

5.4 APPEASEMENT

(a) What is meant by the term 'appeasement'?

Appeasement was the policy followed by the British, and later by the French, of *avoiding war with aggressive powers such as Japan, Italy and Germany, by giving way to their demands*, provided they were not too unreasonable.

There were two distinct phases of appeasement

- 1 *From the mid-1920s until 1937, there was a vague feeling that war must be avoided at all cost, and Britain and sometimes France drifted along, accepting the various acts of aggression and breaches of Versailles (Manchuria, Abyssinia, German rearmament, the Rhineland reoccupation).*
- 2 *When Neville Chamberlain became British prime minister in May 1937, he gave appeasement new drive; he believed in taking the initiative – he would find out what Hitler wanted and show him that reasonable claims could be met *by negotiation rather than by force.**

The beginnings of appeasement can be seen in British policy during the 1920s with the Dawes and Young Plans, which tried to conciliate the Germans, and also with the Locarno Treaties and their vital omission – Britain did not agree to guarantee Germany's eastern frontiers (see Map 5.3), which even Stresemann, the 'good German', said must be revised. When Austen Chamberlain, the British Foreign Minister (and Neville's half-brother), remarked at the time of Locarno that no British government would ever risk the bones of a single British grenadier in defence of the Polish Corridor, it seemed to the Germans that Britain had turned her back on eastern Europe. Appeasement reached its climax at Munich, where Britain and France were so determined to avoid war with Germany that they made Hitler a present of the Sudetenland, and so set in motion the destruction of Czechoslovakia. Even with such big concessions as this, appeasement failed.



Map 5.3 Hitler's gains before the Second World War

(b) How could appeasement be justified?

At the time appeasement was being followed, there seemed to be many very good things in its favour, and the appeasers (who included MacDonald, Baldwin, Simon and Hoare as well as Neville Chamberlain) were convinced that their policy was right:

- 1 *It was thought essential to avoid war*, which was likely to be even more devastating than ever before, as the horrors of the Spanish Civil War demonstrated. The great fear was the bombing of defenceless cities. Memories of the horrors of the First World War still haunted many people. Britain, still in the throes of the economic crisis, could not afford vast rearmament and the crippling expenses of a major war. British governments seemed to be supported by *a strongly pacifist public opinion*. In February 1933, in a much-publicized debate, the Oxford Union voted that it would not fight for King and Country. Baldwin and his National Government won a huge election victory in November 1935 shortly after he had declared: 'I give you my word of honour that there will be no great armaments.'
- 2 *Many felt that Germany and Italy had genuine grievances*. Italy had been cheated at Versailles and Germany had been treated too harshly. Therefore the British should show them sympathy – as far as the Germans were concerned, they should try and revise the most hated clauses of Versailles. This would remove the need for German aggression and lead to Anglo-German friendship.
- 3 Since the League of Nations seemed to be helpless, Chamberlain believed that the only way to settle disputes was by *personal contact between leaders*. In this way, he thought, he would be able to control and civilize Hitler, and Mussolini into the bargain, and bring them to respect international law.
- 4 *Economic co-operation between Britain and Germany would be good for both*. If Britain helped the German economy to recover, Germany's internal violence would die down.
- 5 *Fear of communist Russia* was great, especially among British Conservatives. Many of them believed that the communist threat was greater than the danger from Hitler. Some British politicians were willing to ignore the unpleasant features of Nazism in the hope that Hitler's Germany would be *a buffer against communist expansion westwards*. In fact, many admired Hitler's drive and his achievements.
- 6 Underlying all these feelings was the belief that Britain ought not to take any military action in case it led to *a full-scale war, for which Britain was totally unprepared*. British military chiefs told Chamberlain that Britain was not strong enough to fight a war against more than one country at the same time. Even the navy, which was the strongest in the world apart from the American navy, would have found it difficult to defend Britain's far-flung Empire and at the same time protect merchant shipping in the event of war against Germany, Japan and Italy simultaneously. The air force was woefully short of long-range bombers and fighters. The USA was still in favour of isolation and France was weak and divided. Chamberlain speeded up British rearmament so that 'nobody should treat her with anything but respect'. The longer appeasement lasted, the stronger Britain would become, and the more this would deter aggression, or so Chamberlain hoped.

(c) What part did appeasement play in international affairs, 1933–9?

Appeasement had a profound effect on the way international relations developed. Although it might have worked with some German governments, with Hitler it was

doomed to failure. Many historians believe that it convinced Hitler of the complacency and weakness of Britain and France to such an extent that he was willing to risk attacking Poland, thereby starting the Second World War.

It is important to emphasize that appeasement was mainly a British policy, with which the French did not always agree. Poincaré stood up to the Germans (see Section 4.2(c)), and although Briand was in favour of conciliation, even he drew the line at the proposed Austro-German customs union in 1931. Louis Barthou, foreign minister for a few months in 1934, believed in firmness towards Hitler and aimed to build up a strong anti-German group which would include Italy and the USSR. This is why he pressed for Russia's entry into the League of Nations, which took place in September 1934. He told the British that France 'refused to legalize German rearmament', contrary to the Versailles Treaties. Unfortunately Barthou was assassinated in October 1934, along with King Alexander of Yugoslavia, who was on a state visit to France. They were both shot by Croat terrorists shortly after the king had arrived in Marseilles. Barthou's successor, Pierre Laval, signed an alliance with Russia in May 1935, though it was a weak affair – there was no provision in it for military co-operation, since Laval distrusted the communists. He pinned his main hopes on friendship with Mussolini, but these were dashed by the failure of the Hoare–Laval Pact (see Section 5.2(b)). After this the French were so deeply split between left and right that no decisive foreign policy seemed possible; since the right admired Hitler, the French fell in behind the British.

Examples of appeasement at work

- 1 *No action was taken to check the obvious German rearmament.* Lord Lothian, a Liberal, had a revealing comment to make about this, after visiting Hitler in January 1935: 'I am convinced that Hitler does not want war ... what the Germans are after is a strong army which will enable them to deal with Russia.'
- 2 *The Anglo-German Naval Agreement* condoning German naval rearmament was signed without any consultation with France and Italy. This broke the Stresa Front, gravely shook French confidence in Britain, and encouraged Laval to look for understandings with Mussolini and Hitler.
- 3 There was only *half-hearted British action against the Italian invasion of Abyssinia.*
- 4 The French, though disturbed at the German reoccupation of the Rhineland (March 1936), *did not mobilize their troops.* They were deeply divided, and ultra cautious, and they received no backing from the British, who were impressed by Hitler's offer of a 25-year peace. In fact, Lord Londonderry (a Conservative, and Secretary of State for Air from 1931 to 1935), was reported to have sent Hitler a telegram congratulating him on his success. Lord Lothian remarked that German troops had merely entered their own 'back garden'.
- 5 *Neither Britain nor France intervened in the Spanish Civil War,* though Germany and Italy sent decisive help to Franco. Britain tried to entice Mussolini to remove his troops by officially recognizing Italian possession of Abyssinia (April 1938); however, Mussolini failed to keep his side of the bargain.
- 6 Though both Britain and France protested strongly at the *Anschluss* between Germany and Austria (March 1938), many in Britain saw it as *the natural union of one German group with another.* But Britain's lack of action encouraged Hitler to make demands on Czechoslovakia, which produced Chamberlain's supreme act of appeasement and Hitler's greatest triumph to date – Munich.

5.5 MUNICH TO THE OUTBREAK OF WAR: SEPTEMBER 1938 TO SEPTEMBER 1939

This fateful year saw Hitler waging two pressure campaigns: the first against Czechoslovakia, the second against Poland.

(a) Czechoslovakia

It seems likely that Hitler had decided to destroy Czechoslovakia as part of his *Lebensraum* (living space) policy, and because he detested the Czechs for their democracy, for the fact that they were Slavs, and because their state had been set up by the hated Versailles settlement (see Section 4.4(b) for the situation in Czechoslovakia). Its situation was strategically important – control of the area would bring great advantages for Germany's military and economic dominance of central Europe.

1 *The propaganda campaign in the Sudetenland*

Hitler's excuse for the opening propaganda campaign was that 3.5 million Sudeten Germans, under their leader Konrad Henlein, were being discriminated against by the Czech government. It is true that unemployment was more serious among the Germans, but this was because a large proportion of them worked in industry, where unemployment was most severe because of the depression. The Nazis organized huge protest demonstrations in the Sudetenland, and clashes occurred between Czechs and Germans. The Czech president, Edvard Beneš, feared that Hitler was stirring up the disturbances so that German troops could march in 'to restore order'. Chamberlain and Daladier, the French prime minister, were afraid that if this happened, war would break out. They were determined to go to almost any lengths to avoid war, and they put tremendous pressure on the Czechs to make concessions to Hitler.

Eventually Beneš agreed that the Sudeten Germans might be handed over to Germany. Chamberlain flew to Germany and had talks with Hitler at Berchtesgaden (15 September), explaining the offer. Hitler seemed to accept, but at a second meeting at Godesberg only a week later, he stepped up his demands: he wanted more of Czechoslovakia and the immediate entry of German troops into the Sudetenland. Beneš would not agree to this and immediately ordered the mobilization of the Czech army. The Czechs had put great effort into fortifying their frontiers with Germany, Austria and Hungary, building bunkers and anti-tank defences. Their army had been expanded, and they were hopeful that with help from their allies, particularly France and the USSR, any German attack could be repulsed. It would certainly not have been a walkover for the Germans.

2 *The Munich Conference, 29 September 1938*

When it seemed that war was inevitable, Hitler invited Chamberlain and Daladier to a four-power conference, which met in Munich. Here a plan produced by Mussolini (but actually written by the German Foreign Office) was accepted. The Sudetenland was to be handed over to Germany immediately, Poland was given Teschen and Hungary received South Slovakia. Germany, along with the other three powers, guaranteed the rest of Czechoslovakia. Neither the Czechs nor the Russians were invited to the conference. The Czechs were told that if they resisted the Munich decision, they would receive no help from Britain or France, even though France had guaranteed the Czech frontiers at Locarno. Given this betrayal by France and the unsympathetic attitude of Britain, Czech military resistance seemed hopeless: they had no choice but to go along with the decision of the conference. A few days later Beneš resigned.

The morning after the Munich Conference, Chamberlain had a private meeting with Hitler at which they both signed a statement, the 'scrap of paper', prepared by Chamberlain, promising that Britain and Germany would renounce warlike intentions against each other and would use consultation to deal with any problems that might arise. When Chamberlain arrived back in Britain, waving the 'scrap of paper' for the benefit of the newsreel cameras, he was given a rapturous welcome by the public, who thought war had been averted. Chamberlain himself remarked: 'I believe it is peace for our time.'

However, not everybody was so enthusiastic: Churchill called Munich 'a total and unmitigated defeat'; Duff Cooper, the First Lord of the Admiralty, resigned from the cabinet, saying that Hitler could not be trusted to keep the agreement. They were right.

3 *The destruction of Czechoslovakia, March 1939*

As a result of the Munich Agreement, Czechoslovakia was crippled by the loss of 70 per cent of her heavy industry, a third of her population, roughly a third of her territory and almost all her carefully prepared fortifications, mostly to Germany. Slovakia and Ruthenia were given self-government for internal affairs, though there was still a central government in Prague. Early in 1939 Slovakia, encouraged by Germany, began to demand complete independence from Prague and it looked as if the country was about to fall apart. Hitler put pressure on the Slovak prime minister, Father Jozef Tiso, to declare independence and request German help, but Tiso was ultra-cautious.

It was the new Czech president, Emil Hacha, who brought matters to a head. On 9 March 1939 the Prague government moved against the Slovaks to forestall the expected declaration of independence: their cabinet was deposed, Tiso was placed under house arrest, and the Slovak government buildings in Bratislava were occupied by police. This gave Hitler his chance to act: Tiso was brought to Berlin, where Hitler convinced him that the time was now ripe. Back in Bratislava, Tiso and the Slovaks proclaimed independence (14 March); the next day they asked for German protection, although, as Ian Kershaw points out (in *Hitler, 1936–1945: Nemesis*), this was only 'after German warships on the Danube had trained their sights on the Slovakian government offices'.

Next, President Hacha was invited to Berlin, where Hitler told him that in order to protect the German Reich, a protectorate must be imposed over what was left of Czechoslovakia. German troops were poised to enter his country, and Hacha was to order the Czech army not to resist. Goering threatened that Prague would be bombed if he refused. Faced with such a browbeating, Hacha felt he had no alternative but to agree. Consequently, on 15 March 1939 German troops occupied the rest of Czechoslovakia while the Czech army remained in barracks. Bohemia and Moravia (the main Czech areas) were declared a protectorate within the German Reich, Slovakia was to be an independent state but under the protection of the Reich, and Ruthenia was occupied by Hungarian troops. Britain and France protested but as usual took no action. Chamberlain said the guarantee of Czech frontiers given at Munich did not apply, because technically the country had not been invaded – German troops had entered by invitation. Hitler was greeted with enthusiasm when he visited the Sudetenland.

However, the German action caused a great outburst of criticism: for the first time even the appeasers were unable to justify what Hitler had done – he had broken his promise and seized non-German territory. Even Chamberlain felt this was going too far, and his attitude hardened.

(b) Poland

After taking over the Lithuanian port of Memel (which was admittedly peopled largely by Germans), Hitler turned his attentions to Poland.

1 *Hitler demands the return of Danzig*

The Germans resented the loss of Danzig and the Polish Corridor, at Versailles, and now that Czechoslovakia was safely out of the way, Polish neutrality was no longer necessary. In April 1939 Hitler demanded *the return of Danzig and a road and railway across the corridor, linking East Prussia with the rest of Germany*. This demand was, in fact, not unreasonable, since Danzig was mainly German-speaking; but with it coming so soon after the seizure of Czechoslovakia, the Poles were convinced that the German demands were only the preliminary to an invasion. Already fortified by a British promise of help ‘in the event of any action which clearly threatened Polish independence’, the Foreign Minister, Colonel Beck, rejected the German demands and refused to attend a conference; no doubt he was afraid of another Munich. British pressure on the Poles to surrender Danzig was to no avail. Hitler was probably surprised by Beck’s stubbornness, and was still hoping to remain on good terms with the Poles, at least for the time being.

2 *The Germans invade Poland*

The only way the British promise of help to Poland could be made effective was through an alliance with Russia. But the British were so slow and hesitant in their negotiations for an alliance that Hitler got in first and signed *a non-aggression pact with the USSR*. They also reached a secret agreement *to divide Poland up between Germany and the USSR* (24 August). Hitler was convinced now that with Russia neutral, Britain and France would not risk intervention; when the British ratified their guarantee to Poland, Hitler took it as a bluff. When the Poles still refused to negotiate, a full-scale German invasion began, early on 1 September 1939.

Chamberlain had still not completely thrown off appeasement and suggested that if German troops were withdrawn, a conference could be held – there was no response from the Germans. Only when pressure mounted in parliament and in the country did Chamberlain send an ultimatum to Germany: if German troops were not withdrawn from Poland, Britain would declare war. Hitler did not even bother to reply; when the ultimatum expired, at 11 a.m. on 3 September, Britain was at war with Germany. Soon afterwards, France also declared war.

5.6 WHY DID WAR BREAK OUT? WERE HITLER OR THE APPEASERS TO BLAME?

The debate is still going on about who or what was responsible for the Second World War.

- The Versailles Treaties have been blamed for filling the Germans with bitterness and the desire for revenge.
- The League of Nations and the idea of collective security have been criticized because they failed to secure general disarmament and to control potential aggressors.
- The world economic crisis has been mentioned (see Sections 14.1(e–f) and 22.6(c)), since without it, Hitler would probably never have been able to come to power.

While these factors no doubt helped to create the sort of atmosphere and tensions which might well lead to a war, something more was needed. It is worth remembering also that by the end of 1938, most of Germany’s grievances had been removed: reparations were largely cancelled, the disarmament clauses had been ignored, the Rhineland was remilitarized, Austria and Germany were united, and 3.5 million Germans had been brought into the Reich from Czechoslovakia. Germany was a great power again. So what went wrong?

(a) Were the appeasers to blame?

Some historians have suggested that appeasement was largely responsible for the situation deteriorating into war. They argue that *Britain and France should have taken a firm line with Hitler before Germany had become too strong*: an Anglo-French attack on western Germany in 1936 at the time of the Rhineland occupation would have taught Hitler a lesson and might have toppled him from power. By giving way to him, the appeasers increased his prestige at home. As Alan Bullock wrote, 'success and the absence of resistance tempted Hitler to reach out further, to take bigger risks'. He may not have had definite plans for war, but after the surrender at Munich, he was so convinced that Britain and France would remain passive again, that he decided to gamble on war with Poland.

Chamberlain has also been criticized for choosing the wrong issue over which to make a stand against Hitler. It is argued that German claims for Danzig and routes across the corridor were more reasonable than the demands for the Sudetenland (which contained almost a million non-Germans). Poland was difficult for Britain and France to defend and was militarily much weaker than Czechoslovakia. Chamberlain therefore should have made his stand at Munich and backed the Czechs, who were militarily and industrially strong and had excellent fortifications.

Chamberlain's defenders, on the other hand, claim that his main motive at Munich was to give Britain time to rearm for an eventual fight against Hitler. Arguably Munich did gain a crucial year during which Britain was able to press ahead with its rearmament programme. John Charmley, in his book *Chamberlain and the Lost Peace* (1989), argues that Chamberlain had very little option but to act as he did, and that Chamberlain's policies were far more realistic than any of the possible alternatives – such as building up a Grand Alliance, including Britain, France, Poland, Czechoslovakia, Romania and the USSR. This idea was suggested at the time by Churchill, but Andrew Roberts (2006) argues that this was never a serious possibility because of the many points of disagreement between them. Chamberlain's most recent biographer, Robert Self (2007), believes that he had very few viable alternatives and deserves great credit for trying to prevent war. Surely any 'normal' leader, like Stresemann, for example, would have responded positively to Chamberlain's reasonable policies; sadly Hitler was not the typical German statesman. Having said all this, arguably Britain and France must at least share the responsibility for war in 1939. As Richard Overy pointed out in *The Origins of the Second World War* (2nd edition, 1998):

It must not be forgotten that war in 1939 was declared by Britain and France on Germany, and not the other way round. Why did the two western powers go to war with Germany? Britain and France had complex interests and motives for war. They too had to take decisions on international questions with one eye on public opinion and another on potential enemies elsewhere. ... British and French policy before 1939 was governed primarily by national self-interest and only secondarily by moral considerations. In other words, the British and French, just like the Germans, were anxious to preserve or extend their power and safeguard their economic interests. In the end this meant going to war in 1939 to preserve Franco-British power and prestige.

(b) Did the USSR make war inevitable?

The USSR has been accused of making war inevitable by signing the non-aggression pact with Germany on 23 August 1939, which also included a secret agreement for Poland to be partitioned between Germany and the USSR. It is argued that Stalin ought to have allied with the west and with Poland, thus frightening Hitler into keeping the peace. On the other

hand, the British were most reluctant to ally with the Russians; Chamberlain distrusted them (because they were communists) and so did the Poles, and he thought they were militarily weak. Russian historians justify the pact on the grounds that it gave the USSR time to prepare its defences against a possible German attack.

(c) Was Hitler to blame?

During and immediately after the war there was general agreement outside Germany that Hitler was to blame. By attacking Poland on all fronts instead of merely occupying Danzig and the Corridor, Hitler showed that he intended not just to get back the Germans lost at Versailles, but to destroy Poland. Martin Gilbert argues that his motive was to remove the stigma of defeat in the First World War: 'for the only antidote to defeat in one war is victory in the next'. Hugh Trevor-Roper and many other historians believe that *Hitler intended a major war right from the beginning*. They argue that he hated communism and wanted to destroy Russia and control it permanently. In this way, Germany would acquire *Lebensraum*, but it could only be achieved by a major war. The destruction of Poland was an essential preliminary to the invasion of Russia. The German non-aggression pact with Russia was simply a way of lulling Russian suspicions and keeping her neutral until Poland had been dealt with.

Evidence for this theory is taken from statements in Hitler's book *Mein Kampf* (*My Struggle*) and from the Hossbach Memorandum, a summary made by Hitler's adjutant, Colonel Hossbach, of a meeting held in November 1937, at which Hitler explained his expansionist plans to his generals. Another important source of evidence is Hitler's *Secret Book*, which he finished around 1928 but never published.

If this theory is correct, appeasement cannot be blamed as a cause of war, except that it made things easier for Hitler. Hitler had his plans, his 'blueprint' for action, and this meant that war was inevitable sooner or later. Germans, on the whole, were happy with this interpretation too. If Hitler was to blame, and Hitler and the Nazis could be viewed as a kind of grotesque accident, a temporary 'blip' in German history, that meant that the German people were largely free from blame.

Not everybody accepted this interpretation. A. J. P. Taylor, in his book *The Origins of the Second World War* (1961), came up with the most controversial theory about the outbreak of the war. He believed that *Hitler did not intend to cause a major war, and expected at the most, a short war with Poland*. According to Taylor, Hitler's aims were similar to those of previous German rulers – Hitler was simply continuing the policies of leaders like Bismarck, Kaiser Wilhelm II and Stresemann; the only difference was that Hitler's methods were more ruthless. Hitler was a brilliant opportunist taking advantage of the mistakes of the appeasers and of events such as the crisis in Czechoslovakia in February 1939. Taylor thought the German occupation of the rest of Czechoslovakia in March 1939 was not the result of a sinister long-term plan; 'it was the unforeseen by-product of events in Slovakia' (the Slovak demand for more independence from the Prague government). Whereas Chamberlain miscalculated when he thought he could make Hitler respectable and civilized, Hitler misread the minds of Chamberlain and the British. How could Hitler foresee that the British and French would be so inconsistent as to support Poland (where his claim to land was more reasonable) after giving way to him over Czechoslovakia (where his case was much less valid)?

Thus, for Taylor, Hitler was lured into the war almost by accident, after the Poles had called his bluff. 'The war of 1939, far from being premeditated, was a mistake, the result on both sides of diplomatic blunders.' Many people in Britain were outraged at Taylor because they thought he was trying to 'whitewash' Hitler. But Taylor was not defending Hitler; just the opposite, in fact – Hitler was still to blame, and so were the German people,

for being aggressive. 'Hitler was the creation of German history and of the German present. He would have counted for nothing without the support and cooperation of the German people. ... Many hundred thousand Germans carried out his evil orders without qualm or question.'

Most recent interpretations have tended to play down Taylor's 'continuity' theory and highlight the *differences in aims between earlier German rulers on the one hand, and Hitler and the Nazis on the other*. Until 1937, Nazi foreign policy could be seen as typically conservative and nationalistic. It was only when all the wrongs of Versailles had been put right – the main aim of the conservatives and nationalists – that the crucial differences began to be revealed. The Hossbach memorandum shows that Hitler was preparing to go much further and embark on an ambitious expansionist policy. But there was more to it even than that. As Neil Gregor points out (2003), what Hitler had in mind was 'a racial war of destruction quite unlike that experienced in 1914–18'. It began with the dismemberment of Poland, continued with the attack on the USSR, and culminated in an horrific genocidal war – the destruction of the Jews and other groups which the Nazis considered inferior to the German master race; and the destruction of communism. 'Nazism was a destructive new force whose vision of imperial domination was radically different' from anything that had gone before.

Another explanation of why Hitler decided to risk war in September 1939 was put forward by Adam Tooze in his book *The Wages of Destruction: The Making and Breaking of the Nazi Economy* (2006). His theory is that Hitler was afraid that the longer he delayed the inevitable war, the greater the danger that Britain and France would overtake German rearmament. According to Tooze, 'Hitler knew that he would eventually have to confront the Western powers. And in the autumn of 1939 he attacked Poland because he had decided that he was willing to risk that wider war sooner rather than later. ... The military advantage that Germany currently enjoyed over its enemies was fleeting.' Germany had been steadily rearming, even before Hitler came to power. From 1936, when the Four Year Plan was introduced, until 1939, no less than two thirds of all investment in industry was for producing war materials. Richard Overby points out that in 1939 about a quarter of the industrial workforce was employed on military orders, 'a figure unmatched by any other state in Europe'. The problem was that the German armaments industry was running short of raw materials, mainly because Germany's shortage of foreign exchange made it impossible to import sufficient quantities of iron and copper ore. Throughout the interwar period the Reichsmark was chronically overvalued, making exports uncompetitive. Hitler complained that Germany's enemies, egged on by their Jewish backers, had closed their borders to German exports. To make matters worse, in response to the German occupation of Prague, in March 1939 President Roosevelt of the USA placed punitive tariffs on imports from Germany. As Tooze explains:

Hitler might have wished to fight the big war against Britain and France at a moment of his choosing at some point in the early 1940s, but by early 1939 the pace of events had rendered such long-term plans impractical. With America, France and Britain appearing to grow ever closer together, there was no time to lose. If Hitler's sworn enemies were improvising, so would he. It was time to wager everything. Otherwise, faced by a global coalition animated by its implacable Jewish enemies, Germany would face certain ruin.

What conclusion are we to reach? Today, over forty years after Taylor published his famous book, very few historians accept his theory that Hitler had no long-term plans for war. Some recent writers believe that Taylor ignored much evidence which did not fit in with his own theory. It is true that some of Hitler's successes came through clever opportunism, but there was much more behind it than that. Although he probably did not have

a long-term, detailed step-by-step plan worked out, he clearly had a basic vision, which he was working towards at every opportunity. That vision was a Europe dominated by Germany, and it could only be achieved by war. This is why there was so much emphasis on rearmament from 1936 onwards. Clearly Hitler intended much more than self-defence.

There can be little doubt, then, that Hitler *was* largely responsible for the war. The German historian Eberhard Jäckel, writing in 1984, claimed that

Hitler set himself two goals: a war of conquest and the elimination of the Jews. ... [his] ultimate goal was the establishment of a greater Germany than had ever existed before in history. The way to this greater Germany was a war of conquest fought mainly at the expense of Soviet Russia ... where the German nation was to gain living space for generations to come. ... Militarily the war would be easy because Germany would be opposed only by a disorganized country of Jewish Bolsheviks and incompetent Slavs.

So it was probably not a *world* war that Hitler had in mind. Alan Bullock believed that he did not want a war with Britain; all he asked was that the British should not interfere with his expansion in Europe and should allow him to defeat Poland and the USSR in separate campaigns. Richard Overy agrees, pointing out that there is no evidence that Hitler ever thought of declaring war on Britain and France. He hoped to keep the war with Poland localized and then turn to the main campaign – the destruction of the USSR. Hitler was responsible for the war because he failed to realise that as far as Britain and France were concerned, the attack on Poland was one step too far.

Hitler's most recent biographer, Ian Kershaw, sees no reason to change the general conclusion that Hitler must take the blame:

Hitler had never doubted, and had said so on innumerable occasions, that Germany's future could only be determined through war. ... War – the essence of the Nazi system which had developed under his leadership – was for Hitler inevitable. Only the timing and direction were at issue. And there was no time to wait.

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