Appeasement Fails

Main Idea Other European nations stood by as Germany expanded its territory.

Reading Focus How do you deal with bullies? Is it better to stand up to them or give them what they want? Read on to find out how Europe’s leaders dealt with Adolf Hitler’s demands.

One reason Adolf Hitler was popular in Germany was because he criticized the Treaty of Versailles. Many Germans believed the treaty was unfair. Hitler promised in his speeches that he would no longer obey the treaty.

The Treaty of Versailles kept Germany’s military forces small. Hitler, however, insisted that this was unfair. In March 1935, he stated that Germany would build a new air force and increase the size of its army. The Treaty of Versailles had also declared that no German troops could be in the Rhineland, a German territory west of the Rhine River along the French border. In 1936 Hitler ordered troops into the Rhineland.

France wanted to expel the German troops from the Rhineland, but the French government would not act without British help. Britain did not want to use force against Germany. Instead, British leaders chose a policy of appeasement (uh-PEEZ-muhnt). Appeasement is the idea that if you meet another government’s demands, you can avoid war.

Hitler gained a close ally in Italy’s Benito Mussolini. In 1935 Mussolini sent Italian forces to invade the African nation of Ethiopia. Britain and France opposed
the invasion but took no military action to
stop it. Hitler, however, threw his support to
 Mussolini.

Next, the two dictators intervened in
Spain. From 1936 to 1939, a civil war
divided that country. Germany and Italy
helped a Spanish military leader, General
Francisco Franco, overthrow Spain’s new
republic. Soon after, Italy and Germany
formed an alliance.

Next, Hitler turned to Austria. He
insisted that Austria, a German-speaking
country, should be part of Germany. In
March 1938, he sent troops into Austria
and took it over.

Hitler then turned to Austria’s neigh-
bor, Czechoslovakia, and demanded that
the Czechs give Germany the Sudetenland
(soon•DAY•tuhn•LAND), an area in western
Czechoslovakia where many Germans
lived. Czechoslovakia was ready to fight to
keep the Sudetenland, but Britain and
France preferred to negotiate. In
September 1938, European leaders met in
the German city of Munich (MYOO•nihk).

At the Munich Conference, Britain and
France agreed to give the Sudetenland to
Germany. Hitler, in turn, promised not to
expand Germany’s territory further. The
British prime minister, Neville Chamberlain
(NEHV•uhl CHAYM•buhl•luhn), returned
home and declared that there would be
“peace in our time.”

Hopes for peace were smashed the fol-
lowing year. In March 1939, German forces
took over western Czechoslovakia and set
up a Nazi-friendly state in the eastern part.
Hitler then demanded control of Danzig, a
German city inside Polish territory. In
response, Britain promised to support
Poland if the Germans invaded.

Reading Check Analyze Why did British
and French leaders appease Hitler?

The War Begins

Main Idea World War II began when Germany
invaded Poland in September 1939, leading France
and Britain to declare war.

Reading Focus Have you ever had to do something
really difficult? What helped you to do it? Read to learn
how the British endured defeats and German bombings.

In the summer of 1939, Hitler prepared
to invade Poland. He worried, however, that
such an attack would anger Stalin because
Poland bordered the Soviet Union. Though
bitter enemies, Hitler and Stalin signed a
treaty in August 1939 in which they prom-
ised not to attack each other. They also
agreed to divide Poland between them. This
agreement freed Hitler to attack Poland.