

# THE CAUSES OF THE SECOND WORLD WAR

- Chairman I'm here with four trainee teachers to discuss the question: 'Who was to blame for the Second World War?' Well, ladies and gentlemen – you're going to have to teach this next year: what do you think?
- John Obviously it was Hitler! He SAID in *Mein Kampf* in 1924 he would go to war. In 1935, he told his generals to get ready to do it in four years time. And then he went ahead and did it: 1935: rearmament rally – 1936: remilitarisation of the Rhineland – March 1938: *Anschluss* with Austria. In September 1938 he bullied Chamberlain into giving him the Sudetenland, and in March 1939 he took the rest of Czechoslovakia and *dared* the world to stop him. Then in September 1939 he did the same again in Poland and ... surprise, surprise ... there's a war. Open and shut case: Hitler!
- Andrea I know that Hitler SAID he was destroying Versailles to get the support of his own people. But the Treaty of Versailles was dead long before Hitler. The allies had killed it already. They had renegotiated reparations in 1924, and allowed Hindenburg to deny war guilt in 1927. In 1935 the British had even made a naval arms agreement with Germany – they *cooperated* in overturning Versailles. And then they GAVE him the Sudetenland at Munich! So we can't be surprised if Hitler thought it would be OK to attack Poland.
- John Wasn't Chamberlain at Munich simply trying to buy time for Britain to rearm?
- Andrea Rubbish! If Britain was militarily weak in the 1930s, Germany was weaker. Remember that the German army had orders to retreat if it met ANY resistance in the Rhineland in 1936. No – we ENCOURAGED Hitler to do what he did. Loads of people in Britain actually SUPPORTED what he was doing. And NOBODY thought Chamberlain would ever *keep* his promise to defend Poland – not even Stalin, who gave up on Britain and made the Nazi-Soviet Pact with Hitler in August 1939. Appeasement ENCOURAGED Hitler to go too far and – for me – you've got to blame the appeasers.
- Peter I don't think I blame *a person* at all. I blame the Great Depression of the 1930s. While the economy was booming in the 1920s, everybody was happy to sign up to peace. But when the economy fell apart in the '30s, and people were starving, suddenly it was: 'I need that and I'm taking it, war or no war'. That's why Japan marched into Manchuria; their Pacific empire was called the 'Japanese Co-Prosperity Sphere' ... it can't be any clearer than that. That's why Italy invaded Abyssinia. And that's what *lebensraum* was all about – expanding into Russia to secure food and raw materials.
- Paula But surely that's nonsense? The invasion of Poland was not about Germany ATTACKING Russia, it was about Germany and Russia allying and splitting Poland between them. That's politics, not economics. For me, if you're looking for a scapegoat for starting World War II, what about Stalin? Hitler would NEVER have dared to attack Poland without Russia's consent.
- Chairman Can you sort this out in terms of long-term, short-term and trigger causes? Long-term, you've got Germany's anger at the Treaty of Versailles.

Shorter-term you have the economic depression, and all the tensions caused by Japan, Italy and Germany, and appeasement.  
And then the Nazi-Soviet Pact of August 1939 sort of releases a trigger and ... everything explodes into war.

- John Yes, but that doesn't *assess* the causes – it doesn't say which was the most important.  
For me, it's got to be Hitler. He set the agenda. He was – in Churchill's words – 'insatiable in his lust for power'. Look at the history of Europe. It's happened often – one nation becomes too powerful, and the others get together and knock it back into line. It just happened again in 1939.
- Andrea Can't agree. If a child is *allowed* to misbehave, you can't blame him for being naughty. If you're looking for a cause of World War Two, try appeasement. At best Chamberlain allowed Hitler to go too far. At worst, he actively LURED Hitler into war, hoping he would attack Russia so Fascism and Communism would fight each other to the death.
- Paula NA! ALL that happened without there being a war.  
Economic depression: Manchuria – Abyssinia. No war.  
Nazi expansionism: Austria – Czechoslovakia. No war.  
Appeasement: Sudetenland. No war.  
And yet – Hitler makes the Nazi Soviet Pact with Stalin on 23<sup>rd</sup> August ... and one week later, 1<sup>st</sup> September 1939, BANG! Germany invades Poland. War!  
LOOK AT THE DATES!!! It's Stalin, I blame for World War Two.
- Chairman Hmm. I wonder which of you is right? I suppose I need to go back to look at the facts and the events and the dates ... and decide for myself what I think.