

# Hitler's Foreign Policy and the Third Reich: 1936-1939

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PIANGTAWAN PHANPRASIT, MAY 8 2009

**'From 1936 to 1939 the Third Reich consistently yet flexibly pursued Hitler's systematic foreign policy.'**  
**Discuss.**

The statement that from 1936 to 1939 the Third Reich consistently yet flexibly pursued Hitler's systematic foreign policy points out the relationship between the Fuehrer and the Third Reich and suggests how Hitler's plans in the making of foreign policy were translated into action. Given that during the period 1936-39 Nazi Germany experienced diplomatic gains and that Hitler was perceived as 'the bearer of the people's will'[1] it is plausible to assert that Germany's successes on the road to war were driven by Hitler's aims and motives in the sphere of foreign policy. Nevertheless, the statement in question in fact concerns more than one aspect of the history of the Third Reich and an evaluation of Hitler's power as the maker of German foreign policy from 1936 to 1939 portrays some of the most controversial debates on the Nazi history. To assess the validity of the statement in question Hitler's power over the Third Reich, the existence of his so-called blueprints for the Reich and the consistency and flexibility of Nazi Germany's foreign policy must be contemplated. In this vein, a synthesis across the issues can be made[2] and hence the proposed claim may be true in one sense but not in another.

Firstly, Hitler's power over the Third Reich can be evaluated via the investigation into the political structure of Nazi Germany during the period concerned. Power in this sense is defined as the ability to exert influence over the making of policy and to translate ideas into practice. Power is, thus, by no means a static term. At one extreme end, the diary by Lord Mayor of Hamburg after a conversation with Lammers the head of the Reich Chancellery in 1937 about the nomination of personnel[3] is a piece of personal, direct evidence for Master in the Reich or weak dictator discussion. A 'large cabinet' implies the Nazi regime was polycratic and Hitler's hoping 'the question of the personnel would solve itself' shows fragmentation of the authority beneath Hitler. This highlights Hitler's reduced power to dictate agenda because such disintegration arguably allowed some to influence the agenda setting. As such it is perhaps inaccurate to suggest that the Third Reich pursued Hitler's foreign policy when it is possible that foreign policy might have been conducted by the Nazis in the upper echelon rather than Hitler alone. Consistent with this view is that evidence on Hitler's 'artistic temperament'[4] is suggestive of Hitler's being a lazy ruler and hence master only in theory. In practice policy might have emerged out of chaos and confusion in the system as 'ad hoc responses'[5] to circumstances rather than directly from Hitler. Even if not so, it is still hard to see how an individual was able to control decisions in every aspect concerning foreign policy. Hitler's personification of the nation was perhaps used by his subordinates as propaganda to further their own initiatives. Hitler's emphasis on the racial struggle was exploited by Himmler to justify his organisation of the Death's Head Units in 1937[6]. The Fuehrer, therefore, was probably largely dependent on his subordinates on making foreign policy.

On the other hand, the arguments ignore the relationship between Hitler and the people, Hitler and the Party and the link between the two relationships which had come into play before the period in question. Ever since 1933 Hitler's myth as standing aloof of self-interest but on behalf of the whole Germany was reinforced by Goebbels' propaganda machinery and intimidation by the secret police and the use of terror and force. Although it is problematic to assess public opinion during the Nazi regime because people were not allowed to express their views freely, Hitler's success of combining the Presidency and the Chancellery within a year of his becoming Chancellor reflected a level of nationwide consent. Hitler was able to and did abolish the framework created by the conservative elites to ensure that he would pursue their foreign policy direction[7]. In fact he began to override the conservatives by assuming

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authority in taking major decisions in the sphere of foreign policy since 1933 and increasingly became the 'latter-day Bismarck'[8]. This created power dynamism for Hitler to extend the conventional expansionist demands[9] to acquire *Lebensraum* to remilitarisation of the Rhineland in 1936. The event was arguably the decisive turning point in European international relations in the period 1933-39 because not only was Hitler able to override the army and enhance his personal standing within Germany but it reflected Germany's willingness and capacity to retaliate against Versailles and Locarno. This in turn enabled Hitler to order the purges of Conservatives in 1937-38 so as to introduce the new phase of foreign policy dimension via establishing enhanced patronage over new positions replacing the old ones. Most important of this was Schacht's resignation in 1937 after his clashes with Goering over economic issues. The link between Hitler's authority over his Party as the autocrat of the NSDAP[10] and that over the people was developed since individuals attempted to outdo each other to gain Hitler's favour by translating his will into actions under the *Fuehrerprinzip* and *Social Darwinism*. The 'witches' cauldron'[11] became the divide and rule strategy which furthered Hitler's supremacy as the final decision maker.

Nevertheless, the extent to which Hitler was in a strong position to formulate foreign policy may be undermined by the view that his power was constrained by domestic matters. The Four-Year Plan of 1936 and the Hossbach Memorandum of 1937 were perhaps shaped by domestic economic and military issues. In this regard, the Third Reich in its broadest sense pre-dominated Hitler's decision making and not vice versa. Hitler's underlining that the degree of the military rearmament could not be too large[12] showed that he had no complete control over the pace of rearmament. His concern over living space and the subsequent need to overthrow Czechoslovakia and Austria for iron and grain highlighted how his foreign policy was shaped by Germany's internal factors. It is conceivable to point out the rearmament programme and autarky as responses to the Depression of 1930s and as preconditions for Hitler's expansionist goals[13]. Yet there is little doubt that Marxist historians would argue for the supremacy of economic factors over foreign policy because to them history is shaped by economic superstructure. It is, however, arguable that the German economy was not in such a crisis that Hitler had to gear it to war. The Hossbach Memorandum refers to 1942-43 as the years when Germany would be ready for war. Had economic issues been significantly dominant, the decision for a European war would have been taken in mid 1940s. International context, hence, was far more decisive in the decision for war in 1939. Overall, Hitler's directives were implemented on the grounds of internal dynamism within Germany and in turn foreign policy goals shaped the nature and objectives of domestic policy[14].

This relates back to the statement in question. It is open to discussion whether Hitler had systematic foreign policy. His aims and motives were initially reflected in his *Mein Kampf* and *Hitlers Zweite Buch*, some of which represented a diversion from the past and the elites' goals. The problem here is to define Hitler's 'systematic foreign policy'. In its strictest sense, it can refer to Hitler's blueprint for German expansionism, be it continental or global but in its broader term it refers to Hitler's taking decision stage-by-stage to materialise his foreign policy objectives. To some extent, the proposal is valid. As the personification of the nation's will, Hitler took the Third Reich beyond traditional revisionism of the Treaty of Versailles into the racial-power politics whereby anti-Semitism was radicalised to make Germany greater not in terms of power politics but also in terms of racial superiority. In this aspect, the *Fuehrerprinzip* brought Hitler's subordinates to attempt to establish the regime of racial purity with the strength of arms and national rebirth in the continent[15]. This was concretised in the event of the Anschluss of 1938 before Hitler moved on to focus on Czechoslovakia.

However, it is much more plausible to see the chain of events between 1936 and 1939 as more arbitrary and ad hoc rather than systematic. It is undeniable that Hitler had fixed bearing towards achieving his goals in making foreign policy but this does not mean he had a clear outline or timed schedule for it. In fact the proposed claim in the question that the Third Reich 'consistently yet flexibly' pursued Hitler's foreign policy exposes the fact that Hitler had no clear measures of how to achieve his objectives. Rather, Hitler was able to conduct the direction, or framework, of Nazi Germany's foreign policy but at the same time exploited opportunities granted by international circumstances to precipitate what he had in mind. In the case of the remilitarisation of the Rhineland, the event was made possible partly because Mussolini's invasion of Abyssinia diverted international attention away from Germany's rearmament. Paul Schmidt's writing in 1949[16] that Hitler was nervous after the remilitarisation of the Rhineland due to Germany's inadequate resources should a war break out. This means Hitler took a 'wild gamble' or, in other words, exercised brinkmanship by escalating the possibility of war with the West via his diplomatic coup.

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The Czech crisis of 1938 and the Munich Agreement in that September resulted from his triumph over the Anschluss which led to the encirclement of western Czechoslovakia and economic advantages for the Reich. Hitler's diplomatic successes during these years considerably served to enhance his authority within Nazi Germany. This can be shown by contemplating resistance and opposition against the Nazis. The year 1938 was marked by the emergence of conservative resistance against Hitler which followed the Blomberg-Fritsch crisis whereby Hitler was able to retain his supremacy over Blomberg and Fritsch. Such conservative resistance culminated into General Beck's bomb plot in the same year but as it turned out Hitler's diplomatic gains over the period deterred the planned assassination of the Fuehrer.

Perhaps the flexibility of Hitler's methods in achieving his objectives was most clearly shown by the making of the Nazi-Soviet Pact in August 1939. Before the Czech crisis the alliance between Soviet Union and Nazi Germany was rather unforeseen and regarded as improbable. Yet when Soviet Union was excluded from the decision-making process in Munich, Stalin's regime was also alienated against Britain and France. This opened up opportunities for Hitler to exploit in order to acquire Poland via the additional secret clause. Consequently the confidence of his position in Europe amid Britain and France's policy of appeasement during the 1930s prompted Hitler to order Germany to attack Poland in September 1939. As such, if Hitler had any plan in the making of foreign policy it would rather be shaped by international context than ruthlessly designed beforehand according to his will. Rauschnig's explanation of Hitler's tactics in foreign affairs, further, leads to another interpretation that Hitler was indeed 'a master tactician with a daemon'[17]. It can, thus, be argued that Hitler's re-active approach might have been done to create the consequences he desired and the flexibility of his short-term approach suggests that the Fuehrer kept his options open 'to the very last moment'[18].

In the final analysis, at one end of spectrum Hitler possessed unrestricted power in Germany which was the spring board for his exercising of excessive power in the formulation of German foreign policy. Nonetheless, it is oversimplistic to deduce that the Third Reich from 1936 to 1939 consistently yet flexibly pursued Hitler's foreign policy simply because Hitler was the personification of the nation. The consistency of the foreign policy of the Third Reich undeniably was derived from Hitler having fixed bearing and broad aims in foreign affairs. On the other hand the flexibility of the methods of achieving foreign policy aims were considerably attributed to international context rather than Hitler alone. Further, the validity of the statement in question can be undermined since Hitler's foreign policy was more opportunistic than systematic. The Fuehrer had the framework of and direction for foreign policy but it was his strategy of exploiting the opportunities placed before him that led to the Third Reich's diplomatic successes during the period 1936-39.

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