

# German foreign policy, 1933–39

## Key questions

To what extent did Nazi foreign policy imitate earlier German foreign policy?

How responsible was Hitler for causing the Second World War?

What were the main influences on Nazi foreign policy?

## THE LEGACY OF WEIMAR

Revisionism set in with Dawes, Young and Locarno, all of which had modified the terms of Versailles. A working relationship with Russia had been established by the Rapallo and Berlin Treaties. Stresemann had made Germany more respectable at Locarno again, and entrance to the League of Nations was important to German rehabilitation. Germany had signed the Kellogg–Briand Pact, but revisionism had not been neglected either with the eastern clauses of Locarno, which indicated that the boundaries between Germany and its eastern neighbours might be redrawn in Germany's favour. Allied troops were withdrawn and Germany attended the Lausanne Conference of 1932 in the hope of ending the reparations issue. It also attended the Disarmament Conference at Geneva, while secretly making plans to rearm. It could be argued that the foundations for what Hitler intended to achieve were laid in the years before he came to office, and that there was considerable continuity between Weimar and Nazi Germany in this respect.

## HITLER'S INTENTIONS

*Mein Kampf*, although incomprehensible in places and frequently contradictory, contains foreign policy objectives along with the racial ones. The book calls for the subordination of eastern Europe to German interests. Hitler's determination to destroy communism and his craving for land and resources in the East led inevitably to a conflict with Russia and Poland and to the Ukraine's absorption into Germany. Austria and the German speakers of countries like Poland and Czechoslovakia would also be absorbed into the Reich. However, Hitler did not anticipate conflict in the West. He felt that the interests of France and Britain in the destruction of communism need not conflict with those of Germany.

## NAZI FOREIGN POLICY, 1933–35: THE INITIAL IDEAS

At first, caution was the main feature of Hitler's foreign policy. He had no military power because of Versailles, no alliances, no secure power base at home and powerful French and Russian armies to consider. The French had allies in eastern Europe, Italy was hostile, and collective security and disarmament were preoccupied with the order of the day. It was not a time for bold ventures. However, the Nazis found encouraging signs. Potential opponents of German expansionism were preoccupied with the Depression. Japan had showed earlier how easy it was to get away with aggression in Manchuria and in doing so had demonstrated that collective security had very obviously not worked. The USA was becoming

Note the continuity between the Second Reich, Weimar and the Nazi regime in foreign policy.

The basic foreign policy ideas of Hitler were always fairly clear.

There was evidence that Hitler could get away with bold moves in foreign and military policy.

Note the reasons for Hitler moving carefully at first.

With the period of consolidation over, Hitler could act decisively. Note also his involvement in the Spanish Civil War, in clear breach of League of Nations rulings.

Note the mixture of planning and opportunism.

This was perhaps the most significant series of events in the build-up to the Second World War.

more isolationist, divisions between Britain and France were apparent during disarmament talks and the Soviet Union was sinking into the nightmare of the Terror.

### **THE FIRST STEPS, 1933–35**

Withdrawal from the League of Nations followed the breakdown of disarmament talks in Geneva. A German non-aggression pact with Poland showed a conciliatory and diplomatic German face to counter the facts of rearmament, the introduction of conscription and the ignoring of the Versailles military clauses. The Nazis had to watch other developments, particularly the Stresa Front, where the British, French and Italians made it clear they were unhappy with German diplomacy, the Franco–Russian Pact of 1935 and the strong Italian reaction to Hitler's involvement in Austria, when Chancellor Dolfuss was assassinated by Nazis in 1934 and a Nazi seizure of power was attempted. Nazi progress had been made, but it was more limited than Hitler would have wished.

### **CRITICAL DEVELOPMENTS, 1936**

Many see 1936 as the turning point in Nazi foreign policy, with Hitler having secured his power base at home and built up the army, and the economy being in a position to support his strategy. This is linked in with the Four-Year Plan at home and the ideal of self-sufficiency. The Anglo–German naval deal of 1935 (which undermined Stresa, as it encouraged German naval rearmament), the success of Mussolini in Abyssinia, the diversion of Spain, the Anti-Comintern Pact and the start of the Rome–Berlin Axis combined to encourage Germany to remilitarise the Rhineland. It was a small step, considering the Rhineland was part of Germany, but the fact that Hitler got away with it so easily overrode the fears of his generals and enhanced Hitler's position. The open split between Britain and France on how to react to events in the Rhineland, and an apparent reluctance of any major power to act against Germany, were also encouragements. The League of Nations had proved useless and collective security was dead.

### **DEVELOPMENTS, 1937–38**

The year 1937 was vital for Hitler's consolidation and control of the army into a subordinate and less independent agent of the German state. The Hossbach Memorandum revealed Hitler's aggressive military intentions in the East. During 1938, the Nazi movement in Austria was developed to undermine the democratic government and the *Anschluss* came into existence. The work of Seyss-Inquart, the Austrian Nazi ordered to destroy democracy in Austria, and the insistence on at least the appearance of some legality by Hitler ran true to past form. The inability or unwillingness of France, Britain or any other major power to intervene in response to the *Anschluss* played a vital role in encouraging Nazi ambitions.

### **MUNICH**

A glance at the European map indicated that Czechoslovakia would be the next gain that Germany needed to realise the Polish/Russian ambitions that Hitler had written about in *Mein Kampf*. Encouraged by the inactivity of other powers, and yet still warned to be cautious by his military, Hitler demanded the Sudetenland.



Consider whether the invasion of Poland was where Hitler made his biggest error.

The Nazi–Soviet Pact was one of the greatest errors that Stalin made.

You won't be expected to know the truth here, but at least be aware of the issues.

Methods tried and tested during the *Anschluss* were used in Czechoslovakia — unrest was stirred up and unrealisable demands were placed on the Czech leadership. Using Mussolini as the nominal conference head, Hitler got what he wanted at Munich. He ignored the warnings of his military that he might face the united armies of France, the Soviet Union, the Czechs and Britain, and his audacity paid off once again. The impact was far-reaching. The Soviet Union was so disgusted with France and Britain that it moved towards signing the pact with Germany in 1939. This, of course, did nothing to check Hitler's eastward ambitions. The drive that Munich gave to the British rearmament programme should also be noted.

### 1939

The take-over of the remainder of Czechoslovakia led to the Polish guarantee by Britain and France. But Hitler's experience of Munich led him to believe that he still had a free hand. With the Russian pact sealed and another pact with Italy securing mutual support, Hitler's Germany had the confidence to invade Poland.

### THE NAZI–SOVIET PACT

The Nazi–Soviet Pact in 1939 was seen as an amazing *volte face*. How could an anti-communist Nazi state actually do a deal with the head of a regime that it was committed to destroying? Bearing in mind the earlier deal at Rapallo in 1922 when Weimar Germany made an agreement with Russian communists, the deployment of another big lie was not that surprising. The pact gave Hitler security in the East, in case he had to fight in the West. It gave him a large slice of Poland and a much easier spring-board from which to invade the Soviet Union later. The fact that Germany gained access to vital raw materials made further sense.

### HITLER'S FOREIGN POLICY: THE GREAT DEBATE

There are many debates on Hitler's foreign policy, particularly as to whether there was continuity with German policy under the Second Reich and during the Weimar years. The extent to which Hitler followed a thought-out plan laid down in *Mein Kampf*, or merely seized opportunities to expand Germany as they came along, is much debated. The extent to which it was Hitler's own policy or the wishes of the German people and the German élites has also been the subject of much debate, as has the question of whether he had continental or global ambitions.

### Key factors in German foreign policy to 1935

- the tradition of eastern expansion of the Second Reich
- the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk
- the Treaty of Versailles
- the Treaty of Rapallo with Russia in 1922
- the earlier revisionism of Locarno, especially the eastern boundary clauses
- disarmament
- the ideas expressed in *Mein Kampf*
- Hitler's opposition to the Young Plan, which implied agreement with the Treaty of Versailles
- Manchuria
- the failure of collective security

- leaving the League of Nations in 1933
- German rearmament
- the Stresa Front — the British/Italian and French attempt in 1935 to contain Hitler
- the Franco–Russian Pact
- the murder of Dolfuss in Austria — the first attempt at a German/Nazi take-over
- the Anglo–German Naval Agreement, which encouraged German rearmament

### Key factors in German foreign policy, 1936–39

- the remilitarisation of the Rhineland
- Abyssinia — Mussolini’s illegal seizure of another country
- the Hoare–Laval Pact — the British/French agreement which allowed Mussolini to keep Abyssinia
- Hitler’s illegal support of the fascists in Spain
- the Hossbach Memorandum, which showed Germany’s aggressive eastern policies
- Seyss-Inquart and the *Anschluss* — the illegal take-over of Austria
- the Sudetenland
- Munich
- the Anti-Comintern Pact — the treaty with Italy and Japan
- the brutal friendship with Italy
- the invasion of Czechoslovakia
- the Polish guarantee by Britain and France
- Danzig and the Polish corridor — Hitler’s final attempt to expand eastwards without a full war
- the Nazi–Soviet Pact
- the invasion of Poland

## J Nazi economic policy

### Key questions

To what extent did the Nazis transform German society?

How successful were Hitler’s economic policies?

### THE NAZI ECONOMY

*Mein Kampf* talks of the need for German self-sufficiency, but not of how it might be achieved. Apart from promising to end the Depression — and in doing so giving conflicting ideas to industrial workers, students, business people, industrialists and farmers — Hitler was simply not interested. Economics to him was a means to an end. If economic policies won acceptance and enabled him to implement his aims, he was unconcerned about methods. If they involved an unbalanced budget, deficit financing or an adverse balance of payments, he was likewise unconcerned. Economic matters were not things Hitler thought about or discussed in depth and he had no coherent economic policy.

### THE EARLY ECONOMIC POLICY

The first 3 years of Nazi power were a mixture of state control and free enterprise. Hjalmar Schacht, president of the Reichsbank, is the key figure here.

Economics was never a central part of Nazi thinking.