



tion, they initially flew unescorted, since many believed that bombers equipped with defensive firepower flew too high and too fast to be attacked. However, advanced German technology allowed fighters to easily shoot down the lumbering bombers. On some disastrous missions, the Germans shot down almost 50 percent of American aircraft. However, the advent and implementation of a long-range escort fighter let the bombers hit their targets more accurately while fighters confronted opposing German aircraft.

In the wake of the Soviets' victory at Stalingrad, the Big Three (Roosevelt, Churchill, and Stalin) met in Tehran in November 1943. Dismissing Africa and Italy as a sideshow, Stalin demanded that Britain and the United States invade France to relieve pressure on the Eastern Front. Churchill was hesitant, but Roosevelt was eager. The invasion was tentatively scheduled for 1944.

Back in Italy, the “soft underbelly” turned out to be much tougher than Churchill had imagined. Italy’s narrow, mountainous terrain gave the defending Axis the advantage. Movement up the peninsula was slow, and in some places conditions returned to the trenchlike warfare of World War I. Americans attempted to land troops behind them at Anzio on the western coast of Italy, but, surrounded, they suffered heavy

In 1943, Allied forces began bombing railroad and oil targets in Bucharest, part of the wider policy of bombing expeditions meant to incapacitate German transportation. Bucharest was considered the number one oil target in Europe. Photograph, August 1, 1943. Wikimedia.



Bombings devastated Europe, leveling ancient cities such as Cologne, Germany. Cologne experienced an astonishing 262 separate air raids by Allied forces, leaving the city in ruins. Amazingly, the Cologne Cathedral stood nearly undamaged even after being hit numerous times, while the area around it crumbled. Photograph, April 24, 1945. Wikimedia.

casualties. Still, the Allies pushed up the peninsula, Mussolini's government revolted, and a new Italian government quickly made peace.

On the day the American army entered Rome, American, British and Canadian forces launched Operation Overlord, the long-awaited invasion of France. D-Day, as it became popularly known, was the largest amphibious assault in history. American general Dwight Eisenhower was uncertain enough of the attack's chances that the night before the invasion he wrote two speeches: one for success and one for failure. The Allied landings at Normandy were successful, and although progress across France was much slower than hoped for, Paris was liberated roughly two months later. Allied bombing expeditions meanwhile continued to level German cities and industrial capacity. Perhaps four hundred thousand German civilians were killed by allied bombing.<sup>8</sup>

The Nazis were crumbling on both fronts. Hitler tried but failed to turn the war in his favor in the west. The Battle of the Bulge failed to

drive the Allies back to the English Channel, but the delay cost the Allies the winter. The invasion of Germany would have to wait, while the Soviet Union continued its relentless push westward, ravaging German populations in retribution for German war crimes.<sup>9</sup>

German counterattacks in the east failed to dislodge the Soviet advance, destroying any last chance Germany might have had to regain the initiative. 1945 dawned with the end of European war in sight. The Big Three met again at Yalta in the Soviet Union, where they reaffirmed the demand for Hitler's unconditional surrender and began to plan for postwar Europe.

The Soviet Union reached Germany in January, and the Americans crossed the Rhine in March. In late April American and Soviet troops met at the Elbe while the Soviets pushed relentlessly by Stalin to reach Berlin first and took the capital city in May, days after Hitler and his high command had committed suicide in a city bunker. Germany was conquered. The European war was over. Allied leaders met again, this time at Potsdam, Germany, where it was decided that Germany would be divided into pieces according to current Allied occupation, with Berlin likewise divided, pending future elections. Stalin also agreed to join the fight against Japan in approximately three months.<sup>10</sup>

## V. The United States and the Japanese War

As Americans celebrated V-E (Victory in Europe) Day, they redirected their full attention to the still-raging Pacific War. As in Europe, the war in the Pacific started slowly. After Pearl Harbor, the American-controlled Philippine archipelago fell to Japan. After running out of ammunition and supplies, the garrison of American and Filipino soldiers surrendered. The prisoners were marched eighty miles to their prisoner-of-war camp without food, water, or rest. Ten thousand died on the Bataan Death March.<sup>11</sup>

But as Americans mobilized their armed forces, the tide turned. In the summer of 1942, American naval victories at the Battle of the Coral Sea and the aircraft carrier duel at the Battle of Midway crippled Japan's Pacific naval operations. To dislodge Japan's hold over the Pacific, the U.S. military began island hopping: attacking island after island, bypassing the strongest but seizing those capable of holding airfields to continue pushing Japan out of the region. Combat was vicious. At Guadalcanal American soldiers saw Japanese soldiers launch suicidal charges rather



than surrender. Many Japanese soldiers refused to be taken prisoner or to take prisoners themselves. Such tactics, coupled with American racial prejudice, turned the Pacific Theater into a more brutal and barbarous conflict than the European Theater.<sup>12</sup>

Japanese defenders fought tenaciously. Few battles were as one-sided as the Battle of the Philippine Sea, or what the Americans called the Japanese counterattack, the Great Marianas Turkey Shoot. Japanese soldiers bled the Americans in their advance across the Pacific. At Iwo Jima, an eight-square-mile island of volcanic rock, seventeen thousand Japanese soldiers held the island against seventy thousand Marines for over a month. At the cost of nearly their entire force, they inflicted almost thirty thousand casualties before the island was lost.

By February 1945, American bombers were in range of the mainland. Bombers hit Japan's industrial facilities but suffered high casualties. To spare bomber crews from dangerous daylight raids, and to achieve maximum effect against Japan's wooden cities, many American bombers dropped incendiary weapons that created massive firestorms and wreaked havoc on Japanese cities. Over sixty Japanese cities were fire-bombed. American fire bombs killed one hundred thousand civilians in Tokyo in March 1945.

In June 1945, after eighty days of fighting and tens of thousands of casualties, the Americans captured the island of Okinawa. The mainland of Japan was open before them. It was a viable base from which to launch a full invasion of the Japanese homeland and end the war.

Estimates varied, but given the tenacity of Japanese soldiers fighting on islands far from their home, some officials estimated that an invasion of the Japanese mainland could cost half a million American casualties and perhaps millions of Japanese civilians. Historians debate the many motivations that ultimately drove the Americans to use atomic weapons against Japan, and many American officials criticized the decision, but these would be the numbers later cited by government leaders and military officials to justify their use.<sup>13</sup>

Early in the war, fearing that the Germans might develop an atomic bomb, the U.S. government launched the Manhattan Project, a hugely expensive, ambitious program to harness atomic energy and create a single weapon capable of leveling entire cities. The Americans successfully exploded the world's first nuclear device, Trinity, in New Mexico in July 1945. (Physicist J. Robert Oppenheimer, the director of the Los Alamos Laboratory, where the bomb was designed, later recalled that



the event reminded him of Hindu scripture: “Now I am become death, the destroyer of worlds.”) Two more bombs—Fat Man and Little Boy—were built and detonated over two Japanese cities in August. Hiroshima was hit on August 6. Over one hundred thousand civilians were killed. Nagasaki followed on August 9. Perhaps eighty thousand civilians were killed.

Emperor Hirohito announced the surrender of Japan on August 15. On September 2, aboard the battleship USS *Missouri*, delegates from the Japanese government formally signed their surrender. World War II was finally over.

## VI. Soldiers’ Experiences

Almost eighteen million men served in World War II. Volunteers rushed to join the military after Pearl Harbor, but the majority—over ten million—were drafted into service. Volunteers could express their preference for assignment, and many preempted the draft by volunteering. Regardless, recruits judged I-A, “fit for service,” were moved into basic training, where soldiers were developed physically and trained in the basic use of weapons and military equipment. Soldiers were indoctrinated into the chain of command and introduced to military life. After basic, soldiers moved on to more specialized training. For example, combat infantrymen received additional weapons and tactical training, and radio operators learned transmission codes and the operation of field radios. Afterward, an individual’s experience varied depending on what service he entered and to what theater he was assigned.<sup>14</sup>

Soldiers and Marines bore the brunt of on-the-ground combat. After transportation to the front by trains, ships, and trucks, they could expect to march carrying packs weighing anywhere from twenty to fifty pounds containing rations, ammunition, bandages, tools, clothing, and miscellaneous personal items in addition to their weapons. Sailors, once deployed, spent months at sea operating their assigned vessels. Larger ships, particularly aircraft carriers, were veritable floating cities. In most, sailors lived and worked in cramped conditions, often sleeping in bunks stacked in rooms housing dozens of sailors. Senior officers received small rooms of their own. Sixty thousand American sailors lost their lives in the war.

During World War II, the Air Force was still a branch of the U.S. Army and soldiers served in ground and air crews. World War II saw



the institutionalization of massive bombing campaigns against cities and industrial production. Large bombers like the B-17 Flying Fortress required pilots, navigators, bombardiers, radio operators, and four dedicated machine gunners. Airmen on bombing raids left from bases in England or Italy or from Pacific islands and endured hours of flight before approaching enemy territory. At high altitude, and without pressurized cabins, crews used oxygen tanks to breathe and on-board temperatures plummeted. Once in enemy airspace, crews confronted enemy fighters and anti-aircraft flak from the ground. While fighter pilots flew as escorts, the Air Corps suffered heavy casualties. Tens of thousands of airmen lost their lives.

On the ground, conditions varied. Soldiers in Europe endured freezing winters, impenetrable French hedgerows, Italian mountain ranges, and dense forests. Germans fought with a Western mentality familiar to Americans. Soldiers in the Pacific endured heat and humidity, monsoons, jungles, and tropical diseases. And they confronted an unfamiliar foe. Americans, for instance, could understand surrender as prudent; many Japanese soldiers saw it as cowardice. What Americans saw as a fanatical waste of life, the Japanese saw as brave and honorable. Atrocities flourished in the Pacific at a level unmatched in Europe.

## VII. The Wartime Economy

Economies win wars no less than militaries. The war converted American factories to wartime production, reawakened Americans' economic might, armed Allied belligerents and the American armed forces, effectively pulled America out of the Great Depression, and ushered in an era of unparalleled economic prosperity.<sup>15</sup>

Roosevelt's New Deal had ameliorated the worst of the Depression, but the economy still limped its way forward into the 1930s. But then Europe fell into war, and, despite its isolationism, Americans were glad to sell the Allies arms and supplies. And then Pearl Harbor changed everything. The United States drafted the economy into war service. The "sleeping giant" mobilized its unrivaled economic capacity to wage worldwide war. Governmental entities such as the War Production Board and the Office of War Mobilization and Reconversion managed economic production for the war effort and economic output exploded. An economy that was unable to provide work for a quarter of the workforce less than a decade earlier now struggled to fill vacant positions.





Government spending during the four years of war *doubled* all federal spending in all of American history up to that point. The budget deficit soared, but, just as Depression-era economists had counseled, the government's massive intervention annihilated unemployment and propelled growth. The economy that came out of the war looked nothing like the one that had begun it.

Military production came at the expense of the civilian consumer economy. Appliance and automobile manufacturers converted their plants to produce weapons and vehicles. Consumer choice was foreclosed. Every American received rationing cards and, legally, goods such as gasoline, coffee, meat, cheese, butter, processed food, firewood, and sugar could not be purchased without them. The housing industry was shut down, and the cities became overcrowded.

But the wartime economy boomed. The Roosevelt administration urged citizens to save their earnings or buy war bonds to prevent inflation. Bond drives were held nationally and headlined by Hollywood

As in World War I, citizens were urged to buy war bonds to support the war effort overseas. Rallies such as this 1943 event appealed to Americans' sense of patriotism. Wikimedia.



celebrities. Such drives were hugely successful. They not only funded much of the war effort, they helped tame inflation as well. So too did tax rates. The federal government raised income taxes and boosted the top marginal tax rate to 94 percent.

With the economy booming and twenty million American workers placed into military service, unemployment virtually disappeared. And yet limits remained. Many defense contractors still refused to hire black workers. A. Philip Randolph in 1941 threatened to lead a march on Washington in protest, compelling Roosevelt to issue Executive Order Number 8802, the Fair Employment Practice in Defense Industries Act, which established the Fair Employment Practices Committee (FEPC) to end racial discrimination in the federal government and the defense industry.<sup>16</sup>

During the war, more and more African Americans continued to leave the agrarian South for the industrial North. And as more and more men joined the military, and more and more positions went unfilled, women joined the workforce en masse. Other American producers looked outside the United States, southward, to Mexico, to fill its labor force. Between 1942 and 1964, the United States contracted thousands of Mexican nationals to work in American agriculture and railroads in the Bracero Program. Jointly administered by the State Department, the Department of Labor, and the Department of Justice, the binational agreement secured five million contracts across twenty-four states.<sup>17</sup>

With factory work proliferating across the country and agricultural labor experiencing severe labor shortages, the presidents of Mexico and the United States signed an agreement in July 1942 to bring the first group of legally contracted workers to California. Discriminatory policies toward people of Mexican descent prevented bracero contracts in Texas until 1947. The Bracero Program survived the war, enshrined in law until the 1960s, when the United States liberalized its immigration laws. Though braceros suffered exploitative labor conditions, for the men who participated the program was a mixed blessing. Interviews with ex-braceros captured the complexity. “They would call us pigs . . . they didn’t have to treat us that way,” one said of his employers, while another said, “For me it was a blessing, the United States was a blessing . . . it is a nation I fell in love with because of the excess work and good pay.”<sup>18</sup> After the exodus of Mexican migrants during the Depression, the program helped reestablish Mexican migration, institutionalized migrant farm work across much of the country, and further planted a Mexican presence in the southern and western United States.





## VIII. Women and World War II

President Franklin D. Roosevelt and his administration had encouraged all able-bodied American women to help the war effort. He considered the role of women in the war critical for American victory, and the public expected women to assume various functions to free men for active military service. While most women opted to remain at home or volunteer with charitable organizations, many went to work or donned a military uniform.

World War II brought unprecedented labor opportunities for American women. Industrial labor, an occupational sphere dominated by men, shifted in part to women for the duration of wartime mobilization. Women applied for jobs in converted munitions factories. The iconic illustrated image of Rosie the Riveter, a muscular woman dressed in coveralls with her hair in a kerchief and inscribed with the phrase *We Can Do It!*, came to stand for female factory labor during the war. But women also worked in various auxiliary positions for the government. Although such jobs were often traditionally gendered female, over a million administrative jobs at the local, state, and national levels were transferred from men to women for the duration of the war.<sup>19</sup>



With so many American workers deployed overseas and with so many new positions created by war production, posters like the iconic 1942 *We Can Do It!* urged women to support the war effort by entering the workforce. Wikimedia.

For women who elected not to work, many volunteer opportunities presented themselves. The American Red Cross, the largest charitable organization in the nation, encouraged women to volunteer with local city chapters. Millions of women organized community social events for families, packed and shipped almost half a million tons of medical supplies overseas, and prepared twenty-seven million care packages of nonperishable items for American and other Allied prisoners of war. The American Red Cross further required all female volunteers to certify as nurse's aides, providing an extra benefit and work opportunity for hospital staffs that suffered severe personnel losses. Other charity organizations, such as church and synagogue affiliates, benevolent associations, and social club auxiliaries, gave women further outlets for volunteer work.

Military service was another option for women who wanted to join the war effort. Over 350,000 women served in several all-female units of the military branches. The Army and Navy Nurse Corps Reserves, the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps, the Navy's Women Accepted for Volunteer Emergency Service, the Coast Guard's SPARs (named for the Coast Guard motto, *Semper Paratus*, "Always Ready"), and Marine Corps units gave women the opportunity to serve as either commissioned officers or enlisted members at military bases at home and abroad. The Nurse Corps Reserves alone commissioned 105,000 army and navy nurses recruited by the American Red Cross. Military nurses worked at base hospitals, mobile medical units, and onboard hospital "mercy" ships.<sup>20</sup>

Jim Crow segregation in both the civilian and military sectors remained a problem for black women who wanted to join the war effort. Even after President Roosevelt signed Executive Order 8802 in 1941, supervisors who hired black women still often relegated them to the most menial tasks on factory floors. Segregation was further upheld in factory lunchrooms, and many black women were forced to work at night to keep them separate from whites. In the military, only the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps and the Nurse Corps Reserves accepted black women for active service, and the army set a limited quota of 10 percent of total end strength for black female officers and enlisted women and segregated black units on active duty. The American Red Cross, meanwhile, recruited only four hundred black nurses for the Army and Navy Nurse Corps Reserves, and black army and navy nurses worked in segregated military hospitals on bases stateside and overseas.

And for all of the postwar celebration of Rosie the Riveter, after the war ended the men returned and most women voluntarily left the work-