

# Realism theory as a manifestation of self- interest in understanding international...

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This essay will argue that the Realism theory describes international politics to an accurate degree. It will focus on the two World Wars, arguing that realism explains why these two events happened, and what happened during and also between the two world wars. Realism is going to be defined, then, using the historical examples the principle of Realism will be applied to international politics. There are also the issues of modern wars and how realism adapts to describe these.

Realism is the political idea that world politics is driven almost entirely by competitive self interest. (Rourke: 2010: 16) One of the main ideas of Realism is that states themselves are the principle international actors. (Dunne & Schmidt: 2011: 86) This means that there are no international governmental organisations that can regulate the actions of the states and how they interact with each other, meaning that any agreements have to be reached by the states themselves. This is called the 'anarchic system'. (Donnelly: 2008: 150) In addition to this belief realists don't subscribe to the idea that there are 'universal moral principles' that all states must follow. This is perhaps why all the states act in their own interests. (Dunne & Schmidt: 2011: 86) To reach this view of world politics the Realist has to believe that humans themselves are basically selfish, with there being a constant struggle for power in society, this is fixed and cannot change. (Rourke: 2010: 16) Finally, according to Jack Donnelly the primary concern of every state is its survival. To achieve this they build up their military forces. (Donnelly: 2008: 150)

Realism is not simply a one branch theory, there are slightly different strands of it which hold slightly different beliefs as to why the world is as it is.  
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Classical Realists believe that it is in fact human nature that causes people and states to act as they do, with their own interests in mind. (Dunne & Schmidt: 2011: 90) Structural realists believe that it is the anarchy in the international system, due to the lack of an international governing body, that causes the world and states to act as they do. (Dunne & Schmidt: 2011: 90) Finally there are also Neoclassical Realists, these believe that the differences in state behaviour come from the interpretations of state power of the leaders themselves. (Dunne & Schmidt: 2011: 92)

Having described realism in its most basic forms it would now be sensible to apply this theory to the period of history around the two world wars. World War One, for Germany, was not so much about conquest or ambition. It has been argued that it was also about Germany's aggression which fuelled from the internal political desires of the elite class, this is a view shared by the German Historian Fritz Fischer (Scott: 2011: 52) Other arguments as to why the war started include the idea that Germany went to war to protect its position against Russia and France. What is interesting is the fact that huge swathes of the populace subscribed to the idea that war was important for them, and may even be glorious for them. (Scott: 2011: 53)

One thing that is clear for everyone is the effect that the end of the First World War had on international politics. In particular the Treaty of Versailles, which was meant to usher in a new framework for the security and peace of the whole of Europe and also create a new international order. (Scott: 2011: 53) However, because the countries worked for their own interests and didn't consider the 'greater good' the attempt failed. The treatment of Germany at

Versailles didn't necessarily cause the Second World War, but it definitely pushed Europe towards it. New states were created and highly contested borders and areas were changed around completely. (Scott: 2011: 53) Because of this some scholars have argued that the period of time from 1919 to 1939 was a twenty year long crisis. Another issue for Germany was the harsh repatriation payments, which were so great that they were only finished being paid in October 2010. All of the actions of the various nations at Versailles show how when they work in their own self interests nothing is achieved in the confusing that ensues. Another part of the fallout from World War One that goes to show how Realism describes international politics is Woodrow Wilson's failed attempts to establish a unified and powerful League of Nations.

The rise to power of both Hitler and Mussolini shows that nations, and the individuals who live in the nations, are in fact greedy and self interested. The two parties sought the expansion of their respective nations. One of the main principles of realism is that states are interested in increasing their own power and resources, i. e. land. (Donnelly: 2008: 150) All it took for Hitler to be given the opportunity to attempt to take these was the 1929 Wall Street Crash. In 1933 he assumed the Chancellorship of Germany with his Nazi party. Having assumed power Hitler could realise his dream for the German Reich. This included taking back lands stripped away from them under the Treaty of Versailles, such as the Sudetenland and the German speaking part of Czechoslovakia. This shows an obvious self interest from Hitler and German, he was simply trying to gain some 'Lebensraum' or living space for German people.

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His actions did provoke a reaction from other World Leaders, Chamberlain made him sign his intention to stop in the 1938 Munich Agreement. (Scott: 2011: 53) This weak response from one of the leading nations in the world at the time again shows the self interested nature of States on the World Stage. Chamberlain saw no huge threat to Great Britain and so didn't push for any huge punishment or enforcement on Nazi Germany. Although there is the argument that since Britain was less ready for war than Germany it was in no position to bargain to harshly with Hitler. Another thing that the failed Munich Agreement shows is the fact that states are the primary actors on the international stage. There was no international group with the power to enforce the Germans to abide by the agreement. (Donnelly: 2008: 150) With no real impetus on them to stop taking land a few months later the Germans invaded the rest of Czechoslovakia in order to gain more 'Lebensraum'. The reason that Hitler was so interested in taking this living space was so that he could create a racially pure social system in which the master Aryan race could live. This, again, shows the greedy nature of states. Another aspect of this period of history that Realism describes is the fact that Hitler saw the weaker states as not being deserving of any lands that he was able to take off of them. The actions of France, Britain and the Soviet Union show a great example of what Jack Donnelly calls 'buck passing'. This almost certainly helped push Europe towards the Second World War. (Donnelly: 2000: 109)

What was almost certainly the greatest atrocity of the Second World War, the Holocaust, also goes to show the self centred nature of humanity as Rourke argues is central to the realist ideology. (Rourke: 2010: 16) The entire German nation was seemingly happy with the treatment of the Jews, <https://assignbuster.com/realism-theory-as-a-manifestation-of-self-interest-in-understanding-international-politics/>

the Blacks, the Disabled, the Gays and the Roma by the Nazis. This is probably because it was too much of a risk for most of the populace to try and intervene.

In terms of explaining international politics as a whole realism also does an adequate job. However, it must be noted that realism is not a theory defined by any single explicit set of functions, it is more similar to a 'philosophical disposition'. (Donnelly: 2000: 6) One issue that the theory does have when it comes to explaining global politics, particularly recent wars, is the rise of the Intra-State war. (Dunne & Schmidt: 2011: 88) Realism originally struggled to deal with wars in which the main actors weren't different states. There are now Realists turning their attention to this, one explanation of intra state wars using realism is that when a state collapses the anarchy that ensues in terms of the domestic order is the same as the anarchy among states which are at war. (Dunne & Schmidt: 2011: 88)

Realism as a theory of international relations and politics seems to describe events and their causes quite well. Out of the branches that were touched on in this essay, perhaps the most pertinent one is the structural realism idea. This could be solved if the UN had greater powers, or the nation states weren't all working towards their own ends, such as when Russia and China blocked resolution on the atrocities in the Arab Spring. What is particularly impressive about realism is the fact that it has been able to adapt greatly to cover a completely different kind of war to the one that it was originally prescribed to.