

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

There was never a war in all history easier to prevent by timely action than the one which has just desolated great areas of the globe. It could have been prevented without the firing of a single shot, but no one would listen.¹

Winston Churchill 1946

Introduction

Was World War 2 inevitable, or could it have been averted? Historians have debated this question since the end of the war. Some argue that the events leading up to its outbreak made it inevitable. In contrast, others contend that it could have been avoided if crucial events and decisions had been handled differently. This essay will argue that the war was conceivably avoidable. It will analyse several key events that could have averted its outbreak, including the Treaty of Versailles and the appeasement of Hitler, as seen at Munich in 1938. In doing so, it will consider both the longer-term factors that created instability in Europe and the more immediate decisions taken by political leaders in the 1930s. While developments such as economic hardship and political resentment contributed to an unstable environment, they did not make war inevitable. Instead, it will be argued that a series of missed opportunities, particularly the failure to confront German expansion earlier or to form stronger alliances, played a significant role in allowing the situation to escalate towards war.

The Impact of the Treaty of Versailles

The Treaty of Versailles can be argued to have contributed to instability in Europe after the First World War, but this did not mean that the Second World War was inevitable.

One of the treaty's main weaknesses was its emphasis on punishing Germany rather than on rebuilding and reconciliation among the countries involved. The Treaty, Article 231², required Germany to pay reparations; this provision imposed a severe economic strain on the German economy. The payments for civilian damages alone amounted to \$33 billion³, which John Keynes⁴ considered 'Claims against Germany which the allies were contemplating were impossible of payment.'⁵

This treaty obligation hampered Germany's recovery and bred widespread resentment. As Lisa Beckenbaugh asserts, the treaty was 'too harsh to conciliate but

¹ Record, INVESTIGATING THE MYTHOLOGY OF THE 1930s, p.1.

² 'THE GERMAN PEACE TREATY: Full Text of the Historic Document Signed at Versailles on June 28, 1919', *Current History* (1916-1940), 10.2 (1919), pp. 285–368 <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/45328826>>.

³ Britannica Editors. "Treaty of Versailles". *Encyclopedia Britannica*, (2026) <https://www.britannica.com/event/Treaty-of-Versailles-1919> [accessed 26 April 2026].

⁴ Robert Skidelsky, *John Maynard Keynes : A Biography / Vol.1, Hopes Betrayed 1883-1920*. (Macmillan, 1983).

⁵ John Maynard Keynes and Aberystwyth former location. United Theological College, *The Economic Consequences of the Peace* (Macmillan, 1919).

The Territorial concessions Germany had to endure meant the loss of 14% of its land and 6.5million⁷ of its people. This further increased dissatisfaction and instability not only in Germany but also amongst the displaced German-speaking populations across the new Europe that the treaty had defined.

The Effects of the Great Depression

The largest single net creditor was the United States; the largest single net debtor was Germany.⁹

⁶ 'Did the Paris Peace Settlement That Officially Ended World War I Make World War II Inevitable?', in *Treaty of Versailles: A Primary Document Analysis*, ed. by Lisa L. Beckenbaugh (ABC-CLIO, 2019), pp. 1–2 <<https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/CX7648000009/GVRL?u=walamp&mp>>.

⁷ Klaus, Schwabe, 'World War I and the Rise of Hitler', *Diplomatic History*, 38.4 (2014), pp. 864–79 <<http://www-istor-org.uwtsd.idm.oclc.org/stable/26376610>>.

⁸ Catherine Lu, 'Justice and Moral Regeneration: Lessons from the Treaty of Versailles', *International Studies Review*, 4.3 (2002), pp. 3–25 <<http://www.istor.org.uwtsd.idm.oclc.org/stable/3186461>>.

⁹ Heywood Fleisig, 'War-Related Debts and the Great Depression', *The American Economic Review*, 66.2 (1976), pp. 52–58 <<http://www.jstor.org/uwtsd.idm.oclc.org/stable/1817198>>.

¹⁰ Fleisig, 'War-Related Debts and the Great Depression'.

standard¹¹ to which most countries at the time adhered. When the Wall Street crash occurred in the USA in 1929, American loans were quickly withdrawn, which led to the collapse of the German economy, as Robert Samuelson argues:

Germany's Reichsbank, the Bank of England, the Fed, and other central state financial institutions were handcuffed in their efforts to aid their countries' banks.¹²

Germany remained committed to the gold standard until 1931, probably because abandoning it was feared to signal economic weakness, risk further erosion of international confidence, and potentially trigger even greater financial instability. This, in turn, limited Germany's ability to respond effectively to the crisis. As a result, the government was constrained from introducing measures that might have alleviated the worst effects of the Depression, such as expanding the money supply or increasing public spending. This prolonged economic hardship, particularly rising unemployment and declining industrial output, further undermined confidence in the Weimar government and contributed to growing political instability.

However, as Frank Steindl argued:

Countries leaving the gold standard recovered substantially more rapidly and vigorously than those who did not¹³

The effect of the Depression on Germany could have been lessened if the Treaty of Versailles had included different decisions and obligations on territory and reparations, which may have reduced resentment and economic suffering, thereby lowering the likelihood of the rise of extremist views and political parties. Adherence to the international gold standard also likely prolonged the effects of the Depression, thereby aiding Hitler's rise.

Appeasement

The effects of the Treaty of Versailles and the Depression probably set Europe on the path to the Second World War. Though war was not inevitable, the decisions taken in its aftermath increased resentment and suffering for millions of Germans, both within Germany and in the ceded territories. This section will examine the question of appeasement, which was probably the best opportunity to reduce the risk of another conflict, particularly in the Rhineland in 1936.

Articles 42, 43 and 44¹⁴ of the Treaty of Versailles stipulated that Germany was forbidden to fortify the Rhineland, and that it was a demilitarised zone, meaning no troops were allowed to occupy it. Violating these articles would be an act of aggression. On 7 March 1936, German forces remilitarised the Rhineland, in direct violation of the Treaty. The German forces that entered the Rhineland were under

¹¹ Robert J. Samuelson, 'Revisiting the Great Depression', *The Wilson Quarterly* (1976-), 36.1 (2012), pp. 36–43 <<http://www.jstor.org.uwtsd.idm.oclc.org/stable/41484425>>.

¹² Samuelson, 'Revisiting the Great Depression', p.2

¹³ Frank G. Steindl, 'What Ended the Great Depression? It Was Not World War II', *The Independent Review*, 12.2 (2007), pp. 179–97 <<http://www.jstor.org.uwtsd.idm.oclc.org/stable/24563084>>.

¹⁴ 'THE GERMAN PEACE TREATY: Full Text of the Historic Document Signed at Versailles on June 28, 1919'.

orders to withdraw if any resistance was encountered. This suggests that Germany was not prepared for a confrontation at that time.

Hitler stated:

If French forces had entered the Rhineland in response, we would have had to withdraw with our tails between our legs, for the military resources at our disposal would have been wholly inadequate for even a moderate resistance.¹⁵

In response to this clear violation, both Britain and especially France, which the demilitarised Rhineland was supposed to protect, did nothing. Britain, which had some sympathy for Germany after the Treaty of Versailles, felt that remilitarising the Rhineland was, as Lord Lothian stated, 'The Germans, after all, are only going into their own backyard'.¹⁶

The lack of action by France was a different matter and probably stemmed from unwillingness and political instability

Although France was at that moment militarily stronger than Germany, which sent only a small contingent of '3 Battalions'¹⁷ (3000 soldiers) into the Rhineland, William Shirer¹⁸ also notes, that General Gamelin, Chief of the General Staff in France, was willing to commit only 13 Divisions near the German border, not in the Rhineland itself, and solely to support the Maginot Line.

On the issue of political instability in France, Zara Steiner¹⁹ shows that the French government was unstable and divided. Laval, the French Prime Minister, relied on a coalition of political groups, and there were clear disagreements between the right, which supported closer relations with Italy, and the left, which backed the League of Nations. This made it harder for the government to act decisively, helping to explain its cautious response to the remilitarisation of the Rhineland. The reluctance of both Britain and France to intervene in the Rhineland, despite being entitled to do so under Article 44 of the Treaty of Versailles, perhaps represented the most significant missed opportunity to curb, if not halt, Hitler's expansion at an early stage.

The very idea of marching into the Rhineland was not popular among German military commanders, as William Shirer notes:

To the consternation of the Generals, most of whom were convinced that the French would make mincemeat of the small German forces gathered for the move into the Rhineland.²⁰

German commanders felt that if force were used against them, it would result in a humiliating withdrawal, possibly with substantial losses. This could have meant a severe setback for Hitler and potentially a loss of power. Hitler's regime, as

¹⁵ Record, *INVESTIGATING THE MYTHOLOGY OF THE 1930s*.

¹⁶ William Lawrence. Shirer, *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich : A History of Nazi Germany* (Mandarin, 1991).

¹⁷ Shirer, *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich : A History of Nazi Germany*, p.293

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Zara Steiner, *The Triumph of the Dark: European International History 1933-1939* (Oxford University Press, 2013), doi:10.1093/acprof:osobl/9780199676095.001.0001, pp.107-108

²⁰ Shirer, *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich : A History of Nazi Germany*, p.291

Raymond Sontag notes, 'would stand or fall on his ability to achieve success abroad'.²¹

With Germany still militarily weak and constrained by the Treaty of Versailles, both Britain and France could have reduced the likelihood of another world war by committing troops to the Rhineland, potentially forcing Hitler to reconsider his plans for Europe.

The failure of Britain and France to act in the Rhineland had significant long-term consequences for all of Europe. After his success in the Rhineland, Adolf Hitler grew more confident in his ability to carry out his plans. German rearmament reduced the likelihood that future attempts to oppose German expansion would succeed, as seen in the Anschluss, the Sudetenland, and, finally, Bohemia and Moravia.

Conclusion

This essay argues that the pivotal moment most likely to have averted the war was the Rhineland crisis in 1936. This was the moment when Germany was at its weakest. With the combined strength of France and Great Britain and the political will, it is likely that Germany, as ordered by its military and by Adolf Hitler himself, would have retreated, back over the border into Germany, if confronted with force. This could have meant the end of Hitler and the curbing of Nazi ideology and expansion plans.

The lack of resolve shown by both France and Britain in failing to confront Germany emboldened Hitler to continue his plans to expand Germany's borders, knowing that little resistance would be met.

This was demonstrated by the Anschluss in Austria in 1938, the takeover of the Sudetenland in 1938, and the subsequent German occupation of Bohemia and Moravia following Munich, which resulted in the loss of all of Czechoslovakia.

The moment to stop Hitler had passed, and it was now far more difficult for France, Britain and the rest of Europe to prevent war and the destruction and loss of life that would follow it.

As Winston Churchill later observed in 1946:

"It could have been prevented without the firing of a single shot, but no one would listen"

The events of 1936 serve as a stark warning that appeasement and failure to act decisively against aggression can have far-reaching consequences for all concerned.

²¹ Raymond J. Sontag, 'The Origins of the Second World War', *The Review of Politics*, 25.4 (1963), pp. 497–508 <<http://www.jstor.org.uwtsd.idm.oclc.org/stable/1405846>>.

Bibliography

Beckenbaugh, Lisa L. (ed.), 'Did the Paris Peace Settlement That Officially Ended World War I Make World War II Inevitable?', in *Treaty of Versailles: A Primary Document Analysis* (ABC-CLIO, 2019), pp. 1–2

<https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/CX7648000009/GVRL?u=walamp&>

Britannica Editors. "Treaty of Versailles". Encyclopedia Britannica,(2026)
)<https://www.britannica.com/event/Treaty-of-Versailles-1919>
[accessed 26 April 2026].

Fleisig, Heywood, 'War-Related Debts and the Great Depression', *The American Economic Review*, 66.2 (1976), pp. 52–58
<<http://www.jstor.org.uwtsd.idm.oclc.org/stable/1817198>>

Keynes, John Maynard, and Aberystwyth former location. United Theological College, *The Economic Consequences of the Peace* (Macmillan, 1919)

Lu, Catherine, 'Justice and Moral Regeneration: Lessons from the Treaty of Versailles', *International Studies Review*, 4.3 (2002), pp. 3–25
<<http://www.jstor.org.uwtsd.idm.oclc.org/stable/3186461>>

Record, Jeffrey, *INVESTIGATING THE MYTHOLOGY OF THE 1930s* (Strategic Studies Institute, US Army War College, 2005) <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep11202>>

SAMUELSON, ROBERT J., 'Revisiting the Great Depression', *The Wilson Quarterly* (1976), 36.1 (2012), pp. 36–43 <<http://www.jstor.org.uwtsd.idm.oclc.org/stable/41484425>>

SCHWABE, KLAUS, 'World War I and the Rise of Hitler', *Diplomatic History*, 38.4 (2014), pp. 864–79 <<https://www-jstor-org.uwtsd.idm.oclc.org/stable/26376610>>

Shirer, William Lawrence., *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich : A History of Nazi Germany* (Mandarin, 1991)

Skidelsky, Robert, *John Maynard Keynes : A Biography / Vol. 1, Hopes Betrayed 1883 1920*. (Macmillan, 1983)

Sontag, Raymond J., 'The Origins of the Second World War', *The Review of Politics*, 25.4 (1963), pp. 497–508 <<http://www.jstor.org.uwtsd.idm.oclc.org/stable/1405846>>

Steindl, Frank G., 'What Ended the Great Depression? It Was Not World War II', *The Independent Review*, 12.2 (2007), pp. 179–97
<<http://www.jstor.org.uwtsd.idm.oclc.org/stable/24563084>>

Steiner, Zara, *The Triumph of the Dark: European International History 1933-1939* (Oxford University Press, 2013), doi:10.1093/acprof:osobl/9780199676095.001.0001

‘THE GERMAN PEACE TREATY: Full Text of the Historic Document Signed at Versailles on June 28, 1919’, *Current History (1916-1940)*, 10.2 (1919), pp. 285–368
<<http://www.jstor.org/stable/45328826>>