

World War II

Summary: World War II or the Second World War (1 September 1939 – 2 September 1945) was a global conflict between two coalitions: the Allies and the Axis powers. Nearly all of the world's countries participated, with many nations mobilising all resources in pursuit of total war. Tanks and aircraft played major roles, enabling the strategic bombing of cities and delivery of the first and only nuclear weapons ever used in war. World War II was the deadliest conflict in history, resulting in 70 to 85 million deaths...

World War II or the Second World War (1 September 1939 – 2 September 1945) was a global conflict between two coalitions: the Allies and the Axis powers. Nearly all of the world's countries participated, with many nations mobilising all resources in pursuit of total war. Tanks and aircraft played major roles, enabling the strategic bombing of cities and delivery of the first and only nuclear weapons ever used in war. World War II was the deadliest conflict in history, resulting in 70 to 85 million deaths, more than half of which were civilians. Millions died in genocides, including the Holocaust, and by massacres, starvation, and disease. After the Allied victory, Germany, Austria, Japan, and Korea were occupied, and German and Japanese leaders were tried for war crimes.

The causes of World War II included unresolved tensions in the aftermath of World War I and the rises of fascism in Europe and militarism in Japan. Key events preceding the war included Japan's invasion of Manchuria in 1931, the Spanish Civil War, the outbreak of the Second Sino-Japanese War in 1937, and Germany's annexations of Austria and the Sudetenland. World War II is generally considered to have begun on 1 September 1939, when Nazi Germany, under Adolf Hitler, invaded Poland, after which the United Kingdom and France declared war on Germany. Poland was divided between Germany and the Soviet Union under the Molotov Ribbentrop Pact. In 1940, the Soviets annexed the Baltic states and parts of Finland and Romania. After the fall of France in June 1940, the war continued mainly between Germany and the British Empire, with fighting in the Balkans, Mediterranean, and Middle East, the aerial Battle of Britain and the Blitz, and naval Battle of the Atlantic. Through campaigns and treaties, Germany gained control of much of continental Europe and formed the Axis alliance with Italy, Japan, and other countries. In June 1941, Germany led an invasion of the Soviet Union, opening the Eastern Front and initially making large territorial gains.

In December 1941, Japan attacked American and British territories in Asia and the Pacific, including at Pearl Harbor in Hawaii, leading the United States to enter the war against Japan and Germany. Japan conquered much of coastal China and Southeast Asia, but its advances in the Pacific were halted in June 1942 at the Battle of Midway. In late 1942, Axis forces were defeated in North Africa and at Stalingrad in the Soviet Union, and in 1943 their continued defeats on the Eastern Front, an Allied invasion of Italy, and Allied offensives in the Pacific forced them into retreat on all fronts. In

1944, the Western Allies invaded France at Normandy as the Soviet Union recaptured its pre-war territory and the U.S. crippled Japan's navy and captured key Pacific islands. The war in Europe concluded with the liberation of German-occupied territories; invasions of Germany by the Western Allies and the Soviet Union, which culminated in the fall of Berlin to Sov

iet troops; and Germany's unconditional surrender on 8 May 1945. On 6 and 9 August, the U.S. dropped atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in Japan. Faced with an imminent Allied invasion, the prospect of further atomic bombings, and a Soviet declaration of war and invasion of Manchuria, Japan announced its unconditional surrender on 15 August, and signed a surrender document on 2 September 1945.

World War II transformed the political, economic, and social structures of the world, and established the foundation of international relations for the rest of the 20th century and into the 21st century. The United Nations was created to foster international cooperation and prevent future conflicts, with the victorious great powers China, France, the Soviet Union, the UK, and the U.S. becoming the permanent members of its security council. The Soviet Union and U.S. emerged as rival global superpowers, setting the stage for the half-century Cold War. In the wake of Europe's devastation, the influence of its great powers waned, triggering the decolonisation of Africa and Asia. Many countries whose industries had been damaged moved towards economic recovery and expansion.

Start and end dates

World War II began in Europe on 1 September 1939 with the German invasion of Poland and the United Kingdom and France's declaration of war on Germany two days later on 3 September 1939. Dates for the beginning of the Pacific War include the start of the Second Sino-Japanese War on 7 July 1937, or the earlier Japanese invasion of Manchuria, on 19 September 1931. Others follow the British historian A. J. P. Taylor, who stated that the Sino-Japanese War and war in Europe and its colonies occurred simultaneously, and the two wars became World War II in 1941. Other proposed starting dates for World War II include the Italian invasion of Abyssinia on 3 October 1935. The British historian Antony Beevor views the beginning of World War II as the Battles of Khalkhin Gol fought between Japan and the forces of Mongolia and the Soviet Union from May to September 1939. Others view the Spanish Civil War as the start or prelude to World War II.

The exact date of the war's end also is not universally agreed upon. It was generally accepted at the time that the war ended with the armistice of 15 August 1945 (V-J Day), rather than with the formal surrender of Japan on 2 September 1945, which officially ended the war in Asia. A peace treaty between Japan and the Allies was signed in 1951. A 1990 treaty regarding Germany's future allowed the reunification of East and West Germany to take place and resolved most post World War II issues. No formal peace treaty between Japan and the Soviet Union was ever signed, although the state of war between the two countries was terminated by the Soviet Japanese Joint Declaration of 1956, which also restored full diplomatic relations between them.

Background

Aftermath of World War I

World War I had radically altered the political European map with the

defeat of the Central Powers including Austria-Hungary, Germany, Bulgaria, and the Ottoman Empire and the 1917 Bolshevik seizure of power in Russia, which led to the founding of the Soviet Union. Meanwhile, the victorious Allies of World War I, such as France, Belgium, Italy, Romania, and Greece, gained territory, and new nation-states were created out of the dissolution of the Austro-Hungarian, Ottoman, and Russian Empires.

To prevent a future world war, the League of Nations was established in 1920 by the Paris Peace Conference. The organisation's primary goals were to prevent armed conflict through collective security, military, and naval disarmament, as well as settling international disputes through peaceful negotiations and arbitration.

Despite strong pacifist sentiment after World War I, irredentist and revanchist nationalism had emerged in several European states. These sentiments were especially marked in Germany because of the significant territorial, colonial, and financial

losses imposed by the Treaty of Versailles. Under the treaty, Germany lost around 13 percent of its home territory and all its overseas possessions, while German annexation of other states was prohibited, reparations were imposed, and limits were placed on the size and capability of the country's armed forces.

Germany and Italy

The German Empire was dissolved in the German revolution of 1918 1919, and a democratic government, later known as the Weimar Republic, was created. The interwar period saw strife between supporters of the new republic and hardline opponents on both the political right and left. Italy, as an Entente ally, had made some post-war territorial gains; however, Italian nationalists were angered that the promises made by the United Kingdom and France to secure Italian entrance into the war were not fulfilled in the peace settlement. From 1922 to 1925, the Fascist movement led by Benito Mussolini seized power in Italy with a nationalist, totalitarian, and class collaborationist agenda that abolished representative democracy, repressed socialist, left-wing, and liberal forces, and pursued an aggressive expansionist foreign policy aimed at making Italy a world power, promising the creation of a "New Roman Empire".

Adolf Hitler, after an unsuccessful attempt to overthrow the German government in 1923, eventually became the chancellor of Germany in 1933 when President Paul von Hindenburg and the Reichstag appointed him. Following Hindenburg's death in 1934, Hitler proclaimed himself Führer of Germany and abolished democracy, espousing a radical, racially motivated revision of the world order, and soon began a massive rearmament campaign. France, seeking to

secure its alliance with Italy, allowed Italy a free hand in Ethiopia, which Italy desired as a colonial possession. The situation was aggravated in early 1935 when the Territory of the Saar Basin was legally reunited with Germany, and Hitler repudiated the Treaty of Versailles, accelerated his rearmament programme, and introduced conscription.

European treaties

The United Kingdom, France and Italy formed the Stresa Front in April 1935 in order to contain Germany, a key step towards military globalisation; however, that June, the United Kingdom made an independent naval agreement with Germany, easing prior restrictions. The Soviet Union, concerned by Germany's goals of capturing vast areas of Eastern Europe, drafted a treaty of mutual assistance with France. Before taking effect, though, the Franco-Soviet pact was required to go through the bureaucracy of the League of Nations, which rendered it essentially toothless. The United States, concerned with events in Europe and Asia, passed the Neutrality Act in August of the same year.

Hitler defied the Versailles and Locarno Treaties by remilitarising the Rhineland in March 1936, encountering little opposition due to the policy of appeasement. In October 1936, Germany and Italy formed the Rome Berlin Axis. A month later, Germany and

Japan signed the Anti-Comintern Pact, which Italy joined the following year.

Asia

The Kuomintang party in China launched a unification campaign against regional warlords and nominally unified China in the mid-1920s, but was soon embroiled in a civil war against its former Chinese Communist Party (CCP) allies and new regional warlords. In 1931, an increasingly militaristic Empire of Japan, which had long sought influence in China as the first step of what its government saw as the country's right to rule Asia, staged the Mukden incident as a pretext to invade Manchuria and establish the puppet state of Manchukuo.

China appealed to the League of Nations to stop the Japanese invasion of Manchuria. Japan withdrew from the League of Nations after being condemned for its incursion into Manchuria. The two nations then fought several battles, in Shanghai, Rehe and Hebei, until the Tanggu Truce was signed in 1933. Thereafter, Chinese volunteer forces continued the resistance to Japanese aggression

in Manchuria, and Chahar and Suiyuan. After the 1936 Xi'an Incident, the Kuomintang and CCP forces agreed on a ceasefire to present a united front to oppose Japan.

Pre-war events

Italian invasion of Ethiopia (1935)

The Second Italo-Ethiopian War was a brief colonial war that began in October 1935 and ended in May 1936. The war

began with the invasion of the Ethiopian Empire (also known as Abyssinia) by the armed forces of the Kingdom of Italy (Regno d'Italia), which was launched from Italian Somaliland and Eritrea. The war resulted in the military occupation of Ethiopia and its annexation into the newly created colony of Italian East Africa (Africa Orientale Italiana); in addition it exposed the weakness of the League of Nations as a force to preserve peace. Both Italy and Ethiopia were member nations, but the League did little when the former clearly violated Article X of the League's Covenant. The United Kingdom and France supported imposing sanctions on Italy for the invasion, but the sanctions were not fully enforced and failed to end the Italian invasion. Italy subsequently dropped its objections to Germany's goal of absorbing Austria.

Spanish Civil War (1936 1939)

When civil war broke out in Spain, Hitler and Mussolini lent military support to the Nationalist rebels, led by General Francisco Franco. Italy supported the Nationalists to a greater extent than the Nazis: Mussolini sent more than 70,000 ground troops, 6,000 aviation personnel, and 720 aircraft to Spain. The Soviet Union supported the existing government of the Spanish Republic. More than 30,000 foreign volunteers, known as the International Brigades, also fought against the Nationalists. Both Germany and the Soviet Union used this proxy war as an opportunity to test in combat their most advanced weapons and tactics. The Nationalists won the civil war in April 1939; Franco, now dictator, remained officially neutral during World War II but generally favoured the Axis. His greatest collaboration with Germany was the sending of volunteers to fight on the Eastern Front.

Japanese invasion of China (1937)

In July 1937, Japan captured the former Chinese imperial capital of Peking after instigating the Marco Polo Bridge incident, which culminated in the Japanese campaign to invade all of China. The Soviets quickly signed a non-aggression pact with China to lend materiel support, effectively ending China's prior cooperation with Germany. From September to November, the Japanese attacked Taiyuan, engaged the Kuomintang Army around Xinkou, and fought Communist forces in Pingxingguan. Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek deployed his best army to defend Shanghai, but after three months of fighting, Shanghai fell. The Japanese continued to push Chinese forces back, capturing the capital Nanking in December 1937. After the fall of Nanking, tens or hundreds of thousands of Chinese civilians and disarmed combatants were murdered by the Japanese.

In March 1938, Nationalist Chinese forces won their

first major victory at Taierzhuang, but then the city of Xuzhou was taken by the Japanese in May. In June 1938, Chinese forces stalled the Japanese advance by flooding the Yellow River; this manoeuvre bought time for the Chinese to prepare their defences at Wuhan, but the city was taken by October. Japanese military victories did not bring about the collapse of Chinese resistance that Japan had hoped to achieve; instead, the Chinese government relocated inland

to Chongqing and continued the war.

Soviet Japanese border conflicts

In the mid-to-late 1930s, Japanese forces in Manchukuo had sporadic border clashes with the Soviet Union and Mongolia. The Japanese doctrine of Hokushin-ron, which emphasised Japan's expansion northward, was favoured by the Imperial Army during this time. This policy would prove difficult to maintain in light of the Japanese defeat at Khalkin Gol in 1939, the ongoing Second Sino-Japanese War and ally Nazi Germany pursuing neutrality with the Soviets. Japan

and the Soviet Union eventually signed a Neutrality Pact in April 1941, and Japan adopted the doctrine of Nanshin-ron, promoted by the Navy, which took its focus southward and eventually led to war with the United States and the Western Allies.

European occupations and agreements

In Europe, Germany and Italy were becoming more aggressive. In March 1938, Germany annexed Austria, again provoking little response from other European powers. Encouraged, Hitler began pressing German claims on the Sudetenland, an area of Czechoslovakia with a predominantly ethnic German population. Soon the United Kingdom and France followed the appeasement policy of British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain and conceded this territory to Germany in the Munich Agreement, which was made against the wishes of the Czechoslovak government, in exchange for a promise of no further territorial demands. Soon afterwards, Germany and Italy forced Czechoslovakia to cede additional territory to Hungary, and Poland annexed the Trans-Olza region of Czechoslovakia.

Although all of Germany's stated demands had been satisfied by the agreement, privately Hitler was furious that British interference had prevented him from seizing all of Czechoslovakia in one operation. In subsequent speeches Hitler attacked British and Jewish "war-mongers" and in January 1939 secretly ordered a major build-up of the German navy to challenge British naval supremacy. In March 1939, Germany invaded the remainder of Czechoslovakia and subsequently split it into the German Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia and a pro-German client state, the Slovak Republic. Hitler also delivered an ultimatum to Lithuania on 20 March 1939, forcing the concession of the Klaipėda Region, formerly the German Memelland.

Greatly alarmed and with Hitler making further demands on the Free City of Danzig, the United Kingdom and France guaranteed their support for Polish independence; when Italy conquered Albania in April 1939, the same guarantee was extended to the Kingdoms of Romania and Greece. Shortly after the Franco-British pledge to Poland, Germany and Italy formalised their own alliance with the Pact of Steel. Hitler accused the United Kingdom and Poland of trying to "encircle"

Germany and renounced the Anglo-German Naval Agreement and the German Polish declaration of non-aggression. The situation became a crisis in late August as German troops continued to mobilise against the Polish border. On 23 August the Soviet Union signed a non-aggression pact with Germany, after tripartite negotiations for a military alliance between France, the United Kingdom, and Soviet Union had stalled. This pact had a secret protocol that defined German and Soviet "spheres of influence" (western Poland and Lithuania for Germany; eastern Poland, Finland, Estonia, Latvia and Bessarabia for the Soviet Union), and raised the question of continuing Polish independence. The pact neutralised the possibility of Soviet opposition to a campaign against Poland and assured that Germany would not have to face the prospect of a two-front war, as it had in World War I. Immediately afterwards, Hitler ordered the attack to proceed on 26 August, but upon hearing that the United Kingdom had concluded a formal mutual assistance pact with Poland and that Italy would maintain neutrality, he decided to delay it.

In response to British requests for direct negotiations to avoid war, Germany made demands on Poland, which served as a pretext to worsen relations. On 29 August, Hitler demanded that a Polish plenipotentiary immediately travel to Berlin to negotiate the handover of Danzig, and to allow a plebiscite in the Polish Corridor in which the German minority would vote on secession. The Poles refused to comply with the German demands, and on the night of 30-31 August in a confrontational meeting with the British ambassador Neville Henderson, Ribbentrop declared that Germany considered its claims rejected.

Course of the war

War breaks out in Europe

(1939-1940)

On 1 September 1939, Germany invaded Poland after having staged several false flag border incidents as a pretext to initiate the invasion. The first German attack of the war came against the Polish defences at Westerplatte. The United Kingdom responded with an ultimatum for Germany to cease military operations, and on 3 September, after the ultimatum was ignored, Britain and France declared war on Germany. During the Phoney War period, the alliance provided no direct military support to Poland, outside of a cautious French probe into the Saarland. The Western Allies also began a naval blockade of Germany, which aimed to damage the country's economy and war effort. Germany responded by ordering U-boat warfare against Allied merchant and warships, which would later escalate into the Battle of the Atlantic.

On 8 September, German troops reached the suburbs of Warsaw. The Polish counter-offensive to the west halted the German advance for several days, but it was outflanked and

encircled by the Wehrmacht. Remnants of the Polish army broke through to besieged Warsaw. On 17 September 1939, two days after signing a cease-fire with Japan, the Soviet Union invaded Poland under the supposed pretext that the

Polish state had ceased to exist. On 27 September, the Warsaw garrison surrendered to the Germans, and the last large operational unit of the Polish Army surrendered on 6 October. Despite the military defeat, Poland never surrendered; instead, it formed the Polish government-in-exile and a clandestine state apparatus remained in occupied Poland. A significant part of Polish military personnel evacuated to Romania and Latvia; many of them later fought against the Axis in other theatres of the war.

Germany annexed western Poland and occupied central Poland; the Soviet Union annexed eastern Poland; small shares of Polish territory were transferred to Lithuania and Slovakia. On 6 October, Hitler made a public peace overture to the United Kingdom and France but said

that the future of Poland was to be determined exclusively by Germany and the Soviet Union. The proposal was rejected and Hitler ordered an immediate offensive against France, which was postponed until the spring of 1940 due to bad weather.

After the outbreak of war in Poland, Stalin threatened Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania with military invasion, forcing the three Baltic countries to sign pacts allowing the creation of Soviet military bases in these countries; in October 1939, significant Soviet military contingents were moved there. Finland refused to sign a similar pact and rejected ceding part of its territory to the Soviet Union. The Soviet Union invaded Finland in November 1939, and was subsequently expelled from the League of Nations for this crime of aggression. Despite overwhelming numerical superiority, Soviet military success during the Winter War was modest, and the Finno-Soviet war ended in March 1940 with some Finnish concessions of territory.

In June 1940, the Soviet

Union occupied the entire territories of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, as well as the Romanian regions of Bessarabia, Northern Bukovina, and the Hertsa region. In August 1940, Hitler imposed the Second Vienna Award on Romania which led to the transfer of Northern Transylvania to Hungary. In September 1940, Bulgaria demanded Southern Dobruja from Romania with German and Italian support, leading to the Treaty of Craiova. The loss of one-third of Romania's 1939 territory caused a coup against King Carol II, turning Romania into a fascist dictatorship under Marshal Ion Antonescu, with a course set towards the Axis in the hopes of a German guarantee. Meanwhile, German-Soviet political relations and economic co-operation gradually stalled, and both states began preparations for war.

Western Europe (1940 1941)

In April 1940, Germany invaded Denmark and Norway to protect shipments of iron ore from Sweden, which the Allies were attempting to cut off. Denmark capitulated after six hours, and d

espite Allied support, Norway was conquered within two months. British discontent over the Norwegian campaign led to the resignation of Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain, who was replaced by Winston Churchill on 10 May 1940.

On the same day, Germany launched an offensive against France. To circumvent the strong Maginot Line fortifications on the Franco-German border, Germany directed its attack at the neutral nations of Belgium, the Netherlands, and Luxembourg. The Germans carried out a flanking manoeuvre through the Ardennes region, which was mistakenly perceived by the Allies as an impenetrable natural barrier against armoured vehicles. By successfully implementing new Blitzkrieg tactics, the Wehrmacht rapidly advanced to the Channel and cut off the Allied forces in Belgium, trapping the bulk of the Allied armies in a cauldron on the Franco-Belgian border near Lille. The United Kingdom was able to evacuate a significant number of Allied troops from the continent by early June, although they had to abandon almost all their equipment.

On 10 June, Italy invaded France, declaring war on both France and the United Kingdom. The Germans turned south against the weakened French army, and Paris fell to them on 14 June. Eight days later France signed an armistice with Germany; it was divided into German and Italian occupation zones, and an unoccupied rump state under the Vichy Regime, which, though officially neutral, was generally aligned with Germany. France kept its fleet, which the United Kingdom attacked on 3 July in an attempt to prevent its seizure by Germany.

The air Battle of Britain began in early July with Luftwaffe attacks on shipping and harbours. The German campaign for air superiority started in August but its failure to defeat RAF Fighter Command forced the indefinite postponement of the proposed German invasion of Britain. The German strategic bombing offensive intensified with night attacks on London and other cities in the Blitz, but largely ended in May

1941 after failing to significantly disrupt the British war effort.

Using newly captured French ports, the German Navy enjoyed success against an over-extended Royal Navy, using U-boats against British shipping in the Atlantic. The British Home Fleet scored a significant victory on 27 May 1941 by sinking the German battleship Bismarck.

In November 1939, the United States was assisting China and the Western Allies, and had amended the Neutrality Act to allow "cash and carry" purchases by the Allies. In 1940, following the German capture of Paris, the size of the United States Navy was significantly increased. In September the United States further agreed to a trade of American destroyers for British bases. Still, a large majority of the American public continued to oppose any direct military intervention in the conflict well into 1941. In December 1940, Roosevelt accused Hitler of planning world conquest and ruled out any negotiations as useless, calling for the United States to become

an "arsenal of democracy" and promoting Lend-Lease programmes of military and humanitarian aid to support the British war effort; Lend-Lease was later extended to the other Allies, including the Soviet Union after it was invaded by Germany. The United States started strategic planning to prepare for a full-scale offensive against Germany.

At the end of September 1940, the Tripartite Pact formally united Japan, Italy, and Germany as the Axis powers. The Tripartite Pact stipulated that any country with the exception of the Soviet Union that attacked any Axis Power would be forced to go to war against all three. The Axis expanded in November 1940 when Hungary, Slovakia, and Romania

joined. Romania and Hungary later made major contributions to the Axis war against the Soviet Union, in Romania's case partially to recapture territory ceded to the Soviet Union.

Mediterranean (1940-1941)

In early June 1940, the Italian Regia Aeronautica attacked and besieged Malta, a British possession. From late summer to early autumn, Italy conquered British Somaliland and made an incursion into British-held Egypt. In October, Italy attacked Greece, but the attack was repulsed with heavy Italian casualties; the campaign ended within months with minor territorial changes. To assist Italy and prevent Britain from gaining a foothold, Germany prepared to invade the Balkans, which would threaten Romanian oil fields and strike against British dominance of the Mediterranean.

In December 1940, British Empire forces began counter-offensives against Italian forces in Egypt and Italian East Africa. The offensives were successful; by early February 1941, Italy had lost control of eastern Libya, and large numbers of Italian troops had been taken prisoner. The Italian Navy also suffered significant defeats, with the Royal Navy putting three Italian battleships out of commission after a carrier attack at Taranto, and neutralising several more warships at the Battle of Cape Matapan.

Italian defeats prompt

Germany to deploy an expeditionary force to North Africa; at the end of March 1941, Rommel's Afrika Korps launched an offensive which drove back Commonwealth forces. In less than a month, Axis forces advanced to western Egypt and besieged the port of Tobruk.

By late March 1941, Bulgaria and Yugoslavia signed the Tripartite Pact; however, the Yugoslav government was overthrown two days later by pro-British nationalists. Germany and Italy responded with simultaneous invasions of both Yugoslavia and Greece, commencing on 6 April 1941; both nations were forced to surrender within the month. The airborne invasion of the Greek island of Crete at the end of May completed the German conquest of the Balkans. Partisan warfare subsequently broke out against the Axis occupation of Yugoslavia, which continued until the end of the war.

In the Middle East in May, Commonwealth forces quashed an uprising in Iraq which had been supported by German aircraft from bases within Vichy-controlled Syria

. Between June and July, British-led forces invaded and occupied the French possessions of Syria and Lebanon, assisted by the Free French.

Axis attack on the Soviet Union (1941)

With the situation in Europe and Asia relatively stable, Germany, Japan, and the Soviet Union made preparations for war. With the Soviets wary of mounting tensions with Germany, and the Japanese planning to take advantage of the

European War by seizing resource-rich European possessions in Southeast Asia, the two powers signed the Soviet Japanese Neutrality Pact in April 1941. By contrast, the Germans were steadily making preparations for an attack on the Soviet Union, massing forces on the Soviet border.

Hitler believed that the United Kingdom's refusal to end the war was based on the hope that the United States and the Soviet Union would enter the war against Germany sooner or later. On 31 July 1940, Hitler decided that the Soviet Union should be eliminated and aimed for the conquest of Ukraine, the Baltic s

tates and Byelorussia. However, other senior German officials like Ribbentrop saw an opportunity to create a Euro-Asian bloc against the British Empire by inviting the Soviet Union into the Tripartite Pact. In November 1940, negotiations took place to determine if the Soviet Union would join the pact. The Soviets showed some interest but asked for concessions from Finland, Bulgaria, Turkey, and Japan that Germany considered unacceptable. On 18 December 1940, Hitler issued the directive to prepare for an invasion of the Soviet Union.

On 22 June 1941, Germany, supported by Italy and Romania, invaded the Soviet Union in Operation Barbarossa, with Germany accusing the Soviets of plotting against them; they were joined shortly by Finland and Hungary. The primary targets of this surprise offensive were the Baltic region, Moscow and Ukraine, with the ultimate goal of ending the 1941 campaign near the Arkhangelsk-Astrakhan line from the Caspian to the White Seas. Hitler's objectives were to eliminate the Soviet Union as a military power, exterminate Communism, generate Lebensraum ("living space") by dispossessing the native population, and guarantee access to the strategic resources needed to defeat Germany's remaining rivals.

Although the Red Army was preparing for strategic counter-offensives before the war, Operation Barbarossa forced the Soviet supreme command to adopt strategic defence. During the summer, the Axis made significant gains into Soviet territory, inflicting immense losses in both personnel and materiel. By mid-August, however, the German Army High Command decided to suspend the offensive of a considerably depleted Army Group Centre, and to divert the 2nd Panzer Group to reinforce troops advancing towards central Ukraine and Leningrad. The Kiev offensive was overwhelmingly successful, resulting in encirclement and elimination of four Soviet armies, and made possible further advance into Crimea and industrially-developed Eastern Ukraine (the First Battle of Kharkov).

The diversion of three-quarters of the Axis troops and the majority of their air forces from France and the central Mediterranean to the Eastern Front prompted the United Kingdom to reconsider its grand strategy. In July, the UK and the Soviet Union formed a military alliance against Germany and in August, the United Kingdom and the United States jointly issued the Atlantic Charter, which outlined British and American goals for the post-war world. In late August the British and Soviets invaded neutral Iran to secure the Persian Corridor, Iran's oil fields, and preempt any Axis advances through Iran toward the Baku oil fields or India.

By October, Axis powers had achieved operational objectives in Ukraine and the Baltic region, with only the sieges of Leningrad and Sevastopol continuing. A major offensive against Moscow was renewed; after two months of fierce battles in increasingly harsh weather, the German army almost reached the outer suburbs of Moscow, where the exhausted

troops were forced to suspend the offensive. Large territorial gains were made by Axis forces, but their campaign had failed to achieve its main objectives: two key cities remained in Soviet hands, the Soviet capability to resist was not broken, and the Soviet Union retained a considerable part of its military potential. The blitzkrieg phase of the war in Europe had ended.

By early December, freshly mobilised reserves allowed the Soviets to achieve numerical parity with Axis troops. This, as well as intelligence data which established that a minimal number of Soviet troops in the East would be sufficient to deter any attack by the Japanese Kwantung Army, allowed the Soviets to begin a massive counter-offensive that started on 5 December all along the front and pushed German troops 100 250 kilometres (62 155 mi) west.

War breaks out in the Pacific (1941)

Following the Japanese false flag Mukden incident in 1931, the Japanese shelling of the American gunboat USS Panay in 1937, and the

1937 1938 Nanjing Massacre, Japanese-American relations deteriorated. In 1939, the United States notified Japan that it would not be extending its trade treaty and American public opinion opposing Japanese expansionism led to a series of economic sanctions the Export Control Acts which banned U.S. exports of chemicals, minerals and military parts to Japan, and increased economic pressure on the Japanese regime. During 1939 Japan launched its first attack against Changsha, but was repulsed by late September. Despite several offensives by both sides, by 1940 the war between China and Japan was at a stalemate. To increase pressure on China by blocking supply routes, and to better position Japanese forces in the event of a war with the Western powers, Japan invaded and occupied northern Indochina in September 1940.

Chinese nationalist forces launched a large-scale counter-offensive in early 1940. In August, Chinese communists launched an offensive in Central China; in retaliation, Japan in

stituted harsh measures in occupied areas to reduce human and material resources for the communists. Continued antipathy between Chinese communist and nationalist forces culminated in armed clashes in January 1941, effectively ending their co-operation. In March, the Japanese 11th army attacked the headquarters of the Chinese 19th army but was repulsed during Battle of Shanggao. In September, Japan attempted to take the city of Changsha again and clashed with Chinese nationalist forces.

German successes in Europe prompted Japan to increase pressure on European governments in Southeast Asia. The Dutch government agreed to provide Japan with oil supplies from the Dutch East Indies, but negotiations for additional

access to their resources ended in failure in June 1941. In July 1941 Japan sent troops to southern Indochina, thus threatening British and Dutch possessions in the Far East. The United States, the United Kingdom, and other Western governments reacted to this move with a freeze

on Japanese assets and a total oil embargo. At the same time, Japan was planning an invasion of the Soviet Far East, intending to take advantage of the German invasion in the west, but abandoned the operation after the sanctions.

Since early 1941, the United States and Japan had been engaged in negotiations in an attempt to improve their strained relations and end the war in China. During these negotiations, Japan advanced a number of proposals which were dismissed by the Americans as inadequate. At the same time the United States, the United Kingdom, and the Netherlands engaged in secret discussions for the joint defence of their territories, in the event of a Japanese attack against any of them. Roosevelt reinforced the Philippines (an American protectorate scheduled for independence in 1946) and warned Japan that the United States would react to Japanese attacks against any "neighboring countries".

Frustrated at the lack of progress and feeling the pinch of the American British Dut

ch sanctions, Japan prepared for war. Emperor Hirohito, after initial hesitation about Japan's chances of victory, began to favour Japan's entry into the war. As a result, Prime Minister Fumimaro Konoe resigned. Hirohito refused the recommendation to appoint Prince Naruhiko Higashikuni in his place, choosing War Minister Hideki Tojo instead. On 3 November, Nagano explained in detail the plan of the attack on Pearl Harbor to the Emperor. On 5 November, Hirohito approved in imperial conference the operations plan for the war. On 20 November, the new government presented an interim proposal as its final offer. It called for the end of American aid to China and for lifting the embargo on the supply of oil and other resources to Japan. In exchange, Japan promised not to launch any attacks in Southeast Asia and to withdraw its forces from southern Indochina. The American counter-proposal of 26 November required that Japan evacuate all of China without conditions and conclude non-aggression p

acts with all Pacific powers. That meant Japan was essentially forced to choose between abandoning its ambitions in China, or seizing the natural resources it needed in the Dutch East Indies by force; the Japanese military did not consider the former an option, and many officers considered the oil embargo an unspoken declaration of war.

Japan planned to seize European colonies in Asia to create a large defensive perimeter stretching into the Central Pacific. The Japanese would then be free to exploit the resources of Southeast Asia while exhausting the over-stretched Allies by fighting a defensive war. To prevent American intervention while securing the perimeter, it was further planned to neutralise the United States Pacific Fleet and the American military presence in the Philippines from the outset. On 7 December 1941 (8 December in Asian time zones), Japan attacked British and American holdings with near-simultaneous offensives against Southeast Asia and the Central Pacific. These i

ncluded an attack on the American fleets at Pearl Harbor and the Philippines, as well as invasions of Guam, Wake Island, Malaya, Thailand, and Hong Kong.

These attacks led the United States, United Kingdom, China, Australia, and several other states to formally declare war on Japan, whereas the Soviet Union, being heavily involved in large-scale hostilities with European Axis countries, maintained its neutrality agreement with Japan. Germany, followed by the other Axis states, declared war on the United States in solidarity with Japan, citing as justification the American attacks on German war vessels that had been ordered by Roosevelt.

Axis advance stalls (1942 1943)

On 1 January 1942, the Allied Big Four the Soviet Union, China, the United Kingdom, and the United States and 22 smaller or exiled governments issued the Declaration by United Nations, thereby affirming the Atlantic Charter and agreeing not to sign a separate peace with the Axis powers.

During 1942, Allied officials debated on the appropriate grand strategy to pursue. All agreed that defeating Germany was the primary objective. The Americans favoured a straightforward, large-scale attack on Germany through France. The Soviets demanded a second front. The British argued that military operations should target peripheral areas to wear out German strength, leading to increasing demoralisation, and bolstering resistance forces; Germany itself would be subject to a heavy bombing campaign. An offensive against Germany would then be launched primarily by Allied armour, without using large-scale armies. Eventually, the British persuaded the Americans that a landing in France was infeasible in 1942 and they should instead focus on driving the Axis out of North Africa.

At the Casablanca Conference in early 1943, the Allies reiterated the statements issued in the 1942 Declaration and demanded the unconditional surrender of their enemies. The British and Americans agreed to continue to press the initiative in the

Mediterranean by invading Sicily to fully secure the Mediterranean supply routes. Although the British argued for further operations in the Balkans to bring Turkey into the war, in May 1943, the Americans extracted a British commitment to limit Allied operations in the Mediterranean to an invasion of the Italian mainland, and to invade France in 1944.

Pacific (1942 1943)

By the end of April 1942, Japan and its ally Thailand had almost conquered Burma, Malaya, the Dutch East Indies, Singapore, and Rabaul, inflicting severe losses on Allied troops and taking a large number of prisoners. Despite stubborn resistance by Filipino and U.S. forces, the Philippine Commonwealth was eventually captured in May 1942, forcing its government into exile. On 16 April, in Burma, 7,000 British soldiers were encircled by the Japanese 33rd Division during the Battle of Yenangyaung and rescued by the Chinese 38th Division. Japanese forces also achieved naval victories in the South China Sea, Java Sea, and

Indian Ocean, and bombed the Allied naval base at Darwin, Australia. In January 1942, the only Allied success against

Japan was a Chinese victory at Changsha. These easy victories over the unprepared U.S. and European opponents left Japan overconfident, and overextended.

In early May 1942, Japan initiated operations to capture Port Moresby by amphibious assault and thus sever communications and supply lines between the United States and Australia. The planned invasion was thwarted when an Allied task force, centred on two American fleet carriers, fought Japanese naval forces to a draw in the Battle of the Coral Sea. Japan's next plan, motivated by the earlier Doolittle Raid, was to seize Midway Atoll and lure American carriers into battle to be eliminated; as a diversion, Japan would also send forces to occupy the Aleutian Islands in Alaska. In mid-May, Japan started the Zhejiang-Jiangxi campaign in China, with the goal of inflicting retribution on the Chinese who aided the surviving A

merican airmen in the Doolittle Raid by destroying Chinese air bases and fighting against the Chinese 23rd and 32nd Army Groups. In early June, Japan put its operations into action, but the Americans had broken Japanese naval codes in late May and were fully aware of the plans and order of battle, and used this knowledge to achieve a decisive victory at Midway over the Imperial Japanese Navy.

With its capacity for aggressive action greatly diminished as a result of the Midway battle, Japan attempted to capture Port Moresby by an overland campaign in the Territory of Papua. The Americans planned a counterattack against Japanese positions in the southern Solomon Islands, primarily Guadalcanal, as a first step towards capturing Rabaul, the main Japanese base in Southeast Asia.

Both plans started in July, but by mid-September, the Battle for Guadalcanal took priority for the Japanese, and troops in New Guinea were ordered to withdraw from the Port Moresby area to the northern part of the island, where they faced Australian and United States troops in the Battle of Buna Gona. Guadalcanal soon became a focal point for both sides with heavy commitments of troops and ships in the battle for Guadalcanal. By the start of 1943, the Japanese were defeated on the island and withdrew their troops. In Burma, Commonwealth forces mounted two operations. The first was a disastrous offensive into the Arakan region in late 1942 that forced a retreat back to India by May 1943. The second was the insertion of irregular forces behind Japanese frontlines in February which, by the end of April, had achieved mixed results.

Eastern Front (1942 1943)

Despite considerable losses, in early 1942 Germany and its allies stopped a major Soviet offensive in central and southern Russia, keeping most territorial gains they had achieved during the previous year. In May, the Germans defeated Soviet offensives in the Kerch Peninsula and at Kharkov, and then in June 1942 launched their main summer offensi

ve against southern Russia, to seize the oil fields of the Caucasus and occupy the Kuban steppe, while maintaining positions on the northern and central areas of the front. The Germans split Army Group South into two groups: Army

Group A advanced to the lower Don River and struck south-east to the Caucasus, while Army Group B headed towards the Volga River. The Soviets decided to make their stand at Stalingrad on the Volga.

By mid-November, the Germans had nearly taken Stalingrad in bitter street fighting. The Soviets began their second winter counter-offensive, starting with an encirclement of German forces at Stalingrad, and an assault on the Rzhev salient near Moscow, though the latter failed disastrously. By early February 1943, the German Army had taken tremendous losses; German troops at Stalingrad had been defeated, and the front-line had been pushed back beyond its position before the summer offensive. In mid-February, after the Soviet push had tapered off, the Germans launched another attack on Kharkov, creating a salient in their front line around the Soviet city of Kursk.

Western Europe/Atlantic and Mediterranean (1942-1943)

Exploiting poor American naval command decisions, the German navy ravaged Allied shipping off the American Atlantic coast. By November 1941, Commonwealth forces had launched a counter-offensive in North Africa, Operation Crusader, and reclaimed all the gains the Germans and Italians had made. The Germans also launched a North African offensive in January, pushing the British back to positions at the Gazala line by early February, followed by a temporary lull in combat which Germany used to prepare for their upcoming offensives. Concerns that the Japanese might use bases in Vichy-held Madagascar caused the British to invade the island in early May 1942. An Axis offensive in Libya forced an Allied retreat deep inside Egypt until Axis forces were stopped at El Alamein. On the Continent, raids of Allied commandos on strategic targets, cul-

minating in the failed Dieppe Raid, demonstrated the Western Allies' inability to launch an invasion of continental Europe without much better preparation, equipment, and operational security.

In August 1942, the Allies succeeded in repelling a second attack against El Alamein and, at a high cost, managed to deliver desperately needed supplies to the besieged Malta. A few months later, the Allies commenced an attack of their own in Egypt, dislodging the Axis forces and beginning a drive west across Libya. This attack was followed up shortly after by Anglo-American landings in French North Africa, which resulted in the region joining the Allies. Hitler responded to the French colony's defection by ordering the occupation of Vichy France; although Vichy forces did not resist this violation of the armistice, they managed to scuttle their fleet to prevent its capture by German forces. Axis forces in Africa withdrew into Tunisia, which was conquered by the Allies in May 1943.

In June 1943,

the British and Americans began a strategic bombing campaign against Germany with a goal to disrupt the war economy, reduce morale, and "de-house" the civilian population. The firebombing of Hamburg was among the first attacks in this campaign, inflicting significant casualties and considerable losses on infrastructure of this important industrial centre.

Allies gain momentum (1943 1944)

After the Guadalcanal campaign, the Allies initiated several operations against Japan in the Pacific. In May 1943, Canadian and U.S. forces were sent to eliminate Japanese forces from the Aleutians. Soon after, the United States, with support from Australia, New Zealand and Pacific Islander forces, began major ground, sea and air operations to isolate Rabaul by capturing surrounding islands, and breach the Japanese Central Pacific perimeter at the Gilbert and Marshall Islands. By the end of March 1944, the Allies had completed both of these objectives and had also neutralised the major Japanese base

at Truk in the Caroline Islands. In April, the Allies launched an operation to retake Western New Guinea.

In the Soviet Union, both the Germans and the Soviets spent the spring and early summer of 1943 preparing for large offensives in central Russia. On 5 July 1943, Germany attacked Soviet forces around the Kursk Bulge. Within a week, German forces had exhausted themselves against the Soviets' well-constructed defences, and for the first time in the war, Hitler cancelled an operation before it had achieved tactical or operational success. This decision was partially affected by the Western Allies' invasion of Sicily launched on 9 July, which, combined with previous Italian failures, resulted in the ousting and arrest of Mussolini later that month.

On 12 July 1943, the Soviets launched their own counter-offensives, thereby dispelling any chance of German victory or even stalemate in the east. The Soviet victory at Kursk marked the end of German superiority, giving the Soviet Union the