

Hitler's Strategic Gambit: A Chessmaster Amidst Checkers

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Adolf Hitler's attempted conquest of Europe would shift the global power dynamics and leave a lasting imprint on modern history. When Hitler came to power in 1933 he promoted his vision of Lebensraum and restoring ethno-linguistic German lands to the German empire, similar to Germany's geopolitical landscape during Otto von Bismarck's era. The concept of Lebensraum is derived from the belief that the German people were the superior race, and needed to expand their territory to accommodate their growing population and achieve economic self-sufficiency. It was the driving factor behind Germany's aggression in World War I, and was the justification for Hitler's territorial ambitions and subjugation towards those he considered not a part of the "superior race." In the aftermath of World War I, Hitler and Germany lost a lot of territory that was largely settled by ethnic Germans, such as the Sudetenland in Czechoslovakia and the Rhineland. These concepts served as pivotal ideals that legitimized his reign and bolstered his authority, providing him with the backing and momentum to assert his power further and pursue his expansionist agenda. Both the remilitarization of the Rhineland and the invasion of Czechoslovakia were crucial in solidifying Hitler's control over the German military, each contributing distinctively to the consolidation of power. While the invasion of Czechoslovakia on October 1, 1938, underscored Hitler's expansionist ambitions and further galvanized German nationalism, the remilitarization of the Rhineland on March 7, 1936, was imperative to Hitler's military control through its assertion of German sentiment and national pride. The reclamation of the stolen German territory represented a retaliatory response to the unjust constraints imposed by the Versailles Treaty, bolstering his military control and advancing his expansionist agenda.

The basis of Hitler's power can be traced back to July 18, 1925, when he published his autobiography *Mein Kampf*, a foundational text for the propagation of Nazi ideology and his system of beliefs. Hitler's weaponization of propaganda, originating in *Mein Kampf*, allowed

him to cement his power by ingeniously leveraging it as a blueprint for manipulating public perception to indoctrinate and mobilize the masses. This use afforded him the opportunity to effectively garner loyalty, and validate his authority by portraying his decisions as infallible and morally righteous. Hitler explains, "The function of propaganda is, for example, not to weigh and ponder the rights of different people, but exclusively to emphasize the one right which it has set out to argue for. Its task is not to make an objective study of the truth, in so far as it favors the enemy, and then set it before the masses with academic fairness; its task is to serve our own right, always and unflinchingly."¹ Hitler revolutionized propaganda by reframing its purpose from merely alienating enemies or shaping public sentiment to serving his agenda and cultivating unwavering loyalty among followers. This ability was extremely advantageous to Hitler, as it became a crucial component of his power and control. This subtle indoctrination would prove vital throughout Hitler's reign, especially with the remilitarization of the Rhine. Through this event, Hitler capitalized on the national sentiment in a way that allowed him to advance his personal agenda and Lebensraum, while also playing in his favor publicly. The Nazi propaganda machine made Hitler's motives out to be exactly what the population wanted to hear, avenging the unjust oppressive nature of the West and the Treaty of Versailles. This sentiment would be further intensified following the Munich agreement, where a Guardian editorial explains, "Most of us would agree with the 'New York Times' that 'It is a price which enables a dictator who would willingly destroy the last vestige of democracy in Europe to claim with justice that he scored over the democracies of Europe the greatest diplomatic triumph of modern times-that he accomplished by a mere ultimatum what Bismark failed to accomplish with armies.'"² Hitler's strength on the global level was uncontested following the remilitarization of the Rhine, as his

¹ Adolf Hitler, Ralph Manheim, and Abraham H. Foxman, *Mein Kampf* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2002), 159.

² An Editorial, "1 October 1938: Chamberlain declares 'Peace for our time' on return from Munich," *The Guardian*, October 1, 1938, The Guardian/Observer Archive.

populous support rendered him a dominant force in Europe, even as Germany was in the rebuilding process due to the widespread unity amongst the German masses. His ability to successfully further his agenda without bloodshed or real conflict allotted him confidence and bolstered his perception as the rightful Fuhrer of Germany. The Rhineland allowed him to compound his strength and be aggressive on the world stage as a direct result of the successful propaganda campaign and the immense support and backing that came with it. Evidently, propaganda proved key throughout Hitler's reign, as through the ability to retain the support of the population it provided he would ensure his authority and further his Nazi ideology.

In the aftermath of World War I, the punitive measures of the Treaty of Versailles devastated Germany economically and spiritually, creating conditions to exploit Germany's wounded national pride. By capitalizing on the resentment towards the Treaty of Versailles and the failures of the Weimar government in the 1920s, Hitler consolidated his power and solidified his control. Hitler had been gaining traction as a political candidate, and amidst the economic turmoil and political chaos that followed The War, he emerged as a charismatic leader, promising to restore Germany's former greatness and overturn the cruel terms of the Treaty of Versailles. Hitler catered to the people and saw an opportunity in the Treaty of Versailles to exploit the widespread discontent amongst the people, use it in his favor, and direct it toward achieving his agenda. The fuel Hitler needed was in Article 232 of the Treaty, which states,

The Allied and Associated Governments, however, require, and Germany undertakes, that she will make compensation for all damage done to the civilian population of the Allied and Associated Powers and to their property during the period of the belligerency of each as an Allied or Associated Power against Germany by such aggression by land, by sea and from the air, and in general all damage as defined in Annex I hereto.³

³ The Paris Peace Conference, 1919, Volume XIII: Versailles Treaty, Treaty Doc., at Articles 231-244 (). Office of the Historian.

Even though they were part of the Triple Alliance and had multiple countries fighting alongside it, Germany had most if not all of the blame placed on them by the Allies. Germany was the scapegoat, which deeply wounded German pride as it was built upon the ideals of a strong military and a dominating presence in Europe. Furthermore, the deliberate attribution of full blame to Germany in the Treaty added a personal dimension, singling out the nation and reinforcing the perception of their defeat, emphasizing their status as the vanquished. The need for vengeance felt throughout the German nation was the exact sentiment Hitler capitalized on and used to fuel his conquest of Europe. In addition, Versailles left Germany vulnerable and fractured as,

The French occupation of the Ruhr led to a vast, reckless printing of paper notes with the deliberate objective of destroying the whole basis of the currency. The social and economic consequences of this inflation were deadly and far-reaching. All led directly to the large-scale borrowings of a bankrupt nation abroad which were the feature of ensuing years.⁴

The loss of the Rhineland (Ruhr) was devastating to Germany economically and politically, as it was key to the industrial capabilities of Germany and its abundance of natural resources, which are important to maintaining a military in War. The main reason for the importance of this region, however, was the symbolism of the Rhineland, which had been unjustly ripped away from them by the Allies. A core part of the German nation, being ousted and given to France further heightened tensions between the Allies and Germany, arousing extreme anti-Allies sentiment amongst the masses. Germany desired to break free of the oppressive nature of the Treaty but needed a strong leader to do so which Weimar Germany couldn't provide. The coalition government was too divided and slow-moving to enact change or assert itself on the world stage, leaving the perfect gap in the system for Hitler to take advantage of. The

⁴ Jeff Hay, *The Treaty of Versailles* (San Diego, Calif.: Greenhaven Press, 2002), 53.

significance of a part of the German Vaterland being stripped away from them and occupied by another force was shattering for the people, as following the Treaty the “main aim of all German parties across the political spectrum since 1919, was therefore predicated on reoccupying the Rhineland.”⁵ With the beliefs of the people, the political parties, and Hitler all converging on the shared desire to get back the Rhineland, remilitarizing this zone made for the perfect objective for Hitler in his quest to solidify his control both politically and militarily, as he would be looked upon favorably by the vast majority of the population.

The resentment and disillusionment among the German populace, stemming from the overbearing terms of the Treaty of Versailles imposed by the Allies, served as fertile ground for Hitler to harness and exploit anti-Allied sentiments, ultimately consolidating his power by rallying a unified Germany under his leadership. Hitler's ascent to power was dependent on his ability to resonate with the populace. Both his agenda and Germany's system relied heavily upon populous support and a unified, confident base. The Rhineland region was the perfect scenario for Hitler, as through its remilitarization he could concurrently strengthen his industrial capabilities and the German resolve. The Treaty was intended to punish Germany for the atrocities committed in World War I, but had the unintended outcome of bringing the German people together rather than dividing them. A. J. P. Taylor, a renowned British journalist, remarks,

In the immediate situation of 1919 the peace treaty seemed crushing a vindictive; a Diktat or a slave-treaty as the Germans called it. In a longer perspective, the most important thing in the treaty is that it was concluded with a united Germany. Germany had only to secure a modification of the treaty, or to shake it off altogether; and she would emerge as a strong or almost as strong, as she had been in 1914.⁶

⁵ Shore, Zach. “Hitler, Intelligence and the Decision to Remilitarize the Rhine.” *Journal of Contemporary History* 34, no. 1 (1999): 3. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/261191>.

⁶ A. J. P. Taylor, *The Origins of the Second World War*, Simon & Schuster pbk. ed. (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1961), 24.

Unlike most dictators in history, Hitler came from a political background and rose to power through political means. Whereas dictators from military backgrounds such as Napoleon had already established themselves as effective and successful generals, Hitler was put in a position where he needed to gain the respect and trust necessary to operate the military and would do so through the support of the population. He could demonstrate his military prowess through the remilitarization of the Rhine while appearing justified and righteous in the eyes of the people simultaneously. Many European nations began to realize the strength of the German nationalist movement following the Treaty of Versailles, with Winston Churchill stating, "The indestructible might of "all the German tribes" would rise once more and the unquenched fires of warrior Prussia glow and burn again...The territorial provisions of the Treaty of Versailles left Germany practically intact. She still remained the largest homogenous racial block in Europe."⁷ The Allies had inadvertently placed the power and control of Germany on Hitler's doorstep. They left Germany fractured politically, while the will of the people and their resilience had never been stronger. Versailles inherently did nothing to prevent a future war, only heightening tensions further. In the words of Marshal Foch, the Chief of Staff of the French Army, "This is not Peace. It is an Armistice for twenty years."⁸ Versailles had set Hitler up perfectly to take full control, as by appealing to the collective desire for revenge and restoration, he was able to rally widespread support and consolidate power immediately. He brought stability and sureness to a nation that desired this more than ever, and in return secured his position of power on the foundation of German pride and nationalism. This is reinforced by historian Jeff Hay, who claims,

The Treaty of Versailles made a further conflict nearly inevitable. Its economic and territorial provisions encouraged not only resentment but also the growth of such forms of political extremism as fascism in Italy, Nazism in Germany, and Communism not only

⁷ Hay, *The Treaty*, 49.

⁸ Ibid.

in the Soviet Union but throughout Europe. Moreover, the Treaty's architects were naive in hoping that Germany could turn itself into a democratic republic, as it had little experience of such a system.⁹

The Allies left Germany in a state ripe for exploitation by extremist ideologies, as the people greatly desired assurance and justice for the Treaty that the Weimar Republic couldn't provide. The democratic system, forced upon Germany by the Allies following World War I, prioritized moving forward from the war and rebirthing Germany, however, this did not concur with the population, who remained fixated on past grievances and seeking revenge for the Treaty of Versailles. The Treaty ultimately enabled Hitler, allowing him through the remilitarization of the Rhine to validate his rule and consolidate his control over the military while initiating his vision of Lebensraum.

Furthermore, through a consistent application of appeasement and diplomatic maneuvers, Hitler positioned the West into acquiescing to his demands. This gained him the upper hand in future conflicts and showcased his political finesse and strategic superiority over Western powers, enabling him to garner support and assert himself on the global stage. By remilitarizing the Rhineland, he tested their resolve and gauged their commitment to upholding democracy and enforcing the Versailles Treaty. Following World War I, the Allies were in shambles, as France was broken economically and politically, Britain was reeling from the costs and damages of the war, and America was withdrawing her presence on the European continent, leaving them unable to enforce the conditions of the Versailles Treaty. The situation of the French, who occupied the Rhineland at the time, is outlined by Historian Zachary Shore, who highlights,

French policy-makers cut military spending substantially, the French military were compelled to economize on research and development of new weapons systems, weapons

⁹ Hay, *The Treaty*, 48.

procurement and training. Moreover, the commitment to constructing the Maginot Line, limited the army's options. Robert Young, in his study of French foreign policy and military planning in the 1930s, convincingly showed that no one in France believed the Rhineland was worth going to war over.¹⁰

France's unique geopolitical and internal situation rendered it practically helpless against possible German aggression, and their lack of desire to retain the landmass made remilitarizing the Rhineland the perfect first objective for Hitler. It underscored his political acumen, emphasizing how he could consolidate power while maintaining a facade of non-aggression towards the Allies, thereby avoiding a provocation for war. This strategic maneuver highlighted his ability to navigate geopolitical complexities, reinforcing his image as a leader adept at advancing national interests without escalating international tensions. Germany had not fully prepared for War yet, making this the perfect scenario as Hitler would continue to have time to prepare for his first provocative move, invading Poland. The Rhineland was also significant geographically in the sense that it would establish a land barrier on Germany's western front, allowing Hitler to direct his focus toward Eastern Europe. In fact, due to Versailles, Germany was forbidden to station troops beyond a fifty kilometre zone on the Rhine's right bank. The purpose of this restriction was to prevent a German attack on her eastern neighbours by leaving her vulnerable to a French counter-attack in the west.¹¹ Germany's entrapment, inflicted by the Locarno Treaty and Versailles proved detrimental to Hitler's expansionist agenda, as in order to fight a two-frontal war, securing control over the Rhineland was paramount. This region served as a strategic buffer zone, not only safeguarding Germany's western borders but also bolstering Hitler's control over key industrial areas and critical transportation routes, crucial for his militaristic ambitions and overall authority. Additionally, this move would fare well with Hitler's

¹⁰ Shore, Zach. "Hitler, Intelligence and the Decision to Remilitarize the Rhine." *Journal of Contemporary History* 34, no. 1 (1999): 9. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/261191>.

¹¹ Shore, "Hitler, Intelligence and the Decision to Remilitarize the Rhine." 7.

military officials, “as for the German military, it is clear that they supported the remilitarization. Klaus-Jiirgen Miiller demonstrated by extensive use of the military archives in Freiburg that General Ludwig Beck fully supported the remilitarization as part of his plan for the rebuilding of German military might.”¹² The support and backing of the military is crucial to any leader’s power, as they enforce the ruler’s will and authority. Having high-ranking military officials on Hitler’s side was vital to achieving his visions, as through their backing Hitler could retain his control and enforce his rule. Hitler’s remilitarization of the Rhine marked the initial test of his strategic prowess, highlighting the foundational pillars that justified his authority. This pivotal action reinforced the core elements of his support and power, as through this decision he was able to rally populous support while amassing his military capabilities and industrial strength. The territorial reclamation displayed Hitler’s diplomatic superiority through his assertion on the global stage, granting him the means to advance his agenda and further his dominance, bolstering his military and political control significantly.

Through Hitler’s defiance of the Treaty of Versailles in his remilitarization of the Rhineland, he not only tapped into the deep-seated resentment and wounded national pride amongst Germans but also fueled the German people’s anti-West animosity, solidifying his image as a resolute and just leader among the radicalized German populace. This bold move to cement his control proved critical as it allowed him to shift his focus to his broader geopolitical agenda of territorial expansion and establishing a hegemonic German state with the backing of the people and the military. Furthermore, the lack of immediate and effective response from the Allied powers only enhanced his standing, portraying him as a leader who could challenge the status quo without consequence and assert his will successfully. Ultimately, the remilitarization

¹² Shore, “Hitler, Intelligence and the Decision to Remilitarize the Rhine.” 12.

of the Rhine was not merely a military maneuver but a fundamental assertion of Nazi ideology and a precursor to Hitler's disastrous pursuit of extreme Lebensraum, resonating with the populace through its avenging nature and its portrayal of German strength through innovative propaganda.

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