

A critical appraisal of Adolf Hitler's Reichstag speech on September 1, 1939

On the first of September 1939, Adolf Hitler delivered a speech to the Reichstag announcing that Germany had invaded Poland¹. This speech marked the official commencement of the Second World War and served as Hitler's justification for German military action. We can look at this as a primary source to view Nazi rhetoric, ideological framing, and German propaganda through a historical lens. It has been debated by historians as to whether it was a speech that Hitler believed would absolve him of blame for the invasion or whether it was political posturing done to build the components for war. They used the frame of whether it was ideological or opportunistic. Hugh Trevor Roper argued that Hitler's foreign policy was driven by a 'consistent and coherent purpose that remained unchanged from the beginning'². However, A.J.P Taylor challenged this interpretation, he argued that it was not necessarily a fixed plan but was a pragmatic response to the circumstances, he claimed that 'Hitler was a statesman in the tradition of German foreign policy'³. This debate is vital as it raises the question of whether the speech given in 1939 was reflecting genuine strategic reasons for military operation or if it was merely propaganda designed to legitimise Hitler's notion for war. Critically we will look how the speech was delivered to present a biased position that essentially allowed Hitler to justify his brutality and increasing volatility towards the international community and as a result the commencement of World War 2.

This first discussion point when appraising this speech is first recognising who delivered the speech. Adolf Hitler was the Fuhrer and Chancellor of Nazi Germany. As the head of state Hitler created a totalitarian state often exercising control over political messaging and the press. Hitler's speeches are renowned being carefully crafted and designed to shape the public's perception of topics and reinforce ideological narratives

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The speech is a primary source as it was produced by a central historical figure from the historical event. It provides direct evidence of how the Nazis justified using military force. However, its delivery shows a controlled environment supporting the potential narrative that it was in fact propaganda.

¹ Adolf Hitler, 'Address by Adolf Hitler to the Reichstag Announcing the Invasion of Poland', 1 September 1939, *Avalon Project*, Yale Law School

<https://avalon.law.yale.edu/wwii/gp2.asp> [accessed 19th February 2026].

² H. R. Trevor-Roper, *Hitler's War Directives 1939-1945* (London: Sidgwick & Jackson, 1964), p. 7.

³ A. J. P. Taylor, *The Origins of the Second World War* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1961), p. 44.

⁴ Ian Kershaw, *Hitler, 1936-1945: Nemesis* (London: Penguin, 2001), pp. 81-83.

The purpose of the speech is clear. Hitler wanted to justify Germany's invasion of Poland. Hitler framed Germany as a victim claiming on several occasions throughout the speech that he made 'endless attempts ... for a peaceful clarification'⁵. This presented Hitler as sympathetic to the German people as they could believe he was trying his best to restore the conversation to a peaceful situation. Richard Overy argues that the Nazi leaders "consistently portrayed German expansion as defensive and necessary in order to maintain popular support for the regime".⁶ Whilst this is still propaganda and is planned to shape opinion it is done to defend what the Nazis may have believed were justified military acts.

This, however, is directly contradicted by Hitler's use of the word 'diktat'. Hitler was using a word with negative connotations to anger the German people. The use of the word Diktat regarding the Treaty of Versailles supports the idea this was politically crafted speech to increase support for the military action and eventually the war. Diktat means 'an order or decree by someone in power without popular consent'⁷. Identifying that the treaty was in fact an order given to the German people by the victorious WW2 Countries allows Hitler to stoke the flames of division, this in turn allowed him to distract the German people away from his actions and towards the "unfairness" of the treaty. Hitler doing this lends further to the idea that the speech is propaganda rather than justifying war as he was actively trying to shape people's opinion.

Furthermore, we need to look at the audience, The immediate audience to the speech was the Reichstag. If you believed it was a purely defensive move you could argue that Hitler chose to give the speech to the Reichstag as a symbol of his belief. He presented the idea that this was the government protecting Germany and not just Hitler choosing violence.

Alternatively, at this point in history the Reichstag no longer existed as a democratic institution and due to the enabling act of 1933, Hitler ruled by decree⁸. One could argue that if this was meant to be propaganda why would Hitler present it to an echo chamber. It would be more effective had it been delivered as a public speech, the very thing that Hitler rose to prominence doing,

⁵ Hitler, 'Address by Adolf Hitler to the Reichstag', 1 September 1939

⁶ Richard Overy, *The Dictators: Hitler's Germany and Stalin's Russia* (London: Penguin, 2004), p. 181.

⁷ 'Diktat', *Oxford English Dictionary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).

⁸ 'Reichstag Fire Decree', *Holocaust Encyclopedia*, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/reichstag-fire-decree#translation-1> [accessed 12 March 2026].

However, as Claudia Koonz notes “Nazi propaganda was carefully tailored”⁹ meaning that the immediate audience being satisfied with the speech allowed the German people to accept the speech undeniably. No-one in the governing chamber had contested to it meaning it felt more legitimate. Had it been in an uncontrolled environment such as a public speech it ran security risks, The Anti-Nazi groups were starting to form and could cause trouble which could cause people to question the legitimacy of the violence as well as the legitimacy of Hitler’s own premiership. Avoiding these potential hiccups allowed for the Nazi party to seem cool and calm allowing them to spread the speech far and wide as a positive notion.

Next, we will discuss the actual content, on several occasions in the speech Hitler tries to convey that this was a last resort, that he only chose to do this because his hands were tied by Poland. Hitler justifies Germany's actions as defence by discussing how the Nazi party pursued peaceful revisions of Versailles, thus justifying the idea that he tried peace first. Hitler then points out that Poland acted aggressively towards ethnic Germans and that this forced Germany to react with military action, these claims reflect Gerhard Weinberg’s theory that it was the Nazi party trying to systematically present aggression as a defensive necessity¹⁰. This in turn increases the validity of the act as people begin to agree with the reasoning.

However, to appraise this critically it is important to note that the speech missed out Germany’s secret agreement with the Soviet Union. The Nazi-Soviet pact was a protocol that divided parts of Eastern Europe into German and Soviet spheres of influence and stated “In the event of territorial and political rearrangement of the areas belonging to the Polish state, the spheres of influence of Germany and the USSR shall be bounded approximately by the lines of the rivers Narev, Vistula and San.”¹¹ The protocol demonstrates that Germany had not only thought of invading Poland but had planned what would occur when they did. Using this protocol as a primary source increases evidence that the Germans carefully curated the original speech as a way of increasing division and increasing support for the inevitable war. The omission of this in the speech proves that it was curated to show the Nazi party in a sympathetic light and that the invasion was strategically arranged rather than a spontaneous response.

It is worthy of note that some historians such as A.J.P Taylor¹² denies views the incident as proof of Hitler being a genius tactician. Taylor theorised that the plan wasn’t the

⁹ Claudia Koonz, *The Nazi Conscience* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2003), p. 42.

¹⁰ Gerhard L. Weinberg, *A World at Arms: A Global History of World War II* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 28.

¹¹ ‘Secret Additional Protocol of the Nazi–Soviet Pact’, 23 August 1939, *Avalon Project*, Yale Law School https://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/addsepro.asp [accessed 12 March 2026].

¹² A. J. P. Taylor, *The Origins of the Second World War*, p. 103

intended course of action, but that Hitler was wise enough as a tactician to have a backup plan so when he confronted Poland for their abuse of Germans, he could react swiftly if the talks did not go well.

Throughout the speech Hitler utilises several propaganda techniques. However, the disagreement between historians is not what he uses or how he uses them but the impact that they were meant to have.

For example, Hitler used a victimhood narrative such as using the word 'diktat' and portraying the German people as being wronged by the Polish's actions. This aligns with Ian Kershaw's view that Hitler consistently used narratives to mobilise support.¹³ Whereas A.J.P Taylor contends that Hitler's early policies were not unreasonable within the context of diplomacy and matched the general feeling of the German people.¹⁴

Another device used by the Nazi's was emotional appeal and emotional language. They chose words carefully referencing Germans suffering to evoke an emotional response from the general population.

The next area to look at is its reliability. The speech is reliable evidence that the Nazi party used propaganda to evoke specific responses from the general German population even if historians disagree with how the propaganda was meant to be interpreted. However, it must be identified that it is unreliable when it comes to the facts.

Historians showed that Germany staged provocation to justify their invasion, the Gleiwitz incident involved German forces staging an attack to allow Poland to take the blame, this supports Hugh Trevor Roper's argument that Nazi policy was not driven by defensive necessity but specific aggression.¹⁵

Historians disagree on whether Hitler followed a coherent plan and whether he had mastered a tactical behemoth or whether luck had been on his side and he was able to use it for his own efforts. Trevor-Roper¹⁶ and Kershaw¹⁷ argue that Hitler was driven by long-term ideological goals including expanding territory and racial conquest whereas

¹³ Ian Kershaw, *Hitler, 1889–1936: Hubris* (London: Penguin, 1998), p. 478

¹⁴ A. J. P. Taylor, *The Origins of the Second World War*, pp. 44–46.

¹⁵ H. R. Trevor-Roper, *Hitler's War Directives 1939–1945*, p. 7.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, p.8.

¹⁷ Ian Kershaw, *Hitler, 1936–1945: Nemesis*, p. 214.

Taylir argued that Hitler reacted to circumstances and his speech was purely shoring up to the German people the idea that Hitler had made the right decision.

More recent scholarships such as Evans argues that ideological expansion was so central to Nazi policy that it is difficult to believe Hitler was only reacting.¹⁸

The limitations and values the speech has are finely balanced. The speech unashamedly reflects propaganda rather than objective truth and omits information that would present the Nazi party in a bad light. It reflects just one single position (Hitler's views) and was delivered in a controlled environment. All these points widely direct Historians to the view that the speech was purely political and is biased at the core.

However it would be remiss not to identify how valuable it is in its insight into Nazi propaganda, you can disagree over its intended emotional impact (defensive or raising aggression) but both sides of the debate understand that it was propaganda created by the Nazi party to illicit specific emotions. It demonstrates how the Nazi party validates its aggression. The speech itself also represents a critical historic movement, had this speech not been done in a controlled environment, had it not been made at all, it is entirely possible that the German people may not have believed the invasion of Poland was unavoidable and may have led to the second world war never occurring.

In conclusion, Hitler's Reichstag speech is a crucial primary source for understanding the symptoms of the Second World War. It reveals how the Nazi government justified its invasion of Poland and mobilised public support for the World War.

However, for us to understand and hold value to the historical importance of the speech we must critically evaluate it. The speech reflects German propaganda rather than cold hard truth. Other historical evidence demonstrates that whilst there was some truth in Hitler's speech – it left crucial information out.

Debating why the speech was made is also of importance understanding whether the speech was made to drive ideological goals or whether the invasion was purely just defensive necessity, the speech broadly supports the former. It is not just the content that demonstrates this theory but also what is missing, specifically, the missing Germany-USSR pact. Therefore, whilst the speech is unequivocally highly valuable as a

¹⁸ Richard J. Evans, *The Third Reich at War* (London: Penguin, 2006), pp. 1–3.

primary source as evidence of Naz rhetoric it is not an accurate account of historical events.

This proves the point that the source is reliable in showing how the Nazi party stirred up emotional reactions and support for the war, but it doesn't prove whether they were doing it to stir up violence or whether they truly believed they were justifying just actions.

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