

# The Causes of World War II

Some historians believe that World War II (1939-1942) was caused by the outcome of World War I (1914-1918). After Germany was defeated in World War I, the victorious Allied nations imposed harsh penalties on Germany through the Treaty of Versailles. Rather than comply with these penalties, Germany rebelled.

## World War I

World War I was caused by Germany's attempts to expand its empire. Kaiser Wilhelm II tried to expand the German empire into France, which dragged the rest of Europe, and the world, into war. The result was four years of military fighting and devastation in Europe from 1914-1918.

## Treaty of Versailles

When World War I ended with Germany's surrender, the leaders of the Allied countries (Britain and the Commonwealth countries, France and the United States) met at the Palace of Versailles in France in 1919. They drew up the Treaty of Versailles which officially ended World War I. In the Treaty, there were terms imposed upon Germany in four main areas:

- 1. Territory:** Germany was stripped of large amounts of land including overseas colonies in Africa. The Alsace-Lorraine region of France was returned to France. Land that Germany had acquired through military means was returned to Denmark, Poland, Czechoslovakia, Belgium, and Lithuania. Germany was forced to acknowledge and respect the independence of Austria.
- 2. Military:** The German army was allowed to have a maximum of only 100,000 men. No tanks or heavy artillery were allowed. All enlisted men had to remain in the military for 12 years to limit the number of men who could receive military training. No submarines were allowed in the navy and the air force was abolished.
- 3. German responsibility:** The most humiliating part of the Treaty for the German people was the *War Guilt* clause. Germany was to accept full responsibility for causing the war and all damage suffered by the Allies.
- 4. Reparations:** Germany had to agree to financially compensate the Allies for the damage it caused during the war. In 1921, the reparations bill was 269 billion gold Deutsche Marks. It was predicted that it would take Germany until 1984 to repay the debt to the Allied nations. There were many moves made in the 1920s and 1930s to reduce the debt to a more reasonable amount. In 1930, it was reduced to 121 billion Deutsche Marks.

## Seeds of discontent

Little did the Allies know that the terms of the Treaty of Versailles would plant the seeds of discontent among German people and allow a radical leader named Adolf Hitler to come to power with the purpose of overturning the humiliation of the Treaty.

## **Hitler in power**

In 1933, a democratic election confirmed the rule of Hitler's Nazi government. Hitler passed the *Enabling Act* 1933 which gave him and the Nazi government power to pass legislation, make foreign policy decisions and alter the constitution.

The German people felt alienated from the rest of the world and the reparations were putting a terrible strain on the German economy. Hitler's Nazi Party used Nationalism - pride in one's own country - to rally the German people behind his cause.

The rest of Europe watched Hitler rebuild Germany. All that European countries could do was watch and wait for his next move.

## **A highway to war**

Hitler began to violate the terms of the Treaty of Versailles. In 1936, he ordered his army to reoccupy the Rhineland district of Germany, whereas France had negotiated for Rhineland to be a buffer zone in the Treaty. Despite protests from France, there was the belief that Hitler would not go further, and no action was taken.

This constant underestimation of Hitler's ambitions led to the policy of appeasement (non-resistance) adopted by British Prime Minister Chamberlain. From 1936-1938, many concessions were granted to Hitler.

In 1938, Germany announced its annexation or absorption of Austria. This independent country of 6 million German-speaking people was invaded and made the German province of 'Gau Ostmark'. There was no reaction from Britain or France.

Hitler then turned his attentions to Czechoslovakia. He seized the Sudetenland, a large mountainous border region of Czechoslovakia.

The Czech army mobilised over one million soldiers and prepared to fight Hitler's invading force. Czechoslovakia called on help from France and England, but to no avail.

In September 1938, Leaders from Britain and France met with Hitler at the Munich Conference. They agreed that Hitler could occupy the Sudetenland where many ethnic Germans lived 'for the sake of peace'.

Czechoslovakia was forced to allow the Germans to occupy the Sudetenland. The Munich Conference is seen today negatively because Britain and France appeased Hitler. They gave into his demands instead of standing up to him.

In March 1939, Hitler took over the remainder of Czechoslovakia. Hitler was taking advantage of the reluctance of Britain and France to go to war over the invasion of small countries in Europe.

Hitler then set his sights on Poland. Chamberlain realised that Hitler's territorial ambitions could not be stopped by giving in to his demands. So, in March 1939, Chamberlain declared that Britain would come to Poland's aid if attacked. France soon joined Britain in support of Poland.

Hitler was undeterred. In August 1939, he stunned the world, announcing he had signed a non-aggression treaty with the Soviet Union. Hitler could now invade Poland without fear of Russian interference.

At 9.00am on 3 September 1939, Sir Neville Henderson, Britain's ambassador to Germany, delivered an ultimatum to Hitler, stating that if hostilities against Poland did not stop by 11am, a state of war would exist between Britain and Germany. Germany did not respond.

At 11:15am, Chamberlain interrupted regular radio broadcasts to announce that Britain was at war with Germany.

At 11:27am, London's air raid sirens began to wail. It was only a test, but unlike tests that had been conducted before, this one signalled that the country really was at war. Sandbags were filled to protect important buildings, gas masks became required equipment for civilians, nightly blackouts became a way of life, and children were herded aboard evacuation trains to escape the danger of the city.

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