

## **Hitler's Foreign policy – info adapted from BBC Bitesize website (link to all their info for the Germany topic in the Germany in Transition section of our website)**

### **Foreign policy aims**

Hitler had three main aims in his foreign policy:

- revise the Treaty of Versailles
- unite all German-speaking people into one Reich
- expand eastwards to achieve Lebensraum

Historians have disagreed about Hitler's aims. A J P Taylor argued that Hitler did not deliberately set out for a destructive war. Instead, Hitler was an opportunist and made gains in his foreign policy by direct action and audacity. Hugh Trevor-Roper has argued that Hitler had a long term plan - a programme of colonisation of Eastern Europe and a war of conquest in the West. This **Stufenplan**, step-by-step policy, led to war. Probably the most convincing argument is that Hitler had consistency of aims, but was also an opportunist that was flexible in his strategy.

There were three stages to his foreign policy.

- A moderate policy up to 1935.
- Increased activity between 1935 and 1937.
- A more confident foreign policy after 1937, certain that there would be little opposition to his plans.

### **Rearmament and conscription**

Rearmament created jobs in the armaments industry pushing the idea of 'guns before butter'. Rearmament started almost as soon as Hitler came to power but was announced publicly in 1935. The introduction of national service meant all young men spent six months in the RAD and then they were conscripted into the army. By 1939, 1.4 million men were in the army, so they were not counted as unemployed. These actions were a direct attack on the Treaty of Versailles.

In January 1935, the population of the Saar coalfield, separated from Germany by the post-war treaties, were allowed a plebiscite (vote) and showed that over 90 per cent of the population wanted to reunite with Germany. Hitler regarded this as a great triumph because it was the first of the injustices of the Treaty of Versailles to be reversed.

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## Rhineland Invasion, March 1936



For many years the Rhineland area had been a key industrial region of Germany, producing coal, steel and iron resources. The Rhineland also formed a natural barrier to its neighbour and rival, France. In the event of a war, the River Rhine, if properly defended, would be a difficult obstacle for an invading force to cross.

One of the terms of the Treaty of Versailles was that the Germans would not be able to keep military forces in a 50 km stretch of the Rhineland. Hitler resented this term as it made Germany vulnerable to invasion. He was determined to enlarge his military capability and strengthen his borders. In 1935, Hitler revealed that he had built up an air force and signed the Anglo-German Naval Agreement that allowed him to enlarge his naval forces.

In 1936, Hitler boldly marched 22,000 German troops into the Rhineland, in a direct contravention of the Treaty of Versailles. Hitler offered France and Britain a 25 year non-aggression pact and claimed 'Germany had no territorial demands to make in Europe'.

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# Austrian Anschluss, March 1938



Map showing the Anschluss with Austria

Hitler wanted all German-speaking nations in Europe to be a part of Germany. To this end, he had designs on re-uniting Germany with his native homeland, Austria. Under the terms of the Treaty of Versailles, however, Germany and Austria were forbidden to be unified. Hitler also wanted control of the largely German-speaking area within Czechoslovakia, called the Sudetenland. Importantly, Austria shared a border with this area. Austria was a convenient 'stepping-stone' to further invasions.

In an attempt to realise his goals, Hitler was determined to destabilise Austria and undermine its independence. He would cause chaos, then present himself as the person to restore order through the Anschluss (union with Austria)

## The failed coup – Hitler attempted Anschluss in 1934, but it failed.

The Austrian Chancellor, Dollfuss, tried to crack down on the Socialists and Nazis - political factions that he thought were tearing the country apart. Dollfuss banned the Nazi party. In 1934, Hitler ordered the Austrian Nazis to create havoc in Austria. This turned into an attempt to overthrow the government. Chancellor Dollfuss was murdered but the attempted coup failed because the Austrian military intervened to back up the government.

In 1934, Italy had an agreement with Austria that it would protect Austria from outside aggression. The Italian dictator, Mussolini, honoured the agreement and moved Italian troops to the Austrian border to deter Hitler from invading.

## Events in Austria

The new Austrian Chancellor, Schuschnigg tried to preserve the country from German invasion by trying not to give Hitler an excuse for aggression. He tried to co-operate with Hitler as much as possible. Schuschnigg signed the German-Austrian Agreement of 1936. This pact recognised the independence of Austria but the price was that Austria's foreign policy had to be consistent with Germany's. The agreement also allowed Nazis to hold official posts in Austria. Schuschnigg hoped this would appease Hitler. He was wrong.

Schuschnigg's position was undermined in 1936 when Hitler and Mussolini formalised the Rome-Berlin Axis during their joint involvement in the Spanish Civil War (1936-39). With Germany and Italy now firm allies, Austria had lost the protection of Italy and was vulnerable to German attack.

In 1938, Schuschnigg visited Hitler near the Austrian border. Hitler demanded that Nazis be given key government posts in Austria. Schuschnigg compromised and the Nazi member, Seyss-Inquart, was made Minister of the Interior. Hitler ordered Austrian Nazis to create as much trouble and destruction as possible in order to put pressure on Schuschnigg. If Hitler could claim that Austrian law and order had broken down he could justify marching German troops into Vienna to restore peace - despite the fact that he was responsible for the chaos in the first place.

## **Four days in March**

### **Wednesday 9 March 1938**

In a desperate act, Schuschnigg announced a referendum whereby the Austrian people would decide for themselves if they wanted to be a part of Hitler's Germany. Hitler was furious. If the Austrians voted against joining Germany his excuse for invasion would be ruined.

### **Thursday 10th March 1938**

Hitler told his generals to prepare for the invasion of Austria. He ordered Schuschnigg to call off the referendum. Knowing he would receive no help from Italy, and that France and Britain would not interfere in Hitler's plans, Schuschnigg conceded. He called off the referendum and resigned.

The Nazi Austrian Interior Minister, Seyss-Inquart, was ordered by Hitler to ask for German help in restoring order in Austria.

### **Friday 11th March 1938**

Hitler reassured Czechoslovakia that they had nothing to fear.

### **Saturday 12th March 1938**

German troops marched into Austria unopposed. Hitler now had control of Austria. A month later, Hitler held a rigged referendum. The results showed that the Austrian people approved of German control of their country.

## **Foreign reaction to the Anschluss**

### **France**

French politics were in turmoil in March 1938. In fact, two days before Germany invaded Austria, the entire French government had resigned. France was not in a position to oppose the invasion.

### **Britain**

In March 1938, Britain was having its own political problems. Anthony Eden, the Foreign Secretary, had resigned over Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain's decision to open negotiations with the fascist dictator of Italy, Mussolini. As such, with Chamberlain determined to appease Hitler, there was no political will to oppose Germany.

Furthermore, the British population were against the idea of another European war. The Anschluss was not seen as a threat to Britain and, as both nations were German-speaking, there was a sense that there was no good reason why Austria and Germany shouldn't unify.

Anti-appeasers, such as Winston Churchill, were alarmed by Germany's annexation of Austria. They believed that if Hitler had a true claim to Austria, he should have used negotiation and diplomacy rather than force.

## Results

- Germany added seven million people and an army of 100,000 to its **Reich**.
- Germany gained useful resources such as steel, iron ore and Austria's foreign exchange reserves.
- The balance of power in south-eastern Europe shifted in favour of Germany, increasing their influence in the Balkans.
- Czechoslovakia was now surrounded on three fronts by Germany.

Your summary diagram of key info....

# The Sudetenland 1938



Map showing the Czech partition

Hitler turned his attention to Czechoslovakia after his Anschluss triumph. He wanted to dismember this democratic country by whatever means necessary. Czechoslovakia was a member of the League of Nations and allied to France and the Soviet Union. There were however large minorities within Czechoslovakia. This included 3 million Germans in the area known as the Sudetenland.

- **Key events**

- Early in **1938**, the German leader in the Sudetenland Konrad Henlein complains that Sudeten Germans are being mistreated by Czechs.
- **30 May 1938** – Hitler orders plans to destroy Czechoslovakia by 1 October.
- **12 September 1938** – Hitler makes a speech attacking Czechoslovakia.
- **15 September 1938** – Neville Chamberlain, the British Prime Minister, flies to see Hitler at the Berghof and agrees that Czechoslovakia should give all areas with 50 per cent German Sudetens to Germany. The British and French persuade the Czechs to agree.
- **22 September 1938** – Chamberlain is successful in persuading Edvard Beneš, President of Czechoslovakia, to accept Germany's demands. Chamberlain meets Hitler at Bad Godesberg confident that the crisis was over. Hitler however had changed his mind and wanted the Sudetenland by 1 October. The talks break down and there is real fear now of a war in Europe. Chamberlain persuades Mussolini, the Italian dictator, to arrange a conference at Munich to discuss the issue of the Sudetenland.
- **29-30 September 1938** – Britain, France, Germany and Italy met in Munich. Crucially Czechoslovakia and the Soviet Union were not present. The four countries agreed to the German occupation of the Sudetenland between 1 and 10 October. German troops occupy the Sudetenland. Britain and France were following a policy of appeasement. Neville Chamberlain returned to Britain claiming he had established peace in our time. However following the agreement both Britain and France speeded up their own rearmament plans. Chamberlain's claim turned out to be a false hope as within a year of the agreement World War Two had started.
- **The final destruction of Czechoslovakia - 1939**
- The Munich agreement dealt only with the Germans in the Sudetenland. It said nothing of the nearly 2 million Germans living in Bohemia and Moravia. Hitler now moved to bring them under German control.

- Using the same tactics as in other events, he claimed that Germans were being treated unfairly. He claimed that the Czech government had lost control and that the German army should be sent in to restore order.
- Hitler invited President Hacha to Berlin on 14 March 1939. Hitler demanded that Hacha agreed to split Czechoslovakia within a few hours. At 04:00, President Hacha caved in to Hitler's demands and German troops marched into Prague on 15 March 1939. This was conquest pure and simple.
- Germany expanded and gained valuable resources as Czechoslovakia was rich in coal and possessed the huge Skoda armaments factory.

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## The Nazi-Soviet Pact 1939



Hitler wanted the restoration of Danzig to Germany and also the return of the Polish Corridor. Britain and France had realised by now that it was not possible to appease Hitler and made a commitment to defend Poland. Hitler had broken the Munich Agreement by taking over the rest of Czechoslovakia.

In August, Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union signed a non-aggression pact. This was a promise not to fight each other. The agreement publicly stated that there would be non-aggression for ten years and made economic agreements. There were however secret elements to the agreement. Both countries agree to help each other if there is a war against Poland. Crucially this gave Hitler the freedom to invade Poland without having to worry about the Soviet Union. This meant that the USSR could not support Britain or France against Germany, so in effect it created a divide between the enemies of Germany.

The Pact was an amazing U-turn. Hitler had always stressed that the Soviet Union was his main enemy, ruled by Jewish Communists and subhuman Slavs. It was the main focus of **Lebensraum**. This shows he was willing to adapt in order to achieve his wider aims.

It was a masterstroke because:

- it left Poland isolated
- it destroyed attempts by the West to bring the Soviet Union into an alliance against Germany
- Germany avoided being dragged into a war on two fronts
- Germany gained vital raw materials from the Soviet Union that helped rearmament

Your summary diagram of key info....