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# MODERN HISTORY

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**HSC**

RON RINGER

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## onflict in Europe



### 1935–1945

The war that engulfed Europe from September 1939 to May 1945 had its immediate origins in the foreign policy pursued by Hitler's Nazi régime. Indeed, the expansionist aims of Germany form one of the continuous threads linking the era of Otto von Bismarck, Wilhelm II and the Third Reich of Adolf Hitler. These themes were carefully explored during the 1960s and 1970s by the German historians Fritz Fischer and Emmanuel Geiss.

In 1871 the Chancellor of Prussia, Otto von Bismarck, removed the last obstacle to the German unification by defeating France in the Franco-Prussian war. From 1890 Emperor Wilhelm II tried to gain a 'place in the sun' for Germany through an ambitious policy of colonial acquisition in Africa and the South Pacific. Expansionism was also evident in the growing influence of the Pan-German movement that desired the political and geographical unity of Germans in a greater Germany. It was intended the new Germany would dominate Europe by its size, economic capacity and military power.

During World War I, expansionist plans could be found in the aims of the German High Command which have been well-documented by historians, among them Paul Kennedy. After the war, territorial losses imposed by the Treaty of Versailles brought widespread demands for a revision of the Treaty, and renewed calls for the restoration of German power. In this period most political parties adopted the 'revisionist' program, condemned by Hitler as traitorous. Once in power, Hitler intended not only to overturn the Treaty, but also to expand at the expense of neighbouring countries. If necessary this policy would be achieved by force.

At first glance, the foreign policy goals pursued by Chancellor Gustav Stresemann before 1929 appear remarkably similar to those of Adolf Hitler: rearmament, regaining the Rhineland, restoring the eastern frontiers and forming a political union with Austria. The difference between the two leaders was that Hitler pursued these goals more ruthlessly and from a position of greater strength.

With the coming of war, the speed of the initial German victories was truly astounding. Yet the advantage gained by Hitler and his generals was squandered during the Russian campaign. Perhaps more than any other single factor, it was the refusal of Hitler to accept tactical withdrawals in the face of Soviet counter-attacks that lost Germany its earlier advantage. Left to his Generals, the attack on Russia may well have succeeded.

## Part IV

### International Studies in Peace and Conflict

#### Option B

## What is dictatorship?

Dictatorship is a form of government in which one person or a small group has absolute power over the state. Dictators usually resort to force or fraud to gain political power, which they maintain through intimidation, terror and the withdrawal of basic civil rights. Dictators may also use propaganda in order to maintain the support of the masses. Nazi Germany under Adolf Hitler was one example of a modern totalitarian dictatorship.

Important elements associated with Fascist dictatorship include:

- the association of the state with a single party
- the association of the party with its charismatic leader
- the use of an official ideology to justify and maintain the régime
- the use of terror and propaganda to reduce opposition
- the use of modern science and technology to control the economy and individual behaviour.

## Germany under Hitler

Adolf Hitler (1889–1945) stood against Hindenburg in the presidential election of 1932 and achieved 36.8 per cent of the votes on the second ballot. Despite the decline in Nazi Party's share of the votes in November 1932, Hitler insisted that the Chancellorship was the only position he would accept, and this only by legal and constitutional means, rather than through a revolution. In January 1933 he finally achieved what he had been waiting for when Hindenburg invited him to be the German Chancellor.

Once in power, Hitler set about establishing an absolute dictatorship. Yet he was also a shrewd politician, aware of the weaknesses of his own position; he understood more quickly than anyone else how a situation could be turned to his own advantage. Within weeks Hitler had secured President Hindenburg's approval for new elections on the grounds that it would deliver him a majority in the Reichstag.

On the night of 27 February 1933, the Reichstag mysteriously burned down, providing the excuse he needed to enact decrees overriding people's freedom. When Hindenburg died on 2 August 1934, Hitler merged the office of Chancellor and President.

Economic recovery and a drop in the number of unemployed due to world recovery and work schemes made the régime more acceptable, endearing Hitler to many Germans who began to see him as the country's saviour.

## Italy under Mussolini

Benito Mussolini became the youngest Prime Minister in Italian history on 31 October 1922. He also became the first of Europe's Fascist dictators in the twentieth century. Anxious to demonstrate that he was not merely the leader of Fascism but also the head of a united Italy, Mussolini presented to the king a list of ministries, although the majority were not members of his party. He made it clear that he intended to govern authoritatively and obtained full dictatorial powers for a year. During that time he pushed through a law that enabled the Fascists to secure a majority in the chamber. The elections in 1924, though fraudulent, secured his personal power.

The Italian people welcomed Mussolini's brand of authority. Tired of strikes and riots, they wanted a strong leader who would bring stability to the nation and restore economic progress. Mussolini seemed to them the one man capable of bringing order out of chaos. In due course, the conditions of the workers began to improve, and ambitious programs of public works started.

Mussolini was regarded as a genius by public figures across Europe and in the United States. His achievements were regarded with awe for he had united his divided country and carried out much-needed social reforms and public works without losing the support of the industrialists and landowners. Mussolini had even succeeded in coming to terms with the Church and the papacy.

## Significance of dictatorships

The appeal of dictators such as Hitler and Mussolini was undeniable. For the most part their peacetime economic policies were beneficial in that they sought to create employment and restore prosperity. Many citizens gained from such policies, which cannot be lightly dismissed. In the early years of Fascist rule, both Germany and Italy were considered to be success stories.

The real issue, however, was the true nature of dictatorship, and this was only revealed through the

passage of time. In 1933 few people in Germany outside the inner circles of the Nazi Party could have imagined that Hitler's anti-Semitism would lead to the Holocaust, or that his desire to avenge German losses at Versailles would plunge Europe into another war.

Thus, the foreign policies of Hitler and Mussolini were opportunistic, aggressive and dangerous, thereby helping to exacerbate tensions between the older established European powers as well as the newly independent states created at Versailles in 1919.

## The League of Nations and the end of collective security

*Failure of Collective Security — Italy Invades Abyssinia — Spanish Civil War — Significance of Events*

### Failure of collective security

The purpose of the League of Nations, as a body, was to find ways to prevent disputes from leading to war. The member states — both small states and major powers — were supposed to find security through justice.

Woodrow Wilson's original intention was that the League would monitor and make periodic adjustments to the various treaties signed during 1919 and 1920. Instead, it was used to enforce the provisions upon Germany, while German politicians worked to change what they regarded as oppressive terms.

The intentions of Woodrow Wilson and the Allied victors in framing the charter of the League during the Versailles Conference in 1919 were laudable, but within ten years of its founding collective security had fallen by the wayside.

### Why the League of Nations failed

The failure of the League was caused by a number of factors.

#### ► Refusal to admit Germany

The defeated Germany was refused admission until the Treaty of Locarno in 1926. In the meantime, it was judged by the victors to have been the cause of war and therefore denied entry into the post-war family of nations.

#### ► Fear of Communist Russia

The Bolshevik seizure of power in October 1917 and the consolidation of the Soviet state by 1921 put paid to any hope that Russia would be welcome in the League of Nations. The existence of a Communist state in Russia substantially altered the balance of power, and encouraged Allied attempts to isolate the regime. Like Germany, Soviet Russia became an international outcast for the next decade.

#### ► Poor support for new nation states

The League provided little support to the newly independent countries of Eastern Europe, many of

which fell victim to conservative groups (such as landowners and the Roman Catholic Church) which asserted control over government.

#### ► Failure to address ethnic rivalries

The new nations that were established after the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian empire in 1918 were subject to some intense ethnic rivalry, provoking violence and oppression. Ethnic Germans in Poland and Czechoslovakia felt that they had been denied national self-determination. Poland included one million Germans, six million White Russians and three million Jews. The League could offer little to these minorities.

#### ► Failure to extend disarmament

The League's plan for disarming all nations was revealed as a sham and a one-sided affair. Signatories to the League Covenant had agreed upon disarmament, but in practice, Germany was the only nation to be disarmed and this was against its will. Britain and the United States made some concessions towards disarmament. The German General Staff made secret preparations for rearmament and training. The Treaty of Rapallo, concluded with Russia in 1924, allowed German pilots to train with Soviet forces.

#### ► Failure of the US to join the League

US President Wilson was disillusioned even before his departure from the Versailles Conference, frustrated with the atmosphere of implacable hostility towards Germany, and still clinging to the belief that the League was the solution to all international problems.

Branded an idealist and a wishful thinker by detractors, his vision for a new world order found little support either at home or abroad. Congressional opposition within the USA to both the League and the Treaty of Versailles was intense. Despite an extensive public speaking tour in the United States, Wilson was out of step with his compatriots and failed to rally support. He suffered a collapse in health and completed his term of office as a broken man. He died in 1924. The Senate refused to ratify the Treaty and the US withdrew from its European commitment.