

9.1 Causes of World War II

Hitler and Mussolini:

In the years that followed World War I, Europe was devastated by the effects of a worldwide economic depression. As people blamed government leaders for their hardships, a great deal of political and social unrest began to rise within a number of nations. As a result, totalitarian governments that restricted personal freedoms and prohibited political opposition rose to power. Two particularly charismatic leaders were Adolph Hitler in Germany and Benito Mussolini in Italy. Mussolini seized power first in 1922. Meanwhile, Hitler took advantage of the German people's resentment over World War I to win support for his Nazi Party. Using his talents as an inspiring speaker, Hitler effectively blamed the Jews, the betrayal of the former German republic, and Germany's enemies in World War I for the nation's troubles. Promising to restore the glory of the nation, Hitler ascended to power in 1933. He cleverly disposed of any opposition to his leadership and became known as the "Führer" (leader, or guide) of Germany. Hitler labeled his new government the "Third Reich" and he envisioned it as an empire that would last a thousand years. When Mussolini was condemned by the League of Nations for invading Ethiopia in 1935, Hitler supported the Italian dictator. From that point on, the two leaders were allies.

Hitler's Aggression:

In 1936, Hitler moved German troops into an area known as the Rhineland. Such action directly violated the treaty ending WWI and outraged a number of leaders. Fearing another war with Germany, however, Britain and France did nothing. In March 1938, Hitler tested his boundaries again by annexing Austria as well. Once again, he met no resistance. In September, he demanded the right to annex the Sudetenland, the western region of Czechoslovakia in which 3.5 million ethnic Germans lived. Although few wanted to admit it, Hitler's aggression was setting the stage for another world war. In an effort to try and avoid war, Great Britain and France actually signed a treaty with Hitler in which they agreed to Hitler's capture of the Sudetenland in exchange for his promise not to invade anymore territories. (Such a policy is called "appeasement" because it assumes that by giving aggressors what they want they will be satisfied and stop their aggressive behavior. History has proven that appeasement rarely works.) One member of the British Parliament who opposed this approach was Winston Churchill. Churchill voiced his opposition stating, "Britain and France had to choose between war and dishonor. They chose dishonor. They will have war."

Japan:

In the 1920s and '30s, the nation of Japan began aggressively expanding its territory. As a tiny series of islands, Japan did not have access to many natural resources despite being a fairly modernized country. To get the resources it needed, Japan's leaders decided to conquer territory in the South Pacific. When Japan invaded the Chinese province of Manchuria in 1931, the League of Nations demanded that they leave China. Japan responded by leaving the League of Nations instead. In 1937, Japan began trying to seize the rest of China as well. By the end of 1938, Japan had captured major cities along the Chinese coast but could not control the inland countryside. In 1940, Germany, Italy, and Japan formed an alliance and became known as the Axis Powers.

US Reactions:

The United States at first tried to stay out of matters in Europe and the Far East. Congress passed the Neutrality Act in 1935 and considered a Constitutional amendment restricting the government's power to declare war. Still, as Japan continued its aggressive behavior and Hitler appeared more and more willing to take what he wanted by force, President Roosevelt grew increasingly concerned. Although he did not yet have enough political support to take a more active stance, FDR kept a suspicious eye on Germany and Japan. The president also had to deal with racial tension in the US armed forces. Although African Americans and whites both served in the military, they usually did so in segregated units. If they were on ships, whites tended to be assigned more sophisticated duties, while blacks were often relegated to being cooks, janitors, and performing menial tasks. In 1941, an African American leader named A. Philip Randolph proposed a march on Washington, DC to protest racial discrimination in the military. President Roosevelt responded by supporting the Fair Employment Act, which prohibited

discrimination in the national defense industry. As the first federal law against employment discrimination, the Fair Employment Act convinced Randolph and his colleagues to cancel their march. Still, Randolph's influence helped draw attention to the injustices facing African Americans in the US.