

Europe Goes to War

READING FOCUS

- How did the German invasion of Poland lead to war with Britain and France?
- What wartime victories and setbacks did Germany experience in western Europe?
- Why was the Battle of Britain an important victory for Britain?

MAIN IDEA

After war began in September 1939, Germany easily conquered Poland, France, and several smaller countries, but Britain successfully defended itself against German air attacks.

KEY TERMS

blitzkrieg
collaboration
Resistance
Allies

TAKING NOTES

As you read, prepare an outline of this section. Use Roman numerals to indicate the major headings of the section, capital letters for the subheadings, and numbers for the supporting details.

I. Invasion of Poland

- A. Hitler invades Czechoslovakia.
- B. Stalin and Hitler agree to divide Eastern Europe between them.
- C. German *blitzkrieg* attack overwhelms Poland in three weeks.

II. War in the West

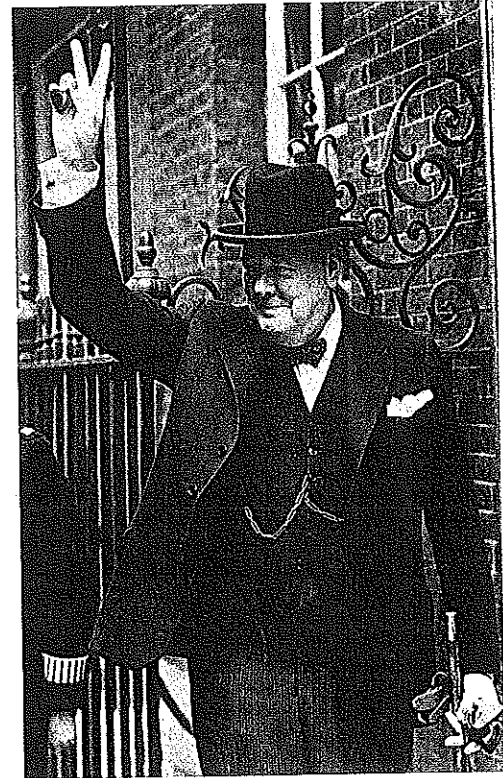
Setting the Scene Neville Chamberlain's triumphant return from the Munich Conference in 1938 did not cheer everyone. Winston Churchill, a member of the British Parliament, believed that sacrificing part of Czechoslovakia to preserve peace was a fatal mistake. He made a dire prediction about this choice: "Britain and France had to choose between war and dishonor," Churchill said. "They chose dishonor. They will have war."

Churchill thought that Hitler had no intention of stopping his military machine and that Chamberlain's peace agreement would give Britain only a few more months of peace. He and other members of Parliament urged Chamberlain to reconsider Britain's policy toward Germany. Alfred Duff Cooper, the head of the British navy, chose to resign rather than accept that policy. In his resignation speech to Parliament, he insisted that Hitler had to be confronted with British might, not appeased:

"That is the deep difference between the Prime Minister and myself throughout these days. The Prime Minister has believed in addressing Herr Hitler through the language of sweet reasonableness. I have believed that he was more open to the language of the mailed [armored] fist."

—Alfred Duff Cooper, First Lord of the Admiralty, 1938

Hitler had promised that the Sudetenland was all he wanted. But in March 1939, only six months after annexing the Sudetenland, Hitler occupied the western half of Czechoslovakia and divided the rest of the country among his allies. Most Czechs were hostile to Hitler and bitterly opposed to the German occupation. The following month, Italian forces invaded and occupied Albania, a nation on the Balkan Peninsula north of Greece. Although no shots had been fired, peace in Central Europe was rapidly breaking down.



Winston Churchill succeeded Neville Chamberlain as prime minister in May 1940.

Invasion of Poland

The March invasion of Czechoslovakia ended Chamberlain's hope of working peacefully with Hitler. Britain and France abandoned their policy of appeasement and prepared for war. After Hitler took Czechoslovakia, British and French leaders warned him that any further German expansion would risk war. On March 31, 1939, they formally pledged their support to Poland, agreeing to come to its aid if Germany invaded. Hitler, however, did not believe their warning.

Hitler did have one major concern. As in 1914, Germany could ill afford to fight a war on two fronts at the same time. Hitler wanted to deal with Britain and France, his foes to the west, without having to fear an attack from the east.

Hitler's Pact With Stalin Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union had been sworn enemies, but Hitler and Stalin recognized that they had much to gain by working together. Stalin refused to believe that Hitler's long-term plans included conquering the Soviet Union. In August, he and Hitler signed a ten-year Nonaggression Pact, which eliminated the danger of a Soviet invasion from the east.

A secret document attached to the pact divided up the independent states of eastern Europe between Germany and the Soviet Union. One week later, on September 1, 1939, Hitler invaded Poland. On September 3, Britain and France declared war on Germany.

Lightning War Britain, France, and Poland together made an impressive alliance, at least on paper. They had more soldiers and more infantry divisions than Germany. Each German division, however, had superior firepower—more machine guns, artillery, and other weapons. Unlike Britain and France, Germany organized its tanks into separate panzer, or armored divisions.

In addition, the Germans practiced a new form of attack that they unveiled in the invasion of Poland. Called *blitzkrieg* ("lightning war"), this new military tactic included a fast, concentrated air and land attack that took the enemy's army by surprise. The German *stuka*, a divebombing warplane, began the *blitzkrieg* by shattering defenses and terrorizing civilians. Then the tanks and mobile artillery of the panzer divisions punched through enemy lines, encircling and capturing opposing troops. Finally, the infantry moved in to defeat the enemy and occupy the country.

Using the *blitzkrieg* tactic, German troops overran Poland in less than a month. They imposed German laws and imprisoned and murdered Jewish citizens. This treatment of Jews, known as the Holocaust, is discussed in the next chapter. Britain and France watched helplessly, unable to aid Poland in time. Meanwhile, in mid-September, Soviet forces joined the German attack. Under the secret terms of his Nonaggression Pact with Hitler, Stalin seized eastern Poland for the Soviet Union.

War in the West

After Poland fell, the war entered a quiet period. The British and French held back their troops, fearing tremendous losses. The American press dubbed this lack of combat the "phony war." The Germans labeled the lull in fighting the *sitzkrieg* ("sit-down war"). For the next several months, German troops sat and waited while French forces held their defenses.

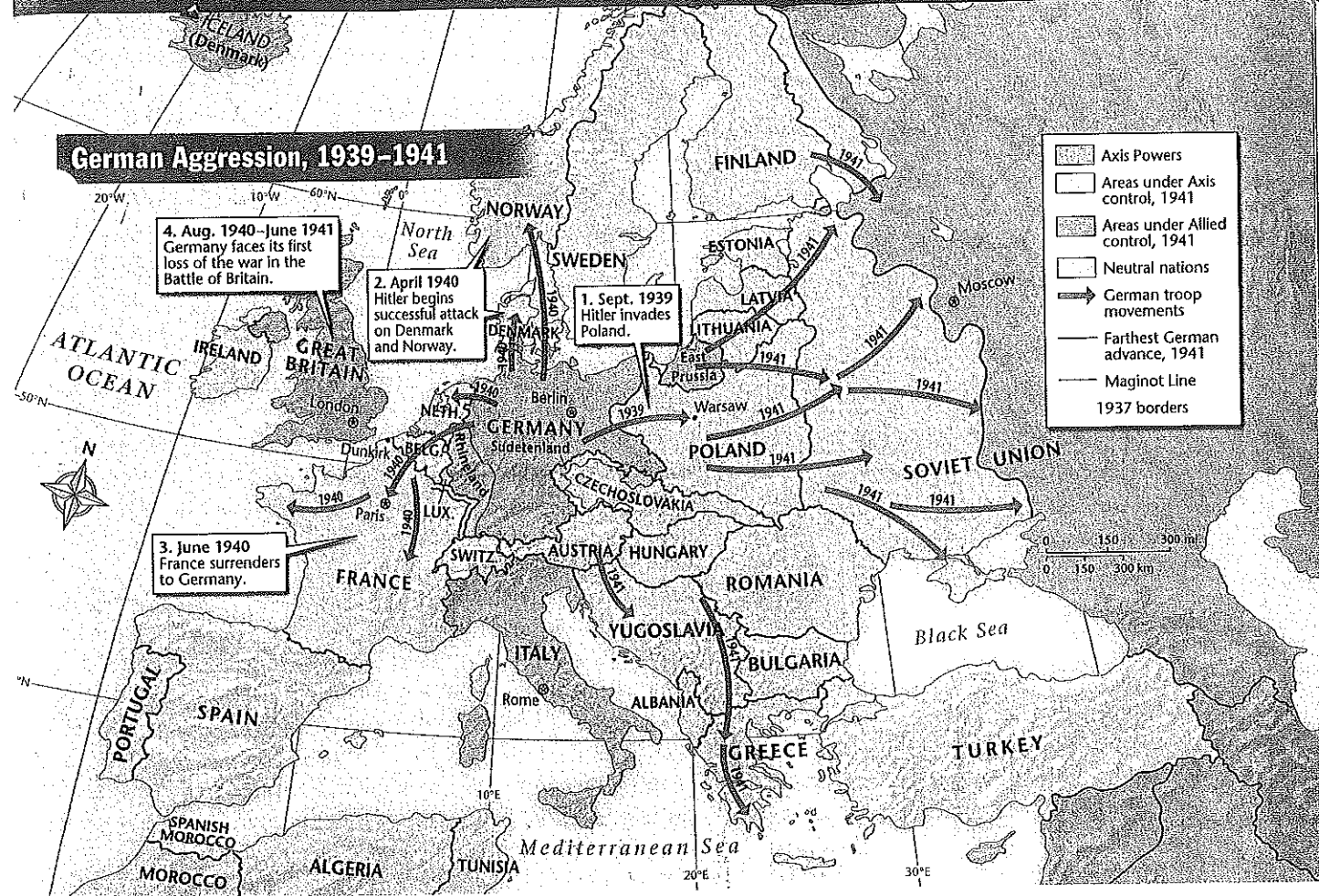
The key to these defenses was the Maginot Line, a massive string of fortifications along France's border with Germany. A triumph of modern technology, the Maginot Line provided housing for troops, recreational areas, and even air



INTERPRETING POLITICAL CARTOONS The unlikely alliance between Nazi Germany and the Communist Soviet Union stunned western observers. **Drawing Inferences** What does the caption imply about the Nonaggression Pact?

READING CHECK

How did Britain and France react to the fall of Poland?



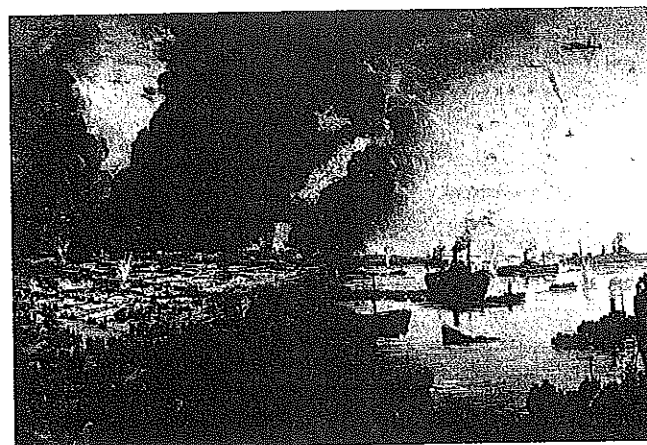
conditioning. Underground rail lines connected its main sections. Thick concrete walls and extra-heavy artillery stood ready to fend off any invading army. The Maginot Line had two major problems, however. It protected only the part of the French border that faced Germany, leaving France open to an attack through Belgium. In addition, all of its heavy guns pointed east, toward Germany. If the Germans got around the line, those guns would be useless.

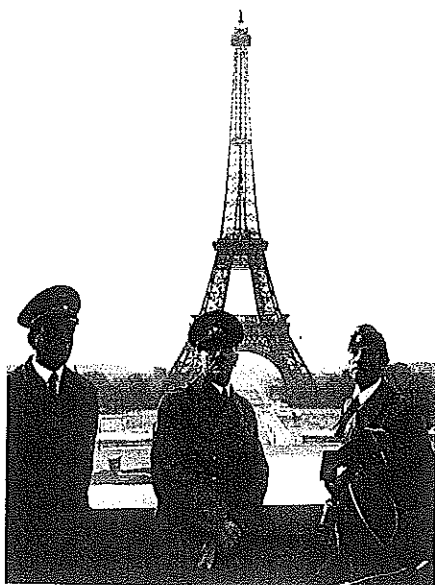
Germany Attacks On April 9, 1940, the phony war came to an end as Hitler began a successful attack on Denmark and Norway. Then, on May 10, German troops launched a *blitzkrieg* on the Netherlands, Belgium, and Luxembourg. Although British and French troops rushed to Belgium to defend their neighbor, they were too late. The German army overran Luxembourg in a day, the Netherlands in five days, and Belgium in less than three weeks. Meanwhile, in mid-May, German motorized divisions in Belgium invaded northern France, skirting the end of the Maginot Line. They raced from there all the way to the English Channel, splitting the main French armies to the south from the British and French troops in northern France and Belgium.

Dunkirk The German drive west divided British and French troops into two pockets, one in the north and one in the south. In the face of Germany's advance, French and British forces in the north retreated to the coastal city of Dunkirk. There, over a nine-day period in late May and early June, one of the greatest rescues in the history of warfare took place. While some troops fought to slow the advancing Germans, others hastily

MAP SKILLS Germany overran northern and western Europe in 1940, conquered Yugoslavia and Greece in the spring of 1941, and invaded the Soviet Union in June 1941. **Location** How does this map illustrate the dire situation of the Allies in 1941?

This 1940 British painting depicts the difficult circumstances surrounding the retreat from Dunkirk.





Adolf Hitler posed before the Eiffel Tower during a victory tour of German-occupied Paris.

assembled a makeshift fleet consisting mainly of tugboats, yachts, and other small private craft. Braving merciless attacks by the *Luftwaffe* (the German air force), about 900 vessels carried some 340,000 soldiers across the English Channel to Great Britain. Although Dunkirk marked a retreat for the British, the remarkable boatlift saved British and some French forces from almost certain capture by the Germans.

The Fall of France Hitler's armies turned and swept south through France. On June 10, the French government abandoned Paris. With France's defeat only a matter of time, Italy declared war on France and Britain on the same day. On June 14, German troops entered Paris, and on June 22 France and its more than 1.5 million soldiers officially surrendered. Adolf Hitler himself traveled to France to join the armistice negotiations and to make a brief victory tour of Paris. The British and French were stunned by the speed of Germany's conquest of France.

According to the surrender terms, Germany occupied the northern three fifths of France and the entire Atlantic Coast southward to Spain. The French government supervised the unoccupied south from the vacation resort of Vichy, and this zone became known as Vichy France. Under General Henri-Philippe Pétain, Vichy France adopted a policy of **collaboration**, or close cooperation, with Germany.

Free France, a government-in-exile in London, continued the struggle against the German invaders from bases in Britain and in France's colonies in Africa. Led by General Charles de Gaulle, the Free French also backed the underground **Resistance** movement in France. The Resistance consisted of groups of French citizens whose activities ranged from distributing anti-German leaflets to sabotaging German operations in France.

Until the summer of 1940, Hitler had experienced nothing but success. German armies had conquered most of Western Europe. He seemed to be on the verge of destroying the **Allies**, the group of countries who opposed the Axis Powers. Eventually, the United States and the Soviet Union would join the Allies, but at that time Great Britain stood alone.

The Battle of Britain

As France fell, Hitler amassed troops on the French coast. His next invasion target, Great Britain, lay just 20 miles away, across the English Channel. Winston Churchill, now Britain's prime minister, pledged that the British would defend their island at all costs:

"We shall fight on the beaches, we shall fight on the landing grounds, we shall fight in the fields and in the streets, we shall fight in the hills; we shall never surrender."

—Winston Churchill

VIEWING HISTORY London's St. Paul's Cathedral survived the Battle of Britain while surrounding buildings were reduced to rubble. The cathedral became a powerful symbol of Britain's spirit of defiance. **Drawing Conclusions** How did this spirit help defeat the Luftwaffe?



Relentless Attack Britain's large and well-equipped navy stood between Hitler and England. To neutralize the British navy, Germany would have to control the air. Hitler turned to the *Luftwaffe* to destroy Britain's air defenses. In August 1940, he launched the greatest air assault the world had yet seen. This intense attack, called the Battle of Britain, would continue well into September. Day after day, as many as 1,000 planes rained bombs on Britain.

The 1923 Hague Draft Rules of Air Warfare prohibited attacks on civilians. At first, the Germans only targeted British ports, airfields, and radar installations. Later they attacked aircraft factories and oil storage tanks. In late August, a

group of German bombers strayed off course and dropped their bombs on London. Two nights later, perhaps in retaliation, British planes bombed Berlin. A new, more deadly type of air war was about to begin.

In early September, Hitler ordered massive bombing raids on London and other cities to try to break the British people's will to resist. These attacks included firebombs, which carried a mix of chemicals that burned at a temperature high enough to set buildings on fire. The bombing of London, called the Blitz, would continue off and on until May 1941. The bombing of population centers, by both sides, would continue throughout the war.

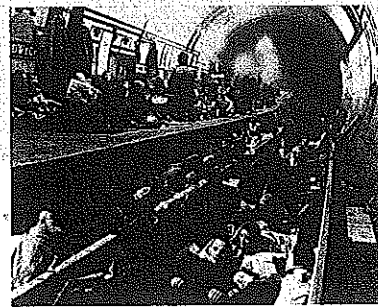
Courageous Defense Britain's Royal Air Force (RAF), although greatly outnumbered, stoutly defended its homeland. In a typical raid, slow-moving German bombers, accompanied by speedy fighter planes, would cross the English Channel at a height of about 15,000 feet. RAF pilots in British Spitfires and Hurricanes dodged the German fighter planes while trying to shoot down the bombers. They inflicted heavy damage on the attackers, sometimes flying six or seven missions a day. Hundreds of RAF pilots died defending Britain, but German losses were higher. "Never in the field of human conflict was so much owed by so many to so few," said Churchill, praising the courageous resistance of the RAF.

The British people showed equal bravery. In December 1940, German bombing of London started some 1,500 fires, setting the center of the historic city ablaze. Despite massive losses, the British people kept their will to fight. By the end of 1941, when the German air raids ended, some 20,000 Londoners had been killed and more than 70,000 injured.

Besides courageous pilots and citizens, Britain had another advantage. By February 1940, scientists in Britain had cracked the code that Germany used for top-secret communications. By deciphering coded messages, the British military could get a general idea of Hitler's battle plans. They knew, for example, that Hitler would not invade Britain until the *Luftwaffe* established air superiority—which it never did.

Focus on DAILY LIFE

London in the Blitz Some Londoners sought nighttime shelter from the Blitz in the stations of London's Underground subway system. The authorities tried to discourage the practice for safety reasons, but they were overwhelmed by the number of people who hurried underground in advance of air raids. Eventually, London Transport allowed civilians to spend the night on the tracks and platforms and even provided special trains to supply them with coffee and snacks.



Section

2

Assessment

READING COMPREHENSION

1. How did relations between Britain and Germany change between the Munich Conference and the invasion of Poland?
2. What were three reasons why Germany was able to defeat Poland in less than a month?
3. What was the French policy of **collaboration** with Germany?
4. Why were aircraft crucial to Germany's planned invasion of Britain?

CRITICAL THINKING AND WRITING

5. **Identifying Alternatives** (a) Why did Britain and France choose not to attack Germany in 1939 and early 1940? (b) What were the possible disadvantages of attacking Germany?
6. **Demonstrating Reasoned Judgment** Do you think bombing cities is a fair act of war? Explain your answer.
7. **Creating a Time Line** Construct a time line of important events in Europe in 1939 and 1940.



Take It to the NET

Virtual Field Trip The Maginot Line was designed to shield France from German aggression following World War I. Take a virtual tour of these historic fortifications and write a summary of what you learn on the journey. Use the links provided in the *America: Pathways to the Present* area of the following Web site for help in completing this activity.

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