

Leading up to World War II

The devastation of the Great War (World War I) greatly destabilized Europe, and many unresolved issues from that conflict helped spark World War II. Germany's political and economic instability and resentment over the Treaty of Versailles fueled the rise of Adolf Hitler and the Nazi Party (NSDAP). In his 1923 propaganda tract *Mein Kampf*, Hitler predicted a European war and called for the extermination of the Jewish population in Germany.

After becoming Chancellor in 1933 and Führer in 1934, Hitler pursued an ideology centered on "Aryan" racial superiority and territorial expansion. He violated the Versailles Treaty by secretly rearming Germany. In 1938, German forces occupied Austria and annexed Czechoslovakia in 1939. Despite these acts of aggression, France and Britain hesitated to act due to their own post-WWI traumas, while the U.S. and USSR focused on internal politics.

Outbreak of World War II (1939)

In August 1939, Hitler and Stalin signed the German-Soviet Nonaggression Pact. On September 1, Hitler invaded Poland; on September 17, the Soviets did the same. Within weeks, Poland was conquered and divided. Over 100 merchant ships were sunk by German U-boats in just the first four months—an early sign of the deadly Battle of the Atlantic, which would ultimately cost around 100,000 lives.

World War II in the West (1940–41)

In spring 1940, Germany launched its Blitzkrieg strategy through Denmark, Norway, Belgium, and the Netherlands. The fall of France quickly followed. Operation Dynamo evacuated British troops from Dunkirk—though a German victory, the rescue of over 330,000 Allied troops became a morale booster. On June 10, 1940, Italy joined the Axis. Paris fell on June 14.

The Battle of Britain began in July 1940. From September to May 1941, German bombers inflicted heavy civilian casualties during the Blitz. Despite this, Britain's Royal Air Force (RAF) ultimately triumphed. Civilian deaths in the war would later total between 50 and 55 million—around 65% to 70% of total WWII deaths.

Operation Barbarossa (1941–42)

Germany invaded the Soviet Union on June 22, 1941. Despite numerical superiority in tanks and planes, Soviet forces were initially caught off guard. Within weeks, German forces advanced within 200 miles of Moscow. However, by winter, the Soviet counteroffensive and bitter weather stalled the assault. Hitler's genocide plans advanced during this period: over 4 million Jews were exterminated in Polish death camps—part of a total of 6 million Jewish victims, making up around 7.5% to 10% of all WWII deaths.

Pacific War (1941–43)

On December 7, 1941, Japan attacked Pearl Harbor, killing more than 2,300 Americans—less than 1% of stationed forces. The U.S. declared war, and the global conflict intensified. The June 1942 Battle of Midway was pivotal: U.S. forces sank four Japanese carriers. The Guadalcanal campaign from August 1942 to February 1943 marked the beginning of the Allies' "island-hopping" strategy. That campaign alone saw 31,000 Japanese casualties and 7,100 Allied losses.

Toward Allied Victory (1943–45)

The tide turned with Allied victories in North Africa and Italy. Mussolini's government collapsed in July 1943. On the Eastern Front, the Soviet victory at Stalingrad—where nearly 2 million people

died—ended Germany's eastern advances. On D-Day, June 6, 1944, 156,000 Allied troops landed in Normandy. The U.S. suffered 2,000+ casualties on Omaha Beach alone.

The Battle of the Bulge (Dec 1944–Jan 1945) was Hitler's last major offensive. It resulted in 100,000+ German casualties and approximately 81,000 American ones. In April 1945, Soviet forces encircled Berlin. Hitler died by suicide on April 30. Germany surrendered on May 8.

End of the War and Aftermath

At the Potsdam Conference (July–Aug 1945), post-war plans for Germany were finalized. Meanwhile, brutal battles continued in the Pacific. On Iwo Jima, 7,000 U.S. Marines were killed and 20,000 wounded. Of 18,000 Japanese soldiers stationed there, only 216 survived—just 1.2%.

The Battle of Okinawa (April–June 1945) resulted in more than 12,000 American deaths. Over 100,000 Japanese soldiers and 150,000 civilians perished, making it one of the bloodiest battles of the war. The immense cost of these battles led President Truman to approve the use of atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August 1945. Japan surrendered on September 2.

African American Servicemen

Over 1 million African Americans served in segregated units during WWII. While often restricted to labor and support roles, they made significant contributions. The Red Ball Express ensured supply lines for Patton's army; the 761st Tank Battalion and 92nd Infantry Division saw fierce combat. However, despite fighting for freedom abroad, Black troops returned to a segregated America. It wasn't until 1948 that President Truman ordered the military's desegregation.

Casualties and Legacy

World War II resulted in 60–80 million deaths worldwide. Civilians accounted for roughly 50–55 million deaths (or ~65% of total), while military deaths numbered 21–25 million. The Holocaust claimed 6 million Jewish lives.

The war shifted global power from Europe to the U.S. and USSR, laying the groundwork for the Cold War and the geopolitical landscape of the modern world.