



# **The Start of World War II: The History of the Events that Culminated with Nazi Germany's Invasion of Poland**

*Charles River Editors*

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\*Includes pictures \*Explains the appeasement of the Nazis in Czechoslovakia and Austria, and reactions to it  
\*Includes accounts of the fighting in Poland \*Includes online resources and a bibliography for further reading \*Includes a table of contents

"We have suffered a total and unmitigated defeat ... you will find that in a period of time which may be measured by years, but may be measured by months, Czechoslovakia will be engulfed in the Nazi régime. We are in the presence of a disaster of the first magnitude ... we have sustained a defeat without a war, the consequences of which will travel far with us along our road ... we have passed an awful milestone in our history, when the whole equilibrium of Europe has been deranged." – Winston Churchill

"My good friends," the mustached, bony man with thick eyebrows and large, strong teeth somewhat reminiscent of those of a horse, shouted to the crowds from the second-floor window of his house at 10 Downing Street, "this is the second time in our history, that there has come back to Downing Street from Germany peace with honor. I believe it is peace for our time." (McDonough, 1998, 70). The man addressing the crowd, British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain, had just returned from the heart of Nazi Germany following negotiations with Adolf Hitler, and the crowd gathered outside the English leader's house on September 30, 1938 greeted these ringing words with grateful cheers. The piece of paper Chamberlain flourished exultantly seemed to offer permanent amity and goodwill between democratic Britain and totalitarian Germany. In it, Britain agreed to allow Hitler's Third Reich to absorb the Sudeten regions of Czechoslovakia without interference from either England or France, and since high percentages of ethnic Germans – often more than 50% locally – inhabited these regions, Hitler's demand for this territory seemed somewhat reasonable to Chamberlain and his supporters. With Germany resurgent and rearmed after the disasters inflicted on it by the Treaty of Versailles following World War I, the pact – known as the Munich Agreement – held out hope of a quick end to German ambitions and the return of stable, normal international relations across Europe. Of course, the Munich agreement is now notorious because its promise proved barren within a very short period of time. Chamberlain's actions either failed to avert or actually hastened the very cataclysm he wished to avoid at all costs. The "Munich Agreement" of 1938 effectively signed away Czechoslovakia's independence to Hitler's hungry new Third Reich, and within two years, most of the world found itself plunged into a conflict which made a charnelhouse of Europe and left somewhere between 60-80 million people dead globally. Of course, as most people now know, the invasion of Poland was merely the preface to the Nazi blitzkrieg of most of Western Europe, which would include Denmark, Belgium, and France by the summer of 1940. The resistance put up by these countries is often portrayed as weak, and the narrative is that the British stood alone in 1940 against the Nazi onslaught, defending the British Isles during the Battle of Britain and preventing a potential German invasion. In particular, the campaign in Poland is remembered as one in which an antiquated Polish army was quickly pummeled by the world's most modern army. Polish lancers charging in a valiant yet idiotic attack against German tanks is the only image from the 1939 Nazi-Soviet invasion of Poland remaining in the popular imagination today. Originating as a piece of Nazi propaganda, paradoxically adopted by the Poles as a patriotic myth, the fictional charge obscures the actual events of September 1939. Outnumbered, outgunned, and under-equipped, the Polish army nevertheless inflicted heavy losses on the invading Wehrmacht. In fact, only the unexpected advance of Soviet forces from the east put a quick end to the struggle.

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