

Causes of World War II

The German military and international relations theorist Carl von Clausewitz famously observed that “war is a mere continuation of policy by other means.” In other words, military conflict is often an extension of pre-existing political realities, causes, and grievances (whether real or imagined). That was true for each of the primary Axis Powers in World War II: Germany, Italy, and Japan.

The German Motivations for War

Hitler did not simply decide to invade Poland out of the blue in September 1939. Although several factors contributed to the rise of his National Socialist (Nazi) Party and his own rule over the country, one key motivation had been the grievance many Germans felt from the Treaty of Versailles in 1919. As the losing aggressor, Germany had been forced to pay significant reparations, cede territory, and significantly disarm; the allied Austria-Hungary had been dissolved, and much of its territory granted independence. The end result was a deep sense of persecution among many Germans, which the Nazi Party carefully stoked, especially during the instability of economic depression.

Before invading Poland, Hitler had already forcibly annexed Austria and the Sudetenland—the largely German speaking portions of Czechoslovakia—citing the ostensible goal of reunifying historic German peoples. Finally, Germany occupied the rest of Czechoslovakia itself, claiming instability in the recently independent country (which had been a part of the now-dissolved Austro-Hungarian Empire.)

At the Munich Conference in 1938, the British and French governments had largely acceded to these German actions, especially the incorporation of the German-speaking areas. After all, Wilson’s Fourteen Points itself had argued for the redrawing of borders and “self-determination” by European ethnic communities, and some believed that the Treaty had been too harsh.

But the additional reason for appeasing Germany at Munich was that British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain believed this would buy some more time to let Britain rearm for a possible larger confrontation with Hitler’s Germany. Many historians have since contended that France could have defeated Germany, and even at the time many, such as Winston Churchill, argued this appeasement only invited further expansion by Germany.

Some of Poland had once been a part of the Prussian empire that had preceded Germany; the creation of an independent Poland cut off part of east Prussia from the rest of the country. Poland was, therefore, an obvious candidate for German conquest. Hitler had also spoken of so-called Lebensraum, the need for additional land, even beyond historic German holdings, which might be taken from inferior peoples and into which the growing German population could be settled. Nazi ideology included a strong component of racial superiority, which accounted for the beliefs in Slavic inferiority as well as the anti-Semitism that would lead to the Holocaust.

Hitler’s Germany had made peace with the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, or USSR, the Communist empire to the east, centered in historic Russia and led by Joseph Stalin. Stalin and Hitler’s emissaries had quietly arranged to divide Poland between them in the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, and on September 1, 1939, the German military invaded Poland; a little more

than two weeks later, Soviet forces moved in to take eastern Poland. As the British and French governments had pledged to protect the independence of Poland, this was the beginning of World War II.

The Italian Motivations for War

Italy, too, objected to the Treaty of Versailles. Although the Italian government had been on the winning side of the war, it felt betrayed by the treaty insofar as the settlement transferred far less territory to Italy than the Italians had been secretly promised as a condition for siding with France and Britain, rather than their historic German allies, in World War I. Thus, a similar grievance and sense of political betrayal helped fuel the rise to power of Mussolini in Italy.

Mussolini became Italy's Prime Minister in 1922 and effectively took total power in 1925 (though a figurehead monarch remained). Mussolini built up the fascist government, in many ways seeking to revivify the Roman empire. (The icon of the fasces, an axe surrounded by a bundle of sticks—strength in numbers, in effect—was borrowed from old Roman imagery.)

Mussolini's Fascist ideology was pitched as a third way between classical liberalism and socialism, holding that service to the State was the highest goal. Like communism or socialism, fascism argued that the old classical liberal ways were obsolete; it shared those ideologies' belief in progress and contempt for individual rights, constitutionalism, limited government, civil liberties, and political freedom. But unlike communism or socialism, under fascism the means of production would remain in the hands of business owners, but in service of the state; in other words, it echoed the collectivism of socialism over individualism and state-oriented progress over liberty, while rejecting socialism's core economic model.

Fascist Italy sought to expand on its African holdings—it already occupied much of Somalia, Eritrea, and Libya before Mussolini's reign—and invaded the mineral resource-rich Ethiopia (then often called Abyssinia) in 1935. (That the Italian government had tried, but failed to capture Ethiopia in 1895-1896, offered a further possibility for glory redeeming Italy). Soon after, Italy, eyeing its own expansion closer to home, signed a treaty with Germany in 1936.

The Japanese Motivations for War

Similar motivations led Japan to become the third member of the Axis Powers. Imperial Japan was a technologically powerful and growing nation—it had shocked the world by defeating a European power in the Russo-Japanese war at the turn of the 20th century, and continued its rise from there. But it was a small island-based nation with minimal territory, few resources and little farmland—but much ambition. Its emperor, Hirohito, ascended to the throne in 1926, around the same time that Hitler and Mussolini were consolidating their power in Europe.

Japan had annexed Korea in 1910, but its invasion of the resource-rich Chinese province of Manchuria in 1931 marked its period of major expansion. Like the Germans, the Japanese believed they had to expand their empire, both in terms of access to land and resources, as well as their own ethnic superiority, and in 1937, Japan invaded even more of China. Japan signed a treaty with Germany and Italy in 1940, largely to deter American involvement in either the Far East or Europe, and with that began proceeding to capture even more Chinese territory and

eventually build a Pacific empire. In response to these actions, the U.S. imposed steadily more aggressive embargoes on Japan. These embargoes were especially damaging insofar as they attempted to cut off access to the oil necessary to power the Japanese war machine. The threat of losing access to these resources, in turn, increased Japanese motivation to expand its empire to ensure its own domestic production.

The United States of America's Entry into the War

The invasions of Ethiopia and Manchuria had already demonstrated the impotence of the League of Nations to deter aggressive invasion by Italy or Japan. Hitler's invasion of Poland, while the actual trigger for World War II, thus built on a decade of military aggression, and an even longer period of political development since the first world war.

A war-weary United States initially avoided military intervention but provided indirect aid—cutting off Japanese supplies while pressuring them to withdraw from China, while in the European theater, leasing military equipment to Britain and its allies. But the Japanese government, fearing the inevitability of eventual conflict with America (such as through expanding into the American colonies in the Philippines, or being cut off from access to natural resources), launched a sneak attack on the naval base at Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, in hopes of crippling the American navy. The United States declared war on Japan in response; Germany and Italy then fulfilled their treaty obligations by also declaring war on the United States. Thus, the United States would become a central participant in World War II.