlain never took these negotiations seriously and left them to his subordinates. The Western states had little regard for Russia's military abilities. Obviously, Chamberlain still preferred some agreement with Germany. Stalin feared precisely that and opened himself to the possibility of negotiating with the Germans.

Shortly after the Czechoslovakian success, Hitler began to focus on Poland. By the Treaty of Versailles, Poland had been given a corridor to the sea that cut off East Prussia from the rest of Germany. The German city of Danzig had also been made a free city to serve as a seaport for Poland. Now Hitler demanded the return of Danzig and an extraterritorial passageway through the Polish Corridor. Fearful of Hitler's ultimate intentions after the Czechoslovakian experience, the Poles accepted an Anglo-French offer on March 31 of a guarantee to protect Poland's existence if it was clearly threatened. On April 3, Hitler ordered his generals to prepare a military plan to solve the Polish question by September 1, 1939. At the end of April, claiming that Poland's agreement with Britain and France violated the 1934 German-Polish agreement, Hitler abrogated the nonaggression pact with Poland.

Despite the British and French guarantees to Poland, Hitler still hoped that the Western powers would give him a free hand in the east. As we have seen, Hitler's ultimate strategy to gain living space in the east was based on his securing an alliance with Britain, or at least British neutrality. His failure to do so had led him, despite his wishes, to the realization that he might have to deal with the West. He made his own preference clear, however, to Carl Burckhardt, the League of Nations high commissioner for Danzig, on August 11, 1939:

Everything I undertake is directed against Russia. If the West is too stupid and too blind to comprehend that, I will be forced to come to an understanding with the Russians, to smash the West, and then, after its defeat, to turn against the Soviet Union with my combined forces.  

For Hitler, an attack on Poland was a precondition for the ultimate assault on the Soviet Union. But if the West planned to intervene in the attack on Poland, then he would need to deal with the Western democracies. Poland would have to be eliminated quickly before the clash with the Western democracies. Hitler knew that his own military preparations were far superior to those of the West. Any postponement of the ultimate clash would only benefit the West.

Hitler had already strengthened his hand with the Pact of Steel, a military alliance formed with Italy on May 28. He took an even more significant step when he decided that the only way to avoid an alliance between the West and the Soviet Union was to arrive at an agreement with the Soviet state. Although he had ranted against communism in his entire career, he overcame his ideological preferences for purely opportunistic reasons. An alliance with the Soviet Union, undoubtedly only temporary in Hitler's mind, freed him from the danger of a two-front war if the West took up arms over his planned attack on
Poland. In addition, the raw materials that Russia would now ship to Germany as part of the alliance freed Hitler from worries about an economic blockade of Germany in his struggle with the West. The world was startled to learn on August 23, 1939, that Hitler and Stalin had signed a nonaggression pact. The world did not know that a secret protocol between the two states specified separate spheres of influence in eastern Europe: Finland, the Baltic states, eastern Poland, and Bessarabia (in Romania) would go to the Soviet Union while Germany would gain control of western Poland. The nonaggression pact with the Soviet Union gave Hitler a free hand to attack Poland on September 1. He exulted to his generals: “Now Poland is in the position in which I wanted her … I am only afraid that at the last moment some swine or other will yet submit to me a plan for mediation.”* Obviously Hitler was eager for war by the end of August. As he remarked to his military chiefs in November 1939, “Basically I did not organize the armed forces in order not to strike. The decision to strike was always in me.”*6 Hitler would have preferred a war against Poland without French and British involvement, but he was willing to take a chance. He knew he would probably have to deal with them anyway.

WORLD WAR II

The Early Victories

Nine days before the attack on Poland, Hitler indicated to his military commanders what he expected of them in their invasion of Poland: “When starting and waging a war it is not right that matters, but victory. Close your hearts to pity. Act brutally. Eighty million people must obtain what is their right … The wholesale destruction of Poland is the military objective. Speed is the main thing. Pursuit until complete annihilation.” Europe was stunned by the speed and efficiency of the German attack. Moving into Poland with one and a half million troops from three fronts, German forces used armored columns (the panzer divisions) supported by airplanes to break quickly through Polish lines and encircle the outnumbered and poorly equipped Polish armies. The coordination of air and ground assaults allowed effective use of Stuka dive bombers, which added a frighteningly destructive element to the German attack. Within four weeks all Polish resistance had been eliminated, and on September 28, 1939, Germany and the Soviets officially divided Poland between them.

Hitler’s attack on Poland was Europe’s introduction to Blizkrieg, or lightning war. Blizkrieg’s military dimension was based on the lessons of World War I as perceived by Hitler and some of his military commanders. To avoid the trench warfare that had made World War I into a defensive slaughter, the German army created plans for a lightning warfare that depended on mechanized columns and massive air power to cut quickly across battle lines and encircle and annihilate entire armies. Blizkrieg meant that an enemy could be defeated quickly, before it could completely mobilize and before others could come to its aid. But Blizkrieg was also based on economic considerations. It allowed the Germans to win quick victories against individual enemies and thus avoid having to mobilize the nation’s resources for a long total war. Quick victories could be cheap victories. Food and raw materials could be plundered from defeated states to bolster the German economy. Hitler’s concern for the German home front, based on his World War I experience, caused him to favor cheap victories instead of making too many demands on German civilians.

Two days after the attack on Poland, Britain and France declared war on Germany, thus creating the very Europewide war that Hitler had hoped to prevent. With his quick victory over Poland, however, Hitler believed that Germany could still handle the situation. Assuming a quick victory over Poland, Hitler had deliberately weakened his forces in the west, making Germany vulnerable to a British and French attack. Even Hitler believed that an Allied offensive now would create difficulties for Germany. At the same time, he doubted that the Western democracies would assume an offensive strategy. He was correct. The Allies, conditioned by their experiences in World War I, believed that time was on their side. Once again they could use a blockade and gradually grind Germany down. There was no need to follow an offensive pattern that would simply result in unnecessary bloodshed.

If the Allies were reluctant to take the offensive, Hitler was extremely eager to do just the opposite. Already on September 27 he told the military command that he had decided to attack the West as soon as possible. His generals resisted. General Guderian, one of the main panzer leaders, believed that the armored divisions would have trouble operating in winter. There was a noticeable lack of supplies and a need to repair vehicles. Hitler pressed on, but was forced by bad weather to finally give up his hopes for a lightning attack against the West in 1939.

The winter of 1939–1940 witnessed the so-called “phony” or “bore” war, which killed the Allies into inaction except for plans by Great Britain to mine Norwegian waters to stop the flow of Swedish iron ore from Norwegian ports. On his part, Hitler was willing to see Scandinavia remain neutral, but the commander in chief of the Navy, Admiral Erich Raeder, emphasized to Hitler the importance of Norway for naval bases as well as the danger to Germany’s northern flank if the British were to use Norway for bases themselves. They could, Raeder warned, close the Baltic itself to the German fleet and seriously affect the shipment of iron ore from Sweden—a serious problem since Germany received 50 percent of its iron ore from Scandinavia. Hitler received encouragement from Vidkun Quisling, head of the Norwegian National Unification Party and a confirmed anti-Bolshevik and anti-Semite. Quisling sought German aid to establish a pro-German government and warned Hitler of Norway’s strategic and economic importance to the Germans. He also emphasized the need to counter British designs on Norway. Although Hitler still seemed reluctant to push the British because of his desire for a settlement with them, he decided to attack and occupy both Norway and Denmark. On April 9, one day after the British had begun to mine Norwegian waters, the Germans struck. The Danish government immediately accepted German conditions and surrendered without a fight. But the Norwegians refused to capitulate. The Nazis undertook a dramatic invasion, landing troops at key positions along the coast and dropping paratroopers into airfields and major cities. Britain landed a force of almost 50,000 troops, but they were eventually driven out. Norway surrendered on June 9 and a new government that included Quisling was established. In the course of World War II, the name Quisling became synonymous with traitor. Although Germany’s victory had not been easy—the battlefhiesshi Lützow and a number of cruisers and