

Ch. 7 - Hitler's Foreign Policy,
1933-39 - **COMMUNISM IN RUSSIA** And the Causes of the
Second World War

Learning Intentions

In this section, you should understand:

- How Hitler's foreign policy caused the Second World War.

*H*ITLER'S FOREIGN POLICY, 1933-39

Hitler's Aims

In 1939, the Second World War began when Germany invaded Poland. Hitler's aims in foreign policy and the aggressive way in which he carried them out were the main causes of the war.

Hitler had **three main aims** in foreign policy:

1. He wanted to **destroy the Treaty of Versailles** - to rearm the German army, navy and air force; to remilitarise the Rhineland; to form Anschluss (union) with Austria; to change the borders on the east with Poland.
2. He wanted to create a **Greater Germany (Grossdeutschland)** by uniting all German-speaking people.
3. He wanted to create **Lebensraum** - living space in Eastern Europe to make Germany self-sufficient in food and raw materials for his master race. *'The new Reich must... obtain by the German sword, sod for the German plough and daily bread for the nation.'* (Mein Kampf)

KEY CONCEPT LEBENSRAUM

Hitler believed that having additional living space would strengthen Germany by making it self-sufficient in food and raw materials. He wanted the living space in Eastern Europe, particularly Russia. This idea of lebensraum became the basis of German foreign policy during Hitler's Third Reich.



REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. List the three aims of Hitler's foreign policy.
2. What was Greater Germany?
3. What was Lebensraum?

EXAM QUESTION

1. How and why did Lenin and the Communists win the Russian Civil War?

Hitler's Successes

After coming to power in 1933, Hitler **proceeded cautiously** in foreign policy for the first year. He wanted to be seen as a man of peace while he consolidated his power at home. He withdrew from the **Disarmament Conference** and the **League of Nations** but he was able to blame it on France's refusal to disarm like Germany. He was part of the **Four Power Pact** of Britain, France, Italy and Germany itself to preserve the peace of Europe. He formed a ten-year **Non-Aggression Pact** with Poland. This broke the isolation of Germany which France had achieved. A further success was the **Saar Plebiscite** (vote of the people). In the Treaty of Versailles (1919), the Saar had been given to France for 15 years to extract coal. Now the people of the Saar voted to become part of Germany.



Hitler's Foreign Policy and German Expansion, 1933-9



Setback

But Hitler also suffered a setback. The union of Austria with Germany (Anschluss) was one of his main aims. Austrian Nazis were encouraged and helped by Hitler. In 1934, they murdered the Austrian Chancellor, **Dollfuss**, in an attempted Nazi coup (or takeover). Hitler was ready to invade the country, but Italy feared a German takeover. The Italian leader, **Mussolini**, rushed troops to the Austrian border and Hitler backed down.

Destroying Versailles

By 1935, Hitler had consolidated his power at home. He began a **more aggressive foreign policy** by breaking the terms of the Treaty of Versailles. Initially, the terms he broke applied directly to Germany. In early 1935, Hitler began German **rearmament**. He introduced conscription (compulsory military service) and announced the existence of the **Luftwaffe** (air force), which had been set up secretly. Hitler's actions led to the formation of the **Stresa Front** (1935) by **Britain, France and Italy** because of fear of German expansion.

However, within a few months, Britain undermined the Stresa Front and helped Hitler dismantle the Treaty of Versailles further by agreeing to the **Anglo-German Naval Agreement** (1935). This allowed Hitler to increase his navy up to thirty-five per cent of the British navy, but have the same amount of submarines (U-boats) as the British. France was very upset by the agreement because they had not been consulted. But Hitler was delighted. He felt that Britain was prepared to allow German breaches of the Treaty of Versailles and this encouraged him to try again.



Italian Invasion of Abyssinia

In October 1935 Mussolini invaded Abyssinia. Abyssinia turned to the **League of Nations** for help. The League imposed economic sanctions on Italy but these sanctions excluded oil. However, the League failed to take any other effective action. At the same time, Britain and France secretly agreed the **Hoare-Laval Plan** (called after the British and French foreign ministers) to give most of Abyssinia to Italy. When news of this plan leaked out, it was dropped and it led to the resignation of both foreign secretaries. Abyssinia was quickly and easily defeated by the modern technology of Italy.

The invasion of Abyssinia had a number of important **results**:

- Britain and France fell out over the **Hoare-Laval Plan**.
- British and French support for sanctions upset Mussolini and the **Stresa Front** broke up.
- On the other hand, Hitler supported Mussolini and this brought them **closer together**.
- The **weaknesses of the League of Nations** were shown up. They showed that collective security - countries working together to protect other countries - did not seem to work:
 - **Economic sanctions** did not work because they did not apply to non-members such as the US and Germany.
 - The League had **no army** to enforce its decisions.
 - The **absence of the US** was a major weakness since it was the most powerful country in the world.



REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What was German rearmament?
2. What was the Stresa Front?
3. What was agreed in the Anglo- German Naval Agreement?
4. What was the significance of the Italian invasion of Abyssinia?

Remilitarisation of the Rhineland, 1936

Hitler took his next gamble. He was encouraged by his early success to remilitarise the Rhineland. The remilitarisation of the Rhineland was banned by the Treaty of Versailles and agreed to by Germany in the **Locarno Pact** (1925).

Hitler **timed** his action well. He took advantage of the crisis in 1936 over Abyssinia between Italy, Britain and France. He also said that Germany was under threat because of a recent agreement between France and Russia. In March 1936 he moved about 10,000 troops, backed up by police, into the Rhineland.

The **League of Nations** condemned his action but did nothing else because of the Abyssinian crisis. France was the country most threatened by the remilitarisation but it failed to act. The Left and Right were bitterly divided; and France did not get British support. Instead, Britain looked on the remilitarisation as the Germans going into their **own back garden**.

Hitler had gambled and won. The remilitarisation of the Rhineland allowed him to build the **Siegfried Line** - a line of fortifications along the Franco-German border and this prevented France invading Germany. It also protected his back as he turned his attention to Eastern Europe.



The Influence of the Spanish Civil War

The **Spanish Civil War** (1936-9) broke out between the Republican government and the Nationalist army led by Franco. Hitler and Mussolini gave help to Franco by providing ships, planes, equipment and soldiers. This help ensured victory for Franco.

Mussolini's dispute with Britain and France over Abyssinia and the events of the Spanish Civil War led Hitler and Mussolini to form the **Rome-Berlin Axis** (November 1936). They made an agreement over Austria (Hitler gave up his claim to the German-speaking people of the South Tyrol); in return Mussolini agreed to Hitler's takeover of Austria. One month later, Germany and Italy joined with Japan in the **Anti-Comintern Pact** to stop the spread of Communism.

The Hossbach Memorandum and Plans for War

In November 1937 Hitler met his senior military commanders. The **Hossbach Memorandum**, notes taken at the meeting by Colonel Hossbach, recorded Hitler's plans for the future. That future depended on getting **lebensraum** (living space) for food and raw materials. He believed that his first objective must be to overthrow Austria and Czechoslovakia. He used the same tactics in both cases of **outside pressure** combined with **internal disruption**.

Hitler could feel confident of success because, by this time, Germany was rearming quickly. The army was expanded from 100,000 in 1933 to 750,000 by 1939, with 1 million reserves; large numbers of tanks were produced; the navy was equipped with new battleships and submarines; and the Luftwaffe had about 4,500 aircraft. The other European powers had been overtaken because their rearmament began later. Hitler believed that the latest Germany could go to war was 1943-5 because after that other countries would have caught up with it.

Anschluss with Austria, 1938

Hitler took a special interest in Austria where he was born. He encouraged the Austrian Nazi Party to demand union with Germany (Anschluss). He demanded of the Austrian Chancellor, **Dr Schuschnigg**, that the Nazi Party be legalised and that the Nazi, **Dr Seyss-Inquart**, be appointed Minister of the Interior. Schuschnigg had to agree. However, Schuschnigg decided to hold a **plebiscite** (referendum or vote of the people) on union with Germany, knowing that the Austrian people would reject it. But Hitler acted before the plebiscite. He forced the resignation of Schuschnigg. Seyss-Inquart then invited the German army into Austria to *'help preserve the peace'*. Austria was taken over and Hitler returned triumphantly to Vienna on 15 March 1938. One month later a Nazi-supervised referendum produced a 99.75 per cent vote in favour of Anschluss.

Anschluss consolidated Germany's relations with Italy. Hitler was grateful to Mussolini for allowing the German takeover; *'Tell Mussolini I will never forget him for this,'* he said. The British did not try to stop the union because they felt that the Austrians and Germans had a right to be united.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What was the significance of the remilitarisation of the Rhineland?
2. How did the Spanish Civil War influence foreign affairs in the 1930s?
3. What was the Hossbach Memorandum and why is it so important?
4. Explain Anschluss.

The Sudetenland, 1938

Across the border from Germany was the **Sudetenland**, a German-speaking part of Czechoslovakia which included 3 million Germans. The Sudeten Germans complained they were discriminated against. Their leader, **Konrad Henlein**, demanded to be united with Germany. He was encouraged and supported by Hitler who sent troops to the border. But the Czechs had a modern army and strong defences. They also had a military alliance with France, while Britain and Russia promised support. They were prepared to resist the German threats, so Europe seemed on the verge of war during the summer of 1938. France favoured action but Britain was cautious. **Neville Chamberlain**, the British Prime Minister, expressed his views; *'How horrible, fantastic, incredible it is that we should be digging trenches and trying on gas masks here because of a quarrel in a faraway country between people of whom we know nothing. I am myself a man of peace to the depths of my soul.'*



The Munich Agreement

The **Munich Conference** was organised to prevent war. **Chamberlain, Daladier (France), Mussolini** and **Hitler** met in Munich (September 1938) to decide the future of the Sudetenland. The Soviet Union was not invited, and neither was Czechoslovakia. The four leaders agreed that the Sudetenland should be given to Germany and Czechoslovakia had to give in. Chamberlain returned home with **peace for our time** and a hero's welcome. In France the view was, *'We can go back to work and sleep soundly again.'*

Once again Hitler had gambled and won. His tactics of taking Europe to the brink of war had succeeded. This crisis encouraged Hitler to believe that neither Britain nor France would back up their words with action. Now Germany was in a much stronger position - in taking over the Sudetenland, Germany had taken most of Czechoslovakia's heavy industries and defences.



REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Where was the Sudetenland?
2. What did Hitler want to do with the Sudetenland?
3. Why was Europe on the verge of war in the summer of 1938?
4. What was agreed at the Munich Conference and why was that important?

EXAM QUESTION

How successful was Hitler in destroying the Treaty of Versailles by 1939?

Britain, France and the Policy of Appeasement

Britain's policy towards Hitler was characterised by **appeasement**. Britain believed that if they gave in to Hitler's demands, this would prevent a European war. Instead they believed in the League of Nations and disarmament as the best way of achieving peace. This policy was mainly associated with Neville Chamberlain, but it was supported by all sections of the British people:

- Many British leaders had fought in the First World War and they did not want to see the horrors of war repeated.
- Many British people felt that Germany had been too harshly treated by the Treaty of Versailles; they believed that Hitler's demands were reasonable.
- Hitler and Nazi Germany was seen as a barrier to the spread of Communism from the Soviet Union.
- Britain was not ready for war - the politicians did not want to cut spending on social welfare programmes to pay for rearmament.



Britain, France and the Policy of Appeasement

Winston Churchill was the main opponent of appeasement. By now on the Conservative backbenches, he warned about the threat from Hitler. He opposed the Anglo-German Naval Agreement (1935). Instead, he said Britain should rearm to meet the danger from the Fascist dictator. He also wanted Britain to build up its defences, and he warned about German air superiority.

He campaigned against appeasement in 1938. He looked on the Munich Agreement as 'a total and unmitigated defeat', and a surrender to Hitler. He warned that the rest of Czechoslovakia would soon be 'engulfed in the Nazi regime'. Instead, he wanted collaboration with the Soviet Union. For the moment, however, Churchill was in a minority.

The **French government and people** also longed for peace and supported appeasement for many of the same reasons as Britain. But France was also affected by the **Maginot mind** - the belief that France could defend itself behind the **Maginot Line**, the huge system of fortifications built along the eastern border with Germany.

The Destruction of Czechoslovakia, March 1939

In March 1939 Hitler took over the rest of Czechoslovakia. Britain and France only protested. This clearly showed **the weaknesses** of the policy of appeasement. However, this was also the first non-German area taken over by Hitler. British policy began to change. Prior to this, the British believed that Hitler's aims were limited; now they knew he sought European domination. It was clear that Poland would be Hitler's next target.

Poland and the Polish Corridor

The Treaty of Versailles had separated East Prussia from the rest of Germany by the **Polish Corridor** - a narrow strip of land which gave Poland access to the sea through the port of **Danzig**. In 1939, Hitler demanded the return of Danzig and a road and rail link to East Prussia through the Polish Corridor. Poland rejected Hitler's demands.

In March 1939, Britain and France agreed to support Poland against *'any action which clearly threatened Polish independence'*. But after years of appeasement, Hitler did not believe that Britain and France would act. Hitler also made his own agreement - the **Pact of Steel** with Italy, 1939. This was a military alliance in which each country would help the other in war. Europe was divided into two armed camps and once again it faced the prospect of war.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What was the policy of appeasement?
2. Why did Chamberlain follow a policy of appeasement?
3. Why did France support appeasement?

The Nazi-Soviet Pact, 1939

However, the key to the safety of Poland was the **Soviet Union**.

Stalin was worried about the safety of Russia since Hitler came to power. He wanted an alliance with Britain and France during the Sudetenland crisis, but now he did not trust them after the Soviet Union was not included in the Munich Conference. Instead, **Ribbentrop, the German Foreign Minister**, and **Molotov, the Soviet Foreign Minister**, stunned the world when they agreed a **ten-year non-aggression pact**. The arch-enemies of Fascism and Communism also secretly agreed to divide Poland between themselves.

The **Nazi-Soviet Pact** was very important to Hitler. He feared that if he invaded Poland, he would be involved in a two-front war against Russia in the east and France and Britain in the west. Now the Pact allowed him to attack Poland without Russia intervening. It also gave Stalin time to prepare his army. Later Stalin said, *'We secured peace for our country for eighteen months which allowed us to make military preparations.'*



The War Begins

Hitler believed everything was now in his favour. He had the non-aggression pact with Russia; the Siegfried Line protected him from attack in the west; he believed Britain and France would not fight, and if they did they were too far away to help Poland; and he had Poland surrounded on three sides. He also had the strongest army in Europe.

But Poland still refused to give in to his demands, so on 1 September 1939 Hitler **invaded** the country. To his surprise, Britain and France backed Poland and declared war on Germany on 3 September.

British and French opinion had changed quickly after the Munich Conference. They felt Hitler could not be trusted and they backed rearmament. There was a determination to face war if it was necessary.

In a radio broadcast, Chamberlain expressed his own views and those of many other people. *[Hitler] gave his word [and] he broke it ... Can you wonder his word is, for us, not worth the paper it is written on!*

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What were the terms of the Nazi- Soviet Pact?
2. Why was the Nazi- Soviet Pact important for both Hitler and Stalin?
3. Why did Hitler invade Poland?

The Causes of the Second World War

Hitler's Aims and Methods:

- Hitler wanted to create a Greater Germany with living space (lebensraum) in the east.
- He broke the terms of the Treaty of Versailles.
- He used outside pressure and internal disruption to take over Austria and Sudetenland.
- When he took over the rest of Czechoslovakia, Britain and France supported his next target, Poland.

Weakness of the League of Nations:

The League could not stop Mussolini and Hitler (and Japan in Asia) from taking over other countries:

- Economic sanctions were not effective.
- There had to be unanimous agreement among the members for action.
- The US was not a member and other powers were members for short periods.
- The League did not have an army to enforce decisions.

Isolation of the US:

America was the strongest country but it followed a policy of isolation:

- It was only interested in affairs on its own continent.
- It did not want to send troops to fight in faraway wars. America rejected the Treaty of Versailles and did not become a member of the League of Nations.
- In the 1930s America passed the Neutrality Acts which stopped aid or trade with warring countries.

Policy of Appeasement:

Britain and France followed this policy:

- They believed that if they gave in to Hitler's small demands they would stop a European war.
- The policy was influenced by:
 - Their experiences of the First World War.
 - In Britain they believed that Germany had been harshly treated by the Treaty of Versailles.
 - They wanted a strong Germany to stop the spread of Communism.

