



The Causes of World War II

By Curtis Jerry Smothers

World War II was, in many senses, the “perfect storm.” Its whirlwind was generated by the convergence of many causes, including: (1) issues unresolved by World War I, (2) unfettered nationalism and militarism, and (3) passive and foolish appeasement that served only to encourage the sense of entitlement and invulnerability of the aggressors.

Throw into that mix the miasma of conflicting ideologies (communism, fascism, Japanese emperor worship, democracy) and add a dash of economic chaos caused by the Great Depression, and you get World War II.

The war was, in a sense, a sort of great “temper tantrum” that engulfed the world and wiped out millions.

The travesty of the Treaty of Versailles

The first world war (1914-1918) was less than a final defeat of Germany and more of a “timeout” before the second round. That period between wars was characterized by a breathtaking lack of foresight and wisdom on the “winners” of the first round, England and France.

Vindictive, punitive and financially crippling, the Treaty of Versailles was more of an ultimatum and a menu of punishments for the exhausted Germans, who had no choice but to sign it.

The Nazis knew what they were doing when they tapped into the lingering resentments of the shameful treaty, and it is no coincidence that what Hitler began to do after his rise was to violate one provision after another of the Treaty of Versailles.

Militarism and Nationalism

As Germany rebuilt its air, land and sea forces and carried out its national goals of regaining territory and influence lost in World War I, Japan invaded the Republic of China. In North Africa, fascist Italian troops invaded Abyssinia using tanks and flamethrowers against spears and obsolete rifles.

Truly, by the mid-1930's, the world became a place where military force was the norm, where the other side was slow to catch on. In each case, aggressive use of force as national policies seemed to be more successful, and the success was brought about by totalitarian governments who sneered at democracies as weak.

Appeasement and Weakness

Mistaking appeasement for "peace in our time," western leaders like Britain's Chamberlain felt that passive acceptance of Hitler's demands and claims was better than going to war again. Before the Munich agreement of 1938 sold Czechoslovakia out to German occupation, however, democracies gave no indication that it had any intention of standing up to fascist bullies.

Nothing was done about Italy's invasion of weak Abyssinia. The allies remained neutral during the civil war in Spain, and their passivity contributed to a fascist victory (with German manpower, equipment, and technical aid.)

Moreover, after World War I the isolationism of the United States and failure to join the League of Nations helped cripple the one organization that might have encouraged a unified front against fascist aggression.

Other causes

The Great Depression struck Europe hard. As Germany struggled to pay crippling war reparations to France and Britain, the depression hit and crippled the economy of France (who needed the payments), and ruined Germany economically and politically. The pieces in Germany were picked up by the Nazis, who simply stopped paying and built up their military instead. Before Hitler, Benito Mussolini's black-shirted fascists imposed their own economic solutions on a failed Italian economy.

Then there were the extreme fascist ideologies of Germany, Italy, and Japan. Germans believed they were "the master race." Italians wanted to resurrect the glory of the Roman Empire in Africa. The Japanese cult of emperor worship led them to believe that their destiny was to control the East. Meanwhile, the Soviet Union under the iron hand of Stalin was undergoing a radical societal and economic transformation that was also totalitarian. Stalin only became an ally of the west when the treaty he signed with Hitler turned out to be worthless as Germans held true to their hatred of Communists.

The immediate causes: German attacks Poland; Japan attacks U.S.

On September 1, 1939, Germany launched a three-pronged invasion of Poland. Britain and France were committed to defend Poland and each sent ultimatums to Germany demanding withdrawal.

Two days later, after no response from Germany, Chamberlain declared that a "state of war" existed between Germany and Great Britain. Talk, however, was cheap, and Chamberlain learned once again that the fascists were not deterred by words. Just one month later, Poland ceased to exist as a free country.

The war in Europe got off to a slow start, but the German "blitzkrieg" geared up and eventually conquered France, threw British troops out, and threatened to crush Stalin in the East. The United States, though sympathetic to Great Britain and helpful in other ways, remained uninvolved, until Japan attacked.

The Pearl Harbor Attack Sealed the Deal...

On Sunday, December 7, 1941, the Japanese launched a surprise air attack on U.S. ships in Pearl Harbor, Hawaii. With one military action, the war truly became global. The United States, shocked and outraged by this "sucker punch" slowly and inexorably mobilized its vast military production capability, which prevailed against enemies on two fronts.

The war would rage on until Japan surrendered unconditionally on August 14, 1945, days after two nuclear weapons burst over Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

The bottom-line causes

World War II was caused when a divided world, led by selfish and shortsighted men failed to act wisely after the carnage of World War I.

War, in the end, is really two things: (1) a failure of diplomacy, or "diplomacy by other means", and (2) a hatred and lack of empathy for those who are different. In the former case, diplomats were not equal to the impossible task of finding a way to make diplomacy work. They could not cope with their irreconcilable differences between peaceful coexistence and aggressive acquisitiveness and intolerance.

It was as if this tragic war was a vast "do over" that required the annihilation of whole ideologies and people like Hitler before the new United Nations (this time with U.S. help) could try to pick up the pieces.