

SECTION 2

World War II Begins

Guide to Reading

Main Idea

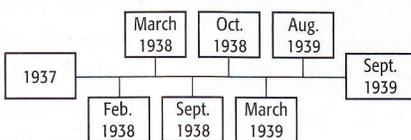
World War II officially began with the Nazi invasion of Poland and the French and British declaration of war on Germany in September 1939.

Key Terms and Names

Anschluss, appeasement, blitzkrieg, Maginot Line, Winston Churchill, Battle of Britain

Reading Strategy

Sequencing As you read about the events leading up to the beginning of World War II, record them by completing a time line similar to the one below.



Reading Objectives

- **Explain** why Hitler was able to take over Austria and Czechoslovakia.
- **Describe** the early events of the war and why Britain was able to resist the Nazis.

Section Theme

Continuity and Change The desire of the French and British to avoid another war helped encourage Hitler's aggression in Europe.

Preview of Events

◆ 1938

March 1938
Hitler announces German-Austrian unification

◆ 1939

August 1939
Hitler and Stalin sign Nazi-Soviet pact

September 1939
World War II begins

◆ 1940

June 1940
France surrenders to Germany

◆ 1941

August 1940
Battle of Britain begins

★ An American Story ★



Sumner Welles

In February 1940, President Franklin Roosevelt sent Undersecretary of State Sumner Welles to Europe to report on the political situation. A few months earlier, Germany had invaded Poland, and Roosevelt hoped to negotiate peace before wider hostilities erupted.

In Italy Welles found Mussolini intent on war and judged that "there was not the slightest chance of any successful negotiation." In Paris Welles glumly noted the "sullen apathy" in people's faces and concluded that France had little will to resist a German onslaught. After speaking to Hitler, Welles concluded that a negotiated peace settlement was impossible: "It was only too tragically plain that all decisions had already been made." In London, Welles did not feel the sense of doom he had in Paris. The British, he reported, would "fight to the very last ditch." Welles later reflected on his mission:

“Only one thing could have deflected Hitler from his purpose: the sure knowledge that the power of the United States would be directed against him if he attempted to carry out his intention of conquering the world by force. . . . At that time no representative of this government could have been authorized to intimate any such thing. . . . My mission, therefore, was a forlorn hope.”

—quoted in *Roosevelt and Churchill*

“Peace in Our Time”

Whether or not the United States could have forced Hitler to negotiate is uncertain. By 1940 the German army had been rebuilt, and Hitler was bent on conquest. What is known is that in the years before Welles visited Europe, when the Nazi regime was



Appeasement in Action At Munich in September 1938, Mussolini (second from left), Britain's Neville Chamberlain (left), and Hitler (second from right) were among those deciding Czechoslovakia's fate.

much weaker, European leaders did not try to stop Hitler. Instead, they vainly tried to buy peace by giving in to his demands.

Europe's leaders had several reasons for believing—or wanting to believe—that Hitler could be satisfied and war avoided. First, the shadow of World War I loomed large, making many leaders fearful of another bloody conflict. Second, some thought Hitler's demand that all German-speaking regions of Europe be united with Germany was reasonable. Third, many people assumed that the Nazis would be more interested in peace once they gained more territory.

The Austrian *Anschluss* Hitler's first demands concerned Austria and Czechoslovakia. In late 1937 Hitler stepped up his call for the unification of all German-speaking people, including those in Austria and Czechoslovakia. Seizing Austria and Czechoslovakia would also gain food supplies, defensible frontiers, and soldiers for Germany. Hitler believed that Germany could only expand its territory by “resort[ing] to force with its attendant risks.”

In February 1938 Hitler threatened to invade German-speaking Austria, his native land, unless Austrian Nazis were given important government posts. Austria's chancellor quickly gave in to this demand. Several weeks later, the chancellor tried to put the matter of unification with Germany to a democratic vote. Fearing the outcome, Hitler sent troops into Austria in March and announced the *Anschluss*, or unification, of Austria and Germany.

The Munich Crisis and Appeasement Shortly after Germany annexed Austria, Hitler announced German claims to the Sudetenland, an area of Czechoslovakia with a large German-speaking

population. Since Austrians shared a common culture and language with Germany, many people had accepted the *Anschluss*. In Czechoslovakia, on the other hand, people spoke several different languages. In addition, while Austria had an authoritarian government, Czechoslovakia was a democracy. Furthermore, Austria had no allies to help it defend itself, but Czechoslovakia was allied with France and the Soviet Union.

The Czechs strongly resisted Germany's demands for the Sudetenland. France threatened to fight if Germany attacked, and the Soviet Union also promised assistance. British prime minister **Neville Chamberlain** publicly promised to support France, Britain's ally.

To prevent another war, representatives of Britain, France, Italy, and Germany agreed to meet in Munich to decide Czechoslovakia's fate. At the Munich Conference on September 29, 1938, Britain and France agreed to Hitler's demands, a policy that came to be known as **appeasement**. Appeasement is the policy of giving concessions in exchange for peace. Supporters of appeasement mistakenly believed that Hitler had a few limited demands. They felt that if they gave Hitler what he wanted, he would be satisfied and war would be avoided. Czechoslovakia was informed that it must give up the Sudetenland or fight Germany on its own.

Chamberlain had gambled that sacrificing part of Czechoslovakia would satisfy Hitler. He also knew that Britain's military was not ready for war, so he was buying time. When Chamberlain returned home he promised “a peace with honor . . . peace in our time,” but he also began to speed up British rearmament.

The following March, in brazen violation of the Munich agreement, Germany sent troops into Czechoslovakia and broke up the country. Slovakia became independent in name, but it was actually a satellite state under German control. The Czech lands became a German protectorate.

Danzig and the Polish Corridor After the Munich conference, Hitler turned his sights on Poland. In October 1938 he demanded the return of Danzig, a Baltic Sea port with strong German roots, to German control. Although Danzig was more than 90 percent German, it had been separated from Germany at the end of World War I to give Poland access to the sea. Hitler also requested a highway and railroad across the Polish Corridor, which separated western Germany from the German state of East Prussia.

Hitler's demands on Poland convinced the British and French that appeasement had failed. On March 31,

1939, the British announced that if Poland went to war to defend its territory, Britain and France would come to its aid. This encouraged the Polish government to refuse Hitler's demands.

In May 1939, Hitler ordered the German army to prepare to invade Poland. He also ordered his foreign minister to begin negotiations with the USSR. If Germany was going to fight Britain and France, Hitler did not want to have to fight the Soviets too.

The Nazi-Soviet Nonaggression Pact When German officials proposed a nonaggression treaty to the Soviets, Stalin agreed. He believed the best way to protect the USSR was to turn the capitalist nations against each other. If the treaty worked, Germany would go to war against Britain and France, and the USSR would be safe.

On August 23, 1939, Germany and the USSR signed the nonaggression pact. The Nazi-Soviet pact shocked the world. Communism and Nazism were supposed to be totally opposed to each other. Leaders in Britain and France understood, however,

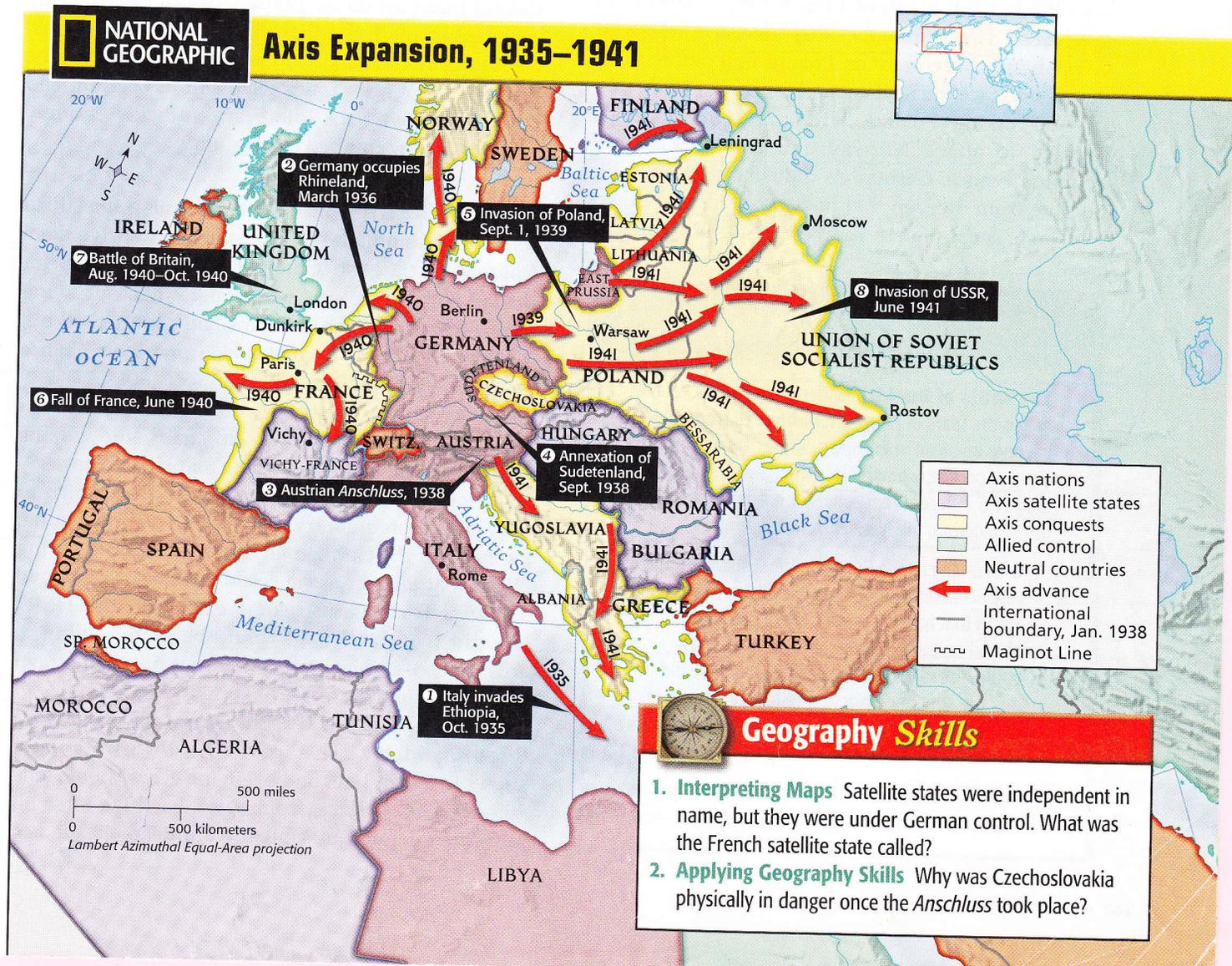
that Hitler had made the deal to free himself for war against their countries and Poland. What they did not know was that the treaty also contained a secret deal between Germany and the Soviet Union to divide Poland between them.

Reading Check Explaining What were three reasons European leaders agreed to a policy of appeasement?

The War Begins

On September 1, 1939, Germany invaded Poland from the west, and soon after the Soviets invaded from the east. On September 3, Britain and France declared war on Germany, marking the start of World War II.

Blitzkrieg in Poland Poland bravely resisted Germany's onslaught, but to no avail. The Germans used a new type of warfare called **blitzkrieg**, or lightning war. Blitzkrieg used large numbers of massed tanks to break through and rapidly encircle enemy



positions. Supporting the tanks were waves of aircraft that bombed enemy positions and dropped paratroopers to cut their supply lines. Blitzkrieg depended on radios to coordinate the tanks and aircraft. The Polish army was unable to cope with the German attack. On September 27, the Polish capital of Warsaw fell to the Germans. By October 5, 1939, the Polish army had been defeated.

GEOGRAPHY

The Fall of France In contrast to the war in Poland, western Europe remained eerily quiet. The Germans referred to this situation as the *sitzkrieg*, or sitting war. The British called it the “Bore War,” while American newspapers nicknamed it the “Phony War.” The British had sent troops to France, but both countries remained on the defensive, waiting for the Germans to attack.

After World War I, the French had built a line of concrete bunkers and fortifications called the **Maginot Line** along the German border. Rather than risk their troops by attacking, the French preferred to wait behind the Maginot Line for the Germans to approach. Unfortunately, this decision allowed Germany to concentrate on Poland first before turning west to face the British and French.

After taking Poland, Hitler and his generals decided to attack Norway and Denmark before invading France. Germany’s industry depended on iron ore from Sweden that had to be shipped down Norway’s coast part of the year. If the British sent

troops to Norway, they could block the iron shipments. On April 9, 1940, the attack began, and within a month, Germany controlled both countries.

With his northern flank secure, Hitler turned his attention to France. Hitler planned to go around the Maginot Line, which protected France’s border with Germany but not France’s border with Belgium and Luxembourg. To get around the Maginot Line, the Germans would have to invade the Netherlands, Belgium, and Luxembourg first—which is exactly what they did. On May 10, Hitler launched a new blitzkrieg in the west. While German troops parachuted into the Netherlands, an army of tanks rolled into Belgium and Luxembourg.

The British and French had expected the German attack. As soon as it began, British and French forces raced north into Belgium. This was a mistake. Instead of sending their tanks through the open countryside of central Belgium, the Germans sent their main force through the Ardennes Mountains of Luxembourg and eastern Belgium. The French did not think that large numbers of tanks could move through the mountains, and they had left only a few troops to defend that part of the border. The Germans easily smashed through the French lines, then raced west across northern France to the English Channel. The British and French armies were still in Belgium and could not move back into France quickly enough. They were now trapped in Belgium.

The Miracle at Dunkirk After trapping the Allied forces in Belgium, the Germans began to drive them toward the English Channel. The only hope for Britain and France was to evacuate their surviving troops by sea, but the Germans had captured all but one port, **Dunkirk**, a small town in northern France near the Belgian border.

As German forces closed in on Dunkirk, Hitler suddenly ordered them to stop. No one is sure why he gave this order. Historians know that Hitler was nervous about risking his tank forces, and he wanted to wait until more infantry arrived. Hermann Goering, the head of the German air force, was also assuring Hitler that aircraft alone could destroy the trapped soldiers. There is also some evidence that Hitler thought that the British would be more willing to accept peace if the Germans did not humiliate them by destroying their forces at Dunkirk.

Whatever Hitler’s reasons, his order provided a three-day delay. This gave the British time to strengthen their lines and begin the evacuation. Some 850 ships of all sizes, from navy warships to small sailboats operated by civilian volunteers, headed to

Fact

Fiction

Folklore

The Battle of Dunkirk Hitler’s invasion of Poland fueled the fears of Americans who preferred not to become involved in Europe’s conflict. In contrast, the evacuation from Dunkirk less than a year later generated very different reactions. For example, soon after the evacuation, the *New York Times* wrote:

“So long as the English tongue survives, the word Dunkirk will be spoken with reverence. For in that harbor, in such a hell as never blazed on earth before, at the end of a lost battle, the rages and blemishes that have hidden the soul of democracy fell away. There, beaten but unconquered, in shining splendor, she faced the enemy.”

Indeed, the Battle of Dunkirk would soon help to lift the United States out of its isolationism.



NATIONAL
GEOGRAPHIC

MOMENT in HISTORY

NEVER GIVE IN

Few photographs capture the British resolve to keep a stiff upper lip better than this one. Night after night between September 1940 and May 1941, German warplanes rained bombs on London, Coventry, and other British cities. The attacks were intended to destroy British morale and war production, but Royal Air Force pilots shot down bombers faster than Germany could replace them. Plucky British civilians, like this milkman making his rounds through a debris-strewn London street, remained determined to carry on as usual each morning.



Dunkirk from England. The British had hoped to rescue about 45,000 troops. Instead, when the evacuation ended on June 4, an estimated 338,000 British and French troops had been saved. This stunning success led British newspapers to refer to the evacuation as the “Miracle at Dunkirk.”

The evacuation had its price, however. Almost all of the British army’s equipment remained at Dunkirk—90,000 rifles, 7,000 tons of ammunition, and 120,000 vehicles. If Hitler invaded Britain, it would be almost impossible to stop him from conquering the country.

Three weeks later, on June 22, 1940, Hitler accepted the French surrender in the same railway car in which the Germans had surrendered at the end of World War I. Germany now occupied much of northern France and its Atlantic coastline. To govern the rest of the country, Germany installed a puppet government at the town of Vichy and made Marshal Philippe Pétain the new government’s figurehead leader. Pétain predicted that Britain “will have her neck wrung like a chicken.”

Reading Check **Summarizing** Why was Germany able to overtake Poland?

Britain Remains Defiant

Neither Pétain nor Adolf Hitler anticipated the bravery of the British people or the spirit of their leader, **Winston Churchill**, who had replaced Neville Chamberlain as prime minister. Hitler fully expected the British to negotiate peace after France surrendered. For Winston Churchill, however, peace was not an option. The war was a fight to defend civilization. On June 4, 1940, Churchill delivered a defiant speech in Parliament, intended not only to rally the British people but to alert the isolationist United States to Britain’s plight:

“Even though large tracts of Europe have fallen . . . we shall not flag or fail. . . . We shall defend our island, whatever the cost may be, we shall fight on the beaches, we shall fight on the landing grounds, we shall fight in the fields and in the streets, we shall fight in the hills; we shall never surrender.”

—quoted in *Freedom from Fear*

When Hitler realized that Britain would not surrender, he ordered his commanders to prepare to invade. Only the choppy waters of the narrow



Picturing History

Never Surrender Hitler ordered Nazi aircraft to bomb British cities, intending to weaken the people's will. Though shaken, the British, like the dome of St. Paul's Cathedral (right), stood firm. **What technology allowed the outnumbered Royal Air Force to resist the German *Luftwaffe*?**

English Channel separated Britain from Germany's powerful army, but getting across the Channel posed a major challenge. Germany had few transport ships, and the British air force would sink them if they tried to land troops in England. To invade, therefore, Germany first had to defeat the British air force.

In June 1940, the German air force, called the *Luftwaffe*, began to attack British shipping in the English Channel. Then, in mid-August, the *Luftwaffe* launched an all-out air battle to destroy the British Royal Air Force. This air battle, which lasted into the fall of 1940, became known as the **Battle of Britain**.

On August 23, German bombers accidentally bombed London, the British capital. This attack on civilians enraged the British, who responded by bombing Berlin the following night. For the first time in the war, bombs fell on the German capital. Infuriated, Hitler ordered the *Luftwaffe* to stop its attacks on British military targets and to concentrate on bombing London.

Hitler's goal now was to terrorize the British people into surrendering. The British people endured, however, hiding out in the city's subway tunnels whenever German bombers appeared.

Although the Royal Air Force was greatly outnumbered, the British had one major advantage. They had developed a new technology called radar. Using radar stations placed along their coast, the British were able to detect incoming German aircraft and direct British fighters to intercept them.

Day after day, the British fighters inflicted more losses on the Germans than they suffered. The skill of a few hundred pilots saved Britain from invasion. Praising the pilots, Churchill told Parliament, "Never in the field of human conflict was so much owed by so many to so few." On October 12, 1940, Hitler cancelled the invasion of Britain.

Reading Check **Evaluating** Why was Britain able to resist Hitler and the Nazis?

SECTION 2 ASSESSMENT

Checking for Understanding

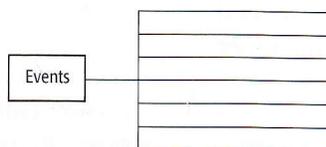
- Define:** *appeasement*, *blitzkrieg*.
- Identify:** *Anschluss*, Maginot Line, Winston Churchill, Battle of Britain.
- Explain** why Hitler was able to take over Austria and Czechoslovakia.

Reviewing Themes

- Continuity and Change** How did the policy of appeasement affect France and Great Britain?

Critical Thinking

- Evaluating** Why were the British able to prevent the Germans from invading their country?
- Organizing** Use a graphic organizer similar to the one below to list the early events of the war in Poland and western Europe.



Analyzing Visuals

- Analyzing Photographs** Study the photographs on pages 593 and 594. How do they reflect the British resolve to "never surrender"?

Writing About History

- Expository Writing** Using library or Internet resources, find more information on the German annexation of Czechoslovakia. Use the information to write a report detailing the events leading up to and including the annexation. Share your report with the class.