

D Why was Hitler able to smash the Versailles settlement?

We now focus on the four most important events in Hitler's foreign policy 1933-9.

FOCUS ROUTE

- 1 Explain how Hitler was able to remilitarise the Rhineland without Allied military intervention.
- 2 Explain the significance of this move.

SOURCE 20.9 Hitler's interpreter, Paul Schmidt, writing in 1949

More than once, even during the war, I heard Hitler say: 'The 48 hours after the march into the Rhineland were the most nerve-wracking in my life.' He always added, 'If the French had then marched into the Rhineland we would have had to withdraw with our tails between our legs, for the military resources at our disposal would have been completely inadequate for even moderate resistance.'

Remilitarisation of the Rhineland, March 1936

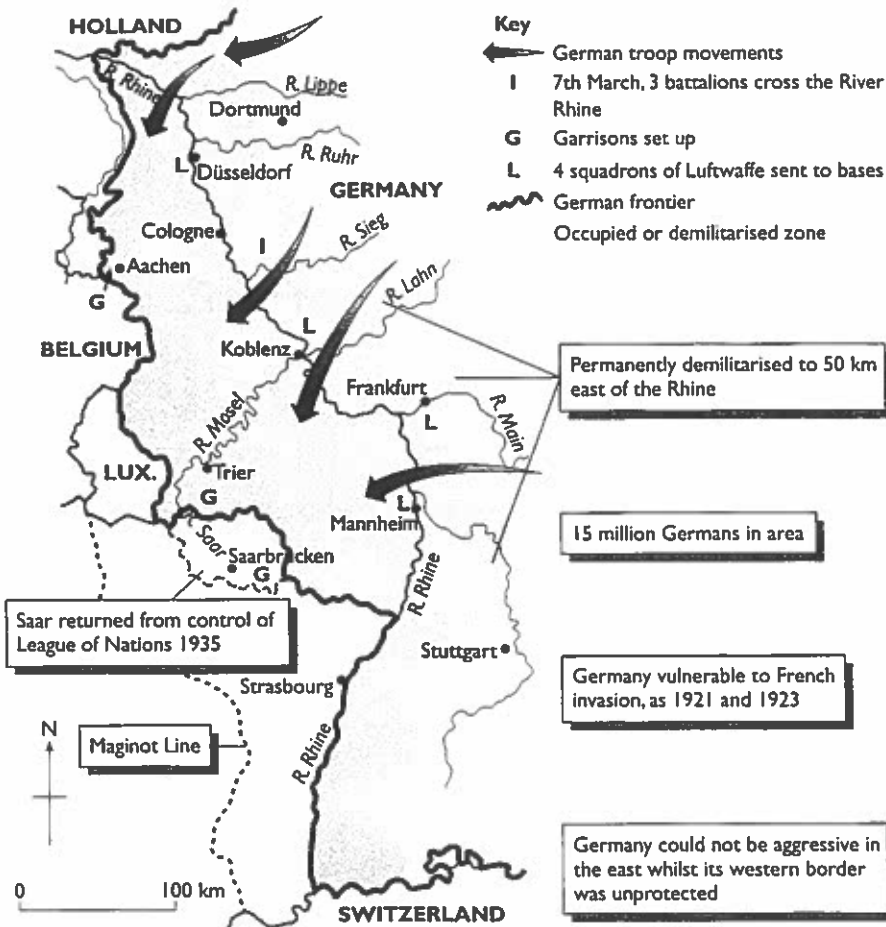
From 1933 to 1935 Hitler's approach was cautious, as Germany was in a weak position compared to its potential opponents. By 1935 Hitler felt secure enough to announce in public Germany's rearmament. He also sensed in parts of Europe a mood of reluctance to risk war in defence of a possibly unjust and outdated settlement. In 1936 Hitler raised the stakes higher by entering the Rhineland.

Why did the West not intervene?

In Britain, public opinion was hostile to military action. In January 1935 the British government decided that the Rhineland was not vital. It favoured negotiations, since Hitler offered a bulwark against Bolshevism. France was militarily too weak for offensive action. The French government had cut military expenditure by 17 per cent between 1930 and 1934 and had concentrated resources on building the defensive Maginot Line instead of modernising equipment. A general election was six weeks away and military action would be unpopular. In addition, Britain and France were quarrelling over their response to Mussolini's invasion of Abyssinia. On 5 March the French government asked Britain for assurances of support over the Rhineland. Britain refused to give them.

20D The Rhineland 1936

The Rhineland was German territory run by the German government, but Germany did not exercise full SOVEREIGNTY, since under the terms of the Treaty of Versailles it was unable to fortify it



Hitler's aims

- To regain full control of the Rhineland
- To secure Germany's border against France, thus allowing greater assertion in the east

Timing

- Hitler originally planned to REMILITARISE the area in 1937, but in 1936 the international situation seemed favourable
- Domestically, Hitler needed to distract attention from economic problems caused by his increased rearmament programme
- He overrode the worries of generals and diplomats who considered it too risky

Events

- Hitler sent 14,000 lightly armed troops plus 22,000 local police into the Rhineland
- Most stayed on the east bank; only 3,000 went as far as the border near Aachen, Trier and Saarbrücken
- German troops had orders to withdraw if they met opposition. The French took no military action

Hitler's justification

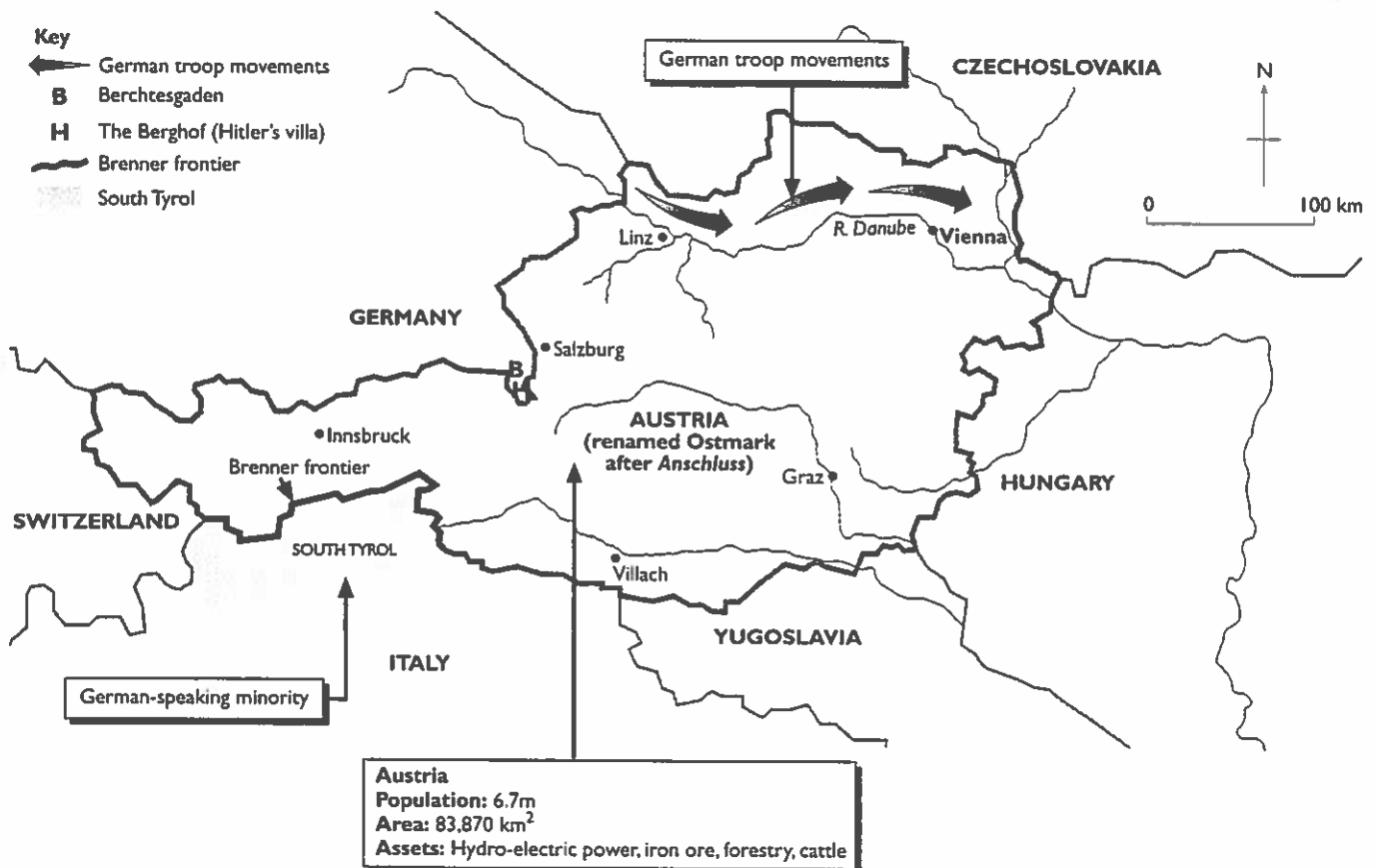
The Rhineland was his own territory; he cited the 1935 French-Soviet alliance which he claimed broke the terms of Locarno; he offered non-aggression pacts

FOCUS ROUTE

Explain how and why Hitler was able to achieve *Anschluss* in March 1938.

Anschluss: the union of Austria with Germany

After his success in the Rhineland Hitler next turned his eyes to Austria. With his opponents far from united, Hitler saw opportunities to increase German influence in Austria. Versailles had banned *Anschluss*, although at the time the majority of Austrians probably favoured it. When the Nazis came to power, *Anschluss* seemed more possible but less attractive to many Austrians. An Austrian Nazi coup was suppressed in 1934 and Kurt von Schuschnigg established a right-wing government. In July 1936 an Austro-German Agreement saw Germany promising to respect Austrian independence, while Austria agreed to have a policy 'based always on the principle that Austria acknowledges herself to be a German state', and the National Opposition (Austrian pro-Nazis) would be given a role in government. By 1938 problems in the Austrian economy, still badly hit by the Depression, encouraged support for joining the more prosperous Germany. In 1937 Germany had sounded out opinion in Italy, Britain and France over closer German-Austrian links and had received indications that these countries would not resist German control of Austria.

20E Austria and its neighbours**Italy**

In 1934 Italy had mobilised along the Brenner frontier to resist a possible German take-over of Austria. By November 1937 Mussolini, moving increasingly into Hitler's orbit, said he would not move against Germany over Austria

France

On 10 March 1938 Camille Chautemps' government fell, so there was no effective government during the crisis

Britain

The Foreign Minister Anthony Eden supported a strong line, but others thought the issue less important. The government gave no serious warning throughout the tension of winter-spring 1937-8

Key characters

Kurt von Schuschnigg – right-wing Austrian Chancellor
 Artur Seyss-Inquart – adviser to Schuschnigg but pro-Nazi; passed information to Hitler; became Austrian Chancellor and invited Nazis in
 Wilhelm Miklas – Austrian President
 Franz von Papen – German Ambassador in Vienna
 Hermann Goering – eager to gain Austria's economic resources; conveyed Hitler's demands to Austria via the telephone

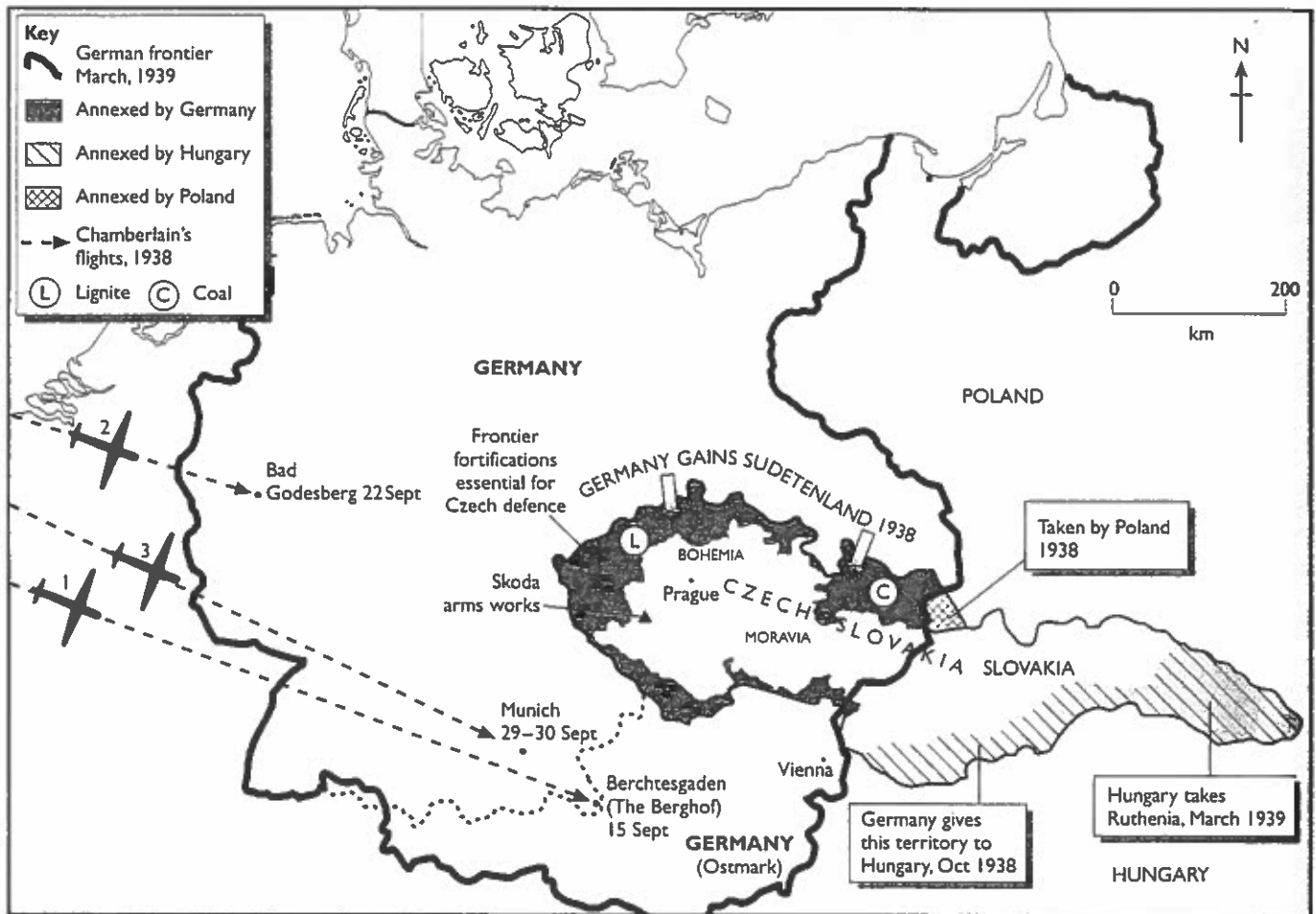
Czechoslovakia: September 1938–March 1939

FOCUS ROUTE

Explain how Hitler gained control of Czechoslovakia without war.

Hitler's attention turned to Czechoslovakia after his *Anschluss* triumph. This democratic state created by Versailles was to be dismembered by whatever means necessary. Czechoslovakia was a member of the League of Nations and had been allied to France since 1924 and to the Soviet Union since 1935. However, these two countries had no borders with Czechoslovakia, and Poland and Romania would not allow Soviet troops through their territory to assist Czechoslovakia. Czechoslovakia's other weakness lay in the large minorities within its population. There were 2 million Slovaks, Poles and Hungarians who wanted autonomy and 3 million Germans in the area known as the Sudetenland.

20G The destruction of Czechoslovakia



Hitler's strategy

- Use the argument of the Sudeten Germans' right to SELF-DETERMINATION in order to undermine the Czech state, then conquer it
- Threaten war to persuade the weak West to let him dismember Czechoslovakia

Key characters

Eduard Benes, Czech Prime Minister
 Emil Hacha, Czech President
 Konrad Henlein, leader of the Sudeten German Party
 Bela Tuka, leader of the Slovaks

European context

- France: generally followed lead taken by Britain
- Britain: Prime Minister Chamberlain determined to avoid war and viewed Czechoslovakia as unimportant; he considered the transferring of the Sudetenland to Germany reasonable, and that it was Hitler's last territorial demand

■ 20H The destruction of Czechoslovakia in two moves

MOVE ONE: 1938

1938

Early in 1938, Henlein complains at mistreatment of the German minority by Czechs. On 28 March Hitler tells Henlein to make demands that the Czech government cannot accept

20–22 May 1938

War scare. Czechs mobilise against feared German invasion. Hitler denies he is planning to invade. The lack of a German attack looks like a victory for Czechoslovakia over Hitler

30 May 1938

Hitler orders plans to smash Czechoslovakia by 1 October. Throughout summer, German propaganda campaign against Czechoslovakia

12 September 1938

Hitler attacks Czechoslovakia in a speech at Nuremberg. He hopes for a Sudeten German rising, but it does not occur. The French government urges Chamberlain to try to negotiate a settlement. Hitler agrees to the idea of a meeting

15 September 1938

Chamberlain flies to see Hitler at the Berghof, his house on the Obersalzberg, near Berchtesgaden. He agrees that Czechoslovakia should cede all areas over 50 per cent German. The British and French pressurise the Czechs to agree. Hitler hopes the Czechs will refuse, so they will be isolated

22 September 1938

Chamberlain succeeds in pressurising Benes to accept Hitler's demands. Confident that the crisis is over, Chamberlain meets Hitler at Bad Godesberg. Hitler now raises his demands; he wants the Sudetenland by 1 October. Talks break down. Major fear of war in Europe

Chamberlain persuades Mussolini to arrange conference at Munich. The views of the German generals and Goering, the lack of German public enthusiasm for war and Mussolini's views all help persuade Hitler to agree to attend the proposed conference

29–30 September 1938

Four Power Conference at Munich: Britain, France, Germany, Italy. (Czechoslovakia and the USSR are not invited.) Agree to the German occupation of the Sudetenland between 1 and 10 October, followed by plebiscites in mixed areas, and international guarantees of Czechoslovakia

German troops occupy the Sudetenland. Benes resigns and goes into exile. On 10 October Poles take Teschen district. The plebiscites agreement is ignored

Effects

- Czechoslovakia loses 41,000 sq km, including its richest industrial sites and its strongly fortified border; its communications system is disrupted. Czechoslovakia is no longer able to take on Germany militarily
- Germany gains major economic and military resources
- Hitler's domestic popularity increases and the plans of some generals to replace Hitler if he has a diplomatic setback are ruined. It boosts Hitler's confidence as the West appears feeble
- Generally, the USSR sees appeasement as evidence that the West will not stand up to Hitler, so it reinforces the Soviet idea of doing a separate deal with Germany. The French alliance system is broken and this classic example of appeasement, by encouraging further German expansion, contributes greatly to the Second World War

MOVE TWO: THE FINAL DESTRUCTION OF CZECHOSLOVAKIA: 1939

1 October 1938

The German army draws up fresh plans for attacking Czechoslovakia. Hitler encourages Poles, Romanians and Hungarians to demand pieces of Czechoslovakia, and Slovaks to demand autonomy

February 1939

Hitler meets Bela Tuka, the Slovak leader, and tells him to demand Slovakia's complete separation from Czechoslovakia. President Hacha declares MARTIAL LAW to try to stop the break-up of Czechoslovakia. He dismisses the Slovak government, and sends troops into Slovakia to crush unrest stirred up by the Nazis

13 March 1939

Hitler demands Slovakia declare its independence or it will be taken over by Hungary. Next day, the Slovak government complies

14 March 1939

President Hacha, in desperation, goes to Berlin to see Hitler. Hitler keeps him waiting till 1.15 a.m. whilst he finishes watching a film. Hitler demands Hacha agree to split Czechoslovakia otherwise German troops will enter Czechoslovakia within a few hours. At 4 a.m. Hacha gives in. Bohemia–Moravia to become a German protectorate, while Slovakia to remain nominally independent

15 March 1939

German troops march into Prague; Bohemia–Moravia is incorporated into the Reich

16 March 1939

Slovakia asks for German protection; German troops are sent to establish the satellite state of Slovakia. The Hungarians take over Ruthenia

Effects

- Germany makes major economic gains, especially Skoda armaments works
- Hitler has for the first time conquered non-German territory
- The West's belief in Hitler's moderation is weakened. Britain resolves to resist further German moves