

Hitler's Foreign Policy

Brief Summary

1933 Germany left the League of Nations.

1934 Attempted Nazi coup in Austria crushed. Poland and Germany sign alliance.

1935 Germany broke the military clauses of the Treaty of Versailles

1936 German troops reoccupied the Rhineland. Rome-Berlin Axis signed

1938 Anschluss with Austria. Sudetenland handed to Germany as a result of the Munich conference.

1939 Rest of the Czech lands occupied by the Germans. Germany invaded Poland. WWII began.

Hitler's Foreign Policy Aims

When Hitler came to power he was determined to make Germany a great power again and to dominate Europe. He had set out his ideas in a book called *Mein Kampf* (My Struggle) that he had written in prison in 1924. His main aims were

1. To destroy the Treaty of Versailles imposed on Germany after her defeat in World War One. Hitler felt the Treaty was unfair and most Germans supported this view.
2. To unite all German speakers together in one country. After World War One there were Germans living in many countries in Europe e.g. Austria, Czechoslovakia, Poland. Hitler hoped that by uniting them together in one country he would create a powerful Germany or Grossdeutschland.
3. To expand eastwards into the East (Poland, Russia) to gain land for Germany (**Lebensraum**-living space).

His tactics involved using the threat of violence to achieve his aims. He realised that his potential foes, France and Britain, were reluctant to go to war and were prepared to compromise to avoid a repeat of World War One. He was also an opportunist who often took advantage of events for his own benefit.

His foreign policy successes in the 1930s were to make him a very popular figure in Germany. As one German political opponent described:

“Everybody thought that there was some justification in Hitler's demands. All Germans hated Versailles. Hitler tore up this hateful treaty and forced France to its knees.... people said, “he's got courage to take risks”

1933-4

Hitler protested at the fact that the Allies had not disarmed after World War and he left the disarmament conference and the League of Nations in 1933. He intensified the programme of secret rearmament.

In 1934, Germany and Poland concluded an alliance, the first of his infamous **ten year non-aggression pacts**. This caused a surprise in Europe at the time. The alliance broke Germany's diplomatic isolation while also weakening France's series of anti-German alliances in Eastern Europe. For the next five years Poland and Germany were to enjoy cordial relations. However like many of his agreements, this was a **tactical move** and Hitler had no intention of honouring the agreement in the long term.

In July 1934 an attempt by Austrian Nazis to overthrow the government in their country was crushed. The Austrian Prime Minister **Dollfuss** was killed in the attempt. Hitler at first supported the attempted coup but disowned the action when it was clear it would fail. Italy reacted with great hostility to the prospect of Austria falling into Nazi hands and rushed troops to the border with Austria.

In January 1935 **the Saar** voted to return to Germany. This region had been placed under the control of the League of Nations by the Treaty of Versailles. This allowed the French to exploit its coalfields for 15 years. The vote to return to Germany was supported by over 90%. It was a major propaganda boost for Hitler who could claim that his policies had the backing of the German people.

In March, using the pretext that the other powers had not disarmed, Hitler announced that Germany was going to reintroduce conscription and create an army of 36 divisions. He also said that Germany was going to build up an air force (the **Luftwaffe**) and expand her navy. All of these actions were against the terms of the Treaty of Versailles but were very popular in Germany. Britain, Italy and France formed the **Stresa front** to protest at this action but took no further measures. This united front against Germany was further weakened when Italy invaded **Ethiopia**.

A factor that helped Hitler was the attitude of the English. They felt that Germany had been very harshly treated at Versailles and there was a lot of sympathy for the German actions. The memory of the horrors of the First World War was also still very strong in Britain. They were also very anti-communist and worried more about Stalin.

Protecting their own interests, the British concluded a naval agreement with Hitler that limited the German navy to 35% of Britain's. No limit was placed on the number of submarines that Germany could develop.

The Rhineland 1936

Under the Treaty of Versailles the Germans were forbidden to erect fortifications or station troops in the Rhineland or within 50 kilometres of the right bank of the river. In 1935 when Mussolini attacked **Ethiopia**, Hitler ignored international protests and supported Mussolini. This ended Germany's international isolation and the Italians signalled their acceptance of German influence in Austria and the eventual remilitarisation of the Rhineland.

Most people expected the Germans to send troops into the Rhineland, the question was when? On 7 March 1936, in one of his many Saturday surprises, Hitler announced that his troops had entered the Rhineland.

The British were not prepared to take any action. There was a lot of sympathy in Britain for the German action. Without British support the French would not act. The French had built the **Maignot line**, a series of forts on the German border and felt secure behind it.

The force that Hitler had sent into the Rhineland was small but he had gambled and won.

He said

"The forty-eight hours after the march into the Rhineland were the most nerve-racking in my life....If the French had then marched into the Rhineland, we would have had to withdraw with our tails between our legs, for the military resources at our disposal would have been wholly inadequate for even moderate resistance."

He drew the conclusion that Britain and France were weak and that he could get away with more aggressive actions.

Alliance with Mussolini 1936

In June 1936 the Spanish Civil War broke out. Both Hitler and Mussolini sent aid to **General Franco** who was fighting against the popularly elected government of Spain. This closer co-operation between the two Fascist dictators led to an alliance known as the Rome-Berlin Axis. It was an agreement to pursue a joint foreign policy. Both agreed to stop the spread of communism in Europe. This relationship became closer in 1939 with the signing of "**The Pact of Steel**".

Austria 1938

Hitler had long wished to bring the land of his birth under German control. There was a Nazi party in Austria and many in Austria supported the union of both countries. Although there had been a failed coup attempt in 1934, Germany had extended its influence in Austria by 1938.

In February 1938 the Austrian Prime Minister, **Schuschnigg**, met Hitler at **Berchtesgaden** in the Alps. At the meeting the Austrian chancellor was threatened and was forced to place leading Austrian Nazis in his Government.

On his return to Austria, Schuschnigg tried to stop spreading German influence by calling a referendum. This enraged Hitler and Schuschnigg was forced to resign. German troops "were invited in" by the new Nazi Prime Minister, **Seyss-Inquart**.

Hitler returned in triumph to Vienna where he was greeted by euphoric crowds. This was the city where before World War One he had lived as a down and out. Hitler incorporated Austria into the Reich as the province of **Ostmark**. This event became known as the **Anschluss**.

Again the British and French did nothing. The new Prime Minister in Britain was **Neville Chamberlain**. He wanted to prevent another European war breaking out. He decided to follow a policy called **Appeasement**.

Appeasement was a policy of giving into Hitler's reasonable demands in order to prevent war. It was a very popular policy in Britain at the time.

The Sudetenland (Czechoslovakia) 1938



The Sudetenland

The next target for Hitler was the country of Czechoslovakia. It had been founded after World War One. It was the only democracy in Eastern Europe and possessed a good army. It also contained a number of national minorities (it was nicknamed "little Austria-Hungary") including a large German minority in an area known as the **Sudetenland**. Hitler encouraged the Germans living there to demonstrate against Czech rule. The leader of the **Sudeten German Party** was **Konrad Henlein**.

Hitler decided to use the grievances of the Sudeten Germans to bring the area under German control. He secretly set the date of 1 October for war with Czechoslovakia if the issue was not resolved. Throughout the summer of 1938 the crisis grew worse. The Sudeten Germans backed by Nazi propaganda agitated for greater autonomy (independence).

Chamberlain hoped to avoid war and felt that there was some justification in the German demand for the region. He flew to Germany and met Hitler twice, at **Berchtesgaden** and **Bad Godesberg**. However although it seemed an agreement had been reached, Hitler made new demands and it looked as if Europe was on the brink of war.

Mussolini was ill prepared for a war and proposed a conference of Britain, France, Germany and Italy. This met at **Munich** on 28 September. The Czechs were not even invited. The British and French agreed to Hitler's demands and it seemed as if the threat of war was averted. Chamberlain and **Daladier**, the French Prime Minister, received heroes welcomes when they returned home. The Czechs were bitter at the loss of territory including most of their border fortifications and were now virtually powerless to resist

the Germans.

In March 1939, Hitler took over the rest of the Czech lands after encouraging the **Slovaks** to declare independence under German protection. The Czech president, **Hacha** was invited to Berlin and was threatened that if he did not agree to German occupation, Prague would be bombed. **Significantly this was the first non-Germanic land that Hitler had seized. This occupation outraged public opinion in Britain and marked the end of appeasement.** In the same month the German speaking town of **Memel** was seized from **Lithuania**.

Poland 1939

The occupation of the rest of Czechoslovakia had led Britain to guarantee Poland that if she was attacked she would come to her aid. Under the Treaty of Versailles the newly created state of Poland was given the German speaking port of **Danzig** and land known as the **Polish Corridor** in order to give it access to the sea.

Hitler wanted to destroy Poland in order to gain living space (Lebensraum). Hitler demanded the German speaking town of **Danzig** from Poland and the building of a motorway to link East Prussia with the rest of the Reich.

However the demand for Danzig was not the real issue for Hitler. He said

Further successes can no longer be attained without the shedding of blood...Danzig is not the subject of the dispute at all. It is a question of expanding our living space in the east...there is no question of sparing Poland.

He accused the Poles of mistreating the German minority in other parts of Poland. Nazi propaganda greatly exaggerated stories of attacks on the German minority. The Poles refused to hand over the town of **Danzig**.

A Very Surprising Alliance!

As the summer wore on tension grew. Both Britain and France and Germany were trying to gain the support of the USSR in the event of war. Stalin did not trust Britain and France and felt they were encouraging Hitler to attack Russia. He had been greatly angered by the Munich agreement.

Although both Germany and the Soviet Union had been bitter enemies up to 1939, the world was stunned to learn that they had reached an agreement on **23 August 1939**. This was a **Ten Year Non-Aggression** pact. Both countries benefited from this agreement. For the Soviet Union it allowed her more time to prepare for war and she gained a lot of territory in Eastern Europe. Germany was assured that if she attacked Poland she would not have to face a two-front war.

Nazi Soviet Non Aggression Pact

Secret Additional Protocol.

On the occasion of the signature of the Non-Aggression Pact between the German Reich and the Union of Socialist Soviet Republics the undersigned plenipotentiaries of each of the two parties discussed in strictly confidential conversations the question of the boundary of their respective spheres of influence in Eastern Europe. These conversations led to the following conclusions:

In the event of a territorial and political rearrangement in the areas belonging to the Baltic States Article(Finland, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania), the northern boundary of Lithuania shall represent the
I. boundary of the spheres of influence of Germany and U.S.S.R. In this connection the interest of Lithuania in the Vilna area is recognized by each party.

In the event of a territorial and political rearrangement of the areas belonging to the Polish State, the spheres of influence of Germany and the U.S.S.R. shall be bounded approximately by the line of the rivers Narev, Vistula and San.

Article

II. The question of whether the interests of both parties make desirable the maintenance of an independent Polish State and how such a state should be bounded can only be definitely determined in the course of further political developments.

In any event both Governments will resolve this question by means of a friendly agreement.

Article III. With regard to South eastern Europe attention is called by the Soviet side to its interest in Bessarabia. The German side declares its complete political disinterest in these areas.

Article

IV. This Protocol shall be treated by both parties as strictly secret.

Moscow, August 23, 1939.

War

Hitler hoped that the news of the Pact with Russia would stop France and Britain from going to war if Germany attacked Poland. He was surprised when Britain and Poland concluded a mutual defence treaty. Mussolini informed him that Italy was unprepared for war and he postponed the invasion of Poland. A flurry of diplomatic activity achieved nothing and on 1 September Germany invaded Poland. On 3 September Britain and France declared war on Germany.

World War Two had begun.