

### Debating ideology and foreign policy in the 1930s

Many of the debates associated with the origins of the Second World War in Europe revolve around the complicated relationship between ideology and foreign policy. Obviously, it is impossible to make any sense of the diplomacy of Germany, Russia and Italy without some reference to ideology, but the real question is: to what degree were Hitler, Stalin, Mussolini and their advisers driven by the doctrines of Nazism, communism and Fascism? Was ideology really the principal driving force behind policy? Or did these statesmen often break free from their doctrines in order to play the 'perpetual' game of power politics with greater tactical freedom? For instance, the British historian A. J. P. Taylor in his *The Origins of the Second World War* (London, 1961) sparked a bitter debate by describing Hitler as the 'supreme opportunist' in diplomacy. Hitler was a typical German statesman, Taylor argued, who sought to make the Reich dominant in Europe through the accumulation of power. As Taylor had intended, his dismissal of Hitler's beliefs as mere rhetoric designed to whip up popular sentiment at home shocked many historians. However, Taylor's challenge meant that his critics were forced to reconcile Hitler's remarkably consistent and often-stated views about race and living space with the fact that he did not have a fixed timetable for the completion of his programme.

The debate about the role of ideology is not restricted to the policies of the revisionists. Although Britain, the United States and France did not espouse monolithic, all-embracing ideologies, there is also no doubt that statesmen such as Chamberlain, Roosevelt and Daladier were in part guided by the essentials of liberal democracy as well as national values and identities. Indeed, some historians have argued that anti-Bolshevism in the West played a decisive role in blocking the formation of an anti-Hitler coalition between France, Britain and the Soviet Union. French and British statesmen were so blinded by their hatred and suspicion of the Soviet Union, according to this argument, that they failed to pursue the 'realistic' course of aligning themselves with Stalin against Hitler before it was too late.

Students should pay careful attention to the way in which arguments about ideology are framed. Normally, key personalities are categorized in one of two ways. First, there are the ideologues, who cannot grasp the dictates of balance-of-power politics because they cannot throw off their ideological blinkers. Second, there are the so-called realists, who transcend ideology and see the 'eternal' truths of power politics. So, for example, some argue that 'realists' such as Stalin and Churchill called for an alliance against Nazi Germany because they were not unduly influenced by their aversion to either capitalism or communism, while Chamberlain and Daladier could not overcome their hostility to communism and thus refused to consider an anti-German alliance with Russia. Here, the tacit assumptions are that there are 'eternal' truths about international politics and that human beings are capable of escaping their own world-views. Both of these assumptions, though widely shared by historians, are questionable.