

The rearmament of germany in the 1920s and 30s

[Countries](#), [Germany](#)



Looking back on the history, people begin to ask questions about why things happened the way that they did. Looking specifically in the field of World War 2, a popular question is “ how was Germany such a successful force on the battlefield? ” There are many explanations as to why Germany was so successful in all of its earlier military campaigns, but the largest reason is because of the secret rearmament that took place within Germany, years before the war. Several years before Hitler and The Second War, World War 1 ended in the humiliating defeat of Germany as a country.

The conditions of Germany’s surrender were even more humiliating than the losses on the battlefield. As a result of the Treaty of Versailles, which Germany was forced to sign, the entire cause of the war was placed on Germany. Therefore Germany was forced to pay large sums of reparations and suffered several consequences militarily and economically. Those consequences were set up mainly by the British and French as a way to ensure that another war of aggression by Germany will not be able to happen again. First off, Germany’s military was disarmed and downsized.

The number of troops allowed in the German army was never to exceed 100,000 men. Germany’s army was further disarmed when the victories allies forbade the use of tanks, poison gas, and large artillery pieces. 1 The German navy was forced to hand over all its battleships, heavy cruisers, and U-boats, effectively making the navy useless against any power in a possible naval confrontation. 2 The number of sailors allowed in the navy was also limited to 15,000 men as the maximum at any time. 3 Lastly, the German air force was disbanded all together, as Germany was not allowed to possess any warplanes.

Also to add to the limitations of the German military, the German economy was also limited as another way to prevent a German rearmament. The factories in the Ruhr area, where much of Germany's manufacturing took place, were taken over by the French. 4 With no materials and no factories, the allies believed there was no way Germany could ever rearm themselves for war. However after a period of time, the allies began to forget about Germany and the previous war. The allies lost interest in German affairs, as they faced their own economic problems at home.

Britain and France both had to now focus on the economic depression of their own countries, and had little time to worry about the affairs in Germany. However in Germany, through a string of political moves, Adolf Hitler becomes named chancellor of Germany. Whenever the president Paul Von Hindenburg dies in 1933, Hitler proclaims himself the dictator, which officially puts an end to the Weimar government. 5 One of Hitler's very first objectives as new leader of Germany was to personally oversee the rearmament process of Germany. Germany immediately began secretly rearming itself for war.

However in France, Britain, and even America, they were still suffering from the effects of the depression. No democratic nation had the resources or money to be building weapons of war. As a matter of fact, the democratic powers were actually downsizing their military spending while Germany was quickly rearming. This rearmament period in Germany is probably the biggest reason for all of Germany's success on the battlefield during the early stages of the war. While the world is building projects of peace, Germany is building up weapons of war.

It only makes sense that Germany was able to conquer most of continental Europe after they have been rearming and preparing for years, while the democratic powers had been disarming their own militaries. It can be quite obvious that due to Germany's prolonged period of secret rearmament, they had become so successful over the other world powers once fighting broke out again. Contrary to popular belief, German rearmament of Germany did not begin under Hitler and the Nazis; Hitler was just the one that massively expanded rearmament. Secret policies for German rearmament were created almost immediately after the defeat of Germany in World War 1.

However due to the strict sanctions of the Versailles Treaty, very few of these rearmament policies were possible. Following the disarmament of Germany after World War 1, the official army, or the Reichswehr consisted of 4,000 officers, 20,000 noncommissioned officers, 38,000 Gefreite, and 38,000 soldiers, for the maximum number of 100,000.⁶ However, there were still militaristic units in Germany not counted towards the 100,000 total. At the beginning of the Weimar Republic, during the demobilization and the formation of the new troops, there was no clear distinction between legal and illegal parts of the army.

Returning soldiers from World War 1, when removed from the army would join organizations which acted like an army, such as the Freikorps, border patrols, and home guards.⁷ It is in these unofficial military units, that Germany is able to fight off the Communist revolution within its borders, and keep a large portion of its military intact. While the military factories in Germany had mostly been shut down or taken over by the British and French

soldiers, Germany was still able to produce an abundance of new weapons, despite several bans on them.

Many of the major German arms manufacturers had subsidiaries in other countries, particularly the countries neutral in the First World War, such as Sweden, Holland, Switzerland, and Spain. 8 These served as branches of the German companies engaged in armament production, research, and development. The use of neutral countries to produce weapons was a great way for German companies to continue making weapons that would have been outlawed in Germany. However since the weapons themselves were not allowed in Germany, the factories had to then ship them elsewhere for sale.

German export trade flourished with arms trading to China, the Baltic States, and Czechoslovakia. 9 This greatly helped the German economy which would have been doomed to fail had it not been for this illegal selling of German arms. Ironically the greatest country responsible for the pre-Hitler German rearmament, is the country that suffered the most from it, Russia. Russia not only allowed the production of arms in its borders, it allowed the secret training of members of the German army.

This began in 1921 with the Rapallo Treaty signed between the two countries which had both been severely weakened by the First World War. 10 This connection between the two countries led to the construction of the early German air force, or the Luftwaffe. The Junkers airplane factory located in Dessau, built airplane factories in Russia. Airplane factories were built near Moscow, and in Samara and Saratow, all deep within Soviet territory to hide

the information from the rest of the world. 11 Military air personnel got their instruction in Russia.

German officers dismissed from the army went to Russia as civilians and, after a period of training there, returned to the army with a higher rank. 12 The German Army used this to effectively train men for the future air force. In addition to airplanes, the army also built a poison gas factory in Samara Oblast, a tank school at Kazan, and a naval base to hide and train Germanys navy. 13 The German company Krupp, was one of the larger factories that had a firm in Russia which produced heavy artillery, especially howitzers, that would eventually be used in war. 14

All of the rearmament up to this point was almost strictly confined and controlled by the leaders in the German army. The first known German politician in the Weimar government that becomes aware of this rearmament is the chancellor in the 1920's, Heinrich Muller. 15 Muller did nothing to stop the re-arming, and actually passed cabinet orders to encourage secret German rearmament. However Muller did place a ban on the paramilitary units in the Freikorps. However that only led to one of the Freikorps refusing to disband and marching on Berlin in the Kapp Putsch. 6 This began to show the true weakness of the Weimar government. The Weimar government will continue to fail at its policies which will lead to the eventual ascent to power of Adolf Hitler and the Nazi party. After the Nazi takeover of power, the rearmament became the topmost priority of the German government. Hitler would then spearhead one of the greatest expansions of industrial production and military buildup the world has ever seen. Once Hitler had

gained power in 1933, he immediately continued the secret rearming of Germany.

Hitler had made it plain what the basis of his foreign policy would be. He had clearly stated that he would undo what had been imposed on Germany by the Treaty of Versailles and re-unite all Germans into one nation. Hitler however before rearming the German military, first had to rearm the German economy and industry before expanding the army for war. Before Hitler could rearm Germany any further, he had to first make Germany a self-sustaining country that is able to maintain a continued war without suffering severe supply problems, such as the ones that were common in the First World War.

Hitler and his economic ministers devised a ' Four Year Plan' that would in theory establish an economically independent Germany. The Four Year Plan sought to reduce unemployment, increase synthetic fibre production, undertake public works projects, increase automobile production, initiate numerous building and architectural projects, and further develop the Autobahn system. ¹⁷ The plan also emphasized building up the nation's military defenses, in direct violation of the terms set by the Allies of World War I at the Treaty of Versailles. One large project of this plan was the creation of the autobahn highway system.

The autobahn was a highway system that was devised as a massive public works project by Hitler, but in reality it was a system of transportation devised for fast transportation of tanks and troops of the German army once war broke out. Hitler's autobahn construction began in September 1933 under the direction of chief engineer Fritz Todt. ¹⁸ The 14-mile expressway <https://assignbuster.com/the-rearmament-of-germany-in-the-1920s-and-30s/>

between Frankfurt and Darmstadt, opened on May 19, 1935, was the first section completed under Hitler. By December 1941, once America had entered the war, Germany had completed 2,400 miles (3,860 km), with another 1,550 miles (2,500 km) under construction. ⁹ This highway system was one of Hitler's first devious plots to construct a way to wage war on a massive scale. Rearmament in Germany during the 1930's also sought to improve the German industrial buildup. Archival research shows that German published industry statistics attempted to hide sensitive armament industries during this buildup. The industry census of 1936 lists 1.22 million employed in "construction and other branches of industry". ²⁰ Unpublished archival documents from the Statistical Office reveal that this total includes about 167,000 employed in aircraft and firearms industry. ¹ This is a third larger than Germany's motor industry at the same time. This is during the same time that Hitler is claiming to be industrializing Germany's economy to create jobs and to produce cars and roads for the German citizen. The table found below can provide details on Hitler's policy of rearming Germany's factories. Table Depicting 1936 Census Results of German Industry in War making facilities

Once Germany's economic situation had been settled, Hitler was satisfied enough to begin his next phase of the rearmament of Germany. Hitler saw Nazi Germany as being at the center of Europe and as the great power of Europe, so the nation needed a strong military. Up to this point, Germany had been technically keeping to the terms of the Treaty of Versailles but in reality she had been bending the rules regarding training. The Treaty of Versailles had not stated that Germany could not train submarine crews abroad or that pilots for the banned German Air Force

could train on civilian planes. Therefore, on paper Hitler inherited a weak military but this was not in reality the case. However, Hitler knew that publicly Nazi

Germany was still seen within Europe as being held to the terms of Versailles and he was determined to openly break these terms and re-assert Germany's right to control its own military. In 1933, Hitler ordered his army generals to prepare to triple the size of the army to 300, 000 men, and ordered the Air Ministry to plan to build 1, 000 war planes. 22 Military buildings such as barracks were built. Hitler withdrew Germany from the Geneva Disarmament Conference when the French refused to accept his plan that the French should disarm to the level of the Germans or that the Germans should re-arm to the level of the French.

Hitler is quoted as saying " Either way, the two main powers of Europe will be balanced. " 23 Hitler knew that the French would not accept his plan and therefore when he withdrew from the conference, he was seen by some as the politician who had a more realistic approach to foreign policy and the French were seen as the nation that had caused Nazi Germany to withdraw. For two years, the German military expanded in secret. By March 1935, Hitler felt confident enough to go public on Nazi Germany's military expansion, which broke the terms of the Versailles Treaty.

Europe learned that the Nazis had 2, 500 war planes in its Luftwaffe and an army of 300, 000 men in its Wehrmacht. 24 Hitler felt confident enough to also publicly announce that there would be compulsory military conscription in Nazi Germany and that the army would be increased to 550, 000 men. 25 Now Hitler had to wait and see how France and Britain would respond to his <https://assignbuster.com/the-rearmament-of-germany-in-the-1920s-and-30s/>

massive rearming policies. The French and British however did nothing. Britain was still recovering from the Depression which had devastated the British economy.

She could not afford a conflict. The French preferred a defensive policy against a potential German threat and she spent time and money building the vast Maginot Line, which was a series of vast forts on the French and German border. To Hitler, it even seemed that Britain was supporting Germany's breaking of the Treaty of Versailles. Britain knew that Germany was rebuilding its navy and could do little to stop it other than going to war, which she was not prepared to do. As a result, Hitler signed the Anglo-German Naval Agreement with Britain. ⁶ This treaty had clearly gone against what was stated in the Versailles Treaty on what Germany's navy should be; " no submarines and only six warships over 10, 000 tons. " In June 1935 the Anglo-German Naval Agreement was signed, which allowed Germany to have one third of the tonnage of the British navy's surface fleet and an equal tonnage of submarines. That now allowed for Germany to build up their navy, or Kriegsmarine, without fear of condemnation from Britain. As an addition to expanding the Army and Navy, arguably the most effective tool for Hitler and the Nazis, would be his air force, or Luftwaffe.

Aircraft technology developed quickly after the First World War and by the 1930s it was clear to Hitler that air power would play an important role in modern warfare. Hitler had an opportunity to give combat experience to his pilots during the Spanish Civil War. In 1937 the German Condor Legion bombed the town of Guernica in support of the fascist rebel leader General Franco. ²⁷ In 1936, again Hitler took a major risk by moving German troops

into the Rhineland. 28 This remilitarization was yet another clear contradiction of the Treaty of Versailles, but it was again unopposed by Britain and France.

The Abyssinian Crisis in Africa and the shift of Mussolini towards an alliance with Hitler distracted Britain and France. In Britain, many felt that it was only fair that Germany should be able to protect her borders, after all the Rhineland was Germany's territory. The success of the remilitarization and further rearmament emboldened Hitler to attempt a series of foreign policy adventures in the certain knowledge that Britain and France would be reluctant to go to war with Germany unless directly threatened. This policy has come to be known as appeasement.

By 1939, Hitler had an army of nearly 1 million men, over 8,000 aircraft and 95 warships. 29 This military strength had not been used in conflict, but the threat of it had helped him to achieve the remilitarization of the Rhineland in 1936, the Anschluss with Austria in 1938, the annexation of the Sudetenland in 1938 and the invasion of the rest of Czechoslovakia in March 1939. 30 All of this had been achieved without a shot being fired. A graph depicting Hitler's forces can be found below. German rearmament| 1932| 1939| Army| 100,000| 950,000| Warships| 30| 95|

Aircraft| 36| 8,250| Graph showing a close estimate of the rearming of the German military under Hitler All during the rearmament process in Germany, the other countries such as Britain, France, and America are downsizing their armies and navies. The major naval powers of Britain, the United States, and Japan recognized the financial costs of a naval arms race. Organized and hosted by Secretary of State Charles Evans Hughes, the first naval <https://assignbuster.com/the-rearmament-of-germany-in-the-1920s-and-30s/>

disarmament conference was held in Washington during the winter of 1921-22, with eight nations in attendance.

The agreement reached is known as the Five Power Treaty, which established a stoppage on the building of new warships for 10 years and set a tonnage ratio for Britain, the United States, Japan, France, and Italy. 31 Respectively and bound by the treaty, the signatories scraped 66 capital ships. 32 In addition to naval disarmament, Secretary of State Frank Kellogg and French Foreign Minister Aristide Briand engineered a pact at the 1927 Geneva conference that outlawed war entirely. 33 It is most likely that out of these weaknesses of the democratic nations, Hitler saw his opportunity to confidently rearm Germany.

As a result, Germany continued to rearm continually once Hitler gained power in 1933 up to the break out of war in 1939. Britain and France, still suffering from earlier disarmament efforts, and still feeling the effects of the Depression, were unable to rearm to counter the German rearmament until 1937. By this time, it was too late to compete with the German armament. Once war broke out in 1939, Hitler was equipped with an all-powerful army, unlike the world had seen before. Due to the rearmament policies of Hitler, the German army had a massive force of tanks and planes, that the allies were unable to compete against.

In the Battle for France, the Germans were equipped with 141 divisions, most of them motorized, 2500 modern tanks, and over 5500 modern planes. 34 On the British and French sides, they had 144 divisions, but most were still simple infantry divisions using outdated World War 1 era rifles and machine guns. 35 They were equipped with 3300 tanks which actually outnumbered <https://assignbuster.com/the-rearmament-of-germany-in-the-1920s-and-30s/>

the Germans, but again due to the lack of allied armament in the 1930's, all of their tanks were outdated and inferior to the newer German tank designs. 6 Lastly, the allies could only amount 2200 aircraft, who were severely outnumbered and outgunned by the superior German Luftwaffe due to Germanys emphasize on rearming the Luftwaffe as the most important priority in modern warfare. 37 Germanys newly created and updated armed forces were able to easily defeat the outdated armed forces of most of Europe all the way up until late 1941 and 1942. Germany's rearmament process from the 1920's and 1930's was definitely one of the most defining reasons as to why Germany was able to become such a successful military force.

If German rearmament had been stopped during the interwar period, it would have been impossible for Germany to wage any serious war against the allied powers. The tragedies of the war also could have been prevented if the allies were able to immediately respond to the German armament, instead of appeasement policies and not rearming their armies. After years of a struggling war, the allies were able to slowly defeat the German army through eventually rearming and reequipping their armies with the modern equipment that Germany had done years before the war. Notes 1.

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