

Outbreak of War in Europe

Amanda Soh

“The outbreak of World War II in Europe was a result of Hitler’s aggression.”
How far do you agree with this statement? Explain your answer.

The given assertion makes the claim that Hitler’s aggressive and unrelenting foreign policy was what forced all of Europe’s major powers into a continental war. The statement is largely supported by the reason that Hitler’s goals and the actions taken for them to be executed made it such that Europe’s major powers would have to react with the declaration of war. However, this reason is largely impartial because although Hitler’s aggressive goals and actions directly triggered the war, it was the failure of the League of Nations, which resulted in the hegemons resorting to accommodating Hitler’s demands, and thus the failure of collective security, that enabled him to enact his aggressive foreign policy in the first place. As such, I believe that Hitler’s aggression, or rather his expansionist policy, should be accorded an equal amount of blame as the prevailing circumstances.

The assertion that Hitler’s expansionist policy is to bear the brunt of the blame for the outbreak of war in Europe in 1939 is mainly supported by the fact that the [expansionist policy was aggressive in nature](#) and had the potential to trigger decisive action from major European powers that involved the use of force, and was hence hailed as the source of tension leading to the outbreak of war in Europe. Hitler mentioned and argued in his autobiography *Mein Kampf* that Germany needed *Lebensraum*, and that Germany must “turn our gaze toward the land in the East”. *Lebensraum*, or living space, he argued,

was necessary for Germany to achieve Autarky and also to fulfil his goal of creating and maintaining a superior human race. The abolition of the Treaty of Versailles was also one of Hitler's aims. These goals were also coined as Hitler's expansionist policy. However, achieving the goals and enacting the expansionist policy could only be obtained through invasion and conquest. This shows that the intent of Hitler's foreign policy was to make an active push to conquer land, specifically land in the East, where Poland was. Such intent to seize land makes it abundantly clear that Anschluss, the annexation of Sudetenland, the invasion of Czechoslovakia and the invasion of Poland, all major events that pushed major European powers into war, happened not purely because of Hitler's opportunism but instead were all intended in one way or another as a part of acquiring living space. Given the aforementioned, it is clear that Hitler's foreign policy and plans, which were documented in the Hossbach Memorandum, were actualised and action was in fact taken to seize foreign land. As the events progressed to the invasion of Poland, the trigger point of war in Europe, it is obvious that Hitler completely disregarded the Treaty of Versailles, stretching the limits, going to the point of disregarding the sovereignty of other nations. Since Germany made an active push to acquire land and followed through the foreign policy despite understanding the threat of a continental war, as can be seen in the Hossbach Memorandum, where Hitler's foreign policy was apparent, the given assertion argues that Hitler's aggressive foreign policy, which involved the disregard of the Treaty of Versailles, made the outbreak of war inevitable as Germany would have taken action, seizing land, that would result in a war once the hegemony, Britain and France, could not accommodate the shift in the balance of power.

However, though Germany's expansionist policy that was aggressive in nature had a role to play in triggering the European powers to take action in the form of force, it should be worth noting that Hitler had limited aims in the initial phase. The opportunist in him capitalised on the perceived reluctance of Allied powers in taking military response to not only redress the grievances of the Treaty of Versailles, but also to make further territorial demands. This reluctance proved costly as it emboldened Hitler's foreign policy beyond accommodation.

The [failure of the League of Nations](#), which caused hegemons to adopt the accommodation approach, was what emboldened Hitler to take aggressive action to enact his foreign policy that would threaten war. The failure of the League of Nations can largely be seen in 2 main events, that being their non-interference in the Italian invasion of Abyssinia and the Japanese invasion of Manchuria. These actions were directly against the goals of the League of Nations, and they were done with the intention of gaining land for their nation's own interests, yet the League failed to stop it. This, coupled with the fact that Japan and Italy left the League of Nations with ease after their respective invasions showed Hitler that the League was weak and had no actual power. This gave Hitler the perception that major world powers would not interfere when the sovereignty of other nations were threatened, and it made him more confident that collective security would not pose as a threat to his aggressive foreign policy. As such, Hitler took aggressive actions such as taking over Sudetenland and invading Czechoslovakia, as he believed that his actions would not be met with the declaration of war by the major powers. It was the failure of the League of nations that led to him shifting from his initial cautious approach to a more bold and aggressive approach. Additionally, given the weaknesses of the League of Nations, instead of relying on the League to act, the hegemony adopted the [policy of accommodation](#), or in other words appeasement, as the culmination of diplomatic overtures, to satisfy Hitler and prevent the outbreak of another major war. A prominent example in this case would be the Munich agreement. Hitler declared that he would go to war for the Sudetenland if necessary. The hegemons, Britain and France, as well as the Soviet Union, had also promised to support Czechoslovakia. In the aforementioned situation, it seemed that war was imminent. As such, to defuse the threat of war, Chamberlain met with Hitler and gave in to his demands to take over the Sudetenland. This essentially took away and completely disregarded the sovereignty of the nation, and emboldened Hitler to continue in his steps to abolish the Treaty of Versailles and pursue his goal of German expansion. From the example, it is clear that the hegemons did not take effective measures to keep Hitler in check while he took such aggressive actions to seize land, allowing him to be more ambitious and daring.

Furthermore, accommodative responses prior to the Munich agreement, such as the lack of a military response over Germany's remilitarisation of Rhineland showed Hitler the Allied Powers' lack of appetite for confrontation over justified grievances arising from the Treaty of Versailles. This emboldened Hitler to embark on further territorial demands later on. Therefore, it was the failure of the League of Nations that caused hegemons like Britain to revert to Great Power negotiations instead of through an international mediation body and adopting the appeasement policy, and thus the [failure of collective security](#), which ultimately emboldened Hitler to take more daring and aggressive steps to achieve his goal of acquiring living space and German expansion.

Weighing the aforementioned factors that either paved the way for conflict or directly triggered war in Europe, it is safe to conclude that it was with the favourable circumstances at that point of time that Hitler was able to enact his foreign policy. This is because at the start of Hitler's reign, he was taking a more cautious approach, which could be seen the most clearly in his decision to back down when Italy threatened to attack if Hitler moved troops to Austria and his decision to order his troops to back down if the French retaliated upon seeing him remilitarise the Rhineland. This shows that although Hitler had aggressive goals in mind, if met by the realistic threat of an attack by a stronger nation, Hitler would still adopt a more cautious approach, and would not take aggressive decisions, much less actions that could trigger a continental war, which he actively avoided. This makes it very clear that although Hitler's aggressive foreign policy triggered the outbreak of war, his foreign policy was only adopted and put into action because the hegemons accommodated his demands and Germany's grievances, in relation to the Treaty of Versailles, and Hitler felt that the allies no longer posed a realistic threat to Germany. Hence, the hegemons brought war onto themselves, given their poor handling of the situation, reverting to Great Power negotiations rather than through the League of Nations given its weakness, in turn emboldening Hitler to actualise his goals and to take aggressive action that would threaten and directly trigger war. Furthermore, the absence of an active US and USSR in Europe's power brokering meant that real options were limited, short of full on confrontation or allowing Germany to make unlimited demands,

both of which were unacceptable by the hegemons of the day.

In conclusion, I believe that while Hitler's aggressive goals and actions, which includes the violation and disregard of the Treaty of Versailles, created the environment for tension in Europe, antagonising the security landscape and destabilising the world order, it was the failure of the League of Nations, which resulted in hegemons resorting to accommodating Hitler's demands that provided Hitler the favourable and optimal circumstances he needed, and as a result enabled the outbreak of war in Europe. The favourable circumstances out of Hitler's control played an equally important role, enabling Hitler to go as far as he did, to the point whereby Britain and France were no longer able to accommodate to Hitler's demands and actions, paving the way for war and hence, equal share of blame should be accorded to the favourable circumstances and Hitler's aggressive expansionist policy.