

What Were the Causes of World War II?

How did the international community try to prevent war? The League of Nations, disarmament conferences, and mutual defense treaties were efforts used in the 1920s and 1930s by the international community to maintain world peace.

PRIMARY SOURCE

British historian Dr. G.P. Gooch addressed the threat of war in his 1938 article, “The Breakdown of the System of Collective Security.”

“Since the Allies declined to scale down their armaments to the German level, Germany was certain to climb towards theirs as soon as she felt strong enough to do so with **impunity**¹. The Disarmament Conference which opened at Geneva in February 1932 had taken years to prepare, and it met too late. Even the chance of a limited agreement was lost owing to the lack of a strong lead at the outset by a Great Power . . . Each country was **virtuously**² ready for reductions in categories which were not of vital importance to itself, but stood out for those which it needed most. Thus Great Britain longed for the abolition of the submarine, which nearly starved us in 1917, while she clung to the **capital ship**³. . . . When the Conference adjourned for the summer holidays in 1932, it was clear that it had failed. In the autumn Germany retired, but was brought back by a promise of equality of status. . . . Such a system proved unattainable, and a year later Hitler’s Germany withdrew not only from the Conference but from the League [of Nations] itself. . . . Since that moment Germany has been re-arming at feverish speed, and Europe is back again in its pre-War mood when everyone was afraid of Berlin. Our own colossal re-armament programme is the measure of our alarm.”

1 **impunity**: freedom from punishment

2 **virtuously**: morally

Why did these efforts fail to prevent

World War II? Japan, Italy, and Germany each used its military to occupy foreign territories in the 1930s. Their aggressive moves led to the outbreak of a global conflict by the end of the decade.

After World War I ended in 1918, global leaders resolved to prevent future wars. Nonetheless, only two decades later, the most destructive conflict in human history broke out. Read the excerpts and study the cartoon to learn more about the causes of World War II.

PRIMARY SOURCE

The following passages are from 1938 diary entries of Victor Klemperer, a Jewish professor who lived in Nazi Germany.

The immense act of violence on the [German] **annexation**⁴ of Austria, the immense increase in [Germany’s] power both internally and externally, the defenseless trembling fear of England, France, etc. We shall not live to see the end of the Third Reich. . . .

The Third Reich will win again—whether by bluff or by force. . . . Chamberlain flies to Hitler for the second time tomorrow. England and France remain calm, in Dresden the **Sudeten German “Freikorps**⁵ is almost ready to invade [Czechoslovakia]. And the populace here is convinced that the Czechs alone are to blame and that Hitler loves peace. . . .

Four-power meeting⁶ today [September 29] at three in Munich. Czechoslovakia continues to exist, Germany gets the Sudetenland, probably a colony as well. . . . For the populace on the front pages of the German press it is of course the absolute success of Hitler, the prince of peace and brilliant diplomat. . . . No shot is fired, and the [German] troops have been marching in since yesterday. Wishes for peace and friendship have been exchanged with England and France, Russia is cowering and silent, a zero. Hitler is being acclaimed even more extravagantly than in the Austria business.

3 **capital ship**: large class warship, such as a battleship

4 **annexation**: the act of incorporating new territory



▲ The weakness of the League of Nations is illustrated in this 1931 cartoon, “Let Sam Do It,” by Winsor McCay.

At the end of World War I, United States president Woodrow Wilson lobbied for the creation of an international organization to help prevent future conflicts. The League of Nations formed in 1919. Many Americans, however, feared that joining the League would drag the country into foreign wars. As a result, the U.S. Senate refused to allow the nation to become a member of the League.

In 1931, the League of Nations faced a major challenge to its ability to maintain world peace when Japan invaded China. Artist Winsor McCay published the above cartoon after Japanese soldiers captured Manchuria from the Chinese. The man standing on the right side of the cartoon, Uncle Sam, represents the United States.

5 **Sudeten German “Freikorps”:** German guerrilla force that sought to add the Sudetenland region to Germany

6 **Four-power meeting:** meeting of Germany, Italy, France, and Britain to discuss Germany’s claims to the Sudetenland

DBQ Analyzing Historical Documents

- 1 **Explaining** According to Gooch, why did the Disarmament Conference in Geneva fail?
- 2 **Recognizing Bias** What does Klemperer suggest about how most Germans felt about Hitler in 1938? Why do you think the German populace felt that way about Hitler?
- 3 **Interpreting** What does McCay believe about the likelihood of stopping the conflict between Japan and China?
- 4 **Analyzing** Do Gooch and Klemperer primarily agree or disagree in their assessments of the threat to world peace in 1938?
- 5 **Comparing** What common point does each of the three sources make about the international efforts to prevent war in the 1930s?
- 6 **Drawing Conclusions** What were the causes of World War II? Do you think the Western powers could have prevented the war? Why or why not?