**History 12**

**Was Hitler responsible for the outbreak of the Second World War?**

The conventional historical interpretation is that Hitler and Nazi Germany bear the primary responsibility for the Second World War. However, in his controversial book *The Origins of the Second World War*, British historian A. J. P. Taylor challenged this traditional view. Taylor claimed that Hitler did not plan to go to war but was simply a politician trying to solve the historic German problem of security and to right the wrongs of the Treaty of Versailles. Taylor’s viewpoint is countered by historian H. R. Trevor-Roper. He argues that Taylor’s analysis and interpretation of the events leading to war are historically false.

**Prior Reading:**

**Global Forces: p. 30-48; p. 52-68**

**Student Workbook: p. 13-22; p. 47-59; p. 79-82**

**Map History of Modern World: p. 30-35; p. 38-41; p. 52-59**

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_A. J. P. Taylor\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

Most people think that the Germans wanted international equality – a state free from all restrictions on its armed forces including all Germans. This is correct. But the inevitable consequences of fulfilling this wish was that Germany would become the dominant state in Europe. Again, many people including many Germans, said that Germany merely wanted to reverse the verdict of the First World War. This is also correct. But they misunderstood what was implied. They thought that it meant only undoing the consequences of defeat – no more reparations, the recovery of the European territory and the colonies lost by the Treaty of Versailles. It means much more than this: not only that things should be arranged as though Germany had not been defeated, but that they should be arranged as though they had won.

We now know…what the Germans would have arranged if they had won the First World War. It was a Europe indistinguishable from Hitler’s empire at its greatest extent, including even a Poland and a Ukraine cleared of their native inhabitants. Hitler…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…

I fear I may not have emphasized the profound forces. Of course there was a general climate of feeling in Europe of the 1930s, which made war more likely. In particular, military men – in Great Britain and France as much as in Germany – treated war as inevitable. This was quite right from their point of view. It is the job of military men to prepare for war and indeed to assume that it is coming. But their talk washed over on to the politicians, as it still does, and they, too, began to regard war as inevitable…

We do right to ask: why did war seem likely in the 1930s? But wars, however likely, break out at a specific moment and presumably over some specific issue. On 1 September 1939 the German armies invaded Poland. On 3 September Great Britain and France declared war on Germany. These two events began a war, which subsequently – though not until 1941 – became the Second World War….I think we are entitled to ask: why did Hitler invade Poland when he did? Why did Great Britain and France declare war on Germany? These questions may seem trivial, but historians spend much of their time on trivialities, and some of them believe that only by adding up trivialities can they safely arrive at generalizations….

Source: Reprinted from *Past and Present* (April 1965), by permission of the author and *Past and Present* (Article: ‘War Origins’ p. 110)

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_H. R. Trevor-Roper\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

The thesis of [A. J. P. Taylor’s book *The Origins of the Second World War*] is perfectly clear. According to Mr. Taylor, Hitler was an ordinary German statesman in the tradition of [chancellors] Stresemann and Bruning, differing from them not in methods (he was made chancellor for ‘solidly democratic reasons’) nor in ideas (he had no ideas) but only in the greater patience and stronger nerves with which he took advantage of the objective situation in Europe. His policy, in so far as he had a policy, was no different from that of his predecessors. He sought neither war nor annexation of territory. He merely sought to restore Germany’s ‘natural’ position in Europe, which had been artificially altered by the Treaty of Versailles: a treaty which, for that reason, ‘lacked moral validity from the start.’ Such a restoration might involve the recovery of lost German territory like Danzig, but it did not entail the direct government even of Austria or the Sudetenland, let alone Bohemia. Ideally, all that Hitler required was that Austria, Czechoslovakia and other small Central European states, while remaining independent, should become political satellites of Germany.

Of course, it did not work out thus. But that, we are assured, was not Hitler’s fault. For Hitler, according to Mr. Taylor, never took the initiative in politics. He ‘did not make plans – for the world conquest or anything else. He assumed that others would provide opportunities and that he would seize them.’ And that is what happened….The last thing [Hitler] wanted was war. The war of nerves was ‘the only war he understood and liked….

Do statesmen really never make history? Are they, all of them, always ‘too absorbed by events to follow a preconceived pan?’ Certainly Hitler himself did not think so. He regarded himself as a thinker, a practical philosopher, the…evil creator of a new age of history. And since he published a blueprint of the policy which he intended to carry out, ought we not at least to look at this blueprint just in case it had some relevance to his policy? After all, the reasons why the majority of the British people reluctantly changed, between 1936 and 1939, from the views of Neville Chamberlain and and Mr. Taylor to the views of Winston Churchill was their growing conviction that Hitler meant what he said: that he was aiming….at world conquest.

Let us consider briefly the programme which Hitler laid down for himself. It was a programme of Eastern colonization, entailing a war of conquest against Russia. If it were successfully carried out, it would leave Germany dominant in Eurasia and able to conquer the West at will. In order to carry it out, Hitler needed a restored German army which since it must be powerful enough to conquer Russia, must also be powerful enough to conquer the West if that should be necessary.

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.

I think Mr. Taylor’s book utterly erroneous. In spite of his statements about ‘historical discipline,’ he selects, suppresses and arranges evidence on to principle other than the needs of his thesis; and that thesis, that Hitler was a traditional statesman, of limited aims, merely responding to a given situation, rests on no evidence at all, ignores essential evidence, and is, in my opinion, demonstrably false.

Source: E. M. Robertson (ed.), *The Origins of the Second World War: Historical Interpretations*, 1978, Macmillan Press Ltd., pp. 83-104 reproduced with permission of Palgrave Macmillan.

**‘One Pager’ (1-2pages….see rubric)**

* Decide which of the viewpoints you tend to support and explain why. If you agree with neither, state the position you do support and explain it. Be sure to use specific information from the textbook, the readings, and other sources.