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## 8. Road to World War II (1931-1939)

Robert L. Bloom  
*Gettysburg College*

Basil L. Crapster  
*Gettysburg College*

Harold L. Dunkelberger  
*Gettysburg College*

*See next page for additional authors*

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## 8. Road to World War II (1931-1939)

### Abstract

In the history of international relations, the 1920's are characterized by tidying up after the "war to make the world safe for democracy;" the 1930's, by preparations for World War II. In general, the causes of the renewal of global war are the same as those listed earlier for World War I, with several major additions. [*excerpt*]

### Keywords

Contemporary Civilization, World War II, Second World War, WWII, Global War, Totalitarian Ideologies, Great Depression, International Relations, Nationalism, Pacifism, League of Nations

### Disciplines

European History | History | Military History | Models and Methods | Political History | Political Science | Social History | United States History

### Comments

This is a part of [Section XVIII: The Western World in the Twentieth Century: The Historical Setting](#). The [Contemporary Civilization](#) page lists all additional sections of *Ideas and Institutions of Western Man*, as well as the [Table of Contents](#) for both volumes.

### More About Contemporary Civilization:

From 1947 through 1969, all first-year Gettysburg College students took a two-semester course called Contemporary Civilization. The course was developed at President Henry W.A. Hanson's request with the goal of "introducing the student to the backgrounds of contemporary social problems through the major concepts, ideals, hopes and motivations of western culture since the Middle Ages."

Gettysburg College professors from the history, philosophy, and religion departments developed a textbook for the course. The first edition, published in 1955, was called *An Introduction to Contemporary Civilization and Its Problems*. A second edition, retitled *Ideas and Institutions of Western Man*, was published in 1958 and 1960. It is this second edition that we include here. The copy we digitized is from the Gary T. Hawbaker '66 Collection and the marginalia are his.

### Authors

Robert L. Bloom, Basil L. Crapster, Harold L. Dunkelberger, Charles H. Glatfelter, Richard T. Mara, Norman E. Richardson, and W. Richard Schubart

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\* James H. Meisel and Edward S. Kozera, eds., Materials for the Study of the Soviet System... (Ann Arbor, Michigan: The George Wahr Publishing Company, 1953), pp. 385-388. Used with permission.

safe for democracy;" the 1930's, by preparations for World War II. In general, the causes of the renewal of global war are the same as those listed earlier for World War I, with the following major additions.

First, new totalitarian ideologies appeared, each firmly entrenched in a state and using that state as a basis for expansion. Each had a "fifth column" of supporters within other states. To none of these ideologies was force repugnant; it was either inevitable or even desirable. Because they tended to see the world as divided into simply friends and foes, they viewed conciliation as no major virtue.

The Great Depression hastened the deterioration of international relations in several ways. It strengthened economic nationalism. Many people were so preoccupied with their perplexing domestic problems that they overlooked what was happening beyond their frontiers. Others were stimulated to seek prosperity through expansion.

Pacifism flourished in a world which remembered all too clearly the horrors of the last war. Sternly repressed in police states, in democracies it induced some to dismiss all wars as wrong and to welcome any alternative to fighting. The very existence of such organizations as the League of Nations and such agreements as the Kellogg-Briand Pact encouraged the illusion that all was well, when in reality such devices had few teeth because no power would surrender any of its sovereignty. They could be no more effective than the powers wanted them to be. The United States, for example, was not a member of the League, participated little in efforts to achieve collective security, and isolated herself behind a legal wall of neutrality legislation.

The stirring of non-Western people was markedly altering the balance of power. In what may be called "The Decline of the East," the Near and Far East were rapidly losing certain aspects of their distinctively Oriental culture, replacing them with the nationalism, political ideals, and industrial machine of the West. The process was furthest advanced in Japan, whose expanding colonial empire was a threat to Russia, France, Britain, and the United States. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries Western borrowing from the East had been primarily economic and, to a lesser extent, cultural, and had redounded to the advantage of the West. In the twentieth century, for the first time since the seventeenth, an Eastern power posed a serious military threat to the West.

The Paris Peace Settlement contained fatal flaws, with tragic consequences. It could have been a Carthaginian peace, with the vanquished thoroughly crushed and the postwar world policed by the victors. Alternatively, it could have created a world from which the causes of war were removed, or at least dramatically reduced in influence. It did neither of these. It was enough of a victor's peace for the vanquished to harbor



resentment, made all the more bitter by the pious protestations of the victors. But the victors did not stand together to defend their handiwork, or show sufficient evidence of a determination to right the wrongs committed.

The world set off on its descent into World War II in 1931, when Japan invaded Manchuria with impunity. Shortly thereafter, the Nazis came to power and began an extensive rearmament program. In 1935, Italy began the conquest of the independent African kingdom of Ethiopia, despite half-hearted protests of the League which by now meant Britain, France, and lesser states. Between 1936 and 1938, the Axis powers sent men and materiel to the conservative and fascist forces of General Francisco Franco (1892- ) who waged successful civil war against a fledgling Spanish republic. The latter received some aid from Russia but none from the democratic states who clung to nonintervention. Russia thereby gained considerable credit as ostensibly the leader of antifascism in a conflict whose ideological implications aroused intense interest throughout the West. Meanwhile, in eastern Europe the Axis won additional victories. In 1936, Germany and Italy were allied in the Rome-Berlin Axis, to which Tokyo was soon added. In 1938, Germany forcibly annexed Austria. Later in the same year, part of Czechoslovakia was added to her list of acquisitions. In 1939, she absorbed the remainder of that unfortunate state and tore Memel from Lithuania, while Italy annexed Albania without difficulty.

The immediate cause of the Second World War was Germany's determination to annex Poland in 1939. By then Britain and France were sufficiently alarmed to promise to defend their eastern ally. Germany purchased Russian neutrality by a non-aggression pact granting Russia permission to annex eastern Poland, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. Then Germany invaded Poland and the war was on. Britain and France honored their commitments by coming to Poland's aid. Meanwhile, Russia engaged successfully in a little war of her own with Finland, who had refused to surrender border territory.