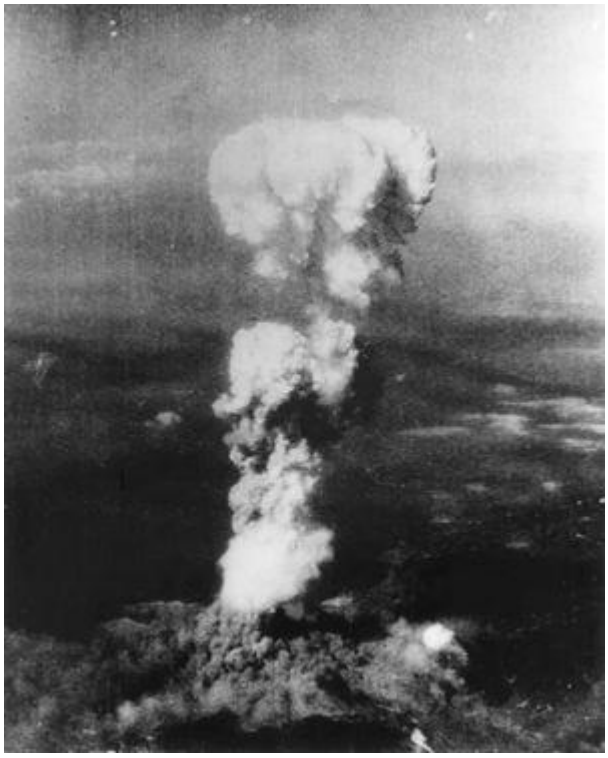
WW2

World War II, conflict that involved virtually every part of the world during the years 1939–45. The principal belligerents were the Axis powers—Germany, Italy, and Japan—and the Allies—France, Great Britain, the United States, the Soviet Union, and, to a lesser extent, China. The war was in many respects a continuation, after an uneasy 20-year hiatus, of the disputes left unsettled by World War I. The 40,000,000–50,000,000 deaths incurred in World War II make it the bloodiest conflict, as well as the largest war, in history.

Winston Churchill, Harry Truman, and Joseph Stalin
British Prime Minister Winston Churchill, U.S. Pres. Harry S. Truman, and Soviet Premier Joseph Stalin meeting at Potsdam, Germany, in July 1945 to discuss the postwar order in Europe.(more)



Atomic bombing of Hiroshima
A gigantic mushroom cloud rising above Hiroshima, Japan, on August 6, 1945, after a U.S. aircraft dropped an atomic bomb on the city, immediately killing more than 70,000 people.(more)
Along with World War I, World War II was one of the great watersheds of 20th-century geopolitical history. It resulted in the extension of the Soviet Union's power to nations of eastern Europe, enabled a communist movement to eventually achieve power in China, and marked the decisive shift of power in the world away from the states of western Europe and toward the United States and the Soviet Union.

(Read Sir John Keegan's Britannica entry on the Normandy Invasion.)

Axis initiative and Allied reaction

The outbreak of war

By the early part of 1939 the German dictator Adolf Hitler had become determined to invade and occupy Poland. Poland, for its part, had guarantees of French and British military support should it be attacked by Germany. Hitler intended to invade Poland anyway, but first he had to neutralize the possibility that

the Soviet Union would resist the invasion of its western neighbour. Secret negotiations led on August 23–24 to the signing of the German-Soviet Nonaggression Pact in Moscow. In a secret protocol of this pact, the Germans and the Soviets agreed that Poland should be divided between them, with the western third of the country going to Germany and the eastern two-thirds being taken over by the U.S.S.R.

Having achieved this cynical agreement, the other provisions of which stupefied Europe even without divulgence of the secret protocol, Hitler thought that Germany could attack Poland with no danger of Soviet or British intervention and gave orders for the invasion to start on August 26. News of the signing, on August 25, of a formal treaty of mutual assistance between Great Britain and Poland (to supersede a previous though temporary agreement) caused him to postpone the start of hostilities for a few days. He was still determined, however, to ignore the diplomatic efforts of the western powers to restrain him. Finally, at 12:40 PM on August 31, 1939, Hitler ordered hostilities against Poland to start at 4:45 the next morning. The invasion began as ordered. In response, Great Britain and France declared war on Germany on September 3, at 11:00 AM and at 5:00 PM, respectively. World War II had begun.

Forces and resources of the European combatants, 1939

Adolf Hitler
Adolf Hitler reviewing German troops in Poland, September 1939.
In September 1939 the Allies, namely Great Britain, France, and Poland, were together superior in industrial resources, population, and military manpower, but the German military, or Wehrmacht, because of its armament, training, doctrine, discipline, and fighting spirit, was the most efficient and effective fighting force for its size in the world. The index of military strength in September 1939 was the number of divisions that each nation could mobilize. Against Germany's 100 infantry divisions and six armoured divisions, France had 90 infantry divisions in metropolitan France, Great Britain had 10 infantry divisions, and Poland had 30 infantry divisions, 12 cavalry brigades, and one armoured brigade (Poland had also 30 reserve infantry divisions, but these could not be mobilized quickly). A division contained from 12,000 to 25,000 men.

It was the qualitative superiority of the German infantry divisions and the number of their armoured divisions that

made the difference in 1939. The firepower of a German infantry division far exceeded that of a French, British, or Polish division; the standard German division included 442 machine guns, 135 mortars, 72 antitank guns, and 24 howitzers. Allied divisions had a firepower only slightly greater than that of World War I. Germany had six armoured divisions in September 1939; the Allies, though they had a large number of tanks, had no armoured divisions at that time.

BRITANNICA EXCLUSIVE ARCHIVE

WWII: D-DAY IN PICTURES

After a prolonged naval and aerial bombardment of German defenses on the Channel coast of France and the Low Countries, the Allied invasion of Normandy began in the early morning hours of June 6, 1944. This collection of pictures documents the historic event that created a turning point in World War II.

German tanks
German Pz. IV (foreground) and Pz. III (background) tanks, 1942.

Stuka
German Junkers Ju 87 “Stuka” dive-bomber.
The six armoured, or panzer, divisions of the Wehrmacht comprised some 2,400 tanks. And though Germany would subsequently expand its tank forces during the first years of the war, it was not the number of tanks that Germany had (the Allies had almost as many in September 1939) but the fact of their being organized into divisions and operated as such that was to prove decisive. In accordance with the doctrines of General Heinz Guderian, the German tanks were used in massed formations in conjunction with motorized artillery to punch holes in the enemy line and to isolate segments of the enemy, which were then surrounded and captured by motorized German infantry divisions while the tanks ranged forward to repeat the process: deep drives into enemy territory by panzer divisions were thus followed by mechanized infantry and foot soldiers. These tactics were

supported by dive bombers that attacked and disrupted the enemy's supply and communications lines and spread panic and confusion in its rear, thus further paralyzing its defensive capabilities. Mechanization was the key to the German blitzkrieg, or "lightning war," so named because of the unprecedented speed and mobility that were its salient characteristics. Tested and well-trained in maneuvers, the German panzer divisions constituted a force with no equal in Europe.

WORLD WAR II EVENTS

keyboard_arrow_left

fleet air arm 204 194 —

Great Britain, which was held back by delays in the rearmament program, was producing one modern fighter in 1939, the Hurricane. A higher-performance fighter, the Spitfire, was just coming into production and did not enter the air war in numbers until 1940.

View archival footage of German troops invading Poland and forcing Europe into war

In September 1939 the Germans overrun Poland, forcing all of Europe into a state of war. From “The Second World War: Prelude to Conflict” (1963), a documentary by Encyclopædia Britannica Educational Corporation.(more)

See all videos for this article

The value of the French Air Force in 1939 was reduced by the number of obsolescent planes in its order of battle: 131 of the 634 fighters and nearly all of the 463 bombers. France was desperately trying to buy high-performance aircraft in the United States in 1939.

Bismarck battleship

The *Bismarck* shortly after commissioning in 1940.

At sea the odds against Germany were much greater in September 1939 than in August 1914, since the Allies in 1939 had many more large surface warships than Germany had. At sea, however, there was to be no clash between the Allied and the German massed fleets but only the individual operation of German pocket battleships and commerce raiders.

Technology of war, 1918–39

Maginot Line

Main entrance to the Schoenenbourg Fort on the Maginot Line, Bas-Rhin department, Alsace region, France.(more)
When World War I ended, the experience of it seemed to vindicate the power of the defensive over the offensive. It was widely believed that a superiority in numbers of at least three to one was required for a successful offensive. Defensive concepts underlay the construction of the Maginot Line between France and Germany and of its lesser counterpart, the Siegfried Line, in the interwar years. Yet by 1918 both of the requirements for the supremacy of the offensive were at hand: tanks and planes. The battles of Cambrai (1917) and Amiens (1918) had proved that when tanks were used in masses, with surprise, and on firm and open terrain, it was possible to break through any trench system.

The Germans learned this crucial, though subtle, lesson from World War I. The Allies on the other hand felt that their victory confirmed their methods, weapons, and leadership, and in the interwar period the French and British armies were slow to introduce new weapons, methods, and doctrines. Consequently, in 1939 the British Army did not have a single armoured division, and the French tanks were distributed in small packets throughout the infantry divisions. The Germans, by contrast, began to develop large tank formations on an effective basis after their rearmament program began in 1935.

In the air the technology of war had also changed radically between 1918 and 1939. Military aircraft had increased in size, speed, and range, and for operations at sea, aircraft carriers were developed that were capable of accompanying the fastest surface ships. Among the new types of planes developed was the dive bomber, a plane designed for accurate low-altitude bombing of enemy strong points as part of the tank-plane-infantry combination. Fast low-wing monoplane fighters were developed in all countries; these aircraft were essentially flying platforms for eight to 12 machine guns installed in the wings. Light and medium bombers were also developed that could be used for the strategic bombardment of cities and military

strongpoints. The threat of bomber attacks on both military and civilian targets led directly to the development of radar in England. Radar made it possible to determine the location, the distance, and the height and speed of a distant aircraft no matter what the weather was. By December 1938 there were five radar stations established on the coast of England, and 15 additional stations were begun. So, when war came in September 1939, Great Britain had a warning chain of radar stations that could tell when hostile planes were approaching.

The war in Europe, 1939–41

The campaign in Poland, 1939

The German conquest of Poland in September 1939 was the first demonstration in war of the new theory of high-speed armoured warfare that had been adopted by the Germans when their rearmament began. Poland was a country all too well suited for such a demonstration. Its frontiers were immensely long—about 3,500 miles in all; and the stretch of 1,250 miles adjoining German territory had recently been extended to 1,750 miles in all by the German occupation of Bohemia-Moravia and of Slovakia, so that Poland's southern flank became exposed to invasion—as the northern flank, facing East Prussia, already was. Western Poland had become a huge salient that lay between Germany's jaws.

It would have been wiser for the Polish Army to assemble farther back, behind the natural defense line formed by the Vistula and San rivers, but that would have entailed the abandonment of some of the most valuable western parts of the country, including the Silesian coalfields and most of the main industrial zone, which lay west of the river barrier. The economic argument for delaying the German approach to the main industrial zone was heavily reinforced by Polish national pride and military overconfidence.

When war broke out the Polish Army was able to mobilize about 1,000,000 men, a fairly large number. The Polish Army

was woefully outmoded, however, and was almost completely lacking in tanks, armoured personnel carriers, and antitank and antiaircraft guns. Yet many of the Polish military leaders clung to the double belief that their preponderance of horsed cavalry was an important asset and that they could take the offensive against the German mechanized forces. They also tended to discount the effect of Germany's vastly superior air force, which was nearly 10 times as powerful as their own.

The unrealism of such an attitude was repeated in the Polish Army's dispositions. Approximately one-third of Poland's forces were concentrated in or near the Polish Corridor (in northeastern Poland), where they were perilously exposed to a double envelopment—from East Prussia and the west combined. In the south, facing the main avenues of a German advance, the Polish forces were thinly spread. At the same time, nearly another one-third of Poland's forces were massed in reserve in the north-central part of the country, between Łódź and Warsaw, under the commander in chief, Marshal Edward Rydz-Śmigły. The Poles' forward concentration in general forfeited their chance of fighting a series of delaying actions, since their foot-marching army was unable to retreat to their defensive positions in the rear or to man them before being overrun by the invader's mechanized columns.

The 40-odd infantry divisions employed by the Germans in the invasion counted for much less than their 14 mechanized or partially mechanized divisions: these consisted of six armoured divisions; four light divisions, consisting of motorized infantry (infantry wholly transported by trucks and personnel carriers) with two armoured units; and four motorized divisions. The Germans attacked with about 1,500,000 troops in all. It was the deep and rapid thrusts of these mechanized forces that decided the issue, in conjunction with the overhead pressure of the Luftwaffe, which wrecked the Polish railway system and

destroyed most of the Polish Air Force before it could come into action. The Luftwaffe's terror-bombing of Polish cities, bridges, roads, rail lines, and power stations completed the disorganization of the Polish defenses.

German invasion of Poland in World War II
German soldiers breaking down a barricade at the Polish border at the outbreak of World War II, 1939.(more)

On September 1, 1939, the German attack began. Against northern Poland, General Fedor von Bock commanded an army group comprising General Georg von Küchler's 3rd Army, which struck southward from East Prussia, and General Günther von Kluge's 4th Army, which struck eastward across the base of the Corridor. Much stronger in troops and in tanks, however, was the army group in the south under General Gerd von Rundstedt, attacking from Silesia and from the Moravian and Slovakian border: General Johannes Blaskowitz's 8th Army, on the left, was to drive eastward against Łódź; General Wilhelm List's 14th Army, on the right, was to push on toward Kraków and to turn the Poles' Carpathian flank; and General Walther von Reichenau's 10th Army, in the centre, with the bulk of the group's armour, was to deliver the decisive blow with a northwestward thrust into the heart of Poland. By September 3, when Kluge in the north had reached the Vistula and Küchler was approaching the Narew River, Reichenau's armour was already beyond the Warta; two days later his left wing was well to the rear of Łódź and his right wing at Kielce; and by September 8 one of his armoured corps was in the outskirts of Warsaw, having advanced 140 miles in

the first week of war. Light divisions on Reichenau's right were on the Vistula between Warsaw and Sandomierz by September 9, while List, in the south, was on the San above and below Przemyśl. At the same time, the 3rd Army tanks, led by Guderian, were across the Narew attacking the line of the Bug River, behind Warsaw. All the German armies had made progress in fulfilling their parts in the great enveloping maneuver planned by General Franz Halder, chief of the general staff, and directed by General Walther von Brauchitsch, the commander in chief. The Polish armies were splitting up into uncoordinated fragments, some of which were retreating while others were delivering disjointed attacks on the nearest German columns.

On September 10 the Polish commander in chief, Marshal Edward Rydz-Śmigły, ordered a general retreat to the southeast. The Germans, however, were by that time not only tightening their net around the Polish forces west of the Vistula (in the Łódź area and, still farther west, around Poznań) but also penetrating deeply into eastern Poland. The Polish defense was already reduced to random efforts by isolated bodies of troops when another blow fell: on September 17, 1939, Soviet forces entered Poland from the east. The next day, the Polish government and high command crossed the Romanian frontier on their way into exile. The Warsaw garrison held out against the Germans until September 28, undergoing terror-bombings and artillery barrages that reduced parts of the city to rubble, with no regard for the civilian population. The last considerable fragment of the Polish Army resisted until October 5; and some guerrilla fighting went on into the winter. The Germans took a total of 700,000 prisoners, and about 80,000 Polish soldiers escaped over neutral frontiers. Approximately 70,000 Polish soldiers were killed and more than 130,000 wounded during the battle, whereas the Germans sustained about 45,000 total casualties. Poland was conquered for partition between Germany and the U.S.S.R., the forces of which met and greeted each other on Polish soil. On September 28 another secret German–

Soviet protocol modified the arrangements of August: all Lithuania was to be a Soviet sphere of influence, not a German one; but the dividing line in Poland was changed in Germany's favour, being moved eastward to the Bug River.

The Baltic states and the Russo-Finnish War, 1939–40

Profiting quickly from its understanding with Germany, the U.S.S.R. on October 10, 1939, constrained Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania to admit Soviet garrisons onto their territories. Approached with similar demands, Finland refused to comply, even though the U.S.S.R. offered territorial compensation elsewhere for the cessions that it was requiring for its own strategic reasons. Finland's armed forces amounted to about 200,000 troops in 10 divisions. The Soviets eventually brought about 70 divisions (about 1,000,000 men) to bear in their attack on Finland, along with about 1,000 tanks. Soviet troops attacked Finland on November 30, 1939.

The invaders succeeded in isolating the little Arctic port of Petsamo in the far north but were ignominiously repulsed on all of the fronts chosen for their advance. On the Karelian Isthmus, the massive reinforced-concrete fortifications of Finland's Mannerheim Line blocked the Soviet forces' direct land route from Leningrad into Finland. The Soviet planners had grossly underestimated the Finns' national will to resist and the natural obstacles constituted by the terrain's numerous lakes and forests.

The western powers exulted overtly over the humiliation of the Soviet Union. One important effect of Finland's early successes was to reinforce the tendency of both Hitler and the western democracies to underestimate the Soviet military capabilities. But in the meantime, the Soviet strategists digested their hard-learned military lessons.

On February 1, 1940, the Red Army launched 14 divisions into a major assault on the Mannerheim Line. The offensive's weight was concentrated along a 10-mile sector of the line near Summa, which was pounded by a tremendous artillery

bombardment. As the fortifications were pulverized, tanks and sledge-carried infantry advanced to occupy the ground while the Soviet Air Force broke up attempted Finnish counterattacks. After little more than a fortnight of this methodical process, a breach was made through the whole depth of the Mannerheim Line. Once the Soviets had forced a passage on the Karelian Isthmus, Finland's eventual collapse was certain. On March 6 Finland sued for peace, and a week later the Soviet terms were accepted: the Finns had to cede the entire Karelian Isthmus, Viipuri, and their part of the Rybachy Peninsula to the Soviets. The Finns had suffered about 70,000 casualties in the campaign, the Soviets more than 200,000.

The war in the west, September 1939–June 1940

During their campaign in Poland, the Germans kept only 23 divisions in the west to guard their frontier against the French, who had nearly five times as many divisions mobilized. The French commander in chief, General Maurice-Gustave Gamelin, proposed an advance against Germany through neutral Belgium and the Netherlands in order to have room to exercise his ponderous military machine. He was overruled, however, and French assaults on the 100-mile stretch of available front along the Franco-German frontier had barely dented the German defenses when the collapse of Poland prompted the recall of Gamelin's advanced divisions to defensive positions in the Maginot Line. From October 1939 to March 1940, successive plans were developed for counteraction in the event of a German offensive through Belgium—all of them based on the assumption that the Germans would come across the plain north of Namur, not across the hilly and wooded Ardennes. The Germans would indeed have taken the route foreseen by the French if Hitler's desire for an offensive in November 1939 had not been frustrated, on the one hand, by bad weather and, on the other, by the hesitations of his generals; but in March 1940 the bold suggestion of General Erich von Manstein that an offensive through the

Ardennes should, in fact, be practicable for tank forces was adopted by Hitler, despite orthodox military opinion.

Meanwhile, Hitler's immediate outlook had been changed by considerations about Scandinavia. Originally he had intended to respect Norway's neutrality. Then rumours leaked out, prematurely, of British designs on Norway—as, in fact, Winston Churchill, first lord of the Admiralty, was arguing that mines should be laid in Norwegian waters to stop the export of Swedish iron ore from Gällivare to Germany through Norway's rail terminus and port of Narvik. The British Cabinet, in response to Churchill, authorized at least the preparation of a plan for a landing at Narvik; and in mid-December 1939 a Norwegian politician, Vidkun Quisling, leader of a pro-Nazi party, was introduced to Hitler. On January 27, 1940, Hitler ordered plans for an invasion of Norway, for use if he could no longer respect Norway's neutrality.

After France's failure to interrupt the German conquest of Poland, the western powers and the Germans were so inactive with regard to land operations that journalists began to speak derisively, over the next six months, of the "phony war." At sea, however, the period was somewhat more eventful. German U-boats sank the British aircraft carrier *Courageous* (September 17) and the battleship *Royal Oak* (October 14). The U-boats' main warfare, however, was against merchant shipping: they sank more than 110 vessels in the first four months of the war. Both the Germans and the British, meanwhile, were engaged in extensive mine laying.

In surface warfare at sea, the British were on the whole more fortunate than the Germans. A German pocket battleship in the Atlantic, the *Admiral Graf Spee* sank nine ships before coming to a tragic end: having sustained and inflicted damage in an engagement with three British cruisers off the Río de la Plata on Dec. 13, 1939, she made off to Montevideo and obtained leave to spend four days there for repairs; the British mustered reinforcements for the two cruisers still capable of action after the engagement, namely the *Ajax* and the *Achilles*,

and brought the *Cumberland* to the scene in time; but, on December 17, when the *Graf Spee* put to sea again, her crew scuttled her a little way out of the harbour before the fight could be resumed.

The invasion of Norway

British plans for landings on the Norwegian coast in the third week of March 1940 were temporarily postponed. Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain, however, was by that time convinced that some aggressive action ought to be taken; and Paul Reynaud, who succeeded Édouard Daladier as France's premier on March 21, was of the same opinion. (Reynaud had come into office on the surge of the French public's demand for a more aggressive military policy and quicker offensive action against Germany.) It was agreed that mines should be laid in Norwegian waters and that the mining should be followed by the landing of troops at four Norwegian ports, Narvik, Trondheim, Bergen, and Stavanger.

Because of Anglo-French arguments, the date of the mining was postponed from April 5 to April 8. The postponement was catastrophic. Hitler had on April 1 ordered the German invasion of Norway to begin on April 9; so, when on April 8 the Norwegian government was preoccupied with earnest protest about the British mine laying, the German expeditions were well on their way.

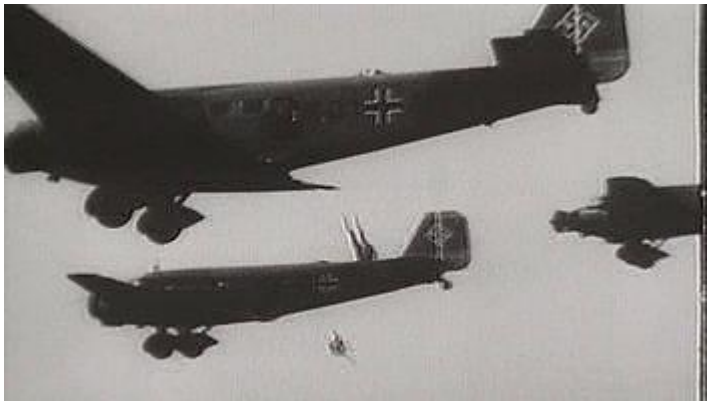
On April 9, 1940, the major Norwegian ports from Oslo northward to Narvik (1,200 miles away from Germany's naval bases) were occupied by advance detachments of German troops. At the same time, a single parachute battalion (the first ever employed in warfare) took the Oslo and Stavanger airfields, and 800 operational aircraft overawed the Norwegian population. Norwegian resistance at Narvik, at Trondheim (the strategic key to Norway), at Bergen, at Stavanger, and at Kristiansand had been overcome very quickly; and Oslo's effective resistance to the seaborne forces was nullified when German troops from the airfield entered the city.

Simultaneously, along with their Norwegian enterprise, the Germans on April 9 occupied Denmark, sending troopships, covered by aircraft, into Copenhagen harbour and marching over the land frontier into Jutland. This occupation was obviously necessary for the safety of their communications with Norway.

Allied troops began to land at Narvik on April 14. Shortly afterward, British troops were landed also at Namsos and at Åndalsnes, to attack Trondheim from the north and from the south, respectively. The Germans, however, landed fresh troops in the rear of the British at Namsos and advanced up the Gudbrandsdal from Oslo against the force at Åndalsnes. By this time the Germans had about 25,000 troops in Norway. By May 2, both Namsos and Åndalsnes were evacuated by the British. The Germans at Narvik held out against five times as many British and French troops until May 27. By that time the German offensive in France had progressed to such an extent that the British could no longer afford any commitment in Norway, and the 25,000 Allied troops were evacuated from Narvik 10 days after their victory. The Norwegian king Haakon VII and his government left Norway for Britain at the same time. Hitler garrisoned Norway with about 300,000 troops for the rest of the war. By occupying Norway, Hitler had ensured the protection of Germany's supply of iron ore from Sweden and had obtained naval and air bases with which to strike at Britain if necessary.

What was to happen in Norway became a less important question for the western powers when, on May 10, 1940, they were surprised by Hitler's long-debated stroke against them through the Low Countries.

The invasion of the Low Countries and France



See how German troops parachuted behind the Maginot Line as part of the blitzkrieg against Allied forces

The German invasion of France, May 1940; from *The Second World War: Triumph of the Axis* (1963), a documentary by Encyclopædia Britannica Educational Corporation.(more)

See all videos for this article

How the halt command saved British troops in Dunkirk

Overview of the German invasion of France and the Low Countries, 1940.(more)

See all videos for this article

France's 800,000-man standing army was thought at the time to be the most powerful in Europe. But the French had not progressed beyond the defensive

mentality inherited from World War I, and they relied primarily on their Maginot Line for protection against a German offensive. The Maginot Line was an extremely well-developed chain of fortifications running from the Swiss frontier opposite Basel northward along the left bank of the Rhine and then northwestward no farther than Montmédy, near the Belgian frontier south of the Ardennes Forest. The line consisted of a series of giant pillboxes and other defensive installations constructed in depth, equipped with underground supply and communications facilities, and connected by rail lines, with all its heavy guns pointed east at the German frontier. Depending heavily on the line as a defense against German attack, the French had 41 divisions manning it or backing it, whereas only 39 divisions were watching the long stretch of frontier north of it, from Montmédy through the Ardennes and across Flanders to the English Channel.

In their plan for the invasion of France and the Low Countries, the Germans kept General Wilhelm von Leeb's Army Group C facing the Maginot Line so as to deter the French from diverting forces from it, while launching Bock's Army Group B into the basin of the Lower Maas River north of Liège and Rundstedt's Army Group A into the Ardennes. Army Group B comprised Küchler's 18th Army, with one armoured division and airborne support, to attack the Netherlands, and Reichenau's 6th, with two armoured divisions, to advance over the Belgian plain. These two armies would have to deal not only with the Dutch and Belgian armies but also with the forces that the Allies, according to their plan, would send into the Low Countries, namely two French armies and nine British divisions. Rundstedt's Army Group A, however, was much stronger, comprising as it did Kluge's 4th Army, List's 12th, and General Ernst Busch's 16th, with General Maximilian von Weichs's 2nd in reserve, besides a large armoured group under Paul Ludwig von Kleist and a smaller one under General Hermann Hoth, and amounting in all to 44 divisions, seven of them armoured, with 27 divisions in reserve. Army Group A thus amounted to more than 1,500,000 men and more

than 1,500 tanks, and it would strike at the weak hinge of the Allies' wheel into Belgium—that is to say, at two French armies, General Charles Huntziger's 2nd and General André Corap's 9th, which together mustered only 12 infantry and four horsed cavalry divisions and stood, respectively, east and west of Sedan on the least-fortified stretch of the French frontier. Against this weak centre of the Allied line were thus massed nearly two-thirds of Germany's forces in the west and nearly three-quarters of its tank forces.

The Dutch Army comprised 10 divisions and the equivalent of 10 more in smaller formations, and thus totaled more than 400,000 men. It apparently had a good chance of withstanding the German invasion, since the attacking German army comprised only seven divisions, apart from the airborne forces it would use. The Dutch, however, had a wide front, a very sensitive and loosely settled rear, very few tanks, and no experience of modern warfare. On May 10, the German attack on the Netherlands began with the capture by parachutists of the bridges at Moerdijk, at Dordrecht, and at Rotterdam and with landings on the airfields around The Hague. On the same day, the weakly held Peel Line, south of the westward-turning arc of the Maas, was penetrated by the German land forces; and on May 11 the Dutch defenders fell back westward past Tilburg to Breda, with the consequence that the French 7th Army, under General Henri Giraud, whose leading forces had sped forward across Belgium over the 140 miles to Tilburg, fell back to Breda likewise. The German tanks thus had a clear road to Moerdijk, and by noon on May 12 they were in the outskirts of Rotterdam. North of the Maas, meanwhile, where the bulk of the Dutch defense was concentrated, the Germans achieved a narrow breach of the Geld Valley line on May 12, whereupon the Dutch, unable to counterattack, retreated to the "Fortress of Holland" Line protecting Utrecht and Amsterdam.
Queen Wilhelmina and her government left the country for England on May 13; and the next day the Dutch commander in chief, General Henri Gerard Winkelman, surrendered to the Germans, who had threatened to bomb Rotterdam and Utrecht,

as places in the front line of the fighting, if resistance continued. In fact, Rotterdam was bombed, after the capitulation, by 30 planes through a mistake in the Germans' signal communications.

The news of the German onslaught in the Low Countries, dismaying as it was to the Allies, had one effect that was to be of momentous importance to their fortunes: Chamberlain, whose halfhearted conduct of the war had been bitterly criticized in the House of Commons during the debate of May 7–8 on the campaign in Norway, resigned office in the evening of May 10 and was succeeded as prime minister by Churchill, who formed a coalition government.

For the first phase of the invasion of the Belgian plain north of Liège, Reichenau had four army corps, one armoured corps, and only 500 airborne troops; but he also had massive cooperation from the German Luftwaffe, whose dive bombers and fighters played a major role in breaking down the Belgian defenses. West of the Maastricht "appendix" of indefensible Dutch territory separating Belgium from Germany, the fortress of Eben Emael, immediately opposite Maastricht, and the line of the Albert Canal constituted the Belgians' foremost defensive position. On May 10 German airborne troops landed in gliders on the top of the fortress and on bridges over the canal. On May 11 the Belgian front was broken, the German tanks running on westward and some of the infantry turning southward to take Liège from the rear, while the Belgians made a general retreat to the Antwerp–Namur, or Dyle, Line. French and British divisions had just arrived on this Dyle Line, and General René Prioux's two tank divisions went out from it to challenge the German advance. After a big battle on May 14, however, Prioux's tanks had to retire to the consolidated Dyle Line; and on May 15, notwithstanding a successful defense against a German attack, Gamelin ordered the abandonment of the position, because events farther to the south had made it strategically untenable.

The chances for success of the German offensive against France hinged on a German advance through the hilly and dense Ardennes Forest, which the French considered to be impassable to tanks. But the Germans did succeed in moving their tank columns through that difficult belt of country by means of an amazing feat of staff work. While the armoured divisions used such roads through the forest as were available, infantry divisions started alongside them by using field and woodland paths and marched so fast across country that the leading ones reached the Meuse River only a day after the armoured divisions had.

The decisive operations in France were those of Rundstedt's Army Group A. Kleist's tanks on May 10 took only three hours to cover the 30 miles from the eastern border of independent Luxembourg to the southeastern border of Belgium; and on May 11 the French cavalry divisions that had ridden forward into the Ardennes to oppose them were thrown back over the Semois River. By the evening of May 12 the Germans were across the Franco-Belgian frontier and overlooking the Meuse River. The defenses of this sector were rudimentary, and it was the least-fortified stretch of the whole French front. Worse still, the defending French 2nd and 9th armies had hardly any antitank guns or antiaircraft artillery with which to slow down the German armoured columns and shoot down their dive bombers. Such was the folly of the French belief that a German armoured thrust through the Ardennes was unlikely.

On May 13 Kleist's forces achieved a threefold crossing of the Meuse River. At Sedan wave after wave of German dive bombers swooped on the French defenders of the south bank. The latter could not stand the nerve-racking strain, and the German troops were able to push across the river in rubber boats and on rafts. The tremendous air bombardment was the decisive factor in the crossings. A thousand aircraft supported Kleist's forces, while only a few French aircraft intervened in a gallant but hopeless effort to aid their troops on the ground.

Next day, after the tanks had been brought across, Guderian widened the Sedan bridgehead and beat off French counterattacks. On May 15 he broke through the French defenses into open country, turning westward in the direction of the English Channel. On May 16 his forces swept on west for nearly 50 miles. His superiors tried to put on the brake, feeling that such rapid progress was hazardous, but the pace of the German drive upset the French far more, and their collapse spread as Reinhardt's corps joined in the pressure. When more German tanks crossed the Meuse between Givet and Namur, the breach of the French front was 60 miles wide.

Driving westward down the empty corridor between the Sambre and the Aisne rivers, Guderian's tanks crossed the Oise River on May 17 and reached Amiens two days later. Giraud, who on May 15 had superseded Corap in command of the French 9th Army, was thus frustrated in his desperate plan of checking the Germans on the Oise; and Kleist, meanwhile, by lining the Aisne progressively with tanks until the infantry came up to relieve them, was protecting the southwestern flank of the advance against the danger of a counteroffensive from the south. Indeed, when the Germans, on May 15, were reported to be crossing the Aisne River between Rethel and Laon, Gamelin told Reynaud that he had no reserves in that sector and that Paris might fall within two days' time. Thereupon Reynaud, though he postponed his immediate decision to move the government to Tours, summoned General Maxime Weygand from Syria to take Gamelin's place as commander in chief; but Weygand did not arrive until May 19.

Guderian's tanks were at Abbeville on May 20, and on May 22 he turned northward to threaten Calais and Dunkirk, while Reinhardt, swinging south of the British rear at Arras, headed for the same objectives, the remaining ports by which the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) could be evacuated.

The evacuation from Dunkirk

Learn how Nazi panzers wedged between French and British troops and trapped the latter at Dunkirk

The British Expeditionary Force being surrounded by invading Germans at Dunkirk and evacuated from France by a motley rescue fleet of military ships and private boats; from *The Second World War: Triumph of the Axis* (1963), a documentary by Encyclopædia Britannica Educational Corporation.(more)

See all videos for this article

For the Allies, all communication between their northern and southern forces was severed by the arc of the westward German advance from the Ardennes to the Somme. The Allied armies in the north, having fallen back from the Dyle Line to the Escaut (Schelde), were being encircled, and already on May 19 the British commander, Viscount Gort, was considering the withdrawal of the BEF by sea. On May 21, however, to satisfy orders from London for more positive action, he launched an attack from Arras southward against the right flank of the Germans' corridor; but, though it momentarily alarmed the German high command, this small counterstroke lacked the armoured strength necessary for success.

Meanwhile, Guderian's tanks had swept up past Boulogne and Calais and were crossing the canal defense line close to Dunkirk when, on May 24, an inexplicable order from Hitler not only stopped their advance but actually called them back to the canal line just as Guderian was expecting to drive into Dunkirk.

Dunkirk was now the only port left available for the withdrawal of the mass of the BEF from Europe, and the British Cabinet at last decided to save what could be saved. The British Admiralty had been collecting every kind of small craft it could find to help in removing the troops, and the British retreat to the coast now became a race to evacuate the troops before the Germans could occupy Dunkirk. Evacuation began on May 26 and became still more urgent the next day, when the Belgians, their right wing and their centre broken by Reichenau's advance, sued for an armistice. On May 27, likewise, bombing by the Luftwaffe put the harbour of Dunkirk out of use, so that many of the thousands of men thronging the 10-mile stretch of beaches had to be ferried out to sea by petty craft pressed into service by the Royal Navy and manned largely by amateur seamen, though the harbour's damaged breakwater still offered a practicable exit for the majority. By June 4, when the operation came to an end, 198,000 British and 140,000 French and Belgian troops had been saved; but virtually all of their heavy equipment had to be abandoned, and, of the 41 destroyers participating, six were sunk and 19 others damaged. The men who were saved represented a considerable part of the experienced troops possessed by Great Britain and were an inestimable gain to the Allies. The success of the near-miraculous evacuation from Dunkirk was due, on the one hand, to fighter cover by the Royal Air Force from the English coast and on the other to Hitler's fatal order of May 24 halting Guderian. That order had been made for several reasons, chiefly: Hermann Göring, head of the Luftwaffe, had mistakenly assured Hitler that his aircraft alone could destroy the Allied troops trapped on the beaches at Dunkirk; and Hitler himself seems to have believed that Great Britain might accept peace terms more readily if its armies were not constrained into humiliating surrender. Three days passed before Walther von Brauchitsch, the German Army commander in chief, was able to persuade Hitler to withdraw his orders and allow the German armoured forces to advance on Dunkirk. But they met stronger opposition from the British, who had had time to solidify their defenses, and almost

immediately Hitler stopped the German armoured forces again, ordering them instead to move south and prepare for the attack on the Somme–Aisne line.

The campaign in northern France was wound up by Küchler's forces, after both Guderian and Reichenau had been ordered southward. Altogether, the Germans had taken more than 1,000,000 prisoners in three weeks, at a cost of 60,000 casualties. Some 220,000 Allied troops, however, were rescued by British ships from France's northwestern ports (Cherbourg, Saint-Malo, Brest, and Saint-Nazaire), thus bringing the total of Allied troops evacuated to about 558,000.

There remained the French armies south of the Germans' Somme–Aisne front. The French had lost 30 divisions in the campaign so far. Weygand still managed to muster 49 divisions, apart from the 17 left to hold the Maginot Line, but against him the Germans had 130 infantry divisions as well as their 10 divisions of tanks. The Germans, after redisposing their units, began a new offensive on June 5 from their positions on the Somme. The French resisted stiffly for two days, but on June 7 the German tanks in the westernmost sector, led by Major General Erwin Rommel, broke through toward Rouen, and on June 9 they were over the Seine. On June 9 the Germans attacked on the Aisne: the infantry forced the crossings, and then Guderian's armour drove through the breach toward Châlons-sur-Marne before turning eastward for the Swiss frontier, thus isolating all the French forces still holding the Maginot Line.

Italy's entry into the war and the French Armistice

Italy had been unprepared for war when Hitler attacked Poland, but if the Italian leader, Benito Mussolini, was to reap any positive advantages from partnership with Hitler it seemed that Italy would have to abandon its nonbelligerent stance before the western democracies had been defeated by Germany singlehanded. The obvious collapse of France convinced Mussolini that the time to implement his Pact of Steel with Hitler had come, and on

June 10, 1940, Italy declared war against France and Great Britain. With about 30 divisions available on their Alpine frontier, the Italians delayed their actual attack on southeastern France until June 20, but it achieved little against the local defense. In any case, the issue in France had already been virtually settled by the victory of Italy's German ally.

Meanwhile, Reynaud had left Paris for Cangé, near Tours; and Weygand, after speaking frankly and despondently to Churchill at the Allied military headquarters at Briare on June 11, told Reynaud and the other ministers at Cangé on June 12 that the battle for France was lost and that a cessation of hostilities was compulsory. There was little doubt that he was correct in this estimate of the military situation: the French armies were now splitting up into fragments. Reynaud's government was divided between the advocates of capitulation and those who, with Reynaud, wanted to continue the war from French North Africa. The only decision that it could make was to move itself from Tours to Bordeaux.

The Germans entered Paris on June 14, 1940, and were driving still deeper southward along both the western and eastern edges of France. Two days later they were in the Rhône valley. Meanwhile, Weygand was still pressing for an armistice, backed by all the principal commanders. Reynaud resigned office on June 16, whereupon a new government was formed by Marshal Philippe Pétain, the revered and aged hero of the Battle of Verdun in World War I. In the night of June 16 the French request for an armistice was transmitted to Hitler. While discussion of the terms went on, the German advance went on too. Finally, on June 22, 1940, at Rethondes, the scene of the signing of the Armistice of 1918, the new Franco-German Armistice was signed. The Franco-Italian Armistice was signed on June 24. Both armistices came into effect early on June 25.

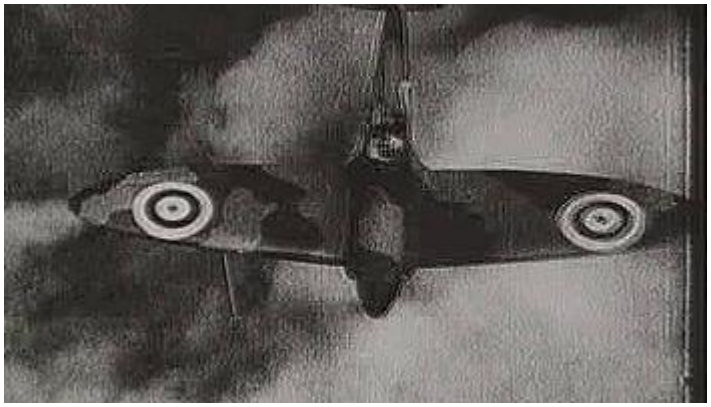
The Armistice of June 22 divided France into two zones: one to be under German military occupation and one to be left to the French in full sovereignty. The occupied zone comprised all northern France from the northwestern frontier

of Switzerland to the Channel and from the Belgian and German frontiers to the Atlantic, together with a strip extending from the lower Loire southward along the Atlantic coast to the western end of the Pyrenees; the unoccupied zone comprised only two-fifths of France's territory, the southeast. The French Navy and Air Force were to be neutralized, but it was not required that they be handed over to the Germans. The Italians granted very generous terms to the French: the only French territory that they claimed to occupy was the small frontier tract that their forces had succeeded in overrunning since June 20. Meanwhile, from June 18, General Charles de Gaulle, whom Reynaud had sent on a military mission to London on June 5, was broadcasting appeals for the continuance of France's war.

The collapse of France in June 1940 posed a severe naval problem to the British, because the powerful French Navy still existed: strategically, it was of immense importance to the British that these French ships not fall into German hands, since they would have tilted the balance of sea power decidedly in favour of the Axis—the Italian Navy being now also at war with Britain. Mistrustful of promises that the French ships would be used only for "supervision and minesweeping," the British decided to immobilize them. Thus, on July 3, 1940, the British seized all French ships in British-controlled ports, encountering only nominal resistance. But when British ships appeared off Mers el-Kébir, near Oran on the Algerian coast, and demanded that the ships of the important French naval force there either join the Allies or sail out to sea, the French refused to submit, and the British eventually opened fire, damaging the battleship *Dunkerque*, destroying the *Bretagne*, and disabling several other vessels. Thereupon, Pétain's government, which on July 1 had installed itself at Vichy, on July 4 severed diplomatic relations with the British. In the eight following days, the constitution of France's Third Republic was abolished and a new French state created, under the supreme authority of Pétain himself. The few French

colonies that rallied to General de Gaulle's Free French movement were strategically unimportant.

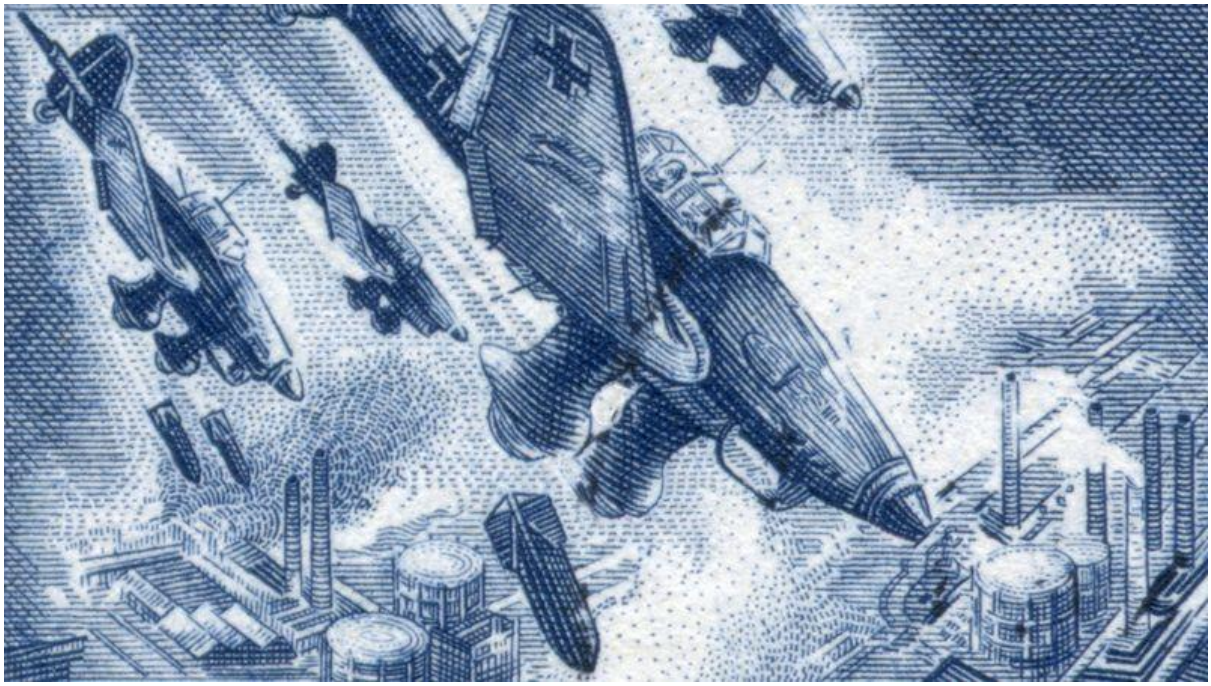
The Battle of Britain



What was the Battle of Britain?

Learn about the Battle of Britain, between Britain's Royal Air Force and Germany's Luftwaffe, which began in July 1940. From *The Second World War: Triumph of the Axis* (1963), a documentary by Encyclopædia Britannica Educational Corporation.(more)

See all videos for this article



Bombings in World War II: The first war decided from the air

Overview of aerial bombardment in Europe during World War II, with a detailed discussion of the Battle of Britain.(more)

See all videos for this article

With France conquered, Hitler could now turn his forces on Germany's sole remaining enemy: Great Britain, which was protected from the formidable German Army by the waters of the English Channel. On July 16, 1940, Hitler issued a directive ordering the preparation and, if necessary, the execution of a plan for the invasion of Great Britain. But an amphibious invasion of Britain would only be possible, given Britain's large navy, if Germany could establish control of the air in the battle zone. To this end, the Luftwaffe chief, Göring, on August 2 issued the "Eagle Day" directive, laying down a plan of attack in which a few massive blows from the air were to destroy British air power and so open the way for the amphibious invasion, termed Operation "Sea Lion." Victory in the air battle for the Luftwaffe would indeed have exposed Great Britain to invasion and occupation. The victory by the Royal Air Force (RAF) Fighter Command blocked this possibility and, in fact, created the conditions for Great Britain's survival, for the extension of the war, and for the eventual defeat of Nazi Germany.

Supermarine Spitfire

Supermarine Spitfire, Britain's premier fighter plane from 1938 through World War II.(more)

The forces engaged in the battle were relatively small. The British disposed some 600 frontline fighters to defend the country. The Germans made available about 1,300 bombers and dive bombers, and about 900 single-

engined and 300 twin-engined fighters. These were based in an arc around England from Norway to the Cherbourg Peninsula in northern coastal France. The preliminaries of the Battle of Britain occupied June and July 1940, the climax August and September, and the aftermath—the so-called Blitz—the winter of 1940–41. In the campaign, the Luftwaffe had no systematic or consistent plan of action: sometimes it tried to establish a blockade by the destruction of British shipping and ports; sometimes, to destroy Britain's Fighter Command by combat and by the bombing of ground installations; and sometimes, to seek direct strategic results by attacks on London and other populous centres of industrial or political significance. The British, on the other hand, had prepared themselves for the kind of battle that in fact took place. Their radar early warning, the most advanced and the most operationally adapted system in the world, gave Fighter Command adequate notice of where and when to direct their fighter forces to repel German bombing raids. The Spitfire, moreover, though still in short supply, was unsurpassed as an interceptor by any fighter in any other air force.

The British fought not only with the advantage—unusual for them—of superior equipment and undivided aim but also against an enemy divided in object and condemned by circumstance and by lack of forethought to fight at a tactical disadvantage. The German bombers lacked the bomb-load capacity to strike permanently devastating blows and also proved, in daylight, to be easily vulnerable to the Spitfires and Hurricanes. Britain's radar, moreover, largely prevented them from exploiting the element of surprise. The German dive bombers were even more vulnerable to being shot down by British fighters, and long-range fighter cover was only partially available from German fighter aircraft, since the latter were operating at the limit of their flying range.

The German air attacks began on ports and airfields along the English Channel, where convoys were bombed and the air battle was joined. In June and July 1940, as the Germans

gradually redeployed their forces, the air battle moved inland over the interior of Britain. On August 8 the intensive phase began, when the Germans launched bombing raids involving up to nearly 1,500 aircraft a day and directed them against the British fighter airfields and radar stations. In four actions, on August 8, 11, 12, and 13, the Germans lost 145 aircraft as against the British loss of 88. By late August the Germans had lost more than 600 aircraft, the RAF only 260, but the RAF was losing badly needed fighters and experienced pilots at too great a rate, and its effectiveness was further hampered by bombing damage done to the radar stations. At the beginning of September the British retaliated by unexpectedly launching a bombing raid on Berlin, which so infuriated Hitler that he ordered the Luftwaffe to shift its attacks from Fighter Command installations to London and other cities. (For contemporary descriptions of the devastation of London, *see* BTW: London Classics: London in World War II.) These assaults on London, Coventry, Liverpool, and other cities went on unabated for several months. But already, by September 15, on which day the British believed, albeit incorrectly, that they had scored their greatest success by destroying 185 German aircraft, Fighter Command had demonstrated to the Luftwaffe that it could not gain air ascendancy over Britain. This was because British fighters were simply shooting down German bombers faster than German industry could produce them. The Battle of Britain was thus won, and the invasion of England was postponed indefinitely by Hitler. The British had lost more than 900 fighters but had shot down about 1,700 German aircraft.

How World War II led to the end of the British Empire

Learn more about World War II and the end of the British Empire.

See all videos for this article

During the following winter, the Luftwaffe maintained a bombing offensive, carrying out night-bombing attacks on Britain's larger cities. By February 1941 the offensive had declined, but in March and April there was a revival, and nearly 10,000 sorties were flown, with heavy attacks made on London. Thereafter German strategic air operations over England withered.

Central Europe and the Balkans, 1940–41

The continued resistance of the British caused Hitler once more to change his timetable. His great design for a campaign against the U.S.S.R. had originally been scheduled to begin about 1943—by which time he should have secured the German position on the rest of the European continent by a series of "localized" campaigns and have reached some sort of compromise with Great Britain. But in July 1940, seeing Great Britain still undefeated and the United States increasingly inimical to Germany, he decided that the conquest of the European part of the Soviet Union must be undertaken in May 1941 in order both to demonstrate

Germany's invincibility to Great Britain and to deter the United States from intervention in Europe (because the elimination of the U.S.S.R. would strengthen the Japanese position in the Far East and in the Pacific). Events in the interval, however, were to make him change his plan once again.

While the invasion of the U.S.S.R. was being prepared, Hitler was much concerned to extend German influence across Slovakia and Hungary into Romania, the oil fields of which he was anxious to secure against Soviet attack and the military manpower of which might be joined to the forces of the German coalition. In May 1940 he obtained an oil and arms pact from Romania; but, when Romania, after being constrained by a Soviet ultimatum in June to cede Bessarabia and northern Bukovina to the U.S.S.R., requested a German military mission and a German guarantee of its remaining frontiers, Hitler refused to comply until the claims of other states against Romania had been met. Romania was compelled to cede southern Dobruja to Bulgaria on August 21 (an act that was formalized in the Treaty of Craiova on September 7); but its negotiations with Hungary about Transylvania were broken off on August 23. Since, if war had broken out between Romania and Hungary, the U.S.S.R. might have intervened and won control over the oil wells, Hitler decided to arbitrate immediately: by the Vienna Award of August 30, Germany and Italy assigned northern Transylvania, including the Szekler district, to Hungary, and Germany then guaranteed what was left of Romania. In the face of the Romanian nationalists' outcry against these proceedings, the king, Carol II, transferred his dictatorial powers to General Ion Antonescu on Sept. 4, 1940, and abdicated his crown in favour of his young son Michael two days later. Antonescu had already repeated the request for a German military mission, which arrived in Bucharest on October 12.

Though Hitler had apprised the Italian foreign minister, Galeazzo Ciano, of his intention to send a military mission to Romania, Ciano had not apprised Mussolini. So,

since the latter's Balkan ambitions had been continually restrained by Hitler, particularly with regard to Yugoslavia, the sudden news of the mission annoyed him. On Oct. 28, 1940, therefore, having given Hitler only the barest hints of his project, Mussolini launched seven Italian divisions (155,000 men) from Albania into a separate war of his own against Greece.

The result was exasperating for Hitler. His ally's forces were not only halted by the Greeks, a few miles over the border, on Nov. 8, 1940, but were also driven back by General Alexandros Papagos' counteroffensive of November 14, which was to put the Greeks in possession of one-third of Albania by mid-December. Moreover, British troops landed in Crete, and some British aircraft were sent to bases near Athens, whence they might have attacked the Romanian oil fields. Lastly, the success of the Greeks caused Yugoslavia and Bulgaria, who had hitherto been attentive to overtures from the Axis powers, to revert to a strictly neutral policy.

Anticipating Mussolini's appeal for German help in his "separate" or "parallel" war, Hitler in November 1940 drew Hungary, Romania, and Slovakia successively into the Axis, or Tripartite, Pact that Germany, Italy, and Japan had concluded on September 27 (*see below* Japanese policy, 1939–41); and he also obtained Romania's assent to the assembling of German troops in the south of Romania for an attack on Greece through Bulgaria. Hungary consented to the transit of these troops through its territory lest Romania take Hungary's place in Germany's favour and so be secured in possession of the Transylvanian lands left to it by the Vienna Award. Bulgaria, however, for fear of Soviet reaction, on the one hand, and of Turkish, on the other (Turkey had massed 28 divisions in Thrace when Italy attacked Greece), delayed its adhesion to the Axis until March 1, 1941. Only thereafter, on March 18, did the Yugoslav regent, Prince Paul, and his ministers Dragiša Cvetković and Aleksandar Cincar-Marković agree to Yugoslavia's adhesion to the Axis.

Meanwhile, the German 12th Army had crossed the Danube from Romania into Bulgaria on March 2, 1941. Consequently, in accordance with a Greco-British agreement of February 21, a British expeditionary force of 58,000 men from Egypt landed in Greece on March 7, to occupy the Olympus–Vermion line. Then, on March 27, 1941, two days after the Yugoslav government's signature, in Vienna, of its adhesion to the Axis Pact, a group of Yugoslav Army officers, led by General Dušan Simović, executed a coup d'état in Belgrade, overthrowing the regency in favour of the 17-year-old king Peter II and reversing the former government's policy.

Almost simultaneously with the Belgrade coup d'état, the decisive Battle of Cape Matapan took place between the British and Italian fleets in the Mediterranean, off the Peloponnesian mainland northwest of Crete. Hitherto, Italo-British naval hostilities in the Mediterranean area since June 1940 had comprised only one noteworthy action: the sinking in November at the Italian naval base of Taranto of three battleships by aircraft from the British carrier *Illustrious*. In March 1941, however, some Italian naval forces, including the battleship *Vittorio Veneto*, with several cruisers and destroyers, set out to threaten British convoys to Greece; and British forces, including the battleships *Warspite*, *Valiant*, and *Barham* and the aircraft carrier *Formidable*, likewise with cruisers and destroyers, were sent to intercept them. When the forces met in the morning of March 28, off Cape Matapan, the *Vittorio Veneto* opened fire on the lighter British ships but was soon trying to escape from the engagement, for fear of the torpedo aircraft from the *Formidable*. The battle then became a pursuit, which lasted long into the night. Finally, though the severely damaged *Vittorio Veneto* made good her escape, the British sank three Italian cruisers and two destroyers. The Italian Navy made no more surface ventures into the eastern Mediterranean.

The German attack on Greece, scheduled for April 1, 1941, was postponed for a few days when Hitler, because of the Belgrade coup d'état, decided that Yugoslavia was to be destroyed at the same time. While Great Britain's efforts to draw Yugoslavia into the Greco-British defensive system were fruitless, Germany began canvasing allies for its planned invasion of Yugoslavia and Greece. Italy agreed to collaborate in the attack, and Hungary and Bulgaria agreed to send troops to occupy the territories that they coveted as soon as the Germans should have destroyed the Yugoslav state.

On April 6, 1941, the Germans, with 24 divisions and 1,200 tanks, invaded both Yugoslavia (which had 32 divisions) and Greece (which had 15 divisions). The operations were conducted in the same way as Germany's previous blitzkrieg campaigns. While massive air raids struck Belgrade, List's 12th Army drove westward and southward from the Bulgarian frontiers, Kleist's armoured group northwestward from Sofia, and Weichs's 2nd Army southward from Austria and from western Hungary. The 12th Army's advance through Skopje to the Albanian border cut communications between Yugoslavia and Greece in two days; Niš fell to Kleist on April 9, Zagreb to Weichs on April 10; and on April 11 the Italian 2nd Army (comprising 15 divisions) advanced from Istria into Dalmatia. After the fall of Belgrade to the German forces from bases in Romania (April 12), the remnant of the Yugoslav Army—whose only offensive, in northern Albania, had collapsed—was encircled in Bosnia. Its capitulation was signed, in Belgrade, on April17.

In Greece, meanwhile, the Germans took Salonika (Thessaloníki) on April 9, 1941, and then initiated a drive toward Ioánnina (Yannina), thus severing communication between the bulk of the Greek Army (which was on the Albanian frontier) and its rear. The isolated main body capitulated on April 20, the Greek Army as a whole on April 22. Two days later the pass of Thermopylae, defended by a British rear guard, was taken by the Germans, who

entered Athens on April 27. All mainland Greece and all the Greek Aegean islands except Crete were under German occupation by May 11, the Ionian islands under Italian. The remainder of Britain's 50,000-man force in Greece was hastily evacuated with great difficulty after leaving all of their tanks and other heavy equipment behind.

The campaign against Yugoslavia brought 340,000 soldiers of the Yugoslav Army into captivity as German prisoners of war. In the campaign against Greece the Germans took 220,000 Greek and 20,000 British or Commonwealth prisoners of war. The combined German losses in the Balkan campaigns were about 2,500 dead, 6,000 wounded, and 3,000 missing.

German airborne troops began to land in Crete on May 20, 1941, at Máleme, in the Canea-Suda area, at Réthimnon, and at Iráklion. Fighting, on land and on the sea, with heavy losses on both sides, went on for a week before the Allied commander in chief, General Bernard Cyril Freyberg of the New Zealand Expeditionary Force, was authorized to evacuate the island. The last defenders were overwhelmed at Réthimnon on May 31. The prisoners of war taken by the Germans in Crete numbered more than 15,000 British or Commonwealth troops, besides the Greeks taken. In battles around the island, German air attacks sank three light cruisers and six destroyers of the British Mediterranean fleet and damaged three battleships, one aircraft carrier, six light cruisers, and five destroyers.

Both the Yugoslav and the Greek royal governments went into exile on their armies' collapse. The Axis powers were left to dispose as they would of their conquests. Yugoslavia was completely dissolved: Croatia, the independence of which had been proclaimed on April 10, 1941, was expanded to form Great Croatia, which included Srem (Syrmia, the zone between the Sava and the Danube south of the Drava confluence) and Bosnia and Hercegovina; most of Dalmatia was annexed to Italy; Montenegro was restored to independence; Yugoslav Macedonia was partitioned between Bulgaria and Albania; Slovenia was partitioned between Italy and Germany;

the Baranya triangle and the Bačka went to Hungary; the Banat and Serbia were put under German military administration. Of the independent states, Great Croatia, ruled by Ante Pavelić's nationalist Ustaše ("Insurgents"), and Montenegro were Italian spheres of influence, although German troops still occupied the eastern part of Great Croatia. A puppet government of Serbia was set up by the Germans in August 1941.

While Bulgarian troops occupied eastern Macedonia and most of western Thrace, the rest of mainland Greece, theoretically subject to a puppet government in Athens, was militarily occupied by the Italians except for three zones, namely the Athens district, the Salonika district, and the Dimotika strip of Thrace, which the German conquerors reserved for themselves. The Germans also remained in occupation of Lesbos, Chios, Samos, Melos, and Crete.

Other fronts, 1940–41

Egypt and Cyrenaica, 1940–summer 1941

The contemporary course of events in the Balkans, described above, nullified the first great victory won by British land forces in World War II, which took place in North Africa. When Italy declared war against Great Britain in June 1940, it had nearly 300,000 men under Marshal Rodolfo Graziani in Cyrenaica (present-day Libya), to confront the 36,000 troops whom the British commander in chief in the Middle East, General Sir Archibald Wavell, had in Egypt to protect the North African approaches to the Suez Canal. Between these forces lay the Western Desert, in which the westernmost position actually held by the British was Mersa Matruh (Marsā Maṭİūḥ), 120 miles east of the Cyrenaican frontier. The Italians in September 1940 occupied Sīdī Barrānī, 170 miles west of Mersa Matruh; but, after settling six divisions into a chain of widely separated camps, they did nothing more for weeks, and during that time Wavell received some reinforcements.

Wavell, whose command included not only Egypt but also the East African fronts against the Italians, decided to strike first in North Africa. On December 7, 1940, some 30,000 men, under Major General Richard Nugent O'Connor, advanced westward, from Mersa Matruh, against 80,000 Italians; but, whereas the Italians at Sīdī Barrānī had only 120 tanks, O'Connor had 275. Having passed by night through a gap in the chain of forts, O'Connor's forces stormed three of the Italian camps, while the 7th Armoured Division was already cutting the Italians' road of retreat along the coast to the west. On December 10 most of the positions closer to Sīdī Barrānī were overrun; and on December 11 the reserve tanks made a further enveloping bound to the coast beyond Buqbuq, intercepting a large column of retreating Italians. In three days the British had taken nearly 40,000 prisoners.

Falling back across the frontier into Cyrenaica, the remnant of the Italian forces from Sīdī Barrānī shut itself up in the fortress of Bardia (Bardīyah), which O'Connor's tanks speedily isolated. On January 3, 1941, the British assault on Bardia began, and three days later the whole garrison of Bardia surrendered—45,000 men. The next fortress to the west, Tobruk (Ṭubruq), was assaulted on January 23 and captured the next day (30,000 more prisoners).

To complete their conquest of Cyrenaica, it remained for the British to take the port of Benghazi. On February 3, 1941, however, O'Connor learned that the Italians were about to abandon Benghazi and to retreat westward down the coast road to Agheila (al-ʿUqaylah). Thereupon he boldly ordered the 7th Armoured Division to cross the desert hinterland and intercept the Italian retreat by cutting the coast road well to the east of Agheila. On February 5, after an advance of 170 miles in 33 hours, the British were blocking the Italians' line of retreat south of Beda Fomm (Bayḍāʾ Fumm); and in the morning of February 6, as the main Italian columns appeared, a day of battle began. Though the Italians had, altogether, nearly four times as many cruiser tanks as the British, by the following

morning 60 Italian tanks had been crippled, 40 more abandoned, and the rest of Graziani's army was surrendering in crowds. The British, only 3,000 strong and having lost only three of their 29 tanks, took 20,000 prisoners, 120 tanks, and 216 guns.

The British, having occupied Benghazi on February 6 and Agheila on February 8, could now have pushed on without hindrance to Tripoli, but the chance was foregone: the Greek government had accepted Churchill's reiterated offer of British troops to be sent to Greece from Egypt, which meant a serious reduction of British strength in North Africa.

The reduction was to have serious consequences, because on February 6, the very day of Beda Fomm, a young general, Erwin Rommel, had been appointed by Hitler to command two German mechanized divisions that were to be sent as soon as possible to help the Italians. Arriving in Tripolitania, Rommel decided to try an offensive with what forces he had. Against the depleted British strength, he was rapidly and brilliantly successful. After occupying Agheila with ease on March 24 and Mersa Bréga (Qasr al-Burayqah) on March 31, he resumed his advance on April 2—despite orders to stand still for two months—with 50 tanks backed by two new Italian divisions. The British evacuated Benghazi the next day and began a precipitate retreat into Egypt, losing great numbers of their tanks on the way (a large force of armour, surrounded at Mechili, had to surrender on April 7). By April 11 all Cyrenaica except Tobruk had been reconquered by Rommel's audacious initiative.

Tobruk, garrisoned mainly by the 9th Australian Division, held out against siege; and Rommel, though he defeated two British attempts to relieve the place (May and June 1941), was obliged to suspend his offensive on the Egyptian frontier, since he had overstretched his supply lines.