1996

Versailles to the Battle of Britain : Hitler's misreading of British appeasement

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.31979/etd.4864-hhmd>
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**Versailles to the Battle of Britain:
Hitler's Misreading of British Appeasement**

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of History

San Jose State University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

by

Daniel Scafani

May 1996

UMI Number: 1379377

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ABSTRACT

Versailles to the Battle of Britain: Hitler's Misreading of British Appeasement

by Daniel Scafani

This thesis asserts that Hitler ultimately lost the Second World War because he failed to understand Britain's inter-war policy of appeasement and its practitioners. Hitler's twin foreign policy goals were the dismantling of the Versailles Treaty and the acquisition of *Lebensraum* in the east. The fulfillment of both of these required the acquiescence of the leading power in Europe, England and its empire.

Hitler failed to obtain their acquiescence and on September 3, 1939 was faced with a war for which he had not prepared. Hitler failed to produce a navy or air force capable of defeating Britain before it could marshal its potential resources — in particular, a practical alliance with the United States. Hitler revealed, through his writings and conversations with intimates, a persistent misapprehension of Britain's leadership and its appeasement policy. The consequences of that failure was a second world war which Germany was doomed to lose.

Acknowledgments

This paper would not have been impossible without help of the members of my thesis committee. Upon my return to the History Department after twenty years, I sought out the teachers who had made the greatest impression on me during my undergraduate years. My impressions were confirmed and Doctors Eugene Bernardini and Charles Paul of the Humanities Department proved to be unstinting with their time and efforts as well as their encouragement from the moment of my return. Doctor Paul contributed countless hours spent in reshaping a collection of short papers into a coherent whole. Doctor Harry Gailey graciously guided me through the process of writing my first extended project in spite of the fact of his retirement. Though I have others to thank for that which is correct in this paper, any errors of fact or interpretation are strictly my own.

Table of Contents

Acknowledgments	v
Introduction	1
Chapter One—Hitler’s Plan: From Vienna to Berlin	6
Chapter Two— Hitler Gains Power	21
Chapter Three—Roots of Appeasement	39
Chapter Four—On the Road to Munich	56
Chapter Five—After the Munich Pact	69
Chapter Six—The Wrong Sword: At Sea	88
Chapter Seven—The Wrong Sword: In the Air	104
Epilogue	115
Bibliography	119

Introduction

Hitler Loses His War

On September 3, 1939, Germany lost the war.

It is the thesis of this study that Adolf Hitler's failure to avoid a declaration of war by Great Britain on that date doomed Hitler's foreign policy and consequently his Third Reich. Hitler's unprovoked attack on Poland was rooted in a foreign policy whose ultimate goal was to make the German people the permanent masters of Europe and can be traced back to his earliest political ideas. By 1923 Hitler had crystallized a plan which was based upon the achievement of two goals. These were the overthrow of the Treaty of Versailles and the acquisition of vast territory in the east, or *Lebensraum*, for the German *Volk*. This plan and the foreign policy required to accomplish these ambitious aims rested on a set of plausible premises. Two of these premises emerged from lessons Hitler had learned from errors committed by Kaiser Wilhelm II during the First World War: Germany could not win a war fighting simultaneously on two fronts and it could not win a world war with the United States on the other side.

Hitler believed that by 1939, he had solved both of these problems. Germany's early rearmament gave it a temporary advantage over its adversaries. Germany could win only a short war because of its enemies' greater resources. But, due to the changes in technology over the preceding twenty years, the pace of war could be changed, and a short war was possible. Such a short, victorious war could be assured if Great Britain

could be persuaded to remain aloof. Britain's best interests lay, Hitler believed, in an alliance or, at least, neutrality with Germany. Hitler mistakenly assumed that the conclusion of the Stalin-Hitler Pact in August 1939 would force the British to renounce their hastily made assurances to Poland. However, his efforts to compel Britain and its ally France to remain neutral failed.

The war in Poland was but one step in the fulfilment of Hitler's oft-stated twin foreign policy goals. The first of these was the destruction of the Treaty of Versailles with its humiliating provisions that limited German power and decreased its territory, in this case, Danzig and the Polish Corridor. From the start of his political career Hitler was obsessed with Germany's defeat in the First World War and the subsequent Versailles Treaty. Indeed, Germany's defeat was Hitler's impetus to enter political life. After Hitler came to power in 1933, he immediately began a series of diplomatic steps, backed by military force, to reverse the losses incurred in 1919 at Versailles. The re-incorporation of Danzig and the Polish corridor into the Reich was an important step in the undoing of the Versailles Treaty. The second and far more ambitious of Hitler's goals was the acquisition of vast territory in the east, *Lebensraum*, for the expansion of the German *Volk*. Hitler believed that a nation or race that failed to expand was doomed to destruction – grow or die. This organic theory of race was at the heart of National Socialism. Poland stood athwart the road to Germany's destiny.

Hitler hoped that Versailles could be undone without war, that diplomacy and bluff could secure the first of his goals. However, Hitler knew that to achieve his second goal,

war was inevitable. The nations of Eastern Europe, including the Soviet Union, would not passively cede their territory or existence to accommodate Germany's need for *Lebensraum*. Hitler's victory could be assured only if the war were fought on his terms. He recognized that Germany had come close to victory at two stages, in August of 1914 and during the great offensive of 1918. In the first instance, the dilution of effort caused by an Eastern Front doomed the von Schlieffen Plan. In the second, America's belated entry into the war tipped the scales against Germany. British acquiescence would obviate both circumstances, since neither France nor America was prepared to challenge German ambitions without Great Britain.

Hitler believed that he could fight a war in Poland without fighting a war with Great Britain. He believed that even if the British declared war their inability to provide concrete aid to the Poles would force them quickly to conclude a peace on his terms. He proved to be wrong and this error proved to be his undoing. How did he come to this incorrect conclusion? Hitler despised democracies and their institutions, as well as their leaders. His hatred blinded him to the strengths of democratic decision making, especially consensus making, and this confused his judgement in his dealings with the democratic leaders. His *Führerprinzip* or leadership principle was a direct response to the failings of democratic principles which Hitler characterized as the authority of a momentary mob.¹ Hitler misread the actions, motives and character of the men, Neville Chamberlain and

¹Adolf Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, trans. Ralph Manheim (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1943), 81.

later Winston Churchill, who led his principal potential adversary, Great Britain. Hitler misconstrued the nature of Chamberlain's policy of appeasement and confused his intense desire for peace with a lack of will. Subsequently, Hitler underestimated Churchill's antipathy for him and his Nazi regime and misunderstood Churchill's perception of his own and the British people's place on the world stage. Consequently, Britain's declaration of war and prosecution of the war was a shock for which Hitler had prepared no riposte.

Overconfident in his estimation of Britain's leaders and his ability to anticipate their reactions, he had failed to prepare the German armed forces to fight Great Britain. The planes his Luftwaffe built were too short-ranged to engage Britain effectively. He failed to develop sufficient German naval power, especially U-boats, to blockade Britain's vulnerable and vital sea lanes. Not only did Hitler misread the British leadership and the meaning of their policy of appeasement, both passive and active, before the outset of the war, but he also did not foresee the strength of British resolve after their declaration of war. His failure to build the weapons that could defeat Britain in a short war led directly to the long war in which eventual American intervention was inevitable, the war Germany could not win. Because of his misreading of British leaders and their foreign policy, Hitler had thus initiated the most disastrous war in world history.

Details of Hitler's foreign policy and the forces that shaped its development will be discussed in the following chapter. Subsequent chapters will examine the reasons for Hitler's mistakes and the circumstances surrounding the implementation of his plans.

Certain aspects of Britain's interwar foreign policy will be considered, with special stress laid upon the nature of Britain's appeasement, both active and passive, as well as Hitler's misinterpretation of that policy and its authors. Finally, Germany's rearmament efforts, in light of the war with Britain, will be analyzed. All of these add up to a convincing argument that Germany lost the war on September 3, 1939, and not at the Battle of Britain, nor the invasion of Russia, nor the Battle of Stalingrad, nor the Battle of El Alamein, nor with Hitler's declaration of war on the United States, nor the Normandy Invasion. In this thesis I have relied upon such secondary sources as standard biographies of Hitler and other key players in the events described as well as primary sources such as Hitler's writings, recorded conversations and the memoirs of his entourage and other appropriate figures.

Chapter One

Hitler's Plan: From Vienna to Berlin

To lend support to my contention that Hitler lost the war on September 3, 1939, I will discuss, in this chapter, Hitler's overall cast of mind, specifically his attitude towards Great Britain and its people, and the general manner in which this attitude was reflected in his pre-World War II armament program and foreign policy.

Hitler's attitude towards Great Britain and the British must be seen in the light of two general characteristics of the man himself. These are: 1) the personal and historical reasons that led to his domination of European politics for twelve years and 2) the foreign policy he developed from before the *Putsch* of 1923 and which he held, unyieldingly, past the critical date of September 3, 1939.

Hitler's rise to power in Germany was remarkable in many ways. As a foreigner with a mediocre education, no money and no family connections, Hitler could not achieve power in the conventional way. But the period in which he moved to the top of German political power was not a conventional era. During a period in which Germany was wracked by revolution, catastrophic inflation and depression, conventional politicians lost all credibility. Men with radical solutions received a respectful hearing they would never have been accorded in the pre-war Reich. Hitler was ready for such conditions, indeed those very conditions had propelled him into politics. His rhetorical skills first caused him

to be noticed, but another of his talents soon became evident. From the beginning, he proved himself astute in reading both his allies and adversaries and in perceiving their weaknesses. Where others saw strength, Hitler saw weakness and was quick to exploit it. Another characteristic of his was his unparalleled confidence in himself, his destiny and his ideas. An opinion once held by Hitler was seldom re-examined or modified. His self-assurance and the correct apprehension of his foes brought unexpected success, attracted more adherents, and inspired confidence in his friends and fear in his enemies. His successes fed his arrogant self-confidence and eventually overwhelmed his skill at sizing up his enemies. Hitler's rigid thinking led to his failure to correctly predict the actions of Chamberlain and Great Britain. In the end, this would prove to be his and Germany's undoing.

Hitler's political career was born at the death of the German Second Reich at the end of the First World War. Hitler, the son of a minor Austrian functionary, was at that moment in a German Army hospital, having been temporarily blinded in a gas attack on the Western Front. Like millions of other war veterans, Hitler was stunned by the sudden collapse of the German Reich and could not believe that defeat was due to a failure of the German Army. The German Army still occupied much of the western territory it had seized in the opening months of the war as well as vast tracts of Russian land. For millions in Germany, only betrayal by politicians from within could account for Germany's loss. Thus was born the "stab in the back" theory to explain the tragedy that befell the Fatherland. Hitler vowed, through the first tears he had shed since his mother's death, to

enter politics in order to reverse Germany's terrible disaster and punish those he believed had made it possible, the Jews and the Marxists.²

Like so many other Germans, he had been deeply shocked and even humiliated by the Versailles Treaty of 1919 which compounded the military loss of the First World War. As is well known, this treaty forced Germany to accept the "guilt" for having allegedly started the World War, to cede territory in the East, West and North, to pay crippling amounts of money for reparations of war damages, to demilitarize the Rhineland as a buffer between Germany and France, and to reduce its military establishment to near insignificance. Accepting the right-wing and prevailing view that the Versailles Treaty had been all too docilely negotiated and accepted by the Weimar regime, Hitler joined the National Socialist German Workers' Party, or Nazis, and through his oratory and drive quickly came to dominate the tiny party.³

In November of 1923, Hitler and the Nazis attempted to seize the Bavarian government in the "Beer Hall *Putsch*." The *Putsch* failed and Hitler was subsequently sentenced to Landsdorf Prison. During his relatively short and comfortable stay there, he wrote his political manifesto, *Mein Kampf*. In the book Hitler publicly states his goals for the Nazis and Germany as well as the racial theories that underpinned his plans. Among the most important of those were the overthrow of the Versailles Treaty, the acquisition of

²Ibid., 204-206

³Alan Bullock, *Hitler: A Study in Tyranny* (New York and Evanston: Harper & Row, Publisher, 1962), 64-67.

*Lebensraum*⁴, or growing space in the east, the elimination of Jewish influence in the new Germany, and the cultivation of Great Britain as an ally. Each of these goals had profound implications for the future of Europe and consequently the world. However, the world for the most part was as yet unaware of Hitler's plans, or ignored them as the ranting of a discredited, minor, right-wing, extremist politician.

Hitler's ideas on race, culture and nationalism, which he elaborated in *Mein Kampf*, were rooted in the experiences of his years of poverty and failure in Vienna.⁵ Hitler was a voracious, but undisciplined, reader whose interests skipped from subject to subject, as varied as Ancient Rome, the Eastern religions, Yoga, Occultism, Hypnotism and Astrology.⁶ There is evidence that he was an avid reader as well of the *Ostra*, a magazine whose stated editorial policy was "the practical application of anthropological research for the purpose of...preserving the European master race from destruction by the maintenance of racial purity."⁷ Another source of his ideas on anti-Semitism, his hostility towards socialism and the Hapsburgs, as well as his plans for *Anschluss*, or union between Germany and Austria, was the Pan-German Nationalist Party of Georg von Schönerer.⁸ There was nothing unique about Hitler and the ideas he acquired from radical political

⁴Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, 612.

⁵Ibid., 125

⁶Bullock, *Hitler*, 35.

⁷John Toland, *Adolf Hitler* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1976), 62.

⁸Ibid., 44-45.

newspapers and the lurid racist magazines that abounded in pre-war Vienna, but he was unique in that he acted decisively upon so many of these ideas. Even before Hitler settled in Vienna in 1908, his high school history teacher, Dr. Leopold Pötsch, had, as Hitler thankfully remembered, encouraged his “budding nationalistic fanaticism” and had stirred within him the “little revolutionary.”⁹

Although his overall political and racial views had been formed by 1920, it was not until 1922 that Hitler’s education in geopolitics began. He was persuaded by his friend and later personal secretary, Rudolf Hess, to meet with Professor Karl Haushofer. Haushofer was a former General of the Imperial Army who, prior to the war, had served as military attaché to Japan, where he had developed an interest in Asian affairs. After the armistice he was appointed professor of geopolitics at the University of Munich. General Haushofer believed that Germany’s salvation lay in autarky, or national self-sufficiency. The General was convinced that a nation’s existence depended upon the space it controlled, and that the circumstances of Germany’s defeat by the blockade was proof of his theory. Encircled and suffocated, Germany needed *Lebensraum* to survive.¹⁰ Hess, Hitler’s secretary, was fascinated by Haushofer’s ideas and made every effort to acquaint Hitler with them at the time he was writing *Mein Kampf* in Landsberg Prison.¹¹

⁹Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, 14-15.

¹⁰Toland, *Adolf Hitler*, 168.

¹¹*Ibid.*, 269-70.

Hitler's book shows that he clung to ideas he had acquired during high school and his years in Vienna as well as concepts gained at Landsberg Prison, all of which made up his intellectual repertoire for the rest of his life. Indeed, over his entire political career, Hitler demonstrated a remarkable consistency in his attitude toward such diverse topics as Pan-Germanism, his hatred of Jews and Slavs, and the necessity of an alliance with Great Britain. He expressed these themes in such chronologically disparate sources as *Mein Kampf*, written in 1924; conversations with *Sturm-Abteilung* (S.A.), Chief of Staff Otto Wagener, from Autumn 1929 to Summer 1933; conversations with Albert Speer in 1939; and his own *Table Talk*, recorded in 1941-1943.

Hitler's cast of mind made such constancy very predictable. Hitler demonstrated rigidity and great confidence in his thinking from his earliest days.¹² In *Mein Kampf* he described his decision to defy his strong-willed father, Alois Hitler, at eleven years of age. His father decided to send Adolf to the *Realschule* to prepare him to follow in his footsteps as a civil servant, but the young Hitler already showed that strong will for which he was to be so renowned:

I did not want to become a civil servant.

Neither persuasion nor 'serious' arguments made any impression on my resistance. I did not want to be a civil servant, no, and again no. All attempts on my father's part to inspire in me love or pleasure in this profession by stories from his life accomplished just the opposite.¹³

¹²Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, 22.

¹³*Ibid.*, 8.

Hitler said of his time at Landsberg,

That period gave me the chance of deepening various notions for which I then had only an instinctive feeling. It was during this incarceration, too, that I acquired that fearless faith, that optimism, that confidence in our dealing, which nothing could shake thereafter.¹⁴

This was a most unusual response to the disastrous Beer Hall *Putsch* and his consequent imprisonment. Hitler's visible self-confidence and self-assurance in the face of apparent catastrophe was one of his most useful political traits. Hitler's newspaper reading techniques are also instructive of the manner in which his mind worked. Hitler shunned ideas that conflicted with his preconceived notions. As his confidant, Otto Wagener phrased it, Hitler "simply took in whatever interested him and registered it in his brain, in the nook where it fit and served to confirm or perhaps even justify his own ideas and opinions. Whatever refuted his ideas he rejected out of hand, never even absorbed."¹⁵ In *Mein Kampf*, Hitler contrasted his reading habits with those of the so called intelligentsia:

...true they possess a mass of knowledge but their brain is unable to organize and register the material they have taken in.... On the other hand, a man who possess the art of correct reading will, in studying any book, magazine, or pamphlet, instinctively perceive everything which in his opinion is worth permanently remembering, either because it is suited to his purpose or generally worth knowing.¹⁶

¹⁴Toland, *Adolf Hitler*, 274.

¹⁵Otto Wagener, *Hitler—Memoirs of a Confidant*, trans. Ruth Hein, ed., Henry Ashby Turner, Jr. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1978), 67.

¹⁶Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, 35-36.

It suited Hitler's purpose (as well as his deeply-held prejudices) to woo the British statesmen, for only with that imperial and maritime power either neutralized or allied with Germany, could he effectuate his policy of *Lebensraum*. That policy was designed not only to take over the nation-states of Czechoslovakia and Poland (created by the "infamous" Versailles Treaty of 1919), but the Communist nation of the U.S.S.R. as well. As early as 1924 we find the genesis of the military campaign of 1941, coded with the name of Barbarossa, for only Russia possessed sufficient territory for German *Volk*.¹⁷ In *Mein Kampf* he had held that the fundamental long-term problem facing Germany was a birthrate that added 900,000 new citizens every year. Germany could not feed and clothe an ever increasing number of people. Hitler posited four possible solutions for the Malthusian conundrum: 1) restriction of birthrate, 2) internal colonization, 3) acquisition of new territory or 4) production of goods for foreign trade. The consequences of three of the choices were explored and rejected; only one held the key to Germany's future. The first solution, the restriction of the birthrate, is contrary to nature and in the end would leave Germany vulnerable to its adversaries. "A stronger race will drive out the weak...in order to replace it by the humanity of nature which destroys the weak to give his place to the strong."¹⁸ The second, internal colonization, was rejected as well. By internal colonization, Hitler referred to efforts to maximize the agricultural potential of the

¹⁷Ibid., 654.

¹⁸Ibid., 131-32.

country. There was an inherent limit to the possible increase of food and fiber and this solution only postponed the reckoning. Furthermore, limited borders had profound negative military implications. According to Hitler, “the size of the area inhabited by a people constitutes in itself an essential factor for determining its outward security...the very size of a state offers in itself a basis for more easily preserving the freedom and independence of a people, while, conversely, the smallness of such a formation is a positive invitation to seizure.”¹⁹ The commercial solution, his fourth, leads to dependence on foreign nations as well the destruction of the peasant class.²⁰ Having rejected the other solutions, Hitler came forcefully down on his third, the acquisition of new land for the German *Volk, Lebensraum*.

The *Lebensraum* solution had two variations: overseas colonies or expansion on the European Continent. Overseas colonies were rejected:

For Germany, consequently, the only possibility for carrying out a healthy territorial policy lay in the acquisition of new land in Europe itself [Overseas] Colonies cannot serve this purpose unless they seem in large part suited for settlement by Europeans. But in the nineteenth century such colonial territories were no longer obtainable by peaceful means. Consequently, such a colonial policy could only be carried out by means of a hard struggle which, however, would have been carried on to much better purpose, not for territories outside Europe, but for land on the home continent.²¹

¹⁹Ibid., 137.

²⁰Ibid., 138.

²¹Ibid., 139.

Empires like the British Empire could no longer be created, Hitler explained. He believed that the most important elements of the British Empire were the dominions whose populations were overwhelmingly European. In addition, he hinted at the location of the projected European territory in a discussion of the two *Ostmarks* of the Reich. The first is the Bavarian *Ostmark*, or Austria, and the other, the historical German *Ostmark*, the land east of Prussia.²² So vast were his ambitions in the East, and so great would be the need for settlers in the newly conquered lands, Hitler proposed the resettlement of nordic peoples from all over the world: “The Nordic blood available in England, northern France and North America will eventually go with us to reorganise the world.”²³

Hitler recognized the difficulty of securing the territory required for the continued growth and development of the German *Volk*, but the vital importance of this goal made its fulfillment imperative. No effort would be too great. “[T]he entire political leadership of the Reich should have devoted itself to this exclusive aim; never should any step have been taken, guided by other considerations than the recognition of this task and its requirements.”²⁴ He recognized that *Lebensraum* could be won only by war. “It is indispensable to see clearly that this aim could only be achieved by struggle, and

²²Ibid.

²³Eduoard Calic, *Unmasked: Two confidential Interviews with Hitler in 1931*, trans. Richard Barry (London: Chatto & Windus, 1971), 81.

²⁴Ibid., 140.

consequently to face the contest of arms with calm and composure.”²⁵ Having settled on a policy of war in the East, Hitler now considered the problem of developing alliances.

Hitler examined the alliance system of pre-1914 Germany and found it wanting. Austria had ceased to be a German state, having succumbed to the Slavic forces, and had become a liability; Italy had actually fought against its erstwhile allies. Hitler was unequivocal in his choice of Great Britain as the proper ally for Germany. If the land he coveted was, for the most part, Russian, then the Reich “must again set itself on the march along the road of the Teutonic Knights of old to obtain by the German sword sod for the German plow and the daily bread of the nation. For such a policy there was but one ally in Europe: England.”²⁶ An alliance with Britain solved Germany’s fundamental strategic problem, that of the two front war. “With England alone was it possible, our rear protected, to begin the new Germanic march.... Consequently, no sacrifice should have been too great for winning England’s willingness.”²⁷

As Hitler in *Mein Kampf* surveyed the field for potential European allies, he came to the conclusion that only England and Italy had sufficient common interests with Germany to make an alliance mutually useful. He argued that France represented the natural adversary of all three nations. Germany’s defeat in the World War meant that

²⁵Ibid.

²⁶Ibid.

²⁷Ibid.

France was unchallenged on the Continent, and by 1925, had come dangerously close to achieving Continental hegemony. "The ultimate aim of French diplomacy will always stand in conflict with the ultimate tendency of British statesmanship."²⁸ Germany's defeat left it unable to challenge Britain commercially, and France, not Germany, posed a threat to Britain's overseas empire. France, not Germany, was poised "directly opposite the vital nerves of the British Empire"²⁹ and represented a potential military rival as well. France's interests were in direct conflict with those of Italy as well, for its "future will always be conditioned by a development...around the Mediterranean basin."³⁰ Any further strengthening of France would be detrimental to Italian interests. Finally, Hitler summarized his perception of France's policy towards Germany:

France's desire is and remains to prevent the formation of a unified power in Germany, the maintenance of a system of German petty states with balanced power relations and without unified leadership, and occupation of the left bank of the Rhine as the presupposition for creating and safeguarding her position of hegemony in Europe.³¹

Hitler contrasted the threat his continental goals posed for the British with those of the French in his *Secret Book* where he argued weakly:

that it was most erroneous to assume that 'England fought every hegemonial power in Europe immediately.' Instead, history teaches that England does so only in order to eliminate competing powers overseas, but

²⁸Ibid., 618.

²⁹Ibid., 617.

³⁰Ibid., 621.

³¹Ibid., 619.

not as long as the goals of any given hegemonial power were 'obviously and purely continental in nature.'³²

During the early days of the spreading Depression, Hitler's efforts were focused on the political task at hand, building the Nazi Party and taking control of Germany. Nevertheless, he never lost sight of the reasons he had for becoming a politician. To fulfill its destiny, Germany needed to remove the shackles of Versailles and capture the territory that was necessary for the German *Volk* to flourish. Nor did he change his mind about the necessity of developing an alliance with Great Britain. In a June 1931 interview with Richard Breiting, editor of the *Leipziger Neueste Nachrichten*, Hitler said, "My closest adviser (Hess)...can assure you how firmly we believe that we must be long-term allies of England."³³ Hitler confirmed this in his private conversations as well. From the autumn of 1929 to the summer of 1933 Otto Wagener was the Chief of Staff of the S.A., also known as the Brownshirts. In this capacity, Wagener was a frequent companion of Adolf Hitler and frequent listener to Hitler's impromptu monologues. Great Britain and its place in his new world order was one of the many topics discussed. "The world's oceans need a police force that will preserve order, a power that can compel order. That power is England...."³⁴ Hitler was as convinced as ever that England was the key:

³²Eberhard Jäckel, *Hitler's Weltanschauung: A Blueprint for Power*, trans. Herbert Arnold (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1972), 41.

³³Eric Breiting, *Secret Conversations with Hitler*, trans. Richard Barry, ed. Edouard Calic (New York: John Day Company, 1971), 50.

³⁴Wagener, *Memoirs*, 90.

It is all the more important that we work at coalition. And on that point I will tell you over and over again. Without England it is not possible! England has the necessary power.... It cannot discard the world mission of the Aryan race in the world *to such an extent!*[author's italics]³⁵

Hitler went a step further in describing his feelings towards Great Britain, "Wagener, I admire England, I admire its lucid and far-sighted politics. I love England as a fraternal Volk..."³⁶ He was convinced not only that Germany needed a coalition with England but that the British were bound to see the necessity of a coalition with Germany as well.

We bring along only the idea and the will. I cannot imagine that England will not decide to climb down from the pedestal of arrogance and imperialism, which has been made outmoded by history and extend its hand to the community of nations.... It must surely recognize the danger of international communism, even if its island realm might be the last to fall into its hands."³⁷

Only Jewish influence in England stood in the way.

During the period preceding Hitler's assumption of power, British agents approached the Nazi Party for a meeting with him to determine his attitude concerning possible future Anglo-German relations. Though Hitler demurred, Wagener met with them and was encouraged by their interest in the growing but, as yet powerless, Nazi Party. Hitler was encouraged as well but urged caution and disclosed to the S.A. Chief of Staff his plan to induce the British to form an alliance when he gained power in Germany.

³⁵Ibid., 173.

³⁶Ibid., 90.

³⁷Ibid., 173.

We must alert England and its leading statesmen to the dangers from the east, we must keep on alerting them, and we must do nothing ourselves that might provoke England. If we make it clear that we will renounce Alsace-Lorraine in France's favor, the border area south of Aachen in Belgium's favor, the section of Schleswig that Versailles assigned to Denmark in the latter's favor, our colonies in England's favor, and that we merely wish to have a free hand in the east and southeast...³⁸

Hitler was particularly sensitive to British concerns over the Empire and was eager to reassure British leaders he had no desire to upset the status quo in that area. "...[I]t's all right with me if they set some additional conditions that serve the security of England and its empire."³⁹

³⁸Ibid., 228-29.

³⁹Ibid., 230.

Chapter Two

Hitler Gains Power

Hitler assumed the title of Chancellor on January 30, 1933 through legitimate parliamentary means. He immediately set about to expand his authority and gather all power into his hands. Even during this period of power consolidation, foreign policy was not completely ignored. On May 17, 1933, Hitler delivered his famous *Friedensrede*, or Peace Speech to the Reichstag (now in temporary quarters) with an eye to its effect upon domestic as well as foreign public opinion, especially British. Hitler eloquently proclaimed his peaceful intentions but stressed the unequal treatment of Germany after the war as an impediment to peace, effectively using the “slogans of Wilsonian idealism, from self-determination to a peace founded upon justice.”⁴⁰ In order to advance his foreign policy plans at this stage he had to count upon both the good will of international public opinion and the support of the professional German army, whose undivided loyalty he needed to carry out his entire program. Hence he found the thugs and bully boys that made up the S.A. an embarrassing reminder of his roots. More importantly, the S.A., led by Ernst Röhm, was not only an undisciplined group best at controlling the streets but also an independent armed force within the Nazi party capable of challenging his absolute authority. A year later, working through his personal bodyguard, the S.S., Hitler had

⁴⁰Bullock, *Hitler*, 276.

Röhm and the other leaders of the S.A. killed in “the night of the long knives,” June 29-30, 1934.⁴¹ Many of the rank and file of the S.A. were integrated into the regular army. With his only significant domestic rival finally out of the way, Hitler could now turn his attention to the first of his foreign policy goals, the destruction of the Versailles Treaty. This aim, he hoped, would receive the acquiescence of Great Britain or, at least, its neutral indifference.

Soon after the people of the Saar, heretofore under French mandate, voted in January of 1935 to reunite with Germany, Hitler moved to develop more positive relations with Great Britain. Several weeks later, Hitler hosted a party attended by Lord Rothermere and Ward Price, the editor of Rothermere’s most influential newspaper, the *Daily Mail*. Several weeks later Hitler received two other prominent guests from London. Lord Allen of Hurtwood came bearing a message of goodwill from Prime Minister Ramsay Mac Donald and the Marquess of Lothian was so impressed with Hitler’s peaceful assurances, that he successfully persuaded Foreign Secretary Sir John Simon of their sincerity.⁴² A staunchly anti-Marxist Germany had many sympathetic listeners in Britain’s upper class who had come to believe the terms of Versailles had been excessive. People who feared Stalin’s Soviet Union were inclined to see Germany as a bulwark against communism. The British press had become interested in the Nazis and Hitler as early as

⁴¹Ibid., 293.

⁴²Ibid., 500-501.

1930 after the Nazis' first significant electoral success. "The [London] *Times* printed his [Hitler's] assurances of goodwill at length, while in the *Daily Mail* Lord Rothermere welcomed Hitler's success as a reinforcement of the defenses against Bolshevism."⁴³

Furthermore, Hitler's regime earned admiration in those countries of Western Europe that were still plagued by a relentless depression, leading in all cases to the development of indigenous fascist movements. They were all impressed by the manner in which the economy in Nazi Germany had been invigorated and unemployment drastically reduced by public works such as the Autobahnen and by the secret armament program.

Indeed, Hitler in 1934 had issued secret orders to treble the size of Germany's 100,000-man army in direct violation of the Versailles Treaty. Such growth in Germany's armed forces, however, could not be concealed forever. When Hitler disclosed his move a year later, he coupled the revelation with a peace initiative towards Britain by shrewdly proposing a unilateral limit on German naval construction. The British had been pressing for disarmament and Hitler had long believed that the renunciation of any naval rivalry with Britain was a necessary first step in improved relations with the British, a relationship that was vital to his plans.⁴⁴ He promised to limit the German navy or *Kriegsmarine* to 35% of the Royal Navy in the German-British Naval Pact of 1935. Hitler had long recognized that Kaiser Wilhelm II's naval building program preceding the First World War

⁴³Ibid., 42-43

⁴⁴Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, 140.

had been a major cause of the British hostility that had led to participation in that war. An island empire's very existence, it goes without saying, is dependent on its naval dominance and the Royal Navy was the cornerstone of its power and prestige around the world as well as the glue holding the Empire together.

Hitler's hopes to placate British fears and improve mutual relations were not without foundation; many of the ruling class in England continued to be sympathetic to German efforts to revise the provisions of the Versailles Treaty. The most famous of these was Britain's Prime Minister during World War I, David Lloyd George. In 1936 the former Liberal P.M. visited Hitler at Obersalzberg where he publicly praised the Führer "as a 'great man' who had the vision and the will to solve a modern nation's social problems—above all, unemployment...."⁴⁵ Germany's war guilt and its reparation burden seemed excessive to many members of the English elite now that emotions generated during the war had cooled. The early stages of the Versailles Treaty's unraveling was presaged by the frantic fears of Hitler's professional military class that Germany would be crushed. To their great surprise, each step was met with mere notes of protest from the capitals of the Allies who had imposed this treaty on the beaten foe less than a generation earlier. In contrast to that of the "experts," Hitler's assessment of the opposition was proven correct again and again, including the Allied response to both his public denunciation of the Treaty in March, 1935, and to his public revelations of German

⁴⁵William L. Shirer, *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich: A History of Nazi Germany* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1990), 232.

rearmament. Otto Dietrich, Hitler's press secretary, opined: "The years 1935 and 1936 were of the utmost importance for the development of Hitler from a domestic reformer and socialist leader to the international desperado and gambler.... Hitler could no longer tolerate objections to his ideas, or in fact anything which cast doubt on his infallibility."⁴⁶

The Allies' failure to insist upon respect for the terms of the Versailles Treaty during those years nurtured the myth of Hitler's lucky destiny and infallible intuition in the minds of his advisors, the German people and, most importantly, Hitler himself.

The following year, on March 7, 1936, Hitler ordered German troops into the Rhineland, again in direct violation of the provisions of the Versailles Treaty. The German high command had resisted this move vigorously, fearing an armed response from the French and possibly the British, with which they were ill-equipped to deal. However, the British never considered taking action, and the French contented themselves with re-deploying thirteen divisions to the Maginot Line. Hitler's great bluff had tested the allied governments' resolve to maintain the treaty, and they had barely reacted. Hitler later confessed his apprehension, "The forty-eight hours after the march into the Rhineland were the most nerve-wracking in my life."⁴⁷ The success of his first confrontation with France and Britain confirmed his notions of allied weakness and set a pattern he was to repeat for the next three years.

⁴⁶Otto Dietrich, *Hitler*, trans. Richard and Clara Winston (Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1955), 30-31

⁴⁷Bullock, *Hitler*, 345.

That fall Hitler made a decision that had profound consequences for Germany's future relations with England. Few of the traditional diplomatic corps were sympathetic to Hitler's plans and he sought means to bypass them. In order to accomplish this and more directly control this all important relationship he appointed Anglophile and ardent Nazi Joachim von Ribbentrop as Ambassador to the Court of St. James. Von Ribbentrop came from a prominent military family and through his rich and well-connected wife socialized with members of German high society. Furthermore, his job as a wine and liquor importer brought him in contact with prominent British and French merchants. Hitler, who had no overseas experience, confused von Ribbentrop's polished manners and foreign contacts with a talent for diplomacy. In his ignorance of Britain and appreciation for von Ribbentrop's fawning devotion to him, Hitler had come to trust his new ambassador's knowledge of England.⁴⁸

When von Ribbentrop left for London on October 25, 1936, Hitler's parting words were "Ribbentrop, bring me the English alliance."⁴⁹ However, the neophyte ambassador's tenure began with a *faux pas* when he accompanied public remarks with the Hitler salute before presenting his credentials. Von Ribbentrop's ignorance of diplomatic protocol led to numerous repetitions of this type of blunder. Indeed, his personal vanity as well as his contempt for traditional diplomats led him to ignore the advice of his professional aide,

⁴⁸Michael Bloch, *Ribbentrop* (New York: Crown Publishers, Inc., 1992), chaps. VI & VII passim.

⁴⁹*Ibid.*, 110.

Erich Kordt. He was soon the laughing stock of the British press and earned the humiliating nickname 'Brickendrop'. Even Germany's friends in England became exasperated with him.

Ernest Tennant, Ribbentrop's oldest political ally in England and founder of the Anglo-German Fellowship, admitted in his memoirs that Ribbentrop eventually became intolerable to him. Men such as Lothian and Londonderry continued to be enthusiastic advocates of giving Hitler a degree of freedom in the East in return for German support of the British Empire – but no longer found Ribbentrop a particularly agreeable person with whom to discuss these matters.⁵⁰

Von Ribbentrop failed in his primary tasks as ambassador to Great Britain: he embarrassed his nation repeatedly, failed to cultivate powerful Britons friendly to Germany, and most important, failed to provide Hitler with accurate information about his host country. For example, von Ribbentrop slighted his Military Attaché, Geyr von Schweppenburg, and ignored his 1937 report to the ambassador that England's 'rearmament was serious and that the British Empire, if provoked, would prove a formidable adversary.'⁵¹ Instead von Ribbentrop chose to accept the analysis of the more ideologically driven Air Attaché, Nazi General Wenninger, that it would be a long time before the British would have the means to fight even if they could summon the will.⁵² That spring the man Hitler had commissioned to bring home a *rapprochement* reacted to

⁵⁰Ibid., 117.

⁵¹Ibid., 133-34.

⁵²Ibid.

the personal rebuffs he received in London by becoming a violent antagonist of Great Britain who was no longer interested in promoting “understanding.”⁵³ From this date forward, von Ribbentrop had a corrosive effect upon Hitler’s judgment concerning British attitudes and capabilities. Less than a year later Hitler compounded his delinquency in judgement by appointing the incompetent, von Ribbentrop, Foreign Minister of the Third Reich. His replacement in London, Herbert von Dirksen, was a career diplomat of the type Hitler most distrusted and was without significant influence.⁵⁴

With the Foreign Office firmly in his hands, Hitler began to plot the integration of his birthplace, Austria, into his Third Reich. Discontent was rife in post-war Austria. The Austrians had suffered grievously at the end of the First World War, losing their entire multi-ethnic empire. The loss of empire hurt their pride and their pocketbooks, for the political arrangements of that empire that had integrated the region's economy were also destroyed in 1919. It was natural that a large number of the country's German speaking majority would look to their confident, newly prosperous former ally for inspiration and succor, and from this impetus a large and active Nazi Party was created. When the young Austrian democratic state was destroyed by carefully orchestrated pressure from domestic Nazis as well as the German Reich, few in Austria were surprised when Hitler and German troops were met by cheering crowds in Vienna on April 8, 1938. Fearing foreign

⁵³Ibid., 131.

⁵⁴Ibid., 156-57.

intervention, Hitler had not planned to annex Austria at that time. He had originally intended that the Austrian President Miklas appoint a National Socialist government.⁵⁵ However, the following day at noon at the Weininger Hotel in Linz, his press secretary, Otto Dietrich, presented the Führer with a report on the foreign presses' response to the invasion.

All the newspapers abroad represented *Anschluß* with Austria as already a *fait accompli*, and the way they fumed about it made him take a fancy to the idea. He asked himself why he should not carry out an annexation which was already being charged to him. After several hours of vacillation he finally decided in favor of *Anschluß*.... Newspaper allegations about his intentions often gave him ideas.⁵⁶

On the following day a plebiscite was taken and the Anschluss was approved by 99.7% of the Austrian voters. "The popular joy over the Anschluss seemed to him a mandate to go ahead with his plans."⁵⁷ Hitler's second bloodless victory evoked little more than two strongly worded verbal communications delivered by the British Ambassador, Neville Henderson.⁵⁸

Czechoslovakia was another of the new states that had been created from the wreckage of the former Austro-Hungarian Empire. It was Czechoslovakia's misfortune that her northern border with Germany held many ethnic Germans who, like their brethren

⁵⁵Dietrich, *Hitler*, 38.

⁵⁶*Ibid.*

⁵⁷*Ibid.*, 39.

⁵⁸Neville Henderson, *Failure of a Mission: Berlin 1937-1939* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1940), 124.

in Austria, longed to be united with the German-speaking Reich. Furthermore, this area, known as the Sudetenland, was a mountainous region that formed the best natural defensive position for the Czech military. Hitler and the German military regarded Czechoslovakia as a geographic dagger aimed at the heart of the Reich.⁵⁹ Furthermore, Czechoslovakia was the linchpin of France's system of alliances in Eastern Europe. Germany could not fight an offensive war with such a threat. However, the annexation of Austria significantly weakened the Czechs' position and allowed them to be flanked. Hitler had in place a native Nazi party that was provided with money and direction from the Fatherland and the same pretext for occupation, the reuniting of all Germans, but he also faced several important complications. Unlike Austria, Czechoslovakia had a non-German majority that prized its long-awaited independence as well as important allies. Czechoslovakia also had a competent army, extensive fortifications on the Czech-German border and the Skoda works. Indeed, the Skoda works had been the most important source of military supplies and equipment for the former Austro-Hungarian Empire.

Hitler's long held attitude towards the Czechs constituted another misfortune for them. His hatred of the Czechs was rooted in his youthful experiences in pre-war Vienna, mainly his belief in the Czechs' attempt to supplant German influence in the empire. He was particularly incensed by some members of the Hapsburg family and the Catholic Church. He believed that Archduke Francis Ferdinand had been leading an effort to de-

⁵⁹Toland, *Adolf Hitler*, 628.

Germanize the Dual Monarchy. “The central idea of this new Hapsburg, whose family had ceased to speak anything but Czech...was gradually to establish a Slavic state in Central Europe.”⁶⁰ The Church had presumably conspired, as well, in the Slavization of Austria. “The use of Czech pastorates and their spiritual shepherds was but one of the many means of attaining this goal, a general Slavization of Austria.”⁶¹ Hitler was repelled by all non-Germans within his homeland but saved a special hatred for the Czechs. At the height of the crisis on September 19, 1938, an article appeared in the *Daily Mail* in which Hitler was quoted in an interview with Ward Price, making his case for the destruction of the Czech state. “The Czechs have none of the characteristics of a nation, whether from the standpoint of ethnology, strategy, economics or language. To set an intellectually inferior handful of Czechs to rule over minorities belonging to races like the Germans, Poles, Hungarians, with a thousand years of culture behind them was a work of folly and ignorance.”⁶² Four years later his anger had not cooled when he warned his comrades and hinted at a solution. “Of all the Slavs, the Czech is the most dangerous, because he’s a worker. He has a sense of discipline, he’s orderly, he’s more of a Mongol than a Slav....

⁶⁰Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, 93.

⁶¹Ibid., 109.

⁶²Bullock, *Hitler*, 42-43

To put it briefly, the Czechs are a foreign body in the midst of the German community.

There's no room both for them and for us. One of us must give way."⁶³

February 20, 1938, marks the beginning of the Czech Crisis that culminated in the most dramatic act of appeasement preceding the Second World War. Hitler made a speech to the Reichstag, in the midst of the Austrian crisis, offering his protection to the ten million Germans living outside the Reich. Clearly the six-and-a-half million Sudeten Germans were the focus of Hitler's attentions at this time and they reacted during the ensuing months with a series of riots and violent demonstrations coordinated by the German government with the aid of the Sudeten Nazi Party. The Czech Premier, Milan Hodža, responded with a statement that Czechoslovakia would "brook no interference with its internal policy under any circumstances" and turned to Czechoslovakia's ally, France.⁶⁴ The French government under the newly installed Prime Minister, Léon Blum, hastened to assure Hodža that in the event of an attack, France would honor the Treaty of 1925 which promised military assistance. But by 1938, weakened by economic problems and political instability, France had tied its foreign policy inextricably to that of Great Britain and would not act independently of the British. Though the Czechs were firmly committed to resistance, Chamberlain was committed to finding a compromise between

⁶³Adolf Hitler, *Table Talk: 1941-1944*, trans. Norman Cameron and R.H. Stevens (London: Weindenfeld and Nicholson, 1953), 26.

⁶⁴Eugene J. Bernardini, "Franco-German Diplomatic Relations from September 1937 to September 1939" (Master's Thesis, San Jose State College, 1960), 26.

the Czech government and the Sudeten Germans. When in March of 1938 both France and the Soviet Union declared their willingness to honor their treaty obligations to the Czechs, Chamberlain rejected the Soviet Foreign Minister's offer of concerted action to prevent aggression. Hitler could hardly fail to interpret Chamberlain's rejection as supportive, intentional or not, of his efforts. Thus encouraged, Hitler named Konrad Henlein, head of the Sudeten Nazi Party, as his personal representative. Henlein was given instructions to make a series of impossible demands on the Czech government that would create a constant state of unrest and would require armed intervention to protect the German minority.⁶⁵ On April 24, Henlein announced a set of demands at Karlsbad, Czechoslovakia. These demands included full autonomy for the German areas, full equality of status for Germans and freedom for Germans to adhere to "the ideology of Germans." Further disturbances ensued. The following month Hitler went to Italy to consult with Mussolini concerning his plans for Czechoslovakia. Upon receiving tacit approval from his only ally, he ordered Joseph Goebbels to step up the propaganda campaign against the Czechs. The German press began to exert pressure on the Czech President, Edward Beneš and his democratic government in the spring of 1938 concerning the "severe persecutions"⁶⁶ of the German minority in the Sudetenland. In May of that year the German press conducted a violently anti-Czech propaganda campaign which

⁶⁵Toland, *Adolf Hitler*, 629.

⁶⁶Bullock, *Hitler*, 628.

apparently stimulated a false rumor that German and Austrian troops had mobilized on the Czech border. In response to this misinformation, Beneš ordered a partial mobilization and Czech troops occupied the border fortifications. The French and British governments, as well as important elements of the foreign press, responded to the perceived threat with support for the Czechs.⁶⁷ The French and British reluctantly supported the Czech initiative, and the Germans truthfully responded they had massed no troops for an invasion. When the Czechs publicly claimed their mobilization had thwarted Hitler's plans, he became enraged and vowed the destruction of Beneš and Czechoslovakia.⁶⁸ The following week Hitler ordered his General Staff to prepare a plan, code-named Case Green, for a Czech invasion on October 1.

Through the rest of 1938 the Nazis in both Germany and Czechoslovakia maintained a steady drumbeat of pressure on the Czech government concerning alleged Czech abuses of the Sudeten Germans. Chamberlain was determined to remove the source of German complaints and applied pressure on the Czechs to comply with German demands throughout the entire period. Loath to provoke Hitler, Chamberlain cultivated the role of disinterested party in the dispute. He was interested only in preserving peace, not in Czech national integrity.

⁶⁷Toland, *Adolf Hitler*, 635.

⁶⁸Neville Henderson, *Failure of a Mission*, 178.

The May Crisis had ended without a war, but tension remained high when the Czech government entered into a series of negotiations with Henlein over his demands. Sir Robert Vansittart, Permanent Under-Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, was also in regular contact with Henlein who made the absurd declaration that he was “free from interference by Hitler.”⁶⁹ On May 22, Lord Halifax, the Foreign Secretary, stated during a Meeting of the Ministers that the French wished to rescind the promises made to the Czechs prior to German rearmament. He suggested that he would like to see the Czech State move to a position of neutrality wherein all “[a]lliances would automatically disappear.”⁷⁰ Next a cantonal system for Czechoslovakia was discussed by the cabinet. Finally a discussion of British military weakness and their inability to respond in case of war ensued.⁷¹ Chamberlain’s cabinet endeavored to solve the problem of Czech reticence, not German aggression: How could the Czechs be induced to peacefully dismember their own country to avoid a war in which Britain might become involved? Under extreme pressure from France and Great Britain, their putative allies, a series of compromises were offered by the Czech Government to the obdurate Sudeten Nazi leader. Under orders from the Reich, each compromise provoked more extreme demands from Henlein. By the

⁶⁹Ian Colvin, *The Chamberlain Cabinet: How the meetings in 10 Downing Street, 1937-1939, led to the Second World War* (New York: Taplinger Publishing Company, 1971), 135.

⁷⁰*Ibid.*, 130.

⁷¹*Ibid.*

end of the summer, Lord Runciman was sent by the British to act as a mediator in the talks.

On September 1, a plan brokered by Runciman that included cantonal self-determination was rejected by Hitler's order. After a second compromise plan was rejected the following week, the talks were broken off. On the twelfth, Hitler demanded self-determination for the Sudeten Germans in a speech at Nuremberg. Riots ensued in the Sudeten region and martial law was declared. In mid-September, Chamberlain met with Hitler at Berchtesgaden and Hitler again declared that the Sudeten Germans must return to the Reich, even at the risk of war. French and British officials met in London and urged the Czechs to accede to German demands. On September 22-24, a second meeting took place between Chamberlain and Hitler at Godesburg where Hitler presented his demands insisting upon German occupation of the Sudeten region of Czechoslovakia. A shocked Chamberlain returned to London and Czechoslovakia rejected Hitler's Godesburg demand to dismember their country. France ordered a partial mobilization in support of the Czechs. Chamberlain sent Sir Horace Wilson to Hitler to inform him that if war broke out, Britain would support the Czechs. Hitler threatened to invade the following day, September 28, at 2 p.m. Britain ordered the mobilization of the fleet but the import of this action was weakened when Chamberlain simultaneously held out an offer of further negotiations. A four power conference was proposed by Mussolini for the following day and accepted by France, Britain and Germany. At the "conference," Mussolini presented a document secretly prepared by German foreign office officials as his

own. It was essentially a re-write of the Godesburg demands. During this final meeting, Daladier, the French Premier, and Chamberlain agreed to the peaceful dismemberment of Czechoslovakia. So craven was Chamberlain's behavior, he acceded to Hitler's demand that the Czechs be barred from the meetings. Under the terms of the agreement, the deadline for Czech evacuation of the Sudetenland was October 1, the same date Hitler had chosen for the invasion four months earlier.⁷² The next morning, before Chamberlain left for London, a private meeting with Hitler was arranged. Chamberlain successfully prevailed upon Hitler to sign an Anglo-German Declaration as "symbolic of the desire of our two people never to go to war again." When his Foreign Minister, von Ribbentrop, expressed his concern about the agreement, Hitler replied, "Don't take it at all seriously. That scrap of paper is of no significance whatever."⁷³

Von Ribbentrop's disastrous tenure as Ambassador to Great Britain had converted him from a friend to an enemy of his host. A member of the official entourage commented upon von Ribbentrop's pernicious influence on Hitler as well Hitler's incipient megalomania during the Munich Crisis:

Since Ribbentrop's return from London Hitler had displayed intense distrust of England—in marked contrast to his former attitude. It is true that I recall conversations in which Hitler commented sarcastically upon Ribbentrop's exaggerated hatred for England. But Ribbentrop's one-sided

⁷²Melvin Small and Otto Feinstein, eds. *Appeasing Fascism: Articles from the Wayne State University Conference on Munich After Fifty Years* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1991), 99-101

⁷³Bloch, *Ribbentrop*, 197.

appraisals soon began to have their effect. As Hitler became aware of England's stiffening attitude toward him, he fell more and more under the sway of Ribbentrop's Anglophobia. All along Hitler stood for a purely constructive, peaceful policy drawn along racial lines. But instead of using the resources at his command for developing that policy, instead of appreciating the gift of peace given him by the Prime Minister of the British Empire, Hitler succumbed to the intoxication of success. He gave way to the wild impulse to play power-politics; this impulse had grown stronger within him than the politico-moral forces of his ego.⁷⁴

War had been averted once more. Although the initial response in the West to Munich was one of great relief and happiness, within weeks delirium was replaced by doubts. Britain had suffered an enormous strategic defeat and Hitler had obtained his victory through bullying and threats. Chamberlain was roundly criticized in Parliament and in the press. Erstwhile supporters abandoned him and a member of his cabinet resigned. With or without him, the era of appeasement, passivity and complacency in Britain was coming to an end.

⁷⁴Dietrich, *Hitler*, 40-41

Chapter Three

Roots of Appeasement

No foreign policy practiced by a democratic state in the twentieth century has received such scorn as Neville Chamberlain's appeasement of Hitler's Nazi Germany at Munich in 1938. The policy has been criticized as ineffective at best and at worst as an act of personal cowardice by its practitioner. The reality of the situation is, of course, not so simple. One must examine the policy, Chamberlain's character, his options and the situation he inherited. The British policy of appeasement that Chamberlain inherited had its roots in fundamental differences in British and French attitudes towards a defeated Germany which began to surface nearly the minute the guns were silenced in November, 1918. Twenty years later, Britain confronted a far more powerful German state with an aggressive leader but the policy nonetheless persisted. Naturally, the policy did not operate in a vacuum and the response Chamberlain hoped to evoke was not forthcoming. Chamberlain's efforts to address and rectify legitimate German grievances stemming from the post-war settlement were met with scorn, for Hitler was not appeased, merely emboldened. The failure of Chamberlain's policy to communicate to Hitler the limits of British concessions to a wronged Germany and the Nazi leader's misinterpretation of that policy resulted in one of the greatest disasters of European history, a second world war within a generation.

As stated earlier, Chamberlain's policy was not original with him. The roots of appeasement and Hitler's misinterpretation can be traced back to December, 1918, when the first post-war election was held in Great Britain. Tempers were naturally running high and the tone of election rhetoric was vengeful, with each party outbidding the other in claims of proposed toughness towards the beaten foe. Consequently, British Prime Minister David Lloyd George's effort to restrain French vengefulness at Versailles was severely constrained by the tone of his election. Three results of his failure to moderate French demands were 1) a treaty of which many leading Englishmen, particularly politicians and publicists, disapproved; 2) the seeds of alienation between Britain and her former allies, especially France; 3) and the roots of appeasement as a necessary corrective to an unwise and unjust settlement.⁷⁵ But from the beginning, the policy of appeasement could not be articulated directly by Lloyd George and the members of his cabinet for fear of alienating France or voters who were promised revenge during the 1918 election campaign. Lloyd George's conflicting goals of maintaining Britain's wartime relationship with the French and reintegrating Germany into the European family of nations placed the British in the position of responding to the demands of the new leaders of the Weimar Republic rather than assuming leadership themselves. Unfortunately, this policy was passive, the initiative was relinquished to the far weaker Germans and a false impression of British weakness was conveyed to both former ally and foe.

⁷⁵William R. Rock, *British Appeasement in the 1930s*, Foundations in Modern History (New York: W.W.Norton & Company, 1977) , 33.

By 1920, Lloyd George had begun to put into practice the policy of appeasement. At the time the Versailles Treaty was signed, he assumed that with a strong League of Nations and significant support from the Americans, Britain would be in a position to soften the terms of the treaty. This could be accomplished through the myriad commissions formed to implement the treaty but by 1920, Britain, France and Italy were the only three powers left to enforce the Treaty of Versailles. The United States, the most powerful ally in economic terms, had failed to ratify the treaty, declined to join the League of Nations and was rapidly withdrawing from European affairs. "Return to Normalcy," which implied a return to isolation, was the successful campaign theme for Republicans in that election year. Russia, controlled by Bolshevik revolutionaries who were anathema to the democracies, was engulfed in a vicious civil war and was excluded by the Allies from European affairs for years to come.

The positions of the three Allies left on the scene were very different. Italy, clearly the weakest from the start, had barely survived the war. Its weak economy and fragile political institutions could not support continued pretensions to great power status. France had won a great victory but had suffered terrible losses on the battlefield, losses that France could ill afford to make good. Great tracts of her prime agricultural lands and much of her industrial plant had been occupied by the enemy for four years. That which could not be looted had been destroyed. The French were acutely aware how close they had come to losing the war. The French also knew that with their lower birth rate as well as an initial population half that of Germany, it would take its enemy but a single

generation to produce a vengeful foe that France could not match. France had to insist upon a peace that denied the Germans the means to reverse the hard won decision. Germany would be shorn of her colonies, reduced in population and territory, forbidden more than a token army, and made militarily impotent by denying her an invasion route. France had prevailed at Versailles. In sharp contrast, Great Britain emerged from the war physically intact and in a strong position, relative to the rest of Europe. Britain did not perceive Germany as a military or commercial rival after the war and was consequently more concerned with peacefully reintegrating a chastised Germany into the European family of nations. In contrast to French fears, Britain hoped a revitalized, democratic Germany could provide a bulwark against the threat of an expanding communist revolution as posed by Soviet Russia. The policy of appeasement launched by Lloyd George in 1920 was initiated from a position of overwhelming strength not weakness. His motive was not fear but hope.

The roots of Chamberlain's appeasement can be found in the events immediately following the signing of the Versailles Treaty. The ink was hardly dry on the Versailles Treaty before the first signs of the split between the erstwhile Allies began to surface. American President Woodrow Wilson had influenced the framing of the treaty in such a way that made American participation essential.⁷⁶ The anticipated role of America, the main creditor, in the all important Reparations Commission promised to put that nation at

⁷⁶Martin Gilbert, "The Roots of Appeasement," in *Appeasement of the Dictators: Crisis Diplomacy* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1970), 8.

the center of future negotiations. The failure of the U.S. Senate to ratify the Versailles Treaty in November 1919 and America's obvious withdrawal from European affairs threw all the participants, both victors and the defeated, completely off balance.

With the Americans absent, Lloyd George unexpectedly found himself as the only spokesman in the Allied camp willing to represent German interests. The British and French differences in the two vital areas of reparations and culpability came into sharp relief with the loss of Wilson's soothing intervention. Within a week of the treaty's ratification, France and Great Britain were in conflict over the standards of culpability to be used for drawing up the list of German "war criminals." No difference was drawn by the French in determining culpability between the necessary actions resulting from executing orders and flagrant violations of the rules of war. Lloyd George was furious when he was first shown the French "war criminal" list and discovered the names of the Generals Hindenburg and Ludendorff as well as the former Imperial Chancellor Bethmann-Hollweg.

Ludendorff and Hindenburg were national heroes, perhaps the only two who had emerged from the war with any credit in German eyes. The Prime Minister was convinced their prosecution would so antagonize the Germans as to guarantee their total refusal to comply with the treaty's provisions, including the reparation payments. In consultation with his cabinet, Lloyd George dispatched the Lord Chancellor, Lord Birkenhead, to French President, Alexandre Millerand, to forcefully convey his views. The President was strongly urged to reconsider France's decision in light of the present situation in Germany

and changes that had taken place since the signing of the treaty. Millerand responded that such leniency was greater than he would countenance and pressed for a literal interpretation of the treaty. When the French list of “war criminals” was published, it contained the three names that had inspired Lloyd George’s fury. A week after the publication of the list, Millerand was in London for the second of many conferences concerning the implementation of the treaty. Within ten minutes of the opening of discussions, the Prime Minister pressed Millerand on the topic of the list. He stated his belief that a demand upon the defeated Germans to surrender Hindenburg would be a grave political mistake. Furthermore, a German refusal to surrender their heroes would put the allies in a very difficult situation. It was incredible to believe, he said, that Italy, Great Britain and France would go to war to force Hindenburg’s surrender. He argued that a new war, in which Great Britain would not engage, and against which the common sense of the world would protest, would lead to the humiliation of the Allies.

Millerand countered with the argument that a compromise would lead the Germans to the belief that vigorous protest would cause modification in every aspect of the treaty. The Belgian Prime Minister, Léon Delacroix, warned that Allied unity was essential, and emphasized the danger of giving Germans any hint of Allied disagreement. He ended with a stated willingness to see a modified list that could appear as a unanimous Allied decision. The modified list, deleting the names of Hindenburg and Ludendorff, was finally adopted by the Allies and the Anglo-French split was papered over but mutual suspicions had been

aroused. Fundamental differences in their policies toward Germany had developed since the end of the war, differences that had been masked by the common goal of victory.

In March 1920, a Communist Revolution in the Ruhr provided the stimulus for a second crisis in the Anglo-French relationship. Believing that a Bolshevik Germany would repudiate any treaty obligations contracted under the Versailles Treaty, Lloyd George looked kindly upon efforts by the German government to suppress any revolutionary movement. Lloyd George was not upset by the fact that German authorities used German troops commanded by German officers for anti-revolutionary activities. Nor was he concerned the Germans were using weapons that ought to have been surrendered under treaty terms. The same could not be said about the French. Any effective use of German military force was perceived by the French as a potential threat to French security. Determined to remain the final arbiters in German domestic policy, the French refused unilaterally to grant permission for German troops to be used in the Ruhr. Dissension in the Allied ranks encouraged the Germans, and the seriousness of the situation forced the German government's hand. On April 3, 1920, German authorities sent eighteen thousand troops into the Ruhr. The French responded, three days later, by occupying five Rhineland towns, including Frankfurt. France had pressed the Allies for an independent Rhineland during treaty negotiations but had not prevailed. The British were convinced that the occupation was wrong and were particularly incensed with the French for taking such a precipitous action without consultation. The explanation offered by the French Ambassador, Paul Cambon, that German troop movements were a grave treaty violation

and posed a serious menace to France, did not impress Cabinet member Andrew Bonar Law.

Further rancor between the wartime allies was to emerge from this incident. The French had issued a statement at the time of occupation which mentioned previous consultation with their allies that implied their approval. Lord Curzon was sent to Paris two days after the incident to communicate the British cabinet's collective disapproval of the French action. The next day, April 9, in Frankfurt, a defiant crowd provoked some French troops, who fired on the crowd, killing eight people. Curzon used the incident to point out risks involved in the French occupation. Furthermore, he pointed out that France's provocative use of black troops from Morocco made the incident in Frankfurt practically inevitable. Lloyd George considered their use a political blunder, for these troops were believed by both the German and British public to be particularly vicious and were associated, in the public mind, with stories of violent assault and rape. The use of Moroccan troops was seen by some as an intentional French policy intended to frighten the population of the occupied cities. France's actions in the Ruhr damaged the Alliance and created a negative impression in the minds of the British public. The wartime atrocities committed by Germans in Belgium were overshadowed by current stories of atrocities committed by French-Moroccan troops in the Ruhr. The possibility of an Anglo-German rapprochement was being furthered by the "push" of French unilateral action as well as the "pull" of British fears of the Soviet Union. Winston Churchill wrote in a July 28, 1920, article in the *London Evening News* that by resisting "the flood of red

barbarism flowing from the East,” Germany had “taken a giant step upon the path of self-redemption.”⁷⁷

The British were next to make a fundamental policy statement frustrating the desires of, and without consulting, their former ally. In October 1920, the British Government announced that if Germany was unable to make its reparation payment Britain would not exercise its right under the treaty to seize the property of German nationals in England. The British Cabinet made this decision without consultation with France, a decision that had a profoundly negative effect on French expectations for meaningful reparations. German reparations had been designed to serve the three French goals of rebuilding France’s shattered industrial plant and rehabilitating its agricultural territory as well as crippling German recovery efforts.

The French plans concerning Germany’s fate had begun to unravel from the moment of their adoption at Versailles. Disagreements over Britain’s emerging appeasement policy towards Germany struck yet another blow in the decisive year of 1920 at the formerly intimate Anglo-French wartime alliance.

The German economy had collapsed in 1922 and the German Government claimed itself incapable of making its reparations payments. The French Government was convinced Germany was capable of meeting its obligations if it wanted and the French Premier, Raymond Poincaré, used the technical excuse of German default in deliveries of

⁷⁷Ibid., 12-13.

timber to occupy the industrial Ruhr district on January 11, 1923. The Ruhr was vital to the economic life of Germany and the German Government responded by calling for passive resistance, which quickly degenerated into a state of undeclared war. The Ruhr invasion and the German response precipitated a total collapse in the already reeling mark. By November 1, 1923, one hundred-thirty billion marks equaled one dollar.⁷⁸ The mark's difficulties caused untold damage to the German people; it destroyed trade, bankrupted businesses, caused food shortages in the big cities, reduced the value of wages to nothing and wiped out middle class savings in a single blow. When the Labour Party came to power in 1923, the new Prime Minister Ramsay MacDonald moved to mediate the conflict and declared himself to be impartial when considering French and German reparations claims. This attitude of impartiality was in itself a further weakening of the Anglo-French relationship. To establish a reasonable payment schedule, the Dawes plan was successfully negotiated in 1924, with MacDonald's skillful aid as an impartial mediator. German reparations were reduced to \$250 million per year and France was again the loser. Under the terms of the agreement, Britain's share of the reparations, including a broker's fee for successfully mediating the plan, was sufficient to meet her debt obligation to the United States.⁷⁹ The Young Plan signed in 1929 further reduced German reparations and ended

⁷⁸Bullock, *Hitler*, 81.

⁷⁹A.J.P. Taylor, *English History: 1914-1945* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965) , 215.

Allied control of the entire reparations process.⁸⁰ Hitler interpreted the incident and the split in policy between France and England in a speech on April 13, 1923: "For 140 years England has battled France for hegemony. They are old bitter rivals to this day despite the fact that they have waged a predatory war together."⁸¹

...Germany should have responded to the occupation of the Ruhr by taking up arms. Then the world would have realized that Germany had regained her senses and 'a reorientation of English policy would have been the first natural result, a result which would have been welcomed in London. Not because they love us. No, for the simple reason which has always guided England's policy, namely to re-establish more or less the balance of continental powers, for the sake of its own security and peace.'⁸²

Ironically, Hitler did not foresee that Germany's rise would stimulate British suspicions about his motives.

In 1924, British elections brought the Conservative Party back into power.

Included in the new Cabinet were several politicians who would later be prominent as advocates and critics of appeasement. Austen Chamberlain served as Foreign Secretary, Churchill as Chancellor of Exchequer and Neville Chamberlain regained his position as head of the Health ministry. Austen Chamberlain's work to integrate the Germans into the European system culminated in the Locarno Pact in 1925. Though possessing great symbolic value, the specifics of the pact did little to guarantee the peace. In the pact,

⁸⁰Ibid., 272.

⁸¹Jäckel, *Hitler's Weltanschauung*, 31.

⁸²Ibid.

France, Belgium and Germany signed a non-aggression agreement and confirmed their common post-Versailles borders. Great Britain and Italy, the two “impartial” powers, guaranteed it. No provisions were made for implementing the guarantee and, in fact, staff talks between the British and Germans or British and French were forbidden. British strategists did not consider Franco-British cooperation possible until after Hitler’s denunciation of the Locarno Pact at the time of Germany’s remilitarization of the Rhineland in 1937.⁸³

Throughout the Twenties, therefore, Great Britain’s foreign policy was aimed at bringing an apparently repentant Germany, under the Weimar Republic, into the European community. The British leadership knew that in order to bring about this goal French interests would need to be sacrificed. This stance was consistent with England’s traditional “balance of power” policy. France was, at the start of the decade, the greatest power on the Continent and further aggrandizement by France could possibly lead to hegemony over Europe. Britain’s policy of appeasement of Germany was designed to bring about a counterweight in Central Europe to Russia in the east and France in the west. Germany was the only realistic candidate to fill that role.

Just as Neville Chamberlain’s appeasement was not born upon his appointment as Prime Minister, so Adolf Hitler inherited a set of foreign policy goals with which he was in total agreement. The leaders of the Weimar Republic had consistently aimed their foreign

⁸³Ibid., 221-22.

policy at overturning the most punitive aspects of the Treaty of Versailles. In 1931 and 1932 the republican government of Germany pursued two lines which challenged the terms of that treaty: one which met with success and another which clearly failed. After having obtained a one year moratorium on repayment on reparations in 1930, Chancellor Heinrich Brüning declared Germany would cease all reparations in June, 1931. France, in the end, paid 70% of the cost of the reconstruction of its devastated areas. In the other instance, secret negotiations were established by the German government with Austria to create an economic union. When French authorities discovered the talks, the French cabinet declared its strong opposition to Germany's attempt to dominate Central European economics. Though concerned with the secrecy of the Austro-German talks, the British public was sympathetic to the proposed custom union, but fearing internal repercussions in France, the British cabinet urged the French to take their case before the Permanent Court of International Justice. Under this pressure and sensing a negative ruling, the Austrians and Germans dropped their plan.⁸⁴ The Weimar Germans pursued the overturn of the Versailles Treaty while eschewing force or the threat of force. The goals of the German foreign policy of the pre-Third Reich era had a great deal in common with the appeasement of the contemporary British governments. Both aimed to mitigate the harsh terms of the Treaty of Versailles peacefully.

⁸⁴Pierre Renouvin, *World War II and Its Origins: International Relations, 1929-1945*, trans. Rémy Inglis Hall (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1969), 49-50.

When Hitler came to power in 1933, he knew that until Germany was rearmed caution was required and that outwardly the foreign policy of the Weimar Republic must be maintained. The British responded by continuing their policy of passive appeasement. Furthermore, Hitler was positively disposed towards Great Britain and eager to make an alliance with it. Hitler stated in his political manifesto, *Mein Kampf*, that the Kaiser's naval competition had been a serious blunder. He believed that Germany's destiny was on the continent and that Germany was fated to lose a naval rivalry with Britain as well as turn a potential ally into a potent enemy.⁸⁵ Britain's overseas empire, so dependent upon the Royal Navy, posed no threat to Hitler's plans for repatriation of the German *Volk* and acquisition of *Lebensraum* at the expense of Poland and the Soviet Union.⁸⁶ Hitler acted on this belief when he concluded the Naval Pact of 1935 with Great Britain. The circumstances of Hitler's diplomatic initiative were indicative of his attitude towards the British. Despite his public announcement of the existence of the *Luftwaffe* and his intention to triple the size of the Army, acts forbidden by the Versailles Treaty, Hitler's offer to unilaterally limit the size of the *Kriegsmarine* to a maximum of 35% of the Royal Navy was designed to signal his peaceful intentions towards the British while simultaneously threatening all his continental neighbors. In pursuit of their current disarmament policy, the British rose to the bait and the pact was concluded in a very

⁸⁵Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, 140.

⁸⁶*Ibid.*, 138-140

amiable atmosphere. Curiously, the British conceded a special limit of 45% for the German U-boat fleet, the German weapon that had nearly brought the British to their knees in 1917. British confidence in an anti-submarine device, ASDIC, developed during the immediate post-war era, later proved premature. The French, in political disarray, limited their diplomatic effort in response to Hitler's clear violation of the treaty to a meaningless plea to the League of Nations.⁸⁷ Hitler was emboldened by the ease with which he was able to contravene the articles of the treaty and placate one of the parties who were expected to enforce it.

As discussed earlier, Hitler decided to remilitarize the Rhineland in mid-January of 1936. The disparate responses to Hitler's aggression displayed by the allies both encouraged him and weakened his potential enemies. The importance of the Rhineland to the French system of security, as envisioned at the time of the Versailles Treaty, cannot be exaggerated. The Rhineland was the only possible direct invasion route Germany could employ to make war on France and, as such, its demilitarization represented an invaluable insurance policy for France. Ever concerned with a possible hostile British reaction to a new encroachment on the terms of the treaty, Hitler took heart in the accession of Edward VIII to the British throne upon the death of George V on January 20, 1936. Edward, as well as many in his coterie, was known to be sympathetic to many of Germany's aspirations. The new King had expressed his desire to improve relations with Germany

⁸⁷Toland, *Adolf Hitler*, 501-505

and had disapproved of France's efforts to revive the *entente cordiale* and "hitch Britain to the French wagon."⁸⁸ Hitler was encouraged as well by the uncoordinated and ineffective response France and England had offered to Mussolini's invasion of Ethiopia the previous fall. Nonetheless when Hitler scheduled the "invasion" of the Rhineland for Saturday, March 7, 1936, he did so with great trepidation. A Saturday was chosen because the British Foreign Office would be closed till the following Monday by which time "the excitement would be over."⁸⁹ Fearing a vigorous response from the French, the German General Staff strenuously objected to this challenge to the vastly larger French army. Hitler ignored their fears, screwed up his courage and gambled on his instincts.

Hitler proved correct and the General Staff's fears were unfounded. Though the German troops were under orders to retreat immediately upon contact with French troops, the call of the French Ambassador to Germany for an "energetic response" from his own government was not heeded. When pressed by civilian authorities, General Maurice Gamelin warned that any response, however limited, entailed unpredictable risks that necessitated full mobilization. In place of an armed confrontation, thirteen French divisions were rushed to the Maginot Line, a number four times larger than the "invading" force.⁹⁰ Britain never considered any military action. France had lost an invaluable buffer,

⁸⁸Ibid., 522

⁸⁹Ibid., 524

⁹⁰Ibid., 528.

and huge crowds had jubilantly greeted the German troops as they entered the Rhineland. In addition, by occupying the Rhineland Hitler had violated the Locarno Pact and had placed German troops on the Belgian border. King Leopold reacted by withdrawing from the pact, abrogating Belgium's alliance with Britain and France and proclaimed that henceforth Belgium would follow a course of strict neutrality.⁹¹ A great victory had been obtained by the untried Führer with nothing but a bluff. Encouraged by British inaction, Hitler could only interpret this example of continued appeasement as weakness or as support for his dismantling of the post-war system in Europe. A military defeat in the Rhineland would have branded Hitler a dangerous adventurer, invited a planned military Putsch and ended his career. On the other hand, his apparently effortless success in reasserting German sovereignty in the Rhineland met with great popular success and confounded his critics, both civilian and military.

⁹¹Shirer, *Third Reich*, 302.

Chapter Four

On the Road to Munich

The policy of appeasement entered a new phase with the elevation of Neville Chamberlain to Prime Minister on May 28, 1937.⁹² For two years, Hitler had surprised the British with his foreign policy initiatives and presented them with many a *fait accompli*. Each was backed by force or bluff of force and Britain was faced with two unattractive alternatives: military reaction or passive acceptance. Chamberlain believed that by anticipating Germany's and Italy's legitimate grievances, and satisfying them peacefully, war could be avoided and the British could regain some control of pace and direction of events on the Continent.⁹³ A month after he assumed power, Chamberlain took the opportunity at an Imperial Conference to delineate his assumptions concerning the underlying goals of German foreign policy in response to a question from the Canadian Prime Minister. Chamberlain opined that the German Government desired financial and economic assistance and political appeasement “—not, of course, by force—to enable them to make some progress with neighboring countries containing considerable numbers of

⁹²R.A.C. Parker, *Chamberlain and Appeasement: British Policy and the Coming of The Second World War* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1993) , 93.

⁹³William R. Rock, *Appeasement on Trial*, (Archon Books, 1966), 4.

persons of German race.”⁹⁴ He expressed his opinion that a peaceful destruction of Versailles was possible and that a revision would satisfy Hitler’s ambitions. Indeed, Chamberlain did not fully abandon his faith in his ability to restrain Hitler until September 1939.⁹⁵ Little more than a month after assuming power, on July 3, Chamberlain spoke at the Council House in his native Birmingham where he described the ideas underpinning his approach to making foreign policy:

When I served as a member of the Birmingham City Council, I learned one lesson which I have never forgotten, and that in this imperfect world a man cannot have everything his own way, and that those who get things done are those who are ready to work with, and for others, and who are prepared to give up something themselves in order that they may receive something in return. There is always some common measure of agreement if only we will look for it, and there is but little satisfaction in standing out for the last item of a programme on which we have set our hearts if, by so doing, we are going to miss the opportunity of obtaining anything at all.⁹⁶

Chamberlain’s successful experiences in business and government conditioned him to believe that he could resolve the existing international conflicts in Europe through his personal diplomatic efforts. His naive faith in his ability to deal with people directly was the basis for all his efforts to avoid war.

⁹⁴Parker, *Chamberlain and Appeasement*, 74.

⁹⁵*Ibid.*, 20-21.

⁹⁶Neville Chamberlain, *In Search of Peace* (New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1939), 15-16.

Neville Chamberlain's character and background must be examined in light of his critical part in the appeasement policy in the years leading directly to the war.

Chamberlain succeeded Stanley Baldwin as Prime Minister. Neville was the second son of a successful, self-made businessman and equally successful politician, Joseph Chamberlain.

The elder Chamberlain had entered local Birmingham politics in the late 19th Century, was one of the founders of Birmingham University, and was soon recognized in both the Liberal and the Conservative parties for his obvious talents. By the end of the century, he had become a prominent member of Conservative party in national politics. In this capacity, Joseph Chamberlain crusaded to promote a settlement of outstanding differences between Britain and Germany. Neville's older half-brother, Austen, was chosen by his father for a political career and consequently the younger brother was selected for a business career. Though he attended Rugby, a college preparatory school, Neville did not attend university because of his father's decision. Instead, he pursued a business and technical course at Mason College in Birmingham.

At age twenty-two, Neville Chamberlain was sent by his father to Andros Island in the Bahamas to operate a sisal plantation. For six years Chamberlain struggled to make a success of the enterprise but the land and climate made the task impossible. Some of Chamberlain's critics have surmised that his dogged persistence in attempting to reach an agreement with Hitler was the result of the over-learned lessons of his Andros

experience.⁹⁷ Upon his return to Birmingham in 1897, Chamberlain began a career in manufacturing and settled into the life of a public spirited businessman. Within a few years Chamberlain entered local politics and was elected Lord Mayor in 1915. In 1917, due to his record for efficiency as Mayor and his half-brother's prominent position in Lloyd George's wartime coalition, Chamberlain obtained a position in London as Director of the Department of National Service. His eight month tenure in this position resulted in a falling out with Lloyd George that left a lasting mutual antipathy.⁹⁸

In 1918, Chamberlain was elected to parliament from the Ladywood district of Birmingham. By 1925, he had moved to the Ministry of Health and his brother had become the Foreign Secretary. That year, under the guiding hand of Austen, the Locarno Pact was signed. It was the first comprehensive post-war European settlement. The pact signaled Germany's re-entry, as a respectable member, into the European family of nations. The Foreign Secretary's efforts in promoting improved German-British relations was a continuation of a Chamberlain family tradition. The Labor Party's victory in 1929 pushed Chamberlain's party into opposition, at which time he turned his efforts to reorganizing and revitalizing the Conservative Party. By 1932, Chamberlain and the Conservatives were back in power. At that time he began his five year stint as Chancellor of the Exchequer and immediately put into effect his protectionist scheme which was

⁹⁷William R. Rock, *Chamberlain and Roosevelt: British foreign policy and the U.S. 1937-1940* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1988), 4.

⁹⁸Ibid. 5-6

implemented with the Ottawa Agreements. The Ottawa Agreements set up reciprocal preferential agreements between Great Britain and the dominions. This sharpened existing economic differences with the United States, which naturally desired freer access to these markets. The following year, Roosevelt's rejection of the goals of the London Economic Conference exacerbated the existing frictions. The conference attempted to stabilize currencies and clashed with Roosevelt's policy of inflating the dollar to raise commodity prices and thus, stimulate the U.S. economy. These events, coupled with longstanding rancor over the repayment of Britain's debt, planted the seeds of mistrust between Chamberlain and Roosevelt and their respective nations, a mistrust that bore bitter fruit when Chamberlain became Prime Minister.⁹⁹ Strained relations between the leaders of the great English-speaking nations supported the German Führer's notions concerning the divisive effect of the commercial rivalry between the United States and Great Britain.

In 1937 Prime Minister Chamberlain inherited a seventeen-year-old policy of appeasement, albeit one with which he certainly concurred. Yet he was faced with a far more dangerous situation than his predecessor had been. Great Britain's military forces were spread very thinly and Britain had potentially aggressive adversaries at every turn. Its interests in Asia were threatened by Japan, in the Mediterranean by Italy and in the rest of Europe by Germany. Chamberlain believed that security for Great Britain lay in reducing the number of her enemies rather than increasing the number of her allies. Not

⁹⁹Ibid. , 7

only did he believe Britain's allies and potential allies were too unreliable but he also held that the experience of the World War indicated that alliances could easily have the opposite effect of that intended.¹⁰⁰ The complicated alliances wrought before the war did not preclude war but enlarged its scope. The massive pool of industrial and financial resources available to the combatants in a general European war led to the most costly war, both in lives and goods, in world history. Furthermore, all the defeated empires had been destroyed; indeed European civilization had been nearly destroyed. Every effort had to be made to avoid a repetition of the events of 1914-1918.

Chamberlain's confidence in his ability to deal with foreign dictators with the same success which he had dealt with his business and political rivals as well as his distrust of Franklin Roosevelt precipitated the first crisis of his government, the resignation of his Foreign Minister, Anthony Eden. Chamberlain and Eden concurred in the importance of restraining the dictators but disagreed in methods and tactics. Eden had come to a far different conclusion than his superior; his dealings with the dictators over Italy's conquest of Ethiopia and the question of foreign intervention in the Spanish Civil War led him to believe they were untrustworthy and only negotiations backed by force and suitable alliances would prove productive. Early in 1938 there took place the first of two incidents that highlighted Eden's differences with Chamberlain. On the twelfth of January, the British Foreign Office received a telegram from President Roosevelt "suggesting a

¹⁰⁰Rock, *British Appeasement*, 50-51

conference in Washington with the representatives of certain nations to consider the underlying causes of tensions, with the hope of agreement on essential principles to be observed in the conduct of international relations.”¹⁰¹ Without consulting Eden, who was vacationing in Southern France, and against the advice of Sir Alexander Cadogan, the Permanent Under-Secretary and Sir Ronald Lindsay, the British Ambassador in Washington, Chamberlain replied negatively within twenty-four hours. He peevishly responded that he hoped to secure an agreement with Italy and Germany and that Roosevelt should consider “whether there is not a risk of this proposal cutting across our efforts here.”¹⁰² When Eden heard of the incident, he was “outraged” (his own word) and immediately returned to London to minimize the effects of Chamberlain’s chilling reply. Eden was able to modify Chamberlain’s attitude, and a cordial message was sent to Roosevelt on the fifteenth in which he was encouraged to go ahead with his plan but the American President never repeated his proposal.¹⁰³ Eden was appalled that an opportunity to include America in Britain’s efforts to curb dictatorial appetites had been so foolishly squandered. Others in the Cabinet shared Chamberlain’s distrust; most leading ministers “were deeply suspicious...of American readiness to follow up inspiring words with any practical action,” according to what Home Secretary, Samuel Hoare later attested.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰¹Rock, *Appeasement on Trial*, 22.

¹⁰²Ibid.

¹⁰³Ibid., 23.

¹⁰⁴Rock, *British Appeasement*, 49.

Less than a month later Chamberlain received another overture from a foreign head of state with a far different response. Mussolini contacted Chamberlain through back door channels, expressing a desire for an early Anglo-Italian agreement covering all points in dispute between the two countries. Chamberlain responded positively and met immediately with the Italian Ambassador, Count Dino Grandi, to arrange for talks. Speed was of the essence, for Germany had begun to apply pressure upon the Austrian Government to include Nazis in key positions with an eye to eventually destroying Austrian independence; Hitler had proved himself capable of acting at a dizzying pace in the past. Mussolini had prevented a Nazi Putsch in 1934 by mobilizing his troops on the Brenner Pass and continued to fear a strong Germany on its border. Germany's strength had grown enormously in proportion to Italy's in the previous four years and the *Duce* was looking for support. But Mussolini had another alternative as Hitler was actively pursuing Italian acquiescence to his Austrian policy.

Chamberlain was eager to pursue any possibility of reducing the number of Britain's potential enemies by reaching an agreement with Mussolini. Count Grandi, in a letter to Count Ciano, recounted a meeting with Chamberlain and Eden in which the apparent differences between Eden and Chamberlain were greater than those between Britain and Italy. Eden was adamant that British recognition of Italy's conquest of Ethiopia must not be a prerequisite for Anglo-Italian talks. Such *a priori* concessions were not likely to yield any advantage for Britain. Chamberlain disagreed, "...we declare that England recognises Italian sovereignty in Ethiopia, and that thereafter one should pass

on to the examination of all the problems which must form the subject of the general agreement between the two countries.... I do not see how this can prejudice British interests and I do not see how the British Government can decline to accept the Italian point of view.”¹⁰⁵ But the British Foreign Minister did not agree with Chamberlain’s assessment and believed he was succumbing to Italian blackmail. Mussolini’s demand for undue haste and British recognition of Ethiopia as a prerequisite to talks smacked of an ultimatum to Eden. Chamberlain’s and Eden’s disagreement came to a head in Grandi’s presence. He wrote, “Eden showed that he did not like these statements by Chamberlain (*a priori* recognition of Italian Ethiopia) in the least, and addressing the Prime Minister directly—as if I were not there—countered that he did not see how one could reconcile the simultaneous carrying on of Anglo-Italian conversations and the work of the Non-Intervention Committee (referring to the Spanish Civil War).”¹⁰⁶ Clearly the Prime Minister and his Foreign Secretary should not argue in front of foreign diplomats. Eden had lost the trust of his chief; several days later Eden resigned and was replaced by the more pliable Lord Halifax. Safety, Chamberlain believed, lay in reducing the number of one’s enemies rather than increasing the number of one’s feckless friends. Chamberlain was determined to save the peace through appeasement rather than pursuing collective security.

¹⁰⁵Count Ciano, *Ciano’s Diplomatic Papers*, ed. Malcolm Muggeridge (London: Odhams Press Limited, 1948), 175.

¹⁰⁶*Ibid.*

While Chamberlain was talking with the Italians, Hitler, strengthened by his success in defying the British and French over the Rhineland the previous year, was plotting the destruction of Austria as an independent state. Hitler's native country contained the largest German-speaking population outside the Reich and as such the *Anschluß* or joining of Germany and Austria, was fundamental to his plans to include all the German *Volk* in the new German Reich. Yet, the *Anschluß* was expressly forbidden by the Treaty of Versailles. On February 11, 1938, Austrian Chancellor Kurt von Schuschnigg was invited to meet secretly with his German counterpart at Hitler's Berghof at Berchtesgaden to discuss the indignities Austrian Nazis were allegedly suffering at the hands of the present regime. Upon his arrival, Hitler greeted von Schuschnigg affably enough but the tone rapidly changed. Hitler complained that Austria's whole history represented a betrayal of German history. Hitler made it clear that any attempt to resist Germany was both futile and treasonous. A two-page memorandum containing Hitler's demands was proffered to von Schuschnigg after the first interview by von Ribbentrop. Germany would agree to recognize Austrian sovereignty if Austria would agree to release all National Socialist prisoners, including the assassins of a previous Austrian Chancellor, Engelbert Dollfuss; within three days, reinstate all dismissed National Socialist officials to their former positions; appoint Artur Seyss-Inquart, a Pan-German politician, as Interior Minister with unlimited police powers; appoint an Austrian Nazi Minister of Defense; and, finally, remove incumbent propaganda chiefs to facilitate a press truce. The Austrian refused at this time. However, after several meetings, during which Hitler bullied,

threatened and cajoled von Schuschnigg ever more vigorously, the shaken Chancellor agreed to Hitler's terms.¹⁰⁷ Naturally, the concessions von Schuschnigg made, when revealed, only further inflamed the heavily subsidized and German-directed Austrian Nazis. Hitler contacted Count Ciano through the good offices of the Prince of Hesse who assured the Italians that no action against Austrian independence would occur without prior consultation.¹⁰⁸ Italy was being courted by both Britain and Germany and had the luxury of waiting for the best offer.

As the Nazis and their political foes battled on the streets for the soul of Austria, Schuschnigg arranged for a plebiscite over the independence of the country. Hitler knew that a majority vote for Austrian independence would wreck his plans and stepped up the pressure, diplomatically, militarily and on the streets of Vienna. In addition, German troops were massed on the Austrian border. Von Schuschnigg appealed to London for help. Ironically, Chamberlain was with von Ribbentrop when he received the Austrian's plea. Von Ribbentrop blandly reassured Chamberlain that though he knew nothing of the situation, it could not possibly be as was described. Thus soothed, Chamberlain asked Lord Halifax to send the following telegram to the Austrian government:

"His Majesty's Government cannot take responsibility of advising the Chancellor

¹⁰⁷Toland, *Adolf Hitler*, 590-595.

¹⁰⁸Ciano, *Diplomatic Papers*, 163-64

to take any course of action which might expose his country to dangers against which His Majesty's Government are unable to guarantee protection."¹⁰⁹ Schuschnigg offered his resignation and the new Chancellor, Seyss-Inquart, invited the Germans in to quell the Nazi inspired riots and restore order. On the evening of March 11, 1938 Hitler received word from Hesse that the Duce had accepted Hitler's plan to occupy Austria. Hitler, uncharacteristically, spoke of his gratitude for Mussolini's gesture, "You may thank him ever so much, never, never shall I forget."¹¹⁰ This incident led to the Pact of Steel. The following day at dawn German troops streamed into Austria where they were met with huge cheering crowds. It was a parade, not an invasion and, in fact, so weak were German logistics, motorized units were forced to use civilian filling stations to refuel. Later that day, buoyed by the hysterical reception he received in Vienna, Hitler determined to fully integrate Austria into the Reich rather than implement the looser confederation he had previously envisioned.¹¹¹ It was another bloodless victory for the Führer and another bloodless defeat for France, England and the Treaty of Versailles. Hitler had successfully challenged the status quo again within a year of the Rhineland crisis.

On March 14, 1938, Chamberlain offered his account of British efforts in a speech to the House of Commons. Protests were presented to the German Government through

¹⁰⁹Ibid. , 609.

¹¹⁰Bullock, Hitler, 393-4.

¹¹¹Ibid., 617.

the German Ambassador on March 10 and again on the 11th through the British Ambassador in Berlin to the German Foreign Minister, Count von Neurath. In response to British protests, Chamberlain received a letter from the German Foreign Minister, in which he asserted, "the German Government [has] never left the British Government in doubt that the form of the relations between the Reich and Austria can only be regarded as an internal affair of the German people which is no concern of third Powers."¹¹² For the second time in a year Britain stood by as the post-war arrangements it had been so instrumental in constructing were dismantled, unilaterally by Hitler. Britain would have been better served by actively supporting Hitler or successfully resisting him. But Chamberlain was determined to come to an understanding with the dictators and avoid a general European war. His first effort with Mussolini had failed but he was more determined than ever to succeed with Hitler. Anthony Eden was gone and Chamberlain had British foreign policy firmly in his grasp. Thus the final, tragic chapter of active appeasement was about to unfold.

¹¹²Neville Chamberlain, *In Search of Peace*, 71.

Chapter Five

After the Munich Pact

As described on pages 32 through 38, the Munich Pact temporarily resolved the Czech crisis and averted the immediate threat of war. At first the news was met with a collective sigh of relief by the public in the West. Within the week, the euphoria in Great Britain over the Munich solution was replaced by a sense of betrayal and important dissenters began to express their misgivings. The opposition as well as the independent newspapers and periodicals were unrestrained in their condemnation of Chamberlain's Munich agreement. The independent *Fortnightly* commented that Britain had made "another sickening surrender to blackmail." *The Reynolds News* asserted that only a turn towards collective security could save Britain from the "ruin Mr. Chamberlain's policy had made in Europe." The Labor *Daily Herald* and *Liberal News Chronicle* stressed that only collective resistance to aggression with Russia could hope to deter Hitler.¹¹³ More disturbing to Chamberlain than press criticism was First Lord of the Admiralty Duff Cooper's resignation from the cabinet on September 30 in protest over the appeasement policy. Another of the most prominent of Chamberlain's critics at the time was Winston Churchill, a member of the Prime Minister's Conservative Party and the man who had seconded his nomination for Prime Minister a year earlier. Churchill publicly

¹¹³Rock, *Appeasement on Trial*, 156-57.

stated his strong opposition to Chamberlain's policy of appeasement. Privately, Churchill had been exchanging letters with another emerging foe of Hitler's, U.S. President Franklin Roosevelt. It is interesting to note that no such correspondence was taking place between Chamberlain and Roosevelt. Observing German aggression for over a year, Roosevelt had been coming to the conclusion that America needed to be part of or a leader of an anti-Hitler coalition.¹¹⁴ However, wary of American public opinion and strong isolationist sentiment in the Congress, Roosevelt felt compelled to operate secretly through various agents. Yet Chamberlain was not without his defenders. The *Times* of London declared the "policy of international appeasement must of course be pressed forward" and complained of the "foolish and quite inexcusable disparagement of the Prime Minister's work..."¹¹⁵ On October 6, Chamberlain summarized his position in the House of Commons:

What is the alternative to this bleak and barren policy of the inevitability of war? In my view it is that we should seek by all means in our power to avoid war, by analysing possible causes, by trying to remove them, by discussion in a spirit of collaboration and good will. I cannot believe that such a programme would be rejected by the people of this country, even if it does mean the establishment of personal contact with dictators, and of talks man to man on the basis that each, while maintaining his own ideas of the internal government of his country, is willing to allow that the other systems may better suit other peoples.¹¹⁶

¹¹⁴Robert Herzstein, *Roosevelt and Hitler* (New York: Paragon House, 1989) , 249.

¹¹⁵Rock, *Appeasement on Trial*, 157.

¹¹⁶Chamberlain, *In Search of Peace*, 216.

Obviously, the events at Munich and their aftermath and the rising opposition to his foreign policy had not shaken Chamberlain's faith in appeasement.

Hitler, on the other hand, came away from the Munich conference bitterly angry at Chamberlain and complained minutes after his departure that Chamberlain had come only "in order to trick and cheat him."¹¹⁷ The following day Hitler was heard to remark to his S.S. entourage, "That fellow Chamberlain has spoiled my entry into Prague."¹¹⁸ Clearly Hitler's threats to invade Czechoslovakia were not mere threats. These remarks indicate that Chamberlain's efforts did indeed delay the war by nearly a year. On October 9, Hitler announced he was strengthening Germany's western fortifications and added, "It would be a good thing if people in Great Britain would gradually drop certain airs which they have inherited from the Versailles period. We cannot tolerate any longer the tutelage of governesses."¹¹⁹ Hitler, however, was not entirely unhappy with the results. In conversations between von Ribbentrop and Mussolini on October 28, 1938, the German Foreign Minister explained to the *Duce* Hitler's response to Munich: "The Czechoslovak crisis has shown our power. We have the advantage of the initiative and are masters of the situation.... In September it would have required two weeks to carry out the invasion, today forty-eight hours would suffice."¹²⁰ Hitler's continued truculence did not cause the

¹¹⁷Dietrich, *Hitler*, 40.

¹¹⁸Bullock, *Hitler*, 431.

¹¹⁹*Ibid.*, 433.

¹²⁰Ciano, *Ciano's Diplomatic Papers*, 243.

British Prime Minister to lose faith in appeasement but instead turned his attention to another dictator, Mussolini. In January of 1939, Chamberlain, accompanied by Lord Halifax, visited Rome for conversations with the *Duce*. Soon after his return, Chamberlain reported in a speech in his native Birmingham that though no concrete results were achieved, "...we did not convert or attempt to convert one another to our point of view on any subject on which we might differ, yet I can say that we came away better friends than we were when we went there."¹²¹ Chamberlain however took great heart in the response of the Italian people. "From the moment we entered upon Italian soil till the moment we left it, we were the objects of the most remarkable, spontaneous, universal demonstration of welcome that I have ever witnessed."¹²²

A terrible inverse symmetry had developed between the actions and perception of Hitler and Chamberlain. Each clung to his own beliefs doggedly in the face of doubt and criticism and each was blind to the import of the actions of the other. Chamberlain was convinced that with sufficient sustained effort he could force peace on Hitler. Hitler interpreted Chamberlain's strength as weakness, that his effort on behalf of peace was no more than fear of war. On the other hand, Chamberlain believed the obvious desire for peace he had observed in Germany and Italy would restrain Hitler and Mussolini. Hitler believed the peace loving British public could never be provoked. Until this point,

¹²¹Chamberlain, *In Search of Peace*, 252.

¹²²*Ibid.*

Chamberlain was as persistent and confident in his actions as was Hitler. Chamberlain's policy convinced Hitler that though the chances for an alliance with Britain were diminishing, the prospects for British forbearance for his endeavors were improving.

Four and a half months later, on March 15, 1939, German troops entered the Czech capital, Prague, without firing a shot. Under the pretense of violent internal difficulties between the Czech and Slovaks, Hitler summoned the Czech President, Emil Hodža to Berlin. The President was threatened with invasion and hectored and bullied into inviting German intervention to quell the disturbances. Hodža resisted but, isolated and worn down by military threats, he suffered a heart attack and needed an injection from Hitler's physician to revive him. Only then did he sign the invitation to avoid a bloody invasion of his friendless homeland.¹²³ This apparently painless victory was not without very serious consequences for the future. Hitler had come to believe that the British policy of appeasement meant that Britain would not fight to restrain German ambitions in Central and Eastern Europe under any conceivable circumstances. This notion nicely coincided with his long-standing desire to avoid conflict with Great Britain. Chamberlain, on the other hand, suddenly and reluctantly was forced to reassess the long standing British policy of appeasement. The dismemberment of the Czech state so soon after Munich brought about a fundamental change in Chamberlain's perception of Hitler's motives and goals. Hitler could no longer be trusted. The Prime Minister, acutely aware

¹²³Dietrich, *Hitler*, 43.

of Britain's lack of military preparation, moved to redouble his efforts to strengthen its armed forces, especially the Royal Air Force.¹²⁴

Though Chamberlain had worked tirelessly to maintain the peace by an “effort to eradicate the possible causes of war and to try out the methods of personal contact and discussions,”¹²⁵ it would be untrue to claim he entirely ignored the need for a strong defense. In January of 1939, Chamberlain delivered a speech in Birmingham in which he reported the results of recent British efforts to strengthen the Fleet and R.A.F.

To give you some idea of the extent of this programme I may tell you that during the 12 months ending on the 31st of next March some sixty new ships, with a tonnage of about 130,000 tons, will have been added to the Navy. And the ensuing twelve months the addition will be even larger—namely, about seventy-five ships of 150,000 tons.

The Royal Air Force is also going ahead at an equally remarkable rate. Large factory extensions have been made and huge new factories have been or are being erected in different parts of the country. You can see for yourselves what has been done here in the Austin factory and the immense new works being erected in record time under the direction of Lord Nuffield. To show you that the results of all this activity are no longer reserved for the future you may like to know that in the last few months we have actually doubled the rate of aircraft production.¹²⁶

Without revealing actual numbers, Chamberlain then went on to describe progress in recruiting and in civil defense.

¹²⁴Donald Cameron Watt, *How War Came: The Immediate Origins of the Second World War, 1938-1939* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1989), 82-83.

¹²⁵Chamberlain, *In Search of Peace*, 240.

¹²⁶*Ibid.*, 253-4

Chamberlain's initial response to Hitler's aggression was cautious but he made a distinction between Germany's incorporation of Germans in the Sudetenland and the German occupation of the rest of the Czech State. Nonetheless, in his speech to the Commons on March 15, he ended with: "Though we may have to suffer checks and disappointments, from time to time, the object that we have in mind is of too great significance to happiness of mankind for us lightly to give it up or set it on one side."¹²⁷ But within two days the full import of events finally shook Chamberlain's confidence in appeasement and in a speech given at Birmingham asked disturbing rhetorical questions: "Is this the last attack upon a small State or is it to be followed by others? Is this, in fact, a step in the direction of an attempt to dominate the world by force?"¹²⁸

Within the cabinet, Chamberlain was even more forthcoming about his conversion from appeasement to collective security. After reviewing the available options, he stated, "The real issue was that if Germany showed signs that she intended to proceed with her march for world domination, we must take steps to stop her by attacking her on two fronts. We should attack Germany not in order to save a particular victim but in order to pull down the bully."¹²⁹ Lord Halifax proposed a four power approach consisting of Britain, France, Poland and Russia. Much discussion ensued considering the pros and

¹²⁷Ibid., 266.

¹²⁸Ibid., 274.

¹²⁹Colvin, *The Chamberlain Cabinet*, 190.

cons of including Russia. Lord Halifax aired his concern that closer ties with the Russians would complicate matters with other potential members of any anti-German coalition. Other cabinet members such as Sir Samuel Hoare and Mr. Walter Elliot emphasized the importance of Russia. Chamberlain took the position that the Poles were of key importance. "The essential point was to manage matters so as to secure the support of Poland. At the same time he would take what steps are possible to keep in with Russia."¹³⁰ On March 29 Lord Halifax was contacted by the Berlin correspondent for the *News Chronicle*, who was convinced Hitler would attack Poland shortly unless the British made certain he understood such an act would provoke a British counterattack. Halifax was impressed by the report and brought the reporter to see Chamberlain. He decided to act immediately, and two days later announced to the House of Commons:

...I now have to inform the House that during that period [of consultations within the cabinet], in the event of any action which clearly threatened Polish independence, and which the Polish Government accordingly considered it vital to resist with their national forces, His Majesty's Government would feel themselves bound at once to lend the Polish Government all support in their power. I may add that the French Government have authorised me to make it plain that they stand in the same position in this matter..."¹³¹

This startling *volte face* in policy placed the decision of war and peace for Great Britain and France in the hands of the Polish Foreign Minister, Colonel Beck, and Adolf Hitler.

¹³⁰Ibid., 194.

¹³¹Chamberlain, *In Search of Peace*, 279.

When the German Führer heard of Chamberlain's action he responded angrily, "I will brew them a devil's drink."¹³² Hitler ordered General Wilhelm Keitel, *Oberkommando der Wehrmacht* (Armed Forces High Command), to prepare Case White, the invasion of Poland on April 1, 1939 to be launched on or after September 1. "Preparations were also to be made against the contingency of intervention by the Western Powers – although the Führer, encouraged as always in such beliefs by Ribbentrop, was sure that their promises to Poland were mere bluff and that they would shrink from war with Germany."¹³³ Hitler believed that British ground forces were insufficient to back their promises to Poland with war.¹³⁴ On April 28, Hitler gave a speech in the Reichstag in which, after an elaborate defense of his foreign policy, he stated that, in spite of his feelings of friendship and admiration of Great Britain, he was reluctantly forced to denounce the Anglo-German Naval Treaty of 1935 as well as the German-Polish agreement of 1934. England was up to her old game of encircling Germany.¹³⁵

The die was cast. Poland, like Czechoslovakia, was created by the Versailles Treaty, in part, at the expense of Germany. Danzig was a German city stranded in a Polish "sea" and the Polish Corridor physically isolated East Prussia from the rest of the Reich. Consequently, Hitler used his well worn theme of reuniting the German people in a

¹³²Bloch, *Ribbentrop*, 221.

¹³³*Ibid.*, 220-21.

¹³⁴Hitler, *Table Talk*, 439.

¹³⁵Bullock, *Hitler*, 461.

preparatory propaganda campaign against Poland. More importantly in this case, Poland lay directly in Hitler's path to the long coveted *Lebensraum* in the East. Chamberlain's decree had created a serious problem for Hitler's long term plans.

Hitler had maintained positive relations with Poland since the signing of the German-Polish agreement of January, 1934, and was in the midst of talks conducted by Ribbentrop at the time of the destruction of Czechoslovakia and the consequent British guarantee of Polish independence. Ribbentrop had been pressing for "for future co-operation between the countries...and a joint policy towards Russia on the basis of the Anti-Comintern Pact."¹³⁶ But Danzig and the Corridor continued to remain an intractable sticking point impeding any progress in German-Polish relations. Furthermore, the Poles, caught between Russia and Germany, were convinced they could not afford to provoke either and remain independent¹³⁷. Chamberlain's promise further strengthened Polish resolve and the talks went nowhere. In order to proceed with his plans Poland would need to be isolated.

Hitler planned this Polish isolation on two levels, military and diplomatic. "In the late fall and winter of 1938-39 Hitler devoted himself to the building of the West Wall, which was his original creation and which he himself planned down to the smallest

¹³⁶Ibid., 453.

¹³⁷Ibid., 452.

detail.”¹³⁸ These fortifications were designed to prohibit France and possibly Britain from attacking western Germany during Hitler’s unveiling of the Blitzkrieg against Poland. Also, geography dictated that the Soviet Union was the only possible source of direct military support for Poland, and the Russians were presently involved in negotiations with the British. Hitler was forced to bide his time.

The British were equally aware of the importance of Russia but the prospect of an agreement was problematic. On April 18 the Russian Foreign Minister, Maxim Litvinov, approached the British with a proposal for a pact of mutual assistance. While Chamberlain was certainly interested, certain details troubled him. The first was Poland’s recent refusal to take part in a four power declaration with Russia recognizing that the Russians could fulfill their pledge only by sending troops through Polish territory or aircraft over it. Furthermore, a recent dispatch from the British Embassy in Moscow described the Russian Army as “greatly weakened by the recent purges, of small offensive value, but expected to show good defensive qualities.... This military appreciation was also discouraging about Russian air strength.”¹³⁹ There was also great suspicion in Chamberlain’s cabinet concerning Stalin’s aspirations in the Baltic region and in Eastern Europe in general. A long series of diplomatic discussions ensued in which the French joined and in which each side attempted to reconcile their mutual suspicions with their

¹³⁸Dietrich, *Hitler*, 42.

¹³⁹Colvin, *Chamberlain’s Cabinet*, 200-201

desire to find agreement. One question however proved insoluble. “They [the British] rejected any definition of ‘indirect aggression’ which allowed Soviet Russia, and not the threatened state, to decide that it had taken place: the Baltic states were not to be assisted against their will [T]he British would co-operate with Russia only if Poland were attacked and agreed to accept Soviet assistance; otherwise the Russians would have to fight alone.”¹⁴⁰ Political negotiations were suspended on July 23 and never seriously resumed.¹⁴¹

Britain and France were not the only countries interested in coming to an agreement with the Soviets. Stalin made a speech to the XVIII Congress of the Soviet Communist Party on March 10, 1939, in which he “declared that no insurmountable differences existed between Germany and the Soviet Union.”¹⁴² Ribbentrop used his private foreign service, the *Dienststelle*, to contact the Soviet Embassy for clarification of Stalin’s remarks on April 7. Though Ribbentrop had begun his career as an extreme anti-Bolshevist and a staunch supporter of Hitler’s goal of cementing relations with Britain as well, the humiliating failure of his mission in Great Britain had turned him into an Anglophobe. In order to counter Great Britain, he had become an aggressive advocate of improved relations with Russia. So when his agent returned and reported that the

¹⁴⁰A.J.P. Taylor, *The Origins of the Second World War*, (New York: Antheneum, 1968), 239.

¹⁴¹*Ibid.*

¹⁴²Bloch, *Ribbentrop*, 235.

Embassy Counselor, Georgi Astkhov, had stated that it was “absurd for Germany and the Soviets to fight each other over ‘ideological subtleties’ instead of making grand policy side by side, as they had done so often in history,”¹⁴³ and encouraged von Ribbentrop responded. A long series of intermittent talks proceeded but the Soviets did not appear to be as eager to come to an agreement as was von Ribbentrop and on June 29, Hitler ordered the Foreign Minister to break off the talks, fearing they were just using them to extract a better deal from the British. But on July 19, the Russian trade representative to Germany contacted the Germans to announce that the Russians were again interested in re-opening trade negotiations. Soon thereafter the Soviet Chargé proposed “the inauguration of a new era in Soviet-German cultural relations.”¹⁴⁴ Hitler authorized von Ribbentrop to pursue the Russian overtures, which the Foreign Minister did eagerly. Meanwhile, Stalin had replaced Litvinov with his right-hand man, V.M. Molotov, as Foreign Minister and placed him in personal charge of negotiations. A month later, a trade agreement provided for an annual exchange of 200 million Reichsmarks worth of German manufactured goods for an equal amount of Soviet raw materials. This was a prerequisite for a political agreement to be signed a week later. The Germans were on a very tight schedule, for Hitler had planned his invasion of Poland for ten days hence.

¹⁴³Ibid., 235.

¹⁴⁴Ibid, 239.

In contrast to the minor figures sent by France and England, Hitler proposed sending von Ribbentrop to Moscow to demonstrate the seriousness of his intentions. A six part document was presented to the Soviets. Among the key points were the following: 1) the two regimes were unified by the fact that 'the capitalist Western democracies' were the 'implacable enemies' of them both and; 2) the crisis in German-Polish relations necessitated 'a speedy clarification of German-Russian relations'.¹⁴⁵ In addition, a secret protocol defining spheres of influence in Eastern Europe was to be prepared upon von Ribbentrop's arrival in Moscow. Finland, most of the Baltic States and Bessarabia were placed in the Russian sphere and a line of demarcation was agreed upon in case of war between Poland and Germany. Ready to sign a pact based on these points, Stalin rejected only the flowery preamble to the document prepared by von Ribbentrop. Nicely summing up the event, Stalin said, "For years we have poured pails of manure at one another. That should not stop us from coming to an understanding."¹⁴⁶ On August 23, 1939, a Non-aggression Pact was signed during an elaborate ceremony personally conducted by Stalin.

Though subsequent events surely cast doubt on Stalin's wisdom in entering into such a pact, in the short run he had masterfully played off Germany and the West and received all he had hoped for in the negotiations. Britain and France were hamstrung by

¹⁴⁵Ibid. 241.

¹⁴⁶Toland, *Adolf Hitler*, 750.

their scruples for the independence of the smaller nations in the east, particularly Poland and the Baltic States. Hitler had no such fetters, knowing such restraints to his ambitions were merely temporary.

With the conclusion of the Non-aggression Pact with Stalin, Hitler thought that France and Great Britain would find it impossible to honor effectively their pledge to Poland. Under the new circumstances, he believed that Britain would not act upon Chamberlain's promise to provide "all the support in their [France's and Great Britain's] power"¹⁴⁷ for Polish resistance to any clear threat to its independence. When Hitler first heard the news of the coming pact, he "flushed deeply, then banged on the table so hard that the glasses rattled, and exclaimed in a voice breaking with excitement, 'I have them! I have them!'" Seconds later he had already regained control of himself."¹⁴⁸ He was so exuberant because he was convinced he had avoided the two-front war he so greatly feared. In the unlikely event Britain did declare war, he believed the rapid destruction of the Polish state he and his new ally, the Soviets, had planned would force Great Britain to accept the fourth partition of Poland as a *fait accompli* and abandon the war. The same day the Non-aggression Pact was signed, the British ambassador delivered a letter to Hitler from Chamberlain insisting upon "His Majesty's Government's determination to

¹⁴⁷Ibid., 239.

¹⁴⁸Albert Speer, *Inside the Third Reich: Memoirs by Albert Speer*, trans. Richard and Clara Winston. (New York: Macmillan Co., 1970), 223.

fulfill their obligations to Poland” as well as their readiness, in an atmosphere of peace, to discuss all the problems at issue between our two countries.¹⁴⁹ But as the British Ambassador to Germany, Neville Henderson, observed, “A week earlier my message might have made an impression, but now the whole position had been compromised by the Russian Treaty.”¹⁵⁰

A week later, September 1, 1939, German forces attacked Poland on the ground and from the sea and air, revealing to the world the fury of the new tactic, *Blitzkrieg*. Still, Hitler did not believe war with Britain was inevitable.

Hitler’s view that the West would once more give in to his demands as it had done at Munich was supported by intelligence information: An officer on the British General Staff was said to have evaluated the strength of the Polish Army and come to the conclusion that Polish resistance would soon collapse. Hitler thus had reason to hope that the British General Staff would do everything in its power to advise its government against so hopeless a war.¹⁵¹

The British General Staff apparently had no more effect on Britain’s civilian government than the German General Staff had had on Hitler, because when Britain’s ultimatum ran out on September 3, 1939, Britain promptly declared war on Germany. Albert Speer described Hitler’s reaction:

...Hitler was initially stunned, but quickly reassured himself and us by saying that England and France had obviously declared war merely as a

¹⁴⁹Henderson, *Failure of a Mission*, 269.

¹⁵⁰*Ibid.*, 268.

¹⁵¹Speer, *Inside the Third Reich*, 164.

sham, in order not to lose face before the whole world. In spite of the declaration there would be no fighting; he was convinced of that, he said. He therefore ordered the Wehrmacht to remain strictly on the defensive. He felt that this decision of his showed remarkable political acumen.¹⁵²

Hitler quickly regained his composure and soon after Britain's declaration of war, he spoke to his round table reassuringly: "Of course we are in a state of war, the whole business will evaporate."¹⁵³

Speer offered his observations about Hitler's state of mind during the immediate period surrounding the outbreak of the war:

He stuck unswervingly to the opinion that the West was too feeble, too worn out, and too decadent to begin the war seriously....I still remember his consternation when the news came that Churchill was going to enter the British War Cabinet as First Lord of the Admiralty. This ill-omened press report in his hand, Goering stepped out of the door of Hitler's salon. He dropped into the nearest chair and said wearily: 'Churchill in the Cabinet. That means that the war is really on. Now we shall have war with England.' From these and other observations I deduced that this initiation of real war was not what Hitler had projected....

I do not think that in those early days of September, Hitler was fully aware that he had irrevocably unleashed a world war. He had merely meant to move one step further.... *His naval rearmament was obviously planned for a later date* [my emphasis]....Moreover, he had spoken so often of the neglect of the submarine arm in the First World War that he probably would not have knowingly begun the Second *without preparing a strong fleet of U-boats* [my emphasis].¹⁵⁴

¹⁵²Ibid., 164-65.

¹⁵³Ibid., 165.

¹⁵⁴Ibid., 165-66

The state of mind Speer described, of course, supports the argument of this thesis that Hitler had greatly misjudged the British resolve to stop German aggression and that his error left Germany at war with an enemy it did not want and for whose defeat Hitler had no realistic plan. Hitler was obsessed by the British Empire and maintained that an alliance with Germany was necessary for its continued existence.¹⁵⁵ Another world war, he correctly asserted, was bound to destroy that empire.¹⁵⁶ Hitler never understood that British independence always superseded maintenance of the Empire as the primary goal of Great Britain's foreign policy, its independence being dependent upon the prevention of any single power from dominating the continent of Europe. Britain strove to maintain a balance of power by consistently supporting any power that opposed any nation threatening to gain Continental hegemony. The ideological nature of the adversary was of small importance; Britain had opposed such diverse regimes as Protestant Germany, revolutionary France, Catholic France, and the reactionary Hapsburgs. Though Hitler was certainly aware of Britain's historic foreign policy goals,¹⁵⁷ his failure to fully appreciate their implications led him to consistently misinterpret British actions. At first, he hoped such concessions as the Naval Pact of 1935, which promised continued British naval dominance and which he believed indicated his acceptance of their empire would induce

¹⁵⁵Hitler, *Table Talk*, 50.

¹⁵⁶*Ibid.*, 184-85.

¹⁵⁷Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, 613-14

them to forge an Anglo-German alliance.¹⁵⁸ Later, though he was disabused of his plan in creating an alliance, the British policy of appeasement convinced him that Britain was willing to allow German continental hegemony.

¹⁵⁸Ibid., 140.

Chapter Six

The Wrong Sword: At Sea

Hitler must bear the full responsibility for the state of the German armed forces at the time of the Polish invasion. According to Göring, Hitler's greatest interests and main activities were the leadership of the armed forces and foreign policy.¹⁵⁹ From the time he came to power in 1933, Hitler devoted his energy to foreign policy and the direction of the German armed forces. Hitler was the final arbiter of any decision made concerning the development, composition and disposition of those forces. The same was true of Germany's foreign policy. Thus the flaws that existed in the German armed services must be traced back to Hitler for he alone determined when, how and against whom these forces would be used.

Hitler's misreading of British intentions manifested itself most especially in the weakness of Germany's naval forces, in particular the U-boat flotilla, at the outset of war, as well as his continued reluctance to supplement those forces during the crucial early months of the war. Of great significance, as well, was Hitler's failure to build up the kind of air force that could defeat Great Britain in the air or at sea. Consequently, Germany was unable to mount a sufficient attack on Great Britain at the time of its greatest physical and psychological vulnerability, the period that ended with the shocking loss of its only

¹⁵⁹Bullock, *Hitler*, 313.

ally, France. Moreover, at the time of the outbreak of the war German naval forces were insufficient and of the wrong composition to challenge Great Britain at sea. As the events of the First World War had clearly demonstrated, Britain's vital maritime fleet, not the Royal Navy, was vulnerable to German attack. Not only were naval forces slighted in Hitler's pre-war naval rearmament but the resources allotted the German navy, the *Kriegsmarine*, were misallocated. Germany's surface fleet of the First World War, built at enormous expense, had fought but one inconclusive major engagement battle during the entire war, the Battle of Jutland. In contrast, the U-boat had very nearly brought Britain to her knees in 1917. A similar misapportionment of effort was made during the build-up preceding Hitler's attack on Poland. From the outbreak of the war until the fall of France, operations conducted with the various naval weapons at hand as well as the *Luftwaffe* demonstrated the potential an effective campaign against the British merchant marine could have had. Hitler's failure to assess correctly Britain's strategic position and provide the means to threaten credibly Britain's survival eliminated any possibility of a short war, the only war for which Hitler had planned and the only war Germany could win.

The nature of Great Britain, an island nation with a vast overseas empire, dictated certain elements of any successful strategy to defeat it. A key element was the fact that Great Britain was dependent upon overseas imports for feeding its people and supplying absolutely vital raw materials for industry. The effective interruption of its sea lanes would compel it to surrender. The main burden of any attempt to starve Britain into submission fell upon the *Kriegsmarine*. That effort was significantly supplemented with

maritime and land-based elements of the German air force, the *Luftwaffe*. The *Kriegsmarine* had at its disposal a fleet of surface warships, including pocket battleships, light and heavy cruisers, destroyers, auxiliary craft and two battleships that were among the most powerful warships in the world. But the ships that most successfully challenged the naval might of Great Britain during the Second World War were the same that were effective during the First World War and they did it by stealth rather than by direct confrontation. One of these stealth weapons, the armed merchant ship or *Hilfskreuzer*, an effective weapon of the First World War, had been totally ignored during the interwar period. Not until after the outbreak of hostilities was a small flotilla of *Hilfskreuzers* created by the conversion of German and captured merchant ships to be used as warships by the addition of guns, torpedo tubes, and mines. These ships sailed the oceans disguised as innocent allied and neutral merchantmen and created havoc far out of proportion to their cost and numbers. The U-boat had been the most successful vessel of the Imperial Fleet during the First World War. Unfortunately for Germany's future prospects, only the core of a U-boat flotilla had been developed during the previous four years.

On June 18, 1935, the Anglo-German Naval Agreement legitimized the existence of the *Kriegsmarine's* small U-boat flotilla. Under the terms of the agreement, the German Navy was limited to 35% of the tonnage allowed the Royal Navy. One class of craft was excepted, the submarine; the Germans were allotted 100% of the British

Commonwealth fleet.¹⁶⁰ The following year Germany signed the Submarine Protocol, which severely restricted U-boat operations. The protocol required attacking U-boats to “surface, take measures to assure the safety of crews--lifeboats were not sufficient--merchant ships could not otherwise be attacked.”¹⁶¹ Such agreements accurately reflected Hitler’s desire to assuage Britain’s fears of German aggression and develop a positive relationship with the British Empire, a position which he stated prior to coming to power.¹⁶² Members of the German Naval High Command were not so sure that they would not face the Royal Navy in the next war, and Karl Doenitz began planning for that war from the time he assumed command of the U-boat flotilla in 1935.

Doenitz had commanded a U-boat during the First World War and spent the intervening years in studying the problems associated with defeating, with a U-boat fleet, the British Empire which possessed the greatest navy in the world. Doenitz understood that as an island empire, Great Britain was utterly dependent upon its merchant fleet for its survival. Therefore the destruction of that fleet was the key to defeating Great Britain. During the First World War, the convoy had proved Britain’s most successful tactic for dealing with the U-boat. The solution Doenitz devised against the convoy was the submarine wolfpack. Wolfpack tactics were devised to bring sufficient firepower to bear

¹⁶⁰*Ibid.*, 338.

¹⁶¹Karl Doenitz, *Memoirs: Ten Years and Twenty Days*, trans. R. H. Stevens (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1984) , 12.

¹⁶²Wagener, *Hitler-Memoirs of a Confidant*, 228-29.

upon a large group of merchant ships and their escorts to inflict significant losses. In order to understand these tactics, it is necessary to examine the strengths and limitations of the U-boats in use at the beginning of the Second World War. Submarines of that era were not essentially underwater craft. They were diving vessels that spent most of their time on the surface where they could use their diesel engines. Under water, they were forced to use batteries to drive electric motors. U-boats under battery power could move only for short periods of time at speeds reduced to one-third of the surface rate.¹⁶³ Furthermore, U-boats were very poor reconnaissance vessels. The same low silhouette that made them so difficult to spot made them poor platforms for observation. Their low cruising speeds made it difficult for them to patrol large areas, track convoys, and maneuver for attack. Stealth was the fundamental strength of the submarine, and the torpedo and mine were its weapons.

The wolfpack tactics devised by Doenitz could play on the strengths of the U-boat and mask its weaknesses. Merchant ships, not warships, were the proper primary targets of U-boats. The destruction of enemy naval units was an objective only to the extent that it supported the primary objective of starving the British Isles by destroying the ships supplying them. Single U-boats and aircraft would search for neutral and enemy merchant ships. Upon sighting a single ship, an attack would be launched. However, a convoy would set a different chain of events into action. The U-boat or aircraft would send a

¹⁶³Doenitz, *Memoirs*, 127.

coded message to the U-boat command center. The command center would vector a number of U-boats into the projected path of the convoy. The original U-boat would shadow the convoy on the surface at the maximum range at which it could maintain contact and report changes in direction or speed of the convoy. (A submerged U-boat would be unable to keep up with any but the slowest surface vessel.) The assembled U-boats would then maneuver for the most favorable attack position. The U-boats would attack at night on the surface. They would attempt to enter the perimeter of the convoy so that any torpedoes missing their primary targets might hit secondary ones. The ideal attack position would then be where the convoy sailed directly into the waiting wolfpack. Slow torpedo speeds and limited fuel made attacks on ships pulling away from U-boats problematic, as torpedoes might well run out of fuel before catching their prey and sink harmlessly to the bottom. The wolfpack would travel on the surface and would dive only to escape detection and attack. The key concept was the coordination of the fleet to maximize the ability of individual boats to find the elusive convoys and to concentrate the fleet on the convoys, once spotted. This required a suitable land-based headquarters that could gather, analyze, and distribute information, including U-boat locations, air and U-boat reconnaissance information, and weather reports. This required a secure, effective means of communication.

Using such tactics with a fleet of three hundred U-boats, Doenitz believed Germany could have defeated Great Britain in World War II. Hitler was well aware of the importance of the U-boat in any conflict with Great Britain and, in fact, complained to his

architect and companion, Albert Speer, of Imperial Germany's early neglect of the U-boat arm during the First World War.¹⁶⁴ Nonetheless, Germany did not possess the theoretical prerequisite of three hundred U-boats at the beginning of the war. Hitler had not intended to fight Britain and no such fleet had been created. The other reason was the prevailing interwar naval thinking that decreed that peacetime naval shipbuilding plans and consequent budgets should focus on large capital ships with long construction lead times. Smaller craft, according to this theory, could be quickly built after the start of hostilities. This view was shared by most navies in the world. As a result, at the start of hostilities Germany had just begun a grand scale capital ship building program called the "Z" plan, devised after Hitler denounced the Naval Pact. The "Z" plan included six battleships, four aircraft carriers, numerous cruisers and other craft scheduled to be completed in 1948. Doenitz, in his memoirs, criticized the "Z" plan adopted in 1938 on the basis of four points: 1) it would take too long to complete as tensions with Great Britain were growing; 2) it would stimulate Great Britain to compete in a race in which she already enjoyed a great head start; 3) it ignored the air menace, from which surface ships would be subject to constant air attack from the Royal Air Force; in contrast, Royal Navy ships could be withdrawn to northern ports out of range of the *Luftwaffe*; 4) and it failed to take into account geographic considerations—Britain needed to be attacked on its western

¹⁶⁴Speer, *Inside the Third Reich*, 166.

approaches and that put Great Britain athwart German lines of communications.¹⁶⁵

Doenitz's fears of growing tensions with Great Britain in 1938 were borne out by events within the year, in spite of Hitler's reassurances to Admiral Raeder which he relayed to members of his senior staff on July 22, 1939, at Swinemünde. After his meeting with Hitler, Raeder announced, "He would ensure that in no circumstances would war with Britain come about. For that would mean *Finis Germaniae*. The officers of the U-boat arm had no cause to worry."¹⁶⁶ Less than two weeks later, however, Germany was at war with Great Britain.

Speaking of the war against Great Britain, Doenitz declared that "seldom had the armed forces of a country gone to war so poorly equipped. I could, in fact, do no more than subject the enemy to a few odd pinpricks. And pinpricks are no means with which to try and force a great empire and one of the foremost maritime powers in the world to sue for peace."¹⁶⁷ At the start of the war the U-boat flotilla included forty-six boats ready for action, which was sixteen fewer than the number allowed under the Anglo-German Naval Agreement of 1935. Of this number, only twenty-two U-boats were the 500-ton Type VII and were capable of operating on the western approaches in the North Atlantic. The others were of the 250-ton Type II and were limited to mine laying and other duties in the

¹⁶⁵Doenitz, *Memoirs*, 37-39.

¹⁶⁶*Ibid.*, 42.

¹⁶⁷*Ibid.*, 47.

North Sea. According to Doenitz, approximately one third of operational U-boats could be on patrol at any given time, another third would be in passage to or from the patrol area, and the last third would be in port for refitting and repair. Germany, therefore, had only five to seven U-boats available at the start of the war to threaten directly Great Britain's vital supply lines.¹⁶⁸ The U-boats were further constrained by Hitler's firm orders to adhere to the Submarine Protocol of 1936. Hitler had convinced himself the British declaration of war was a bluff and that a provocation on the high seas would strengthen the war party in England.¹⁶⁹

The U-boat flotilla was more than 250 U-boats shy of the 300 that Doenitz believed were necessary to defeat England. Plans for the production of 25 U-boats per month were approved, but, due to restrictions on naval construction during the first half of 1940, the average production, in fact, was two U-boats per month. In conformance with Hitler's long held conception of military policy,¹⁷⁰ the navy was receiving less than 5 percent of German steel production at a time when Great Britain was her most significant foe. Germany was committed to a continental strategy and never committed significant resources to her naval forces.

¹⁶⁸Ibid., 46.

¹⁶⁹ Speer, *Inside the Third Reich*, 164-65.

¹⁷⁰ Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, 140.

The severe problems with the U-boats' primary weapon, the torpedo, were indicative of the neglect of the U-boat arm of the *Kriegsmarine* prior to the war. U-boats of this era were essentially submersible torpedo boats and, consequently, the quality of their torpedoes was a fundamental factor in their effectiveness. But German torpedoes were, at the beginning of the war, deeply flawed. The *Kriegsmarine* employed two varieties, both of which were used by their U-boats. The first was propelled by an internal combustion engine, fueled by gasoline and compressed air. This was the G7a and, unfortunately, it left a trail of bubbles, but its greater speed and range offset that flaw in certain circumstances. The other torpedo was the G7e, driven by a battery-powered electric motor that left no trail. Both types had two "pistols" or detonating devices from which the U-boat commander was to choose, depending on circumstances. One was a contact pistol designed to explode on contact and concentrate the force of the explosion over a small area. The other was the magnetic pistol, which was designed to detonate when the torpedo came within range of the target ship's steel hull. A delicate magnetic switch would close when it got close enough to the magnetic field of the target. The ensuing explosion, set off a short distance from the ship's hull, was sufficient to break the back of a merchantman. In practice, however, three flaws were discovered in both types of torpedoes. The contact pistol did not detonate if the angle of impact was not very near the perpendicular, a difficult feat to achieve when the submarine, target ship, and torpedo are all moving independently. The flaws in the magnetic pistol became apparent to the submariners during the Norwegian invasion when it was discovered that the magnetic

pistols could be detonated by the magnetic north pole, large iron deposits, and other natural phenomena. Complaints about torpedoes from U-boat commanders previous to this campaign had been dismissed as technical failures on the part of officers and crew. As examples of the failure of these torpedoes to operate effectively, note the actions taken by a German submarine on April 13, 1940.

The submarine *U-48* fired a salvo of torpedoes at the British battleship *Warspite* from close range with no results. Two days later, in Norwegian waters, *Kapitänleutnant* Günter Prien, hero of the Scapa Flow, saw a “wall of ships” through his periscope and fired four torpedoes to no effect. He surfaced, fired another four, only one of which detonated and that against a submerged rock in the distance. As he withdrew, he spotted the selfsame *Warspite*, and fired two torpedoes, one of which detonated prematurely and the other well past the target.¹⁷¹ The torpedoes armed with contact pistols were failing when fired at deep draft supply ships at anchor. This revealed another failing of both torpedo types: they ran two to three times deeper than their depth setting indicated. Doenitz estimated, from ships’ logs, that between half and two thirds of torpedoes fired during the Norwegian campaign failed to detonate.¹⁷² An inquiry was ordered and the problems with the pistols were so manifold that a British design from a captured torpedo was copied as a stopgap measure.

¹⁷¹Dan van der Vat, *The Atlantic Campaign: World War II's Struggle at Sea* (New York, Philadelphia, San Francisco: Harper & Row) , 115.

¹⁷²Doenitz, *Memoirs*, 86.

In spite of serious problems with the “pistols” installed in German torpedoes the U-boats enjoyed some spectacular successes in the first months of the war. The first of these was the sinking of the 22,500-ton HMS *Courageous*, the oldest aircraft carrier in the royal Navy. On September 17, 1939, the *U-29* was returning home from a successful first war cruise, having that week sunk three British tankers, when she spotted a very large and ungainly ship. The U-boat’s slow submerged speed made it very difficult for *Kapitänleutnant* Otto Schuhart to maneuver his boat into a favorable attack position. After two hours of fruitless efforts on the part of Schuhart, Captain W.T. Makeig-Jones of the *Courageous* altered course to accommodate the landing of several of his Swordfish torpedo planes and placed the carrier across the bow of the *U-29*. The U-boat fired a spread of three torpedoes at a range of 2,500 meters. Two struck the *Courageous*, which sank in fifteen minutes with 519 men, including the captain. The *U-29* escaped a determined search by escorting destroyers and returned to Wilhelmshaven to a hero’s welcome that included the Führer himself.¹⁷³ But the most dramatic U-boat operation was a stroke Doenitz had been contemplating for twenty years. *Kapitänleutnant* Günter Prien had sunk three British steamers during his first cruise of the war and was known as a resourceful commander who had come up through the ranks. A month after war began, on October 1, 1939, Prien was summoned to Doenitz’s office and informed of his commander’s plan to penetrate the great anchorage of the Home Fleet’s Battleships,

¹⁷³van der Vat, *The Atlantic Campaign*, 86-87.

Scapa Flow in the Orkney Islands. Using reconnaissance photos taken by the *Luftwaffe*, Doenitz had discovered a fifty-foot gap in the wire and cables in one of the seven channels. The U-boat's entry was known as Kirk Sound and was located between the islet of Lamb Holm and the principal island, Mainland. The *U-47* set sail on October 8, 1939, and was slated to arrive before the moonless evening of the thirteenth. Having spent the day on the seabed, the boat surfaced at 7:00 p.m. where Prien was startled to find the *aurora borealis* illuminating the Flow. Fighting the tide, the *U-47* entered the anchorage to find only two large vessels, the seaplane-carrier *Pegasus* and the 29,150 ton battleship *Royal Oak* with her main armament of eight 15-inch guns five miles distant. Unable to fight the current with the electric motors, *Kapitänleutnant* Prien surfaced in order to engage his much noisier diesel engines. In spite of everything, Prien was able to approach the battleship undetected and fire two salvos, the first of which did so little damage the *Royal Oak's* captain thought there might have been a spontaneous explosion in the paint-store. A quarter hour later, the *U47* had reloaded her tubes and fired the second salvo of four torpedoes. This time one of them made a direct hit on a main magazine and the entire ship blew up, taking 785 men with her. Prien and the *U47* returned to a delirious welcome as heroes of the war.¹⁷⁴ One can only speculate upon the devastation the U-boats might have wrought upon Britain's maritime assets, military and civilian, had Germany's submariners been supplied with reliable torpedoes. The British were certainly aware of the

¹⁷⁴Ibid., 87-91.

U-boats' potential and in consequence their first bombing raid of the war targeted Wilhelmshaven, the U-boats' home port.

Though not, in the strictest sense, weapons, the codebreakers and intelligence efforts of the Germans played an important part in the U-boat's success in the Battle of the Atlantic. The Wolfpack tactics Doenitz devised were dependent upon secure radio communications and any compromise to those communications jeopardized the U-boats' survival. On the other hand, the U-boats were dependent, to a great degree, on their intelligence service to find their illusive quarry. The revelations concerning the success of the British in cracking the German codes based on the Enigma machine and the efforts of Bletchley Park in supplying Ultra-secret materials to Allies, have obscured the role of *Beobachtungsdienst* (B-dienst or observation service) in supplying useful information to the U-boat command. The B-dienst had developed a worldwide organization of stations to observe the movement of ships in and out of the world's harbors. A special section of the B-dienst called the xB-dienst, under Wilhelm Tranow, had made much progress in penetrating British ciphers before the war. By 1939 the High Command employed 700 workers in the crypto analysis, the breaking of ciphers, at the xB-dienst. Prior to the war, much work had been done in eavesdropping on the Royal Navy during the Abyssinian crisis and especially during the Spanish Civil War.¹⁷⁵ While the British were only beginning to crack the Enigma machine, the xB-dienst was already solving parts of the

¹⁷⁵Ibid., 113.

two current British systems, the Naval Cipher No. 1 and the Naval Code.¹⁷⁶ The *Kriegsmarine* consistently displayed a greater respect for Allied counter-intelligence and code breaking abilities than did other branches of the *Wehrmacht* and added rotors to the navy's Enigma machines to increase their complexity and made frequent changes in the codes used.

The surface fleet of the *Kriegsmarine* at the time of the outbreak of the war consisted of two old battleships, two modern battle-cruisers, three pocket battleships, eight cruisers and twenty-two destroyers, but it was not until the outbreak of war that a fleet of nine German armed merchant raiders or *Hilfskreuzers* were created for use against the Allied merchant fleet.¹⁷⁷ This highly effective arm of the fleet was built from a collection of German and captured merchantmen. A typical ship had concealed behind collapsible bulkheads six 5.9-inch guns, one 75-millimeter gun, six light antiaircraft guns, and four torpedo tubes. The most successful of the ships, the *Atlantis*, also carried ninety-two mines, and a Heinkel 114 seaplane. These ships were disguised as neutral ships and changed nationalities on a regular basis depending on the sea being sailed in order to maintain their disguises. Unfortunately for the navy's effort against the British merchant fleet, the *Hilfskreuzers* were not prepared for the outbreak of the war. For example, the

¹⁷⁶J. Rowher, "The Wireless War" in *The Battle of the Atlantic: 1939-1945*, ed. S. Howarth and D. Law (Annapolis: Naval Institute, 1994), 409.

¹⁷⁷David Woodward, *The Secret Raiders: The Story of the German Armed Merchant Raiders in the Second World War* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co. 1955), 13.

Atlantis was commissioned on December 19, 1939, but the extremely cold winter of 1939-1940 forced a delay in the launch of the ship until March 31, 1940. The nine *Hilfskreuzers* that stalked the trading routes of the Arctic, Atlantic, Pacific, and Indian Oceans for the next three years were to sink a total of 850,000 tons of Allied and neutral shipping.¹⁷⁸ This was more than three times the total tonnage sunk or captured by the rest of the surface fleet. Yet not one of these incredibly cheap ships was available at the start of the war.

On the other hand, two of Germany's most conventionally formidable surface warships, the pocket battleships *Graf Spee* and the *Deutschland* were in the Atlantic on September 1, 1939. The pocket battleship was a concept born of restrictions on Germany by the Treaty of Versailles. Intended to conform to the upper limit of 10,000 tons allowed the Germans, the pocket-battle ship combined the armament of a battleship with medium armor and high top speed. "The pocket battleship was a triumph of the German shipbuilder's art, a demonstration of how to get a quart into a pint-pot."¹⁷⁹ The *Graf Spee* and *Deutschland* sailed with their own supply ships from Wilhelmshaven on August 21 and 24, 1939, respectively. The *Deutschland* stayed at sea for nearly three months in the North Atlantic, off the coast of Greenland and Labrador. Though her presence created a threat that disrupted convoy routes and forced the Royal Navy to redeploy significant

¹⁷⁸Ibid. , 51-56.

¹⁷⁹van der Vat, *The Atlantic Campaign*, 51.

naval assets, she sank but two ships and captured another before returning to port at Gotenhafen on November 15, 1939. The *Graf Spee*, with the *Altmark*, sailed directly to the South Atlantic and sank her first ship, the *Clement*, off the coast of Brazil on September 30, 1939. Her next victim, the S.S. *Newton Beech*, was able to get off a distress signal that was relayed to the H.M.S. *Cumberland*. The *Graf Spee* then turned to the sea lanes off the coast of South Africa, sinking four more ships on the way. On the eastern coast of South Africa, in the Indian Ocean she sank her sixth victim on November 15, 1939. Returning to the mid-Atlantic she dispatched three more vessels and turned to the South American coast. There she was spotted by one of the eight Allied raider hunting groups consisting of three British cruisers, the *Exeter*, *Ajax* and *Achilles*. The Battle of the River Plate ensued whereupon the German battleship was forced into the Montevideo harbor where Captain Langsdorf ordered the *Graf Spee* scuttled and three days later committed suicide ashore. The *Graf Spee* sank only nine ships totaling some 50,000 tons before her destruction in sharp contrast to the much cheaper *Hilfskreuzers* and U-boats.¹⁸⁰ Using the resources expended in the construction of the two pocket battleships alone, the available U-boat fleet could have been nearly doubled by the start of the war.

¹⁸⁰S.W. Roskill, *The War at Sea: 1939-1945, vol. 1, The Defensive* (London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1954), 112-21.

Chapter Seven

The Wrong Sword: In the Air

Air power represented a second method of attack on Britain's ocean lifeline. In addition, support from air units was vital to the success of all naval units, including U-boats. Surface ships were highly vulnerable to air strikes and required aerial protection from enemy air forces. Though Hitler was interested in the increased development of the German air force or *Luftwaffe* from the beginning of his tenure as Chancellor, because Hitler expected to avoid war with Britain, the naval functions of that force was given a very low priority. As with all military matters, land warfare dominated Hitler's thinking and the subsequent development of that force reflected this fact in both its organization and aircraft procurement.

In the First World War, both the German Imperial Army and Navy had their own air arm. After Germany's defeat, the Versailles Treaty forbade Germany the use, ownership or construction of military aircraft. In order to evade these restrictions, the Weimar regime conducted clandestine military aircraft testing, pilot training and tactical development in cooperation with the Soviet Union on Soviet territory as early as 1925.¹⁸¹ It was not until Hitler came to power that large scale development of air power led to the

¹⁸¹Edward L. Homze, *Arming the Luftwaffe: The Reich Air Ministry and the German Aircraft Industry 1919-39* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1976), 13.

creation of the *Luftwaffe*. The *Luftwaffe*, like the Royal Air Force before it, combined all military air activity under one command.

Soon after Hitler came to power a curious incident occurred. On June 24, 1933 an article appeared in the *Völkischer Beobachter*, the Nazi party's daily newspaper, under the headline "**RED PLAGUE OVER BERLIN.**" The article described unknown, but "obviously foreign" warplanes that had arrogantly penetrated German airspace, circled the capital and unhurriedly flown east. Göring, feigning outrage and helpless innocence, contacted the British Embassy, complaining of German helplessness in the air. Göring requested an export permit to purchase engines to equip a few "police" planes. Not only were the permits quickly granted, but Sir John Siddeley, managing director of the Armstrong-Siddeley Works in England, flew to Germany for a personal conference with Hitler and Göring. Hitler, "who had an abiding respect and admiration for almost everything British, was at his charming best with the English aviation pioneer and industrialist."¹⁸² Hitler ordered eighty-five aircraft engines of the latest type. Within six months of Hitler's rise to power the British were aiding the Germans in the creation of an illegal air force.¹⁸³ This would certainly have encouraged Hitler in his beliefs that Britain could be converted to an ally in or, at a minimum, a passive observer to his foreign policy.

Though a World War I Ace and last commander of the famous Flying Circus,

¹⁸²Herbert Molloy Mason, *The Rise of the Luftwaffe: Forging the Secret German Air Weapon, 1918-1940*, (New York: The Dial Press, 1973), 177.

¹⁸³*Ibid.*, 176-77.

Hermann Göring was chosen in 1933 to lead Germany's secret air force, not for his organizational ability but as reward for his service and loyalty to Adolf Hitler. Göring's ability to move in social circles and garner generous contributions from wealthy industrialists had financially saved the Nazi party at several critical junctures. His loyalty, no, adoration of the Führer, was unquestioned and often publicly stated in exaggerated form: "God has sent him [Hitler] to us to save Germany."¹⁸⁴ Fortunately for the future of the *Luftwaffe* the slothful Göring chose Erhard Milch for his State Secretary for Air. Milch was famous as the man most responsible for the rapid growth of *Lufthansa*, the German national airline.¹⁸⁵ By 1932, Milch's last year as director, *Lufthansa* controlled Europe's largest civil air fleet, including sixty-five lines with such far-flung destinations as Moscow, Barcelona, Athens and China. Milch moved quickly to increase the country's aviation production potential.¹⁸⁶

Project Rhineland was launched to create secretly both aircraft and the infrastructure to quintuple aircraft production in less than two years. The number of aircraft production workers increased from four thousand to twenty thousand during 1933 and were slated to quadruple again in the following twelve months. Milch's crash program called for 4,021 planes to be produced during the period from January 1, 1934 to

¹⁸⁴Ibid., 171.

¹⁸⁵David Irving, *The Rise and Fall of the Luftwaffe: The Life of Field Marshal Erhard Milch* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1973), 27.

¹⁸⁶Mason, *The Rise of the Luftwaffe*, 172-73.

September 30, 1935. Of this number, an insignificant 153 aircraft were built for the navy, 3% of the total. The air force created during this twenty-one month period was known as the Risk Air Force and was made up of existing models, many of which were already obsolete. It was designed from the beginning as a stopgap force. The *Luftwaffe* possessed 1,833 frontline aircraft, of which only 119 were dedicated to naval operations, six months after it was unveiled by Hitler to the world on February 26, 1936.¹⁸⁷

For the next phase of development for the *Luftwaffe* another actor, Colonel Walther Wever, came on the stage. A career officer specializing in staff work, Wever was transferred from the *Reichswehr* to the *Luftwaffe* and appointed Chief of the Air Command Office which was a camouflage name for the forbidden position of chief of the Air General Staff. Though not an aviator, Wever was a talented military man and quickly came to appreciate the potential of air power. He formulated an ambitious goal of a 10,000 plane air force but was faced with many strategic decisions. Receiving no direction from Göring, Wever turned to his well-worn copy of *Mein Kampf* for insight. "...through Hitler's awful prose were two clear beacons: the Führer wanted no war of revenge against France, and he certainly wanted none with England, for the British were 'Aryan brothers,' to be cultivated as allies."¹⁸⁸ Wever came to the conclusion that the Soviet Union blocked the way to Germany's historical expansion to the East. His solution

¹⁸⁷Ibid., 180.

¹⁸⁸Ibid., 184-85.

to the strategic problem represented by the vastness of the Soviet Union was the creation of two air forces, one tactical for direct support of the ground forces and another strategic, designed to destroy military and industrial targets far in the enemy's rear. The tactical air force was in existence and further advances were in development. It already included light bombers, dive bomber trainers, fighters, long and short range reconnaissance craft as well as the aforementioned naval aircraft. What was missing was a heavy, long-ranged, four-engine bomber for strategic bombing in the Soviet Union. Two prototypes for the "Ural" bomber were commissioned by Wever but neither was adequate. Both aircraft were seriously underpowered and neither plane could reach a top speed of 200 mph.¹⁸⁹ Further development was clearly in order. Though designed to attack the Soviet heartland, an effective "Ural" bomber produced in large numbers would have been extremely useful against Great Britain. On June 3, 1936, however, Wever was killed in an air crash upon takeoff at the Dresden airport. Wever's death ended the drive for development of an effective strategic air force within the *Luftwaffe*.¹⁹⁰ Internal political squabbles between Milch and Wever's successors plagued the *Luftwaffe* for the entire period leading up to the war.¹⁹¹ Without direct intervention on Hitler's part, the aircraft needed to confront Great Britain were unlikely to be created, and no such intervention

¹⁸⁹Ibid., 213.

¹⁹⁰Homze, *Arming the Luftwaffe*, 123.

¹⁹¹Matthew Cooper, *The German Air force: 1933-1945* (New York: Jane's Publishing Inc., 1981), 18-23.

took place. The advanced four-engine, heavy bombers so desperately needed in the summer and fall of 1940 were neither designed nor built.

The *Luftwaffe* of 1939 did not contain the strategic elements Wever envisioned, but the tactical air force that had been created was ideal for the war that Hitler planned, a short, sharp decisive blow that would mask the long term strategic deficiencies of the Third Reich. The air force Wever and Milch created was to function as one of the vital elements of the *Blitzkrieg* tactics. The main function of such a force was direct support of armor and infantry as well as tactical control of the battlefield. Furthermore, indirect support was to be provided the ground forces by the disruption of enemy logistical support and transportation nets, roads and rail. Such a force consisted of short-range fighters, dive- and medium-bombers, short- and medium-range transport (especially for paratroops) and light reconnaissance craft. Such a conception left little room for the needs of the *Kriegsmarine* in their struggle with the Royal Navy in the Atlantic Ocean. Political forces further weakened the position of the German Navy. Hermann Göring was the second most dominant character in the Third Reich and had commensurate political authority in any policy dispute with the navy concerning the disposition of aircraft. Göring was loath to release authority over any aircraft in the Reich, and, consequently, the needs of the Navy were regularly ignored.

Though an agreement had been made before the war that all air units assigned to work with the navy would be placed under its operational control, Göring began to transfer aircraft from units under the navy's command and reassign them to units under his

control. The *Luftwaffe* intervened in naval operations within weeks of the outbreak of hostilities. The muddle thus created had severe negative repercussions almost immediately. The Germans had developed a very useful magnetic mine, and it was vital that these mines be laid in the most propitious locations to maximize their effectiveness. Most of the mines were placed by submarines and surface ships, but Göring refused to allow the Navy to use bombers and their highly trained crews to complete the task. Consequently, the Navy was forced to use seaplanes with inexperienced crews to sow mines. In November of 1939, two of the secret magnetic mines so delivered were dropped “in the soft mudflats of Shoeburyness, on the east coast of England, conveniently close to a naval workshop.”¹⁹² After the mines were discovered, British technicians retrieved the mines, dismantled them and discovered a method to counter them.

The unplanned and unanticipated war that developed with Britain strained the resources of the young *Luftwaffe*. Its usefulness was severely limited early in the conflict by a variety of factors. The two most prominent weaknesses were unsuitability of aircraft and training. The *Luftwaffe* had no long-range bombers nor were their pilots able to navigate effectively over the ocean. Göring had promised thirteen bomber *Geschwader* or squadrons (approximately 120-200 planes each) would be available to the *Kriegsmarine* at the outbreak of the war. In fact, only two severely under strength bomber *Geschwader* consisting of sixty-five He.111 and eighteen of the new Ju.88, both medium bombers,

¹⁹²S. W. Roskill, *The Defensive*, 100.

were provided.¹⁹³ At the outbreak of war the navy had eighty-three of the 1560 to 2600 bombers promised by Göring. Several short and medium range craft designed for maritime use were also deployed by the *Luftwaffe* at that time, none of which ever became available in significant numbers. As the battle moved to the mid-Atlantic, the deficiencies in range of the planes deployed became critical. In the Spring of 1940, the Germans were forced to employ a modified civilian airliner, the FW200 *Kondor*, for long-range naval reconnaissance and bombing. Though the most effective airplane the Germans possessed for this task, the plane had several important defects. The *Kondor* was very slow with a top speed of 224 mph. Furthermore, it was vulnerable to anti-aircraft fire and had a structural weakness that made it prone to a “broken back.” Even more critical to Germany’s maritime forces was the fact that at no time did the total number of frontline Kondors exceed sixty, a low figure made worse by the fact that the serviceability rate seldom rose above 25%. The Germans had, on average, fifteen aircraft to act as the eyes of the U-boat flotilla for the Battle of the Atlantic. In spite of these severe limitations, the FW200 *Gruppe* sank eighty-five merchant ships, totaling 363,000 tons in the first seven months after their deployment.¹⁹⁴ Still, the *Luftwaffe* of 1939 or 1940 was neither equipped to confront Great Britain directly nor configured properly to effectively disrupt Britain’s vital sea lanes. The success of the under strength, makeshift force that was

¹⁹³Cooper, *The German Air force*, 125-26.

¹⁹⁴*Ibid.*, 125-26.

cobbled together after the fact demonstrated the vast potential of a coordinated assault of surface, submarine and aerial force on the British merchant fleet. One can only speculate upon the effect sufficient numbers of properly designed long-range, anti-shipping bombers would have had during the early days of the war.

During the period from the outbreak of the war to the fall of France, September 1939 to June 1940, the U-boats accounted for 48 percent of the 2,250,000 tons of allied and neutral shipping sunk, mines for 26 percent (many of which were sown by U-boats), aircraft for 13 percent and surface raiders for 6 percent. Causes for the remaining 7 percent could not be determined. As impressive as these numbers appear, three salient facts must be kept in mind. The vast majority of ships sunk by U-boats were independents, i.e., ships not in convoy, at a ratio of 195 to 22. Furthermore, great improvements had been made in the British convoy system. During this same period the Germans lost twenty-four U-boats, eleven of which were sunk by convoy escorts, and the total number of U-boats available to Doenitz had shrunk from fifty-seven to fifty-one. The average life of a U-boat at sea was less than three months, and the replacement rate was 10 percent less than the rate of loss.¹⁹⁵ So low was U-boat production during the critical opening period that the already minuscule U-boat fleet was shrinking during the first nine months of war, the nine months of maximum vulnerability of the enemy fleet. Thus, a very

¹⁹⁵van der Vat, *The Atlantic Campaign*, 126-27.

small allocation of German military resources had a significant but inadequate effect on the lifeline of British and neutral shipping that kept Great Britain in the war.

Hitler's failure to understand the nearly intractable problem that Great Britain posed, the fact that it had not abandoned its traditional foreign policy goals and its strategic position as an island empire, encouraged him to believe he could come to an understanding with Great Britain's leadership. The preservation of Britain's security and independence outweighed any filial sympathy that leadership might have had for their northern European brethren's aspirations. Only a credible threat of Britain's destruction, through invasion or starvation, could have compelled Great Britain to capitulate to German control of Europe. Hitler's failure to create and deploy naval and aerial forces sufficient in quantity and composition to create that threat before the war led directly to the two front war he strove so mightily to avoid.

Epilogue

All of Hitler's efforts to avoid war with England had failed. So sure of his ability to forge an alliance with British, he had failed to create the weapons to defeat the island empire. In addition, contrary to his expectations, the astonishing pact between Germany and Russia did not compel British neutrality. Hitler's invasion of Poland had placed Germany on the road to the two-front war he believed Germany was fated to lose. Though the immediate cause of the war was Polish intractability over Danzig and the Polish Corridor, *Lebensraum* was the underlying reason for Hitler's overt aggression. Peace with Russia was merely a temporary arrangement as part of Hitler's plan to avoid encirclement. With victory in the West, his rear would be secure and the way open for the fulfillment of his ultimate goal: a victorious war of conquest in the East that would provide the German *Volk* with the land and resources for his empire to last a thousand years. England's persistent refusal to accept the place assigned it in Hitler's dream stood in his way to victory and hegemony.

At every stage of his career Hitler continued to seek British neutrality in the conflict. Even as the *Wehrmacht* was conquering Britain's ally, Poland, Hitler was attempting to end the war with England and France. Walther Hewel, Ribbentrop's liaison in the Chancellory, spoke to the German Ambassador to England, Fritz Hesse, about Hitler's peace offensive directed at the West. "Hitler will again reach an understanding

with the English and wants to make it as easy as possible for them.”¹⁹⁶ As soon as Germany and Russia totally defeated Poland, Ribbentrop and Molotov issued a joint communiqué stating: “after the definite settlement of the problems arising from the collapse of the Polish State...it would serve the true interests of all peoples to put an end to the state of war existing between Germany on the one side, and England and France on the other.”¹⁹⁷ On October 8 Hitler addressed the Reichstag with a much awaited peace initiative. After assuring the French he had no claims on them, including Alsace-Lorraine, and reiterating his desire for Anglo-German friendship, Hitler asked the rhetorical question: “Why should this war in the west be fought? For the restoration of Poland? The Poland of the Versailles Treaty will never rise again. This is guaranteed by two of the largest states in the world.”¹⁹⁸ A member of Hitler’s entourage gives his assurance that Hitler’s peace initiative was sincere.¹⁹⁹ Rebuffed by the West, Hitler, on the following day, ordered the General Staff to plan for an attack on France.

The following spring of 1940, Germany dealt another blow to England’s war effort with a preemptive strike against Denmark and Norway. England had hoped to threaten Germany’s iron ore supply line from Sweden via the North Sea, but quick action by the Germans foiled the British and provided themselves with a base from which to threaten

¹⁹⁶Toland, *Adolf Hitler*, 800.

¹⁹⁷Bullock, *Hitler*, 508.

¹⁹⁸Ibid., 511.

¹⁹⁹Dietrich, *Hitler*, 49.

Britain's vital sea lanes. Hitler followed this success with a lightning conquest of France.

Hoping France's quick demise would bring the British to their senses, Hitler hesitated at Dunkirk.

On the 23rd, [May, 1940] Reinhardt's panzer corps reached the St. Omer canal 20 miles from Dunkirk. The bulk of the B.E.F. [British Expeditionary Force] retreating under pressure was still 50 miles away. There was nothing to prevent von Kleist's panzer army from taking Dunkirk and cutting the B.E.F. off from its only hope of escape, when on the 24th von Kleist received an order forbidding him to advance over the canal or to take Dunkirk..... [T]he order...came from Hitler who had overruled both Brauchitsch and Halder. Von Kleist decided to ignore the order and cross the canal. His advance reached Hazebrouck and cut off the British retreat. Von Kleist then received a further pre-emptory order to withdraw to the canal. The panzer army had to sit and watch the British evacuation.

Lack of enterprise was not usually one of Hitler's shortcomings as a general. His decision to permit the evacuation of the B.E.F. was probably political... He had no desire to see it [the British Empire] disintegrate and have the pieces picked up by America. So long as the B.E.F. was kept under sufficient pressure to prevent it from taking its equipment, it would be unable to play any part in the Battle of France, and if the British Army was saved the ignominy of surrender, the British people would be more likely to accept his proffered friendship. Hitler subsequently spoke on these lines to Rundstedt.²⁰⁰

With Churchill's ascension to the head of His Majesty's Government on May 10, 1940, the start date of Hitler's campaign in the West, the chances for a negotiated peace were nil. Hitler's previous failure to provide the air force with the appropriate aircraft to defeat England led to the defeat of the *Luftwaffe* that fall. Britain's defensive victory that fall and Churchill's relationship with Roosevelt bore fruit with the advent of Lend Lease

²⁰⁰R. T. Paget, K.C., M.P., *Manstein: His Campaigns and His Trial* (London: Collins, 1951), 25.

and the timely transfer of fifty American destroyers to the Royal Navy. America's initially cautious but growing intervention in the North Atlantic led to an inevitable confrontation and the eventual defeat of Germany in that crucial battle.

A year after France's capitulation, Hitler had neither defeated Britain nor neutralized it. Convinced for ideological reasons as well as from his observation of the Red Army's poor performance in Finland, Hitler believed Russia could be rapidly defeated. In a conversation with Mussolini, Hitler expressed no doubt in the outcome in Russia campaign on August 25, 1941. "...[B]ut he is inclined to believe that the Red military force must be finally broken up, at the latest by October, under the repeated blows which are being and will be inflicted."²⁰¹ He went on to say that England was to be finally dealt with after Russia's defeat.²⁰² Thus, Hitler began the two-front war to avoid one. Hitler timed his attack on Russia to remove one of England's last hopes. Within little more than a year after Germany's defeat in the Battle of Britain, Hitler had arrayed the three greatest industrial powers in the world against him on two fronts. The inevitable destruction of Hitler's Third Reich was played out over the next three and a half years and ended in a smoking ruin in the heart of Berlin. And all this, largely because Hitler miscalculated the intent and resolve of Britain's leaders.

²⁰¹Ciano, *Ciano's Diplomatic Papers*, 448.

²⁰²*Ibid.*, 449.

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