

Hitler: planner or an opportunist?



In order to reasonably construct an argument, it is first necessary to elucidate the question slightly. Specifically, it would seem that the question infers planning and opportunism to be mutually exclusive by asking if Hitler was a planner or an opportunist in his foreign policy. To adapt ones actions in order to achieve wider predefined goals contains elements of both planning and opportunism, so it should be borne in mind that one does not necessarily exclude the other; he may have been both.

Since Taylor's controversial *The Origins of the Second World War* (Taylor, 1961) was first published, intense debate has raged in the historical world as to whether Hitler was simply an opportunist, a view propounded by Taylor (1961), or if his actions were well planned and strategised, as suggested by Hillgruber's *Stufenplan* (Hillgruber, 1965) and others. This essay addresses the question by considering key events in German foreign policy from 1933-1941, analysing each in terms of opportunism and planning.

Particular attention shall be given to events prior to the German invasion of Poland and the resulting declarations of war upon Germany by France, Britain, Australia and New Zealand. After these declarations were made, Hitler's foreign policy would need to be more opportunistic and fluid if it was to be successful; in any war victory requires constant reappraisal of the situation at hand.

It shall also be suggested that Hitler's actions in the period 1940-1941 were, though forced to adapt due to circumstance, ultimately motivated by a greater plan built on strong ideological beliefs, a view shared by Hillgruber (1965) in *Hitlers Strategie*.

The question of the existence of a Stufenplan, as proposed by Hillgruber (1965), is somewhat harder to answer. Certainly such a plan may be constructed from analysis of Mein Kampf. However, it is difficult to say if such a plan genuinely existed, or if it is merely a construct built upon a foundation of selected statements from the book. Such a plan is also suggested in Nazism 1919-1945, A Documentary Reader (Noakes & Pridham, 1988, p. 617): “ from the comments and arguments contained in Mein Kampf one can construct a foreign policy programme which essentially consisted of five stages ”

However, this is somewhat within the realm of conjecture and with the benefit of hindsight. Mein Kampf is by no means a step-by-step work, but there are key principles embedded within the text which may be extracted and compared to Hitler’s actual foreign policy actions. Through this it shall be argued that at least some level of planning, some attempt to achieve pre-defined goals, did in fact exist.

In the broadest sense, the foreign policy advocated by Hitler in Mein Kampf is quite clear, namely to expand Germany to become a world power through the acquisition of territory or ‘ living space’. In Mein Kampf Hitler (1926, p. 557) states: “ without consideration of ‘ traditions’ and prejudices, it (Germany) must find the courage to gather our people and their strength for an advance along the road that will lead this people from its present restricted living space to new land and soil ”

Furthermore, it should be noted in the above quote that Hitler not only expresses his desire for lebensraum, but goes further in suggesting that it is

reasonable to acquire territory without “ consideration of ‘ traditions’ and prejudices”. From this it may be inferred that Hitler is largely unconcerned by any ethical argument that might counteract the expansion of Germany. This view is compounded by Hitler’s (1926) further statement “ Germany will either be a world power or there will be no Germany”.

Although A. J. P. Taylor (1961) argued that Hitler did not have any real blueprint for his foreign policy, which consisted of nothing more than taking opportunities as they offered themselves, that Hitler was nothing more than “ a traditional European statesman” (Taylor, 1961), the above comments from Mein Kampf seem to suggest a higher motivation, the desire to expand Germany’s borders and present Germany as a world power by non-traditional means, without, as Hitler (1926) states, “ consideration of ‘ traditions’ or prejudices”.

In order to expand Germany and gain lebensraum it would first be necessary to somehow remove the restrictions of the Versailles Treaty. It is already apparent that in 1926 Hitler saw no use in any future delegations regarding the removal of the sanctions imposed by Versailles, dismissing the treaty as an act of “ highway robbery against our people” (Hitler, 1926). He further stated in Mein Kampf: “ One must have the simple mind of a child to believe that the revision of the Versailles Treaty can be obtained by indirect means and by beseeching the clemency of the victors... The sword is the only means whereby a nation can thrust that clutch from its throat” (Hitler, 1926, p. 554).

Taylor (1961) would have us believe Mein Kampf to be nothing more than the ramblings of an imprisoned man, yet already we see an element of forward planning; what was outlined here would be realised by Hitler years later.

In March 1935, Hitler introduced compulsory military conscription, openly flaunting the Treaty of Versailles, although his army had already been growing in secret since 1933, when Hitler ordered his Generals to treble the size of Germany's army to 300, 000. This was the ' sword' with which Hitler intended to vanquish the ' clutch' of Versailles. A year later, on March 7, 1936, German troops remilitarised the Rhineland, again flagrantly violating the Versailles Treaty.

Were these actions merely opportunistic, lacking any real planning? Had Hitler simply, to paraphrase Taylor (1961), leaned on the door of the Rhineland hoping to gain entrance? One could argue that, due to the poor British economy following the Depression, Hitler was opportunistic in his timing of these treaty violations, perhaps sensing that military retaliation was unlikely. However, he had undoubtedly expressed his intentions to violate Versailles by forceful means almost ten years earlier, as evidenced above in Mein Kampf.

Rather than simple opportunism, it would seem that Hitler was shrugging away the shackles of Versailles at a prudent juncture, just as he had intended. Furthermore, this may be seen as the first step in his wider quest for lebensraum. To acquire territory, to become a world power, required military strength prohibited by Versailles.

In March 1938, German troops annexed Austria. This was at least in part opportunistic. Hitler knew very well that the Nazis enjoyed strong support in Austria; four years earlier Dolfuss had been assassinated by pro-Nazi sympathisers within Austria who actively desired Austro-German unification. Such was the influence of the Austrian pro-Nazis that Austrian Chancellor Schuschnigg was ultimately forced to resign, due to pressure from within Austria and from Hitler himself. Following Schuschnigg's resignation, German troops were able to enter Austria without resistance.

In the case of Austria, perhaps it is reasonable to entertain the idea of Hitler simply acting as a statesman rather than following any great plan. Since such strong support for the Nazis existed within Austria, it could be argued that any prudent statesman in a similar position would take advantage of such a situation. However, there is also evidence in *Mein Kampf* that this event was planned: " German-Austria must be restored to the great German Motherland. And not indeed on any grounds of economic calculation whatsoever. No, no. Even if the union were a matter of economic indifference, and even if it were to be disadvantageous from the economic standpoint, still it ought to take place. People of the same blood should be in the same Reich" (Hitler, 1926, p. 11).

Hitler appears to hold the union of Austria and Germany in particular regard, a matter of principle and genetic unity rather than merely a stepping-stone in Germany's expansion. Taylor (1961) would have us believe that Hitler merely took advantage of the situation in Austria and that this situation was " produced by Schuschnigg not Hitler" (Taylor, 1961). This view seems somewhat myopic. Hitler may have been acting opportunistically to restore

or strengthen Germany through alliance with Austria, but his primary motivation would appear to be something more esoteric, the unification of blood or race.

To counteract the above argument, one might say that there were many far-right individuals with similar beliefs, that Hitler was not unique and thus the annexing of Austria was still simply an opportunist act. Opportunist in timing, perhaps, but it cannot be denied that as early as 1925, when the first volume of *Mein Kampf* was published, Hitler already intended to unite the two countries. How and when he did so may be a matter of opportunism, but the fact that he intended to do so for ideological reasons remains. In view of this it seems difficult to renounce the unification of Germany and Austria as purely opportunistic.

The evidence presented so far in support of the view that Hitler's foreign policy was not entirely opportunistic is largely rooted in *Mein Kampf*. However, when considering the Sudetenland and Czech Republic there is further evidence of possible planning on Hitler's part in the form of the Hossbach Memorandum, minutes of a meeting that took place on November 5, 1937 between the Fuehrer and several high-ranking Nazis (of these the majority were military officials rather than politicians). It is interesting that Hitler chose not to hold a full cabinet meeting, given the gravity of the topics discussed. Hitler himself attributed this to the importance of the matter, but one might also infer that he was reluctant to include too many politicians in the meeting in order to minimise the abstraction of military planning from himself and thus maintain more precise military control. This in itself may be said to evidence a certain level of planning on Hitler's part; discussing such

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matters within a full cabinet would seem to be the logical course of action for the typical statesman.

What is especially interesting about the meeting is that the subject of Czechoslovakia as a tactical foothold is specifically addressed. Hossbach (1937) specifically notes: “ If the Czechs were overthrown and a common German-Hungarian frontier achieved, a neutral attitude on the part of Poland could be the more certainly counted on in the event of a Franco-German conflict. Our agreements with Poland only retained their force as long as Germany’s strength remained unshaken. In the event of German setbacks a Polish action against East Prussia, and possibly against Pomerania and Silesia as well, had to be reckoned with” (Hossbach, 1937).

Almost a year later, German troops occupied the Sudetenland, with the blessing of both Neville Chamberlain and Edouard Daladier. In fact Lord Runciman, sent by Chamberlain to attempt reconciliation between the Germans and Czechs prior to the cession of the Sudetenland seemed to positively endorse the action as ‘ natural’: “ the feeling among the Sudeten Germans until about three or four years ago was one of hopelessness. But the rise of Nazi Germany gave them new hope. I regard their turning for help towards their kinsmen and their eventual desire to join the Reich as a natural development in the circumstances” (Runciman, 1938).

Reading Lord Runciman’s comments above, one might consider it reasonable to view the acquisition of the Sudetenland as opportunistic; after all the British and French were willing to appease Hitler with the Munich Agreement. However, a year earlier, Hitler and those present at the meeting documented



by Hossbach had realised the advantages occupying Czechoslovakia would present; Hitler's desire to take Czechoslovakia was already evident in 1937. Shortly after signing the agreement Hitler complained " That fellow Chamberlain spoiled my entrance into Prague".

Three weeks later, Hitler told generals to prepare for the " liquidation of the remainder of Czechoslovakia". Undoubtedly Hitler was opportunistic in signing the Munich Agreement, though it is clear that both before and after signing his ultimate goal was to take Czechoslovakia. It is also apparent that two years before finally annexing Czechoslovakia in March 1939, Hitler saw an advantage in Czechoslovakia beyond immediate opportunistic gain; namely the improved position of Germany with regard to possible aggression on the part of Poland in the event of Franco-German conflict.

Taylor (1961, p. 152) dismisses all this, saying " Even more than in the case of Austria, Hitler did not need to act The crisis over Czechoslovakia was provided for Hitler" and claims that Anschluss in Austria had led German Czechs to " ungovernable excitement" (Taylor, 1961, p. 152). However, even if Hitler was taking advantage of the crisis, to dismiss his actions as pure opportunism seems churlish; the plan to take Czechoslovakia existed in 1937, before the annexation of Austria took place. This plan also had a wider strategic purpose, even if the execution may have taken advantage of opportunity, particularly in the form of the Munich Agreement.

The Pact of Steel also held a higher tactical purpose than mere opportunistic allegiance. In Nazism 1919-1945 – A Documentary Reader, it is heralded as a " diplomatic success in his (Hitler's) preparation for war with Poland securing

at long last an alliance with Italy” (Noakes & Pridham, 1988, p. 736). Hitler knew that the French and British would not support the invasion, in fact in his *Zwite Buch* he makes it quite clear that France shall always be an enemy of Germany: “ In any conflict, regardless on what grounds, regardless for what reasons, France will always be our adversary” (Hitler, 1928, p128).

Thus the Pact was important to Hitler, it levelled the field somewhat regarding the issue of Poland. With France and Britain likely to oppose Hitler in this matter, Italy became an important ally. Taylor (1961) counters this view saying “ The Germans attached less weight to the Pact (than the Italians). They took it almost by accident”. Here it seems hard to logically support Taylor’s comments. The Pact was proposed by the Germans themselves in 1938, so to suggest that it was taken “ by accident” simply does not make sense. Even if it is argued that the Pact was not direct preparation for war with Poland, it was proposed by Germany in 1938 and became reality in 1939. It did not fall to Hitler by accident, it was an opportunity Germany made for itself.

Even if one chooses not to see the Pact as preparation for war with Poland, the invasion of Poland itself was preparation for a greater war in Hitler’s view. In May 1939 he stated: “ It is not just the Danzig that is at stake. For us it is a matter of expanding our living space in the East and making food supplies secure and also solving the problem of the Baltic States” (Noakes & Pridham, 1988, p. 737).

Thus the tactical importance of the Danzig and Poland was paramount to Hitler. Not least it represented preparation for a greater conquest; Russia.

Furthermore, this principle of expansion into the East was not a new dream of Hitler's, being laid out quite clearly in *Mein Kampf*: " When we speak of new territory in Europe today we must primarily think of Russia. This colossal empire in the East is ripe for dissolution. And the end of Jewish domination in Russia will also be the end of Russia as a state " (Hitler, 1926, p. 557)

As evidenced above, in 1926, Hitler was convinced that Russia should be Germany's primary goal in terms of land acquisition. Thirteen years later, he is intent on annexing the Danzig to expedite this goal. It is difficult to deny a certain clarity of vision here. Hitler still seems to be following his original wider plan of expansion, namely to reach a position where it becomes feasible to attack Russia.

On 23 August 1939, the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact is signed, facilitating Hitler's invasion of Poland with help from the Soviets. This could be argued as an opportunistic Pact, simply expediting the attack on Poland, expanding German territory and presenting a stronger united enemy to the French and British, allowing Hitler to fight a stronger war in the West if need be.

Conversely it could be argued that Hitler's conviction that Germany must expand into living space in the East remained. In this case the non-aggression pact with the Soviets and the subsequent invasion of Poland can be seen as opportunism with a further goal, the invasion of Russia itself. Since Hitler had maintained this attitude towards Russia since 1926 and reiterated it only months before signing the Molotov- Ribbentrop Pact, it would seem that, opportunistic or not, Hitler had signed the Pact with Russia ultimately to facilitate action against Russia herself.

Operation Barbarossa further supports the view that action against Russia was always intended, with Hitler invading the Soviet Union on 22 June 1941. If anything it could be argued that a more opportunistic leader would have sought to maintain the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact and concentrate on what was available in Western Europe, rather than risking a war on two fronts. However, Hitler was not only opportunistic but idealistic, seemingly determined to end “ Jewish domination in Russia”. From a purely opportunistic point of view, starting a war with Russia would not seem the most prudent course of military action given the current conflict in the West, so one can only assume that Hitler did so due to anti-Semitic ideals and his ongoing belief that Russia should ultimately provide lebensraum.

To summarise, it is difficult to label Hitler or his foreign policy as either purely planned or purely opportunistic. Taylor (1961) seems to do the latter at the expense of evidence to the contrary, yet equally it cannot be doubted that Hitler often took advantage of fortuitous situations such as the Austrian Crisis, whilst also creating his own, one example being the Pact of Steel.

Ultimately it would seem that Hitler had several definite goals in mind as set out in Mein Kampf; to breach Versailles, to build military strength, to unite Germany and Austria, to invade Russia and ultimately to establish Germany as a world power. Whether or not these goals were intended to be accomplished step-by-step, a Stufenplan, or were simply tackled on a more ad-hoc basis, the key aims established in Mein Kampf do seem to persist in later German foreign policy and many of them were achieved.

Rather than simply a planner or an opportunist, it would seem that Hitler was both; taking advantage of opportunity to bring him closer to his planned objectives. Henig's (1985) interpretation of Bullock's argument articulates this view extremely well, and it is with this that the discussion shall be drawn to close: " He combined consistency of aim with opportunism in method and tactic" (Henig, 1985, p. 39).