

What were the
causes of the second
world war?



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It would be too difficult to address fully all of the factors which contributed to the outbreak of the Second World War in any depth within the scope of this essay. It could be argued that the only cause of the war was when Germany invaded Poland on the 1st of September 1939, thus forcing Britain and France to declare war on the Reich as part of the mutual assistance pact between those nations and Poland. In this writer's opinion there are, however, several key contributing factors which had a direct influence on the course of events which led Germany to invade Poland including the effect of the Treaty of Versailles on Germany, the rise of the Nazi party and its policy of aggressive expansionism, the weakness League of Nations and the policy of appeasement in Britain and France. I will concentrate mainly on the events which occurred in Europe, with particular emphasis on those which happened in Germany, even though Japan and China had already been fighting each other since 1937 in the second Sino – Japanese war, The treaties ending the First World War were all named after the palaces in France where they were signed, the first and most important being the Treaty of Versailles, which was enacted on the 28th of June 1919. The then President of the United States, Woodrow Wilson, brought with him to the negotiating table an idea for a “fourteen point” plan to ensure future peace in Europe, one point being the right of “self determination” for its peoples. He envisioned a “League of Nations” which would be created to safeguard peace through moral solidarity and economic or military sanctions, should it prove to be necessary. This idea particularly appealed to Europe's smaller states which were anxious for security and stability. The treaty ended up, however, being a compromise which pleased nobody. The terms which Germany was forced to accept were perceived by Britain to be a threat to the economic recovery of Europe and a

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guarantee of a war of revenge, possibly in league with Russia if it drove the suffering Germans to communism. To France, with the memory of Verdun still raw, it didn't go far enough. The French considered the German people to be warlike by nature and demanded further measures designed to suppress them sufficiently to prevent further aggression. As part of the treaty, Germany was forced to accept the so called " War Guilt Clause", Article 231 of the treaty, which laid the sole responsibility for the entire war with the German state and served as a justification for the obligations which the rest of the treaty imposed on it. On top of crippling and wholly unrealistic reparations to be paid to the allies, the restrictions to Germany's armed forces were a massive blow. These included limiting the number of soldiers allowed in her army to one hundred thousand, the denial of access to tanks, armed aircraft and submarines and limiting the total amount of tonnage in her navy. She was also required to give up all of her overseas colonies and territory that many Germans considered was theirs by right, including West Prussia, which was to be given over to Poland. Anschluss, the union of Germany and Austria was also forbidden under the terms of the treaty and the Rhineland was made into a demilitarised zone to be occupied by the Britain and France. Under the Treaty of St Germain, signed on the 10th of September 1919, The Sudetenland which had been populated by ethnic Germans for generations became part of the newly formed country of Czechoslovakia. This was against the wishes of the Sudeten Germans who stated their right to self determination under Wilson's Fourteen Points. To the Germans who had been led to believe that the armistice had been agreed to based on those lenient Fourteen Points, the treaty the Treaty of Versailles was viewed as humiliating and overly harsh. This caused deep

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mistrust and resentment of their new government, the Weimar Republic. As their nation had not been routed and as German cities escaped major damage, army leaders were able to invent the “stab in the back” myth. This was the belief that as the army had not been defeated on the field of battle it must have been “undermined from within” and “sabotaged” by Jews, Bolsheviks and Socialists. It was a belief in this myth and his obsessive drive “to smash Germany’s foes” which pushed Adolf Hitler into politics in 1919 as a member of the fledgling Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei – the “Nazi Party”. The Party soon hailed him its Fuehrer and began to pursue a policy of anti-Semitism and anti-Bolshevism, playing on the “stab in the back” legend to whip up public support. Hitler promised to “tear up” the Treaty of Versailles and was committed to a radical “solution” to the “Jewish Question”, advocating the racial purity of the German people and the need for additional German “Lebensraum” -living space. The German economy was crippled by hyperinflation caused by an unstable government and its obligation to pay war reparations. This situation was made even worse by the onset of the Great Depression. Playing on the economic distress in the Weimar Republic and backed by the strongarm tactics of the S. A, the Nazi Party became a political force. On the 30th of January 1933, Hitler was in a position to take power and was grudgingly made Reich Chancellor by President Paul von Hindenburg. On the 16th of March 1935, in a violation of the Treaty of Versailles, Hitler ordered Germany’s remilitarization. As the German forces increased in size through conscription, the other European powers voiced minimal protest as they were more concerned with enforcing the economic aspects of the treaty. In a move that tacitly endorsed Hitler’s violation of the treaty, Great Britain signed the

Anglo-German Naval Agreement in 1935, which allowed Germany to build a fleet one third of the size of the Royal Navy. Two years after beginning rearmament, Hitler further violated the treaty by ordering the reoccupation of the Rhineland. Treading cautiously, he ordered that that if the French intervened then the German troops should withdraw. The appeasers in Britain and France were eager to avoid more conflict and so sought a resolution, with little success, through the League of Nations. Emboldened by the lack of military reaction from Britain and France to his reoccupation of the Rhineland, Hitler began to move forward with a plan to create a “Greater German Reich”. Anschluss, the union of Germany and Austria, came next when the Austrian Nazi Party pulled off a coup on the 11th of March 1938. German troops crossed the border the next day. The international community again failed to act strongly with Britain and France both issuing protests but still unwilling to take military action. Hitler then turned his attention towards the Sudetenland. To counter any possible advances by Germany, Czechoslovakia had built a system of fortifications throughout the mountains of the Sudetenland and had also formed military alliances with France and the Soviet Union. At the beginning of 1938 the Nazi Party began secretly sponsoring terrorist activity and extremist violence in the in the region thus causing martial law to be declared, whereupon Germany demanded that the land should be turned over to them. Britain and France finally took action and mobilised their armies for the first time since World War One. As war clouds hung over Europe, a conference was called to discuss the future of Czechoslovakia. The meeting took place in September 1938, at Munich. Britain’s Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain and French President Édouard Daladier, followed a policy of appeasement and gave way

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to Hitler's demands in order to avoid war. When it was signed on the 29th of September 1938, the Munich Agreement handed the Sudetenland to Germany provided Germany made no further territorial demands in the area. The following March, in breach of the agreement, the remainder of Czechoslovakia was overrun by German troops. Believing that the Western Powers conspired to give Czechoslovakia Germany, Josef Stalin worried that a similar thing could occur with the Soviet Union. Though wary, Stalin entered into talks with Britain and France regarding a potential alliance. In the summer of 1939, with the talks stalling, the Soviets began discussions with Germany regarding the creation of a non-aggression pact. The Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, as it was to become known was signed on the 23rd of August 1939. As well as supporting mutual non-aggression between the two nations, the pact also called for the sale of food and oil to Germany. Also included in the pact, though not made public, were plans for dividing Poland and Eastern Europe into spheres of German and Soviet influence. The "Polish Corridor" had been created as a result of the Treaty of Versailles, providing Poland with a narrow strip of land with which access the sea. It also served the purpose of separating the province of East Prussia from the rest of Germany. Hitler, wanting to retake this land and gain "Lebensraum" for the German "volk", began planning for the invasion of Poland. Poland's army was relatively weak and ill-equipped compared to Germany therefore to aid in its defence it had formed military alliances with Great Britain and France. After staging a fake Polish attack on the 31st of August 1939 and using this as a pretext for an invasion, German forces moved across the border the next day. So successful were they that later, on the 17th of September, Stalin, eager to put as much distance between the new German

frontier and Moscow, ordered approximately half a million “ Red Army” regulars into Eastern Poland to occupy the land allotted to it in the Nazi – Soviet Non Aggression Pact. Perhaps most importantly, prior to that on the 3rd of September, Britain and France issued an ultimatum to Germany to end the fighting or they would take action against it. When no reply was received, both nations were obligated by the treaty they had signed with Poland to declare war on Germany. In conclusion, the points above, though put in simplified terms, were all major contributors to the outbreak of war in Europe which would lead to armed conflict on a global scale. It would of course be foolish to believe that these were the only factors which played a part. I have not been able to go into further detail regarding the many treaties signed in the interwar period or, for example, the pursuit of technological and scientific progress by German industry through companies such as IG Farben and how they drove the rearmament of the Third Reich. I have also chosen to leave out the events taking place in Japan and China which led to war in the Pacific. I believe that it must be accepted that the outbreak of the Second World War was inevitable after the lack of democratic solidarity between the Allied Powers and the policy of isolationist neutrality which nations such as Belgium employed and which were fully exploited by Hitler.