

Breaking the Versailles Treaty - 1934-1937

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Hitler ordered the army to be trebled in size, from the 100,000 man Versailles Treaty limit, to 300,000 men by October of 1934. This was initially ordered to be carried out under the utmost secrecy. Admiral Raeder, the chief of the navy, was given orders to begin the construction of large warships, way above the maximum size decreed by the Versailles Treaty. The construction of submarines, also forbidden by the Treaty, had already begun secretly by building parts in foreign dockyards ready for assembly. In addition, Goering had also been tasked by Hitler with the training of air force pilots and the design of military aircraft.

In March 1935 Hitler decided to take a gamble and test the resolve of Britain and France by authorising Goering to reveal to a British official the existence of the Luftwaffe (German Air Force). Even though this was a direct challenge to the Versailles Treaty, there was little reaction (its existence was already known anyway). Thus Hitler was given encouragement to take further steps. A few days later, Hitler took a further gamble and declared openly the introduction of military service and the creation of an army with 36 divisions (approx. 1/2 million men). Again, a weak reaction from Britain and France allowed Hitler the comfort of knowing that his gamble had paid off.

At the same time that Hitler was increasing the strength of the armed forces, he was also following a policy of making speeches proclaiming a desire for peace and the folly of war. He also announced that he had no intention of annexing Austria or re-militarising the Rhineland and would respect all the territorial clauses of the Versailles Treaty. Hitler also announced that he was prepared to mutually disarm the heaviest of weapons and limit the strength of the German Navy. A quote from Hitler at that time: "Whoever lights the torch of war in Europe can wish for nothing but chaos."