

World War II

The Road to War

Many people had called World War I “the war to end all wars.” Certainly most people had hoped that would be true. Yet the peace agreements that ended World War I had left many problems unsolved and had even created new problems. During the 1920s, nations adjusted to the postwar changes. During the 1930s, clashes between nations began to break out again. Each clash was a step on the road to World War II.

In the 1930s, Germany and Italy were ruled by the dictators Adolf Hitler and Benito Mussolini. Japan’s government was controlled by militarists. Each of these countries had a foreign policy of expansion. They made repeated acts of aggression during the 1930s. People of the Western democracies were repelled by the thought of another war. The United States held to a policy of isolation, avoiding any involvement in the affairs of Europe. Leaders of Great Britain and France followed a policy of **appeasement**. That is, they protested but gave in to the demands of the aggressors in order to keep the peace.

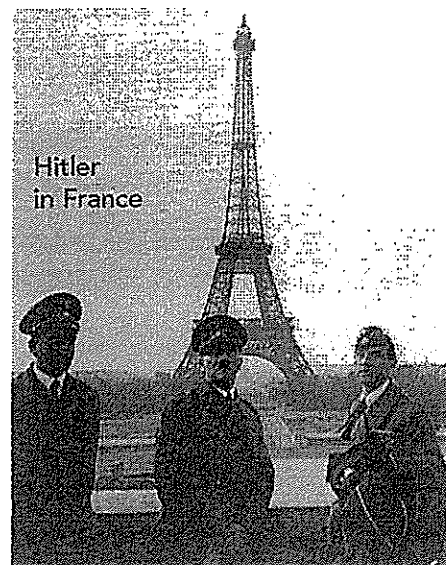
The League of Nations denounced these acts of aggression. But the League had no power to act against the aggressors. In fact, when the League condemned Japan’s actions in Manchuria, Japan dropped out of the League.

Japan took the first step toward war in 1931, when it invaded Manchuria, taking it from China. Other steps soon followed:

- In 1935, Germany began to rearm itself. This was a violation of the Versailles Treaty.

- In 1936, German troops moved into the Rhineland, next to France. This, too, was a treaty violation.
- Italian troops invaded Ethiopia in 1935 and made that African nation part of Italy in 1936.
- Japan’s army spread out over eastern China in 1937.
- In Spain, German and Italian forces helped a right-wing general win a bloody civil war. Fighting raged from 1936 to 1939.

German moves in eastern Europe were the final steps toward war. Germany claimed a right to “living room” for its people. It also claimed a right to unite all German-speaking people. So in March 1938 Germany annexed German-speaking Austria. In September 1938, Hitler met in Munich, Germany, with the French premier and the British prime minister. They agreed to allow Hitler to annex the Sudetenland. This was the German-speaking part of Czechoslovakia.



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World War II (continued)

When he arrived home from Munich, a smiling Neville Chamberlain—the British prime minister—said that the agreement he had made with Hitler “means peace in our time.” He was very wrong. British politician Winston Churchill said, “They [the British and French diplomats] had to choose between war and dishonor. They chose dishonor; they will have war.” He was very right.

In September 1939, the German army marched into Poland, seizing that nation as “living room” for Germans. Britain and France finally decided they had to act. They declared war on Germany. World War II had begun.

The War Begins in Europe

World War II was a truly worldwide war. Battles in the Pacific Ocean area were as critical to the outcome as battles in Europe. So were actions in North Africa and the Soviet Union. This was a war of quick troop movements, backed up by armed war planes. It was also a war in which both sides bombed civilians.



The early years of the war brought a lot of success to the Axis Powers. Hitler’s army and air force moved swiftly to take over western Poland. The Germans called this type of speedy action *blitzkrieg*, “lightning war.” The Soviet Union then seized eastern Poland, three Baltic countries, and, after fierce fighting, Finland.

In this war, the main Allies were Great Britain, France, the Soviet Union, and (from December 1941) the United States. The main Axis Powers were Germany, Italy, and Japan.

Meanwhile, British and French troops massed in France but saw no action. In April 1940, German forces suddenly invaded neutral Denmark and Norway. In May, the German *blitzkrieg* overran the Netherlands and Belgium and then poured into northern France. British troops, and some French, had to retreat across the English Channel.

People in the Western nations called the months of quiet in the west the “phony war” or “*sitzkrieg*.”

German troops pressed south and took Paris, the French capital, in June 1940. Hitler then launched his plan to bomb Britain into surrender. Waves of German planes dropped bombs on British cities, railroads, and factories. The period of the heaviest bombing, in 1940, was called the Battle of Britain. But fighter pilots of the British Royal Air Force downed many German planes, and Hitler ended the bombing campaign.

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The War Spreads

The Axis Powers also took control of Eastern Europe and the Mediterranean area. Italy took Albania in 1939. Germany invaded and took over the countries of eastern Europe in 1941. Italian and German troops also took over large parts of North Africa. (The Allies held on to most of the Middle East, plus Egypt.) In Asia, Japan took over French Indochina and the Dutch East Indies.

Hitler's invasion of Russia was a repeat of Napoleon's big mistake. The French army suffered huge losses in 1812, when the brutal Russian winter forced the French troops to retreat.

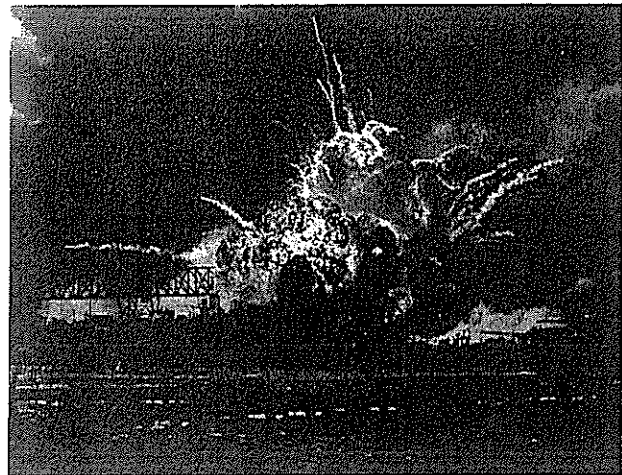
With France under German control to the west, Hitler decided to invade the Soviet Union on the east. He thought German troops could take the U.S.S.R. in a *blitzkrieg* during the summer and fall of 1941. Millions of Russian troops died resisting the German onslaught. But the German advance stalled when a powerful Soviet ally arrived—the Russian winter. Both Russians under siege and German besiegers suffered terribly during the long, brutally cold winter.

The United States Enters the War

When the war began, the United States declared itself neutral. But most Americans

favored the Allies. In early 1941, the U.S. Congress passed the Lend-Lease Act. This law allowed the sale of U.S. war materials to Britain and other nations. The United States Navy helped protect ships carrying these supplies across the Atlantic Ocean from German submarine attacks.

The United States did not like Japan's moves in Asia. So the U.S. stopped shipments of war-related raw materials to Japan. In response, Japan launched a devastating surprise air attack on the U.S. Navy base at Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, on December 7, 1941. The United States declared war on Japan. Germany and Italy—Japan's allies—declared war on the United States. The conflict now reached entirely around the globe.



The attack on Pearl Harbor

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World War II (continued)

The Tide Turns for the Allies

The years of war through 1941 had seen a series of Axis victories. The tide began to turn in favor of the Allies during 1942. In November of that year, Allied forces landed troops in North Africa. They drove Axis forces out of that region by May 1943. From there, they launched an invasion of Italy in July. Early in 1943, the Soviets defeated the Germans at Stalingrad. They then began driving the rest of the invading German army back west toward Germany. On the Atlantic Ocean, the Allies had new weapons—sonar and aircraft carriers. They largely quashed the power of German submarines, or U-boats.

Allied armies invaded France across the English Channel on June 4, 1944—D-Day. Soon they began to push the Germans back to Germany, as the Soviets continued their push westward. By March 1945 the Allies were in Germany. The Axis powers of Europe surrendered on May 8—V-E (Victory in Europe) Day.



Allied armies invade France—D-Day

Adolf Hitler committed suicide in Berlin to avoid capture by the enemy Allies. Anti-fascist guerrillas captured and executed Mussolini in Italy.

The War in the Pacific

In the months after Pearl Harbor, Japanese forces had swept across the Pacific. But the tide turned against Japan when it lost the battles of the Coral Sea and Midway in May and June 1942. U.S. forces then ejected the Japanese from a string of strategic islands in a series of fierce, bloody battles. By 1944, U.S. warplanes were bombing Japan itself.

Japan's fighting ability by now was greatly weakened. But the Japanese were still fiercely determined to resist. It seemed that only a U.S. invasion of Japan would force a Japanese surrender. American military leaders, including President Harry Truman, thought the loss of Allied life in such an invasion would be much too high. So they turned to a terrifying new weapon, the atomic bomb. The U.S. dropped a single bomb on the Japanese city of Hiroshima on August 6, 1945. It killed 80,000 people instantly. On August 9, the U.S. dropped a second bomb on the city of Nagasaki. On August 14, Japan surrendered. It signed formal surrender papers on September 1, 1945—V-J (Victory in Japan) Day. The war was over.

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World War II (continued)



The Japanese bombing of Shanghai

The Price of the War

Like World War I, World War II was extremely expensive. More than 20 million people died, both soldiers and civilians. Much of Europe was left in ruins, from land battles and extensive bombing. Millions of people were refugees. Food was scarce, and jobs were gone.

When Allied troops moved through Germany and eastern Europe, they discovered another dreadful price of the war. Adolf Hitler had focused his ethnic hatred on Jews during the 1930s. In 1941, Hitler came up with a “Final Solution” to the “Jewish problem.” All Jews in Germany, and in German-occupied lands, were to be killed. Nazi police and soldiers rounded up Jews from all across Europe. They were shipped in railroad cattle cars to concentration camps in eastern Germany and Poland. There millions of Jews—and other people Hitler considered “inferior”—died by poison gas. Their bodies were burned in huge ovens that

ran day and night. This mass murder became known as the Holocaust.

As the war ended, Allied troops found the Nazi concentration camps. People outside Germany were shocked. Many civilians had died in the war because of bombings and battles near their homes. But the planned killing of most of an ethnic group—**genocide**—was not an accepted part of war. So Nazi leaders were tried and convicted of war crimes in a special court at Nuremberg, Germany. Japanese wartime leaders were also tried and convicted for war crimes. Their guilt was for actions against civilians in the Asian countries that Japan had conquered.



Concentration-camp survivors

When World War I began, the nations of Western Europe were the most important and powerful countries of the world. By the end of the Second World War, two different nations commanded the scene: the United States and the Soviet Union. Their clashing interests would dominate world affairs in the postwar world.



Steps Toward War

Directions: Japan, Germany, and Italy made a series of aggressive moves against other regions during the 1930s. Each move was a large step toward the outbreak of World War II. For each step listed below, describe the response by the League of Nations and Western democracies. What pattern emerges from your answers?

1. **September 1931:** Japan seizes Manchuria.
Response: _____

2. **March 1935:** Germany announces it will ignore Versailles Treaty limitations on size of its army.
Response: _____

3. **October 1935:** Italy invades Ethiopia.
Response: _____

4. **March 1936:** Germany occupies Rhineland, in violation of Versailles Treaty.
Response: _____

5. **July 1937:** Japan invades China.
Response: _____

6. **March 1938:** Germany annexes Austria.
Response: _____

7. **September 1938:** Germany takes the Sudetenland.
Response: _____

8. **March 1939:** Germany takes Czechoslovakia.
Response: _____

9. **April 1939:** Italy seizes Albania.
Response: _____

10. **September 1939:** Germany invades Poland.
Response: _____

