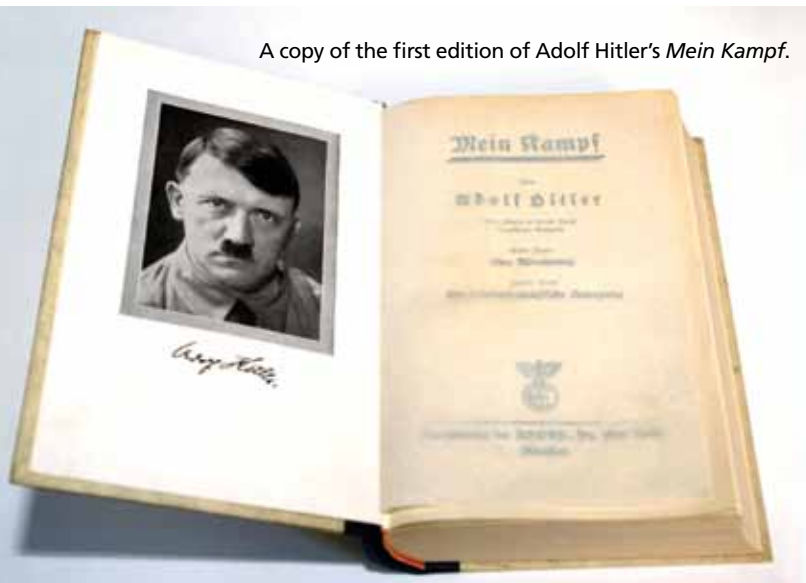


Nazi aggression

planned or improvised?

Hendrik Karsten Hogrefe

A copy of the first edition of Adolf Hitler's *Mein Kampf*.



Historians have tried for decades to understand how far the Second World War was planned by Hitler. Much has been written and debated as to whether or not Hitler's ideas evolved into an overall blueprint, which he intended to follow. Hendrik Hogrefe considers the extent to which *Mein Kampf* and the Hossbach Memorandum have been used by historians as evidence of a Hitler blueprint, and how valuable these sources may be in studying German foreign policy in this period.

Since the 1960's, there have been two main schools of thought on this subject. According to the 'fanatic' view, expressed by historians like Hugh Trevor-Roper, Hitler aimed consistently at expansion and war. His Lebensraum policy has been emphasised since the days of his imprisonment, and naturally struggle and war were seen to be vital to its success. Trevor-Roper believes Hitler had a clear vision that involved a master plan for war and he completely controlled the events that culminated in his attack on Poland in 1939. The evidence for this interpretation comes from *Mein Kampf* and, according to Trevor-Roper, the ideas expressed in *Mein Kampf* and the *Zweite Buch* – Hitler's secret book which was never published – are the keys to understanding German foreign policy after 1933. However, some historians suggest that these books only express broad aims that Hitler still held when he became Führer.

The 'opportunist' view has been expressed most controversially by A.J.P. Taylor. He argues that Hitler had no blueprint for aggression. Instead, he was an astute and cynical politician who took advantage of the mistakes and fears of other leaders and his apparent fanaticism was an act. According to this view, Hitler was in the mainstream of traditional German foreign policy, which had been expansionist since the second half of the nineteenth century. Taylor claims this is a development of the arguments of German historian Fritz Fischer who maintains that Germany was expansionist from before 1914 and that there was continuity in German foreign policy aims up to 1939. According to Taylor: "The foreign policy of National Socialism merely restated the German



Hitler accepts the ovation of the Reichstag announcing the 'peaceful' acquisition of Austria. It set the stage to annex the Czechoslovakian Sudetenland, largely inhabited by a German-speaking population. Berlin, March 1938.

National Archives and Records Administration



Problem.”

To an extent these two views have been reconciled. The synthesised and balanced view can be found, among others, in the writings of Alan Bullock who maintains that Hitler had a consistency of aim and that it “never changed from its first definition in *Mein Kampf*.” However, Bullock claims there was never a definite blueprint to achieve this aim. Hitler was an opportunist in his methods, and also in his effort to restore German military power, expand its frontiers and create living space. Bullock also claims that he was an opportunist in his firmness of purpose, strong will and readiness to threaten, bluff, gamble and fight to achieve these aims. According to Bullock, opportunism was Hitler’s weapon in fulfilling his aims. While he may have employed time limits, using what Bullock calls “one at a time tactics,” he never used a timetable.

Mein Kampf is a mixture of autobiography and political philosophy. It contains Hitler’s ideas and beliefs, and he writes about issues concerning the German race and nation, as well as his

ideas for the recovery of Germany as a major power after the humiliation of the Versailles Peace Conference in 1919. D.G. Williamson acknowledges the importance of *Mein Kampf*, emphasising that, while the document does not specifically state future policies, it expresses ideas that have inherent links with his plans for the future. However, it would be illogical to assume that *Mein Kampf* was a precise plan of action for Hitler’s foreign policy once he was in power after 1933. Hitler could not be certain in 1924 that he would ever have the power to implement such policies.

Hitler’s long term aims in foreign policy were to expand Germany’s borders and to gain “Lebensraum,” and this meant eastward expansion. He clearly states this vision in *Mein Kampf* and the intended direction of this expansion was also made abundantly clear: “We put a stop to the eternal movement of the Germanic people to Europe’s South and West and we turn our eyes to the land in the east.” More specifically: “In speaking of new territory in Europe, we can, above

all, have in mind only Russia and its subjugated border states.” This action of gaining Lebensraum was bound to provoke a conflict with Poland and Russia. The dreams of an optimal alliance policy also expressed in *Mein Kampf* strongly suggest that alliances should be forged with England and Italy in order to outplay France.

Mein Kampf’s reliability is unquestionable, although not in terms of what the policy actually consisted of during the period, as it was written a decade before Hitler had the power to turn his dreams into reality. However, as a stimulus for future policy *Mein Kampf* is reliable as it was written by the same man who instigated the policies being studied. Equally important in determining the reliability of the alternative interpretations of the book is the consideration that the original was written in German. Translation into English lays open the risk of altering and misunderstanding the original text in some ways. For example, the translator of the Pimlico edition, Ralph Manheim, states: “There are certain traits of Hitler’s

Hitler announces the Anschluss to 200,000 Austrians in the Heldenplatz, Vienna, 15 March 1938.
Deutsches Bundesarchiv (German Federal Archive), Bild 183-1987-0922-500



style that are peculiarly German and do present a problem in translation". He goes on to state: "No non-German would write such labyrinthine sentences" and that Hitler's writing is cluttered with "useless little words like: wohl, ja, denn, schon, noch, eigentlich,... which he strews about quite needlessly". These words have no English equivalent and are, therefore, lost in translation.

A study of the German version of *Mein Kampf* and the English translation confirms that Manheim's 'useless little words' indeed make a material difference in a German sentence. They can underline and accentuate certain statements, which makes them appear more direct and powerful. Their presence makes a strong difference to Hitler's intended meaning. This is, however, only something that the German reader can perceive. These little words are usually employed orally and do not normally appear in written texts as often as in *Mein Kampf*. The South Germans and Austrians are especially addicted to these 'little words', and they can be found in almost every one of Hitler's sentences. This is one factor that removes some authenticity from the working English source. However, the core language of the English version still provides an insight into Hitler's mind, demonstrating how his talents lay

in oratory rather than in writing. For Hitler there was little hope his writing would win over great support. This is largely due to the fact that *Mein Kampf* is "lengthy, dull, bombastic, repetitious and most of it extremely badly written". Bullock shares the view of numerous historians who are quick to highlight the weaknesses of the writing, its literary inconsistencies and poor construction. Due to Hitler's inarticulation, care must be taken when analysing Hitler's words, ensuring that what he was expressing was what he really felt at that moment in time. Any false interpretation in this area may reduce the value of *Mein Kampf* as a source for the study of Hitler's foreign policy. Nevertheless, the historian J.C. Fest places much value on this source by going so far as to state: "the work contains an exact portrait of its author". He also summarises *Mein Kampf* as "partly an ideological tract, partly a plan of action ... it nevertheless contains much involuntary truth". Fest therefore suggests that in writing *Mein Kampf* Hitler exposes some of his ideas for future foreign policy. In the preface of the 1943 edition Hitler claims that the book was a plan, or as he put it, the "aims" of Nazism. On the other hand, the claims of "opportunistic" historians like A.J.P. Taylor suggest that in the period 1933-1939 Hitler would have

adapted previous ideas as circumstances changed. This therefore suggests that *Mein Kampf* may not be the most valuable source from the point of view of what actually happened in foreign policy during the period. Only when used in conjunction with other sources does one see the real value of *Mein Kampf* in determining where the stimulus for Hitler's foreign policy originated and for seeing how close he came to achieving his aims.

Hitler disliked writing and so there are no vast files of Führer correspondence for historians to study. He made no margin comments on official documents, but preferred to discuss problems unofficially with close friends. It is therefore very difficult to trace the development of his ideas for the future. He distrusted his diplomats and by the late 1930's did not keep a diary and wrote few private letters or memoranda. Consequently, historians are left with *Mein Kampf* and the few existing records of confidential addresses in the 1930s to high-ranking party officials, businessmen and army commanders. Of these, the memorandum written by Colonel Hossbach is of special significance. This controversial document, known as the "Hossbach Memorandum", is a summary of a secret meeting on 5 November 1937

between Adolf Hitler and his military leadership. He clearly wanted those attending to regard his words as a political testimony in the event of his death. It outlines some of Hitler's future hypothetical expansionist policies in Europe in response to differing possible circumstances. The memorandum was found by the US military in the ruins of the Reich Chancellery in Berlin in 1945 and a shortened version was used at the Nuremberg trials. It has, however, limited credibility as the minutes were drawn up five days after the event by Colonel Hossbach, from his memory, and not by his secretary directly after the meeting, as was usually done. In fact, no minutes of this meeting were meant to be taken as Hitler's closest advisers had been pledged to secrecy. Hitler would certainly have ordered them to be destroyed if he had become aware of their existence. Therefore, it could be argued that either his opinions were more freely expressed than if he had been at a normal minuted meeting, or that he was more concerned about being restricted by his generals and foreign minister because of their concerns about the strains of rearmament. In fact, historians are divided over the purpose of the meeting as to whether it was planning for war or a political power struggle. This view considers that the Hossbach meeting was more concerned with internal political wrangling and Hitler was testing out his ideas on his generals.

All this, unfortunately, diminishes the reliability of the Memorandum. Nonetheless, it is often used by historians, who want to prove that Hitler had consciously planned the Second World War, and the consequences that followed. However, structuralist historians would argue that when his suspicion of the lack of a serious response by Britain and France after he took the Rhineland was confirmed in March 1936, then it allowed him to exploit the opportunity, and therefore led to the Hossbach Memorandum and plans for war. Hitler outlined his war plans based on possible scenarios; in other words, it was a hypothetical policy and this therefore raises the question about how reliable the memorandum is as a source. The first part of the document stressed the idea of Lebensraum and Hitler's aim to preserve the racial community and gain space. It also minuted Hitler's wish that Germany becomes an autarky. This was considered as a way of preparing Germany for conflict, by ensuring that it was not economically reliant on states with which it could soon be at war. The memorandum's suggestion

that certain types of autarky were not possible can thus be considered a reason for regarding the war as something of a necessity. The second part of the document detailed three 'contingencies' that Hitler would take if certain situations prevailed in Europe in order to ensure the security of the Reich. Beyond that, Hitler claimed that Britain and France were blocking German foreign policy goals at every turn and some time in the next five years or so, Germany would have to achieve autarky by seizing eastern Europe to prepare for a possible war with the British and the French.

Historians, however, are divided over the two main interpretations of the meeting which are: firstly the Hitler's blueprint for war interpretation mainly supported by Trevor-Roper and Shirer, and secondly the "daydreaming" interpretation which is most controversially expressed by A.J.P. Taylor. The question is therefore asked as to whether this can all be dismissed as hypothetical at one particular moment in time with Hitler just thinking out loud and testing the reactions of his generals. Taylor claims: "Hitler was just ranting and saying nothing new. He wanted to avoid a discussion on steel shortages with Hjalmar Schacht (his economics minister who was worried that rearmament was overheating the German economy), which is what the meeting was supposed to be about. Dates were wrong, Russia was ignored and France did not suffer a civil war." Taylor, therefore, disagrees that the memorandum was the blueprint for war, for which so many were looking. He believes that the Hossbach Memorandum contained no plans for war, arguing that: "The Memorandum tells us what we know already, that Hitler intended Germany to become the dominant power in Europe. It also tells us that he speculated how this could happen. His speculations were mistaken. They bear hardly any relation to the actual outbreak of the war in 1939."

Many writers accepted that Taylor had shed important light on some of the political crises among the Nazi leadership that preceded the Second World War, but his overall thesis provoked widespread controversy. Prominent historians refused to accept that major pieces of evidence, such as Hitler's statements in *Mein Kampf* and in the Hossbach Memorandum, could simply be set aside. Therefore, in contrast with Taylor, Hugh Trevor-Roper argued strongly that Hitler considered himself not merely a practical politician, but a thinker, a practical philosopher of a new age of history. Trevor-Roper and his like-minded colleagues are convinced

Benito Mussolini and Adolf Hitler



that Hitler did have long term objectives presented in the Memorandum which included war, and they believe that Taylor's approach is too narrow. Trevor-Roper argues that *Mein Kampf* is clear proof for Hitler's later plans after 1933-34 and that the Memorandum reiterates the theory of Hitler as a "master planner" as early as 1923-24, when he wrote *Mein Kampf*. Bullock states that, contrary to a common misconception, Hitler did not want war with Britain and France in 1939. What he wanted was small wars of plunder to help support Germany's struggling economy (although the Nazis never broadcast their financial problems). Hitler wanted a full scale European war with Britain and France by no later than 1943, before Germany's rivals were fully rearmed. This can be seen in the Hossbach Memorandum and thus it would prove his aggressive intentions as early as 1937. This raises the question of whether there was intent on Hitler's part to start a war rather than just a hypothetical scenario; the Allies at Nuremberg certainly defined it as intent.

Historians like Shirer and Trevor-Roper state that Hitler had a blueprint for war as early as 1924. With regard to *Mein Kampf*, Shirer states that *Mein Kampf* acted as a warning and blueprint of future Nazi intentions. Shirer strongly

elaborates on the messages in *Mein Kampf*: “The book contains... an outline of the future German state... and how... the new Reich was to regain her position as a world power and then go on to world mastery...” Shirer also often employs quotes from *Mein Kampf* as a proof for Hitler’s intentions to drive eastward into Russia as early as 1924. “If we speak of soil in Europe today we can primarily have in mind only Russia and her vassal border states”. He also cites *Mein Kampf* as proof that Hitler clearly planned “Anschluss” all along. A.J.P Taylor, however, argues that this was nothing other than unreliable “daydreaming” and that events followed the course they did due to circumstances rather than the clear intentions of Hitler. According to Taylor, Hitler was profoundly influenced by the needs of the moment. He was an astute, cynical politician who took advantage of other leaders’ mistakes and fears. Taylor argues that Hitler’s projects as outlined in the Hossbach Memorandum were in large part daydreaming and unrelated to what followed in reality. In his opinion, Hitler was once again gambling on some twist of fortune which would lead him to success. In other words, his view is that Hitler’s apparent ‘fanaticism’ was an act, made more plausible by rhetorical statements. Shirer’s views on Hossbach state that the meeting was “the decisive turning point in the life of the Third Reich.” Shirer also claims that Hitler had said it all “ten years before in *Mein Kampf*”, and that now he was setting out on the road of the conqueror to fulfil his destiny.

The nature of Hitler’s charismatic leadership is another factor to be taken into account when analysing the motives behind his foreign policy. Hitler was driven by the need for constant success and that is what he achieved in his foreign policy, taking over one country after another, at first without even the need for war. Hitler’s apparently sensationally effective ‘coups’ in foreign policy were fundamental to his hold on the German people. By 1938, if one ‘coup’ did not swiftly follow another, there was a sense, even among ordinary German people, that Hitler’s grasp was slipping. The essence of Hitler’s style was the method of conducting foreign policy by sudden moves, often carried out at weekends and designed to catch potential opponents off guard. He adapted the methods of the streetwise agitator- methods that had brought him success on his road to power- to his application of foreign policy. Undisciplined and often slothful in his personal lifestyle, Hitler was not a calculating long-term planner and his

approach was not that of a chess player. He was, as A.J.P. Taylor suggests, a high-risk gambler, for whom the concept of policy based on collective decision-making was an alien concept.

Mein Kampf was intended to further educate people who were already in the Nazi Party about its aims and future development and Hitler states this clearly in both the preface of the original and the English translation. However, it is strange that *Mein Kampf*, and its limited-use as an early propaganda tool to recruit new members into the Party, stands in some contrast with the writings of Karl Marx and how they were indirectly used to convert millions of people to Communism. It seems odd that Hitler invested so much energy and time in producing such a long-winded and repetitive book which was merely preaching to the converted, and not originally intended to win over new support for the movement. Perhaps it could be suggested that *Mein Kampf* was in fact written as some form of self-justification, and to make people take him seriously as an original thinker. This is a view which is supported by Bullock who suggests that few contemporary readers had their interests awakened by *Mein Kampf*. Yet all of Hitler’s later foreign policy moves can be found in *Mein Kampf* and so Bullock suggests that World War Two could have been predicted in 1924.

Conclusion

Neither *Mein Kampf* on its own, nor the Hossbach Memorandum on its own, may be as valuable a source as many might think for studying German foreign policy during the years 1933-39. Only when used in conjunction with other sources does *Mein Kampf* have some value in determining where the stimulus for Hitler’s foreign policy originated, and for seeing how close he came to achieving what he generally intended to do. Nevertheless, what Hitler achieved in the later 1930’s seems to bear a considerable resemblance to the aims he set out in *Mein Kampf* and the Hossbach Memorandum. Moreover, when placing these events in the context of the 1930’s, then the case for seeing Hitler as someone who was propelling towards war from the outset seems even stronger.

As soon as Hitler had succeeded in annexing Austria in March 1938, he turned his attention in September 1938 to the Germans living in the Sudetenland. Once he had achieved their integration into Germany, via the Munich agreement, he quickly proceeded to dismember the rest of Czechoslovakia, invading it in March

1939. When this had been achieved, he focused his attention straight away on Poland, provoking a crisis which eventually would lead to war in September 1939. The speed and consistency with which Hitler moved from one crisis to the next suggests that much more than clever opportunism was at work. It is simply not credible to think that Hitler could, by accident, have moved Germany from the situation it had been in during 1933 to that in which it found itself in 1939. A.J.P. Taylor may have dismissed *Mein Kampf* as the ‘day dreaming’ of a marginal right-winger, and certainly not everything that Hitler aspired to in the book actually came to pass. But even if it is agreed that *Mein Kampf* does not contain a detailed timetable, and even if it is acknowledged that it is impossible to see in it a consistent set of plans, it must be recognised that, in broad terms, the vision which Hitler outlined in this book and in the Hossbach Memorandum bears a striking resemblance to the broad policies of expansion, aggression and violence he pursued from 1933 onwards. Perhaps the best way to think about Nazi aggression is not as the product of a careful, detailed planner, but also not simply the product of short-term opportunism either. A more apt description of Hitler’s aggression in the 1930s was that it was the work of a visionary, a man with a vision of a German dominated Europe towards which he was working throughout his political career, and which he would use any means to achieve.

Further reading

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