



Harvard Model Congress

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CHURCHILL'S WAR CABINET:

MAY 1940

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INTRODUCTION

May 10, 1940. Germany invades France, Belgium, and the Netherlands. Winston Churchill becomes Prime Minister following the resignation of Neville Chamberlain. Over the next month, Churchill's cabinet would make a series of decisions that would forever change the course of the Second World War and modern history. The cabinet responded as Nazi Germany pushed deeper and deeper into Western Europe — coordinating resistance with the French, preparing for a potential invasion of the British Isle, and ultimately organizing the last-ditch evacuation at Dunkirk from May 26 to June 4.

This committee will begin on May 10 as Churchill forms his cabinet. From there, we leave the bounds of history. Delegates will respond to both domestic and international developments, with crises changing depending on the actions taken by the cabinet. By the end of the month, the war's outlook may be completely different — for better or for worse.

The aim of this briefing is to provide an overview of the committee's historical background and introduce some of the central challenges delegates will face. To become fully situated in the world of Churchill's cabinet, it is important to understand both the international and domestic history leading to the political moment of May 1940.

A central tension of this committee will be the policy of **appeasement**: the placation of Germany's expansionary actions in order to avoid war. The previous government, headed by Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain, pursued appeasement to the German regime prior to the war (Imperial War Museums). Now, with Poland under German annexation and most of Western Europe under



Winston Churchill
Smithsonian

attack, there are those in Churchill's cabinet who support attempting to find a peace before further lives are lost, including Foreign Secretary Edward Wood, 1st Earl of Halifax — one of the main proponents of appeasement under Chamberlain (Spartacus).

While this war-versus-appeasement dichotomy will be useful for framing debates, delegates are also encouraged to take a more nuanced perspective. If Britain hopes to make peace with Germany, through which intermediaries should the government liaise? What minimum conditions would have to be met for a peace agreement to be amenable? What happens if talks fall through — how can the government avoid falling to a place of strategic weakness?

If war is the answer, should the British military take an offensive or defensive approach? How should the economy and domestic resources be managed to mobilize the war effort?

HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT

The Road to War

Pre-War German Aggression

Armistice was signed on November 11, 1918, bringing the central conflict of the First World War to an end. It was hoped that Europe would never again become engulfed in war. The Treaty of Versailles was signed in 1919, forcing Germany to take responsibility for the war, completely disarm, and pay reparations to the **Allied Powers**. Under the Treaty's disarmament rules, Germany's ability to own certain arms and munitions was severely limited, as was the size of the German Army (National Geographic).

But under twenty years later, Europe would once again be facing an aggressive German regime. Nazi leader Adolf Hitler was appointed Chancellor of Germany in 1933. He quickly consolidated power and trashed the **Weimar Republic's** fledgling democratic institutions (National WWII Museum).

In 1936, Germany sent troops into the Rhineland, a region on the German-French border that had been occupied by the Allied Powers since Armistice. In March 1938, Germany annexed the Federal State of Austria, an event known as *Anschluss*. Hitler next looked to the Sudetenland, areas on the border of Czechoslovakia occupied primarily by ethnic Germans (National Archives).

Meanwhile, in Britain, Neville Chamberlain had become Leader of the Conservative Party and Prime Minister in May 1937, following the retirement of Stanley Baldwin. In what may have been the apotheosis of the appeasement policy, Chamberlain met personally with Hitler and members of the Czech government and acquiesced to the German demands in order to avoid war. Meeting in Munich in September 1938, Britain, Germany, Italy, and France agreed to allow

appeasement — the policy of acceding to the demands of the Nazi regime in order to avoid war

Hitler to annex the Sudetenland. Hitler claimed that his territorial demands in Europe had all been met. Upon returning to Britain, Chamberlain announced that the Munich Agreement had ensured “peace in our time” (BBC, 2023).

But Winston Churchill had other thoughts. In a speech to the House of Commons, Churchill (then just a Member of Parliament) decried Chamberlain’s agreement:

[W]e have sustained a total and unmitigated defeat... You will find that in a period of time measured only by months, Czechoslovakia will be engulfed in the Nazi regime. Perhaps they may join it in despair or in revenge. At any rate, that story is over and told... It is the most grievous consequence which we have yet experienced of what we have done and of what we have left undone in the last five years — five years of futile good intention, five years of eager search for the line of least resistance, five years of uninterrupted retreat of British power, five years neglect of our air defenses. (National Churchill Museum)

Churchill’s prediction would prove correct. In March of 1939, German troops marched into Prague. Czechoslovakia was divided, with Slovakia becoming a nominally independent state loyal to Germany and the Czech territory being subsumed under the German Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia (BBC).

British Re-Armament

Although Chamberlain is not remembered fondly for the failed appeasement approach, some historians have argued that diplomacy was only part of his strategy. Chamberlain and other British leaders quickly rearmed and modernized the British military in light of the growing German threat. As early as 1936, Chamberlain — then Chancellor of the Exchequer (head of the British Treasury) — launched an expensive and expansive investment into the Royal Navy and Royal Air Force (Reader, 2022). As historians Norrin Ripsman and Jack Levy argue:

British appeasement was not based on a naïve understanding of Hitler’s intentions or on wishful thinking about the possibility of establishing a lasting peace with Germany... To the contrary, we demonstrate that British leaders recognized the growing German threat but felt they had no good options for dealing with it. They believed that Germany had already surpassed Britain in effective military power, and consequently that Britain, alone or even with France, could not yet win a war against Germany. They believed, however, that with a major rearmament effort the military imbalance

Germany annexed the remainder of Czechoslovakia in March 1939, reneging on the Munich

could be corrected by the late 1930s. British leaders appeased Germany as a means of buying time for rearmament, thus delaying the likely confrontation until Britain was adequately prepared for war. (Ripsman and Levy, 2008)

Regardless of how earnest Chamberlain's attempts at diplomacy may or not have been, illusions of "peace in our time" had faded by the time Hitler reached Prague in March 1939. With Germany in direct breach of the terms of the Munich Agreement, Chamberlain now publicly recognized that he could not trust Hitler to refrain from further territorial expansion. And he promised to come to Poland's defense should Germany attempt an invasion (Reader, 2022). War in Europe could now be seen clearly on the horizon.

But the British military was also far better prepared to face the Germans. The British Navy was a more modern, diversified fleet than it had been before re-armament. By the summer, the Royal Air Force's Spitfire and Hurricane fighters would be ready to face the **Luftwaffe**: at the time, the largest air force in Europe (Imperial War Museums). And Britain had built up its defensive infrastructure: early-warning radar systems lined the English coastline. As one historian put it, Chamberlain was a "warlord presiding over [a] military-industrial complex" when war finally broke out in September (Reader, 2022).

***Luftwaffe** – the German air force during*

Invasion of Poland

Hitler established a series of alliances that would pave the way for the ground invasion of Poland – and the official start to the Second World War. In May 1939, Germany and Italy signed the **Pact of Steel**, a military and economic alliance stipulating that Hitler and Italian fascist leader Benito Mussolini would defend each other in case war broke out (BBC).

Then, in late August, Germany and the Soviet Union signed a 10-year non-aggression pact – known as the **Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact**, the names of the countries' foreign ministers. The agreement included secret provisions with plans to divide up Poland, Lithuania, Estonia, and Latvia after they had fallen to the German military. Poland was now completely surrounded (History, 2009).

On September 1, 1939, over 1.5 million German soldiers, 2,500 tanks, and 2,000 airplanes poured across the Polish border. Chamberlain kept his promise to defend Poland: Foreign Secretary Lord Halifax sent an ultimatum letter to Hitler, demanding he immediately withdraw from Poland. The letter was ignored, and so Britain and France declared war on Germany on September 3 (Waxman, 2019).

The German army quickly tore through Poland, employing the new **Blitzkrieg** military tactic. Warsaw fell to the Germans on

***Pact of Steel** – a military alliance between Germany and Italy signed in 1939*

***Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact** – a non-aggression pact between Germany and the Soviet Union signed in 1939*

September 28, and the next day, Poland was divided with the Soviets according to the protocols established in the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum).

Invasion of Western Europe

The next eight-month period would be known as the “Phony War” due to a lack of significant hostilities following the Nazi conquest of Poland. However, Britain did establish naval blockades in order to cut Germany off from key natural resources. In particular, Britain attempted to block Germany from access to Swedish iron ore — necessary for steel production — via the Norwegian port of Narvik. Wanting to protect supply to this crucial resource and expand influence, Germany invaded neutral Denmark and Norway in April 1940. Denmark surrendered within the day, while Norway fought back against the occupation with British support (Quinlan-Flatter, 2021). By May 10, 1940, Norway was a key early theater in the war; the Allies viewed Narvik, the northern port where Swedish ore is shipped from, and Trondheim, a city linking the north and south of the country, as crucial assets in the campaign (SWWEC).

Swedish iron ore — a key natural resource for the German war effort — was transported via the Norwegian port of Narvik

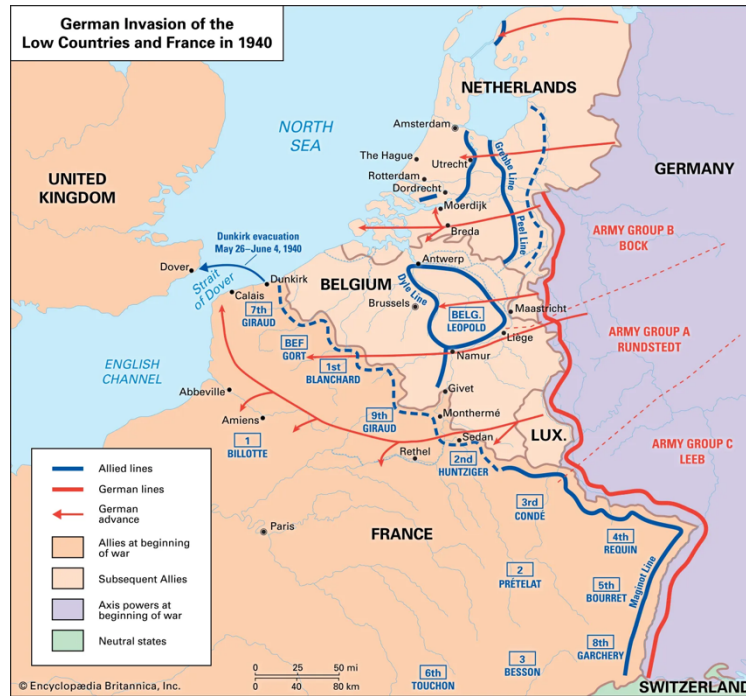


The Norwegian Campaign, 1940
Source: Historynet

Maginot Line —
French defensive fortifications along the German border

On May 10, 1940, when our committee began, Germany began its invasion of France and the Low Countries (Belgium, Luxembourg, and the Netherlands). The German campaign is divided into three

sections. Army Group C attacks France on the **Maginot Line** — French defensive fortifications built along the France-Germany border. Army Group B invades Belgium and the Netherlands. And Army Group A attacks Belgium and Luxembourg, before plunging into France via the Ardennes, a rough, heavily forested region unprotected by the Maginot defenses (Britannica).



The Battle of France, 1940
Source: Britannica

Domestic Politics

The National Government

Conservative Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin won re-election in 1935, with Conservative Members of Parliament (MPs) making up over 60% of the body. Baldwin's government also received support from some members of the Labour and Liberal Parties. Together, this bloc was known as the National Government and controlled 429 of 615 seats at the time of the 1935 election. When Baldwin retired in 1937, Chamberlain inherited control of the coalition.

Chamberlain's policy of appeasement was initially fairly popular among the British public. After the Munich Agreement, he received thousands of letters thanking him for avoiding war. According to a poll conducted at the time, 57% of the British public was satisfied

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with Chamberlain, while 33% disapproved and 10% were undecided. But the populace was also wary of the rising German threat: 72% said they supported increased spending on defense (Caquet, 2019).

The Norway Debate

But by the time that German soldiers were making their way through Norway, public sentiment — and feelings in Parliament — had shifted. The British had attempted a major operation in southwestern Norway, landing at Åndalsnes to fortify the defenses at Trondheim. The British were badly unprepared to face the Germans attacking from Oslo, located southeast of Åndalsnes. By May 1, troops at Åndalsnes were forced to withdraw; the British campaign across southern Norway was a stinging failure (Hansard Society, 2020).

Facing harsh criticism from the Labour opposition, Chamberlain agreed to a 2-day debate in the House of Commons in early May. Chamberlain opened debate on May 7, discussing the trials of the British military in Norway:

Whatever criticisms may be made about anyone else, I am sure everybody will agree that the troops who have been engaged in this campaign carried out their task with magnificent gallantry and in a way which has added still further to the great traditions of the Service. Whether in hard fighting, or in stolid endurance, or in quick and skillful movements, exposed as they were to superior forces with superior equipment, they distinguished themselves in every respect, and man for man they showed themselves superior to their foes... No doubt the news of our withdrawal from Southern Norway created a profound shock both in this House and in the country. (Hansard, 1940)

“And abroad”; “All over the world,” MPs disapprovingly jeered. “They missed the bus,” yelled an MP a few moments later, mocking Chamberlain for a statement made during the Phony War that Hitler had “missed the bus.” Labour opposition leader Clement Attlee continued the assault on Chamberlain in his opening address:

It is not Norway alone. Norway comes as the culmination of many other discontents... Everywhere the story is “Too late.” The Prime Minister talked about missing buses. What about all the buses which he and his associates have missed since 1931? They missed all the peace buses but caught the war bus. The people find that these men who have been consistently wrong in their judgment of events, the same people who thought that Hitler would not attack Czecho-Slovakia, who thought that Hitler could be

appeared, seem not to have realized that Hitler would attack Norway. (Hansard, 1940)

Later that evening, MPs were openly calling for Chamberlain to resign. The usually soft-spoken Leo Amery, a former Conservative cabinet minister, closed his speech by quoting Oliver Cromwell:

You have sat too long here for any good you have been doing. Depart, I say, and let us have done with you. In the name of God, go. (Hansard Society, 2020)

Winston Churchill was serving in Chamberlain's cabinet as the chair of the Military Coordination Committee and was thus tied to defending the government. He closed the debate with a strong stand for the government, but it was clear that Chamberlain's days were numbered. Chamberlain survived a **no confidence vote** — which would have forced him to resign if it had received a majority — but 39 government MPs voted against the Prime Minister and 30 to 40 more abstained (Hansard Society, 2020).

no confidence vote —
an important
parliamentary vote that
typically triggers
resignation of the
government if it fails

Succession

Chamberlain could conceivably have stayed in power, but he recognized the need to reorganize the government under a wartime coalition of all the major parties. The day after the vote, May 9th, he called Labour Leader Clement Attlee to propose a new coalition government. Attlee refused to join if Chamberlain was still to be Prime Minister. On the morning of the 10th, Germany began its invasion of France and the Low Countries. Attlee once again refused to join a government under Chamberlain, and so the Prime Minister decided to step down.

House of Lords — the
unelected upper house of
the British Parliament

The exact details surrounding Winston Churchill's ascension to the premiership are subject to some historical controversy. In broad strokes, Chamberlain — and many members of the Conservative Party — favored Foreign Secretary Lord Halifax to succeed him. Labour seemed to be amenable to forming a united government under Halifax. But Halifax himself worried about the practicalities of running the war effort from the **House of Lords** (Halifax was not an elected MP). The Foreign Secretary thus removed himself from consideration, leaving the premiership to Churchill (Overy, 2017).

At 6:00 p.m. on May 10, 1940, Chamberlain visited King George VI to offer his resignation and suggest Churchill as his successor. At 9:00 p.m., Chamberlain announced his resignation on a BBC broadcast (UPI, 1940).

Churchill's War Cabinet was formed, with the initial innermost circle consisting of five members. Churchill was Prime Minister and gave himself the Minister of Defense portfolio. Chamberlain was

made Lord President of the Council. Clement Attlee became Lord Privy Seal. Arthur Greenwood, the Deputy Leader of the Opposition under Attlee, became a Minister without Portfolio. And Lord Halifax was kept on as Foreign Secretary (Daniell, 1940). Finally, we reach the present day.

CURRENT SITUATION

The committee shall commence in the days following the establishment of Churchill's wartime government on May 10. Over the course of the conference, delegates will respond to a series of interrelated crises, designed to occupy the span of around a month in the world of the committee.

The crisis will focus on three constantly evolving parts of the war. First, the invasion of France and the Low Countries: as the German army pushes deeper into Western Europe, the British government must mobilize the **British Expeditionary Force** — and prevent it from being wiped out. Defeat in France would leave Britain alone in its fight against the German Reich. In that case, should Britain look to find peace with Germany in order to ensure security of the British Isle and avoid further bloodshed?

Second, on ongoing conflict in Northern Europe, particularly Norway: the British armed forces's inability to suppress the German invasion of Norway is what led to Chamberlain's resignation. With the invasion of France now underway, how greatly should Britain prioritize this conflict in the north — especially given the strategic importance of Swedish iron ore to the German war effort?

Third, on diplomatic relationships with Italy and the Soviet Union: the Pact of Steel and the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact have aligned Italy and the Soviet Union with Nazi Germany. But neither Italy nor the Soviet Union is yet at war with Britain or France. Britain can thus use these diplomatic ties to negotiate with Germany — or attempt to turn them on Hitler.

At the same time as dealing with these crucial national security issues, delegates must constantly consider the domestic political context. The all-party government is not necessarily stable: many in the Conservative Party remain loyal to Chamberlain and Halifax, skeptical of Churchill's leadership (Overy, 2017). The Labour and Conservative Parties, meanwhile, have sharp ideological differences — Labour is strongly supportive of domestic social reform, whereas the Conservatives are highly critical of socialism (IWM).

Should the war cabinet become too fractured, Churchill's government could easily fall. Churchill loyalists, Halifax loyalists, and Labour officials must be able to work out their disagreements, or else form a new government under different leadership. But reshuffling the government could derail existing progress and delay

British Expeditionary Force — *the segment of the British military fighting in France*

the war effort as officials settle into their new roles. Moreover, having three prime ministers over the course of one month does not project strength, especially when contrasted with the fascist leaders (Hitler had come to power in 1933, Mussolini in 1922).

IDEOLOGICAL VIEWPOINTS

Churchill & His Loyalists

Churchill had been a steadfast opponent of appeasement in the 1930s. As he wrote just before the Munich conference, “I think we shall have to choose in the next few weeks between war and shame, and I have very little doubt what the decision will be” (Churchill Society). The newly minted Prime Minister and his allies believe that a peace agreement with Germany is not an option. Capitulation to Germany would leave Britain beholden to the fascist Nazi regime. Germany might demand that Britain disarm its armed forces and contribute its natural resources and manufacturing output to the German war effort across Europe. And even if favorable terms could be worked out, Hitler is clearly not to be trusted after his betrayal of the Munich Agreement (Dunton, 2020).

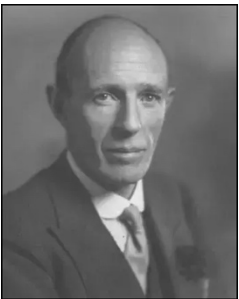
Certainly, Churchill may consider different peace proposals — especially if times become dire. But this bloc will generally pursue a fight-at-all-costs approach.

Halifax & His Loyalists

Halifax and his supporters are much more likely to pursue an agreement with Germany in order to protect the British Expeditionary Force in France and maintain the integrity of the British nation. Halifax is not a defeatist and will support continuing war if he sees a feasible path to victory. But should the British armed forces be pushed to the brink, he may attempt to work through Mussolini in Italy or Stalin in the Soviet Union to reach a more favorable exit from the war for the British. As Halifax sees it, peace terms with the Germans may be preferable to the annihilation of the British forces in France — or a full-on invasion of the British Isle (Dunton, 2020).

The Labour Party

As previously discussed, the Labour Party (led by Clement Attlee and Arthur Greenwood) is not ideologically aligned with either Churchill or Halifax (both Conservatives) when it comes to domestic policy. Regarding international affairs, Labour had initially fought attempts to increase the military budget — wanting to focus resources on directly aiding British citizens. But as Hitler grew in



Lord Halifax
Britannica

power, Labour changed tack and became critical of the appeasement policy. Attlee's harsh attacks on Chamberlain during the Norway Debate played an important role in forcing the Prime Minister to resign (Hansard Society, 2020). Continuing off this opposition to the appeasement policy, Labour leaders are more likely to side with Churchill when it comes to the central question of war versus peace. Still, Labour may be willing to entertain a peace agreement if they believe it is in the best interest of the British people.

BUDGETARY CONSIDERATIONS

Mobilizing the British economy is a central component of the war effort. While this committee will not deal directly with domestic economic policy, the national budget is nonetheless an important consideration.

The budget proposed by the previous government in April estimated expenditures of around 2,687,000,000 **British pounds sterling (GBP)** (approximately 192 trillion GBP adjusting for inflation). This value was widely criticized in the House of Commons, with members from across the aisle believing it insufficient to match the German war effort. According to economist John Maynard Keynes, the British government would have to spend 500,000,000 GBP more to match German and French spending (The Canberra Times, 1940). Delegates should be aware of these budgetary limitations as the cabinet continues its fight against Germany.

***British pounds sterling (GBP)** – the currency of the United Kingdom*

CONCLUSION

May 1940 is considered by some to be the “darkest hour” of British history. With the British military pushed to the brink in France and Norway, how Churchill's cabinet chooses to respond will forever change the history of Britain, Europe, and the world. Balancing international considerations and domestic politics, delegates must rapidly adapt to ongoing crisis developments. In particular, delegates will navigate the German invasions of France and Norway as well as relationships with other major European powers.

As an important note, delegates are encouraged to avoid using historical hindsight to motivate their stances. We, of course, all know how the Second World War ultimately progressed, but we must imagine the situation as it was back in May 1940, without this benefit of hindsight. The crisis will be designed to quickly veer from the true path of history, even if the cabinet were to exactly follow their real-

world actions. But delegates are still encouraged to do their best to cut themselves off from present knowledge.

Finally, delegates are reminded to be cognizant of sensitive subject matter related to the committee. The Holocaust, which saw the systematic murder of around 6 million Jews, has not been addressed in this briefing – mainly because the mass killings of Jews did not begin until 1941. This does not mean, however, that the atrocities committed by the Nazi regime are irrelevant to this committee. Hitler’s fascist and anti-Semitic rhetoric and policies long predated the “official” start of the Holocaust. In November 1938, *Kristallnacht*, which saw the destruction of Jewish-owned stores and synagogues, was widely reported on in Britain and helped turn British public opinion against Nazi Germany. Thus, arguments for or against a given action based on the anti-Semitic actions of the Nazi regime are perfectly legitimate, even if the horrors of the Holocaust are not yet known to the committee.

The Hansard keeps track of all official statements made in the British Parliament

GUIDE TO FURTHER RESEARCH

This briefing is designed to provide an overview of the events leading up to May 10, 1940 and the ideological stances of some of the key leaders in Churchill’s government. But the Second World War was incredibly complex, and so this committee can only begin to scratch the surface. Delegates are thus encouraged to research specific aspects of the war effort that are relevant to their position. The Chancellor of the Exchequer, for example, should dive deeper into the economic policy of 1940 Britain. The Secretary of State for Air should familiarize themselves with the Royal Air Force campaigns in Norway and France.

Although delegates are discouraged from using historical hindsight, it may be worth researching what role (if any) your position played during the actual cabinet crisis of May 1940. This is not so that you will exactly follow what your cabinet member did in real life, but rather to gain a better sense of where they might stand on key debates.

The [UK Parliament Hansard](#) is also a valuable tool; one can search parliamentary debates for statements by individual MPs to gain a better sense of the positions they took during public debates.

GLOSSARY

Allied Powers – the group of nations fighting Nazi Germany and its allies

Appeasement – the policy of acceding to the demands of the Nazi regime in order to avoid war

Blitzkrieg – deriving from the German for “lightning” and “war,” a military tactic designed to rapidly overwhelm the opponent

British Expeditionary Force – the segment of the British military fighting in France

British pounds sterling (GBP) – the currency of the United Kingdom

House of Lords – the unelected upper house of the British Parliament

Luftwaffe – the German air force during Second World War

Maginot Line – French defensive fortifications along the German border

Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact – a non-aggression pact between Germany and the Soviet Union signed in 1939

no confidence vote – an important parliamentary vote that typically triggers resignation of the government if it fails

Pact of Steel – a military alliance between Germany and Italy signed in 1939 stipulating that the two nations would defend each other in case of war

Weimar Republic – Germany from the end of the First World War in 1918 until the ascension of Hitler in 1933

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