Origins of the Second World War:

Historiography of the Debate

The Nuremberg War Trials of 1946 led to the executions of large numbers of former Nazis on the basis that they had helped Hitler to *deliberately plan and launch World War Two*.

AJP Taylor turned this thesis on its head in 1961 when he argued that Hitler was a traditional statesman, with traditional aims, who had muddled into war much as the Great Powers had done in 1914.

**There are in fact two debates going on here:**

1. **Were Hitler’s war aims actually traditional German foreign policy goals?**
2. **Did Hitler have a clear strategy for achieving his goals?**

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| **The most contentious is whether Hitler was a "planner" (Intentionist) or a "gambler" (Structuralist / Opportunist)** |

Tasty Historiography Bites

* **Hugh Trevor-Roper (1960),** stressed that Hitler was a *planner* who deliberately sought and started the war for deeply-held ideological reasons. He argued that Hitler had a clear, step-by-step plan to realise his goal of creating a racially pure German empire in Eastern Europe. Trevor-Roper uses *Mein Kampf*, written while Hitler was in prison in 1926, and the 1937 Hossbach memorandum, to support his view that Hitler's foreign policy was based on clear objectives that were consistently and coherently followed once he came to power: Lebensraum in the East, and the 'final solution' to exterminate the European Jews. *"To the end, Hitler maintained the purity of his war aims."*
* **A.J.P. Taylor (1961),** argued that Hitler was from being a planner in foreign policy, and in fact was an *opportunist* taking advantage of the situations presented to him. This view of Hitler therefore reduces the extent of Hitler's responsibility for causing the war, and implies that Britain and France encouraged Hitler's opportunism through their policy of appeasement. Taylor also shocked his readers by arguing that Hitler was not a radically different German leader, but rather he was simply an 'ordinary statesman' following in traditional German foreign policy concerns - i.e. Treaty of Brest-Litovsk as proof that earlier German statesmen had ambitions in the East. *"Far from wanting a war, a general war was the last thing Hitler wanted."*
* **Alan Bullock (1964),** and something of a *synthesis* of the above two positions: yes, Hitler was a strategist with clear aims and objectives, but he pursued these using clearly opportunistic techniques. So Hitler as both a planner and an opportunist!
* **William Shirer** (*The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich*, **1960**) agreed with Taylor that Hitler’s aims were essentially traditional, but agreed with Roper that Hitler had a clear strategy for achieving those objectives.

Savoury Historiography Entrees

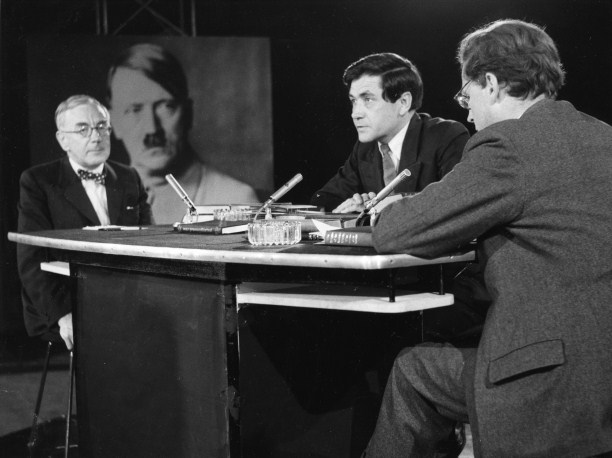
**A.J.P. Taylor**

***Alan John Percivale Taylor*** *(25 March 1906 – 7 September 1990) was a popular and best-selling British historian known for his controversial beliefs on the nature of Hitler and his time as dictator in his book, The Origins of the Second World War, and he is seen by many historians to be revisionist. He studied at Oriel College at Oxford and enjoyed a long career as a journalist and broadcaster. Taylor published several books throughout his career focusing on European history and diplomacy in the 19th and 20th centuries.*  
***The Origins of the Second World War***

Taylor sparked a great deal of debate among historians with his highly criticized work *The Origins of the Second World War*. In it, he expresses his beliefs that Hitler never had a plan of action leading up to and during World War II. He stresses that Hitler was an opportunist, taking advantage of events and circumstances that had been thrust upon him and successfully using them to increase his power and move forward in his expansion of Germany. Taylor believes that Hitler did not take initiative in politics and that he was simply an ordinary European statesman, not unlike the politicians of other Western European nations. Taylor explains,  
  
 “In principle and doctrine, Hitler was no more wicked and unscrupulous than many other contemporary statesmen. In wicked acts he outdid them all. The policy of Western statesmen also rested ultimately on force--French policy on the army, British policy on sea-power. But these statesmen hoped that it would not be necessary to use this force. Hitler intended to use his force, or would at any rate, threaten to use it.”  
  
 He goes against the traditional view that Hitler did indeed have plans for invasions of other territories and nations, that he knew what he was doing all along, and that he was the main instigator of the outbreak of the war. This rejection of the traditional view makes many historians uncomfortable and some critics have even described Taylor's views as sympathetic towards Hitler.  
  
 In a later piece titled War Origins Again, Taylor succinctly sums up what he believes to be the character of Adolf Hitler:  
 His methods were often new. He was a gambler in foreign, as in home affairs; a skillful tactician, waiting to exploit the opportunities which others offered to him. His easy successes made him careless, as was not surprising, and he gambled steadily higher. He found the path of violence increasingly attractive and the path of negotiation increasingly tedious. But essentially his stake, if I may for once allude to profound forces, lay in the logic of the German problem.

**The Hossbach Memorandum**  
 One of Taylor's major arguments lies in the Hossbach Memorandum, a document that summarized a meeting held on November 5, 1937, between Hitler and his leaders of foreign policy as well as German military leaders. It is named after Count Colonel Friedrich Hossbach, who was the keeper of the minutes during the meeting. Hitler discussed his foreign policy and his ideas for the expansion of Germany in Europe. He muses about the possibility of making Germany an autarchic state and laid out various scenarios that could occur in the future, including the German overthrow of Czechoslovakia and Austria, and war with England and France. Because none of these scenarios played out exactly the way Hitler imagined, Taylor dismisses the memorandum as "in large part daydreaming." He claims that because his visions did not come true, the document should not be considered a plan of action and that it shows that Hitler had no real directive at that time. He also claims that since only one person present at the meeting was a member of the Nazi party, that Hitler would not reveal a true plan of action for war to people he most likely distrusted.

**Hugh Trevor-Roper**

*[](http://www.historytoday.com/tim-stanley/contrarian-historians-stepping-out-line)Hugh Trevor-Roper is considered to be A.J.P. Taylor's arch-rival and most vehement challenger to his theories. Coming form similar backgrounds, both men were two of the most acclaimed British historians of the 20th century despite their opposing views. Both historians have published several essays in which they address and challenge each other.*

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| (From left) A.J.P. Taylor, Robert Kee, and Hugh Trevor-Roper |

In his piece, ***A.J.P. Taylor, Hitler, and the War***, Trevor-Roper directly and harshly refutes Taylor's work:  
"Hitler meant what he said: that he was aiming... at world conquest. A contemporary conviction that was strong enough to change the mood of a nation from a passionate desire for peace to a resolute determination on war surely deserves some respect from the historian. A historian who totally ignores it because, twenty years later, he can interpret some of the documents in an opposite sense runs the risk of being considered too clever by half."  
  
 "Now this programme, which Hitler ascribed to himself, and which he actually carried out, is obviously entirely different from the far more limited programme which is ascribed to him by Mr. Taylor, and which he did not carry out. How then does Mr. Taylor deal with the evidence about it? He deals with it quite simply, either by ignoring it or by denying it as inconsistent with his own theories about statesmen in general and Hitler in particular: theories (one must add) for which he produces no evidence at all”

**T.W. Mason**

T.W. Mason wrote an essay entitled *Some Origins of the Second World War* in which he criticizes Taylor because his ideas on the origins of WWII omit the profound causes and specific events, political movements, and ideologies that clearly contributed to the outbreak of World War II. Mason agrees with Taylor about the "inability of historians writing on the inter-war period to overcome their horror at the atrocities committed by the National Socialist regime; this horror has led them to mistake the general moral responsibility of the Third Reich for the greatest barbarities in the history of western civilization for an assumed, concrete historical responsibility for the outbreak of the Second World War." However, he also claims that Taylor has "made a greater effort than any previous historian to achieve an emotional and moral detachment from the subject matter."

While Mason also concedes that Taylor's gives provocative accounts of nations other than Germany leading up to the war, and the minor causes of the war, he also states that Taylor excludes the most profound ideological causes. Specifically, Mason explains, "National Socialism was perhaps the most profound cause of the Second World War, but Mr. Taylor's book is not informed by any conception of the distinctive character and role of National Socialism in the history of twentieth-century Europe."

One of Mason's major issues is with Taylor's treatment of the Hossbach Memorandum. He essentially maintains that Taylor is incorrect on almost all of his claims. Mason explain that while Taylor claimed that Hitler called the conference, it was in fact Blomberg who called it in order to raise a complaint against Goering. Mason also asserts that the Hossbach Memorandum did, in fact spark direct and rapid change in Germany's military rearmament only weeks after the conference was held. He explains, "This change mirrored the new temper and new aims of Hitler's policy as he had expounded it to his military leaders on 5 November. The conference marks the point at which the expansion of the Third Reich ceased to be latent and became explicit."

**Keith Eubank**

*Keith Eubank is the author of****The Origins of World War II****and numerous other works.*  
 In *The Origins of World War II*, Eubank discusses that Hitler was not an ordinary statesman and that Hitler determined his own policy. In the preface, Eubank admits that while he is “indebted to A. J. P. Taylor for his provocative and interesting ideas, [he] cannot accept his interpretation of Hitler.” "Taylor regarded Hitler as no worse in his tactics and strategy than other contemporary statesmen," argued that Hitler did not really know his mind and was simply pushed into aggression by Neville Chamberlain,” and believed “that he neither plotted nor prepared for war but rather blundered into it. However, Eubank argues that “Hitler determined his own policy according to the available opportunities and that he deliberately ran the risk of a world war for which he had not prepared Germany. But his failure to prepare ought not to be used to argue, as does Taylor, that he never intended war. For, as I have tried to show, Hitler was not averse to small wars, and he prepared Germany for such conflicts.”

Eubank believes that Hitler did not prepare for a large scale war, but prepared Germany for smaller scale wars. These smaller scale wars were “not a plan of conquest but a set of goals for Germany;” “Hitler did not have a master plan to conquer the world through war.” Since Hitler lacked a master plan to conquer the world through war, Eubank considers Hitler to be an opportunist who was prepared to seize and achieve his goals. He deems that Hitler was presented with numerous opportunities. Hitler’s first opportunity was when he stated to take control of the Nazi party. According to Eubank, membership consisted of “confused young men coming out of the trenches, disgusted with the defeat, despairing at economic difficulties, and searching for someone-anyone-to blame for the misfortunes they were unable to understand.” Hitler provided them with direction, hope, and someone to blame.

Eubank believes that the strangest opportunity was the support of Joseph Stalin. Stalin supported the Nazis because they were removing the Social Democrats; Stalin believed the Social Democrats were swaying people from Communism. He saw Fascism as a precursor to the inevitable Communist revolution. However, Stalin overlooked Hitler and Fascism. Hitler was not in favor of Communism and only allied with Stalin temporarily to obtain certain territories. These opportunities did not dictate Hitler's objectives as Taylor believes. Instead, Hitler uses these opportunities to achieve his goals. Eubank also demonstrates how Hitler did not behave like an ordinary statesman and how Hitler used appeasement to his advantage. Hitler “who had survived by learning the intricacies of hitting below the belt and stabbing in the back, had the advantage over the kind of men who knew only the standards of Whitehall and the Quai d’Orsay [the centers of government for Britain and France respectively].” Hitler used tactics that statesmen were not familiar with. He was not afraid to use force or to threaten his opponents. Since these statesmen “were so befuddled at being faced with a man unlike anyone they had ever had to deal with…they hurried to order the objects of Hitler’s wrath to surrender lest he launch a war.” Hitler’s uniqueness led the statesmen to simply appease him. Eubank demonstrates that Hitler was not an ordinary statesman, that Hitler certainly knew his mind, and that Hitler had goals that he wished to achieve through small-scale wars.

**Anita J. Prazmowska**

*Anita Prazmowska is Senior Lecturer in International History at the London School of Economics. She has written numerous books and is currently writing a history of the origins of the Communist regime in Poland.*  
 Prazmowska addresses the belief that Poland and other smaller states “were at best passive, at worst opportunistic in their responses to the impending European conflict.” In a short essay, she argues against Taylor’s perception of “Poland as a victim rather than a player in the complex game of brinkmanship that marked the months preceding the outbreak of the war.” Through Taylor’s study of the implications of British appeasement, he suggests “that by guaranteeing Polish security and hence the security of the Free City of Danzig, Britain encouraged Poland to become intransigent and that this caused the outbreak of the Second World War.” However, Prazmowska proves that Poland acted as a Great Power and conducted a complex foreign policy. Poland carefully considered the security of their state and the growing power of their neighbors, Germany and the Soviet Union. It believed that the Soviet Union and Germany should and could be kept out of eastern and south-eastern Europe.

Poland desired to be the dominant power in the region, so it thought it could benefit from German aggression and resist Britain and France’s attempts to build anti-German unity. Germany was seen as useful because its aggression could be used to subdue Czechoslovakia which Poland resented because of its economic and political influence in the region. Therefore, Poland sought an agreement with Germany.

In 1934 Poland and Germany signed a Declaration of Non-Aggression in which both “sides agreed to maintain the territorial *status quo* and to negotiate on all contentious issues. Since Danzig was the most controversial unresolved problem between the two states,…[as] long as they agreed not to change the status of the Free City”conflict would be avoided. However, in October 1938 Germany disrupted the agreement by proposing that Poland relinquish Danzig to Germany and in return Germany would renew the agreement for another 25 years. Germany’s offer enraged Poland because it was being “reduced to the role of a subordinate partner, a role it disdainfully rejected.” After this offer, Germany and Poland’s relations became strained. Poland attempted to keep Danzig within their control, but by August of 1939 Danzig became incorporated into the Third Reich. When the war broke out in September, Danzig had ceased to retain its importance. Instead, “the total destruction of the Polish state” and “the seizure of Polish territories” by Germany forced Poland to take action. Prazmowska demonstrates, contrary to Taylor’s belief, that the Free City of Danzig was not the reason why Poland entered the war. Poland entered the war because Germany was attempting to incorporate the whole Polish state and its territories into the Third Reich. Poland refused to act passively and to allow Germany to take over. Poland was not a victim, but an active player in its fate.

**Robert Jervis**

*Robert Jervis is Adlai E. Stevenson Professor of International Politics at Columbia University. He is the author of several books. According to Princeton University Press, Jervis uses “insights from complexity theory as his point of departure” and “observes that we live in a world where things are interconnected, where unintended consequences of our actions are unavoidable and unpredictable, and where the total effect of behavior is not equal to the sum of individual actions.”*  
  
 Jervis discusses the importance of domestic policy in determining foreign policy in an essay on political science perspectives. In the essay, Jervis argues that “foreign policy is rooted in domestic goals, world-views and politics.” Jervis’ argument differs from A. J. P. Taylor’s argument “that the two realms were essentially separate and that there is no need to consider Hitler’s racist ideology and his quest to eliminate inferior races when we are explaining his foreign policy.” To dispute Taylor’s argument, Jervis first illustrates how Germany has a long history of domestic policy dictating foreign policy. Since Germany was “late to unite into a single country and develop economically, it welded a capitalist economic system on to a pre-modern social and political system and followed a distinctive domestic path or *Sonderweg*.”  Germany’s unique formation fostered an environment in which the government consisted of incompatible coalitions committed to maintaining domestic order. Therefore, consistency in foreign policy relied on “the fundamental characteristics of its domestic regime.”

However, Hitler was unlike his predecessors; his abnormal international behavior was due to his unusual domestic policies. Germany under Hitler’s rule did not follow the usual policy of expansion. Instead, Germany fought for the Nazi conception of the Aryan race. Since Germany fought for the Aryan race, Jervis argues that “domestic and foreign policy cannot be separated because they were twin manifestations of the same racist impulses.” Jervis uses the example of security. According to him, realists argue that security is the first goal of states” and that after achieving this goal “they may seek a wide range of other goals, including expansion.” However, security was not Germany’s goal. Hitler sacrificed security “in the attempt to dominate, and dominance was sought in order to serve interests framed in terms of race, not the German state.” By invading Russia, Hitler demonstrated that he sought to dominate to serve his ideas of race. Hitler believed Slavs inhabiting Russia to be subhuman, so he invaded Russia to eliminate these subhumans.

Jervis also uses Hitler’s invasion of Russia to counter Taylor’s portrayal of Hitler as a “normal” statesman. He argues that “few other than Hitler and his hand-picked lieutenants were willing to risk the destruction of the country in order to dominate” and “few would have made racial values rather than traditional national ones the loadstone of policy.” Jervis states that “Taylor simply throws up his hands and says that at this point Hitler lost his senses.” The invasion of Russia did not demonstrate a loss of senses, but a logical step. Hitler desired to racially purify Russia and eventually all of Europe. Jervis not only dismisses Taylor’s portrayal of Hitler as normal, but also illustrates how domestic policy influences foreign policy.

**Alan Cassels**

*Alan Cassels is the Professor of History Emeritus at McMaster University in Canada. He has published widely on Italian foreign policy in the Mussolini period and on the ideology of Fascism. His most recent book is titled****Ideology and International Relations*** *in the Modern World. In the book, Cassels traces the importance of ideology in international relations over the past two centuries.*  
 In an essay published in *The Origins of World War II: The Debate Continues*, Cassels discusses ideology in the debate over the Origins of the Second World War. In the essay, Cassels argues that “ideological thinking was a stock in trade of the aggressor states;” “in the most striking instance, German foreign policy under Hitler was constantly subject to the dictates of his racist *Weltanschauung*.” His view is in opposition to “those who would explain Hitler’s policy in terms of an uncomplicated lust for power and prestige, coupled with a sharp eye for the main chance,” like historian A. J. P. Taylor. According to Cassels, Taylor “in his notorious and quixotic *Origins of the Second World War* saw Hitler as an opportunist whose quest for power and domination, not for himself but for his nation, was that of a traditional statesman. Moreover, Taylor, who apparently had not read *Mein Kampf* before writing his book, evaded the issue of ideology altogether by stopping his account in 1939-before the dogma behind the Fuhrer’s actions became inescapable.”

Cassels opposes Taylor’s perception of Hitler as a traditional statesman and evasion of ideology as an influence in German foreign policy. Cassels argues that Hitler added “an extra measure of racism” to traditional nationalist obsessions. For example, most German expansionist projects in the east were “predicated on the Slavs’ alleged backwardness and inferiority, and Hitler subscribed wholeheartedly to this conceit.” However, Hitler took this notion a step further by “deliberately interchanging the words *Slawen* (Slavs) and *Sklaven* (slaves), and ultimately…apply[ing] the term *Untermenschen* (subhumans) routinely to the peoples of eastern Europe.” Cassels illustrates how Hitler took a typical notion within German politics, the addition of territory from the east, and “added an extra measure of racism.” Another example is “Hitler’s use of his visceral antisemitism as an additional rationale for pursuit of *Lebensraum*.” In *Mein Kampf*, Hitler discusses how the Russian Revolution in 1917 eradicated the Germanic nucleus in Russia’s upper society. The Bolshevik’s seizure of power led to a government of revolutionaries and more ominously Jews. Therefore, Hitler believed that “‘it was impossible for the Jew to maintain the mighty empire for ever. He himself is no element of organisation, but a ferment of decomposition. The Persian empire [sic] in the east is ripe for collapse’.” Again Hitler adds “his extra measure of racism” to justify adding territory from the east. Since the government consists of Jews and Jews are simply parasites who bring about the downfall of a healthy nation, Russia can easily be dominated.

Through these examples Cassels shows that “the ideological dynamo which drove Nazi foreign policy…is to be found in his preoccupation with Bolshevism and Jewry, his anti-Communism and antisemitism.” He proves that Hitler’s ideology is connected to Germany’s foreign policy and that Taylor’s failure to include ideology does not present a complete picture of Hitler and his policies.

Historiography: The Full Meal Deal

**Read:**

* Taylor, A.J.P. *The Origins of the Second World War* (*Preface)*.
* Trevor-Roper, H. R. “A.J.P. Taylor, Hitler, and the War”
* Martel, Gordon. “The Revisionist as moralist – A.J.P. Taylor and the lessons of European history” from *Origins of the Second World War Reconsidered*.
* Overy, Richard. “Misjudging Hitler: A.J.P. Taylor and the Third Reich” from *Origins of the Second World War Reconsidered*.
* Kennedy, Paul and Talbot Imlay. “Appeasement” from *Origins of the Second World War Reconsidered*.

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| **Task:** |

Hitler: A Planner or a Gambler?

***“Adolf Hitler had clear foreign policy goals and a clearly planned strategy for achieving them.”***

To what extent do you agree with the above statement? Respond with a ~500 word mini-essay using the Paper 2 rubric.