

Topic 7.6: Causes of World War II

Standards Table

Theme	Learning Objective	Key Concept(s)	Historical Thinking Skill(s)	Standards Alignment
Governance (GOV)	Explain the causes and consequences of World War II	KC-6.2.IV.B.ii	Causation, Contextualization, Comparison, Sourcing	AP World History: Modern Unit 7

Learning Objectives

By the end of the lesson, students will be able to:

- Identify major political, economic, and ideological causes of World War II.
- Explain how unresolved tensions after World War I contributed to renewed conflict.
- Analyze historical documents through sourcing, contextualization, and evidence use.
- Evaluate the relative importance of economic crisis, fascist expansion, and international weakness in causing World War II.

Lesson Overview

World War II did not begin because of one event alone. It emerged from the unstable peace settlement after World War I, the economic crisis of the Great Depression, imperial ambitions, and the rise of aggressive authoritarian governments. The Treaty of Versailles weakened Germany but did not create a stable peace, and many states increasingly doubted whether international agreements could prevent future war. Economic hardship after 1929 further destabilized societies, especially in Germany and Japan, where leaders linked national revival to military expansion. These developments created conditions in which aggressive regimes could gain support and challenge the postwar order.

In this lesson, you will study a set of AP-style documents that reveal competing interpretations of why World War II began. Some sources emphasize the unfairness of the peace settlement, while others stress the importance of economic collapse, ideological extremism, or weak international responses. As in a real DBQ, you will need to move beyond summary by identifying each source's point of view, purpose, audience, and historical situation. You will also practice grouping documents, connecting them to outside evidence, and building a historically defensible argument about relative causation.

Essential Vocabulary

- **Collective Security:** The principle that countries will act together against aggression in order to preserve peace.
- **Revisionism:** Efforts by a state to alter an existing treaty, border arrangement, or international settlement.
- **Autarky:** A policy aiming for national economic self-sufficiency, often associated with aggressive expansion.
- **Remilitarization:** The rebuilding or reintroduction of military forces into areas where they had been restricted.
- **Lebensraum:** Nazi ideology calling for territorial expansion to provide “living space” for Germans.

Background Reading

The settlement that ended World War I reshaped Europe but left many tensions unresolved. The Treaty of Versailles reduced Germany’s military, imposed reparations, and assigned blame for the war, while other treaties redrew borders across Europe and the Middle East. Although supporters argued that the new order would preserve peace, critics warned that it punished Germany without creating a stable balance of power. German resentment over territorial losses, military restrictions, and reparations became a powerful political force during the interwar years. Outside evidence such as the “war guilt” clause and the demilitarization of the Rhineland can help students explain why many Germans later supported revisionist politics.

The Great Depression intensified instability across the globe. Beginning with the 1929 stock market crash in the United States, the economic crisis spread through banking systems, trade networks, and industrial economies. Unemployment rose dramatically, democratic governments appeared weak, and extremist parties gained support by promising national renewal and decisive leadership. In Germany, the Nazi Party turned economic suffering into political opportunity, while in Japan military leaders argued that control over foreign territory was necessary for access to raw materials and markets. Outside evidence such as the collapse of Weimar coalition governments or Japan’s dependence on imported resources can strengthen a DBQ argument about economic causation.

Aggressive expansion by fascist and militarist regimes further undermined peace. Japan invaded Manchuria in 1931, Italy invaded Ethiopia in 1935, and Germany remilitarized the Rhineland in 1936 before annexing Austria and demanding the Sudetenland. These actions revealed the weakness of collective security and the inability or unwillingness of Britain and France to stop aggression. Appeasement, especially at Munich in 1938, reflected the hope that concessions might preserve peace, but instead encouraged further expansion. Students can use outside evidence such as the Rome-Berlin Axis,

the Anti-Comintern Pact, and the Nazi-Soviet Pact to show how aggressive states reshaped diplomacy and prepared the ground for war.

At the same time, World War II reflected both continuity and change in global conflict. Like World War I, it grew from nationalism, militarism, imperial rivalry, and unstable alliances. However, the causes of World War II also involved stronger ideological conflict, more openly expansionist totalitarian regimes, and the severe impact of worldwide economic collapse. Comparison to World War I can help students show continuity, while analysis of fascism, totalitarianism, and the failure of the League of Nations can help them explain change. In a DBQ, this kind of reasoning allows students to build a more complex argument rather than simply listing causes.

DBQ Documents Analysis Section

Document 1

- **Type of Source:** Treaty excerpt
- **Author:** Allied representatives at the Paris Peace Conference
- **Date:** 1919

“The Allied and Associated Powers affirm that the German Government and its allies bear responsibility for the war and for the losses and damages to which the Allied peoples and their property have been subjected. In consequence of this responsibility, Germany shall undertake compensation for civilian damages arising from the aggression imposed upon Europe. The armed forces of Germany shall be reduced to a scale strictly limited to the maintenance of internal order and frontier defense, since the preservation of peace requires that no renewed threat arise from German militarism. Territories formerly administered by Germany shall be disposed of according to the settlement determined by the victorious powers, and no future arrangement shall permit Germany again to disturb the equilibrium of Europe. The intention of the present terms is not vengeance but security, so that a just and durable peace may rest upon the prevention of renewed aggression.”

Historical Situation: This document reflects the post-World War I settlement created by the victors at Paris, who aimed to prevent Germany from again threatening European peace.

Perspective / Limitation: The document reflects the victors’ desire for security and order, but it does not account for how punitive provisions might fuel German resentment and revisionism.

Use in Argument: This document can be used to argue that the peace settlement after World War I created long-term instability by humiliating and weakening Germany without fully reconciling Europe.

Questions

1. How does the authors' position as victorious Allied powers shape the terms and tone of this treaty excerpt?
2. What specific evidence in the document suggests that Germany is being punished and restrained?
3. How does this document help explain how the post-World War I peace settlement contributed to World War II?

Document 2

- **Type of Source:** Political speech
- **Author:** Adolf Hitler
- **Date:** 1935

“For years the German nation has endured a peace that was no peace, but rather a system of organized humiliation imposed by those who claimed to defend civilization while denying our people equality among nations. We were stripped of arms, of territory, of honor, and then told that submission was the condition of peace. No people of spirit could accept forever a settlement founded on guilt and weakness. The German Reich therefore rejects the lie that strength is itself aggression. Our task is the restoration of national dignity, the unity of our people, and the recovery of those rights unjustly denied to us. Rearmament is not undertaken for reckless adventure, but because no sovereign state can remain permanently defenseless while others preserve the means of power. Germany demands not privilege, but the recognition due to a great nation determined to cast off the chains of Versailles and resume its rightful place in Europe.”

Historical Situation: Hitler delivered arguments like this while openly challenging the military restrictions imposed on Germany after World War I.

Perspective / Limitation: The speech is openly propagandistic and nationalistic, presenting German rearmament as defensive while obscuring the regime's aggressive expansionist goals.

Use in Argument: This document can be used to show how Nazi leadership exploited resentment over Versailles to justify remilitarization and territorial aggression.

Questions

1. How does Hitler's position and purpose shape the way he describes Versailles and rearmament?
2. What evidence in the document shows how German grievances are being turned into a political argument for military expansion?
3. How does this document help explain the rise of aggressive militarism as a cause of World War II?

Document 3

- **Type of Source:** Economic analysis
- **Author:** European economic observer writing for an international policy journal
- **Date:** 1932

“The financial collapse that has spread since 1929 has done more than reduce production and employment; it has shaken confidence in the institutions upon which parliamentary government depends. In Germany especially, one sees not only factories standing idle and workers without wages, but also a dangerous willingness to abandon constitutional moderation in favor of political movements that promise national rebirth through forceful action. Where savings disappear, businesses fail, and coalition ministries seem incapable of decisive relief, extremists find their opportunity. The crisis therefore threatens Europe not merely with poverty but with the political consequences of poverty. Economic desperation breeds distrust of liberal government, and distrust creates openings for men who claim that discipline, expansion, and national unity can restore prosperity. Unless recovery comes soon, the continent may discover that depression has prepared the social foundation for a new and more dangerous conflict.”

Historical Situation: This source reflects the effects of the Great Depression on European political life, especially in Germany.

Perspective / Limitation: The author focuses strongly on economic causation and may understate ideological, diplomatic, and military factors that also contributed to war.

Use in Argument: This document can be used to argue that the Great Depression destabilized democratic systems and increased support for extremist movements.

Questions

1. What is the author’s main argument about the relationship between economic crisis and political extremism?
2. What evidence in the document connects economic suffering to the weakening of democracy?
3. How does this document help explain the Great Depression as a cause of World War II?

Document 4

- **Type of Source:** Diplomatic statement
- **Author:** British prime minister after the Munich Conference
- **Date:** 1938

“We have sought, through frank discussion and reasonable compromise, to remove a dispute that threatened to plunge Europe once more into war. The settlement reached recognizes that grievances left unresolved can become sources of grave danger, and it

is therefore wiser to correct certain injustices through negotiation than to test them on the battlefield. No responsible government can lightly dismiss the memory of the last war or ignore the suffering another conflict would bring upon our people. If peace can be preserved by meeting legitimate claims without general war, then statesmanship demands that such a course be attempted. We do not act from weakness, but from the conviction that peace is best defended when passions are restrained and settlements are achieved without bloodshed. The choice before Europe has not been between honor and cowardice alone, but between a chance for peace and the immediate certainty of catastrophe.”

Historical Situation: This document reflects British defense of appeasement after the Munich Agreement allowed Germany to gain the Sudetenland from Czechoslovakia.

Perspective / Limitation: The source reflects fear of another world war and the belief that negotiation could preserve peace, but it underestimates Hitler’s broader ambitions.

Use in Argument: This document can be used to show how appeasement, though intended to avoid war, enabled Nazi expansion.

Questions

1. How does the historical experience of World War I shape the author’s argument for compromise?
2. What evidence in the document shows the logic behind appeasement?
3. How does this document help explain how international responses contributed to the outbreak of World War II?

Document 5

- **Type of Source:** Government statement
- **Author:** Japanese foreign policy official
- **Date:** 1931

“The present circumstances in Manchuria cannot be understood apart from the larger realities confronting our empire. Japan’s population grows, its industries expand, and its need for secure access to raw materials and markets becomes more urgent with each passing year. Yet instability in northeastern China, combined with the threat that rival powers may exploit disorder to their advantage, leaves our national future exposed to unacceptable risk. Measures undertaken in Manchuria are therefore neither acts of wanton aggression nor departures from reasoned policy, but necessary steps to secure peace, commerce, and stability in East Asia. A great nation cannot rely indefinitely upon uncertain foreign supplies while domestic welfare and imperial security remain vulnerable. The responsibility of government is to ensure that the Japanese people are not left at the mercy of external pressures. Expansion, in such conditions, is not merely ambition; it is prudence joined to national survival.”

Historical Situation: Japan used arguments like this to justify its seizure of Manchuria during the global economic crisis.

Perspective / Limitation: The source presents imperial conquest as defensive necessity and ignores Chinese sovereignty and the violence of occupation.

Use in Argument: This document can be used to show how economic pressures and imperial ambition contributed to World War II in Asia.

Questions

1. How does the author justify Japanese expansion in Manchuria?
2. What evidence in the document suggests that economic concerns are linked to imperial policy?
3. How does this document help explain imperialist expansion as a cause of World War II?

Document 6

- **Type of Source:** Personal account
- **Author:** German middle-class observer
- **Date:** 1933

“There is in the streets a feeling difficult to describe, part relief, part excitement, and part apprehension. For years people have watched prices, jobs, and governments fail them, and many now say that at last there is a movement that speaks clearly of order, work, and national pride. Men who once distrusted political extremes now argue that extraordinary times require extraordinary leadership. They are tired of weakness, tired of parties that quarrel while the country declines. Yet beneath the public enthusiasm there remains uncertainty. Some welcome discipline because they believe it will restore Germany; others fear where such discipline may lead, though they say little. What is beyond doubt is that suffering has changed what people are prepared to accept. Ideas once dismissed as dangerous now appear to many as practical remedies for humiliation and disorder.”

Historical Situation: This account reflects public reactions during Hitler’s rise to power amid economic and political instability.

Perspective / Limitation: As a personal account, it reveals social mood but cannot fully explain state policy or international developments.

Use in Argument: This document can be used to show how economic distress and political disillusionment made fascist rule more acceptable to many Germans.

Questions

1. What perspective does this source offer on support for authoritarian leadership in Germany?
2. What evidence in the document shows how crisis changed political attitudes?
3. How does this document help explain the rise of fascism as a cause of World War II?

Document 7

- **Type of Source:** League of Nations report
- **Author:** League official
- **Date:** 1936

“The repeated defiance of treaty obligations by member and non-member states alike has exposed a grave weakness in the present structure of collective security. Where aggression is met only by protest, and where violations of international agreements bring neither swift penalty nor united resistance, confidence in peaceful settlement declines. The remilitarization of forbidden zones, the occupation of foreign territories, and the open testing of international resolve have all demonstrated that declarations alone cannot restrain governments determined to alter the existing order by force. The danger is not only that one act of aggression goes unanswered, but that each unanswered act invites the next. A system created to preserve peace cannot endure if its members hesitate whenever enforcement requires sacrifice. Unless governments accept that peace depends upon common action rather than private calculation, the authority of international law will continue to erode, and the prospect of wider war will become increasingly difficult to avoid.”

Historical Situation: This report reflects growing awareness that the League of Nations was failing to stop aggression during the 1930s.

Perspective / Limitation: The source highlights institutional weakness but may understate why major powers were unwilling to act decisively.

Use in Argument: This document can be used to show that weak international enforcement encouraged aggressive states and undermined peace.

Questions

1. What is the report’s main criticism of the international system in the 1930s?
2. What evidence in the document shows why collective security was failing?
3. How does this document help explain the role of weak international response in causing World War II?

Table 1: Grouping the Documents by Cause

Category	Documents	How they support the argument
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Unsustainable peace settlement after WWI	1, 2	Versailles created German resentment that Hitler later exploited
Great Depression and economic crisis	3, 5, 6	Economic instability undermined democracy and encouraged extremism or expansion
Fascism / totalitarianism / militarism	2, 6	Fascist leadership transformed resentment into aggressive state policy
Weak international response / appeasement	4, 7	Failure to enforce peace encouraged further aggression
Imperialist expansion	5	Japan pursued expansion for resources, markets, and strategic security

Table 2: Outside Evidence Options

Outside Evidence	How to use it in a DBQ
Remilitarization of the Rhineland	Show Germany openly violated Versailles and tested foreign resolve
Invasion of Ethiopia	Show League weakness and fascist aggression beyond Germany
Anschluss	Show how Nazi territorial expansion continued before 1939
Nazi-Soviet Pact	Show diplomacy helped clear the way for invasion of Poland
Manchurian Crisis	Show the causes of WWII were global, not only European

Historical Reasoning Section

Change Over Time

From 1919 to 1939, the international system changed from a postwar settlement that claimed to preserve peace into one increasingly dominated by revisionist and militarized states. In the early 1920s, leaders focused on treaties, borders, and collective security, but by the 1930s many governments had lost confidence in those arrangements. The Great Depression changed the political environment by weakening democratic institutions and strengthening extremist movements. Germany moved from defeat and restriction to open remilitarization and expansion, while Japan increasingly pursued aggressive empire in East Asia. In a DBQ, students can use this change over time to argue that World War II resulted not only from unresolved tensions after 1919 but also from the collapse of interwar stability in the 1930s.

Continuity Over Time

Some causes of World War II reflected long-standing patterns in global history. Nationalism, militarism, and imperial ambition had already contributed to World War I and remained important in the 1930s. States continued to seek security, prestige, territory, and access to resources, and powerful governments still justified expansion in

the language of national survival. European rivalries and broader imperial competition therefore did not disappear after 1918. In a DBQ, students can use this continuity to show that World War II was not entirely new, even though its ideological and economic dimensions were intensified.

Comparison

World War II can be compared to World War I because both conflicts were shaped by nationalism, militarism, imperial rivalry, and unstable diplomacy. However, the causes of World War II were more strongly connected to global economic collapse and to openly expansionist fascist and militarist regimes. The leaders of the 1930s also operated in the shadow of World War I, which shaped appeasement and public fear of another mass conflict. Japan's expansion in Asia shows that the causes of World War II extended beyond Europe, making the conflict more immediately global in character. In a DBQ, comparison helps students distinguish between inherited tensions and genuinely new developments.

Key Takeaways

- The Treaty of Versailles weakened Germany but failed to create a stable, lasting peace.
- The Great Depression destabilized societies and made extremist politics more attractive in several countries.
- Fascist and militarist governments turned economic hardship and nationalist resentment into aggressive expansion.
- Appeasement and the weakness of collective security encouraged aggressive states to take greater risks.
- World War II had both European and Asian causes, so students should avoid treating it as only a European conflict.

DBQ Practice Section

Prompt:

Evaluate the extent to which the rise of aggressive fascist and militarist regimes was the most important cause of World War II.

Task Instructions:

Develop a thesis. Use at least 4 documents. Include outside evidence. Explain sourcing for at least 2 documents.