Why a Second World War?

Why did civilization nearly destroy itself—70 million combatants under arms, more than 50 million soldiers and civilians killed—between 1939 and 1945, a mere twenty-one years after the end of the Great War to end all wars?

The well-known causes of World War II are various. An exhausted and defeated Germany and Austria in autumn 1918 accepted an armistice but not an immediate unconditional surrender. Instead, the Central Powers ceased fighting even though their forces were still in Belgium, Italy, France, and Russia. By 1919 the Treaty of Versailles that officially ended the First World War began to be seen as unnecessarily harsh to the defeated. The German people, however, were already beginning to accept the myth that their superior armies had surrendered on the offensive on foreign soil but stabbed in the back at home by Jews and Communists. The German military vowed never again to fight a conventional static war against aggregate greater manpower and industrial resources; thus a new Wehrmacht was born, with Blitzkrieg and a faith in advanced technology as its creed.

In contrast, the liberal democracies took the opposite lessons from their victory: that only passivity, appeasement, and entrenchment would ensure that French and British soldiers would never again die en masse at a Somme or Verdun. The result was that, by 1930, a defeated Germany had learned the military lessons of the First War far better than had the victors. Militarists in Germany, Italy, and Japan brazenly armed, convinced this time that democracies either would not fight well or would not fight at all.

The global Depression years of the 1930s weakened confidence in both capitalism and democracy. Authoritarians in Germany, Italy, Japan, and Russia, however, stimulated their economies by putting them on a war footing, convinced that history was on the side of all-powerful dictatorships that could best marshal the new forces of modernism fueled by racial and ideological chauvinism.

Those who opposed the new totalitarians put their faith in utopian world governance and the League of Nations rather than in military preparedness and the deterrence against aggression that confidence in arms provides. The United States, whose late entry into World War I with more than a million combatants had saved the French and British democracies on the Western Front, was reluctant to enter yet another bloody European war. Both disarmed and isolationist, America of the 1930s was determined not to confront either a Nazi Germany or an Imperial Japan—and so ensured that there would be few consequences to those countries’ serial aggression.

After World War II, having learned from the failure of Versailles, the victorious United States in 1945 remained armed, occupied the homelands of the defeated, insisted on imposing democratic governments, created global economic cooperative institutions and military alliances, and ensured that Americans would stay engaged in both Europe and Asia—thereby preventing another world war.