

3 The appeasers missed excellent chances to stop Hitler

The appeasers were so busy looking for chances to give Hitler what he wanted that they missed good opportunities to resist him. After the remilitarisation of the Rhineland in 1936, Hitler admitted that any sign of military action by the French would have led him to withdraw his troops immediately. At Munich in 1938, Britain and France abandoned Czechoslovakia, a well-defended and well-armed country, which could have put up a significant resistance to German attack.

How important was the Nazi–Soviet Pact?

Hitler turns to Poland

After the destruction of Czechoslovakia, it was clear that Poland would be Hitler's next target. Germany had obvious claims on some Polish territory. The 'Polish corridor', which split East Prussia from the rest of Germany, had been taken from Germany by the Treaty of Versailles, as had the city of Danzig, which was now a 'free city' under League of Nations control. Hitler wanted these areas back. He also wanted Polish territory as *Lebensraum* (living space).



A Soviet cartoon of 1936 showing western nations as Hitler's protectors.

Despite this, the Poles enjoyed a friendly relationship with Hitler's Germany until 1939. The Polish government sympathised with the Nazis' authoritarian and anti-Semitic (anti-Jewish) policies. They had even taken part in the destruction of Czechoslovakia after the Munich Conference by grabbing Teschen. At first, the Poles found it hard to take seriously Hitler's demands and increasing threats against them. They even thought their best hope of survival was to try and avoid making commitments to either of their two powerful neighbours, Germany and the Soviet Union.

Britain's promise

Britain's guarantee to preserve the independence of Poland made the Poles feel safer than they really were. There was little that Britain and France could do to stop a German invasion of Poland – it was too far away from them. So the attitude of Poland's other powerful neighbour, the Soviet Union, would be crucial. Would it help Poland against a German attack?

Discussions between Britain, France and the Soviet Union took place through early August 1939, but collapsed because of distrust between the two sides, and also because the Poles refused to let Soviet troops enter their territory in advance of an attack by Germany. The Soviets thought that Britain and France would be happy to see the Soviet Union doing all the fighting if war broke out with Germany.

The Nazi–Soviet Pact

On 23 August 1939 the sensational news broke of an agreement signed in Moscow by the foreign ministers of the Soviet Union and Germany, Molotov and Ribbentrop. They had agreed to a non-aggression pact – a promise not to fight each other. Secretly, they had also decided to split up Poland between them. Fascist Germany and the communist Soviet Union gave every appearance of being bitter political enemies. Nobody really believed that the pact made any difference to their mutual hatred. So why did they make an agreement not to fight each other?

Why was the Nazi–Soviet Pact important?

The pact left Britain and France to fight Germany alone. Hitler did not really believe they would go to war over Poland, but almost had second thoughts when Britain's reaction to the pact was the signing of a formal alliance with Poland on 25 August 1939. This time Britain and France would not be able to back down in the face of Nazi aggression. If they did, it would signal to the world that they could no longer be regarded as great powers, and unlike in 1938, re-armament meant that they were now more ready for war. But the Anglo-Polish alliance did not really change anything. It took only a few days for Hitler to recover his nerve and order that Poland be invaded on 1 September. When Hitler ignored Britain and France's ultimatum to call off the attack, they declared war on 3 September. Nevertheless, within three weeks Poland had been defeated, its armies completely

SOURCE P

It is not Danzig that is at stake. For us it is a matter of expanding our living space to the east. There is therefore no question of sparing Poland and we are left with the decision: to attack Poland at the earliest opportunity. We cannot expect a repeat of Czechoslovakia. There will be war.

Hitler speaking at a conference of his generals, 23 May 1939.

QUESTION

How far does Source O help you understand why the Soviet Union was prepared to make a pact with Germany in August 1939?

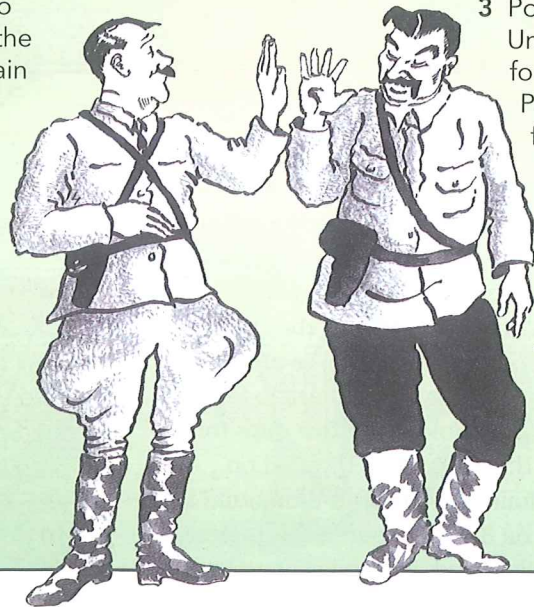
powerless against the *Blitzkrieg* (lightning war) launched by Germany. Two weeks into the fighting, Soviet armies invaded Poland from the east, at the same time occupying the Baltic states (Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania).

The pact makes war inevitable

The pact was the single most important short-term cause of the Second World War. This means that it explains how and why the war broke out at the time it did. Hitler had planned to invade Poland, and now he knew that he could do so without direct interference from any other great power. Once he attacked, Britain would be forced to honour its guarantee to Poland. Of course, this could not save Poland because there was nothing that Britain and France could do to stop the German invasion, but it would mean war.

Advantages for Germany of the Nazi-Soviet Pact

- 1 Hitler knew he could now invade Poland without having to fight the Soviet Union.
- 2 Hitler would be able to get back land lost to Poland at Versailles, and begin to acquire *Lebensraum*.
- 3 There would be no alliance between the Soviet Union, Britain and France to prevent Hitler carrying out his plans.



Advantages for the Soviet Union of the Nazi-Soviet Pact

- 1 The Soviet Union would not be drawn into a war with Germany over Poland.
- 2 The Soviets did not trust Britain and France enough to ally with them to save Poland, and now would not have to.
- 3 Poland was hostile to the Soviet Union and the two countries had fought a war in the 1920s. Much of Poland's territory had been taken from Russia when Poland was created. Now the Soviet Union could get this land back. This area would be a useful 'buffer zone' against any future German attack.
- 4 Stalin still believed that war with Germany would come eventually, but the pact gave him time to build up the strength of Soviet armed forces.

Why did Britain and France declare war on Germany in September 1939?

Neither Britain nor France wanted to go to war with Germany in 1939. They would have preferred a peaceful solution to the Polish crisis and did their best to persuade the Poles to negotiate with Hitler over the disputed areas, Danzig and the Polish corridor. The problem was that the Poles did not want to negotiate – they knew from the example of Czechoslovakia that negotiating with Hitler could be fatal. Anyway, once the Nazi-Soviet Pact was signed, negotiations would have been meaningless as Germany and the Soviet Union had secretly resolved to split Poland between them.

QUESTIONS

- 1 Why do you think Germany and the Soviet Union signed the Nazi-Soviet Pact?
- 2 Do you agree that the Nazi-Soviet Pact was the most important cause of the war? Explain your answer.

A 'state of war'

When Germany invaded Poland on 1 September 1939, Britain and France did not declare war immediately. They delayed, still hoping that there might be a chance to make Hitler change his plans. They knew they could not save Poland. However, they were both allied to Poland and had to take some action. On 3 September the British government sent Hitler an ultimatum (Source R). The French sent a similar ultimatum. When no reply was received by 11 a.m., Britain declared war on Germany.

Britain and France went to war because they were forced to. Hitler had finally pushed them to the point at which they had to resist. The alternative was national humiliation and acceptance of German domination of Europe.

Chamberlain speaking in the House of Commons, 3 September 1939.

SOURCE R

Unless not later than 11 a.m., British summer time, today September 3rd, satisfactory assurances have been given by the German government and have reached His Majesty's Government in London, a state of war will exist between the two countries from that hour.

The ultimatum from the British to the German government, 3 September 1939.

SOURCE S

This is a sad day for all of us, and to none is it sadder than to me. Everything that I have worked for, everything that I have believed in during my public life, has crashed into ruins.

SOURCE Q



A group of British people reading about the invasion of Poland, 3 September 1939.