Hitler and the Second World War
Causes and consequences

How significant was Hitler in causing the Second World War and all that followed?

Role of the individual

Before you read this
Think through or discuss: at what point do you think a Second World War became inevitable? If you date it from the Treaty of Versailles, then was Hitler really necessary?

Since the writings of Karl Marx and the growth of socioeconomic studies, many professional historians have relegated the individual as a prime causative factor in history to a position of relative unimportance, although, paradoxically, biography writing has flourished. However, there are compelling arguments for emphasising Hitler’s personal contribution to the causes and consequences of the Second World War. Hitler exploited the situation in Germany in the 1930s, which had been created out of medium- and long-term political, social and economic factors, such as the following:

- the Versailles Diktat, which damaged Germany’s national pride
- the Great Depression, without which the Nazis probably would not have got into power
- the meagre opposition, both domestic and international, which allowed Hitler to destroy Weimar democracy from within and to grasp the initiative abroad

Nevertheless, the fact remains that Hitler played a ruthless tactical hand with the cards which circumstances dealt him.

Hitler’s role in causing the Second World War

Despite the circumstances of 1930s Germany, Hitler’s strategic aims and actions make him the main factor responsible for starting the war, for the following reasons:

- He was a restless expansionist and nationalist who wanted to overthrow the Versailles settlement and re-arm as fast as possible.
- As a racist, he wanted to get all Germans within one Reich (again, by force, if possible) and to deal with the Jewish ‘question’.
- He also wanted a showdown with Slav and Communist Russia in order to carve out Lebensraum in Russian territory.

The global situation

Hitler’s aggressive violations of the Treaty of Versailles show how fundamental he was to the outbreak of the Second World War; certainly the global situation precluded a general war being started by anyone else. Mussolini knew that Italy was too weak to start a European war on its own. Japan was certainly expansionist, but it is doubtful whether it would have risked attacking British and French colonies in the Pacific if Britain and France had not been distracted by Hitler. The USA was too isolationist and preoccupied with the Depression and the New Deal to think in terms of expansion.

Stalin realised that the USSR was still too weak to launch a war, especially after the officer corps of the Red Army was decimated in the 1937–38 purges. Moreover, Stalin was dubious about the effectiveness of collective security; after the 1938–39 Soviet-Japanese conflicts on the Soviet-Manchurian border, he was anxious to avoid a war on two fronts, which is why he signed the Nazi–Soviet Non-Aggression Pact in 1939.

As victors in the First World War and dictators of the peace and treaty terms, Britain and France were satisfied powers, not seeking any territorial revision to the 1919 settlement. After the exhaustion of the First World War, they did not want another global struggle.

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socioeconomic studies: historical analyses that emphasise the importance of social and economic factors, such as class, trade patterns or new methods of production.

Versailles Diktat: the Germans were not allowed to negotiate the terms of the 1919 Treaty of Versailles, which they therefore regarded as an unjust, dictated peace (Diktat).

Lebensraum: Nazi concept of ‘living space’ in eastern Europe.

collective security: belief in maintaining international security through the League of Nations.

Was the Second World War an accident?
The historian A. J. P. Taylor believed that the Second World War was an accident. This might be true as far as Britain and France were concerned, but most historians think that Hitler’s attack on the USSR was long premeditated. From 1939 to 1941, Hitler opted for war when no one else did. Britain was still concerned enough about the balance of power to declare war on Germany for invading Poland in 1939, but the subsequent Phoney War suggests that Britain had no plans for waging war with any vigour. As late as the summer of 1940, the foreign secretary, Lord Halifax, wanted the Cabinet to discuss peace-terms with Germany and was only stopped by Churchill himself.

The Second World War became global because of the German attack on the USSR in June 1941 – Operation Barbarossa – and because Hitler declared war on the USA. Prior to that, the USA had limited itself to providing economic aid for Britain and cooperation in the anti-submarine war in the Atlantic.

Key points

- Socioeconomic studies tend to downplay the importance of the individual in history.
- However, Hitler and the Second World War demonstrate the supreme importance of certain individuals in the making of history.
- Despite the broader political, social and economic factors, without Hitler there would have been no war in Europe, possibly not even in the world.
- Hitler and the Second World War helped create the late twentieth-century and early twenty-first century world.

The centrality of Hitler
Would there have been a war without Hitler? Definitely not in Europe and probably not in the Pacific. Hitler relished war: to him, war was the proving ground of a nation’s Herrenvolk credentials, but not all Germans shared this view by any means. Certainly they wanted an end to the Treaty of Versailles but Hitler’s was not the only way to achieve it. Gustav Stresemann had already made considerable inroads into the treaty’s provisions by diplomacy and negotiation — and he had no plans to attack the USSR. Some of Hitler’s generals were so worried by their leader’s aggression and possibility of war with Britain and France that in 1938–39 they planned a coup and were in secret contact with Britain.

The consequences of Hitler’s aggression
Hitler’s aggressive drive for war had immense consequences for the rest of the world.

Germany
Hitler provoked a global alliance against Germany, thereby ensuring Germany’s defeat. This alliance of capitalist and Communist powers was unnatural, held together only by sheer expediency in the fight against Hitler. After the war, it disintegrated, leading to the long, drawn-out Cold War.

The USA and the USSR
Hitler’s aggression compelled the USSR and the USA to renounce their isolationism and prepare to fight. As a consequence of this, they realised the potential military and industrial strengths. They might have become superpowers in the long term.

Chronology

| October 1933 | Hitler withdraws from the League Disarmament Conference in Geneva and from the League of Nations. |
| March 1935 | Hitler announces a policy of rearmament in violation of the terms of the Treaty of Versailles. |
| March 1936 | Hitler remilitarises the Rhineland. |
| March 1938 | Anschluss: Hitler unites Austria with Germany. |
| September 1938 | Sudetenland crisis and the Munich conference. |
| March 1939 | Hitler invades Czechoslovakia and seizes Memel. |
| August 1939 | Nazi-Soviet Pact. |
| September 1939 | Hitler invades Poland. |
Important alliances

NATO

SEATO
South East Asia Treaty Organization. US-led anti-Soviet alliance covering the Pacific region; formed 1954.

Baghdad Pact
Later known as CENTO — Central Treaty Organization. British-led alliance of anti-Soviet Middle Eastern states; created 1955.

EEC
European Economic Community (now the European Union). Trading union created 1957.

Marshall Aid: US aid package offered to Europe and the USSR after the war. Rejected by Stalin and the east European states, it helped to tie western Europe closely to the USA.

nuclear capability: Britain gave its nuclear know-how to the USA in 1941 but was excluded by the 1946 US McMahon Act from continued participation in nuclear research and development with the USA. Britain built its own atomic bomb, testing it successfully in 1952.

Israel and Palestine
Hitler's treatment of the Jews and Slavs during the war tainted European history with the evil of genocide and gave an added impetus to Zionism. After the war, many Jews were intent upon emigrating to Palestine, to found a country there of their own, free from persecution. The partition of Palestine in 1948, however, brought the Jews into conflict with the Palestinians and the Arabs and led to the modern Middle East conflict. Though the problem goes back to the 1917 Balfour Declaration, Hitler's war and the Final Solution (Holocaust) undoubtedly led indirectly (and ironically) to the foundation of the state of Israel.

Conclusion
Conventionally historians divide into two camps: determinists, who believe that large sociopolitical forces determine the shape of events, and those who see history as decided by individuals operating their own free will. In the case of Hitler, the course of twentieth-century history would have been very different without him. Sociopolitico-economic
forces may have created opportunities but it was still up to him to exploit them and shape them for his purposes. Determinists might say that even here Hitler was the victim of his own compulsive neuroses. It is certain that he had an irrational hatred of the Jews and the Slavs, and he even wrote off the Americans as degenerates. Declaring war on both the USSR and the USA defies all rationality — Germany could not hope to win — though there is nothing to say that free will necessarily operates rationally. However, determinism usually deals with external, rather than internal, psychological factors. Hitler responded tactically to situations, backing down over the attempted Anschluss with Austria in 1934, and signing the Non-Aggression Pact with the Soviet Union in 1939, but he did not deviate from his aim: the Anschluss was finally achieved in 1938 and the USSR invaded 3 years later.

In the end, we are forced to conclude that Hitler was a major factor in helping to shape the late twentieth- and early twenty-first century world. He did not just drift helplessly on the sea of deeper forces; he was one of those forces — he made the waves.

**Questions**

- If Hitler was not the main cause of the Second World War, who or what was?
- Is this article saying that the outbreak of the war was inevitable as soon as Hitler came to power? How strong is the evidence for that?
- How useful is it to blame Hitler for the consequences of the Second World War?

**Further study**


