

How did Hitler destroy the Treaty of Versailles?

Between 1933 and 1936 Hitler destroyed the Treaty of Versailles, finding this surprisingly easy to do. One reason was his determination and willingness to take risks. Another was the weakness of other nations and their unwillingness to stop him.

1 Germany leaves the League of Nations and the Disarmament Conference, October 1933

The League of Nations Disarmament Conference started in 1932 and dragged on unsuccessfully into 1933. The Germans said they would be happy to accept disarmament if every nation disarmed. If not, they wanted to increase their armaments to French levels. The French would neither disarm nor allow German re-armament. This gave Hitler an excuse to quit the conference while pretending that Germany wanted peace. In fact, almost from the moment Hitler came to power, Germany had been re-arming. On the same day he withdrew Germany from the League of Nations. Many in Britain blamed France for the failure of the Disarmament Conference.

2 The population of the Saar votes to rejoin Germany, January 1935

The Treaty of Versailles had placed the Saar, an important coal-mining area on the Franco-German border, under League of Nations administration for fifteen years. In January 1935 the people of the Saar voted by 477,000 to 48,000 to return to Germany. This overwhelming vote was a tremendous propaganda success for Hitler, who increased its international impact by promising to make no further claims on French territory, so giving up German claims to Alsace and Lorraine, which had also been lost in the Treaty of Versailles.

3 German air force and army, March 1935

In March 1935 Hitler announced that Germany had a military air force (the Luftwaffe), and that he was introducing conscription (compulsory military service) to expand the army to half a million men. It was an open secret that Germany had been re-arming for some time, but this announcement was a clear rejection of the military restrictions in the Treaty of Versailles. Britain, France and Italy formed the so-called Stresa Front, condemning German re-armament, and agreeing to work together to preserve existing treaties. But as Hitler expected, they were not prepared to take any action.

4 Anglo-German Naval Treaty, June 1935

This treaty allowed the Germans to build a navy 35 per cent of the size of Britain's. It seemed to guarantee Britain permanent naval superiority over Germany, and was consistent with Britain's policy of trying to control and satisfy legitimate German demands. In fact, it merely permitted Germany to ignore the naval restrictions in the Treaty of Versailles, including those on the possession of submarines and battleships, and to build up a navy as quickly as possible. By signing this treaty, Britain officially recognised that the military terms of the Treaty of Versailles were dead. Britain had consulted neither France nor Italy before signing – the Stresa Front had collapsed.

5 German re-occupation of the Rhineland, March 1936

While the Rhineland remained demilitarised, Germany was vulnerable to attack from the west. Pursuing a more aggressive policy in the east meant that the Rhineland would first have to be made secure. On 7 March 1936, Hitler took a big

gamble by marching his troops into the demilitarised zone. His armies were not prepared for war, and he could not know how Britain and France would react. But the French would not act on their own, and the British saw no reason to risk war in order to stop Hitler 'marching into his own backyard'. Hitler had used force, and nobody had tried to stop him. In future, the threat of war would lie behind all of Hitler's demands.

6 The Rome–Berlin Axis and the Anti-Comintern Pacts

Hitler's successes made it easier for him to develop closer relationships with possible allies such as Italy and Japan. The Rome–Berlin Axis (1936) was not a formal alliance, but an informal agreement between Hitler and Mussolini to work more closely together. Thus both Italy and Germany gave support to the nationalists in the Spanish Civil War. This war, which broke out in 1936, gave Hitler an opportunity to test much of his new military equipment. The Anti-Comintern Pact (1936) committed Germany and Japan to hostility towards the Soviet Union, and Italy joined the pact in 1937. A full military alliance between Germany and Italy (the Pact of Steel) was signed in 1939, and expanded in 1940 to include Japan.

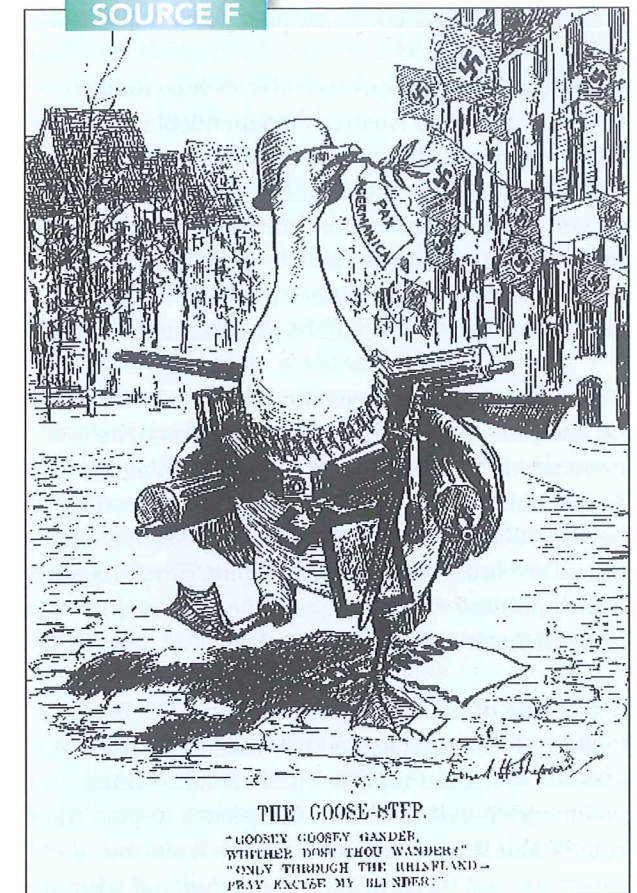
How far was Hitler's foreign policy to blame for the outbreak of war in 1939?

Anschluss, March 1938: why did Hitler bother to invade Austria?

Austria is a German country both by language and by culture. Hitler had been born and raised in Austria, and his desire to unite all Germans was well known. Although the Treaty of Versailles forbade the union of Germany and Austria (Anschluss), it seemed obvious that he would try to bring it about. A strong Nazi Party already existed in Austria. In 1934 Nazis murdered the Austrian chancellor, Dollfuss, during an attempted takeover which failed only when Mussolini, the Italian dictator, threatened to intervene. At this time, Mussolini was suspicious of Hitler, and regarded Austria as being in Italy's sphere of interest.

In 1936, Dollfuss' replacement, Schuschnigg, agreed to appoint Nazis to the government. In return, Germany promised to respect Austria's independence. But in January 1938 Austrian police raided Nazi headquarters in Vienna and found plans to take over the government. On 12 February, Schuschnigg met Hitler at Berchtesgaden and agreed to appoint Seyss-Inquart, a Nazi supporter, as Minister of the Interior,

SOURCE F



A British cartoon of 1936 about the remilitarisation of the Rhineland. The 'goose-step' was the style of marching used by the German army.

SOURCE E

I think it would be a mistake to seem to be on the side of France about the secret re-arming of Germany. To do that means that we appear to re-endorse that wicked Versailles Treaty and to justify the evil policies of France towards reconciliation over the past ten years. God knows, the danger from Germany is bad enough, but the dangers from France in the last few years have been equally grave.

From a letter written in 1934 by a British Labour Party politician. The letter helps to explain why Hitler could get away with his re-armament plans.

QUESTIONS

- 1 Study Source F. What does it tell you about British attitudes to the remilitarisation of the Rhineland? Explain your answer, referring to the cartoon.
- 2 Why do you think Britain followed a policy of appeasement towards Hitler?
- 3 How did Hitler make Germany a great power again?