

Hitler's Speech to the Commanders in Chief (August 22, 1939)

Abstract

On May 23, 1939, just a day after signing the "Pact of Steel," Hitler told his generals that a German invasion of Poland was now inevitable. The conflict over Danzig and the Polish corridor was mere pretext. Germany could simply no longer do without Eastern European "living space" [*Lebensraum*] and the attendant raw materials. Hitler therefore announced his willingness to accept the possibility of a declaration of war by England and France. His greatest concern was a possible Soviet intervention on the side of the western Allies. But on August 21, 1939, when he received Stalin's agreement to enter into a German-Soviet pact, Hitler saw that the course had been set for war. (Reich Foreign Minister Joachim von Ribbentrop and Soviet Foreign Minister Vyacheslav Molotov signed the pact two days later in Moscow.) On August 22, 1939, Hitler invited his generals to yet another situation meeting. On September 1, 1939, the invasion of Poland began.

Source

Speech by the Führer to the Commanders in Chief on August 22, 1939

I have called you together to give you a picture of the political situation, in order that you may have some insight into the individual factors on which I have based my decision to act, and in order to strengthen your confidence.

After this we shall discuss military details.

It was clear to me that a conflict with Poland had to come sooner or later. I had already made this decision in the spring, but I thought that I would first turn against the West in a few years, and only after that against the East. But the sequence of these things cannot be fixed. Nor should one close one's eyes to threatening situations. I wanted first of all to establish a tolerable relationship with Poland in order to fight first against the West. But this plan, which appealed to me, could not be executed, as fundamental points had changed. It became clear to me that, in the event of a conflict with the West, Poland would attack us. Poland is striving for access to the sea. This further development appeared after the occupation of the Memel Territory, and it became clear to me that in certain circumstances a conflict with Poland might come at an inopportune moment. I give as reasons for this conclusion:

1. First of all, two factors related to persons:

There is myself and there is Mussolini.

Essentially all depends on me, on my existence, because of my political talents. Furthermore, the fact that probably no one will ever again have the trust of the whole German people as I have. There will probably never again in the future be a man with more authority than I have. My existence is therefore a factor of great value. But I can be eliminated at any time by a criminal or a lunatic.

The second person to be taken into account is the Duce. His existence is also decisive. If anything happens to him, Italy's loyalty to the alliance will no longer be certain. The Italian Court is fundamentally opposed to the Duce. Above all, the Court regards the expansion of the empire as an encumbrance. The Duce is the man with the strongest nerves in Italy.

The third person who can be counted in our favor is Franco. We can ask only for benevolent neutrality from Spain. But this depends on Franco himself. He guarantees a certain uniformity and stability in the present system in Spain. We must accept the fact that Spain does not as yet have a Fascist party with our internal unity.

The other side presents a negative picture as far as authoritative persons are concerned. There is no exceptional person in England and France.

It is easy for us to make decisions. We have nothing to lose; we have everything to gain. Because of our restrictions [*Einschränkungen*] our economic situation is such that we can only hold out for a few more years. Göring can confirm this. We have no other choice, we must act. Our opponents will be risking a great deal and can gain only a little. Britain's stake in a war is inconceivably great. Our enemies have leaders who are below the average. They lack exceptional persons, masters, men of action.

Besides the factors related to persons, the political situation is favorable for us: In the Mediterranean, rivalry between Italy, France, and England; in the Far East, tension between Japan and England; in the Middle East, tension which causes alarm in the Mohammedan world.

The English Empire did not emerge stronger from the last war. Nothing was achieved from the maritime point of view. Strife between England and Ireland. The Union of South Africa has become more independent. Concessions have had to be made to India. England is in the utmost peril. Unhealthy industrialization. A British statesman can only view the future with concern.

France's position has also deteriorated, above all in the Mediterranean.

Further factors in our favor are these:

Since Albania, there has been a balance of power in the Balkans. Yugoslavia is infected with the fatal germ of decay because of her internal situation.

Romania has not grown stronger. She is open to attack and vulnerable. She is threatened by Hungary and Bulgaria. Since Kemal's death, Turkey has been ruled by petty minds, unsteady, weak men.

All these favorable circumstances will no longer prevail in two or three year's time. No one knows how much longer I shall live. Therefore, better a conflict now.

The creation of Greater Germany was a great achievement politically, but militarily it was doubtful, since it was achieved by bluff on the part of the political leaders. It is necessary to test the military. If at all possible, not in a general reckoning, but by the accomplishment of individual tasks.

The relationship with Poland has become unbearable. My Polish policy hitherto was contrary to the views of the people. My proposals to Poland (Danzig and the Corridor) were frustrated by England's intervention. Poland changed her tone towards us. A permanent state of tension is intolerable. The power of initiative cannot be allowed to pass to others. The present moment is more favorable than in two or three years' time. An attempt on my life or Mussolini's could change the situation to our disadvantage. One cannot forever face one another with rifles cocked. One compromise suggested to us was that we should change our convictions and make gestures. They talked to us again in the language of Versailles. There was a danger of losing prestige. Now there still is a great probability that the West will not intervene. We must take the risk with ruthless determination. The politician must take a risk just as much as the general. We are faced with the harsh alternatives to strike or to face certain annihilation sooner or later.

I will refer to previous hazardous undertakings.

I would have been stoned if I had not been proven right. The most dangerous step was the entry into the neutral zone. Only a week before, I got a warning through France. I have always taken a great risk in the conviction that it would succeed.

Now it is also a great risk. Iron nerves, iron resolution.

The following particular reasons give me strength in my conviction. England and France have undertaken obligations which neither is in a position to fulfill. There is no real rearmament in England, but only propaganda. A great deal of harm was done by many Germans, who were not in agreement with me, saying and writing to English people after the solution of the Czech question: The Führer was proven right because you lost your nerve, because you capitulated too soon. This explains the present propaganda war. The English speak of a war of nerves. One factor in this war of nerves is the demonstration of increase in armaments. But what are the real facts about British rearmament? The naval construction program for 1938 has not yet been completed. Only the reserve fleet has been mobilized. Trawlers have been purchased. No substantial strengthening of the Navy before 1941 or 1942.

Little has been done on land. England will be able to send at most three divisions to the Continent. A few things have been done for the Air Force, but it is only a beginning. Anti-aircraft defense is in its initial stages. At the moment England has only 150 anti-aircraft guns. The new anti-aircraft guns have been ordered. It will be long time before enough have been produced. There is a shortage of predictors. England is still vulnerable from the air. This could change in two or three years. At the moment the English Air Force has only 130,000 men, France 72,000, Poland 15,000. England does not want the conflict to break out for two or three years.

The following is typical of England: Poland wanted a loan from England for her rearmament. England, however, only granted credits in order to make sure that Poland would buy in England, although England cannot deliver. This suggests that England does not really want to support Poland. She is not risking eight million pounds in Poland, although she poured five hundred million into China. England's position in the world is very precarious. She will not take any risks.

France is short of men (decline in the birth rate). Little has been done for rearmament. The artillery is obsolete. France did not want to embark on this adventure. The West has only two possibilities for fighting against us:

1. Blockade: It will not be effective because of our autarky and because we have supply sources in Eastern Europe.
2. Attack in the West from the Maginot line: I consider this impossible.

Another possibility would be the violation of Dutch, Belgian and Swiss neutrality. I have no doubt that all these States, as well as Scandinavia, will defend their neutrality with all available means. England and France will not violate the neutrality of these countries. Thus in actual fact England cannot help Poland. There still remains an attack on Italy. Military intervention is out of the question. No one is counting on a long war. If Herr von Brauchitsch had said to me, "I need four years to conquer Poland," I would have replied: "Then it's impossible." It is nonsense to say that England wants to wage a long war.

We will hold our position in the West until we have conquered Poland. We must bear in mind

our great production capacity. It is much greater than in 1914–1918.

The enemy had another hope, that Russia would become our enemy after the conquest of Poland. The enemy did not reckon with my great strength of purpose. Our enemies are small fry. I saw them in Munich.

I was convinced that Stalin would never accept the English offer. Russia has no interest in preserving Poland, and Stalin knows that it would mean the end of his régime, no matter whether his soldiers emerged from a war victorious or vanquished.

Litvinov's replacement was decisive. I brought about the change with respect to Russia gradually. We got into political conversations in connection with the commercial treaty. Proposal for a non-aggression pact. Then came a comprehensive proposal from Russia. Four days ago I took a special step, which led to Russia replying yesterday that she is prepared to sign. Personal contact with Stalin is established. The day after tomorrow von Ribbentrop will conclude the treaty. Now Poland is in the position in which I wanted her.

We need not be afraid of a blockade. The East will supply us with grain, cattle, coal, lead, and zinc. It is a mighty aim, which demands great efforts. I am only afraid that at the last moment some swine or other will yet submit to me a plan for mediation.

The political objective goes further. A start has been made on the destruction of England's hegemony. After I have made the political preparations, the way will be open for the soldiers.

Today's announcement of the non-aggression pact with Russia came as a bombshell. The consequences cannot be foreseen. Stalin also said that this course will benefit both countries. The effect on Poland will be tremendous.

In reply, Göring thanked the Führer and assured him that the Wehrmacht would do their duty.

Source of English translation: Speech by the Führer to the Commanders in Chief on August 22, 1939, in United States Department of State, *Documents on German Foreign Policy: From the Archives of the German Foreign Ministry*. Washington, DC: United States Government Printing Office, 1957–1964. Series D (1937–1945), *The Last Days of Peace*, Volume 7: August 9–September 3, 1939. Document 192, pp. 200–04. Edited by GHI staff.

Source of original German text: Ansprache Hitlers an die Oberbefehlshaber am 22. August 1939 über seine Absicht, Krieg zu führen und seine politischen Vorbereitungen dazu, sowie Voraussagungen über die Haltung anderer europäischer Staaten und den wahrscheinlichen Kriegsverlauf (Beweisstück US-29), in *Der Prozess gegen die Hauptkriegsverbrecher vor dem Internationalen Militärgerichtshof. Nürnberg 14. November 1945–1. Oktober 1946*. Volume XXVI, Amtlicher Text–Deutsche Ausgabe, Urkunden und anderes Beweismaterial. Nuremberg 1947. Reprint: Munich, Delphin Verlag, 1989. Document 798-PS, pp. 338–44.

Recommended Citation: Hitler's Speech to the Commanders in Chief (August 22, 1939), published in: German History in Documents and Images, <<https://germanhistorydocs.org/en/nazi-germany-1933-1945/ghdi:document-1546>> [July 03, 2024].