

Second World War: Causes

(a) The Unjust Nature of the Peace Treaty

The terms imposed upon Germany at the end of First World War were harsh. Stripped off its colonies, the size of the German army was drastically reduced. Germany was forced to cede Alsace and Lorraine to France and to agree to the temporary occupation by French troops of the Saar valley. Germany was also compelled to hand over to Poland large parts of the industrial area of Silesia. Further Germany was to pay an impossible sum (6600 million pounds) in reparation. These terms gave rise to a strong feeling of injustice in Germany and had much to do with the subsequent success of the Nazi Politics. Reduced to the status of a small republic, Austria was not allowed to unite with Germany as the combination would be a threat to France.

(b) Failure of the League of Nations

The League of Nations, envisaged as an international body to avert another world war, turned out to be an alliance of the victors against the vanquished. The seeds for another war were sowed ever since the Treaty of Versailles was signed. From 1918 to 1933 a series of conferences were held to eliminate threats of war. In 1925, representatives of the chief European powers met at Locarno, a Swiss town, where Germany and France agreed to respect the Rhine frontiers, as established in the Versailles treaty. The next agreement widely appreciated was the Kellogg–Briand Pact of 1928. Though the US did not become a member of the League of Nations, it participated in this meet. The outcome of this pact was the pledge of all nations of the world to renounce war as “an instrument of national policy”. But the League of Nations was not strong enough to enforce these agreements when some countries defied them. When Hitler came to power in 1933, a Disarmament Conference was organised by the League of Nations at Geneva. The issue was the German rearmament plan on a par with France. The French refused to agree to this proposal, while Britain was willing to concede Germany’s demand. Hitler’s response to French refusal was withdrawal of Germany from the conference and from the League of Nations. A plebiscite in Germany showed enormous support in

favour of Hitler's step. Encouraged, in March 1935, Hitler announced Germany's intention of building up an army by conscription to over half a million men. This was the first breach of the Treaty of Versailles. The League of Nations attended by Britain, France and Italy condemned Germany's action but took no further steps. Britain even went to the extent of negotiating a naval agreement. According to this agreement, Germany could build up to 35 per cent of Britain's naval strength. Italy invaded Ethiopia in 1935. Emperor Haile Selassie of Ethiopia appealed to the League of Nations, but received no help.

(c) Economic Depression of 1930s

The most important economic cause of World War II was the Great Depression. The Depression intensified economic nationalism. Hit by the problems of unemployment and business stagnation, governments resorted to high tariffs to preserve the home market for consumption of their home products. This resulted in an expansionist policy leading to the conquest of neighboring territories as a means of solving economic problems. Japan took the lead. In 1931 it reacted to the global economic crisis by seizing the Chinese northern region of Manchuria. In the face of decline of Japanese exports of raw silk and cotton cloth, Japanese militarists came up with this idea so that Manchuria could be a market.

(d) Aspirations of German Big Business and Grievances of German Patriots

Britain, France, the US and the USSR each controlled vast areas as colonies across the world. Germany, the most powerful industrial country in continental Europe, had no colonies. This prompted German big business to campaign vigorously to break the restraints imposed by the Treaty of Versailles. It wanted to recover German territory lost to Poland, absorb the German-speaking Austrian state and Czech border land, the Sudetenland. Under Nazi rule there was convergence between the requirements of big business and Nazi ideology.

Powers like Great Britain, the United States, France and Russia had their empire extending over one fourth of land area of the earth. Germany, Italy and Japan seemed poor by comparison. German patriots openly articulated their grievance by stating that the average German citizen had only .004 of square mile

of living space at his disposal, whereas the average Briton could draw upon the wealth and economic opportunities of almost three square miles of imperial territory.

(e) Mussolini's Expansionist Policy

Mussolini's Italy sought to expand its colonial empire by grabbing Ethiopia to add to its colonial possessions such as Somaliland, Eritrea and Libya. It looked for an opportunity to seize Albania from Yugoslavia. The establishment of an economy based on military state capitalism encouraged the drive to armed expansion. The arms industries needed raw materials and the only way to obtain the resources required was to grab extra territory. Britain and France condemned Mussolini's invasion of Ethiopia and this helped Hitler to establish close relationship with Italy. This was the beginning of Rome–Berlin Axis

(f) Japan's Imperial Policy

The German approach was emulated in East Asia by Japan. It had already taken Taiwan and Korea as colonies, and controlled Manchuria. The government that came up after a military coup in Japan (1936) began to cast its covetous eye over Dutch East Indies, the British colonies in Malaya and Singapore, the French colonies in Indochina and the US-controlled Philippines.

(g) Responsibility of Hitler for the War

(i) Incorporation of Saar into Germany

Under the terms of the Treaty of Versailles, a plebiscite was to be held in the Saar in January 1935. The people were to decide whether they wished to join Germany or France, or remain under League of Nations' control. Ninety percent voted for a return to Germany. In March 1935 the Saar was incorporated into Germany. This was a morale booster for Hitler.

(ii) Annexation of Rhineland

In 1936 Hitler flouted the peace settlement by sending troops to occupy Rhineland, the area of Germany demilitarised by the Treaty of Versailles. If the

French had resisted, the Germans would have withdrawn. The French army at that time was stronger than the German, but economic distress caused by the Great Depression and political instability leading to the resignation of Prime Minister Edouard Daladier rendered France incapable of resisting the breach of the Treaty of Versailles by Germany.

(iii) Forcible Merger of Austria with Germany

Hitler, an Austrian by birth, had always wanted Austria to be part of Germany. In February 1938, Hitler summoned the Austrian Chancellor Schuschnigg to Berchtesgaden, a mountain town in the Bavarian Alps, for a discussion. The Austrian Chancellor was given a Hobson's choice – either to legalise Nazi Party in Austria and integrate Austria's economy with that of Germany or face a German invasion. Austria has lost the support of Italy with the formation of the Rome–Berlin Axis. Schuschnigg was therefore left with no choice but to choose the first option. At the instance of Hitler, the Austrian Chancellor cancelled the proposed plebiscite in Austria and formed a Nazi government there. Thereupon the German army entered Vienna to take control of the country.

(iv) Occupation of Sudetenland

Encouraged by the lack of resistance from major European powers, Hitler turned his attention towards Czechoslovakia. In June 1938, Hitler sent directions to his army about his intention of invading Sudetenland. A systematic Nazi propaganda that their German subjects were being subjected to harsh treatment in Sudetenland was launched. The British Prime Minister, Neville Chamberlain, after consulting the French and the Czechs, eventually agreed to cede to Germany all territories where more than half the inhabitants were German. But to the warmonger Hitler, this proposition was unacceptable. He was keen to avoid any plebiscite in this matter. So he wanted his army to occupy Sudetenland before such a plebiscite could take place.

Munich Agreement

The mood in London was in favour of a war against Hitler. But Chamberlain and his counterpart in France were bent on buying peace at any cost – a policy called

'appeasement'. A conference was held at Munich where the British, French, German and Italian premiers agreed that the German army should occupy the Sudetenland, as demanded by Hitler, on 1 October and that parts of Czechoslovakia should go to Poland and Hungary.

(v) Aggression against Czechoslovakia

The Czechs felt betrayed. The new frontiers of Czechoslovakia had been guaranteed by the four powers at the Munich Conference. Chamberlain claimed that the deal had averted another massive European war. But using the conflict between the Slovaks and the Czechs as an excuse, Hitler sent German forces to occupy the conflict zone.

Nazi–Soviet Pact

The guarantees that Britain and France had given Poland were considered weak without Russia's help. During the early summer of 1939, Britain and France negotiated with Russia. But partly because of mutual distrust and partly because Russia was not prepared for a war against Germany, no progress could be made. Russians preferred peace and guarantee for their territories. As Germany offered both, in August 1939 the Nazi–Soviet (Nonaggression) Pact was signed in the Kremlin. The secret clauses in the pact were: Eastern Europe was to be demarcated into German and Russian spheres of influence and Poland was to be divided.

(vi) Invasion of Poland and Outbreak of War

In order to carry out Hitler's larger plan of conquering the whole of Europe, Germany invaded Poland on 1 September 1939 on the ground that Poland had been planning with its allies, Great Britain and France, to encircle and dismember Germany and that Poles were persecuting ethnic Germans. In two days Britain gave the ultimatum: unless German troops were withdrawn from Poland, Britain and Germany would be at war. The ultimatum was ignored and the Second World War began.