



Hitler and the origins of the war, 1919-1939

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In this series of four lectures I want to discuss the origins, course and consequences of the Second World War from a German perspective: my aim is not just to explain how the war came about, why Germany conquered most of Europe with such apparent ease, when the tide of war turned against Germany, and what the reasons were for Germany's eventual defeat, but also to explore the unusual, even in many respects unique nature of the war that Germany waged, particularly in Eastern Europe, to show how the war was experienced by ordinary Germans, both members of the armed forces and civilians on the Home Front, and to assess the changing levels of support for the war effort amongst the German people as a whole.

In this opening lecture in the series I'll talk about the origins of the war. It used to be thought, both during the war and, under the influence of Winston Churchill's massive, and widely-read five volumes on its history, that the war was caused simply by Nazi aggression, and that the British and French should have stood up to it earlier. But this simple explanation was torpedoed by A. J. P. Taylor nearly half a century ago, in his book *The Origins of the Second World War*. In this provocative work, which helped shape the views of a generation on this topic, Taylor reminded his readers that in 1939 Britain and France declared war on Germany, not the other way round. Why did they do so, he asked? His answer has largely been accepted by subsequent historians. Britain and France declared war, he argued, for old-fashioned reasons of state. German expansion in Europe was undermining the balance of power, and they wanted to restore it. Moral objections had nothing to do with it, though of course as with the German invasion of neutral Belgium in 1914, they immediately became part of the Allied propaganda campaign. Taylor swept away the rhetoric made popular by Michael Foot and his collaborators in their wartime polemic *Guilty Men*, which pilloried British Prime Minister Chamberlain and his ministers for appeasing Nazi Germany instead of launching a war, say, in 1936, at a time when its aggression could have been stopped and its crimes limited in scope.

Here too, Taylor's argument has largely been accepted by later scholars in the field: appeasement, far from being politically blind and morally reprehensible, was, he suggested, the only sane and honourable course for the British and French governments to take while German intentions remained unclear, or seemed at least to be confined to a revision of the Treaty of Versailles. This treaty, and the associated minor treaties that together formed the Peace Settlement of 1919, redrew the map of Europe after the defeat of Germany and its allies in the First World War. The Peace Settlement was regarded soon after its conclusion as unfair to the defeated nations, hypocritical and immoral, a view largely shared by Chamberlain and his government.

To begin with, the Peace Settlement imposed massive financial reparations on Germany for the damage caused in Belgium and Northern France by the German armies that invaded and occupied them from August 1914 to November 1918. Economists like John Maynard Keynes condemned reparations almost as soon as they were imposed, and the economic history of the 1920s and early 1930s seemed to confirm the view that they were fatally damaging to the German economy. In fact, as we now know, the massive hyperinflation of the early 1920s, which shattered the political allegiances of the middle classes, was caused not least by the actions of the German governments of the time, which refused to raise taxation for fear of the political consequences of being accused of taxing the Germans in order to pay the French. And the liberal, pro-democracy parties collapsed mainly because the middle classes no longer saw them as a necessary bulwark against the threat of a Communist revolution once the political situation had stabilized. Still, none of this was apparent to the large body of opinion in Britain and France that felt guilty about

having imposed reparations in the first place.

Reparations came to an end in 1932. So they did not play any direct part in the triumph of Nazism the following year. Far more important were the territorial provisions of the Peace Settlement. Following the principles laid down by US President Woodrow Wilson, the Peace Treaties redrew the boundaries of Europe along the lines of nationality. Each nation was to be allowed to determine its own destiny. The great multinational empires, above all the Habsburg Monarchy, were duly parcelled out into a number of different national states, with a new or revived Polish state being carved out of parts of the former German, Russian and Austrian Empires. However, implementing the principle of national self-determination posed insurmountable problems. It left a legacy of bitterness for the future.

The lines of ethnicity in Europe were far from clearly drawn in 1919. Pockets of German settlement, some very substantial, existed all over East-Central Europe as far as the Baltic coast of Russia, Romania, Poland, the Czech borderlands and so on. Everywhere the lines of the new states seemed to many to be drawn to favour nationalities other than the Germans. So the new states generally included large German-speaking minorities. Some of the new states curtailed the rights of these minorities; Poland tried to "Polonize" German-speakers, while ethnic Germans in Czechoslovakia formed a growing source of discontent because they felt themselves disadvantaged in comparison to native Czechs. Alsace-Lorraine, with a majority of German-speakers, had been annexed by France, while the Saarland, which was wholly German, had been mandated to France with the promise of a popular vote in 1935 on whether to return to Germany or not. Following this principle, many politicians in Britain and France were persuaded that such minorities should be able to have more of a say over which state they belonged to, and in the 1930s that meant, increasingly, Germany.

The Peace Settlement also insisted on creating an independent, sovereign state for the 6 million German-speakers who lived in what now became the Republic of Austria. At the end of the First World War, when the other nationalities of the Habsburg Monarchy had broken off to form their own independent states, the German-speakers in Vienna and the surrounding provinces had voted to join in the Weimar Republic, which in its turn had accepted the policy of union with Austria. After all, German-speaking Austria had been part of the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation until its demise in 1806, and part of the German Confederation from 1815 to its abolition by Bismarck in 1866. In other words it had been part of Germany in one form or another for over a millennium, and had only existed outside it for just over half a century. But the Allies thought that it was absurd and dangerous for Germany actually to get bigger after having been defeated in the First World War, so vetoed the idea. This perhaps more than any other measure of the Peace Settlement seemed to many in Britain and France to be a blatant violation of the principle of national self-determination which had been applied so rigorously to nationalities other than the Germans themselves.

Finally, the Peace Settlement imposed strict limits on German armaments. The Germans were not allowed to build warships or combat aircraft, and all their existing armaments in these areas had to be destroyed. They were not allowed modern weapons like tanks, and their army was limited to a maximum of 100,000 men. By contrast, there was no corresponding disarmament in other countries, since the Treaty of Versailles affirmed the view that Germany's aggression had caused the war in the first place.

When the parliamentary democracy of the Weimar Republic collapsed in the early 1930s, and gave way to the stridently nationalistic regime of the Third Reich, there was a widespread view outside Germany that the Peace Settlement was a major cause, a view that of course was strongly encouraged by Nazi propaganda. In fact, there can be little doubt that the real cause was the economic depression that began in the USA in 1929. In the previous year, the Nazis had won less than 3 per cent of the vote in German national elections. Four years on, in 1932, they scored 37.4 per cent. Hitler began his foreign policy in October 1933 by withdrawing from disarmament talks, protesting that the British and French had refused to disarm themselves although Germany had already been disarmed for a decade and a half. But he reassured international opinion by signing a non-aggression pact with Poland in January 1934, signalling his peaceful intentions to the rest of the world.

Hitler made a bad error of judgment later in the year, however, by backing a botched attempt to absorb Austria into Germany. Although the Austrian Chancellor Dollfuss was assassinated by a unit of SS men, the coup failed, not least because the Italian dictator Mussolini moved his troops up to the border and made it clear he would not tolerate the takeover. Germany's international isolation was deepened when the people of the Saarland voted to return to Germany early in 1935. Hitler declared shortly afterwards that he was introducing universal military conscription and building a military air force and a battle fleet, and

equipping his new army with the latest armour, thus repudiating the arms restrictions imposed on Germany by the Peace Settlement. The French, British and Italian governments responded by meeting in the town of Stresa and agreeing to guarantee the integrity of Austria. The French concluded an agreement with the Soviet Union.

Nevertheless, these security measures were only half-hearted. Fundamentally the British and French governments could not see what was morally objectionable in the German moves. Domestic public opinion backed them. At the same time, while hoping for the best, it seemed prudent to prepare for the worst, and Britain began to modernize and expand its armed forces and equipment, above all from 1936 onwards, followed by France. But both countries had far-flung overseas empires to think of, and European politics seemed of secondary importance. As Neville Chamberlain was to exclaim in a radio broadcast during the Czechoslovakian crisis of September 1938: "How horrible, fantastic, incredible it is that we should be digging trenches and trying on gas-masks here because of a quarrel in a far-away country between people of whom we know nothing!" He would not have used the same words to describe Canada, India, South Africa or Australia. But he knew that the majority of the British electorate still, at this time, placed these parts of the British Empire far closer to home in their mental map of the world than they did anywhere in Central or Eastern Europe. The Dominions and the rest of the British Empire were reluctant to become involved in a European conflict, where Britain's aims seemed uncertain and Britain's role of little relevance to their concerns. And Hitler repeatedly expressed his admiration for the British Empire and claimed that he wanted it as an ally not as an enemy.

Given Hitler's repeated assurances that he had no intention of going any further than righting the wrongs of the 1919 Peace Settlement, it seemed to the British and French governments and indeed the British and French people that every effort should be made to avoid war with Germany. The creation of the League of Nations in 1919 had promised an international system through which future wars would be avoided, and there was a widespread reluctance to return to the old days of sabre-rattling and military alliances that, most people thought, had led to the outbreak of war in 1914.

Nobody wanted to repeat the terrible carnage of 1914-18, in which many British and French people, including leading figures in both governments, had lost close friends and relatives. There was a general belief that the next war would differ from the first one mainly through the use of massive aerial bombardment of major cities, and that there was no defence against attacks of this kind. The loss of civilian life would be incalculable, and the bombing of the Basque town of Guernica by German and Italian planes during the Spanish Civil War seemed to underline this point. Moreover, in 1936 the Italians invaded Ethiopia and bombed enemy troops with poison gas, making it seem likely that the same thing would happen in other future wars: hence the manufacture of millions of gas masks and their distribution to the population of London and other cities in the late 1930s. Britain was only slowly recovering from economic depression in the mid-1930s, and France was still sinking in to it, and the economic costs of waging war seemed to many to be prohibitive. This view was strengthened by the belief in London and Paris that German rearmament was moving so fast, and had reached such an advanced stage after five years, in 1938, that the prospects of actually winning a war against Hitler's resurgent Reich were dubious, to say the least. And in any case, many key figures in the Conservative establishment in the UK, and not a few in France, particularly among the military, admired the way that Hitler seemed to have restored order, prosperity and national pride in Germany. Soviet Communism seemed a far greater threat than Nazism, and Germany offered an effective bulwark against Bolshevism. What possible English or French interests were there in Austria or Poland or Czechoslovakia, people asked, that could justify launching a costly war with little prospect of success and the likelihood of weakening Britain and France's grip on their overseas empires?

If Hitler did indeed seem at times to speak, and act, with a belligerence that belied his repeated insistence that he was a man of peace, then perhaps, it was argued, the wind could be taken out of the sails of Nazi aggression by giving him what he wanted. Once those provisions of the Peace Settlement that had caused bitterness and resentment in Germany had been remedied, then there would be no more reason for German aggression and the radical elements in the Nazi regime would be tamed: this was the policy, in a word, of "appeasement".

Such was the reasoning that lay behind British policies towards Nazi Germany for most of the 1930s. On 18 June 1935, the British concluded a naval agreement with Germany that limited the German navy to just over a third of the size of its British counterpart (which, it must be remembered however, had a worldwide deployment in contrast to the merely European area of operations of the German Navy). The agreement also allowed parity in submarines. This cut the ground from under the Stresa agreement; and in a further

development favourable to Hitler's position, the Italian invasion of Ethiopia left Mussolini internationally isolated, with only Hitler as a potential major ally in Europe. The Rome-Berlin axis was cemented the following year by the two countries' joint intervention on the side of the Francoist rebels in the Spanish Civil War.

On 7 March 1936 Hitler marched his troops into the large area of western Germany, the Rhineland, from which they were formally barred by the Treaty of Versailles. Britain and France could see no good reason why a sovereign state should not be able to deploy its own troops on any part of its own territory, so they held back. By 1938, German rearmament had reached a stage where Hitler felt ready to move into Austria, which he annexed on 12 March with no opposition at all from Austria's inhabitants, the great majority of whom were only too happy to leave what they regarded as a failed and unviable state and join what seemed to be an advanced and successful one. In September 1938 Hitler secured an international agreement at Munich with Britain, France and Italy to detach the western, north-western and south-western borderlands of Czechoslovakia, inhabited mainly by German-speakers, and incorporate them into the German Reich; placed under such heavy international pressure, the Czechoslovak government gave its assent.

How did the situation get from this point to the outbreak of war less than a year later? The Munich agreement, in which a jubilant Chamberlain announced to the British public that he had secured "peace for our time", had the support of the vast mass of the British people, and it was clear, as A. J. P. Taylor had noted, that they had no appetite for a war. But on 15 March 1939, German armies marched into the rest of Czecho-Slovakia and took it over. This was not only a clear violation of the Munich agreement, it was also the first time Hitler had invaded a country or annexed an area that was not inhabited mainly by Germans. This roused the suspicion in Britain and France that he aimed at more than the mere revision of the Treaty of Versailles. He seemed indeed to be aiming at the domination of Europe, and this would clearly, as Taylor noted, upset the balance of power. By this time, too, it had become apparent to the British and French governments that German rearmament was not so overwhelming as they had previously thought, while their own programmes of arms and armaments were forging ahead and beginning to give them the confidence that they could withstand German aggression. The development of radar, backed by the construction of an effective fleet of fighter planes, offered the possibility of defence against aerial bombardment. The interests of the Empire became involved because Germany was beginning to threaten Britain's wider role in the world, through the growing strength of the German battle and submarine fleets. Above and beyond all this was the knowledge that if Germany secured control over Western Europe it would acquire the resources of some of the richest economies on the Continent and pose a direct threat to Britain across the Channel and the North Sea.

The conquest of rump Czecho-Slovakia thus convinced the mass of the British electorate and, crucially, its representatives in all the major political parties, that Hitler's ambitions were effectively limitless and that the British national interest demanded that they be stopped. Soon afterwards, a German propaganda offensive against Poland began accusing the Poles of maltreating and murdering Polish citizens of German extraction. It seemed obvious that Poland was next on Hitler's list. So the British and French governments issued a guarantee of Polish sovereignty and made it clear to Germany that they would declare war if it was violated.

Yet Chamberlain continued to believe that peace was possible. When Germany did eventually invade Poland, at the beginning of September 1939, he appeared in the House of Commons to suggest mediation by Italy, giving no time limit for the Anglo-French response. A repeat of the Munich Agreement seemed on the cards once more. But this time, the mood in the House of Commons, and in the country more generally, was entirely different. Conservative backbenchers were appalled at Chamberlain's attempt to renege on the guarantee to Poland. As the Labour Party spokesman Arthur Greenwood got to his feet, he was brusquely interrupted. "Speaking for the Labour Party", he began - "Speak for England!" shouted Leo Amery from the Tory back benches. Greenwood did. "I am greatly disturbed", he said. "An act of aggression took place thirty-eight hours ago...I wonder how long we are prepared to vacillate at a time when Britain, and all that Britain stands for, and human civilization are in peril." After the session the Cabinet met and forced Chamberlain to issue an ultimatum to the Germans to withdraw or face a declaration of war from Britain and France. The Germans did not withdraw, and war was duly declared.

"Everything that I have hoped for, everything that I have believed in in my public life", Chamberlain told the House of Commons, "has crashed into ruins." But what had overwhelmed him was not, in the end, any rational calculation of Britain's national interest in preserving the balance of power on the Continent but an onrush of moral passion that saw Germany as a ruthless aggressor riding roughshod over one sovereign

nation after another, and doubtless hell-bent on destroying more. It was time to call a halt. Britain was a leading world power. It was Britain's duty to ensure a stable and as far as possible morally justifiable international order on the European Continent. The widespread belief in the importance of morality in international relations that had been one of the forces behind support for the League of Nations and criticism of the Treaty of Versailles was now expressing itself in revulsion against Nazi foreign policy.

What was that policy, then? Here Taylor was at his weakest. In order to understand his arguments, it is important to realize that under the influence of Sir Lewis Namier, with whom he had taught at Manchester, and whose Polish-Jewish background gave him an extreme and undying hatred of Germany and the Germans, Taylor belonged to the school of thought in Britain that believed Germany was predestined to be an international aggressor. His book *The Course of German History*, had been commissioned during the war by the Political Warfare Executive of the government but rejected because it was too anti-German (as well as because, as the man who recommended its rejection, the left-wing German exile Francis Carsten, once told me, it was full of basic factual errors). In it, Taylor argued that Germany's lack of natural boundaries made it inevitable that Germany would always seek to expand across Europe until it found them. Of course there were obvious flaws in this argument: many other countries have no natural boundaries; rivers are made to be crossed, mountains to be traversed, and natural boundaries often fail to coincide with political ones. If the argument held good then Germany would never have sought to acquire territory across the river Rhine like Alsace-Lorraine or the Saarland, and might easily have stopped where it stops now, at the rivers Oder and Neisse in the East.

His book might seem to have been a product of wartime propaganda. Yet in 1961, the same year in which he published *The Origins of the Second World War*, Taylor reprinted *The Course of German History* without alteration, merely appending a new preface in which he expressed once more his fears that there would be a "third German war" before the end of the twentieth century. It was therefore a rabidly anti-German historian who wrote *The Origins of the Second World War* and not an apologist for Hitler as his German critics claimed. When he claimed that Hitler was no more than an ordinary German statesman, like Bismarck or Frederick the Great, he was not claiming that he was no worse than them, but that they were no better than him.

At the same time, as a self-professed believer in the role of chance in history, Taylor sought to deny that Hitler had any personal plan for Europe, still less for world domination. In the course of a detailed examination of the diplomatic manoeuvrings of the 1930s, he showed convincingly that Hitler had changed his mind and the direction of his policy on numerous occasions. Taylor cited the famous memorandum taken by Colonel Friedrich Hossbach at a meeting with army, navy and air force chiefs on 5 November 1937, when Hitler declared his intention of conquering Czechoslovakia and then Austria. But he then conquered them in the reverse order, so, Taylor claimed triumphantly, he did not have a plan but simply took advantage of circumstances as they arose. And in any case, he added for good measure, the memorandum itself was of dubious authenticity and could not be relied on. Hitler in other words was not in the driving seat, German history was.

I can't help thinking there's something rather contradictory about these views. Either Hitler was aiming at European hegemony or he wasn't. The Second World War might have been started by Britain and France declaring war on Germany, but would there have been a war if they hadn't done so? Taylor seems to be implying both that there would, and that there wouldn't. In the end, he was only explaining why the war happened when it did; he took it for granted that it would have happened at some time or other anyway. More to the point, Taylor relied wholly on published diplomatic documents, speeches and published writings, but even at the time he wrote there was a good deal of evidence available to document Hitler's intentions, and a good deal more has come to light since. And intentions, of course, as Taylor failed to see, are not the same as plans. Most politicians and statesmen have some kind of longer term intention or purpose, but how they actually get there depends on how they use the chances and circumstances of the moment; in other words, it depends on their mastery of the art of politics. Bismarck was the classic example: his intention was to unify Germany without Austria, but he did it by exploiting the convoluted politics of the Schleswig-Holstein question and the Hohenzollern candidature for the Spanish throne, neither of which was predetermined in any way.

But Adolf Hitler was different. He came from the extreme right-wing fringe of German and Austrian politics. Reacting to Germany's defeat in the First World War, and generalizing from his experience in the multi-ethnic Habsburg Monarchy before then, he saw world history and international relations essentially as a Darwinian struggle between races - Aryans, Latins, Slavs, Anglo-Saxons and so on - for the survival of the fittest. The world enemy of all of them, but especially of the Aryans, by which he meant essentially

Germans and possibly or partially Dutch and Scandinavians as well, was the Jew; Hitler believed that Jews everywhere were engaged in a co-ordinated international conspiracy to bring down Germany and that they had indeed succeeded in doing so in 1918 by fomenting revolution on the Home Front and so delivering the infamous "stab-in-the-back" to the undefeated army. In fact, of course, the German army had been defeated by the superior material resources of the Allies, especially after the United States had joined the conflict. The Allied blockade had cut off food supplies and led to the death from starvation and associated diseases of some 600,000 Germans. Allied arms had proved superior.

Hitler believed that Germany's only chance of long-term survival lay, as he wrote in his book *My Struggle* (*Mein Kampf*), published in two volumes in 1925-26, in the acquisition of agricultural land in Eastern Europe. This would be Germany's equivalent of the American West. The Communist regime in Russia was, he believed, run by Jews (in fact under Stalin it exhibited markedly anti-Semitic traits). "The end of Jewish rule in Russia", Hitler declared in *Mein Kampf*, "will also be the end of Russia as a state." Russia and its "vassal border states" would be conquered and occupied by Germans to create "living-space" (*Lebensraum*), by which he meant that German farmers would displace Russians, Ukrainians and Belarussians, and establish an agricultural area that would be able to feed Germany in any future conflict and thus allow Germans to live. "The boundaries of the year 1914", he stated in the book "mean nothing at all for the German future."

In 1928 he wrote a Second Book which, however, was never published, or at least not until it was discovered some years after 1945. In a remarkable passage in the book, Hitler wrote that American dominance of the world was becoming clear for all to see. It would reduce every European state to the level of Switzerland. "The only state that will be able to stand up to North America will be the one that has understood how, through the essence of its inner life and the meaning of its foreign policy, to raise the value of its people in racial terms and to bring them into the state-form most appropriate for this purpose...It is the task of the national socialist movement to strengthen and prepare its fatherland for this mission.' Thus in other words, putting these two books together, Hitler was saying that Germany under the Nazis would create a dictatorship based on ethnic purity and capable of achieving domination over the European Continent. In this way it would be able to face up to the USA, possibly in alliance with the British Empire.

So Hitler's ambitions from the outset were framed on a global scale. *Mein Kampf* was not a blueprint or a plan. But as Hugh Trevor-Roper pointed out in response to Taylor, taken together with other relevant utterances of Hitler it did reveal long-term intentions that never changed, whatever the political or diplomatic manoeuvres of the moment. Hitler was quite open about these intentions. On 23 May 1928 he stated publicly that his aim was to save Germany by war "into the most distant future by securing so much land and ground that the future receives back many times the blood shed". Shortly after his appointment as Reich Chancellor on 30 January 1933 he told two American businessmen in a private conversation that he intended to annex Austria, the Polish Corridor, Alsace-Lorraine and German-speaking areas in Denmark, Italy, Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia and Romania.

On 3 February 1933 Hitler met with senior army officers, whose support he was anxious to secure as he began to unleash his stormtroopers against the enemies of Nazism on the streets in a bid to drive them out of politics and establish a one-party dictatorship. He told them openly that he would rearm, invade Eastern Europe and then "Germanize" it, expelling the native population of Slavs. A year later, in February 1934, he told a meeting of army, SS and stormtrooper leaders that he expected the economic recovery now under way to come to a halt by 1942 at the latest, unless Germany acquired "living-space" in the East. "Short, decisive blows", he said, "to the west and then to the east could be necessary."

There is thus plenty of evidence quite apart from the Hossbach memorandum that attests to Hitler's intention to create living-space in the east and defeat Germany's enemies, principally France, in the west. The primacy of rearmament in the early years of his regime was absolute. Some economic historians have argued that he put money into the economy in order to reduce unemployment, which was affecting over a third of the workforce in 1933. But on 8 February 1933 that year he said: "Every publicly supported job creation scheme must be judged by the criterion of whether it is necessary from the point of view of the rearmament of the German people." Rearmament was disguised as job creation in order to deceive the other Great Powers, until it reached a point, as it did in 1935, where Germany was no longer so militarily weak that it posed no deterrent to a French invasion of the kind that had happened in 1923.

By 1936 the road to war was open; and not to a limited war but to a general European war. The Four-Year Economic Plan, established that year, had the explicit aim of preparing the German economy for a general war by 1942. And at the meeting recorded in 1937 by Colonel Hossbach, whose minutes, needless to say,

are undoubtedly genuine, Hitler announced his intention of conquering Austria and Czechoslovakia and dealing as well with the possible hostility of France. In the months following the meeting, he replaced the more conservative, cautious members of his government and military leadership - Schacht, Blomberg, Fritsch, Neurath - with men more willing to do his will. Fearing that he might succumb to a fatal illness, and also feeling more confident than before that Britain and France would not offer any effective barrier to German expansion, he accelerated the pace of his foreign policy, in effect bringing the date of the start of the war forward from 1942 by two or three years.

After the Anschluss of Austria, Hitler's next aim was not to right another wrong of the 1919 Peace Settlement by annexing the German-speaking borderlands of Czechoslovakia, but to remove Czechoslovakia and then Poland from the map altogether, as obstacles to Germany's further eastward expansion in pursuit of the goal of "living-space". On 28 May 1938 he told army generals and German Foreign Office bureaucrats that he had taken an "unalterable decision to smash Czechoslovakia by military action in the foreseeable future." As was also to be the case with Poland, the alleged maltreatment of ethnic Germans, played up so vociferously by Joseph Goebbels's propaganda machine, was only an excuse.

These foreign policy aims were far more radical than those pursued by earlier German statesmen, which is indeed a major reason why Chamberlain failed to recognize them for what they were. Bismarck in the 1870s and 1880s had declared Germany a satiated power, but that did not last very long, as we know. At their furthest extent, German aims in the first World War included the weakening of France and the detachment of major industrial regions from it and the incorporation of Belgium and Holland into a German economic empire. Hitler wanted in the long run to absorb what he thought of as "Germanic" parts of these and the Scandinavian countries into the German Reich itself. In the east, Germany aimed in the First World War to remove territory from Poland and reduce it to a satellite state; Hitler wanted to destroy it altogether. There was no thought in the First World War, of course, of absorbing Austria or creating a German protectorate in Bohemia. Crucially, while Germany in the First World War aimed to create an independent buffer state in the Ukraine, to cushion the Reich against the potential might of Russia, in the Second World War and indeed long before, Hitler rejected such ideas, even though they were championed by his arch-ideologue Alfred Rosenberg. He aimed only to annihilate all Eastern European states along with most of their inhabitants.

In the end, though they shared the racial prejudices of their day, the men who led Germany in 1914-18 did not see world history and European politics exclusively in racial terms, as Hitler did. On the whole, they did not share Hitler's later view of Eastern Europe as Germany's equivalent of the American West, a supposedly empty space whose indigenous inhabitants had to be killed or displaced to make way for new settlers from the civilized part of the continent. Hitler paid little more than lip-service to the idea of regaining Germany's lost overseas colonies and perhaps in the longer run a few more besides; for him, the prospect of a colonial empire lay in Europe, not in Africa, Asia or the Pacific. Breaking through into the big league of colonial powers was, however, the major driving force behind the military and naval ambitions of Imperial Germany. Finally, Hitler of course had a new and fearsome enemy to contend with, namely Communist Russia; while Imperial Germany still thought in conventional terms of states and inter-state diplomacy and conflict, Hitler and the Nazis downgraded the importance of the state and thought in radical terms of races and inter-racial conflict instead.

Hitler, then, was, whatever Taylor might claim, no ordinary German statesman. His radical, unlimited ambition emerged out of a radical, almost unlimited set of crises - military, economic, cultural, social and political - that overwhelmed Germany between 1918 and 1933. But Hitler's foreign policy was not made in a vacuum, of course. Even a dictatorship has to some extent to take popular opinion into account, otherwise it risks being undermined or overthrown from within. How far, therefore, did Hitler's policies win the assent of the German people? There is no doubt that one of the factors that won the Nazis the support of more than a third of the electorate in 1932-33 was their promise to make Germany great again. But this not much more than vague, if vehement, rhetoric. What about the actual policies themselves?

Here there were essentially two key parts of German opinion to deal with. The first was represented by the top military officers, the men who would have to implement any decision to go to war. They had already been nervous in the run-up to the German strike against Austria in March 1938. The hesitations of some of them had led Hitler to replace them the month before the invasion. And the Czechs were a far tougher proposition. They were undoubtedly and overwhelmingly opposed to a German attack, they had a well trained and well equipped army, and they possessed excellent lines of defence.

Moreover, while Britain and France were likely to tolerate a German absorption of Austria, Czechoslovakia was formally allied to France and there was a real possibility of the British backing the French in coming to the aid of the Czechs; during the Munich crisis of September 1938, indeed, extensive preparations for war were made in Britain, including the evacuation of children from major cities and the issuing of gas-masks to those people who stayed behind. This caused serious alarm among the German generals. The Chief of the German Army General Staff, Ludwig Beck, told Hitler German rearmament had not reached a point where he could hope to win a war against the combined might of the British and the French.

Forced to resign by a furious Hitler on 18 August 1938, Beck was succeeded by another man with similar views, Franz Halder, who won the support of a number of other officers and civil servants, particularly in the German Foreign Office. They began plans for a coup d'état that would begin with the arrest and imprisonment of Hitler and lead on to the establishment of a military regime. These men did not disapprove of the idea of invading and annexing Czechoslovakia in itself, they merely thought that Hitler was trying to do it before the German armed forces were ready. When Chamberlain brokered the Munich agreement, therefore, and Czechoslovakia was dismembered without any armed intervention, the conspirators were forced to abandon their plans. Many of them would later become involved in the Bomb Plot against Hitler in July 1944 and pay for their involvement with their lives. Hitler's string of foreign policy successes, however, quelled their doubts for the time being. By September 1939 even skeptical army officers believed that Poland, with its brave but ramshackle and poorly equipped military forces, would be easy to defeat, far easier than the Czechs would have been. They were confident that another year of headlong rearmament had given them sufficient force to defeat the British and the French if they should decide to step in, but, crucially, they thought in the end, just as Hitler did, that Britain and France would not intervene; on so many occasions before, they had stood aside, or tried to broker a peaceful settlement, and the same would surely be true in the case of Poland, as indeed it very nearly was.

The second part of opinion in Germany, that of the population at large, was far from overwhelmingly supportive of a war. As in Britain, most people were deeply apprehensive, even fearful, at the prospect of another general European war. Secret agents reporting on popular opinion to the exiled German Social Democratic Party leadership in Prague reported that during the remilitarization of the Rhineland, which had been accompanied by preparations for air-raid protection all across Germany, "the people are very worked-up. They're afraid of war." Similar fears were expressed by ordinary Germans over the Austrian crisis in March 1938, while SS Security Service surveillance reports recorded a widespread "war psychosis", as they called it, during the long-drawn-out crisis over Czechoslovakia. Social Democratic agents reported that "nowhere is there any enthusiasm for war to be found...If it comes to a war, this war will be as unpopular in Germany as possible."

What Germans essentially wanted, and this went for Germans of almost every class and political colouring, was the re-establishment of German greatness without any blood being shed. And this, of course, time and again is exactly what Hitler gave them. Every time they were afraid a war would break out, whether in 1935 over conscription, in 1936 over the Rhineland, in 1938 over Austria and Czechoslovakia, it did not. Hitler's popularity increased still further with every victory. German propaganda, German media, German education were all geared from the outset to preparing Germans for war and making them enthusiastic for it. Heroism, self-sacrifice, courage, derring-do, aggressiveness, were all urged upon Germans of every age and every class. But this massive indoctrination did not have the desired effect. Some of the younger generations, who had known little else but life under the Nazis, were influenced, but the great majority, especially those who had experienced the First World War, continued to be apprehensive about another major military conflict.

In August and September 1939 it was just the same. The American reporter William L. Shirer went out onto the streets of Berlin when war was declared, looking for the cheering crowds that had thronged the main squares and thoroughfares on 1 August 1914; he only found silent, empty streets and a general "astonishment [and] depression" on the faces of the people he encountered. Surveillance reports registered a general "despondency" among the population. The mood everywhere at the beginning of the war was thus subdued and concerned, rather than euphoric or aggressive. Soon, however, all this was to change; and I'll explore this change of mood in Germany, and the reasons for it, in next month's lecture, on October 16th.