CHAPTER XXXII

Prelude to War (1938-39)

On November 5, 1937, Hitler summoned five of his principal subordinates and subjected them to a four-hour monologue on the subject of Germany's immediate possibilities in foreign policy. Present were Field Marshal von Blomberg, Generals von Fritsch and Goering, Admiral Raeder, and Foreign Minister von Neurath. Hitler's general theory was that the achievement of autarky was basically impossible and that therefore Germany must occupy more land adjacent to her. The direction of advance was marked out as south and east; Austria and Czechoslovakia had to be overrun. Beyond this he did not go into specific detail. There was no evasion of the threat that the Germans might find themselves at war. Hitler declared himself in certain circumstances ready for war the following year and certainly within six or seven years, by which time Germany would be starting to lose her lead in war equipment. The period of preparation was over; the time of achievement was at hand.

The program was greeted with mixed attitudes by Hitler's listeners. The minutes record that the two army officers put up some protest on the ground that German armed might was not yet great enough and the potential opposition abroad too great. It is no accident that these men lost their posts in the next few months.

In fact, the most important development of the next weeks was the replacement of leading independent and critical officials by people who could be counted on to do only what Hitler told them. Already the axe had fallen on Schacht, who was no longer minister of economics; he was soon replaced by Funk, who recognized that he was subordinate to the head of the Four Year Plan, Hermann Goering.

Ever since the Roehm purge of 1934 Hitler had treated the officers of the growing army with honor and favor. There had been no great effort to synchronize the officers with the party. This did not arise from any warmth which Hitler felt toward the generals; in fact, he felt socially inferior to them, but he needed their technical services badly. Now,
however, he felt stronger and was determined that the army should be an unquestioning instrument to enforce his foreign policy. He received unexpectedly just the material he needed to carry out his plans to control the high command.

In January 1938 Blomberg quietly married a woman with an admittedly obscure past. Both Hitler and Goering were at the wedding. Immediately thereafter Himmler unearthed from the police records information that the field marshal’s bride had a record as a former prostitute and as a model for indecent photographs. The generals were infuriated at this affront to the officers’ code and insisted that Blomberg be dismissed. Hitler agreed to this.

It looked as if Fritsch were the obvious successor to Blomberg, but an even less attractive story was developed to get rid of him. Himmler delved into the records and came up with an accusation of homosexuality against Fritsch. He even produced a professional blackmailer to confront the general. The accusation was quite groundless; it developed that the blackmailer had had relations with a retired officer with a similar name. However, Fritsch chose not to defend himself and was sent into retirement, although he was later officially exonerated. By these methods Hitler tamed the army, but he also created a core of resentful officers who were later to constitute the nucleus of the principal anti-Nazi resistance movement, which culminated with the attempt on the Führer’s life on July 20, 1944.

To succeed Fritsch, Hitler reached down the list of generals and picked General Walther von Brauchitsch. The succession to Blomberg was arranged differently. Hitler abolished the ministry of defense and replaced it with a staff called the High Command of the Armed Forces (Oberkommando der Wehrmacht, or OKW). At the head of this Hitler placed himself immediately in command. To control the administration of the OKW, he appointed General Wilhelm Keitel, an obsequious timeserver.

The final purge was made in the foreign ministry. Neurath dated as minister from pre-Nazi days. He was a respectable, if unimpressive, figure. Now, however, Hitler asked for his resignation and gave him a decorative but meaningless title. As his successor Hitler named Joachim von Ribbentrop. Some changes were also made in important posts abroad.

The first crisis came immediately Hitler did not plan events in advance; no one can do that with exactness. Yet during 1938 he proved himself a brilliant, brutal, and bullying improviser in the field of foreign policy, as he had already done in domestic affairs.

For some months Austria’s international position had deteriorated
rapidly. The treaty of 1936 between Germany and Austria provided that each would respect the independence of the other. At that time Austria felt that she could rely on the protection of Mussolini. During 1937 the situation changed with the increasing intimacy between Germany and Italy. At home Schuschnigg, Dollfuss’ successor, maintained his dictatorial one-party government, refused to take any Nazis into his cabinet, imprisoned a number of them, and talked publicly about the possibility of a restoration of the Hapsburg pretender to the Austrian throne. All these attitudes grated seriously on the Nazis.

On February 12, 1938, Schuschnigg traveled to Berchtesgaden for a conference with Hitler. It turned out to be not a conference but one of the Führer’s most venomous monologues. He turned on the unfortunate Austrian and for several hours upbraided him with wild fury, informing him that he would have to agree immediately to an ultimatum. The ultimatum provided that Austria would release all imprisoned Nazis, that Nazis might join the one party in Austria, the Fatherland Front, and that two Nazis would be admitted to the cabinet. The more significant one was Arthur Seyss-Inquart, who was slated for the important post of minister of the interior. Schuschnigg had no alternative but to accept Hitler’s demands.

During the next few weeks there was a lull. Seyss-Inquart went to Berlin for orders. Schuschnigg gave a major speech calling for continued Austrian independence. However, all over Austria outbreaks of violence fomented by the Nazis occurred to such an extent that the police were no longer in control. On March 8, 1938, Schuschnigg decided to hold a plebiscite on the following Sunday, the thirteenth, in which the Austrian people would vote on whether they wanted Austria to remain independent.

When Hitler heard of Schuschnigg’s move, his rage was intense. This was undercutting his whole policy. On the tenth he ordered the mobilization of the army on the southern frontier ready to invade Austria if necessary to protect the German character of Austria. He also sent a personal letter by air to Mussolini explaining his position and asking for a friendly attitude. The next day Hitler halted rail traffic on the Austrian border and sent an ultimatum to Vienna demanding that the plebiscite be postponed. Later the same day he demanded that Schuschnigg resign and be succeeded by Seyss-Inquart. President Miklas of Austria demurred at this last demand and refused to agree to it for several hours until the moment had passed at which the German army was to start to cross the frontier. However, Seyss-Inquart had time to send a telegram inviting the German army into Austria.

Meanwhile in Berlin Hitler heard by telephone the happy news that
Mussolini would not oppose the entrance of German troops into Austria. His hysterical gratitude knew no bounds, and he promised undying affection for the Italian dictator and that he would never endanger the new frontier on the Brenner Pass. The German troops started to move. Hitler flew to the south and crossed the border to the town of Linz, where he had spent much of his childhood. With public emotion he decorated his parents' graves. The next day he received Seyss-Inquart, whose one action as Austrian chancellor had been to sign a decree integrating Austria into Germany. On the fourteenth the Führer made a triumphal journey from Linz to Vienna, greeted by flags, music, and enthusiasm. Standing by the palace of the Hapsburgs in the city where his life had been so squalid, he received the homage of the Viennese. The Anschluss was accomplished.

Nazi methods immediately went into operation: arrests by the thousands, suicides, beatings, the whole panoply of Nazi horror. Yet there is no doubt that the change was popular. For the first time in twenty years Austria was assured of economic security and a position as an integral part of a great power once again. In April a plebiscite was held under Nazi auspices, and almost 100 per cent of the Austrians voted for the Anschluss. Abroad there was not a great deal of stir. Britain and France protested but in a halfhearted way, for it was undeniable that the Austrians were ethnically German and many felt that they should have been permitted to join Germany earlier. During 1938 Hitler's actions had just enough plausibility that it was difficult to condemn them out of hand.

Hitler did not rest long after his success in Austria. Within a few weeks he started making plans against his next victim, Czechoslovakia. Ever since his early Vienna days Hitler had hated the Czechs, who at that time, being Austrian subjects, were waging a nationalistic war of nerves against the German Austrians. Czechoslovakia had almost alone in central Europe maintained a democratic government; geographically it was a sort of wedge pointed toward Germany; also it was allied with France and the Soviet Union. All these things provoked Hitler's hatred. On the other hand, ever since the Anschluss the German position was much improved, because now Germany surrounded the most populous part of Czechoslovakia on three sides.

Hitler had a ready-made pretext in his anti-Czech moves. Around the western border of Czechoslovakia lived between three and four million ethnic Germans, the so-called Sudeten Germans. These people had been Austrian subjects before 1918. At the peace conference there was even talk of permitting them to join Germany, but not very much talk. They were granted as a large minority group to the new Czechoslovak state. They lived in a reasonably cohesive area immediately
adjacent to Germany. Strategically their location was important because it was on the eastern slopes of the mountains. If Germany included the Sudeten area, Czechoslovakia would have no natural barrier against attack from the west. Furthermore, this was the area in which the Czechs had built their strong defense positions against Germany.

Hitler, of course, regarded the Sudetens as Germans forcibly ruled by inferior foreigners. He encouraged the formation and growth of a Sudeten Nazi party, whose leader was Konrad Henlein. This party and other Sudeten parties caused constant disturbances in the parliament at Prague, until in November 1937 they left it and became even more vocal about their alleged disabilities. This hue and cry was eagerly taken up in Germany.

Immediately after the Anschluss Hitler began to see more and more of Henlein and to give him instructions. The general tenor of the instructions was to demand more and more. Every time the Czech government offered a concession, the Sudetens were to demand others and thus maintain a constant state of unrest. This was to be coupled with demonstrations, propaganda, and purposeful confusion of all sorts. In April 1938, Henlein announced an eight-point program and went so far as to demand a shift in Czech foreign policy. The Czech government felt that this was too much and refused the demands, in spite of continuing advice from London and Paris to make as many concessions as humanly possible.

Hitler spent early May on a state visit to Italy, where he received a tremendous ovation from all but the pope, although Mussolini still refused to sign an actual military alliance with Germany. When the Führer returned home, he found that a crisis was in the immediate offing. President Beneš of Czechoslovakia, outraged by the constant disturbances at home and by information of German troop concentrations near the border, ordered a partial mobilization of the Czech army. France and Britain warned Germany of the possibility of general war; both France and the Soviet Union announced their intention to carry out their treaty promises to Czechoslovakia. The Germans, who were in no position to face Britain, France, and Russia, plus the efficient Czech army, had to back down, and Henlein was ordered to continue to negotiate in Prague. However, Hitler's fury was unlimited; his hatred of Beneš and the Czechs increased. He decided to bide his time and started the construction of the West Wall or Siegfried line along the French frontier.

The crisis simmered during the summer. Henlein negotiated halfheartedly with the Prague government and got a statute published which did not go as far as the eight points. German diplomats did what they could to weaken the Czech position in eastern Europe. In August Prime
Minister Chamberlain sent Lord Runciman to Czechoslovakia as an official mediator. Runciman continued the British policy of urging concessions on Beneš, but in the meantime all the powers tightened up their military preparedness.

In September the crisis reached its apex. Serious fighting between Czechs and Sudetens erupted in the town of Moravská Ostrava, and the Sudetens broke off negotiations. On the twelfth Hitler addressed the Nazi party congress at Nuremberg with an unheard-of degree of venom directed at the Czechs and at Beneš personally. Within Czechoslovakia the fighting was almost out of hand.

At this point with French agreement Chamberlain decided to act personally. On the thirteenth he informed Hitler that he was willing to leave immediately for Germany to try to solve the problem by a personal interview. On the fifteenth, after his first trip by plane, he arrived at the Führer’s home in Berchtesgaden. Hitler delivered a diatribe against the Czechs and insisted that the question of the Sudetens had to be solved immediately by their integration into Germany. Chamberlain got Hitler to promise no action by force until he had discussed the matter with the British cabinet and with the French.

On his return to London and upon consultation with France, Chamberlain managed to persuade the Czech government to cede the Sudeten area to Germany in return for a guarantee of the remainder to Czechoslovakia. Now Chamberlain was doing Hitler’s work for him.

On the twenty-second Chamberlain again flew to Germany. This time the two met at Bad Godesberg on the Rhine, but now Chamberlain found that Hitler had stiffened and raised his price. The fact was that Hitler did not want merely to annex the Sudeten area; he wanted all of Bohemia and Moravia. Chamberlain was playing the part of a meddling peacemaker, who, however, was too important to be rebuffed publicly. Hitler insisted on a very short time limit for the cession and on further plebiscites; he also brought up what he said were the legitimate claims of Poland and Hungary against Czechoslovakia. Chamberlain was simply not equipped emotionally to deal with a personality like Hitler. He was despondent and promised only that he would convey the new German demands to London and Prague.

No one who lived through the next few days will forget them. Italy announced its solidarity with Germany. Hitler gave another speech packed with hatred. The French premier, Daladier, went to London to confer. President Roosevelt proposed a conference; so did Chamberlain. Finally Chamberlain appealed to Mussolini to make a move for peace. Mussolini agreed; he was not happy at the thought of a war, and so proposed a general conference. Hitler accepted the proposal and set the
date for the next day. Chamberlain, Daladier, and Mussolini were invited to meet with Hitler in Munich on September 29. It is instructive to note that neither Czechoslovakia nor the Soviet Union was invited. Stalin never forgot this insult and held it against the Western powers.

At the Munich conference Hitler received all that he had asked at Godesberg, except that the time schedule for the German occupation was somewhat modified. Britain and France agreed to guarantee the new Czech state. Germany and Italy agreed to do the same, once Poland and Hungary had been satisfied in their claims. Czechoslovakia had no choice but to accept.

Before the conference ended, Chamberlain wrote out a statement promising Anglo-German accord in the future and asked Hitler to sign it. He did so, and it was this sheet of paper which Chamberlain waved in his hand as the crowds enthusiastically greeted him at the London airport. This document was to bring, in Chamberlain’s words, “peace in our time.” After the British awoke from their intoxication with peace, their outstanding leaders, notably Winston Churchill, realized that Great Britain had suffered perhaps the most humiliating defeat in her history.

Still Hitler was not very happy; he did not consider Munich an overwhelming victory. Quite the contrary, for there was still a Czech state in existence. During the winter of 1938–39 the Germans laid the foundations for further action in the east. Hitler had convinced himself, quite rightly as it turned out, that France was seriously weakened through internal dissension. He hoped, therefore, to detach her from her alliance with Britain. He did not achieve this, but in December 1938 Ribbentrop visited Paris and signed a treaty guaranteeing the Franco-German frontier and promising consultation on any disputes. Hitler kept insisting that he had given up all claims on Alsace-Lorraine. In the southeast the Germans worked hard to solidify their relations with the Balkan nations: Romania, Bulgaria, Yugoslavia, and also Hungary.

After the Munich conference the Czechoslovak state was much changed. Poland was appeased with the cession of the Teschen area, and Hungary received a slice of territory along the southern border of Slovakia and Ruthenia. President Beneš resigned and was succeeded by Emil Hácha. The Czechs granted full autonomy within the new Czecho-Slovakia (the hyphen was added to indicate the new federal state) to both Slovakia and Ruthenia, now called Carpatho-Ukraine and possibly useful to Hitler in the future for Ukrainian propaganda against either Poland or the Soviet Union. Germany, oddly enough, became the godfather of an autonomous Slovakia.

In the early months of 1939 the Czech government became alarmed that the Slovaks and Ruthenians were plotting independence rather than
simply autonomy. In March President Hacha deposed their two govern-
ments on these grounds. The Slovak premier, Monsignor Tiso, appealed
to Hitler, who saw the opportunity offered him. German agents went to
the Slovak capital, Bratislava, to spur on the Slovak leaders to insist on
independence. Hitler invited Tiso to come to Berlin on March 13. The
_Führer_ persuaded him to call a meeting of the Slovak parliament for
the next morning, fly to it, and proclaim Slovak independence. This he
did somewhat to the astonishment of the Slovak parliamentarians.

On the same day President Hacha was ordered to Berlin. When he
arrived, he was treated to the same kind of tirade as Schuschnigg the
year before. After Hitler delivered himself of a lengthy polemic against
the Czechs, he told Hacha that there was only one thing he could now
do for his country. German troops were on the march and Hacha could
telephone Prague and order that there be no resistance to them. The un-
fortunate Hacha fainted. After he revived, he made the call and then
officially placed "the fate of the Czech people . . . trustingly in the
hands of the _Führer_."

Hitler now took another victorious trip—this time to Prague, where
he arrived on March 15. There he proclaimed that the Czechoslovak state
had ceased to exist and set up the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia
under the supervision of Germany, with Neurath as protector. Slovakia
was recognized as independent. Hungary eventually annexed Carpatho-
Ukraine. The whole operation had taken a week. Hitler slept that night in
the Hradschin palace built by Emperor Charles IV in the fourteenth
century.

The world reeled again; the protests came in, but no forceful action
was taken. However, the seizure of Prague did have the important effect
of turning Chamberlain once and for all against Hitler. Up to this time
he had been impressed by the plausibility of the German argument based
on national self-determination. This argument had no weight so far as
the Czechs were concerned. The British attitude stiffened, and Chamber-
lain decided to offer British guarantees to nations which seemed to be
threatened by Germany.

The events of March 1939 were not completely over. Within a week
of his entrance into Prague Hitler enjoyed one more small triumph.
Ribbentrop sent an ultimatum to Lithuania demanding the return to
Germany of the port of Memel and its hinterland, which had been
separated from Germany by Versailles. There was certainly nothing the
Lithuanians could do to stop the Germans, so they agreed. Hitler went
aboard a German naval vessel, presumably to avoid crossing the Polish
Corridor, and on March 21 had the pleasure of welcoming the people of
Memel into Greater Germany. It was a happy month for the _Führer_.

Hitler had no idea of resting on his laurels. His successes of the past year had been so spectacular that he saw no reason why their momentum should not increase rather than diminish. A few weeks after the Munich conference and several months before the Czech state was destroyed, the Germans started negotiations directed toward their next objective, a settlement of matters with Poland. Ever since 1919 all German governments had been bitterly resentful of the treaty arrangements on the east: the loss of Danzig; the wedge between East Prussia and the rest of Germany constituted by the Polish Corridor; and the inclusion into Poland of considerable German minorities in Silesia, Posen, and the Corridor. Even Strecmann in his most conciliatory moments refused to sign an “eastern Locarno” to guarantee the border with Poland.

Poland was in an unenviable position surrounded by her two historical enemies, Germany and Russia, both of which were growing stronger every day. During the twenties she had cast her lot with France and the “Versailles” powers, but in 1934 the Polish government welcomed the advances of Nazi Germany and signed a nonaggression pact with Hitler to last for ten years and to complement the nonaggression pact already in existence with the Soviet Union. Both the Polish dictator Marshal Piłsudski and his successor Marshal Smigly-Rydz, as well as the foreign minister, Josef Beck, seemed to be more anti-Soviet than anti-German.

Hitler, too, pursued an ambivalent policy toward Poland. While there is no doubt that he was determined to regain Danzig and other German-populated areas, he seems to have considered Poland a possible ally in an eventual war with the Soviet Union. In any case, he maintained friendly relations with Warsaw, and frequently his speeches boasted about the warm spirit which had prevailed since the treaty of 1934. By late 1938 his attitude had solidified, however, and he decided to settle the Danzig problem. In Danzig itself events had moved favorably to Germany. As early as 1933 the local Nazis elected a majority in the Danzig Senate and over the years increased their numbers until by 1938 they held 70 of the 72 seats. The Gauleiter of Danzig, Albert Forster, effectively ruled the city and treated his nominal master, the high commissioner appointed by the League of Nations, with scorn and neglect. The weakened League was unable to do anything about it.

The negotiations began in a friendly way on October 24, 1938, when Ribbentrop invited the Polish ambassador, Lipski, to lunch and outlined Germany’s wishes. They included the return of Danzig to Germany and the construction of an extraterritorial railway and highway across the Polish Corridor. As for the rest, Ribbentrop promised a German guarantee of the Polish-German border and even hinted at a future Polish-German collaboration aimed at the Soviets. This talk was followed by
others and by visits of Beck to Germany and of Ribbentrop to Poland. The Poles were very suspicious and ostentatiously renewed their non-aggression pact with the Soviet Union. They continued to be friendly toward the Germans but nevertheless maintained a firm policy of refusal of the German proposals.

Immediately after the seizure of Memel the German attitude toward Poland stiffened. Ribbentrop once more called in Lipski and reiterated his proposals, this time insisting on an immediate answer. Beck's reply was that although the Polish government was willing to discuss any matters with Germany, the specific German requirements were impossible. The last few days of March were filled with angry exchanges both in Berlin and Warsaw, with the Germans now beginning to talk about outrages committed by the Poles against German minority groups in Poland.

At this point the gradual attrition of the Poles, which Hitler counted on, was interrupted by action taken in London. On March 31 Neville Chamberlain, at last definite in his opposition to Hitler, extended in a speech in the Commons a guarantee of support to Poland by force of arms if necessary to preserve Polish independence. Immediately the French government associated itself with the British action. Hitler had an ugly surprise; for the first time he had to face clear defiance from the west. However, he was wise enough not to push the Polish matter right away. He imitated the tactics of Bismarck, who in 1865 waged a diplomatic campaign to assure himself of the attitude of the other powers before he pounced on Austria. The Führer had to assure himself of the general European situation now that he was threatened with the opposition of Great Britain and France.

In mid-April another country made itself heard. President Roosevelt, angered by the German aggressions and the recent seizure of Albania by the Italians, sent a note to Hitler and Mussolini asking their future intentions and specifically if they had aggressive designs on a list of over thirty countries. Hitler replied to the president in a full-dress speech delivered to a delighted Reichstag on April 28. It was a brilliantly derisive piece of irony and invective, but it did not answer Roosevelt's question. Hitler simply reiterated his old demands, attacked warmongers, and defended his actions in foreign policy. The only new element added to the situation was the Führer's denunciation of both the Anglo-German Naval Treaty of 1935 and the Polish-German nonaggression pact of 1934. After this outburst Hitler retired from the public scene, while the German newspapers intensified their campaign of hate against Poland describing Polish atrocities in vivid and imaginative detail.

During the late spring and the summer of 1939 the German government devoted itself to mending international fences. It signed nonagres-
sion pacts with Denmark, Latvia, and Estonia. Hitler welcomed high officials of Hungary, Yugoslavia, and Bulgaria to Berlin. In particular, the Nazis worked to tighten their already close relationship with Italy. Mussolini was in a happy frame of mind because of his recent cheap conquest of Albania, but he and Ciano were worried by the possibility of a European war arising out of the Polish problem. The Italian leaders knew that their armed forces were not ready for major combat and were anxious to restrain their German partners. Ciano therefore invited Ribbentrop to meet him in Milan in early May. The German minister managed to quiet the Italian's fears and even to obtain Mussolini's agreement to a real military alliance, hitherto unobtainable. The alliance was drawn up by the Germans and agreed to in Rome. It was a clear military alliance by which each power promised full support to the other in case of war. Ciano went to Berlin for the ceremonious signing of the treaty on May 22. Mussolini christened it the Pact of Steel, but in spite of all this ostentation he sent Hitler a secret message a few days later in which he warned that Italy would not be ready for war for more than three years.

Much more important than the treaty with Italy was the possibility which had loomed in Hitler's mind of an arrangement with the Soviet Union which would open the way to a direct attack on Poland. In view of the consistent anti-Communism of the Nazi philosophy and particularly of the anti-Comintern pact, such a possibility seemed to exist only in a dream world. However, Hitler was not a man to be deterred simply by ideology; he knew that there were powerful voices both among his generals and in the foreign ministry which would applaud a warmer relation with the Russians. The advantages to Germany were obvious. Without Russian support the British and French guarantees to Poland would be weak and Hitler would be spared the prospect of a long, grueling two-front war. In fact, British and French representatives were even then in Moscow trying to enlist Russian sympathy for their cause, although halfheartedly because of Chamberlain's extreme anti-Russian attitude. Hitler reasoned that Russia had a good deal to gain by an agreement with Germany. Although he no doubt anticipated an eventual war with Russia, he felt that Stalin would be happy for a breathing space and also a share of possible Polish spoils to be acquired without any Russian effort. An important straw in the wind was the replacement in May of the Western-oriented Soviet foreign minister, Maxim Litvinov, by V. M. Molotov. During the first months of 1939 Hitler's and Stalin's pronouncements seemed to be oddly free of the usual mutual invective.

The first steps were taken in May when the two governments agreed to undertake trade negotiations which had been overdue for some time but postponed. The negotiations occupied most of the month of June
but were discontinued because of a lack of definite results. They were
reopened in late July in Berlin, and it was then that the German represen-
tative suggested that they be supplemented by political agreements.
At the same time von der Schulenburg, the German ambassador in
Moscow, made the same suggestion to Molotov and engaged in several
friendly conversations with him.

On August 11 a British and French military mission arrived in Mos-
cow for detailed conversations with the Soviets. On the same day Ciano
and Ribbentrop met at Salzburg. The Italians were becoming very jitty
at the prospect of a general war. Ribbentrop, and Hitler too, quieted
Ciano with a promise that the war would be short and easy, and dangled
the prospect of an agreement with the Russians as if it were an accom-
plished fact.

In Moscow the Soviets played a game of delay with the Germans.
Throughout the negotiations it was the Germans who were eager and the
Russians who were reluctant. Stalin knew well his value to Hitler and
was determined to keep his price high. Molotov turned the conversa-
tions away from simply Poland and discussed Asiatic problems and
the affairs of southeastern Europe. Ribbentrop ordered acquiescence to
anything the Russians would propose and suggested that he himself
would like to visit Moscow to sign a final agreement. However, Molotov
kept postponing the date, thus raising havoc with the German timetable.
On August 20 Hitler sent a personal telegram to Stalin asking him to
receive Ribbentrop on the twenty-second or the twenty-third, not later.
Hitler spent an anxious thirty-six hours waiting for a reply. It came on
the twenty-second. Stalin wired that he would be willing to receive Rib-
bentrop the next day. Hitler immediately gave full powers to his minister,
who left Berlin the same day and arrived in Moscow the following
afternoon.

Ribbentrop spent less than twenty-four hours in Moscow. Most of
them were passed in cordial conversations with Stalin and Molotov, dur-
ing which the world situation was explored and the agreements drawn
up. The public agreement looked relatively innocent. It was a simple
nonaggression treaty to last for ten years, calling for consultation and
arbitration in the event of differences. Much more important was the
secret protocol which divided eastern Europe into two spheres of in-
fluence. Lithuania was in the German sphere; Finland, Estonia, and
Latvia in the Soviet. In case of changes in the political organization of
Poland, a line was drawn to indicate the two spheres. Germany declared
that she had no interest in the Romanian province of Bessarabia, which
Russia had lost after World War I. The agreements were signed on the
twenty-fourth, and the world rocked with the news that the two great ideological enemies had come together.

While Ribbentrop was in Moscow, Hitler received Sir Nevile Henderson, the British ambassador. Henderson handed the Führer a communication from Prime Minister Chamberlain which stated in absolutely explicit terms Britain's determination to honor her pledge to Poland with all the forces at her command. Even then Hitler hoped that the news of the Russian accord would detach Britain and France from Poland; he had set the early hours of the twenty-sixth as the moment for the attack across the eastern frontier. On the twenty-fifth he made a last effort to placate the British. It took two forms—one unofficially through a Swedish intermediary named Dahlerus, the other officially through the ambassador. Shortly after Henderson left for London, Hitler heard that that very day a pact of mutual assistance had been signed by Britain and Poland. This gave Hitler pause. His hesitation was increased by a letter from Mussolini in which the Italian dictator stated that in case of war, while he would give every political and economic assistance to Germany, he would not fight unless Germany could guarantee to Italy huge quantities of raw materials and munitions, which was manifestly impossible. In the light of these two developments Hitler postponed the attack on Poland.

The events of the remaining six days of peace were confused and kaleidoscopic. Hitler did not for a moment give up his plan to attack Poland. He accepted Mussolini's refusal to come into the war with such grace as he could muster, though he was obviously disappointed. He exchanged letters with the French premier, Daladier, asking what France had to gain from a war for Danzig. He engaged in more serious negotiations with Great Britain, sending both Dahlerus and Henderson once again to London with proposals, which, however, did not include a retreat on the questions of Danzig or the Corridor. It is interesting that until the last moment there was no serious thought of negotiating with the Poles. Hitler treated them as he had treated the Czechs a year earlier. In Berlin Ribbentrop was the leader of the war party and Goering the leader of those who sought to keep Britain out of the struggle. On the twenty-eighth a British note recommending negotiations between Germany and Poland arrived in Berlin. The British had won Polish agreement to this course. On the twenty-ninth Hitler agreed to the British proposal on condition that a Pole with full powers should arrive in Berlin the next day. On the thirtieth the Germans drew up a sixteen-point demand to be presented to the Poles. It was rather moderate in tone, but was obviously window-dressing. This was made clear when
Ribbentrop read the demand to Henderson on the night of the thirtieth but declared that it was already out of date since no plenipotentiary had arrived from Poland during the day.

By the thirty-first the negotiations ceased. Hitler wanted his war. In the evening some S.S. men faked a border incident which was used as one of the pretexts for armed action. At dawn on September 1, 1939, the German army and air force crossed the Polish frontier. World War II had begun. Later that day Hitler drove through an unenthusiastic Berlin to address the Reichstag and declare that the war had started and that he was "the first soldier of the German Reich." He nominated Goering and then Hess to succeed him in case of his death.

Even at this juncture Hitler hoped that Britain would back down, an opinion which was supported by Ribbentrop. Instead, on the morning of September 3 Sir Nevile Henderson handed an ultimatum to Hitler, stating that if German troops did not withdraw from Poland in a matter of hours, Great Britain would declare war. Shortly afterward the French ambassador arrived with a similar note. There was no question of a withdrawal from Poland, so on that day for the second time in twenty-five years the lights went out all over Europe.