

World War II: Causes (1919–1939)

You Mean World War I Was Not “The War to End All Wars”?

Causes of World War II

The death and destruction of World War I was so horrible that it was called “the war to end all wars.” Yet, the agreement to end World War I did not resolve the problems of the world and, according to some historians, lead directly to the next **catastrophe**: World War II. The major causes of World War II were numerous. They include the impact of the Treaty of Versailles following WWI, the worldwide economic depression, failure of **appeasement**, the rise of **militarism** in Germany and Japan, and the failure of the League of Nations.

Treaty of Versailles

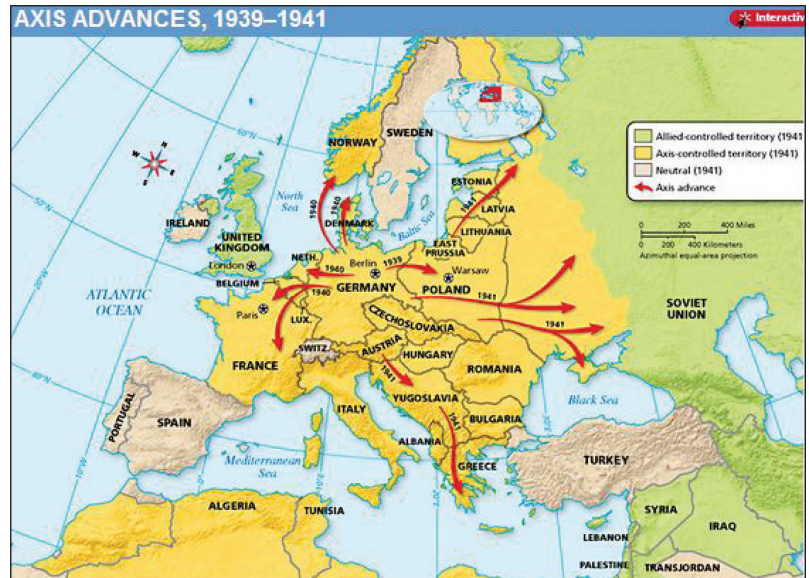
Following World War I, the victorious Allied Powers met to decide Germany’s future. Germany would be forced to sign the Treaty of Versailles. Germany had to accept guilt for the war and to pay **reparations**. Germany lost territory and was prohibited from having a large military.

Economic Depression

The whole world was hit by an economic depression in the late 1920s. In a depression, economies shrink, trade is reduced, businesses close, prices fall, banks fail, and unemployment rises. Sometimes during a depression, people look for a strong political leader to resolve their problems. In 1933, Adolf Hitler became the leader of Germany by promising to restore German wealth and power.

Germany’s Militarism

Hitler immediately began secretly building up Germany’s army and weapons. Although Britain and France knew of Hitler’s actions, they thought a stronger Germany would stop the spread of Communism from Russia. In 1936 Hitler ordered German troops to enter the German-speaking areas of the Rhineland (France), Austria, and Czechoslovakia. At this point neither France nor Britain was prepared to go to war. In 1936, Hitler made **alliances** with Italy and Japan. The military alliance of Germany, Italy, and Japan was called the Axis Powers.



Map of Germany’s advancement
 Source: <http://mrshealyhistoryclass.wikispaces.com/file/view/WWIIIMapEurope%231.JPG/316812366/530x381/WWIIIMapEurope%231.JPG>



British Prime Minister Chamberlain holding up the Munich Peace Agreement
 Source: [http://www.historyonthenet.com/WW2/causes.htm#agreement with Hitler in 1938](http://www.historyonthenet.com/WW2/causes.htm#agreement%20with%20Hitler%20in%201938)

Failure of Appeasement

Appeasement meant agreeing to the demands of another nation in order to avoid conflict. During the 1930s, politicians in Britain and France began to believe that the Treaty of Versailles was unfair to Germany and that Hitler’s actions were understandable and justifiable. This belief, adopted by Britain, was the Policy of Appeasement. An example of appeasement was the Munich Agreement of September 1938. In the Agreement, Britain and France allowed Germany to **annex** areas in Czechoslovakia where German-speakers lived. Germany agreed not to invade the rest of Czechoslovakia or any other country. In March 1939, Germany broke its promise and invaded the rest of Czechoslovakia. Neither Britain nor France was prepared to take military action. Then, on September 1, 1939, German troops invaded Poland. Britain and France immediately declared war on Germany. World War II had begun in Europe.

Failure of the League of Nations

The League of Nations was an international organization set up in 1919 to keep world peace. It was intended that all countries would be members and that if there were disputes between countries, they could be settled by negotiation rather than by force. The League of Nations was a good idea, but ultimately a failure. Not all countries joined the league and the League had no army to prevent military aggression such as Italy's invasion of Ethiopia in Africa or Japan's invasion of Manchuria in China.

Japan's Militarism

In 1931, Japan was hit badly by the economic depression. Japanese people lost faith in the government. They turned to the army in order to find a solution to their economic problems. In order to produce more goods, Japan needed **natural resources** for its factories. The Japanese army invaded China, an area rich in minerals and resources. China asked for help from the League of Nations. Japan ignored the League of Nations and continued to occupy China and Korea. As Japan invaded other areas of South East Asia including Vietnam, the United States grew concerned about its territories in Asia, such as the Philippines and Guam. Japan felt that its expansion could be threatened by the United States military and attacked Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, in December 1941. World War II had begun in Asia.



Newspaper Reporting Pearl Harbor Attack
Source: <https://vintages-antiques-collectibles.knoji.com/ten-valuable-old-historical-newspapers/>

Key Vocabulary

Appeasement: giving in to another country's demands often in an effort to prevent war or other problems

Alliance: agreement between nations; often one nation agrees to defend another nation in time of war

Catastrophe: an event causing great and often sudden damage or suffering; a disaster

Reparations: payments for damages that occur during a war, usually paid by the losing side

Annex: to add or attach especially to something larger, sometimes done without permission

Natural resources: materials such as minerals, oil, or wood that come directly from nature and are used in the manufacturing process

Militarism: the belief that a country should maintain a strong military and be prepared to use it aggressively to defend or promote national interests

Quick Review

1. Which was NOT a reason for the start of World War II?

- A. Failure of Appeasement
- B. Failure of League of Nations
- C. Germany invaded Poland
- D. Strong economies throughout the world

2. What is the best title for the list?

- A. Munich Agreement
- B. Treaty of Versailles
- C. Sino Non-Aggression pact
- D. League of Nations

?

- Guilty for World War I
- Must pay reparations
- Loss of territory
- Must not form a military

3. The passage refers to _____?

- A. depression.
- B. appeasement.
- C. militarism.
- D. nationalism.

The military should dominate the political and social life of the nation, and the strength of the military is equal to the strength of a nation.

4. Identify and explain two to three causes of World War II.

Connection to Today

What It has been a century since the World War I. Is another world war possible today? What are some factors that could cause or prevent one from happening?

Resources

- ABC-CLIO
 • World War II
<http://worldhistory.abc-clio.com/Search/Display/310047?terms=world+war+two>
- Marshall Cavendish
 • World War II
<http://www.marshallcavendishdigital.com/encnav/World-War-II.28>