

# [Hitler’s foreign policy and the outbreak of the second world war, 1933-39](https://assignbuster.com/hitlers-foreign-policy-and-the-outbreak-of-the-second-world-war-1933-39/)

“ The outbreak of war can be more attributed to blunder than design. ” Until this statement from AJP Taylor it was the common belief amongst historians that the outbreak of the Second World War was solely attributed to Hitler’s planning and design. Taylor’s conclusions started a new wave of controversy as to the origins of the Second World War. Subsequently, historians began to divide into two schools of thought: Intentionalists and Functionalists.

Intentionalists include the historians Klaus Hildebrand and Eberhard Jeckel. Functionalists include the historians Hans Mommsen and Martin Brozat. For the Intentionalists Hitler remains central to the origins of war. For the Functionalists the belief is that foreign policy was created by the social and economic conditions of the Third Reich, and Nazi foreign policy did not show a design to wage war but was reactive to the developing European climate. The first of many blunders set the stage for future German hostility towards the Allies.

The Treaty of Versailles was a blunder on the part of Britain and France in that the terms of the treaty were too harsh. It crippled Germany and led to bitterness and resentment amongst the German people. Hitler used the it to shape his foreign policy. It is important that Nazi foreign policy is seen in this historical context for example, as a result of the treaty, Nazi Germany stopped paying reparations, abandoned disarmament and remilitarised the Rhineland. Another blunder on the part of the Allies was that of appeasement. Appeasement led Germany to become powerful.

Had the allies taken action earlier, Nazi Germany would not have become so powerful. For example, no action was taken when Hitler’s army marched into the Rhineland although, according to the memoirs of his interpreter, Hitler had said: “ If the French had then marched into the Rhineland, we would have had to withdraw with our tails between our legs. ” There were many reasons why the Allies appeased the German government. Many in Britain believed that Hitler’s coming to power was as a result of insufficient appeasement in the earlier stages. Due to the great fear of communism in Europe at the time, many felt Hitler’s anti-Communist stance made him a useful barrier to Soviet expansion.

The British government was also deeply affected by public opinion. The majority of the British public believed that events in Germany did not affect them. The British people also remembered the horrors of the First World War and did not want to relive them. An example of appeasement was the Munich agreement of September 1938.

The British and French agreed to the German military occupation of the Sudentenland. They also agreed to the Hungarian and Polish demands for territory. Czechoslovakia was told to accept the terms of the treaty or fight alone. Once this had been accepted there was a weak guarantee by the Munich powers to respect the territorial integrity of the rest of the Czechoslovak state.

The allies had handed Hitler all he wanted. Hitler also signed a treaty saying that Britain and Germany would never go to war again. Appeasement was not only a blunder on the part of the allies but it led to a blunder on the part of Hitler. He did not anticipate the reaction of the allies when he invaded Poland in 1939.

Appeasement had led Hitler to believe that once the German attack began, Poland would stand alone. The weaknesses of the British and French governments had encouraged this belief. He had received poor intelligence on the changing political mood of the allies. He failed to realise that the two governments knew that Poland’s fate would involve their own status as great powers. Hitler’s confidence in the invasion of Poland predominately came from his belief that there was no effective alliance to stop him.

This belief was, in large part, true. From the early stages Britain and France had had different objectives, for example, both saw the Treaty of Versailles in very different ways. For example, both countries had different views on how the treaty could be modified. Britain began to take an increasingly isolationist approach.

As allies, relations between Britain and France were stretched. The Anglo-German Naval Pact of 1935 limited the German navy to thirty five per cent of the British. This agreement not only undermined Versailles and the Stresa Front (alliance between Britain, France and Italy) but also dealt a considerable blow to Anglo-French co-operation since the French had not been consulted. This blunder on the part of Britain not only damaged relations between the allies, but it allowed Hitler to almost triple his existing navy. There were also weaknesses in the League of Nations due to America’s non-involvement and the fact that the league did not have an army to enforce any decisions made. The Anglo-German Naval pact did considerable damage to the allies but it was the Italian Invasion of Abysinnia that dealt the greatest blow to any attempt to present a united front to Hitler.

France seemed prepared to offer Italy a free hand in the takeover of Abysinnia whilst Britain was not. This divided the allies and gave Italy confused messages as to what the reaction of the allies would be. Italy took the information it had received as a green light and in October 1935, Mussolini invaded Abysinnia. As a reaction to this, Britain and France imposed half-hearted sanctions on Italy. The sanctions were sufficient to cause some difficulty to the Italian economy and considerable irritation to Mussolini.

Hitler used this as an opportunity to re-militarise the Rhineland and Italy became increasingly closer to Germany, signing the Rome-Berlin axis in 1936. This incident severely damaged the credibility of the League of Nations as it was unable to help Abyssinia due to it having no army. It marked the end of the league as an effective organisation. Another blunder on the part of Britain and France was their relations with the Soviet Union.

The Soviet Union had been excluded from the Munich agreement as France and Britain were not willing to form alliances with a communist state due to their fear of the spread of communism throughout Europe. If war were to come with Germany, western military experts did not place much value on any help from the Soviet Red Army. Faced with the prospect of further Nazi expansion, the British and French opened cautious negotiations with the Soviets. The Western powers gave remarkably low priority to these negotiations. The Soviets suspected the motives of both the other powers, believing their real intention was to lure the Soviet Union into fighting a war for them.

The talks stalled on the issue of whether the Red Army would be given uninterrupted passage across Poland and Romania to engage the German forces. The allies could give no commitment on this due to the obstinacy of the Poles. It was becoming clear to the Soviets that the Western Powers had little to offer them and that their own security might be better served by a deal with Germany. This ultimately led to the Nazi-Soviet pact, 23 August 1939. Whilst the Nazi-Soviet pact was the result of a series of blunders on the part of Britain and France, it shows that Hitler was indeed planning a war. The tactical attractions of an understanding with the Soviet Union became evident to Hitler.

Both Germany and the Soviet Union had lost land to Poland during the First World War. Secret clauses in the Nazi-Soviet Non-Aggression Pact drew up a map of Poland and divided it into Soviet and German ‘ Spheres of Influence’. In the next two years, arrangements for economic co-operation between both countries provided Germany with valuable iron-ore and oil supplies. Further evidence of Hitler’s desire to wage war can be found in a variety of sources.

The earliest of these sources is Hitler’s book ‘ Mein Kampf’. Written in 1923 before Hitler came to power, it talks of the need for racial purity in Germany and the need for the German people to be prepared to fight for living space in Eastern Europe. The book, as a historical source has caused much controversy amongst historians. Historians such as Trevor Roper believe ‘ Mein Kampf’ to be Hitler’s ‘ blueprint’ to war whilst others such as AJP Taylor saw the book merely as the daydreaming of a failed revolutionary. The question still remains as to whether the book is important as far as Hitler’s diplomacy is concerned but it is important in analysing Hitler’s character. It shows Hitler’s intention to use violence if necessary and must not be overlooked as continuities appear throughout the period.

The Hossbach Memorandum shows continuity in Hitler’s thoughts in ‘ Mein Kampf’. In November 1937, a meeting was called to review German policy at home and abroad. Hitler, the heads of the armed forces and top foreign ministry officials attended the meeting. In the meeting, Hitler made it clear that he was resolved to solve Germany’s problem of living space by 1943-45 at the latest. There is a great level of continuity with ‘ Mein Kampf’ here. He still spoke of the need for living space for his people, the need to ‘ preserve the racial community’ and his intentions to overthrow Austria.

He also showed his intention to overthrow Czechoslovakia. His does not only show continuity with ‘ Mein Kampf’ but also with events that later took place. For example, Germany invaded Czechoslovakia in 1938. Hitler made a union between Germany and Austria in 1938 (Anschluss) creating a greater Germany of 70 million inhabitants. The memorandum has also caused much controversy amongst historians so must be treated with caution. Taylor argued that the memorandum survives as a copy of a copy of the original, which had been written from memory days after the conference meaning it may not be completely accurate.

The Four Year plan is another indication that Hitler was planning a war. This was an economic plan to develop Germany’s industries, in particular, armaments and the basic industries on which armament production depended. This plan would make Germany ready to wage war by 1940. The document also spoke of the need for Germany to become self-sufficient showing that Hitler also wanted the German economy to be fit for war. By increasing the pace of re-armament, Hitler had started an arms race and it became apparent that, due to Germany’s comparative lack of resources, it was a race that he was not going to win if it went on for any length of time. History contains evidence for both planning and blunders.

Both ‘ Mein Kampf’ and the Hossbach Memorandum show Hitler’s intentions to use force if necessary. Taking into consideration the controversy surrounding these sources, I would say that they still portray an accurate picture of Hitler’s state of mind, and that it was always Hitler’s intention to wage war however inaccurate the detail in these sources. A series of blunders and misjudgements on the parts of both the allies and Germany ultimately led to war but these would not have occurred if Germany had not been pushing for a war. However, this series of blunders did push Hitler into the kind of war he did not want, for example: the four year plan stated that Germany would be ready for war in 1940 although war broke out in 1939; Mein Kampf stated that Hitler wanted Britain as an ally but Hitler, in reality ended up at war with Britain. In conclusion, I would say that a series of blunders led to a different war than Hitler had planned for.