The Causes of WWII

Name

Class

Professor

Date

Power and the pursuit of power inevitably lead to conflict and conflict can lead to war. World War II reshaped the geopolitical powers at the time and its effects still last today. Under the dominating influence of Hitler, Germany sought to increase its power through expansionism and militarism. The appeasement policies of France and Great Brittain did not temper Hitler’s quest for power and the alliance between German and the Soviet Union, along with the subsequent invasion of Poland, brought all the major powers into a second world war. The causes of World War II are many and include the intersection of several different power struggles along with the lingering effects of the Treaty of Versailles.

When viewing the causes of World War II, there are several political theories that can provide clarity as to the underlying cause of war. Realism theory is the concept that anarchy or lack of structure on the international level creates instability.[[1]](#footnote-0) Nation-states seek to resolve this instability by increasing their own power and security and reducing the relative power and security of countries around them. Competition for a limited amount of resources is part of the power struggle and can include geographical territory and economic resources. In World War II, the ineffectiveness of the League of Nations meant that there was no dominating power that could exert its authority over Germany as it began to rise to power and was one of the causes of war.

The failures of the Treaty of Versailles are also to blame for Germany’s resurgence after their defeat in World War I. The Treaty of Versailles was the inspiration of US President Woodrow Wilson. The goal of the treaty was to neutralize German power and prevent another occurrence of Germany’s expansionist plans by authorizing a League of Nations to enforce the provisions of the treaty.[[2]](#footnote-1)

Another cause of war is inadequate information. In the 1930-40’s, the lack of a global news source meant that leaders were often making decisions based on incomplete or inaccurate data.[[3]](#footnote-2) This factor led to Great Brittain and France vastly underestimating the will and strength of Germany. Because these two European powers failed to realize the aggressive determination of the Nazi regime to expand its resource base, Great Brittain and France chose a strategy of appeasement. By the time Germany invaded Poland and they realized Germany’s true intent, the time had passed for them to make an effective stand.

The opposite of the realism theory of international anarchy as the cause of war, is the Thucydides theory of a hegemonic state. In hegemony, a dominant super power can provide the stability needed to keep other countries at peace.[[4]](#footnote-3) States in hegemony realize that they have more to gain by working with each other than against each other. Gilpin, in his study of the Greek philosopher Thucydides, stated, “this fundamental idea-that the uneven growth of power among states is the driving force of international relations-can be identified as the theory of hegemonic war.”[[5]](#footnote-4) World War II is considered a hegemonic war because Germany sought to become the global superpower that would provide a hegemonic state for the rest of the world.

Hitler’s dynamic and opportunistic personality was another cause of WWII. At the onset of the war, European politics were fragmented and Hitler exploited this fragmentation by expertly playing countries against each other. Taylor states, “Hitler alone possessed the will and had provided himself with the means. Not only did he create the threat of war and exploit it, but when it came to the point he was prepared to take the risk and go to war…”[[6]](#footnote-5) Again, the appeasement policies of Brittain and France played a role here in underestimating Hitler’s personal convictions and military strengths and failed to prevent the spread of the Nazi regime.

From these roots of war, the events continued to unfold and play out on the world stage. Japan’s lack of resources and nationalistic pride led to its own expansionist policies as it attempted to gain land and resources in China. Japan feared the United States would act to stop their expansion and sought to proactively disarm the Pacific fleet with the attack on Pearl Harbor in 1945. This attack brought the fury of the United States into World War II and helped lead to a resolution of the conflict.

The political theories of realism and hegemony help explain the drives that brought all the major powers into World War II. First, the lack of a strong League of Nations, as outlined in the Treaty of Versailles led to a hegemonic war as Germany sought to increase its power and influence across the world. Second, a lack of adequate information as to the true intent of Hitler’s plans led Great Brittain and France to adopt a policy of appeasement and miss the opportunity to raise the warning to the rest of the world before Germany invaded Poland. The Soviet Union recognized the power grab and understood Germany’s willpower and military strength. They also had expansionist plans and aligned with Germany, and later Japan, to further that cause. Japan’s expansionist goals led to the bombing of Pearl Harbor and brought the United States, who had attempted to remain out of the war, into the conflict and ultimately led to the resolution of the last of the great World Wars.

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1. Frieden, Jeffry A., David A. Lake, and Kenneth A. Schultz. 2010. *World politics: interests, interactions, institutions*. New York: W.W. Norton. p.85. [↑](#footnote-ref-0)
2. Graebner, Norman A., and Edward M. Bennett. 2011. *The Versailles Treaty and its legacy: the failure of the Wilsonian vision.* New York: Cambridge University Press. Preface, p. x. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
3. Ibid, p.86. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
4. Gilpin, Robert. 1988. *The Theory of Hegemonic War*. Journal of Interdisciplinary History, Vol. 18, No. 4, The Origin and Prevention of Major Wars (Spring, 1988), pp. 591-613 The MIT Press. P.590. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
5. Ibid, p.591. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
6. Taylor, A. J. P. 1962. *The origins of the Second World War*. New York: Atheneum. P.145. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)