

## Leading up to World War II

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

Did you know? As early as 1923, in his memoir and propaganda tract "Mein Kampf" (My Struggle), Adolf Hitler had predicted a general European war that would result in "the extermination of the Jewish race in Germany."

After becoming Chancellor of Germany in 1933, Hitler swiftly consolidated power, anointing himself Führer (supreme leader) in 1934. Obsessed with the idea of the superiority of the "pure" German race, which he called "Aryan," Hitler believed that war was the only way to gain the necessary "Lebensraum," or living space, for the German race to expand. In the mid-1930s, he secretly began the rearmament of Germany, a violation of the Versailles Treaty. After signing alliances with Italy and Japan against the Soviet Union, Hitler sent troops to occupy Austria in 1938 and the following year annexed Czechoslovakia. Hitler's open aggression went unchecked, as the United States and Soviet Union were concentrated on internal politics at the time, and neither France nor Britain (the two other nations most devastated by the Great War) were eager for confrontation.

### Outbreak of World War II (1939)

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

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

### World War II in the West (1940-41)

On April 9, 1940, Germany simultaneously invaded Norway and occupied Denmark, and the war began in earnest. On May 10, German forces swept through Belgium and the Netherlands in what became known as “blitzkrieg,” or lightning war. Three days later, Hitler’s troops crossed the Meuse River and struck French forces at Sedan, located at the northern end of the Maginot Line, an elaborate chain of fortifications constructed after World War I and considered an impenetrable defensive barrier. In fact, the Germans broke through the line with their tanks and planes and continued to the rear, rendering it useless. The British Expeditionary Force (BEF) was evacuated by sea from Dunkirk in late May, while in the south French forces mounted a doomed resistance. With France on the verge of collapse, Italy’s fascist dictator Benito Mussolini formed an alliance with Hitler, the Pact of Steel, and Italy declared war against France and Britain on June 10.

On June 14, German forces entered Paris; a new government formed by Marshal Philippe Petain (France’s hero of World War I) requested an armistice two nights later. France was subsequently divided into two zones, one under German military occupation and the other under Petain’s government, installed at Vichy France. Hitler now turned his attention to Britain, which had the defensive advantage of being separated from the Continent by the English Channel.

To pave the way for an amphibious invasion (dubbed Operation Sea Lion), German planes bombed Britain extensively beginning in September 1940 until May 1941, known as the Blitz, including night raids on London and other industrial centers that caused heavy civilian casualties and damage. The Royal Air Force (RAF) eventually defeated the Luftwaffe (German Air Force) in the Battle of Britain, and Hitler postponed his plans to invade. With Britain’s defensive resources pushed to the limit, Prime Minister Winston Churchill began receiving crucial aid from the U.S. under the Lend-Lease Act, passed by Congress in early 1941.

**Hitler vs. Stalin: Operation Barbarossa (1941-42)**

By early 1941, Hungary, Romania and Bulgaria had joined the Axis, and German troops overran Yugoslavia and Greece that April. Hitler’s conquest of the Balkans was a precursor for his real objective: an invasion of the Soviet Union, whose vast territory would give the German master race the “Lebensraum” it needed. The other half of Hitler’s strategy was the extermination of the Jews from throughout German-occupied Europe. Plans for the “Final Solution” were introduced around the time of the Soviet offensive, and over the next three years more than 4 million Jews would perish in the death camps established in occupied Poland.

On June 22, 1941, Hitler ordered the invasion of the Soviet Union, codenamed Operation Barbarossa. Though Soviet tanks and aircraft greatly outnumbered the Germans’, Russian aviation technology was largely obsolete, and the impact of the surprise invasion helped Germans get within 200 miles of Moscow by mid-July. Arguments between Hitler and his commanders delayed the next German advance until October, when it was stalled by a Soviet counteroffensive and the onset of harsh winter weather.

### **World War II in the Pacific (1941-43)**

With Britain facing Germany in Europe, the United States was the only nation capable of combating Japanese aggression, which by late 1941 included an expansion of its ongoing war with China and the seizure of European colonial holdings in the Far East. On December 7, 1941, 360 Japanese aircraft attacked the major U.S. naval base at Pearl Harbor in Hawaii, taking the Americans completely by surprise and claiming the lives of more than 2,300 troops. The attack on Pearl Harbor served to unify American public opinion in favor of entering World War II, and on December 8 Congress declared war on Japan with only one dissenting vote. Germany and the other Axis Powers promptly declared war on the United States. After a long string of Japanese victories, the U.S. Pacific Fleet won the Battle of Midway in June 1942, which proved to be a turning point in the war. On Guadalcanal, one of the southern Solomon Islands, the Allies also had success against Japanese forces in a series of battles from August 1942 to February 1943, helping turn the tide further in the Pacific. In mid-1943, Allied naval forces began an aggressive counterattack against Japan, involving a series of amphibious assaults on key Japanese-held islands in the Pacific. This "island-hopping" strategy proved successful, and Allied forces moved closer to their ultimate goal of invading the mainland Japan.

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

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

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

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

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

### **World War II Ends (1945)**

At the Potsdam Conference of July-August 1945, U.S. President Harry S. Truman (who had taken office after Roosevelt's death in April), Churchill and Stalin discussed the ongoing war with Japan as well as the peace settlement with Germany. Post-war Germany would be divided into four occupation zones, to be controlled by the Soviet Union, Britain, the United States and France. On the divisive matter of Eastern Europe's future, Churchill and Truman acquiesced to Stalin, as they needed Soviet cooperation in the war against Japan.

Heavy casualties sustained in the campaigns at Iwo Jima (February 1945) and Okinawa (April-June 1945), and fears of the even costlier land invasion of Japan led Truman to authorize the use of a new and devastating weapon.

Developed during a top secret operation code-named The Manhattan Project, the atomic bomb was unleashed on the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in early August. On August 15, the Japanese government issued a statement declaring they would accept the terms of the Potsdam Declaration, and on September 2, U.S. General Douglas MacArthur accepted Japan's formal surrender aboard the USS Missouri in Tokyo Bay.

#### African American Servicemen Fight Two Wars

World War II exposed a glaring paradox within the United States Armed Forces. Although more than 1 million African Americans served in the war to defeat Nazism and fascism, they did so in segregated units. The same discriminatory Jim Crow policies that were rampant in American society were reinforced by the U.S. military. Black servicemen rarely saw combat and were largely relegated to labor and supply units that were commanded by white officers.

There were several African American units that proved essential in helping to win World War II, with the Tuskegee Airmen being among the most celebrated. But the Red Ball Express, the truck convoy of mostly Black drivers were responsible for delivering essential goods to General George S. Patton's troops on the front lines in France. The all-Black 761st Tank Battalion fought in the Battle of the Bulge, and the 92 Infantry Division, fought in fierce ground battles in Italy. Yet, despite their role in defeating fascism, the fight for equality continued for African American soldiers after the World War II ended. They remained in segregated units and lower-ranking positions, well into the Korean War, a few years after President Truman signed an executive order to desegregate the U.S. military in 1948.

#### World War II Casualties and Legacy

World War II proved to be the deadliest international conflict in history, taking the lives of 60 to 80 million people, including 6 million Jews who died at the hands of the Nazis during the Holocaust, making up around 7.5% to 10% of all WWII deaths. Civilians made up an estimated 50-55 million deaths from the war (or ~65% of total). while military comprised 21 to 25 million of those lost during

the war(or ~35% of total). Millions more were injured, and still more lost their homes and property. The legacy of the war would include the spread of communism from the Soviet

Union into eastern Europe as well as its eventual triumph in China, and the global shift in power from Europe to two rival superpowers—the United States and the Soviet Union—that would soon face off against each other in the Cold War.

**Battle of the Atlantic: September 3, 1939 to May 8, 1945**

World War II's longest continuous campaign takes place, with the Allies striking a naval blockade against Germany and igniting a struggle for control of Atlantic Ocean sea routes. The Axis, with its U-boats, responds with a counter-blockade that is at first successful, but the Allies' use of convoys, aircraft and technology eventually turns the tide. Over five years, thousands of ships engage in 100-plus battles in the Atlantic Ocean with approximately 100,000 lives lost.

**Battle of Dunkirk from May 26 to June 4, 1940**

A German invasion around the French coastal town of Dunkirk separates the French and British armies, marooning Allied forces. But with Adolf Hitler halting Germany's advance there, the Allies are able to perform a daring—and successful—evacuation, called Operation Dynamo. Germany claims victory with remaining Allied troops surrendering, but the evacuation serves to boost British morale, still referred to as the "Dunkirk spirit."

**Battle of Britain, July 10 to October 31, 1940**

After a nearly four-month air campaign waged over England, Britain's Royal Air Force and Navy respond to heavy bombing attacks from Germany's Luftwaffe air force, including "the Blitz," in an attempt to destroy the RAF before invading. Defense systems, including radar, and Hitler's decision to bomb London, rather than military bases, allows Britain to regroup and eventually win the battle.

**Battle of Crete: May 20 to June 1, 1941**

Nazi paratroopers invade the Greek island of Crete, marking history's first mostly airborne attack. Day one of the campaign results in heavy losses for the Germans, but fearing a sea assault, Allied forces soon withdraw and evacuate in defeat. With nearly 4,000 Allies and more than 3,000 Germans killed, however, Hitler decries "the day of the parachutist is over" and it is the country's last airborne campaign.

**The Siege of Leningrad: September 8, 1941 to January 27, 1944**

German and Finnish soldiers begin a nearly 900-day siege and blockade of Leningrad (now St. Petersburg), the second-biggest Soviet city and a major center of industry. With supplies, water, electricity and transportation cut off, 1.3 million people are evacuated. As the Red Army finally begins to break through the blockade, the siege ends and the city is freed, but approximately 800,000 civilians die, most from hunger.

**Battle of Moscow: October 2, 1941 to January 7, 1942**

Following Germany's Operation Barbarossa, an invasion of the Soviet Union, the Axis launches a campaign to capture the capital city of Moscow before winter sets

in. In preparation, the Soviets fortify the city and bring in reinforcements. After a series of gains and losses on both sides during harsh weather, the Germans are eventually beaten back and forced to retreat.

**Battle of Pearl Harbor, December 7, 1941**

In a surprise wave of attacks on the U.S. naval base at Oahu Island, Hawaii's Pearl Harbor, Japan, aligned with the Axis, takes out America's Pacific fleet (the fleet's three aircraft carriers are not present during the attack). With approximately 2,400 U.S. troops killed and another 1,000 wounded, President Franklin D. Roosevelt calls it "a date which will live in infamy" and, the next day, the U.S. officially enters World War II, declaring war on Japan.

**Second Battle of Kharkov: May 12-28, 1942**

In a counter-offensive after Germany's attack on Moscow, the Soviet Red Army attacks Kharkov, Ukraine with the aid of 1,500 tanks and 1,000 aircraft but German intelligence alerts the Axis to the campaign. Facing nearly 300,000 casualties and gaining little traction, the Soviets are forced to concede.

**Battle of Midway, June 4-7, 1942**

In one of America's most important World War II naval wins, American intelligence is able to break codes to thwart a Japanese attack on the US. at Midway Island in the Pacific Ocean. With Japan focused on Midway, U.S. forces, including dive bombers, attack, sinking four of Japan's aircraft carriers and the victory serves as a turning point in the conflict.

**Battle of the Guadalcanal Campaign: August 7, 1942 to February 9, 1943**

Weeks after Japan begins building a strategic airfield on Guadalcanal, part of the Solomon Islands in the South Pacific Ocean, U.S. forces launch a surprise attack, taking control of the airfield and forcing the Japanese into initial retreat. But with reinforcements arriving, hand-to-hand jungle combat follows with Japan finally retreating six months later, with 31,000 casualties and the loss of 38 ships. The Allies lose 29 ships and 7,100 soldiers.

**Battle of Stalingrad, August 23, 1942 to February 2, 1943**

In a conflict that marks the war's outcome tipping in the favor of the Allies, the Red Army defends the Russian city of Stalingrad from German attack, bringing an end to the Axis's eastern Europe advances and handing it its first decisive defeat. One of the longest, biggest and deadliest battles of the war, it ends with close to 2 million casualties, including civilians, with brutal winter weather and a Russian blockade causing many Germans to starve to death.

**Operation Torch: November 8-16, 1942**

The Allies invade French North Africa in an attempt to draw the Axis away from Soviet attacks on the Eastern Front and gain control of the Mediterranean shipping lanes. Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower leads attacks on Oran, Algiers and Casablanca before advancing on Tunis and causing the Vichy French to realign with the Allies. The victory is touted by Winston Churchill as the "end of the beginning."

**Battle of Kursk, July 5 to August 23, 1943** Military history's largest tank battle takes place on the Eastern Front involving an estimated 6,000 tanks, 4,000 aircraft and 2 million soldiers. In its last blitzkrieg offensive, Germany attacks the Red Army near Kursk, Russia, but due to delays and the cracking of the German Wehrmacht code, the Soviets are prepared and keep Hitler from conquering Russia.

**Battle of Monte Cassino: January 17 to May 18, 1944**

Advancing in Italy toward Rome, the Allies attack the Gustav Line, held by the Axis, at the mountain town of Monte Cassino, home to a Benedictine abbey dating to 524 A.D. Evacuated by the Germans, both sides tell the Vatican it will not be attacked or used in military operations. However, in a bomber attack by the Allies, the abbey is destroyed, leading to public outcry and, post-bombing, as shelter for the Nazis. Polish troops capture the abbey on May 18, leading the way for the Allied capture of Rome soon after.

**Battle of Anzio: January 22 to June 5, 1944**

Attempting to liberate Italy, the Allies land at Anzio, catching the Germans by surprise and quickly securing a beachhead during Operation Shingle. However, continued Axis resistance and counter-attacks ensue, resulting in a stalemate that doesn't end until the fall of Rome. It's seen as a failure for the Allies, although it does keep German troops from moving to France in the days before the invasion at Normandy.

**Battle of the Philippine Sea: June 19-20, 1944**

Japan attacks Allied forces who have advanced in the Pacific Theater to the Marianas Islands in the war's largest aircraft carrier battle. Prepared for the strike, the United States launches a stunning counter-attack, and the battle is later called the "Marianas Turkey Shoot" due to minimal U.S. casualties and the Japanese losing some 600 aircraft, two oilers and three carriers.

**Battle of Normandy, June 6 to August 30, 1944**

American, British and Canadian troops storm five beaches at Normandy France June 6, known as D-Day, waging one of military history's largest water invasions. At Omaha Beach, more than 2,000 American casualties are suffered with some 4,000 deaths that day. But by June 11, the beaches are secured and 325,000-plus forces have landed. The Allies begin their advance across Normandy, eventually liberating Paris.

**Battle of Leyte Gulf: October 23-26, 1944**

In World War II's largest naval battle, the Allies invade the Philippines to retake the commonwealth and create a Southeast Asian blockade. In a counter-attack, Japan deploys its first kamikaze, or suicide, bombers. Despite heavy U.S. casualties—more than 23,000 U.S. soldiers and sailors are killed—Japan suffers nearly 420,000 casualties and the conflict serves to cripple most of Japan's surface fleet, giving the Allies command of the Pacific.

**Battle of the Bulge: December 16, 1944 to January 25, 1945**  
Fought in brutal, frigid winter conditions, Hitler's forces launch a surprise, last-ditch counter-attack in an attempt to split the line of the Allies on the Western Front at the forested region of Ardennes in Belgium and Luxembourg. The battle becomes known as Battle of the Bulge, because the Germans created a "bulge" around the area of the Ardennes forest in pushing through the American defensive line.

After early German success, the Allies regain their positions thanks, in part, to reinforcements and an eventual Christmas Day airstrike once the weather clears. The Allies win (German casualties number 100,000-plus and American casualties are estimated to be 81,000) and continue their advance toward Berlin.

**Battle of Iwo Jima: February 19 to March 26, 1945**

Fought 660 miles south of Tokyo, U.S. Marines invade the volcanic island of Iwo Jima seeking a strategic staging area for a possible attack on Japan's mainland. Weeks of bloody battle follow and while the Americans eventually gain control, 7,000 Marines are killed, with 20,000 wounded. All but 216 of 18,000 Japanese soldiers are killed, about 99% are killed, only 1% survived. The island later serves as an emergency landing sight for B-29 bombers.

**Battle of Berlin, April 16 to May 2, 1945**

Soviet forces, with support from American and British aircraft, launch an offensive against the German capital of Berlin in one of World War II's final major battles. As the Red Army encircles the city, capturing Gestapo headquarters, Hitler commits suicide April 30 in the Führerbunker and Germany surrenders a few days later, essentially ending the war.

**Battle of Okinawa: April 1 to June 22, 1945**

World War II's final major battle—and one of the war's bloodiest—begins Easter Sunday as U.S. Army and Marine forces invade Okinawa in the Ryukyus island chain southwest of Japan with the orders of taking the island to execute air strikes against Japan and create a blockade.

Counter-striking with kamikaze attacks, the Japanese sink 26 Allied ships and damage nearly 170 more, causing more than 12,000 American deaths over the three-month battle. Finally overpowered by the Americans, many surviving Japanese kill themselves rather than surrender. In the end, Over 100,000 Japanese soldiers and 150,000 civilians perished, making it one of the bloodiest battles of the war.