

2.5 German expansion, 1938–1940



▲ German troops march into Poland following the start of hostilities on 1 September 1939

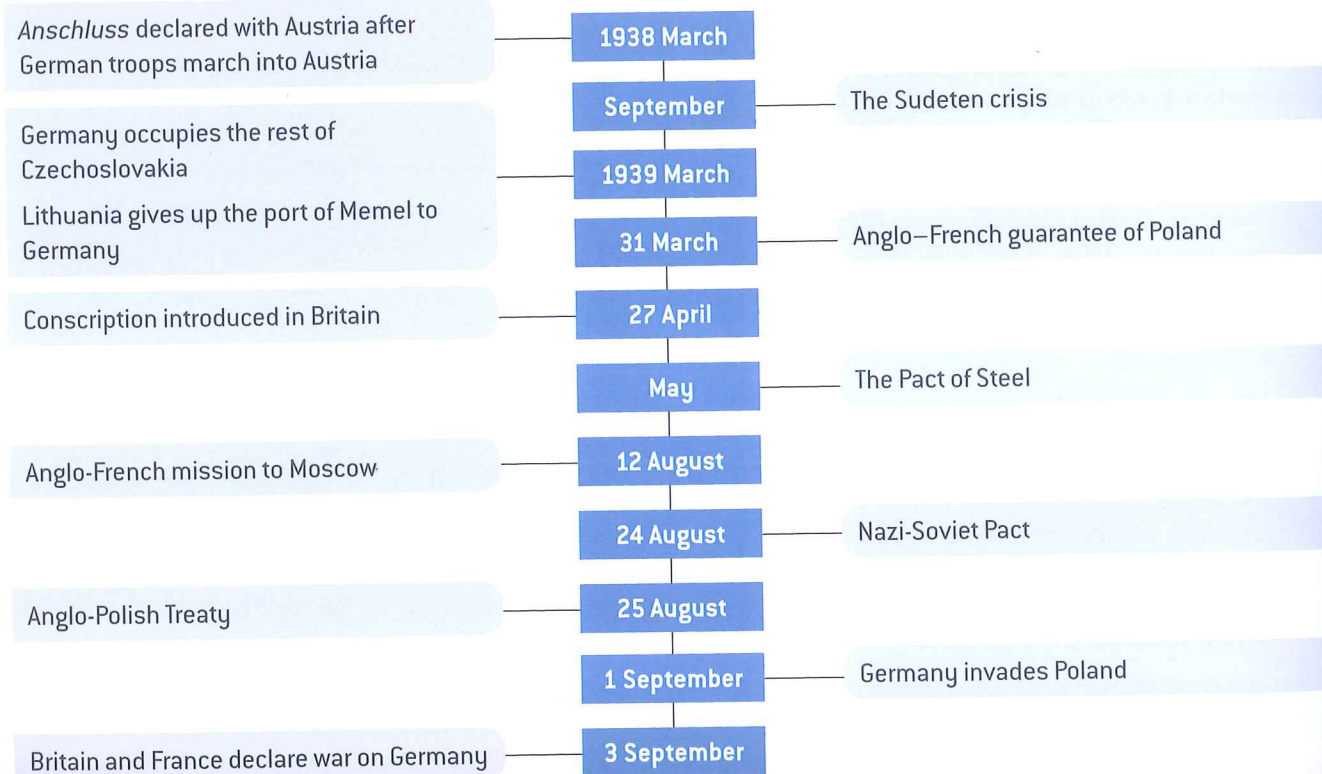
Conceptual understanding

Key concepts

- Causation
- Change
- Perspective

Key questions

- Examine the ways in which Hitler went further than challenging the post-war settlement after 1937.
- To what extent was Hitler successful in carrying out his foreign policy aims?
- Discuss the consequences of Hitler's actions for the international situation.



Following the shake-up of his military command in 1937 after the Hossbach Conference, Hitler was in a position to start taking more risks in his foreign policy. The first of these was the takeover of Austria; the next was the takeover of Sudetenland. These actions completed the revision of the post-war settlement and also put Hitler in a position to pursue his goal of *Lebensraum* in the East.

Challenging the post-war settlement after 1937

Anschluss, 1938

Between 1938 and 1939, Hitler was able to achieve the aims that he had set out at the Hossbach Conference in 1937: the annexation of Austria and the dismemberment of Czechoslovakia. However, this was not achieved in the way that Hitler had anticipated; indeed, historian Alan Bullock sees *Anschluss* as “a striking example” of Hitler’s ability to combine “consistency in aim, calculation and patience in preparation with opportunism, impulse and improvisation in execution” (Bullock, 1967: 204).

Despite his failure to take Austria in 1934, Hitler had already made much progress in establishing Nazi influence in the country. In July 1936, an Austro–German agreement had been signed, which agreed the following:

- Germany reaffirmed its recognition of Austria’s independence.
- Both powers agreed not to interfere in each other’s internal affairs.
- Austria would conduct a foreign policy consistent with it being a “German state”.

In addition, secret clauses gave prominent Austrian Nazis, such as Arthur Seyss-Inquart, a role in the government.

However, in 1938 the opportunity to take over Austria directly arose due to the actions of Austrian Chancellor Kurt Schuschnigg. Schuschnigg was alarmed by the activities of the Austrian Nazis and he requested an interview with Hitler. However, when Schuschnigg arrived at the meeting in Berchtesgaden on 12 February 1938, Hitler launched into an attack on Austria:

Hitler: “The whole history of Austria is just one interrupted act of high treason. That was so in the past, and is no better today. The historical paradox must now reach its long-overdue end. And I can tell you here and now, Herr Schuschnigg, that I am absolutely determined to make an end of all this. The German Reich is one of the Great Powers, and nobody will raise his voice if it settles its border problems ... Who is not with me will be crushed ... I have chosen the most difficult road that any German ever took ...”

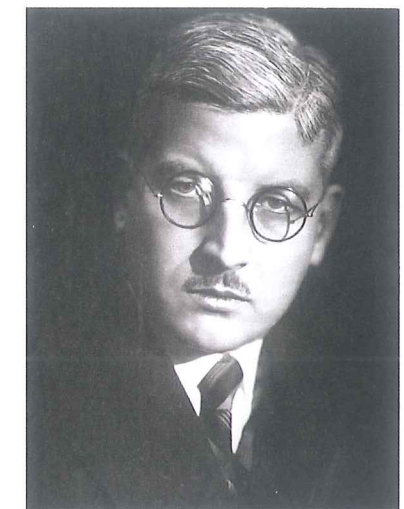
Schuschnigg: “Herr Reichkanzler, I am quite willing to believe it ... We will do everything to remove obstacles to a better understanding, as far as possible ...”

Hitler: “That is what you say, Herr Schuschnigg. But I am telling you that I am going to solve the so-called Austrian problem one way or the other ... I have only to give the order and your ridiculous defence mechanism will be blown to bits ...”

Chancellor Schuschnigg’s recollection of the conversations at Berchtesgaden, 12 February 1938, written shortly afterwards from memory

Class discussion

Discuss the events that were happening in Asia at this time. What expansionist moves had Japan made by early 1938? Do you think events in Asia had any influence on the international response to German expansion?



▲ Schuschnigg, Chancellor of Austria

Source skills



Second question – 4 marks

With reference to its origin, purpose and content, assess the value and limitations of Schuschnigg's account of his meeting with Hitler for historians studying the Austrian crisis of 1938.

Examiner's hint:

Here are some points that you could consider in your answer:

Values

- A value of the origin is that Schuschnigg was present at the meeting and so would have first-hand knowledge of what was said.
- Schuschnigg wrote the conversation down soon after the meeting so it would have been fresh in his mind.
- The purpose is of value as Schuschnigg made a record of the meeting which he saw as important.

Limitations

- Schuschnigg's account was written afterwards from memory, so he is unlikely to have been able to remember the conversation so precisely as it is here.
- His purpose would be to gain sympathy for his treatment, so it is possible that he might want to exaggerate Hitler's attack on Austria.
- Certainly, the language used by Hitler here is very aggressive in contrast to Schuschnigg's very reasonable tone which could support the idea that he is exaggerating.

After being submitted to two hours of abuse, Schuschnigg was forced to agree to a list of demands that included releasing all imprisoned pro-Nazi agitators, lifting the ban against the Nazi Party and appointing Seyss-Inquart as interior minister. Pro-Nazis were also to be made the ministers of war and of finance, and the economic systems of the two countries were to be assimilated. These demands would effectively end Austrian independence; Schuschnigg was told that if he did not agree, Hitler would march into Austria.

Schuschnigg attempted a desperate last action: he announced a plebiscite for 13 March 1938, in which Austrians were to vote on whether or not they wanted a "free and German, independent and social, Christian and united Austria". Austrians could only answer "yes" or "no"; given the wording, along with the fact that Schuschnigg's own political party was in charge of the plebiscite, there was a good chance that a Yes vote could be secured. This would then give him a chance to break free of his agreement with Hitler.

Hitler, therefore, decided to act before this could happen. Mussolini gave his assurances that he would not object to *Anschluss* and Hitler mobilized his army. When Schuschnigg found that no help was coming from Italy, Britain or France, he resigned. Hitler marched into Austria on 12 March 1938.

ATL Communication skills

In pairs review Chapter 2.3 and then discuss the reasons for the change in Mussolini's position on Anschluss by 1938.

On 13 March, apparently in a spur of the moment decision following an emotional visit to his home town of Linz, Hitler announced the incorporation of Austria into the Reich. This was subsequently confirmed by 99% of the population in a plebiscite on 10 April.

Historian Klaus Fischer sums up the impact of *Anschluss*:

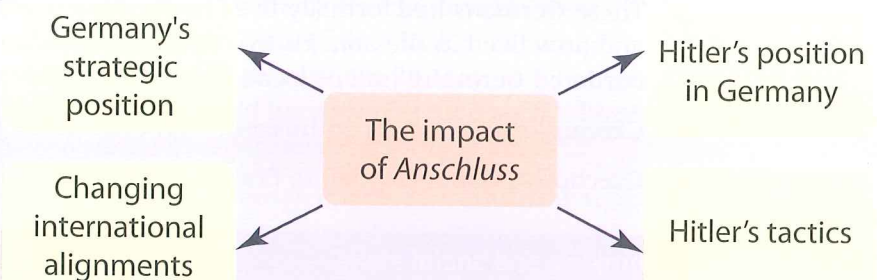
The Anschluss and the methods that brought it about had far-reaching consequences. Hitler had gambled successfully again. He became convinced that his strategy of ruthless power politics had been vindicated and that it was the only effective policy against his war-weary and vacillating opponents. Aside from reinforcing Hitler's belief in the effectiveness of international blackmail and intimidation, the Anschluss also had far-reaching consequences in the field of diplomacy. It promoted the friendship of the two Fascist tyrants – Hitler and Mussolini, and this further polarised European powers. Another consequence of the Anschluss was that Germany's strategic position was greatly enhanced. With Vienna at his disposal Hitler had acquired direct access to the whole of south-eastern Europe. From Vienna it was only a footstep to Czechoslovakia, Hungary and Yugoslavia. — Fischer, 1995



▲ Austrian crowds greeting Hitler after Anschluss

ATL Thinking and communication skills

Use Fischer's analysis of *Anschluss* to add detail to your own copy of this mind map.



ATL Communication skills



Go to www.britishpathe.com/video/hitler-annexes-austria.

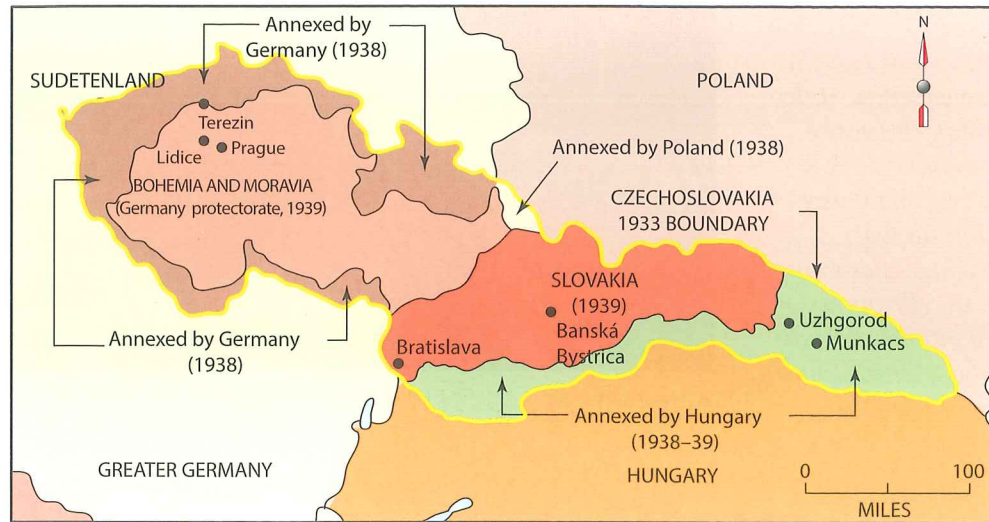
Watch this Pathé News clip of Hitler entering Austria.

According to the commentary, what made it hard for anyone (inside or outside of Austria) to oppose this move?

The Sudeten crisis

Hitler's action against Czechoslovakia was a virtuoso performance, diminished only by the fact that his antagonists made things easier for him than he deserved. — Craig, 1978

After the success of annexing Austria, Hitler turned his attention to Czechoslovakia. There were several reasons for this:



▲ Partition of Czechoslovakia, 1938–39

- Czechoslovakia was the only successful independent state created by the Versailles Settlement; it consisted of many different peoples and had therefore proved that ethnically diverse people could live together.
- One of the ethnic groups in the new Czechoslovakia was German. These Germans had formally lived in the Austro–Hungarian Empire and now lived in the area known as the Sudetenland, which bordered Germany (see its location on the map above).
- Czechoslovakia was an enthusiastic supporter of the League of Nations.
- Czechoslovakia was allied to France and Russia.

ATL Thinking and social skills

In pairs, consider how each of the bullet points above would contribute to Hitler's hostile attitude towards Czechoslovakia.

The Sudeten Germans

The Sudetenland – a mountainous area, rich in mineral resources – had been given to Czechoslovakia in order to give the new state a strong frontier and to ensure its prosperity. The Czechs had then further strengthened this frontier by building defences. In addition, Czechoslovakia had a strong arms industry and a well-organized army.

- Hitler considered Slavs to be *untermenschen* (racially and socially inferior).
- Many Czechs had resisted Austrian rule in the old Austro–Hungarian Empire and had fought for Russia during the First World War, rather than for Austria.

However, the Sudeten Germans themselves, some 3.5 million people, had not accepted their position in Czechoslovakia. As part of the former Austrian Imperial ruling nation, they resented their loss of status and regarded themselves as victims of Czech discrimination. With the impact of the Great Depression and high unemployment, their sense of grievance grew.

The leader of the Sudeten Germans, Konrad Heinlein, became the mouthpiece for Sudeten discontent and for demands to the Czech government for self-government. He led the Sudeten German Party, which, from 1935, was funded by Nazi Germany. Hitler encouraged Heinlein to make continual demands on the Czech government and to keep up a relentless programme of agitation and subversion. On 24 April 1938, Heinlein presented the Czech government with his Eight Demands in the form of the Karlsbad Programme; these demands included autonomy and various special rights.

Initially, however, Hitler was reluctant to use force against Czechoslovakia. He told Heinlein that he would solve the Sudeten issue “in the not too distant future”, but did not commit himself to any clear plan on how this was to be achieved. In addition, many of Hitler's generals warned him that Germany was not ready for a war at this stage.

The May Crisis, 1938

Hitler changed his mind with regard to taking action against Czechoslovakia as a result of the so-called May Crisis. On 20 May, rumours started circulating that the Germans were making military preparations near to the Czech border. As a result, the Czech government ordered partial mobilization, and Britain and France sent warnings to Germany.

In fact, the rumours were unfounded and Hitler had to tell the powers involved that no such preparations to attack Czechoslovakia were underway. He found this action humiliating, as it looked as though he had responded to British and French threats. On 28 May, in what was known as Operation Green, Hitler told his generals: “*It is my unalterable decision to smash Czechoslovakia by military action in the near future*”.

Throughout the summer of 1938, tensions increased in the Sudetenland as the Sudeten Germans, on instructions from Hitler, increased their violence against the Czech government. On 5 September, the Czech President Edvard Beneš agreed to all demands of the Sudeten Germans for self-government. However, Heinlein was told by Hitler to reject this offer, thus proving that Hitler was interested only in conquest and not in justice for the Sudeten Germans. Meanwhile, the German press whipped up a frenzy of anti-Czech feeling by showing pictures and film footage of the apparent ill-treatment of Sudeten Germans.



▲ Konrad Heinlein, leader of the Sudeten German Party

ATL Thinking and communication skills

Speech made by Hitler on 12 September 1938 at the annual Nuremberg Rally.

I am speaking of Czechoslovakia. This is a democratic State founded on democratic lines by forcing other nationalities without asking them into a structure manufactured by Versailles. As good democrats they began to oppress and mishandle the majority of the inhabitants ...

If this were a matter foreign to us ... we would regard the case as so many others, merely as an interesting illustration of the democratic conception of self-determination, and simply take note of it. But it is something most natural which compels us Germans to take an interest in this problem. Among the nationalities being suppressed in this State there are 3,500,000 Germans. That is about as many persons of our race as Denmark has inhabitants ... That conditions in this nation are unbearable is generally known. 3,500,000 people were robbed in the name of a certain Mr Wilson of their right to self-determination. Economically these people were deliberately ruined and afterwards handed over to a slow process of extermination. The misery of the Sudeten Germans is without end. They are being oppressed in an inhuman and intolerable manner and treated in an undignified way ...

This may be a matter of indifference to the democracies ... but I can only say to the representatives of the democracies that it is not a matter of indifference to us, and I say that if these tortured creatures cannot obtain rights and assistance by themselves they can obtain both from us ...

We can quite understand that the French and British defend their interests in the world. I can assure the statesmen in Paris and London that there are also German interests which we are determined to defend in all circumstances ... You will understand that a Great Power cannot suddenly submit ... to such a base attack ... What the Germans demand is the right of self-determination which other nations possess ... if the Democracies, however, should be convinced that they must in this case protect with all their means the oppressors of the Germans, then this will have grave consequences.

In pairs, read Hitler's speech and consider what evidence this document provides of:

- Hitler's political views
- Hitler's tactics with regard to taking over the Sudetenland
- the nature of Nazi propaganda.

Hitler's speech at the Nuremberg Rally caused more unrest in the Sudetenland, but this was brought under control by the Czech government, which declared martial law.

ATL Communication skills



Go to www.youtube.com/watch?v=hprV2nQRvbc, or search for "The German people persecuted at Sudetenland".

Watch this German propaganda film. According to the film, how are the Sudeten Germans being persecuted?

Chamberlain's intervention

It was at this point that Britain decided to act. The full reasons and nature of this involvement are discussed in more detail in the next chapter. However, Chamberlain desperately wanted to avoid a war, and so now flew three times to meet Hitler to try to make a deal over the Sudetenland.

Berchtesgaden, 15 September 1938

▲ Chamberlain arriving at Berchtesgaden

At this meeting, it was agreed that the Sudeten German areas of Czechoslovakia should be transferred to Germany. Chamberlain persuaded his Cabinet and the French to agree to this deal. The Czechs finally agreed after two days of persuasion.

Godesberg, 22–23 September 1938

Chamberlain flew to Godesberg to tell Hitler the good news, but Hitler was furious. He wanted an excuse for a war with Czechoslovakia, not a peaceful handover of the Sudetenland. He insisted that the demands of the Hungarians and the Poles for territory in Czechoslovakia should also be met, and that German troops should be allowed to occupy the Sudetenland on 28 September.



▲ Chamberlain leaving Godesberg

It now seemed as though war was inevitable. The Czechs rejected Hitler's terms and the French said they would support Czechoslovakia. As mentioned previously, the Czechs had good defences and a strong army. They hoped that with the help of their allies, France and the Soviet Union, they could resist a German attack.

Munich, 29 September 1938



▲ Chamberlain, Daladier, Hitler and Mussolini at the Munich Conference

With Britain and France now showing that they were prepared to fight, and with his own generals pointing out that Germany was not yet ready for war, Hitler agreed to a further conference. Mussolini stepped in as a mediator to prevent war, and a Four Power Conference was held in Munich. Here, a plan presented by Mussolini (though written by Hitler!) was agreed on.

The plan included the following points.

- The German occupation of the Sudetenland would take place by 1 October and an international commission would determine a provisional new frontier by 10 October. The international commission would also supervise plebiscites in areas of dispute.
- Czechs would be allowed to leave and Germans allowed to join the Sudeten territories (neither the plebiscites nor the transfer of populations actually happened).
- Poland was to be given Teschen.
- Hungary was to get South Slovakia.
- Germany, along with the other powers, guaranteed the independence of the rest of Czechoslovakia.

Neither the Czech President, Beneš nor the Soviet leader, Stalin were invited to the Munich Conference. The Czechs were told that if they resisted this agreement they would receive no help from Britain or France, even though France had guaranteed the Czech borders at Locarno. The Czechs therefore had no option but to agree. Beneš resigned a few days later.

Following the conference, Chamberlain got Hitler to sign a statement in which he agreed to settle all matters of international interest through consultation. Hitler, however, was determined not to be deprived of his war against Czechoslovakia. On 21 October, he gave orders for the “liquidation of the remainder of the Czech state”.

Source skills

Gordon A. Craig. *Germany 1866–1945* (1990).

Munich seemed to convince Hitler that he could do no wrong, and his policy now betrayed an impatience that had not characterised it earlier. In his search for new triumphs, economic factors no longer had the power to restrain him, for it was clear that

the country’s readiness for war was as good as it could be without measures of domestic discipline that he was disinclined to take; and it seemed possible, in any case, that conquests might repair deficiencies. Moreover, the acceleration of Hitler’s campaign against the Jews at the end of 1938 contributed to the mounting pace of his external policy. One

of the complaints that he made against the government of Czechoslovakia was that “the Jews in Czechoslovakia were still poisoning the nation” against Germany and would have to be dealt with. As he turned to new objectives, it is clear that the conquest of space

and the destruction of Jewry were inextricably connected in his thoughts.

First question, part a – 3 marks

According to Craig, what was the impact of the Munich Conference on Hitler?

Beyond the Treaty of Versailles: The liquidation of Czechoslovakia

ATL Communication skills



▲ German troops enter Prague in March 1939

What does this photo suggest about the attitude of the citizens of Prague towards the takeover of the rest of Czechoslovakia?

As a result of the Munich Conference, Czechoslovakia lost 70% of its heavy industry, a third of its population and both the natural mountainous defences and the man-made fortifications of the Sudetenland. Slovakia and Ruthenia were given self-government for internal affairs, though were still ultimately controlled from Prague.

Clearly, Hitler saw the Munich Agreement as “a stepping stone to the liquidation of the Czech state” (Stackelberg, 1999: 173). From early 1939, Hitler encouraged the Slovaks to cause disruption and to ask for complete independence. He was willingly helped in this by Father Jozef Tiso, who was head of the fascist Slovak People’s Party.

As with Austria, Hitler was given the excuse to directly get involved when the new Czech President, Emil Hachá, moved troops into Slovakia to crush this agitation. Prompted by Hitler, Tiso proclaimed full independence for Slovakia and asked for German protection.

ATL Thinking and social skills

- 1 According to Craig in the source above, what factor linked Hitler’s domestic and foreign policies?
- 2 With a partner, discuss what conclusions Hitler might now draw as to the attitude of the West regarding any future action he might take.

In the hope of saving Czechoslovakia, Hachá now asked to see Hitler. This, of course, was a mistake; Hachá was forced to sign over Bohemia and Moravia to Hitler.

On 15 March 1939, German troops occupied the rest of Czechoslovakia. On 16 March, Bohemia and Moravia were declared a protectorate of Germany; Slovakia was to be an independent state under the protection of Germany and Ruthenia was occupied by Hungarian troops.

This action led to a change in British policy towards Germany. On 18 March, Chamberlain told the British Cabinet that “no reliance could be placed on any of the assurances given by the Nazi leaders” (see page 223).

German expansion: Poland



▲ The Polish Corridor after the First World War

It was now clear that Hitler's next target would be Poland. Poland had been dismantled as a country in the 18th century and partitioned between Prussia, Russia and the Austrian Empire. However, following Wilson's aims of self-determination at Versailles, it had been recreated as a nation. It was this part of the Treaty of Versailles that was probably most resented by the Germans, as West Prussia had been given to Poland to allow it access to the sea, thereby splitting East Prussia off from the rest of Germany. This piece of land, known as the Polish Corridor, also included the city of Danzig, which became a “free city” run by the League of Nations, allowing both Poland and Germany to use it as a sea port.

Less than a week after the occupation of Prague, the Germans proposed to Poland that Danzig should be returned to Germany, and that Germany should have direct access to East Prussia via a German-controlled road and rail link. This was actually a more legitimate demand than the German claim to the Sudetenland, which had not been part of Germany before the First World War. However, Poland's foreign minister Colonel Beck refused, seeing this as the start of an attack on Polish territory.

Britain's guarantee to Poland

In March 1939, Hitler asked the Lithuanian government to hand over Memel. Lithuania was a Baltic state that had been made independent from Russia in 1919; Memel was a city and strip of land bordering East Prussia that had a substantial German population. Lithuania was in no position to stand up to Hitler and the land was handed over four days later.

Britain now decided to act and, on 30 March, a guarantee was offered to Poland to give help in the event of a German attack:

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. They have given the Polish Government an assurance to this effect.

I may add that the French Government have authorised me to make it plain that they stand in the same position in this matter as do His Majesty's Government.

The Anglo–Polish Treaty failed to make Hitler more cautious in his actions. Indeed, he was furious about this opposition to his plans, commenting, “I'll cook them a stew that they'll choke on”. Two days after the British guarantee to Poland, Hitler responded by declaring the Anglo–German Naval Agreement invalid and ending the 1934 Non-Aggression Pact with Poland. He then ordered his Chief of Staff, Keitel, to prepare for the attack on Poland. This was known as Operation White, and the plan was for a limited war on Poland rather than for a wider war involving Britain and France.

Changing international alignments: The Pact of Steel, May 1939

Pact of Steel

International tensions continued to rise with Mussolini's invasion of Albania (see page 147). Although this action was caused by Mussolini's attempt to show his independence of Hitler and to increase his own international importance, to Britain and France this looked like a coordinated action between the dictatorships. Thus, Britain and France immediately issued guarantees to both Greece and Romania.

The Germans supported Mussolini's action in Albania, and Mussolini found that he needed Hitler's support given the hostile reaction of Britain and France. He thus agreed to sign the Pact of Steel with Germany, whereby each power agreed to come to the aid of the other if it became involved in hostilities “contrary to its wishes and desires”. However, Mussolini was wary of getting involved in a full-scale conflict, and privately he made it clear to Hitler that Italy would not be ready for war for another three or four years.

Nevertheless, Hitler was intent on an immediate war with Poland. The day after the signing of the Pact of Steel, he told his generals: “we are left with the decision: to attack Poland at the first suitable opportunity”. As Kershaw writes, “War for [Hitler] was no conventional military conflict. It represented the decisive step towards the fulfilment of his ‘idea’, the accomplishment of his ‘mission’” (Kershaw, 1991: 134).

TOK

You have already reflected on the role of the individual in history when considering Italy's foreign policies under Mussolini. In pairs consider the role of Hitler in shaping and directing events. Intentionalist historians view the role of individuals and personalities as key forces of historical change. To what extent do you agree with this idea. Refer to your study of German expansion in the 1930s. Other historians, and particularly Marxist historians argue that economic forces are the key factor. Investigate historians' views on German expansion in the 1930s. How far can you identify political or cultural perspectives of the historians from their accounts?