

## Why was Hitler's foreign policy so successful 1933–9?

### CHAPTER OVERVIEW

Hitler was remarkably successful in foreign policy in the 1930s. In this chapter you are going to examine the reasons for his success under the following headings:

- A** What were Hitler's aims and plans in foreign policy? (pp. 376–9)
- B** How did the situation in Europe in the 1930s help Hitler? (pp. 380–1)
- C** Key events and personnel in Hitler's foreign policy 1933–9 (pp. 382–3)
- D** Why was Hitler able to smash the Versailles settlement? (pp. 384–95)
- E** How did the major powers react to Hitler's foreign policy 1933–9? (pp. 396–9)
- F** Was Hitler a master planner or an opportunist? (pp. 400–1)
- G** Review: Why was Hitler's foreign policy so successful 1933–9? (pp. 402–5)

### FOCUS ROUTE

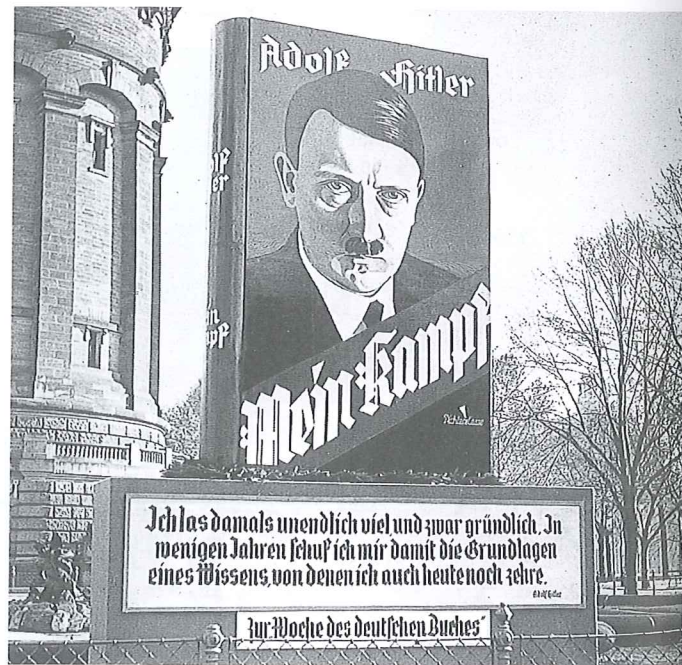
- 1 What were Hitler's aims?
- 2 What methods did Hitler use to achieve his aims?
- 3 How did other powers react to his measures?
- 4 How successful was Hitler in achieving his aims?
- 5 Why was he successful?

### A What were Hitler's aims and plans in foreign policy?

Sources 20.2–5 are a narrow but important selection of sources that record Hitler's views on foreign policy matters. Some historians consider *Mein Kampf* and Hitler's *Zweite Buch* (see opposite) to be the mere musings of a fringe politician, but most argue that they express broad aims that Hitler still held when he became Führer. His 1936 Memorandum on the Four-Year Plan and his speech to the generals at the 'Hossbach' Conference in 1937 also shed light on his policy.

#### SOURCE 20.1

A display poster for *Mein Kampf*. This book was written by Hitler when he was in prison in 1924; it was published in 1925–6 and widely available from 1933. References to foreign policy are scattered throughout *Mein Kampf*, and Hitler stresses Russia as Germany's main enemy and *Lebensraum* as the main purpose



#### SOURCE 20.2 Extract from *Mein Kampf*

The acquisition of new soil for the settlement of the excess population possesses an infinite number of advantages, particularly if we turn from the present to the future. For one thing, the possibility of preserving a healthy peasant class as a foundation for a whole nation can never be valued highly enough. Many of our present-day sufferings are only the consequence of the unhealthy relationship between rural and city population. A solid stock of small and middle peasants has at all times been the best defence against social ills such as we possess today...

If land was desired in Europe, it could be obtained by and large only at the expense of Russia, and this meant that the new Reich must again set itself on the march along the road of the TEUTONIC Knights of old [a medieval religious order of knighthood], to obtain by the German sword sod [earth] for the German plough and daily bread for the nation. For such a policy there was but one ally in Europe: England... With England alone was it possible, our rear protected, to begin the new Germanic march... But we National Socialists must go further. The right to possess soil can become a duty if without extension of its soil a great nation seems doomed to destruction. And most especially when not some little nigger nation or other is involved, but the Germanic mother of life, which has given the present day world its cultural picture. Germany will either be a world power or there will be no Germany... And so we National Socialists consciously draw a line beneath the foreign policy tendency of our pre-war period. We take up where we broke off six hundred years ago. We stop the endless German movement to the south and west and turn our gaze towards the land in the east. At long last we break off the colonial and commercial policy of the pre-war period and shift to the soil policy of the future.

If we speak of soil in Europe today, we can primarily have in mind only Russia and her VASSAL border states. Here fate itself seems desirous of giving us a sign... This colossal empire in the east is ripe for dissolution, and the end of Russia as a state.

#### Hitler's Second Book

Hitler dictated a second book as a sequel to *Mein Kampf* in May–July 1928. It was then kept at the headquarters of the Nazi Party with orders that it was not to be published until after Hitler's death. The Americans discovered it in 1945, and it was authenticated and published in 1958 in German as *Hitlers Zweite Buch* (Hitler's Second Book) and translated and published in English as *Hitler's Secret Book*. It contains a far more considered view of foreign policy than the sporadic references in *Mein Kampf*. In it, Hitler stressed the need for *Lebensraum* in the east and his explanation of why he thought Britain would not oppose Germany in Europe, since Germany was no threat to the British Empire. He also talked more of the final struggle between German-dominated Europe and the United States of America.

#### SOURCE 20.3 An extract from *Hitler's Secret Book*

For this earth is not allotted to anyone... It is awarded by providence to people who in their hearts have the courage to conquer it, the strength to preserve it, and the industry to put it to the plough... Every healthy, vigorous people sees nothing sinful in territorial acquisition, but something quite in keeping with nature. The primary right of this world is the right to life, so far as one possesses the strength for this. Hence on the basis of this right a vigorous nation will always find ways of adapting its territory to its population size...

For this, however, a nation needs weapons. The acquisition of soil is always linked with the employment of force.

**Four-Year Plan, 1936**

This memorandum, rare because it was written by Hitler himself, was produced during the economic troubles of 1936 in order to justify continued massive rearmament, so as to be ready for war in four years.

**SOURCE 20.4** The Four-Year Plan, 1936

*Since the outbreak of the French Revolution the world has been moving with ever increasing speed towards a new conflict, the most extreme solution of which is Bolshevism; and the essence and goal of Bolshevism is the elimination of those strata of mankind which have hitherto provided the leadership and their replacement by worldwide Jewry.*

*No nation will be able to avoid or abstain from this historical conflict. Since Marxism, through its victory in Russia, has established one of the great empires as a forward base for its future operations, this question has become a menacing one . . . The military resources of this aggressive will are . . . increasing from year to year . . . Germany will as always have to be regarded as the focus of the Western world against the attacks of Bolshevism . . . we cannot . . . escape the destiny . . . Apart from Germany and Italy, only Japan can be considered as a Power standing firm in the face of the world peril . . .*

*This crisis cannot and will not fail to occur, and . . . Germany has the duty of securing her existence by every means in the face of this catastrophe . . . For a victory of Bolshevism over Germany would lead not to a Versailles Treaty but to the final destruction, indeed to the annihilation, of the German people . . . In the face of the necessity of warding off this danger, all the other considerations must recede into the background as completely irrelevant.*

**SOURCE 20.5** Extract from the Hossbach Memorandum

*The aim of German policy was to make secure and to preserve the racial community and to enlarge it. It was therefore a question of space . . . before turning to the question of solving the need for space, it had to be considered whether a solution holding promise for the future was to be reached by means of autarky or by means of an increased participation in the world economy . . .*

*The question for Germany ran: where could she achieve the greatest gain at the lowest cost? German policy had to reckon with two hate-inspired antagonists, Britain and France, to whom a German colossus in the centre of Europe was a thorn in the flesh, and both countries were opposed to any further strengthening of Germany's position either in Europe or overseas . . . Germany's problem could only be solved by means of force, and this was never without attendant risk . . . there remain still to be answered the questions 'when' and 'how'? In this matter there were three cases to be dealt with . . .*

*Case I: period 1943-45. After this date only a change for the worse, from our point of view could be expected . . . Our relative strength would decrease in relation to the rearmament which would by then have been carried out by the rest of the world . . . Nobody knew today what the situation would be in the years 1943-45. One thing only was certain, that we could wait no longer . . . If the Führer was still living, it was his unalterable resolve to solve Germany's problem of space at the latest by 1943-45. The necessity for action before 1943-45 would arise in cases II and III.*

*Case II: if internal strife in France should develop into such a domestic crisis as to absorb the French army completely and render it incapable of use for war against Germany, then the time for action against the Czechs had come.*

*Case III: if France is so embroiled by a war with another state that she cannot 'proceed' against Germany.*

*For the improvement of our political and military position our first objective, in the event of being embroiled in war, must be to overthrow Czechoslovakia and Austria simultaneously in order to remove the threat from our flank in any possible operation against the West . . .*

**The Hossbach Memorandum**

This controversial document was a record of a three-hour meeting in the Reich Chancellery on 5 November 1937 attended by Hitler and military leaders Hermann Goering (air), Werner von Fritsch (army), Erich Raeder (navy), Werner von Blomberg (defence) and Foreign Minister Konstantin von Neurath. Tension with Hjalmar Schacht, who was critical of excessive rearmament, was at its peak, and Hitler tried to convince his listeners of the need for a more aggressive approach in foreign policy. Hitler's speech was recorded by Colonel Friedrich Hossbach five days later, from notes made at the time (he took the official minutes of the meeting). Blomberg filed the document without showing it to Hitler. The original disappeared, but various copies were used at the Nuremberg trials as evidence of planned Nazi aggression.

In his speech Hitler argued that Germany needed to solve her space problems by 1943-5. He did not though refer specifically to war with the USSR. The speech was poorly received by his cautious audience and within three months most had been replaced. Most historians consider the memorandum does indicate how Hitler was moving towards implementing his longer-term programme.

**TALKING POINT**

What other sources might be available to a historian to analyse Hitler's aims in foreign policy?

**ACTIVITY**

- 1 How, in *Mein Kampf* and the *Zweite Buch* (Second Book), does Hitler justify German expansionism?
- 2 Which country is Hitler most hostile to? Why?
- 3 What change in his attitude to Britain occurs between *Mein Kampf* and the Hossbach Memorandum?
- 4 Why, in the Hossbach Memorandum, does Hitler argue that war for *Lebensraum* is required by the mid 1940s?
- 5 Which source do you consider most valuable in seeking to understand Hitler's foreign policy? Refer to background and content.

On pages 382-92 we will look at the key events in Hitler's foreign policy until 1939. In many ways, this proved to be a remarkably successful period for him. But first we are going to look at the context in which Hitler was able to pursue his aims.

**SOURCE 3** This cartoon was published in *The Nation* in 1933



**SOURCE 4** From an NSDAP illustrated postcard produced shortly after Hitler introduced compulsory military service in 1935

*The one-sided disarmament of Germany seriously endangers her security as long as her neighbours do not also disarm. The German people unanimously demand the same rights and the same security as other nations and claim an absolute equality of status with regard to this vital question.*

**SOURCE 5** Nazi marching song

*If all the world lies in ruins,  
What the devil do we care?  
We still go marching on,  
For today Germany belongs to us  
And tomorrow the whole world.*

**SOURCE 6**  
German tanks on parade



**German foreign policy 1933–45: a chronology**

**CAUTION 1933–5**

- 1933
  - 14 Oct Germany leaves League of Nations and Disarmament Conference
- 1934
  - 26 Jan Non-Aggression Pact with Poland
  - 14–15 Jun Hitler visits fellow Fascist leader Mussolini in Venice
  - 25 Jul Austrian Chancellor Engelbert Dollfuss assassinated in attempted coup by Austrian Nazis
- 1935
  - 13 Jan In League of Nations' plebiscite (held under terms of Treaty of Versailles), the Saar votes to return to Germany
  - 9 Mar Hitler announces expansion of the German air force
  - 16 Mar Hitler announces conscription
  - 11–14 Apr Stresa Conference of Britain, France, Italy to unite opposition to German infringement of Versailles
  - 18 Jun Anglo-German Naval Agreement on an enlarged German navy
  - 2 Oct Italy invades Abyssinia; League of Nations votes for (ineffective) sanctions; Mussolini begins to move away from Britain and France towards Germany

**ASSERTION AND EXPANSION 1936 to 23 Aug 1939**

- 1936
  - 6 Jan Mussolini ends Italian guarantee of Austrian independence
  - 7 Mar German troops reoccupy the demilitarised Rhineland
  - 27 July Germany starts to send military help to right-wing rebel nationalists in Spanish Civil War
  - 19 Oct Goering in charge of economic Four-Year Plan
  - 1 Nov Rome-Berlin Axis with Fascist Italy announced
  - 25 Nov Germany forms Anti-Comintern Pact with Japan
- 1937
  - 27 Apr Luftwaffe destroys Guernica in Spain
  - July Japan-China War
  - 25–9 Sep Mussolini visits Germany and is impressed
  - 5 Nov Hossbach memorandum records Hitler's plans for major expansion
  - 6 Nov Italy joins Anti-Comintern Pact
- 1938
  - 4 Feb Ribbentrop becomes Foreign Minister. Generals Blomberg, Fritsch replaced
  - 12 Feb Hitler bullies Austrian Chancellor Schuschnigg to include Nazis in his government
  - 6 Mar Austrian plebiscite on Anschluss announced
  - 11 Mar Germans invade Austria
  - 13 Mar Anschluss (German union with Austria)
  - 24 Apr German Sudetens in Czechoslovakia demand autonomy
  - 18 Aug General Beck resigns
  - Aug Great danger of war over Czechoslovakia

- 29–30 Sep Munich conference of Germany, Italy, France, Britain grants Germany the Sudetenland
- 1–10 Oct Germans take Sudetenland
- 1 Oct Czechs cede Teschen to Poland
- 6–8 Oct Slovakia, Ruthenia granted autonomy within Czechoslovakia
- 21 Oct Hitler orders plans to invade the remaining part of Czechoslovakia
- 1939
  - 14 Mar Slovakia declares independence
  - 15 Mar Germany occupies Czechoslovakia
  - 23 Mar Germany occupies Memel
  - 31 Mar Britain, France guarantee Poland
  - 22 May Germany and Italy form the Pact of Steel, a military alliance
  - 23 Aug Nazi Soviet Non-Aggression Pact

**WAR 1 Sep 1939 onwards**

- 1939
  - 1 Sep Germany invades Poland
  - 3 Sep France, Britain declare war on Germany
  - 17 Sep USSR invades Poland. Poland defeated and partitioned between Germany and the USSR
- 1940
  - Apr Germany occupies Denmark. Germany conquers Norway in two weeks
  - May Germany invades Holland (falls in five days), Belgium (eighteen days), France (four weeks)
  - June France capitulates. Germany occupies the north and west of France
  - Aug–Sep Germany plans to invade Britain but is defeated in Battle of Britain. Hitler prepares plans to invade the USSR
- 1941
  - Apr Germany invades Yugoslavia and Greece
  - June–Dec Germany invades the USSR but is stopped at Moscow and Leningrad
  - 7 Dec Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. USA declares war on Japan and Germany
- 1942
  - May Major German offensive at Stalingrad, USSR
  - June Germany and Italy attack Egypt
- 1943
  - Jan Germans surrender at Stalingrad; Hitler's first major defeat
  - May Germans, Italians, surrender in North Africa. Germans lose tank battle of Kursk in the USSR; general Soviet advance 1943–5
  - July Anglo-American invasion of Italy; Mussolini overthrown, Germans take over north Italy
- 1944
  - June Allies invade west France; general Allied advance 1944–5
- 1945
  - Germany is invaded from east and west
  - 30 Apr Hitler commits suicide
  - 7 May Germany surrenders

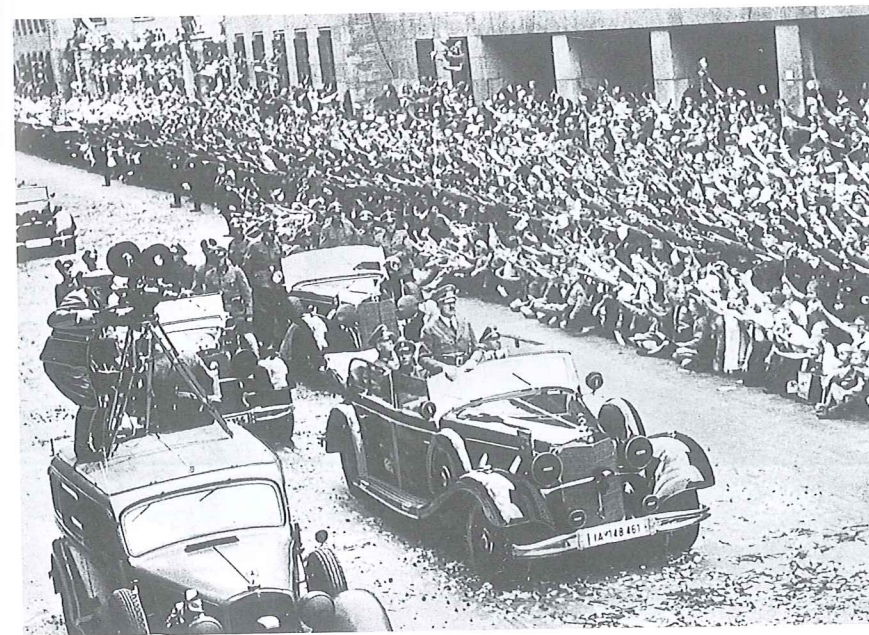
**Key**

**Bold type** in chronology represents Hitler's orders and actions

- Hitler's methods 1933–9**
- Acting unilaterally
  - Making bilateral agreements
  - Diplomacy with threats
  - Using troops without fighting
  - Troops fighting

**SOURCE 7**

Hitler returning to Germany after the conquest of France, 1940



**SOURCE 8** The percentage of Germans voting yes in plebiscites on Hitler's foreign policy

Date	Plebiscite	%
November 1933	Leaving the League/Disarmament Conference	95
March 1936	After reoccupying Rhineland	98.8
April 1938	Anschluss with Austria	99