

# MODERN HISTORY

## The Origins of the Second World War

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A very simplistic approach to the origins of World War II states that Hitler was single handily responsible for the international conflict that took place between 1939 and 1945. Whilst this would have been the favoured view by the likes of Churchill and his allies, a more objective investigation of the political circumstances draws the conclusion that whilst Hitler may have been the catalyst, he was not the only cause. Other factors that have naively been undervalued in the past include the Treaty of Versailles and more importantly, the political and military inaction of Hitler's opponents. Yet, it is these issues which prove crucial in properly comprehending the situation. The former gives justification to Hitler's cause and the latter establishes an environment suitable for the strong, pragmatic leader to carry out his ideals.

Hitler's ascension to power was not simply a matter of wilful determination and political opportunism. There was also the requirement for his radical ideas to be utilised through a suitable social, economic and political climate. 1918 through to the early 1930's had been the bleakest years in German history and finally the German people had a system of government that provided hope for a nation. As stated by historian A.J.P Taylor, "Germany fought specifically in the Second World War to reverse the verdict of the first and destroy the settlement that followed". In his book *the Origins of the Second World War*, Taylor places over bearing emphasis on the treaty's failure to solve the German problem. Rather than to create a diplomatic resolution to the conflict it sought to humiliate the nation and ensure that its strength would never return to wreak havoc again. This approach ultimately resulted in a war of redemption 20 years into the future in which the German people would seek to reassert themselves in Europe.

In order for Hitler to effectively reach his objective he understood that he would need to put much at risk. He was not swayed by the threat of another war. In fact, through his social-Darwinist perspective, he believed that it was necessary. "No grace will win soil for us and hence life for our people, but only the might of a victorious sword." In March of 1935, Hitler reintroduced conscription and began to rearm the military, both of which were violations of the treaty of Versailles. U-Boats were under construction in Dutch shipping yards and mysterious hangers began to emerge in the areas of Kiel and Hamburg which no one was allowed access. 'Improved 10 000 ton ships' were in actuality 25 000 ton battleships including the *Scharnhorst* and the *Gneisenau* which exceeded the limitations emplaced on the German Navy in Versailles. By mid 1934 approximately a quarter of a million factories were designated to armament production. Hitler assumed direct control over the armed forces and was preparing for his war under the noses of his enemies. In spite of this, on 21<sup>st</sup> May 1935 Hitler would reassure the world by claiming to the Reichstag that "War is senseless. War is Horror". His underlying intentions were further stated when on 7<sup>th</sup> March of the following year Hitler ordered German troops into the Rhineland. This ran parallel to another speech to the Reichstag that he wanted nothing but peace. This was a direct threat to France, who had ordered the demilitarisation as a safe guard against German aggression, and when the French displayed no injunctive efforts Hitler's confidence was boosted significantly.

The year 1936 also proved important because it saw the beginning of the union between the fascist leaders Hitler and Mussolini. Italy and Germany had both sent troops to the aid of General Franco in the Spanish civil war allowing the ideological bond to culminate into the Rome-Berlin Axis in 1938. Italy had similarly been insulted by the Treaty of Versailles. With Hitler's support it sought to achieve what they had hoped previously to obtain; provinces in Africa. Presenting a formidable opposition to the allies of France and Britain, the axis held similar views including expansionary policy and national destiny. This would provide Hitler with confidence and put him one step closer to obtaining his objectives and further discredit the Treaty of Versailles. As his military expanded and Germany recaptured providences that had fallen under its borders prior to World War One, Hitler took notice as the world stood by.

In relation to the inaction of Hitler's opponents, rather than ask how they contributed to World War II, perhaps the better question is how could they have avoided it? Hitler's book *Mein Kampf*, which had been a bestseller in England, depicted his future intentions including his racial policy, national destiny and expansionary ambitions. Despite this, Hitler's opponents naively carried through with a policy that attempted to redress the situation by effectively allowing Hitler to fulfil his objectives unchallenged. This was a fundamental error as Andrew J. Bacevich states, "for evil to prevail requires only one thing: for those confronted with it to flinch from duty". President Woodrow Wilson's idealistic League of Nations was established in 1919 in an effort to prevent another world war through the policy of 'Collective Security'. This policy encouraged the member nations to stand collectively against those who threatened international order. The fundamental error with this was that it was predicated on good will and national sacrifice for the protection of world peace. This flaw was uncovered in 1931 with the Japanese invasion of Manchuria in which no effort was made by any members of the League of Nations to prevent Japanese aggression. Collective security was further undermined in October 1936 when Italy invaded the North African province of Abyssinia. The League of Nations condemned the invasion and went about imposing economic sanctions on the Roman power until it agreed to cease the conflict. Despite the League's efforts, the sanctions took six weeks to be finalised and imposed. Furthermore, oil was excluded from the ban, the one resource that would have paralysed the Italian invasion. Whilst the League of Nations officially ceased in 1946, its influence and integrity had been destroyed before the outbreak of war. Had collective security successfully encouraged submission to a world order, it is possible that the dictatorial regimes of Hitler and Mussolini would have been severed before they had a chance to come into fruition. When the idealism failed, Hitler was reassured that the world was not prepared to intervene in the proceedings of insignificant or minor nations. Spurred on by this dormancy, there was little to discourage the belief that his involvement in Czechoslovakia or Poland would not be approached in a similar manner.

The League of Nations was not the only political weakness that provided the Axis powers with the confidence to follow through with their objectives. From 1935 to 1939 the allied forces of Britain and France would adopt the policy of appeasement in an effort to avoid war. Ironically, this policy of inaction is fundamental in evaluating why World War II broke out. On 25<sup>th</sup> July 1934 the Austrian Nazi party attempted a putsch which was consequently suppressed by the Austrian army. If Hitler wanted Anschluss he would have to assist by sending troops across the border. To the south, Mussolini mobilised four divisions to intervene if Germany attacked and as a result Hitler stood down. This incident created a precedent that would have changed the course of the next five years had the allies noted its significance. Hitler was not prepared to fight and would have been the first to fold when fronted with opposition. The first signs of appeasement came in March 1935 when Hitler made a claim to a British newspaperman, Ward Price of the London Daily Mail, that he had no intention of abiding to the clauses of the treaty of Versailles and was currently in the process of re-establishing his military. This was, as Edwin P. Hoyt wrote it, "a trial balloon to see how strong the allies were and how far they would go". As Hitler predicted, the allies did nothing. When he rearmend the Rhineland a year later he took an enormous gamble that could have instigated a war long before he was prepared to defend it. It was for this reason that Hitler's orders stated that at any sign of aggression from the French should result in an immediate withdrawal of German troops. Hitler later stated that "[i]f the French had taken any action, we would have been easily defeated". Historian Phillip Warner stated, "this was the critical time when Hitler should, and could have, been stopped", but instead the French intelligence believed that Hitler was by this stage too powerful to oppose.

Despite much criticism, it is easier to evaluate appeasement retrospectively. However, to Chamberlain and his allies, appeasement seemed to be the only option. For France, its political situation showed similar instability to that of the Weimar republic with a total of 40 coalition governments since the conclusion of World War One. In fact, one of the fundamental reasons France was unable to intervene with the annexation of Austria in 1938 was because at the time it did not have a government in office. Both of the allied nations were recovering economically after the assault of the great depression and arms productions had slowed significantly during and

subsequent to the crisis. Meanwhile, Hitler had taken every opportunity to increase production of armaments and as a result the German army made the allies weaponry obsolete. Furthermore, Germany had defaulted on the repayments that had been intended for the assistance in rebuilding of Britain and France. The end result of this being that the German economy remained stimulated with increased circulation of the Reichsmark while the French and English economies struggled in debt without stimulus. Phillip Warner summarised the situation writing, "Britain and France, both slowly recovering from the slump, were horrified at the thought of fighting another war". In 1938 Hitler expressed his desire to liberate the Sudeten (Southern) Germans from the province of Sudetenland in Czechoslovakia. "I weep for the wrongs of my unhappy compatriots, these tortured souls". The allies saw potential for a war and decided to attempt to mediate the situation. Their efforts of mediation however excluded that of Czechoslovakia. Instead only Hitler, Mussolini, Chamberlain and Daladier (of France) were at the Munich conference where concessions were made that saw the annexing of the Sudetenland eventuate. This conference saw France renege on a Czechoslovakian defence pact and significantly undermined the power of the allies. By this stage, Hitler had tested the resolve of Britain and France and held a powerful ally in Italy to the south. His confidence culminated in a threat made to allies, "I warn you, that if we go to war we shall have the Italians on our side this time". Seven months later Hitler took the remainder of Czechoslovakia. Appeasement had naively attempted to negotiate with Hitler in order maintain security and stability in Europe; however, in actuality it contributed significantly to the speed in which Hitler was able to dominate Europe. In response to the Cuban Missile Crisis twenty three years later, John F. Kennedy stated that "the 1930's taught us a clear lesson: aggressive conduct, if allowed to go unchecked, ultimately leads to war".

Whilst the treaty of Versailles and the policy of appeasement worked hand-in-hand, the greater responsibility falls on those who, overshadowed by the First World War, apprehensively failed to do what was necessary to prevent another. But whilst these factors existed separately, they were amalgamated by an audacious and opportunistic character found in Adolf Hitler. Historian Jeffery Record stated that "[h]ad Hitler dropped dead before 1939, there would have been no World War II or Holocaust, and therefore no transformation of the word 'appeasement' into a pejorative". This statement accurately captures the argument that Hitler was the catalyst that allowed the terms of Versailles, and more importantly, appeasement to culminate into the horrific war that followed.

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