

MODERN HISTORY

Assess the impact of Nazi Ideology on German Foreign Policy

Professor Richard Bessel begins his 2004 publication *NAZISM AND WAR* with a statement 'Nazism was inseparable from war', going on to argue that Germany had come to be ruled by 'an ideologically driven regime whose goal was unlimited expansion and the racial restructuring of the European continent through war'. In recent years, there has been considerable agreement amongst historians of the Third Reich that Nazi ideology was fundamental to the shaping of foreign policies after 1933. However, Hitler also showed that despite his deeply held views and objectives, he was prepared to temporarily put them aside for the sake of pragmatism and opportunism.

Nazi Party Ideology was of huge importance and a driving force in the shaping of German foreign policy. Hitler's obsession with the superiority of the Aryan race, his profound anti-Semitism and anti-communism, unity of the Reich and his drive for Lebensraum (Living-space) dominated the direction of his foreign policy. This inevitability meant that the early years of Hitler's foreign policy or what is now called the consolidation period had to be dedicated on revising the restrictions that were imposed on Germany by the Treaty of Versailles.

As Intentionalists argue, it was this treaty, a barrier that had to be removed in order to realise the long terms goals of the Nazi Foreign Policy. Hitler did challenge various clauses of the treaty, achieved success without any real opposition due to the Policy of Appeasement other world leaders were practising in order to avoid another world war. Hitler first removed Germany from the Geneva Conference and League of Nation in October 1933 with the intention of rearming Germany past the point of which any other leagued nations would allow. Conscription was re-introduced and in 1936 Hitler made the dramatic move of sending troops to re-occupy the demilitarised area of Rhineland. Through these moves the Nazis had backed up their ideology with actions, they had followed their belief and denied the Versailles treaty, which to them was worth no more than the paper on which it was written.

In *Mein Kampf*, Hitler argued that 'only a sufficiently large space on this earth can ensure the independent existence of a nation' and that, therefore, 'it was a question of space' now and eastern Europe and the Soviet Union would provide this space. Thus with this verification, Lebensraum or the need for living space for the German master race became a driving force of the Nazi foreign policy. Although historians that take the line of A.J.P Taylor argue that the concept of Lebensraum was an existing element of German foreign policy prior to Nazi rule, the difference lies in that the Nazis transformed Lebensraum from a mere geo-political concept into a racial one. The acquisition of Lebensraum and world power status was necessary not only to secure the German nation for the future but also to fulfil the goals of the Nazi racial ideology.

The Nazis interpreted Lebensraum in terms of their Social Darwinistic philosophy of the racial struggle for survival. It was in this view that Hitler added a racist element to Lebensraum. By stating that the Soviet Union was run by communist Jews, then Hitler concluded Germany had a right to take Russian land. The belief in the supremacy of the Aryan race was further heightened when Hitler stated that the inferior Slavic population of the Soviet Union was destined to serve the master race of Aryan Germans. These Slavs were in Hitler's words 'Untermenschen' or subhumans, they did not 'create culture' but 'destroyed culture' (Smith, W).

Hitler's hostility to Russia was, therefore, based not on its potential strategic threat or military power but on its capacity to undermine Germany's social and political foundations and contaminate its Aryan race.

The Anti-Comintern Pact of 1936 signed between German and Japan was an agreement based on opposition against communism and the Soviet Union and the aggressive invasion of whole of Czechoslovakia in March 1939 are practical examples of the concept of Lebensraum coming to

light, fuelled by anti-Semitic, anti-communist, and anti-Slavic aims of Nazism.

On the very first page of Mein Kampf, Hitler states that 'Kindred blood should belong to a common empire'. Here is his aim of drawing together all German speaking people into a GrossDeutschland (Webb, K) or a German state comprising all German speaking people. Hitler's belief in the biological and cultural superiority of the Aryan race informed the concept that races should not be mixed. He saw the 'purity of the blood' a prerequisite for the coming greatness of the German people (Fleming, P).

From this came the extensive Nazi plans to move all ethnic Germans who were citizens of other countries, into the Third Reich. Germany put this belief into practice when it acquired the lost territory of The SAAR in 1935, re-united German speaking Austrians with German with the Anschluss of 1938 and acquired Sudetenland from Czechoslovakia after Hitler claimed that that it had a large ethnic German population. In fact, this world view (Weltanschauung) lay at the heart of Nazi foreign policy and German expansion.

While some historians such as A.J Taylor assert that Hitler was an opportunist in the way he approached crises after 1933, Professor Alan Bullock propose a viable alternative and states that this was merely Hitler's 'flexibility of method' which was allied to a 'consistency of aim' with his long-term ideology. This 'flexibility of method' can be seen in The Poland Pact that Germany signed in 1934, giving the impression that Germany had no ambitions to take Polish territory. Its aim actually contradicted Hitler's belief of Lebensraum, and the eastward expansion to Russia.

Hitler's 1939 Non-Aggression pact with USSR is another good example of his flexibility. This Nazi-Soviet pact paved the way for the German invasion of Poland in 1939 without any interference from the Soviets. Hitler's unwavering commitment to anti-communism and the pursuit of Lebensraum in the east always stayed intact as he dishonoured both pacts and attacked the Soviet Union after two years of signing the agreement.

Hitler made several pragmatic compromises in foreign affairs, as he had done in domestic policy, but these were made out of necessity and always remained temporary. More than anything else, it was ideology that determined the Nazis and Hitler's conduct of foreign affairs.