WORLD WAR II: THE 'GOOD WAR'; ORIGINS AND SIGNIFICANCE

I. Overview and purpose of lecture

A. To look at the origins of World War II—still widely considered a "good war," one that accomplished something positive (contrasted to WWI), and which had clear "good guys" and "bad guys"
   1. In a wide range of ways, the nature and origins of this war cast shadows over the rest of the century, in particular the Cold War
   2. To what extent was it a good war? Do we now see it somewhat differently than people did immediately afterward?

B. To explore the linkage to points already discussed:
   1. Hitler's rise to power
      a) His growing popularity, and his apparent ability to deal with Germany's problems—economic, political, social, etc.
      b) The accelerating process of considering him a great statesman, and infallible

C. The key focus today: the phenomenon of "appeasement"
   1. I will suggest a broader use of the term than has often been the case, and also explore its long-range significance for the rest of the century

D. To look further at Hitler the man, his personality and his goals
   1. In particular how much it was his intentions, his will, his whole Weltanschauung, that may be seen as the most important cause of WW II

II. The legacy of Versailles

A. It has long been believed that the Treaty of Versailles was both a fundamental cause of Nazism and thus of WW II

B. There is no question that many German politicians were discredited for having accepted it
   1. Indeed, the Weimar Republic itself was badly discredited for being associated with the peace treaty
C. In a broader way, there is little question that the vindictiveness of the French contributed to the run-away inflation of 1923
   1. The enormous reparations, similarly, appear short-sighted, merely vindictive and—most important, economically irrational

D. Further, the indecisiveness of the Americans, first intervening forcefully for a League of Nations and then failing to support it, caused havoc
   1. Similar remarks might be made about America's attitudes to the repayment of loans made during the war

E. Still, our judgement of the Germans must be considered in light of what they might have done if they had won the war
   1. Indeed, we know how they treated the Russians in making peace (Brest-Litovsk, taking away a large part of European Russia)
   2. And we know that the Germans were preparing a much more punitive peace than Versailles turned out to be, had they won the war
   3. Similarly, it is interesting how quickly Germans raised the money and goods for rearmament that they supposedly could not possibly raise for reparations
      a) The truth was that they did not want to pay reparations, that they did everything to avoid it—including make up the argument that it was absolutely impossible

F. French vindictiveness, their obsession with keeping Germany weak, was in many regards understandable
   1. Most of the fighting had been on French and Belgian land
   2. There was also what might be termed an "unavoidable demographic reality": The Germans were the most numerous and industrially advanced group in Europe
      a) If they were not in some way "controlled" they would dominate Europe
   3. Thus, the French at first hoped to partition Germany
      a) And they adamantly rejected the idea of allowing the German-speakers of old Austrian Empire into the German Reich
      b) That would have been a logical movement in terms of Wilson’s points, the principle of national self-
Yet, when all is said and done, one of the biggest problems was the arrogance of German nationalism, the inability of many Germans to accept responsibility for the war.

1. They thought it outrageous that they should be treated so shabbily (even if they would have treated defeated enemies in the same way).
2. Of course, in nazi nationalism, and in Hitler personally, this arrogance reached its ultimate extreme.
   a) By no means all Germans were that way, but the arrogance of German nationalism remained a key problem.

Similarly, German resentments against Versailles, while on the one hand understandable, on the other are somewhat hollow.

1. If Germans as victors had treated others more generously, then they might have had a better case.
2. It was that very arrogance, of course, that caused others—and not only the French—to be so vindictive and so paranoiac in regard to Germany, feeling that it had to kept weak.

Perhaps even more fundamental: There were “too many Germans,” and the Germans were “too strong” for the rest of Europe to be comfortable with them.

1. The “rise of the Germans” is thus a fundamental cause of European instability.

III. **French insecurity and the origins of the war**

A. Even if understandable, this insecurity, linked to German nationalistic arrogance and strength, can be seen as one important factor that eventually led to World War II, or at least that made war more likely.

B. A key event in this regard was France's occupation of the Ruhr in 1923 and the ensuing run-away inflation in Germany.
   1. France finally occupied the Ruhr unilaterally, since Germany was not paying reparations as the French believed they should be paid.

C. The long-run implications were not only disastrous for Germany but for France, if in more subtle ways.
   1. France was widely criticized for it, even by its friends.
2. The country lost much prestige, and indeed the right-wing government coalition was eventually overthrown in part because of this action
   a) When French troops finally left, it was with real sense of relief everywhere
3. In short, France had had her fingers badly burned
   a) The important long-range implications were that France would be hesitant to take unilateral action again
   b) France looked thereafter to English support, when dealing with Germany, and the English were "soft" on Germany

IV. European pacifism and the origins of the war

A. Many in Europe, after experiencing the front in WW I, firmly believed that no evil could equal that of another war
   1. Thus, they were willing to go to almost any length in an effort to preserve peace
   2. Students at Oxford went so far as to declare that they would not fight for king and country under any circumstances

B. What they did not know—and perhaps could not be expected to know—was that there was something even worse than trench warfare, and that was nazism
   1. The concentration and extermination camps finally exceeded even the horror of the meaningless slaughter of Verdun
   2. They also did not realize that Hitler did not have the kinds of goals that were associated with other regimes
      a) That is, he could not really be satisfied, or appeased; his appetite and that of his party were limitless

C. Evolution of the term "appeasement"
   1. In this regard, we should recognize how different were the connotations of the term in the 1920s and 1930s
   2. It was regularly used as a word meaning, simply, "making peace," with mostly positive connotations
      a) Certain things were to be offered to reduce tensions
   3. Many believed that if Austria-Hungary had been offered
some "appeasements" in 1914, millions of lives might have been saved

a) Even if such appeasements had entailed injustice to Serbia, that seems insignificant when weighed against the millions of dead, crippled, and disfigured

4. So "appeasement" at first had very wide and lasting appeal—as something that would bring peace

V. The internal successes of Hitler and Nazi Party

A. The significance of the success of Hitler and his party cannot be stressed enough

1. Without the extraordinary popularity of Hitler, due to domestic measures, he could not have succeeded in his foreign policy

B. Especially crucial was his repression of his own dissidents, the S.A. leadership in June 1934

1. After that, many were reassured that the more dangerous elements in nazism had been repressed, that Hitler was a statesman, a moderate, one who hoped for peace and tranquility

C. In a more general way, it seemed that after years of hopelessness, Germany was once again on the move, upbeat, sure of itself

D. The economy was recovering, political strife and chaos on the streets were put to an end, Germans felt reconciled to one another

1. Most of all, from the youth of Germany there was a burst of enthusiasm, of "idealism" for the nazi cause

E. These successes linked and were intertwined with the even more dramatic successes in the foreign policy arena of the Golden Years

F. Hitler became ever more difficult to resist, ever more surrounded with an aura of infallibility, popular support, and power

VI. The beginnings of Nazi diplomatic-military aggression

A. If ever there was a time when different decisions by individual statesmen could have changed the course of history, that time was 1936-9
B. A persuasive argument can be made that Hitler could have been stopped, frustrated, and ultimately brought down long before 1944—and at a fraction of the price
1. Here, too, the issue of Hitler's intentions begins to come into focus

C. The remilitarization of the Rhineland, March 1936
1. Of all the opportunities lost, in terms of stopping Hitler, this one has long seemed to stand out
2. At this time, German troops marched into the Rhineland, into a demilitarized zone established by earlier treaties
3. This was Hitler's first major foreign policy gamble
   a) It was a particularly flagrant and risky one
4. Military occupation of this territory was contrary not only to the Versailles Treaty but also to the Locarno Agreements
   a) The latter of which Germany had signed voluntarily, unlike the Versailles Treaty
5. Moreover, the German forces that went into the Rhineland in March 1936 were relatively weak
   a) Many have since asserted that the French could have easily chased it out
   b) But the French did nothing
6. And it certainly appears persuasive to argue that they lost their chance for the easiest and cheapest victory over Hitler that they would ever have
7. The reasons that French leaders so hesitated were many:
   a) Fear of unilateral action—and in this case they could not get English support—linked to the memory of the Ruhr occupation
   b) Total lack of enthusiasm for chasing the Germans out on the part of the military and the general population
   (1) In general, this reticence has been referred to as the "Maginot Mentality"—that is, the belief in relying on French defenses, not offensive power
   c) A caretaker government was in power in March, merely holding power in expectation of the June
elections, which would bring the Popular Front into power

D. The remilitarization of the Rhineland was perhaps Hitler's most decisive foreign policy move
   1. It was the beginning of a string of what must appear as extraordinary gambles, most of which he won—especially at first
   2. He won them, it must be noted, usually in opposition to the advice of the military and the diplomatic corps
      a) These successes, against all "expert" advice, further weakened resistance to Hitler
      b) More and more, both leaders and masses came to see the Fuehrer as having almost magically insight
      c) Less and less were they inclined to oppose their will to his
   3. If Hitler had gambled and lost in the Rhineland remilitarization, this process of "deification" of Hitler might well have been nipped at the bud
      a) Certainly, the army would have been more likely to oppose him

E. There was considerable celebration in Germany over the success of this step
   1. It represented a high point the period I have called the Golden Years
   2. It was soon to be followed by another: the Olympic Games in Berlin, summer 1936
      a) And they, too, earned Germany a great deal of respect in the world
   3. Germans seemed extremely happy with their new leader, nearly all who visited Germany commented

F. There were much more tangible implications to the Rhineland remilitarization as well
   1. It transformed diplomatic and military relationships in Europe
   2. German armies, established in the Rhineland, built strong fortifications there—the "Siegfried Line"
      a) These fortifications shielded Germany's western borders, freed Hitler to concentrate on moves to the
south and east

3. With the Siegfried Line in place, France's position as an effective ally of such countries as Czechoslovakia and Romania greatly declined
   a) Her alliances in eastern Europe were based on a central assumption: France would be able to strike quickly into Germany's undefended western areas

G. In sum, then, we can consider France's failure to oppose the remilitarization of the Rhineland the "first major act of appeasement"
   1. It may well have been the most decisive one
   2. It was alarming, it should be noted, not only to countries like Czechoslovakia and Romania
   3. The Russians, too, wondered if Germany were not in some way being turned eastward, implicitly being given a green light to expand in that direction

VII. The Anschluss of Austria, March 1938

A. After his victory in remilitarizing the Rhineland, Hitler marched from victory to victory, until finally stopped in the vast steppes of Russia

B. His next main step was to unite to the Reich the Germans in Austria, the land of his birth

C. Again, he succeeded in doing so because western politicians were unwilling to make a major issue of it
   1. Indeed, many of them had a guilty conscience about how Germany had been treated after WW I
   2. Such feelings were especially prominent in Great Britain
      a) In a famous series of talks with Hitler, Lord Halifax led Hitler know that his country, unlike France, was not committed to the status quo in Austria (or in Czechoslovakia)
      b) He insisted that Great Britain would only sanction "peaceful" solution to nationality problems
      c) But Hitler interpreted this—correctly—as a kind of green light to go ahead with his plans

D. Thus, in March of 1938, the Austrian Republic was brought under Nazi control by a combination of external and internal pressures, exerted with great skill by Hitler
1. Evidence indicates that the majority of Austrians opposed this move
2. Yet there were also those who greeted it with great enthusiasm
   a) Hitler's claims that he was carrying out the desires of the great mass of Austrians was given credibility by the enthusiastic reception given Nazi troops, as they occupied the country
   b) Even more, perhaps, by the extraordinary zeal of the Viennese in abusing the numerous Jews of the city
   c) In fact, Jews of Vienna ironically came to think of Berlin as a distinctly less anti-Semitic place
E. The lack of opposition to the Anschluss may be seen as a second major step on the road to appeasement of Hitler
   1. There was not much protest against it, because many believed that Hitler was in fact acting in the name of the German people, that this act helped undo the injustices of the Versailles Treaty
      a) The bottom line: Whatever the pros and cons, few were willing to go to war over the issue

VIII. The Munich Agreements, Sept. 1938

A. These were, of course, the most famous of the acts of "appeasement"
   1. Indeed, the word “Munich” is often used to apply exclusively to these agreements
B. The obstacles that Hitler faced in this case were more formidable
C. That is, when he began to make demands concerning the Germans who lived on the western borders of Czechoslovakia, he met solid resistance from the leaders of the Czech state
   1. Moreover, they were ready and willing to resist militarily
      a) They had first-rate military equipment and excellent fortifications, in the mountainous territory between Germany and Czechoslovakia
      b) Finally, they had firm treaty agreements with France in the case of external aggression
D. Because of these many factors, Hitler's generals warned him
that a strike against Czechoslovakia would be very costly, and might not succeed

E. Yet, once again, Hitler's will and his insight into the shaky determination of the French and English, finally prevailed

1. It was, however, for some time an extraordinary war of nerves
   a) By September 1938 it seemed that war would come
   b) The Germans began to move troops to the Czech border
   c) The French ordered partial mobilization

2. "Peace" was finally assured by efforts of Neville Chamberlain, and indeed of Mussolini
   a) The events that finally led to the Munich Agreements are too complex to narrate here
   b) But finally what Hitler had demanded from the beginning, he achieved—incorporation of the Sudetenland, the German-speaking areas of Czechoslovakia

3. What is often not fully recognized is the tremendous popularity of Chamberlain at the time—not only in Great Britain but in Germany as well
   a) There was a great outpouring of affection for him by Germans at Munich

4. The same may be said of Daladier, the French Premier (who was, at any rate, accepting English leadership)

F. In a related way, what is often not recognized, is how unready France and Great Britain were for war at this time

1. Psychologically, more than in any other sense, but also in more concrete military terms

2. Looking back at the utter collapse of Chamberlain's efforts, and the horrible implications of appeasing Hitler, we can fail to recognize how important it was that he gave peace every conceivable chance
   a) When Churchill then took over the government, with a hard-line approach, he had the kind of support that he could never have had before

IX. Appeasement from the East: the Nazi-Soviet Pact

A. Chamberlain was not the only one to mistake the nature of
nazism, or the personality of Hitler

B. The leaders in Moscow, and Stalin in particular, also misjudged him and the general situation

C. Their faulty understanding of fascism and nazism had led to a fundamental re-evaluation of existing anti-fascist strategy, the Popular Front
   1. By Sept. 1938, that strategy, too, seemed in ruins
   2. The Spanish Civil War was clearly a losing cause, and the Popular Front in France had proved futile—even weakening France

D. These were ominous developments for the leaders of the Soviet Union
   1. They began to worry, moreover, that the Munich Agreements were simply the last in a long series of moves by western statesmen to avoid war in the west—turning it east, at the expense of the Soviet Union
      a) Hitler had said that his ultimate goal was expansion to the east, not the West—to subdue and enslave the Slavic Untermenschen
      b) Moreover, it was true that in certain conservative circles it was argued that a war between Nazi Germany and Soviet Russia would be a fine thing indeed
      c) The western powers could only view with satisfaction the spectacle of these two totalitarian powers tearing themselves apart

(1) This does not seem to have been Chamberlain's own conscious design, but it is easy to see how the leaders in Moscow could have suspicions about his motives

(2) Such was especially the case, since the Soviet leaders were not even invited to Munich—and they let it be known that they violently opposed them

E. A further source of suspicion: France and Great Britain seemed to be delaying, dragging their feet in coming to any meaningful agreements with the Soviet Union about how to stop Hitler
   1. That is, efforts to surround Germany once again, with firm
treaty agreements against aggression, were not given high priority

2. The Soviets could thus well suspect that western statesmen were hoping Hitler would move to the east, and they were giving him time to do so

3. A key issue, really, was getting Poland to consent to Soviet troops on her territory, as part of anti-German agreement
   a) Even though Hitler was now making demands over the Polish Corridor and Danzig, the Poles could not accept the idea of having Russian troops on their land
   b) And this made any coalition of western powers and the Soviet Union to protect Poland nearly impossible to work out

F. Signing of Nazi-Soviet Pact (Aug. 1939)
   1. At one time, many western historians condemned this treaty as a "cynical deal between two dictators"
   2. There certainly was cynicism in it, but in many ways it made good sense simply from the standpoint of Russian national interests
      a) In other words, the policy-makers in Moscow could simply reason that the western powers were trying to encourage Hitler eastward by appeasing him
      b) They would thus reverse the tables, and encourage Hitler westward
      c) The assumption, then, was that the "capitalist" powers would destroy themselves, allowing the communists to pick up the pieces

G. For Hitler, of course, the advantage of a non-aggression pact with Communist Russia were very great
   1. It seemed to violate certain central tenets of his program—the destruction of communism, subjection of the Untermenschen—but it also delivered him from the threat of a two-front war
   2. It also made his strike against Poland in September much easier, since Red Army troops moved in from the east, and Poland was defeated within six weeks

H. There is, in fact, much more to this story
1. And, really, a deeper irony:
   a) This Realpolitik by Stalin did not work
   b) For Hitler did not waste his resources in a war against the west
   c) Rather than a repeat of WW I, France collapsed like a house of cards
   d) And Russia was thus left to face, before too long, an incomparably more powerful Germany