Thirty Years of Continuous War

by Whitney Howarth

What’s worse than having a second world war only 20 years after the first one? How about 30 years of continuous war? Exploring continuity and causation shows the connections between historical events. This exploration reveals strong links between the First World War (1914–1918) and the Second World War (1939–1945).
One Long War?

“The Great War” was fought from 1914 to 1918, and another global conflict erupted 20 years later. The two events became known as the First World War and the Second World War. However, many historians argue it was all one long war. Are they right? One way to determine if two events are continuous is to look for continuities—the themes and situations that connect them.

Let’s explore the continuities of nationalism, empire, and colonialism across this violent period in history. We’ll also consider the causation that links these issues.

Continuity: Nationalism

We’ll start with nationalism. Nationalism is when a country and its people believe they are better and more important than any other country. It was one of the most important continuities of the First World War and the Second World War.

In June of 1914, a young Bosnian Serb man assassinated a key Austro-Hungarian political figure. It triggered a series of events as political leaders strengthened alliances in preparation for war. The assassination might have been a surprise. However, everyone’s willingness to fight was not. Several decades of conflict had created a war-ready mood across Europe. In addition, many European countries wanted access to more resources. To do this, European powers sought to expand their empires by taking over others.

The major European states mobilized quickly for war. Most people believed the fighting would be short and inexpensive. It was neither. It snowballed into the bloodiest conflict up to that point in world history. The final result was 17 million people dead and another 20 million wounded. In addition, the continent was even more unstable. The same territorial disputes and national tensions from before the war remained. Then came part two, the Second World War, which began in 1939.

Between the two wars, an important new leader had entered the story: Adolf Hitler. A decade after the end of the first conflict, many Germans were poor and hungry. They also felt humiliated and furious at the harsh peace they had been forced to accept. It was no secret that the terms of the 1919 peace treaty, the Treaty of Versailles, were severe. They put tight limits on Germany’s industry and military. Germany also had to pay a large amount of money as a consequence. Germans’ growing resentment toward their conquerors was ripe for a strong national leader to exploit. Along came Hitler and his Nazi party.

Adolf Hitler effectively appealed to Germans’ national pride. He also promised more land and resources for the German people. Twenty years before, France, Germany, Russia, and other powers had also called on nationalism. They used it to arouse their people to fight. Some might argue that the Nazis’ nationalism of the 1930s was more racist and destructive than that of those states. But weren’t both sides promoting a similar vision? Wasn’t it a vision where their nation was supreme above all others?
Continuity: Empire and colonialism

A second continuity between the two wars was the importance of empire. In the decades before the First World War, the competition for colonies had grown intense. Many non-Europeans fought for their European colonizers in these wars and millions of them would die. Survivors, both civilian and military, suffered long after the war was over.

One example—of many—is Japan. The Japanese state had a very small empire when it joined the winning side during the First World War. As a result of the war, Japan expanded its influence over China. Its forces also captured German colonies in Asia and took control of many Pacific sea lanes (trade routes). Japanese imperialists still wanted more.

In the 1930s, nationalist politics in Japan heated up. Goals turned toward military strength and imperial conquest. With little territory of its own, Japan experienced a shortage of raw materials. The need for natural resources pushed industrialists to demand new sources—colonies, in other words. In these colonies, they could also sell their goods. In pursuit of these ambitions, Japan invaded and occupied China in 1937. The Chinese were treated as conquered colonial subjects. Japanese forces killed some 400,000 Chinese people and raped tens of thousands of Chinese women.

In Europe, the German and Italian states were trying to expand their empires as well. Benito Mussolini had become the Fascist dictator of Italy. He vowed to rebuild the Roman Empire for a new Italy. Under his leadership, Italy invaded several countries. Germany under Nazi rule turned its eyes mainly toward Eastern Europe. It began large-scale invasions in 1939 that marked the beginning of the Second World War.

In 1940, these three empires signed a pact. They agreed to help each other pursue their goals. In December 1941, Japan bombed the American naval base at Pearl Harbor in Hawai'i. The plan was to prevent the American military from interfering with Japan’s goals in Asia. The United States responded by entering the Second World War. Germany and Italy declared war on the United States. The Americans soon joined an alliance with Britain, the Soviet Union, and China.
Causation: German moves

Historians have studied carefully how the First World War ended. They have also researched the events of the years afterward (1919–1928). Many have connected those periods to the rise of Nazi Germany. In particular, scholars point to the treatment of the German people at the Paris Peace Conference in 1919. The war had cost Germany all of its colonial possessions. Those losses were added to the humiliations of the Treaty of Versailles. Germany was forced to pay costly penalties. Their industries were crippled and the military was prevented from rebuilding. These terms meant Germany would remain weak. The victors of the First World War, especially the French, wanted to punish Germany for its role in starting the war. They also hoped to prevent the Germans from ever again becoming a threat. The plan backfired.

This punishing peace settlement ultimately had destructive consequences. It left the German people hungry and desperate. Their resentment paved the way for the rise of a dictator.

Hitler and his Nazi party came to power early in the 1930s. They appealed to German pride and harnessed the desperation of German citizens. Germans were also eager to find someone to blame for their defeat in the Great War. Nazi leaders channeled that prejudice and hate. They aimed it at Jews, Communists, and other groups. Such anger spoke to the hearts of a once proud and powerful nation. The vision of a restored Germany motivated great national effort. It also sparked sweeping victories in the first years of the Second World War.

Still, Germany and Japan were both defeated in 1945. Their nationalist dreams failed. Their defeat came at the end of the second phase of this 30-year conflict (1939–1945). It left more than 70 million people dead.

Conclusion

Such continuities connect the First World War and the Second World War. In other words, the end of the first conflict led to the second. We can ask ourselves if negotiations at the end of the first were a missed opportunity to create a more lasting peace. We can also wonder whether the year 1919 was a missed chance to deal more effectively with the issues that caused the war: militarism, nationalism, and imperialism. But perhaps the underlying causes ran deeper. Perhaps the links were bigger than the mistakes made by those who negotiated at the end of the First World War. Is it possible the underlying issues were even more difficult to resolve?

Fun fact: “Fascist” is capitalized when referring to the actual National Fascist Party that Mussolini led. Hitler was also a fascist, but there the word is lowercase because it refers to his style of leadership, not the name of his political party. In a fascist state, as Hitler’s Germany would become, strict economic and civic laws can be enacted without a democratic process.
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