

WORLD WAR II – CAUSES

Two major interpretations of the causes of W.W.II exist:

1. The major cause of the Second World War was Hitler's desire for the expansion of Germany
2. The major cause of the Second World War was the policy of appeasement

Other important interpretations are:

1. The consequences of the Paris Peace Settlement's
2. The role of Mussolini and Italy 1933-1939
3. The Soviet Union and the Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact 1939
4. The weak French foreign policy
5. The isolation of the USA
6. The failure of the League of Nations
7. The Depression (esp. after the Wall Street Crash 1929)
8. Nationalism
9. Totalitarian ideologies; communism, fascism and Nazism

One important scholar of the “origins/causes” is A.J.P. Taylor:

In his book "*The origins of the Second World War*" (1961) A.J.P. Taylor stated:

- Hitler was not an "evil monster" who molded events to fit his master plan, but he was a man of "improvisation", "opportunism" and "the-spur-of-the-moment bright idea". His foreign policy followed earlier German tradition
- Appeasement was a logical and realistic policy, but the mistakes made by Chamberlain when he abandons this policy brought the war on

So... the Second World War according to A.J.P. Taylor broke out not because of Hitler's design, but because of Chamberlain's blunders. Hitler's foreign policy succeeded (for a while) because of his ability to seize opportunities and profit from the mistakes of his opponents.

Link to more detailed information about the “Causes of World War II”

Some notes from Morris...

The Versailles Settlement

- It was an uneasy compromise.
- Redrawn boundaries of Europe did not satisfy all.
- New frontiers avoided the minority problems.
- The whole idea of reparations "contained the seeds of future disputes".

Isolation of both the USA and USSR

- USA refused to ratify the Treaty of Versailles and join the League of Nations.
- USSR was treated like the defeated Central Powers.
- Neither power had an interest in maintaining the peace settlements of 1919-20.

Nationalism

- New states determined by the concept of "self-determination of peoples" proved aggressive and expansionary (i.e.: Poland...)

Reorganization of Europe did not produce more democratic states:

- Dictatorships in Italy, Germany, Hungary, Rumania, Poland, Spain, Portugal...
- Only Czechoslovakia established a stable democracy

The World Depression

- Led to the rise of extremists to power (i.e.: Rise of the Nazi Party)

- Led to governments to focus on short-term nationalistic measures instead of international co-operation

Weakness of Britain and France

- French and British failure to support the League of Nations
- The appeasement policies
- Led other countries to see dictatorship as a stronger and more effective form of government

Causes of WWII – from “The origins of the First and Second World Wars” by Frank McDonough

Two major interpretations of the causes of W.W.II exist:

1. The major cause of the Second World War was Hitler's desire for the expansion of Germany (this interpretation was used by the prosecution judges in the international military tribunal in Nuremberg 1945-1946)
2. The major cause of the Second World War was the policy of appeasement

Paris Peace Settlement consequences

Orthodox view: Many historians see the settlement in Paris 1919 as a **failed compromise between the idealism of Wilson** (the US President) and the realism and selfishness of the European powers:

James Joll: The peace conference divided Europe into those who wanted the peace revised [Germany, Italy, Japan and Hungary], those who wanted it upheld [France, Poland, Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia] and those who were not that interested [USA and Great Britain].

E.H. Carr: “The fundamental weakness of the settlement was that it failed to solve the “German problem”.

Anthony Lentini: The peacemakers did not seem to realize that the collapse of the Russian, Habsburg and Ottoman empires left Germany in a potentially stronger position in Europe than ever before.

Revisionist view: Other historians see the settlement in Paris 1919 as an **achievement but the architects failed to follow through** the principles laid down at Paris and by their failure ensured a German revival:

Paul Birdsall: The refusal of the USA to become involved in upholding the Paris Peace Settlement was a crucial reason for the settlement's failure.

Paul Kennedy: Huge difference between the 1920's when the settlement worked and the 1930's when it was crushed by the combined militarism of Germany, Japan and Italy. For Kennedy, the crucial reason for its collapse was the Great Depression of the early 1930's (Wall Street Crash!). This destroyed the international co-operation and encouraged extreme selfishness to dominate international relations. The Depression also helped to destroy German democracy and contributed to Hitler's rise to power, and it was his dictatorship which brought war.

The Hitler Factor

- Orthodox view: Hitler had a fanatical will and a consistent program of aggression (Hugh Trevor-Roper, Alan Bullock, Andreas Hilgruber, Klaus Hildebrand). Hitler was an unprincipled opportunist constrained by internal politics, and responding to the ebb and flow of events in a flexible manner.
- Revisionist view: Most revisionists reject the idea of Hitler being an all-powerful leader in complete control of events. They portray him as a referee controlling bitter disputes between competing factions, individuals and organizations within Nazi Germany. Hitler's

Germany was "*a minefield of institutional disagreements and bureaucratic chaos*". The revisionists have highlighted the high level of internal rivalry between competing centers of power within the Third Reich. They view Hitler as being more indecisive and weak than was previously thought (Karl-Dietrich Bracher, Martin Broszat, Hans Mommsen)

Continuity in German foreign policy

Hitler's foreign policy played an important role in the outbreak of WWII. The historical debate has concentrated on the following question: Was Hitler's foreign policy unique or did it just represent a continuation of earlier German foreign policy?

- Hitler's foreign policy was unique (Friedrich Meinecke, Gerhard Ritter, Ralf Dahrendorf)
- Hitler's foreign policy was not very unique (some agree with A.J.P. Taylor's view that it followed earlier German traditions) (Detlev Peukert, **A.J.P. Taylor**, Lewis Namier, Fritz Fischer, Geoffrey Eley, Gordon Craig). Some of the arguments are:
 1. Lebensraum can be traced back to propaganda pamphlets produced by the Pan German League before 1914
 2. German dominance in eastern Europe and the subordination of the Slavs were key aims of the German government during W.W.I
 3. The restoration of the German Army power was a desire for the Army throughout the Weimar period
 4. Hate for socialism was a major feature of the old Junker class who welcomed the destruction of socialistic parties and trade unions
 5. Several of Hitler's foreign policy aims was chaired by Weimar governments, especially the ones between 1930 and 1933
 6. "Hitler just represented a right-wing consensus in Germany over the basic goals and aims of German foreign policy"
 7. Geoffrey Eley also sees a continuation of Austrian policies... Anti-Semitism was common in Austria. So was the desire to control Eastern Europe and to weaken Slav nationalism...

A.J.P. Taylor

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The Role of Neville Chamberlain and Appeasement

Orthodox view: Chamberlain's conduct of British foreign policy was "*diplomacy of illusion*". Chamberlain's inability to deal with Hitler and Germany made the aggressive German foreign policy possible. It also ensured that, when the war broke out, Britain and France had no major allies, and that they were also in a very weak military position (Cato - pseudonym for a number of British left-wing writers, John Wheeler-Bennet, Keith Middlemass, R.A.C. Parker)

Revisionist view: When the archives were opened on the subject of appeasement we can see a trend of treating Chamberlain and the policy of appeasement far more sympathetically. Most revisionists avoid moral judgments on Chamberlain and instead focus on social, economic and strategic factors:

1. The complex set of domestic, international, military and economical factors made a policy of standing up to the dictators impractical, and a policy of finding peace preferable - that's why the focus on Chamberlain and the leading figures of the "National Government" is misleading
2. British foreign policy during the 1930's should be viewed within an international context, which gives due emphasis to rival ideologies, economic systems and social groupings in Europe ,
3. The leaders who took the decisions were prisoners of circumstances beyond their control
4. It's wrong to blame Chamberlain exclusively - he was an able and realistic politician who realized that Britain and France could not keep order in Europe, and who wanted Britain to retain its world power status, which he believed would be lost in a second major world war
5. The British economy did not contain enough skilled workers to effect a large scale rearmament program without endangering the fragile British recovery from the great economic slump of the 1930's
6. The military and naval chiefs constantly warned that Britain was not prepared for a simultaneous war against Germany, Italy and Japan, and advised the government to follow a policy of appeasement
7. Public opinion consistently opposed rapid rearmament and a strong stand being taken against the dictators (David Dilks).

Today the supporters of the revisionist interpretation are in majority. Some "ultra-revisionists" claims that Chamberlain could have saved the empire and prevented a post-war decline if he hadn't lost nerve and allowed appeasement to continue.

French foreign policy

A great many studies link British and French policy during the late 1930's. France was deeply divided and politically unstable, which stumbled from crisis to crisis, from government to government (16 different coalition governments between 1932 and 1940), and from peace to war.

Orthodox view: French foreign policy during the 1930's was obsessed with security and defense. France had no intention of stopping Hitler by force, and therefore willingly allowed Chamberlain to march France along the road to Munich. France did this because they feared losing British support if they didn't (Anthony Adamthwaite, J-B Duroselle, René Girault). Just like in Britain many of the French leaders during the 1930's has been branded "guilty men" due to the policy of appeasement. Contrary to Britain the French version of appeasement was negative - it was a grim realization of their past failures

Many historians highlight the lack of boldness in French planning and tactics. Robert Young shows that the French military planning was based on the defense of the Maginot Line, with no offensive plan

Mussolini's role in the origins of W.W.II

Mussolini was the first European fascist dictator: he undermined the Paris Peace Settlement, aided Franco during the Spanish Civil war, played a crucial role at the Munich Conference, signed the Pact of Steel, remained neutral in September 1939, and finally joined the war on Hitler's side in 1940...

Orthodox view: Mussolini's foreign policy was ineffective, immoral, designed to grab headlines and to please Italian public opinion, and it lacked any clear objectives (Gaetano Salvemini, Elizabeth Wiskemann, Denis Mack Smith, A.J.P. Taylor)

Revisionist view: Mussolini might have been an opportunist but he did have a coherent set of aims in his foreign policy. Most important were to achieve "*spazio vitale*" (living space) for Italians in north Africa and the Middle East. Some historians also mention that Mussolini used

the aggressive foreign policy to divert public attention from domestic problems (MacGregor Knox, George Baer, Renzo de Felice's, Cassel). The weak position among the European powers is also an issue the revisionists bring up...

Mussolini and Germany: Two major opinions exist in this matter;

1. The Rome-Berlin Axis was a typical example of Mussolini's idea of always keeping his options open (D.C. Watt, Denis Mack Smith)
2. The Pact of Steel represented the expression of parallel desires in mind of the two dictators to achieve their aims by alliance in war (Philip Morgan)

Soviet Union and the origins of W.W.II

Collective-security approach: Stalin's foreign policy attempted to uphold the principles of collective security against Hitler, and reluctantly moved towards signing the Nazi-Soviet Pact because Britain and France deliberately appeased Hitler, undermined the League of Nations, and delayed signing a triple alliance in 1939 to deter Nazi Germany (Soviet historians, A.J.P. Taylor, Jonathan Haslam, Geoffrey Roberts). After the Munich Agreement in 1938, Stalin viewed the League of Nations as a spent force, and became deeply mistrustful of the aims of the appeasers, whom, he felt, were happy as long as Hitler moved east

US historians: The Nazi-Soviet Pact was "Stalin's blank cheque" to Hitler, which virtually guaranteed that war would start in 1939. Stalin's support for collective security was a cynical ploy to mask an underlying desire for a Nazi-Soviet pact (William Langer, S. Everett Gleason, Robert Tucker...this view was deeply colored by the Cold War)

German school: This is a more recent school of historians, which uses primarily German archives. They think Stalin had significant responsibility for the outbreak of the war. Soviet foreign policy during the 1930's desired a reconstruction of the close Soviet-German relationship, established by the co-operative Soviet-German Treaty of Rapallo in 1922, and broken off by Hitler in 1933. This interpretation regard the Soviet Union as giving Hitler the "green light" for aggression in 1939 Ernst Topitsch:

- The view of Hitler as being the leading character in the events which led to the Second World War has been exaggerated and requires modification
- Stalin was the key figure in the outbreak of war and the key victor of the war
- Stalin was the only leader in Europe with clear aims
- Stalin set out to start a European war in 1939 between what he saw as aggressive and non-aggressive capitalist states, which left the Soviet Union in a neutral position and well placed to reap a rich reward

P.H.M. Bell does not agree... The Soviet Union's incredible lack of preparation for the German attack in June 1941 must raise doubts about whether such a plan ever existed (the plan of a Soviet attack on the Western capitalist democracies, with Hitler acting as Stalin's unwitting agent)

The recent opening of Soviet archives supports Bell's view (the Soviet entry into the League of Nations; its offer to save Czechoslovakia in 1938; the speeches by Litvinov, the Soviet foreign minister, at the League of nations in support of collective security; the denunciations of fascism and appeasement by Stalin; and the preference, in 1939, for an agreement with Britain and France, do all appear to have been genuine)

Soviet internal politics: There was a key division within Stalin's regime over the direction of foreign policy: on the one hand, a significant group favored a return to a close Soviet-German friendship: on the other, a larger group supported collective security. The course of events allowed the pro-German group to shift opinion... This view might be exaggerated since the major Soviet desire was to search for a foreign policy which would prevent it being involved in war. The roles of the external events were more important. The Munich Agreement 1938 left a very deep impression on Stalin; that's where the foundations of the Nazi-Soviet Pact was laid (Hildebrand)