



The Road to World War II

This is a transcript of the [Road to World War II, 1933-39 podcast](#) from www.mrallsophistory.com

As we've seen from the challenges to the League of Nations in the 1930s, international tension was increasing massively and, by 1939, this would develop into all-out war. This podcast is designed to consider the key reasons for the breakout of World War 2 by discussing the different impacts of Hitler's aims and actions, the policy of appeasement, the problems caused by the peace treaties, the Nazi-Soviet Pact and the failures of the League of Nations.

With the Wall Street Crash and its ensuing world depression from 1929, the Nazi party was back on the scene in Germany. In 1933 they took control of the Reichstag, the German parliament, and Hitler quickly secured complete control of the governmental system and began working towards three key aims. He had made it clear in both his election speeches and in his autobiography, Mein Kampf, that he believed the Treaty of Versailles was unjust and that he aimed to overturn its limitations. Although by 1933 Germany had stopped making reparation payments, many of the Treaty's terms were still in place.

The second aim of Hitler was to expand German territory. Uniting with Austria was just one part of his plan, which clearly a direct challenge to the demands of the Treaty of Versailles, but it was also the embodiment of Hitler's plan to extend German land into eastern Europe for "Lebensraum" of "living space" for the German people.

Hitler was also ardently anti-Communist and wanted to remove the threat of Communism to Germany. In Mein Kampf he clearly stated how, "The first essential is the expulsion of the Marxist poison from the body of our nation." Therefore it is possible to map the events leading to World War 2 against Hitler's three broad aims for Germany – the abolition of the Treaty of Versailles, the expansion of German territory and the defeat of Communism.

Hitler's first action after becoming Chancellor of Germany in 1933 was to begin rebuilding the German armed forces. He prepared his military commanders for an increase of 300,000 men in the army from the 100,000 permitted by the Treaty of Versailles. He ignored the Treaty's demands for no air force and prepared to build 1,000 war planes. All this took place in secret at first, as at the same time he was arguing at the Geneva Disarmament Conference that the French should disarm to the level of the Germans or that the Germans should re-arm to the level of the French. When the French, unsurprisingly, refused he withdrew from the conference but was seen by the world's eye as a politician who had tried hard not to rearm Germany.



In fact, when he openly showed the growth of his armed forces at a military rally in 1935 the rest of the world did little to stop Hitler's clear breaking of the terms of the Treaty of Versailles. Britain, France and Italy formed the Stresa Front which issued a policy against Hitler's rearmament, but in real terms did nothing to stop him. In fact, countries such as Britain were beginning to believe that the Treaty had been too harsh on Germany in the first place and that Germany should be allowed more troops to improve its chances of defending itself against attack – particularly as it was in the perfect geographical position to act as a buffer against Communism of which Britain was also scared.

But that wasn't all that Britain did. In fact, Britain could be seen to have begun its policy of appeasement in 1935 when it signed the Anglo-German Naval Agreement which allowed Germany to increase its navy to around a third of the size of Britain's – a massive challenge to the terms of the Treaty of Versailles. Hitler had begun to push Britain, and Britain gave way, allowing Hitler to get away with this blatant disregard for the agreement at Versailles. Surely, Hitler must have thought, if he could get away with rebuilding his armed forces to such an extent he would also be able to challenge other terms of the Treaty?

Well, yes, and he did just that. The Rhineland had remained part of Germany after the Treaty of Versailles, but was made into a demilitarized zone. Although the Locarno Treaties signed by Germany in 1925 accepted that the Rhineland needed to remain demilitarized, many Germans felt angered and weakened by the fact they had an area of their country they couldn't defend – and one that was right on the border with France.

So, in March 1936, while the world's attention was turned to Mussolini and the Italian conquest of Abyssinia, Hitler ordered his troops to move back into the Rhineland and thus break one of the key terms of Versailles. It was an enormous gamble – despite the growth of the military thanks to the rearmament program, Germany would never had been able to defend itself if another nation tried to stop the remilitarization – and Hitler himself would have been humiliated both at home and abroad. However, he had watched the Manchuria crisis unfold and noted that the League of Nations had not acted against Japan despite clearly having the ability to do so. The League was proving to be just as ineffective against Italy in Abyssinia.

Britain, Hitler was convinced, would not intervene as it generally believed it to be reasonable for Germany to have military control over her own "backyard". France, despite being worried about the move, was approaching an election and no politician there was prepared to potentially plunge France into another war against Germany. In the end, nothing happened. Yet again Hitler had successfully defied the terms of Treaty of Versailles and got away with it.

It's possible to argue that, if Versailles had not been perceived as harsh in the 1930s by countries such as Britain, Hitler would have struggled to oppose it. Indeed, the fact that he



did oppose it yet nobody was willing to defend the terms of the Treaty, proved to Hitler that he was justified in his actions.

But how far could he go? In 1936 Hitler joined Franco in fighting the Communist insurgents in the Spanish Civil War, demonstrating the power and destruction of his new air force in Guernica in 1937. The Anti-Comintern Pact of 1936 with Japan aimed to limit Communist influence, and especially that of the USSR. In 1937, Italy joined as well, forming the Axis alliance.

Yet still the world looked on and refused to challenge Hitler. Even when he began move towards unifying Germany and Austria, again prohibited by the Treaty of Versailles, there was no international response other than a suggestion from Britain's Lord Halifax that Britain would not resist Germany uniting with Austria. With Anschluss completed in 1938 after a plebiscite watched over by Nazi troops returned a result of 99.75% of Austrians wishing to unite with Germany, the nation's soldiers, weapons and natural resources were absorbed by the ever-expanding Germany. Yet Hitler had, again, defied the Treaty of Versailles with no response from either Britain or France. It was beginning to appear that whatever Hitler did, Britain and France would sit and watch. They were simply not prepared to go to war to stop Hitler getting what he wanted.

Thus appeasement, which arguably began with the Anglo-German Naval Agreement in 1935, was the policy adopted by the western powers throughout the 1930s. There are a number of arguments for and against Neville Chamberlain's adoption of this policy of giving Hitler what he wanted, but we'll just cover a couple here.

Firstly, as suggested by Britain's responses to some of Hitler's moves against the Treaty of Versailles, many people felt that the Treaty was unfair to Germany and that it was justified in seeking changes to it. After all, the Treaty had ended the Great War, and attempting to stop Hitler could have led both Britain and France back into another war – even if it meant allowing Hitler to build his strength. Could they afford such a war anyway, even if they did fight it? Both Britain and France were both suffering the effects of the Depression and needed to use their finances to sort out their own internal problems first rather than worrying about upholding international treaties. They knew that the USA wouldn't have stepped in to stop Hitler, anyway. After all it was America who had encouraged the founding of the League of Nations but then refused to become a part of it. Without America's help, it was unlikely that Britain and her allies would have been strong enough to fight the rearmed Germany. At the very least Britain itself would need time to build up its armed forces to a level where it could successfully engage Nazi Germany.

On the flip side, the policy of appeasement was risky. By refusing to stand up to Hitler's early gambles, Britain and France encouraged him to take bigger and bigger risks, which began



over time to move away from Hitler's supposed aim of correcting the unfairness of the Treaty of Versailles and towards Nazi domination of countries for Lebensraum. By assuming, also, that Hitler would honour the promises he made later over issues such as the Sudetenland, Britain and France were – ultimately – trusting a liar. It also gave Hitler the time to build up his army in readiness for war, meaning that Britain and France would have a lot of catching up to do if they were to stand up to him effectively. All this is easy to say now, however, due to the gift of hindsight. It would have been impossible for people at the time to have known what was to come.

By 1938, then, Hitler's confidence was growing as all his previous challenges to the Treaty of Versailles had come and gone without interference from Britain or France. Czechoslovakia, meanwhile, was beginning to feel very threatened after the Anschluss, as they felt they would next on Hitler's list. "I give you my word of honour," Hitler told Chamberlain, "that Czechoslovakia has nothing to fear from the Reich." He lied. Hitler intended to regain some territory lost at Versailles, which contained large numbers of German people. After people sympathetic to the Nazis in the Sudetenland area of Czechoslovakia began to stir up trouble demanding to be part of Germany, Hitler threatened the Czechs with invasion.

Tensions were high throughout the summer and so, in on September 15, the British Prime Minister, Neville Chamberlain, flew to Munich to meet with Hitler in the hope of avoiding war. The talks appeared to go well, but a week later Hitler increased his demands and told Britain that he wanted all the Sudetenland. Britain began to mobilise, but a final meeting on 29th September led to Chamberlain agreeing that Hitler could have what he wanted – the whole of the Sudetenland – in return for no more territorial demands. The declaration, which Chamberlain claimed would bring "peace for our time" was called the Munich Agreement, but was ultimately not worth the paper it was written on. Just 6 months later, on 15th March 1939, Hitler's troops took over the rest of Czechoslovakia. He had no excuse this time – there were no Germans living there to unify, no parts of the Treaty of Versailles to correct; this was simple German expansion to create Lebensraum – living space – for the people of the Reich.

There was no doubt that war was brewing. Appeasement had clearly failed, as Hitler's promises dissolved into the air the moment he made them. It was of little surprise, therefore, that Hitler soon moved onto his next target – Poland – under the guise of regaining the Polish Corridor lost in the Treaty of Versailles.

Britain and France, Hitler felt, were weak and unwilling to risk war for the sake of defending a distant country. Russia, meanwhile, was less predictable and so for this reason Hitler forged an alliance with Stalin – the Nazi-Soviet Pact – on 24th August 1939. It ensured that neither side would attack each other, and secretly agreed to divide Poland between the two of them. For Hitler, it cleared the way for an invasion of Poland on 1st September 1939. Hitler didn't



expect Britain and France to come to Poland's aid, but they did. On 2nd September they declared war on Germany.

Hitler's belief that Britain would stay out of Hitler's way was based on his understanding of the policy of Appeasement. He simply didn't believe that Chamberlain would change his strategy and go to war when for the past 4 years he had agreed to every one of Germany's demands. Some historians claim that Appeasement was the wrong policy because it had encouraged Hitler to make ever increasing demands that sent the world into the Second World War. Others, however, claim that to have successfully opposed Hitler, Chamberlain would have needed to drag Britain into another war before it was properly ready to fight. Even the people of Britain, as we discovered earlier, were unlikely to have supported another war with the memories of 1914-1918 still fresh in their memories. Britain's empire was unlikely to lend its own support, and America was happily keeping itself to itself. More importantly, Britain's own army was not ready to engage Hitler in battle. Hitler's rearmament from 1935 had made Nazi Germany considerably stronger than Britain, and Britain needed to play for time to close the gap.

Ultimately, war broke in 1939 for a combination of reasons. In your exam you may be asked to compare the relative importance of different factors, or choose which you think was most important. Remember that you can't be wrong – but you can answer badly. If you are asked to compare a list of given factors, make sure you include them all and, if relevant, refer to other factors that also had a part to play. If you believe that one factor was more important than any other, explain why. And if you believe that factors were inter-linked in a causal web, be sure to explain it. Good luck.