

HITLER'S FOREIGN POLICY IN THE 1930'S AND THE FAILURE OF APPEASEMENT

A. 1933 : Hitler comes to power in Germany

Hitler came to power in Germany in January 1933. He was determined to make Germany a strong and powerful nation once again and was determined to take revenge against those who had signed the hated Treaty of Versailles in 1919. Hitler's vision for the future was a union of all German speaking peoples across Europe ; he estimated that this would create a "Greater Germany" made up of 100 million Germans. In addition to this, Hitler wanted control of foreign lands to act as a slave labour force for the "Greater Germany" ; he called this "lebensraum" or living space and looked mainly to eastern Europe and beyond. He regarded those races living in Poland, Russia etc. (mainly Slavs and Jews) as inferior peoples to the Aryan Germans who he referred to as the "master race". In creating this Greater Germany, Hitler realised that he would have to break the Treaty of Versailles as he would need to re - arm Germany. In January 1933, as the new chancellor of Germany, he was given hope by events in the Far East ; the League of Nations had failed to prevent Japan from taking control of Manchuria. Hitler's first actions in his foreign policy was to withdraw Germany from the League in October 1933 ; Hitler claimed that Germany wanted disarmament and made the excuse for withdrawal the fact that other countries were refusing to do so and Germany was unable to defend herself. Hitler then begin to build up Germany's armed forces in secret.

B. 1933 - 1935

It was no secret to other countries that Hitler had begun to re - arm Germany, however with most countries struggling with economic depression, no one chose to confront Hitler. In 1935, Hitler had a number of successes in his foreign policy :

() January 1935 : the people of the Saar voted to rejoin Germany, having been under the control of the League since 1919 .

(ii) March 1935 : Hitler announced that Germany had an airforce and that compulsory military conscription was to be introduced. This was a clear breach of the Treaty of Versailles, yet the only action came in the form of a collective protest by Britain, France and Italy - this was known as the Stresa Front

(iii) June 1935 : the Anglo - German Naval Agreement was signed. This

allowed Germany to have a navy one third of the size of the British navy. Britain was openly breaking the Treaty of Versailles because she believed that it was better to restrict the size of Germany's navy as it was inevitable that she was intent on enlarging it in the near future.

Events during 1935 made it clear to Hitler that neither Britain nor France were prepared to use force or intervention to defend the Treaty of Versailles. Both countries were following policies of "appeasement" and with both countries suffering from economic depression, they were not prepared nor in a position to afford to confront Hitler. Towards the end of 1935, Hitler watched eagerly to see how the League would respond to Italy's invasion of Abyssinia ; the League's handling of this crisis would have a bearing on Hitler's next steps in his foreign policy.

C. 1936 - Spring 1938

Hitler's first major foreign policy success was achieved in March 1936 with the invasion of the Rhineland. The Rhineland was German territory but had been de - militarised in 1919 by the Treaty of Versailles. Hitler was anxious to gain control because he needed a strong western border if he was to embark upon an aggressive policy in the east. He took a gamble when he marched his troop into the Rhineland in March, but it was a gamble that paid off, as neither Britain nor France were prepared to act forcefully against Hitler. In fact, the British government endorsed Hitler's invasion by saying that she had every right to recover land "in her own back yard".

In Abyssinia, meanwhile, the Italian dictator Mussolini had successfully seized control of the country. The League had imposed economic sanctions on Italy but these had only partially worked because there was no ban on the sale of oil. Britain and France had attempted to take independent action against Italy through the Hoare - Laval Plan but this had failed. The League's failure to prevent Mussolini's take - over of Abyssinia destroyed its' reputation as a peace keeping organisation. Hitler recognised that this could only work to his advantage in the months and years ahead.

Since Hitler came to power in 1933, relations between Hitler and Mussolini had been poor even though both men were right - wing dictators with similar aims in their foreign policies. In fact, in 1934, when it was feared that Hitler was planning to take - over Austria, it was Mussolini who sent troops to the Austrian border to defend Austria against a Nazi invasion ; no invasion followed but it highlighted the fact that Mussolini and Hitler were far from being like - minded allies. In 1936, however, relations between the two leaders improved dramatically ; they signed an agreement, The Rome - Berlin Axis, promising to work more closely together. Their first joint action was to send military help to the Spanish dictator, General

Franco in 1936 and 1937. A civil war had broken out in Spain between left and right wing forces. Hitler saw this as the perfect opportunity to try out his new airforce on the side of Franco. The Luftwaffe (airforce) was spectacularly successful in its' bombing of enemy strongholds - in Britain, alarm bells began to ring with reports of the devastation caused.

Since coming to power, Hitler had continued to emphasise that communism posed the greatest threat to Germany. Communist Russia under the leadership of Stalin was seen as a threat to German security and so in 1936 an anti - communist alliance was drawn up ; known as the Anti - Comintern Pact, it comprised of Germany and Japan, with Italy joining a year later in 1937. Japan regarded Hitler (and Mussolini) as a useful ally in Europe at a time when Japan was planning its' next aggressive step in its' foreign policy. Four years after the successful conquest of Manchuria, in 1937 , Japan invaded China, where the eyes of the world were focused upon events in Europe.

In March 1938, Hitler had his second major success in his foreign policy with the occupation of Austria. By the Treaty of Versailles, an "anschluss" or union between Germany and Austria had been forbidden. Hitler was determined to achieve the anschluss but realised that he would have to await the right moment. Already, there was a strong Nazi party in Austria that was very vocal in its' support for Hitler. The Austrian chancellor, Schuschnigg, was determined to maintain Austria's independence but was forced, by Hitler, to accept a number of Nazis into the government. Under pressure, Schuschnigg arranged a plebiscite in March 1938 ; the Austrian people were to vote upon whether Austria remained independent or fell under the control of the Nazis. Hitler intervened and demanded that the vote be postponed and Schuschnigg replaced as chancellor by Seyss - Inquart, a Nazi. This was accepted ; once in power, Seyss - Inquart invited Nazi troops to invade to help deal with a series of riots. The anschluss had been achieved peacefully.

D. Crisis in Czechoslovakia, 1938

With Austria under Nazi control, Hitler now turned his attention towards Czechoslovakia, focusing upon a predominantly German speaking area of the country called the Sudetenland where 3.5 million Sudeten Germans lived. The Sudetenland was an important industrial and agricultural part of Czechoslovakia where the country's strongest fortifications were located. Hitler knew that if he succeeded in forcing the Czech government to give up the Sudetenland to him, it would severely weaken the country and make it easy for him to invade and occupy the rest of Czechoslovakia. Hitler, however, was aware that the Czechs had a large and well equipped army and should war break out between the two countries, it would probably develop into a long struggle. Also, Hitler had to take into consideration what Britain and France might do if he was to put pressure on Czechoslovakia. Neither country wanted to get involved in a war against Germany but Hitler could not be sure that they would not come to the assistance of the Czechs.

During the summer of 1938, Hitler increased the pressure on Benes, the Czech Prime Minister to concede the Sudetenland to Germany. Within the Sudetenland, the Sudeten German Nazi Party led by Henlein, stirred up trouble deliberately in an attempt to force Benes to give in. As the situation deteriorated, Benes looked to Britain and France for promises of support. The French government sympathised with the Czechs but offered no help. This left the new British Prime Minister, Neville Chamberlain with a difficult decision to make ; should he abandon Britain's policy of "appeasement" and intervene on the side of the Czechs to put a stop to Hitler's aggression in central Europe. Or, should he continue with a policy of "appeasement" in the belief that giving in to Hitler would keep the peace and prevent the outbreak of another major war in Europe.

It is easy to look back and criticise Chamberlain for not taking firm action against Hitler in the summer of 1938, however at the time the government and a majority of Britons believed that appeasement was the right policy to follow. They believed that the Treaty of Versailles had been unfair on Germany and that Hitler was doing little wrong in re - arming , taking back the Rhineland and uniting Germany and Austria. Hitler's demands were seen as reasonable and just and agreeing to his demands was better than confronting him. Also, people remembered the horrors of World War One and wanted to avoid a repetition of the suffering and devastation that was an inevitable outcome of war. In any case, Britain was in no position to fight a war in 1938 ; Britain's armed forces were weak compared to Germany, particularly Britain's air force and air defences. For some, Germany was not seen as Britain's major enemy on the continent but communist Russia ; did it not make good sense having a strong Germany in central Europe as a defence against the spread of communism ? Finally, many could see little sense in defending a country thousands of miles away and that had few ties with Britain.

At the same time, many in Britain spoke out against appeasement claiming that it would inevitably lead to a major catastrophe ; giving in to Hitler whenever he demanded something simply provoked him into more aggressive actions. For many critics of appeasement like Winston Churchill, appeasement was morally wrong ; it was the actions of cowards too afraid to stand up to bullies. Hitler had taken back the Rhineland, united Germany and Austria ; now in 1938, he was intent on seizing the Sudetenland. Britain must abandon appeasement and support the Czechs before Hitler became too powerful and it was too late to stop him.

Chamberlain decided to seek a peaceful solution to the crisis and went to Germany to discuss the matter with Hitler. On 15 September, they met at Berchtesgarden where it was agreed that the Sudetenland should be given to Germany. Chamberlain returned to Germany for a second time on 22 September (Bad Godesburg) to

confirm the agreement only to be told that there were new demands to be included (Hungarian and Polish claims on Czech lands to be met). Chamberlain refused to accept them and returned home fearing that Britain was on the brink of a war with Germany. What prevented war was a third meeting in Munich on 29 September, arranged by the Italian dictator Mussolini. Britain, Germany, Italy and France attended the meeting at which an agreement was signed that handed over the Sudetenland to Hitler but at the same time guaranteed that Czechoslovakia would be protected against any further threats to its'. It appeared as if the crisis was over ; the reality was that Britain and France had given in to Hitler to keep the peace. The real loser was Czechoslovakia which had been abandoned by those countries in a position to help. On 30 September, before returning home, Chamberlain and Hitler signed an Anglo - German agreement. Known as the Munich Agreement, it promised that the two countries would never go to war ever again and that any disputes would be resolved peacefully. At the airport on his return, Chamberlain said "I believe it is peace for our time".

Many in Britain greeted the returning Chamberlain as a national hero and a saviour of peace. It seemed as if appeasement had succeeded in keeping the peace. Hitler, however, began immediate plans for the conquest of his next target, Poland. He had no intention of honouring his promised made at Munich.

E The Invasion of Czechoslovakia, March 1939

In the months that followed the Munich meeting, Hungary and Poland seized parts of Czechoslovakia. Worse was to follow with civil war between Czechs and Slovaks. Hitler used this as an opportunity to invade Czechoslovakia in March 1939. Claiming that he was sending his troops into the country to restore peace, he took control. Czechoslovakia had ceased to exist ; more importantly, Chamberlain's policy of appeasement was in tatters.

Chamberlain had no option now but to abandon the policy of appeasement. At the end of March, Britain (and France) promised

Poland that if she was threatened by any country, she would come to her assistance. This promise was known as the "Polish Guarantee". It was clear to all observers by the summer of 1939 that Hitler's next target was Poland ; 3 million Germans lived within the Polish Corridor and he could justify any intervention on the grounds that he was simply returning them to German rule. Bordering on the Baltic Sea also was the German city of Danzig, under the League's control since 1919.

F. The Nazi - Soviet Pact, August 1939

Britain and France realised that it would be geographically very difficult to send troops to Poland if a war broke out against Germany. Britain and France, therefore decided to ask Russia for help in case of a war. Secret talks took place on both sides but came to nothing as both sides distrusted each other - in reality, this was no great surprise. What was an enormous surprise was news that Germany and Russia had signed a military agreement in August. By the Nazi - Soviet Pact, both countries agreed not to fight against each other should there be a European war and secretly agreed that in the advent of a war they would divide up Poland between them. Neither Nazi Germany nor communist Russia trusted each other ; in fact, both leaders, Hitler and Stalin, despised each other. The Pact was of benefit to both countries in the short - term, particularly Germany which now prepared for the invasion of Poland.

Britain and France were alone ; both countries had made promises to help Poland but neither side wanted war. In fact, both governments put pressure on Poland to reach agreements over the Polish Corridor and Danzig. Poland, however, correctly saw that agreements meant nothing when dealing with Hitler and refused.

On 1 September 1939, Hitler ordered the invasion of Poland. Britain and France waited until 3 September before sending an ultimatum to Hitler. Hitler ignored the ultimatum as a result of which war was declared on Germany by Britain and France.