

Germany prepares for war



AQA AS Life in Nazi Germany, 1933–1945

Edexcel AS From Second Reich to Third Reich: Germany, 1918–45

Edexcel A2 From Kaiser to Führer: Germany 1900–45

OCR (A) A2 Nazi Germany 1933–45

OCR (A) AS International Relations c1890–1941

OCR (A) AS Democracy and Dictatorship in Germany 1919–63

Richard Overy investigates the arguments that still surround Hitler's intentions in preparing Germany for war in the 1930s

Key concept

The role of the individual

Before you read this

List Hitler's actions and known intentions during the 1930s, then familiarise yourself with historians' interpretations of those of his actions that provoke differing opinions. This comprehensive review will serve as an excellent revision aid.

There has never been much doubt that Hitler expected and wanted a war of some kind after he had come to power in Germany in 1933. What historians argue over is the nature and timing of the war Hitler hoped for. German preparations for war in the 1930s might well supply important clues to answer the question: what kind of war? But historians have argued now for half a century over how to interpret war preparations and there is still no clear consensus today.

There are in effect two different issues to confront:

- The first is the question of what scale of preparations was undertaken in the period between 1933 and 1939 and what effect this might have had on the economy.
- The second question is to ask whether or not the war that broke out in September 1939 was the war Hitler wanted and had been preparing for, or whether he was pushed into conflict by an accumulation of short-term economic and political difficulties.

The scale of preparations

German rearmament had already begun before Hitler came to power. The German armed forces tried to find ways of concealing the research and development of tanks and aircraft banned by the Treaty of Versailles. They used, in particular, an agreement made with the USSR in 1926, the Treaty of Berlin, which allowed them to develop weapons and explore their use in

remote bases in the Soviet Union. These links were terminated when Hitler came to power. Instead he announced in February 1933 to the generals and to his cabinet that restoring German military strength was the principal aim of his regime.

The rearming of Germany did not necessarily mean war. It was supported by military, political and business leaders because it reversed the sense of insecurity Germany had felt in the 1920s and was a means to return Germany as a full member of the club of Great Powers. Even Hitler, in the early years of the regime, had as yet no particular war in mind and knew that Germany would run major risks if he went too far too fast.

His strategic thinking was much influenced by the idea of economic imperialism. After the Great War Germany was in a permanently weak trading position and had difficulty meeting all necessary supplies of food and raw materials. Hitler favoured the idea of seizing additional 'living space' (Lebensraum) in areas of central and eastern Europe. This was an idea that had circulated in one form or another among military and academic circles since the late nineteenth century, but Hitler conceived of living space as something that superior peoples deserved, like the colonial empires of Britain and France. He favoured the use of direct military power to secure a large territorial empire for Germany too, which many German leaders regarded as too risky.

Defying the Versailles restrictions

Rearmament in Germany can be divided into two distinct stages.

During the first stage, in the period from 1933 to 1937, the **Versailles restrictions** were overturned. A German air force was set up, first in secret, then from 1935 in open defiance of the treaty limitations. The German navy embarked on a limited expansion, building small battleships and its first new submarines. The Anglo-German Naval Agreement of June 1935 gave formal approval for the German navy to violate the restrictions imposed in 1919. The 100,000-man army allowed under Versailles was expanded to a 300,000-man army and in March 1935 conscription was introduced. All of these moves were widely approved by German elites as an expression of German national revival.

The age of the Four-Year Plan

The second stage of rearmament was different as it bore the specific character of direct preparation for a war or wars at some time in the near future. The change was signalled by Hitler in the autumn of 1936 when he launched the Second Four-Year Plan (to succeed the First Four-Year Plan to tackle unemployment, begun in 1933).

The idea behind the plan was Hitler's own, though he put the head of the air force, Hermann Göring, in charge of it. He saw a successful future

The Second Four-Year Plan

On 18 October 1936 the Second Four-Year Plan was formally launched at a reception in Berlin. The person given responsibility for the plan was General Hermann Göring, who had already been appointed as a special commissar for currency and raw materials in April that year. He set up a major organisation dealing with prices, trade, agriculture, substitute materials, currency and industrial retraining. Investment in the programmes totalled 5.5 billion Reichsmark, more than the value of all industrial investment in Germany between 1933 and 1936.

In 1938–39, 736,000 workers were retrained in jobs necessary for the war effort. In July 1938 a 'New Production Programme' was launched for chemical output which was to cost 8.6 billion Reichsmark from 1938 to 1941.

These vast programmes were difficult to achieve but they were self-evidently based on the idea of large-scale commitment to creating the sinews of future warfare on a scale hitherto thought impossible in peacetime.

Versailles restrictions:

these included the extensive assignment of 'German' territory to other states, payment of reparations, War Guilt Clause No. 231, restrictions on Germany's military capacity: no conscription, no tanks, no heavy artillery, no poison gas supplies, no aircraft, no airships, no submarines and no air arm, no General Staff, limitation of the German navy, limitation of the army to 100,000 men.

war as a total war, which would need to make demands of an unprecedented kind on the German industrial economy, domestic food supply and workforce. In Hitler's eyes this required two things:

- First, the greatest possible preparations for war needed to be made so that German society would already be mobilised or ready for mobilisation when the conflict came.
- Second, Germany would have to adopt a strategy of 'autarky' or self-sufficiency to avoid the danger of trade blockade that it had experienced between 1915 and 1918.



German tanks parading at the Nuremberg Rally in 1935.



Hitler and Göring at the Munich Conference in September 1938.

German conservative allies: after the November 1932 election Papen, the new chancellor, sought to cobble together a 'Cabinet of National Concentration', to include Hitler, Hugenberg (leader of the DNVP, or Conservative People's Party) and himself. The March 1933 election gave the NSDAP 43.9% of the votes cast and the DNVP 8.9%, thus producing a narrow majority.

Hitler's conception of future war had a strong economic core and it meant adopting policies in 1936–37 that would supply the economic springboard necessary for launching wars of conquest. These wars would, in turn, expand German resources and increase German military strength.

This was the point at which the German conservative allies of the National Socialist revolution parted company with Hitler. The economics minister and head of the Reichsbank, Hjalmar Schacht, objected to the Four-Year Plan as too expensive and a diversion of the national economy away from civilian and export needs. He had masterminded much of the economic recovery of Germany between 1933 and 1936, but in 1937 he was forced to resign in protest at the new stage of rearmament and the strategy of autarky. The army leaders were also unhappy about the new stage of military build-up and were unwilling to run the risk of major war so soon after Germany had won back its sovereignty over security matters.

On 5 November 1937, at a meeting recorded by the army adjutant Friedrich Hossbach, Hitler declared his first firm plans for possible military action against Austria and Czechoslovakia. The war minister, Field Marshal Werner von Blomberg, and

the army commander-in-chief, General Werner von Fritsch, were both unhappy about the prospect. Their potential opposition was overcome with two staged Gestapo frame-ups, which led Hitler to suspend Fritsch for alleged homosexuality and sack Blomberg for marrying a former porn model.

In February 1938 Hitler assumed the supreme command of the armed forces himself. He abolished the war ministry and set up a large staff

German military spending (millions of Reichsmark)

Budget year	Army	Air force	Navy	Mefo-Bills*	Total spending
1933–34	–	–	–	–	750**
1934–35	815	642	496	2,140	4,093
1935–36	1,041	1,036	695	2,720	5,492
1936–37	2,435	2,225	1,161	4,450	10,271
1937–38	3,537	3,258	1,487	2,690	10,972
1938–39	9,465	6,026	1,756	–	17,247

* Bills used to fund rearmament but disguised as bills of the 'Metal Research Company' (*Metallurgische Forschungsgesellschaft*)

** Individual figures within categories unknown

- German rearmament began before Hitler came to power and was designed to restore Germany as a Great Power and not necessarily to wage war.
- German rearmament followed two stages, in the first few years re-establishing a German military infrastructure in defiance of Versailles, and in the years 1936–39 actively preparing for a major war.
- German military preparations were governed by the idea of total war and large-scale mobilisation, not by ideas of limited war.
- Hitler was obsessed by the idea of waging some kind of small war in the late 1930s to give his forces combat experience and to grab the economic resources of central Europe.
- Historians remain divided over the question of whether Hitler really wanted a local or a general war in 1939 because the evidence can be read a number of ways. The argument that economic and social pressures pushed Hitler to a premature big war remains speculative.

responsible directly to him. From then on rearmament was focused on war preparation, first for small local wars that would extend German influence in eastern Europe and capture important economic resources, then for a major conflict to be fought, Hitler suggested, some time after 1942–43.

The 3 years from 1936 saw the militarisation of the German economy and of much of the German population. Between 1936 – when the Four-Year Plan was set up – and 1939, two-thirds of all industrial investment went into war or war-related industries, such as chemicals or aluminium. Agriculture was overhauled and modernised so that Germany might be almost self-sufficient in all major foodstuffs except fats and oils.

By 1939 around a quarter of the industrial workforce was employed on military orders, a figure unmatched by any other state in Europe. The incorporation of Austria in March 1938 (the Anschluss) and the acquisition at the Munich Conference of the Sudeten German areas of Czechoslovakia gave Germany access to rich resources of iron ore and brown coal (for the production of synthetic petroleum) as well as Austrian engineering and arms sectors. The seizure of Bohemia and Moravia (the areas of Czech population) on 15 March 1939 brought the large Skoda armaments works and Czech supplies of coal and other minerals. By 1939 Germany was much less dependent on overseas exports and devoted the largest proportion of the national product to military purposes of any of the major powers.

All of this was achieved without war, a fact that Hitler found disappointing. He planned in May 1938 to launch a short, sharp war against Czechoslovakia in the autumn, designed not only to seize resources



A German machine-gun crew on the outskirts of Warsaw during the invasion of Poland in September 1939.

but to give the armed forces real battlefield experience. Even his closest party supporters, including Göring, were unenthusiastic about running the risk of a major war and in the end pressured Hitler into backing down from the Czech conflict and accepting international mediation.

This left Hitler frustrated and petulant in September 1938. He began to plan the next target in taking back territory lost to Poland and bringing Poland under German domination. It is not clear that he always intended to fight Poland because at first he assumed the Polish government would acquiesce. But when the Poles refused to cooperate, Hitler ordered the armed forces in April 1939 to draw up plans to destroy Poland in a short campaign in August and September. This was to be Hitler's first war.

What kind of war?

It is at this point, with Germany now heavily armed, larger and more economically independent than before, that historians debate Hitler's real intentions in 1939. Some insist that the decision for a war with Poland was soon followed by a decision to use the crisis as the point at which to fight the two major Western powers, Britain and France, before perhaps turning at a future stage to conflict with the USSR or even the USA. This decision was forced, according to historian Tim Mason, by fear of a 'stab in the back'

'stab in the back': the original so-called 'stab in the back' occurred at the end of the First World War when the German army sought to blame the politicians for negotiating the armistice that ended the war.

by disgruntled workers, who could only be bought off by a victorious war that diverted attention from the failure of the regime to be able to supply both 'guns' and 'butter' at the same time.

A second argument has been put forward recently by historian Adam Tooze, and is supported by historian Zara Steiner in her new international history of the 1930s. This is that by the spring and summer of 1939 the heavy demands of rearmament had produced insupportable economic problems, provoked by a lack of foreign exchange and currency to buy essential imports and growing inflationary pressures. Faced with these difficulties, so the argument goes, Hitler gambled on a large-scale war in which Germany had a better prospect of winning in 1939 than would have been the case if he had delayed any further.

It is possible to read the evidence available from 1939 a number of ways, but there are two major problems with the argument that Hitler chose war with the West in 1939 because of social and economic pressures:

■ First, there is almost no evidence of social unrest in 1939 so serious as to revive the 'stab-in-the-back' fear (nor did a social crisis occur at any time during the subsequent war).

■ Second, the economic strains in 1939 were not simply taken at face value but were tackled by a variety of policy initiatives. These included the so-called New Finance Plan, launched in 1939, which increased taxes and introduced new ways of funding industrial expansion. Special incentives were also introduced for export and improved industrial rationalisation to cut costs. Overseas observers, certainly, found no evidence that the German economy was so 'overheated' in 1939 that Hitler had to escape into a major war to mask the crisis.

A more substantial objection to the argument that Hitler wanted a major war in 1939 is the widespread evidence that from April 1939 to the day when Poland was invaded, 1 September 1939, Hitler insisted to all around him – party leaders, military commanders, diplomats, even Mussolini – that the war with Poland would be localised and that the West might engage in political 'theatre' but would not actually fight. This conviction clearly suited Hitler's view of the possibilities in 1939 because he did want a war against Poland, but did not want or expect a war with Britain and France. All the efforts to break up the Western entente, to isolate Poland and eventually, on 24 August 1939, to sign a non-aggression pact with the Soviet Union suggest a concerted effort to localise the conflict.

Hitler seems to have understood the kind of risk he was running, but he hoped he could bluff the West into accepting a *fait accompli* in Poland. There is no evidence that Hitler ever thought of declaring war on Britain and France, as he later did with the USA in December 1941. Instead he invaded Poland

Questions

- What was the relationship between Hitler's view of future war and German military preparations in the 1930s?
- How convincing are the arguments that Hitler chose to fight a major war against the West in 1939 because of economic and social problems?

Weblink

There is a great deal of information and opinion about Hitler and his intentions on the internet, of varying quality. Useful overviews can be found at www.adolfhitlerspeeches.com/ and www.historyguide.org/europe/lecture11.html.

and found as a consequence that Britain and France found the courage at last to declare war on him.

These two approaches to explaining war in 1939 are difficult to reconcile. They depend on different readings of the available evidence and they stem from different assessments of Hitler's state of mind, or level of economic understanding, in 1939. It has to be remembered, however, that in October 1939 Hitler once again asked the Western states to accept that they could not help Poland (which was clear also in Paris and London) and to step back from total war. The West assumed Hitler was in bad faith, but it could also be argued that the peace offensive in October 1939 was consistent with the strategic hope Hitler had expressed in the 6 months before the German-Polish war that it could be kept localised.

In October 1939 Hitler was already telling party leaders that war with the Soviet Union was not to be on the agenda and it was here, not in the West, that the gleaming prospect of German empire could be fulfilled. In June 1941 Hitler launched the war against the Soviet Union, on which much of the war preparation of the 1930s had been predicated.

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Further reading

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