2.7 The international response to German aggression, 1933–1940

The international reaction to the actions of Germany, 1935–39, has been the subject of much criticism and debate amongst historians. As you read this next section, consider the options available to Britain and France at each stage of German expansion, and the extent to which the decisions that Britain and France took encouraged German aggression.

What was the international reaction to German rearmament?

As we have seen, there was sympathy in Britain towards Germany’s desire to reverse certain aspects of the Treaty of Versailles. Following Germany’s withdrawal from the Disarmament Conference and the League of Nations in 1933 (see page 157), Britain worked hard to get Germany back into the conference. It proposed that Germany should be allowed to have an army of 200,000 (rather than the 100,000 stipulated in the Treaty of Versailles), that France should also reduce its army to 200,000, and that Germany should be allowed an air force half the size of the French air force.

However, the realization in 1935 that Germany was introducing conscription and already had an air force ended attempts by the British and French to bring Germany back into the League of Nations and to establish new conditions for rearmament. Germany’s actions blatantly contravened the terms of the Treaty of Versailles. This was obviously a concern to the other powers, who could see that Germany was now catching up militarily. German military expenditure increased from 2.7 billion marks in 1933 to 8 billion marks in 1935; while this was still a relatively low proportion of the gross national product (GNP), it was nonetheless a worry to Britain and France. It was clear that such rearmament would strengthen German demands for further treaty modifications and that, indeed, Germany would be able to achieve these by force if it could not get them by peaceful means.
In response to German rearmament, and following Hitler’s threatening moves over Austria in 1934, a conference was held at Stresa in Italy, and was attended by the prime ministers and foreign ministers of France, Britain and Italy. The ministers drew up a formal protest at Hitler’s disregard of the Versailles provisions regarding disarmament, and they reaffirmed their commitment to Locarno and to Austrian independence.

This collective action, as you have read in Chapter 2.3, was known as the Stresa Front, and it could have acted as a deterrent to Hitler’s plans. However, three developments now took place that undermined this united front.

- First, France concluded the Franco–Soviet Mutual Assistance Treaty with Russia, in 1935. This coincided with Russia’s entry into the League of Nations; with Poland in a pact with Germany (see page 159), it was important to keep Russia on side. However, Italy was unwilling to conclude any pact with a communist government. Britain was also worried about using a communist country to contain Germany and opposed France’s idea of surrounding Germany with alliances, believing that this would lead to Germany feeling encircled.

- The second development was initiated by Britain and it offended both the French and Italian governments. Britain was unwilling to enter a naval race with Germany at a time when its naval strength was already stretched to capacity; there was also a concern that Japan might want to renegotiate the terms of the naval treaties of Washington and London (see page 22). This made it tempting to respond to Hitler’s offers to limit the German fleet to 35% of the British fleet, which in fact gave the opportunity for the German navy to triple its size. On 18 June, this percentage was agreed in the Anglo–German Naval Agreement. The agreement also allowed a German submarine fleet equal to Britain’s. The Versailles restrictions on the German navy had thus been completely set aside.

Ruth Henig summarises the effect of this treaty in Source A below.

Source A

**Ruth Henig. The Origins of the Second World War (1985).**

While such an agreement may have been militarily desirable from a British point of view, it was politically inept. It drove a wedge between Britain on the one hand and the French and Italians on the other, at a time when it was vitally important for the three powers to work together. The British government could claim that it was possible to do business with Nazi Germany in the field of arms limitation. But they had, in the process, condoned German violation of the Treaty of Versailles by agreeing to a German navy considerably in excess of that stipulated by the treaty, and they had not attempted to secure the prior agreement of the other major signatories, France and Italy. What was now to stop Hitler repudiating other provisions of the treaty, fortified by the knowledge that the British government was, if not tacitly supporting him, most unlikely to offer strenuous opposition?
Chapter 2.7: The International Response to German Aggression, 1933–1940

Source B
A cartoon by David Low, 24 June 1935 (with added annotations), depicting French prime minister Pierre Laval, Italian prime minister Benito Mussolini and British prime minister Ramsay MacDonald in a boat labelled “Collective isolation”. The text reads “3 wise men of Stresa went to sea in a Barrel. If the Barrel had been stronger, my story would have been longer.”

First question, part a – 3 marks
According to Source A what were the key limitations of the Anglo-German Naval agreement?

First question, part b – 2 marks
What is the message of the cartoon in Source B?

Examiner’s hint: Use the annotations on the cartoon to help you write your answer. Here is a starting sentence:
The overall message of this cartoon is that the Stresa Front is weak and unlikely to last long. This is shown by the fact that … (use the details of the cartoon to back up your points)

- The third development which undermined the Stresa Front was Mussolini’s invasion of Abyssinia in October 1935. In fact, this left the Stresa Front in ruins. After this, Hitler was able to pursue his aims with greater confidence.

What was the international reaction to the remilitarization of the Rhineland?
When Hitler marched into the Rhineland in 1936, violating both the Treaty of Versailles and the Locarno Treaties, he faced no opposition from either Britain or France.
The French government at the time was only a “caretaker” government and thus was not in a position to consider war. The divisions in French society made a clear response impossible and neither left nor right wanted to propose a war against Germany with forthcoming elections.

In addition, the general staff of the French army had exaggerated the number of German forces marching into the Rhineland, putting them at 265,000 when in fact there were only 30,000. To deal with an invasion of such supposed size, the French would have to mobilize its army and General Gamelin, the Chief of Staff, told French ministers that this would lead to a long, drawn-out war for which there was little support in France. The French thus looked to Britain for a response, but Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin’s government made it clear that they, too, were unwilling to contemplate war over the Rhineland. One reason for this was Britain’s overstretched military commitments, and in 1936 the Chief of the Imperial General Staff made it clear that the armed forces were not in any position to fight a successful war against Germany (see page 168).

Significantly, the British also did not see Hitler’s action as particularly threatening. As the British politician Lord Lothian put it, “The Germans … are only going into their own back garden”. Hitler of course, had also offered negotiations at the same time as invading (see page 163), a move that historian William Craig calls “a diplomatic smokescreen”; this made it easier to aim for a settlement rather than to confront Hitler directly. Foreign Minister Anthony Eden wrote:

It seems undesirable to adopt an attitude where we would either have to fight for the [demilitarized] zone or abandon it in the face of a German reoccupation. It would be preferable for Great Britain and France to enter … into negotiations … for the surrender on conditions of our rights in the zone, while such a surrender still has got a bargaining value. — Eden, 1936

The failure to stop Hitler at this point, especially given that his troops had instructions to turn back if confronted, is often seen as a turning point: the last chance to stop Hitler without war. Harold Macmillan, a Conservative politician, wrote in the Star newspaper, “There will be no war now. But unless a settlement is made now – a settlement that can only be made by a vigorous lead from this country – there will be war in 1940 or 1941”. However, at the time, this was the view only of a minority. The reality is that it would have been hard for the British government to act given that political and public opinion were firmly in favour of peace and of negotiating with Germany.

**Source skills**

**A.J.P. Taylor. The Origins of the Second World War (1964).**

It was said at the time, and has often been said since, that 7 March 1936 was “the last chance” ... when Germany could have been stopped without all the sacrifice and suffering of a great war. Technically, on paper, this was true: the French had a great army, and the Germans had none. Psychologically it was the reverse of the truth ... The French army could march into Germany; it could extract promises of good behaviour from the Germans, and then it would go away. The situation would remain the same as before, or, if anything, worse –
the Germans more resentful and restless than ever. There was in fact no sense in opposing Germany until there was something solid to oppose, until the settlement of Versailles was undone and Germany rearmed. Only a country which aims at victory can be threatened with defeat. 7 March was thus a double turning point. It opened the door for Germany’s success. It also opened the door for her ultimate failure.

First question, part a – 3 marks
According to Taylor, why was opposing Germany in the Rhineland not a good idea.

The international reaction to the Spanish Civil War:  
The Non-Intervention Committee

In France, a Popular Party government with similar views to the republican government in Spain was elected in June 1936. The new prime minister, Leon Blum, wanted to support the Spanish government; it was not in French interests to have on its border a right-wing regime that could join with Italy and Germany to encircle France. However, Blum feared opposition if he directly intervened and knew that Britain was unlikely to support such a move. He therefore came up with the idea of non-intervention, whereby all of the European countries would commit to keeping out of the conflict.

Baldwin’s government in Britain wanted to prevent the Spanish Civil War becoming a wider conflict and so agreed with the French plan. However, British motives were different from those of the French. Baldwin’s largely Conservative government believed that the nationalists would probably win the war and so did not want to make an enemy of the Spanish nationalist leader, General Franco. In addition, the British government did not want to upset Mussolini. It also viewed the Republican government as communist (an impression reinforced by the fact that it received aid from the Soviet Union). There were many British business interests in Spain, and investors believed that they faced financial risks if Franco lost resulting in a socialist or communist government in Spain. They also supported Franco’s tough anti-union position.

A total of 16 countries signed the Non-Intervention Pact. However, three of the key members of the Non-Intervention Committee (NIC) – Germany, Italy and the Soviet Union – ignored the NIC commitment completely and, as we have seen, sent substantial aid into Spain.

In addition, Britain’s policy of non-intervention favoured the nationalists:

• It focused on preventing aid to the Republic and allowed the Nationalists, rather than the Republicans, to use Gibraltar as a communications base.

• In December 1936, Britain signed a trading agreement with the Nationalists that allowed British companies to trade with the rebels.

• Franco, not the Spanish republicans, was able to get credit from British banks.

TOK

In small groups investigate a current civil war or conflict and find out how the international community has responded. How does your understanding of the international response to the Spanish Civil war in the 1930s help you to make sense of the complexity of responding to civil conflicts today?
The policy of non-intervention thus played a key role in allowing Franco to win the civil war in Spain. Non-intervention worked against the Republicans, while Hitler and Mussolini continued to give effective aid to the Nationalists.

The failure of non-intervention further discredited the appeasement policies of Britain and France. Hitler had ignored non-intervention, which was also the policy of the League of Nations, and had successfully helped a right-wing government to power. The Western democracies thus appeared weak to Hitler, and this encouraged him further in his actions.

**What was the international response to Anschluss?**

With Anschluss in May 1938, Hitler had again violated the Treaty of Versailles which specifically forbade the union of Germany and Austria. He invaded an independent state and was in a stronger position to attack Czechoslovakia. Yet, apart from British and French protests to Berlin, there was limited international response. Why was this?

- France was paralysed by an internal political crisis and did not even have a government at the time of Anschluss. Ministers threatened to call up reservists to strengthen France’s army but needed Britain’s support, which was not forthcoming.

- Italy was now increasingly dependent on German friendship and refused to respond to Chancellor Schuschnigg’s appeals for help.

- The League of Nations was discredited after the Abyssinian affair and Anschluss was not even referred to the League for discussion.

- In Britain, there was a feeling that Germany’s union with Austria was inevitable. Chamberlain made a statement in the House of Commons in which he condemned Germany’s actions and the way in which Anschluss had taken place, but also stated, “the hard fact is … that nothing could have arrested this action by Germany unless we and others with us had been prepared to use force to prevent it”.

**Source A**


On 14 March *The Times* newspaper told its readers that “our correspondent leaves no room for doubt about the public jubilation with which [Hitler] and his army were greeted everywhere”. The Labour Party, recalling the brutality of Dollfuss a few years earlier against Austrian socialists, had little inclination to speak up now for Schuschnigg. Even the Archbishop of Canterbury appealed to the House of Lords for “calmness and balance of judgement”. The union of Germany and Austria “sooner or later was inevitable” he told his fellow peers, and “finally, may bring some stability to Europe”. At the Foreign Office too, the general feeling was one of relief.
What was the international reaction to German aggression in Czechoslovakia?

France’s reaction

Following *Anschluss*, it was clear to Britain and France that Czechoslovakia would be the focus of Hitler’s next foreign policy moves. France had two treaties with Czechoslovakia, signed in 1924 and 1925, which committed France to assisting Czechoslovakia in the event of a threat to their common interests. However, the French also saw that they were in no position to keep to these treaty obligations. They argued that Czechoslovakia could not be defended, and French Prime Minister Daladier and Foreign Minister Bonnet were only too happy to follow Britain’s lead in finding a way out of a military showdown with Germany.

**Source B**

A cartoon by David Low, “Not only the Austrians voted”, published in the UK newspaper, the *Evening Standard*, on 12 April 1938.

First question, part a – 3 marks

According to Source A, what factors influenced Britain’s attitude towards *Anschluss*?

First question, part b – 2 marks

What is the message of Source B concerning *Anschluss*?

**Examiner’s hint:** Don’t forget to use the details of the cartoon to support your two points. Start by annotating it in the same way as we annotated the cartoon on page 215. Make sure you look at the title to give you a hint as to the meaning of the cartoon.
Britain’s reaction

Many British politicians had sympathy with Czechoslovakia, as it had survived as a democracy for a longer period than the other new states in central and eastern Europe. However, Chamberlain did not believe that Czechoslovakia was worth fighting for. He saw Czechoslovakia as a “highly artificial” creation and one that was ultimately unsustainable. He had some sympathy with the Sudeten Germans and believed that he could organize a peaceful and negotiated handover of the Sudetenland to Germany.

In any case, Britain was not in a position to offer military help to Czechoslovakia. Chamberlain wrote in his diary that,

We could not help Czechoslovakia – she would simply be a pretext for going to war with Germany … I have therefore abandoned the idea of giving guarantees to Czechoslovakia, or the French in connection with her obligations to that country.

Given their determination to avoid a conflict over Czechoslovakia, Britain and France worked hard to find a diplomatic solution. Following Hitler’s speech of 12 September 1938 at the Nuremberg Rally (see page 176), Chamberlain decided to seize the initiative and to fly to meet Hitler in Germany. This was a radical move in the world of diplomacy, as at this time prime ministers did not fly abroad to meet other leaders one to one. This was the first time that Chamberlain had flown; as historian David Reynolds has pointed out, it also marked the first of the 20th century summits between world leaders.

At the meeting, Hitler demanded that all areas of Czechoslovakia in which Germans comprised over 50% of the population should join Germany. This would be supervised by an international commission. Chamberlain agreed, but said that he would have to get the agreement of the Czechs and the French first. Chamberlain privately remarked that,

In spite of the hardness and ruthlessness I thought I saw in his face, I got the impression that here was a man who could be relied upon when he had given his word.

Over the following week, Chamberlain was able to get agreement for this deal from the British Cabinet and the French government, despite the fact that this would mean ignoring their alliance with Czechoslovakia. The Czechoslovakian government, led by President Edvard Beneš, was told that, if these proposals were rejected, the Czechs would have to face Germany on their own. Czechoslovakia accepted the plan on 21 September 1938.

On 22 September, Chamberlain flew back to Germany, expecting to have a discussion at Bad Godesberg about the proposals that had previously been discussed and were now agreed upon. However, Hitler now said that the previous proposals did not go far enough. He wanted the claims of Hungary and Poland to Czech territory met and he wanted to occupy the Sudetenland no later than 1 October.
Back in Britain, many of Chamberlain’s colleagues rejected the Godesberg proposals. France now said it would honour its commitments to Czechoslovakia; the Czechs said that the new proposals were unacceptable. All countries started preparing for war. In Britain, trenches were dug in London’s parks and 38 million gas masks were distributed. On 27 September, Chamberlain made the following radio broadcast:

> How horrible, fantastic and incredible it is that we should be digging trenches and trying on gas-masks because of a quarrel in a far-away country between people of whom we know nothing. I would not hesitate to pay even a third visit to Germany if I thought it would do any good.

> Armed conflict between nations is a nightmare to me; but if I were convinced that any nation had made up its mind to dominate the world by fear of its force, I should feel it must be resisted. Under such a domination, life for people who believe in liberty would not be worth living, but war is a terrible thing, and we must be very clear, before we embark on it, that it is really the great issues that are at stake.

### Thinking and Communication skills

**Task one**

In what way does the cartoonist Low in the cartoon at the start of this chapter disagree with Chamberlain?

**Task two**

Go to [www.britishpathe.com/video/the-crisis-latest/query/Sudeten](http://www.britishpathe.com/video/the-crisis-latest/query/Sudeten). Watch Chamberlain’s broadcast on this Pathé News clip. What is the British attitude towards Chamberlain as shown in the clip?

Go to [www.youtube.com/watch?v=cPo0TNPYKnQ](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cPo0TNPYKnQ), or search for “Peace in our time? [1938 Munich Crisis] Part 2 of 11”.

Watch part of the video *Peace in our Time*? What point is the narrator making about Czechoslovakia and the British attitude towards Czechoslovakia?

How useful is this documentary for a historian investigating the Munich Crisis?

**Task three**

Go to [www.youtube.com/watch?v=BFisYfrrTFO](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BFisYfrrTFO), or search for “Hitler and Chamberlain: The Munich Crisis 1938”.

Watch this documentary by historian David Reynolds on the Munich Conference. How does this compare to the documentary *Peace in our Time*? in terms of presentation and content? (You will need to watch the rest of *Peace in our Time* to answer this question.)
Hitler agreed to a third conference, which was to be chaired by Mussolini. As you can see in the Pathé News clip below, this last hope for peace was greeted with much enthusiasm in Britain. Neither the Czech president, Edvard Beneš, nor the Soviet leader, Stalin, was invited to the conference, which agreed to give the Sudetenland to Germany (see page 178 for full details of the Munich Agreement). For Chamberlain, however, the highlight of the conference, was securing from Hitler a joint declaration that Britain and Germany would only deal with problems through negotiation and would not attempt to use force. For Chamberlain, this meant “peace in our time” (though this was a phrase that he later said he regretted using).

There was much relief in Britain that war had been averted. The British press mostly supported Chamberlain’s policy and Chamberlain had support from the majority of his party. However, even at the time, there was criticism of the agreement. Winston Churchill called British policy “a total and unmitigated disaster”, and Duff Cooper, First Lord of the Admiralty, resigned from the government. The Labour and Liberal Parties both opposed the agreement. Clement Attlee, leader of the Labour Party, said:

*We have been unable to go in for carefree rejoicing. We have felt that we are in the midst of a tragedy. We have felt humiliation. This has not been a victory for reason and humanity. It has been a victory for brute force … We have today seen a gallant, civilised and democratic people betrayed and handed over to a ruthless despotism.*

**Class discussion**

In pairs, discuss the extent to which you agree with the historian Richard Overy’s appraisal of the Munich Agreement that it "represented a realistic assessment of the balance between Western interests and Western capabilities" (Overy, 2008).

**The invasion of Czechoslovakia: The end of appeasement**

Hitler’s takeover of the rest of Czechoslovakia in March 1939, caused great shock and outrage in Britain. It was now clear that Hitler’s aims were not limited; he had broken a signed agreement and his invasion of Czechoslovakia could not be justified by any claim to be uniting Germans. There was a shift of opinion in Britain, and Chamberlain was put under pressure to take a firmer stand against Hitler.

He made his new stance clear in a speech on 17 March 1939:
Is this the last attack upon a small state or is it to be followed by others? Is this, in effect, a step in the direction of an attempt to dominate the world by force? ... While I am not prepared to engage this country in new and unspecified commitments operating under conditions which cannot now be foreseen, yet no greater mistake could be made than to suppose that because it believes war to be a senseless and cruel thing, this nation has so lost its fibre that it will not take part to the utmost of its power in resisting such a challenge if it were ever made.

What was the international reaction to Hitler’s demands regarding Poland?

Given Hitler’s actions over Memel, and German demands over Danzig, on 31 March 1939, Britain offered a guarantee to Poland which said that, if it was the victim of an unprovoked attack, Britain would come to its aid. France gave a similar assurances.

These guarantees were controversial. Poland was a right-wing military dictatorship and anti-Semitic; it had also accepted Japanese and Italian expansion, and had taken territory from Czechoslovakia as part of the Munich Agreement. Moreover, actually sending military aid to Poland would be even more difficult than acting to support Czechoslovakia.

Nevertheless, Britain’s guarantee to Poland did act as a warning to Hitler, and it did allow Britain to feel that it was taking more direct action against Hitler to deter further aggression. In fact, Chamberlain still believed that he could use diplomacy to get Hitler to negotiate.

When Mussolini invaded Albania on 7 April, Britain and France also gave guarantees to Greece and Romania. In May, Britain further strengthened its position in the Eastern Mediterranean by negotiating an agreement with Turkey for mutual assistance in case of war in the Mediterranean area.

Meanwhile, both Britain and France stepped up military preparations. The Pact of Steel confirmed that Italy could not now be detached from Germany and this strengthened military collaboration between the two countries. In March, the British government announced that it was doubling the territorial army, and in April conscription was introduced. In fact, by 1939, it was clear that Britain and France were in a much stronger military position than they had been in 1938, and this fact, too, allowed them to take a firmer stand against Hitler. In Britain, air defence and the introduction of radar was near completion. The rearmament programme was also set to reach a peak in 1939–40, by which time it was estimated that Britain would, militarily, be on roughly equal terms with Germany.

Negotiations with the Soviet Union

If Britain and France were to be able to assist Poland in the event of a German attack, then help from the Soviet Union would be key. The French were more enthusiastic about this than the British as they had
a long tradition of Franco–Soviet/Russian cooperation. Many British politicians on the left also felt that such an alliance had to be established quickly; however, there was still a reluctance on the part of the British government to follow this line of action. It had ignored the Soviet Union’s approaches during the Austrian and Sudeten crises, and Stalin had not even been invited to the Munich Conference.

Even in 1939, Chamberlain was unenthusiastic about an alliance with the Soviets, confessing to “the most profound distrust of Russia”. There were also other, more practical, reasons to be concerned about such an alliance:

- The Soviet army was militarily weak after Stalin’s purges.
- An alliance could alienate other Eastern European countries that Britain hoped to win over to form a diplomatic front against Germany.
- If Germany felt hemmed-in this could actually push it towards war.
- An alliance might push Poland, where Stalin was also distrusted, and Spain into an alliance with Hitler.

In April 1939, despite these misgivings, Chamberlain finally bowed to pressure and agreed to start negotiations. However, the expectations of what should be included in such an agreement were different for the Soviets on the one hand, and the French and British on the other. Britain and France just wanted the Soviets to join in the guarantees to Poland, but the Soviets proposed instead a mutual assistance treaty by which Britain, France and Russia would all come to one another’s aid in the event of an attack. This was to prevent the Soviet Union being left to deal with Germany in the East alone.

In addition, Stalin demanded that the Soviet Union should have the right to intervene militarily in neighbouring states if they were threatened internally by local fascist forces. This was rejected outright by the British and French, who saw this as an excuse to interfere with, or even take over, other countries. There were other reasons for the failure of the negotiations as explained by historian Richard Overy in Source A, below.

Source skills

Source A

Talks continued throughout the summer, though both sides complained endlessly about the obduracy and deviousness of the other. In August the Soviet side insisted on full military discussions before any more progress could be made. Again the west showed what Molotov later condemned as a “dilatory” attitude. The British delegation was sent on a long trip by sea instead of by air. When it arrived the Soviet negotiators, all top military and political figures, found that the British had sent a junior representative, who had no powers to negotiate and sign an agreement. This slight deeply offended Soviet leaders. It was soon discovered that the western delegations had no real plans for the military alliance, and had not even secured agreement for the passage of Soviet forces across Poland to fight the German army. The discussions, which had begun on 12 August 1939, broke up after three days and were not revived.
Self-management and communication skills

Review the relationships between the Soviet Union and the Western democracies and Germany between 1933 and 1939. Refer back to the discussion of the reasons for the Nazi–Soviet Pact (see page 224; also pages 183–184).

Make notes under the following headings:

- the view of the British and French concerning an agreement with the Soviet Union
- the view of the Soviets on an agreement with the Western democracies
- the view of Germany on an agreement with the Soviet Union
- the view of the Soviets on an agreement with Germany.

Imagine that you are advising Stalin on whether to make an agreement with either Britain and France or with Germany.

Prepare a presentation to Stalin on the advantages and disadvantages of each course of action. Make sure you give evidence to support your points.

What is your final advice on the course of action that Stalin should take?

TOK

You have used your imagination in the task here as an “adviser” to Stalin. How do historians use their imagination when writing their accounts?