

World War II

Origins in Europe, 1936-1941

Two Central Questions:

1) How did the War begin?

2) Why were the Germans able to pursue an aggressive policy for so long without facing significant opposition?

The origins and unfolding of the Second World War had very little to do with the United States. The World War II memorial in Washington, DC gives the dates of the war as “1941-1945.” Though those were the years of direct U.S. participation in the military conflict, the war in Europe was well underway long before the U.S. was even a factor.

Contrary to Hollywood-generated mythology that presents the war as almost solely an American triumph, the Soviet Union bore the brunt of the Nazi war machine, and its armed forces – assisted greatly by U.S. aid – deserve much of the credit for breaking the back of the Third Reich.

In many respects the Second World War was simply a continuation of the First World War.

The Treaty of Versailles (1919) may have ended hostilities, but it did not entirely resolve the underlying sources of conflict.

The terms that it dictated were neither harsh enough nor lenient enough to insure a lasting peace. Germans resented what they considered the treaty's overly harsh terms and sought revenge. But the terms also left the German infrastructure largely intact and capable of threatening Europe once again. This led many French and British citizens to believe the treaty had been too lenient and they resented German claims that the treaty had been too harsh. They opposed any attempts by their governments to “go easy” on the Germans. As a result, the Treaty of Versailles brought about much resentment without insuring that German resentment would not turn into military aggression.

German resentment over the Treaty of Versailles in part set the stage for the emergence of Adolf Hitler. (Similarly, Japanese resentment of the Treaty terms partially explain the origins of the war in Asia.)

Hitler and his National Socialist (Nazi) Party stoked feelings of resentment among many in the German middle classes who had suffered economically and psychologically in the wake of World War I. He rode this resentment to power in 1933.

Hitler also co-opted the Allies' "self-determination" rhetoric to make the case for mobilizing German military power and expanding the German borders (seeking "*lebensraum*" or living space). Citing U.S. President Woodrow Wilson who had preached that all peoples should have a government of their own choosing that represented the people's interests, Hitler set his sights on gathering all German speakers (the German "Volk") under the sovereignty of the German government.

He also preached a variant of the American notion of "Manifest Destiny" – Much as the Americans believed that their moral/racial superiority made it their "destiny" to expand across the North American continent during the 19th century, Hitler and the Nazis saw it as their "destiny" to expand across Europe in the 20th century.

Hitler's belief that the Germans constituted a "superior race" would get him into a lot of trouble and lead to his waging of the war in an ineffective manner. Germans could not win battles simply because of some alleged "racial superiority" or "triumph of the will." To believe that they could was foolish and counterproductive.

German expansion began with the re-occupation of the Rhineland in March 1936. Hitler demanded that French and British troops withdraw and allow the Germans who lived in this region full sovereignty.

Determined to avoid another conflict and preoccupied with domestic economic problems, London and Paris agreed to withdraw. Hitler soon began to use the natural and industrial resources now back under German control to fuel his military machine, though he tried to conceal the extent to which he was doing this.

Two years later, in March 1938, Hitler negotiated the "Anschluss" ("Connection" or "Joining") between Germany and Austria. This move, he claimed, was not aggressive or expansionist but merely made legal the cultural reality – the Austrians and the Germans were one people or "Volk" (or so Hitler believed).

The West registered only a muted protest since Hitler justified his actions based on the self-determination ideology that the Western nations themselves had embraced.

Many Austrians (though certainly not all) welcomed the Anschluss, believing that they would benefit from German protection. Jews, of course, were the notable exception. It soon became clear that the Nazis were a threat to them since they did not consider them "German," but rather of some inferior race whose influence had to be curbed, if not eliminated.

Six months later, Hitler met with the leaders of France, Great Britain, and Italy in **Munich**. There, he promised them that his goals were limited – to bring German speaking peoples under German control. Once he had achieved this, he would forego any further expansion.

The governments of France and England chose to “appease” Hitler, not because they trusted his word, but because they knew they were in no position to defeat the Germans in a war. First, the Germans were stronger militarily; and second, public opinion was so anti-war that even attempts to mobilize for a potential war or to increase defense budgets could get the ruling parties voted out of office.

British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain came to be the “face” of appeasement and his ever-present umbrella became its symbol.

History has not been kind to Chamberlain. Many later accused him of cowardice and naivete; but his policies were more realistic and less cowardly than some of his critics have claimed.

By signing the Munich Agreement, Chamberlain believed he was “buying time” for the British to mobilize so that when the time came to face the Germans on the battlefield, the British armed forces would have a better chance of success.

Less than a month after the Munich Agreement, however, Hitler’s forces moved into the Sudetenland – a region of Czechoslovakia in which German speakers were numerous (but also a region in which some non-German speakers resided.) Again, Hitler justified his move in terms of “self-determination” – the German speakers had a right to be ruled by a German government.

A look at the map, however (See Powerpoint slide), shows that Hitler was positioning his troops to take over all of Czechoslovakia. The Czechs saw the writing on the wall and desperately appealed to Great Britain and France to protect them. They got no response.

All the while, Stalin in the Soviet Union was watching the unfolding of events. He urged the Western governments to join the Soviet Union in pursuing a policy of “Collective Security” in opposition to Hitler. London and Paris showed little interest in Stalin’s strategy.

Stalin concluded the Western governments were weak and would do (and could do) nothing to stop Hitler. He also suspected he was being set up – by “appeasing” the German leader as he cast his eyes toward the east (and the Soviet Union), the West (or so Stalin believed) was indirectly urging Hitler to attack the Soviet Union.

By mid-1939 Stalin abandoned his efforts to join with the West in Collective Security and was looking for other options.

Meanwhile, Hitler was laying out his plans. Determined above all else not to fight a two-front war, he indicated his willingness to sign a non-aggression pact with the Soviets, despite the fact that the Soviet Union had been ardently anti-Nazi in its rhetoric (and Hitler had been ardently anti-communist in his rhetoric).

Putting aside ideological differences for military and strategic considerations, the Germans and the Russians sign the **Nazi-Soviet pact** in August 1939. Under the terms of the agreement, each nation agreed not to attack the other. The agreement also had “secret” stipulations that would only be discovered as events unfolded.

This agreement immediately put Poland in jeopardy. (Russia in the East; Germany in the West – see map on the Powerpoint slides – both threatened to invade.) In response, the French and British governments announce that if Germany attacks Poland, this will force them to declare war on Germany. Germany is not intimidated. Hitler’s armies invade Poland on September 1, 1939, marking the official beginning of the Second World War in Europe.

Additionally, Soviet troops moved to occupy the eastern half of Poland (in part to expand Soviet influence but also to create a fortified buffer zone between the German army and Soviet territory.) The Germans also indicated they would “look the other way” if the Soviets wished to conquer Finland so as to gain access to a warm-water port.

The Poles fought valiantly but were quickly vanquished by the superior German forces. (That the Poles sent men armed with sabers on horseback into the teeth of the German tanks is an exaggeration, but the fact remains that the Poles were no match for Hitler’s Blitzkrieg.)

Having conquered the western half of Poland and insured that the Soviets would not move against German forces from the east, Hitler turns his attention once again to the west.

In 1940, his troops rapidly defeat the armed forces of Belgium, the Netherlands, Norway, and Luxemburg. Next in his path is France, which falls in June 1940. The world sees the grim images of Nazi troops marching down Paris’s Champs Elysees.

The French had a substantial and well-equipped army, so the French defeat at the hands of the Nazis came as a great shock – particularly given how quickly it occurred. (This was especially shocking to the Russians who thought it would be a year or two before they had to worry about the Germans moving east toward them.)

The defeat occurred so suddenly in part due to German military tactics. They attacked the French with great speed (“Blitzkrieg”) using armored tanks and air attacks. The French, though they fought courageously, were simply not equipped to withstand such an onslaught. Later, critics would claim the French government of the time was ineffective and put its people in jeopardy, but the myth that the French soldiers chose to surrender rather than fight has little basis in reality. In fact, the French troops fought well and took upon themselves the brunt of the Nazi forces, thereby allowing the British the chance to successfully retreat at Dunkirk.

In fact, British troops sent to supplement the French forces beat a hasty retreat after the battle of Dunkirk in northern France. Most made it safely back across the English

Channel insuring the British would survive to fight another day, but British Prime Minister Winston Churchill (who replaced Neville Chamberlain in 1940) reminds his people that “wars are not won by evacuations.” Still, the successful retreat was vital to continuing the war against Nazism.

After the fall of France and the return of the British troops across the channel, Hitler came to believe that the war, for all intents and purposes, was over. He awaited the British government to contact him and offer terms of surrender. He waited in vain, as the British, under Churchill, had no intention of surrendering.

For a time, though, there was a significant contingent of Brits, many of them at the upper levels of the so-called British establishment, who believed it was best to come to terms with Hitler even if doing so entailed allowing Hitler to dominate the European continent. Better, they argued, to accept German dominance of Europe than to continue fighting the Nazis and lose the British Empire (if Britain were to be completely defeated). Even the former king, Edward VIII, who had abdicated the throne in 1936, was rumored to be sympathetic to this strategy. The Nazis had even invited Edward to Berlin before the war began to see if he would be willing to accept German dominance in Europe in exchange for perhaps German support if he wished to overthrow his brother, the current king of England, and return to the throne. It is not known for sure if Edward ever entertained such an offer, but nothing ever came of it in any case.

Puzzled as to why the Brits had not yet sued for peace, Hitler comes to suspect (incorrectly) that the Brits and the Soviets were conniving against him. Britain, Hitler convinced himself, had not asked for terms of surrender because Churchill had convinced Stalin to break the Nazi-Soviet pact, throw in with the Allies, and attack Germany.

Therefore, Hitler, pressing his advantage, begins an aerial bombardment of British military installations. Had he continued this strategy, he might have been able to overcome the British Air Force and lay the groundwork for a complicated, but not impossible invasion of the British Isles. Instead, in response to the British bombing of Berlin (which had no significant military effect), a furious Hitler ordered that London and other British cities be bombed. Perhaps, he thought, doing so would terrify the British people to the extent that they might press their government to sign some kind of peace with Germany. And, indeed, some British officials were already calling for such a “deal.”

In fact, it had the opposite effect. By broadening the air war to urban areas, Hitler had less fire power concentrated on military installations, fuel depots, and British air fields, giving the British military a desperately needed respite. Moreover, the London bombing so outraged the British citizens that they vowed to fight on until the “final victory.” Prime Minister Winston Churchill expressed public opinion succinctly, “We will NEVER surrender.”

As the bombs fell nightly on the working-class East End of London, the people hid in shelters and did the best they could to survive “the Blitz.” It was, some said, Britain’s

“finest hour.” The King and Queen (the parents of the late Queen Elizabeth II) visited the bombed-out neighborhoods, comforting the people and boosting their morale. At one point even the royal residence, Buckingham Palace, was bombed and the King barely escaped with his life. Unintimidated, the Queen refused to leave London for her own safety and declared, “At least now we can look the East End in the eye.” (For this line alone, the Queen, who would live to age 101 – dying in 2002 – remained one of the mostly widely admired women in Britain for generations.)

In the end, the British Royal Air Force (RAF) outfought the German Luftwaffe and Hitler paused his attack. The Germans come close, but they are unable to deliver a knock-out blow to the British.

At this point, Hitler makes the first of two colossal blunders that will ultimately lose him the war. Rather than continuing to focus on defeating the British, he assumes that they are so close to defeat that he can finish them off later. Instead, he mobilizes his forces to attack the Soviet Union before Stalin has a chance to double-cross him and attack Germany.

Churchill and U.S. President Franklin D. Roosevelt warn Stalin that the Germans are preparing to invade his country. Stalin, wary of the deceptive ways of “capitalists and imperialists,” ignores the warnings....until it is too late.

Even worse, during the previous year Stalin had conducted a ferocious purge of Soviet generals and other senior officers. At the very moment when a war against Germany loomed, Stalin was decimating the upper ranks of his military. This occurred, in part, because of the Soviet Army’s poor showing in the war with Finland. Though the Soviets ultimately emerged victorious, the Finns fought them hard and revealed that the Soviet Army was backward and weak – and in no position to take on the Germans. Rather than introduce reforms and other necessary measures to strengthen his armed forces, Stalin vented his anger on his generals – executing many of the most capable Soviet military officials as punishment for the army’s poor showing in Finland.

In the days before the German invasion, Stalin descended into nervous paranoia. He retreated to his vacation home, and, some claimed, waited for a coup to occur that would result in his own execution. In fact, the Soviet military and top government officials, terrified of being subjected to Stalin’s wrath, remained loyal to the dictator. Stalin refocused and returned to Moscow. Nonetheless, he had not served his country well. The Soviets were in no way ready for the carnage that awaited them.

On June 22, 1941 German troops crossed into Soviet territory. Unprepared and ill-equipped, Soviet troops were no match for heavily armed, mechanized German tank divisions. The Soviets, some fighting with broom sticks, were mercilessly slaughtered. Wave after wave of Soviet infantry are thrown at the advancing German line. Over the next two years, the Germans march relentlessly across Soviet territory (the same distance as if they had landed on the east coast of the U.S. and marched as far as Chicago).

Those Soviet troops who try to escape by running away from the front lines are shot down by the Soviet secret police (NKVD). By the end of the war, some historians have claimed, the NKVD had killed nearly a million Soviet soldiers and civilians who tried to flee the German advances. Overall, the Soviets lose more than 20 million people.

The Soviets commence a long, not always well-organized retreat deep into their own territory. The entire government leaves Moscow and moves East. Hundreds of thousands of Soviet soldiers and civilians die.

In time, however, Hitler's forces would fall victim to the same Russian winter that had thwarted Napoleon Bonaparte's ill-fated invasion more than a century before. Once again, the invasion of Russia had catastrophic consequences for the attacker. The tide would turn and the Soviets would go on the offensive, not stopping until they had marched all the way to Berlin – where they arrived in the summer of 1945. Along the way, large amounts of American aid would help keep Soviet troops supplied and well-armed.

Few anticipated such an outcome in the dark days of the fall of 1941, however. Fearing, with good cause, that the Soviets were done for, Churchill turned to the Americans as the only potential saviors of Western Civilization. The question then became, "What would the American role be?"