

# The Palgrave Concise Historical Atlas of the Second World War

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Martin H. Folly



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THE PALGRAVE CONCISE  
HISTORICAL ATLAS  
OF  
THE SECOND WORLD WAR

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**ALSO BY MARTIN FOLLY**

*Churchill, Whitehall & the Soviet Union, 1940–1945*

*The United States in World War II: The Awakening Giant*

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THE PALGRAVE CONCISE  
HISTORICAL ATLAS  
OF  
THE SECOND WORLD WAR

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*For Nessa  
– and for Tim*



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## Preface

The Second World War affected most of the nations of the world in one way or another. It had long-lasting effects on the politics and economics of the world for the rest of the twentieth century. In those countries directly involved, the social and cultural impact was profound. Over 55 million people died, the majority of them civilian. Modern technology was matched by a callousness shown at times by all sides to produce a war of unprecedented destructiveness. For those living in the West, it has been seen as a 'good war', which resulted in the triumph of right over evil, though elsewhere the results have been regarded as more ambiguous. During the Cold War even in the West the expansion in power of the USSR seemed to be the major consequence of the war and this led many to see the Second World War as an incomplete, or fundamentally flawed, victory. There remains contention about many issues of the conflict, which is beyond the scope of this book to cover fully: the bibliography provides suggestions of texts for readers who wish to explore these more thoroughly. There is even dispute as to whether it should be regarded as one war or several. The thesis followed here is that it should be regarded as one, while recognising that the global nature of the conflict was only evident to some of its participants, and even for them for only some of its duration. But the fact that US participation, crucial to victory against Germany in the west, was precipitated by events in the Pacific, which were a culmination of the response by the US to the Japanese advance into Indo-China, which itself was made possible by the French defeat in Europe, demonstrates the layers of connection that link the different theatres of conflict around the world – while also demonstrating that it is essentially a Eurocentric viewpoint that sees the war beginning with the German invasion of Poland in September 1939 rather than the Japanese invasion of China in 1937.

The events of the war itself have been recounted and analysed in many forms, including in highly-detailed historical atlases. This atlas is designed to give a concise but rounded history of the war. It will regard the events of Asia and Europe as interrelated, and will treat the war as beginning in China in 1937. It is not intended to give detailed diagrams of military engagements nor supply the level of military details found in unit histories, but to provide an integrated geopolitical and strategic overview. The aim is to provide students and the general reader with a basic visual aid for understanding the course of events during the Second World War. The maps therefore have been kept as straightforward as possible. Too much detail can obscure as much as elucidate. For the details of key

military engagements and fuller statistical data, readers are referred to the texts in the bibliography.

The purpose of the atlas is to clarify the major developments and movements of the war. Each map is accompanied by a page of text explaining the events depicted, and giving further information and interpretations. These essays are of necessity brief. There are also, inevitably, aspects of the war that evade rendition into maps. The present focus of much writing on the war is on covert activities, most particularly signals intelligence (when referring to the Allied side, often called Ultra). This aspect is not ignored here, but is not a major focus, as the emphasis of the atlas is on the outcome rather than the process. Even with such good intelligence, the battles still had to be won: it is worth noting that the French in 1940 had good intelligence of the German order of battle, but still suffered catastrophic defeat. Modern writing on the war, particularly popular writing, also focuses heavily on the personal rather than the strategic; the recent spate of Hollywood movies is a case in point. Putting ordinary people at centre stage is entirely right: it was *their* war. Again, such an approach is, however, hard to deliver in an atlas of this kind. What this book does is to give a tactical, strategic and political context to their experiences. Again, some reading suggestions are provided at the end for readers to follow some personal stories that flesh out and humanise the picture presented of the war as a whole given here. The Second World War was a total war, in which the major events were not always those on the battlefield, or involving young men in uniform. Sections here deal with the home front, with the economics of war, and with the politics of this most political of struggles. Inevitably, the individuals specifically named are statesmen or generals, and the ordinary people are referred to *en masse*. But the war was an amalgam of personal histories, usually tragic, often heroic, sometimes comic, as ordinary people found themselves caught up in extraordinary events. While they may not appear in its pages, this book was written with them in mind, in particular my personal heroes: Pearl Withrington, John Gillespie Magee, Wade McCluskey, Lilya Litvak, Donald Macintyre, Raoul Wallenberg. And, for giving us those two lasting iconic images of the victory of the Allies: Joe Rosenthal for the photograph of the US Marines' raising of the American flag over Mount Suribachi and Yevgeny Khaldei for the photograph of Alyosha Kovalyov raising the Soviet flag over the Reichstag. It is entirely fitting that both photographers were Jewish.

I would like to acknowledge with thanks the encouragement of my colleagues in American Studies and History

at Brunel University, in particular Niall Palmer and Sean Holmes, who tolerated with quizzical stoicism my obsession with apparently arcane details like the operational range of the Messerschmitt Bf109E. Finally, this book is dedicated to Vanessa, without whose support it could not have been written, and to the memory of my colleague Tim Fernyhough, who took great interest in the project and whose untimely death has left a hole that cannot be filled.

### **A note on the maps**

The prime aim of the maps is to demonstrate geopolitical and strategic developments, and the spatial relationship between important places. To achieve this a simplified form of Mercator's projection is used, while recognising the shortcomings of that method in geographical exactitude, in the belief that this is the best way to present the information that is the focus of this book. In most instances, the

maps are aligned around a central vertical north–south axis (the major exception is Map 26).

As befits an historical atlas, in both the text and maps place names and country names are those used at the time (thus Beijing is cited as Peking, Sri Lanka as Ceylon, St Petersburg as Leningrad). The maps have been drawn with the versatile drawing tools of Microsoft Word.

Symbols used in individual maps are defined in keys to each one. Allied movements (American, British, French, Chinese, Soviet) are generally represented with green arrows. In both maps and text, in accordance with usual convention, the term 'British' is applied to armed forces units that also contained elements from the British Empire and Commonwealth: thus, the 'British' 8th Army contained significant numbers of troops from India, New Zealand, Australia and South Africa. Axis movements (German, Italian, Japanese) are generally represented with black. Minor allies of both sides are represented with grey, which is also used at times to depict specific elements of the major powers.



## Map 1: The Uneasy Peace

The Second World War – in its European manifestation – has often been characterised as the final act of a thirty years war for domination of the continent. In this interpretation, the second war followed because the arrangements after the first war failed to settle the issues that caused it; principally the problem of a Germany that was the strongest nation in Europe, but was geographically constrained. The shared ambitions of the Kaiser's and Hitler's regimes for expansion in the east at the expense of the Slavs make this theory plausible.

An alternative theory was advanced by the Allies during the Second World War, and widely accepted afterwards: that the war was the product of Hitler's prejudices and ambitions (and generally that appeasement of such dictators is what causes wars). That theory, as A. J. P. Taylor pointed out in the early 1960s, tended to blame other nations only passively – in their failure to stand up to Hitler – rather than ascribing responsibility more generally to the ambitions and mistakes of statesmen from 1919 to 1939. Taylor's approach stimulated much debate, but generally Hitler is still regarded as the active element on the road to war in Europe, and also a man who welcomed war, when almost all of his victims and opponents were anxious, for various reasons, to avoid it at virtually any cost. That Hitler did not have the detailed timetable that traditionally he has been ascribed, does not remove that basic responsibility.

This is not to exonerate other leaders. Nor is it to downplay the importance of the instability of the international system in which Hitler operated. It is tempting – because Hitler and the other aggressive statesmen of the 1930s, Mussolini and Stalin, sought to revise them – to see the cause of this in the five treaties that ended the First World War (notably Versailles, which dealt with Germany). The defeat of Germany, Austria-Hungary and Turkey (and a year earlier, Russia) had allowed nationalities within their multi-ethnic empires to secure independence, encouraged by US President Woodrow Wilson who set self-determination of peoples as a war aim (and by implication, a right). The Paris Peace Conference had to deal with national units that were already spontaneously emerging. Given this situation, and the complex geography of European ethnicity, it is hardly surprising that the result was flawed.

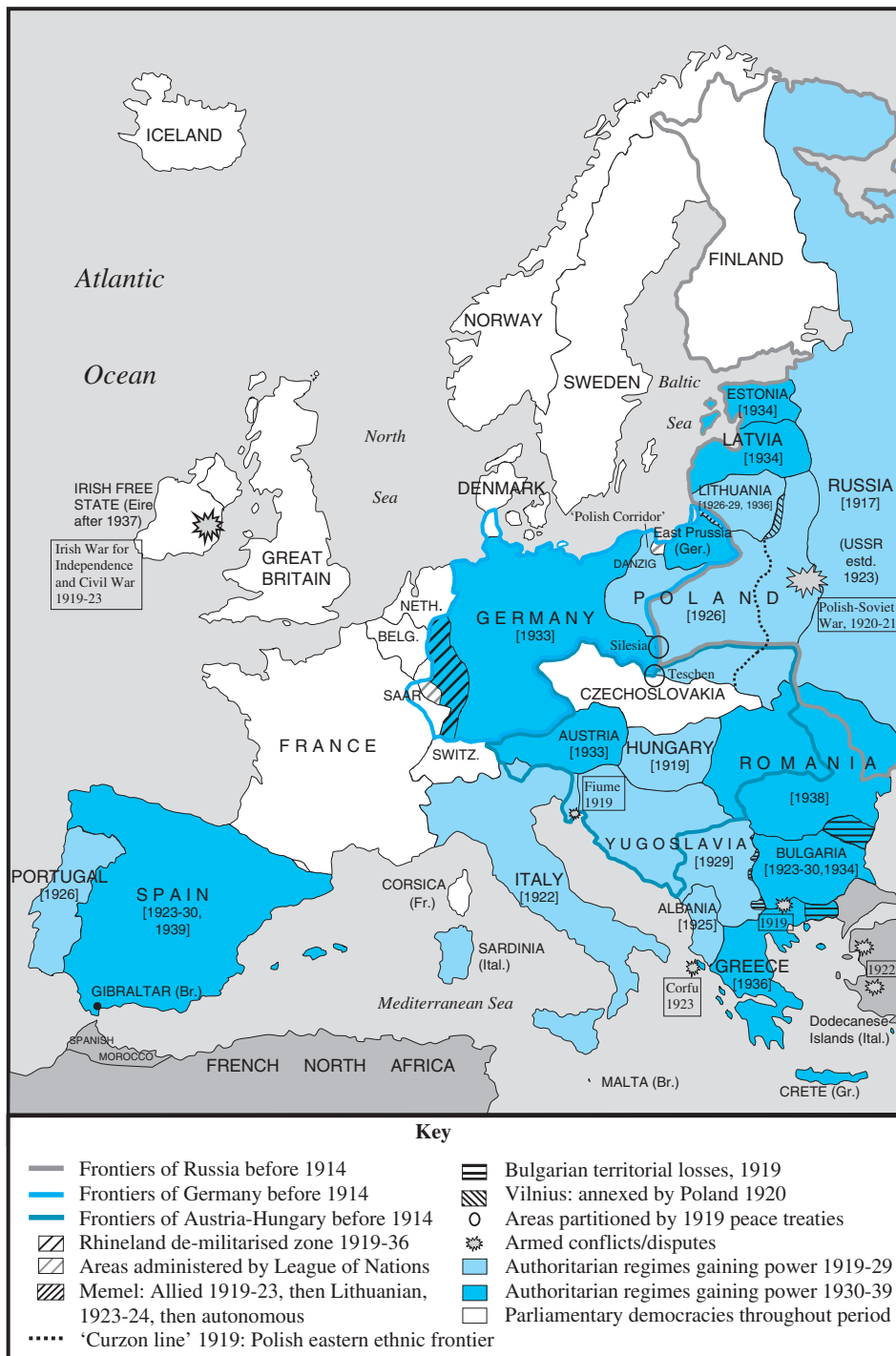
Some peoples, who now regarded themselves as 'nations', found themselves still minorities, even in the new states. Old rivalries between peoples were maintained by the new states, and many states, old and new, had claims on the territory of their neighbours. Moreover, many of these states were small, and their natural economic ties had been damaged when the empires fell apart. Should the larger states, Germany and Russia (now the USSR), become

stronger once again, these states would be very vulnerable. Wilson always intended that this eventuality could only be prevented by effective international management of the system, in the new League of Nations.

The peace settlement created strong resentments, particularly in Germany. The Versailles Treaty was seen as punitive and imposed on a country that had been defeated by a 'stab in the back' by elements at home, not on the battlefield. It had separated many Germans from the Fatherland. It is possible, however, to see the treaty as too soft, for though it punished Germany with territorial losses, disarmament and reparations, the country was left essentially intact, and potentially still the most powerful nation in Europe. During the 1920s, with American economic aid, the new German republic did indeed prosper, and was welcomed back into the community of nations. At Locarno in 1925, Germany accepted the Versailles frontiers – at least the western ones. In point of fact, although the 'thirty years war' theory is beguiling, in 1929 the system was working well, despite US isolation from the League. The Pact of Paris in 1928, which outlawed war except in self-defence, and was signed by all but five nations in the world, has often been derided as naïve idealism (and since it provided no sanctions against transgressors it was certainly weak), but at the time there was no apparent crisis on the horizon.

The event that changed this, and brought out the latent tensions in Europe (and beyond), was the Great Depression. It began with the crash of the US stock market, and as the American financial system collapsed, so too did European economies, tied heavily to that of the US by trade and by debts from the war. European businesses and banks closed, unemployment rose, and governments sought to balance their economies by nationalistic measures such as withdrawal from the gold standard and austerity measures that made the plight of the unemployed even worse. World trade slumped with the collapse of orderly currency exchange against gold. Old enemies or the new international order were blamed.

Extremist movements proposing simplistic solutions based on ideology or power emerged throughout Europe. This put strain on the practice of democracy, a new form of government for many. In an increasing number of states, it was replaced by authoritarian rule. Only the USSR did not experience the shattering economic, social, political and cultural dislocation of the Depression, but the situation there was even worse, as Stalin set about forced collectivisation of agriculture and a crash programme of industrialisation. Those who were opposed, or whom Stalin suspected of opposition, were liquidated – whole classes of Soviet society were wiped out.



## Map 2: The Road to War in Asia

Although it only emerged from 300 years of isolation in 1853, by 1900 Japan had become the leading Asian industrial power. War with China brought possession of Korea, Formosa and concessions on the Chinese mainland. Japan became the first Asian power to defeat a European one in the Russo-Japanese war of 1904–05. For fighting on the Allied side in the First World War, Japan was given German Pacific island colonies. Pressure tactics (the ‘21 Demands’) used against China, however, worsened Japanese relations with the US, already strained by American restrictions on immigration from Japan. The Japanese had been allies with Britain – sharing a rival in Russia – and the British helped the development of the Imperial Navy. However, after the First World War, American pressure and British desire to reduce commitments, led the British to end the alliance. In the Washington Naval Treaties (1921) Japan was limited to just over half the number of capital ships of Britain and the US (who claimed they had two or more oceans to protect, where the Japanese had only the Pacific). The ratios were 5 (US): 5 (UK): 3 (Japan): 1.5 (Italy and France). The Japanese Navy regarded this as a humiliation. All parties also agreed not to fortify their Far Eastern possessions.

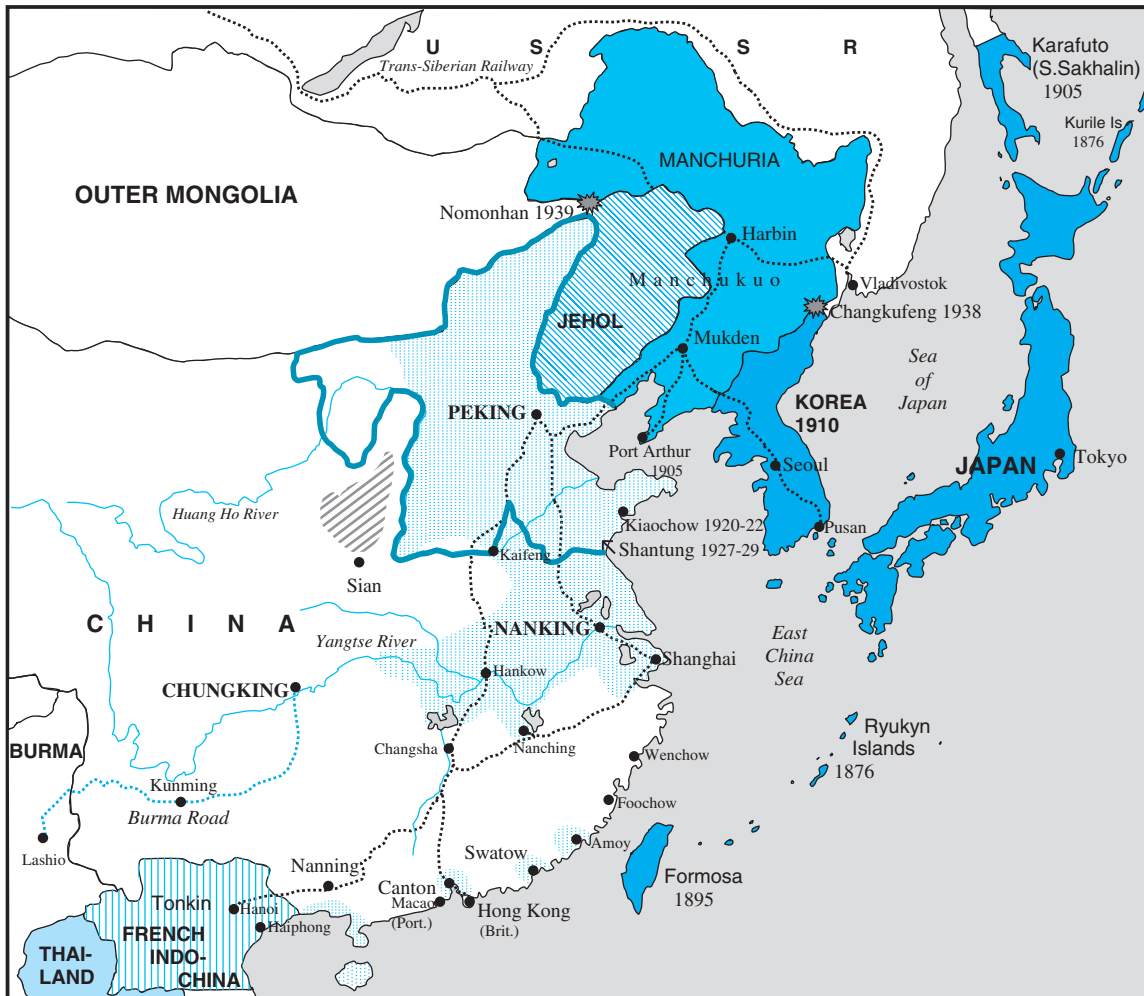
For an industrial country, Japan was extremely short of vital resources, notably iron ore, coal, oil and rubber. Many Japanese felt that they had the right to develop and exploit these resources in neighbouring territories. The Depression hit Japan hard, leading to an increase in power of the military, and the assassination of a number of political leaders as politics descended into factionalism. The War and Navy Ministers were serving officers, leaving the forces effectively free of civilian control. A consequence of this was the ‘Manchurian Incident’ (1931). Troops guarding Japanese concessions in this resource-rich Chinese province seized control from local warlords. China was in a state of semi-anarchy. There was a nationalist government, dominated by the Kuomintang party led by Jiang Jieshi (Chiang Kai-Shek), but many localities were controlled by warlords. Jiang devoted much of his attention to dealing with a growing Communist movement. The Japanese conquest of Manchuria prompted a League of Nations investigation which failed to condemn Japanese aggression in strong terms, yet did enough to prompt the Japanese to leave the League. The US kept aloof from League activities, but like the League refused to recognise the state of Manchukuo that the Japanese set up with a puppet regime under the former emperor of China.

In 1937, a clash with Chinese soldiers at the Marco Polo bridge near Peking (Beijing) led the Japanese Army to invade China, and again the government was dragged












along in its wake. Peking soon fell, as did much of the coastal region. Shanghai was bombed, to international outrage, and the new Chinese capital of Nanking was captured in November 1937, to be followed by mass slaughter in the ‘Rape of Nanking’. The US traditionally had sympathies for China, but it did nothing, such was the strength of domestic neutralism and isolationism. Even when a gunboat, USS *Panay*, was sunk on the Yangtse river and two Americans were killed, the US government was satisfied with an apology from the Japanese.

The war in China soon developed into a stalemate. Japan did not possess the means to conquer China, and Jiang would not give up the fight, though his strategy tended towards the passive – ‘trading space for time’ – even when forced by some of his officers into a pact with the Communists at Sian in 1936. The Japanese Army found the war a drain on resources. They were concerned about the danger of attack from the USSR – which supported Jiang in the 1930s – and two brief wars in 1938 and 1939 demonstrated Soviet military strength in the region. Japan had joined the anti-Comintern Pact with Germany in 1936 with this danger in mind. Invasion of Siberia was an option, but this would not solve the problem of resources. These lay southwards, in territory controlled by the European colonial powers. The defeat of these powers in 1940 offered the enticing prospect of a solution to Japan’s long-term economic problems.

A new phase in the conflict began when the Japanese demanded the British close the Burma Road. Japanese conquest of coastal ports and closure of the railway to Haiphong were designed to starve Jiang of resources, and bring the victory that was proving impossible by force of arms alone. The Burma Road was the only remaining supply route to Jiang’s capital, Chungking. The British agreed to do this temporarily in June 1940: since it was the rainy season, this had little material impact – but it did bring home to the Japanese how weak was even the strongest of the imperial powers. Pressure followed on the authorities in Indo-China after the French surrender to Germany. The French Vichy regime agreed to Japanese use of northern Vietnamese ports as bases. The American government saw this as a threat to resources vital to the British war effort, and as evidence of unlimited Japanese ambitions. US policy changed: the Japanese–American Trade Treaty was terminated, and, after the Japanese signed the Tripartite Pact with Italy and Germany in September, embargoes were placed on certain strategic materials. It seemed clear that they would oppose further expansion, and Japanese strategy now had to assume that the US ability to intervene needed to be neutralised.



### Key

- |   |  |   |  |
|---|--|---|--|
|  | Japanese Empire in 1930, with dates of acquisition |  | Under Japanese influence                       |
|  | Japanese occupation 1931                           |  | Armed clashes with Soviet Union                |
|  | Japanese occupation 1933                           |  | British supply route to Chinese                |
|  | Japanese attempt to organise puppet state, 1935    |  | Major railways                                 |
|  | Japanese occupation 1937-40                        |  | Centre of Chinese Communist activity from 1936 |
|  | Franco-Japanese agreement permits occupation, 1940 |   |  |



### Map 3: The Road to War in Europe

In Germany, with economic stability after 1923, the extreme right and left declined in popularity: but democracy had shallow roots, associated as it was with defeat and Versailles, and it could not survive the upheaval of the Depression. From 1930, the government ruled by emergency decree. The Communists, claiming the USSR had avoided depression, grew in popularity among industrial workers. In response, the National Socialists (Nazis), led by the charismatic Adolf Hitler, appealed to the middle classes, claiming to represent the values of the great German past. They aimed to reverse the humiliations of Versailles and unite all Germans (the *‘volksdeutsche’*) in one Reich, and claimed to have an explanation for Germany’s problems in what they saw as a Jewish–Bolshevik world conspiracy. Conservatives saw the Nazis as a useful weapon against the Communists, and they helped Hitler become Chancellor in January 1933. He soon dispensed with their assistance and established a one-party totalitarian state, maintained by the terror of the Gestapo and the concentration camp. In July 1934, he secured the loyalty of the Army, by purging the Nazis’ paramilitary force, the SA, in the ‘Night of the Long Knives’. On the death of President Hindenburg, Hitler became head of state, calling himself simply *Führer*.

At first, many foreign statesmen sympathised with Hitler’s aim of revising the Versailles settlement. When Germany expanded its army beyond the 100,000 men allowed by Versailles, and established an air force, the *Luftwaffe*, there was little reaction: indeed the British agreed a treaty in 1935, which allowed a German build-up to a third of British naval strength. Initially, Hitler proceeded cautiously. An attempt to bring about union with Austria (*Anschluss*) in 1934 failed, principally because of the opposition of Mussolini, the Italian Fascist dictator who saw Austria as part of his own sphere. Hitler set himself to woo Mussolini, aided by their ideological similarities and by Mussolini’s own ambitions to build a new Roman empire, shown in his conquest of Ethiopia in 1935–36 and Albania in 1939.

The main potential obstacles to Hitler’s plans were Britain, France and the USSR. France had set up defensive alliances with Germany’s eastern neighbours, but the British in particular were reluctant to make any arrangements with the Soviets, whom they mistrusted more than the Nazis. France was wracked by internal discord, and increasingly came to rely on the defensive Maginot line and in foreign policy to follow Britain. The British, unready and unwilling to make war, believed Hitler could be dealt with by ‘appeasement’. They looked to grant him economic concessions, to tempt him with colonies, and also sought the mediation of Mussolini. Crucially, when Hitler sent troops into the Rhineland, which had been de-militarised, the

British and French did nothing. Emboldened, Hitler encouraged Austrian Nazis and in March 1938 he completed the *Anschluss*. He then made demands against Czechoslovakia, which contained a German minority, mostly living in the strategically important Sudetenland. The Czechs were prepared to fight, but fearful of a war for which they were not prepared, the British and French made a deal with Hitler at Munich in September 1938 that gave Hitler the Sudetenland.

The horrors of modern warfare had already been shown in the civil war in Spain that broke out in 1936 between the Republican government and right-wing forces led by General Franco. Other states had agreed to keep out, but Germany, Italy and the USSR all sent forces to Spain: the Germans in particular used it as a testing ground for the new *Luftwaffe*. Franco captured Madrid in March 1939 and thereby secured power. By that time attention was focused elsewhere. Hitler had occupied the rest of the Czech lands in March 1939. Bohemia and Moravia were taken into the Reich and Slovakia became a clerical-fascist German satellite state. As if to show the bankruptcy of collective security, Czechoslovakia’s neighbours, Hungary and Poland, each took a small part of the spoils. In addition, Germany regained Memelland after an ultimatum to Lithuania on 23 March.

This was all too much for British Prime Minister Chamberlain, who in a dramatic about-face issued security guarantees to Poland, Greece and Romania, and reluctantly entered discussions with the Soviets. British rearmament gathered pace. Appeasement had never been ‘peace at any price’ (though it should not be seen as simply a measure to gain time for rearmament, as some have asserted: there was a genuine hope that war could be avoided). Hitler’s aim for ‘living-space’ now seemed to extend far beyond merely the re-unification of the *volksdeutsche*. However, there was deep suspicion between the Anglo-French and the Soviets, and negotiations on political and military arrangements foundered on Soviet demands that they be able to deploy forces into the states between them and Germany should war threaten. The Poles and Romanians would not allow this. The British guarantees to those countries were therefore left without effective means of implementation.

Hitler then turned to pressure Poland over the so-called Polish corridor that separated East Prussia from the rest of Germany, and especially the internationalised city of Danzig. He too entered negotiations with the Soviets. With more to offer, he was successful, and on 24 August 1939, to the shock of the world, these two bitter ideological foes announced the signature of the Nazi–Soviet pact of non-aggression. What was kept secret was a protocol dividing eastern Europe between the two. Hitler could now go to war against Poland without fear of effective intervention.



### Key

- ⊗ Chamberlain's conferences with Hitler
-  Rhineland re-militarised, March 1936
-  Annexed by Germany (*Anschluss*), March 1938
-  Annexed by Germany, October 1938 (ceded to Germany at Munich)
-  Annexed by Germany, March 1939
-  Bohemia and Moravia annexed by Germany, March 1939
-  Annexed by Hungary from Slovakia, November 1938
-  Autonomous from Sept 1938, annexed by Hungary, March 1939
-  Czech part of Teschen annexed by Poland, October 1938
-  Annexed by Lithuania from Poland, October 1939

## Map 4: The Fall of Poland

Late on 31 August 1939, German SS men disguised as Polish soldiers staged an ‘incident’ at Gleiwitz, which gave Hitler his pretext for attacking Poland without a declaration of war. Hitler had been planning this war for months. Despite the British guarantee, he believed that they would not risk a general European war over Poland. By concluding the Nazi–Soviet Pact he had made it impossible for the British to directly affect the outcome in Poland, and he judged that they would accept the result of a quick, decisive war as unpleasant but unavoidable.

The Polish Army was not an insignificant force, but it was not ready for the new form of warfare the Germans employed. This was *blitzkrieg*, the ‘lightning war’. The spearhead was the panzer division, a concentration of armour, with fully motorised infantry and close air support provided by the *Luftwaffe* in the form of the fearsome dive-bombers, the *Stukas*. Germany had only light tanks available, and the Army was not fully prepared for war, but the key to *blitzkrieg* was speed, which would overwhelm enemy defences before their strength could be mustered, or underlying weaknesses in the attacking forces exposed. Use of airpower against civilian targets would clog the roads with refugees and add to the disintegration of morale: a vital component of successful *blitzkrieg*. The Poles had numerical strength – 30 divisions and ten in reserve – but had outdated equipment and strategic doctrine. Their forces were deployed on their frontiers: it was Polish misfortune that their main industrial areas were in Silesia, right on their borders – and this made them highly vulnerable to *blitzkrieg*.

Britain and France issued an ultimatum for Germany to withdraw: when it expired on 3 September, Chamberlain regretfully announced that Britain was once more at war with Germany. The British Dominions followed suit. With no arrangement with the Soviets, it was not clear how Britain or France were going to help Poland. The French Army made a token movement over the German border in the Saar, but its military strategy was built around the defensive, based on the Maginot line.

German armies converged on Poland from three sides. Most significantly, General Guderian’s five panzer divisions were concentrated in spearheads that made deep and rapid penetration, leaving their infantry far behind. The Poles, deployed too far forward, especially in the Polish corridor, lacked the mobility to respond. The Polish Air Force had half its strength destroyed on the ground by the end of 1 September and its aircraft were outperformed by those of the *Luftwaffe*. The Poles fought hard, but were overwhelmed. General von Bock’s Army Group North from Pomerania and East Prussia overran the corridor by

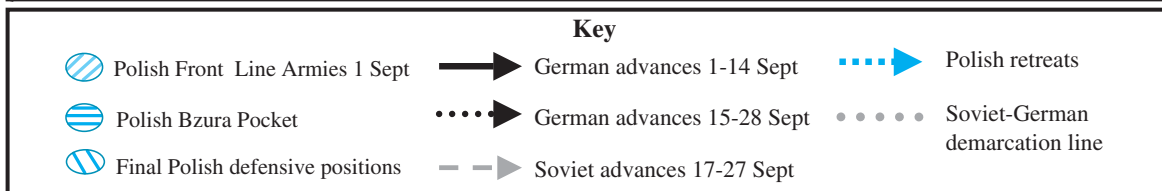
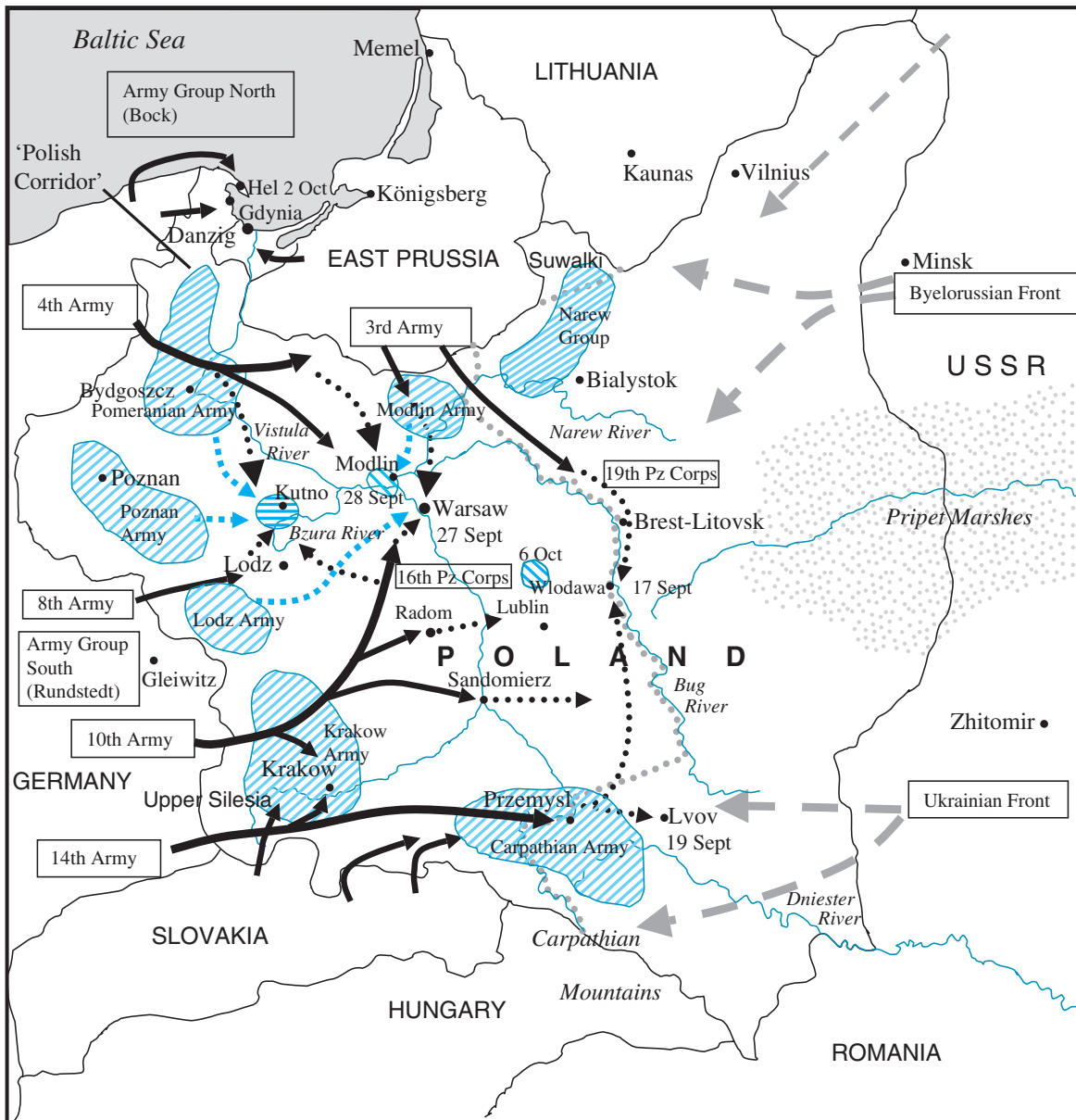
3 September. The *Luftwaffe* disrupted communications and made organising a defence behind the Vistula–Narew line by the Polish commander, Marshal Smygły-Rydz, impossible. The panzers thrust towards Warsaw. Polish forces fell back on the city, but a double-pincer movement by Army Groups North and South met at Brest-Litovsk and encircled the Polish forces by 17 September. Only at Kutno was there an effective counter-attack, and that was overwhelmed by 19 September in the Battle of Bzura River.

The Germans bombed Warsaw from 17 to 27 September to demoralise by terror. On 17 September, the Soviets acted in accordance with the secret protocol, and invaded Poland from the east. As a consequence, many of the Polish forces fell into Soviet hands (220,000 out of 910,000 Poles taken prisoner). They were taken to camps in the USSR, where over 20,000 were murdered in the next 18 months. The Soviets incorporated eastern Poland into the USSR on the grounds that it was ethnically Ukrainian. Sovietisation and destruction of Polish culture followed.

The last organised resistance took place in Warsaw and the fortress of Modlin: after heavy bombardment Warsaw surrendered on 27 September and Modlin a day later. The defeat of Poland was complete by 5 October. The Polish armed forces suffered 70,000 killed, against 8,082 Germans. Some 90,000 escaped to Hungary, Romania, Lithuania and Latvia, and many made their way to the west to continue the fight. Members of the government who escaped by way of Romania set up a government-in-exile in France (and later London), headed by General Sikorski. They brought with them details of their attempts to crack the German Enigma encryption machine, which were to prove an invaluable asset to the Allied war effort.

Poles living in the Polish corridor were forced to leave, and replaced by Germans, and the area was incorporated into the Reich as Warthegau (Wartheland). The rest of Poland was put under the control of Hans Frank as the General Government. He embarked on a policy of national and cultural destruction in accordance with Nazi racial theories. Thousands of intellectuals, nationalists and professionals were murdered in an attempt to reduce Poland to a slave society. Frank, based at Krakow, put tens of thousands to forced labour, and ghettoised and then murdered Poland’s 3 million Jews. Poland was to suffer a higher proportion of its population killed in the war than any other state.

Hitler expected that Britain and France would see the folly of maintaining hostilities after the disappearance of the country for which they went to war. When it became obvious that they intended to fight on, he ordered the General Staff (OKW) to prepare plans for the invasion of France (*Fall Gelb* – Operation Yellow).



## Map 5: Soviet Expansion 1939–41

The secret protocol of the Nazi–Soviet Pact divided Eastern Europe into German and Soviet spheres of interest. The Soviets began immediately to act upon this agreement, which, Stalin said, had ‘been sealed with blood’. Stalin proceeded to force ‘mutual assistance’ pacts on Latvia and Estonia, under which he could station Soviet troops on their soil. Lithuania had been assigned to Germany, but under the German–Soviet Border and Friendship Treaty of 28 September, it was exchanged for German occupation of a larger part of Central Poland up to the Bug river and the Suwalki area, and it too was forced into such a pact. Stalin pressured his other neighbours Romania and Turkey, and also Bulgaria, for similar arrangements. Whether these moves were opportunistic expansionism or defensive responses to German expansionism is disputed. The likelihood is that they were both, as Stalin felt insecure about any areas not under his control. He preferred to deploy his troops right up to the frontier of a potential enemy.

Stalin also put pressure on Finland, but in this case it was not to gain a pact, but to gain actual territory, pushing the frontier further away from Leningrad and the important port of Murmansk. The Finns rejected his demands, and on 30 November, the Soviet Union attacked. Finnish resistance was fierce, and the Soviet performance, despite overwhelming numbers, was abysmal. Many of the Soviet units initially deployed were from Central Asia, the Soviet practice being to station troops well away from their home regions, and they were untrained and unequipped for winter warfare.

The success of the Finns attracted great sympathy in Britain and France. The Soviet attack confirmed for many that Stalin was as bad as Hitler, and it was widely assumed that they were colluding so closely as to be allies. The USSR was expelled from the League of Nations, and even for many of those left-wing sympathisers whose loyalty to the Soviet Union had survived the Nazi–Soviet Pact, it was the last straw. For strategists in France, the Winter War seemed to offer an opportunity to fight the war away from the Western Front. While the British military were less enthusiastic, it was felt in the governments of both countries that aiding Finland and attacking the USSR would be a way to strike at Germany. It was assumed, correctly, that the Soviets were supplying oil and other war materials to Germany, circumventing the Allied blockade. The purges of the military and political leadership, and collectivisation upheavals in the USSR in the 1930s, were believed to have made it economically and morally weak, so that a well-directed blow could bring the whole structure crashing down. This would neatly end the Bolshevik menace and

strike a blow against the German war economy, which was itself believed to be vulnerable. An air strike was therefore seriously mooted by the French and the British from bases in the Middle East against the Soviet oil installations at Baku and Batum in the Caucasus. The British Chiefs of Staff were cautious about the practicality of this, but were prepared to begin planning another operation, the despatch of ground forces to Finland.

The attraction of doing this was that in the process, the Allied forces could block the passage of Swedish iron ore to Germany. Winston Churchill, British First Lord of the Admiralty, was particularly keen on this plan, which would be a mortal blow against the German war effort. The Soviet military performance in Finland meant that few feared engaging the Red Army; indeed it seemed the weak point of the enemy front.

Two things prevented this operation going ahead, though French and British troops were gathered ready to go. Norway and Sweden refused to allow passage for the Allied troops through their territory. Churchill was prepared to force the way through, but while this was being debated, the Finns surrendered on 12 March. The Soviets had made drastic changes to their tactics and command structure and had launched successful assaults in the New Year, including the bombing of Finnish towns. They broke through the ‘Mannerheim line’ and the Finns bowed to the inevitable, and accepted terms that were worse than those they had been offered in November. The USSR gained the territory it wanted, at the cost of 200,000 casualties – though Finland did remain independent. It would increasingly look to Germany to help with its defences over the next year.

The Allied assumption that the USSR was in the enemy camp was only to be reinforced as Stalin took advantage of the war situation to extend his control over the states on his borders. In June 1940, Moscow demanded that ‘friendly governments’ be installed in the three Baltic States, and immediately invaded them. Rigged plebiscites were held, approving entry into the USSR. The secret police (NKVD) then embarked on wholesale arrests, murders and sovietisation. Further south, pressure was put on Romania which resulted in the annexation of Bessarabia, which had been part of Tsarist Russia, and Northern Bukovina, which had not. Romanian oil was vital to Germany, and Stalin was directly threatening German interests. With Britain’s ability to keep Germany preoccupied with war in the west very uncertain at this time, these moves were very risky, and added very little to Soviet security: Romania and Finland had become enemies and the British and Americans convinced that Stalin was Hitler’s closest collaborator.



**Key**

Above: The Soviet-Finnish War, 1939-40

- Soviet attacks Nov 1939-Jan 1940
- Finnish counter-attacks Jan 1940
- 'Mannerheim line'
- Finnish defensive holding positions
- Abortive Soviet naval assaults
- Soviet attacks Feb 1940
- New Soviet frontier March 1940 (Hangö leased to USSR)

Right: Soviet territorial expansion

- ▨ Annexed from Poland Oct 1939
- ▨ Annexed by Lithuania Oct 1939
- ▨ Gained from Finland, Treaty of Moscow, March 1940
- ▨ Annexed June 1940 after fake plebiscites
- ▨ Annexed from Romania June 1940





## Map 6: The 'Phoney War' and the Invasion of Norway

Allied strategy was based on the belief that the German economy was fundamentally weak, and that holding defensive positions and implementing a naval blockade would win victory by attrition. Unable to deliver a decisive victory against the Allied defensive position in the west, Hitler would be overthrown, bringing peace and the restoration of Polish independence. There were serious flaws to this approach, both in its fundamentals and in its implementation. The Nazi–Soviet Pact reduced the likelihood that Germany would need to station many troops on its eastern frontier, and also constituted a serious breach in the blockade.

Hitler offered peace to the Allies after completing the conquest of Poland, but Chamberlain no longer trusted him, and the war was now less about Poland than about the whole European balance of power. The period from October to April 1940 is often called the 'phoney war', a derisive term applied by an isolationist American senator. There was action elsewhere, but certainly it was a time of inaction on the Western Front – disastrously so for the Allies. The attrition strategy created a state of mind that avoided bold risks; passivity was all that was necessary. They failed even to develop an effective defensive strategy. The French and British continued to rearm, and a sizeable British Expeditionary Force (BEF) was deployed to France. The problem was the northern part of the line. Belgium and the Netherlands were determined to remain neutral, so refused to engage in any military planning and would not allow Allied forces into their countries. Allied planning had either to be based on leaving the Low Countries to the Germans or on guesses as to their defensive deployments and capabilities. The first option was rejected because it would compromise the whole defensive position. It was planned therefore to advance to the natural defensive lines in Belgium formed by the canals, in the hopes of forming a line with the Belgian Army. Unfortunately, German planning accurately predicted this move, and indeed welcomed it as it would draw the Allied forces forward into the trap to be sprung through the Ardennes.

There was more action at sea. The German Navy (*Kriegsmarine*), like the Army, was unprepared for war in 1939. The submarine force was small, and the two new battleships, *Tirpitz* and *Bismarck*, and the aircraft carrier *Graf Zeppelin*, were nowhere near completion (the latter never was). As it was, the submariners scored some spectacular early successes, aided by British tardiness in introducing up-to-date anti-submarine measures. Günther Prien in *U-47* became the first German Second World War hero when he penetrated the fleet anchorage at Scapa Flow and sank the battleship HMS *Royal Oak* on 14 October 1939. The aircraft carrier *Courageous* was another early victim of the U-boats,

as, more controversially, was the liner *Athenia* on 3 September. At the outbreak of war, some surface commerce raiders were at sea, and caused great disruption to merchant shipping. One, *Graf Spee*, was tracked down in the South Atlantic and engaged in the Battle of the River Plate by two British cruisers, *Ajax* and *Exeter* and the New Zealand-manned *Achilles*. After battering *Exeter*, *Graf Spee* took refuge in Montevideo. Deceived into thinking that a larger British force was waiting outside, its captain, Langsdorff, scuttled the ship and committed suicide.

One of *Graf Spee*'s supply ships, *Altmark*, was intercepted in February in Norwegian coastal waters by HMS *Cossack* and British prisoners-of-war on board were liberated. The British and French were still considering intervention in Scandinavia to interdict the ore traffic to Germany, at the least by mining Norwegian waters. After the *Altmark* incident, Admiral Raeder, commander-in-chief of the *Kriegsmarine*, convinced Hitler that he should pre-empt this in order to protect German interests and prevent the Allies gaining control of key Norwegian ports.

Not for the last time, the Germans moved faster than the Allies. On 9 April, without warning, German forces entered Denmark, which, being virtually unarmed, capitulated without a struggle. Naval forces, mountain troops and airborne units were sent to Norway to land at six points simultaneously. Despite the betrayal of the collaborator Vidkun Quisling, the Norwegians were able to hold up the Germans in time for Anglo-French forces to land. The Royal Navy had significant forces close by: they were unable to stop the Germans landing, but the *Kriegsmarine* suffered serious losses in the campaign, which it could ill afford. The new cruiser *Blücher* was sunk by a shore battery in the approaches to Oslo, two other cruisers were sunk and the cream of German destroyer forces was sunk in the two battles of Narvik. The two largest German ships, the battle-cruisers *Scharnhorst* and *Gneisenau*, plus the pocket battleship *Lützow*, were damaged – though the aircraft carrier HMS *Glorious* had been sunk in return.

The Germans, however, seized important airfields, enabling them to fly in further troops. The invasion of Norway was the world's first offensive airborne operation. The Allied response was poorly planned and executed, and German land forces fought effectively. The Allies landed at Andalsnes and Tromsø and engaged the Germans at Trondheim, then were forced to withdraw within two weeks. Their forces further north in Narvik held on until June, when events on the Western Front heralded the end of the 'phoney war' and forced a withdrawal. The campaign demonstrated the close and effective inter-service cooperation that was to be the hallmark of German military operations throughout the war, and gave Germany important air and naval bases.





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