As you have read, there were problems with peacekeeping in the 1920s, and there were aggressive and expansionist states that were threatening peace (Japan in Manchuria and Italy in Abyssinia) in the 1930s. Yet according to some historians, and according to Britain’s wartime leader, Winston Churchill, World War II was primarily caused by the ambitions and policies of Adolf Hitler – the conflict was ‘Hitler’s War’.

In his account of the causes of World War II, *The Second World War: Volume One, The Gathering Storm*, 1948, Winston Churchill asserted that Hitler had a master plan for the domination of Europe, which Hitler had outlined in his book *Mein Kampf* (‘My Struggle’; 1925–26). Churchill went on to suggest that the ‘granite pillars’ of his plan had been to reunite Germans in a Great German Empire and to conquer Eastern Europe by force. War was inevitable to attaining these goals, and Hitler pursued these ambitions by creating
a militarized nation. In Churchill’s analysis, the turning point was 1935 when Germany rearmed; from that point on war was the only way to stop Hitler.

As you read through this chapter, consider whether or not you agree with Churchill’s perspective on events leading to war in Europe.

**Hitler’s foreign policy aims: 1919–33**

Hitler had fought in World War I, and the war left its mark on the young Austrian. He had been temporarily blinded in a gas attack, and it was while he was recovering in hospital that he heard of Germany’s surrender. It was then, Hitler has stated, that he decided to ‘go into politics’.

With the defeat of Russia on the Eastern Front, and the terms of the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk in 1917, Germany had almost realized the domination of Eastern Europe (Poland and Lithuania became German territories). These gains, however, were lost when Germany was defeated on the Western Front. Nevertheless, as both the Russian and Austro-Hungarian Empires had fallen, Germany was left in a potentially dominant position in continental Europe, even after the peace settlements. If you look back to the terms of the Treaty of Versailles in Chapter 4, the perceived severity of the treaty meant that Germans, even democratic ones, wanted to reverse the settlement. Most could not accept the severe losses, particularly of territory to Poland. In addition, German commitment to making reparation payments was limited.

Nazi foreign policy was shaped by this historical context, but Adolf Hitler also had ambitions that went beyond redressing the outcome of World War I. In 1919, Hitler became the 55th member of a new political party, led by Anton Drexler, the Deutsche Arbeiterpartei (DAP; German Workers’ Party), later renamed the Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei (NSDAP; National Socialist German Workers’ Party) in 1920. By 1921, Hitler had become party leader. This ‘Nazi’ Party set down a 25-point programme, which included key objectives such as the union of all Germans, an end to the Treaty of Versailles, a strong state, the creation of a national army and the exclusion of Jews from German society. The programme is clear evidence that Hitler had long-term objectives that would cause tension, and potentially conflict, in Europe.

In November 1923, Hitler and his Nazis attempted to seize power in a coup d’état in Munich – known as the Munich Beer Hall Putsch (putsch is the German word for coup). The attempt failed, and Hitler was sent to prison for nine months. It was while serving his sentence in prison that Hitler wrote *Mein Kampf*. The book was a combination of autobiography and political philosophy – it covered racist and authoritarian theories and ideas for the direction of Nazi foreign policy. In this book, Hitler asserted the need for German racial purity and the absolute need to acquire ‘living space’ for the German population, known as Lebensraum.

> Only an adequate large space on this earth assured a nation of freedom of existence... We must hold unflinchingly to our aim ... to secure for the German people the land and soil to which they are entitled.

> From Adolf Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, 1925

The historian Andreas Hillgruber suggested that the plans set down in *Mein Kampf* could be viewed as Hitler’s Stufenplan or ‘stage-by-stage plan’. The first stage would be the termination of the Treaty of Versailles, and the formation of an alliance with Britain and Italy. The second stage would be a war against France and her Eastern European allies; and the last stage would be a war with the USSR. Hitler, however, did not use the
term Stufenplan in his book. Indeed, Mein Kampf’s value as evidence of war planning by Hitler has been debated by historians. Statements like the quotation above were taken by many people as evidence of Hitler’s clear intention for world domination. A.J.P. Taylor, by contrast, sees Mein Kampf as rather more irrelevant – just a work of wishful thinking by a then-failed revolutionary.

The Nazi Party did not do well in the German elections in 1928; Hitler retreated to Munich to dictate another book, Zweites Buch, known as the ‘Secret Book’ of 1928. This book provides historians with further evidence of Hitler’s longer-term ambitions, and his more consistent foreign policy objectives. In the book, Hitler develops many of the foreign policy ideas he discussed in Mein Kampf, although he suggests that in the 1930s a final struggle would take place for world hegemony between the USA and the combined forces of a ‘Greater Germany’ and the British Empire. Hitler also wrote here about his admiration for Mussolini, and his anger towards the German Chancellor Gustav Stresemann, whose foreign policy ambition was to return Germany to its pre-1914 borders. Hitler saw this goal as far too limited. He restated his principal aim of attaining vast territories of Lebensraum, space to be taken from the USSR. The overthrow of Versailles was just the preamble to this objective.

**Hitler’s rise to power**

As we saw in Chapter 5, there was a period of optimism in international relations in the 1920s. From Locarno in 1925, to the Kellogg–Briand Pact in 1928 and the commencement of the World Disarmament Conference in 1932, there had been a sense of international cooperation and accord, which was manifest in the new League of Nations organization. Indeed, Germany had signed or been involved with all these agreements. Yet the stability was fragile, and the weaknesses of the League to maintain peace by collective security had been tested and found wanting before Hitler came to power in Germany. The Great Depression undermined both the League’s ability to resist aggressor states, and the willingness of member states to work together.

The impact of the global economic crisis was particularly dramatic in Weimar Germany (see Chapter 4). The mass unemployment and despair that followed assisted Hitler’s rise to power. Indeed, the Nazi Party’s success at the polls directly correlated with the degree
of unemployment in Germany (see graph); the more unemployed there were, the more successful the Nazis were in elections. In the end, Hitler was able to come to power legally; a group of conservative politicians, including the President, General von Hindenburg, concluded that Hitler would be useful to have on their side. They believed that they would be able to control him. Thus, Hitler became Chancellor of Germany, democratically, in January 1933. He was now able to pursue his long-term ambitions.

It could be argued that Hitler had to pursue certain aggressive foreign policy objectives, as such aims had brought him to power. His attack on the Treaty of Versailles and those who had signed it meant that many Germans believed he and the Nazis would restore Germany’s international prestige through crushing the treaty. In addition, Hitler had been brought to power with the assistance of other right-wing parties in the Weimar Republic; much of this support was gained because of the Nazis’ stated foreign policy ambitions.

Between 1933 and 1934, Hitler consolidated his control in Germany. He gained the tacit cooperation of the army and the industrialists, who both believed Hitler would bring in a massive programme of rearmament. The Nazi regime was totalitarian, and the rights of its citizens were subordinate to the state. Ultimately, this meant that the Nazis could gear domestic policy to meet the needs of its expansionist foreign policy. Military conscription and rearmament, meanwhile, could relieve mass unemployment.

**Hitler and the short-term causes of World War II (1933–38)**

As we have seen, there is evidence in the longer term that Hitler had a consistent ambition to control ‘race and space’ – the Nazis wanted racial purity and Lebensraum. These themes are consistent in his speeches, writing and policy statements throughout the 1920s, and then, once in power, appear to be consistent in the direction Hitler steered Germany through the 1930s. It would seem that neither of these objectives could be obtained without war.

**Revising the Treaty of Versailles**

Between 1933 and 1935, Hitler set about revising the Treaty of Versailles, a process that led to tension in Europe and placed pressure on the League of Nations. Hitler began by attacking reparations. Although repayment of reparations had been suspended before Hitler came to power, in 1933 he announced that the Nazis would not resume payments. The declaration was good propaganda, but was not a major cause of international friction, as most powers had already accepted this. What did increase tension was Hitler’s intention to rearm Germany. As we have seen, Hitler manipulated the reluctance of France towards embracing general disarmament to justify Germany’s withdrawal from the Disarmament Conference in 1933. German military spending in the year 1934–35 increased fivefold when compared to that of 1933–34. Historian Ted Townley writes in *Hitler and the Road to War*,

STUDENT STUDY SECTION

**Review questions**

1. From what you have read so far, what evidence is there that Hitler had a long-term plan that would lead to a general European war?

2. To what extent should a) German moderates and b) foreign governments have been aware of the potential danger of Hitler?

3. How far do you agree that the Nazis’ popularity was due to the economic crisis in Germany?
‘For whatever final purpose, Hitler worked at this time to create a German economy that would provide total industrial backing for the German military.’

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>GERMAN MILITARY EXPENDITURE</th>
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<tr>
<td>Fiscal period</td>
<td>Million marks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1933–34</td>
<td>750</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1934–35</td>
<td>4,093</td>
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<tr>
<td>1935–36</td>
<td>5,492</td>
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<tr>
<td>1936–37</td>
<td>10,271</td>
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<tr>
<td>1937–38</td>
<td>10,963</td>
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<tr>
<td>1938–39</td>
<td>17,247</td>
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Hitler again showed his contempt for the Versailles settlement when he withdrew Germany from the League of Nations in 1933. Leaving the League, plus open rearmament, had put Germany on a new path. The Weimar Republic had attempted to work with the international community and the League to rehabilitate Germany. Hitler’s new course, by contrast, alarmed the other powers, who were still suffering the effects of the Depression and therefore had limited means to respond.

Germany’s rearmament can be seen as the fundamental first step in facilitating Hitler’s expansionist foreign policy. Hitler’s next step was to sign the ten-year ‘Non-Aggression Pact’ with Poland in January 1934. Although Germany resented Poland on account of the ‘Polish corridor’ separating Germany from East Prussia, Hitler had gone ahead with this agreement to secure his eastern border. Some historians, for example William Shirer in *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich*, regard this agreement as evidence of Hitler’s plan to dominate Europe. The terms of the pact not only secured Germany’s eastern border with Poland, it also undermined the French alliance system in Eastern Europe – the Little Entente – as it directly countered the Franco-Polish Alliance of 1925. To some extent, it also gave the impression to the international community that Hitler’s intentions were ultimately peaceful.

Hitler’s attention then turned to Austria. One of Hitler’s stated objectives was to unify Austria with Germany, a policy outlined at some length in *Mein Kampf*. However, unification was forbidden by the Treaty of Versailles, and any attempt to achieve this might lead to confrontation with the European powers. Yet there were pro-Nazi groups in Austria, and in 1934 they murdered the Austrian Chancellor Engelbert Dollfuss and attempted to seize power in a coup. Initially, Hitler saw the coup as an opportunity to obtain his goal of *Anschluss*, but was deterred when the Austrian government crushed the coup and Mussolini sent troops to the border with Austria to warn Germany off.

Some historians have focused on this episode as evidence of Hitler’s ‘improvisation’ in foreign policy, and argue that it suggests he did not have a long-term plan. Others, however, argue that Hitler was not yet ready to pursue his expansionist ambitions. He was still developing the Nazi state within Germany.
Hitler was able to use the pro-German Saar plebiscite in 1935 as very positive propaganda. The Treaty of Versailles had set down that there would be self-determination in the Saar by a public vote or plebiscite. The plebiscite was held in 1935, and the result was overwhelming: 9–1 in favour of reuniting with Germany. With the Saar plebiscite acting as a boost to his ‘popular mandate’, Hitler announced he would introduce compulsory military service in Germany. This step, again, was a violation of the Treaty of Versailles. At the same time he announced the increase of his armaments programme. Hitler now declared the existence of an army of more than 500,000 men, and had admitted the existence of an air force. The other powers were deeply concerned, but continued to hope that a revision of Versailles would satisfy the more moderate elements of German society.

The European response

In a collective response to Hitler’s attacks on the Treaty of Versailles, in particular German rearmament, Britain, France and Italy joined together in the ‘Stresa Front’ (named after the town in Italy in which the agreement was signed). The three powers failed to finalize an agreement on how the Stresa Front would stop Hitler, and within a month the Stresa Front was shown to be meaningless when Britain and Germany signed a Naval Agreement. The Anglo-German Naval Agreement of 1935 allowed for a much larger German Navy than was permitted by the Treaty of Versailles, and thus indicated British acceptance of German rearmament. The British had not consulted the French in signing the agreement and were pursuing self-interest, as the agreement was an attempt by Britain to limit German naval expansion. It was another passive victory for Hitler, as Britain had in effect condoned or at least accepted German naval rearmament. It also revealed that Hitler’s aggression was successfully intimidating the other European powers.

Hitler was then able to manipulate the new international situation that had resulted from the Italian invasion of Abyssinia in October 1935. Abyssinia was a member of the League of Nations, and the invasion led to the breakdown of relations between Italy, Britain and France. Italy ultimately left the League and, with its humiliation at the hands of a key member state, the League was left impotent. Hitler’s expansionist plans, with his rearmed Germany, could enter their next phase.

German remilitarization of the Rhineland

Up until 1936, Hitler had been rather cautious. He had capitalized on the international understanding that his aims were to redress the ‘wrongs’ meted out to Germany at Versailles. Yet there had also been clear indications that his objectives were more extreme. In 1936 Hitler turned his attention to Germany’s western border. Versailles had made the Rhineland a demilitarized zone to help secure the border between Germany and France. France deemed this provision as a key element in its security, and thus any attempt to
remilitarize the area was potentially highly provocative. By this point, Hitler’s army had grown, he had the backing of the more extreme nationalists in Germany, and he had the advantage of the divisions between the European ‘defenders’ of the settlement. Hitler bided his time until it was clear that Italy was going to be victorious in Abyssinia.

Nevertheless, some of Hitler’s senior generals were concerned that France would take military action to defend the demilitarized zone; these included his commander-in-chief, Werner von Blomberg. Hitler assured them that he would pull out at the first sign of a French military response. The Germans sent 10,000 troops and 23,000 armed police into the Rhineland in March 1936. There was no response from the French or the British. In France, there was division over how to react, and no support from the British, who generally were against resistance. Some contemporaries, such as Winston Churchill, argued that this had been a crucial point at which Hitler could and should have been stopped. Not only was the German force relatively small, but stopping Germany at this point would have undermined Hitler’s position both politically and militarily. Nevertheless, you will read later in this chapter that the reality of the situation for Britain and France was complicated. Hitler remilitarized the Rhineland, and moved on to his next objective.

Hitler’s involvement in the Spanish Civil War

Hitler had entered the Rhineland while Mussolini was occupying international attention in Africa. When the League criticized Italian action in Abyssinia, however, Italy and Germany grew closer together. With the outbreak of a civil war in Spain in 1936 (see Chapter 12), both Germany and Italy sent support to Franco’s forces. Germany’s involvement in the Spanish Civil War was more limited than Italy’s; for example, there were never more than 10,000 Germans fighting in Spain, whereas Italy had seven times that number. Hitler’s motives for getting involved were not simply to benefit from another right-wing government in power in Europe, but also to test out Germany’s new and improved armed forces. The nature of the German involvement in Spain is further evidence to support the argument that Hitler was preparing his forces for the realities of war in Europe. Infamously, at Guernica in northern Spain on 26 April 1937, the bombers of Hitler’s Condor Legion tested out the effectiveness of civilian aerial bombing. It was an ominous indication of what was to come.

Rome–Berlin Axis and the Anti-Comintern Pact

A treaty of friendship between Germany and Italy was concluded in October 1936, and in November Mussolini first suggested the idea of a Rome–Berlin Axis around which the other European countries would revolve. Hitler broadened his alliance base when Germany signed the Anti-Comintern Pact with Japan in November 1936. In 1937 Italy joined the pact. The Nazi Foreign Minister, Joachim von Ribbentrop, believed Japan could be used as a force to counter Britain and Russia in Asia. The intention was that, by using Japan to apply pressure in Asia, Hitler would meet less resistance to his expansionist aims in Europe.

The Anti-Comintern Pact

The Communist International (Comintern) was an international organization set up in the Soviet Union in 1919 with the aim of spreading world revolution. In November 1936, Germany and Japan signed the Anti-Comintern Pact, which was later joined by Mussolini. This pact was directed against the Comintern in general, and the Soviet Union in particular. In case of an attack by the Soviet Union against Germany or Japan, the two countries agreed to consult on what measures to take ‘to safeguard their common interests’. They also agreed that neither of them would make any political treaties with the Soviet Union, and Germany also agreed to recognize Manchukuo. When Italy joined the pact, the alliance of what would become known as the Axis powers was now formed.

A photograph of the destroyed city of Guernica. Hitler’s Condor Legion bombed the city in April 1937.
The Hossbach Memorandum

In August 1936 Hitler launched the ‘Four Year Plan’ designed to prepare the German economy for war by 1940. Then on 5 November 1937, he called a meeting in the Reich Chancellery in Berlin. This meeting was to result in the now infamous ‘Hossbach Memorandum’. Present at the meeting were the key military men of Hitler’s Germany. According to the minute-taker, Colonel Friedrich Hossbach, Hitler opened the meeting by suggesting that the subject for discussion was of the utmost importance, indeed too important for a wider discussion in the Reichstag. Hitler, Hossbach wrote, then went on to add that in the event of his death, the points he made at the meeting regarding Germany’s long-term policy should be regarded as his ‘last will and testament’. Hitler proceeded by stating that the key aim of German policy was to secure and preserve the racial community and to enlarge it. He then addressed the questions of when and how. Hitler suggested that after the period 1943–45, the international situation would not be favourable to German ambitions; the re-equipping and organization of the armed forces was nearly complete, and any delay could result in ‘their obsolescence’. The meeting considered scenarios in which France would be less of a threat, e.g. domestic problems or a war with another nation, and the necessity of Germany seizing the initiative to take territory (e.g. Czechoslovakia and Austria). The second part of the conference focused on ‘concrete questions of armament.’

This meeting has been seen by some historians as evidence of Hitler planning a general war, while others have questioned its importance. Many historians have agreed with the conclusions of Anthony P. Adamthwaite about the Hossbach Memorandum: ‘…there is no reason why the memorandum should not be accepted as a guide to Hitler’s ideas on foreign policy. The Hossbach Memorandum confirms the continuity of Hitler’s thinking: the primacy of force in world politics, conquest of living space in the east, anti-Bolshevism, hostility to France. Hitler’s warlike intentions were now explicit’ (Anthony Adamthwaite, *The Making of the Second World War*, 1989).

<table>
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<th>Review and research questions</th>
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<tr>
<td>1 What key aims does Hitler set down for German foreign policy during the Hossbach meeting?</td>
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<td>2 Hitler did not seem interested in retaining the minutes of this meeting (none were taken). Is this significant?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Compare and contrast the nature and importance of the Hossbach meeting in November 1937 to the German War Council meeting in December 1912.</td>
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<tr>
<td>4 Read through a copy of the Hossbach Memorandum at The Avalon Project (see Internet links section at the back of this book). Would you identify any other points that suggest Hitler is planning for a general war? The Hossbach Memorandum was used at the Nuremberg War Trials (a series of Allied war trials in 1945–46) as evidence of Nazi Germany’s planning for war. However, A.J.P. Taylor has questioned its importance. Taylor points out that the memorandum is a copy of a copy, and even the original had been written from memory days after the conference. He suggests that historians have misunderstood what the meeting was really about; it was not, in his view, a war planning meeting at all. Its true purpose was an internal political device to get rid of Hitler’s Minister for Economics, Hjalmar Schacht, who was opposed to the cost of proposed rearmament.</td>
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<tr>
<td>5 In pairs evaluate the value and limitations of the Hossbach document as evidence for historians looking at the causes of World War II.</td>
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For some historians, it is not the meeting itself that is the evidence of Hitler’s war planning, but what happened as a result of the meeting. In *The Monopoly of Violence – Why Europeans Hate Going to War*, James Sheehan initially seems to agree with Taylor’s view of the meeting, but he goes on to point out that the *purpose* of the meeting was to root out those high up in the military who would not support Hitler’s foreign policy ambitions:

*On November 5, 1937, Hitler summoned his foreign minister and the leaders of the army, navy and air force to the newly completed Chancellery for a discussion of his long-range objectives. The four-hour meeting, of which a summary prepared by Colonel Friedrich Hossbach, the Führer’s adjutant, was not, as historians have sometimes claimed, a road map for war. But it did clearly formulate Hitler’s central goal, which was ‘to make secure and to preserve the racial community and enlarge it.’ This, he insisted, was a question of space. Three of Hitler’s listeners – the war minister, Field Marshal von Blomberg, the commander of the army, General von Fritsch and the foreign minister, Baron von Neurath – expressed some misgivings about these ambitions. Within a few months, they had all been replaced by more pliable subordinates.*


**Anschluss**

In March 1938, Hitler sent troops into Austria. Where he had been resisted in 1934, four years later he encountered no military resistance. Italy was now an ally, and Britain, under the leadership of Chamberlain, argued that the Versailles Treaty had been wrong to enforce a separation of Germany and Austria. Hitler had seized his opportunity when the Austrian Chancellor Kurt von Schuschnigg had called for a referendum over the issue of *Anschluss*. Hitler’s excuse for sending in troops was to ensure the vote was conducted peacefully. With his forces in place, the vote was overwhelmingly in favour – 99.75 per cent. Hitler was now strengthened not only by the Austrian armed forces, but also by the country’s rich deposits of gold and iron ore. Tension in Europe increased as Hitler prepared his next move.

**The takeover of Czechoslovakia**

Hitler’s actions had clearly threatened peace in Europe. In pursuit of his long-term aims, it is apparent that he was methodically revising the terms of the Treaty of Versailles, so his next action was to regain the Sudetenland. The Czechoslovakian leader, Edvard Beneš, was fully aware of the imminent threat to his country, and appealed for help from Britain and France. France, bound by a treaty obligation, agreed to defend Czechoslovakia if it were invaded by Germany, although it was reluctant to do so. Britain then agreed to support the French. In May 1938, Hitler increased the tension by declaring that he would fight for the Sudetenland if he had to.

This was a bold threat from Hitler, as the Czechs had a modernized army, with state-of-the-art armaments. They also had guarantees of support from Britain, France and the USSR. However, central to their defences was the Sudetenland, a heavily fortified region containing key industries and railways. Hitler had initiated a crisis throughout Europe; there was a genuine fear that a war was coming.

On 15 September 1938, Chamberlain attempted to resolve the crisis by meeting with Hitler. At his initial meeting, it seemed as though Hitler wanted a compromise too – he moderated his demands, asking for only parts of the Sudetenland, and only those if a plebiscite showed that the people wanted to be part of Germany. However, at a second meeting on 22 September Hitler increased his demands; he now wanted all the Sudetenland. Britain
responded by mobilizing its navy; war seemed imminent. A final meeting was held on 29 September. Britain, France and Italy decided to agree to Hitler’s ‘ultimatum’, and give Germany the Sudetenland; this was known as the Munich Agreement. The three powers did not consult with Beneš and the Czechs, nor with the Soviets. Hitler had again achieved his objective by threatening force.

Although Chamberlain declared that the agreement meant ‘peace in our time’, he had at the same stroke authorized a massive increase in arms spending. Hitler’s policies had led to a renewed arms race in Europe. On 15 March 1939, Germany marched in and occupied the rest of Czechoslovakia. The Munich Agreement was shattered. Hitler had taken over a sovereign territory, and the pursuit of his foreign policy objectives meant that war in Europe was inevitable.

**STUDENT STUDY SECTION**

Research activity

Research different newspaper reports on the Munich Agreement from the time. How was this crisis viewed?

**Hitler and the immediate causes of World War II (1939)**

Hitler’s actions put Europe on the brink of war. He was the aggressor; Britain and France had sought only peace. It was clear that Poland would be Hitler’s next target. Britain and France had failed to respond to the occupation of Czechoslovakia, but now warned Germany that an attack on Poland would mean war. The policy of appeasement they had pursued throughout the 1930s was at an end. Britain and France attempted to back this threat up with an agreement with the USSR. During the summer of 1939, however, Stalin was also meeting with the German Foreign Minister, von Ribbentrop. On 24 August 1939, Germany pulled off one of the most controversial agreements in modern history, the Nazi–Soviet Pact. Essentially, the two ideological enemies agreed not to attack one another, and secretly they agreed to divide Poland between them. Although Hitler had signed an
agreement with the country he intended to invade, this was a short-term strategic triumph as it would allow Germany to invade Poland without the risk of a two-front war, and gain a launch pad for the later goal of conquering the USSR.

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<tr>
<th>Why did Germany sign an agreement with the USSR?</th>
<th>Why did the USSR sign an agreement with Germany?</th>
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<tr>
<td>Hitler wanted to avoid a war on two fronts. He did not believe that Britain and France would intervene to defend Poland once he had a pact with Stalin. The economic aid which the USSR would give Germany as a part of the pact would negate the impact of any Anglo-French blockade. Hitler still intended to invade the USSR at a later date – this agreement gave him time to deal with the West first.</td>
<td>The pact meant that the USSR would not have to get involved in a war in the West. This was important as it faced a threat in the East from Japan, and the Soviet Army had been weakened through Stalin’s purges. It gave Stalin time to prepare for war, and there was always the hope that Germany and the West would weaken each other in the war and the USSR would be left as the strongest nation. As part of the deal, Stalin got half of Poland and the opportunity to take over Finland and the Baltic States. Germany was still the USSR’s major trading partner.</td>
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**STUDENT STUDY SECTION**

**Cartoon analysis**

![Cartoon](image)

**Question**

What is the message of the Low cartoon of 1939?

**The invasion of Poland**

The most immediate cause of World War II was the conflict over the independence of Poland. If you refer back to Chapter 4, you will see how the Allied powers had created an independent Polish state that was given a land ‘corridor’ to the sea through territory that was formerly German. The important German port of Danzig was to be a ‘free city’ under League of Nations supervision, which meant the Poles could use it. Both sides knew that this solution would be a cause of future tension, and the Germans never accepted it. Soon after Hitler came to power, the National Socialists won a majority in the city’s government.

Yet Poland was not only threatened by a resurgent Germany; the Soviets had also laid claim to the newly independent Polish territory. Poland had been given more territory in the east than it had before the peace settlements. In 1920, the Red Army (Soviet Army) had invaded...
in an attempt to crush this new state and consolidate their control in Eastern Europe. The Poles had rallied and managed to defeat the Red Army in the battle for Warsaw. This victory was key to the Poles’ new sense of national identity, and it was important in their determination not to make concessions to either the Soviets or the Germans in 1939. In November 1938, Hitler had told his armed forces to prepare a plan for the forced seizure of Danzig, and by the beginning of 1939 Hitler was demanding the city’s return. The Poles decided that they would have to meet German demands with force.

On 3 March 1939, Chamberlain announced that Britain and France would guarantee the independence of Poland. The British now saw the issue as being between German ambition to dominate Europe versus Polish determination to defend themselves. One month after the British guarantee was made, Hitler ordered preparations for the invasion of Poland. For the Poles, cooperating with the Soviets to deter the Germans seemed abhorrent. Fighting was seen as the only option, and by July 1939 the country was confident and prepared for engagement.

Once Hitler had secured his deal with Stalin on 24 August, he could unleash his attack on Poland. Germany ignored the Anglo-French threat, and invaded Poland on 1 September 1939. This time Britain and France had to keep their word, and declared war on Germany. Hitler had started a general war in Europe. It may not have been against the countries he had planned for, nor at the time he had expected, but it was Hitler’s war.

**Appeasement as a cause of World War II**

As you read the next section, consider the following essay question:

- How important was the policy of appeasement as a cause of World War II?

Appeasement was the policy followed primarily by Britain in the 1930s in attempting to settle international disputes by satisfying grievances through compromise and negotiation. It has been argued that by pursuing such a policy, Britain and France encouraged Hitler’s aggression. In consistently and continuously giving in to Hitler’s demands, the Western democracies also further alienated the USSR and led Stalin to believe that the policy was designed to allow for German expansion in the East and to promote a conflict between the Nazis and the Soviet communists. In addition, appeasement also meant that Hitler gambled on that policy continuing in the case of Poland, and thus brought about a general European war when Britain and France changed their stance in 1939. Indeed, A.J.P. Taylor, in his 1961 book *The Origins of the Second World War*, disagreed with the view that World War II was Hitler’s war; he suggests that it was at least as much due to the failures of the European statesmen.

Taylor and others have argued that although there is evidence of expansionist aims in Hitler’s speeches and writing in the 1920s, this does not mean that he had a ‘blueprint’ plan of what he would do once in power in the 1930s. They argue that Hitler was not ‘acting’ to shape, but rather ‘reacting’ to, the actions of other European leaders. (Taylor dismisses the importance of *Mein Kampf*, suggesting it was written to pass the time in prison rather than as a coherent plan for a future regime.)

Taylor goes on to argue that Hitler’s successful dismantling of the Treaty of Versailles was the fault of the other European leaders who failed to contain Germany. It was too late to stop Germany over Poland, and Hitler was not convinced that Britain and France would go to war, as this would go against their typical policy of appeasement. Ultimately Hitler, Taylor suggests, was not so different from previous German leaders.

There would seem to be a strong case against Britain’s policy of appeasement. Appeasement had encouraged Hitler to be increasingly aggressive, and each victory had given him
confidence and increased power. With each territorial acquisition, Hitler’s Germany was better defended, and had more soldiers, workers, raw materials, weapons and industries. Many saw the betrayal of Czechoslovakia at Munich as one of the most dishonourable acts Britain had ever committed. Furthermore, this act was all for nothing, as Britain had not rearmed sufficiently to take on Germany in 1939. Appeasement had also led to the USSR signing an agreement with Hitler, thus unleashing World War II. The Nazi–Soviet Pact meant that Hitler did not have to fear a two-front war, and could continue to provoke the West over his claims to Polish territory. Indeed, Hitler’s continued expansion would now only mean war to the west, as he had secured his eastern border.

**STUDENT STUDY SECTION**

**Document analysis**

[Image of a cartoon showing a map of Europe with a character saying, “What, no chair for me?”]

**Question**
How does this cartoon support the view that appeasement led to the Nazi–Soviet Pact?

**Can appeasement as a policy in the 1930s therefore be justified at all?**

Appeasement was viewed by many in the 1940s, and by many today, as a cowardly policy that facilitated the aggression of expansionist states. Much of the justification for hardline foreign policy initiatives since World War II has been based on the perceived damage caused by appeasing states that should have been resisted by force.

When British Cabinet minutes and government papers became available 30–40 years after the end of World War II, it became increasingly clear that the situation facing Chamberlain was complex. The reality of the British economy at the time meant that rearmament and the cost of then waging a drawn-out war with Germany would be very difficult. The memory of the horrors of World War I still haunted most Europeans, and there was little popular support to engage in another conflict of this scale. In a democracy, the people had to want war, or at least feel that war was literally unavoidable. This was also true of Britain’s empire – in order to get the necessary material and human resources to fight a general war, Britain needed to convince its imperial domains of the ‘just’ and inescapable nature of war with Germany. Most of Hitler’s demands, at least initially, were seen in the context of ‘revising the Treaty of Versailles’, a treaty that many British saw as being too harsh anyway. It was believed that once the unfairness of the treaty had been redressed, Hitler might be
content. When Hitler broke the Munich Agreement, this showed the British public that there could be no negotiated peace with the regime in Germany.

Chamberlain and appeasement

Chamberlain’s policy was grounded in the idea that Germany had three key issues that needed to be resolved – territorial grievances, economic problems and absence of raw materials. His solutions were to give territorial concessions, economic credits, and colonial concessions. Appeasement would then lead to the strengthening of the more moderate groups in Germany, and a move away from the pursuit of the policy of autarky. Britain would then benefit by being able to reduce arms spending, plus international markets would improve and manufacturers could sell to Germany.

Chamberlain himself did not believe in peace at any price, and it has been argued that appeasement was buying time for Britain to rearm. After World War I, Britain had reduced its fighting forces, and was thus militarily unable to oppose Hitler in the mid 1930s. In 1936, the German government launched a Four Year Plan for rearmament. Between 1934 and 1939 the defence budget increased fourfold. Between 1938 and 1939 it doubled. During the crisis over Czechoslovakia, the British government ordered the digging of air raid shelters and distributed gas masks. Richard Overy argues that appeasement was pragmatic until 1939/40, when Britain’s rearmament was at a stage that the nation could resist, if not defeat, Hitler.

Of course, the French also followed a policy of appeasement, although it can be argued that this was because they had little choice. The French could not act independently, and so they took their lead from Britain. However, their situation was also complex, as the case study

Autarky

Autarky meant being self-sufficient. This was a key objective of both Hitler and Mussolini – both wanted economic autarky so that they could survive economically without any external assistance or trade. Ultimately this would enable them to have a degree of military autarky, so that their states could defend themselves without help from another country.
of the remilitarization of the Rhineland suggests. Why, given the strategic importance of the Rhineland to the French and their concern that it be remilitarized, had they then not challenged the Germans when they sent in troops in 1936? The French government believed that the German Army might have forcibly resisted any French counter-force, and they might have received support from the population as they had done in the Ruhr in 1923. The French military were not ready for this kind of campaign; the focus of military planning from 1929 to 1934 had been the Maginot Line chain of border defences, and so the military could not give the government clear advice. In addition, the government in control was weak due to internal divisions, and some suggested that a military response would actually strengthen support for the Nazi regime.

Perhaps the key to understanding the policy of appeasement in the inter-war years is the fact that throughout the West there was genuine fear of communism. Hitler was seen by many, including leading politicians, as the ‘lesser of two evils’. Indeed, it was hoped that Hitler’s Germany would provide a strong bulwark against the spread of communism across Europe. In this case, the fear of one extreme ideology fostered another.

STUDENT STUDY SECTION

**Class discussion questions**

Read the following quotation and discuss the following questions:

*Whatever the merits of Chamberlain’s policy in 1938, it is well to remember that, in itself, appeasement is not necessarily a bad thing. In their efforts to resolve conflicts without resorting to violence, diplomats often must appease their opponents. It is also important to recognize that the alternative to appeasing Hitler in 1938 was fighting him. He was not bluffing, and the threat of war alone would not have stopped him…*


1. To what extent has the policy of appeasement had a negative impact on international relations since the 1930s?

2. Do you think that Chamberlain’s policy was right?

Now organize a class debate on the motion: ‘The policy of appeasement was the right policy for Britain in the 1930s.’

*For the motion:*

Look at the arguments mentioned above. Also consider the following:

Richard Overy argues that Chamberlain’s policy was the right one for Britain at the time, and to a certain extent the policy paid off in that Britain forced Germany into a war sooner than it wanted and at a time when Britain stood a chance of not losing. Overy contends that Hitler’s economic and military planning would have led to Germany being a military ‘superpower’ by the mid 1940s if they had continued without challenge.

*Against the motion:*

Churchill in the 1940s argued that World War II was an ‘unnecessary war’, as it would have been prevented by opposing Hitler before he rearmed.

**Reviewing the causes of war**

As we have seen, each of the major European powers in some way made a contribution towards the outbreak of World War II. Below are some of the most important issues to consider when thinking about their responsibility:
Britain

- Signed the Anglo-German Naval Agreement, undermined the Stresa Front
- Did not attempt to use the League of Nations in response to the series of crises in the late 1930s – the League then became obsolete, and with it the possibility of ‘collective security’
- Failed to encourage a firmer stance from France over the Rhineland
- Failed to support the Czechs at Munich
- Failed to work harder for an agreement with the USSR
- Committed itself to support Poland after it had pursued a policy of appeasement; so, it could be argued, Hitler did not believe that Britain would go to war over Poland
- The Polish guarantee made war inevitable.

France

- Committed itself to supporting states in Central Europe in the Little Entente, but did not follow up with military preparations to support them
- Like Britain, did not attempt to use the League of Nations in response to the series of crises in the late 1930s, undermining the principle of ‘collective security’
- Failed to support the Czechs in 1938
- Followed a defensive strategy focused on the Maginot Line
- Did not work hard enough for an agreement with the USSR.

USSR

- Stalin had purged his armies in the 1930s and was militarily weakened; it was in the Soviet interest to work for a delay in a war with Germany
- Stalin believed that the Western powers’ policy of appeasement was predominantly anti-communist
- As the USSR was not invited to the Munich Conference, and attempts to find an agreement in 1939 by Britain and France appeared half-hearted, Stalin saw that his interests were best served by an agreement with Germany
- The Nazi–Soviet Pact unleashed World War II by allowing Hitler to invade Poland
- The secret clauses in the agreement were cynical and expansionist; Stalin would recoup territories lost after World War I.

Italy

- Dealt a fatal blow to the possibility of collective security when it invaded Abyssinia and undermined the League of Nations. Italy then moved away from the Stresa Front towards Germany
- Italy encouraged the political polarization of Europe by intervening in the Spanish Civil War.

STUDENT STUDY SECTION

Review activity and exam preparation

Essay question
To what extent was World War II Hitler’s war?

Introduction: Set up the debate, explaining the two sides of the argument. You should also state what your key argument will be in the essay.

Paragraph 1: Always address the issue given in the title first. Here you need to set out the arguments in favour of the ‘Hitler’s war’ interpretation. Consider the evidence of long-term planning before he gets to power and then link this to the actions that Hitler takes after 1933. Bring in the views of historians mentioned in this chapter to support your views.
Paragraph 2: Now consider the other side of the argument. Make sure you have a clear opening sentence, e.g. ‘However, it could be argued that World War II was not simply Hitler’s war and that Britain and France must bear some responsibility…’ Look at the role of appeasement in encouraging Hitler into actions that he might not have considered otherwise. Also, reflect on whether he was brought into a war for which he had not planned. Again, refer specifically to historians here in support of these arguments.

In his book *Churchill, Hitler and the Unnecessary War: How Britain Lost its Empire and the West Lost the World* (2008), Patrick Buchanan argues that the critical mistake was made by Britain when it gave Poland the guarantee that made war ‘inevitable’. He goes on to suggest that by doing this, Britain unleashed the ‘bloodiest war in all of history’, lost their own empire and created the conditions for the ensuing Cold War.

Paragraph 3: An alternative argument is that it was Germany’s war rather than just Hitler’s war, and that there was in fact a great deal of continuity between World War I and World War II. This is a major argument of Fritz Fischer. Fischer suggested that there was continuity in the aims of German policy-makers in 1914 and Nazi leaders in the 1930s. This continuity was founded on the powerful industrial and landowning classes, which remained in authoritative positions. They had played a vital role in bringing Hitler to power in 1933. Both Wilhelmine and Nazi Germany wanted to establish control over Eastern Europe to provide economic benefits.

When comparing and contrasting the objectives of German foreign policy prior to both world wars, there are some vivid similarities: Wilhelmine Germany was pursuing an expansionist foreign policy before 1914, and attained this goal, temporarily, in Europe in the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk. The domination of Central and Eastern Europe, and the creation of an overseas empire, were objectives for both Kaiser Wilhelm and Hitler.

Conclusion: This should reflect the weighting that you have given the different sides of the argument in the body of your essay.

Essay question
To what extent did the unsatisfactory outcome of World War I lead to World War II?
This question could be argued using Marshal Foch’s statement on the Versailles settlement: ‘This is not a peace. It is an armistice for 20 years.’ Points that you could develop for this essay include:

- German dissatisfaction with the Treaty of Versailles
- The ‘German problem’ (see Interesting Facts box on p.80)
- Italian dissatisfaction with the treaty
- How Britain’s dissatisfaction with the treaty affected British policy towards Germany in the 1920s and 1930s
- The USA’s retreat into isolationism and its impact on the League of Nations
- Weakness of Eastern European states after the break-up of the Russian and Austro-Hungarian empires.

Make sure that for each point you refer directly to the question and consider how it contributed to the outbreak of World War II.

Essay question
Why did World War II break out in 1939?
For this question, you can start with the thesis that it was Hitler’s war. However, you also need to consider a range of other factors:

- The impact of the Versailles settlement and political instability in the 1920s and 1930s
- Weakness of the League of Nations
- The actions of Britain and France
- Effects of the Great Depression (very important!)
- Fear of communism.

Again, make sure you link each point to how it contributed to war in 1939.
You will also have to answer questions that compare the causes of both wars. Try planning out the following:

Compare and contrast the reasons for Germany’s involvement in both world wars. For this question, review Chapters 2 and 3. Consider the ambitions of Kaiser Wilhelm’s Germany and compare and contrast these aims with those of Hitler’s Germany. Refer to the first essay plan above on Fischer’s ideas on this topic.

**Essay question**

To what extent should Germany be held responsible for causing both the First and the Second World Wars?

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This is similar to the question above, except that you also have to look at alternative arguments for both wars, e.g. collective responsibility in World War I and the role of appeasement in World War II.

**Historiography**

This chapter has covered different perspectives on the reasons why war broke out in Europe in 1939. Review the key arguments presented in this chapter, and research the views of the historians listed in the grid below. Then list each historian’s key ideas and evidence in the second column of the grid. (Draw out the grid separately if there is not enough room here.)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Contemporary / Historian</th>
<th>Summary of Key Ideas / Evidence</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Winston Churchill</td>
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<td>A.J.P. Taylor</td>
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<td>Stephen Lee</td>
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<td>James Sheehan</td>
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<td>Richard Overy</td>
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<td>Fritz Fischer</td>
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<td>Patrick Buchanan</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

- **Examiner’s hint**
  
  It is good to show knowledge of historical debate in your essay and to bring in direct reference to historians. However, these techniques alone will not get you a high grade! Avoid making your essay just a discussion about historians’ views and avoid using historians’ comments randomly. Historians’ views or quotes should be used to support the evidence and arguments that you present as part of the argument in your essay.