

# Causes of World War II

When World War I officially ended in 1919, it was thought that this conflict would be the 'wars to end all wars'. This statement would be proven wrong 20 years later, when a resurgent Nazi Germany would invade Poland on 1st September 1939, sparking another war whose devastation would exceed that of World War I.

Like the First World War, the Second World War would also break out due to a wide variety of factors, most -if not all- related to grievances carried over from the previous global conflict.

This article will give details about the causes of World War II within the context of the Civil Services Examination.

## The Treaty of Versailles

The Treaty of Versailles signed on 28 June 1919 brought an official end to World War I. But at the very outset, it became evident that a harsh peace would be imposed upon the defeated. France, in order to protect itself from a future German attack, put forth the demands of reparations, demilitarization of the Rhineland region and the 'War Guilt Clause' which put the blame of starting the war squarely on Germany's shoulders.

It was French revenge, nursed from the days of its defeat during the Franco Prussian War of 1871, that led to the imposition of such harsh terms. The resulting war had also led to the unification of Germany, which was proclaimed in the very halls of the Versailles, which added insult to injury.

The German people were outraged that they were to be held responsible for the conflict. Instead of working out an agreement that would bring peace, the victors were only content with humiliating them. The demilitarisation of the military, the loss of territory and the preposterous amount of reparation to be paid were akin to rubbing salt on an open wound.

The Weimar government that came to power in Germany had no other choice but to accept the humiliating peace terms. This only labelled them as 'criminals and traitors' in the eyes of the German people. In order to repay the massive reparations, the Weimar Republic began to print the German currency in huge numbers. This led to its devaluation and inflation on a massive scale and near collapse of the already fragile economy. Fed up with the mismanagement of its own government, the German people began to support anyone who would reverse the humiliation that was heaped upon them. It was at this time when Hitler and his Nazi party would emerge with such a promise.

## Rise of Nazism

The wave of resentment over the perceived injustices of the Treaty of Versailles was fully exploited by Hitler and his Nazi Party. Capitalising on the dent made towards German pride. Hitler promised to undo wrongs of the Versailles Treaty. Added to this was the “us versus them” rhetoric. In this case, the ‘us’ were the Aryan race, while the ‘them’ were the Slavic Eastern Europeans.

The list of ‘them’ also included Jews, Communist, Gipsies and others who did not fit the Nazi definition of an Aryan. The Jews were blamed by the Nazis for the defeat in World War I and all the economic hardship that followed was a ‘conspiracy’ that had weakened Germany.

This rhetoric would have serious consequences for the Jewish populations of Europe and Germany

## Economic Hardship

The harsh sanctions placed on Germany as per the Versailles Treaty only bought hardship for the German people. The great depression of the late 1920s further exacerbated the problem with the price of essential items hitting through the roof hyperinflation caused the many essential items such as bread to become more expensive than they already had been, fuelling much resentment against the fragile Weimar Republic.

The Ruhr valley was one of the most industrialised regions of Germany at the time. In order to claim war indemnities promised, France invaded the Ruhr valley and occupied it. This hurt German pride to such an extent that they were willing to support any party or leader who would avenge the humiliation heaped upon them. It was fertile ground for Hitler and his Nazi party to rise in power.

## Failure of the League of Nations

The League of Nations (dissolved on April 20, 1946) was founded following the end of World War I in 1919. It was envisioned as an international body that would prevent conflicts between member nations from breaking out and disputes to be settled with diplomatic means. But to enforce and uphold its mandate, the League of Nations had no army of its own to do it. It had to rely on economic sanctions and armies of the member nations to uphold its directives.

Although US President Woodrow Wilson was an enthusiastic supporter of the league, he had to withdraw in the light of furious opposition from the more isolationist faction of the US Congress, a faction that had no interest in being involved with the politics of distant Europe.

The lack of participation from the United States lessened power and credibility of the United States—the addition of a burgeoning industrial and military world power such as the United States might have added more force behind the League's demands and requests.

As such the League of Nations was powerless to stop the Japanese invasion of China and the German invasion of Czechoslovakia. Due to the lack of response from the league, Imperial Japan, Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy would form an alliance of their own to begin to continue their own expansionist policy, setting the stage for a new world war.

## Failure of Appeasement

Through the mid-1930s the Nazis re-armed Germany in spite of the Treaty of Versailles and without sanction or protest from Britain or France. The Luftwaffe was founded, Naval forces were expanded and conscription was introduced.

With continuing disregard for the Treaty, German troops reoccupied the Rhineland in March 1936. Simultaneously, these developments added to Hitler's legend within Germany and provided much-needed employment, whilst encouraging the Führer to push foreign appeasement to the limit.

Neville Chamberlain, the British Prime Minister from 1937-40, is the man most closely associated with the appeasement of Nazi Germany. The retributive conditions placed on Germany at Versailles meant that many other potential challengers to Hitler chose to concede the German right to claim the Sudetenland and complete the Anschluss of Austria rather than confront him and risk antagonising war.

This attitude resulted in the signing of the Munich Agreement without question of Hitler's demands, much to his surprise, which Chamberlain infamously celebrated on his return to Britain.

There was a sea-change in public opinion following Hitler's appropriation of the remainder of Czechoslovakia in March 1939, which contemptuously disregarded the Munich treaty. Chamberlain then guaranteed Polish sovereignty, a line in the sand that was forced by the prospect of German domination in Europe.