

# Appeasement and the outbreak of the Second World War

How did Europe transition from one world war to another? The key events are outlined below

## The Versailles inheritance

Could the Second World War have been avoided? If so, how? Hitler's policies of expansionism, notably the quest for 'living space' (*lebensraum*) on Polish and Soviet territory was obviously the main cause, but could it have been dealt with more skilfully? German expansionism was already widely blamed for the outbreak of war in 1914 and a 'War Guilt' clause had been hung round its neck at the Versailles Conference in 1919. Even then, opinion was split. Britain and France wanted to treat Germany harshly and extract compensation for the costs imposed by the war. Eventually, from US prompting, it was realised that such treatment might turn Germany towards revolution and communism, so a policy of reconstruction took the sharp edges off the reparations policy.

## Enter Hitler

Once Hitler came to power in 1933, however, the threat re-emerged. The British government under Neville Chamberlain has been much-criticised for believing Hitler could be 'appeased' — meaning that Germany's expansionist tendencies could be contained by peaceful negotiation. The Soviet Union proposed a policy of joint resistance to Nazi Germany known as 'collective security' — if Britain, France and the USSR stood together they could force Hitler into agreement. Even if Hitler went to war, such an alliance would have an overwhelming military preponderance.

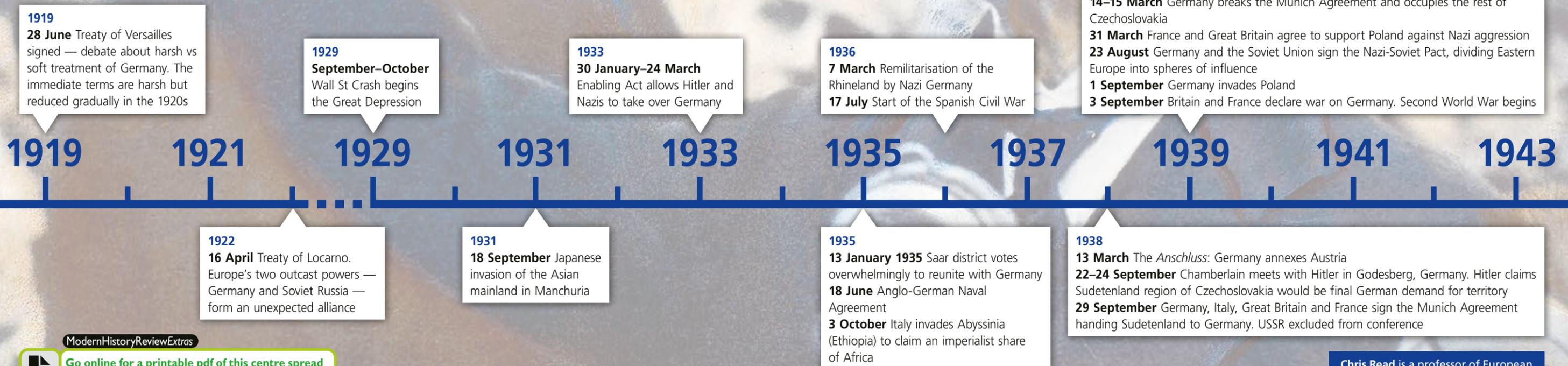
Hitler avoided sharp confrontation by dressing up early expansion as 'reasonable' steps to bring German citizens back into the Reich from the Saar, Rhineland, Austria and the Sudetenland fringe of Czechoslovakia. Ironically, at the last minute, the two major powers switched roles. In March 1939, Britain committed itself to defending Poland from attack. However, it dragged its heels over an agreement with the USSR which would have made that pledge viable. Without Soviet agreement, Poland could not be helped by distant Britain's small army and large navy. Fearing a German invasion of the whole of Poland, the USSR shocked the world by agreeing to partition Poland. Germany and the USSR also agreed, though neither side took it seriously, to not fight each other in the next ten years. At the very moment Chamberlain had turned to resistance, Stalin saw no option but appeasement. A week later, the war began. What had happened?

## Diplomatic disaster

British foreign policy had three foundations — defence of empire; a balance of power in Europe; anti-communism. From this perspective not only Hitler but, especially, Japan, having invaded Manchuria in 1931 and threatening Hong Kong and Singapore, had to be dealt with. If Hitler could be encouraged to attack to the east it would weaken Germany and the USSR, a double win for Britain. The Munich Treaty seemed to shine a green light for Hitler to do what he wanted in the East without British opposition.

The other main player, the USSR, was directly threatened by Nazi Germany and, from 1934, sought to create a firm alliance against it through 'collective security'. The USSR fought against the fascist overthrow of democracy in Spain while Britain forced France into 'non-intervention' and turning a blind eye to German and Italian involvement. When Hitler threatened Czechoslovakia, having swallowed up Austria, the USSR was ready to go to war and, with British and French support, would most likely have defeated a not-yet fully re-armed Germany.

Britain, however, still persisted in driving Hitler East and it also hoped to keep Italy apart from Germany and do a deal with it as the Italian naval threat increased in the Mediterranean, a vital British route to India. By mid-1939, the USSR saw no alternative but to ward off Germany's expected blow and gain preparation time and space for the massive war which finally erupted when Hitler invaded the USSR in June 1941.



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