

Events Leading to World War Two in Europe

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Introduction

[World War II](#) did not begin because of one sudden quarrel in September 1939. The invasion of Poland was the immediate cause of war between Germany, Britain, and France, but the crisis had developed over many years. The peace settlement after World War I, the weakness of international institutions, the Great Depression, the rise of fascist governments, Japanese and Italian expansion, and repeated concessions to Adolf Hitler all shaped the road to war. Each German success made the next act of aggression appear less risky. (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, n.d.)

The questions below examine three connected issues: the events that led Europe into war, the differences between German military operations in the two world wars, and the reaction of the United States. A careful answer must distinguish political decisions from battlefield methods. It must also avoid treating the outcome as inevitable. European leaders made choices at several points when deterrence, negotiation, or collective action might have produced a different result.

Question 1: What Events in Europe Led to the Beginning of World War II?

The [Treaty of Versailles](#), signed in 1919, became a powerful symbol in German politics. It imposed territorial losses, military restrictions, and reparations, and it assigned responsibility for the war to Germany and its allies. Many Germans considered the settlement humiliating. Hitler used that anger effectively, although the treaty alone did not cause another war. The Weimar Republic faced political violence, economic instability, and eventually the Great Depression, conditions that helped the Nazi Party present dictatorship and rearmament as national recovery.

After becoming chancellor in 1933, Hitler destroyed democratic opposition and withdrew Germany from the League of Nations and the disarmament conference. The Nazi government rebuilt the armed forces in open violation of Versailles. Britain and France protested but did not organize an effective response. Both countries carried memories of World War I, faced economic problems, and disagreed about how much force should be used to uphold the postwar settlement.

In March 1936, German troops entered the Rhineland, a German region that had been demilitarized by treaty. The original essay describes it as territory ruled by France, which is inaccurate. France had occupied parts of the region after World War I, but the 1936 crisis concerned Hitler's decision to station German forces there. The German military was not prepared for a major confrontation, and

Hitler reportedly understood that a firm French response could have forced a retreat. France did not act without British support, and Britain did not regard the move as sufficient reason for war. The success strengthened Hitler's prestige and weakened confidence in collective security.

Italy's invasion of Ethiopia and the Spanish Civil War further exposed the weakness of the League of Nations and the growing division of Europe. Germany and Italy supported Francisco Franco's forces in Spain, while the Western democracies followed non-intervention policies. The war gave German forces experience with aircraft, bombing, and coordination, although it was not a simple rehearsal for everything that occurred later.

In March 1938, Germany annexed Austria in the *Anschluss*. Nazi pressure and the presence of German troops made claims of a freely requested union misleading. The annexation was welcomed by many Austrian supporters of Nazism, but opponents and Jewish residents immediately faced persecution. Britain and France again accepted the change rather than risk war.

The next crisis focused on the Sudetenland, a border region of Czechoslovakia with a large German-speaking population. Hitler claimed that ethnic Germans were being mistreated and demanded the territory. Czechoslovakia had military defenses and alliances, but its government was excluded from the decisive negotiations at Munich in September 1938. British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain, French Prime Minister Édouard Daladier, Hitler, and Italian leader Benito Mussolini agreed that Germany could occupy the Sudetenland. Chamberlain hoped the concession would satisfy Hitler and preserve peace.

Appeasement is often described simply as cowardice, but the policy reflected several concerns: military unreadiness, fear of bombing, public opposition to another war, doubts about the fairness of Versailles, and the desire to gain time for rearmament. Those explanations do not make the Munich Agreement successful. It weakened Czechoslovakia, transferred defenses and industry to Germany, and convinced Hitler that Britain and France were unlikely to fight.

In March 1939, German forces occupied the Czech lands, while Slovakia became a dependent state. This action destroyed Hitler's claim that he wanted only to unite German-speaking populations. Britain and France responded by guaranteeing Poland's independence. Their policy shifted from concession toward deterrence, though they still hoped war could be avoided.

Hitler next demanded the return of Danzig, now Gdańsk, and access across the Polish Corridor. Poland rejected demands that threatened its sovereignty. The most surprising diplomatic development came in August 1939, when Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union signed a nonaggression pact. A secret protocol divided parts of Eastern Europe into German and Soviet spheres. The agreement reduced Hitler's fear of an immediate two-front war and left Poland in extreme danger.

Germany invaded Poland on September 1, 1939. Britain and France delivered ultimatums and declared war on September 3 when Germany did not withdraw. Soviet forces entered eastern Poland on September 17 under the terms of the secret arrangement. The European war had begun, although

Poland had already faced both German and Soviet invasion before meaningful Western military assistance could arrive. (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, n.d.)

Question 2: How Did Hitler's Military Moves Differ from Germany's Strategy in World War I?

Germany entered both wars expecting that speed could prevent a long struggle against enemies on several fronts. The methods, however, reflected different technologies, planning assumptions, and political situations. In World War I, the German command followed a modified version of the Schlieffen Plan. It attempted to defeat France quickly by advancing through neutral Belgium before turning east against Russia. The invasion brought Britain into the war and encountered stronger resistance than expected.

The German advance was stopped near the Marne in 1914. Both sides then constructed defensive systems extending across the Western Front. Machine guns, rapid-firing artillery, barbed wire, trenches, and the difficulty of coordinating movement made frontal attack extraordinarily costly. Germany did not rely on offense alone throughout the war; it developed strong defensive positions and later used infiltration tactics. Nevertheless, the conflict became associated with attrition because neither coalition could easily produce a decisive breakthrough.

By 1939, radios, tanks, aircraft, motorized transport, and improved command systems allowed forces to move and coordinate more quickly. The popular term *blitzkrieg*, or lightning war, describes the concentration of armor, aircraft, artillery, and mobile infantry against selected points. The aim was to disrupt command, break through the front, bypass strong positions, and encircle enemy formations before they could reorganize.

It is misleading to imagine that every German unit was mechanized. Much of the army still depended on horses and foot movement. German success came from concentrating mobile forces at decisive places rather than possessing unlimited modern equipment. Commanders also used flexible mission orders, which gave subordinate officers room to pursue objectives when communications changed.

The invasion of Poland combined rapid German operations with important geographic and political advantages. Poland faced attacks from several directions and later from the Soviet Union. Its forces were spread to defend a long border, and Western allies did not launch a major offensive capable of relieving pressure. German air attacks damaged communications and supported ground movement, though the myth that the Polish army relied mainly on cavalry charges against tanks is false.

In 1940, Germany defeated Denmark and Norway, then attacked the Netherlands, Belgium, Luxembourg, and France. Allied leaders expected the main German advance through Belgium, but armored forces passed through the Ardennes, crossed the Meuse, and reached the English Channel. This movement separated Allied armies in the north from forces farther south. The campaign

produced a rapid French collapse that surprised both sides.

Mobility did not guarantee permanent victory. Britain remained in the war, and Germany failed to gain the air superiority needed for invasion. In the Soviet Union, great distances, weather, logistical weakness, Soviet resistance, and German strategic mistakes turned the campaign into another massive war of attrition. Hitler's racial ideology also shaped military decisions. The eastern war was designed as conquest and annihilation, producing systematic murder, starvation, and brutality against civilians and prisoners.

Thus, the central difference was not that World War I Germany attacked while World War II Germany moved. Germany sought rapid decision in both conflicts. The later army initially used combined arms, radio communication, and operational surprise more effectively. Once its early advantages faded, Germany again faced the problem it had tried to avoid: a long war against enemies with greater combined resources.

Question 3: How Did Americans React?

American reaction changed gradually. During the 1930s, many citizens wanted to avoid another European war. The experience of World War I, the Great Depression, and investigations into arms manufacturers encouraged isolationist sentiment. Congress passed Neutrality Acts intended to keep the United States from being drawn into conflicts through loans, arms sales, or travel on belligerent ships.

Isolation did not mean that all Americans were indifferent to fascism. News of Nazi persecution, the destruction of democratic states, and German expansion caused growing concern. President Franklin D. Roosevelt argued that the United States could not remain secure if dictators dominated Europe and Asia. He moved cautiously because public and congressional opinion limited how far he could go.

After war began in Europe, the United States changed the law to permit "cash-and-carry" sales, allowing belligerent countries to purchase weapons if they paid immediately and transported them themselves. This policy favored Britain and France because they controlled Atlantic shipping. Following the fall of France in 1940, American support for Britain expanded. The United States transferred destroyers to Britain in exchange for base rights, increased military spending, and introduced the first peacetime draft in its history.

The Lend-Lease Act of 1941 allowed the United States to provide weapons, food, vehicles, and other supplies to countries considered important to American defense. Roosevelt described the United States as an "arsenal of democracy." American naval forces also escorted shipping and came into increasing contact with German submarines in the Atlantic. The country was formally neutral, but its material and strategic support had moved decisively toward the Allies. (National Archives, n.d.)

American public opinion remained divided. The America First Committee opposed entry and argued

that the country should concentrate on defense at home. Interventionists believed that helping Britain was necessary to prevent a more dangerous future. The debate ended after Japan attacked Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941. Congress declared war on Japan the following day. Germany and Italy then declared war on the United States on December 11, and the United States responded with declarations of its own.

American industry became a decisive Allied advantage. Factories produced ships, aircraft, vehicles, weapons, fuel, and supplies on an enormous scale. Women entered industrial employment in large numbers, while millions of men served in the armed forces. The war also exposed contradictions within American democracy. Black Americans served in segregated forces and pressed for victory against racism abroad and at home. Japanese Americans were forcibly removed and incarcerated under Executive Order 9066, a grave violation of civil rights.

U.S. forces fought in North Africa, Italy, western Europe, the Atlantic, and the Pacific. Strategic bombing targeted German industry and cities, causing extensive civilian casualties as well as military destruction. In August 1945, the United States used atomic bombs against Hiroshima and Nagasaki after Germany had already surrendered. Japan announced its surrender soon afterward. The bombings remain subjects of historical and ethical debate because of their immense civilian consequences and the disputed alternatives available at the time.

Hitler did not hang himself, as the original answer claimed. He died by suicide in his Berlin bunker on April 30, 1945, while Soviet forces closed in. Germany surrendered in May. The war in Europe and the war against Japan ended through different sequences of military defeat.

Conclusion

The outbreak of World War II resulted from aggressive expansion and repeated failures of deterrence. Hitler exploited resentment against Versailles, rearmed Germany, remilitarized the Rhineland, annexed Austria, dismantled Czechoslovakia, reached an agreement with Stalin, and invaded Poland. Britain and France did not cause Nazi aggression through appeasement, but their concessions reduced the risks Hitler expected to face. (Weinberg, 2005)

German forces initially achieved results through concentrated armor, air support, surprise, and flexible command, yet those methods could not solve the strategic problem of fighting a prolonged global war. The United States moved from formal neutrality to material support and finally entered after Pearl Harbor and Germany's declaration of war. The conflict demonstrates that military innovation matters, but economic capacity, alliances, political judgment, ideology, and the treatment of civilians are equally important to understanding how wars begin and why they end.

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