

Spineless Democracies

During his early years in political power in Germany, Adolf Hitler hid his aggressive intentions from other European leaders. The 1919 Treaty of Versailles had limited the German army to only a hundred thousand (100,000) soldiers. Hitler knew that, if the democratic leaders realized what he planned to do, they would have easily stopped him.

By 1933, however, Hitler felt more confident. He indicated his plans to rearm Germany by walking out of a 60-nation disarmament conference. That same year, he resigned from the League of Nations.

In March 1935, Hitler openly rebelled against the disarmament clauses of the Treaty of Versailles. He established a general military draft in Germany. The rest of Europe began to sense danger. Led by France, Italy and Great Britain protested against German rearmament. United opposition to Hitler was short lived. Fearing another world war, Britain tried to negotiate with Hitler. It signed a naval agreement with Germany in 1935. A year later, German troops marched into and occupied the Rhineland. This German region had been *demilitarized* by the Versailles Treaty, (no army was to be allowed there). Hitler had ordered his troops to turn back if they met resistance from France. But without Britain's backing, France could do nothing. Britain refused to help on the grounds that German forces had a right to occupy German soil.

One important reason for Britain's policy of *appeasement* (giving in to an aggressor's demands in order to avoid conflict) was the memory of the "Great War" of 1914 – 1918. British leaders were willing to pay almost any price to avoid such disaster.



David Low's accurate depiction of the results of appeasement: Using the "spineless leaders of democracy" as stepping stones, a nose-thumbing Hitler marches towards his ultimate goal. [Source: *Lachen*, p. 280.]

Another reason is that British leaders shared Hitler's dislike of communism. They hoped that Hitler, who had suppressed all forms of socialism in Germany, would prove an ally against the Soviet Union and its economic political beliefs.

Confident that Britain would not protest, Hitler next forced the leader of Austria to accept a Nazi German government. British

Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain, convinced that he was achieving peace, allowed Germany to move into the Sudetenland in 1938. This was a large area of Czechoslovakia with a German-speaking population. When Hitler next targeted Danzig, a German-speaking area of Poland, Chamberlain at last took a stand against the Nazi leader. He threatened that France and Britain would fight to prevent an invasion of Poland.

