

By the late 1930s, dictators were ruling the Soviet Union, Germany, Italy, and Japan. These leaders consolidated power under militaristic regimes based on extreme nationalist ideas. Although these leaders and their governments had some similarities, the dictators came to power in different ways. They also ruled over their countries differently. Toward the end of the 1930s, three of these dictatorships formed an alliance that threatened to put all of Europe and much of Asia under their control.

[Image courtesy German Federal Archive]



After Vladimir Lenin, the first leader of the Soviet Union, died in 1924, Joseph Stalin took over as leader. He slowly consolidated power, and by 1928, he was in complete control of the Communist Party and the rest of the country. Stalin believed that the best way to spread communism was to make the Soviet Union into a world power. He tried to remove any parts of the economy that weren't communist and he attempted to keep any foreign influences out of the country.

Stalin believed that the Soviet Union's industries were fifty to one hundred years behind Europe's other major powers and he made plans to try and catch up with the rest of Europe. Part of his strategy was based in communist ideas that the government would own all factories and would decide how much of each product to produce. Stalin's rule lasted until 1952. During that time, he implemented two Five-Year Plans where he set extremely high targets for production. Although these targets were not met, the Soviet Union rapidly industrialized by building factories and bringing electricity to more and more of the country. As a result, the country quickly became an industrial powerhouse.

Many of the people in the Soviet Union lived in the country and worked on farms using relatively old technology. In order to boost agricultural production, Stalin combined small, independent farms into larger collectives. People could farm the land together, using modern machinery. Many peasants fiercely resisted Stalin's collectivization plans, but by 1938, 90% of the country's farms were organized into collectives that produced much greater amounts of food than the old farms did.

Unfortunately, increased agricultural and industrial production came at a high human cost. The Communist Party controlled every aspect of the average worker's day. Communist officials supervised people's work, and anyone seen as a bad worker might be imprisoned, exiled, or even killed. Millions of workers and peasant farmers were killed or exiled to Siberia under Stalin's harsh rule. Stalin's secret police tried to eliminate anyone who criticized Stalin or the Communist Party. As Stalin's rule continued, any personal freedoms basically disappeared as he consolidated his totalitarian regime. Stalin believed that religion was incompatible with communism and persecuted those who continued to practice it.

He even turned against other members of the Communist Party. Between 1936 and 1938, Stalin implemented his Great Purge. During this time, he tried to eliminate anyone in the party or in the country that he didn't trust, or that he saw as a threat to his rule. According to declassified documents from the Soviet archives, during the years of 1937 and 1938 alone, over one point five million people were detained, and over six hundred and eighty thousand people were executed – an average of over one thousand executions a day. Among those who were eliminated were thousands of people who had been part of the communist revolution, fought in the Russian Civil War, and helped Stalin take power. The Great Purge eventually targeted any dissidents or people opposed to his rule, regular farmers, and military leaders. The Great Purge hurt the Soviet Union at the beginning of World War II.



Italy fought on the side of the Allied Powers in World War I and over one point five million Italian soldiers were either killed or wounded during the war. England and France received most of the benefits of World War I from the war reparations and territorial gains. Meanwhile, many Italians believed that the Treaty of Versailles did very little to reward Italy for its sacrifice.

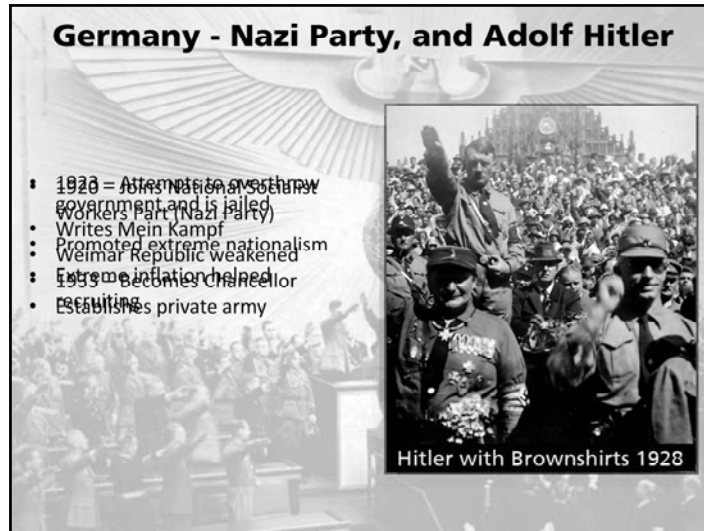
The cost of the war left Italy's economy in poor shape, and some people feared that a communist revolution similar to Russia's might happen in Italy. Many Italians looked for a strong leader to restore order to a chaotic world. That man was Benito Mussolini, who rose to power in the 1920s. Mussolini was a charismatic speaker who promised to fix Italy's problems and restore the country to the former glory of the Roman Empire.

Early in Mussolini's life, he was a socialist, but during World War I, he began to believe in extreme nationalism. Mussolini organized the Fascist Party, which was made up of World War I veterans. The Fascists had intimidation squads called the “Black-shirts” to deal with their opponents, who were mainly communists and socialists. In 1922, King Victor Emmanuel III asked Mussolini to form a government and become prime minister of Italy. Mussolini was given emergency powers to restore order and make new laws. Fascism was based on extreme nationalism, loyalty to the country, censorship, and the limitation of personal freedoms to maintain security. Unlike the Soviet Union, the Fascists supported private property and businesses, but with strong government direction and regulation to benefit the government and the country's industrial leaders.



Like Hitler, Mussolini was a charismatic leader. He was known as “Il Duce,” which means “The Leader” in Italian. By 1925, Mussolini had gained absolute control of Italy. He effectively used propaganda to indoctrinate Italians into supporting his policies. Mussolini was the model for other Fascist governments of the time, like Hitler's Germany.

As dictator, Mussolini dreamed of building an Italian empire. In 1935, he invaded Ethiopia, one of the few independent countries in Africa. Ethiopia had previously defeated Italian forces in 1896. Ethiopia's leader Haile Selassie appealed to the League of Nations, but received no help. The members of the League of Nations decided to appease Italy rather than use military force, and Ethiopia was eventually conquered. Italy's empire was short-lived. In 1941, Ethiopian forces, with the help of British soldiers, defeated the Italians and liberated the country.



Adolf Hitler was drawn to Mussolini's fascist ideas. Hitler fought in WWI and believed that Germany had been betrayed by the Weimar Republic when it signed the Treaty of Versailles. Hitler wanted to take control of Germany and looked to Mussolini as a model. In 1920, Hitler joined a group known as the National Socialist Worker's Party, or Nazi Party, which promoted a form of extreme nationalism. This group practiced their own form of fascism known as Nazism and gained followers from Germany's upper and middle classes. The party was able to recruit followers partly because of the extreme inflation that resulted from Germany's efforts to pay war reparations to France and Britain. For example, an item that cost 100 marks in 1922 cost about 944,000 marks a year later. Many people lost their life's savings to inflation.

In 1923, Hitler's first attempt to take control of Germany's government by force failed and he was sentenced to prison for close to a year. During that time, he wrote the book *Mein Kampf* or "My Struggle", which outlined his future plans and Nazi ideology. By the time he was released, the Nazi party had weakened because the economy had improved. In 1930, when the Great Depression spread to Germany, Hitler found a new, desperate audience drawn to his fiery speeches. By 1932, the Nazi Party had become the largest political party in Germany. The Weimar Republic, the democratically-elected government established at the end of World War I, had been severely weakened because of the Depression. People resented its leaders because they had signed the hated Treaty of Versailles.

In 1933, Hitler was named Chancellor of Germany through a democratic process. Within a year, the legislature passed a law that gave Hitler absolute power over Germany. He became the Fuhrer, or leader, of the Nazi party and established his own private army, the brown-shirts, or storm troopers. To strengthen his position, Hitler sent his elite private forces called the SS, to murder hundreds of his enemies and even members of his own Nazi Party. The SS effectively replaced the brown-shirts after 1934.

## Propaganda and Anti-Semitism

- Control of economy
- No labor unions
- Public works projects
- Anti-Semitism – hatred of Jews



Like Mussolini, Hitler's Nazi government was strongly anti-communist and supported private property rights. The Nazis controlled the economy and banned labor unions. The government created a number of public works projects that lowered unemployment, such as the autobahn, the national highway system. The Nazi government also built the first Volkswagen® factory, in order to provide a car that the average person could afford.

Hitler was very good at using propaganda to get people to support his programs, and to hate his enemies. The government censored anybody that criticized the government. As part of his propaganda, Hitler declared that Germans were part of a "master race" that was superior to all other races. He argued that most of the country's problems were the result of its Jews, who made up roughly 1% of the country's total population. He encouraged anti-Semitism, hatred toward Jews, and passed laws known as the Nuremberg laws that stripped Jews of their rights. These laws included forcing Jewish people to wear the star of David so that they could be easily identified. In 1938, he organized the Kristallnacht, which, in German, means "Night of Broken Glass." Mobs destroyed thousands of Jewish-owned shops and hundreds of Jewish businesses.

[Images courtesy of the German Federal Archive.]



## Germany Expands

- 1935 – Germany no longer follows Treaty of Versailles
- 1938 – Invades Austria
- Invades Sudetenland
- Appeasement - policy of avoiding war by conceding to another country's demands



In 1935, Hitler announced that he would no longer follow the terms of the Treaty of Versailles, which restricted the country's military. He expanded the military and moved soldiers into areas not allowed by the treaty. He also started to invade territories in surrounding countries. In 1938, Germany took over Austria, Hitler's birthplace, without a firing a shot. Hitler turned next to the Sudetenland, a small strip of land in Czechoslovakia which contained a large number of German-speaking people. Great Britain's prime minister Neville Chamberlain met with Hitler in Munich to discuss the Sudetenland. Chamberlain and Hitler agreed that Germany could have the Sudetenland, but Hitler also promised that was the last territory he would take for Germany.

France and Britain were unwilling to risk another war over this small strip of land and followed a policy of appeasement. This is the policy of avoiding war by conceding to another country's demands. Germany had strengthened its position in Europe, and the weak response from the other powers only encouraged Hitler to expand further. This set the stage for Hitler's major military maneuvers that started World War II.

[Image of Neville Chambers courtesy the German Federal Archive.]

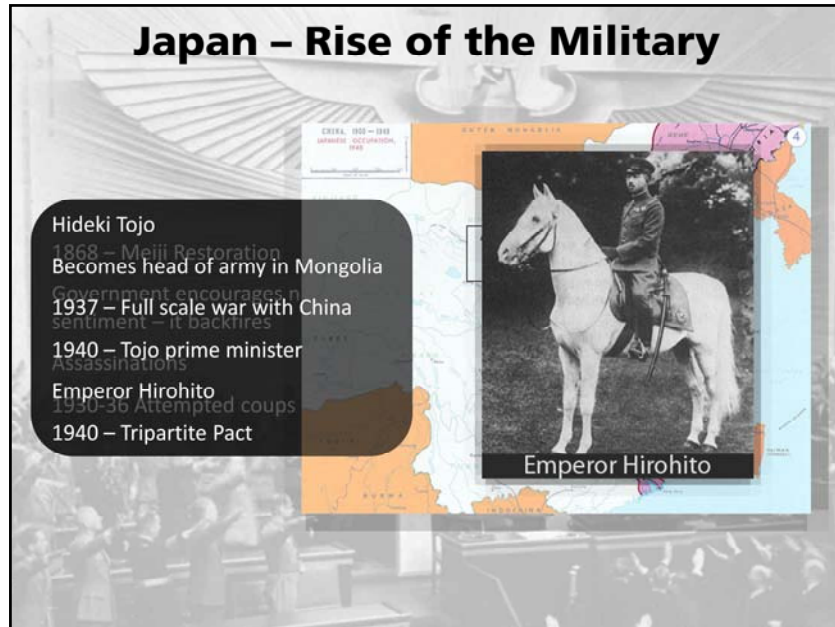


When Japan won the Russo-Japanese war in 1905, the country established itself as one of the world's major military and industrial powers. Japan was the dominant country in East Asia with the territories it took after World War I. Although Japanese troops did not fight extensively during the war, they gained a number of territories as a result of their operations against the German troops in China's Shandong Province. The Treaty of Versailles also gave Japan mandates in the South Pacific.

For the Western powers, Japanese imperialism was quickly becoming a threat to Europe's colonies and influence in the Far East. Like the other major industrialized nations, Japan wanted colonies and access to foreign territories in order to secure raw materials for its factories. Despite Japan's powerful military and highly industrialized economy, the Western powers did not respect the country as an equal, which caused resentment among Japan's leaders. A series of laws passed by the U.S., such as the Exclusion Act of 1924, which restricted Japanese immigration, confirmed that the West viewed itself as superior to Japan.

Meanwhile, Japan's military strength continued to grow. Japan had already colonized Taiwan in 1895, Korea in 1910, and then in 1931, took over Manchuria with the excuse that Chinese citizens had attempted to blow up a Japanese train. Later, the explosion turned out to be the work of the Japanese military, which staged the bombing as a reason to invade Manchuria. The League of Nations reprimanded Japan, leading Japan to withdraw from the organization.





Since 1868, Japan had been governed by a parliamentary system and emperor modeled on European governments. As in most of the world, the Great Depression had an impact on the Japanese economy, as well as its government. The Japanese government encouraged nationalism to try and win the support of the people. The problem was that this led some people to form extreme nationalist groups that assassinated liberal politicians and wealthy businessmen. Between 1930 and 1936, there were also a series of attempted military coups by some soldiers who wanted to restore the emperor to a position of supreme power.

During this time, Hideki Tojo rose through the ranks of the military to become a key military leader. A nationalist and supporter of militarism, Tojo also had fascist beliefs. When soldiers again tried to overthrow the government by killing some of the emperor's closest advisers, the resulting purge of the military left Tojo as chief of staff of the army in Mongolia.

In 1937, Japan entered into full-scale war with China. By the end of the year, Japan had defeated large areas of China and performed atrocities against the Chinese population. Through policies, such as censorship, the Japanese government coerced its own people into supporting the war. After leading troops into battle, Tojo was recalled to Japan to serve in the military high command. In 1940, he was appointed prime minister, which established a military ruler as the head of the country.

The government used the cult of emperor worship surrounding Emperor Hirohito, as well as ideas of racial superiority as a means to justify Japan's invasions in the Far East. In 1940, Japan signed the Tripartite Pact which allied the country with Italy and Germany against the other Western powers in World War II.

## Common Themes



**Gain and hold power by force and fear**  
**Pass laws to forbid political competition**  
**Appeal to people's prejudices**  
**All countries suffering from depression**

By exploring these four dictatorships, you may have noticed that they shared some common traits. Each dictator used extreme tactics to become the leader and stay in control, and they all outlawed any political parties that might oppose their dictatorship. These governments used propaganda to justify their policies, often by promoting a racist ideology, which blamed others as the root of the country's problems.

Finally, the worldwide depression of the 1930s created an unstable world, which these dictators used as a pretense for centralizing authority and silencing their enemies. In those uncertain times, many people supported leaders who offered the promise of security in return for people giving up some of their personal liberties. During World War II, three of these dictators would form an alliance that threatened to take over much of the world.