

# WW2 HISTORY.COM

## Outbreak of war A-level Extension Task

### Introduction

Read the sections of transcript that sets out historians' views on the reasons for war. From these identify which of the reasons you think was the key to the outbreak of the conflict. Consider the role that Hitler played and his motivation, as well as the parts played by the British and French governments.

LAURENCE REES: So it's as simple and straightforward as that? If we focus just on the war in the West, that was occasioned very simply by German expansionist aims?

SIR IAN KERSHAW: That is the underlying cause of it. Those aims, of course, can themselves be explained and they go back really to the Second World War being the unfinished business of the First. And so at the end of the First World War Germany is left a very aggrieved country. It seems as if it's an undefeated nation, undefeated in the field. The claims are in Germany that they've been – by the radical right, not just by Hitler and so on, but by the radical right – there's been a stab in the back, that the fighting front was stabbed in the back by unrest at home, so they hadn't really been defeated. Then comes the Versailles Treaty and they have territory which is taken away from them and so on. So this is like a running sore throughout the 1920s and the 1930s. The conditions of the depression then allow a radical nationalist and revisionist to come to power who then want to reverse the outcome of the First World War. And part of the way of doing this, the major way of doing this, is through recovery of these territories - through expansion to secure Germany's long term future. The German expansion, as Hitler repeatedly said, could only come about through the sword, people weren't going to give you this land back willy-nilly, so you had to take it. And that, therefore, was the underlying cause of the beginning of the Second World War in Europe. And the Japanese case in the Far East was a sort of parallel. The Japanese wanted to expand, which they saw was the only way to ensure their own future, and Germany and Japan were both, from their own perception, have-not nations – they were countries which had lost out as a result of the First World War. And their chance now came with the depression, which gave the radical right a chance in Germany and brought the military into strong positions of dominance in Japan. Now was the opportunity to grab this land and, in a way that was, therefore, the underlying cause of the Second World War.

LAURENCE REES: Many of the people I've met, Germans who were there at the time, say: 'Well, it made complete sense to us that what we should have back was the land that had been taken from us at Versailles – land which had been German for centuries.' So to what extent was that the only goal that Hitler also wanted, or did he always want much more than that?

And to what extent was Hitler open and clear with people about which of those two goals he wanted?

SIR IAN KERSHAW: Well, he always wanted more but, of course, in terms of the public image, what the Nazis seemed to be about, but also other groups – nationalists who supported them – was actually attaining the territory back which they had lost through the Versailles Treaty, through restoring Germany's boundaries, acquiring that land back again. And, hence, in the 1930s all sorts of people from the outside, including Neville Chamberlain and the government in this country and in France, they regarded Hitler as an extreme nationalist who wanted now to restore German pride and German territory, of course, and acquire back the land which had been lost at Versailles.

However, that image was destroyed when the Germans entered Prague in March 1939 and now for the first time are acquiring land which had not been taken away from them at Versailles, it was not part of an earlier Germany and nation state. The majority of the people who had now been taken over were not ethnic Germans at all but they were Czechs. And so to this extent, now, the march into Prague was the instant where it became recognizable that Hitler was not interested just in a greater Germany of ethnic Germans, but his ambitions were imperialist ones which stretched who knows where? And in reality Hitler had always had these aims and actually hadn't made much of a secret of it, because in *Mein Kampf* as well, written in the middle of the 1920s, he'd said that Germany's future has to lie in the acquisition of land in the East at the expense of Russia, which he openly stated in *Mein Kampf*. The question was from these people whether that was Hitler as a youth, as a young firebrand, or whether as a statesman he would change his mind. And for a long time they preferred to believe that he'd changed his mind on that, whereas he hadn't. And that war in the East, to acquire land that had never belonged to Germany, that was, of course, the ultimate aim of Hitler in the policies that led up to the war and then were carried on during the war.

LAURENCE REES: So why did the Second World War happen?

RICHARD OVERY: There is no simple answer to the question why the Second World War happened. There are short term explanations, there are long term explanations, but I think that the explanation most people reach; that without Hitler there would never have been a war is, I think, a vast over-simplification. The war happened principally because of the consequences of the First World War that distorted the international order. It created all kinds of problems for the international economy and basically marked the point where all those areas of the world that Europe had tried to dominate for the previous century were waking up and saying, what is Europe doing to us?

This created a whole series of different dis-equilibriums. I mean, you could find them in Asia, you could find them in Africa and the Middle East and it also meant that the United States, which was a relatively new power, had to think about where it fitted and what it was going to do. All of this fed into a whole series of crises in the 1920s and the 1930s and Hitler, it seems to me, is part of that pattern but he's not the only part of that pattern. The problems of Italian imperialism in the Mediterranean and Africa, the problems with Japanese imperialism and the ambitions of the Soviet Union to - at some point - come out from behind their communist rampart and try and encourage the birth of communism elsewhere, all of these are very destabilising elements.

I think we need to put the question the other way round really. It's clear that Hitler wants to overturn Versailles, it's not very clear what he's going to do then because the free hand in the

East just doesn't exist because the Soviet Union's there. The big question we need to ask is why do Britain and France declare war? That is what makes the Second World War, not Hitler's invasion of Poland which he might have got away with, settled with Stalin, and then some different war might have emerged in the 1940's.

The important thing, it seems to me, is identifying why Britain and France go to war. And I think there are a complex set of answers there. I think partly the answer is genuinely that in Britain and France, and in Britain in particular, both the elite, but also quite a large part of the population, saw themselves as having some kind of responsibility. Not only the responsibilities as the sort of 'masters of empire' but responsibility for maintaining the stability of the world order and a world order which, despite their imperialism, represented Western values. Hitler was identified, I think, quite early on, as the principal challenge to that view, and throughout the 1930s he was demonised more and more until by 1939 the British eventually had come to realise that, of all the different threats they confronted, those from Hitler and National Socialism were the most profound and violent. By the late 1930s they'd made their mind up that saving civilisation as well as saving their empires was, of course, what they needed to do and they chose Poland as the site.

Hitler didn't choose Poland as the site and he didn't want to fight the Western powers in September 1939. He wanted to fight them, if he had to fight them at all, later on. But the British and French chose that as their site, and nobody else did. The Soviet Union didn't get involved and America didn't get involved. But the choice that Britain and France made turned this into a global war. People often say it was a European war, and then later a global war, but of course it is a global war. The French Empire, New Zealand, Australia, South Africa, Canada and India- it's a global war. It's fought in every ocean. By the time Mussolini joins later on it's already been a war which had an impact world-wide.

I think Britain and France had no idea where it was going to go. They took the risk because they felt that the scales of war and peace were so great that they had to make a stand at some point. But what the consequences were going to be, of course, they were uncertain. The consequences were disastrous. What they did was to unfold a world crisis that in the end sucked everybody in and created this thing we now call the Second World War. So, yes, Hitler invades Poland and this is clearly the cause of war as far as Britain and France are concerned, but explaining it simply in these terms seems to me to be entirely misleading and is to avoid all the bigger questions which the crises of the 1920s and the 1930s open up.

LAURENCE REES: So one can play around with 'what ifs' as much as one likes, but simply put - there was always going to be war because Hitler wanted to expand?

ANITA PRAŽMOWSKA: Yes, I think that this is really what the British and French governments find ultimately unacceptable, it is the extent of German ambitions and the anxiety about the fact that movement Eastwards ultimately consolidates economically, as well as militarily, political control over areas which would have effectively meant that half of Europe would have been dominated by Germany. This was considered dangerous and unacceptable.

LAURENCE REES: So there was nothing that could have been done to stop all this without war. It was going to happen because Hitler wanted it?

ANITA PRAŽMOWSKA: They didn't think so to start with, but ultimately that's the direction in which it went. You have an amazing feeling when you read the cabinet papers and

when you look at the Committee for Foreign Affairs with the Staff's submissions, that sinking feeling: good God what shall we do? They really don't know. They don't know what to do. And that picture of not knowing what to do is very much the picture in France too. The age of most of the politicians and military leaders is such that they were too old to have fought in the First World War, so having witnessed the death of their sons, nephews and the younger men they cannot do so again. The whole problem is that they don't formulate alternative policies and they actually are very much trailing behind the initiative which is in Germany's hands.

LAURENCE REES: So given this extraordinary expenditure on armaments, it was clear that Hitler, almost from his earliest days in power, intended war?

ADAM TOOZE: I don't think there's any real question about that. Hitler's entire world view is dominated by the belief that history is struggle, racial struggle. If Karl Marx said all history is the history of class struggle, and then for Hitler it's fundamentally a question of, well, Darwin's almost too optimistic because Hitler doesn't really know how this struggle is going to end. To understand Hitler you have to understand that he's not sure, the way that liberals are, that things are going to turn out well. So he is seized by the idea that peace is just another form of struggle. There are various forms of economic war being waged against Germany in his view and so, yes, it's just simply a question of when fighting will break out and on what terms, but not a question of whether war is part of his equation.

War is essential to the health of the German nation and Germany needs to break out of the encirclement that it's in. So the idea that the Nazis could have somehow just extended the prosperity of the 1930s into some sort of peaceful VW future of modernity and satisfaction is just not on the cards for Hitler's regime. It's a fundamental misunderstanding that many people succumb to, but it's really not what's on Hitler's mind at all.

LAURENCE REES: So you would answer the question 'why did the war happen?' with the answer that 'Hitler always intended the war to happen'?

ADAM TOOZE: Yes, absolutely. In my view even in 1939 he's steering towards the outbreak of an armed conflict in quite an open eyed way. In fact, he's obviously slightly disappointed that they didn't come to blows over Czechoslovakia on the 1st of October 1938 and he regrets in retrospect that he didn't take the risk of actually using armed force without the co-operation of the British and the French.