

World War II

War involving most of the world's nations that was launched in 1939 and lasted until 1945. It began with the German invasion of Poland on September 1, 1939, and ended in Europe with the German surrender on May 7, 1945 and in the Pacific with the Japanese surrender on September 2, 1945. Alongside Germany fought Italy and Japan, known as the Axis powers. Fighting against them were France and Great Britain, and later on the Soviet Union and the United States, or the Allied powers. The destruction and devastation caused by World War II were mammoth in breadth. It is difficult to say how many people perished during the war. The estimates for Europe run between 30-35 million deaths, while nearly 55 million people died world over. Included in that number are six million Jews who were murdered in the Holocaust.

World War II was the result of Nazi Germany's desire to take control of Europe and establish the dominance of the "Germanic-Nordic Aryans." The Nazi ideals of racial antisemitism and *Lebensraum* (the desire for more "living space" for the German people) were closely linked. Although the Nazis had no functional plans for a total annihilation of the Jewish people before 1941, the seed of the Holocaust was contained in Nazi ideology.

Soon after he rose to national power in Germany in early 1933, Adolf Hitler took steps to acquire territory and prepare the German economy and army for war. He entered into alliances with Italy and later with Japan and other countries. By the time Hitler had taken over and carved up Czechoslovakia in March 1939 (after promising the Western powers that he would refrain from doing so), most of the world realized that it was just a matter of time until the outbreak of war.

In late August 1939 Germany and the Soviet Union, formerly enemies, shocked the world by signing a non-aggression agreement called the Nazi-Soviet Pact. This opened the door to the outbreak of war: on September 1, 1939 Germany invaded Poland. Two days later Great Britain and France, whose governments had promised to defend Poland, declared war on Germany. However, they never sent troops to Poland, so Germany and the

Soviet Union greedily divided up the newly conquered territories of Poland as stipulated in their pact.

After the fall of Poland at the end of September, several months passed with no active fighting on the part of the Germans; this period was called the Phony War. The only real fighting to take place during the Phony War was in Finland, which was invaded by the Soviet Union on November 30, 1939. The Finns put up a staunch fight, but they were ultimately defeated in March 1940 (although Finland remained an independent state).

The Nazis waited until April 1940 to make their next major move: the invasion of several Western European countries. German troops invaded Norway and Denmark on April 9; Denmark surrendered almost immediately, while Norway resisted but could not hold out for more than a few weeks (although the port of Narvik continued to be held by the Allies until June 10). On May 10 the Germans attacked the Netherlands, Belgium, Luxembourg, and France using the Blitzkrieg strategy of war. They conquered the Netherlands in five days, while Belgium surrendered on May 28. In France, the fighting raged until early June. At the Battle of Dunkirk in northern France, some 350,000 Allied troops, British, French, and Belgian, managed to evacuate as France fell to Germany. Paris fell to the Germans on June 14, and a new government under World War I hero Marshal Philippe Petain was set up to negotiate a French surrender. Italy had officially joined the war on June 10 and became a co-victor with Germany. France signed armistice agreements with Germany on June 22 and with Italy on June 24. As a result, France was divided up: its northern zone was occupied by the Germans, while most of its southern zone was put under the control of a French administration that was based in the spa town of Vichy. Another small section in the south was put under Italian control. By late June 1940 Germany and its partners dominated Europe.

During the fighting in France, British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain had resigned his post and Winston Churchill took his place. British troops in Oran, Algeria attacked French naval forces to make sure the area did not fall into German hands, while other French naval forces outside of Europe were put under British control.

In the meantime, the Soviet Union entered the Baltic states Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia---and over the course of two months stripped them of their independence. On June 28 the Soviets occupied Bessarabia and northern Bukovina. In August 1940 Germany mediated between Hungary and Romania. As a result, Germany gave northern Transylvania to Hungary, winning Hungary's loyalty, and the royal Romanian government was dissolved and an authoritarian regime under Ion Antonescu took its place. Both Romania and Hungary were now firmly under German influence. Not to be outdone, Italy attacked Greece from Albania in October 1940, but did not make many breakthroughs.

Originally, the Germans planned to take out their major opponent Britain and end the war in the early fall of 1940. However, the date was pushed off again and again due to growing technical difficulties. The German Air Force could not make any headway against the British Royal Air Force, so it changed tactics: bombing British cities to break the citizens' morale in assaults that came to be known as the "Blitz." However, that strategy did not work either, and by the spring of 1941 it looked like neither the Germans nor the British could beat the other.

In the meantime, in September 1940 Italian troops invaded Egypt, which was under British control. The Italians failed to conquer the country and were even put under attack by the British. At that point, Germany sent troops to help its ally in North Africa, where the war was to continue in a seesaw fashion for almost two years. Until early 1941 the British had the upper hand after gaining control of Cyrenaica in Libya. This changed when Germany's Gen. Erwin Rommel and his forces entered the scene. The British were pushed back to Tobruk, but then managed to retake Cyrenaica. Meanwhile, in Iraq, British forces clashed with the pro-Nazi Rashid Ali al-Gaylani. The British successfully took control of Baghdad on May 30, 1941; by doing so, they also stopped the anti-Jewish pogrom that had broken out there.

Meanwhile, back in Europe: during the second half of 1940 Hitler had begun planning an attack on his ally, the Soviet Union. This was part of his ideological desire to obtain living space for Germany by conquering the Soviet Union. Preparations for this attack, code-named "Operation Barbarossa," went

on throughout the winter of 1940-1941 and the spring of 1941. An order issued in March 1941, known as the *Kommissarbefehl*, called for the murder of all political officers of the Soviet armed forces, as well as all Communists. Since Hitler equated Jews with Communists, some historians see the *Kommissarbefehl* as an order by Hitler to murder the Jews.

Romania, Bulgaria, and Yugoslavia officially joined the Axis alliance in early 1941, but the Yugoslav government was overthrown by an anti-Nazi military group under Gen. Dusan Simovic. As a result, in April 1941 Germany invaded Yugoslavia and Greece: Yugoslavia to topple the anti-German government, and Greece to bail out the Italian forces who were floundering there in their fight against the British. Once again using the *Blitzkrieg* strategy, Germany defeated Yugoslavia and Greece easily.

Next, after postponing the attack several times due to the situation in the Balkans, Germany launched its surprise invasion of the Soviet Union on June 22, 1941. The German forces consisted of some three million men, including Finnish, Romanian, and Hungarian units. Despite brave resistance in some areas, millions of Soviet soldiers were soon killed. German forces overran the Baltic states in July, with the local populations actively helping the Germans (although the Soviets managed to stop the Germans before they reached Leningrad). In the south, the Germans moved in on the Ukraine in September, conquering Kiev and then Odessa and Kharkov in mid and late October. They invaded and conquered the Crimea in November, and laid siege to the Crimean city of Sevastopol on November 15. The Germans' main attack in July 1941 brought them to Minsk and then Smolensk. Both in the Ukraine and in the Briansk-Viazma region, huge Soviet armies were defeated and most of their soldiers were taken prisoner. In November the Germans continued their advance on Moscow, and by December 1941 they had nearly reached the Russian capital. However, at that point there was a turnaround: the Soviets launched a counteroffensive on December 6 and pushed the Germans back, away from Moscow. It is possible that this was the war's turning point. The Germans were no longer as confident, and they were forced to fight throughout the winter in the bitter Russian cold.

In the spring of 1942 the Germans managed to rekindle their offensive. Conquering the Don River basin, they reached the outskirts of Stalingrad a strategically crucial city from their standpoint on August 20, 1942. In September they broke out of the Crimean peninsula and soon occupied the Caucasian oil fields. By mid-September they had penetrated Stalingrad itself; the Soviet troops there held on desperately. On November 19, the Soviets renewed their counteroffensive, and closed in on 22 German divisions that included 300,000 soldiers. In January 1943 the Soviet offensive in Leningrad relieved the 17-month German siege of the city. On February 2, 1943 the German Sixth Army, fighting at Stalingrad, surrendered to the Soviets. Some 91,000 German soldiers were taken prisoner.

In spite of mutual distrust, the British, Americans, and the Soviets agreed to work together against the German threat. At first the Americans only meant this in terms of aiding the British and Soviets with war materials. In March 1941 the US Congress had approved the Lend-Lease Act, and the Soviet Union became the recipient of massive American assistance. However, on December 7, 1941 the Japanese (German allies) attacked the US naval base at Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, causing great loss of life and equipment. The United States declared war on Japan, and a few days later Germany and Italy declared war on the United States. Now that the war had expanded to the Far East, it had truly become a "world war." Like the Germans in Europe, the Japanese wanted to become the dominant power in East Asia, and the United States, greatly weakened by Pearl Harbor, was unable to stop them. The US was powerless to defend Guam and the Wake Islands, which fell to the Japanese on December 13 and 20, respectively. The Japanese then invaded the Philippines in late December and vanquished them in January (although US troops held out on the Philippines' Bataan peninsula and Corregidor until May 1942).

Also in December 1941, the British surrendered to the Japanese in Hong Kong, and in January the Japanese conquered the Netherlands East Indies. Next, Malaya was overrun, Singapore fell on February 15, and Thailand allied itself with Japan. In March the Japanese conquered Burma and threatened India, but were halted by the British. In addition, the Allies (mainly Australians

and New Zealanders) stopped the Japanese advance in New Guinea, and in the Battle of the Coral Sea in May, some 100,000 tons of Japanese materials were sunk.

The turning point on the Pacific front came in June 1942 when the US defeated the Japanese in the battle for the Island of Midway. American troops then landed on the Solomon Islands in August. In November a Japanese fleet was defeated there, while the Battle of Guadalcanal cost the lives of large numbers of both Americans and Japanese. In 1943 American and British Commonwealth troops slowly retook control of the Pacific Islands and invaded Burma. Allied soldiers taken as prisoners of war and jailed Allied civilians were subjected to extreme brutality at the hands of the Japanese.

Back in North Africa the seesaw battles continued. The British lost ground in Cyrenaica in January 1942, and in June Tobruk was taken by the Germans under Rommel. However, in July German tanks were stopped at El Alamein. The British then launched their major offensive on October 23, 1942. Less than two weeks later Rommel's troops were in full retreat; they had fallen back to Tunisia by January 1943. On November 8, 1942 American and British troops invaded North Africa. Algiers was occupied by a local anti-Nazi militia composed mainly of Jews. The pro-German French administration in North Africa arranged to surrender to the Allies, and was given the right to continue its rule (and kept the Vichy government's anti-Jewish laws intact for another few months). In Tunis, the Axis forces surrendered on May 12, 1943 after a bitter fight. Thus, the first region to be cleared of Axis troops was North Africa.

In July the Allied forces under General Dwight D. Eisenhower invaded Sicily in southern Italy. This resulted in the resignation and imprisonment on July 25 of Benito Mussolini and the establishment of a military government, which surrendered to the Allies. However, the Germans freed Mussolini and set up a Fascist puppet government in northern Italy. While the Allies liberated Rome on June 4, 1944 and Florence on August 12, the Germans held onto northern Italy until April 1945.

During 1943 the Soviets liberated most of the Ukraine, and in the spring of 1944 they liberated much of Poland. In their advance southward they caused the Romanian king to change his colors and overthrow the pro-Nazi dictator,

Antonescu. Soon, Romania surrendered to the Allies and joined the fight against Germany on August 23. On September 5 the Soviet Union declared war on Bulgaria; Bulgaria soon surrendered and the Soviets occupied the capital, Sofia, on September 16. In March 1944 Hungary, a German ally, tried to make peace with the Allies. In response, Germany invaded Hungary and appointed a pro-German government that collaborated in the deportation of most of the country's Jews. In October, Hungarian Regent Miklos Horthy again tried to arrange a peace agreement with the Allies; Germany responded by toppling Horthy's government and setting up an antisemitic, fascist, collaborative government under the Arrow Cross Party. Now, most of the remnant of the Hungarian Jewish community was destroyed.

Meanwhile, the British and American air forces worked together to strategically bomb the German enemy: the Americans concentrated on daytime bombings of military and industrial targets, while the British devastated German cities at night. In 1944 the Allied air forces, now operating from Italy, achieved complete supremacy in the air. By June, the Allies were ready for their major offensive. On June 6, 1944 (known as D-Day), some 250,000 Allied soldiers landed on the shores of Normandy in northwestern France. By July 31 American forces broke through the German lines of defense, and by the end of August they had liberated France. By the fall of 1944 the Allies were poised to defeat Germany. However, German resistance continued for eight more months: the Allies were held back in the southern part of the Netherlands in September, and were taken by total surprise in December when German forces tried to break through American lines in Belgium. The Allies finally managed to push the Germans back in this battle that came to be known as the "Battle of the Bulge."

On January 12, 1945 the Soviets began a powerful offensive, taking Warsaw just five days later (the Poles had tried to defend Warsaw in August of the previous year, but the Soviets refused to help them, so Warsaw was ravaged and many Poles were killed). Budapest, Hungary was also liberated in January and February. In March 1945 the final Allied offensive was launched both in the east and in the west. Allied troops made their way through Germany (discovering the Nazi concentration camps in the process),

and in April, met at the Elbe River. The Germans were surrounded, and on April 30 Hitler committed suicide in his Berlin bunker (Mussolini had been shot by anti-fascist partisans on April 28). Soviet troops liberated Berlin in early May, and on May 7 the Germans surrendered. May 8 was proclaimed to be Victory in Europe Day (V-E Day).

The war in the Pacific lasted another three months. American Gen. Douglas MacArthur had advanced from one chain of Pacific islands to another, while in October 1944 American forces had begun liberating the Philippines, and at the end of that month they sank a large part of the Japanese fleet. Air raids on Japan itself began in November, while British forces began to retake Burma. After bitter battles that cost the lives of many Americans (especially on the islands of Iwo Jima and Okinawa), the US government decided to end the war, once and for all, by dropping an atomic bomb on Hiroshima, Japan on August 6, 1945. Over 80,000 people were killed on the spot, and many more died later from the aftereffects of the atomic radiation. Three days later another equally devastating bomb was dropped on Nagasaki. On August 8 the Soviet Union joined the war against Japan in order to gain control of certain territories they were fighting over. Japan finally surrendered on August 11, and Victory in Japan (V-J Day) was celebrated on August 15, 1945. With the formal signing of the Japanese surrender on September 2, 1945, the war had finally come to an end.