

# 1939



## 10 FEBRUARY

Pope Pius XI dies in Rome. He is succeeded by Cardinal Eugenio Pacelli, who takes the title Pius XII.

## 15 MARCH

The German army marches into Czechoslovakia. The Czech provinces of Bohemia and Moravia become German protectorates while Slovakia is made an independent state under a pro-Nazi regime.



## 22 MARCH

The Lithuanian government accedes to German demands and hands over the Memel Territory, a region in the west of Lithuania. The Memel Territory had formerly been part of Germany but was taken over by Lithuania after the First World War.

## 28 MARCH

The final battle of the Spanish Civil War ends with the Nationalists taking control of Madrid, the last Republican stronghold. Four days later, Nationalist leader General Francisco Franco declares that the war is over.

## 30 APRIL

The 1939 World's Fair opens in New York. The Irish pavilion, designed by Michael Scott, is chosen as the best building in the Fair.



## REVIEW OF THE PRESS

Germany's invasion of Poland and the beginning of a new European war dominate the pages of this week's newspapers, the *Irish Press* and the *Evening Herald*.

On 1 September 1939 the long-threatened European war finally began when German forces crossed the border into Poland. The following day, the Irish government declared that Ireland would follow a policy of neutrality during the conflict. Meanwhile, Britain and France mobilised their forces, with both countries declaring war against Germany on 3 September.

### *Irish Press* 4 September 1939

*'Without doubt there will be great difficulties and great dangers to be faced as this war develops. We shall face them as a united people.'*



The front page of the *Irish Press* gives a sense of the confusing and terrifying age the world has just entered. The war is merely three days old but already there are reports 'that 1,500 people, including many women and children, have been killed or injured in air raids on Polish towns and villages'. Closer to home, the *Press* reports that the passenger ship *Athenia* has been torpedoed by a German U-boat near the Hebrides. It will later emerge that over 100 people were killed in the attack.

Pages one, two and three cover the Dáil's response to the beginning of the war. It is the stated intention of the Irish government not to enter the conflict and a page-two report, entitled 'Neutrality only practical policy', provides evidence that there is cross-party agreement on this stance. On page three, Seán Lemass, recently installed as minister for supplies as part of a government reorganisation, assures the public that there is no need for any 'panic buying'. Lemass had recently criticised the actions of Findlaters, a chain of Dublin grocers. On 24 August, Findlaters had run an advertising campaign that had the potential to create panic by urging people to stockpile food. Page three of the *Press* carries a new advertisement by the grocers, perhaps chastened by Lemass' criticism, advising the public 'to purchase no more than their weekly requirements'.

Other developments relating to the war can be found on pages seven and eight, including details of the emergency powers that the government now has at its disposal. In Britain, a new cabinet has been formed, which includes the 64-year-old Winston Churchill. Page six carries Hanna Sheehy-Skeffington's eye-witness report from Paris, in which she describes French preparations for war. One of the few stories not connected to the European conflict is on page nine: an account of the previous day's All-Ireland hurling final.

### *Evening Herald* 13 September 1939

*'Modern warfare will prove to be nothing less than a gigantic massacre.'*



By the time this edition of the *Evening Herald* went to press, German forces had driven the Polish army back to the outskirts of Warsaw. Germany's blitzkrieg (lightning war) tactics – the combined use of tanks and aircraft to outmanoeuvre and overwhelm the enemy – had proved irresistible. The Polish army is maintaining a ferocious but increasingly futile resistance. Pages one and five of the *Herald* carry the latest reports from Poland and they make for grim reading. The Polish population is 'already suffering from famine' and the German high command has declared that, 'Civilian resistance must be crushed.'

The *Herald* reports on its front page that French forces have marched towards the western German city of Saarbrücken. The French advance is supposed to be the precursor to an offensive that will draw German troops from Poland. Yet there has been no heavy fighting, so far, and the operation has done nothing to help the Poles. Clearly, the *Herald* expects that Poland will soon fall and the paper speculates on future clashes between Britain and Germany. On page one it prints a Press Association report that Germany could deploy '3,000 planes' to 'bomb British harbours', while the same page analyses the fighting abilities of the German navy.

In Ireland, as across Europe, preparations are being made for war. The Department of Defence is considering the building of concrete 'pill-boxes' as air raid shelters, while the private sector is also mobilising. A page-two advertisement for Grannell's building contractors offers air raid shelters for those who can afford them. 'Be prepared', the advertisement exclaims. Yet it remains to be seen to what extent Ireland will be affected by the war.

■ IAN KENNEALLY  
Editor, *The Revolution Papers*

## POLAND BECOMES THE FIRST BATTLEGROUND OF A GLOBAL CONFLICT

# THE WORLD MARCHES

For most of the 1930s, Adolf Hitler's Nazi regime pursued a ruthlessly aggressive foreign policy and seized large areas of new territory for Germany. In 1939, however, Britain and France – until then either unwilling or unable to resist Hitler's hostility – resolved to stop Germany, by force if necessary.

Throughout the mid- and late 1930s, Britain and France followed a foreign policy of appeasement. They attempted to maintain peace in Europe by making concessions to Hitler's demands and wilfully overlooking those German actions that violated the terms of the 1919 Versailles Peace Treaty. As a result, they acquiesced to Germany's vast programme of rearmament that gathered pace in 1935, its remilitarisation of the Rhineland in 1936 and the annexation of Austria in March 1938.

### A line in the sand

The appeasement policy culminated in September 1938, when the British Prime Minister, Neville Chamberlain, met with Hitler for a series of conferences. For months beforehand, the Nazi leader had been agitating to gain control of the Sudetenland in western Czechoslovakia, where about three million people were of German origin. In the Munich Agreement of 30 September 1938, Britain, France and Italy agreed to allow Germany to take control of the Sudetenland, with Czechoslovakia having no say in the deliberations that led to the agreement.

Chamberlain returned to London, claiming that he had won 'peace for our time'. For this, he has been roundly criticised by subsequent generations, but many people at the time celebrated Chamberlain's efforts to prevent another multi-power European war. Yet, less than six months later, appeasement was shown to have failed when Germany contravened the Munich Agreement and invaded the remainder of Czechoslovakia. Britain and France now publicly abandoned their policy of conciliating Germany and pledged to guarantee the independence of Poland, widely believed to be the next country into which Hitler would send his military forces.

The Second Polish Republic, which had emerged at the end of the First World War, was an unending source of resentment for German nationalists. The Treaty of Versailles had given parts of the German provinces of West Prussia, Posen and Silesia to

Poland. Moreover, Germans were particularly offended by the loss of direct access to East Prussia, as that region was cut off from the rest of Germany by the 'Polish Corridor', a strip of land that ran from mainland Poland to the Baltic Sea. The corridor included the Free City of Danzig (modern Gdańsk).

Hitler was not deterred by Britain and France's pledge to defend Polish sovereignty. On 3 April he ordered the German army, the Wehrmacht, to make preparations for an invasion. He was convinced that Chamberlain would not go to war to defend Poland and that France would refuse to act alone. As well as ordering the German military to prepare for war, Hitler secured a diplomatic triumph by agreeing a non-aggression pact with the Soviet Union in August 1939. The pact enabled Germany to attack Poland without fear of Soviet intervention.

### Battle commences

At 4.45am on 1 September 1939, German tanks and infantry crossed into Poland at multiple locations. That morning, the Polish capital, Warsaw, was hit by the first wave of German bombing raids. Such raids, against largely defenceless cities and towns, were a feature of the invasion. The bombardments, as the Germans hoped, forced hundreds of



Adolf Hitler takes the salute of German troops, marching to the front lines.

thousands of civilians to flee from the front lines, thereby blocking roads and slowing the advance of Polish reinforcements.

In tandem with the bombing raids, German tanks crashed through the Polish lines, creating gaps that allowed the German infantry to follow. Flying directly ahead of the tanks, the Junkers Ju 87 dive-bomber, commonly referred to as the 'Stuka', destroyed Polish defensive positions that might otherwise have hindered the German advance. The Germans' use of blitzkrieg tactics prevented a static front line from being formed and gave the

## DOCUMENT

### Republican voices

Throughout the history of the Free State, the republican newspaper, *An Phoblacht*, had been a consistent critic of Irish governments, whether they were led by Cumann na nGaedheal or Fianna Fáil. The paper was permanently suppressed by Éamon de Valera's government in July 1937, after which republicans launched the *Wolfe Tone Weekly*. Edited by Brian O'Higgins, a veteran of the Easter Rising and an elected member of the first Dáil, the *Weekly* advocated a Gaelic Ireland and provided a platform for IRA statements.

This week's document contains an advertising poster for the *Weekly*, carrying the headline, 'British Bounders at War'. For the *Weekly*, the European war offered hope of a British defeat at the hands of Germany. By the end of September 1939, the government used its new emergency powers to suppress the *Weekly*, and the reverse side of this week's document contains the paper's (inevitably biased) account of how it was shut down. Although the IRA would produce *War News*, a clandestine news-sheet, during 1939 and 1940, republicans were effectively without a newspaper until the *United Irishman* was founded in 1948.



**23 AUGUST**

Germany and the Soviet Union sign a non-aggression pact in Moscow, promising not to attack each other during the next ten years.

**25 AUGUST**

An IRA bomb in Coventry kills five people. The bombing is part of an IRA campaign against targets in Britain, known as the S-Plan.

**1 SEPTEMBER**

Germany invades Poland, beginning the Second World War.

**2 SEPTEMBER**

The Irish government announces that Ireland will follow a policy of wartime neutrality.

**5 SEPTEMBER**

President Franklin Roosevelt declares that the United States will remain neutral during the war.

**6 OCTOBER**

Erwin Schrödinger, an Austrian physicist, takes up residence in Dublin on the invitation of Éamon de Valera. Schrödinger, an opponent of the Nazis, had fled Austria in 1938.

**11 OCTOBER**

Franklin Roosevelt receives a letter explaining that 'extremely powerful bombs' could be developed by using uranium to create a nuclear chain reaction. The letter, written by Hungarian-born physicists Leo Szilard, Edward Teller and Eugene Wigner, is signed by Albert Einstein.

**8 NOVEMBER**

In Munich, Adolf Hitler survives an assassination attempt by a German civilian, Johann Georg Elser. A bomb planted by Elser kills eight people.

**30 NOVEMBER**

The Soviet Union invades Finland.

**15 DECEMBER**

The American Civil War movie, *Gone with the Wind*, premieres in Atlanta, Georgia.

**23 DECEMBER**

The IRA raids the Irish army's largest munitions facility, the magazine fort in Dublin's Phoenix Park, taking over one million rounds of ammunition.



## ALSO IN THE NEWS DURING 1939

### FRANCO'S VICTORY

On 28 March 1939, General Francisco Franco's Nationalists entered Madrid in triumph, bringing the Spanish Civil War to an end.

The war began in July 1936 when officers in the Spanish army attempted a coup against the democratically elected government of Spain. The government forces and their allies, the Republicans, defeated that coup but could not prevent the conflict spreading throughout the country.

By the end of 1936, the Nationalists had seized about half of Spain, although the Republicans still held Madrid and Valencia, as well as the Basque and Catalan regions. The Nationalists, who had superiority in weapons and trained soldiers and were supported by Germany and Italy, made

continual if hard won advances into Republican territory.

During June 1937, the Nationalists captured the Basque city of Bilbao and by the following spring they were able to launch bombing raids against the Catalan capital, Barcelona. Over the next year, the Nationalists cut Republican territory in two and mounted a major offensive against Catalonia.

In January 1939, Barcelona was captured and, soon after, the rest of Catalonia fell. The Republican government attempted to negotiate a peace but Franco refused, continuing the war until his forces had achieved a total victory. Over 500,000 lives were lost in a conflict that resulted in the destruction of Spanish democracy. Franco would rule Spain as a dictator until his death in 1975.

### A TEMPORARY ALLIANCE

Germany's seizure of Czechoslovakia in March 1939 brought an end to the policy of appeasement followed by Britain and France during the 1930s. In response to this latest act of German aggression, the two countries pledged to safeguard the independence of Poland, widely seen as Germany's next target. The British and French then held exploratory talks with the Soviet Union over the possibility of forming an alliance to be activated if Germany invaded Poland. However, these talks failed to achieve an agreement and the Soviet leader, Joseph Stalin, instead turned towards Germany during the summer of 1939.

Although Germany and the Soviet Union were avowed enemies, both Adolf Hitler and Stalin could see the benefits of an alliance. For the Germans, it removed the possibility of being forced to fight a war on two fronts. For the Soviet Union, it opened up the possibility of achieving territorial gains in eastern Europe, while also buying time to prepare for an expected future confrontation with Germany. With such motivations, the foreign ministers of Germany and the Soviet Union, Joachim von Ribbentrop and



The alliance between Hitler and Stalin is satirised here by Egyptian cartoonist Kimon Evan Marengo.

Vyacheslav Molotov, signed a non-aggression pact between the two countries on 23 August.

This non-aggression pact contained a secret protocol. It provided for the partition of Poland between Germany and the Soviet Union, and the division of eastern Europe into German and Soviet spheres of influence. Most significantly, the pact enabled Germany to attack Poland on 1 September 1939 without fear of Soviet intervention. Soon afterwards, the Soviet Union annexed eastern Poland and then attacked Finland, in November 1939.

### AN IRA BOMB IN COVENTRY

On the afternoon of Friday, 25 August 1939, a bomb planted by the IRA exploded in Coventry city centre, killing five people and injuring around 70 others. John Arnott, the youngest of the victims, was 15 years old. Two men from County Offaly, Peter Barnes and James McCormick, were arrested for their part in the bombing, convicted and later hanged. However, Joby O'Sullivan, who claimed to have made and planted the bomb, escaped to Ireland. The bombing was part of an IRA campaign of attacks on Britain from January 1939 to March 1940, known as the S-Plan.

Since 1937, the IRA had been in contact with the Nazi regime in the hope of creating an alliance with the Germans. Indeed, the S-Plan was the means by which the IRA leadership, particularly its chief of staff Seán Russell, hoped to demonstrate the organisation's ability to inflict damage on Britain, thus earning Germany's support. In response, the British and Irish governments moved decisively and successfully to disrupt the activities of the IRA, through arrests and internments. Overall, the S-Plan killed seven people in Britain and injured around 100 others.

# TO WAR



o battle in Poland shortly after the outbreak of the war on 1 September 1939.



Polish soldiers heading to the front. The Polish army put up determined resistance but was overcome by its German enemy.

Polish army no time to regroup. As the Germans advanced, they carried out multiple atrocities: one soldier noted, 'Polish civilians and soldiers are dragged out everywhere. When we finish our operation, the entire village is on fire. Nobody is left alive; also all the dogs were shot.'

By 8 September, German tanks were on the outskirts of Warsaw and, two days later, the Polish government ordered all its forces to regroup in the east. The Poles now pinned their hopes upon France and Britain. If these two allies opened an offensive on the west, the Germans would be forced to fight a two-front war, relieving the pressure on the Polish army. However, all military action on the western front was ended on 16 September, and, soon after, the French government ordered its forces to maintain a defensive stance behind the Maginot line (a series of fortifications built during the 1930s).

Without hope of support from those who had pledged to defend them, the Poles suffered another devastating blow on 17 September when the Soviet Union invaded eastern Poland. Unknown to the world, the non-aggression pact between the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany, signed in August 1939, had contained a protocol in which they agreed that Poland would be partitioned between them.



German and Soviet officers exchange greetings in late September 1939, after Poland has been defeated. The non-aggression pact between Germany and the Soviet Union, signed in August 1939, contained a secret protocol in which the two countries agreed to partition Poland.

Poland's defeat was now inevitable, although Warsaw bravely held out until 27 September. By early October, Germany and the Soviet Union had taken total control of the country. The first campaign of the war had ended and for nearly two years the Nazi and Soviet armies would watch each other across what they cynically referred to as the 'Peace Boundary'.

### The world reacts

At 8am on 1 September, Poland had requested immediate military assistance from France and Britain, but it was 3 September before the two countries declared war on Germany. Military commanders

outside Germany still conceived of battle in First World War terms, which had seen long periods of bloody stalemate and unchanging front lines. They therefore expected the Germans to deploy heavy artillery and bombard Polish positions for several weeks before launching a full invasion. By this reasoning, the western theatre of war would follow a similar pattern. Consequently, the French and their British allies prepared to fight a war of defence.

Elsewhere, governments made statements reacting to the escalating conflict. The United States was one country to declare its neutrality. Finland, Norway, Spain, Sweden and Switzerland made similar declarations, as did Ireland. On 2 September, Éamon de Valera told the Dáil that it was the government's intention that Ireland remain neutral, warning his fellow deputies, '... we may be facing one of the most terrible catastrophes in history and that, even with our knowledge of conditions in the past, we have no means of telling what the consequences of that catastrophe may be.' That day, Dáil Éireann passed the Emergency Powers Bill, giving the government sweeping powers to manage Irish society during the war - Ireland had entered 'The Emergency'.

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