

Assess the importance of each of the following as causes of the Second World War: treaties; economic factors; ideology.

World War II is one of the most studied events in history in terms of understanding the origins of such a disastrous global conflict. Understanding the causes of such a drastic event will lead to further comprehension of how the global political climate evolved in the 20th century. Analyzing the links between the post-World War I era and this time period is crucial for learning how future conflicts arise, especially as to understanding the origins of the Cold War in later years. In addition, understanding the methods of analysis is very beneficial to understanding the arguments behind historiographical claims for every later event.

It is difficult to isolate a specific origin for World War Two, because of the intensely interlocked and complex environment that such a conflict originated in. Using methods of historiographical analysis, this paper will argue that economic factors drove the formation of disastrous treaties which directly led to World War II, while ideology only marginally drove war claims. This paper compares different orthodox and revisionist viewpoints in order to make arguments for how while poor treaties directly escalated tensions in Europe, it was predominately other economic factors that created the basis for conflict on a global scale.

Treaties and the policies of appeasement caused an opportunistic Hitler to implement an expansionistic foreign policy. Although the orthodox view is that Hitler was an all controlling dictator with incredible charisma, the revisionist view states that he was more likely spontaneously responding to internal and external conflicts. In other words, he did not have a defined foreign policy aim to control Europe, but rather had a brief outline of what he wished to accomplish. All of the subsequent invasions and purges were rather the result of opportunities

that opened up in Europe. He was a very skilled statesman but ultimately an opportunist who took advantage of the chaotic aftermath of global treaties.

At the close of the First World War, the Treaty of Versailles was intended to prevent global war from occurring again. Ironically, in attempting to solve problems, it created more drastic issues, leading up to opportunities for Hitler. As the world was recoiling “against the horrors of war”, the victorious nations vowed to prevent such a catastrophe from ever occurring again by limiting German powers. Article 231 placed the blame of the First World War on Germany and demanded massive monetary reparations, military reductions, and territory losses. This created a psychological burden, as the rest of the world seemed to be oppressing the German people and classifying them as a weaker nation. The Treaty of Versailles instilled anger and suffering in the hearts of the Germans, allowing them to be more vulnerable to Nazi propaganda in the future, even as the treaty had very little effect at preserving peace. Without unilateral support from all of the Western powers, there was no enforcement of any of the conditions. Instances such as the failure of the “Stresa Front”, where Britain broke away from the terms of the treaty to offer a policy of appeasement, showed Hitler that the West was divided. Divided policies allowed for Hitler to play diplomats off of each other and take land in Europe through the manipulation of treaties. In addition, British diplomats believed the Treaty of Versailles were too harsh, resulting in decisions to abandon the original terms. Through the 1920s, Chamberlain actively pursued a policy of appeasement in response to the Treaty of Versailles. Later historians refer to his thinking as the “diplomacy of illusion”, as he believed that Hitler only desired reparations from the unjust Treaty of Versailles. This policy of appeasement led to subsequent international treaties, such as the Treaty of Locarno. Although this treaty led to temporary peace on Germany’s western front, as well as earning the negotiators

a Noble Peace Prize, it merely further proved the weakness of the western powers to Hitler. Therefore, the conflicting and ineffective policies created by treaties only fueled the fires for the Nazi regime.

In addition, the failures of international institutes created by treaties allowed for Hitler to steamroll over all of Europe. The League of Nations, created as a result of the Paris Peace Conference, was entirely ineffective in fulfilling its purpose of preventing conflict around the world. During crucial times of crisis, such as when Italy invaded Abyssinia, the League was silent. As Japan instituted the Manchurian Crisis, the League had nothing mild words of rebuke. These actions led Hitler and the Axis powers to view the League as ineffective and useless, and they were correct. Without the backing of the United States or the USSR, the League of Nations did not have any method of enforcing any policies, militarily or economically. Therefore, as there was no global structure to preserve peace, Hitler had an excellent opportunity to build his expansionist policies and take land throughout Eastern Europe.

However, these unstable treaties were merely a result of the poor economic times that Europe was facing at the time. In fact, the battered economy drove most of the primary decision making that led up to the Second World War. It prevented British politicians from pursuing any policy other than appeasement, allowed for the National Socialist Party to seize control in Germany, and was the root cause of the conflict in the Pacific front. As we have established that the Nazi party and the weak foreign policy by the West are the direct causes of World War Two, because a weakened economic condition led to the aforementioned policies, it is the primary cause for the Second World War.

Economic conditions of the 1930s made policies of appeasement seem reasonable to western powers. Although the orthodox view of appeasement was that Chamberlain was the “guiltiest of guilty men” for following through with those ideas, later revisionist views have shown that these policies were appropriate. Chamberlain was facing complex domestic economic issues throughout this time period, primarily a result of the Great Depression. At this dangerous point along recovery, most of the men serving in the army were actually in the reserve corps, so that if Chamberlain was to activate these troops, British industry would be crippled. Balancing economic issues was also crucial for the politically instable French government, which was trying to reconcile between different political factions. To prevent economic meltdown, the French moved towards policies for increased defense, such as building the Maginot line, rather than mobilizing a large army that would consume resources and deprive a delicate industrial system of its workers. Therefore, it is unfair to claim that treaties were the primary cause of the Second World War. Rather, the British and French governments utilized policies of appeasement because of dire and complex economic conditions at home.

In addition, poor economic conditions in Germany were the primary cause of Hitler’s rise to power. The National Socialist Party was initially seen as an extremist party during its founding. During the boom years of the 1920s, when German people were doing well economically and socially, Germany had no need for retaliation against the Western powers. The Dawes Plan permitted continued economic growth, which pacified the German people. Hitler was even imprisoned in this time for his actions in the Beer Hall Putsch, an indication of how a non-panicked population reacted towards his ideas. However, the stock market crash of 1929 and the global depression that came afterwards ended this peaceful era. Soon, the United States ended aid provided by the Dawes Plan, which increased the financial burden on Germany. As inflation

rose and unemployment rose, common people began to again blame the Treaty of Versailles and unfair terms set at the end of the First World War as the cause. Because the Nazi party was built on the ideological basis of regaining previous glory, more citizens turned towards it. Support for the Nazi Party erupted in both the country side as well as in the main cities, allowing for it to gain control over the Reichstag. With Hitler at the helm, Germany was soon developed into an increasingly militarized country, causing tensions and setting the stage for the Second World War. In short, without the economic shock of the Wall Street Crash, the Nationalist Socialist party would not have found sufficient support to enact its radical and extreme policies.

Also, the manipulation of economic sanctions by the United States on Japan was the prime cause of the war in the Pacific Stage. Although Japan was already waging war in China, that front was quickly reaching a stalemate. Japanese troops were stalled even as the emperor needed more resources to maintain control. The US chose this time to implement an oil and steel embargo, drastically threatening the future of the Japanese empire. As a result, Japan became more opportunistic and looked to attack neighboring Southeast Asian countries and islands. There were plenty of crucial resources, such as oil and rubber, to be found in French colonies, and the League of Nations had already showed no resistance to attacks. Therefore, economic tensions were the primary cause for the increased aggression and militarism in the Pacific theater.

Orthodox interpretation placed a heavy emphasis on the ideological motivations of both the Axis powers and the Western powers in the start of World War II. In most United States propaganda films, the war was depicted as a fight between the liberties of democracy against the terror of tyranny. However, Western powers entered the war primarily because of economic and political tensions, not because of harsh ideological differences. It is useful to differentiate between two branches of ideology at this point: there is the clash between the democracies and

fascist states, but there are also the competing brands of national ideologies, such as Hitler's Nazism and Stalin's Communism. This essay concludes that while the clashing fascist states had very little effect on the outbreak of World War II, the driving rhythm of national ideologies were responsible to some extent in getting belligerent nations to mobilize and become more aggressive.

The United States existed in "golden isolation" during the interwar period and was not ready to rearm solely because of ideological differences. Even as conditions in Europe were deteriorating due to the lack of US involvement, Congress refused to provide military forces or other types of support to stabilize Europe. This reveals that although fascism in Europe was on the rise, the United States did not take any stand against it. In addition, different brands of fascism emerged between the three axis powers. It does not make sense for the United States to be opposed to all three radically different types of governments. Therefore, it is more likely that the US merely used the story of ideological differences to drum up more support for the war effort after the war had been sparked by the tragedy at Pearl Harbor. Although this would have long term effects seen in the origins of the Cold War, ideological differences play a minimal role in beginning World War II.

However, individual brands of ideology were very crucial to the buildup of military power in Europe. Hitler's Nazi party was built on the crucial ideas of Lebensraum and anti-Semitism, as depicted in *Mein Kampf*. As the Nazi party grew larger, Hitler was able to use these fundamental goals to increase the war effort and keep the country on the path towards war. Therefore, it is wrong to claim that ideology had no effect on the origins of World War II. Rather, the effect had a small extent to drive the military effort of individual countries, but had little effect in creating drastic global tensions.

In conclusion, after analyzing several different perspectives and considering many different arguments, this paper concludes that the primary cause for war was the economic conditions of Europe. However, ideological stances played more of a background role throughout all of these events. These combined conditions drove increasingly poor foreign policy decisions and led to the global conflict of World War II.