

6.31 Was World War II Inevitable?

Background: Could nations have learned from World War I, the “Great War,” and prevented World War II? Historian Eric Hobsbawm argues they were really one war with a twenty-year intermission while nations rearmed, resupplied, and bred a new generation of young men willing to fight.

Instructions: Read the joint statement made following the 1938 Munich Conference and examine the chronology of events leading up to World War II? In your opinion, could war have been prevented? If it could have been, at what point or points would nations have had to act to stop Germany and Japanese expansion? Explain.



British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain shaking hands with Adolf Hitler at the 1938 Munich Conference

Joint Statement by Chamberlain and Hitler at Munich Conference

“We, the German fuehrer and the British prime minister, have had a further meeting today and are agreed in recognizing that the question of Anglo-German relations is of the first importance for the future of our countries and Europe. We regard the agreement signed last night and the Anglo-German naval agreement as symbolic of a decision by our two peoples never to go to war with one another again. We are resolved that the method of consultation shall be the method adopted to deal with any other questions that may concern our two countries, and we are determined to continue our efforts to remove possible sources of differences and thus contribute to a solemn peace of Europe.”

Chronology of Events leading to World War II (1931-1941)

- 1931: Japan occupies Manchuria
- 1933: Hitler seizes control of Germany
- 1934: Italy invades Ethiopia
- 1935: German Jews lose political rights
- 1936: Germany reoccupies the Rhineland violating the WWI treaty; Great Britain, France, and the United States participate in the Berlin Olympics; Civil War in Spain. Fascists armed and supported by Germany and Italy; Germany and Italy sign Berlin-Rome Axis.
- 1937: Japan invades China; Japan “accidentally” attacks U.S. ships
- 1938: Germany occupies Austria and part of Czechoslovakia; Great Britain and France back down at Munich; German Jews attacked by Nazis
- 1939: Italy invades Albania; Germany and Russia agree not to fight; Germany invades Czechoslovakia and Poland; Great Britain and France declare war on Germany; Japan joins German-Italians alliance
- 1940: Germany defeats France
- 1941: Japan seizes South East Asia; Germany attacks the Soviet Union; Japan attacks the Philippines and Hawaii