

Hitler as a Cause of World War Two

So far, we have seen how historians have blamed both the Treaty of Versailles and the League of Nations for helping to cause World War Two – mainly because they FAILED to keep the peace.

Most historians, however, blame Adolf Hitler as a POSITIVE cause of war. Hitler came to power with aims in foreign policy which he had stated clearly in *Mein Kampf* (1924) – he was determined to destroy the Treaty of Versailles, defeat Communism and make Germany great. Some historians claim that he intended a World War from the very beginning, others merely that – in pursuing these aims – he systematically drew Europe into war:

1933	Conscription & Rearmament	Hitler built up his army, navy and airforce in secret, then openly.	France did nothing and Britain made an agreement on navies.
1936	Rhineland	He sent the Germany army back into the Rhineland.	Britain and France did nothing.
1938	Austria	He got the Austrian Nazis to make trouble, then invaded Austria.	Britain and France did nothing.
1938	Munich	He got Sudetenland Nazis to cause trouble, and threatened to invade.	At Munich, Chamberlain gave Hitler the Sudetenland.
1939	Czechoslovakia	Hitler invaded the rest of Czechoslovakia	Britain promised to defend Poland.
1939	USSR/ Nazi Pact Poland	He got the Danzig Germans to cause trouble. He made an alliance with Russia, agreeing to split up Poland. Then he invaded.	Britain declared war.

Appeasement

What were the other nations of Europe doing whilst Hitler was doing this? By the 1930s, Britain and France had ditched the Treaty of Versailles and the League of Nations as the way to keep the peace, and were pursuing instead a policy which came to be called ‘appeasement’.

Nowadays the British Prime Minister Chamberlain and the French Prime Minister Daladier are often represented as weak and spineless cowards who gave the bully Hitler what he wanted in the hope that it would prevent a war. However, Chamberlain and Daladier saw it merely as ‘being reasonable’; allowing Hitler’s ‘reasonable’ claims in the belief that he was a reasonable man who would stop when he had achieved his aims. Besides this, there were strong arguments for a policy of appeasement in the 1930s:

1. Chamberlain feared another war would destroy civilisation.
2. The British people wanted peace and as leader of a democracy.
3. Many British people agreed with Hitler that the Treaty of Versailles was not fair.
4. Many British people feared Russia more than Germany.
5. Many British people felt that events in Europe were not Britain’s business.
6. Britain was too weak to help – Munich gave Britain 1 year to rearm.

However, both Hitler and Stalin saw it as cowardice and weakness. The historian AJP Taylor blamed Chamberlain and Daladier for World War II – he argued that by continually giving in to Hitler they TEMPTED Hitler to go further and further, and thus encouraged him into war (like entrapment).

The policy of appeasement ended during the year after Munich (1938-9). Perhaps the greatest cause of this change was Hitler’s invasion of Czechoslovakia in March 1939 (which showed he could not be trusted and turned the British people against him). Another major incident was the German Nazis’ attacks on the Jews on *Kristallnacht* in November, 1938 (which convinced British people that the Nazis were evil). Winston Churchill’s speeches continually warned people about Hitler, and of the need to stand up to him.

The Nazi-Soviet Pact

In August 1939, Hitler and Stalin made an alliance. Hitler gave Stalin half of Poland to let him invade Poland – it was the final cause of the war, because it gave Hitler the go-ahead to invade Poland.

Yet Stalin had originally asked Britain for an alliance with Russia against Hitler! Why did this not happen?

1. The British feared Communism. They went slowly. They sent a minor official who did not have the power to make decisions. Stalin did not trust Britain. He thought that if he allied himself to Britain he would end up fighting Hitler on his own.
2. Hitler moved quickly. He sent Ribbentrop, a senior government minister. He offered Stalin half of Poland. Stalin hated Hitler, but if he allied himself with Hitler he would get half of Poland without fighting, and he would have more time to prepare for war with Germany.