



Neil Gregor

Hitler's aggression

Opportunistic or planned?

Look at the detail and we see a man seizing his chances. But how does the big picture change our view of Hitler and the drive to war?

In November 1945, 6 months after the end of the war, 22 of the surviving members of the Nazi regime were put on trial before the International Tribunal at Nuremberg. They were accused of four crimes: 'war crimes', 'crimes against peace', 'crimes against humanity' and 'conspiracy to wage aggressive war'.

The fourth charge, 'conspiracy to wage aggressive war', clearly implied that the Nazi regime, with Hitler at its apex, had not only been aiming at war from 1933 onwards but had been planning it in some detail. And, ever since the trials, there have been historians who have argued that Hitler's aggression was intended from the outset, focused on a clear set of goals, and driven by a timetable. One example of a German historian who believed this was Klaus Hildebrand. We need only think of Hugh Trevor-Roper's famous characterisation of the notorious '**Hossbach memorandum**' of 1937 as a 'blueprint for aggression' to recognise that leading British scholars often also came to the same conclusions.

However, it did not take long for alternative interpretations to emerge. In the first serious biography of Hitler, published in 1952, the equally eminent historian Alan Bullock insisted that Hitler's foreign policy, while driven perhaps by very broad

goals, had been characterised by a high degree of flexibility, suggesting that Hitler had indeed wanted to take territory in the east but had no strong preference for precisely where, when, or in what order. Similarly, A. J. P. Taylor argued that Hitler's foreign policy had been the product of a high degree of opportunism, with Hitler just exploiting chances as they arose, as Taylor believed all statesmen were inclined to do.

The debates have continued ever since. When such eminent historians disagree so fundamentally, what are we to do? The answer, as ever, is to undertake a close examination of the evidence, and to look at some case studies in detail, before forming our own conclusions.

Case study 1: the remilitarisation of the Rhineland

Under the general disarmament terms of the Treaty of Versailles (1919), the Rhineland had been demilitarised. In March 1936, in his first big foreign policy gamble, and contrary to the advice of many around him, Hitler ordered its remilitarisation. Why did Hitler choose to embark upon this initiative at this particular point, and how could he be so sure that the gamble would succeed? The remilitarisation of the Rhineland was, arguably, a masterpiece of opportunistic timing.

In the first place, Hitler's opponents were deeply divided among themselves at this point. In April 1935, the governments of Britain, France and Italy had formed the 'Stresa Front' — a statement of collective opposition to Hitler's introduction of military conscription in the previous month. Yet this apparent unity did not last long. In June 1935, the British government concluded the Anglo-German Naval Agreement, which ceded to Germany the right to build a navy one-third the size of Britain's fleet. This greatly angered the French, and led to a major temporary breakdown in Anglo-French relations. Then, in October 1935, Mussolini invaded Abyssinia. The British government took the lead in encouraging the League of Nations to impose sanctions on Italy, which in turn caused a major rift in relations between the two countries and led Mussolini to gravitate slowly towards better relations with Hitler instead.

Hossbach memorandum: unofficial report of a meeting between Hitler and his senior military commanders, during which Hitler first outlined his intention to go to war before 1943 over Austria, Czechoslovakia and *Lebensraum* (living space for Germans in the east).

German troops occupy the Rhineland, 7 March 1936.



Key points

- ✘ To assess the different arguments historians advance, we have to draw our own independent conclusions from the evidence.
- ✘ If we look at individual diplomatic events we can see much evidence to suggest that Hitler was an opportunist.
- ✘ We must, however, bear the 'big picture' in mind: individual diplomatic events did not occur in a vacuum but within a very clear context.
- ✘ Hitler had a general vision of German expansion and domination, but this does not mean that he had detailed plans or timetables.

Thus in March 1936, Hitler could calculate that there would be no concerted opposition on the part of the Western powers to his entry into the Rhineland. But there were also good reasons to suspect that France (whose reaction was clearly the most important) would not respond unilaterally. An important factor to remember here (it is often overlooked) is that France was experiencing a temporary period of political uncertainty. The Laval government had fallen in January 1936, and from January to May 1936 France was led by a provisional 'caretaker' government under Sarraut. Not until May 1936, with the election of the so-called Popular Front government, did a stable regime re-emerge. In other words, French political paralysis offered Hitler a crucial window of opportunity at this point.

Finally, Hitler's remilitarisation of the Rhineland was opportunistic in another sense. In 1935, the Nazi regime went through a period of considerable unpopularity at home, because of economic problems and food shortages. Many Germans were beginning to criticise the regime. Remilitarising the Rhineland therefore played an important role in restoring Hitler's support from the German population and in restabilising the regime at home.

Case study 2: the Anschluss with Austria

In March 1938, Hitler's troops marched confidently into Austria, creating an Anschluss (union) between the two countries, which drove a further nail into the coffin of the Treaty of Versailles. This occasion marked the onset of Nazi Germany's territorial expansion and set in motion a chain of crises which were to culminate in the outbreak of war 18 months later. But in what sense, if any, was the Anschluss the product of careful planning by Hitler?

Much speaks for the interpretation that it was only decided upon very late in the day. In fact, in February 1938 Hitler had concluded a peaceful

agreement with the Austrian chancellor, Schuschnigg, whereby the Austrian government would take a leading Nazi into its cabinet and would coordinate its foreign, military and economic policies with those of Germany. Hitler believed that a formal occupation would not be necessary because this agreement was so wide-reaching that it would effectively turn Austria into a German satellite anyway.

What happened to change Hitler's mind? The key moment was Schuschnigg's decision to call a plebiscite on the agreement, offering ordinary Austrians the chance to express their views on the question of Austrian independence. Hitler had not expected this and had not planned for such an eventuality. But, annoyed as he was, it does not appear that Hitler ordered the invasion in a fit of decisive anger. If anything, he wavered, and it was only with the encouragement of **Hermann Goering** that he finally decided to let his troops march in. The Anschluss was the outcome of a short-term crisis which developed in a manner far different from that envisaged by Hitler, and far from implementing long-held plans, it seems that he acted very nervously throughout.

The 'big picture'

If we look at the evidence presented in these two case studies, it would appear that both achievements were the outcome of Hitler exploiting (or being encouraged to exploit) situations which were not entirely of his own making. Should we therefore see him primarily as a short-term opportunist? However, when thinking about the details of individual diplomatic crises, there is a great danger that we forget the bigger picture. The key thing when considering Hitler's foreign policy is this: we must remember to see the wood as well the trees!

After all, neither the remilitarisation of the Rhineland nor the Anschluss with Austria occurred in a vacuum. The remilitarisation of the Rhineland occurred at a time when Hitler was challenging the stipulations of the Treaty of Versailles more generally. Not only had he recently reintroduced conscription, as we have already noted, he had also embarked upon general rearmament. In other words, we have to place the individual events of March 1936 in context. If we do so, we can see that the remilitarisation of the Rhineland was part of a concerted push on Hitler's part to improve Germany's military and diplomatic position in the mid-1930s prior to embarking upon a more general process of expansion.



Card commemorating the Anschluss, 1939.

Hermann Goering

(1893–1946): appointed prime minister and interior minister for Prussia and Reich air minister in 1933. Built up the Luftwaffe (German air force).

Defendants at the Nuremberg Trial, November 1945.



Nuremberg war trials 1945–47

- The first Nuremberg trial was of 21 major war criminals, including Hess, Goering, Ribbentrop and Speer. There were 11 subsequent trials of judges, doctors and the Einsatzgruppen (four groups of murderers who killed Jews, gypsies, members of the Communist Party and people defying the occupying armies of the Third Reich).
- The trying court was called the International Military Tribunal and consisted of judges drawn from the USA, Britain, France and the Soviet Union.
- The trials were conducted according to international law and the conventions that governed the conduct of war.
- 173 Austrians and Germans were tried for war crimes.
- Of those accused and found guilty, 25 were sentenced to death, 20 to life imprisonment and 97 to imprisonment for shorter terms.
- 35 of those accused were acquitted of war crimes.

Sudetenland: region of Czechoslovakia which bordered Germany and much of whose population was of German origin.

Similarly, the Anschluss with Austria did not come entirely out of the blue. In 1934, Austrian Nazis had assassinated the then chancellor, Dollfuss. Mussolini's opposition meant that the crisis did not result in closer ties with Germany, but the crisis does suggest that at least some elements of the Nazi movement had been trying to engineer closer links between Germany and Austria from the outset. Moreover, in July 1936, Germany and Austria had concluded the Austro-German Agreement, in which Austria agreed to follow a foreign policy compatible with that of Germany. In other words, the Anschluss was the culmination of ongoing pressure from Nazi Germany throughout the 1930s to bring Austria into Germany's sphere of influence.

Hitler: a visionary leader

If we place these events more firmly in the general context of the 1930s, the case for seeing Hitler as someone who was driving towards war from the outset seems even stronger. After all, as soon as

Hitler had succeeded in annexing Austria, he turned his attention to the Germans living in the **Sudetenland**. Once he had achieved their integration into Germany, he quickly proceeded to dismember the rest of Czechoslovakia, invading it in March 1939. Once this had been achieved, he focused his attention straight away on Poland, provoking a crisis which was eventually to lead to war. The speed and consistency with which Hitler moved from one crisis to the next suggests that much more than clever opportunism was at work — after all, it is simply not credible to think that Hitler could, by accident, have moved Germany from the situation it had been in during 1933 to that in which it found itself in 1939.

Moreover, of course, the broad outlines of German expansion in the 1930s can be discerned in Hitler's *Mein Kampf*, written when Hitler was in prison following the Munich putsch of 1923. A. J. P. Taylor may have dismissed it as the 'day dreaming' of a marginal right-winger, and certainly not everything that Hitler aspired to in the book actually came to pass. But even if we agree that *Mein Kampf* does not contain a detailed timetable, and even if we acknowledge that it is impossible to see in it a consistent set of plans, we must recognise that, in broad terms, the vision which Hitler outlined in his book bears a striking resemblance to the broad policies of expansion, aggression and violence he pursued from 1933 onwards.

Perhaps, indeed, this is the best way to think about Hitler's foreign policy — not as the product of a careful, detailed planner at work, but not simply the product of short-term opportunism either. A more apt description of Hitler's foreign policy in the 1930s was that it was the work of a visionary — a man with a vision of a German-dominated Europe towards which he was working throughout his political career, and which he would use any means to achieve.

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Further study

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