

## CAUSES OF WORLD WAR II

### Military Aggression

- Japan's invasion of Manchuria in 1931 and Italy's invasion of Ethiopia in 1935 were among the earliest acts of aggression to threaten world peace.
- The most serious challenge came from Hitler's intention to create a new German empire. He called his empire the Third Reich.
- In violation of the Treaty of Versailles, Germany built up its armed forces. In 1936, Germany moved its army into the demilitarized Rhineland. In 1938, Germany sent its troops into Austria and annexed the German-speaking country. Later that year, Germany demanded control of the German-speaking part of Czechoslovakia known as the Sudetenland.



### Appeasement at Munich

- Remembering the terrible destruction of World War I, both British and French leaders were reluctant to become involved in another war. They hoped that a policy of appeasement might satisfy Hitler and preserve the peace. **Appeasement** is the policy of yielding to the demands of a rival power in order to avoid armed conflict.
- At a conference in Munich, Germany in 1938, British and French leaders gave in to Hitler's demands to annex the Sudetenland. Hitler promised that Germany would not demand any more territory. However, only a few months later, in 1939, Germany occupied the rest of Czechoslovakia. Next, Germany threatened Poland.

### **Inaction by the International Community**

- The League of Nations failed to act to stop Hitler's aggression.
- The League was handicapped by two main weaknesses: (1) Two of the world's major powers – the United States and Soviet Union – failed to join. (2) The League could not force member nations to contribute military forces to support its decisions.

### **U.S. and Soviet Policies**

- The United States and Soviet Union also failed to act.
- Many Americans were disillusioned by the results of World War I. They thought the war had accomplished nothing and that millions had died in vain. They were determined to keep their country out of any future European wars. Following public opinion, Congress passed several Neutrality Acts forbidding the sale or shipment of arms to nations involved in war.
- Soviet dictator Joseph Stalin believed that his country's military forces were not strong enough to fight Hitler without the support of the Allies. After Britain and France failed to stop Hitler, Stalin signed a nonaggression pact with Germany in 1939 agreeing not to attack each other if war broke out. Germany also secretly agreed to permit Russia to seize the Baltic nations of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania.

### **German Invasion of Poland**

- The nonaggression pact assured Hitler that his planned invasion of Poland would not cause the Soviet Union to take up arms against him.
- In September, 1939, German tanks and planes began a devastating attack on Poland. This time, instead of appeasement, Great Britain and France both declared war against Germany. They also declared war against Italy and Japan; two nations that had previously entered into an alliance with Germany called the Axis Powers. War in Europe automatically resulted in war in Asia as well.