

the Russian campaign. Already overcrowded ghettos, such as that in Łódź, began to receive ever larger numbers. Death rates from disease and starvation continued to rise, and the notion of selecting weaker Jews to be disposed of quickly no longer seemed so outrageous. On 8 December the first mass killing took place at Chelmo. Those selected from the Łódź ghetto were gassed to death.

Christian Gerlach claims the turning point was only reached in early December 1941. He distinguishes between the killings of Soviet and other Jews within the occupied territories, and the decision to deport Jews from across Europe. It was only as the war turned into a world war with the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor and Germany's declaration of war on the USA, that Hitler took the ultimate decision to turn his 'prophecy' of January 1939 into murderous reality. On 12 December 1941, Hitler announced to party leaders that the Final Solution now meant genocide.

The meeting at the lakeside villa near Berlin in January 1942, known as the Wannsee conference, had originally been scheduled for early December and then postponed. It initially grew out of Heydrich's directive from Goering of the previous summer to draft a programme for the final solution, and also revisited the question of the definition of *Mischlinge*. Separate initiatives were now coordinated, and the Final Solution as a programme of mass murder moved into an altogether more terrifying phase.

A series of extermination centres were developed (Sobibor, Treblinka, Belzec, Majdanek, as well as the notorious Auschwitz II at Birkenau). Alongside their technological refinement, the Nazis also used psychological means in their implementation of mass murder. Gas chambers were disguised as shower rooms, and posters warning of the alleged dangers of lice were instrumental in calming those walking unwittingly to their death. At this stage, very large numbers were involved in the system of extermination: bureaucrats organising the deportation of Jews or constructing the train timetables; doctors involved in 'medical' experiments and 'selections'; industrialists benefiting from slave labour; technocrats dealing with population policy; SS thugs at the seductive front line, as well as those prisoners forced to assist them. Although there were isolated uprisings, as in Warsaw, affected Jewish communities, facing almost certain defeat in face of insurmountable odds, often resorted to traditions of 'anticipatory compliance' and attempts at 'alleviation'. As Raul Hilberg points out, these methods had worked tolerably well for centuries; but, in the face of this unprecedented evil, were now met by unprecedented disaster.

Every reconstruction of these events relies to a large extent on piecing

Female prisoners in barracks at Auschwitz, 1945.



**Rudolf Vrba (1925–2006)**  
Born in Slovakia, Vrba was deported to Auschwitz in 1942. Vrba and a fellow inmate, Wetzlik, miraculously succeeded in escaping in April 1944, and produced the Vrba-Wetzlik Report with detailed information on the Holocaust. Through reports such as this and from other survivors, and news and rumour from soldiers, engineers, and other eye-witnesses at the front, the fact that 'resettlement' actually meant organised murder was widespread knowledge both among foreign governments and within Nazi Germany itself. But reports of such unthinkable atrocities were widely met with sheer disbelief. One of the minority of lucky survivors, after the war Vrba emigrated first to Israel, and subsequently to Canada, where he became a university professor.

together different fragments of evidence in the light of wider knowledge of Hitler's psychology, and that of those around him, with alternative interpretations possible for many ambiguous sources. It is also notable that all the historians mentioned here to a greater or lesser extent abandon the simple dichotomy between intentionalist and functionalist explanations. They focus rather on the constant interaction between Hitler's radical ideological goals (and fluctuating moods), on the one hand, and the wider field of forces and changing pressures in which he operated, on the other. Constant improvisation in the face of mounting problems and a narrowing of possible alternative 'solutions' provides little evidence of careful prior planning with only one possible 'programme' in mind; yet, varied initiatives did not suddenly come out of the blue, but were constantly given sanction, impetus and direction from the highest level.

#### To what extent were 'ordinary Germans' responsible for the Holocaust?

Immediately after the war was over, the Americans – briefly – held a notion of 'collective guilt', assuming that all Germans were bad Germans. At the same time, many Germans professed that they had 'known nothing about it', and that the post-war revelations of the atrocities 'committed in their name' came as a terrible shock. Neither of these positions is an accurate representation.

#### A nation of perpetrators?

Considerable controversy was occasioned by the publication in 1995 of Daniel Jonah Goldhagen's thesis, *Hitler's Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust*, which resurrected the notion of collective guilt. Making a strong distinction between 'Germans' and 'Jews', Goldhagen suggests that the explanation of the Holocaust is basically very simple: Germans killed Jews because they wanted to kill Jews. German political culture was deeply flawed by a long-standing and peculiarly virulent form of 'eliminationist anti-Semitism'.

There are all manner of theoretical, methodological and historical flaws in this highly emotive and persuasively written text. Goldhagen generalises, citing a small sample of people drawn from a cross-section of German society as 'all Germans'. He fails to explore the ways in which these 'ordinary men' – also studied by Christopher Browning, with rather different conclusions – might have been radicalised under conditions of extreme brutality and warfare. The work fails to compare them with similar perpetrators from other nationalities, such as Ukrainians, Romanians, and collaborators from the Baltic states. It relies the 'collective mentality' of 'eliminationist anti-Semitism', suggesting that it somehow hibernated across decades of the eighteenth century when it remained 'latent' rather than empirically visible in the historical record. The highly 'culturalist' explanation in terms of a collective mentality allegedly persisting across centuries is suddenly abandoned in favour of an institutional explanation; after 1945, with the introduction of democratic political structures, Germans apparently suddenly ceased to have this anti-Semitic mentality.

It could in contrast be argued that 'ordinary Germans' were in fact radicalised by the conditions of warfare. The situational explanation suggests that ordinary people of any background can be driven to commit otherwise unthinkable atrocities under extraordinary circumstances. The 'ordinary men' of police battalions and those drafted to the front were not the ideologically committed anti-Semites of the SS units or the killing squads. It also seems, from the work of Omer Bartov, that 'ordinary Germans' had been to some degree affected by Nazi indoctrination and the pervasive ideology of anti-Semitism to which they had been exposed in preceding

**Primo Levi (1919–87)**  
Born in Turin, Italy, Levi was trained as a chemist. A member of the anti-Fascist resistance in Italy, he was arrested and deported to Auschwitz in 1944. He wrote numerous books and poetry after the war, including *If this is a Man* and *The Periodic Table*. Unable finally to live with the guilt and pain of survival, he committed suicide in 1987.

years. This difference between their attitudes and those of fellow killers from other backgrounds was the product of recent socialisation, not evidence of a centuries-old difference in 'collective mentality'.

#### Violence, legality and apathy

Saul Friedländer characterises Hitler's brand of anti-Semitism as one of 'redemptive anti-Semitism': a 'synthesis of a murderous rage and an "idealistic" goal, namely the total eradication of the Jewish race. This was common among members of the party elite, in the SS and SD, and among party radicals, but was not shared by the wider population, where "anti-Jewish attitudes were more in the realm of tacit acquiescence or varying degrees of compliance". (Saul Friedländer, *Nazi Germany and the Jews: Vol. 1: The Years of Persecution, 1933–39*, HarperCollins, 1997, pp. 3–4.)

During the 1930s, popular attitudes covered a wide spectrum. Hitler himself was well aware of this when he toned down his own virulent anti-Semitism in electoral campaigns before 1933. Once in power, while party radicals repeatedly demanded more violent actions, Hitler was unwilling to jeopardise his personal popularity and he called off the Jewish boycott of April 1933. He also reverted to legal measures in the Nuremberg Laws and he distanced himself from the Kristallnacht of 1938. The party radicals and he engaged with glee on the rampages of looting, beating up and murdering of Jews were a small minority. Their criminal actions were both unleashed and sanctioned by the Nazi government, but many other Germans reacted with shame and horror to these events.

Germans had generally fewer scruples about the legalisation of discrimination. Jews could thus be stigmatised, removed from their status as German citizens with equal rights in German society, and ultimately removed from living in Germany and indeed from life itself, with only minimal protest on the part of bystanders and onlookers. News leaking out about the Holocaust was reacted to with apathy and disbelief. This stood in stark contrast to the public outcry supported by the Catholic Bishop von Galen against the euthanasia programme. Had a similar outcry been unleashed against the systematic vilification, violent maltreatment and sporadic killing of German Jews in the 1930s, the fate of European Jews might have been very different.

Kershaw points out that the persecution of the Jews 'would not have been possible without the apathy and widespread indifference which was the common response to the propaganda of hate'. It would also not have been possible 'without the silence of church hierarchies... and without the consent ranging to active complicity of other prominent sections of the German elites – the civil service bureaucracy, the armed forces, and not least leading sectors of industry' (Ian Kershaw, *Popular Opinion*, p. 372).

Hitler's own ideological goals and obsessive character were clearly central to the dynamics of the Holocaust. However, Hitler's views could only have had the impact they did within the extraordinary, quasi-feudal system of power, repression, hatred and aggression that had been constructed over the space of a very few years. This system had the active consent or compliance of the key elites, while the vast majority of 'ordinary Germans' retreated into their private spheres, primarily concerned with personal survival and matters of self-interest.

There can be no single or simple explanation for the Holocaust: neither Hitler's intentions, nor the curious structures of power, nor the alleged character of Germany's collective mentalities, can stand as easy scapegoats for this virtually incomprehensible crime.

## 6.14 To what extent was Nazi authority resisted within Germany?

NSDAP: Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei (National Socialist German Workers' Party).

Sicherheitsdienst, SD (Security Service): the intelligence branch of the SS, under Reinhard Heydrich



**Joseph Goebbels (1897–1945)**  
Joseph Goebbels poured his intellectual energy into propaganda for the Nazi party. He joined in 1926 and took over the Berlin section of the NSDAP. In 1929 he became 'Reich Propaganda Leader', and was instrumental in the NSDAP's subsequent election successes. In March 1933 Goebbels became 'Reich Minister for Public Enlightenment and Propaganda', with total control over the press, radio and film. He played a key role in anti-Semitic events. He stayed with Hitler in the bunker to the last, and then, after poisoning his children, committed suicide alongside his wife, Magda.

Hitler was not brought to power in January 1933 on a tidal wave of popular support; nor did he 'seize power'. Rather, in the context of political stalemate and constitutional crisis, Hitler was appointed Chancellor in a mixed cabinet, by the ageing President Hindenburg. Prior to 1933, the Nazi vote had been volatile: climbing within five years from a mere 2.6 per cent in 1928 to more than one in three of the voters (37.8 per cent) at the height of economic depression and political crisis in July 1932. It then declined again to 33.1 per cent in November 1932. In January 1933, Hitler was still leader of the largest party; but even in the General Election of March 1933, the NSDAP failed to score more than 44 per cent of the vote.

In the following twelve years, Hitler's popularity first soared, with economic recovery and foreign policy successes, and then, with a reversal of Germany's fortunes in war, declined. Throughout the period, too, an increasingly formidable apparatus of repression and terror accompanied Nazi attempts to produce ideological conformity, and while a minority of Germans opposed Hitler in a variety of ways, none were ultimately successful.

#### How important were propaganda and indoctrination in producing consent?

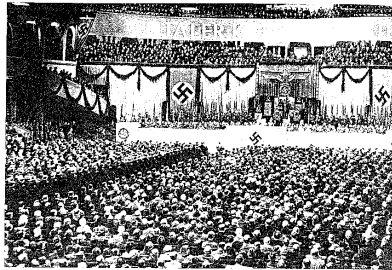
There are difficulties with ascertaining levels of popular support in a dictatorship. While the results of rigged elections and direct votes by the controlling party in a one-party state can indicate high levels of support at certain times (as Robert Gellately argues in *Backing Hitler*), such results nevertheless have to be treated with a considerable degree of scepticism. While the regime's own reports from the security service or *Sicherheitsdienst* (SD) tended pessimistically to underestimate popular support, the reports of the Social Democratic Party in exile (SOPADE) tended, equally pessimistically but from the opposite perspective, to over-estimate support. Historians have also used other types of evidence – diaries, letters, even the wording used in newspaper death notices (as in Ian Kershaw's *The Hitler Myth*) – to gauge popular opinion. Widespread voluntary cooperation in the implementation of policies and in the *Gleichschaltung* ('co-ordination') of organisations is also indicative of general agreement.

#### Over propaganda

Control and manipulation of the news was of considerable importance. Joseph Goebbels, appointed Minister of Propaganda and Public Enlightenment in March 1933, rapidly sought to bring the highly diverse regional press of Germany under increasing Nazi control, through central control of editors and journalists under Max Amann's Reich Press Chamber. The Nazi newspaper, the *Völkische Beobachter*, increased in circulation and more Germans felt they needed to pay attention to it. Radio ownership expanded rapidly: by the outbreak of war, between two-thirds and three-quarters of Germans had access to a radio. Goebbels ensured not only that Nazi speeches and bombastic news bulletins were broadcast, but that there was no escape from exposure: radio broadcasts were boomed out in public places – cafes, squares – to Germans who did not possess a radio in their own homes or who might not want to listen to such bulletins.

Sophisticated visual representations were crucial. The architect Albert Speer was employed to design the buildings and townscapes of the 'master race', while 'German art' was celebrated and 'degenerate art' (by Jews, socialists and other 'undesirables') was banned and denigrated. A talented

Joseph Goebbels giving a speech in the Berlin Sports Palace on 18 February 1943, calling for a 'total war'.



young film-maker, Leni Riefenstahl, produced two famous 'documentaries': *Triumph of the Will* depicted Hitler in the context of the 1934 Nuremberg party rally, while *Olympia* deployed new cinematographic techniques to create powerful images of strength at the Berlin Olympics of 1936. The German film industry went into the mass production of light entertainment films, which far out-numbered obvious propaganda films, seeking to build up a sense of well-being. But Goebbels also knew when it was important to strike terror into people's hearts. As the devastating effects of 'total war' became all too obvious, Goebbels – most notably in his speech of February 1943 at the Berlin Sports Palace – turned to a more 'realistic' depiction of the situation and the 'Bolshevik threat' in an attempt to goad Germans into making the ultimate sacrifice for their country.

Racism was a major theme. Overt attempts at anti-Semitic propaganda were evident in films such as *Jud Süß*, about an eighteenth-century court Jew in the Duchy of Württemberg, and even more so in *Der ewige Jude* ('The eternal Jew'), with accompanying posters, and in Julius Streicher's virulently racist magazine *Der Stürmer*. In stark contrast, there were more 'positive' images of the *Völksgemeinschaft* ('people's community') with members of the 'Aryan' or 'master race' in posters advertising, for example, the benefits of the *Kraft durch Freude* ('Strength through Joy') programme, or the Nazi youth organisations (*HJ* and *BDM*). Even the theme of 'sacrifice' could be made the subject of a compelling poster, as in advertisements to participate in the *Einopf* ('One Pot') meals in support of the national economic effort.

Thus propaganda was all around, and unavoidable. But two further elements appear to have been equally, if not more, important in producing consent.

#### *The 'Hitler Myth' and the 'congruence of aims'*

The first element is the 'Hitler myth'. As Ian Kershaw has brilliantly demonstrated, Hitler's role as charismatic *Führer* functioned as a major mechanism for cohesion. The *Führer* was projected as the saviour figure, above the fray, leading Germany onwards and upwards to a glorious future. If people were irritated by the squabbles and corruption of local NSDAP big-wigs, or annoyed by policies which adversely affected their own material interests, they could still take consolation in the belief that 'if only the *Führer* knew', all would be set to rights. The myth was carefully nurtured by Hitler, who stayed clear of day-to-day

'Aryan' or 'master race' terms for an allegedly genetically superior 'race' in the Nazis' racist world view.

policy-making and spats between his subordinates, and instead paid close attention not merely to the contents of his speeches but also to body language and the ways in which power was 'enacted' in rallies and other public representations.

The second element is the question of the similarities between Nazi policies and the aims of different social groups, plus the ways in which the government of the Third Reich actually succeeded in achieving widely shared aims. Popular support required more than propaganda; it was also dependent on improvements in the economic sphere and successes in foreign policy. Very few Germans shared Hitler's desire for war, although many were relieved and indeed elated by the rapid victories in the first two years of war. However, as the war progressed, the difference between ideology and reality became ever more apparent.

Defeat of the German army at Stalingrad dealt a death blow, not merely to the German military effort, but also to the Hitler myth. No amount of propaganda could disguise the truth. Hitler's personal popularity, and with it popular support for the regime began to wane well before the final defeat.

#### **What was the role of terror and coercion?**

The Nazi system of terror was the other side of the coin. Popular conceptions of the Third Reich are filled not only with images of adoring admirers of the *Führer*, but also of the brutality of jack-booted SS officers and horror scenes of corpses in concentration camps. After 1945, fear of Nazi repression was a convenient excuse for many Germans. But the picture is more complex.

#### *The changing balance of forces of repression*

Violence was an integral part of Hitler's rise to power: the brown-shirted SA (*Sturmabteilung*) was effectively a private army, beating up political opponents on the streets and contributing greatly to the chaos of the closing months of the Weimar Republic – a chaos which Hitler ironically promised to solve. The immediate 'solution' to political violence was simply to outlaw political opponents and to 'legalise' only the Nazi use of force. Within weeks of Hitler's appointment as Chancellor, a system of informal prisons and labour camps was set up, with political opponents – mainly communists and socialists – being rounded up and incarcerated. The first more permanent concentration camp was opened in March 1933, at Dachau, a small town just north-west of the Bavarian capital Munich. Its opening was accompanied by much publicity, and generally favourable public reactions.

There were a number of key shifts in the balance of forces of repression in the Third Reich. The first came in 1934. The SA, under the leadership of Ernst Röhm, had grown massively in size and aspirations, and presented a growing challenge. In the uncertain conditions of 1934, with top priority being given by Hitler to rearmament, it appeared essential to retain the backing of the professional Army. In the so-called 'Night of the Long Knives' – actually stretching over three days at the end of June and beginning of July – Ernst Röhm and other SA leaders were assassinated, along with other individuals with whom Hitler wanted to settle old scores (see pages 144–5). The mass murder was retroactively sanctioned by a law in early July. When President Hindenburg died in August, the Army, now restored to what they saw as their rightful place, swore a personal oath of allegiance to Hitler. This military sense of honour and being bound by one's oath was later used to justify obedience to Hitler. Curiously, even conservatives with such a strong belief in 'honour' had managed to swallow their scruples and had failed to protest against the blatant resort to murder.

Night of the Long Knives: the murders on 30 June 1934 (continuing until 2 July) of senior members of the SA, including its leader Ernst Röhm, and other political targets.

Heinrich Himmler with SS leaders, 1933



In the course of the 1930s, another new power rose rapidly to prominence: the SS (*Schutzstaffel*). Originating as Hitler's personal bodyguard, its leader from 1929 was Heinrich Himmler, an effective empire builder who had first joined the SS in 1925 when it was but a small component of the SA. Under Himmler, the SS grew rapidly, and acquired a dedicated intelligence branch, the Security Service or SD (*Sicherheitsdienst*) led by Reinhard Heydrich.

Himmler also soon began to gain control of the regular and secret police forces, becoming police commander for Bavaria in April 1933, and Inspector of the Gestapo (*Geheime Staatspolizei*, or secret state police) in the powerful state of Prussia in April 1934. Having played a key role in the Night of the Long Knives, in July 1934 Himmler secured the independence of the SS from the SA and gained sole responsibility for running the concentration camps. In 1936, Himmler officially added the control of the conventional police forces across Germany to his empire, now boasting the title of 'Reichsführer-SS and Chief of the German Police in the Reich Ministry of the Interior'. In 1939, alongside the SS, Himmler coordinated the Gestapo, the SD, the criminal and the ordinary police forces under the umbrella of the Reich Security Main Office (RSHA), headed by Heydrich. The internal organisation of the expanded SS was also increasingly specialised, with different units in charge of concentration camps, economic enterprises, educational and reproductive centres, as well as elite military units and *Einsatzgruppen* ('extermination squads').

RSHA *Reichssicherheitshauptamt* (Reich Security Head Office): umbrella organisation from 1939 designed to coordinate the work of the Gestapo, the SD, and the criminal and ordinary police forces alongside the SS.

*Einsatzgruppen*: extermination squads following the Army behind the lines and rounding up and murdering those who were ideologically designated targets of the Nazi regime (Jews, gypsies and other 'undesirables').

**Reinhard Heydrich (1904–42)**  
In July 1931, Heydrich joined the NSDAP and then the SS. Tall, blond and blue-eyed, he soon became Himmler's right-hand man, and from 1933 controlled the security police in the Reich. He became head of

the RSHA in 1939, thus controlling the Gestapo, the criminal police and the SD. Heydrich played a major role in the 'Final Solution of the Jewish Question', directing the *Einsatzgruppen* who carried out mass killings in the Soviet Union in 1941,

and convening the 'Wannsee Conference' of January 1942 to coordinate the implementation of genocide. He became Deputy Reich Protector of Bohemia and Moravia in September 1941, and died on 4th June 1942 following an attack by two members

of the Czech Resistance. His assassination was hideously avenged by complete destruction of the village of Lidice where it occurred and estimates of perhaps 1300 to 4000 related murders.

Once the SS had taken control of the camp system, smaller, 'wild' camps were closed, and further camps were established. While Dachau had mainly held political prisoners, the new camps of the 1930s also took in 'socials': not merely 'habitual criminals', but also people who simply refused to conform to Nazi societal norms, despite breaking none of the new laws. These people included Jehovah's Witnesses and homosexuals, as well as the allegedly 'work-shy' and people identified as gypsies, beggars and tramps, who could now be forced into slave labour. Ultimately, alongside these victims, the major targets of the extermination camps which were set up under the control of the SS from 1941 were Jews.

**Ordinary Germans and the system of terror**

Ordinary Germans were well aware of the brutal treatment received by opponents of the regime. Given the dread that this system of terror struck in the hearts of those opposed to the regime, it seems remarkable that many otherwise apolitical Germans actually welcomed the tough new line on 'criminals', the 'work-shy' and other 'socials'. Also welcomed was the radical approach to Bolshevism, fear of which had played a large role in pre-1933 support for Hitler. Many initially felt that the wave of terror was essential to the restoration of stability. They believed that, despite the real growth in the apparatus of terror, by the mid-1930s a 'return to normality' was occurring.

Nazi terror, as Eric Johnson has shown in *The Nazi Terror: Gestapo, Jews and Ordinary Germans* (1999), was 'a selective terror' and it came in waves. Political and other opponents of the regime were among the first to be targeted and a variety of groups deemed in some way inferior or even 'unworthy of life' were to follow. A constant and vital target for the regime were the Jews. Those Germans who fell into none of these groups were largely able to ignore the repression. In *The Gestapo and German Society* (1990), Robert Gellately has shown how a relatively small Gestapo staff was even able to rely on voluntary denunciations by neighbours and colleagues. Overall, the German population was characterised by a degree of apathy.

**Who opposed Hitler and why were they not more successful?**

The question of dissent and opposition in Nazi Germany has been the subject not merely of historical but also political controversy. In East Germany, the allegedly leading role of communist resistance was celebrated, with some recognition being given to socialists, Christians and others who had fought alongside the communists. In West Germany, by contrast, the role of the conservative nationalist resistance to Hitler, and in particular the July Plot of 1944, was awarded great prominence. In the course of the 1960s, however, western historians began to explore a wider range of dissent, resistance and opposition, as traditional approaches to political history were increasingly challenged. Such challenges were complemented by new developments in social history and the history of everyday life, or 'history from below'. (See M. Fulbrook, *German National Identity after the Holocaust*, 1999.)

More recent debates are rooted partly in disagreements over definition. Attempts to assassinate Hitler clearly constitute opposition in a strong sense; this is often termed 'resistance' by English-speaking historians. 'Dissent' may be disagreement with the regime, and 'non-conformity' is behaviour defined by the regime as unacceptable or illegal. But what of more mundane acts of 'refusal', such as refusal to give the 'Heil Hitler' salute, or to hang out a swastika flag? This is rather different from trying to overthrow the regime and its leader.

The German historian Martin Broszat widened debates over definition

when he used the German word 'Resistenz', or 'resistance' in the medical sense of 'immunity to infection', as in the case of Catholics or certain young people who were simply impervious to the Nazi message. His approach provoked controversy over whether it is actual behaviour and its effects, or rather motives and intentions, that are crucial to the definition of resistance. These debates stimulated a wide range of research into areas such as the varieties of grumbling and disaffection in everyday life.

#### *Dissent and nonconformity in everyday life*

Much of the low-level grumbling that went on was in defence of personal material interests (see Ian Kershaw, *Popular Opinion and Political Dissent in the Third Reich*). Peasants grumbled about the Entailed Farm Law (which sought to tie peasants to ancestral land by ensuring that farms were not sub-divided but inherited whole) and tried to get around policies controlling the sale of agricultural produce. Workers sometimes engaged in unofficial strikes and go-slows, but there was a lack of consistent opposition among the German working class, despite the best efforts of Marxist historians such as Tim Mason to find it. The existence instead of a patchy record of partial compliance and non-compliance has been explored by Alf Lüdtke and others. Periodic grumbling was perfectly compatible with support for other developments, such as foreign policy successes, and enthusiasm for the *Führer*.

Other people engaged in more explicit acts of non-conformity (see Detlev Peukert, *Inside Nazi Germany*, 1987). In towns across Germany there were small groups of generally working class young people who refused to go along with the official Hitler Youth movement: the 'Edelweiss Pirates', the 'mobs' (*Mutten*) in Leipzig and Dresden, the 'Blasen' (a slang word for 'mob') in Munich, and the 'Deathhead gang' and 'Bismarck gang' in Hamburg. Among middle class young people there were groups who insisted on listening to and playing jazz music. Many Germans of all ages refused to give up listening to or reading the works of 'Jewish' composers and authors, or enjoying 'decadent' art; and many continued to listen to foreign radio broadcasts, make political jokes, or speak realistically – which was seen to be engaging in 'defeatism' – about the progress of the war.

These kinds of dissent were essentially demonstrative rather than effective, allowing many Germans to hibernate through the regime in a state of 'inner emigration', and illustrating the Nazi state's failure to achieve its total claims.

#### *Organised groups and political parties*

Following the early period of *Gleichschaltung*, there were no independent institutional bases for organised opposition. The Communist Party (KPD) was first to be outlawed, followed by the Social Democratic Party (SPD), whose leaders had spoken out against the Enabling Act of 23 March. With the Concordat between Hitler and Pope, the Catholic Church received guarantees protecting religious practice, and the Catholic Centre Party dissolved itself. Similar fates befell the other political parties, and, with the 'Law against the Formation of New Parties' of 14 July 1933, the Third Reich became a one-party state.

Thousands of left-wing opponents of the regime found they were among its first targets, and were arrested and imprisoned in the early wave of terror. In the new conditions of underground organisation within the dictatorship, and following a change of line in Moscow in 1934, many left-wingers sought to transcend ideological hostilities and work together against the common enemy, but conditions were now far more difficult. Groups such as *Neubeginnen* ('New Beginning') met under extremely difficult circumstances, and were able to achieve little by way of visible effects. At a higher level, the members of the 'Red Orchestra' group working

*Gleichschaltung*. Literally, 'putting into the same gear', or 'co-ordinating', a term used to describe the ways in which organisations were 'brought into line' with Nazi aims and policies (or either forced to disband or outlawed).

within the government, including Harro Schulze-Wechsungen and Arvid Harnack, sought to pass military intelligence to the Soviet Union, again with little practical effect. There was very much less that ordinary workers could do, far as they were from the levers of power: sabotaging munitions production or circulating underground leaflets served to maintain some morale. But by no means did all workers have left-wing sympathies, and denunciation and betrayal were not uncommon. It took only a few years of Nazi terror and torture to break the back of ordinary socialists and communists.

#### *The Christian Churches*

One might have thought that the institutional and moral power of the Christian Churches could have provided a strong base for principled opposition. But such opposition was in fact patchy: a few key campaigns, a few outstanding and courageous individuals, stand out against a more ambivalent picture of compromise and conformity.

Hitler sought at first to 'co-ordinate' the Churches under the Nazi umbrella, or at least render them neutral. The attempt to incorporate Protestantism in the Nazi fold, as pro-Nazi *Deutsche Christen* ('German Christians') under a Reich Bishop was unsuccessful. Those pastors who formed the found themselves in trouble with the new regime soon formed the nucleus of an anti-Nazi group, which became known as the *Bekennende Kirche* ('Confessing Church') associated with Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Martin Niemöller. Many individuals spoke out against Hitler and took up contacts with others opposed to the regime, such as those involved in the July Plot. Many, like Bonhoeffer, paid with their lives, while others suffered long periods of imprisonment. But prior to 1933 Protestants had generally been more likely to vote for the NSDAP than had Catholics (who remained loyal to the Centre Party), and after 1933 either made their peace with or even supported the regime. German Protestantism was thus deeply divided.

With some individual exceptions, Catholics were neutralised to a considerable extent by the Concordat of July 1933 between the Pope and Hitler. After this, Catholic resistance was, on the whole, defensive: for example, an energetic campaign was mounted against the Nazi proposal to remove crucifixes from schools. Perhaps the major example of at least partially successful resistance came from Bishop Count von Galen of Münster, who in August 1941 preached an outspoken sermon against Hitler's 'euthanasia' programme. Hitler, alarmed by this adverse publicity and always unwilling to risk loss of popularity, put an end to the formal programme of 'euthanasia', although killings continued on a less organised basis.

Active resistance by smaller sects, including notably Quakers, could involve little more than isolated acts of moral courage and witness. Such acts may have saved many individual lives, but were not capable of being effective against the regime in any wider sense. Jehovah's Witnesses were among the targeted victims of the regime.

#### **Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906–45)**

A Protestant theologian and active participant in the 'Confessing Church' (*Bekennende Kirche*), Bonhoeffer put his spiritual and political energies into trying to assist all those

who were persecuted by the Nazi regime. In 1939 in Sweden, Bonhoeffer sought unsuccessfully to act as an agent with foreign governments on behalf of high-placed conspirators against Hitler

(including Beck and Oster). He was arrested by the Gestapo and imprisoned in 1943. Following the failure of the July Plot of 1944, Bonhoeffer was sent to Buchenwald concentration camp, and then to Flossenbürg, where he was

executed in April 1945. To this day, his theology has remained highly influential amongst Protestants, especially in Britain and the USA.

**Groups and individuals against the state**

The activities of some individuals and small groups particularly stand out. Among those who took a courageous moral stand were the Munich students, Hans and Sophie Scholl, who, along with one of their professors and a small group of friends, formed the *Weisse Rose* group ('White Rose'). They produced and distributed leaflets against the regime, and sought to make contacts with other resistance groups across Germany, but were ultimately caught, arrested, and executed in 1943.

One of the most notable individuals to act entirely on his own (the efforts of both Hitler and subsequently historians to find evidence of wider backing have drawn a blank) was the Swabian carpenter Georg Elser. Elser single-mindedly devised a plan to plant a bomb in the Munich Beer Hall, timed to go off when Hitler was positioned right next to it, delivering his annual speech commemorating the failed Beer Hall Putsch of 1923. Elser worked away, night after night, at hollowing out a pillar next to which Hitler would stand. Unfortunately, on the November night in 1939 when the bomb went off, Hitler had one of his famous lucky escapes: the weather being foggy, he had left earlier to take a train back to Berlin rather than going back by plane as originally planned. Elser, who had in the meantime attempted to escape over the border to Switzerland, was caught, imprisoned, and eventually executed in April 1945.

Many individuals assisted in hiding Jews, or seeking to reduce the burden of suffering in some way. They were generally isolated, working under difficult conditions, and easily betrayed. The activities of Oskar Schindler, a highly placed entrepreneur who was initially far from motivated by moral outrage, have been widely publicised in Spielberg's film *Schindler's List*. The apparently successful demonstrations in Berlin's Rosenstrasse by Aryan spouses against the deportation of their Jewish partners have recently been the subject of controversy among historians. Some Jews in mixed marriages were able to survive the genocide, and not only as a result of this particular protest.

**Opposition in high places**

In theory, those closest to Hitler were best placed to challenge his clearly murderous regime. Here, despite widespread praise, some historians point out that the record is faltering. The late emergence of opposition by leading Army members and those in government circles, among them those who had for some years supported the Nazi regime, along with their generally conservative, anti-democratic ideas of what should replace a Nazi regime, have been criticised by historians such as Hans Mommsen.

For a long time national conservatives went along with Hitler. It was only as Hitler's extreme aims began to differ more openly from those of the traditional elites, in the winter of 1937-8, that well-placed individuals in government, intelligence and Army circles - including Ludwig Beck, Hans Oster, Wilhelm Canaris, Franz Halder and Carl Goerdeler - began to think seriously about the possibility of challenging Hitler. Attempts were made to make contact with foreign governments, who tended to remain sceptical, and to discuss ways of removing Hitler from power, or even assassinating him. Following the Munich Conference of 1938, Hitler's domestic popularity was such that ideas for a coup were abandoned; and the dramatic military successes of the first two years of the War, alongside the problem of effectively committing treason while the Fatherland was at war, provided further obstacles to nationalist resistance. It was only when the option of an 'honourable' but inevitable defeat seemed preferable to a catastrophic defeat later, that active plans for a coup were resurrected.

**Georg Elser (1903-45)**  
A Swabian carpenter, by late 1938 Elser single-handedly came to the view that Hitler was a dangerous man who must be removed from power. In November 1939, had it not been for Hitler's early departure following his anniversary speech at the Munich Beer Hall, Elser's assassination attempt might well have totally altered the course of history. As it was, however, Elser was arrested, imprisoned in Sachsenhausen concentration camp, and ultimately executed in Dachau in April 1945.

**Ludwig Beck (1889-1944)**  
A professional soldier, Beck joined the Army in 1911 and served during the First World War, thereafter rising steadily in the Army hierarchy. From 1935-8 he was Chief of the Army General Staff. He became increasingly worried about Hitler's opportunist tactics and aggressive policies of wars of conquest, and about the growing influence of the Nazi Party over military affairs. Beck resigned his post in August 1938 over Hitler's plans to invade Czechoslovakia, and thereafter was highly active in the German resistance. Had the July Plot succeeded, Beck would have replaced Hitler as Head of State. Instead, however, Beck committed suicide on 20th July 1944.

**Coup:** A sudden violent or illegal seizure of government.

**Claus Graf Schenk von Stauffenberg (1907-1944)**  
A devout Catholic, Stauffenberg was increasingly disturbed by the immoral character of the Nazi regime, particularly after witnessing the atrocities committed by

the SS on the Eastern front. Developing an interest in socialist ideas, Stauffenberg became very active in resistance circles, comparing the ideas for a post-Hitler government of the conservative military resistance (Goerdeler,

Beck) with those of the socialist and trade unionist Julius Leber. Stauffenberg devoted himself to the attempt to assassinate Hitler and if possible to replace the Nazis with an alternative government. It was Stauffenberg who

unsuccessfully planted the bomb in Hitler's East Prussian headquarters on 20th July 1944. On his return to Berlin (initially unaware that the explosion had not killed Hitler), Stauffenberg was arrested and shot.

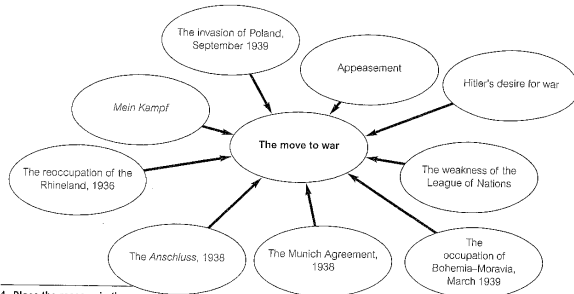
The most celebrated plot to topple Hitler, with clear plans for a post-Hitler alternative government, was the so-called 'July Plot' of 1944. Graf Schenk von Stauffenberg, sufficiently senior to have close access to Hitler, planted a bomb in a briefcase timed to go off when Hitler was meeting with military planners in his Wolf's Lair retreat in East Prussia. Despite technical problems, Stauffenberg embarked on his return to Berlin with the news of a successful explosion. Unfortunately, however, only half the explosives had detonated, and the briefcase had been moved under the protective cover of a very solid table. Hitler came away with little more than minor injuries and a ruined pair of trousers. The plotters, meanwhile, having been activated by Stauffenberg's mistaken message, were readily rounded up, along with many others who had been involved in some way with oppositional activities, and were put to death in a final wave of terror in 1944-5.

**Evaluation**

For long periods of time, there were common aims between the Nazi leadership and key elite groups in the economy, the Army, the civil service and among national conservatives. This only began to break down as the regime became more radical in the later 1930s. There was also much popular support for certain aspects of the regime. These were strengthened by the Hitler cult, particularly in the 'good times' of economic recovery. There was also widespread complicity in, and approval of, the regime's treatment of those seen to be potentially 'dangerous'. Outright political opposition was suppressed in a brutal manner very early on. Thereafter, dissent and resistance were isolated. Also important was the increasing fragmentation of society, with the destruction of institutional bases for resistance, and significant numbers of people concerned primarily with matters of self-interest, remaining apathetic about the fate of others.

From a 'fundamentalist' perspective, it is clear that the Nazi regime was defeated only by war. The 'societal' interpretation, by contrast, suggests that dissent and nonconformity set limits to the success of the regime's 'total claims'. Moreover, there were some important, if limited, successes in specific areas: the euthanasia programme was at least officially stopped; and, although percentages were small, significant numbers managed to survive persecution in hiding, or to escape through the assistance of courageous opponents of the regime.

### 6.15 Was Hitler responsible for the Second World War?



1. Place the reasons in the mind map into long-term and short-term reasons.

2. Which do you regard as the most important reason why war broke out, apart from Hitler's desire for war? Explain your answer.

3. At what point in the period 1933 to 1939 do you think that war became inevitable? Give reasons for your answer.

It takes more than a single person, and indeed more than a single country, to wage a war. Yet for twenty years or so after the outbreak of the Second World War, the explanation of the War's origins seemed simple enough, and could be condensed into one word: Hitler. An aggressive war of expansion, infused with ideas of racial superiority and the exploitation of 'inferior' peoples appeared so obviously the outcome of the world view presented by Hitler in his 1924 book, *Mein Kampf*, and the war itself appeared to represent so clearly the battle of the forces of good against evil, that it hardly seemed worth looking for further explanation. As A. J. P. Taylor put it in *The Origins of the Second World War* (1961):

... an explanation existed which satisfied everybody and seemed to exhaust all dispute. This explanation was: Hitler. He planned the Second World War. His will alone caused it.

In A. J. P. Taylor's interpretation, by contrast, this Hitler-centric explanation was turned on its head. Hitler – despite his modest social class background and Austrian origins – was recast as a traditional politician pursuing conventional German foreign policy aims. Hitler was however a highly effective opportunist; thus the real problem, according to Taylor, lay in the fact that during the 1930s Hitler was presented with so many opportunities for the revision of Germany's position in Europe. Taylor's account, published in the same year as the German historian Fritz Fischer's controversial reappraisal of the origins of the First World War, raised a storm of controversy. Whether or not Taylor was right in his assessment of earlier historical explanations – which were arguably more varied and complex than he suggested – it is certainly the case that, since the early 1960s, the field has broadened massively, with lively debates over a number of areas.

#### German foreign policy in international context: Revisionism, *Lebensraum*, world mastery?

The Second World War was a highly complex phenomenon. It consisted not of one single war, but of many separate conflicts, with different geographical

arenas and periods of conflict across the world. It was preceded by phases of aggression involving many powers, such as the Spanish Civil War in Europe and conflicts involving Japan in the Far East. Many states were also interested in some revision of the European order which had emerged from the Treaty of Versailles. Hitler's role within this broader context of international instability is the subject of some disagreement.

#### Was a Second World War inevitable? The legacies of the Great War

On the one hand, there is what has been dubbed the Thirty Years War thesis, a comparison with the period of sporadic warfare which raged across central Europe in the period 1618–48. According to this view, the 1919 Versailles settlement at the end of the 'Great War' of 1914–18 was problematic in so many respects that a further war appeared to be inevitable sooner or later. There had been fundamental alterations to the international balance of power, which resulted in a multiplicity of local conflicts and disputes, alongside a lack of genuinely 'national' solutions for territorial borders, as well as instabilities of the European economy. As Marshal Foch, who had been in charge of Allied armies in France in 1918, said of the Treaty of Versailles: 'This is not peace. It is an armistice for twenty years.'

There were major shifts in the wider international context and in the character and strengths of the European powers. The USA, following its late entry into the war, soon retreated into isolationism; it signalled dissatisfaction with the Treaty of Versailles as early as November 1919. But the Europe it abandoned was very different from that of the pre-war era. The Great War had wreaked havoc on the economies and politics of the European states most directly affected. The newly created communist Soviet Union was economically weak, internally unstable, and politically suspect as far as other powers were concerned. Italy's post-war instability eventuated in the rise of the fascist leader Mussolini, who played on a widespread feeling among Italians that in the Versailles settlement they had not received their just rewards for assisting in the defeat of Germany. Britain had both domestic social unrest and colonial concerns to worry about. Despite heightened awareness of the horrors of modern warfare after the experience of the trenches and shell-shock on the western front, Britain favoured a degree of revision to the Treaty of Versailles and resumption of friendly relations with Germany. France, also economically weakened and devastated by the loss of so many lives, shared a border with Germany. France was thus most directly concerned about enforcement of the provisions of the Treaty of Versailles, and most worried about future German capacity for aggression. With the disappearance of the Empires of Tsarist Russia, Imperial Germany, and Austria-Hungary, a raft of new 'nation states' were created in central Europe, none of which entirely conformed with notions of national boundaries. Thus there were countless disputed borders and potential flashpoints, from Vlna and Memel through Silesia and the Sudetenland to the Rhineland and South Tyrol.

Finally, to this catalogue should be added the economic consequences of the war. Some were unavoidable, others (notably in the case of the German inflation of 1923), were made very much worse by deliberate government policies of exacerbating pre-existing trends. Widespread unwillingness to accept the territorial, military, political and economic provisions of the Treaty of Versailles, as well as the 'national humiliation' it allegedly entailed, was also highly visible in Germany.

If this view of general international instability is correct, Hitler was merely the person who happened to be in charge of Germany when the inevitable eruption happened. He might have added colour and detail to the shape of events, but could not be held to be the primary or sole cause

**Thirty Years War thesis:** The argument that the Second World War was in some respects a continuation of the First World War, with continued flashpoints and unresolved conflicts across Europe in the period 1914–45.

**Isolationism:** A view prevalent in the USA that it should concern itself solely with its own domestic affairs and not be involved in European conflicts.

**The Locarno Treaty, 1925.** A treaty between Germany, France, Belgium, Italy and Britain, guaranteeing the western frontiers of Germany with France and Belgium. Although Germany concluded separate agreements with Czechoslovakia and Poland, the 1926 Berlin Treaty between Germany and Russia left Poland in a vulnerable position and the question of Germany's eastern frontiers remained open.

**The League of Nations** based on US President Wilson's 'fourteen points' of 1918, this was set up in 1919 as part of the Versailles settlement 'to create mutual guarantees of the political independence and territorial integrity of States, large and small equally'. Germany was admitted in 1926, and withdrew in 1933.

**Dawes Plan/Young Plan** the Dawes Plan of 1924 regularised Germany's reparations payments in the short term. The Young Plan of 1929 was designed to be a final settlement of a much reduced reparations bill, to be paid over 59 years.

**Wall Street Crash of 1929** following years of rising investment on the American stock market in New York's Wall Street, a sudden loss of confidence precipitated a spiral of selling and dramatic losses in share prices in October 1929. The resulting bankruptcies occasioned massive unemployment and inaugurated years of economic depression in the USA, with reverberations across Europe, most marked in Germany, which had been dependent on short-term loans from the USA.

**Revisionism** the view that the Treaty of Versailles was in need of revision.

**Hitler's programme** the notion among some historians that Hitler had clearly formulated aims and plans to achieve his goals, which he then pursued single-mindedly.

**Congruence of aims** specific areas over which different groups agreed with Hitler about desired ends, without necessarily accepting much, if any, of the wider ideological baggage of Nazism.

of war. Without the First World War, there would, as Kershaw has cogently argued, have been no Hitler. The logic of those adhering to the 'Thirty Years' War thesis' is to suggest that even without Hitler, there would have been a Second World War.

Against this view, many historians argue that there were in fact successful measures for stabilisation of the international system in the 1920s. The Locarno Treaty of 1925 regularised and recognised Germany's western borders, providing a degree of German assent to the 'Diktat' of Versailles in this area. The League of Nations, and Germany's entry into it in 1926, appeared to provide an international framework for the peaceful resolution of disputes. Finally, the Dawes Plan of 1924, and the Young Plan of 1929 which replaced it, seemed to offer realistic measures for dealing with reparations. Revision of the Treaty of Versailles was thus on the international agenda and peaceful adjustments were not impossible in principle. From this perspective, the international situation might well have stabilised with peaceful resolution of disputed issues, had it not been for the Wall Street Crash of 1929, the consequent plunge into Depression and the related rise of ideological movements, of which the most virulently aggressive was Nazism in Germany.

#### What did the rise of Hitler add to this unstable situation?

Revisionism now came to play an important role in a rather different way. In the context of economic crisis after 1929, widespread resentment at Germany's 'national humiliation' after Versailles could be linked with the hatred whipped up by Nazi propaganda of the so-called 'November criminals'. The Nazis claimed that the 'Bolsheviks' and 'Jews' had conspired to 'stab Germany in the back', resulting in the loss of the war.

To the traditional revisionist demands were now added Hitler's views on the 'master race' and its alleged need for *Lebensraum* ('living space'). This began a policy not merely of revision but also of aggressive expansion, colonisation of new territories in eastern Europe, and ultimately perhaps even world domination. In his political tract *Mein Kampf*, written while in Landsberg prison in 1924 and published in 1925, and in his unpublished *Second Book* of 1928, Hitler presented foreign policy aims which, linked intrinsically to his rabid racism, seemed to go way beyond those of traditional revisionism.

Whichever view is held of international instability, Hitler's aims did seem to add new ingredients to the equation. Yet even the role of Hitler's programme is disputed.

#### Hitler's role: master plan or effective opportunism?

If Taylor was reacting against an undue emphasis on Hitler as the primary cause, then soon there was in turn a reaction, with Hitler's intentions brought right back into centre stage. Revisionism was clearly a key element in the so-called congruence of aims between the Nazi leadership and conservative nationalist elites in Germany – without which Hitler would not have come to power. According to some historians, however, Hitler had clearly defined more radical goals, or a 'master plan', which continually guided his actions and informed his strategies as events unfolded.

#### Hitler's Programme?

The notion that Hitler was operating according to a master plan or pre-conceived programme, rooted in a consistent and strongly held *Weltanschauung* ('world view') was argued most fully by a number of German historians in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

Andreas Hillgruber argued in *Germany and the Two World Wars* (1967) that during the 1920s Hitler developed 'a firm program, to which he then

single-mindedly adhered until his suicide in the Reich Chancellery on April 30, 1945'. This programme entailed a 'stage plan': first, Germany would gain control of continental Europe and colonise Russia in order to gain *Lebensraum*. Germany would then become a world power with African colonies and a strong navy (on a par with Britain, Japan and the USA). Finally, probably after Hitler's own lifetime, Germany would engage in a 'battle of the continents', fighting the USA for world domination. The scheme was further infused with racist ideology, linking Bolshevism and 'international Jewry', both of which were targets for destruction.

'International Jewry', Hitler's vague and ideologically loaded term for an assumed international network of Jews, who were allegedly behind both 'Bolshevism' and 'international finance capitalism'.

According to Eberhard Jaeckel in *Hitler's World View: A Blueprint for Power* (1969), by the time of writing his secret *Second Book* of 1928, Hitler had developed a 'grand design' which then remained his guiding plan. Jaeckel claims: 'Few statesmen have ever pursued their goals with greater obstinacy or tenacity'. Klaus Hildebrand in *The Foreign Policy of the Third Reich* (1973), agrees that the ultimate aim of Hitler's 'Programme' (which he dignifies with a capital 'P') was and remained 'world domination based on race'.

Some historians, however, dispute the coherence of Hitler's views, pointing to the inconsistencies, gaps and poor judgements in his thinking. These historians doubt that Hitler's rag-bag of prejudices really amounted to a 'master plan', with any serious strategy for translating megalomaniac fantasies into actual practice. Nor is it easy to assess the evidence of Hitler's speeches and writings. A quotation can be found to support virtually every side of the argument, but the significance of such quotations is far more difficult to determine. A. J. P. Taylor was highly sceptical of using Hitler's words as evidence. In *The Origins of the Second World War* (1961) he claims:

'If his talk of peace was play-acting, so also was his talk of war. Which would become real depended on events, not on any resolution taken by Hitler beforehand.'

Moreover, Hitler did not operate in a vacuum. To identify a coherent plan from Hitler's utterances and writings is not necessarily to demonstrate that it was his own ideas that actually determined the course of German foreign policy in the 1930s.

Hitler was also to some extent a product of his time. The quest for *Lebensraum* within central and particularly eastern Europe was not unique to Nazism: concepts of some form of German domination of *Mitteleuropa* ('Central European Area') had been under active discussion among German nationalist circles for some time. Notions of access to *Lebensraum* in central Europe were built on the view that political boundaries were not natural frontiers fixed for eternity, but were rather the product of struggles for command over valuable land and resources. Similarly, a notion of racial superiority, although most virulent in Nazism, was shared by many European elites. The imperialist adventures of France and Britain were based on the view that it was entirely permissible to exploit other areas of the world, and to export the culture of the colonial power to native peoples whose own customs were held to be inferior.

Hitler's role must also be seen in the context of the changing character of government and the development of the Hitler state. There were multiple variants of foreign policy visions and views present throughout the 1930s, and to a greater or lesser extent these informed German policy-making at different moments during this time. However, there was a distinct shift (and radicalisation) of those in a position of power to translate views into policy from the mid-1930s onwards.





Mussolini welcomes Hitler to Italy during his state visit, May 1938.

**'Congruence of aims'**

In the early years of the Third Reich, the Army, the Foreign Office and the Nazi Party were largely in agreement over the need for revision of the Treaty of Versailles. Plans for rearmament were discussed within the first weeks of Hitler's Chancellorship. In October 1933 Germany withdrew from the Disarmament Conference in Geneva and Hitler announced Germany's intention to withdraw from the League of Nations. By January 1934 a worried Poland concluded a ten-year non-aggression pact with Germany. But when in the summer of 1934 a crisis arose following the murder of Austrian Chancellor Dollfuss by Austrian Nazis, Mussolini's mobilisation of Italian troops at the Italian border with Austria was sufficient to diffuse the situation for the time being.

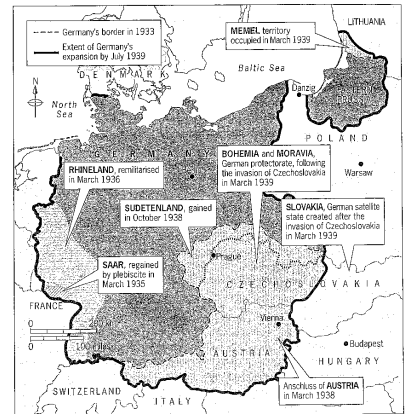
The German threat, however, continued to grow, prompting further jostling for what proved to be rather unstable alliances. On 9 March 1935, Goering revealed the existence of a German air force - which had been expressly forbidden under the Versailles Treaty - and a week later universal military conscription was announced. In April, representatives from Britain, France and Italy met at the Italian resort of Stresa and condemned German rearmament. The unanimity of the Stresa Front was, however, short-lived. Neither Britain nor Italy were happy about France concluding a treaty with communist Russia in May 1935, and the British naval agreement with Germany, concluded in June 1935, was a clear signal that Britain was prepared to condone breaches of the Treaty if this seemed in Britain's interests. In the autumn of 1935, somewhat inconsistent and vacillating responses on the part of both France and Britain to the Italian invasion of Abyssinia led ultimately to economic sanctions against Italy. These sanctions signalled the break-up of the Stresa front and, curiously, a degree of rapprochement between Germany and Italy.

**The radicalisation of foreign policy**

Radicalisation can be observed from 1936 onwards, with increasing Nazi control of the economy, foreign policy and military planning. Hitler gained a pivotal role in the determining of both the aims and methods of foreign policy, apparently providing clear evidence of putting a 'programme' into practice. Yet Hitler's plans were not all achieved, and his methods were often highly opportunistic, seizing favourable moments and exploiting sudden turns in events to his own advantage.

In early 1936, Hitler chose to act on the question of the Rhineland, a demilitarised zone under the provisions of the Treaty of Versailles. The remilitarisation of the Rhineland had long been on the general revisionist agenda, although traditionalists would have preferred this to be negotiated through normal diplomatic channels. Hitler, however, unsettled by loss of popular support within Germany, and concerned to maintain his image as the charismatic *Führer*, wanted a more spectacular achievement. Hitler saw a brief window of opportunity offered by Italy's invasion of Abyssinia (a war he managed to assist in prolonging by sending arms to the Abyssinian resistance to Mussolini's troops). Choosing a more high profile approach, Hitler, in March 1936 sent in German troops, confident that the French would offer little resistance. Events proved this strategy correct: the French failed to meet the fairly minimal German display of force with any

Germany's expansion, 1933-39.



serious counter-force, and the British treated the Germans' action as little more than re-entering their 'own back garden'. Hitler scored a major propaganda coup and his domestic popularity soared.

In spring 1936, there were shortages of meat, butter, raw materials and foreign exchange in Germany. Despite these shortages, Hitler announced that he wanted to be ready for war 'within four years', with no adverse effects on domestic consumption. Against the advice of the Ministry of Economics under Hjalmar Schacht, Hitler abandoned liberal economic doctrines and authorised Goering to increase armaments production under the auspices of the new Four-Year-Plan Office, set up in August 1936. Schacht was forced to resign in November 1937.

The outbreak of the Spanish Civil War in 1936 increasingly polarised opinion in Europe. Nazi Germany and fascist Italy intervened on behalf of the nationalist rebels under Spain's General Franco, who had risen against the left-wing Spanish Republican government coalition in Spain, while

**Hjalmar Schacht (1877-1970)**

An economics graduate and financial expert, Schacht was in charge of stabilising the German currency in the inflationary crisis of 1923, and was involved in negotiating the Dawes Plan of 1924 and the Young Plan of 1929.

Increasingly disillusioned by Weimar politics, Schacht helped to gain support for Hitler among financial and industrial circles in 1932-3. He became Minister of Economics in 1934, contributing greatly to Germany's economic recovery and early rearmament. Disagreeing

with Goering's policies of autarchy under the Four Year Plan, Schacht resigned as Minister of Economics in 1937. In his capacity as President of the Reichsbank in 1935-9, Schacht sought to organise a plan for the emigration of German Jews. Increasing disaffection with Hitler led

to contacts with resistance circles, and following the failure of the 1944 July Plot Schacht was imprisoned. Acquitted at the Nuremberg Trials, Schacht was able to enjoy a long and lucrative retirement in the Federal Republic of Germany.

**Wilhelm Keitel (1882-1946)**  
A professional soldier, Keitel took on the post of Chief of Staff of the High Command of the Armed Forces following the purge of the Army leadership in February 1938. An ardent supporter of Hitler, Keitel played a major role in ensuring that the Army assisted the SS, and justified the implementation of terror and mass murder in the occupied territories on the eastern front. He was found guilty by the Nuremberg Tribunal and executed in October 1946.

Russia and Communists across Europe supported the Republicans. In the course of 1936-7, Germany and Italy became closer in the Rome-Berlin Axis, while the attempts of Hitler's Nazi agent in London, Joachim von Ribbentrop, to gain an alliance with Britain seemed to be leading nowhere. Japan now began to look like a more suitable ally.

By 1937, the German re-armament programme was causing tensions between the conflicting priorities of the Army, Navy and Air Force. Army leaders were concerned about potential social unrest, and they were rattled by Hitler's increasingly strident tone with respect to foreign policy, captured in the 'Hossbach memorandum' of November 1937. In the spring of 1938 the Army leadership was purged. War Minister Werner von Blomberg was dismissed, and the War Ministry was replaced by a new High Command of the Armed Forces (OKW) under Wilhelm Keitel a unique arrangement in a peacetime state. The Commander-in-Chief of the Army, Werner von Fritsch, was ousted and replaced by General Walther von Brauchitsch. Hitler himself assumed a more prominent military role as Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces. The Foreign Ministry was also 'Nazified', with Foreign Minister Konstantin von Neurath replaced by Joachim von Ribbentrop.

In 1938-9 foreign policy moved into a radically new gear, with Hitler both creating and manipulating new opportunities in a rapid escalation of diplomatic and military action. Austrian Chancellor von Schuschnigg was summoned to Hitler's Alpine retreat at Berchtesgaden in March 1938, and forced into giving the post of Austrian Minister of the Interior to a Nazi. When von Schuschnigg nevertheless called a plebiscite on whether or not to maintain Austrian independence, Hitler mobilised the German army. With no moves on the part of Italy, France or Britain to defend Austria, on 12 March 1938 German troops were able to march into Austria unopposed. Hitler returned triumphant to his home town of Linz, and announced the *Anschluss* ('union') of Germany and Austria.

Having encountered no serious international opposition to revision of German borders, Hitler next turned his attentions to the Sudetenland area of Czechoslovakia, where unrest among ethnic Germans had been stirred up by the local Nazi leader. With Hitler designating 1 October 1938 as a date for military invasion, the Army Chief of Staff, General Beck, and others in government and intelligence circles began to feel uneasy, and plans for a possible coup were seriously discussed at high levels for the first time.

Fate now intervened in the form of British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain, whose policies of appeasement have occasioned much historical controversy. Braving the rigours of modern travel by aeroplane, Chamberlain met Hitler at Berchtesgaden and again in the rapidly convened Munich Conference in September 1938. Britain, France and Italy and Germany – in the absence of representatives from both Russia and Czechoslovakia (the country directly affected) – tried to avert war by conceding to German demands. Hitler, infuriated that he had been cheated of his planned war, was nevertheless emboldened. In March 1939 German troops invaded the now militarily weakened state of Czechoslovakia and a week later they seized the Lithuanian port of Memel.

In the meantime, however, Britain had been rapidly rearming, and according to some views the time for effective rearmament had been bought by the policy of appeasement. On 31 March 1939, Britain offered a guarantee to Poland that it would come to Poland's defence if there were any further German moves of aggression. Hitler, who had failed to obtain his desired alliance with Britain, concluded a Pact of Steel with Mussolini in May. Russia was wooed both by the western powers (who needed Russian help to prevent German expansion eastwards), and by Hitler, who had no desire to fight a war on two fronts. In the event, in late August 1939

Pact of Steel: Signed on 22 May 1939, this created a military alliance between Germany and Italy in the event of war, and confirmed Italy's break with France and Britain.

the German-Soviet non-aggression pact, arranged by Joachim von Ribbentrop, with its provisions for a carve-up of Poland between Russia and Germany, gave Germany the green light for the invasion of Poland on 1 September 1939. Honouring its guarantee, on 3 September the British government announced that it was now at war with Germany.

Hitler's strategies shaped not only the outbreak but also the course of the war. His most fateful interventions were the ideologically loaded invasion of 'Bolshevik' Russia in the summer of 1941, and the declaration of war on the mighty USA following the Japanese attack on the American base at Pearl Harbor in December 1941. It is these acts that transformed a European War into a World War.

#### In what ways were social and economic developments and foreign policy related?

The Third Reich was inherently unstable, built on a policy of drive and dynamism. From its inception, the Third Reich was geared to prepare for war – and rearmament carried major implications for economic and social developments. These, in turn, arguably conditioned the character of foreign policy and the nature of the war which resulted. Hitler's own popularity was also closely related to developments in foreign policy.

#### Popular opinion and foreign policy

Hitler constantly had an eye on his personal standing with the German people as we have seen, much of his support was rooted in the 'Hitler myth'. To remain a national saviour figure above the strains and strife of daily life required him to deliver the goods, and do so in a way that did not upset significant sections of the population. Such considerations, while never entirely deflecting Hitler from his principal aims, certainly played a role in foreign policy developments. Conversely, the developments in foreign policy affected Hitler's own standing in the popularity stakes.

Public opinion was less directly relevant to a dictatorial government than to a democratic government, as in the cases of France and Britain, whose economic policies in relation to rearmament had to have a constant eye on potential social unrest. Fear of consumer dissatisfaction nevertheless played a major role in Hitler's thinking with respect to economic policy. Domestic considerations also affected the timing and character of some foreign policy developments, as in the case of the re-militarisation of the Rhineland.

On the occasion of the Munich Conference in 1938, Hitler himself felt cheated of a planned war, but German public opinion appeared mightily relieved that imminent war had been averted and that Germany had made a significant foreign policy gain by peaceful means.

#### The economy and foreign policy

The German economy was deeply affected both by the drive for rearmament and the demands of war. It was further complicated by Hitler's concern not to compromise standards of living and hence his own popularity. Economic recovery had set in already in late 1932, although from 1933 it was enhanced by rearmament-related initiatives. Work creation schemes and prestige projects such as the building of the German autobahn system were designed not merely to tackle unemployment, but to raise a sense of national pride in the *Volksgemeinschaft*. In addition, they were important in developing a basic preparedness for war. Rearmament was not a major concern at this time, accounting for perhaps only 18 per cent of expenditure in work creation schemes in the period 1932-4; but from the mid-1930s onwards it became increasingly important.

Autobahn system: the network of motorways across Germany.

Volksgemeinschaft: the supposedly harmonious and racially defined 'people's community' or 'folk community', which Hitler claimed to be constructing in Germany in place of a modern society riven by class conflicts.