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# DETERRENCE IN 1939\*

By ALAN ALEXANDROFF and RICHARD ROSECRANCE\*\*

In the first World war defense had been immensely more powerful than attack: the attacker needed a superiority of three, if not five to one. . . . If therefore [in 1936] Great Britain and France merely hoped to defend themselves, quite a small increase in their land armaments would enable them to do so; and this increase was more than provided between 1936 and 1939. On the other hand, if they wished to defeat Germany and to recover the position of triumphant dominance which they had enjoyed in 1919, they would have to multiply their armaments not by two, but by six or even by ten—an impossible proposition. . . . There is therefore no simple answer to the question: "Were British and French armaments adequate before 1939?" They were adequate to defend the two countries, if properly used; they were inadequate to prevent the extension of German power in eastern Europe.

—A. J. P. Taylor<sup>1</sup>

## I. THE PROBLEM OF DETERRENCE IN 1939

EVERY major war is reinterpreted after the event. The American Civil War has been endlessly fascinating to historians and has provoked continuing exegesis. World Wars I and II similarly have been the source of historical reconsideration but, in contrast, their interpretation seems to have gone through definite cycles. In reaction to the Versailles emphasis upon Germany's guilt in World War I, a revisionist consideration began in the 1920's which conditioned attitudes until 1939.<sup>2</sup> It was not until after World War II that German war aims in 1914 were subjected to scrutiny and criticism.<sup>3</sup> The analysis of the

\* Simon Newman's *March 1939: The British Guarantee to Poland* (Oxford: Clarendon Press 1976) came into our hands when the article was already in press. Based on many of the same primary sources, the author concludes that "the guarantee to Poland was never really thought of in terms of deterrence; it was regarded as a deliberate challenge. That it would be provocative to Germany and cause Polish intransigence on the questions at issue between the two countries, thereby increasing the probability of war, was expected" (p. 219). Newman is, however, less sympathetic to the preference of the Chiefs of Staff for an agreement with Russia than are the present authors.

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<sup>1</sup> A. J. P. Taylor, *The Origins of the Second World War* (2d ed.; Greenwich, Conn.: Fawcett Publications 1961), 114.

<sup>2</sup> The basic book here is Sidney B. Fay, *The Origins of the World War*, 2 vols. (New York: Macmillan 1928 and 1930).

<sup>3</sup> See particularly Fritz Fischer, *Germany's Aims in the First World War* (London: W. W. Norton 1967). For a review of the various positions, see Wolfgang J. Mommsen,

Second World War reversed this sequence. In the 40's and 50's the traditional explanation, laying the blame on Hitler and Germany, held sway.<sup>4</sup> A. J. P. Taylor's *Origins of the Second World War*, however, offered a revisionist account that distributed blame much more evenly.<sup>5</sup> British and French mistakes, as well as German ones, were held responsible for the war. Wars were likened to "road accidents," with no profound causes. If the brakes or steering had been in better repair, the war might have been avoided. Taylor noted laconically that Italy's proposal for a conference failed for lack of time; thus, "it seems from the record that [Hitler] became involved in war through launching on 29 August a diplomatic manoeuvre which he ought to have launched on 28 August."<sup>6</sup>

The traditional view, of course, was that if Britain and France had taken a strong stand against Germany in 1936 or even somewhat later, Hitler would have had to back down. If war had occurred then, it would have been decided quickly on Western terms. In 1939, however, it was no longer possible to prevent a conflict; events had begun to unroll inexorably like scenes in a classic tragedy. By then, Hitler was either militarily so overconfident that Western attempts to deter him could only be ineffective, or he was misled by Anglo-French appeasement into thinking he could get his way without a major war.

Both these positions are too simple. Each makes the origins of the Second World War seem easier to understand than in fact they are, though the revisionist account is closer to the truth. Consider Taylor's own arguments in the epigraph to this paper. According to his view, Britain and France should not have thought that they could prevent Hitler's drive to the East; to do so, they would have had to be willing to launch an offensive war on the Western Front, for which they were unprepared.<sup>7</sup> Even more significant, however, is Taylor's implicit con-

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"The Debate on German War Aims," *Journal of Contemporary History*, 1 (No. 3, 1966), 47-72; Mommsen, "Domestic Factors in German Foreign Policy before 1914," *Central European History*, vi (March 1973), 3-43; and H. W. Koch, ed., *The Origins of the First World War: Great Power Rivalry and German War Aims* (London: Macmillan 1972).

<sup>4</sup> See, among others, Winston Churchill, *The Gathering Storm* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin 1948), and L. B. Namier, *Diplomatic Prelude, 1938-39* (London: Macmillan 1948).

<sup>5</sup> In addition to Taylor's first and second editions (fn. 1), see W. Roger Louis, ed., *The Origins of the Second World War: A. J. P. Taylor and his Critics* (New York: John Wiley & Sons 1972), and E. M. Robertson, ed., *The Origins of the Second World War: Historical Interpretations* (London: Macmillan 1971).

<sup>6</sup> Taylor (fn. 1), 267.

<sup>7</sup> This question of allied versus German preparedness in the West is considered in more detail below.

tention that Hitler was equally unready for war. In this view, Germany should have been deterred from embarking on a war of conquest directed against the West as well as against Eastern Europe. She did not have the military superiority to succeed in such a venture. Thus, why war? Germany should have held back when she realized (as she almost certainly did by August 26) that Britain and France would stand firm and declare war over Poland in case of an attack. The revisionists err when they maintain that Hitler's actions from August 27 to September 1 are easy to understand.

Some might seek to explain the failure of deterrence in 1939 by denying the need for great superiority in offensive operations. By 1939, it might be asserted, the *Blitzkrieg* had made such calculations obsolete. Germany, after all, succeeded in defeating France in 1940 with an army no larger than the French Army, and with a slight numerical disadvantage in tanks. This view is challenged, however, by B. H. Liddell Hart, the British military historian, who concludes that the fall of France need not have occurred if the Western Allies had used their forces effectively.<sup>8</sup> Victory was made possible in part by German General Guderian's defiance of the orders of the High Command. His brilliant success could not have been anticipated. Taylor's belief that superiority is required for offensive operations is buttressed by the experience of the closing phases of the war, in which Britain, Russia, and the United States needed a five-to-one superiority to defeat Germany. Since Hitler had no such superiority over the French and British Armies, it becomes difficult to explain why he precipitated war with the West by attacking Poland.

If it is difficult to understand why Hitler attacked in September 1939, it is less difficult to explain the military bases of the British and French policy of appeasement from 1936 to 1939. If Britain and France could not realistically oppose the extension of German power in Eastern Europe, what could they do but appease? On the basis of an overwhelming local superiority, Germany was able to defeat Austrian, Czech, and, later, Polish antagonists. France and Britain could not save them; they could only hope to cope with a German attack on the West. From this standpoint, what is interesting is not the appeasement policy but its abandonment in March 1939.

There appear to be two decisions that should have been ruled out by strict military calculation. The first was the British guarantee of Poland on March 31, 1939. Once this had occurred, the second precipi-

<sup>8</sup> In Liddell Hart, *History of the Second World War* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons 1971), 70, 73.

tate act was the German decision to go to war against Poland on September 1. The first appears irrational because neither the British nor the French Army was ready to attack Germany—and that, realistically, was the only way they could aid Poland. The second appears questionable once the guarantee had been given, because Hitler had no plan for defeating either France or Britain; still he struck. Both sides made decisions that depended upon powerful and superior offensive capabilities when, in fact, they had simply attained equality in military forces.

The traditional view of the origins of World War II as briefly outlined above is not only wrong, but gets the analysis backwards: Appeasement in 1939 is perfectly understandable; what is difficult to comprehend is that it could have been reversed. Further, once it had been reversed, deterrence should have worked and Hitler should have been humbled. We have tended to think that World War II was not a failure of deterrence (except perhaps in its Far Eastern and Japanese aspect); rather, that it was a case where deterrence was not tried. If we now concede that 1939 represents a failure in deterrence, we are bound to ask why this could be. Beyond that, we are led to consider what implications such a failure might have for contemporary efforts at deterrence. The rest of this essay is devoted to these two questions.

## II. THE MARCH GUARANTEE

When the United States failed to ratify the Versailles Treaty in 1919, the victorious coalition of France, Britain, and the United States collapsed. From then on, the French strove to create a bastion against Germany on their own. This involved a short-lived occupation of the Rhineland, pacts with Eastern European states, an alliance with the dubious U.S.S.R., and temporary arrangements with Italy over Austria. None of these initially seemed capable of restraining Germany, and thus Paris was thrust back upon London. After 1936, Britain became the key to the maintenance of European peace and prevention of German *revanche*.

Among British leaders, Neville Chamberlain, first as Chancellor of the Exchequer and then as Prime Minister, came to exercise a practical dominance. His direction of foreign policy was more single-minded and detailed than that of most British statesmen. Initially, he favored a refocusing upon Europe as opposed to the Far East, and he worried about a German air offensive against Britain if war came. To counter a German air offensive, he pressed for a powerful metropolitan fighter

force and accelerated air production schedules. In the long run, he wanted a strong bomber force. His objective was to deter Germany while making only a minimum commitment to Europe. In February 1936, he wrote: "If we can keep out of war for a few years, we shall have an air force of such striking power that no one will care to run risks with it. I cannot believe that the next war, if it ever comes, will be like the last one, and I believe our resources will be more profitably employed in the air, and on the sea, than in building up great armies."<sup>9</sup>

There were, however, two problems with this approach. If a bomber offensive was to deter German aggression, the British had to make themselves immune to German retaliation. This required a major buildup of fighter aircraft. But to accelerate fighter production was to slow the output of bombers; the British could not do both at once. Thus the threat of an air offensive could not be used to stay Hitler's hand. Even if bombers had been available in quantity, Britain would have hesitated to initiate an air war on civilian populations, believing that ultimately she might suffer more. Thus, an answer to German aggressiveness had to be found elsewhere.

The Chiefs of Staff looked at matters differently from the Prime Minister. They did not rely on an air strategy, but placed their hopes on a war of strategic attrition that would cut off Germany's sources of supply and would ultimately bring her to her knees. In July 1938, their assessment stated bluntly: "It is obvious that although the political initiative in respect of the moment of our intervention [in war] will be with us, the military will then rest with Germany. Great Britain will therefore have to adopt a strategical defensive until such time as the German initial offensive has been mastered."<sup>10</sup> In February 1939, this calculation was made even more precise: "We must be prepared to face a major offensive directed against either ourselves or France. To defeat such an offensive we should have to concentrate all our initial efforts, and during this time our major strategy would be defensive. Our subsequent policy should be directed to weakening Germany and Italy by the exercise of economic pressure and by extensive propaganda, while at the same time building up our military strength until we can adopt an offensive major strategy."<sup>11</sup>

After Germany marched into Prague on March 15, all of Hitler's promises were shown to be hollow. Germany had violated the principle

<sup>9</sup> Quoted in Keith Feiling, *The Life of Neville Chamberlain* (London: Macmillan 1946), 314.

<sup>10</sup> CAB 53/40, Chiefs of Staff [hereafter COS] 747, 25 July 1938.

<sup>11</sup> CAB 53/45, COS 843, 20 February 1939.

of national self-determination and, even more important in Lord Halifax's view, had made clear that she preferred "naked force to methods of consultation and discussion."<sup>12</sup> The military situation, however, did not favor an early check of the German dictator. (In February it had been made clear that Britain could send no more than two divisions to aid France. The first troop embarkations would take place within three weeks of the onset of war, but the second contingent would wait for two months. In the early stages, the French would be left to face German troops virtually on their own.)

The situation worsened when it appeared that Hitler might give an economic ultimatum to Bucharest. A German absorption of Romania went to the heart of British long-term strategy. Since the goal was to defeat Germany in a war of attrition, Britain had to be able to cut off sources of supply. But the Chiefs of Staff pointed out on March 18: "If Germany obtains access to the economic resources of Romania she will have gone a long way towards rendering herself immune from the effects of economic warfare."<sup>13</sup> It appeared, therefore, that such a move must be blocked. Germany might be stopped if Great Britain could form an alliance with Russia, Poland, and France.

There was still the question, however, how far Britain should go on her own. The Chiefs were asked to advise the Prime Minister whether Britain should commit herself to go to war over a German attack on Romania. In reply, they distinguished three possible situations: (1) Poland and the U.S.S.R. remaining neutral; (2) Poland allied with Great Britain, Russia neutral; (3) Russia allied with Great Britain, Poland neutral. The first was dismissed out of hand; Britain could take no action in this case. Though the Chiefs of Staff expected a brave effort on the part of Poland, they did not look optimistically on the second condition. If there were a combination of Britain and Russia, however, the allies would be in "a better position to prosecute a successful campaign."<sup>14</sup> Still, the military continued to oppose a commitment to Romania or to other Eastern countries. No material help could in fact be given by Britain to any of them. Effectively, the military argued, Britain had to find allies first; only afterward could she make a commitment.

Political leaders neglected that advice. Unless some guarantee could be given to Eastern states, they reasoned, Germany would continue to

<sup>12</sup> Quoted in Sidney Aster, 1939: *The Making of the Second World War* (New York: Simon and Schuster 1973), 31.

<sup>13</sup> CAB 53/10, COS 283 MTG, 18 March 1939.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

expand. On the other hand, if a guarantee were given to Poland and Romania, and if in consequence the guaranteed powers took a very strong and uncompromising line toward Germany, the guarantee might actually bring on war. Since Britain could not prevent successful German expansion in the East, to guarantee a country (without practical means of fulfilling that guarantee) might precipitate Hitler's acquisition of Romanian and Polish resources.

Under political pressure, the military shifted their position from outright opposition to Eastern commitments to the requirement that such a commitment not impair the attrition strategy—the strategy, as it was put, of “bleeding Germany.” A theoretical option was for France and Britain to threaten an offensive in the West if Hitler moved East. Britain's military weakness on land meant that such a thrust would in effect be a French effort, and it could do no more than hope to distract Hitler from his Polish preoccupation. While an offensive was suggested several times by the British, the French remained highly skeptical. As war drew near, the French stated flatly that they would not authorize an offensive. The British briefly considered an allied bombing strategy as an alternative, but the air staff did not want to initiate such warfare.

Thus, in late March 1939, the British effectively had a choice of three strategies: (1) doing nothing—appeasement as usual; (2) giving an immediate guarantee to Poland and Romania; (3) working for a political and military relationship with Russia which would have given substance and force to a later Eastern European guarantee. The first was ruled out by the pressure of British Cabinet politics as well as by international affairs. In the aftermath of Prague, something had to be done.<sup>15</sup> The second policy was the one chosen for reasons of speed as well as Chamberlain's suspicion of the Soviet Union. On this very point, Chamberlain was writing to his sister: “I must confess to the most profound distrust of Russia,” adding that the Soviets had no offensive power<sup>16</sup> (a view not shared by his own military chiefs). He urged a guarantee of Poland upon the Foreign Policy Sub-Committee of the Cabinet. When others objected to the exclusion of Russia from the agreement, he argued the need for speed and cited rumors of im-

<sup>15</sup> The alternative of doing nothing has more to commend it in retrospect than was apparent at the time. We know that Germany in fact intended no threat to either Poland or Romania in March. If Germany had moved eastward later, she would have forced Russia willy-nilly into the arms of the West, cementing the very alliance which eluded British grasp in August 1939. From this strong position, a much more effective resistance to Hitler might have been mounted in 1940.

<sup>16</sup> Aster (fn. 12), 89.



mediate German action. He and Halifax prepared a draft declaration for Parliament, giving a unilateral commitment to Poland; by the time of its announcement on March 31, however, the putative German threat had been exposed as unreal.

The advantage of the third alternative was that it maximized defensive strength in the East, where Hitler would otherwise have had an almost free passage. Polish and Russian forces, using defensive tactics, would have been far more effective against the still untried and partly untrained German Army, than was Poland alone confronting Germany *and* Russia in September 1939. The political and military link to Moscow would also have contributed greatly to deterrence. It was all too easy for Hitler to think that Britain would not honor her guarantee to Poland unless she had an agreement with Russia. For a time, he could view the unilateral guarantee as a paper proposal, a kind of British diplomatic whistling in the dark.

But the third course of action was not seriously considered despite its advocacy by the British military. Immediately after the guarantee, the Chiefs prophetically underscored its weaknesses: "We are not in a position to assess the deterrent effect of such a Pact upon Germany, but an important military implication is that if such a Pact were to encourage an intransigent attitude on the part of Poland and Romania, it would thereby tend to precipitate a European war before our forces are in any way fully prepared for it, and such a war might be started by aggression against Danzig alone."<sup>17</sup>

Once the guarantee had been given, all the damage was done. It was no longer possible to put the kind of pressure on Colonel Beck, the Polish Foreign Minister, that the British had used against President Beneš of Czechoslovakia the previous year. This meant that Polish obduracy on Danzig could make Germany believe that no peaceful settlement was possible. At the same time, the Polish guarantee meant in practice that the U.S.S.R. could not be brought into the arrangement. The Poles, desperately suspicious of the Russians, would have agreed to joint defense proposals only if the British had been able to insist. But with the Polish guarantee already pocketed and a matter of public record, the Poles saw no reason to compromise.<sup>18</sup> Furthermore, the Russians had less reason to reach an agreement. They no longer had to

<sup>17</sup> CAB 53/47, COS 870, 28 March 1939.

<sup>18</sup> The French particularly misled the Poles concerning the possibility of a Western offensive against Germany if Poland were attacked. General Gamelin told Warsaw in May that in such a contingency the French would open an offensive with "*les gros des forces*" fifteen days after the beginning of mobilization. J. R. B. Butler, *Grand Strategy*, II, *September 1939-June 1941* (London: H. M. Stationery Office 1959), 55.

worry about a Western rapprochement with Hitler, and thus did not have to concede in order to get a British commitment to resist the German dictator. They could play their territorial cards and strive to win a measure of recognition in the bargain. It was therefore not surprising that when—finally—London and Paris tried to arrange for military cooperation between Russia and Poland, they could not reach an agreement. Britain could not force Poland to open her frontier to Russian troops (the minimal condition for effective joint resistance against a German invasion). Equally, the British and French offered nothing that would draw Moscow. Despite their hints to Poland, they were not planning a military offensive in the West to offset German pressure in the East. The Russians would have been pulling Western chestnuts out of the fire while remaining unable actually to give effective help to Poland. The Russian Non-Aggression Pact with Germany gave them a much better deal, and it also provided time.

At the end of March 1939, the British thought they were under pressure to do something quickly to resist Hitler. They gave the ill-considered guarantee to Poland and Romania when Germany offered a short-term threat to neither. They had no means of actually implementing the guarantee: neither they nor the French were prepared militarily to launch a major, not just a diversionary, attack upon the Western redoubts of Germany.<sup>19</sup> The British and French could jointly resist an attack upon their own forces, and they should have been able to prevent the fall of France in May 1940. But they could not meet Hitler's march into Poland with an offensive across the Siegfried Line, or through Belgium and Luxembourg. Hitler's own generals had satisfied him that such an attack could not succeed. With the guarantee to Poland, therefore, Britain was merely saying that a German attack on Warsaw would put them and the French into a technical state of war with Hitler. But what did this mean? It did not mean offensive Western action. The allies were still waiting for Germany to attack *them*. There was no sanction that the British could levy in the short run to bring Hitler down; all the British plans turned, rather, on the long run. Germany might win a startling series of victories, but ultimately the war of attrition, successful resistance in France, and an

<sup>19</sup> Even a diversionary attack was not planned. The Chiefs of Staff wrote on 3 June: "So far, therefore, our contacts with the French have not produced the answer to the problem as to how we and they can co-operate effectively in reducing the pressure on Poland if she is attacked. . . . Unless, therefore, the French are prepared to undertake some effective diversion along the lines indicated in Paragraph 10 [of *Report on Anglo-French Action in Support of Poland*] at a very early stage of the war, we cannot hope to relieve pressure on land against Poland." CAB 53/49, COS 905, 3 June 1939.

economic blockade would wear her down. She would lose in the long run. The British tried long-run deterrence when the only effective measure against Hitler would have been short-run deterrence. They invited him to think how he would end the war when all he thought about was how he would win the first battles. The British knew they would lose the first battles; nevertheless they brought them on with the guarantee.

The position of long-term deterrence would have had far more short-term effectiveness if Britain had first sought an agreement with the Soviet Union. But by rushing heedlessly into the arms of Poland, the British lost the chance for a real agreement with Russia; they undermined their short-term deterrence position without any strengthening of their long-term position. In the post-outbreak giddiness of 1940, the British even sought to put themselves at war with the Soviet Union as well as Germany in an ill-considered attempt to assist Finland. They avoided what would have been the most fateful blunder in British military history only because the Finns surrendered on March 6, before the Anglo-French expeditionary force could set sail.<sup>20</sup>

The lesson of the British guarantee of March 31, 1939, is that changes of policy may sometimes be too radical when a nation's operating pre-suppositions are discredited. The German march into Prague undercut the foundations of the appeasement policy, and there was no clear alternative. A guarantee was the least adequate substitute for the old policy. It did not deter Hitler; it did not offer a real check on his Eastern policy. Still more important, it had unresolved logical contradictions. What if Hitler occupied Poland, but failed to attack France? How could Britain act to bring on a war if the firm presumption of all British thinking was that Germany would take the offensive? What would the British have done if Germany had simply ignored them?

### III. THE SEPTEMBER DECISION

The German decision to invade Poland in September raised problems even more acute than those of the British guarantee. Between 1936 and 1939, Adolf Hitler scored a series of dazzling successes in foreign policy, the result of which was to transform European and also world international politics. In 1936, Germany was still the pariah nation, the victim of Versailles, the unrepentant and still shackled loser of the Great War. By 1939, she had liberated herself from all restraints. Ger-

<sup>20</sup> See Liddell Hart (fn. 8), 46.

many had become the dominant nation in Europe. Her diplomacy was the central reference point of world politics. Nations sought to placate her and do her bidding. Until the breakdown of the Munich accords in March, it appeared that German demands over Poland would be given the same favorable treatment as her claims on Czechoslovakia. And even after the occupation of Prague, it was not certain that there could be no further expansion eastward. There was little that the French or British could do to prevent it.<sup>21</sup>

Thus, the British guarantee of March 31 did not deter Hitler; it was the precipitating cause for the development of *Fall Weiss* (Case White), the plan for the invasion of Poland. The Führer's order came on April 3, and the initial target date was set for September 1, 1939. If the plan was to be successful, Poland had to be isolated from effective help by means of two conditions: (1) the French and British would not launch an offensive against Germany in the West while the latter was preoccupied with the Polish war in the East; (2) Russia would not intervene militarily in support of Poland. The Germans thought the second quite unlikely. The Poles and Russians were traditional enemies and ideological foes. In Hitler's view, the former would not want to be "bolshevized." In any event, as Hitler told his generals on May 29, "It is not impossible that Russia will show herself to be disinterested in the destruction of Poland."<sup>22</sup>

After March 31, the Germans had several advantages in their negotiations with the U.S.S.R. First, they could hold out territorial gains to the Soviet leaders which the British could not or were not prepared to give. They could even offer a major part of Poland. Second, Hitler could give the Russians a respite, a temporary peace. The British, on the other hand, could only place on them the burden of fighting to defend Poland against Germany, with a good chance of war in September. Finally, the British guarantee had made it almost impossible for the Russians to press the Poles for military cooperation against Hitler. The latter did not fully realize how desperate their plight was, believing to the end in their own strength and the prospect of an offensive in the West.

The slow-moving British and French military talks with the Russians in August stalled on the inability of Western nations to promise that

<sup>21</sup> The British Chiefs faced this issue in dealing with the Poles. Since neither they nor the French knew what to do "if Germany attacked Poland in the East and stood on the defensive in the West," they were not in a position to give assurances to Warsaw. CAB 53/11, COS MTG 294, 10 May 1939.

<sup>22</sup> "Minutes of a Conference on May 23, 1939," No. 433, *Documents on German Foreign Policy, 1918-1945* (London: H. M. Stationery Office 1956), 576.

Poland would open its borders to permit Russian troops to engage German invaders. When this became clear, the Russians moved quickly to an agreement with Nazi Germany. Thus, Hitler's second requirement for action against Poland was met: the Russians would do more than stand aside, they would participate in the dismemberment of Poland.

The possibility of an offensive by the West was thoroughly considered by General Halder and other members of the German High Command. The success of any French offensive (the British being unable to get their forces to France until after the third week in September) depended critically upon timing. The operation in Poland was planned not to take more than two weeks, after which great numbers of battle-hardened troops might be released to do service against France. Thus, the question was only whether France might strike so quickly that Germany could not respond in time. The answer has been much mooted.<sup>23</sup> The French began preliminary mobilization measures on August 21. By September 9, they had 72 divisions, 8,000 guns, and 2,500 aircraft in position opposite Germany. On the other side, the *Wehrmacht* had 8 first-line and 25 other divisions, making a total of 33. These divisions did not yet have tanks, and their supplies would have been adequate for no more than three days of fighting. The Siegfried Line was not complete. Turrets were missing. No adequate shelter was provided for troops. There was no system of defense in depth.<sup>24</sup> Still, the Germans did not worry greatly about a French attack. While General Halder believed the French to be in a position to launch an offensive two weeks after mobilization, he expected to have 22 to 26 divisions to meet an invasion at the decisive point. The Germans had only 300 artillery pieces to meet the expected 1,600 on the French side, but they were planning to transfer medium artillery from the East. They could also shift their defense to the Meuse and adopt other measures to delay a French offensive. Although they were wrong in believing that the French would not mobilize before the eve of war, the time during which the latter could break through German lines and exploit that advantage was very short. Perhaps the French did possess sufficient superiority between September 9 and 15 to consider an offensive in the West. To make use of this brief period, they would have had to go through Belgium or else attack over the Siegfried Line.

<sup>23</sup> See, among others, Siegfried Westphal, *Heer in Fesseln* (Bonn: Athenäum-Verlag 1950), 109-17; Telford Taylor, *Sword and Swastika* (New York: Simon and Schuster 1952), 305-09; and Jon Kimche, *The Unfought Battle* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson 1968), 89-95.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 89-94.

Movement through Belgium was slow. The French would not be at the German border for several days. They might have speeded this timetable by going against the German *Westwall*, but they did not realize how inadequately prepared it was. The French *Deuxieme Bureau* reported on September 9 that Germany had 43 divisions behind the Siegfried Line, and identified and placed 26 of them. The French were not ready to attack such forces.<sup>25</sup> The British Chief of the Imperial General Staff met with General Gamelin on September 4. He reported to London: "Ultimately General Gamelin intended to throw out three reconnaissances in force and to test the strength of the Siegfried Line. He had no intention of rushing the operation and risking the flower of the French Army by precipitate action."<sup>26</sup> British and French attitudes are exemplified in Telford Taylor's summary of German military confidence:

There is every reason to conclude that Halder's cool and unworried gauge of the western front was shared by the officers' corps as a whole. He was not only Chief of the General Staff; he was a conservative and competent tactician whose views can be regarded as both representative and authoritative. A year earlier, he had not shrunk from planning Hitler's overthrow in order to avert what was then regarded as certain disaster. In 1939, however, he viewed the immediate prospects in the west with equanimity, and we may safely assume that the same was true of his other generals.<sup>27</sup>

Thus, by August 22, Hitler's two main requirements for isolating Poland seemed to have been met. Russia would not help Poland, but rather would be in on the kill. There seemed no realistic prospect that either the British or French would be able to take military advantage of Germany's brief period of distraction in the Polish campaign. Hitler met his generals at the *Obersalzberg* in a mood of triumph. He noted that everything at the moment was uniquely favorable to Germany and to German action, but that this might not be true after two or three years. He and Mussolini were decisive; they were men of action. But the Duce might fall, and Hitler could be struck down. The German Chancellor observed: "Essentially all depends on me, on my existence,

<sup>25</sup> The Anglo-French staff conversations had already made this amply clear. French General Lelong told his British counterparts as early as May 1939, "if Germany decided to remain strictly on the defensive, and if Italy remained neutral, a very thorny problem would be presented to the French and British. The Maginot Line and Siegfried Line faced each other, and France could not seriously attack Germany on land without long preparation. . . . There could be no question of a hurried attack on the Siegfried Line." CAB 53/48, COS 900, J. P., May 1939; 13th meeting of British and French staffs.

<sup>26</sup> CAB 65/3 W. M. 4 Conclusions; Minute 1, September 4, 1939.

<sup>27</sup> Taylor (fn. 23), 308.

because of my political talents. Furthermore, the fact is that probably no one will ever again have the confidence 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." Economic forces and the need for *Lebensraum* also pressed for an early decision: "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."<sup>28</sup> He added that the chances were that the war would be short and confined to Poland. The probability was great that the West would not intervene. The British could gain nothing from a long war and were not prepared for it. In the Far East, in the Mohammedan world, and in the Mediterranean, their power was on the wane: "England and France have undertaken obligations which neither is in a position to fulfill." The British had not even assisted in Polish rearmament, showing how little they wanted to support Poland. The West had only two strategies to use to oppose Germany. The first was a blockade. Hitler dismissed this by saying, "It will not be effective because of our autarky and because we have sources of supply in Eastern Europe." As for an armed attack from the Maginot Line, he maintained, "I consider this impossible."<sup>29</sup>

Germany's previous gains had been "achieved by bluff on the part of the political leaders." At some point it would be necessary to test the military machine. This test should not be "in a general reckoning" but "by the accomplishment of individual tasks." The danger that Russia would become Germany's enemy after the conquest of Poland had been neutralized. "Thus in actual fact England cannot help Poland. . . . Military intervention is out of the question." Hitler looked forward to the impact on Poland and the West of the Non-Aggression Pact with Russia. It would be a bombshell. "The effect on Poland will be tremendous."<sup>30</sup>

Until August 25, Hitler was able to cling to the belief that his strategy had won. Neither France nor Britain would now intervene. Even Liddell Hart stresses the logic of this position. Summarizing Hitler's attitude toward the British, he notes:

<sup>28</sup> Speech by the Führer to the Commanders in Chief, August 22, 1939. *Documents on German Foreign Policy, 1918-1945*, Series D, VII, *The Last Days of Peace, August 9-September 3, 1939* (Department of State, Washington, D.C. 1956), 201.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 203.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 202, 204.

Regarding them as cool-headed and rational, with their emotions controlled by their heads, he felt that they would not dream of entering a war on behalf of Poland unless they could obtain Russia's support. So, swallowing his hatred and fear of "Bolshevism," he bent his efforts and energies towards conciliating Russia and securing her abstention. . . . But the Soviet-German pact, coming so late, did not have the effect on the British that Hitler had reckoned. On the contrary, it aroused the "bulldog" spirit—of blind determination, regardless of the consequences. In that state of feeling, Chamberlain could not stand aside without both loss of face and breach of promise.<sup>31</sup>

Hitler's first inkling that the British would stand firm came on August 23, when both Henderson, the British Ambassador, and Chamberlain (in a private letter) made it clear that England would fulfill her obligations to Poland despite the Non-Aggression Pact. On August 25, the British formalized their obligation to Poland in a treaty signed in London. On the same day, Mussolini told Hitler that he could not enter the war unless supplied with many vital raw materials; his abstention was now clear. Hitler then cancelled the order to begin operation *Fall Weiss* on August 26, hoping for a British reconsideration. But it never came. When the Germans offered a propagandistic recital of their claims and demands on the 29th, it was meant to justify war, not to prevent it. Indeed, by August 27, Hitler had decided to attack Poland regardless of what Britain or France might do.

After the 26th, Hitler's behavior failed to accord with criteria of deterrence. He was prepared to act even though the British and French would go to war with Germany. To be sure, in the short run that would not mean much; for Hitler dismissed their threat to attack in the West, and they could not assist Poland. On the other hand, he had no military plan for eliminating them. He might have presented them with the worst of all worlds by simply ignoring their declaration of war, but it was a foregone psychological conclusion in Hitler's thinking that he would have to attack them. In regard to Poland, Hitler had informed his generals: "A permanent state of tension is intolerable. The power of the 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. . . . We are faced with the harsh alternatives of striking or of certain annihilation sooner or later."<sup>32</sup> This line of reasoning meant that a British-French challenge could not go unmet, or Hitler would lose the initiative in world politics.

<sup>31</sup> Liddell Hart (fn. 8), 12-14.

<sup>32</sup> *Documents on German Foreign Policy* (fn. 28), 202.



When the Czechs had stiffened their resistance in the spring of 1938, Hitler had decided to face them down—politically if possible, militarily if necessary. Similarly, after the British and French entry into the war, it was inevitable that Hitler would attack them.

In this way, of course, Hitler validated the original British assumptions of March 31, and made it unnecessary for the allies to plan offensive operations. That he could do so, however, was testimony to the degree to which the maintenance of sheer political momentum had come to determine his strategy, to the neglect of military prudence. After the conquest of Poland, Hitler made ritual peace overtures to the British and French, conditional on their acceptance of the new situation; but even before they could reply, he laid down plans for an offensive in the West. Operations should be directed, after the manner of the old Schlieffen Plan, through Belgium to the Channel coast, and A-day was set initially as early as November 12th. In his justification for such plans, Hitler stressed the danger that a long war would pose to Germany. A drawn-out conflict, given Germany's "limited food and raw material basis," would threaten the national food supply and "the means for carrying on the war." He feared that "the morale at least of the people will be adversely affected."<sup>33</sup>

Hitler's generals, however, were by no means convinced of the early need to attack the West; some believed that the West need not be struck at all. Leeb, the German commander opposite the Maginot Line, claimed that "It is quite certain that a total destruction of the Anglo-French armies, which is the desired ultimate objective cannot be achieved. . . . An attack costing the attacker more casualties than the defender . . . would be a disadvantage for us. . . . World War I was sufficient proof that long drawn-out trench warfare means tremendous disadvantage for us." General Rundstedt took a similar view. He was against allowing "the attacking power of the army to be consumed by an indecisive and partial objective."<sup>34</sup> With England and France in the war, a long struggle seemed inevitable. "An army capable of attacking" would be the decisive weapon in such a war, but a German attack on the West could only weaken this vital instrument. Some commanders even argued that a German attack on the West would favor Franco-British strategy.

Since the Western allies could neither prevent an attack on Poland nor take the offensive against Germany, a great gap opened in the

<sup>33</sup> Quoted in Telford Taylor, *The March of Conquest* (New York: Simon and Schuster 1958), 45.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 47, 52.

Anglo-French short-term deterrence position in September 1939. After the invasion of Poland, moreover, the way was clear for German expansion to the south. The resources of Eastern Europe, with Russia's tacit consent, would now be available to Hitler. Thus, an important part of Britain's long-term deterrence strategy had also been undercut. At the same time, the attack on Poland did not reverse the scales of power. The defeat of Poland by no means signalled the defeat of France. The Germans would still have to take the offensive in the West to succeed. Even with their enormous army, they never attained a decisive superiority over the opposing forces in the West. No German general could have guaranteed a German success against the French and British, and some predicted stalemate or defeat.<sup>35</sup> Hitler did not see the way clear to victory over the West when he decided to attack Poland. He simply leaped into the dark.

If Hitler's and his generals' conclusions had been brought into harmony, a more sensible strategy might have evolved. Germany might then have decided to hold back in September; or, after the collapse of Warsaw, to let the British and French wear themselves out in an attack against German forces on the Rhine. The necessary integration of thought never occurred. Hitler could attack Poland because of difficulties in the British short-term deterrence position. But he was not deterred from planning, as a logical consequence, an attack on the West that should have been ruled out by British and French long-term deterrence.

#### IV. CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

The outbreak of war in 1939 can thus be seen as a sequence of failures of deterrence. In March, the British risked an already weak short-term position to prevent a further decline in their long-term position. The guarantee to Poland and then to Romania was an ineffective way of stopping the German dictator. Since no British capabilities were available to enforce it, the guarantee only increased Hitler's determination to settle matters with Poland. Once he had obtained Russia's cooperation, he assumed that Britain and France would back down. When they did not, he was confronted by a new dilemma: should he attack Poland when this would put Germany at war with

<sup>35</sup> Taylor's "Second Thoughts" add substance to these contentions. According to Taylor, Hitler "had no idea that he would knock France out of the war when he invaded Belgium and Holland on 10 May 1940. This was a defensive move: to secure the Ruhr from Allied invasion. The conquest of France was an unforeseen bonus" (fn. 1), 277-93; quotation from p. 287.

Britain and France? At the time, he had no plans for a successful offensive against France, to say nothing of Britain. He certainly did not inquire into such possibilities between August 27 and 31; yet German troops attacked on September 1. He discounted the long-term dangers because his short-term position was so favorable.

The time scale of perception and decision is a critical and largely neglected area of deterrence theory. If opponents are to attain "mutual deterrence," they must operate on roughly the same time horizon. Long-term maximizers will not always deter short-term maximizers, and vice versa. Britain was not deterred from giving the guarantee by her short-term weakness in Eastern Europe. She hoped to prevail in a long war in which Germany would take the offensive. Germany was not deterred from attacking Poland by long-term uncertainties; rather, she focused on short-term strength.

It is important to inquire whether the United States and the Soviet Union have operated upon similar time perspectives in the post-World War II era. The revolutionary fact of nuclear and thermonuclear weapons initially made both superpowers consider not just whether devastation might fall upon them, but how soon. In Secretary Dulles's formulation, it was not only "massive retaliation" that was possible, but also "instant retaliation." The very advantages that the Soviet Union might have in the short run in conventional forces could be cancelled by "a great capacity to retaliate instantly by means and at places of our own choosing."<sup>36</sup> But with time and the establishment of mutual deterrence, the certainty that nuclear weapons would be used in response to conventional attacks has inevitably declined. The pause before their introduction has lengthened. Indeed, most of American strategic policy since 1957 has been concerned with trying to find other than instant and massive ways of responding to conventional aggression. If conventional forces were considered inadequate, tactical nuclear weapons too indiscriminate, and strategic options unpromising, the United States might also be willing to delay use of strategic counter-city weapons in response to a major conventional attack. But indefinite postponements undercut deterrence as surely as a decline in credibility. Strategists have speculated about the "dilemmas of the victor's inheritance" which the conqueror would face even if nuclear weapons were not used at all. How could an aggressor expect to govern the rebellious populations of the conquered territory? What would be the reaction of other powers to his success? We have been told that, if nuclear weapons were employed

<sup>36</sup> John Foster Dulles, "The Evolution of Foreign Policy," *Department of State Bulletin*, xxx, No. 761, January 25, 1954.

by an attacker, a defender might gain advantage by adopting a "withholding strategy" in order to maximize the ratio of surviving missile stocks. Increasingly, one looks not to the immediate situation after a *casus belli*, but to leverage in negotiations that might take place days or weeks afterward. On the part of the West at least, there has been a tendency to try to find medium- and long-term advantages to compensate for presumed short-term disadvantages should a conflict begin. And the Soviet Union, equally, has been willing to plan in terms of extended time perspectives. Neither American nor Soviet leaders appear to have "mortality complexes" of the kind that influenced the Nazis' decisions.

Still, at some stage an aggressor may well come to believe that the point at which he would suffer severe sanctions is so far removed and so uncertain that it does not serve as a realistic deterrent. Short-term strengths would then determine the outcome. Here another possible lesson of 1939 may become relevant. Since the *Blitzkrieg*, strategists have perhaps been too ready to overlook the traditional advantages of the defense, too disposed to assume that the offense would overwhelm even the best-prepared conventional defense. In part this has been for historical reasons. After World War II, the United States and Europe did not initially believe they could mount a defense, adequate in conventional terms, to stem an attack by the then presumed 175 Soviet divisions. They sought, for political and technological reasons, to offset such primacy by tactical and strategic nuclear weapons. As a result, they did not design defensive redoubts that would have taken full advantage of terrain and fortifications to stop an attack. Rather, they steeled themselves to be ready for the inevitable transition to a nuclear battlefield, losing many traditional defensive strengths in the process. Today, on the other hand, the development and further perfection of precision-guided munitions may give advantages to a well-prepared defense analogous to those of classical strategy. As Liddell Hart has noted, the required ratio of force to space has been continually declining in the modern era.<sup>37</sup> If so, the number of troops required to hold a given frontier should also have decreased, strengthening the defensive position. If traditional techniques are conjoined with new weapons, one might eventually restore the military *status quo ante* of 1939 and produce a situation in which a very substantial offensive superiority would be necessary to achieve a breakthrough. Then time perspectives would regain symmetry: short-term offensive advantages would be offset by short-term defensive strengths.

<sup>37</sup> Liddell Hart, *Deterrent or Defense?* (New York: Praeger 1960), 97.

The significance of differences in time perceptions is not the only lesson for deterrence to be learned from a study of 1939. Of equal importance is that of political alliance and realignment. The final event tipping the balance toward war in 1939 was the Russo-German Pact of August 23. This squared the diplomatic circle: Communism and Nazism joined forces, at least temporarily. Neither Britain nor France had believed that such an event was possible. They had thought that they well-nigh automatically had Russia on their side; all they had to do was court Poland. In fact, the reverse was nearer the truth. Poland had no options, but Russia did. When the U.S.S.R. shifted her weight from one side of the scales to the other, the weakness of the Western countries was exposed. Poland was vulnerable to attack, and Hitler acted to seize his short-term advantage.

Today, political alignments are just as vital a factor. The Sino-Soviet split has enhanced deterrence. The enmity of the two great Communist states has forced the Soviet Union to station substantial forces on her border with the People's Republic of China. The greater flexibility of Soviet policy since the late 1960's can be seen in part as a response to the threat posed by her southern neighbor. Strategists have speculated that a major Russian move in Europe might bring a response from China. Thus the West's position is considered improved because of Russia's supposed inability to cope with war on two fronts. But this improved deterrence position is premised on a continuing rift between the Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China. The uncertainty of China's political scene is very evident, however. Close supporters of Chairman Mao have followed an anti-Soviet line, but the resurgence of more bureaucratic elements may lead to control by a faction much more amenable to a rapprochement with the U.S.S.R.

It may be well to consider the galvanic effect on international relations of a sudden alliance between these seemingly implacable foes. The example of 1939 shows the destabilizing effect of major alliance reversals. Although the analogy between 1939 and 1977 is rudimentary at best, present deterrence calculations would be seriously affected by such a momentous shift of alignment. The mere possibility of such a reversal suggests that the political foundations of contemporary deterrence need attention. On the whole, the West has been dilatory in its attempts to reach a more complete understanding with China. In the interwar years, the Western countries dallied in their negotiations for closer alignment with the Soviet Union; in the negotiations of 1939, they continued to procrastinate. Diplomats then believed that an alliance between Russia and her primary adversary, Nazi Germany, was

impossible. Today, too many assume that a Sino-Soviet agreement is unthinkable, and thus relegate China's concerns to the distant future.

Although at the present time a move to more cordial relations between the United States and the Soviet Union is important and overdue, it should not obscure the fact that the vital underpinning of détente is a much closer American connection with China. We should recognize that the political balance needs buttressing as much or more than the military balance, and we should seek above all to prevent a destabilizing *renversement des alliances*.