

For Hitler, war was not simply a rational vehicle of policy but also an incarnation of his own and Germany's destiny. This mythic belief justified the extraordinary risks he repeatedly took, to the frequent dismay of his generals and his own entourage. Yet it stood in some tension with the more prosaic lesson he had drawn from the First World War: the need for Germany to avoid the exhausting general war and military stalemate that had supposedly allowed internal enemies to whip mass discontent into revolution in 1918. Hitler spurned the advice of military planners committed to mass mobilization and total war. His strategy was to spare the home front by mounting limited but decisive campaigns that would forestall threats of domestic unrest while delivering epic victories.

Lebensraum and New Order

This oscillation between the metaphysical and the instrumental played out on a monumental double screen: on one side, the bid to open up a vast but ill-defined colonial 'living space' (*Lebensraum*) in the east where the German people could flourish and expand and fulfil its own racial destiny; and, on the other, the idea of establishing a pan-European New Order rescued from Bolshevism, plutocracy, democracy, and international Judaism. As so often, these barely compatible aspirations were not the sole property of the Nazis but were rooted in ideas long cultivated by German nationalists. But in the hands of Hitler and Nazi ideologists such as Himmler, Goebbels, or the agricultural expert Walther Darré, their meaning was to be inflated to the point of racial and geopolitical hyperbole, exploding more conventional understandings of national security, empire, or European reinvention.

Hitler's own sense of what was practically possible shifted according to opportunity and provocation. He had neither a fixed foreign policy calendar nor a blueprint for war and conquest, and he juggled an almost eschatological sense of time with the more

economic interests and their complaints about 'encirclement' by hostile alliances could appear almost legitimate. Even the regime's insistence on dismissing the remaining constraints on its sovereignty, its noisy demands on behalf of German-speaking minorities in Czechoslovakia and Poland, and its calls for gathering all ethnic Germans 'home into the Reich' might just be interpreted in the League of Nations' sacred languages of national self-determination and minority rights.

For Hitler, these claims served to mask geopolitical objectives that could not be achieved without war; but unless Germany's defences were strengthened and the western powers kept at bay, the climactic campaign of territorial conquest in Russia would carry too many risks. His ideal would therefore be not so much a singular 'war', but a sequence of localized and carefully calibrated political and military victories which would also minimize the strain on the overstretched German arms economy and the home front. In each of these conflicts, Hitler would achieve a preparatory strategic objective or overcome one of his intermediate antagonists without risking a more general war. Germany would then be secure enough to strike out for its ultimate prize of *Lebensraum* in the east.

In the real world of defensive alliances and diplomatic expediency, this strategy encountered a cluster of political and military imponderables which Hitler could sometimes exploit but could not control. His diplomatic priority was to dismantle the interlocking relationships that Germany confronted east and west, which included Germany's own multilateral commitments; regional security pacts in central Europe; France's alliances in the region, notably its 1936 pact with the Soviet Union; and the flagging alignment of France, Britain, and Italy. Germany also needed aggressive economic diplomacy to secure a dominant position in eastern Europe and the Balkans. And Germany needed allies of its own. Despite some serious frictions, a linchpin Rome-Berlin alignment or 'Axis' was negotiated in 1935; it formed

the nucleus of the 'Pact of Steel' sealed in May 1939 and the wartime tripartite alliance with Japan.

By the end of 1937, Hitler could chalk up considerable other achievements which disarmed his critics and made him hugely popular within Germany. A spectacularly successful plebiscite returned the industrial Saar region to German control in January 1935, after fifteen years under League administration. The remilitarization (military reoccupation) of the Rhineland in March 1936 was a sensational coup that restored this sensitive region to full German sovereignty, and exposed the inadequacy of the international response at a time when a still weak Germany might have been faced down. But the greater security of the Nazi regime by 1937/8 was accompanied not by stabilization, but by a release from restraints that drove Hitler on to more aggressive postures in his core priorities of foreign policy, military planning, and racial politics.

One key event can stand as an example here. At a secret meeting of top military chiefs called in November 1937 to discuss the worsening shortages of raw materials for rearmament (known as the Hossbach conference), Hitler shocked his audience by tearing the veil off hitherto defensive military planning, and presenting an unexpected and unnerving exposition of his aggressive strategy for *Lebensraum*. He outlined the preparations for its conquest that had to be engaged before Germany lost its competitive edge in the arms race, starting with the destruction of Czechoslovakia, which would bring crucial political, economic, and strategic advantages. Once France and Britain had then been forced into submission, Germany would be free to return to its primary project of eastern conquest.

Those who voiced reservations at these enormously risky calculations—including the war minister Werner von Blomberg, the Wehrmacht commander-in-chief Werner von Fritsch, and the

either the military or civilian administration, ensuring a colonial occupation based primarily on terror. Although German rule everywhere required the cooperation of local institutions and individuals, the Nazis had little interest in preserving the political integrity or fostering the backward agrarian economies of 'primitive' and 'inferior' Slav populations. Instead, German exploitation depended on systematic plunder and draconian repression. Raw materials and workers were hauled away to Germany, while local food supplies were reserved for the Wehrmacht or dispatched to Germany and western Europe. The chillingly detailed 'Hunger Plan' drawn up by German agricultural experts in the spring of 1941 calmly anticipated that tens of millions of Russian civilians and prisoners of war would have to starve to death if Germany's own wartime needs were to be met.

These visions of ruthless economic exploitation combined with the intensifying race war to turn the east into Europe's slaughterhouse. For these were not simply occupied countries: they were supposed to be the nucleus of a new German empire outlined in the so-called Master Plan for the East (*Generalplan Ost*) developed in the RSHA between 1940 and 1942. This programme for wholesale ethnic cleansing and colonization envisaged an extension of militarily secured German *Lebensraum* to the edge of the Urals. International law was violated by the dismemberment of states and the ruthless war against their allegedly dangerous but racially 'inferior' peoples: the destruction of their elites, the degradation of their non-Jewish populations, and the extermination of their Jewish inhabitants (see Chapter 9). Bearing the brunt of all this, the Poles were nullified as a state and a people, with Himmler masterminding this vision as Hitler's 'Commissioner for the Strengthening of the German Nation'. Western districts—where 85 per cent of the population was Polish and even Polish Jews outnumbered Germans—were annexed to the Reich, to be hastily Germanized by the resettlement of ethnic Germans. A Jewish reservation was planned for the east; and between them lay a residual dependency, the General Government ruled by Hans