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# Chapter 17:

## Impact of Ideology on Nazi Foreign Policy to September 1939

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### Was Hitler so different?

The impact of Nazi ideology on Germany's foreign policy between 1933 and September 1939 was substantial. However, historians have debated the extent to which Nazi foreign policy was not so new, but rather a continuation of traditional German aims.

- Before 1914, a feature of German foreign policy had been the 'Drang Nach Osten' – the march to the east. Were the ideas behind the Berlin-Bagdad railway and the Pan-German League far removed from Hitler's later ambitions?
- In March 1918, Germany imposed upon the young Bolshevik state the Treaty of Brest Litovsk. This treaty was very harsh on Russia and it took, be it temporarily, similar expanses of land that Hitler would later take, equally temporarily.
- Gustav Stresemann had been keen to reassert German influence in Eastern Europe in the 1920s. His unwillingness to link the 1925 Locarno Agreement to Eastern Europe suggests that he had hoped for frontier revisions there.
- Research by Fritz Fischer in the 1960s which argued the case for German responsibility for the outbreak of WWI due to its aggressive intentions, suggests further similarity in the foreign policy aims of Imperial Germany and Nazi Germany.

Taking a slightly different tack, AJP Taylor caused something of a storm in the early 1960s when his book 'The Origins of the Second World War' was published. Taylor took a different line from other historians since 1945. The traditional view had been that Hitler was an evil genius who systematically took Europe to war. Taylor's view was that Hitler in fact was no different than other German leaders. In Taylor's eyes:

- Hitler sought to undo the Treaty of Versailles;
- Hitler sought to restore Germany to its rightful place in Europe;
- Hitler had no long-term plan of foreign expansion but rather was an opportunist ready to seize the opportunity as it arose.

If Taylor is right, then the role of ideology in Nazi foreign policy would seem to be negligible. Alan Bullock presents an alternative line of argument. Indeed, Hitler was an opportunist who acted in response to circumstances, but he was only able to do this because he had his long-term goals clearly in mind. Hitler could allow himself to be inconsistent because he always knew where he was headed in the long-term. If Bullock is right, then the case for the role of ideology is heightened.

### Nazi ideology

The argument which will be presented here is that ideology played a major role in Nazi foreign policy. It is 'the intentionalist view, with a bit of Taylor and Bullock thrown in'.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The author acknowledges that there is a range of thinking on this issue. There is Taylor's 'Hitler was just another German leader'. Then there is the thinking of Yad Vashem, the Holocaust Memorial and Education Centre in Jerusalem which argues that Hitler's ultimate aim was the elimination of world Jewry, for which the elimination of European Jewry was merely a tactical step.

The main themes of Nazi ideology are dealt with in some detail in Chapter 6.

The argument against the role of ideology suggests that *Mein Kampf* cannot be taken seriously, any more than Hitler's other ravings when he was younger.

- The ranting that can be found in *Mein Kampf* was written in 1924 when Hitler was in prison. In the years immediately after prison, the Nazi Party was in the wilderness.
- When Hitler did gain power, he behaved much as other statesmen, dealing with problems as they arose and taking opportunities if they presented themselves.

However, such a view that totally dismisses the thinking of *Mein Kampf* fails to recognise the similarity of the ideas in the turgid pages of Hitler's book and what came to happen in the 1930s. Ideology played the key role in Nazi foreign policy both in setting the long-term goals and suggesting the short-term strategies. As stated in Chapter 16, the twin long-term aims of Nazi foreign policy were the achievement of lebensraum in the east and settlement of the Jewish problem. Whether or not this meant the holocaust was inevitable does not detract from the fact that expansion and race were at the root of Nazi foreign policy.

- Hitler always accepted the Social Darwinist view that nations prosper at the expense of others: "Right abides in strength alone".
  - Life is a struggle and if Germany ever felt a need to take from another nation, it was justified in so behaving.
  - 'Strength is always mistress over weakness'.
  - Germany should not be limited by an appeal to scruples. The 'sole earthly criterion of whether an enterprise is right or wrong is its success.'
- 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.
- He recognised that the implacable enemy to German ambitions was France which would have to be dealt with. However, he made it clear that war with France was not an end in itself but merely a means to an end: a free hand in Eastern Europe.
  - This free hand would eventually see a German Empire in the east comprising 250 million people.
  - Hitler predicted Germany's frontiers would run from the Atlantic to the Black Sea.
- Hitler's belief in Aryan superiority as the highest human type yet evolved was clear.
  - The earliest civilisations had prospered both as a result of the taming of animals by man, and the employment of inferior races as slaves.
  - This of course was to be the fate of Slavs in a future German empire.

## What do the historians have to say about 'Impact of Ideology on Nazi Foreign Policy to September 1939'?

1. *Writing after the war, Winston Churchill was clear on the importance of Mein Kampf in understanding Hitler's foreign policy. He argued that if there was ever a book that needed to have been read, Mein Kampf was that book. Hitler had made clear his intentions from creating a National Socialist state to world conquest.*

*"...All was there – the programme for German resurrection...the rightful position of German at the summit of the world. Here was the new Koran of faith and war: turgid, verbose, shapeless, but pregnant with its message."*

### 2. *PMH Bell: The Origins of the Second World War in Europe*

Bell points out that western statesmen believed that there had to be a distinction between ideology and practical politics. They dealt with Hitler as a realist. The mistake they made was that he was more; opportunist he might be, but for him ideology provided direction whereas his peers sought only to turn the next corner.

Bell argues that to deny the role of ideology in Nazi foreign policy is to suggest that Hitler was motivated by purely materialist interests or by impersonal forces. However, to argue this is to reduce Hitler to a mere puppet. Bell says these explanations raise difficulties as they leave:

*"...unexplained the large and important areas of consistency between Hitler's writings, talk and actions, and in particular those areas where ideology carried the day against the obvious appeal of opportunism and material interest."*

### 3. *Richard Evans: The Third Reich in Power*

Evans suggests that the desire for lebensraum had less to do with ideology and more to do with economic necessity. He refers to a speech given to army, SA, and SS leaders in February 1934 in which Hitler argued that living space for Germany's surplus population would be needed because the economic recovery would have run out of steam by 1942. Hitler had spoken to military leaders in a similar vein in February 1933 arguing:

*"...it was pointless trying to boost exports; the only way to a long-term, secure recovery of the German economy was through the conquest of 'living-space' in the East, and preparations for this now had to take priority over everything else."*

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2 Churchill, WS, *The Gathering Storm*, Cassell, London, 1948, p 50

3 Bell, PMH, *The Origins of the Second World War*, Pearson, London, 1997, p 84

4 Evans, R, *The Third Reich in Power*, Penguin, London, 2005, p 346