

EUR3. Dictatorship and Democracy | Sample answer

To what extent did Hitler's foreign policy, 1933-1939, contribute to the outbreak of World War II? (2015)

Hitler's aggressive foreign policy during the period 1933-1939 clearly led to the outbreak of World War II. Hitler's main focus in his foreign policy was breaking free from the Treaty of Versailles. The Treaty severely punished Germany for the role they played in WWI. Their army was restricted to 100,000 men, their navy was restricted to six battleships and they were not allowed to have submarines. They were also forbidden from having an air force. They were forced to take the blame for causing WWI (known as the war guilt clause), and they had to pay reparations for damage caused that amounted to 132 billion gold marks. Hitler also hoped that his foreign policies would help him achieve his goal of creating a "*Greater Germany*". He wished to unify Germany with all other German speaking people to create one powerful 'Third Reich'. His hope was for this empire to last for "*a thousand years*".

In 1933, Hitler attended a disarmament conference set up by the League of Nations. At the conference Hitler suggested that all of the other countries in the League disarm down to the level set for Germany in the Treaty of Versailles. France, fearing attacks from Germany, strongly rejected the idea, while Britain tried to seek a compromise. They suggested that Germany wait 4 years and then they would be given permission to rearm. Hitler refused this compromise and claimed that he was the only one serious about disarmament. He immediately pulled Germany from the League of Nations. That same year Hitler signed a 10-year non-aggression pact with Poland. In this pact he promised to respect Polish borders. The Pole signed this agreement as they feared Stalin and Communism and saw siding with Hitler as a better option. This pact made Hitler look like a man of peace and lulled Europe into a sense of false security.

In 1934, the Prime Minister of Austria, Engelbert Dollfuss, was murdered by Nazi sympathisers. Mussolini, the fascist dictator in Italy, feared a coup d'état in Austria. He wanted Austria to act as a buffer zone between Italy and Germany. He feared the Hitler would want to unite with the German speakers in the North of Italy. Mussolini sent troops to the Brenner pass on the Austrian border to prevent this coup. Hitler was forced to tell the Austrian Nazis to stand down as he was unprepared

for war. This event, known as the Dollfuss Affair, was a huge setback for Hitler's foreign policy, and it ruined his image as a man of peace.

In 1935 Hitler announced rearmament and general conscription. This was in direct violation of the Treaty. Rearmament created jobs in the armaments industry pushing the idea of "*guns before butter*". By 1939, 1.4 million men were employed in the army, far above the 100,000 allowed by the Treaty. Britain, France and Italy did not like this. They met at Stresa in Italy and formed the 'Stresa Front', condemning Hitler's actions. This unity did not last long. When Italy invaded Abyssinia the relationship between Italy, and Britain and France began to crumble. As Hitler's policies were making him stronger, the allies were becoming weaker and more divided.

Britain decided to look after their own interests. They signed a Naval Agreement with Hitler which allowed the Nazis to have 35% the size of the British fleet. It is important to note that submarines were excluded from this agreement. This was a grave mistake on the part of the British as U-boats and other submarines were used to capsize many commercial ships during the war. Many believe that Britain was wrong to condone the Agreement, as under the terms of the Treaty of Versailles, Germany was not allowed to have a big navy. Hitler viewed Britain as weak for having allowed him to continue breaking the Treaty. That year, the Saar mining region voted, by a massive majority of over 90%, to return to Germany (they had been separated from Germany by the Treaty of Versailles). This shows that Hitler's policies, while aggressive, were popular with the German people.

Hitler wanted to test the Allies' resolve. Under the Treaty of Versailles, the Rhineland, the area of Germany bordering France, had to be a demilitarised zone. In 1936, Hitler decided to rearm the region. He sent troops into the zone with orders to retreat if Britain and France forcefully objected. Surprisingly, they did not. Britain was unprepared for war, and France did not want to fight without them. Hitler saw the European powers as weak and began an even more aggressive foreign policy. A civil war had begun in Spain and Hitler sent thousands of German soldiers, 1 tank battalion and 16 aircraft battalions to fight for the fascist General Franco. Hitler wanted to see how far he could push the allies before they abandoned their policy of appeasement. He also thought that a right-wing dictatorship in Spain would weaken France even more. It was bold choices like these that led to the outbreak of WWII.

Hitler was determined to unite all German speakers together under one great empire. Hitler wanted to unite Germany with the German speakers of his homeland Austria. To do this, Hitler signed a pact with Mussolini, known as the Rome Berlin Axis. With Germany and Italy now firm allies, Austria had lost the protection of Italy and was vulnerable to German attack. 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 cooperate with Hitler as much as possible, going so far as to sign the German-Austrian Agreement of 1936, which allowed Nazis to hold official posts in Austria. He even made the Nazi member Seyss-Inquart Minister of the Interior. Schuschnigg hoped this would appease Hitler. He was wrong. Hitler ordered his troops into the country. A month later, a rigged plebiscite was held. The results showed that the Austrian people approved of German control of their country.

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. 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. Anschluss greatly benefited Germany. They added 7 million people and an army of 100,000 to their Reich. They 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. Hitler's foreign policy was working; his empire was expanding.

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. Mussolini, seeing that a world war was inevitable, tried to organise a meeting between the leaders of Germany, France, Britain and Italy to solve the "*Sudeten problem*". This meeting is known as the Munich Conference. Neville Chamberlain returned to Britain after the conference claiming he had established "*peace in our time*". However, following the agreement both Britain and France

speeded up their own rearmament plans. By early 1939, Hitler's army had invaded all of Czechoslovakia, with little protest from Britain and France.

In 1939, Hitler signed a pact with Stalin. 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. 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 his policy 'Lebensraum'. Hitler also signed another pact with Italy – the Pact of Steel – which solidified their position as allies. Hitler was now ready for war. On the 1st of September 1939, Germany invaded Poland. Forced to act, Britain and France declared war 3 days later.

There is no doubt that Hitler's foreign policy was a factor that led to WWII. Step by step, his radical and aggressive policies strengthened Germany and unified the south-east of Europe under his power.