

Why World War II?

Background Information:

In order to understand the reasons that World War II began, one must first know the story of World War I. Between 1914 and 1918, World War I raged in Europe. World War I started because of a land dispute that involved the Austro-Hungarian Empire and Serbia (a province of Yugoslavia and an ally of Russia). The dispute grew to involve many other countries and their colonies in Asia and Africa because of a system of alliances (agreements between countries to help defend each other). Eventually, the war pitted the Allies (including France, Great Britain, Italy, Russia, and the U.S.) against the Central Powers (including Germany, Austria-Hungary, and Turkey). The Allies defeated the Central Powers and the war ended with the signing of a peace treaty at Versailles, France.

Because Germany was the chief aggressor, the Allies particularly punished the Germans with the terms of the Versailles treaty. The Allies ordered the disarmament of Germany and forced the German government to pay them reparations (reparations were like fines for the damage that had been done during the war). Germany struggled to make these payments. Many factories had been damaged in the war and Germany could not produce all the goods it needed to sell in order to earn money to pay the Allies.

The situation became worse when the U.S. stock market crashed in 1929, creating a worldwide depression. Inflation in Germany devalued the *Deutschmark* (the German unit of currency, similar to the U.S. dollar) while causing prices to skyrocket. The German people, bitter and desperate, looked for a new leader who could ease their economic difficulties and restore their nation's reputation for greatness. The young politician Adolf Hitler, leader of the Nazi party, promised to do just those things.

However, Hitler's government was a dictatorship. He used fear and violence to accomplish his goals. Hitler believed that the Aryans (ethnic Germans known for their blond hair and blue eyes) were a superior race and that others – in particular the Jewish population – were responsible for Germany's economic troubles. In 1938, Hitler first began his campaign to bring the rest of Europe under German control when he conquered the Sudetenland, an area in Northwestern Czechoslovakia where ethnic Germans lived, and annexed Austria and Czechoslovakia.

Other dictators also had plans similar to Hitler's. Benito Mussolini, head of the Fascist party, controlled the Italian government and made plans to conquer Ethiopia and Albania. Military leaders in the Japanese Empire had dreams of conquering all of Asia. Hitler invaded Poland on September 3, 1939. Two days later, Great Britain, France, Australia, and New Zealand decided that it was time to stop him and declared war on Germany.

Hitler's army was strong and by the end of 1940 they had conquered France, the Netherlands, Belgium and Luxembourg. In addition, they had united with Italy and Japan in the Tripartite Pact, an alliance that bound them to fight in each other's defense.

Although the United States officially remained neutral through the beginning of the war, it was clear that America supported the cause of the Allied powers (Great Britain, France, Australia, Canada, and New Zealand). The American government supplied ships and other materials of war to the Allies at little to no cost through the Lend-Lease program. Furthermore, the United States' government ordered sanctions against the Japanese government, cutting off Japan's oil supply. Japan was determined to rule Asia, and hoped to stop the United States from halting their advances. Tensions mounted between the U.S. and the Axis powers (Germany, Italy, and Japan), and resulted in the Japanese bombing of Pearl Harbor, an American Naval Base in Hawaii on December 7, 1941.