

How hitler's foreign policy caused war

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World War Two was an event that will reverberate down the ages. Roughly 60 million people were killed, and many more had their lives destroyed. It also led to huge technological advances, such as in rocket science, and helped women get the vote. The issue of the origins of WW2 is one of the most fiercely debated issues in history. At first, the consensus was that it was German foreign policy and the influence of the 'evil, abnormal' Hitler that caused it. However, the debate was reignited when the revisionist AJP Taylor published his book, which suggested that Hitler was simply continuing along the lines of previous policy, and that it was more the fault of Versailles and appeasement. The issue hinges on to what extent Hitler was an opportunist.

The first factor I will consider is the influence of German foreign policy in sparking World War II. Hitler had three main aims: destroy the Treaty of Versailles, unite all German speakers into one country, and to expand eastwards in order to gain Lebensraum, or living space. As soon as he came to power he began implementing his aims through a mixture of aggression and clever political manoeuvres. In 1933, he left the disarmament conference and the League of Nations. He intensified the program of secret rearmament. Next, in March, 1935, he broke the military terms of Versailles by announcing he was reintroducing conscription, building up an air force and expanding the navy; Hitler justified Germany's rearmament by citing the allies' failures to disarm. This is an example of how Hitler built up his military power, which made the allies feel threatened, and was also required to back up his aggressive policy. The allies took no measures apart from creating the Stresa front. This was further undermined when Italy invaded Ethiopia. The

final step was the remilitarisation of the Rhineland. In March, 1936, Hitler ordered his troops to invade the Rhineland; if they had met with any opposition they would have been forced to retreat. However, the allies again did nothing, especially because they were distracted by the Abyssinian crisis. This illustrates Hitler's cunning, and his fine reading of the situation, but also the conciliatory measures undertaken by the allies. Then, in 1935 Hitler had a chance to test his new forces during the Spanish civil war. This brutal display of military might helped perpetuate appeasement, because it served as a fresh reminder of the horrors of WW1. A second consequence was a burgeoning relationship with Italy. This links to the second category, the alliances and treaties that Germany formed. Among these were the Rome-Berlin axis, the Naval agreement with Britain, the Anschluss with Austria, the Anti-Comintern pact, and the infamous Ten Year non-aggression pacts. These alliances increased Hitler's military power. Furthermore, they were often very strategic; Hitler would even go against his principle of destroying communism in order to better his position. The Ten-Year pact with Russia was due to no mutual friendship, but to ensure that Russia would not attack Germany. This willingness to do anything caused instability in the relationships between countries; the combination of the relentless, predictable pursuit of power and the unpredictable willingness to do anything led France and Britain to feel hugely threatened.

It can seem like German foreign policy was the obvious cause of World War 2; however, it is too simplistic to blame the war entirely on Hitler. The significance of Hitler and German foreign policy must be considered within a broad framework which involves at the same time a careful examination of

the economic, political and social problems and policies not just of Nazi Germany but of other leading European powers as well. It was France and Britain's desire to hold on to the status quo - the status quo that Hitler's restless quest for empire was threatening - that led them to declare war. Furthermore, without appeasement Hitler's foreign policy could never have succeeded. Numerous historians have argued that it was a mistake for the allies to make a stand over Poland. Instead, they should have let Hitler invade Eastern Europe, fight Russia, and then asked the United States to sort out the situation. However, the allies would not do this, because this would mark the end of Britain and France's status as world superpowers.

The second factor I will consider is the policy of Appeasement followed by Britain and France. Appeasement was a policy that tried to satisfy, or appease, Hitler, by complying with his demands. In 1961 AJP Taylor published his *Origins of the Second World War*. He argued that Hitler, far from being uniquely villainous, continued the policies of previous German governments. Therefore, the basic problem was not Hitler, but German ambitions which had been checked, but not removed, by World War I. This shifted the debate away from Hitler the planner of war to Hitler the opportunist, whose traditional if substantial German appetite was constantly whetted by allied concessions. This issue is key in considering the cause of World War II: was Hitler a planner or an opportunist? If the latter is true, then this suggests that World War II was Britain and France's fault, for creating the circumstances that Hitler exploited. AJP Taylor suggested that Germany's insufficient armament is evidence that Hitler did not plan for war. On the other hand, *Mein Kampf* and other speeches have been pointed to as

illustrating Hitler's underlying plan. The middle ground seems most likely to be true: Hitler had a general idea of what he wanted, but he opportunistically used events to achieve this.

A key example of appeasement was the disaster in Czechoslovakia. It was the only democracy in Eastern Europe, and had a strong army. It had a large German minority in an area known as the Sudetenland. Hitler encouraged the Germans living there to demonstrate against Czech rule, and used their complaints as a justification. Throughout the summer of 1938 the situation worsened, until it looked like war was inevitable. Mussolini was not ready for war, and so he called a conference. Britain and France agreed to Germany's demands, and it seemed war had been averted. The leaders returned home to a hero's welcome. However, in March, Hitler invaded the rest of the Czech lands. This was a huge success for Hitler, although appeasement ended, and the allies promised to defend Poland. He had taken over the whole of Czechoslovakia without any conflict. Moreover, the allies had lost a significant ally. Finally, Russia was further alienated from the allies leading to August 1939, when Russia and Germany signed a ten-year non-aggression pact. This and the culmination of appeasement was the invasion of Poland, when Hitler did not believe that the allies would stick to their promise. Overall, appeasement not only allowed Germany to strengthen, but it also weakened the allies. France felt threatened by Germany's military power, and thus wanted to defend against and stifle her. As a result, France entered into closer relations with Russia, in order to encircle Germany. On the other hand, many in Britain felt sympathetic towards Germany. The hostility of many British politicians and civil servants towards the Franco-Russian

alliance increased their desire to come to a naval agreement with Germany. At many times, Germany profited from the disarray caused by conflicting methods of maintaining peace.

For these reasons, there was much derision of appeasement and the 'pathetic' men who allowed Hitler to bully them. However, there were many sensible justifications for why appeasement occurred. Firstly, many British people thought that the Treaty of Versailles was unfair. More pragmatic reasons included the relative weakness of Britain, and the ability of Germany to function as a barrier against communism. Finally, the memory of WWI still weighed heavily in the public consciousness, and there was obviously a huge inclination to avoid those recent atrocities. It also has to be considered that appeasement wasn't necessarily as bad as it can seem. If the allies had made a stand over the Sudetenland, for example, there is evidence to suggest that Hitler would have declared war then, at a time when the allies were not ready to fight. The main mistake made by the appeasers was believing, reasonably, that Germany could be sated by some territory, when the expansionist ambitions were relentless to the point of being unreasonable.

The final factor I will consider is the Treaty of Versailles. In 1919, Lloyd of England, Clemenceau of France and Woodrow Wilson from the US met to discuss the punishment that Germany should receive, and how to ensure peace. Wilson wanted a much more lenient 14-point plan, whilst Clemenceau wanted revenge, and to completely destroy Germany so that they could never start another war. Lloyd George personally agreed with Wilson, but was forced to compromise because of the British public's views. The first <https://assignbuster.com/how-hitlers-foreign-policy-caused-war/>

main term of the ToV was reparations. Germany had to accept the blame for starting WW1, and as a result they had to pay 6.6 billion, which amounts to over a trillion dollars today. The German economy was already very weak owing to the WW1. The population was starving, and a flu epidemic swept through the country. Many believed that they should not bear the brunt of the reparations when it was the Kaiser who had made Germany fight. Also, largely due to propaganda, many Germans had not realised how bad the military situation was, and thought that Germany had agreed to a ceasefire, instead of being defeated. Consequently, they felt outraged by the payments. The economic devastation drove the democratic Weimar republic into the ground, and many Germans blamed the government for the ToV, although in reality they had no choice. The hyperinflation caused by the treaty sent the country into a state of anarchy. A striking image from the time depicts a woman burning German marks, because that was cheaper than coal or wood.

Another factor contributing to the downfall of Germany's economy was the loss of territory. The Saar and Upper Silesia were both important industrial areas. Meanwhile, the allies were increasing their empire by annexing German colonies in Africa and the Middle East. This was obviously a huge affront to the German's expansionist ambitions. Disarmament was also a huge blow to German pride. 100,000 men was a tiny amount, especially considering that the allies hardly disarmed. The final main term was the League of Nations, which Germany was insultingly not asked to join. Overall, the Treaty of Versailles was a key factor in causing WW2 because it created the circumstances that Hitler exploited. His extreme right wing policies were

arguably only popular because of the desperate times in Germany. Directly linked to this is the Weimar republic's downfall in popularity after being forced to agree to Versailles. It could be argued that Germany fought specifically in the Second World War to reverse the verdict of the first, a view held by AJP Taylor. This also helped alleviate economic struggles inside Germany. Most of all, the Treaty of Versailles was a failure because it did not solve the 'German Problem'. Although Germany was weakened, it still harboured the same expansionist ambitions. The allies spent 2 ½ times more winning the war than Germany spent losing it. Europe was politically weak and economically unstable, open to German or Russian exploitation. The compromise between the Big Three meant that German ambitions were neither satisfied nor completely crushed, and so the problem remained.

In conclusion, Hitler's foreign policy, enabled by appeasement and the Treaty of Versailles caused war to a large extent in the short term. The accumulation of crisis after crisis built almost irresistible pressure for war. However, these causes can be traced back to the late 19th century, when nationalism and empire building placed a strain on the diplomatic system. World War One failed to resolve these tensions, because the allies rearranged Europe roughly as it had been before, with them as the dominant powers. World War Two can be seen as the result of the diametric opposition between France and Britain's desire to maintain the status quo, and the axis powers' desire to destroy it. This desire was formed during the 19th century when countries competed to dominate the global scene, such as during the Scramble for Africa. In this way, it can seem like WW2 was inevitable, but this is simply not true. Short term factors made a huge difference. For if

example, if Gustav Stresemann had not died at such a young age, Germany may have been led on a more democratic path. Alternatively, if Winston Churchill had been more widely listened to, then perhaps appeasement would not have been followed down such a dangerous path. Whatever particular cause is perceived as the most important, it must be remembered that the many short term and long term factors are inextricably linked, and it was this very multiplicity which made the slide into war nearly ineluctable.