THE SECOND WORLD WAR IN 1942

- Axis Nations
- Axis Conquests
- Neutral Nations
- Allied Nations

Unit 7 Overview

The grandsons of those who fought in the First World War went back to war only a few decades later, in an even more devastating and widespread conflict, and one in which great violence was aimed at civilian populations. How did this happen? Was it a result of fascism and authoritarianism—a turn away from the democratic values of the Long Nineteenth Century? Or was it due to the growth of nationalism and racism? Or because of the Great Depression? Or as a result of the uncertain results of the First World War?

00:01

Kim Lochner and Colby Burnett in conversation – Colby wear a silk spa mask over his eyes.

You look really relaxed.

Thanks, that World War I stuff really stressed me out, so I took a spa day.

Oh, it shows.

What's the next unit about?

Um, is the spa still open?

Oh, no...

Mm-hmm.

Hi, I'm Kim Lochner, and along with Colby Burnett, we're introducing Unit 7: Interwar and World War II. From 1914 to 1918, many people suffered through the First World War. They'd rather hopefully called it "the war to end all wars." The terrible trench warfare, gas weapons, artillery, and grinding conflict left a generation of men dead. The economies of major world powers and their colonies were destroyed. It seemed impossible that a war of that magnitude could ever happen again.

Video footage from World War 1 shows injured and dead men, trench warfare, and destroyed cities

01:02

Footage of militaries around the world

Animated map shows nations at war in 1942

However, only a few decades later, the world would start back down the road to conflict. It began first in Asia, then in the Mediterranean and Europe, and then spread around the world. The sons and grandsons of those who had fought in the First World War became the soldiers and sailors of the Second World War. And this second war would cause even more death and destruction than its predecessor. It would be fought more widely, drawing in and impacting people on battlefields across large parts of Africa, the Pacific Ocean, East and Southeast Asia, and Europe. And once again, the end of this conflict would bring only an unstable peace. The victorious allies divided into two armed camps in 1945, and the Cold War set in.

01:58

*First World War: 1914-1918
Interwar: 1919-1938
Second World War: 1939-1945
"Some problems left by WWI:
-Resentful losers
-Squabbling winners
-Fractured global economy
-War reparations
-Individual and societal trauma"*

In this course, we divide the First World War and the Second World War into two units. But we could instead take a look at the whole period between the 1914 start of the First World War and the 1945 end of the Second World War. By doing that, the years between the two wars look more like a brief interlude than a period of actual peace. It's as if the combatants were just taking a moment to catch their breath.

The problems left by the first war included a broken global system, resentful defeated powers, victors squabbling over the spoils, a global economy hobbled by war reparations, and trauma—both of veterans and of civilians—went unhealed. From this perspective, the Second World War looks inevitable. It seems like a logical result of the world's failure to solve these problems in the 1920s and '30s.

03:01

Colby Burnett

Another key problem that led to the Second World War was how the end of the First World War shifted people's perspectives about their own countries. Rather than discrediting militant nationalism as a war-mongering ideology,

Photographs of nationalist government meetings; a painting depicts Japanese nationalism in play

the peace process ultimately strengthened it. In the years following the armistice that concluded the First World War, various forms of nationalism crept back in. A new way of thinking of the state as a community emerged. It was very nationalist and authoritarian, meaning it required strict obedience. It was also based on ideas about race.

In Germany, anti-foreigner and anti-minority sentiment was fueled by anger over its treatment following its defeat. Italians, who were technically citizens of a victorious state, resented the fact that they had been given little in the treaty that ended the war. Japan was also a member of the alliance that won the war, but found its appetite for new territory amplified by the small gains that it made in 1919. Many people in these countries agitated for revenge or for an empire. They were not alone. Nationalism was on the rise everywhere in the 1920s and '30s.

04:08

A painting of an interracial couple

In many places, it was stoked by racism. The vast casualty rates of the First World War produced fears about the size of each country's population. This in turn drove the so-called science of eugenics in the United States, Brazil, Europe, and elsewhere. Eugenics was an attempt to control reproduction in order to increase a nation's population and to create a "superior" race. It became popular between the wars in the hope of ensuring that a country would win the next war. Eugenics was based on false science. It was used to justify anti-immigrant policies, practices of racial discrimination, and nationalist hatred for other countries.

04:45

Kim Lochner

A photograph of Hitler and the Nazi party in Germany

Photographs of the meetings that were a part of the League of Nations

Economic troubles, like the Great Depression beginning in 1929, also drove people to look for someone to blame. Authoritarian and totalitarian political parties, which promised order and prosperity at the price of individual freedoms, took advantage of this sentiment. They stole or intimidated their way into power. This was particularly true of fascist parties in Germany and Italy. Once these parties gained power, they kept it by pursuing popular policies of hyper-nationalism and discrimination against minorities and foreigners. Organizations for global cooperation tried to hold back these authoritarian parties and nationalist movements. The most extensive of these was the League of Nations—the world's first international political forum. But they failed, and their failure set the scene for the Second World War, which would bring a series of atrocities that exceeded anything that had come before.

05:48

Animated map shows the locations of the mentioned atrocities

These horrors included: the wholesale slaughter of Chinese civilians by the Japanese army; the Soviet deliberate starvation and oppression of populations in Ukraine and Byelorussia; the Italian use of gas on Ethiopian civilians; the concentrated bombing of Spanish cities; and finally, the Nazi extermination camps in Germany and German-occupied Europe.

06:17

Colby Burnett

In this unit, we ask the key question: How were these horrors of the Second World War possible? This question connects the First and Second world wars and the years in between into one longer history. As a result, we can understand the Second World War in a longer context. We can identify trends that led to extermination camps and genocide. And perhaps learn how to look out for them in the future.

Chart shows democracies and autocracies from 1900-1944

One way of beginning to identify what led to the Second World War and the terrors it created is by looking at data. We can revisit this chart of the number of democracies across the whole world over time. You may remember that we looked at this data in Unit 2, when we saw the number of democracies rising across the 19th century. But then the number levels off, suddenly dropping dramatically in the 1930s. In this chart, the definition of democracy is based on a measure called Polity IV. It defines a democracy as a system that has institutions in which individuals can play a political role, voting and expressing their preferences. This definition requires that the people in charge are kept under some control by courts, journalists, and other institutions. Clearly, the number of countries that were democracies by this measure were decreasing in the 1930s, as authoritarianism rose.

07:36

*Kim Lochner
Map shows location of Nuremberg, Germany – artworks and photos depict Nuremberg before it was transformed by the Nazis; a photograph of the massive Nazi arena*

We can also explore the turn towards authoritarianism and extreme nationalism by scale-switching. We can zoom in to explore smaller stories. One of the epicenters of authoritarianism was the city of Nuremberg. Nuremberg was a historically significant city in the center of Germany. In the early 1920s, it was still a mainly medieval-style city made up of small, old wooden houses and town squares. But then, the German authoritarian party—the Nazis—came to power. They transformed Nuremberg into a city that reflected their policies. Huge buildings, especially a vast arena, were built to reflect the power of the state. The Nazis held massive rallies there to command and demonstrate the unity of the German people. Films were shot of these rallies, meant to inspire the Germans to believe in and obey the Nazis.

08:38

In 1935, the Nazi leadership met at Nuremberg to implement policies. It is these policies that in many ways began the horrors of the Second World War. The Nazis blamed minorities within Germany for the country's economic woes. In particular, they singled out the Jewish population. Using eugenic theory, they defined Jews by biology, rather than religion. They passed laws stating that German Jews could not be citizens of Germany, and that they could not marry non-Jewish Germans. These race-based laws were perhaps the most extensive in Europe. But they were not unique to Germany.

09:19

Colby Burnett

These laws were part of the horrors surrounding the Second World War, horrors that were reflected in the changing shape of Nuremberg itself. Nuremberg held one camp that was part of a large system of extermination camps in which the Nazi state killed 12 million people. The dead included not only Jews, but also Roma, Jehovah's Witnesses, homosexuals, political prisoners, disabled people, and the citizens of Eastern European states. This genocide—the attempt to extinguish entire peoples—was one of the principal horrors of the Second World War. This war was arguably a result of the unresolved conflicts of the three decades that preceded it. How would it influence the decades to come?

Colby and Kim in conversation

Okay, I know our students are not children.

No.

But you're scaring the children.

And teaching, it's how we keep genocide from happening again.

Genocide has happened again. And happened again.

Now you're scaring the children.

Oh.