

World War II was a global conflict that lasted from 1939 to 1945, involving more than 30 countries and resulting in the deadliest and most widespread war in history. It began on September 1, 1939, when Nazi Germany, under the leadership of Adolf Hitler, invaded Poland using a military tactic known as Blitzkrieg, or "lightning war." This invasion prompted Britain and France to declare war on Germany on September 3, 1939. Over the next year, Germany rapidly expanded its control over much of Europe, occupying Denmark, Norway, Belgium, the Netherlands, and France by mid-1940. France fell in June 1940, leading to the establishment of the Vichy regime, a German puppet state in southern France.

Meanwhile, in the east, the Soviet Union, which had signed a non-aggression pact with Germany in 1939 (the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact), invaded eastern Poland, the Baltic States, and Finland during the Winter War of 1939–1940. Hitler later broke this pact and launched Operation Barbarossa in June 1941, a massive invasion of the Soviet Union. This campaign marked a turning point as the Eastern Front became a major theater of war, eventually leading to catastrophic losses for the German army, particularly during the Battle of Stalingrad in 1942–1943, which ended in a decisive Soviet victory.

In the Pacific, Japan had already invaded Manchuria in 1931 and launched a full-scale invasion of China in 1937. On December 7, 1941, Japan attacked the American naval base at Pearl Harbor in Hawaii, drawing the United States into the war. Japan also rapidly occupied vast territories in Southeast Asia and the Pacific, including the Philippines, Malaya, Singapore, and Indonesia. The U.S. responded by mobilizing its military and industrial power, engaging in key battles such as the Battle of Midway in June 1942, which marked a turning point in the Pacific Theater.

The Allied powers—primarily the United States, the Soviet Union, the United Kingdom, and China—began to coordinate their efforts to defeat the Axis powers (Germany, Italy, and Japan). In North Africa, Allied forces defeated Axis troops in 1943, and by July of that year, the Allies invaded Sicily and then mainland Italy, leading to Mussolini's downfall. Italy surrendered in September 1943, though fighting continued in the country until 1945.

On June 6, 1944, known as D-Day, Allied forces launched a massive amphibious invasion of Normandy in northern France. This operation opened a Western Front, forcing Germany to fight a two-front war. By early 1945, Allied forces had crossed into Germany from the west, while Soviet troops advanced from the east. Hitler committed suicide in April 1945 as Soviet forces closed in on Berlin, and Germany unconditionally surrendered on May 7, 1945 (V-E Day).

In the Pacific, the United States pursued an "island-hopping" strategy, capturing key islands and moving closer to Japan. The battles of Iwo Jima and Okinawa in 1945 were among the bloodiest of the war. In August 1945, the U.S. dropped atomic bombs on the Japanese cities of Hiroshima (August 6) and Nagasaki (August 9). Japan announced its surrender on August 15, 1945, and formally signed the surrender documents on September 2, 1945 (V-J Day).

World War II caused immense human suffering, with an estimated 70 to 85 million people killed, including civilians and soldiers. The Holocaust, carried out by Nazi Germany, led to the systematic extermination of six million Jews and millions of other persecuted groups. The war led to the formation of the United Nations in 1945, aimed at preventing future global conflicts. It also marked the beginning of the Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union and triggered major political, economic, and social changes across the globe.