

Twentieth Century Conflict – Lesson 6

Was the Second World War Inevitable

Subject Knowledge Notes

Among the causes of World War II were, to a greater extent, the political takeover in 1933 of Germany by Adolf Hitler and his Nazi Party and its aggressive foreign policy, and to a lesser extent, Italian Fascism in the 1920s, and Japanese militarism preceding an invasion of China in the 1930s. The immediate cause was Germany invading Poland on September 1, 1939, and Britain and France declaring war on Germany on September 3, 1939.

Problems arose in Weimar Germany that experienced strong currents of revanchism after the Treaty of Versailles that concluded its defeat in World War I in 1918. Dissatisfactions of treaty provisions included the demilitarization of the Rhineland, the prohibition of unification with Austria (including the Sudetenland) and the loss of German-speaking territories such as Danzig and Eupen-Malmedy despite Wilson's Fourteen Points, the limitations on the Reichswehr making it a token military force, the war-guilt clause, and last but not least the heavy tribute that Germany had to pay in the form of war reparations, which became an unbearable burden after the Great Depression. The most serious internal cause in Germany was the instability of the political system, as large sectors of politically active Germans rejected the legitimacy of the Weimar Republic.

After his rise and take-over of power in 1933 to a large part based on these grievances, Adolf Hitler and the Nazis heavily promoted them and also ideas of vastly ambitious additional demands based on Nazi ideology, such as uniting all Germans in Europe in a single nation; the acquisition of "living space" (Lebensraum) for primarily agrarian settlers (Blut und Boden), creating a "pull towards the East" (Drang nach Osten) where such territories were to be found and colonized; the elimination of Bolshevism; and the hegemony of an "Aryan"/"Nordic" so-called Master Race over the "sub-humans" (Untermenschen) of inferior races, chief among them Slavs and Jews.

Tensions created by those ideologies and the dissatisfactions of those powers with the interwar international order steadily increased. Italy laid claim on Ethiopia and conquered it in 1935, Japan created a puppet state in Manchuria in 1931 and expanded beyond in China from 1937, and Germany systematically flouted the Versailles treaty, reintroducing conscription in 1935 with the Stresa Front's failure after having secretly started re-armament, remilitarizing the Rhineland in 1936, annexing Austria in March 1938, and the Sudetenland in October 1938.

All those aggressive moves met only feeble and ineffectual policies of appeasement from the League of Nations and the Entente Cordiale – in retrospect symbolized by the "peace for our time" speech following the Munich Conference, that had allowed the annexation of the Sudeten from interwar Czechoslovakia. When the German Führer broke the promise he had made at that conference to respect that country's future territorial integrity in March 1939 by sending troops into Prague, its capital, breaking off Slovakia as a German client state, and absorbing the rest of it as the "Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia", Britain and France tried to switch to a policy of deterrence.

As Nazi attentions turned towards resolving the "Polish Corridor Question" during the summer of 1939, Britain and France committed themselves to an alliance with Poland, threatening Germany with a two-front war. On their side, the Germans assured themselves of the support of the USSR by signing a non-aggression pact with them in August, secretly dividing Eastern Europe into Nazi and Soviet spheres of influence.

Source: Wikipedia: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Causes_of_World_War_II

Further Reading;

<https://www.britannica.com/event/World-War-II>

<https://www.historyonthenet.com/world-war-two-causes>

Lesson Six: Was the Second World War inevitable?








5 minutes

- Display and read the lesson question (slide 3).
- Display the retrieval quiz (slide 4) and ask pupils to complete in silence.
- Display the answers (slide 5) for pupils to self-/peer mark.

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Was the Second World War Inevitable

 <p>10 minutes</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Read the section German Foreign Policy Pupils to work together to recall the main terms of the Treaty of Versailles and list them. Ask pupils to try to do this without looking back in their booklets.
 <p>5 minutes</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Pupils read the section Appeasement Rehearse the arguments in the table on both sides (Slide 6). Invite pupils to share whether they think. Explain that in hindsight it is easy to see this as a bad policy, and note the impact of WWI on the desire to avoid another war.
 <p>15 minutes</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Read the section German Rearmament and the Rhineland Point out that this was one of the demilitarised areas set out in the Treaty of Versailles. Note that Britain and France did not respond together and with force. Ask pupils to discuss the question in pairs. Note that the lack of confidence in the Treaty will have weakened the collective response. Read the End of Appeasement (Slide 7) Ask pupils to complete Question 5. Share responses.
 <p>5 minutes</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Explain (or read) The Effects of Hitler annexing Czechoslovakia Ask pupils to discuss the impact of this on the British and French public. What would introducing conscription have done for people's belief / hope of avoiding another war?
 <p>20 minutes</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Read the section Outbreak of World War II Return to the question for the lesson and explain that we are going to reflect on what might have happened that would have prevented World War II. Explain that this is called "Counterfactual" and has a great historical tradition (give the example of 'I Capture the Castle' which imagines the Nazis winning the War and sharing America with Japan), but is impossible to know for sure. Ask pupils to think about three areas – the Treaty of Versailles, Hitler's Foreign Policy and Appeasement and think about what might have avoided the War (Slide 8). Get pupils to start working on their own and write down some ideas. Then have them work in pairs. Then have a discussion, taking each of these three in turn. Pupils should share that if the Treaty had been more lenient, had involved the defeated nations, had not expressed the War Guilt or had had lower reparations then Germany might not have been so angry and vulnerable to Hitler. Also the Allies might have felt more strongly about it being kept to. Pupils might share that if Hitler had been satisfied with what he got earlier in the 30s, the War could have been avoided (this feels like the least likely to have happened). Pupils might share that Appeasement allowed Hitler to become more powerful and a quicker and earlier intervention could have provided a diplomatic solution or a military solution which would not have led to a World War. Explain that next lesson pupils will begin planning their essay.