

# World War 1914-1945: A Second Thirty Years' War

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## Abstract

The prevailing view of the time period of 1914-1945 is as separate events, however this article looks at an alternative to this view by grouping the period into a single thirty year long conflict. Currently in the time period of 1914-1945 there are three recognizable events: World War One, the Interwar, and World War Two. To many it may seem normal that these events are separate since they have clear beginnings and endings but there are historical examples of grouping multiple conflicts into a single conflict. One such example of this is the Thirty Years' War of 1618-1648. This conflict shares several similarities to its more modern counterpart beyond just length. An important similarity that each period has is shared themes. These themes are common across each time period respectively and make each period distinct from the years before and after. Perhaps most important to the argument that 1914-1945 should be a single conflict is the peace, or lack thereof, during the interwar. This article also works with the difference in war experience between the U.S. and Europe and how this has affected the current view of the time period.

*Keywords:* World War, Thirty Years' War, Interwar

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This year marks the centennial anniversary of the end of the First World War, a war which was thought to be the “war to end all wars.” World War One was a transformative event in not just European history, but also world history. It is not the only one, though, as just twenty years after its end the Second World War would begin and the world would once more become shrouded in death and violence. The outcomes of these wars have had lasting impacts on the geopolitical structure of the modern world. Before the First World War, Europe was the epicenter of world politics with the continent collectively controlling more than half of the world's population and an even larger proportion of the world's land area. After the end of World War Two, Europe was left devastated and the true power in the world was split between the

United States and the Soviet Union. Society looks at World War One and World War Two as being two wars separated by a time of peace but this view does not serve the time period justice. By looking at World War One and World War Two as separate the connections and relations between them can become unclear or even lost to some. What does serve these two wars justice, the two most devastating wars in the history of humanity, is to view them as a single event spanning thirty years: The Second Thirty Years' War.

What is the significance of this view? The first significance is that it makes the origins of the Second World War clearer. Most people can say that the Nazis caused World War Two but significantly fewer can say why the Nazis rose to power and under what circumstances. Viewing

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the two world wars as a connected single war is also significant for history teachers. At the high levels of history classes it is easy to understand how World War One and World War Two are related as there are entire classes dealing with this connection. It is at the lower levels such as high school where this can shine as it can be so easy for a student to learn about the First World War, take the test, and forget it all. By viewing the time period as a single event rather than as separate it emphasizes the links between the wars and could lead to better retention of information. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the view of a single war brings out the common themes of the time period which were important driving factors of the conflict: imperialism, nationalism, and racism.

In order to make the argument that these wars should be viewed as a single thirty year long war rather than just World War One, the Interwar, and World War Two, this paper will identify four primary arguments. The first of these arguments is the interconnectedness of the two wars. It will look at how the two wars relate and how the Second World War was dependent on the outcome of the first. The second argument will be a comparison to the Thirty Years' War. Despite the Thirty Years' War having taken place several hundred years ago it shares many similarities to the modern wars and most importantly the length and multiple conflicts. The third argument will be the turbulence during the Interwar. The Interwar period is often seen as being a time of peace between World War One and World War Two, however it was far from it and contained very little true peace. The fourth argument will be looking at the difference in war experience between the United States and Europe from 1914-1945. Given that these conflicts were primarily fought in Europe it takes no stretch of

the imagination to see that the United States and Europe will view them differently.

In order to understand why World War One and World War Two should be grouped together into a single war, it is important to understand just what happened leading up to the First World War and what happened between the years 1914 and 1945. Before the beginning of World War One, Europe had not seen any major conflict since the German wars of unification during the 1860s and early 1870s. During this pre-war time Europe had a buildup of arms as the newly unified German Empire was the preeminent military land power with a strong industrial backing rivaling and even surpassing that of the British Empire. In an attempt to isolate France and ensure German supremacy on the continent the Germans allied with the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Originally this alliance included Russia, but Kaiser Wilhelm II failed to keep the Russians on their side and the Russians would subsequently go on to form an alliance with France to keep Germany in check with the threat of a two-front war. Later still this alliance between France and Russia would grow to include Britain because of British treaties relating to Russia, this formed the Triple Entente.

During this pre-war time, one also sees great increase in the first of the major themes of the wars: imperialism. Following the German unification was the scramble for Africa. The main event of this was the Berlin Conference where the great powers of Europe met to discuss the question of Africa and how they should divide it amongst themselves. This was meant to be a balancing act where all of the European powers would receive some amount of land in Africa in order to avoid a crisis and war breaking out. While this event was far from the beginning of European imperialism, it does represent a great

increase in it especially with regards to the World Wars. The European powers were hungry for more power at this time and their imperial ambitions were not limited to outside Europe. The great powers of Europe hoped that they could each respectively dominate the continent, none more so than the Germans whose strong land army made the prospects of continental domination quite possible. The Germans did receive land from the Berlin conference but their lands were all isolated from one another and did not hold much value to the German Empire besides matching the other European great powers.

With the First World War drawing closer a new problem was being moved onto the heat: nationalism. Wrapped up in and closely related to nationalism was racism with some groups of people or nationalities believing that they were inherently better than others, and especially those which they may rule over. Nationalism had its origins not so long before in the Napoleonic Wars just more than a century before the beginning of World War One. Throughout this time period the idea would grow and become a real nuisance for the sprawling multi-ethnic empires of central and southern Europe. Where nationalism had brought the German Empire together, it was beginning to tear apart the Austro-Hungarian Empire and the Ottoman Empire. Austria-Hungary had already had to divide itself into a dual monarchy recognizing the size of Hungarian population. Other minorities wanted this as well, most prevalent the southern Slavs in the Balkans.

This brings the timeline to the triggering event of the First World War which was the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand. Franz Ferdinand was the heir to the imperial title

of Austria-Hungary. The Archduke was sent to the city of Sarajevo in June of 1914 to observe the military during some maneuvers. During a trip through the city he faced multiple assassins with the final one shooting both him and his wife. The assassins were Serbian nationalists that wanted a free and independent Yugoslavia from the Austro-Hungarian Empire. A month following this assassination, the government in Vienna declared war on Serbia arguing correctly that the Serbian government played a role in the assassination plot. Through a web of alliances which had been in place to deter warfare and maintain the balance of power on the continent, the entirety of the continent ironically found itself at war.

Originally the European powers believed that the war would be over by Christmas of 1914 just a few months away, they could not have been more wrong. In fact, many of the citizens of these countries were enthusiastic to join in the war. They thought that they would be heroes, but as it would turn out the war would only bring them tragedy.<sup>2</sup> In 1917, the Americans would enter into the war adding new life and enthusiasm to the allied powers. Following this the central powers would win the war in the east carving out several new countries from the lands of Russia. In the west with the help of the Americans, though, the war would be turned against Germany and the country in 1918 would be forced to surrender effectively ending the First World War.

It is at this point where the First World War could have remained the only World War. With German imperial ambitions destroyed and the war over the allied powers could have truly made this the “war to end all wars.” This would

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<sup>2</sup> George L. Mosse, “Two World Wars and the Myth of the War Experience.” *Journal of Contemporary History*

not be the case though. The allies came with the Treaty of Versailles, the official end to the war. During the writing of this treaty both Britain and the United States wanted to avoid excessive punishments to Germany as they believed that it could lead to further conflicts in the future. France saw this differently. This was the second time that their country had been invaded by the Germans in half of a century and the majority of devastation in the western front of the war was in the eastern French countryside where the trenches stretched endlessly. The French only sought to cripple Germany so that they would never be able to challenge the French again. This can be seen as a form of imperialism as France hoped they could remain superior to Germany.

The Treaty of Versailles brought extreme punishments to the German state. First the treaty stripped Germany of large areas of land. In the east they lost considerable land to Poland including the historical port city of Danzig. This loss of land also left Germany with an exclave in East Prussia. In the west they would lose the Alsace-Lorain region to France which had been the subject of tension and war between France and Germany for more than a century. In addition, the Saar region was to become a new independent state as well. There were also smaller cessions of land to Belgium, Czechoslovakia, Denmark, and Lithuania. Next the German military was to be reduced to just one hundred thousand soldiers and the Rhineland region was to be demilitarized. Finally, Germany was going to be required to pay an unreasonable amount of reparations to the allied powers. When adjusted for inflation the amount of money that Germany was supposed to pay according to the Treaty of Versailles in modern U.S. dollars

would be roughly five hundred fifty-five billion dollars.<sup>3</sup> These punishments were seen as deplorable to the German people and they felt wronged and insulted. The Treaty of Versailles would turn out to be the biggest mistake of the allied powers and it would lead to the continuation of hostilities in the future.

With the end of the First World War comes the Interwar period, or the time between World War One and World War Two. This roughly twenty-year period which lasted from 1918-1939 is generally perceived as being peaceful, but the majority of the time span was anything but peaceful. While the conflicts during this time were not on the scale of the world wars as they were regional conflicts, they are important because they were results of the ending of the First World War and would have profound impacts on the buildup to and the course of the Second World War. To start with there is the breakup of the former European empires of Austria-Hungary, Russia, and the Ottoman Empire. The first of these to break up was Russia. Russia was defeated by Germany before Germany lost in the west. As such Russia was not included in the Treaty of Versailles and their country had to live with the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk which carved several new countries along racial and nationality lines from the western portions of the Russian Empire. These countries included Finland, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland. In addition to this, the Russian state fell into a civil war between the communist Bolshevik's Red Army and the White Army which consisted of several different groups including capitalists, monarchists, and socialists. This conflict would begin in 1917 and would last until 1922.

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<sup>3</sup> Philander C. Knox, *Treaty of Versailles*, (Washington, Govt. print. off, 1919).

The second of the empires to be torn apart would be the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Austria-Hungary had always been a multi-ethnic empire and since their transition from the Austrian Empire into the Austro-Hungarian Empire they had recognized this fact. As a part of the separate peace treaty which was made with Austria-Hungary, the state was to be dissolved along roughly national borders. This resulted in both Austria and Hungary becoming their own countries as well as Czechoslovakia and the southern Slavic states. Territories were also given to Romania, Poland, and Italy.

The third of the empires to be broken up was the Ottoman Empire. For several centuries the Ottoman Empire had been weakening and was considered by many to be the “sick man of Europe.” By the time that the First World War began several of the regions that the Ottomans occupied in Europe had already been lost such as the southern Slavic states and Bulgaria. World War One saw the Ottoman Empire divided into occupation zones. These occupation zones were extensive and stripped the Ottomans of all but the northern part of the Anatolian Peninsula. The British and French carved the Ottoman held middle east into their own colonial protectorates and included in this was large parts of the peninsula. Italy and Greece both had sizeable holdings on the peninsula and Greece also held western Thrace. Hostilities in the peninsula would continue until 1920 as Turkish nationalists lead by Mustafa Kemal, later to be known as Ataturk, established the modern country of Turkey in the Anatolian Peninsula where the population was majority Turkish.

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<sup>4</sup> Robert Gerwarth, *The Vanquished: Why The First World War Failed To End* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2016).

While the old empires of Russia, Austria-Hungary, and the Ottomans were unstable due to their multiethnic and multilingual natures they did provide some level of stability by grouping the many diverse peoples of this area together. With the absence of these empires the Interwar period saw many of these newly established European countries fight many minor wars against each other over old rivalries and hatreds. This was the battleground of nationalism and racism during the time. Many of these countries, with the notable exception of Czechoslovakia, would fall to various flavors of dictatorship whether it was communist, fascist, or militarist.<sup>4</sup> Quite importantly for this time period is the rise of fascism and communism. The Russian Revolution saw the rise of the world’s first socialist state, the Soviet Union. Previously, though, the communist movement had been growing in many European countries. With a defeated Germany and a new democratic Weimar Republic taking shape the stage was set for communists and fascists to enter the scene. The rise of communists and fascists in Germany can be largely attributed to the hyperinflation which occurred in 1923. This hyperinflation destroyed the middle class leaving most if not all of it in the lower class.<sup>5</sup> The interwar period saw actual fighting between communists and fascists in the streets of Germany as the state was too weak to stop them. It is during this time that the NSDAP, or National Socialist German Workers Party, first came into being. In Italy, despite the state having been on the winning side of World War One, the rise of Benito Mussolini brought fascism to Italy. As the second half of the Interwar period begins, so too does the Great Depression. The

<sup>5</sup> Dietmar Rothermund, “War-Depression-War: The Fatal Sequence in a Global Perspective,” *Diplomatic History* 38, no. 4 (2014): 840.

Great Depression, while affecting the United States the most, was a global depression that did still hit the rest of the world. This only exacerbated problems in already problematic areas such as Germany. It is during this time that the Germans were forced to cease paying reparations because their country could no longer support the payments, this then led to a deepening of the crisis as foreign investments were pulled from Germany. With Germany at its lowest point since the hyperinflation crisis, it was ripe for change. The change that many Germans recognized was in the NSDAP, which would become infamously known as the Nazi party.

In 1933 Adolf Hitler became the Chancellor of Germany. With his acquisition of power, the Nazi party would continue to grow and seize more power in the government. The Nazis would also preach the fascist values of nationalism, racism, and imperialism. In order to answer German grievances over the Treaty of Versailles, Hitler would begin to fight back against its provisions. While Germany began to do this the allies sought an appeasement plan where they would give in to Germany's demands as they wanted to avoid war at all costs. Previous to Hitler's election, the German state had already stopped its reparation payments, by far the harshest of the punishments given to Germany. In 1935 Germany would embark upon a rearmament campaign which would also greatly strengthen the weakened industries in the country. A year later German soldiers marched into the Rhineland. This was a symbolic move showing that this land was German and it was no longer to be at the whim of the allied powers. In 1938 Austria was annexed peacefully. While this was quite a drastic action and was directly barred

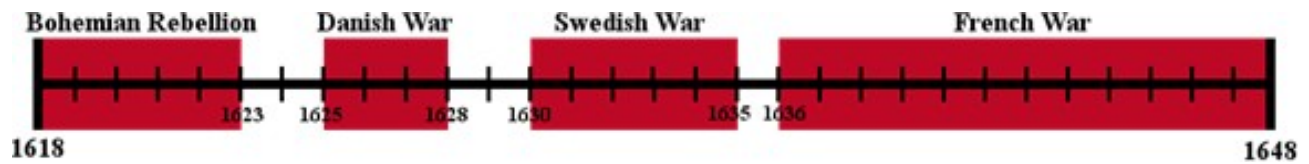
by the Treaty of Versailles, it was overlooked by the allies as being the final unification of all of the German people, something that many Germans wanted during the wars of German unification. In 1938 Germany acquired the Sudetenland from Czechoslovakia. The following year Germany annexed the Czech portions of the country and set up Slovakia as a puppet state. Later the same year Germany invaded Poland marking the beginning of the Second World War.

Outside of central Europe there were other events happening that were causing disturbance in the world. In the years directly preceding the beginning of the Second World War there was the Spanish Civil War where the German-backed nationalists fought against the Republican loyalists. Most countries wanted to stay out of the war as they thought that the war could become a proxy and lead to greater conflicts. The Nationalists would end up victorious but only after huge amounts of bloodshed. Worth noting is that Nationalist Spain, despite receiving help from Germany, would not go on to return the favor and help Germany during World War Two. Across the world in the Pacific the Japanese began a brutal campaign in China which would result in the deaths of millions. One event which was especially atrocious was the Nanking Massacre where several hundred thousand Chinese were murdered and tens of thousands of Chinese women were raped by Japanese soldiers.<sup>6</sup>

This then leaves the world at World War Two. This is the war that most know about. In the early years of the war in Europe, Nazi Germany would conquer most of continental Europe by applying their blitzkrieg tactics. This conquest of

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<sup>6</sup> Wesley R Harker, "Thirty Years Without Peace," American Conservative 13, no. 5 (2014): 6-7.



Europe was the culmination of German imperialism and was what many Europeans had feared would happen even before the start of the First World War. Wrapped up in this imperialism was Nazi Germany's nationalistic and racist policies. The Nazi system emphasized Germanness and the strength of the fatherland. In addition, it also emphasized the superiority of the "Aryan" race and saw all people of the world divided into a hierarchy of racial classes with the Jews occupying the bottom-most tier. Racism in the Third Reich culminated in the holocaust where millions of people, both Jews and non-Jews, would be systematically murdered on an industrial scale.<sup>7</sup>

With regards to the Second Thirty Years' War, the events of World War Two are actually not as important as those before it. This was a war that was a result of the previous twenty-five years. Its existence was dependent on the mistakes of the past. The war saw the death of an era with Nazi Germany being decisively defeated. The loose ends left from the First World War were all tied up with the end of the Second World War as afterwards Europe would enter a new age, the Pax Europa, where the continent would experience an unprecedented period of peace amongst itself. The end of World War Two was the end of an era.

What is also crucial in the understanding of World War One, the Interwar, and World War Two being a single war is the comparison to the

Thirty Years' War of 1618-1648. Why the Thirty Years' War? The Thirty Years' War of 1618-1648 and that of 1914-1945 share some similarities. Both periods saw unprecedented violence and destruction, both left devastation in Europe, both primarily involved Germany or the region now known as Germany, and both involve multiple conflicts. In the Thirty Years' War there are four separate conflicts that took place: Bohemian rebellion, Danish war, Swedish war, and the French war. Each one of these conflicts is marked with some amount of peace between them. Each of the conflicts also has a distinct ending.

The zeitgeist of Thirty Years' War is marked with the struggle between Protestantism and Catholicism. The protestant revolution had begun nearly a century before the Thirty Years' War was to begin. This saw many rulers in Europe turn away from the Pope and Catholicism and instead turn to the various different flavors of Protestantism. Much of modern-day northern Germany, which at that time was a part of the Holy Roman Empire, converted to Protestantism. Worth noting with this, though, is that many of the German princes in the Empire turned to Protestantism in order to distance themselves from the Emperor, give themselves more control, and push themselves towards greater independence.<sup>8</sup>

Following the Defenestration of Prague, the Thirty Years' War would begin in 1618

<sup>7</sup> Ian Kershaw, *To Hell and Back: Europe 1914-1949* (New York: Viking, 2016).

<sup>8</sup> The figure by the author shows the dates that each war was fought between in red.

initially as a rebellion in Bohemia against the Emperor in Vienna. Over the course of the thirty years four separate wars would be fought against the Emperor with the final war resulting in an imperial defeat. This defeat was the final act of the war because after thirty years of conflict the Emperor was weak and the Empire weaker, the Emperor no longer had the means to challenge the new status quo.

While the concepts of racism, nationalism, and imperialism had not yet been invented, imperialism did play an important role in the Thirty Years' War. The empire, though divided, controlled a large swathe of central Europe which included a strong Habsburg Austrian base. The Habsburgs controlled enormous amounts of power and other European countries sought to weaken this power in order to assert their own. This is most clear with France which fought against another Catholic for the sole purpose of weakening the Habsburgs and the Empire. These ideas of imperialism would be echoed centuries later in the buildup to the First World War. In addition, the Thirty Years' War provides an important precedent for combining multiple conflicts into a single long war along the basis of shared themes. In the case of the Thirty Years' War it is religious struggle and imperialism, whereas three centuries later during The Second Thirty Years' War it is nationalism, imperialism, and racism. Links can also be drawn between the ideological struggle between fascism, communism, and liberal democracy during the twentieth century and the religious, and somewhat ideological, struggle in the seventeenth century.<sup>9</sup>

Another commonality that the Thirty Years' War shares with The Second Thirty

Years' War is destruction and devastation. With armies roaming around the Holy Roman Empire for thirty years, the land and people were devastated. Famine, disease, starvation, murder, rape, and more occurred in the area that would become Germany. In relative terms, the devastation and destruction of the Thirty Years' War would not be matched until World War Two.

With there being an established precedent for the inclusion of multiple wars into a single war, the links between World War One and World War Two should be more clearly shown. To start, the single most definitive factor in the buildup to World War Two was the German grievances over the Treaty of Versailles. Because of the ambitions of the French to have power over Germany and their desire to avoid another costly war with Germany, the French pushed for much of the harshness in the Treaty of Versailles. While in some aspects the French were successful in keeping Germany down, they were not successful for long as Germany wanted vengeance. The German people wanted answers for their grievances. Adolf Hitler was the man who had these answers to the misfortune of the rest of Europe. Pushback against the different provisions of the Treaty of Versailles was inevitable, unfortunately though, once Germany had rectified its' grievances, they found themselves in a position of power. It is with this new-found power that Nazi Germany pursued its imperialistic designs on Europe. Another way of saying this is that all parties were wrong in their ideas of what should be done with Germany at the end of World War Two. Too lenient and Germany would be able to dominate Europe, too strict and the country would push back and seek

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<sup>9</sup> Ian Kershaw, "Europe's Second Thirty Years War," *History Today* 55, no. 9 (2005): 10-17.



revenge. This failure is one of the links between the wars. This is why after the war a more permanent solution for peace was found with the unbreakable bond and reliance upon one another which was set up between Germany and France following World War Two and was the seed of the European Union.

The other important link between World War One and World War Two is the time between them, the Interwar. Generally, the Interwar is thought of as a time of peace between two of the most brutal conflicts in human history. As was demonstrated in the background information of the time period, there was very little peace time during the twenty years between the end of World War One and the start of World War Two. The Interwar period saw a number of conflicts in Europe and across the globe, the breakup of old empires in Europe, the rise and violence of communism and fascism, and the greatest economic disaster of the modern era. While officially there may have been peace, in actuality there was not.

The final argument for why World War One and World War Two should be grouped into a single war is the difference in war experience between the United States and Europe. This argument primarily deals with why Americans do not see the World Wars as being two parts of one whole. The difference in experiences is most clear when looking at World War One. To a large extent, World War One has been forgotten in the United States. This can be attributed to a couple different reasons, first is the time that the two regions spent fighting. Europe began the conflict in 1914 whereas the United States began the conflict in 1917, just a year before the war would

end. This difference in time translated to a drastic difference in the amount of lives spent in fighting. In Europe during the First World War roughly 7,000,000 would die collectively across the continent. The Americans would only suffer 116,000 casualties. In addition to this the war was fought in Europe and devastated its lands, the U.S. did not suffer any destruction in its' homeland.<sup>10</sup>

In World War Two the differences are somewhat less. The war in Europe began in 1939 whereas the war would start for the United States at the beginning of 1942. In this war Europe would suffer millions more casualties and the U.S. would once again lag behind only suffering 400,000 casualties. It should be noted, though, that nearly all of the U.S. casualties were combatants whereas much of the death toll for the rest of the world was made up of mostly civilians and non-combatants.

There are some other more general considerations to be had with regards to the difference in war experience. The first of these is how many lives were lost in all American wars. At the top of this list is the Civil War with over 600,000 deaths. This makes a lot of sense as the war was fought between two halves of the United States and was fought on American territory. This also explains why many Americans are quite knowledgeable about the Civil War and why after a century and a half the war is still very present in American minds. This also shows that casualties in World War One are only one sixth of those from the Civil War and a quarter of those from World War Two.

The final consideration is the significance of World War Two for the United States. The

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<sup>10</sup> H.D.S. Greenway, "Why World War I is So Often November 9, 2014"

Forgotten in America," *Public Radio International*,

November 9, 2014

U.S. entered the war in rough shape still recovering from the devastating Great Depression. After World War One the country had turned inward as it had done for so much of its' history. This was not the case with the end of World War Two. At the end of World War Two the United States found itself in the strongest position it had ever been in and the strongest position in the world at large. There had only been the bombing of Pearl Harbor on the mainland of the United States, beyond this the country had not seen the war on its soil. This meant that the U.S. was in a prime position to assert itself as the leading world power closely followed by the Soviet Union. The Second World War was also significant for the United States as it had to fight the war on two fronts which always makes for an intense battle and usually makes for a lost one as well, but this was not so with World War Two. The United States had come out victorious in Europe and especially in the Pacific where it had done the majority of fighting by itself.

The final question with regards to this view of a Second Thirty Years' War is how this could be implemented. In the simplest form, this view could be implemented into textbooks by making both world wars part of a single unit or chapter rather than as separate with separate standards. The idea can go farther though, with the possible rewriting of the world wars section

of textbooks to make the section more cohesive and friendlier to a new learner. Beyond school and textbooks, the idea could make its way into popular culture categorizations on various different sites, services, and programs. One such example could be on a streaming service such as Netflix where smaller categories such as World War One or World War Two would be combined into a larger world wars or Second Thirty Years' War category for the ease of the consumer.

In conclusion, the time period spanning from 1914-1945 which encompasses World War One, the Interwar, and World War Two is best viewed as a single war. Precedence for this has been established with the Thirty Years' War of 1618-1648 which encompassed four different wars linked together with common themes. Similar to this, the First World War, the Interwar, and World War Two are linked together with the common themes of imperialism, nationalism, and racism. By looking at the time period as a whole it could be easier for the subject to be taught and more importantly for the subject to be retained by students at the lower levels. The view of a single war spanning the thirty years from 1914 -1945 is significant not only because it emphasizes the common themes of the time period but also because it grants clarity to the origin of World War Two which was not in the years leading up to the Second World War but was really in the end of the First World War.