

The Führer

Once in power Adolf Hitler destroyed all who opposed his rule. Heinrich Himmler commanded the Gestapo (secret police). The Gestapo destroyed opposition by herding leading Communists and Social Democrats into concentration camps. All political parties, other than the Nazi party, were banned. Hitler even distrusted his own friends; in 1934 Ernst Roehm, the leader of the elite storm troopers, was arrested and shot. And when President Hindenburg died a few weeks later, Hitler combined the offices of president and chancellor into one, proclaimed himself fuhrer (leader) and ordered all German soldiers to take an oath of allegiance to him.

Reaction of the German People

Did the German people support Hitler? In a plebiscite during 1934, thirty-eight million out of forty-two million voters said "yes" to Hitler and the Nazis. Germans supported Hitler because he offered them what they wanted. He said he would bring relief from the terms of the Treaty of Versailles and would restore Germany's greatness. When the United States asked Germany to repay loans after the stock market crash Hitler said he would bring relief from the resultant unemployment. Nazi propaganda and the Nuremberg rallies, which were elaborate productions that played on nationalistic feelings, also exploited the deepest fears of the German people.



Rearmament

Just before he came to power Hitler had told the German industrialists that he would create, with their help, a great new German Reich (empire)—armed to strike. So when he became fuhrer he began establishing, in complete defiance of the terms of the Treaty of Versailles, a German state that was geared for war. He left the League of Nations and authorized the production of U-boats, tanks, and planes for the new Luftwaffe (air force). He virtually ended unemployment by conscripting half a million soldiers into the Wehrmacht (army) and by finding work for thousands in the Labour Corps that, incidentally, helped to build the famous German *Autobahnen* (four-lane express highways).

Testing His Strength

By 1936 Hitler was ready to strike. First he sent a few of his troops into the Rhineland—demilitarized since 1919. Not a finger was raised against them. Next he looked for allies, coming to an understanding with Fascist Italy (an agreement Mussolini called the Axis agreement) and then signing an anti-Communist pact with Japan. So far everything that Hitler had done seemed acceptable to the Western democracies: he had simply taken over parts of Germany that were legally German—the people of the Saar, for example, had willingly voted to rejoin the Reich in a 1935 plebiscite. But after 1936 Hitler began to demand territories that were not legally German. He argued that Germany was in dire need of *lebensraum* (living space) and that outside Germany's borders lived millions of Germans who needed his protection. There is little doubt that, during 1937, Hitler had decided to back up his demands for *lebensraum* with force, if necessary.

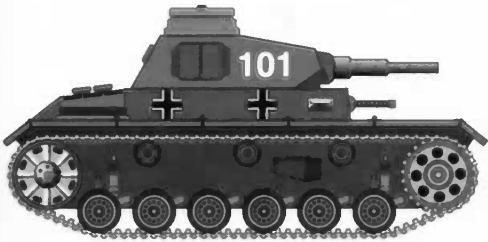
Anschluss

In 1938 Hitler demanded an *Anschluss* (union) with Austria. Kurt von Schuschnigg, the Austrian chancellor, yielded to Hitler's threats and Austria joined the Reich in March 1938. Hitler's policy of *lebensraum* seemed to be enjoying boundless success. But when, later that year, Hitler showed an interest in the Czechoslovakian Sudeten territories he found that the Czechs, confident of French and Soviet support, would rather fight than surrender. Once more the threat of war hung over Europe. At this point, Britain intervened in a desperate play for peace. This intervention is known as the 1938 Munich Crisis.

Election poster urges people to vote for the Hitler-Hindenburg team. Hitler's photo is at the bottom right. Berlin, 1933

Wehrmacht Hitler's army

"PANZERKAMPFWAGEN"
(Armoured fighting vehicle)

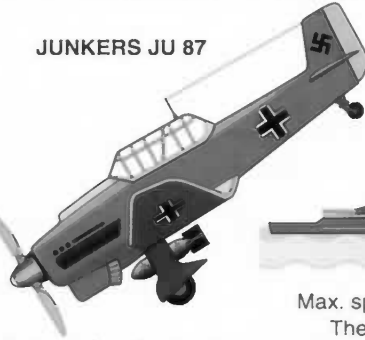


PANZER

This is the Mark III tank (mounting a 37 mm gun) mass produced by Hitler.

Luftwaffe Hitler's air force

JUNKERS JU 87



Forked wing dive bomber or "Stuka" which could carry a 454 kg bomb.

Kriegsmarine Hitler's navy

A revolutionary kind of fighting ship launched in 1936, the **ADMIRAL GRAF SPEE**



Max. speed 26 knots; 6 28 cm guns; Range 20 116 km
The so-called "pocket battleship" had armour that could resist 20 cm shells. It outgunned most ships fast enough to catch it and was speedy enough to escape from conventional battleships.

GERMAN REARMAMENT PROGRAM
50000 troops in the new Wehrmacht



Appeasement

The thought of another European war with the new horrors of air attack was abhorrent to the British people in the thirties—and particularly so to Neville Chamberlain, who became prime minister in 1937. Realizing that the peace of the world depended on the actions of the German *führer*, Chamberlain was prepared to see Germany regain its rightful place in Europe. But this would not happen until the question of the three million Germans living in Czechoslovakia had been settled. Hitler said he wanted “self-determination” for these Sudeten Germans; might it be possible to placate or appease the *führer* by arranging a meeting with him to discuss a settlement?

Munich

In response to Hitler's threats towards the Czechs, Chamberlain flew to meet him in Berchtesgaden (15 September 1938). Here Hitler promised to delay an attack on Czechoslovakia and gave Chamberlain until 1 October to arrange the withdrawal of Czech troops from the Sudetenland. Chamberlain managed to persuade Edvard Benes, the Czech premier, to agree to transfer to Germany *those parts of the Sudetenland where the majority of the population was German*. On 22 September, Chamberlain flew back to Germany and at Godesberg he offered Hitler the deal. The *führer* replied: “I’m very sorry, but I regret that this is of no use now.” He wanted the *whole* of the Sudetenland—and renewed his threat of war. Chamberlain could see no way of preventing war. On the evening of 27 September he broadcast on the BBC: “How horrible, fantastic, incredible it is that we should be digging trenches and trying on gas masks here because of a quarrel in a far away country between people of whom we know nothing...I would not hesitate to pay a third visit to Germany if I thought it would do any good.” Next day he had his chance. He flew to Munich for talks with Hitler, Mussolini, and Edouard

Daladier, the French president. The Czechs were excluded from the conference room; the Soviets were not even invited.

On 30 September—the day before Hitler’s threatened attack upon Czechoslovakia—the decision was announced. Hitler was allowed to occupy the whole of the Sudetenland; he promised he had no more territorial demands to make in Europe. The Czechs, betrayed and isolated, had to agree. So the crisis was solved. Hitler was appeased—because he had his own way; and the price of appeasement was the sacrifice of the frontiers of Czechoslovakia. Chamberlain flew home triumphant.

More Demands

Everything was peaceful for the next six months. Then, to Chamberlain’s horror, Hitler broke his promise to make no more territorial demands. On 15 March 1939 German troops occupied Bohemia and Moravia. A week later they marched into the Lithuanian city of Memel. Where would Hitler strike next? The British guessed correctly that it would be in the Polish Corridor and on 21 March they promised to protect the Poles against German aggression. Exactly how this would be done, no one explained at the time. But surely the threat was enough. Hemmed in by the democracies in the west and by the USSR in the east, Hitler would never dare to resort to war now.

The Pact with the Soviet Union

Then came a bombshell: on 23 August 1939 the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany signed a non-aggression pact. They promised not to wage war against each other. While the rest of the world tried to understand this development, Hitler attacked Poland on 1 September. Now Britain was forced to honour its promise to the Poles. It gave Hitler a deadline: unless he withdrew his troops from Poland by Sunday, 3 September Britain would declare war on Germany.

