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World War II

SHOULD FRANCE AND GREAT BRITAIN HAVE GONE TO WAR WITH GERMANY IN 1938? MAYBE...

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The situation in Europe in 1938 can only be seen, in the historical light of the war that was to come a year later, for what did actually come to pass. However, there exists a single, great counter-factual question that makes for a really interesting analysis of the time, the politics, and the military abilities of all the states involved. The question is what if the United Kingdom and France had decided—or felt themselves forced—to go to war with Hitler's Germany at some point in 1938, as opposed to a full year later? The numerous crises and the changing nature of alliances in that year make the question more tenable than fantastical, but the outcome would have been, very likely, equally disastrous for the Third Reich.

Alliances and Obligations

In the year 1938—in Western and Central Europe, at least—there were several important political crises, the combination of which might have resulted in war. One must remember that the "firm" alliances of 1939 were still in the process of coming together or, sadly, coming apart. There were two core sets of allies, if we can see them as such. One was the burgeoning alliance between the fascist states of Italy and Germany. Important to remember is that someone at the start of 1938 might have seen Italy, with its active policy of military expansion in Africa and intervention in the Spanish Civil War, as more the threat than Germany. The other set of allies was the United Kingdom and France. These two had been the core states of the alliance that had defeated imperial Germany in 1918—which had been finished with assistance from the United States, now completely out of the picture—and they were the two greatest empires on Earth.

Other states remain that must be considered in creating a credible picture of what could happen that might bring France and the U.K. to war with Germany, as well as what the outcome might look like. Three other states are critical in this development: Czechoslovakia, the Soviet Union, and Spain. In the Anschluss Crisis of early 1938, with Germany's absorption of Austria, there was little real expression of any Western interest in a preventative war. The reason for this being that none of the European powers, in particular England or France, had any stomach for all-out war. The annexation of Austria had a good deal of internal support—perhaps from a third of the population—and the blessing of Mussolini's Italy to the immediate south. Finally, neither the French nor the British had any real treaty obligation to the Austrians, to whose rescue no one would come. This first crisis of 1938, while the first warning of a petulant and aggressive Germany, could not provoke war.

Important Events

It is in the combination of alliances, treaty obligations, events in Spain, and Hitler's intentions in the Sudetenland that the causes of war could be seen in 1938. The road to an Anglo-French war with Germany comes through a German invasion of Czechoslovakia, which Hitler had already planned. Since the French were under clear-cut treaty obligations to defend the Czechs and since France had been promised assistance from the USSR in case of German invasion, the possibility was there. However, the British had made it clear earlier in the year that they would not fight, although they were obligated to defend France if it was attacked. Popular opinion, which opposed war, made it impossible for the British government to make any real commitment to a fight. Here, events in Spain might have fueled change in British public opinion that would have allowed for a war.

In the first part of 1938, Italo-German-backed Spanish Nationalist aircraft had attacked 22 British flagships, looking to block supplies from Republican forces. The aircraft used to attack the British were very likely piloted by Italians and Germans—a potential act of war. These actions had provoked open debate in Britain's Parliament and a call by the Labour Party for action. These openly belligerent attacks on neutral British shipping could have changed popular opinion in favor of taking action against Germany and fascism in general.

German Reactions

Therefore, the likeliness of a war in 1938 comes in a possible over-reaction by Hitler to the new French prime minister Edouard Daladier's statement on September 8 that France would defend Czechoslovakia and to the immediate addition of a Soviet promise to send aid as well. The Germans were being steadily driven by economic necessity to press forward to absorb the wealth and resources of the surrounding states in order to support their own, rapidly militarizing economy. German offensive action is required for this scenario as it is historically clear that neither the French nor the British public had any interest in provoking a war. Both had painful memories of the terrible losses of World War I and both states were suffering from the economic downturn caused by the Great Depression. Also, both France and the U.K. had just committed to a sustained rearmaments program, one that would take years to really come to fruition.

In reaction to the French announcement and apparent support from the USSR and maybe even the U.K., Hitler could have put into action the plans for the invasion of Czechoslovakia, already created by the General Staff and set for October 1. Therefore with the plans ready and troops in place, and a formal statement by Franklin D. Roosevelt that the U.S. would not intervene concerning the Czechs, German troops cross the border, assisted by Poland's occupation of Teschen and Hungary's taking of parts of Slovakia. Since Germany occupies Austria, the Czechs can be attacked on three fronts.

German Forces

How can one militarily assess a European war that begins in October of 1938 rather than in September of 1939? The first concern is the military forces available to each side. For certain the French and Czech armies would be part of an immediate force, but it would be several weeks before the British Army would be available for operations in western France. How might this initial encounter between German and Franco-Czech forces have evolved is in question. There are three armies to consider and their positions. The first is the much vaunted German Army, which in 1938 remained an untested and unknown force.

The German Army of 1938 was still in development, as opposed to the army that swept into Poland a year later and across the Low Countries and France in 1940. In 1938, the bulk of German tanks, some 2700, were Mark Is and IIs. These were clearly inferior to their French and Czech counterparts, weighing in at less than 20 tons, armed only with heavy machine guns, and prone to breakdowns. The slightly larger Mark III, which sported a 37mm cannon, was less numerous and the all-important Mark IV—workhorse of German panzer forces—did not arrive for field use at all until mid-1939.

German production of aircraft also lagged behind that of the British, with no real increase until 1939, leaving the Germans to deploy roughly 1,000 fighters and 1,000 light and medium bombers in 1938. As would be the case during the war, the Germans lacked anything like a heavy, long-range bomber, and therefore could project no strategic threat to British or French economic production. The German Army, with a strength of 850,000 men, could count on a mobilization of another 1.7 million, but that would take months. Therefore, in order to achieve real success against Czechoslovakia the bulk of German forces would need to be deployed east, with only several divisions left to screen the French border and little else to cover the Dutch-Belgian fronts or the Polish frontier.

Czech Army

The Czech Army was, considering the size of the state, impressive. With a relatively well-developed economy and effective if smallish industrial base, the Czechs were producing effective tanks, artillery and firearms. These were often associated with the historically vaunted Skoda works, which the Germans coveted and would make great use of during the actual war. The Czech Army possessed a few hundred medium tanks with effective guns, good light anti-tank weapons, and effective small arms. The passes through the mountains from Germany into Czechoslovakia were guarded by well-built fortresses and the army was of a size—if one includes second-line fortress troops—with those of all its neighbors. Finally, it had a small but effective air force and was receiving new aircraft from the USSR during the crisis.

French Forces

Assuming public opinion and the will to fight remained unified, the French military would have been at its most potent against a German threat at this time. It can be argued that an open war in 1938, with the German Army committed in the east, would have suited it better. The French Army, in troop strength, if not quality, was on par with the Germans. Further, French tanks like the Souma and Renault R-35, while slower and not used en masse like German tanks, possessed heavier armor and greater firepower. The French air force, here backed by the powerful fighters and bombers of the British,

would have been numerically and qualitatively close to the Germans.

Finally British naval power, as well as French naval assets in the Mediterranean, would have eliminated German shipping, closing off the German economy from outside resources through a blockade. Important to remember here as well is that only 10 of Germany's vaunted U-boats were launched in 1938, meaning the submarine threat was two years away.

War in 1938

Due to the excellent strategic positioning of German forces for an invasion of Czechoslovakia and the nominal assistance of Polish and Hungarian forces, it is not hard to imagine the Czech Army offering a stalwart but quickly futile resistance. The real objective for the Germans would have been to seize Czech industrial assets intact, the failure to do so being an important setback to German rearmament. The failure to capture Czech tanks, artillery, and firearms (the Germans took over 1 million Czech small arms in 1938, for example), clearly substantial, would have been a serious loss for the Germans. But the real moment of importance would be the ultimatum by France and the United Kingdom demanding an immediate withdrawal, and the mobilization of French and British forces. Hitler would clearly have rejected any demands, preferring war. It is sometimes posited that the German High Command would not have accepted a war in 1938, and therefore moved to oust Hitler. That stated, it is all but impossible to imagine the army's pusillanimous commander-in-chief, Walter von Brauchitsch, leading a coup against the Fuehrer.

What this might mean for the following year, 1939, can only be speculated. Not unlike the period after the defeat of Poland, there would likely have been a repeat of the "Phony War." With all sides pausing with the winter to regroup, arm, and prepare for a next step, the British and French were unwilling to attack. However, due to the geographic nature of Czechoslovakia there would have been no "Blitzkrieg." Worse for Germany, the potential for a working alliance with Stalin would be less likely due to his commitment to an independent Czechoslovakia. Barring a coup that would have removed Hitler, the nature of the war in 1939 looks much like that in 1940. It is very possible that British and French forces deploy as they had before, and that the Germans would evolve the spectacular if risky plan of an invasion of France with a sweep through the Lowlands and the Ardennes. It is also very possible that a precursor of these events might be the actual invasions of Denmark and Norway. The real change would be exactly what would have come to pass for Poland. Hitler clearly envisioned its destruction, but would France and Britain have remained sympathetic to the dictatorial Polish state that helped carve up Czechoslovakia? Likely the Germans would have preserved Poland as a buffer state against the USSR until the defeat of the Western Allies.

In the end, a war starting in 1938 would have seen all sides less ready, not just Germany. The great possible change is that the Allies, having brought the war about a year early, undermine the nature of German offensive power, resulting not in the rapid defeat of France but instead in a war of attrition. Such a war would have been untenable for the Germans, making the invasion of Russia in 1941 impossible. Or the great historical offensives of 1940 simply take place in 1939, resulting in the fall of France and the routing of British land forces. In either case the real change would have taken place in the east, in the relationship between Germany and the USSR.

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