

World War II

*The Great Depression and
World War II (1929–1945)*



Origins and causes

The European theater

The Pacific theater

Aftermath

Thematic Icons



Economics and business



Geography and environment



Historical concepts and questions



Politics, government and citizenship



Society and culture



War, diplomacy and foreign policy

Icons: For more detailed instructions, see the *User Guide*



Flash activity (these activities are not editable)



Teacher notes included in the Notes page



By the end of this section, you will know about the following origins and causes of World War II:

- The rise of postwar dictators
- Problems in postwar Germany
- Nazi ideology
- German expansion and the policy of appeasement
- The Treaty of Non-Aggression between Germany and the Soviet Union.



Looking back timeline



Use this timeline to recap key historical events and contextualize World War II. Either press on a date, or drag the pointer along the timeline to read about what happened in each year.

Press **start** to begin.

start





The rise of European dictators



Like the U.S., postwar Europe faced severe economic depression. Many people became dissatisfied with their government's inability to restore prosperity. The result was revolution. Political upheaval replaced the governments of several countries with **totalitarian** dictatorships. Press the flags to learn more.

Press **start** to begin.

start



Why do you think people accepted totalitarian rule?



Other European powers blamed Germany for starting World War I.

As punishment, the Treaty of Versailles restricted the size of Germany's military and took away its colonial empire.

It also imposed extreme reparation payments that Germany could not afford. By 1923, **hyperinflation** had made the German Mark worthless.



Were these punishments fair? How might Hitler have exploited German feelings toward the Treaty?



Germany's international troubles were compounded by fear of revolution from within.

Many Germans believed that they had lost the War because the army had been betrayed by Communists and Jews.

Germany's postwar government was a representative democracy known as the **Weimar Republic**.



The Republic's inability to deal with Germany's economic collapse led many to look elsewhere for leadership.

What postwar events might have contributed to German fears about communism?



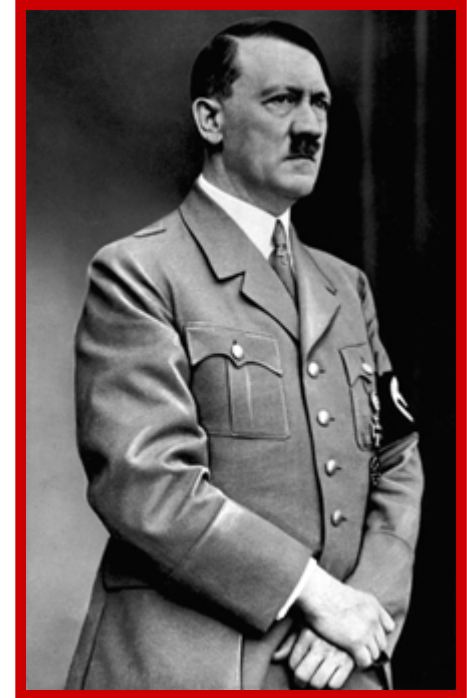
Hitler takes power



Adolf Hitler was a political activist and gifted orator who promoted German **nationalism**.

Hitler became head of the National Socialist German Workers' (Nazi) Party in the early 1920s.

His powerful rhetoric and promise to restore German prosperity made him extremely popular. He was appointed Chancellor of Germany in 1933.



Hitler immediately ended the Weimar Republic and announced the beginning of the **Third Reich**. He called himself **Der Führer**: “The Leader.”





Hitler said Germans needed **Lebensraum**, or “living space,” to support their population. To gain this space, he believed Germany needed to expand eastward.

The Nazis developed the idea of **Blut und Boden**, “blood and soil,” which held that those who work the soil, own it.

According to this belief, regions populated by German-speakers rightfully belonged to Germany.



How might these concepts help to restore German national pride?



Hitler wanted to create a master **Aryan** race. He believed other races were inferior and should be wiped out.

Hitler used racism to his political advantage. Exploiting established **anti-Semitism**, he made the Jewish people scapegoats for all of Germany's problems.

Hitler's discriminatory policies began with his rise to power in 1933, when he forcibly removed all non-Aryans from government office.





As the 1930s progressed, Hitler's territorial aims brought Europe ever closer to war. Can you sort these events into chronological order?
Press the orange information buttons to read more about each event.

Press **start** to begin.

start





The Sudetenland

France and Britain had promised to defend Czechoslovakia in case of invasion.

Hitler invited French and British Prime Ministers **Édouard Daladier** and **Neville Chamberlain** to Munich.

He claimed that his only goal was to protect the Sudeten Germans and that Germany would make no further territorial demands in central Europe.

Desperate to avoid war, Daladier and Chamberlain signed the **Munich Agreement** on September 30, 1938, allowing Germany to annex the Sudetenland.



Why would France and Britain sign the Agreement?



The end of appeasement



British politician **Winston Churchill** criticized this policy of **appeasement**.

“Britain and France had to choose between war and dishonor. They chose dishonor. They will have war.”

–Winston Churchill

Churchill was right. Barely a month after the Munich Agreement, Germany occupied the rest of Czechoslovakia. Hitler then set his sights on Poland.

France and Britain promised to come to Poland's aid if it was attacked, assuming Russia would do the same.





On August 23, 1939, Nazi and Soviet foreign ministers von Ribbentrop and Molotov signed the **Treaty of Non-Aggression between Germany and the Soviet Union**, which promised the two countries would not attack each other. The Treaty also included a secret protocol.

Press **start** and the highlighted text to learn more.

start





Major players

Can you match these wartime leaders
to their descriptions?

Press the information panels on the
right to see a photograph and a
quotation from each of them.

Press **start** to begin.

start

