

MIT Student

Professor Van Evera

17.42

A More Disastrous World War II

World War II, the most devastating war in world history, followed the 1919 Versailles Peace, the most elaborate and determined effort to ensure world peace. It is safe to say that the conditions which would have prevented World War II are difficult to imagine if limited to the existing technologies and political strategy of the time. Western democracies clung onto isolationism as a means to avoid engaging in war, and as a result, aggressive, expansionist dictatorships flourished. However, if the causes of the war were to be reexamined in light of a nuclear revolution occurring around 1920, the events of World War II are undoubtedly changed. Consider a situation in which by 1933, only Germany, Britain, France, the Soviet Union, and the United States have large nuclear second-strike counter value capabilities, meaning these nations have the ability to launch a nuclear force aimed at a civilian population after withstanding a full scale nuclear attack. Although it may seem that the existence of such nuclear weapons would deter states from being aggressive, **the start of World War II would have remained the same because Germany was intent on greatly expanding their borders, and the Allied Powers were adamant on pursuing a policy of appeasement. The end of World War II, however, would be much more intense due to the fact that Germany is on the verge of losing, and Hitler would become a derailed, irrational head of state.**

Regardless of the existence of nuclear weapons, Germany would be insatiable because the German people were convinced that they needed to expand their borders to secure their

country after being treated so unfairly post World War I. The German government went to great lengths to convince the public that they were innocent, setting up a secret public relations campaign that blamed other nations for the war.¹ In the 1920's, German schools and scholars were told and propagated lies about the Entente powers instigating the war, and the Jews and Socialists losing the war.² The German government also promoted the publishing of pro-war literature, which often glorified the personal experience of the war, and consequently promoted a culture where war and military tradition was highly valued.³ This propaganda campaign would have happened whether or not Germany had a large nuclear arsenal. Those in charge in the German government needed nationalist mythmaking to justify their actions from the previous war in order to stay in power. They also needed to establish nationalist citizens in order to maintain a functional state where civilians paid taxes and wanted to serve in the military. Furthermore, the Great Depression of 1929 hit Germany the hardest, and many Germans attributed this to the harsh conditions that had been imposed on Germany from the Treaty of Versailles.⁴ The depression and the nationalist myths brought forth German hatred of the Allies and German insecurity, especially regarding food. Eventually, this train of thought would lead to a call for an empire, with which Germany would be able to have secure, food-producing lands. However, in order for Germany to have a large nuclear force by 1933, they needed to have put together a large industrial workforce in a few years after the depression to support the nuclear revolution. A work force mobilization aimed towards the development of nuclear weapons would allow Germany to use of the weapons as leverage to expand its borders, thereby establishing a secure state. As a result, the general sentiment of the German population would

¹ Stephen Van Evera, *Origins of the Second World War* (Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2018), 1.

² Van Evera, *Origins of the Second World War*, 1.

³ Wolfram Wette, *The German Military in the Age of Total War* (Dover: Berg, 1985), 81.

⁴ R.R. Palmer and Joel Colton, *A History of the Modern World* (NY: Knopf, 1991), 825.

still be pro-expansion with the nuclear revolution because the German government overwhelming promoted a sense of militant nationalism.

Another cause of World War II that would remain unchanged with the advent of the nuclear revolution is the isolationist attitude of other countries, such as Britain, France, and the United States. The First World War was widely seen as pointless and a consequence of war propaganda, so western powers believed that war could not break out if one side refused to be provoked.⁵ For Britain, this mentality was motivated by the large losses they suffered during the war. Many British also fell victim to German propaganda and started to believe that the Treaty of Versailles was too harsh or that the Germans should allow to expand. These beliefs were also applicable to the French, as they were also eager to avoid war after having suffered greatly during the First World War. The French were absorbed in domestic left-right conflicts, in which many French of the right were sympathetic to Hitler and Mussolini, so they were either distracted from or sympathetic to Germany's early expansions.⁶ Meanwhile, the United States embraced isolationism to the such an extent that Congress passes a series of neutrality laws from 1935-1939 that required the U.S. remain neutral in the event of a war elsewhere.⁷ All of these actions encouraged Germany to go on an expansionist rampage. Hitler was able to remilitarize the Rhineland and acquire Austria, the Czech Sudetenland, the Czech rump, and Memel by 1939, all without any meaningful protest from the western powers.⁸ The Allied powers were foolishly hoping that each piece of territory Germany acquired would be its last, that Hitler would be sated. They would not have threatened a nuclear attack over these early acquisitions because they were so firmly entrenched in their isolationism, and they would not risk the total destruction of

⁵ Palmer and Colton, *A History of the Modern World*, 835.

⁶ Palmer and Colton, *A History of the Modern World*, 835.

⁷ Palmer and Colton, *A History of the Modern World*, 836.

⁸ Palmer and Colton, *A History of the Modern World*, 841.

any of their cities over lands that they were somewhat sympathetic to Hitler acquiring. Even when Poland was invaded and they decided to take a stand and denounce Hitler, the Allied powers would not have engaged in nuclear war for fear of mutually assured destruction. The threat of the Allied powers using nuclear weapons after so many years of appeasement would also not be taken seriously by Hitler. Additionally, Hitler would not use nuclear weapons not only because he wanted to avoid mutually assured destruction but also because of how effective the German army and Blitzkrieg strategy were. In effect, the nuclear revolution was unable to prevent the isolationist and appeasement strategy of the Western powers encouraging Germany's aggressive expansion.

In fact, nuclear weapons would not be used for most of the war, even when nations were most desperate. As France was the first nation with nuclear capabilities to fall, the question arises of whether or not France would use nuclear weapons as part of a last minute, desperate attack on Germany. However, given the defensive strategy the French have previously employed, this seems unlikely. Having lost about 1.4 million Frenchmen and half of all males between the ages of 20 and 32 in 1914, the French were incredibly wary of losing more lives.⁹ The political strategists would have understood that bombing Germany's military would not have effectively stopped Germany's ability to retaliate and would have only resulted in their worst fear: a countervalue attack. The French would also have to engage in this nuclear attack on their own, without the support of Britain because the British would most likely be unwilling to engage in a nuclear war and risk their own cities being destroyed, and the same would apply for the United States or the Soviet Union. Due to the fact that the French would not have the backing of any other major power in using nuclear force on Germany, they would most likely accept defeat.

⁹ Palmer and Colton, *A History of the Modern World*, 835.

Similarly, the Soviet Union is another country that was at risk of losing and perhaps would have been desperate enough to consider the use of nuclear weapons. In 1941, the Germans made huge advances into the Soviet Union, killing millions of Soviet soldiers, and the situation seemed dire.¹⁰ However, Stalin highly valued Soviet cities such as Moscow and Leningrad and made great efforts to defend them. He would not have wanted to use nuclear forces against Germany because he believed that the Red Army would eventually be an effective defense for the cities, and he would have known that launching a nuclear attack would drive the Germans to nuke Soviet cities.

The most notable impact that nuclear weapons would have on World War II would occur towards the end of the war, when it was clear that Germany was losing. Unlike the French and Soviet leaders, Hitler had long established that “the fate of the Reich depends on [him] alone,”¹¹ effectively aligning Germany’s life and death with his own. As the German situation became more and more desperate, without nuclear weapons, Hitler’s only option would have been to accept defeat and begin negotiations, but to him, this would have meant suicide. With nuclear weapons, Hitler would have looked to nuclear force as a means to end the war, even if it meant risking the death of a significant portion of his civilian population. Hitler would have struck Great Britain’s industrial centers first, in order to cripple their war effort, but at this point in the war, Great Britain’s forces were not the primary threat to him. They were exhausted. However, his ability to stop the influx of American resources and military was limited because launching a nuclear strike across an ocean would have been much more difficult. Hitler needed to strike the British, accept a countervalue strike, and defeat them in conventional warfare, all before the Americans had a sizable presence on the European continent. The chance of an attack being

¹⁰ Palmer and Colton, *A History of the Modern World*, 847.

¹¹ Sebastian Haffner, *The Meaning of Hitler* (Harvard University Press, 1983), 28.

enough for the Germans to win the war would have been extremely slim, given the American entrance into the war, but it would have been a better alternative to giving up and committing suicide. Hitler's desperation to win the war would not have allowed him to make a decision that could have limited the damage. In fact, by the end of the war, Hitler's health had been declining, which suggests that he may not have been that rational decision maker.¹² Without a rational head of state, the strategy behind mutually assured destruction falls apart because there is no longer a deterrable actor involved.¹³ As a result, Hitler's irrational tendencies at the end of the war would have provoked a nuclear attack on Great Britain and created a much more intense end to World War II.

In summary, nuclear weapons would not have been able to prevent World War II from occurring. The German people were too riled up about expanding far beyond their borders, and the Western powers were insistent on staying out of any potential conflict. As a result, a clear path was left for Hitler to develop Germany's military and nuclear force and to pursue a German empire. The fear of mutually assured destruction would limit conflicts to conventional warfare but only so long as all heads of states were rational. Upon German's defeat, Hitler would have launch a futile nuclear assault on Great Britain, and the resulting nuclear warfare would have caused even more casualties. In this scenario, the nuclear revolution occurring by 1933 would have only worsened the suffering of all parties and would not have been an effective means of preventing conflict. Misunderstandings about the origins of war from both the Allied and Axis powers were too great for the deterrence of nuclear weapons to work.

¹² Haffner, *The Meaning of Hitler*, 59.

¹³ David Ziegler, *War, Peace, and International Politics* (Little, Brown and Company, 1981), 277.

MIT OpenCourseWare
<https://ocw.mit.edu/>

17.42 Causes and Prevention of War
Spring 2018

For information about citing these materials or our Terms of Use, visit: <https://ocw.mit.edu/terms>.