Introduction

An ongoing discussion exists among historians about two cataclysmic events in modern world history. Were World War I and World War II two completely separate events, or were they two related events, with similar players and outcomes?

Any decent scholar could make a good case for either perspective. However, after a good deal of reflection, reading, and conversations with other historians, I have decided to treat World Wars I and II as decidedly "linked" events. Certainly, the players' sides and some of the goals were similar, even though fascism replaced imperialism among the political reasons for war. The "world map" changed after each conflict. And in each case, the "superpowers" of the world (the US being a late bloomer in the first conflict and a major power in the second, along with the USSR) came out stronger either economically, politically, or both.

Thus, this lesson will frame these two major world conflicts with the latter as an extension of the former. I would also argue that World War II, out of all the many conflicts in human history, was one of the few which had compelling and just reasons for nations to war with one another; a key victory in this war was stopping the Nazi blitzkrieg. Much like the 30 Years War, which was a series of three to four year conflicts from 1618 – 1648 in the German states called the Holy Roman Empire, implicit connections link the two World Wars. They cannot stand alone as units of study without understanding some of these links. We'll begin the lesson with a snapshot of the political landscape of the world in 1914 and a brief overview of pre-World War I conflicts that contributed to the rise of international tensions in the early 20th century.