

Could War in 1939 have been averted, and if so, how?

2000-word essay. Eleanor Thorpe

In September 1939 World War Two broke out and marked a catastrophic failure of the interwar years between states. It went on to shape the geopolitical alliances of the 20th Century and resulted in millions of deaths. It has been discussed by many historians for many years afterwards whether or not it could have been prevented and if it was inevitable. One of the core conversations is regarding the Treaty of Versailles and the effects and impact of its political, military, and most importantly economical and territorial policies across the world during the time between World War One and World War Two.

In this essay I will argue that although world war 2 breaking out in 1939 was not inevitable, the foundations that were laid during these interwar years created a political, economic and social environment directly from the signing of the treaty of Versailles which made it very unrealistic to conceive that another world war would not break out, and any attempt at avoiding such an outcome steadily diminished as the colliding factors met during this politically fragile timeframe.

The chances of avoiding World War Two were almost entirely diminished after the signing of the treaty of Versailles, coupled with the subsequent rise of Adolf Hitler and the fractured inability of states to enforce security powers. Had there been a stronger resistance to how the Treaty was created, particularly with clauses such as the Guilt Clause, and if there had been more accountability and enforcement of the clauses at an earlier date, then there may have been more opportunity to prevent the outbreak of war.

The treaty of Versailles was created after World War One by the victorious states with the intention and objection of creating stable and lasting peace but due to a multitude of flaws and its fragility and instability it contractionary became what can be argued as the foundations for World War Two. The treaty focuses heavily on the punishment of Germany, many clauses included were aimed at trying to restrict any military power they had, to effectively bankrupt the country with an immensely impactful long-term financial burden, and to take previous German land away from them to re-distribute. The Guilt Clause was seen as one of the harshest inclusions of the treaty and anger and resentment grew during the interwar in Germany because of what was perceived as unfairness. The Guilt clauses imposition of territorial losses, reparations and military restrictions were seen as national humiliation, something which inherently went on to drive nationalism in Germany. Germany lost territory to France, Poland and all of its colonies in Africa were given as League of Nations Mandates, which included German East Africa to Britain and German South West Africa to South Africa. A relief to those who had suffered underneath the German colonialism, but this helped force Germany's perceived loss of being stripped of their status as a Global Superpower, further adding to their humiliation and resentment.

Its army was limited to 100,000 men and was banned from using or possessing tanks, having an air force and submarines. As R.Keith Schoppa notes in *The Twentieth Century: A World History*, the post-1919 settlement failed to align political realities in defeated states. Schoppa emphasizes that Versailles was viewed by Germany as dictated settlement and punishment¹. The treaty was widely rejected in Germany but although it was signed by Italy as a winning party, Italy felt betrayed by their lack of land distributed to them. This loss of colonial power and territory became part of the Nazi propaganda messaging that Germans had been robbed of their rightful places in the world, which led to the idea that Germany needed more space, land and power. These colonial losses also contributed to the broader economic fallout and psychological impact of the treaty. Although there was only a small amount of trade and raw materials coming from the colonies it helped with the perception that the losses formed an economic hit for Germany too, adding to the general anger and resentment. As Richard J. Evans argues, Germany's colonies were of limited economic value, contributing little to trade, but their loss was perceived domestically as a huge and symbolic loss to national prestige². This reinforced the perception that Germany had been unjustly stripped of its status, and this perception fueled resentment during the interwar period. Even though there was little evidence of economic or social impact amongst German people. Whilst Germany's territorial losses contributed significantly to the German resentment, the significance was more psychological than economic. This demonstrates that it fueled national rhetoric and nationalism and that the territorial losses alone did not make war inevitable,

Italy entered the First World War expecting territorial gains under the 1915 London Pact, including Dalmatia and Fiume, but these expectations were not fully met at the Paris Peace Conference, leading nationalist figures to describe the settlement as a "mutilated victory" (*vittoria mutilata*) (Mazower 1998; Clark 1995). Italy was left with a feeling of betrayal and alongside Germany felt a sense of widespread national humiliation³. It can be argued that this led the people of Italy to be frustrated and angry with politicians they deemed to be "weak", and at a time of economical struggles in the post-World War One-era. This created the perfect environment for Benito Mussolini to enter and unite the country with his strong charismatic leadership, ideas of expansion, and nationalism promoting that Italy deserves more, and better. Italy's dissatisfaction after World War I laid the ideological foundation, but its expansion in World War Two was primarily the result of fascist ambitions and strategic opportunism. Whilst these conditions were conducive to Benito Mussolini's rise, they were not solely the result of the Treaty of Versailles. There were several domestic instabilities that lent to this outcome, and so the effects of the Treaty can be seen as contributing as opposed to solely accountable.

The cause of World War Two is not entirely to blame from the Treaty, there was a time during the mid 1920's where a revision of the treaty was in discussion, the Dawes Plan and the Youngs Plan eased economic pressure and offered to allow Germany into the international network and system. This suggests that World War 2 was not inevitable, and that there were opportunities

¹ Schoppa, R.K. (2011) *The Twentieth Century: A World History*. New York: Oxford University Press.

² Evans, R.J. (2003) *The Coming of the Third Reich*. London: Penguin Books

³ Mazower, M. (1998). *Dark Continent: Europe's Twentieth Century*. London: Penguin

the decade before to implement frameworks that would have not caused as much anger and resentment. Schoppa highlights that the 1920's represented a fragile but genuine attempt at international cooperation, particularly among European powers that were seemingly looking to implement recovery and stability, instead of tensions and instability. Had this cooperation and direction continued and if German grievances had been addressed for closely then the chances of avoiding World War Two would have been strengthened.

Britain and France were key actors in the inconsistent implication of the Treaty, France was keen to fully enforce the clauses and treaty seeing it as crucial to their own security and European power dominance. Whereas Britain disagreed with France's enforcement and saw the treaty as too harsh and supported the idea of a revision in favour of Germany. David Lloyd George (British PM at Versailles) is reported to have said "*We shall have to fight Germany again in 25 years at 10 to 1 on much worse terms*". This highlights how firm Britain's view of the treaty being too punitive on Germany was and suggests a fear of future consequences and lack of confidence in the treaty delivering peace and stability and a need for future revision. The result of such major state allied powers being fractured on their view of the treaty meant that its instability was seen as a weakness which the Germans believed would allow violations to go unpunished.

The instability of Versailles was also shaped by the circumstances surrounding the creation of it, crucially - President Woodrow Wilson was a leading advocate of lessening the harsh clauses against Germany, particularly the Guilt Clause by introducing his Fourteen Points. His influences weakened during the Paris Peace Conference in January 1919, Wilson unfortunately contracted Spanish influenza in early 1919 whilst in Paris. Historians have suggested that this effect on his physical and mental health contributed to Wilson taking a step back from his rebellion against the Guilt Clause. This meant he was less able to resist the pressure from France to include such harsh and punitive wording in Article 231 (The War Guilt Clause). The fact that this clause, which had so many consequences, was built on such fragility shows how unstable the treaty was and the consequences of such on a geopolitical standing.

The Munich Agreement is a clear demonstration of the failings of the Treaty of Versailles as it created resentment in Germany, lacked effective enforcement from Britain and France by permitting revision, and depended on international cooperation that collapsed in the 1930s. By allowing Hitler to revise the Treaty without resistance, Munich demonstrated that the post-World War 1 settlement could no longer maintain peace and that War might have still had a chance to be avoided had there been stronger unity and resistance at this stage.

The appeasement offered by Britain and France in allowing the annexation of Sudetenland by Germany allowed Adolf Hitler the opportunity to make territorial demands and expansion which after agreeing to not expand any further, of which were later broken. These factors played a crucial role in assessing the viability of War in 1939 and if it could have been averted. Historians and contemporaries at the time called the actions of Britain and France "cowardly". Winston Churchill remarked in 1938 at the House of Commons, in direct criticism of the British Government's response to the Munich Agreement, that "*You were given the choice between*

war and dishonour. You chose dishonour, and you will have war." This indicates that the Britain government believed that the treaty was too harsh and that some of Germany's demands should be conceded to, this allowed Hitler the freedom to gain territory without battle and is an example of a moment whereby a strengthened show of unity between the League of Nations could have worked to help prevent further escalation and invasions by Adolf Hitler, this alludes to another example of opportunity missed to lay foundations of peace.

Asides from the consequences of the Treaty of Versailles, the economic depression that followed the Wall Street crash in 1929 marked a turning point in global political stability and state securities. Mass unemployment in Germany and social instability undermined the Weimar leadership and gave opportunity to the rise of extremism, particularly well timed for the Nazi Party. Schoppa noted the Depression as a global crisis that paved the way to radicalized politics and nationalism as it took people and support away from international institutions. States focused on national interests and failed to priorities international security policies; these actions would then shape the foundations for the rise in anger and nationalism. Hitler's view of the treaty being not just problematic and revisable but being inherently threatening to Germany which required destruction of the system paved the way for the support of a German Empire in Europe. Whilst World War Two in 1939 was not inevitable, the cumulative impact of the Treaty of Versailles, the Wall Street Crash (and Great Depression) and the wider failings of nation states suggests that a lack of focus on security meant that by the late 1930s there was very little opportunity for future stability and peace, and that war was extremely likely.

The conclusion is that, although World War Two in 1939 was not inevitable, the fragility of the Treaty of Versailles and its punitive measures created long lasting and significant resentment in Germany through territorial losses, reparations and military restrictions. This aligned with the timing of the Great Depression lay the foundations of destabilization in Europe and allowed for the rise of extremism, nationalism and fascism. The League of Nations failure to collectively focus on security and the appeasement of the Munich agreement which meant that although with earlier changes and resilience during the 1920's, alternative outcomes to World War Two were conceivable, by the end of the 1930's, the accumulation of factors meant that War had become extremely likely and was increasingly difficult to avoid.

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