



Written by [Laurence M. Vance](#) on March 30, 2009

## The Greatest Blunder in British History

It was 70 years ago on March 31 when Great Britain committed the fatal blunder that led to World War II: issuing a war guarantee to Poland. This was the war, as Pat Buchanan says in his recent book, *Churchill, Hitler, and the Unnecessary War*, that “led to the slaughter of the Jews and tens of millions of Christians, the devastation of Europe, Stalinization of half the continent, the fall of China to Maoist madness, and half a century of Cold War.” Buchanan’s book is essential for understanding why World War II was so unnecessary.



Poland was a creature of the Versailles Treaty. After being partitioned several times in history by Prussia, Russia, and Austria, Poland was reconstituted after World War I at the expense of a defeated Germany. But as Buchanan says: “Versailles had created not only an unjust but an unsustainable peace.” To give Poland a port on the Baltic, the city of Danzig, which was 95-percent German and had never belonged to Poland, was detached from Germany and made a Free City administered by the League of Nations. A “Polish Corridor” connected Poland to the Baltic and severed East Prussia from Germany.

The regime in Poland, according to contemporary British historian Niall Ferguson, was “every bit as undemocratic and anti-Semitic as that of Germany.” Marshal Jozef Pilsudski, the dictator in Poland who had come to power in a coup, considered making a preemptive strike against Germany before signing a 10-year nonaggression pact with Hitler in 1934. Poland had joined in the dismemberment of Czechoslovakia after the Munich Agreement, seizing the coal-rich region of Teschen. Hitler’s offer to Polish foreign minister Jozef Beck — a man known for his duplicity, dishonesty, and depravity — to guarantee Poland’s borders and accept Polish control of the Corridor in exchange for the return of Danzig and the construction of German roads across the Corridor was rebuffed.

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Britain did not object to Danzig being returned to Germany, knowing that a plebiscite would result in an overwhelming vote in favor of return. Lord Halifax, the British foreign secretary, deemed Danzig and the Polish Corridor to be “an absurdity.” Hitler wanted an alliance with Poland, not war. He issued a directive to his army commander in chief: “The Fuehrer does not wish to solve the Danzig question by force. He does not wish to drive Poland into the arms of Britain by this.”

But then, after false alarms about an imminent German attack on Poland, Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain addressed the British House of Commons:

I now have to inform the House that ... in the event of any action which clearly threatened Polish independence and which the Polish Government accordingly considered it vital to resist with their national forces, His Majesty’s Government would feel themselves bound at once to lend the Polish Government all support in their power. They have given the Polish Government an assurance to that effect.



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It was March 31, 1939. Germany terminated its nonaggression pact with Poland on April 24, and Poland would cash this “blank check” on September 1, when Hitler invaded Poland. Chamberlain had repeated the blunder made by Kaiser Wilhelm on the eve of World War I.

Former prime minister Lloyd George considered the war guarantee “a frightful gamble” and “sheer madness.” The British army general staff “ought to be confined to a lunatic asylum” if they approved this, said Lloyd George. Former First Lord of the Admiralty Cooper recorded in his diary: “Never before in our history have we left in the hands of one of the smaller powers the decision whether or not Britain goes to war.” It was “the maddest single action this country has ever taken,” said a member of Parliament. Newspaper military correspondent Liddell Hart wrote that the Polish guarantee “placed Britain’s destiny in the hands of Polish rulers, men of very dubious and unstable judgment.” Only the warmonger Churchill seemed to think the war guarantee was a good idea, foolishly asserting: “The preservation and integrity of Poland must be regarded as a cause commanding the regard of all the world.” Buchanan simply calls it “the greatest blunder in British history.”

Buchanan refers to modern British historians Roy Denman, Paul Johnson, and Peter Clarke about the folly of the Polish war guarantee:

The most reckless undertaking ever given by a British government. It placed the decision on peace or war in Europe in the hands of a reckless, intransigent, swashbuckling military dictatorship.

The power to invoke it was placed in the hands of the Polish government, not a repository of good sense. Therein lay the foolishness of the pledge: Britain had no means of bringing effective aid to Poland yet it obliged Britain itself to declare war on Germany if Poland so requested.

If Czechoslovakia was a faraway country, Poland was further; if Bohemia could not be defended by British troops, no more could Danzig; if the democratic Czech Republic had its flaws, the Polish regime was far more suspect.

Britain could not save Poland any more than it could have saved Czechoslovakia. As Buchanan wrote elsewhere:

Britain went to war with Germany to save Poland. She did not save Poland. She did lose the empire. And Josef Stalin, whose victims outnumbered those of Hitler 1,000 to one as of September 1939, and who joined Hitler in the rape of Poland, wound up with all of Poland, and all the Christian nations from the Urals to the Elbe. The British Empire fought, bled and died, and made Eastern and Central Europe safe for Stalinism.

Neither Britain nor France had the power to save any nation of Eastern Europe. Yet, Britain was willing to go to war rather than allow Germany to dominate Europe economically, unaffected by a British blockade.

It is the Polish war guarantee for which Neville Chamberlain should be forever judged harshly, not the Munich Agreement for which he is often castigated. (The Munich Agreement essentially ceded to Hitler large sections of Czechoslovakia in order to reduce the possibility of a European War. This has often been referred to as Chamberlain’s “appeasement” of Hitler. Many believe this agreement gave Hitler the resolve to invade Poland, setting off WWII.) It is March 31 that ought to be a day that will live in infamy. The bloodiest conflict in human history was neither good nor necessary.

**Laurence M. Vance** is the author of [Christianity and War and Other Essays Against the Warfare State](#).



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