

Primary and Secondary Sources Activity

The logo for 'networks' features the word 'networks' in a bold, lowercase sans-serif font. A stylized graphic of intersecting lines forms a starburst or network pattern behind the letter 'o'.

World War II and the Holocaust

The Causes of World War II

Background

After World War I, the international community tried to prevent the outbreak of another global war. The League of Nations, disarmament conferences, and mutual defense treaties were efforts used in the 1920s and 1920s to maintain world peace. Unfortunately, these efforts failed to prevent World War II.

The causes of World War II can be traced to the conditions of the peace treaty ending World War I, the events that occurred between the wars, and the fear of war returning. The Germans felt the Treaty of Versailles was unfair to them and denied them their rightful place in world affairs, which raised resentment in the German people. The massive destruction in Europe made some countries—especially France and Britain—desire peace at practically any cost. Finally, nationalist forces began to rise in Germany, Italy, and Japan. The leaders and governments of those countries advanced plans of expansion to add to the status of their nations. Each used its military to occupy foreign territories in the 1930s. Their aggressive moves led to the outbreak of a global conflict by the end of the decade.

Directions: The following selections address causes of World War II. In this first selection, British historian G.P. Gooch addresses the threat of war in a 1938 article. The second selection is from the 1938 diary entries of Victor Klemperer, a Jewish professor who lived in Nazi Germany. Read the selections. Then, using information from these excerpts, answer the questions.

Since the Allies declined to scale down their armaments to the German level, Germany was certain to climb towards theirs as soon as she felt strong enough to do so with impunity [freedom from punishment].

The Disarmament Conference which opened at Geneva in February 1932 had taken years to prepare, and it met too late. Even the chance of a limited agreement was lost owing to the lack of a strong lead at the outset by a Great Power . . . Each country was virtuously [morally] ready for reductions in categories which were not of vital importance to itself, but stood out for those which it needed most. Thus Great Britain longed for the abolition of the submarine, which nearly starved us in 1917, while she clung to the capital ship [large class warship, such as a battleship]. . . .When the Conference adjourned for the summer holidays in 1932, it was clear that it had failed. In the autumn Germany retired, but was brought back by a promise of equality of status. . . . Such a system proved unattainable, and a year later Hitler's Germany withdrew not only from the Conference but from the League [of Nations] itself. . . . Since that moment Germany has been

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re-arming at feverish speed, and Europe is back again in its pre-War mood when everyone was afraid of Berlin. Our own colossal re-armament programme is the measure of our alarm.

—G.P. Gooch, "The Breakdown of the System of Collective Security," 1938

The immense act of violence on the [German] annexation [the act of incorporating new territory] of Austria, the immense increase in [Germany's] power both internally and externally, the defenseless trembling fear of England, France, etc. We shall not live to see the end of the Third Reich. . . .

The Third Reich will win again—whether by bluff or by force. . . .

Chamberlain flies to Hitler for the second time tomorrow. England and France remain calm, in Dresden the Sudeten German "Freikorps" [German guerrilla force that sought to add the Sudetenland region to Germany] is almost ready to invade [Czechoslovakia]. And the populace here is convinced that the Czechs alone are to blame and that Hitler loves peace. . . .

Four-power meeting [meeting of Germany, Italy, France, and Britain to discuss Germany's claims to the Sudetenland] today [September 29] at three in Munich. Czechoslovakia continues to exist, Germany gets the Sudetenland, probably a colony as well. . . . For the populace on the front pages of the German press it is of course the absolute success of Hitler, the prince of peace and brilliant diplomat. . . . No shot is fired, and the [German] troops have been marching in since yesterday. Wishes for peace and friendship have been exchanged with England and France, Russia is cowering and silent, a zero. Hitler is being acclaimed even more extravagantly than in the Austria business.

—Victor Klemperer, diary entry, 1938

- 1. Explaining** According to Gooch, why did the Disarmament Conference in Geneva fail?

- 2. Recognizing Bias** What does Klemperer suggest about how most Germans felt about Hitler in 1938? Why do you think the German populace felt that way about Hitler?

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3. **Analyzing** Do Gooch and Klemperer primarily agree or disagree in their assessments of the threat to world peace in 1938? Explain.

4. **Comparing** What common point does each of the two sources make about the international efforts to prevent war in the 1930s?

5. **Understanding Historical Interpretation** How do these sources illustrate the causes of World War II?

6. **Constructing Arguments** Could World War II have been prevented by the Western powers? Why or why not? Support your position.
