

THE SECOND WORLD WAR

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PHOENIX

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INTRODUCTION

In June 1944, a young soldier surrendered to American paratroopers in the Allied invasion of Normandy. At first his captors thought that he was Japanese, but he was in fact Korean. His name was Yang Kyoungjong.

In 1938, at the age of eighteen, Yang had been forcibly conscripted by the Japanese into their Kwantung Army in Manchuria. A year later, he was captured by the Red Army after the Battle of Khalkhin Gol and sent to a labour camp. The Soviet military authorities, at a moment of crisis in 1942, drafted him along with thousands of other prisoners into their forces. Then, early in 1943 he was taken prisoner by the German army at the Battle of Kharkov in Ukraine. In 1944, now in German uniform, he was sent to France to serve with an *Ostbataillon* supposedly boosting the strength of the Atlantic Wall at the base of the Cotentin Peninsula inland from Utah Beach. After time in a prison camp in Britain, he went to the United States where he said nothing of his past. He settled there and finally died in Illinois in 1992.

In a war which killed over sixty million people and had stretched around the globe, this reluctant veteran of the Japanese, Soviet and German armies had been comparatively fortunate. Yet Yang remains perhaps the most striking illustration of the helplessness of most ordinary mortals in the face of what appeared to be overwhelming historical forces.

Europe did not stumble into war on 1 September 1939. Some historians talk of a 'thirty years' war' from 1914 to 1945, with the First World War as 'the original catastrophe'. Others maintain that the 'long war', which began with the Bolshevik coup d'état of 1917, continued as a 'European Civil War' until 1945, or even lasted until the fall of Communism in 1989.

History, however, is never tidy. Sir Michael Howard argues

persuasively that Hitler's onslaught in the west against France and Britain in 1940 was in many ways an extension of the First World War. Gerhard Weinberg also insists that the war which began with the invasion of Poland in 1939 was the start of Hitler's drive for *Lebensraum* (living space) in the east, his key objective. This is indeed true, yet the revolutions and civil wars between 1917 and 1939 are bound to complicate the pattern. For example, the left has always believed passionately that the Spanish Civil War marked the beginning of the Second World War, while the right claims that it represented the opening round of a Third World War between Communism and 'western civilization'. At the same time, western historians have usually overlooked the Sino-Japanese War from 1937 to 1945, and the way that it merged into the world war. Some Asian historians, on the other hand, argue that the Second World War began in 1931 with the Japanese invasion of Manchuria.

Arguments on the subject can go round and round, but the Second World War was clearly an amalgamation of conflicts. Most consisted of nation against nation, yet the international civil war between left and right permeated and even dominated many of them. It is therefore important to look back at some of the circumstances which led to this, the cruellest and most destructive conflict which the world has ever known.

The terrible effects of the First World War had left France and Britain, the principal European victors, exhausted and determined at any price not to repeat the experience. Americans, after their vital contribution to the defeat of Imperial Germany, wanted to wash their hands of what they saw as a corrupt and vicious Old World. Central Europe, fragmented by new frontiers drawn at Versailles, faced the humiliation and penury of defeat. Their pride shattered, officers of the *Kaiserlich und Königlich* Austro-Hungarian army experienced a reversal of the Cinderella story, with their fairytale uniforms replaced by the threadbare clothes of the unemployed. The bitterness of most German officers and soldiers at their defeat was intensified by the fact that until July 1918 their armies had been unbeaten, and that made the sudden collapse at home appear all the more inexplicable and sinister. In their view, the mutinies and revolts within Germany during the autumn of 1918 which

precipitated the abdication of the Kaiser had been caused entirely by Jewish Bolsheviks. Left-wing agitators had indeed played a part and the most prominent German revolutionary leaders in 1918–19 had been Jewish, but the main causes behind the unrest had been war-weariness and hunger. The German right's pernicious conspiracy theory – the stab-in-the-back legend – was part of its inherent compulsion to confuse cause and effect.

The hyper-inflation of 1922–3 undermined both the certainties and the rectitude of the Germanic bourgeoisie. The bitterness of national and personal shame produced an incoherent anger. German nationalists dreamed of the day when the humiliation of the Versailles *Diktat* could be reversed. Life improved in Germany during the second half of the 1920s, mainly due to massive American loans. But the world depression, which began after the Wall Street Crash of 1929, hit Germany even harder once Britain and other countries left the gold standard in September 1931. Fear of another round of hyper-inflation persuaded Chancellor Brüning's government to maintain the Reichsmark's link to the price of gold, making it over-valued. American loans had ceased, and protectionism cut off German export markets. This led to mass unemployment, which dramatically increased the opportunity for demagogues promising radical solutions.

The crisis of capitalism had accelerated the crisis of liberal democracy, which was rendered ineffective in many European countries by the fragmentary effect of voting by proportional representation. Most of the parliamentary systems which had sprung up following the collapse of three continental empires in 1918 were swept away, unable to cope with civil strife. And ethnic minorities, which had existed in comparative peace under the old imperial regimes, were now threatened by doctrines of national purity.

Recent memories of the Russian Revolution and the violent destruction of other civil wars in Hungary, Finland, the Baltic states and indeed Germany itself, greatly increased the process of political polarization. The cycle of fear and hatred risked turning inflammatory rhetoric into a self-fulfilling prophecy, as events in Spain soon showed. Manichaean alternatives are bound to break up a democratic centrism based on compromise. In this new collectivist age, violent solutions appeared supremely heroic

to intellectuals of both left and right, as well as to embittered ex-soldiers from the First World War. In the face of financial disaster, the authoritarian state suddenly seemed to be the natural modern order throughout most of Europe, and an answer to the chaos of factional strife.

In September 1930, the National Socialist Party's share of the vote jumped from 2.5 per cent to 18.3. The conservative right in Germany, which had little respect for democracy, effectively destroyed the Weimar Republic, and thus opened the door for Hitler. Gravely underestimating Hitler's ruthlessness, they thought that they could use him as a populist puppet to defend their idea of Germany. But he knew exactly what he wanted, while they did not. On 30 January 1933, Hitler became chancellor and moved rapidly to eliminate all potential opposition.

The tragedy for Germany's subsequent victims was that a critical mass of the population, desperate for order and respect, was eager to follow the most reckless criminal in history. Hitler managed to appeal to their worst instincts: resentment, intolerance, arrogance and, most dangerous of all, a sense of racial superiority. Any remaining belief in a *Rechtsstaat*, a nation based on respect for the rule of law, crumpled in the face of Hitler's insistence that the judicial system must be the servant of the new order. Public institutions – the courts, the universities, the general staff and the press – kowtowed to the new regime. Opponents found themselves helplessly isolated and insulted as traitors to the new definition of the Fatherland, not only by the regime itself, but also by all those who supported it. The Gestapo, unlike Stalin's own secret police, the NKVD, was surprisingly idle. Most of its arrests were purely in response to denunciations of people by their fellow Germans.

The officer corps, which had prided itself on an apolitical tradition, also allowed itself to be wooed by the promise of increased forces and massive rearmament, even though it despised such a vulgar, ill-dressed suitor. Opportunism went hand in hand with cowardice in the face of authority. The nineteenth-century chancellor Otto von Bismarck himself once remarked that moral courage was a rare virtue in Germany, but it deserted a German completely the moment he put on a uniform. The Nazis, not surprisingly, wanted to get almost everyone into uniform, not least the children.

Hitler's greatest talent lay in spotting and exploiting the weakness of his opponents. The left in Germany, bitterly divided between the German Communist Party and the Social Democrats, had presented no real threat. Hitler easily out-manoeuvred the conservatives who thought, with naive arrogance, that they could control him. As soon as he had consolidated his power at home with sweeping decrees and mass imprisonment, he turned his attention to breaking the Treaty of Versailles. Conscription was reintroduced in 1935, the British agreed to an increase in the German navy and the Luftwaffe was openly constituted. Britain and France made no serious protest at the accelerated programme of rearmament.

In March 1936, German troops reoccupied the Rhineland in the first overt breach of the Versailles and Locarno treaties. This slap in the face to the French, who had occupied the region over a decade earlier, ensured widespread adulation of the Führer in Germany, even among many who had not voted for him. Their support and the supine Anglo-French reaction gave Hitler the nerve to continue on his course. Single-handed, he had restored German pride, while rearmament, far more than his vaunted public works programme, halted the rise in unemployment. The brutality of the Nazis and the loss of freedom seemed to most Germans a small price to pay.

Hitler's forceful seduction of the German people began to strip the country of human values, step by step. Nowhere was the effect more evident than in the persecution of the Jews, which progressed in fits and starts. Yet contrary to general belief, this was often driven more from within the Nazi Party than from above. Hitler's apocalyptic rants against Jews did not necessarily mean that he had already decided on a 'Final Solution' of physical annihilation. He was content to allow SA (Sturmabteilung) stormtroopers to attack Jews and their businesses and steal their possessions to satisfy an incoherent mixture of greed, envy and imagined resentment. At that stage Nazi policy aimed at stripping Jews of civil rights and everything they owned, and then through humiliation and harassment to force them to leave Germany. 'The Jews must get out of Germany, yes out of the whole of Europe,' Hitler told his propaganda minister Joseph Goebbels on 30 November 1937. 'That will take some time yet, but will and must happen.'

Hitler's programme to make Germany the dominant power in Europe had been made quite clear in *Mein Kampf*, a combination of autobiography and political manifesto first published in 1925. First he would unite Germany and Austria, then he would bring Germans outside the borders of the Reich back under its control. 'People of the same blood should be in the same Reich', he declared. Only when this had been achieved would the German people have the 'moral right' to 'acquire foreign territory. The plough is then the sword; and the tears of war will produce the daily bread for the generations to come.'

His policy of aggression was stated clearly on the very first page. Yet even though every German couple had to purchase a copy on marriage, few seem to have taken his bellicose predictions seriously. They preferred to believe his more recent and oft-repeated assertions that he did not desire war. And Hitler's daring coups in the face of British and French weakness confirmed them in their hopes that he could achieve all he wanted without a major conflict. They did not see that the over-heated German economy and Hitler's determination to make use of the country's head-start in armaments made the invasion of neighbouring countries a virtual certainty.

Hitler was not interested merely in reoccupying the territory lost by Germany after the Versailles Treaty. He despised such a half-hearted step. He seethed with impatience, convinced that he would not live long enough to achieve his dream of Germanic supremacy. He wanted the whole of central Europe and all of Russia up to the Volga for German *Lebensraum* to secure Germany's self-sufficiency and status as a great power. His dream of subjugated eastern territories had been greatly encouraged by the brief German occupation in 1918 of the Baltic states, part of Belorussia, Ukraine and southern Russia as far as Rostov on the Don. This followed the 1918 Treaty of Brest-Litovsk, Germany's own *Diktat* to the nascent Soviet regime. The 'bread-basket' of Ukraine especially attracted German interest, after the near starvation caused largely by the British blockade during the First World War. Hitler was determined to avoid the demoralization suffered by Germans in 1918, which had led to revolution and collapse. This time others would be made to starve. But one of the main purposes of his *Lebensraum* plan was to seize oil production

in the east. Some 85 per cent of the Reich's oil supplies, even in peacetime, had to be imported, and that would be Germany's Achilles heel in war.

Eastern colonies appeared the best means to establish self-sufficiency, yet Hitler's ambition was far greater than that of other nationalists. In line with his social-Darwinist belief that the life of nations was a struggle for racial mastery, he wanted to reduce the Slav population dramatically in numbers through deliberate starvation and to enslave the survivors as a helot class.

His decision to intervene in the Spanish Civil War in the summer of 1936 was not as opportunistic as has often been portrayed. He was convinced that a Bolshevik Spain, combined with a left-wing government in France, presented a strategic threat to Germany from the west, at a time when he faced Stalin's Soviet Union in the east. Once again he was able to exploit the democracies' abhorrence of war. The British feared that the conflict in Spain might provoke another European conflict, while the new Popular Front government in France was afraid to act alone. This allowed Germany's flagrant military support of Generalissimo Francisco Franco's Nationalists to ensure their ultimate victory while Hermann Göring's Luftwaffe experimented with new aircraft and tactics. The Spanish Civil War also brought Hitler and Benito Mussolini closer together, with the Italian Fascist government sending a corps of 'volunteers' to fight alongside the Nationalists. But Mussolini, for all his bombast and ambitions in the Mediterranean, was nervous about Hitler's determination to overturn the status quo. The Italian people were not ready, either militarily or psychologically, for a European war.

Eager to obtain another ally in the coming war with the Soviet Union, Hitler established the Anti-Comintern Pact with Japan in November 1936. Japan had begun its colonial expansion in the Far East during the last decade of the nineteenth century. Profiting from the decay of the Chinese imperial regime, Japan established a presence in Manchuria, seized Formosa (Taiwan) and occupied Korea. Its defeat of Tsarist Russia in the war of 1904-5 made it the major military power in the region. Anti-western feeling grew in Japan with the effects of the Wall Street Crash and the worldwide depression. And an increasingly nationalistic officer class

viewed Manchuria and China in a similar way to the Nazis' designs on the Soviet Union: as a landmass and a population to be subjugated to feed the home islands of Japan.

The Sino-Japanese conflict has long been like a missing section in the jigsaw of the Second World War. Having begun well before the outbreak of fighting in Europe, the conflict in China has often been treated as a completely separate affair, even though it saw the largest deployment of Japanese ground forces in the Far East, as well as the involvement of both the Americans and the Soviet Union.

In September 1931, the Japanese military created the Mukden Incident, in which they blew up a railway to justify their seizure of the whole of Manchuria. They hoped to turn the region into a major food-producing region as their own domestic agriculture had declined disastrously. They called it Manchukuo and set up a puppet regime, with the deposed emperor Henry Pu Yi as figure-head. The civilian government in Tokyo, although despised by officers, felt obliged to support the army. And the League of Nations in Geneva refused Chinese calls for sanctions against Japan. Japanese colonists, mainly peasants, poured in to seize land for themselves with the government's encouragement. It wanted 'one million households' established as colonial farmers over the next twenty years. Japan's actions left it isolated diplomatically, but the country exulted in its triumph. This marked the start of a fateful progression, both in foreign expansion and in military influence over the government in Tokyo.

A more hawkish administration took over and the Kwantung Army in Manchuria extended its control almost to the gates of Peking. Chiang Kai-shek's Kuomintang government in Nanking was forced to withdraw its forces. Chiang claimed to be the heir of Sun Yat-sen, who had wanted to introduce a western-style democracy, but he was really a generalissimo of warlords.

The Japanese military began to eye their Soviet neighbour to the north and cast glances south into the Pacific. Their targets were the Far Eastern colonies of Britain, France and the Netherlands, with the oilfields of the Dutch East Indies. The uneasy stand-off in China was then suddenly broken on 7 July 1937 by a Japanese provocation at the Marco Polo Bridge outside the former capital of Peking. The Imperial Army in Tokyo assured Emperor Hirohito

that China could be defeated in a few months. Reinforcements were sent across to the mainland and a horrific campaign ensued, fired partly by a Chinese massacre of Japanese civilians. The Imperial Army was unleashed. But the Sino-Japanese War did not end in a rapid triumph as the generals in Tokyo had predicted. The appalling violence of the attacker stimulated a bitter resistance. Hitler failed to recognise the lesson for his own onslaught against the Soviet Union four years later.

Some westerners began to see the Sino-Japanese War as a counterpart to the Spanish Civil War. Robert Capa, Ernest Hemingway, W. H. Auden and Christopher Isherwood, the film-maker Joris Ivens and many journalists all visited and expressed their sympathy and support for the Chinese in general. Left-wingers, a few of whom visited the Chinese Communist headquarters in Yen-an, supported Mao Tse-tung, even though Stalin backed Chiang Kai-shek and his party, the Kuomintang. But neither the British nor the American government was prepared to take any practical steps.

Neville Chamberlain's government, like most of the British population, was still prepared to live with a rearmed and revived Germany. Many conservatives saw the Nazis as a bulwark against Bolshevism. Chamberlain, a former lord mayor of Birmingham of old-fashioned rectitude, made the great mistake of expecting other statesmen to share similar values and a horror of war. He had been a highly skilled minister and a very effective chancellor of the Exchequer, but he knew nothing of foreign policy or defence matters. With his wing-collar, Edwardian moustache and rolled umbrella, he proved to be totally out of his depth when confronted by the gleaming ruthlessness of the Nazi regime.

Others, even those of left-wing sympathies, were also reluctant to confront Hitler's regime, for they were still convinced that Germany had been treated most unfairly at the Versailles conference. They also found it hard to object to Hitler's professed desire to bring adjacent German minorities, such as those in Czechoslovakia's Sudetenland, within the Reich. Above all, the British and French were horrified by the idea of another European war. To allow Nazi Germany to annex Austria in March 1938 appeared a small price to pay for world peace, especially when the majority

of Austrians had voted in 1918 for *Anschluss*, or union, with Germany and twenty years later welcomed the Nazi takeover. Austrian claims at the end of the war to have been Hitler's first victim were completely bogus.

Hitler then decided that he wanted to invade Czechoslovakia in October. This was timed to be well after German farmers had brought in the harvest because Nazi ministers were afraid of a crisis in the national food supply. But to Hitler's exasperation Chamberlain and his French counterpart Édouard Daladier, during the Munich negotiations in September, offered him the Sudetenland in the hope of preserving peace. This deprived Hitler of his war, but allowed him eventually to take over the whole country without a fight. Chamberlain also made a fundamental error in refusing to consult Stalin. This influenced the Soviet dictator's decision the following August to agree to a pact with Nazi Germany. Chamberlain, rather like Franklin D. Roosevelt later with Stalin, believed with misplaced complacency that he alone could convince Hitler that good relations with the western Allies were in his own interest.

Some historians have argued that, if Britain and France had been prepared to fight in the autumn of 1938, events might have turned out very differently. That is certainly possible from a German point of view. The fact remains that neither the British nor the French people were psychologically prepared for war, mainly because they had been misinformed by politicians, diplomats and the press. Anyone who had tried to warn of Hitler's plans, such as Winston Churchill, was simply regarded as a warmonger.

Only in November were eyes opened to the real nature of Hitler's regime. Following the assassination of a German embassy official in Paris by a young Polish Jew, Nazi stormtroopers unleashed the German pogrom known as *Kristallnacht* from all the broken shop windows. With the warclouds over Czechoslovakia that autumn, a 'violent energy' had brewed up within the Nazi Party. The SA stormtroopers burned synagogues, attacked and murdered Jews, and smashed their shop windows, prompting Göring to complain about the cost in foreign exchange of replacing all the plate glass which came from Belgium. Many ordinary Germans were shocked, but the Nazis' policy of isolating the Jews

soon succeeded in persuading the vast majority of their fellow citizens to be indifferent to their fate. And all too many were later tempted by the easy pickings of looted possessions, expropriated apartments and the 'Aryanization' of Jewish businesses. The Nazis were exceptionally clever in the way they drew more and more fellow citizens into their circle of crime.

Hitler's seizure of the rest of Czechoslovakia in March 1939 – a flagrant contravention of the Munich Agreement – finally proved that his claim of bringing ethnic Germans back into the Reich was little more than a pretext to increase his territory. British outrage forced Chamberlain to offer guarantees to Poland as a warning to Hitler against further expansion.

Hitler complained later that he had been thwarted from having a war in 1938 because 'the British and French accepted all my demands at Munich'. In the spring of 1939 he explained his impatience to the Romanian foreign minister: 'I am now fifty,' he said. 'I would rather have the war now than when I am fifty-five or sixty.'

Hitler thus revealed that he intended to achieve his goal of European domination during a single lifetime, which he expected to be short. With his manic vanity, he could not trust anyone else to carry on his mission. He regarded himself as literally irreplaceable and told his generals that the fate of the Reich depended on him alone. The Nazi Party and his whole chaotic form of governance were never designed to produce stability and continuity. And Hitler's rhetoric of the 'Thousand Year Reich' revealed a significant psychological contradiction, coming as it did from a determined bachelor who took a perverse pride in being a genetic dead-end while harbouring an unhealthy fascination with suicide.

On 30 January 1939, the sixth anniversary of his taking power, Hitler made an important speech to the parliamentary deputies of the Reichstag. In it he included his fatal 'prophecy', one to which he and his followers in the Final Solution would compulsively hark back. He claimed that the Jews had laughed at his predictions that he would lead Germany and 'also bring the Jewish problem to its solution'. He then declaimed: 'I want today to be a prophet again: if international Jewry inside and outside Europe should succeed in plunging the nations once more into a world war, the result will be not the Bolshevization of the earth and therefore the victory of

Jewry, but the annihilation of the Jewish race in Europe.' This breathtaking confusion of cause and effect lay at the heart of Hitler's obsessive network of lies and self-deception.

Although Hitler had prepared for war and had wanted war with Czechoslovakia, he still could not understand why the British attitude should now switch so suddenly from appeasement to resistance. He still intended to attack France and Britain later, but that was to be at a time of his own choosing. The Nazi plan, following the bitter lesson of the First World War, was designed to compartmentalize conflicts to avoid fighting on more than one front at the same moment.

Hitler's surprise at the British reaction revealed this autodidact's very imperfect grasp of world history. The pattern of Britain's involvement in almost every European crisis since the eighteenth century should have explained the Chamberlain government's new policy. The change had nothing to do with ideology or idealism. Britain was not setting out to make a stand against fascism or anti-semitism, even if the moral aspect later became useful for national propaganda. Its motives lay in a traditional strategy. Germany's hostile occupation of Czechoslovakia clearly revealed Hitler's determination to dominate Europe. That was a threat to the status quo, which even a weakened and unbellicose Britain could never countenance. Hitler also underestimated Chamberlain's anger at having been so comprehensively deceived at Munich. Duff Cooper, who had resigned as First Lord of the Admiralty over the betrayal of the Czechs, wrote that Chamberlain 'had never met anyone in Birmingham who in the least resembled Adolf Hitler . . . Nobody in Birmingham had ever broken his promise to the mayor.'

Hitler's intentions were now chillingly clear. And the shock of his pact with Stalin in August 1939 confirmed that Poland would be his next victim. 'State boundaries', he had written in *Mein Kampf*, 'are made by man and are changed by man.' In retrospect, the cycle of resentment since the Treaty of Versailles may appear to have made the outbreak of another world war inevitable, but nothing in history is predestined. The aftermath of the First World War had certainly created unstable frontiers and tensions across much of Europe. But there can be no doubt that Adolf Hitler was

the chief architect of this new and far more terrible conflagration, which spread across the world to consume millions, including eventually himself. And yet, in an intriguing paradox, the first clash of the Second World War – the one in which Yang Kyoung-jong was first captured – began in the Far East.

I

The Outbreak of War

JUNE–AUGUST 1939

On 1 June 1939, Georgii Zhukov, a short and sturdy cavalry commander, received an urgent summons to Moscow. Stalin's purge of the Red Army, begun in 1937, still continued, so Zhukov, who had been accused once already, presumed that he had been denounced as an 'enemy of the people'. The next stage would see him fed into Lavrenti Beria's 'meatgrinder', as the NKVD's interrogation system was known.

In the paranoia of the 'Great Terror', senior officers had been among the first to be shot as Trotskyite-fascist spies. Around 30,000 were arrested. Many of the most senior had been executed and the majority tortured into making ludicrous confessions. Zhukov, who had been close to a number of the victims, had kept a bag packed ready for prison since the purge began two years before. Having long expected this moment, he wrote a farewell letter to his wife. 'For you I have this request,' it began. 'Do not give in to snivelling, keep steady, and try with dignity to endure the unpleasant separation honestly.'

But when Zhukov reached Moscow by train the next day, he was not arrested or taken to the Lubyanka Prison. He was told to report to the Kremlin to see Stalin's old crony from the 1st Cavalry Army in the civil war, Marshal Kliment Voroshilov, now the people's commissar of defence. During the purge, this 'mediocre, faceless, intellectually dim' soldier had strengthened his position by zealously eliminating talented commanders. Nikita Khrushchev, with earthy directness, later called him 'the biggest bag of shit in the army'.

Zhukov heard that he was to fly out to the Soviet satellite state of Outer Mongolia. There he was to take command of the 57th Special Corps, including both Red Army and Mongolian forces, to inflict a decisive reverse on the Imperial Japanese Army. Stalin was angry that the local commander seemed to have achieved

little. With the threat of war from Hitler in the west, he wanted to put an end to Japanese provocations from the puppet state of Manchukuo. Rivalry between Russia and Japan dated from Tsarist times and Russia's humiliating defeat in 1905 had certainly not been forgotten by the Soviet regime. Under Stalin its forces in the Far East had been greatly strengthened.

The Japanese military were obsessed by the threat of Bolshevism. And ever since the signature in November 1936 of the Anti-Comintern Pact between Germany and Japan, tensions on the Mongolian frontier had increased between Red Army frontier units and the Japanese Kwantung Army. The temperature had been raised considerably by a succession of border clashes in 1937, and the major one in 1938, the Changkufeng Incident at Lake Khasan, 110 kilometres south-west of Vladivostok.

The Japanese were also angry that the Soviet Union was supporting their Chinese enemy not just economically but also with T-26 tanks, a large staff of military advisers and 'volunteer' air squadrons. The leaders of the Kwantung Army became increasingly frustrated with Emperor Hirohito's reluctance in August 1938 to allow them to respond to the Soviets in massive force. Their arrogance was based on the mistaken assumption that the Soviet Union would not strike back. They demanded *carte blanche* to act as they saw fit in any future border incidents. Their motives were self-interested. A low-level conflict with the Soviet Union would force Tokyo to increase the Kwantung Army, not reduce it. They feared that some of their formations might otherwise be diverted south to the war against the Chinese Nationalist armies of Chiang Kai-shek.

There was some support for the aggressive views of the Kwantung leadership within the imperial general staff in Tokyo. But the navy and the civilian politicians were deeply concerned. Pressure from Nazi Germany on Japan to regard the Soviet Union as the main enemy made them most uneasy. They did not want to become involved in a northern war along the Mongolian and Siberian borders. This split brought down the government of Prince Konoe Fumimaro. But the argument in senior government and military circles did not abate as the approach of war in Europe became self-evident. The army and extreme right-wing groups publicized and often exaggerated the growing number of

clashes on the northern frontiers. And the Kwantung Army, without informing Tokyo, issued an order allowing the commander on the spot to act as he thought fit to punish the perpetrators. This was passed off under the so-called prerogative of 'field initiative', which allowed armies to move troops for reasons of security within their own theatre without consulting the imperial general staff.

The Nomonhan Incident, which the Soviet Union later referred to as the Battle of Khalkhin Gol after the river, began on 12 May 1939. A Mongolian cavalry regiment crossed the Khalkhin Gol to graze their shaggy little mounts on the wide, undulating steppe. They then advanced some twenty kilometres from the river, which the Japanese regarded as the border, to the large village of Nomonhan, which the Mongolian People's Republic claimed lay on the frontier line. Manchurian forces from the Kwantung Army pushed them back to the Khalkhin Gol, then the Mongolians counter-attacked. Skirmishing back and forth continued for about two weeks. The Red Army brought up reinforcements. On 28 May, the Soviet and Mongolian forces destroyed a Japanese force of 200 men and some antiquated armoured cars. In mid-June, Red Army aviation bombers raided a number of targets while their ground forces pushed forward into Nomonhan.

Escalation rapidly followed. Red Army units in the area were reinforced by troops from the Trans-Baikal military district, as Zhukov had demanded after his arrival on 5 June. The main problem facing the Soviet forces was that they were operating over 650 kilometres from the nearest railhead, which meant a huge logistic effort with trucks over dirt roads that were so bad that the round trip took five days. This formidable difficulty at least lulled the Japanese into underestimating the fighting power of the forces Zhukov was assembling.

They sent forward to Nomonhan the 23rd Division of Lieutenant General Komatsubara Michitaro and part of the 7th Division. The Kwantung Army demanded a greatly increased air presence to support its troops. This caused concern in Tokyo. The imperial general staff sent an order forbidding retaliatory strikes and announced that one of their officers was coming over to report back on the situation. This news prompted the Kwantung commanders to complete the operation before they were restrained.

On the morning of 27 June, they sent their air squadrons in a strike against Soviet bases in Outer Mongolia. The general staff in Tokyo were furious and despatched a series of orders forbidding any further air activity.

On the night of 1 July, the Japanese stormed across the Khalkhin Gol and seized a strategic hill threatening the Soviet flank. In three days of heavy fighting, however, Zhukov eventually forced them back across the river in a counter-attack with his tanks. He then occupied part of the east bank and began his great deception – what the Red Army termed *maskirovka*. While Zhukov was secretly preparing a major offensive, his troops gave the impression of creating a static defensive line. Badly encoded messages were sent demanding more and more materials for bunkers, loudspeakers broadcast the noise of pile-drivers, pamphlets entitled *What the Soviet Soldier Must Know in Defence* were distributed in prodigal quantities so that some fell into enemy hands. Zhukov, meanwhile, was bringing in tank reinforcements under cover of darkness and concealing them. His truck drivers became exhausted from ferrying up sufficient reserves of ammunition for the offensive over the terrible roads from the railhead.

On 23 July, the Japanese attacked again head-on, but they failed to break the Soviet line. Their own supply problems meant that they again had to wait some time before they were ready to launch a third assault. But they were unaware that Zhukov's force had by now increased to 58,000 men, with nearly 500 tanks and 250 aircraft.

At 05.45 hours on Sunday, 20 August, Zhukov launched his surprise attack, first with a three-hour artillery bombardment, then with tanks and aircraft, as well as infantry and cavalry. The heat was terrible. With temperatures over 40 degrees Centigrade, machine guns and cannon are said to have jammed and the dust and smoke from explosions obscured the battlefield.

While the Soviet infantry, which included three rifle divisions and a paratroop brigade, held hard in the centre tying down the bulk of the Japanese forces, Zhukov sent his three armoured brigades and a Mongolian cavalry division from behind in encircling movements. His tanks, which forded a tributary of the Khalkhin Gol at speed, included T-26s, which had been used in the Spanish Civil War to support the Republicans, and much faster prototypes

of what later became the T-34, the most effective medium tank of the Second World War. The obsolete Japanese tanks did not stand a chance. Their guns lacked armour-piercing shells.

Japanese infantry, despite having no effective anti-tank guns, fought desperately. Lieutenant Sadakaji was seen to charge a tank wielding his samurai sword until he was cut down. Japanese soldiers fought on from their earth bunkers, inflicting heavy casualties on their attackers, who in some cases brought up flame-throwing tanks to deal with them. Zhukov was undismayed by his own losses. When the commander-in-chief of the Trans-Baikal Front, who had come to observe the battle, suggested that he should halt the offensive for the moment, Zhukov gave his superior short shrift. If he stopped the attack and started it again, he argued, Soviet losses would be ten times greater 'because of our indecisiveness'.

Despite the Japanese determination never to surrender, the Kwantung Army's antiquated tactics and armament produced a humiliating defeat. Komatsubara's forces were surrounded and almost completely destroyed in a protracted massacre inflicting 61,000 casualties. The Red Army lost 7,974 killed and 15,251 wounded. By the morning of 31 August, the battle was over. During its course, the Nazi-Soviet pact had been signed in Moscow, and, as it ended, German troops massed on the Polish frontiers ready to begin the war in Europe. Isolated clashes continued until the middle of September, but Stalin decided in the light of the world situation that it would be prudent to agree to Japanese requests for a ceasefire.

Zhukov, who had come to Moscow fearing arrest, now returned there to receive from Stalin's hands the gold star of Hero of the Soviet Union. His first victory, a bright moment in a terrible period for the Red Army, had far-reaching results. The Japanese had been shaken to the core by this unexpected defeat, while their Chinese enemies, both Nationalist and Communist, were encouraged. In Tokyo, the 'strike north' faction, which wanted war against the Soviet Union, received a major setback. The 'strike south' party, led by the navy, was henceforth in the ascendant. In April 1941, to Berlin's dismay, a Soviet-Japanese non-aggression pact would be signed just a few weeks before Operation Barbarossa, Germany's invasion of the Soviet Union. The battle of

Khalkhin Gol thus represented a major influence on the subsequent Japanese decision to move against the colonies of France, the Netherlands and Britain in south-east Asia, and even take on the United States Navy in the Pacific. The consequent refusal by Tokyo to attack the Soviet Union in the winter of 1941 would thus play a critical role in the geo-political turning point of the war, both in the Far East and in Hitler's life-and-death struggle with the Soviet Union.

Hitler's strategy in the pre-war period had not been consistent. At times he had hoped to make an alliance with Britain in advance of his eventual intention to attack the Soviet Union, but then planned to knock it out of a continental role by a pre-emptive strike against France. To protect his eastern flank in case he did strike west first, Hitler had pushed his foreign minister Joachim von Ribbentrop into making overtures to Poland, offering an alliance. The Poles, well aware of the dangers of provoking Stalin, and rightly suspecting that Hitler wanted their country as a satellite, proved exceedingly cautious. Yet the Polish government had made a serious mistake out of sheer opportunism. When Germany moved into the Sudetenland in 1938, Polish forces occupied the Czechoslovak province of Teschen, which Warsaw had claimed since 1920 to be ethnically Polish, and also pushed forward the frontier in the Carpathian Mountains. This move antagonized the Soviets and dismayed the British and French governments. Polish over-confidence played into Hitler's hands. The Poles' idea of creating a central European bloc against German expansion – a 'Third Europe' as they called it – proved to be a delusion.

On 8 March 1939, shortly before his troops occupied Prague and the rest of Czechoslovakia, Hitler told his generals that he intended to crush Poland. He argued that Germany would then be able to profit from Polish resources and dominate central Europe to the south. He had decided to secure Poland's quiescence by conquest, not by diplomacy, before attacking westwards. He also told them that he intended to destroy the 'Jewish democracy' of the United States.

On 23 March, Hitler seized the district of Memel from Lithuania to add to East Prussia. His programme for war was accelerated because he feared that British and French rearmament

would soon catch up. Yet he still did not take seriously Chamberlain's guarantee to Poland, announced in the House of Commons on 31 March. On 3 April, he ordered his generals to prepare plans for Operation White, an invasion of Poland which was to be ready by the end of August.

Chamberlain, reluctant to deal with Stalin out of a visceral anti-Communism, and overestimating the strength of the Poles, was slow to create a defensive bloc against Hitler across central Europe and the Balkans. In fact the British guarantee to Poland implicitly excluded the Soviet Union. Chamberlain's government began to react to this glaring omission only when reports came of German-Soviet trade talks. Stalin, who loathed the Poles, was deeply alarmed by the failure of the British and French governments to stand up to Hitler. Their omission the previous year to include him in the discussions over the fate of Czechoslovakia had only increased his resentment. He also suspected that the British and French wanted to manoeuvre him into a conflict with Germany to avoid fighting themselves. He naturally preferred to see the capitalist states engage in their own war of attrition.

On 18 April, Stalin put the British and French governments to the test by offering an alliance with a pact promising assistance to any central European country threatened by an aggressor. The British were uncertain how to react. The first instinct of both Lord Halifax, the foreign secretary, and Sir Alexander Cadogan, his permanent under-secretary, was to consider the Soviet *démarche* to be 'mischievous' in intent. Chamberlain feared that to agree to such a move would simply provoke Hitler. In fact it spurred the Führer to seek his own accord with the Soviet dictator. In any case, the Poles and the Romanians were suspicious. They rightly feared that the Soviet Union would demand access for Red Army troops across their territory. The French, on the other hand, having seen Russia as their natural ally against Germany since before the First World War, were much keener on the idea of a Soviet alliance. They felt that they could not move without Britain, and so applied pressure on London to agree to joint military talks with the Soviet regime. Stalin was unimpressed by the hesitant British reaction, but he also had his own secret agenda of pushing the Soviet frontiers further west. He already had his eye on Romanian Bessarabia, Finland, the Baltic states and eastern

Poland, especially the parts of Belorussia and Ukraine ceded to Poland after its victory in 1920. The British, finally accepting the necessity of a pact with the Soviet Union, only began to negotiate towards the end of May. But Stalin suspected, with a good deal of justification, that the British government was playing for time.

He was even less impressed by the Franco-British military delegation which departed on 5 August aboard a slow steamer to Leningrad. General Aimé Doumenc and Admiral Sir Reginald Plunkett-Ernlé-Drax lacked any power of decision. They could only report back to Paris and London. Their mission was in any case doomed to failure for other reasons. Doumenc and Drax faced an insuperable problem with Stalin's insistence on the right of transit for Red Army troops across Polish and Romanian territory. It was a demand which neither country would countenance. Both were viscerally suspicious of Communists in general and of Stalin above all. Time was slipping away as the fruitless talks continued into the second half of August, yet even the French, who were desperate for a deal, could not persuade the government in Warsaw to concede on this point. The Polish commander-in-chief, Marshal Edward Śmigły-Rydz, said that 'with the Germans we risk the loss of our liberty, but with the Russians we lose our soul'.

Hitler, provoked by the British and French attempts to include Romania in a defensive pact against further German aggression, decided that it was time to consider the ideologically unthinkable step of a Nazi-Soviet pact. On 2 August, Ribbentrop first broached the idea of a new relationship with the Soviet chargé d'affaires in Berlin. 'There is no problem from the Baltic to the Black Sea', Ribbentrop said to him, 'that could not be solved between the two of us.'

Ribbentrop did not hide Germany's aggressive intentions towards Poland and hinted at a division of the spoils. Two days later, the German ambassador in Moscow indicated that Germany would consider the Baltic states as part of the Soviet sphere of influence. On 14 August, Ribbentrop suggested that he should visit Moscow for talks. Vyacheslav Molotov, the new Soviet foreign minister, expressed concern at German support for the Japanese, whose forces were still locked in combat with the Red Army either side of the Khalkhin Gol, but he nevertheless

indicated a Soviet willingness to continue discussions, especially about the Baltic states.

For Stalin, the benefits became increasingly obvious. In fact he had been considering an accommodation with Hitler ever since the Munich Agreement. Preparations were taken a step further in the spring of 1939. On 3 May, NKVD troops surrounded the commissariat of foreign affairs. 'Purge the ministry of Jews,' Stalin had ordered. 'Clean out the "synagogue".' The veteran Soviet diplomat Maxim Litvinov was replaced as foreign minister by Molotov and a number of other Jews were arrested.

An agreement with Hitler would allow Stalin to seize the Baltic states and Bessarabia, to say nothing of eastern Poland, in the event of a German invasion from the west. And knowing that Hitler's next step would be against France and Britain, he hoped to see German power weakened in what he expected would be a bloody war with the capitalist west. This would give him time to build up the Red Army, weakened and demoralized by his purge.

For Hitler, an agreement with Stalin would enable him to launch his war, first against Poland and then against France and Britain, even without allies of his own. The so-called Pact of Steel with Italy, signed on 22 May, amounted to very little, since Mussolini did not believe his country would be ready for war until 1943. Hitler, however, still gambled on his hunch that Britain and France would shrink from war when he invaded Poland, despite their guarantees.

Nazi Germany's propaganda war against Poland intensified. The Poles were to be blamed for the invasion being prepared against them. And Hitler took every precaution to avoid negotiations because he did not want to be deprived of a war this time by last-minute concessions.

To carry the German people with him, he exploited their deep resentment against Poland because it had received West Prussia and part of Silesia in the hated Versailles settlement. The Free City of Danzig and the Polish Corridor which, created to give Poland access to the Baltic, separated East Prussia from the rest of the Reich were brandished as two of the Versailles Treaty's greatest injustices. Yet on 23 May the Führer had declared that the coming war was not about the Free City of Danzig, but about a war for

Lebensraum in the east. Reports of the oppression against the 800,000 ethnic Germans in Poland were grossly manipulated. Not surprisingly, Hitler's threats to Poland had provoked discriminatory measures against them and some 70,000 fled to the Reich in late August. Polish claims that ethnic Germans were involved in acts of subversion before the conflict began were almost certainly false. In any case, allegations in the Nazi press of persecution of ethnic Germans in Poland were portrayed in dramatic terms.

On 17 August, when the German army was carrying out manoeuvres on the River Elbe, two British captains from the embassy who had been invited as observers found that the younger German officers were 'very self-confident and sure that the German Army could take on everyone'. Their generals and senior foreign ministry officials, however, were nervous that the invasion of Poland would bring about a European war. Hitler remained convinced that the British would not fight. In any case, he reasoned, his forthcoming pact with the Soviet Union would reassure those generals who feared a war on two fronts. But on 19 August, just in case the British and French declared war, Grossadmiral Erich Raeder ordered the pocket battleships *Deutschland* and *Graf Spee*, as well as sixteen U-boats, to put to sea and head for the Atlantic.

On 21 August at 11.30 hours, the German foreign ministry on the Wilhelmstrasse announced that a Soviet–German non-aggression pact was being proposed. When news of Stalin's agreement to talks reached Hitler at the Berghof, his Alpine retreat at Berchtesgaden, he is supposed to have clenched his fists in victory and banged the table, declaring to his entourage: 'I've got them! I've got them!' 'Germans in cafés were thrilled as they thought it would mean peace,' observed a member of the British embassy staff. And the ambassador, Sir Nevile Henderson, reported to London soon afterwards that 'the first impression in Berlin was one of immense relief . . . Once more the faith of the German people in the ability of Herr Hitler to obtain his objective without war was reaffirmed.'

The British were shaken by the news, but for the French, who had counted far more on a pact with their traditional ally Russia, it was a bombshell. Ironically, Franco in Spain and the Japanese leadership were the most appalled. They felt betrayed, having received no warning that the instigator of the Anti-Comintern Pact

was now seeking an alliance with Moscow. The government in Tokyo collapsed under the shock, but the news also represented a grave blow to Chiang Kai-shek and the Chinese Nationalists.

On 23 August, Ribbentrop made his historic flight to the Soviet capital. There were few sticking points in the negotiations as the two totalitarian regimes divided central Europe between them in a secret protocol. Stalin demanded all of Latvia, which Ribbentrop conceded after receiving Hitler's prompt approval by telephone. Once both the public non-aggression pact and the secret protocols had been signed, Stalin proposed a toast to Hitler. He said to Ribbentrop that he knew 'how much the German nation loves its Führer'.

That same day, Sir Nevile Henderson had flown down to Berchtesgaden with a letter from Chamberlain in a last-ditch attempt to avoid war. But Hitler simply blamed the British for having encouraged the Poles to adopt an anti-German stance. Henderson, although an arch-appeaser, was finally convinced that 'the corporal of the last war was even more anxious to prove what he could do as a conquering Generalissimo in the next'. That same night, Hitler issued orders for the army to prepare to invade Poland three days later.

At 03.00 hours on 24 August, the British embassy in Berlin received a telegram from London with the codeword *Rajah*. Diplomats, some of them still in their pyjamas, began to burn secret papers. At midday a warning was issued to all British subjects to leave the country. The ambassador, although short of sleep from his journey to Berchtesgaden, still played bridge that evening with members of his staff.

The following day, Henderson again saw Hitler, who had come up to Berlin. The Führer offered a pact with Britain once he had occupied Poland, but he was exasperated when Henderson said that to reach any agreement he would have to desist in his aggression and evacuate Czechoslovakia as well. Once again, Hitler made his declaration that, if there was to be war, it should come now and not when he was fifty-five or sixty. That evening, to Hitler's genuine surprise and shock, the Anglo-Polish pact was formally signed.

In Berlin, British diplomats assumed the worst. 'We had moved all our personal luggage into the Embassy ballroom,' one of them

wrote, 'which was now beginning to look like Victoria station after the arrival of a boat-train.' German embassies and consulates in Britain, France and Poland were told to order German nationals to return to the Reich or move to a neutral country.

On Saturday, 26 August, the German government cancelled the commemoration of the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Battle of Tannenberg. But in fact this ceremony had been used to camouflage a massive concentration of troops in East Prussia. The old battleship *Schleswig-Holstein* had arrived off Danzig the day before, supposedly on a goodwill visit, but without any notification to the Polish government. Its magazines were filled with shells ready to bombard the Polish positions on the Westerplatte Peninsula near the estuary of the Vistula.

In Berlin that weekend, the population revelled in the glorious weather. The beaches along the Grunewald shore of the Wannsee were packed with sunbathers and swimmers. They seemed oblivious to the threat of war, despite the announcement that rationing would be introduced. At the British embassy, the staff began drinking up the stocks of champagne in the cellar. They had noted the greatly increased number of troops on the streets, many of them wearing newly issued yellow jackboots, whose leather had not yet been blackened with polish.

The start of the invasion had been planned for that day, but Hitler, taken off balance by Britain and France's resolution to support Poland, had postponed it the evening before. He was still hoping for signs of British vacillation. Embarrassingly, a unit of Brandenburger commandos, who did not receive the cancellation order in time, had advanced into Poland to seize a key bridge.

Hitler, still hoping to put the blame on Poland for the invasion, pretended to agree to negotiations, with Britain and France and also with Poland. But a black farce ensued. He refused to present any terms for the Polish government to discuss, he would not invite an emissary from Warsaw and he set a time limit of midnight on 30 August. He also rejected an offer from Mussolini's government to mediate. On 28 August, he again ordered the army to be ready to invade on the morning of 1 September.

Ribbentrop, meanwhile, made himself unavailable to both the Polish and British ambassadors. It accorded with his habitual posture of gazing in an aloof manner into the middle distance,

ignoring those around him as if they were not worthy to share his thoughts. He finally agreed to see Henderson at midnight on 30 August, just as the uncommunicated peace terms expired. Henderson demanded to know what these terms were. Ribbentrop 'produced a lengthy document', Henderson reported, 'which he read out to me in German, or rather gabbled through to me as fast as he could, in a tone of the utmost annoyance . . . When he had finished, I accordingly asked him to let me see it. Herr von Ribbentrop refused categorically, threw the document with a contemptuous gesture on the table and said that it was now out of date since no Polish Emissary had arrived at Berlin by midnight.' The next day, Hitler issued Directive No. 1 for Operation White, the invasion of Poland, which had been prepared over the previous five months.

In Paris, there was a grim resignation, with the memory of more than a million dead in the previous conflict. In Britain, the mass evacuation of children from London had been announced for 1 September, but the majority of the population still believed that the Nazi leader was bluffing. The Poles had no such illusions; yet there were no signs of panic in Warsaw, only determination.

The Nazis' final attempt to manufacture a *casus belli* was truly representative of their methods. This act of black propaganda had been planned and organized by Reinhard Heydrich, deputy to Reichsführer-SS Heinrich Himmler. Heydrich had carefully selected a group of his most trusted SS men. They would fake an attack both on a German customs post and on the radio station near the border town of Gleiwitz, then put out a message in Polish. The SS would shoot some drugged prisoners from Sachsenhausen concentration camp dressed in Polish uniforms, and leave their bodies as evidence. On the afternoon of 31 August, Heydrich telephoned the officer he had put in charge of the project to give the coded phrase to launch the operation: 'Grandmother dead!' It was chillingly symbolic that the first victims of the Second World War in Europe should have been concentration camp prisoners murdered for a lie.