

CHC2P Unit 2: 1920s-1930s: Growth and Sacrifice

Activity 7: The Background to WWII

Overview

In this activity, you will explore the events that led to World War II.

Lesson

The Failure of the League of Nations

The Versailles Peace Treaty at the end of World War I provided for the creation of a new world organization called the League of Nations. At its headquarters at Geneva, Switzerland, the nations of the world would meet to discuss problems and to attempt to avoid war in the future. Canada joined the League of Nations as an independent country.

However, at various times, important countries such as the United States, Germany, Japan and the Soviet Union were not members of the League of Nations, and as a result, keeping the peace proved difficult.

In 1931, Japan attacked and took over the Chinese province of Manchuria. The League of Nations did nothing. In 1935, Italy attacked and took over the African country of Ethiopia. The League talked about punishing Italy by cutting off trade, but no effective action was taken.

Prime Minister Bennett said that Canada could do nothing to stop Japan's aggression. Prime Minister King refused to agree to any actions against Italy, because he worried about Canada being involved in another world war.

The Treatment of Germany

In the Versailles Peace Treaty, the losing country, Germany, was treated harshly by the victorious countries. Germany was blamed for the war, and forced to pay for its entire cost. Germany lost important chunks of its territory and also had its armed forces drastically reduced.

Many people in Germany felt that their country had been unfairly treated by the winning countries of the First World War. As a result, feelings of anger and frustration were present among the German population. These feelings increased when the German people suffered large economic hardships because they had to pay for the war.

The Nazi Party in Germany

In this atmosphere, a new party, called the Nazi Party, found supporters among the German voters. The Nazis were led by Adolf Hitler. The party blamed Germany's problems on the Versailles Peace Treaty and on the actions of the Jewish people.

Anti-Semitism



The Nazis made the Jewish people scapegoats (people blamed for the wrongdoings of others). The Jewish people were targeted because they had different religious and cultural practices from the majority of Christian Europeans. Hundreds of years ago, Jewish people had been excluded from many professions. Some went into banking and business and experienced large success. This in turn led some to be jealous and suspicious of Jewish people.

Prejudice and hatred against Jewish people is called anti-Semitism.

After Adolf Hitler and the Nazis gained control of the government in 1933, they began to pass laws that discriminated against Jewish people. Jews were forbidden to take government and professional positions, or to join the armed forces. They lost their German citizenship rights and their children were banished from the government schools.



In 1938, the Nazi party organized an attack on Jewish shops and offices. It was later called "The Night of Broken Glass" or "die Krystallnacht." Approximately 100 Jews were killed, and another 20,000 sent to the newly formed concentration camps.

Such examples of anti-Semitism promoted and in fact, heralded by government, prompted many Jewish people to attempt to leave Germany. One family that was able to flee Germany was the Frank family. Anne Frank and her sister and parents moved to Amsterdam, Holland. Unfortunately, the Nazis invaded Holland in 1940, and the Frank family went into hiding in 1942. They were eventually found more than two years later. Anne Frank died in a concentration camp, but her story captured the imagination of millions when her diaries were published at the end of the war.

In May 1939, over 900 Jewish refugees from Germany tried to reach safety in the United States, by way of Cuba. They were aboard the ship, the S. S. St. Louis. When the promised landing in Cuba was denied, the passengers asked other countries to accept them. Countries in South America, and both the United States and Canada, refused to help. Canadian officials stated that they did not wish Canada to become "the dumping ground" for Jewish refugees, and if one shipload were allowed, others would follow.

In his diary, Mackenzie King wrote that he wished to avoid "internal problems" and he refused to accept the passengers on the St. Louis. Belgium, Holland, France, and England did accept the passengers. Soon, however, the Nazis occupied the first three of these countries, and most of the passengers eventually perished in concentration camps.

Isolationism

While the Canadian government rejected Jewish refugees, it also rejected involvement in the international community during the 1930's. Canada, like the United States, was following a policy of isolationism. Both countries attempted to stay away from issues that took place away from North

American shores. Both countries virtually ignored the happenings in Europe that involved Hitler and Nazi Germany.

The Actions of Hitler 1936-1939



To protect France from future attack, the Treaty of Versailles stated that the German military could not occupy the border area between the two countries named the Rhineland (named after the Rhine River that runs through the area). In 1936, German troops moved into the Rhineland. The League of Nations did nothing to stop Hitler.

In 1938, Hitler's troops marched into Austria (a largely German-speaking country). He took it over without a shot being fired. Later in the same year, Hitler threatened to attack Czechoslovakia, so that he could take over the Sudetenland - an area where 3 million German-speaking people lived. Appeasement failed miserably. When Hitler invaded Poland on September 1, 1939, Britain and France decided that enough was enough and they declared war on Nazi Germany on September 3. This signaled the start of World War II.

Prime Minister William Lyon Mackenzie King had been a supporter of appeasement. Based on one meeting, King was convinced that Hitler was "a man of deep sincerity" and "no serious danger to anyone." King's government declared war on Germany on September 10, 1939 - one week after Britain had declared war.

British and French leaders had met Hitler in the German city of Munich in September 1938 and made a deal with him. They allowed Hitler to take over the Sudetenland on the promise that this would be his last territorial demand. The agreement was not worth the paper it was written on. Six months later, in March, 1939, Nazi forces took over the remaining parts of Czechoslovakia.

In dealing with Hitler, most of the world, including Canada, had been following a policy called appeasement. This policy involves giving in to demands to keep someone quiet. It could be compared to giving in to the demands of a screaming child to achieve peace in a household. Many countries, trying to avoid a world war, allowed Hitler to have what he wanted.

Assignment

1. Write a 1-page summary describing the background causes to WWII.
2. In what ways did the Jewish people in Germany suffer from discrimination in the 1930's?
3. What groups of people in today's world at times suffer from discrimination? Explain.