

Discuss the assertion that Hitler bore sole responsibility for the outbreak of war in Europe in 1939

Between the years of 1919 and 1939 the situation in Europe changed dramatically from the peace treaty at the end of the First World War to the outbreak of war in Europe in September 1939. The change escalated with the rise of the Nazi party in Germany and its leader Adolf Hitler. This essay will examine whether Hitler was solely to blame for the outbreak of war in Europe. The essay will examine each situation that arose between Hitler's rise to power and the outbreak of war, analyzing it and giving evidence for the argument that Hitler bore sole responsibility and the evidence against that view.

Two key issues, which Hitler presented in his book 'Mein Kampf' (My Struggle), were those of 'Lebensraum' (Living Space) and his desire for a European war. Hitler made no secret of his views in his book, which he wrote while in jail in the 1920's. It could be argued that with this publication Hitler made his views and plans perfectly clear. If this is so it just highlights the stupidity of the allies' policy of appeasement as Hitler had already declared that wanted war. The issue of Lebensraum could be argued against with the view that Hitler only wanted to re-establish German rule over German speaking areas which had been taken from them at the treaty of Versailles.

It could be argued that Hitler broke key treaties such as the Treaty of Versailles and the Treaty of Locarno in a number of ways. He rearmed Germany to the point where his neighbours, particularly France, felt threatened. The counter argument for this point is that Germany had the smallest army in Europe as she had been forced to disarm but the other European powers had never disarmed after the First World War. Also Great Britain had encouraged Hitler to rearm with the Anglo-German naval agreement. Hitler was not the first German leader to rearm the country but he was the first to announce publicly that he was doing so. Other German leaders had continued to develop weapons in Russia after the signing of the Rapallo Treaty between Russia and Germany.

Another treaty constraint, which Hitler broke, was that of reparations imposed in 1919 in the Treaty of Versailles. Germany was ordered to pay the cost of war damage by the allied leaders after the First World War. Hitler refused to pay these reparations claiming that the Treaty of Versailles was wrong. It could be argued that the reparations were too harsh on Germany and it was unfair to expect her to pay for a war, which many countries had been involved in. Reparations had been stopped for a period of a year in 1931 by the American president Hoover in the Hoover Moratorium. This was the last time any reparations were ever paid by Germany, as Hitler did not start paying again at the end of the moratorium.

Hitler withdrew from the League of Nations in 1933 shortly after he had come to power. This move was seen by some as an act of defiance because the League was setup by the Treaty of Versailles. What is more likely is that Hitler saw the League as another way the allies could try to control Germany. In Hitler's defense he had every right to leave the League, as Germany's entry was not compulsory. Some countries had already left the League, Japan for example, after the Manchuria incident.

In 1936 Hitler became involved in the Spanish civil war helping the fascists in their attempt to gain power by defeating the republicans. Hitler used the Spanish civil war as a testing ground for his idea of blitzkrieg (lightning attack). He also tested his very strong air force the Luftwaffe using them to bomb the republican city of Guernica. It could be argued that Hitler had every right to become involved in the war as the Russians under the control of Stalin were providing the Republicans with weapons. Also Hitler could argue that Great Britain and France had become involved in the Russian civil war on the side of the Whites so they could not criticize him for his involvement.

The next step towards war in Europe was the German re-militarization of the Rhineland. This was in direct defiance of the Treaty of Versailles which stated that the 'Rhineland' (an area of land which was decreed to be the whole left bank of the River Rhine and a 50km wide strip on the right bank) would have no military stationed in it. Hitler defied this directive on the 7th March 1936 when he ordered his troops into the Rhineland. The British and French could have stopped the re-occupation but they were too disorganized, also the British public were sympathetic of the Germans position. They felt that the Germans were only reclaiming land, which was theirs. Lord Lothian said at the time "After all they're only going into their own back garden." Some historians believe that this was their key point in the rise of Germany as a strong military nation. A.J.P Taylor describes the event as "a staggering example of Hitler's strong nerve." What he is saying is that the odds were stacked against Hitler as failure to re-occupy the Rhineland could have been the end of his political career as Germany was not strong enough to go to war.

Hitler again broke the terms of the Versailles peace treaty when he unified Germany and Austria in 1938. Hitler claimed he wanted to unify all the German speakers in Europe. Britain and France did little to stop Hitler following their policy of appeasement, which meant that they would concede to Hitler in the hope that he would stop his advance in Europe.

In March 1938 Hitler went one step closer to war in Europe when he incorporated the Sudetenland area of Czechoslovakia into the Reich. Again Hitler used the pretext that he wanted to unify all German speakers in one country. This was quite a valid excuse as around

80% of the inhabitants of the Sudetenland were German speakers. The incorporation did have its advantages for Hitler. He gained all of the Czechoslovakia's defenses and the Skoda arms factory. Britain and France again refused to do anything following their policy of appeasement. It could be argued that Hitler did not do anything wrong as he was only uniting German speakers and he was given the Sudetenland by the allies at the Munich Conference.

Hitler's next move was to change the situation in Europe dramatically. He ordered the invasion of the rest of Czechoslovakia in March 1939. Up until this point Hitler had only been concerned about German speaking areas of Europe. This invasion showed Hitler's true aims and his methods of execution. This situation was created by Hitler but the allies policy of appeasement which was buying them time was encouraging Hitler's advance. The allies saw this as an act of aggression and realized that their policy of appeasement was not working. They pledged to stop Hitler's next advance. This though did not help Czechoslovakia, which remained under German control.

The final act on the road to war was the signing of the Nazi-Soviet Pact in August 1939. This pact was completely unexpected as the Nazis and Soviets were bitter enemies. The pact was mutually beneficial as both sides benefited from its terms. One of the key points in the pact was the secret term relating to Poland. Both sides discussed how Poland should be divided when the inevitable invasion occurred. They agreed that land to the west of Lithuania was to be German and land to the east was to be Russian. In signing this pact Stalin was condoning the German expansion in Europe. The Russians and Germans had sealed the Polish fate. In Hitler's defense Poland had been made up of a large amount of German territory by the leaders at Versailles. Hitler could have claimed that by planning an invasion of Poland he was just planning to unite the German speakers in Poland back with the rest of Germany.

The allies declared war after the German invasion of Poland in September 1939. In conclusion it could be argued that Hitler was completely to blame for the outbreak of war in Europe in 1939 but we believe that there are a number of key issues which also contributed to the outbreak of war. We also believe that the responsibility should be shared by a number of different parties. The allies should be held partly responsible because of their policy of appeasement, which encouraged Hitler's advance. It could be argued that if the allies had stopped Hitler's re-militarization of the Rhineland war may never have happened. The Soviets should also take some responsibility because of their encouragement of Hitler with the Nazi-Soviet Pact. Overall, although Hitler did not bear sole responsibility, he has to take a major part of the blame. It was largely because of his aggression and desires that war broke out in Europe in 1939.