

The Credibility of Power

Daryl G. Press

Assessing Threats during the
“Appeasement” Crises of the 1930s

In 1933 Adolph Hitler became chancellor of Germany and immediately began breaking his country's international agreements. From 1933 to 1938 Germany violated its treaty commitments by rearming, remilitarizing the Rhineland, and seizing Austria.¹ Although Britain and France complained after each German violation, they refused to respond with force. In September 1938 Hitler threatened to invade Czechoslovakia unless Germany was given a piece of Czech territory called the Sudetenland. Once again, the British and French acquiesced to German demands; at the infamous Munich conference, they agreed to pressure Czechoslovakia into surrendering the Sudetenland to Germany. Finally, in 1939, as Germany was preparing to invade Poland, Britain and France took a firm stand. They warned Hitler that if he attacked Poland, they would declare war on Germany. By this time, however, Hitler no longer believed their threats. As the German leader told a group of assembled generals, “Our enemies are worms. I saw them in Munich.”²

The lessons of Munich have been enshrined in international relations theory and in U.S. foreign policy. For deterrence theorists, the history of the 1930s shows that countries must keep their commitments or they will lose credibility.³ U.S. leaders have internalized this lesson; the most costly and dangerous moves undertaken by the United States during the Cold War were motivated by a desire to preserve credibility. Concerns about credibility led the United

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1. German rearmament, the remilitarization of the Rhineland, and the invasion and annexation of Austria (or *Anschluss*) all violated the 1919 Treaty of Versailles, specifically articles 42–44 and 80 as well as most of part 5, sections 1–3. The remilitarization of the Rhineland also violated article 1 of the 1925 Locarno Pact. Article 4 obligated France and Great Britain, among others, to take immediate action if Germany remilitarized the Rhineland. These treaties can be found online at the website of the Avalon Project at Yale Law School: <http://www.yale.edu/lawweb/avalon>.

2. *Documents on German Foreign Policy, 1918–1945* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1983), Series D, Vol. 7, p. 204.

3. A country's “credibility” is the perceived likelihood that it will carry out its threats and fulfill its promises.

States to fight both in Korea⁴ and in Vietnam⁵; during the 1962 Cuban missile crisis, President John F. Kennedy risked nuclear war rather than back down and risk damaging U.S. credibility.⁶ And even after the end of the Cold War, the fear of breaking commitments continues to be a powerful force in U.S. foreign policy.⁷

The notion that a country's credibility depends on its history of keeping its commitments is widely accepted, but is it true?⁸ Does credibility depend on a

4. Secretary of State John Foster Dulles explained why the United States had to defend South Korea from the Communist North: "To sit by while Korea is overrun by unprovoked armed attack . . . would start [a] disastrous chain of events leading most probably to world war." According to President Harry Truman, "If aggression were allowed to succeed in Korea, it would be an open invitation to new acts of aggression elsewhere." Both Dulles and Truman are quoted in John Lewis Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment: A Critical Appraisal of Postwar American National Security Policy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), pp. 109–110. The original Dulles quote appears in "Dulles and John M. Allison to Acheson and Rusk," June 25, 1950, *Foreign Relations of the United States: 1950*, Vol. 7, p. 140. The original Truman quote appears in "Truman Radio-Television Address," September 1, 1950, *Public Papers of the Presidents: Harry S. Truman: 1950*, p. 610.

5. President Lyndon Johnson offered the following rationale for why the United States should defend Vietnam: "To leave Viet-Nam to its fate would shake . . . confidence . . . in the value of an American commitment and in the value of America's word." Quoted in Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment*, pp. 240–241. Years later, President Richard Nixon used the same logic to argue that the United States had to persevere in Vietnam: "The cause of peace might not survive the damage that would be done to other nations' confidence in our reliability." Quoted in Seymour Hersh, *The Price of Power: Kissinger in the Nixon White House* (New York: Summit, 1983), p. 119.

6. Alone in the Oval Office at midnight on October 18, 1962, President Kennedy dictated into a microphone his reasons for initiating a blockade of Cuba and risking nuclear war with the Soviet Union: "Everyone else [except for National Security Adviser McGeorge Bundy] felt that for us to fail to respond would throw into question our willingness to respond over Berlin." Therefore, "the consensus was that we should go ahead with the blockade beginning on Sunday night." Kennedy was not using the issue of credibility for rhetorical purposes; he was privately recording his reasons for risking nuclear war. Quoted in Ernest R. May and Philip D. Zelikow, eds., *The Kennedy Tapes: Inside the White House during the Cuban Missile Crisis* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997), p. 172. See also *ibid.*, pp. 127, 173, 177.

7. When Iraq invaded Kuwait in 1990, President George H.W. Bush warned that a failure to defend it "would be a signal to actual and potential despots around the world" that they could swallow their neighbors without fear of U.S. retribution. Nine years later, when Serbia, led by Slobodan Milošević, brutalized Kosovar Albanians in defiance of NATO's warnings, Secretary of Defense William Cohen argued that "NATO's credibility [is] on the line." In former Secretary of State Lawrence Eagleburger's words, "Our credibility must be preserved or all the would-be Milosevics around the world will believe that they, too, can kill and maim with impunity." See "Text of President's Address to Joint Session of Congress," *New York Times*, September 12, 1990, p. A20; Dana Priest and Charles Trueheart, "Issue of NATO Airstrikes Rises Again," *Washington Post*, January 21, 1999, p. A21; and Lawrence S. Eagleburger, "NATO, in a Corner," *New York Times*, April 4, 1999, sec. 4, p. 11. For evidence of the pervasive effect of these concerns on U.S. foreign policy, see Daryl G. Press, *Calculating Credibility: How Leaders Assess Military Threats* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, forthcoming), intro. and chap. 1; Jonathan Mercer, *Reputation and International Politics* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1996), pp. 2–4, 19–20; and Robert J. McMahon, "Credibility and World Power: Exploring the Psychological Dimension in Postwar American Diplomacy," *Diplomatic History*, Vol. 15, No. 4 (Fall 1991), pp. 455–471.

8. The international relations literature offers conflicting empirical findings about the effects of backing down on future credibility. Case study researchers have generally not found evidence to

history of resoluteness? More broadly, what causes credibility in international politics? To answer these questions, this article tests two competing theories of credibility. The first, which I call the “past actions” theory, holds that credibility depends on one’s record for keeping or breaking commitments. I test this theory against the “current calculus” theory, which argues that decisionmakers evaluate the credibility of an adversary’s threats by assessing (1) the balance of power and (2) the interests at stake in a given crisis.⁹ If an adversary issues a threat that it has the power to carry out, and an interest in doing so, the threat will be believed, even if that country has bluffed in the past. But if it makes a threat that it lacks the power to carry out, or has no interest in doing so, the credibility of that threat will be viewed with great skepticism.

To test the past actions and current calculus theories, this article uses evidence from German decisionmaking during three crises from the 1930s: the Austrian crisis, the Sudetenland crisis, and the crisis over Poland. These cases offer easy tests for the past actions theory. Nevertheless the current calculus theory performs significantly better. Although the British and French backed down repeatedly in the 1930s, there is little evidence to support the argument that their concessions reduced their credibility in German eyes. The credibility of Britain and France did fluctuate from one crisis to the next, but these fluctuations are better explained by the current calculus theory. Furthermore, German discussions about the credibility of their adversaries emphasized the balance of power, not their history of keeping or breaking commitments.¹⁰

The past actions theory is intuitively appealing because it accurately describes how people assess credibility in their everyday interactions with

support the hypothesis. Press, *Calculating Credibility*; Mercer, *Reputation and International Politics*; and Ted Hopf, *Peripheral Visions: Deterrence Theory and American Foreign Policy in the Third World, 1965–1990* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994). In contrast, several quantitative studies have found confirming evidence. See Paul K. Huth, *Extended Deterrence and the Prevention of War* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1988); Paul K. Huth and Bruce Russett, “Testing Deterrence Theory: Rigor Makes a Difference,” *World Politics*, Vol. 42, No. 4 (July 1990), pp. 466–501; Paul K. Huth, Christopher Gelpi, and D. Scott Bennett, “The Escalation of Great Power Militarized Disputes: Testing Rational Deterrence Theory and Structural Realism,” *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 87, No. 3 (September 1993), pp. 609–626; and Vesna Danilovic, “The Sources of Threat Credibility in Extended Deterrence,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 45, No. 3 (June 2001), pp. 341–369. One problem with the quantitative studies of deterrence is that selection effects invalidate many of the results of even the most sophisticated statistical tests to date. See Eugene Gholz and Daryl G. Press, “The Allure of Sexy Models: Untangling Selection Effects in Studies of Coercion,” University of Kentucky and Dartmouth College, 2005.

9. I test these two theories against each other and also assess the possibility that both are correct.

10. Appeasement did not shatter British and French credibility, but it was misguided because it strengthened Hitler vis-à-vis his domestic opponents; it also delayed the start of World War II until 1939, when Germany was at the peak of its power.

friends, colleagues, and family. Parents know that if they do not keep their promises and carry out their threats, their children will learn to disregard their rules. Moreover, people quickly discover which friends are reliable and which ones frequently break their promises. But people reason differently in their daily lives than they do in high-stakes international crises. In their daily lives, people quickly estimate the odds of friends showing up on time, and children carelessly calculate the odds that parents will punish bad behavior. But when faced with momentous decisions, leaders abandon the simple heuristics that people employ in mundane circumstances; they model the situation more carefully.¹¹ The intuition behind the past actions theory, however appealing, is based on a dubious leap from behavior in daily life to decisionmaking in life-and-death crises.

This article offers both good and bad news for U.S. foreign policy. The good news is that power is a key determinant of credibility. In this age of U.S. hegemony, the United States should have little trouble establishing credibility to defend important national interests. The bad news is that even the world's only superpower will encounter difficulty when trying to appear credible in crises over minor issues. The United States frequently becomes engaged in disputes that involve U.S. preferences, but not vital U.S. interests (examples of the former include U.S. involvement in Somalia in 1993 and Kosovo in 1999). In such situations, adversaries will doubt whether the United States will take costly actions to defend interests of secondary or tertiary importance.

This article is divided into six main sections. I first describe the past actions and current calculus theories and discuss the research design and case selection criteria. In the second, third, and fourth sections, I use evidence about German decisionmaking in three cases—the Austrian, Sudetenland, and Polish crises—to assess the past actions and current calculus theories. The fifth section addresses three counterarguments to this analysis. The last section discusses the implications of these findings for U.S. foreign policy.

11. Cognitive psychologists have discovered that people use simplifying heuristics such as analogical reasoning (i.e., comparisons with the past) for everyday problem solving. But when the stakes are higher and when people feel anxious or threatened, they abandon simple heuristics for more careful "systematic" reasoning. See, for example, Shelly Chaiken, "Heuristic versus Systematic Information Processing and the Use of Source versus Message Cues in Persuasion," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, Vol. 39, No. 5 (November 1980), pp. 752–766; and Norbert Schwarz, "Feelings as Information: Moods Influence Judgments and Processing Strategies," in Thomas Gilovich, Dale Griffin, and Daniel Kahneman, eds., *Heuristics and Biases: The Psychology of Intuitive Judgment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 534–547.

The Past Actions and Current Calculus Theories of Credibility

The past actions theory posits that the credibility of a country depends on its history of fulfilling, or breaking, its commitments. If a country consistently keeps its promises and carries out its threats, its commitments will carry weight. But a country with a history of broken commitments will be considered irresolute, and its pledges will not be believed.

According to this theory, leaders look to their adversary's past to search for patterns of behavior. A country's behavior may reveal aspects of its national character or the tendencies of its leaders, or perhaps both. Past behavior could also reveal private information about how a country evaluates its own power or interests; for example, a history of backing down may indicate that an adversary lacks confidence in its military capabilities.¹² The core of the theory is that the past behavior of an enemy can shed light on useful information about its character, capabilities, or interests.

The past actions theory has many versions. In one variant, a country's actions have a long-lasting effect on its credibility in crises everywhere around the world and in situations that involve different issues and different stakes. Other versions posit that a country's behavior in one crisis has a more limited impact on its overall credibility; for example, behavior in one crisis may affect credibility for only a short period of time or only in crises that are similar to the situation in which the previous behavior occurred.¹³ Table 1 lists eight conditions that define when, according to different versions of the past actions theory, lessons from one crisis influence future credibility.

The current calculus theory, in contrast, posits that a country's credibility does not depend on a history of keeping its commitments. Instead, credibility is a function of the prevailing balance of power and the country's interests. When assessing the credibility of an adversary's threats, decisionmakers ask themselves two questions. First, does the adversary have the capability to carry out its threats and achieve its objectives? Second, are the issues at stake sufficient to justify the costs the adversary would likely pay if it acted on these

12. Jonathan Mercer's study of reputation and decisionmaking examines whether leaders learn about each other's reputation—that is, their character—from their behavior during crises. Mercer, *Reputation and International Politics*. The past actions theory that I test here is broader than the theory Mercer tested. I test the proposition that leaders learn *something* about their enemy—for example, about his character, power, or interests—by examining his history of keeping or breaking commitments. My findings complement and extend Mercer's findings.

13. Both views can be found in Thomas C. Schelling's work. See, for example, Schelling, *Arms and Influence* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1966), pp. 55–57.

Table 1. Versions of the Past Actions Theory

Condition	Narrower Versions of the Past Actions Theory	Broader Versions of the Past Actions Theory
Geography	Actions in one part of the world affect credibility in that part of the world.	Actions in one part of the world affect credibility everywhere.
Timing	Actions in one crisis affect credibility for a short period of time.	Actions in one crisis affect credibility long into the future.
Similarity of issues	Actions in one crisis affect credibility in future crises over similar issues.	Actions in one crisis affect credibility in future crises over any issue.
Similarity of stakes	Actions in one crisis affect credibility in future crises involving similar stakes.	Actions in one crisis affect credibility in future crises involving any level of stakes.
Identity of countries	Actions in one crisis affect credibility in future crises involving the same two countries.	Actions in one crisis affect credibility in future crises involving any other countries.
Same leaders #1	Actions in one crisis affect credibility in future crises until one's own leaders change.	Actions in one crisis affect credibility in future crises even after one's leaders change.
Same leaders #2	Actions in one crisis affect credibility in future crises until the leaders of one's adversary change.	Actions in one crisis affect credibility in future crises even after the leaders of one's adversary change.
Volatility	Actions in one crisis affect credibility only if they create a pattern of repeated behavior (e.g., repeatedly backing down or repeatedly keeping commitments).	Single instances of backing down or keeping commitments substantially affect credibility in future crises.

threats? If the threatened action would achieve something of value and entail low costs, the threat will be credible. If, however, the threatened action would likely result in failure or be very costly, and if the potential gains would in all probability be small, the threat will be dismissed.

The current calculus theory does not explain which element—power or interests—decisionmakers weight more heavily. Therefore it does not make predictions about credibility when a country can carry out its threats at low costs, but doing so would produce small gains, or when a country has large interests at stake, but action would be costly. Rather the theory holds that for a given level of interests, fluctuations in power will have a predictable effect on credibility. And for a given balance of power, threats to defend important interests

will be more credible than pledges to defend secondary or tertiary interests. Most important, the current calculus theory suggests that the best way for a country to enhance its credibility is to build sufficient capabilities to defend its interests as cheaply as possible.

The past actions and current calculus theories appear to overlap when decisionmakers study an adversary's previous behavior to assess its power and interests. For example, an enemy's previous military effectiveness could reveal information about its current military might; previous behavior may also be used to learn what an adversary values. Still, a clear line can be drawn between the two theories: if leaders use an adversary's *history of keeping its commitments* to assess its power or interests, and hence its credibility, they are reasoning the way the past actions theory predicts. On the other hand, the use of an adversary's *history of military effectiveness* to assess the adversary's power, and thus its credibility, supports the current calculus theory.

The logic for drawing a line between the two theories here is simple: the issue at the heart of important foreign policy debates is whether countries need to keep their commitments to build or to preserve their credibility. If decisionmakers use an adversary's history of keeping or breaking commitments to assess its credibility, then leaders should worry that breaking commitments might damage their country's credibility. But if leaders ignore this history, there is no reason to keep commitments for the sake of credibility. Whether decisionmakers use past military performance to assess an adversary's power has no bearing on whether it is important to keep one's commitments. Rather it suggests that if a country fights, it should fight effectively not only to win the battle at hand but also to look powerful in the future.

In sum, the past actions theory posits that leaders assess credibility on the basis of their adversary's history. The current calculus theory holds that the balance of power and the interests at stake in a given crisis determine credibility.

TESTING OF THEORIES OF CREDIBILITY

To test these two theories, I examine German assessments of British and French credibility during the Austrian, Sudetenland, and Polish crises. I rely on three types of historical evidence: the statements, policies, and reasoning of German civilian and military leaders. The oral and written statements about British and French credibility provide direct evidence about German views. The policies that German leaders advocated indirectly reveal their assessments of British and French credibility. Because most German decisionmakers shared Hitler's

desire to seize Austria, Czechoslovakia, and Poland as long as such action would not trigger a war with Britain or France, their support for aggressive policies against the Austrians, Czechs, and Poles reveals indirect information about their views of British and French credibility.¹⁴ Finally, the debates among German leaders during these three crises yield information about the reasoning they used to assess British and French credibility; memos and transcripts reveal whether they discussed Britain's and France's records for keeping or breaking their commitments or whether they focused on the balance of power and interests.

None of these indicators of credibility is perfect; for example, statements about credibility may be insincere, or a leader's reasoning may be affected by unspoken considerations.¹⁵ The use of multiple indicators, however, substantially increases the reliability of these measures of credibility.

CASE SELECTION CRITERIA

The ideal cases for testing the past actions theory are those that match the narrow versions of the theory (see Table 1). Focusing on these cases is useful for two reasons. First, all versions of the theory predict that decisionmakers use past behavior to assess credibility when the conditions match the narrow version of the theory; therefore evidence against the narrowest versions falsifies all variants of the theory. Second, by studying cases that match the narrowest versions of the theory, scholars can draw stronger inferences than if they selected cases randomly. These cases offer an easy test of the past actions theory; that is, they are the cases in which leaders should use past behavior to assess credibility if they ever do so.¹⁶ This is true because people are most likely to

14. Hitler's desire to absorb Germany's Central European neighbors was broadly shared by the leaders of the German military. See Gerhard L. Weinberg, *Germany, Hitler, and World War II: Essays in Modern German and World History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 136; Dale C. Copeland, *The Origins of Major War* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2000), pp. 125–133; and Stephen R. Rock, *Appeasement in International Politics* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2000), p. 64.

15. The problem of unspoken beliefs should be more serious when decisionmakers agree with one another and therefore are not forced to vocalize the reasons behind their beliefs. Given the intense disagreements in these cases, one would expect German leaders to marshal the best arguments for their views.

16. Gary King, Robert O. Keohane, and Sidney Verba write, "How strong our inferences will be about the validity of our theory depends to a considerable extent on the difficulty of the test that the theory has passed or failed." King, Keohane, and Verba, *Designing Social Inquiry: Scientific Inference in Qualitative Research* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1994), p. 209. The seminal articles about this research method are Harry Eckstein, "Case Study and Theory in Political Science," in Fred I. Greenstein and Nelson W. Polsby, eds., *Handbook of Political Science*, Vol. 7: *Strat-*

use history to analyze present circumstances if the historical episode is recent and has high salience in their lives, and if the current situation has surface similarities to a situation in the past.¹⁷ These three criteria (i.e., recency, salience, and surface similarities) match the conditions associated with the narrowest versions of the past actions theory.¹⁸

Based on these criteria, German decisionmaking during the Austrian, Czechoslovakian, and Polish crises presents a nearly ideal set of cases. The crises occurred in quick succession and in the same part of the world; they also involved similar stakes and issues. Furthermore, in all three cases, Hitler ruled in Germany, while Neville Chamberlain served as prime minister of Britain. There was a change in leadership in France following the Austrian crisis: Edouard Daladier replaced Léon Blum as prime minister in 1938. Daladier, however, had been a senior cabinet official in Blum's government, so this reflected only a minor change in the national leadership.¹⁹

An examination of decisionmaking requires identification of the key actors. In prewar Nazi Germany, these included Hitler and a small group of German military commanders. Hitler played the dominant role in German foreign policy from 1933 until his suicide in 1945; he ignored the foreign ministry and made key decisions unilaterally. Other civilians in the Nazi leadership advised Hitler, but he was the only real decisionmaker.²⁰ The views of Germany's military leaders mattered greatly, even though they had no formal role in Germany's decisionmaking. Given Hitler's plan to make frequent use of military force, he needed at least the tacit support of his generals. The military was the only institution with the power to oppose, and depose, Hitler.

egies of Inquiry (Reading, Mass.: Addison Wesley, 1975), pp. 79–139; and Alexander L. George, "Case Studies and Theory Development: The Method of Structured, Focused Comparison," in Paul Gordon Lauren, ed., *Diplomacy: New Approaches in History, Theory, and Policy* (New York: Free Press, 1979), pp. 43–68.

17. Derrde Gentner, "The Mechanisms of Analogical Learning," in Stella Vosniadou and Andrew Ortony, eds., *Similarity and Analogical Reasoning* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989). See also Amos Tversky and Daniel Kahneman, "Judgment under Uncertainty: Heuristics and Biases," in Kahneman, Paul Slovic, and Tversky, eds., *Judgment under Uncertainty: Heuristics and Biases* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982).

18. For a detailed discussion of this research method, see Press, *Calculating Credibility*, chap. 1.

19. As noted earlier, there was another major crisis in the mid-1930s involving the same countries: German remilitarization of the Rhineland in 1936. Because the Rhineland case was the first instance in which Britain and France allowed Germany to violate a crucial international agreement, it does not offer an easy test for the past actions theory. The Austrian case is the first easy test because the Germans had the example of the Rhineland in recent memory.

20. Ian Kershaw, *Hitler, 1936–45* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2000), pp. 183–188; and Gerhard L. Weinberg, *The Foreign Policy of Hitler's Germany*, Vol. 1: *Diplomatic Revolution in Europe, 1933–36* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970), p. 299.

The Crisis over Austria, 1938

As chancellor, Hitler was determined to expand his country's territory and power. He planned to strengthen the German military and then conquer vast expanses of land, principally in the Ukraine and Russia, to give Germans additional *Lebensraum* (i.e., living space). Hitler understood that France would probably have to be defeated before his legions could safely march eastward. He also understood that countries in Central Europe, such as Czechoslovakia and Poland, might have to be conquered because they stood in the way of German expansion and because they were French allies.

In 1936, with German rearmament proceeding quickly, Hitler ordered his military forces into the Rhineland, a part of western Germany that the Treaty of Versailles had demilitarized in 1919. Although rearmament and the remilitarization of the Rhineland violated Germany's treaty commitments, Britain and France (the treaty's most powerful European signatories) decided against confronting Hitler.²¹

On November 5, 1937, Hitler convened a meeting of several senior German civilian and military leaders to explain his short-term plan—to attack Austria and Czechoslovakia—and his long-term plan to seize territory in the east.²² The meeting's participants knew that any move by Germany to unify with Austria would entail risks. The Versailles treaty explicitly prohibited such a union; in addition, Britain and France might decide that the pattern of German violations, and the prospect of an enlarged German *Reich*, required them to defend Austria.²³

In March 1938 Hitler decided to act. He gave Austria's chancellor, Kurt Schuschnigg, an ultimatum: agree to unification or be conquered.²⁴ Facing external pressure from Hitler and internal pressure from the Austrian Nazis, Schuschnigg resigned. Arthur Seyss-Inquart, the leader of the Austrian Nazi Party, invited Germany to occupy Austria. When Hitler ordered German troops to cross the border, the Austrian military did not resist.²⁵

21. Weinberg, *The Foreign Policy of Hitler's Germany*, Vol. 1, chaps. 7, 10, 11.

22. For the minutes of the meeting, see *Documents on German Foreign Policy, 1918–1945* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1983), Series D, Vol. 2, pp. 29–39.

23. See *Treaty of Versailles*, art. 80, <http://www.yale.edu/lawweb/avalon>.

24. Kershaw, *Hitler, 1936–45*, p. 68; and Gerhard L. Weinberg, *The Foreign Policy of Hitler's Germany*, Vol. 2: *Starting World War II, 1937–39* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), p. 286.

25. William Carr, *Arms, Autarky, and Aggression: A Study in German Foreign Policy, 1933–39* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1933), p. 85; Weinberg, *The Foreign Policy of Hitler's Germany*, Vol. 2, pp. 298–299; and Kershaw, *Hitler, 1936–45*, p. 77.

THE BALANCE OF POWER DURING THE AUSTRIAN CRISIS

Whenever Germany considered invading a country in Central or Eastern Europe, its strategic planners had to answer two questions about the balance of power. First, could the German military quickly defeat its target in the east (i.e., Austria, Czechoslovakia, or Poland) while potentially holding off a French counterattack in the west? Second, was the German economy strong enough to keep the country going if Britain and France responded by initiating a blockade?

In the spring of 1938, Germany was ill prepared for war. Four years of rearmament had reconstructed the core of the military, but the *Wehrmacht* was not yet ready for major offensive operations. The unopposed invasion of Austria revealed the limitations of German military power. The operation was badly executed; German troops, for example, exhibited poor road discipline, causing huge traffic jams and severing their own supply lines.²⁶ But the greater vulnerability stemmed from the inability of Germany to simultaneously defend its western border from a potential French counterattack. The western border was defended by only ten to twelve German divisions, half of which were reserve units composed of old men who had not received military training in twenty years.²⁷ This weak force would have been no match for the fifty to sixty divisions that France could have marshaled to invade Germany in early 1938. Furthermore, Germany's economy was already strained and could not sustain the country in a long war against Britain and France. Domestic production of iron and steel was far below expectations, creating bottlenecks throughout the economy. In addition, having depleted its foreign exchange, Germany could not import the raw materials it needed for the war effort.²⁸

German military leaders recognized these weaknesses, but Hitler did not. When he first told his top commanders about his plans for Austria and Czechoslovakia, they warned that the armed forces were unprepared for war. Germany's war minister, Werner von Blomberg, and the commander in chief of the army, Werner von Fritsch, argued that Germany could not attack in the east while maintaining adequate defenses in the west. The country's western defenses, they warned, were "insignificant."²⁹

26. Williamson Murray, *The Change in the European Balance of Power, 1938–1939: The Path to Ruin* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1984), pp. 145–149.

27. *Ibid.*, pp. 144–145.

28. *Ibid.*, pp. 14–15, 135.

29. A transcript of this discussion appears in *Documents on German Foreign Policy*, Series D, Vol. 2, pp. 36–38. See also Gerhard L. Weinberg, "Germany and Munich," in Maya Latynski, ed., *Re-*

Hitler, however, saw the military situation differently. While his commanders emphasized Germany's military vulnerabilities, he focused on the real and imagined weaknesses of his adversaries. The British Empire, he argued, was besieged around the world. Italy was challenging Britain in the Mediterranean; Japan was doing the same in East Asia; the United States would soon control the Atlantic; and India and Ireland were eroding the empire from within. Meanwhile, domestic fissures in France made that country "too weak and divided to pose the slightest threat."³⁰

In sum, the balance of power tilted heavily against Germany in early 1938. Britain and France could have easily invaded western Germany in response to the invasion and annexation of Austria, or they could have strangled the already strained German economy. The German generals recognized their country's weakness; Hitler did not.

BRITISH AND FRENCH INTERESTS IN THE AUSTRIAN CRISIS

The crisis over Austria threatened important British and French interests. Austro-German unification would add 6 million Austrians to the German *Reich*, including large numbers of enthusiastic recruits for the *Wehrmacht*. It would also allow Germany to outflank some of the defensive positions that Czechoslovakia had built along the Czech-German border. Finally, Germany would acquire Austria's foreign currency and gold reserves, allowing it to import badly needed raw materials.³¹ Austro-German unification would not decisively change the European balance of power. It would, however, facilitate future German moves whose cumulative effect would be a significant shift in the military balance in Germany's favor.

PREDICTIONS FROM THE PAST ACTIONS AND CURRENT CALCULUS THEORIES

According to the past actions theory, German leaders should have doubted the credibility of Britain and France during the Austrian crisis. British and French acquiescence to German rearmament and the inaction of both countries in response to Germany's remilitarization of the Rhineland should have revealed

appraising the Munich Pact: Continental Perspectives (Washington, D.C.: Woodrow Wilson Center, 1992), p. 9. The German military leaders argued that Germany was ill prepared for a two-front war. As I describe below, however, they did not oppose the *Anschluss*. This apparent contradiction is explained by the fact that the military leaders did not expect Britain and France to intervene to defend the Austrians (i.e., they rated British and French credibility as "low" in the spring of 1938).

30. *Documents on German Foreign Policy*, Series D, Vol. 2, pp. 33–35; and Weinberg, *Germany, Hitler, and World War II*, p. 102.

31. Murray, *The Change in the European Balance of Power, 1938–39*, pp. 150–151.

their unwillingness to forcefully confront Hitler. During the crisis, therefore, German leaders should have made statements expressing skepticism about British and French credibility; they should have pushed for forceful policies against Austria; and they should have explained their reasoning about British and French credibility by referring to previous Anglo-French concessions.

In contrast, the current calculus theory predicts that German military leaders, though not Hitler, should have respected British and French credibility. Both Britain and France had an interest in preventing the *Anschluss* and—at least in the German military’s assessment—had the power to do so. Germany’s military leaders, therefore, should have made statements expressing confidence that Britain and France would fight for Austria; they should have opposed the war; and they should have based their arguments on the balance of power and interests. Hitler, on the other hand, believed that the balance of power favored Germany. Therefore he should have predicted British and French acquiescence, advocated for the adoption of aggressive policies, and explained his reasoning with arguments about the balance of power and interests.

TESTING OF THE THEORIES: EVIDENCE FROM THE AUSTRIAN CRISIS

The past actions and current calculus theories have a mixed record with respect to the *Anschluss*. Only the past actions theory correctly predicts the German military leaders’ views of British and French credibility. In November 1937, when Hitler revealed his plan to attack Austria and Czechoslovakia, his commanders vigorously opposed the invasion of Czechoslovakia, fearing it would trigger British and French intervention.³² They expressed no concerns, however, about an attack on Austria. In the words of Gerhard Weinberg, “There was full agreement that Germany should and could annex Austria without running a risk of war.”³³ In March 1938 Hitler told his commanders to prepare for an invasion of Austria in a few days. The army had no suitable war plans, so the general staff worked frantically to improvise.³⁴ The military’s support for the *Anschluss* is clear when one compares the commanders’ compliance in this crisis to their intense resistance as Germany prepared to attack Czechoslovakia.

As both theories correctly predict, Hitler doubted that Britain and France

32. *Documents on German Foreign Policy*, Series D, Vol. 2, p. 38.

33. Weinberg, *Germany, Hitler, and World War II*, p. 102.

34. Kershaw, *Hitler, 1936–45*, p. 75. The lack of war plans was not a sign of opposition in the German army to the *Anschluss*. See Carr, *Arms, Autarky, and Aggression*, p. 84.

would intervene to prevent the *Anschluss*. In November 1937 he assured War Minister Blomberg and Army Commander in Chief Fritsch that Germany could safely move against Austria because the British and French would do nothing in response. Later that month, Hitler left a meeting with Lord Halifax, a high-ranking British official, still convinced that Britain would never act to prevent Austro-German unification.³⁵ Even at the peak of the crisis, he maintained his confidence. After an all-night planning session (March 9–10), Joseph Goebbels, the German minister of propaganda, noted that Hitler still believed that the British and French would do nothing to stop Germany from seizing Austria.³⁶ Hitler's confidence is most clearly reflected in Germany's war plans: the military took no steps to alert its forces along the border with France.³⁷

Although Hitler's assessment of British and French credibility is consistent with both the past actions and current calculus theories, the chancellor's reasoning during key meetings supports only the latter theory. In advocating decisive action against Austria, Hitler could have pointed to the previous instances of British and French appeasement (e.g., over rearmament and the Rhineland), but instead he focused on the balance of power and interests. During the meeting on November 5, 1937, for example, Hitler explained why Britain and France would not intervene on Austria's behalf: "Difficulties connected with the [British] Empire, and the prospect of being once more entangled in a protracted European war, were decisive considerations for Britain against participating in a war against Germany. . . . An attack by France without British support, and with the prospect of the offensive being brought to a standstill on our western fortifications, was hardly probable."³⁸ At a different moment in the meeting, Hitler argued that Britain was paralyzed by the growing Japanese threat in Asia.³⁹ Hitler's arguments, therefore, were about the balance of power, not British or French past actions.⁴⁰

35. For Hitler's comments to Blomberg and Fritsch, see *Documents on German Foreign Policy*, Series D, Vol. 2, p. 38. Hitler's reaction after the meeting with Halifax is described in Kershaw, *Hitler, 1936–45*, p. 66.

36. Kershaw, *Hitler, 1936–45*, p. 74.

37. Johannes Hohlfield, ed., *Dokumente der Deutschen Politik und Geschichte von 1848 bis zur Gegenwart* [German political and historical documents from 1848 to the present] (Berlin: Herbert Wendler, 1965), Vol. 4, pp. 416–417. There is some evidence that Hitler's confidence wavered on March 10. Richard J. Overy and Andrew Wheatcroft, *The Road to War* (London: Macmillan, 1989), p. 47. But Hitler never rescinded the invasion orders or moderated his demands.

38. *Documents on German Foreign Policy*, Series D, Vol. 2, p. 35.

39. Weinberg, *The Foreign Policy of Hitler's Germany*, Vol. 2, pp. 294–295.

40. There is little evidence available about the reasoning of Germany's military leaders with regard to the *Anschluss* because they generally supported the plan to take over Austria.

SUMMARY OF THE EVIDENCE FROM THE AUSTRIAN CRISIS

The crisis leading up to the *Anschluss* offers mixed results for the past actions and current calculus theories. Senior German military leaders believed that Britain and France would permit the *Anschluss*, a belief that is consistent with the past actions theory but not with the current calculus theory. Both theories explain Hitler's expectation of British and French acquiescence. Only the current calculus theory, however, correctly predicts the reasoning Hitler used to support his views in discussions with other German leaders.

The Sudetenland Crisis, 1938

In the summer of 1938, Hitler engineered a crisis that he hoped would allow him to conquer Czechoslovakia. He began by encouraging ethnic Germans in western Czechoslovakia, the Sudetenland, to rebel. When they did, they were violently suppressed by government forces. This gave Hitler the excuse he needed to demand that Czechoslovakia relinquish the Sudetenland and allow the ethnic Germans living there to join with Germany. Hitler correctly assumed that Czechoslovakia would rather fight than give away part of its territory, thus giving him an excuse to invade.⁴¹

As war loomed between Germany and Czechoslovakia, the British and French presented Hitler with an offer and a threat. They would pressure Czechoslovakia to give Germany the Sudetenland, but they would fight if German forces invaded the rest of the country.⁴² The British and French concession frustrated Hitler because his real goal was to conquer Czechoslovakia, not just the Sudetenland. Given this, he rejected their offer and ordered the *Wehrmacht* to prepare to invade.⁴³

On September 27, however, Hitler reversed course and accepted the British and French concession. Three events seem to have influenced his calculations. First, German diplomats reported that Britain and France were mobilizing for war.⁴⁴ Second, the Italian dictator Benito Mussolini withdrew an earlier prom-

41. Weinberg, *The Foreign Policy of Hitler's Germany*, Vol. 2, pp. 334, 431–432; Frank McDonough, *Hitler, Chamberlain, and Appeasement* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 51; and Kershaw, *Hitler, 1936–45*, pp. 87–88.

42. Weinberg, *The Foreign Policy of Hitler's Germany*, Vol. 2, pp. 429–430; and Rock, *Appeasement in International Politics*, p. 73.

43. Weinberg, *The Foreign Policy of Hitler's Germany*, Vol. 2, p. 435; and McDonough, *Hitler, Chamberlain, and Appeasement*, p. 52.

44. Murray, *The Change in the European Balance of Power, 1938–39*, pp. 214–215; and Carr, *Arms, Autarky, and Aggression*, p. 100.

ise to support Germany if war ensued.⁴⁵ Third, a military parade in Berlin revealed weak support for war among the German public.⁴⁶ Faced with these obstacles, Hitler reluctantly agreed to take only the Sudetenland, declare victory, and avoid war.⁴⁷

THE BALANCE OF POWER IN THE SUDETENLAND CRISIS

For Germany, the balance of power during the Sudetenland crisis was even less favorable than it had been during the Austrian crisis. Three factors made Germany's strategic position tenuous. First, conquering Czechoslovakia would not be easy. The state possessed a large, well-equipped military and had already heavily fortified the mountainous terrain along the Czech-German frontier.⁴⁸ Second, Germany could spare only five active-duty and five reserve divisions to guard its western border during an invasion. This small force would face approximately fifty-six French divisions if France decided to intervene to protect its Czechoslovakian ally.⁴⁹ Finally, Germany's western fortifications were weak. Fewer than 1,000 of the 10,000 bunkers planned for the *Westwall* had been built by the fall of 1938.⁵⁰ In Williamson Murray's view, if France had attacked while the *Wehrmacht* was entangled in Czechoslovakia, "the Germans could have lost the Saar and possibly the Rhineland, and a determined French thrust might have reached the Ruhr."⁵¹

45. Weinberg, *Germany, Hitler, and World War II*, p. 116; and Murray, *The Change in the European Balance of Power, 1938–39*, pp. 214–215.

46. Overy and Wheatcroft, *The Road to War*, p. 49; and Murray, *The Change in the European Balance of Power, 1938–39*, pp. 214–215.

47. Kershaw, *Hitler, 1936–45*, pp. 122–123; Weinberg, *The Foreign Policy of Hitler's Germany*, Vol. 2, pp. 313, 462; Rock, *Appeasement in International Politics*, p. 74; and McDonough, *Hitler, Chamberlain, and Appeasement*, p. 63.

48. The Czech army fielded forty-two divisions, half active and half reserve. The German army had forty-seven active-duty divisions, but only thirty-seven were available to attack Czechoslovakia. The remaining ten would guard Germany's other frontiers. Katriel Ben-Arie, "Czechoslovakia at the Time of 'Munich': The Military Situation," *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 25, No. 4 (October 1990), pp. 435–439; and Murray, *The Change in the European Balance of Power, 1938–39*, pp. 220, 240–241.

49. Ben-Arie, "Czechoslovakia at the Time of 'Munich,'" pp. 435–438; and Murray, *The Change in the European Balance of Power, 1938–39*, pp. 220, 240–241.

50. Williamson Murray, "The Change in the European Balance of Power, 1938–1939," Ph.D. dissertation, Yale University, 1975, pp. 438–439.

51. Murray, *The Change in the European Balance of Power, 1938–39*, p. 241. Richard Overy disagrees, arguing that France was outgunned in 1938. He does not, however, provide data about the military balance on the Franco-German frontier in 1938 to support his view, and the data from Katriel Ben-Arie and Murray (described above) show convincingly how vulnerable Germany was to French attack in 1938. See Overy, *Origins of the Second World War*, 2d ed. (New York: Longman, 1998), p. 71.

Germany's economic and diplomatic situations were equally tenuous. The Germans faced serious shortages of rubber, iron, copper, and other essential industrial inputs, and had no foreign reserves or gold to import them.⁵² On the diplomatic front, Mussolini pledged to support Germany if the Sudetenland crisis escalated, but (as noted earlier) at the peak of the crisis, he reneged on this promise.⁵³

German military leaders recognized the dangers their country would confront if it invaded Czechoslovakia. War Minister Blomberg and Commander in Chief of the Army Fritsch warned Hitler that Germany would lose if France counterattacked.⁵⁴ The chief of staff of the army, Ludwig Beck, repeatedly told Hitler that the army was unprepared for war.⁵⁵ A military exercise in June 1938 by the German General Staff (under Beck's direction) concluded that an attack on Czechoslovakia would allow French forces to seize the Rhineland and perhaps even cross the Rhine.⁵⁶ An August 4, 1938, meeting of Germany's leading generals revealed deep pessimism about the military balance. The commander of Germany's forces in the west said that he could not defend Germany from a French attack. The consensus among the generals was that Germany would be quickly defeated if France attacked during a German-Czech war.⁵⁷

Hitler rejected his generals' bleak assessments of the balance of power. He dismissed General Beck's quantitative comparisons of military strength as "childish calculations" because wars, he argued, were decided by nonmaterial

52. By the time the Sudetenland crisis began, Germany had largely depleted the gold and foreign exchange seized during the *Anschluss*. Ben-Arie, "Czechoslovakia at the Time of 'Munich,'" p. 444; and Murray, *The Change in the European Balance of Power, 1938–39*, pp. 256–257, 268.

53. Carr, *Arms, Autarky, and Aggression*, p. 92; Weinberg, *Germany, Hitler, and World War II*, p. 116; and Murray, *The Change in the European Balance of Power, 1938–39*, pp. 214–215.

54. *Documents on German Foreign Policy*, Series D, Vol. 2, p. 38.

55. For a useful compilation of documents written by Beck from 1933 to 1938, including those arguing against war in 1938, see Klaus-Jürgen Müller, *General Ludwig Beck: Studien und Dokumente zur politisch-militärischen Vorstellungswelt und Tätigkeit des Generalstabschefs des deutschen Heeres, 1933–1938* [General Ludwig Beck: Studies and documents on the political-military worldview and actions by the general staff of the German army, 1933–1938] (Boppard am Rhein: Harald Boldt Verlag, 1980). See especially documents 44 and 46 (pp. 502 and 521–528). For a discussion of these memos, see Murray, *The Change in the European Balance of Power, 1938–39*, pp. 174–176.

56. Murray, *The Change in the European Balance of Power, 1938–39*, p. 178.

57. *Ibid.*, p. 180. When Hitler heard about the August 4 meeting, he summoned several of his less senior generals who he hoped would be more sympathetic to his arguments—only to discover that they shared their superiors' skepticism about Germany's prospects in a war. For notes from the meeting, see Herbert Michaelis and Ernst Schraepfer, eds., *Ursachen und Folgen: Vom Deutschen Zusammenbruch 1918 und 1945 bis zur staatlichen Neuordnung Deutschlands in der Gegenwart* [Causes and consequences: From the German collapse in 1918 and 1945 to the reorganization of the present German state] (Berlin: Dokumenten-Verlag Dr. Herbert Wendler, 1979), Vol. 12, pp. 253–256; and Ernest R. May, *Strange Victory: Hitler's Conquest of France* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2000), p. 76.

factors. As he later declared, "It is not machines that fight each other, but men. We have the better men. . . . Spiritual factors are decisive."⁵⁸ Hitler denigrated the French spirit and therefore discounted France's military strength.⁵⁹ When told that Germany's western frontier would be overrun if the French attacked, he replied, "I tell you general, the position will not be held three weeks, but three years."⁶⁰ The disagreement between Hitler and his generals about the military balance was rooted in their different conceptions of the sources of power: the generals focused on tangible factors, while Hitler focused on intangibles such as race and national spirit.⁶¹

BRITISH AND FRENCH INTERESTS IN THE SUDETENLAND CRISIS

British and French interests in the Czechoslovakian crisis were similar to those at stake during the *Anschluss*. German conquest of Czechoslovakia would not in itself overturn the European balance of power, but it would strengthen Germany and leave it better positioned to continue its incremental assault on Europe. For example, the control of Czechoslovakia would give Germany badly needed foreign reserves and raw materials. Furthermore, if significant parts of Czechoslovakia's arms industry could be seized intact, it would be a boon for the German military.⁶² Finally, German control of Czechoslovakia would weaken Poland's already tenuous defenses; Germany could attack Poland from three sides.⁶³ The main difference between the stakes in the *Anschluss* and Sudetenland crises was France's defense treaty with Czechoslovakia. If France allowed Germany to conquer an ally, it had to worry that its credibility would be damaged.⁶⁴

58. Quoted in *Documents on German Foreign Policy*, Series D, Vol. 7, pp. 205–206.

59. Murray, *The Change in the European Balance of Power, 1938–39*, p. 241.

60. Quoted in Michaelis and Schraepfer, *Ursachen und Folgen*, Vol. 12, pp. 253–256.

61. Gerhard Weinberg notes that the "racial factor led Hitler to a low estimate of French military power." Weinberg, *The Foreign Policy of Hitler's Germany*, Vol. 1, p. 5 and n. 12; Weinberg, *The Foreign Policy of Hitler's Germany*, Vol. 2, p. 1; and Gerhard L. Weinberg, "Hitler's Image of the United States," *American Historical Review*, Vol. 69, No. 4 (July 1964), pp. 1010–1012. Hitler's focus on national spirit led him to rely on different sources of information than used by his military advisers; he devoured foreign press clippings to learn about his enemies' national morale and political unity. According to Ernest May, "What was most important to [Hitler] was almost certainly evidence on mass opinion in other countries, and on the extent to which leaders abroad seemed to have popular support comparable to his." May, *Strange Victory*, pp. 105–106.

62. On the money, raw materials, and weapons plundered from Czechoslovakia, see Murray, *The Change in the European Balance of Power, 1938–39*, pp. 290–293.

63. Germany could attack Poland from the north (East Prussia), from the south (Czechoslovakia), and from the west (the heart of Germany).

64. This article does not question whether countries worry about their credibility; there is substan-

PREDICTIONS FROM THE PAST ACTIONS AND CURRENT CALCULUS THEORIES

The past actions theory suggests that by mid-1938 Britain's and France's repeated concessions, including their inaction during the *Anschluss*, should have caused German leaders to doubt both countries' credibility. The theory predicts that the statements of German leaders should reflect a low assessment of British and French credibility, that German leaders should have supported Hitler's plan to invade Czechoslovakia, and that these debates over the credibility of Britain and France should have focused on their history of irresolution. The past actions theory also makes one prediction about within-crisis fluctuations in credibility: both countries' credibility should have dropped even further when they agreed to pressure Czechoslovakia to surrender the Sudetenland to Germany.

The current calculus theory makes different predictions about the Sudetenland case. In the view of Germany's military commanders, the British and the French had both the motive and the power to prevent the German conquest of Czechoslovakia. The military leaders, therefore, should have argued that Britain and France would fight if Germany invaded Czechoslovakia; they should have opposed the invasion of Czechoslovakia; and they should have based their arguments on the balance of power and interests. Hitler, on the other hand, believed that the military balance favored Germany. According to the current calculus theory, he should have doubted British and French threats to defend Czechoslovakia; he should have advocated aggressive policies against the Czechs; and he should have supported his views with arguments about the balance of power. The theory also makes one prediction about fluctuations in British and French credibility during the crisis: Mussolini's defection should have increased British and French credibility because it reduced Germany's power. At the peak of the crisis, therefore, German generals should have become increasingly certain that the British and French would defend Czechoslovakia; even Hitler should have begun to give credence to British and French threats.

TESTING OF THE THEORIES: EVIDENCE FROM THE SUDETENLAND CRISIS

The past actions theory does poorly in the Sudetenland crisis, while the current calculus theory performs very well. As the current calculus theory predicts, senior German military leaders repeatedly stated that British and French threats

tial evidence that they do. The issue here is whether keeping one's commitments actually affects one's credibility.

to defend Czechoslovakia if Germany invaded were credible. In late 1937 War Minister Blomberg and Commander in Chief of the Army Fritsch infuriated Hitler by insisting that Britain and France would fight if Germany moved against Prague.⁶⁵ Army Chief of Staff Beck repeatedly argued that the French would fight to defend Czechoslovakia.⁶⁶ Studies by the General Staff echoed this assessment.⁶⁷ And even Franz Halder, who replaced Beck as army chief of staff when Beck resigned in protest over Hitler's plans to invade Czechoslovakia, shared his predecessor's views about British and French credibility.⁶⁸

As the current calculus theory predicts, the generals did not merely warn that British and French threats were credible; indeed, they strongly opposed a German attack on Czechoslovakia. During the meeting on November 5, 1937, Blomberg and Fritsch "repeatedly emphasized" to Hitler their strong opposition to an attack on Czechoslovakia.⁶⁹ Throughout the spring and summer of 1938, Hitler's commanders told him time and again that he should not attack Czechoslovakia.⁷⁰ On September 9 General Beck and General Halder argued with him until four o'clock in the morning, trying to dissuade him from attacking Czechoslovakia.⁷¹ Even more significant, several senior German generals plotted to overthrow Hitler if he issued final invasion orders. One group of conspirators sent an emissary to London to urge the British government to take a hard-line stance in the crisis; in return, they promised to overthrow the Nazis if Hitler ordered an invasion. Another group, which included General Beck, made plans to send army forces to Berlin to attack the SS (Nazi paramilitaries) and arrest Hitler. As war approached, Beck resigned to protest Hitler's plans for war; however, his replacement, General Halder, was also involved in various plots to overthrow the führer.⁷² The schism between Hitler

65. *Documents on German Foreign Policy*, Series D, Vol. 2, p. 38.

66. Weinberg, *The Foreign Policy of Hitler's Germany*, Vol. 2, p. 365; Murray, *The Change in the European Balance of Power, 1938-39*, pp. 174-179; and May, *Strange Victory*, pp. 68-69.

67. Murray, *The Change in the European Balance of Power, 1938-39*, pp. 178-179.

68. *Ibid.*, p. 195; Weinberg, *Germany, Hitler, and World War II*, p. 142; and Albert Seaton, *The German Army: 1933-45* (New York: St. Martin's, 1982), pp. 108-110.

69. *Documents on German Foreign Policy*, Series D, Vol. 2, p. 38.

70. Examples of this opposition appear in Beck's memos, the reports from the General Staff, and the arguments by the generals at their meetings with Hitler on August 4 and August 10, 1938. See Weinberg, *The Foreign Policy of Hitler's Germany*, Vol. 2, pp. 365, 386; Carr, *Arms, Autarky, and Aggression*, p. 91; and Murray, *The Change in the European Balance of Power, 1938-39*, pp. 174-179.

71. Michaelis and Schraepfer, *Ursachen und Folgen*, Vol. 12, pp. 255-256.

72. *Ibid.*, pp. 265-269; John Weitz, *Hitler's Diplomat: The Life and Times of Joachim von Ribbentrop* (New York: Ticknor and Fields, 1992), pp. 173-174; May, *Strange Victory*, pp. 88, 215-216; Seaton, *The German Army: 1933-45*, pp. 108-110; and Peter Hoffmann, "The Question of Western Allied Co-

and the military was so great that even senior generals who refused to participate in such activities—for example, Walther von Brauchitsch, General Fritsch's successor as army commander in chief—did not turn in the plotters.⁷³

The past actions theory cannot explain either the predictions of the German military commanders that Britain and France would intervene on behalf of Czechoslovakia or the commanders' fierce opposition to the war. Furthermore, their belief that Britain and France would fight to defend Czechoslovakia remained firm even after the dramatic concessions by London and Paris that Czechoslovakia should give the Sudetenland to Germany.⁷⁴

On the other hand, Hitler's low regard for British and French credibility and his strong support for attacking Czechoslovakia are consistent with both the past actions and current calculus theories. Until the peak of the crisis on September 28, Hitler ignored the warnings of his generals, remaining confident that the British and French would back down.⁷⁵ He assured his foreign minister, Joachim von Ribbentrop, that Germany could attack Czechoslovakia and "the other powers would definitely not move."⁷⁶ Mussolini's pledge to support Germany only reinforced Hitler's sense of confidence.⁷⁷

One element of Hitler's behavior is deeply inconsistent with the past actions theory: his September 28 decision not to invade Czechoslovakia. Only one week after Britain and France agreed to give Germany control of the Sudetenland, Hitler believed their threat to respond with force if he followed through with his invasion plans. The past actions theory predicts that the British and French concessions should have crippled their credibility, but after learning that Mussolini had betrayed him, Hitler began to believe that they would keep their promise to Czechoslovakia after all.⁷⁸

The final source of evidence about German decisionmaking during the Sudetenland crisis is the most decisive: the reasoning German leaders used in internal discussions to defend their views about British and French credibility. In the key meetings leading up to the crisis, the debates centered on the bal-

Operation with the German Anti-Nazi Conspiracy, 1938–1944," *Historical Journal*, Vol. 34, No. 2 (June 1991), p. 441.

73. Murray, *The Change in the European Balance of Power, 1938–39*, p. 180; and May, *Strange Victory*, pp. 74–75.

74. Murray, *The Change in the European Balance of Power, 1938–39*, pp. 214–215.

75. In Weinberg's words, Hitler "rejected . . . [his military leaders'] views; he was . . . confident that there would be an isolated war [against Czechoslovakia] in which the Western Powers would not intervene." Weinberg, *Germany, Hitler, and World War II*, p. 141.

76. Michaelis and Schraepfer, *Ursachen und Folgen*, pp. 265–267, 269–270.

77. Weinberg, *The Foreign Policy of Hitler's Germany*, Vol. 12, pp. 371, 340; and Murray, *The Change in the European Balance of Power, 1938–39*, pp. 171–173.

78. Murray, *The Change in the European Balance of Power, 1938–39*, pp. 214–215.

ance of power and interests, not on British and French past actions. As described earlier, Hitler argued at the November 5, 1937, meeting that Britain would not fight because of the increasing strains on its empire and the costs of engaging in another continental war. France in turn would not fight without British help, especially given the alleged strength of the *Westwall*.⁷⁹ Six months later, when Hitler tried again to convince his generals that Britain and France would back down, he ignored arguments about their past irresolution and focused instead on the prevailing strategic situation, especially England's small army and the internal divisions that were sapping French power.⁸⁰ He also emphasized the strategic significance of Germany's alliance with Italy. In Murray's words, "With Italian support the *führer* believed that Britain and France would not dare to fight."⁸¹ Weinberg agrees: "Hitler felt that with Italian support, he could afford to attack Czechoslovakia without the West intervening."⁸²

Like Hitler, Germany's military leaders framed their analysis of British and French credibility in terms of power and interests. War Minister Blomberg supported his belief that Britain and France would intervene if Germany attacked Czechoslovakia by highlighting the "insignificant value of [Germany's] present fortifications" along the French border.⁸³ General Beck's pessimistic memos similarly argued that Germany was vulnerable to a French attack in the west, which he assumed meant that such an attack was likely.⁸⁴ The June 1938 exercise conducted by the General Staff found that an invasion of Czechoslovakia would have left Germany vulnerable along its western frontier; again, this was interpreted to suggest that France was likely to intervene.⁸⁵ The mental leap from an assessment of the prevailing balance of power to a judgment about credibility is exactly what the current calculus theory predicts.⁸⁶

SUMMARY OF THE EVIDENCE FROM THE SUDETENLAND CRISIS

The evidence from the Sudetenland crisis lends strong support to the current calculus theory and casts substantial doubt on the past actions theory. The cur-

79. *Documents on German Foreign Policy*, Series D, Vol. 2, p. 35.

80. Murray, *The Change in the European Balance of Power, 1938–39*, p. 183.

81. *Ibid.*, p. 171.

82. Weinberg, *The Foreign Policy of Hitler's Germany*, Vol. 2, pp. 340, 366, 371.

83. *Documents on German Foreign Policy*, Series D, Vol. 2, p. 38.

84. See, for example, documents 44 and 46 in Müller, *General Ludwig Beck*, pp. 502–512, 521–528.

85. Murray, *The Change in the European Balance of Power, 1938–39*, pp. 178–179.

86. General Halder agreed with Beck's assessment, and his reasoning fits perfectly within the current calculus framework. According to Murray, he "thought that the West would intervene because Czechoslovakia had too much strategic importance to allow it to go." *Ibid.*, p. 195.

rent calculus theory explains the thinking of Hitler and his top military leaders; that is, it accounts for their assessments of the credibility of Britain and France, the policies they advocated, and the reasoning they offered for their views. It also explains why, in Hitler's eyes, British and French credibility increased at the peak of the crisis—because he realized that German morale was low and that Italian help would not be forthcoming. The past actions theory, in contrast, cannot account for the assessments of British and French credibility by the German military leaders or the reasoning employed by Hitler and his generals during their contentious debates. Finally, the past actions theory cannot explain why Hitler began to believe British and French threats at the peak of the crisis, only a week after decisionmakers in London and Paris made their most egregious concessions.

It is particularly revealing that Hitler never employed arguments about past British and French irresolution during the Sudetenland crisis, despite their potential usefulness. In 1938 the foreign policy disputes in Nazi Germany were so serious that a number of Hitler's generals plotted to overthrow his government. For rhetorical purposes alone, Hitler should have conceded the generals' expertise on military matters while arguing that he knew that Britain and France would back down because they had repeatedly done so before. Instead he argued ineffectively with his generals about the balance of power.

The Crisis over Poland, 1939

As soon as the Sudetenland crisis ended, Hitler regretted his decision to accept a partial victory and began planning the seizure of the rest of Czechoslovakia. In early 1939 he told Slovak leaders of his invasion plan, dangling before them the possibility of Slovak independence if they seceded before Germany attacked. When they agreed, Hitler invited the president of Czechoslovakia, Emile Hacha, to Berlin and informed him that an invasion was imminent. Unless Hacha capitulated, the German air force would begin bombing Prague. Hacha acquiesced and ordered his military to stand down. On March 15, 1939, the German army poured across the border.

The British and French were outraged by Germany's actions. Britain reacted by pledging to defend Poland if it became Hitler's next target; France was already bound by a 1921 treaty to come to Poland's aid in the event of a German attack.⁸⁷

87. Kershaw, *Hitler, 1936–45*, p. 178; Overy and Wheatcroft, *The Road to War*, p. 13; and Murray, *The Change in the European Balance of Power, 1938–39*, pp. 266, 289–290.

When Hitler decided that Poland would indeed be Germany's next conquest, he ordered his army to draw up a set of invasion plans. He also began wooing a new ally: the Soviet Union. On August 23, 1939, German diplomats informed Hitler that an agreement with the Soviets was imminent; Germany and the Soviet Union would divide up Poland and cooperate broadly on foreign policy.⁸⁸ Hitler ordered the invasion of Poland to begin in three days.⁸⁹

On the eve of the attack, two events shook Hitler's determination. First, Britain and Poland signed a mutual defense treaty, formalizing the promises that Britain had made in the spring to protect Poland. Second, Mussolini once again backed out of his commitment to fight alongside Germany. "Bowled over" by the news from Italy, Hitler suspended the attack on Poland,⁹⁰ but then reconsidered. This time he would not lose his nerve, as he had done during the Sudetenland crisis. He reinstated the order to invade Poland, and German forces began their assault on September 1, 1939. Two days later, Britain and France declared war on Germany.

THE BALANCE OF POWER IN THE CRISIS OVER POLAND

The balance of power was substantially more favorable to Germany in 1939 than it had been a year earlier. Four factors explain this shift. First, Poland was a much easier target than Czechoslovakia would have been: its army was poorly equipped, and its terrain is flat and open, perfect for Germany's *blitzkrieg* style of warfare. Second, the German army had grown significantly from 1938 to 1939; it added seven active-duty divisions and more than doubled the size of its reserves.⁹¹ Third, Germany had transformed its defenses in the west; in the year since the Sudetenland crisis, the *Westwall* grew from approximately 1,000 major bunkers to more than 11,000.⁹² Finally, British and French capabilities to attack Germany's western flank had remained fairly constant. Overall, the change in the military balance was dramatic; in 1938 a German attack eastward would have left only ten divisions to defend the western front from approximately sixty French divisions. In 1939, by contrast, thirty-six German divisions were guarding the western border from much stronger defensive

88. Overy and Wheatcroft, *The Road to War*, p. 58.

89. Carr, *Arms, Autarky, and Aggression*, p. 122.

90. Overy and Wheatcroft, *The Road to War*, pp. 17, 59; Kershaw, *Hitler, 1936–45*, pp. 214–215; and Michael Bloch, *Ribbentrop: A Biography* (New York: Crown, 1992), p. 252.

91. Germany's active-duty force grew from forty-seven to fifty-four divisions; the tank force doubled from three to six divisions; and German reserves swelled from fifteen to thirty-four divisions. Ben-Arie, "Czechoslovakia at the Time of 'Munich,'" pp. 435–438; and Murray, *The Change in the European Balance of Power, 1938–39*, pp. 347–350.

92. Murray, "The Change in the European Balance of Power, 1938–1939," pp. 438–439.

fortifications.⁹³ The German situation on the western front was no longer dire.⁹⁴

Germany was also better positioned to weather the effects of a British-French blockade in 1939 than it would have been a year earlier. As part of the German-Soviet pact, the Soviets agreed to export raw materials to Germany, thus blunting the impact of a possible blockade. Even more important, Soviet ports would become conduits for supplies heading to Germany from around the world.⁹⁵

As a result of these changes, German military leaders were more optimistic about the military balance in 1939 than they had been a year earlier. General Halder, the chief of staff of the army, believed that German defenses in the west were finally strong enough to hold off a French attack until reinforcements could arrive from the east.⁹⁶ General Staff reports concurred.⁹⁷ The change in views among Germany's senior military leaders was apparent in their meetings with Hitler in the summer of 1939; the meetings were much less confrontational than they had been a year earlier. While some generals, including Halder, still worried about German prospects in a long war, their muted misgivings contrasted starkly with the debates that flared the previous year.⁹⁸

93. Murray, *The Change in the European Balance of Power, 1938–39*, pp. 348–350. May disagrees, arguing that the military balance on the western front favored France in 1939. May, *Strange Victory*, pp. 203–209, 275–278. May counts seventy-five French divisions that could have been used in an offensive (which contradicts Murray) and compares them favorably to the thirty to forty German divisions in the west. Even if May's numbers are correct, his analysis understates (1) the advantages that accrue to defensive-oriented ground forces, (2) the importance of the Westwall, (3) the competence of the German divisions, and (4) the fact that a French offensive in 1939 would have been inconsistent with France's defense-oriented military doctrine and training. Given the factors working against the French—especially the defensive nature of their doctrine and the prepared German defensive positions—they would have required substantially greater than a two-to-one advantage to have any likelihood of success. On the defensive nature of French doctrine, see Barry R. Posen, *Sources of Military Doctrine: France, Britain, and Germany between the World Wars* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1986), pp. 85, 105–140.

94. This analysis focuses on the military balance on the continent and ignores, for example, the improvements Britain made to its air defenses from 1938 to 1939; these proved invaluable in the Battle of Britain. The focus here, however, is on German decisionmaking during the Polish crisis, and the aspect of the military balance that should have affected German decisions in this crisis is the ability of Britain and France to defend Poland. British air defenses had at most an indirect effect on Britain's ability to intervene in a war over Poland.

95. G. Jukes, "The Red Army and the Munich Crisis," *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 26, No. 2 (April 1991), p. 206; and Peter Neville, *Appeasing Hitler: The Diplomacy of Sir Neville Henderson, 1937–39* (New York: Palgrave, 2000), pp. 157–158.

96. Alan S. Alexandroff and Richard Rosecrance, "Deterrence in 1939," *World Politics*, Vol. 29, No. 3 (April 1977), p. 415; and Barry A. Leach, "Halder," in Correlli Barnett, ed., *Hitler's Generals: Authoritative Portraits of the Men Who Waged Hitler's War* (New York: Quill, 1989), p. 106.

97. Alexandroff and Rosecrance, "Deterrence in 1939," p. 415.

98. Critics may wonder whether the passivity of the German army regarding Poland reflects changes in the officers' willingness to question Hitler rather than changes in the balance of power.

As always, Hitler was more confident than his military advisers about the balance of power. He continued to focus on the weaknesses of his enemies (e.g., the small size of the British army and French internal political divisions).⁹⁹ The only apparent second thoughts he had about the balance arose just before the invasion, when he was told about Mussolini's withdrawal of support. But for Hitler, the military balance favored Germany too much for it to matter.¹⁰⁰

BRITISH AND FRENCH INTERESTS IN THE CRISIS OVER POLAND

British and French interests in the confrontation over Poland were similar to those in the Austrian and Sudetenland cases. By late August 1939, Britain and France had committed themselves to defend Poland, so a German attack would appear to put their credibility on the line. Moreover, by conquering Poland, Germany would strengthen its hold on Central Europe and increase its capability to threaten France. As long as Poland remained independent, a German attack on France would have to account for the possibility that Poland (a French ally) might counterattack, forcing Germany to fight on two fronts. By conquering Poland, Germany would strengthen its strategic position on the continent, as it had done in the Austrian and Sudetenland crises.

PREDICTIONS FROM THE PAST ACTIONS AND CURRENT CALCULUS THEORIES

Both the past actions and current calculus theories predict that the credibility of Britain and France should have been low during the Polish crisis. For the past actions theory, this low credibility would be the result of their irresolute behavior in the Austrian and Sudetenland crises. The current calculus theory, in contrast, predicts low British and French credibility because of Germany's improved military situation by the fall of 1939.

The theories do, however, offer some competing predictions. The past actions theory predicts that German discussions about the credibility of Britain and France should have emphasized their previous irresolute behavior. The current calculus theory, on the other hand, predicts that these discussions should have focused on the military balance and interests at stake. The current

The senior German generals, however, had not been cowed into subservience by 1939. In fact, they restarted their coup planning in the fall of 1939, when Hitler ordered them to prepare for an immediate invasion of France. May, *Strange Victory*, pp. 23–27. The military went along with Hitler's plans in the summer of 1939 because they wanted to conquer Poland and thought that Germany had a good chance of succeeding.

99. *Documents on German Foreign Policy*, Series D, Vol. 7, pp. 200–204, 552–555.

100. Murray, *The Change in the European Balance of Power, 1938–39*, p. 326.

calculus theory also predicts that British and French credibility should have dropped appreciably when the Soviet Union aligned with Germany, a diplomatic coup that considerably strengthened Germany's prospects for success. Finally, German power declined slightly at the peak of the crisis when Mussolini withdrew his country's support for Germany; this small reduction in German power should have slightly increased British and French credibility.

TESTING OF THE THEORIES: EVIDENCE FROM THE POLISH CRISIS

Evidence from the crisis over Poland lends stronger support to the current calculus theory than to the past actions theory. Consistent with both theories, Germany's military leaders were cautiously optimistic that Britain and France would not intervene if Germany attacked Poland. They were not as certain about these countries' lack of credibility as Hitler was, but the change is apparent when one compares Hitler's meetings with his generals in 1938 and 1939.¹⁰¹ Although many of the generals were still uneasy and wanted more time to prepare for war, they increasingly believed that Germany could conquer Poland without triggering a wider conflict.¹⁰² Furthermore, the confidence of Germany's military commanders rose when Hitler announced the alliance with the Soviet Union.¹⁰³

As both theories predict, Hitler doubted that Britain and France would fight for Poland. He directed the *Wehrmacht* to produce plans for the invasion of Poland that assumed no immediate British or French intervention.¹⁰⁴ Even the British government's declaration in the spring of 1939 that Britain would defend Poland had no effect on the German leader: it "meant next to nothing," he told Ribbentrop.¹⁰⁵ As Michael Bloch explains, Hitler "was sure that [British] promises to Poland were mere bluff and that they would shrink from war with Germany."¹⁰⁶ The British ambassador in Berlin warned his government that

101. Compare the tenor of the meetings in August 1938 with those in August 1939. For descriptions of the 1938 meetings, see *ibid.*, pp. 180–183; and Michaelis and Schraepler, *Ursachen und Folgen*, Vol. 12, pp. 253–256. For transcripts of two key meetings in August 1939, see *Documents on German Foreign Policy*, Series D, Vol. 7, pp. 200–204, 552–555.

102. Kershaw, *Hitler, 1936–45*, pp. 179–180. For a comment on the changed views of several senior German generals, see Brian Bond, "Brauchitsch," in Barnett, *Hitler's Generals*, p. 80. Not surprisingly, many generals vacillated. Halder, for example, wavered between his belief that the British and French would stay out of the war and his fear that they would intervene. But unlike in 1938, he did not challenge Hitler or plot coups to prevent the attack. On Halder's equivocations, see May, *Strange Victory*, p. 89.

103. Weinberg, *Germany, Hitler, and World War II*, pp. 144–145.

104. Carr, *Arms, Autarky, and Aggression*, p. 116; and Overy and Wheatcroft, *The Road to War*, pp. 63–67.

105. Quoted in Weitz, *Hitler's Diplomat*, p. 201.

106. Bloch, *Ribbentrop*, pp. 220–221.

“the Nazi Party leaders . . . believe that England is still unprepared in the last resort to go to war.”¹⁰⁷

Hitler continued to doubt British and French credibility as war approached. He asserted in August that the war against Poland “[would] be localized.”¹⁰⁸ Ribbentrop echoed his boss’s views: “The Fuhrer’s opinion remains that the war will stay localized. England and France will not dare to attack the Axis.”¹⁰⁹ Days later, when Hitler learned that Stalin had agreed to align with Germany, his confidence soared. According to Richard Overy and Andrew Wheatcroft, “Hitler was more convinced than ever that the collapse of Western efforts to encircle Germany spelt the end of serious efforts to help Poland. The West would make gestures of defiance, but they would not fight.”¹¹⁰

Only the current calculus theory correctly predicts Hitler’s second thoughts at the peak of the crisis. When, on August 25, Hitler learned about Mussolini’s defection, he began to reassess British and French credibility and postponed the attack. He complained to Gen. Wilhelm Keitel, “There’s absolutely no doubt that London has realized by now that Italy won’t go along with us. Now Britain’s attitude towards us will stiffen—now they will back up Poland to the hilt.”¹¹¹ But unlike a year earlier, Hitler regained his nerve and reissued the order to attack.¹¹²

Even after Britain signed an alliance with Poland, Hitler still harbored serious doubts about British and French credibility. He expressed surprise when Britain and France declared war on Germany on September 3,¹¹³ and continued to believe that the declaration was a bluff. On the same day, Hitler left Germany for a long trip to Poland to be near the front lines.¹¹⁴ Had he expected a major French attack in the west, he presumably would have stayed in Berlin. Hitler correctly predicted that the Western Allies’ brave declarations on September 3 would be followed by inaction—he anticipated the “phony war” on the western front.

The most compelling evidence against the past actions theory, and in favor of the current calculus theory, is the reasoning Hitler used when discussing the

107. Neville, *Appeasing Hitler*, p. 151.

108. Quoted in Overy and Wheatcroft, *The Road to War*, p. 55.

109. Quoted in Michaelis and Schraepfer, *Ursachen und Folgen*, Vol. 13, p. 419.

110. Overy and Wheatcroft, *The Road to War*, p. 58. See also Michaelis and Schraepfer, *Ursachen und Folgen*, Vol. 13, pp. 467–468; and Carr, *Arms, Autarky, and Aggression*, p. 122.

111. Quoted in Rock, *Appeasement in International Politics*, p. 70.

112. Overy and Wheatcroft and Bloch agree that Hitler was most affected by Italy’s withdrawal of support rather than the Anglo-Polish alliance. See Overy and Wheatcroft, *The Road to War*, p. 59; and Bloch, *Ribbentrop*, p. 252. See also Kershaw, *Hitler, 1936–45*, pp. 214–215.

113. Kershaw, *Hitler, 1936–45*, pp. 228, 230; and Bloch, *Ribbentrop*, pp. 260–262.

114. Kershaw, *Hitler, 1936–45*, pp. 235–326; and Bloch, *Ribbentrop*, p. 263.

credibility of Britain and France in 1939. Even after their egregious concessions during the Sudetenland crisis, Hitler continued to assess the countries' credibility primarily on the basis of the balance of power. For example, in a meeting on August 14, 1939, Hitler assured his senior commanders that the British would not fight to defend Poland: "Not even England has the money nowadays to fight a world war." Furthermore, "England is overburdened with responsibilities because of the excessive size of her empire." As for France, Hitler compared it to "a weak man trying to carry machine guns, heavy guns . . . on his back."¹¹⁵ The French army, he believed, had few recruits, poor equipment, and too many colonial obligations. Hitler explicitly linked his analysis of the military balance to his assessment of British and French credibility by asking: "What military measures can France and England undertake? [A] drive against [the] West Wall [is] unlikely. A northward swing through Belgium and Holland will not bring speedy victory. None of this would help the Poles. . . . All these factors argue against England and France entering the war."¹¹⁶

During the August 14 meeting, Hitler uttered two sentences in which he apparently connected Britain's credibility to its past behavior. Referring to British leaders, he asserted, "[Britain] has no leaders of real caliber. . . . The men I got to know in Munich are not the kind that start a new World War." But his next sentence revealed that his doubts about British (and French) credibility did not rest on his evaluation of their leaders, Hitler announced that "if [he] were in the shoes of the Franco-English statesmen, he would not assume responsibility for a world conflict."¹¹⁷ In other words, even a fearless leader, as Hitler viewed himself, would not command Britain and France into war against Germany. It was not the character of their leaders that would keep Britain and France from intervening; it was the balance of power.

In another meeting, on August 22, 1939, Hitler made a statement that has been offered as the "smoking gun" that confirms the past actions theory: "Our enemies are worms. I saw them in Munich."¹¹⁸ The records of this meeting, however, raise powerful doubts about the significance of this quote.

The notes taken at the August 22 meeting show that Hitler's argument was almost entirely about the military balance. He listed seven reasons why the British and French would not defend Poland: (1) Britain's army was small;

115. *Documents on German Foreign Policy*, Series D, Vol. 7, pp. 554–555.

116. *Ibid.*, p. 555.

117. *Ibid.*

118. *Ibid.*, pp. 200–204.

(2) its empire was vulnerable around the globe; (3) the French army was weak; (4) Britain and France could no longer penetrate Germany's western defenses; (5) a blockade would be neutralized by access to supplies in the east; (6) the German economy was strong; and (7) the Soviet Union was going to ally with Germany. According to the notes taken by Adm. Wilhelm Canaris, Hitler uttered the "worms" line, the only sentence routinely quoted from the meeting, near the end of his remarks.¹¹⁹

There are several reasons to believe that Hitler's quip about Germany's enemies being worms was a trivial part of his argument. First, Hitler developed and clarified the seven reasons outlined above for doubting British and French intervention. For example, he explained why he thought the British military was weak: "The [British] naval construction programme for 1938 has not been completed. Only the reserve fleet has been mobilized. . . . [There will be] no substantial strengthening of the [British] Navy before 1941 or 1942."¹²⁰ Moreover, "England will be able to send at most three divisions to the Continent." He also elaborated on why he thought the French army was no threat to Germany: "France is short of men" because of the decline in its birthrate, and "little has been done for [French] rearmament. The artillery is obsolete." In addition, Hitler revealed why he no longer feared a blockade: "It will not be effective because of our autarky [program] and because we have sources of supply in Eastern Europe." The "worms" comment, on the other hand, was an isolated remark that was neither explained nor expanded upon.

Second, Hitler did not make the "worms" quote his eighth reason for doubting British and French credibility. Rather, it appears in the middle of his argument about Russia coming over to Germany's side. Hitler declared, "The enemy [Britain and France] had another hope, that Russia would become our enemy after the conquest of Poland. The enemy did not reckon with my great strength of purpose. Our enemies are worms. I saw them in Munich. I was convinced that Stalin would never accept the English offer [to ally with the West]. Russia has no interest in preserving Poland, and Stalin knows that it would mean the end of his regime, no matter whether his soldiers emerged from a war victorious or vanquished."¹²¹ Thus the "worms" quote is isolated within Hitler's discussion of Germany's imminent alliance with the Soviet Union. It

119. *Ibid.*, p. 204.

120. All quotations in this paragraph are from *ibid.*, p. 203.

121. *Ibid.*, p. 204. In this translation the Hitler quote is: "Our enemies are small fry. I saw them in Munich." I accept the standard "worms" translation.

was not an argument that Hitler emphasized as much as any of the arguments about power and interests, let alone more than all of them combined.

Finally, the relative unimportance of the “worms” quote is suggested by the fact that only the Canaris text reports it. The most detailed notes from the meeting, taken by Adm. Hermann Boehm, agree with the Canaris text point for point, but they contain no reference to the “worms” comment.¹²² There are at least two other surviving records of the meeting: a diary entry by General Halder and notes by Hitler’s adjutant, Gerhard Engel. Neither includes a reference to “worms.”¹²³ To give the “worms” quote greater significance than any of Hitler’s other arguments, let alone more emphasis than all seven “power” arguments together, is a gross misinterpretation of what transpired at the meeting.¹²⁴

SUMMARY OF THE EVIDENCE FROM THE POLISH CRISIS

As both the past actions and current calculus theories predict, neither Hitler nor Germany’s senior military leaders expected Britain and France to fight for Poland. The current calculus theory, however, also correctly predicts the fluctuations in their credibility as Germany gained one ally (the Soviet Union) and lost another (Italy). Most significantly, the discussions among German leaders about the credibility of Britain and France focused heavily on the military balance and the interests of both countries, not on their history of breaking commitments.

Counterarguments

There are at least three possible counterarguments to this analysis. First, critics may wonder if Hitler actually assessed the balance of power or British and French credibility in 1938 or 1939. Perhaps he was so committed to an aggres-

122. Hohlfeld, *Dokumente der Deutschen Politik und Geschichte von 1848 bis zur Gegenwart*, Vol. 5, pp. 74–81.

123. *Documents on German Foreign Policy*, Series D, Vol. 7, pp. 557–559.

124. For similar arguments questioning the significance of the “worms” and “men of Munich” quotes, see Rock, *Appeasement in International Politics*, p. 71. Rock disagrees with aspects of the argument here; he claims that, by late August, Hitler had become convinced that Britain would fight for Poland. Rock notes that Hitler emphasized this point in his final directive for war and points to statements to this effect in notes by General Halder. The evidence presented earlier in this article convinces me that Hitler still doubted that Britain and France would fight to defend Poland. Hitler’s apparent surprise when told that Britain and France had declared war, together with his departure for Poland on September 3, 1939 (after learning this fact), persuade me that he correctly anticipated the “phony war” in the west.

sive policy that he simply asserted that the military balance was favorable to Germany only to justify his decisions to attack. Or perhaps he claimed that British and French credibility was low to build support for his preferred policies.

The view of Hitler implied by this counterargument—as a man so committed to expansion that he does not calculate the balance of power or assess his enemies’ credibility—is inaccurate. Hitler was a strategic actor; he timed Germany’s actions against Austria, Czechoslovakia, Poland, France, the Ukraine, and Russia on the basis of his assessment of the risks. When he came to power, he had already decided that his ultimate goal was to conquer the Ukraine and much of Russia. He recognized, however, that Germany needed a lengthy period of rearmament before it could expand. He did not order attacks against the Ukraine and Russia until German forces had reduced the danger of a two-front war by conquering France. Similarly, he delayed the conquest of France until Germany had removed the threats to its eastern frontier (i.e., Czechoslovakia and Poland). Hitler was a calculating man who did not initiate conflicts that he expected to lose. It is therefore unreasonable to assume that his optimistic assessments of the military balance and of British and French credibility were merely rhetorical.

A second counterargument posits that the irresolution exhibited by Britain and France in the 1930s affected their credibility indirectly, rather than dictated Hitler’s thinking in a particular crisis. British and French unwillingness to respond to Germany with force convinced Hitler that democracies in general were irresolute. This would explain Hitler’s disdain for British and French leaders as well as the lack of references in the documents to specific acts of Western irresolution.

There are at least two reasons to be skeptical of this counterargument. First, Hitler’s disparaging view of democracies predates the irresolute behavior of Britain and France in the 1930s. Writing in 1924, Hitler argued, “Such a nation [i.e., a democracy] will be unable to muster the courage for any determined act; it will prefer to accept any dishonor, even the most shameful, rather than rise to a decision.”¹²⁵ Appeasement did not teach Hitler that democracies were irresolute; he believed this to be true even before becoming chancellor. Second, Hitler’s occasional disparaging comments about democracies do not reflect his assessments of their credibility. Sometimes Hitler derided the “caliber” of

125. Adolf Hitler, *Mein Kampf* [My struggle], trans. Ralph Manheim (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1999), p. 82.

British and French leaders. At other times, he said that the British and French were not weak or cowardly, but rather “hate-inspired antagonists” and a constant “thorn in the flesh.”¹²⁶ Despite these varying characterizations, when Hitler moved beyond insults, he consistently stated that he doubted British and French credibility.

Finally, some skeptics may wonder whether the crises examined in this article are too idiosyncratic to draw generalizations. For example, much of the evidence presented here focuses on the interactions between Hitler and his generals; perhaps Hitler favored arguments about the balance of power because he thought these would be more persuasive to a military audience. Furthermore, even if this is an easy test for the past actions theory, perhaps the appropriate conclusion is that the theory does not apply to the decisions of dictators or aggressors.

Hitler, however, was arguing with men who knew much more about military matters than he did. Had he selected his arguments for tactical reasons, he would have avoided all discussion of the military balance and focused instead on his area of expertise: bullying the British and French and forcing them to back down. Furthermore, similar analyses of Cold War crises show that U.S. and British civilian leaders assessed Soviet credibility almost entirely with regard to the balance of power and interests, even when the Soviets had backed down repeatedly in response to a series of crises. In other words, the results from the 1930s do not appear to be idiosyncratic: even democratically elected civilian leaders who were defending the Cold War status quo ignored evidence about their adversary’s past actions and focused instead on the balance of power and interests.¹²⁷

Conclusion

For more than fifty years, the “lessons of Munich” have weighed heavily on U.S. foreign policymakers. At the most critical junctures of the Cold War—for example, the U.S. decision to fight the communists in Korea and Vietnam and to risk nuclear war over the Soviet Union’s placement of missiles in Cuba—U.S. policy was driven by the fear that backing down would damage the credibility of the United States. To this day, U.S. leaders follow the prescriptions of the past actions theory; they are loath to reevaluate existing commitments for

126. *Documents on German Foreign Policy*, Series D, Vol. 2, p. 32.

127. Press, *Calculating Credibility*, chaps. 3, 4.

fear that doing so would signal irresolution. These fears, however, are greatly overblown: the credibility of U.S. threats and promises does not hinge on establishing a history of resolute actions. As the current calculus theory explains, threats and promises are credible if—and only if—they are consistent with important interests and are backed by substantial power.

Ironically, the past actions theory is not even applicable in the cases that have become synonymous with the dangers of breaking commitments. German decisionmaking during the appeasement crises of the 1930s offers a remarkably easy test for the theory, but there is little evidence that the behavior of Britain and France in one crisis influenced their credibility in the next stand-off. Although Britain and France backed down repeatedly during the 1930s, their concessions did not damage their credibility. As the current calculus theory predicts, German leaders believed their enemies' threats when the military balance favored the British and French, and they discounted them when the military balance favored Germany. Countries can back away from unwise commitments without doing measurable harm to their credibility.

In one sense, this counterintuitive finding should not be surprising to strategists. In every competitive environment—including sports, chess, poker, and war—competitors use feints and bluffs to tremendous advantage. Probing forward, with the private knowledge that one will retreat if challenged, is an invaluable tactic for learning about an enemy's strength and strategies. But excessive U.S. concern with the dangers of backing down precludes probes and feints. Metaphorically, American foreign policy strategists have used the United States' "chess pieces" as if they were all pawns—unable to move back from an untenable position—when in fact they are rooks and bishops. Understanding the real source of credibility permits a more flexible, and more powerful, approach to foreign policy.