

Hitler as War Leader, 1939-1941

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Introduction



Adolf Hitler visits Paris with architect Albert Speer (left) and artist Arno Breker (right), June 23, 1940 In September 1938, appeasement in action at the Munich Conference thwarted Adolf Hitler's desire for a limited eastern European war to destroy the Czech state. Hitler was determined that, during the Polish crisis of the following summer, nothing would divert him from his aim: the destruction of Poland through war. However, the war that broke out in September 1939 was not the limited conflict that Hitler had intended and cast the British, along with the French, in a role that the Führer had not foreseen. From 1939 to 1941, the British were to play a major part in the development of Hitler's strategy, as it impinged not only on Britain itself but also on the USSR and the USA.

This situation came about due to German occupation of Bohemia and Moravia in March 1939 (Slovakia became a nominally independent German puppet state). Hitler's contempt for the western leaders had been fuelled by Munich: they were 'little worms'. However, he miscalculated their response to his actions in March 1939. The foundations of appeasement were shaken. Hitler had broken his promise that he had no further territorial demands. Moreover, the notion that his policies were aimed only at unifying the German peoples was exposed as a fiction. Above all, it was now clear that Hitler could not be trusted. The result was a guarantee to Poland, Hitler's next target, by the western powers.

What Hitler had sought to avoid had happened. He had thought to use pressure on the Poles as successfully as on the Czechs, presuming that they would yield Danzig and concede extra-territorial routes through the Polish Corridor. Poland would become a German satellite, and useful in a later attack on Russia.

War

During the spring and summer of 1939, German diplomacy aimed to isolate Poland and deter the western powers from involvement. One reflection of this was the signing in May of the Pact of Steel with Italy. However, the stance of Germany's ideological enemy, the Soviet Union, was of most concern.

It was Russia that could interfere with Hitler's intentions as regards Poland. If she could be prevented from allying with the western powers – a possibility that Britain and France were reluctantly exploring – and if, beyond that, she could be persuaded into a pact with Germany, then Poland would be at Hitler's mercy, with the Anglo-French guarantees worthless. Britain, especially, would be significantly weakened.

This was the background to the Nazi- Soviet Pact of August 1939. It made a German war against Poland inevitable, but did it necessitate a wider conflict? Hitler, encouraged by Foreign Minister Ribbentrop, believed that this was unlikely. However, despite their urgings to the Poles to negotiate, it was repeatedly stated that the western powers would honour their obligations to Poland. Hostilities opened on 1 September; on 3 September, Britain and France declared war.

Hitler had now sparked off the general European war which, as indicated at the November 1937 meeting recorded in the Hossbach Memorandum, he had wanted to avoid until the mid-1940s. The Führer was in a pact with his ideological foe, the Soviet Union, and at war with Britain, a country he admired and had portrayed as a natural ally for the Reich in *Mein Kampf*. He had assumed that Britain would not enter the war, although he was also careless of the possibility. If interpreter Paul Schmidt is correct, when he heard of the British action on 3 September Hitler turned angrily to Ribbentrop and said, 'What now?'

Hitler's War?

On 1 September 1939, Chamberlain, referring to Hitler, told the House of Commons: 'Responsibility for this terrible catastrophe lies on the shoulders of one man.' What was the level of Hitler's responsibility?

Clearly, the actions of other nations had helped to bring Hitler to the point where he could threaten the peace of Europe. Yet by the time that the western powers realised the extent of the Führer's ambitions, their options for

restraining him were dangerously limited.

Within Germany, Hitler's personal power had expanded after 1933 at the expense of other groups – notably the nationalist conservatives – until it was absolute. In the aftermath of the November 1937 meeting recorded in the Hossbach Memorandum, Hitler had moved against military and civilian doubters as 1938 ushered in a more radical phase of the regime. War Minister Field-Marshal Blomberg and army head General Fritsch had gone through scandal, as Hitler assumed personal leadership of the Wehrmacht in February. Ribbentrop replaced the conservative Neurath as Foreign Minister.

It was true that, at the time of the Sudetenland crisis in 1938, elements of the army, centred on Chief of Staff General Ludwig Beck, had been appalled by Hitler's apparent willingness to risk war with Britain and France. However, there was never a concerted effort to oppose the Führer, and Beck himself, an increasingly isolated figure, resigned from his post in August 1938. In any case, the behaviour of the western powers at Munich cut the ground from under would-be critics of Hitler in Germany. As war approached in 1939, conservative opponents of the Führer were uncoordinated and uncertain how to proceed.

Within the Nazi hierarchy, different perspectives were represented by Göring and Ribbentrop. The former had been influential at the time of Munich, urging acceptance of a settlement. This was a stance which subsequently tarnished his reputation with a Hitler who believed he had been cheated of his war. In 1939, Göring remained convinced that war with Britain, at least, should be avoided and blamed Ribbentrop for the failure of this strategy. However, whatever the difference in emphasis, Göring was Hitler's subservient vassal.

Ribbentrop himself was arrogant in his certainty that the British would not fight over Poland. Driven in part by resentment over his treatment as ambassador in Britain (1936-1938), he was certainly a warmonger. As such, he had helped influence Hitler in his miscalculation over British policy. However, once again, there could be no doubt about the Foreign Minister's subservience to the Führer.

Thus, in Ian Kershaw's words, 'Hitler decided'. External pressures, derived from the visionary, ambitious course that the Führer had taken in foreign affairs, were underlined by elements of his own psychological state. As he reached 50, Hitler, a hypochondriac, was conscious of time constraints and the need to act before the situation became more threatening for Germany. Given that he believed Germany's future could only be assured by war, and that her enemies, Britain and France, were now gearing up for conflict, war in 1939, and as it developed thereafter, was a function of Hitler's personality and the cult surrounding it.

'The Phoney War': Peace in the West?

With the rapid defeat of Poland in the autumn of 1939, and the implementation of the Nazi-Soviet Pact, Hitler turned to the western powers. The Führer hoped that, having witnessed this triumph of the Wehrmacht, the British and French would see sense and come to terms. After all, they had done nothing to aid Poland. Peace feelers therefore began to come from Berlin during September and October. These centred on a victor's peace, with the return of former German colonies and, especially, the free hand in the east that Hitler had always wanted. Such ideas continued to appear during 1940. Was Hitler serious? It would seem so, although he could have few illusions about their acceptance, particularly as the British Cabinet announced that it was preparing for a war that would last at least three years. Hitler knew that the western powers would hold out until they could complete their armaments programmes. When that point was reached, it would be dangerous for Germany. Holding the French military in some contempt, but not the British, and realising that, behind the British, lurked the threat (not yet rated highly) of American involvement, Hitler hedged his bets by having the military prepare for a western attack that autumn. There was a clear assumption that the defeat of France would force Britain to come to terms.

Pursuing the dual policy of peace offer and threat, Hitler made a speech to the Reichstag on 6 October 1939 outlining the prospect of a conference of the leading nations to settle Europe's problems of peace and security.

However, the division of Poland between Germany and Russia would remain. It would thus be peace on the Führer's terms, with the threat of death and destruction if the western powers declined. The 'warmongering' group of Churchill and his supporters was singled out for particular abuse. Hitler's 'offer' was dismissed by Chamberlain on 12 October, probably as expected. Hitler therefore ended the year with the focus firmly on an impending attack in the west, which was opposed as premature by the army. In fact, there were repeated postponements due to bad weather but it was not until 16 January 1940 that the Führer finally put it off to the spring. In 1940, the consequences of Hitler's failure to confine the war to Eastern Europe would thus be faced head-on.

1940: Victory and Stalemate

If the period of the 'Phoney War' had not secured for Hitler a settlement with the western powers, it had shown that the latter were not capable of bold initiatives. The 65 French divisions available for an assault on Germany from the west in September 1939 had massively outnumbered the Wehrmacht units that were committed in Poland, but they were never sent into action. The British Expeditionary Force in France was also purely defensive. Clearly, if appeasement had been done to death by Hitler's actions in 1939, its ghost continued to haunt the leadership of the western powers, especially the French. The result was caution and weakness, foreshadowing the rapid collapse in the face of the German Blitzkrieg in the spring of 1940. In this sense, Hitler's continued peace feelers might be attributed to more than wishful thinking on his part. However, other factors indicate that the Führer's earlier miscalculation, particularly about the British, continued to be influential.

Hitler alone could not shape events and bring the war to a conclusion. That was impossible unless Britain could be forced to the conference table or militarily defeated. However, Germany was not equipped in 1940 to fight the long war on which the British were clearly reckoning. The Wehrmacht had started hostilities in September 1939 with no clearly thought through plans for a major war, and no strategy for an offensive in the west. In these circumstances, the breathing space that the German army gained during 1939-40 was crucial for preparing it for the attack on France. The Luftwaffe was the best equipped of the three branches of the armed forces. However, even it had an armaments programme targeted at 1942, not 1939. As regards the navy, the lack of an agreement with Britain, combined with increasing diplomatic success, had caused Hitler to take more interest in it in the late 1930s. The result was the Z-Plan of January 1939, in which the Führer's insistence on the building of a huge battle-fleet by 1944, as opposed to the navy's preference for U-boats, which were a better offensive weapon against Britain, seemed to point not only to the struggle against Britain but also to future mastery of the seas and a global conflict, a point returned to below. However, the Z-Plan was halted at the start of the war and only restarted in July 1940. So, given that Hitler now had to fight what was in many ways the 'wrong' war, he also had to take a major gamble. This was to wager everything on the defeat of France. Getting Britain out of the war through her isolation after this defeat was Hitler's main strategy in the first half of 1940. It continued to be a dominant factor thereafter.

There was, of course, some degree of logic in the presumption that, following the spectacular German advance in the spring of 1940 and the offer of reasonable terms, especially concerning the empire, Britain would accept the inevitable out of self-interest. There continued to be loud voices in Britain, such as that of Lord Halifax, raised in support of such thinking. It was clearly not inevitable that Britain's leaders would decide to stand alone in the summer of 1940. However, once that decision was made, it ruined Hitler's single strategy. The Führer, assuming that immediate self-interest could be the only 'principle' in war and peace, underestimated the undoubted resilience and idealism that had arisen in Britain after the German march into Prague in 1939 and which, in the summer of 1940, the new Prime Minister, Winston Churchill, was able to articulate for the British people. The 'duel' between Hitler and his arch-enemy, Winston Churchill, would dominate the summer. Its outcome would vitally affect the future course of the war.

So, although in 1940-41 Hitler was at the height of his power, especially as regards his triumph over France, his inability to conclude the war in the west shaped the rest of the war. Crucially, the decision to open conflict in the east before that in the west was finished would take away from Germany what room for manoeuvre remained to her. By the end of 1941, the seeds of catastrophe had thus been sown.

1940-1941: World War

It followed from the stalemate in the west and the decision, nevertheless, to open hostilities in the east, that two major powers impacted on Hitler's strategic vision: obviously the Soviet Union but also the United States.

In the context of 1940, America was not an immediate problem for Germany. It was currently dominated by isolationism and preoccupied with the presidential elections in the autumn. Early US involvement in the war could thus be discounted. However, as long as Britain stayed in the war, the participation – at least through benevolent neutrality – of the USA, with its immense economic power, could not be ruled out. This was all the more reason, therefore, to eliminate Britain as quickly as possible.

Hitler's wider views on the United States were actually somewhat confused and fluid. His early speeches and writings, including *Mein Kampf*, contain few references to America beyond denunciation for its part in World War One and the peace settlement. By the late 1920s, views of a long-term threat from America to Germany were not unusual, and this was the context in which Hitler expressed his vague notion about the coming conflict between the German-dominated Eurasian empire and the USA, which is discussed in his *Second Book* of 1928. It was Hitler's view that the USA could only be defeated by a dominant, racially pure European state: Nazi Germany. However, he also believed that it would be in Britain's interests to co-operate against the threat from the New World.

Nevertheless, by the time that Hitler was in power, his views had shifted. The coming of the Depression cast the United States as a weak, racially mongrel and Jewish-dominated state which would be incapable of making its mark in a new European war. Its only hope lay in its Nordic, German-American blood, awakened by Nazism. By the late 1930s, American – particularly F.D. Roosevelt's – distaste for Nazi racial and religious policy had confirmed Hitler's assessment of American shortcomings. He did not yet regard the US as a rival and his vision remained primarily European. The idea of a future conflict lacked practical importance.

The question of Hitler's views on the United States is, nevertheless, linked to that of his ultimate intentions on a global stage. A full discussion of this topic lies outside the scope of this article, but it has already been noted that Hitler's naval strategy in the late 1930s implied some such struggle, beyond that with Britain. This accords with his equally vague thinking about the United States. What is clear is that, between 1940 and 1941, Hitler's 'global' thinking was largely a reaction to circumstances which, if he had brought them into existence, were now passing out of his control. Here, planning for a war against the Soviet Union, which Hitler had always wanted ideologically, became strategically driven by the need to bring the British to peace talks, keep America out of the war and thus conclude the conflict to Germany's advantage.

To sum up, integral to Hitler's thinking between 1940 and 1941 was an attack on the Soviet Union. Ideologically, this had always been the Führer's natural enemy and, as explained as far back as *Mein Kampf*, the source of future *lebensraum* for the Nazi state. The circumstances of 1939 had warranted a deal with Stalin. However, this did not preclude a later showdown when the British had been eliminated. That the latter precondition proved unattainable threw the spotlight on the USSR, both ideologically but, even more, strategically. Thus, in July 1940, with France defeated but Britain defiant, Hitler considered the unthinkable: a two-front war. The Chief of the General Staff, General Halder, recorded the Führer's assessment at a military conference on 31 July 1940: 'Britain's hope lies in Russia and the United States. If Russia drops out of the picture, America too is lost for Britain, because elimination of Russia would tremendously increase Japan's power in the Far East ... Decision: Russia's destruction must therefore be made part of the struggle. Spring 1941'.

By autumn 1940, peace overtures to Britain had failed and so had the battle for her skies. American aid for the British was starting with the destroyers-for-bases deal in September. Getting Britain out of the war was urgent. At this stage, Hitler's options were not totally closed off. There was the possibility of forcing Britain to come to terms through a strategy of attacks on her Mediterranean and Near Eastern strongholds. However, once that option also

faded, the Führer was left with only one possibility. On 18 December 1940, the crusade against 'Jewish-Bolshevism' was embodied in a war directive. A year later, the initial progress of Operation Barbarossa, launched in June 1941, had ground to a halt.

There was one other significant development in the autumn of 1940. Ribbentrop was now able to resurrect the idea he had promoted before the war: an anti-British bloc of Germany, Italy and Japan. Negotiations that began in late August led to the signing of the Tripartite Pact in September 1940. The three powers agreed to assist each other in the event of one of their number being attacked by an external power not involved in the European or Sino-Japanese conflict. While this might worry the Soviets, the clear target was that other 'hope' of the British, the United States.

Of course, the Tripartite Pact did not cover the Japanese attack on the Americans at Pearl Harbor on 7 December 1941. Hitler stated to the Reichstag on 11 December 1941 that Germany and Italy saw themselves as compelled, in accordance with the Pact, to declare war against the United States. This was clearly untrue: Japan had attacked the USA. The Führer had chosen war with America. At first glance, this seems an incredible decision but is explicable from the fact that Hitler's view of the US had once again shifted.

Between 1940 and 1941, Hitler became convinced that America would enter the war by 1942 and, as re-elected Roosevelt increased his efforts to aid Britain, mainly through Lend-Lease from March 1941, his views swung back to the image of American strength. The war in the east, strategically aimed in part at ending British defiance and deterring the United States, stalled in the winter of 1941 but had to be finished so that America could be dealt with. The other factor was Hitler's view that, before Pearl Harbor, an undeclared war already existed with the Americans in the Atlantic. A declaration would remove the need for irksome German restraint in that area.

Therefore, from Hitler's point of view, the decision on 11 December 1941 took on an element of inevitability. War with the United States was coming so the Führer would anticipate that and attempt to take back the initiative by declaring war himself. In fact, there had been nothing inevitable about the situation that Germany had reached by the end of 1941. The defiance of Britain, the war against Russia and the American threat were now interlinked. Nevertheless, the starting point had been the stance of the British, Hitler's miscalculation of it and his efforts to solve the problem it created. The consequence was a world war that Germany could not win.

Carole Chapman is a retired teacher of Advanced Level History and Politics.

Issues to Debate

- How far did Hitler's views on Britain affect his strategy in war?
- How far did Hitler hold contradictory views of the United States?
- Why did Hitler declare war on the United States?