

## Hitler's Opening Moves

One of the main goals of the Nazis was a nationalist one. Hitler wanted to regain territories that Germany (or Austria) had lost in the Treaty of Versailles, and to bring European territories with German-speaking populations under one German government. Hitler did not immediately seize territory once in power. He began by attacking opposition inside Germany and rebuilding the military in violation of the peace settlements of 1919. He formed alliances to protect Germany and to weaken the western allies who might oppose German attempts to capture more territory, further violating the Treaty of Versailles.

A 1935 vote in the **Saar** coal mining region, which had been occupied by France since the end of World War I, returned the area to German control. In 1936, German troops marched unopposed into the demilitarized **Rhineland** region on Germany's border with France. In 1938, Nazi troops crossed the border into **Austria** and incorporated that country into the German Reich. This event was referred to as the **Anschluss** or reunification.

Nazi demands to hand over the **Sudetenland** (German-speaking parts of Czechoslovakia) to German control led to an international crisis. In September 1938, at the Munich Conference, Britain and France agreed to the German take-over of the Sudetenland. In March 1939, the **Memel territories** were annexed to East Prussia.

More significantly, in March 1939, Nazi troops occupied the rest of Czechoslovakia, and that country ceased to exist. This was Hitler's first seizure of lands that did not have a large German population. It was now clear to the world that his foreign policy aimed to conquer new lands for the Reich.



## Appeasement



From left to right:  
Chamberlain, Daladier, Hitler, Mussolini, and Ciano  
pictured before signing the Munich Agreement,  
which gave the Sudetenland to Germany

How could the western powers allow Hitler to overthrow the terms of the 1919 peace treaty and not try to stop him? Clearly, he was rebuilding a strong Germany in the centre of Europe, which is exactly what the Treaty of Versailles was supposed to prevent.

Hitler had feared that Britain and France might stand up to him when he sent troops into the Rhineland and thereby stop Germany's expansion before he could rebuild its military. But his gamble paid off: the western powers had not opposed him. This failure to oppose Hitler is called **appeasement**, and it is possible to understand the reasons why it happened.

Strong **pacifist** feelings were common in France and Britain in the 1930s. World War I had been so terrible that few wanted another war. Many felt that any war would be too costly to even think about.

Another strong belief was that The Great War (WWI) had been **the war to end all wars**. Following that war, the League of Nations, not armed force, was supposed to resolve international disputes. Also, **the allies did not feel strong enough** to militarily oppose

Hitler when he reoccupied the Rhineland. American troops had withdrawn to North America, and Britain and France had dramatically reduced their armed forces.

The western powers were also reluctant to oppose Hitler's moves on the Rhineland because it was traditionally German territory. Many in Britain and France believed that the terms of **the peace treaty had been too harsh** and that Hitler's demand for the return of German territory in Europe was reasonable.

Pacifism and sympathy for Germany allowed the forceful annexation of German-speaking Austria by Nazi Germany in 1938. Protests were made when Hitler went after the Sudetenland (the mostly German-speaking borderlands of Czechoslovakia). British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain, Hitler, the Italian Mussolini (Il Duce) and France's Daladier held a series of talks, culminating in the September 1938 **Munich Conference**. Germany was given the Sudetenland in return for assurances of peace. The Czechoslovaks were barely consulted as their country was dismantled and their border defenses given away.

Unfortunately for the world, Hitler saw appeasement as weakness on the part of the west. He felt encouraged to go after more territory. He did not believe the World War I allies had the will to force him to stop.

On March 16, 1939, Nazi forces occupied the remainder of Czechoslovakia, and that democracy—created after World War I and, since 1936, the last remaining democracy in central and eastern Europe—disappeared from the map until after World War II.

## The Master Race

The Nazis wanted far more than simply bringing all Germans under the rule of the Reich. They believed that Germany needed more land to support itself and guarantee the survival of the "Aryan race." This territory was called **Lebensraum**, or living space, and Hitler saw most of it as lying in the east. From his racist point of view, this land was populated by inferior people, such as Slavs, Jews and Gypsies, and it could be put to better use serving the needs of the "master race." Of course, this meant his troops would have to conquer the land.

Nazis believed that the Aryan race, of which Germans were seen as the main representatives, was superior to all others and had a right to take what it needed. That others would oppose them was not important because struggle was viewed as a good thing. Struggle was supposed to eliminate the weak and improve the master race, so the risk of war was acceptable.

Encouraged by his successes in the 1930s, Hitler did not really believe the western powers would oppose his drive to gain *Lebensraum*. When he occupied the non-German parts of Czechoslovakia and Britain and France did nothing, he felt sure that he could continue to conquer new territory. As he looked to the east, his only real concern was Stalin's Russia. Russia, however, appeared weak. It was suffering the aftermath of Stalin's purges, and the elimination of most senior officers had weakened its military. Economically, Russia was still building its production capacity under the Five-Year Plans. To be safe, Hitler guarded his flank by signing a non-aggression treaty with the USSR in August 1939. This left him free to make a move on Poland.

