

WW2

The instability created in Europe by the First World War (1914-18) set the stage for another international conflict—World War II—which broke out two decades later and would prove even more devastating. Rising to power in an economically and politically unstable Germany, Adolf Hitler, leader of the Nazi Party, rearmed the nation and signed strategic treaties with Italy and Japan to further his ambitions of world domination. Hitler's invasion of Poland in September 1939 drove Great Britain and France to declare war on Germany, marking the beginning of World War II. Over the next six years, the conflict would take more lives and destroy more land and property around the globe than any previous war. Among the estimated 45-60 million people killed were 6 million Jews murdered in Nazi concentration camps as part of Hitler's diabolical "Final Solution," now known as the Holocaust.



The devastation of WW1 had greatly destabilized Europe, and in many respects World War II grew out of issues left unresolved by that earlier conflict. In particular, political and economic instability in Germany, and lingering resentment over the harsh terms imposed by the Versailles Treaty, fueled the rise to power of Adolf Hitler and National Socialist German Workers' Party, abbreviated as NSDAP in German and the Nazi Party in English.

Outbreak of WW2 (1939):

In late August 1939, Hitler and Soviet leader Joseph Stalin signed the German-Soviet Nonaggression Pact, which incited a frenzy of worry in London and Paris. Hitler had long planned an invasion of Poland, a nation to which Great Britain and France had guaranteed military support if it were attacked by Germany. The pact with Stalin meant that Hitler would not face a war on two fronts once he invaded Poland, and would have Soviet assistance in conquering and dividing the nation itself. On September 1, 1939, Hitler invaded Poland from the west; two days later, France and Britain declared war on Germany, beginning World War II.

On September 17, Soviet troops invaded Poland from the east. Under attack from both sides, Poland fell quickly, and by early 1940 Germany and the Soviet Union had divided control over the nation, according to a secret protocol appended to the Nonaggression Pact. Stalin's forces then moved to occupy the Baltic States (Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania) and defeated a resistant Finland in the Russo-Finish War. During the six months following the invasion of Poland, the lack of action on the part of Germany and the Allies in the west led to talk in the news media of a "phony war." At sea, however, the British and German navies faced off in a heated battle, and lethal German U-boat submarines struck at merchant shipping bound for Britain, sinking more than 100 vessels in the first four months of World War II.

Operation Barbarossa:

By early 1941, Hungary, Romania and Bulgaria had joined the Axis, and German troops overran Yugoslavia and Greece that April. Hitler's conquest of the Balkans was a precursor for his real objective: an invasion of the Soviet Union, whose vast territory would give the German master race the "Lebensraum" it needed. The other half of Hitler's strategy was the extermination of the Jews from throughout German-occupied Europe. Plans for the "Final Solution" were introduced around the time of the Soviet offensive, and over the next three years more than 4 million Jews would perish in the death camps established in occupied Poland. On June 22, 1941, Hitler ordered the invasion of the Soviet Union, codenamed Operation Barbarossa. Though Soviet tanks and aircraft greatly outnumbered the Germans', Russian aviation technology was largely obsolete, and the impact of the surprise invasion helped Germans get within 200 miles of Moscow by mid-July. Arguments between Hitler and his commanders delayed the next German advance until October, when it was stalled by a Soviet counteroffensive and the onset of harsh winter weather.

Toward Allied Victory in World War II (1943-45):

In North Africa, British and American forces had defeated the Italians and Germans by 1943. An Allied invasion of Sicily and Italy followed, and Mussolini's government fell in July 1943, though Allied fighting against the Germans in Italy would continue until 1945.



On the Eastern Front, a Soviet counteroffensive launched in November 1942 ended the bloody Battle of Stalingrad, which had seen some of the fiercest combat of World War II. The approach of winter, along with dwindling food and medical supplies, spelled the end for German troops there, and the last of them surrendered on January 31, 1943.

On June 6, 1944—celebrated as D-Day—the Allies began a massive invasion of Europe, landing 156,000 British, Canadian and American soldiers on the beaches of Normandy, France. In response, Hitler poured all the remaining strength of his army into Western Europe, ensuring Germany's defeat in the east. Soviet troops soon advanced into Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary and Romania, while Hitler gathered his forces to drive the Americans and British back from Germany in the Battle of the Bulge (December 1944-January 1945), the last major German offensive of the war.

An intensive aerial bombardment in February 1945 preceded the Allied land invasion of Germany, and by the time Germany formally surrendered on May 8, Soviet forces had occupied much of the country. Hitler was already dead, having died by suicide on April 30 in his Berlin bunker.

WW2 Ends:

At the Potsdam Conference of July-August 1945, U.S. President Harry S. Truman (who had taken office after Roosevelt's death in April), Churchill and Stalin discussed the ongoing war with Japan as well as the peace settlement with Germany. Post-war Germany would be divided into four occupation zones, to be controlled by the Soviet Union, Britain, the United States and France. On the divisive matter of Eastern Europe's future, Churchill and Truman acquiesced to Stalin, as they needed Soviet cooperation in the war against Japan. Heavy casualties sustained in the campaigns at Iwo Jima (February 1945) and Okinawa (April-June 1945), and fears of the even costlier land invasion of Japan led Truman to authorize the use of a new and devastating weapon. Developed during a top secret operation code-named The Manhattan Project, the atomic bomb was unleashed on the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in early August.

On August 15, the Japanese government issued a statement declaring they would accept the terms of the Potsdam Declaration, and on September 2, U.S. General Douglas MacArthur accepted Japan's formal surrender aboard the USS Missouri in Tokyo Bay.