

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



◀ 'What, no chair for me?'
Cartoon by David Low,
September 1938.

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

The British Prime Minister, Neville Chamberlain, waves the peace of paper containing the Anglo-German agreement of 1938, assuring the British public that it represented 'peace for our time'.



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.

To access worksheet 6.2 on appeasement, please visit www.pearsonbacconline.com and follow the on-screen instructions.

We have a clear conscience. We have done all that any country could do to establish peace, but a situation in which no word given by Germany's ruler could be trusted, and no people or country could feel themselves safe, had become intolerable... For it is evil things we shall be fighting against: brute force, bad faith, injustice, oppression, and persecution. And against them I am certain that right will prevail.

From Neville Chamberlain's speech to the British nation announcing war with Germany, 3 September 1939

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 Overly 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

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...

From James Sheehan, *The Monopoly of Violence: Why Europeans Hate Going to War*, 2008

- 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 Overly 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. Overly 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.

ToK Time

How far do historians 'revise' their views of leaders and their actions with the benefit of hindsight? What are the knowledge issues involved in drawing conclusions about an historical leader? When we analyze current leaders, do we do this differently? Are there similar knowledge issues? Discuss this in pairs and write down your ideas in your ToK journal.

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.

Examiner's hint

When revising for an exam, plan out as many essay questions as possible on one topic. This strategy means that you will have considered all the different 'angles' on a topic before sitting the exam.