

Causes of World War II

It is blood which moves the wheels of history.

—Benito Mussolini (1914, before he became *Il Duce*, the Leader)

Essential Question: What were the causes and consequences of World War II?

The causes of World War II lay in the unresolved issues in the aftermath of World War I. Economic instability in the postwar economies of Europe led to civil unrest in Italy and Germany. In Italy, the rise of fascism was directly related to the downturn of the Italian economy that occurred after World War I. Benito Mussolini and his National Fascist Party came to power in 1922 because of their promises to renew the Italian economy and create another Italian empire in the Mediterranean and beyond. The peace settlement after World War I also placed unsustainable economic and political terms on Germany and instituted territorial distributions that took away resources and created resentment among the German population. Thus, the ideology associated with Italian fascism and militarism—as seen in the quotation above—spread to Germany, where Hitler and the Nazis adopted it.

The Path to War

Out of the context of the broad economic and political trends emerged **Adolf Hitler**. His extreme views on the superiority of the Aryan race and his vision of a great German civilization led him to persecute Jews and other minorities and to systematically seize land.

Rise of Nazism Following Germany's defeat in 1918, the democratically elected **Weimar Republic** replaced the monarchical rule of the kaiser. Under the terms of the Treaty of Versailles, the new German government not only had to pay billions in war reparations, but it also was not allowed to have an army. The Weimar Republic, appearing weak to the demoralized German people, became especially unpopular during the Great Depression.

The rolls of the unemployed swelled due to the weak German economy. Large numbers of young men, including many World War I veterans, found themselves with few job prospects. Such an environment fostered alienation and bitterness. Many Germans perceived the Weimar Republic to be too weak

to solve the country's problems, so they looked to right-wing political parties that promised strong action.

Hitler had declared his extreme anti-Semitic views in his book *Mein Kampf* ("My Struggle"), which he began writing in 1924 while in a Bavarian prison after a failed coup attempt. The National Socialist German Worker's Party, or the **Nazis**, came to power legally after the party did well in the 1932 parliamentary elections. In early 1933, the president of Germany, Paul von Hindenburg, invited Adolf Hitler to form a government as chancellor, which he did. Hindenburg died in 1934, giving Hitler the opening he needed to declare himself president.

Through manipulation, the Nazi Party instilled fear and panic in the German people, making them believe that they were in a state of emergency. For example, the Nazis staged a burning of the **Reichstag**, the German parliament building, and blamed radical extremists for the act. Using domestic security as justification, Hitler outlawed all other political parties and all forms of resistance to his rule.

Hitler openly promoted ultranationalism and **scientific racism**, a pseudoscientific theory that claimed that certain races were genetically superior to others. He also advanced an extreme form of **anti-Semitism**, or hostility toward Jews. He filled his speeches with accusations against German Jews, whom Hitler claimed were responsible for the nation's domestic problems. Nazi propaganda emphasized a need for a "pure" German nation of "**Aryans**," purged of "outsiders"—not only Jews, but also Slavs, communists, Roma (also known as Gypsies), and gay men and women. Hitler suggested that the only way for Germany to live up to its potential was to eliminate the corrupting influence of these groups, particularly the Jews.

Nuremberg Laws Hitler's anti-Jewish campaign began with laws designed to disenfranchise and discriminate against them. The **Nuremberg Laws**, passed in 1935, forbade marriage between Jews and gentiles (people who are not Jewish), stripped Jews of their citizenship, and unleashed a series of subsequent decrees that effectively pushed Jews to the margins of German society. German Jews, many of whom were successful in their careers and felt assimilated into German society, were shocked by the way they were being treated. Some Eastern European nations, such as Romania and Bulgaria, also passed laws discriminating against their Jewish citizens.

The Axis Powers Hitler then sought new allies to help him acquire *Lebensraum* (living space) for the new German empire. He did not try to hide his ambition to conquer the entire continent. Hitler's lust for land eventually brought the international community to the brink of war. He first formed a military pact with Fascist Italy, the **Rome-Berlin Axis**, in October 1936. In addition to their need for military support, the two countries shared a political ideology and economic interests. Germany then created a military alliance with Japan based on mutual distrust of communism, known as the **Anti-Comintern Pact**. The alliances among these three nations created the **Axis Powers**.

Kristallnacht Hitler's campaign to rid Germany of Jews predated his aggressive land grabs in Europe. His propaganda and the Nuremberg Laws successfully created an atmosphere of hostility, hatred, and distrust within Germany. This tension erupted one night in early November 1938. **Kristallnacht**, the "Night of the Broken Glass," produced anti-Jewish riots that ostensibly occurred in response to the assassination of a German diplomat by a Jewish teenager. Although it appeared to be a spontaneous burst of outrage on the part of the German citizenry, Nazi leaders had actually engineered the entire operation. The riots resulted in the deaths of more than 90 German Jews and the destruction of nearly every synagogue in Germany and some 7,000 Jewish shops. More than 30,000 Jews were dragged from their homes, arrested, and sent to concentration camps. Most of these prisoners were eventually released on orders to leave Germany, an option not given to later concentration camp prisoners.



Source: Center for Jewish History, New York City

Interior of a Berlin synagogue after it was set on fire during Kristallnacht, November 9, 1938.

Nazi Germany's Aggressive Militarism

The terms of the Treaty of Versailles severely limited the German military after World War I. Yet Hitler wanted a stronger military to acquire more land. In March 1935, he broke the treaty when he announced the creation of a German air force and a policy of conscription to enlarge the size of the army.

The Treaty of Versailles Under the treaty, a strip of land in the Rhineland 31 miles wide was set up as a buffer zone between Germany and France. Germany was not allowed to station troops there. Hitler broke the agreement,

sending German troops into the Rhineland on March 7, 1936. Both France and Britain protested this move, but they took no other action.

Some British believed that Hitler was the strong anticommunist leader that central Europe needed to keep order. Others were simply reluctant to return to war. So Britain followed a policy of **appeasement**, giving in to Germany's demands in hopes of keeping the peace. However, Germany's military expansion and its support of the fascist Spanish Nationalist government during the Spanish Civil War (1936–1939) indicated that Hitler was increasing his power. (Connect: Describe the connection between the militarism that led up to World War I and World War II. See Topic 7.2.)

German-Austrian Unification With his military revived and alliances in hand, Hitler felt confident about taking his next step in the creation of a new German empire, the **Third Reich**. His plan was to bring Austria, where he was born, under German rule. Hitler used the threat of invasion to pressure the Austrian chancellor into giving more power to the Austrian Nazi Party. As Hitler had planned, the Austrian Nazis then opened the door for German troops to occupy Austria with no resistance. With the **Anschluss** (political union), Austria officially became part of the Third Reich in March 1938.

Czechoslovakia The annexation of Austria was only the first step for Hitler. He wanted more. In September 1938, he issued a demand to Czechoslovakia for the border territory of the **Sudetenland**. Most of the people who lived in this region spoke German; Hitler argued that the area was a natural extension of his Aryan empire. The German leader met with the leaders of Britain, France, and Italy in Munich to discuss his demands. **Neville Chamberlain**, the British prime minister, again argued that a policy of appeasement would keep the peace and put an end to Hitler's demands for more land. The **Munich Agreement** allowed Hitler to annex the Sudetenland in return for a promise that Germany would not take over any more Czech territory. This was a fateful miscalculation. Hitler saw that the British were not willing to stand up to his illegal land grabs, emboldening him to seize control of all of Czechoslovakia with an armed invasion in 1939.

The Conflict over Poland Hitler next set his sights on the Polish port of **Danzig**. Although Germany did have some historical claims to the port, in reality, Hitler was merely looking for an excuse to invade Poland. Britain, in the meantime, had reached the end of its policy of appeasement and agreed to protect Poland from a German attack. Britain and France also reached out to the Soviet Union to form a stronger alliance against Germany.

Germany, however, was already in negotiations with the Soviets. With the signing of the **German-Soviet Nonaggression Pact** on August 23, 1939, the two nations pledged not to attack one another. During the negotiations for the pact, Hitler secretly offered Stalin control of eastern Poland and the Baltic States if Stalin would stand by during a German invasion of western Poland. With this assurance in hand, Germany invaded Poland on September 1, 1939, claiming that Poland had attacked first. Britain and France honored their agreement to protect Poland and declared war on Germany. These actions marked the official start of World War II in Europe.



Causes of World War II	
Diplomatic	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The imbalance of the Treaty of Versailles • Failure of appeasement • Failure of the League of Nations
Economic	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Global depression • The Treaty of Versailles
Political	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Japan's militarism • Germany's militarism and the rise of Hitler

Japan's Expansion in Asia

By the time Germany invaded Poland in 1939, Japan had already been moving aggressively against Korea and China for almost 50 years. In 1931, Japan had invaded Manchuria. After several months of fighting, it successfully created the state of Manchukuo under its control. Then, in 1937, a small incident in this region between Japanese troops and Chinese troops quickly escalated. Soon, Japan had launched a full-scale invasion of China. This marked the start of World War II in Asia.

KEY TERMS BY THEME		
<p>GOVERNMENT: People Adolf Hitler Neville Chamberlain</p> <p>GOVERNMENT: Geography Weimar Republic Sudetenland Danzig</p> <p>GOVERNMENT: Policies Nuremberg Laws Lebensraum Anschluss Munich Agreement</p>	<p>GOVERNMENT: Alliances Rome-Berlin Axis Anti-Comintern Pact Axis Powers German-Soviet Nonaggression Pact</p> <p>GOVERNMENT: Organizations Nazis Reichstag Third Reich</p>	<p>CULTURE: Beliefs and Ideas <i>Mein Kampf</i> scientific racism anti-Semitism Aryans appeasement</p> <p>SOCIETY: Kristallnacht</p>