

An analysis of Adolf Hitler's speech to the Reichstag on 1 September 1939

Introduction

On 1 September 1939, German Chancellor Adolf Hitler delivered a speech to the Reichstag in Berlin, shortly after ordering German forces to invade Poland. The speech was aimed at the German people and other European governments to justify his decision to invade. However, the speech cannot be accepted at face value. Delivered at the precise moment Germany launched its invasion of Poland, it primarily served as a propaganda tool intended to justify German aggression and depict the war as a defensive response to foreign provocation. By analysing the author, context, content, and omissions of the speech, this essay will also argue that Hitler deliberately exploited historical grievances and distorted events to legitimise Nazi expansionism and to garner both domestic and international support.

Author and Purpose

Adolf Hitler, the leader of the National Socialist German Workers' Party (Nazis), became Chancellor of Germany in 1933¹.

By 1 September 1939, Hitler was the undisputed Führer² of Germany and the leader of the Nazi state apparatus. With this also came the leadership of the German military, which had sworn an oath of allegiance to him in 1935.

I swear by God this holy oath, that I will render to Adolf Hitler, Führer of the German Reich and People, Supreme Commander of the Armed Forces, unconditional obedience, and that I am ready, as a brave soldier, to risk my life at any time for this oath.³

Hitler also exercised control over the influential propaganda ministry, which was headed by Josef Goebbels. This organisation disseminated information through various channels to influence public opinion in Germany and across European and global audiences. This provokes questions regarding the content and reliability of the

¹ The Wiener Holocaust Library, 'Hitler Becomes Chancellor', *The Holocaust Explained*, <https://www.theholocaustexplained.org/the-nazi-rise-to-power/the-nazi-rise-to-power/hitler-becomes-chancellor> [assessed 11 March 2026]

² The Editors of *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 'Führer', *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 21 January 2025, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Fuhrer> (accessed 3 March 2026).

³ United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 'German Military Oaths: Background', *Holocaust Encyclopedia*, <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/german-military-oath> [accessed 11 March 2026].

speech. As previously noted, the speech was delivered in response to the invasion of Poland and the onset of the Second World War. Hitler utilised it to justify his actions and emphasised what he perceived as the issues faced by Germany and its citizens, which he attributed to what he considered unfair treatment since the conclusion of the First World War. Throughout the speech, significant emphasis is placed on the Treaty of Versailles⁴, signed by Germany in 1919, which Hitler derogatorily referred to as the 'Versailles Diktat'⁵.

Therefore, the purpose of the speech was not only to explain Germany's invasion of Poland but also to justify his actions and garner support from the German public and other audiences around Europe. By portraying Germany as a country that had been treated unfairly after the First World War, Hitler attempted to make the invasion appear necessary and his actions reasonable. As a result, the speech's reliability is limited because it was delivered by a political leader whose regime used propaganda to influence public opinion rather than to present an unbiased account of events.

Historical Context

During the years before his speech, Hitler took several significant actions that heavily influenced his later decision to invade Poland and initiate the Second World War. In March 1938, Germany annexed Austria in the 'Anschluss'⁶. In September 1938, the 'Munich Agreement'⁷ was signed with Nevill Chamberlain the British Prime Minister, which awarded Germany the Sudetenland, then part of Czechoslovakia. In March 1939, the Czech region of 'Bohemia and Moravia'⁸ was annexed in direct contravention of the 1938 Agreement, justified not only by the presence of a small German population within its borders but also by false reports of their mistreatment. His apparent hatred of communism led to his most cynical pre-war move, the signing of the 'Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact'⁹ in August 1939, just before the Invasion of Poland.

These developments are essential when analysing the speech, as they reveal how Hitler's public claims differed from the actual Nazi foreign policy. While the speech

⁴ The Editors of *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 'Treaty of Versailles', *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 13 January 2026, <https://www.britannica.com/event/Treaty-of-Versailles-1919> (accessed 4 March 2026).

⁵ Yale Law School, *Address By Adolf Hitler – September 1 1939*. [2008] <https://avalon.law.yale.edu/wwii/gp2.asp>. [accessed 4 March 2026]

⁶ Birgit Johler and others, 'A Local History of the 1938 "Anschluss" and Its Memory: Vienna Servitengasse', in *1914*, ed. by Günter Bischof, Ferdinand Karhofer, and Samuel R. Williamson, Austria-Hungary, the Origins, and the First Year of World War I (University of New Orleans Press, 2014), xxiii, pp. 293–318, doi:10.2307/j.ctt1n2txft.17.

⁷ Bernadotte E. Schmitt, "Munich", *The Journal of Modern History*, 25.2 (1953), pp. 166–80 <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/1875323>>.

⁸ J. R, 'Czechoslovakia during the War: II—Bohemia and Moravia', *Bulletin of International News*, 21.23 (1944), pp. 943–50 <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/25643711>>.

⁹ Yanina Karpenkina, 'The Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact and the Beginning of World War II as Perceived by Soviet Citizens: New Sources and Interpretations', *Russian History* (Leiden, The Netherlands), 51.1 (2024), pp. 1–27, doi:<https://doi.org/10.30965/18763316-12340071>.

presents Germany as responding defensively to external pressures, but the sequence of events leading up to September 1939 clearly demonstrates a pattern of aggressive territorial expansion and the breach of negotiated agreements. The Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact contradicts Hitler’s narrative, since the secret protocol of the agreement planned the division of Poland between Germany and the Soviet Union. This clearly shows that the invasion was strategically planned rather than coerced.

Content Analysis

The style of his speech, like most of Hitler's speeches, was, as Michael Blain assessed:

Hitler’s style, like Nietzsche’s, is essentially hyperbolic. Nietzsche’s objectives were philosophical, to make us question “truths” and to do it an unforgettable way. Hitler’s objectives were political, to create a “fighting movement” and establish “a Thousand Year Reich”¹⁰

Hitler’s rhetoric often used emotionally charged and exaggerated language. He depicted Germany’s circumstances as a situation of unbearable suffering:

For months we have been suffering under the torture of a problem which the Versailles Diktat created, a problem which has deteriorated until it has become intolerable for us¹¹

He tried to appeal to widespread resentment among Germans who felt humiliated by the post–First World War settlement. This rhetorical approach allowed him to link contemporary political actions with long-standing national grievances, thus framing the invasion of Poland not as an act of aggression but as a necessary correction of historical injustice.

Another part of his speech focused on Danzig, a former German city under the League of Nations¹² control as stipulated in the Treaty of Versailles.

Hitler claimed that Germans were being unfairly treated as ‘All German minorities living there have been ill-treated in the most distressing manner’¹³

In fact, there was limited evidence of systematic persecution of ethnic German groups in Danzig or Poland at the scale he described.

Further in his speech, Hitler states:

You know the proposals that I have made to fulfil the necessity of restoring German sovereignty over German territories. You know the endless attempts I

¹⁰ Michael Blain, ‘Fighting Words: What We Can Learn from Hitler’s Hyperbole’, *Symbolic Interaction*, 11.2 (1988), pp. 257–76, doi:10.1525/si.1988.11.2.257.

¹¹ Yale Law School, *Address By Adolf Hitler – September 1 1939*. [2008] <https://avalon.law.yale.edu/wwii/gp2.asp>. [accessed 5 March 2026] p.1

¹² Ann Byers, *The Treaty of Versailles and the League of Nations*, Interwar Years, First edition. (Cavendish Square Publishing, 2018).

¹³ Yale Law School, *Address By Adolf Hitler – September 1 1939*. [2008] p.1

made for a peaceful clarification and understanding of the problem of Austria, and later of the problem of the Sudetenland, Bohemia and Moravia. It was all in vain.¹⁴

In this part, he tries to present himself as both a victim and a defender of German interests. By claiming that he made “endless attempts” to resolve issues peacefully, he implies that Germany was forced into action rather than choosing war.

This gives the impression that Germany was unfairly treated, while overlooking the aggressive expansionist policies of the Nazi regime in the late 1930s.

In another part of the speech, he tries to tell his audience that Poland was the aggressor, but this is again untrue.

The Germans staged an incident at the Polish border to emphasise Polish aggression towards Germany, as Richard Overy wrote:

To give a spurious justification for war, a special operation was mounted by Himmler's deputy and head of the Security Police, Reinhard Heydrich. Early in August he had called a number of senior SS officers to a meeting in the ballroom of the Hotel Oberschlesien in the small German town of Gleiwitz, near the Polish border. He told them that a way had to be found to show that Poland was the aggressor when war broke out.¹⁵

All the examples in the speech show how Hitler tried to portray Germany as the victim rather than the aggressor. By accusing Poland of starting the conflict, he aimed to justify the invasion to his audience. The staged incident at Gleiwitz suggests that the Nazi regime was ready to manipulate events to support this claim, raising questions about the reliability of what Hitler was telling his audience in his speech.

Omissions

Another important aspect to consider when analysing the speech is what Hitler chooses not to mention.

The speech makes no reference to the potential deaths and destruction that going to war could and would cause Germany. It also does not mention the secret protocol contained in the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact to divide Poland with the Soviet Union.¹⁶

Another aspect of Nazi ideology that was also ignored in the speech was the planned persecution of the Jews and other ethnic groups,¹⁷ which would later develop into the Holocaust.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Richard Overy, 'The Summer Ends, The War Begins', *New England Review* (1990-), 31.2 (2010), pp. 101–08 <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/25699502>>.

¹⁶ Geoffrey Roberts, 'The Soviet Decision for a Pact with Nazi Germany', *Soviet Studies*, 44.1 (1992), pp. 57–78 <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/152247>>.

¹⁷ Christopher R. Browning, 'Nazi Ghettoization Policy in Poland: 1939–41', *Central European History*, 19.4 (1986), pp. 343–68 <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/4546081>>.

These issues were probably left out because they would have undermined the argument Hitler wanted to make.

The destruction caused by war could have decreased support among the German public, especially given the memories of the First World War only 20 years earlier. Another omission from the speech was the planned partition of Poland with the Soviet Union, which would have revealed that the invasion was already organised and might have cast doubt on Hitler's supposed hatred for Bolshevism, as he detailed in his book *Mein Kampf*¹⁸, written while in prison in 1924.

The underlying Nazi ideology behind the Holocaust was also omitted, especially the regime's plans after the invasion, including the intended persecution and extermination of groups such as Jews, Slavs, and Roma, which were part of Nazi racial policy.¹⁹

All these omissions were likely because they would not have helped justify the invasion to his audience. By leaving them out, Hitler was able to portray the invasion as necessary rather than exposing the regime's true intentions.

Audience

The audience in the Reichstag on 1st September 1939 was mainly composed of Nazi party loyalists, which would have meant Hitler's speech was enthusiastically received, as could be heard from the Radio broadcast.²⁰

As the broadcast was transmitted live on the radio and later featured in a newsreel, most Germans would have heard it on their 'Volksempfänger' (People's Receiver).²¹ These inexpensive radios were widely distributed among the German population to help spread Nazi propaganda and ideology.

The broadcast would also have been heard in parts of the annexed regions of the Sudetenland, Bohemia and Moravia, as well as in Austria and the border region of Poland that was invaded that morning.

The extensive reach of the broadcast meant that the speech was heard by a very large audience both within Germany and in nearby regions. Foreign governments and journalists were probably also monitoring German radio broadcasts, so the speech may have been intended to sway international opinion.

As a result, it helped shape opinions by presenting the invasion as justified and encouraging support for Germany's actions.

¹⁸ Adolf Hitler and Ralph Manheim, *Mein Kampf*, [New ed.]. (Hutchinson, 1974).

¹⁹ Jürgen Matthäus, 'Defining "The Other" in Nazi Racial Policy', *Journal of Genocide Research* (Abingdon), 27.3 (2025), pp. 534–36, doi:10.1080/14623528.2025.2531616.

²⁰ Imperial War Museum, *Hitler Poland Speech* [2026] <http://www.iwm.org.uk> {accessed 10 March 2026}

²¹ Wolfgang König, 'The Volksempfänger and the Radio Receiver Industry: Politics and Economics in the Third Reich', *Vierteljahrschrift Für Sozial- Und Wirtschaftsgeschichte*, 90.3 (2003), pp. 269–89.

Conclusion

The years before the invasion and Hitler's subsequent speech saw him pursue an aggressive policy of annexing various parts of Europe, which he claimed had been taken from Germany in 1919. In his speech, the persistent claim that Germans and he himself were victims was a false narrative, but it was effectively used as a propaganda tool to garner support for his actions and justify Germany's behaviour. The lack of substantial opposition, not only in the Reichstag, which was mainly composed of party members, but also the widespread fear of retribution within Nazi Germany, helped create the illusion that the German people supported war. Therefore, the speech is valuable for understanding how Hitler attempted to justify the invasion of Poland and influence both German and international audiences. It reveals the arguments and narratives employed by the Nazi regime at the start of the war. However, it must be approached with caution, as it offers a false and highly biased account aimed at supporting Nazi propaganda rather than providing a full or accurate explanation of Germany's actions. Finally, the omissions in the speech concerning the probable death and destruction in Germany and among its people, as well as the systematic genocide of Jews and other groups, suggest that Hitler may have realised his policies, if fully outlined, might have undermined support for the war in Germany and among his allies.

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