

Main Causes of World War Two

World War Two began in September 1939 when Britain and France declared war on Germany following Germany's invasion of Poland. Although the outbreak of war was triggered by Germany's invasion of Poland, the causes of the war are more complex.

Treaty of Versailles

In 1919, Lloyd George of England, Orlando of Italy, Clemenceau of France and Woodrow Wilson from the US met to discuss how Germany should pay for the damage world war one had caused.



Woodrow Wilson wanted a treaty based on his 14-point plan which he believed would bring peace to Europe.

Georges Clemenceau wanted revenge. He wanted to be sure that Germany could never start another war again.

Lloyd George personally agreed with Wilson but knew that the British public agreed with Clemenceau. He tried to find a compromise between Wilson and Clemenceau.

Germany had been expecting a treaty based on Wilson's 14 points and were not happy with the terms of the Treaty of Versailles. However, they had no choice but to sign the document.

The main terms of the Treaty of Versailles were:

War Guilt Clause - Germany should accept the blame for starting World War One

Reparations - Germany had to pay £6,600 million for the damage caused by the war

Disarmament - Germany was only allowed to have a small army and six naval ships. No tanks, no airforce and no submarines were allowed. The Rhineland area was to be de-militarised.

Territorial Clauses - Land was taken away from Germany and given to other countries.

Anschluss (union with Austria) was forbidden.

The German people were very unhappy about the treaty and thought that it was too harsh. Germany could not afford to pay the money and during the 1920s the people in Germany were very poor. There were not many jobs and the price of food and basic goods was high. People were dissatisfied with the government and voted to power a man who promised to rip up the Treaty of Versailles. His name was Adolf Hitler.

Hitler's Actions

Adolf Hitler became Chancellor of Germany in January 1933. Almost immediately he began secretly building up Germany's army and weapons. In 1934 he increased the size of the army, began building warships and created a German airforce. Compulsory military service was also introduced.

Although Britain and France were aware of Hitler's actions, they were also concerned about the rise of Communism and believed that a stronger Germany might help to prevent the spread of Communism to the West.

In 1936 Hitler ordered German troops to enter the Rhineland. At this point the German army was not very strong and could have been easily defeated. Yet neither France nor Britain was prepared to start another war.



Hitler also made two important alliances during 1936. The first was called the Rome-Berlin Axis Pact and allied Hitler's Germany with Mussolini's Italy. The second was called the Anti-Comintern Pact and allied Germany with Japan.



Hitler's next step was to begin taking back the land that had been taken away from Germany. In March 1938, German troops marched into Austria. The Austrian leader was forced to hold a vote asking the people whether they wanted to be part of Germany.

The results of the vote were fixed and showed that 99% of Austrian people wanted Anschluss (union with Germany). The Austrian leader asked Britain, France and Italy for aid. Hitler promised that Anschluss was the end of his expansionist aims and not wanting to risk war, the other countries did nothing.

Hitler did not keep his word and six months later demanded that the Sudetenland region of Czechoslovakia be handed over to Germany.

Neville Chamberlain, Prime Minister of Britain, met with Hitler three times during September 1938 to try to reach an agreement that would prevent war.



The Munich Agreement stated that Hitler could have the Sudetenland region of Czechoslovakia provided that he promised not to invade the rest of Czechoslovakia. Hitler was not a man of his word and in March 1939 invaded the rest of Czechoslovakia. Despite calls for help from the Czechoslovak government, neither Britain nor France was prepared to take military action against Hitler. However, some action was now necessary and believing that Poland would be Hitler's next target, both Britain and France promised that they would take military action against Hitler if he invaded Poland. Chamberlain believed that, faced with the prospect of war against Britain and France, Hitler would stop his aggression. Chamberlain was wrong. German troops invaded Poland on 1st September 1939.

Failure of Appeasement

Appeasement means giving in to someone provided their demands are seen as reasonable. During the 1930s, many politicians in both Britain and France came to see that the terms of the Treaty of Versailles had placed restrictions on Germany that were unfair. Hitler's actions were seen as understandable and justifiable.

When Germany began re-arming in 1934, many politicians felt that Germany had a right to re-arm in order to protect herself. It was also argued that a stronger Germany would prevent the spread of Communism to the west. In 1936, Hitler argued that because France had signed a new treaty with Russia, Germany was under threat from both countries and it was essential to German security that troops were stationed in the Rhineland. France was not strong enough to fight Germany without British help and Britain was not prepared to go to war at this point. Furthermore, many believed that since the Rhineland was a part of Germany it was reasonable that German troops should be stationed there.

In May 1937, Neville Chamberlain became Prime Minister of Britain. He believed that the Treaty of Versailles had treated Germany badly and felt that giving in to Hitler's demands would prevent another war. This policy, adopted by Chamberlain's government became known as the policy of Appeasement.

The Munich Agreement, signed by the leaders of Germany, Britain, France and Italy, agreed that the Sudetenland would be returned to Germany and that no further territorial claims would be made by Germany. The Czech government was not invited to the conference and protested about the loss of the Sudetenland. They felt that they had been betrayed by both Britain and France with whom alliances had been made. However, the Munich Agreement was generally viewed as a triumph and an excellent example of securing peace through negotiation rather than war.

This famous picture shows Chamberlain returning from Munich with the paper signed by Hitler declaring 'Peace in our time.'



When Hitler invaded the rest of Czechoslovakia in March 1939, he broke the terms of the Munich Agreement. Although it was realised that the policy of appeasement had failed, Chamberlain was still not prepared to take the country to war over "...a quarrel in a far-away country between people of whom we know nothing..." Instead, he made a guarantee to come to Poland's aid if Hitler invaded Poland.

Failure of the League of Nations

The League of Nations was an international organisation set up in 1919 to help keep world peace. It was intended that all countries would be members of the League and that if there were disputes between countries they could be settled by negotiation rather than by force. If this failed then countries would stop trading with the aggressive country and if that failed then countries would use their armies to fight. In theory the League of Nations was a good idea and did have some early successes. But ultimately it was a failure.

The whole world was hit by a depression in the late 1920s. In 1931, Japan was hit badly by the depression. People lost faith in the government and turned to the army to find a solution. The army invaded Manchuria in China, an area rich in minerals and resources. China appealed to the League for help. The Japanese government were told to order the army to leave Manchuria immediately. However, the army took no notice of the government and continued its conquest of Manchuria.

The League then called for countries to stop trading with Japan but because of the depression many countries did not want to risk losing trade and did not agree to the request. The League then made a further call for Japan to withdraw from Manchuria but Japan's response was to leave the League of Nations.

In October 1935, Italy invaded Abyssinia. The Abyssinians did not have the strength to withstand an attack by Italy and appealed to the League of Nations for help.

The League condemned the attack and called on member states to impose trade restrictions with Italy. However, the trade restrictions were not carried out because they would have little effect. Italy would be able to trade with non-member states, particularly America. Furthermore, Britain and France did not want to risk Italy making an attack on them.

In order to stop Italy's aggression, the leaders of Britain and France held a meeting and decided that Italy could have two areas of land in Abyssinia provided that there were no further attacks on the African country. Although Mussolini accepted the plan, there was a public outcry in Britain and the plan was dropped.

The main reasons for the failure of the League of Nations:

Not all countries joined the League - Although the idea for the League of Nations had come from Woodrow Wilson, there was a change of government in the United States before the signing of the treaty and the new Republican government refused to join. As a punishment for having started World War One, Germany was not allowed to join and Russia was also excluded due to a growing fear of Communism. Other countries decided not to join and some joined but later left.

The League had no power - The main weapon of the League was to ask member countries to stop trading with an aggressive country. However, this did not work because countries could still trade with non-member countries. When the world was hit by depression in the late 1920s countries were reluctant to lose trading partners to other non-member countries.

The League had no army - Soldiers were to be supplied by member countries. However, countries were reluctant to get involved and risk provoking an aggressive country into taking direct action against them and failed to provide troops.

Unable to act quickly - The Council of the League of Nations only met four times a year and decisions had to be agreed by all nations. When countries called for the League to intervene, the League had to set up an emergency meeting, hold discussions and gain the agreement of all members. This process meant that the League could not act quickly to stop an act of aggression.