

chapter 18

World War II, 1939–1945



Historians agree that the peace treaty signed in 1919 at the Congress of Versailles was one of the major causes of World War II. The second war arose as a natural consequence of the first, and both can fairly be described as wars of German aggression. Many historians consider the two world wars (and the smaller-scale wars that occurred in between) as one war. Some historians refer to the period 1914–1945 as “the Second Thirty Years’ War.”

The Axis powers (Germany and Italy) had the upper hand on the battlefield until late 1942, for several reasons. First, they were the aggressors and were therefore able to control the course of events. Second, their leaders had been planning for the war for years, while the Allied nations (Britain, France, and the USSR—the U.S. would join the Allies later) were taken more or less by surprise. Third, the German troops were extremely well-disciplined. Fourth, Germany and Italy between them controlled almost all of Europe and a sizable chunk of North Africa.

The Allied powers were eventually able to seize the upper hand for two reasons, both very important. First, numerical strength was on their side. The United States and the USSR could provide fresh troops in almost unlimited numbers, and the Italians changed sides in 1943, which left Germany alone. Second, American factories were far from the fighting, out of danger of Axis bombing or capture, and were a source of virtually unlimited supplies: weapons, ammunition, ships, tanks, and so on.

Perhaps the major reason for the German defeat in the war lies in the personality of Hitler. As sole dictator of Germany, Hitler made all the crucial decisions in the early days of the war; many of these turned out to be serious strategic errors. As the war dragged on, Hitler seemed less and less aware of events. Historians are generally agreed that he was not entirely sane.

In terms of lost lives and ruined cities, World War II was by far the costliest war in history. It ended a long historical era of European domination. As it ended, the Allies began to realize they would have to take extraordinary steps to prevent such wholesale violence and slaughter from occurring in the future.

CHAPTER 18 OBJECTIVES

- Identify the major causes of World War II.
- List the Allied and Axis nations and identify their leaders.
- Describe the major battles of the war and locate them on the map.
- Explain what happened at the Yalta and Potsdam conferences.

Chapter 18 Time Line

- 1933 Adolf Hitler becomes chancellor of Germany
- 1935 Nuremberg Laws deprive Jews of German citizenship
- 1936 Germany annexes Rhineland; Germany and Italy unite as Axis powers
- 1938 Germany annexes Austria
- 1939 August 23 Germany and Soviet Union sign nonaggression pact
- September Germany and Soviet Union annex Poland from opposite sides; Britain and France declare war on Germany
- 1940 May 10 Germany invades Belgium and marches into France; Winston Churchill becomes prime minister of Britain
- May 20 Allies retreat at Dunkirk
- June 10 Italy declares war on Britain and France
- July 10 Germany sets up Vichy regime in southern France

- 1941 **June 22** Germany invades Soviet Union; Soviet Union joins Allied side
- **Summer** (exact date is unknown) Germans institute the notorious “final solution” policy of exterminating Jews and other so-called *Untermenschen*
- **December 11** Germany declares war on United States after Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor
- 1943 **May 13** Axis forces surrender in North Africa
- **July 24–25** Mussolini deposed
- **September 3** Italy signs armistice with Allies
- 1944 **June 4** Rome falls to Allies
- **June 6** D-Day; landing of American forces on Normandy beaches
- **August 25** Allies liberate Paris
- **September** Battle of the Bulge
- 1945 **February** Yalta Conference; Allies begin bombing Germany
- **March** Allies invade Germany
- **April 30** Hitler commits suicide
- **May 7** Germany surrenders
- **July** Potsdam Conference

1933: The Beginning of German Aggression

In flat defiance of the Versailles Treaty, Hitler ordered Germany to begin rebuilding its military shortly after he became chancellor. Rearming began in 1933 and escalated in 1936 as part of Hitler’s plan to begin a war of aggression in which he would restore Germany to its mythical imperial glory. In concrete terms, his plan in the late 1930s was to create a culturally and ethnically German empire in central Europe, and to annex an undetermined number of the smaller Eastern European states.

Germany moved into the Rhineland and occupied it in 1936. In 1938, the German army invaded and annexed Austria (the Germans referred to this event

as the *Anschluss*, or “union”), and in 1939, Czechoslovakia. Other European nations watched with concern, but there was no popular support anywhere for another war with Germany. Hitler was therefore allowed to proceed almost unchecked, and he proved he was entirely capable of effective intimidation tactics against anyone who did object. The next step required forming an alliance with the Soviet Union.

Secretly, Hitler and Stalin signed a nonaggression pact with two major provisions. First, neither nation would attack the other. Second, both nations would invade Poland from opposite sides and divide it between them. Stalin’s motive was to recover Polish territory that had been under Russian control before World War I. Hitler’s motive was to recover a stretch of formerly German territory known as the Danzig Corridor.

Danzig was an important port city on the Baltic; the fifty-mile-wide Danzig Corridor provided overland access to it. The Versailles Treaty had declared Danzig a free city and had given the corridor to Poland, thus separating East Prussia geographically from the rest of Germany. Hitler intended to take over the corridor and the port, thus reuniting the German state into one landmass. Of course, the invasion of Poland would also allow the German army direct overland access to the Soviet Union—something the usually distrustful Stalin apparently had not considered.

Britain and France were agreed that Germany could not be permitted to upset the balance of power by taking over all of Eastern Europe and had formally guaranteed Poland’s sovereignty. Hitler’s closest associates, knowing of the agreement, had tried to dissuade him from provoking a war against the Allies by invading Poland, but Hitler refused to listen to them, considering the agreement a bluff. He promptly realized his mistake: Britain and France declared war on Germany immediately after the German invasion of Poland.

1940: The Fall of France and the Battle of Britain

In April 1940, the German army invaded Denmark and Norway. In May the army staged a successful two-pronged attack on France, with one division invading through Belgium and the other through the Ardennes, south of Paris. The advancing German divisions cut off the British troops, who were forced to retreat across the English Channel. On June 21, Marshal Pétain of France asked for an armistice. Thus Hitler won an easy victory over Germany’s historical enemy. The Germans would occupy Paris until late 1944. Hitler maintained

control over southern France, Morocco, and Algeria throughout the Vichy regime.

Now that the Germans were firmly installed only a few miles away across the Channel, the British knew that a change in their leadership was overdue. Winston Churchill had warned Parliament for years about German rearmament and its probable consequences. He had vigorously opposed his predecessor Neville Chamberlain's policy of appeasement. The people turned to Churchill in their fear, and he became prime minister on May 10.

No wartime leader in history ever played a more important role than Churchill in maintaining the morale of his people. Churchill may have been the only man in Europe whom Hitler could not intimidate. His refusal to even consider the possibility of a British defeat was communicated to his people in his radio addresses. Churchill and the Royal Family set an example of courage by refusing to leave London, despite the nightly bombing of the capital by the German air force.

This attack from the air is known as the Battle of Britain, fought entirely between the two air forces. The bombardment began as a prelude to a planned German invasion that never took place. The German Luftwaffe bombed Royal Air Force bases and airfields throughout southern England into the late summer of 1940. The result was costly for the Germans; they lost more than half their fighter planes and took revenge by bombing London and other heavily populated civilian areas. The purpose of the Blitz, as the attack on the civilians is called, was to intimidate the British into surrender or withdrawal from the war. In 1941, the Germans realized this purpose had failed. They would return to bomb London again in 1943, but for now the Battle of Britain was won.

The Eastern Front

In perhaps his most serious error of judgment, Hitler abandoned the nonaggression pact he had signed with Stalin and invaded the Soviet Union in 1941. The Soviets were taken completely unawares, but they soon rallied against the enemy and proved fierce and stubborn in opposition. The German attack immediately brought the Soviet Union into the war on the Allied side. With its enormous army, the USSR would be a crucial factor in the ultimate Allied victory.

In their attack on the eastern front, the Germans made two crucial mistakes. First, they seriously underestimated the vast size of the Soviet army and the

production capacity of the Soviet munitions factories. Second, Hitler genuinely believed that Russians, like all Slavs, were an inferior people who would not be capable of defeating the German army. Of course, this was a delusion with no basis in reality. In fact, the Soviets were highly disciplined, having learned obedience under the harsh rule of Stalin; in that way at least, he proved an important unifying force for his people during wartime. Both these mistakes led the Germans to believe they could achieve an easy victory; hence they did not send a large enough army to the eastern front.

In September 1941, the Germans laid siege to Leningrad. Pinned inside their city with an ever-dwindling supply of food, all the Russians could do was tighten their belts and wait and hope for rescue. By the time the siege was lifted in 1944, more than one million Russian civilians had died of starvation and related illnesses. The Soviets would retaliate for this when they marched into Berlin in 1945.

In the summer of 1942, the industrial city of Stalingrad on the Volga River became a major battleground. The Germans nearly secured a victory, but the Soviets refused to give up, eventually winning the battle in January 1943.

North Africa and the Italian Front

In 1941, Japan took a hand in the game by bombing the U.S. naval base at Pearl Harbor in a surprise, unannounced attack. The United States immediately declared war on Japan. Honoring an agreement signed with Japan in 1940, Hitler then declared war on the United States. He seriously underestimated the efficiency of the American response and the speed with which the Americans would come to the rescue of their European allies.

When the Americans arrived in Europe, they planned with Allied leaders to begin their attack in the Mediterranean. Under the overall command of U.S. General Dwight D. Eisenhower, the Allies invaded North Africa in November 1942. British forces under General Montgomery pursued German forces led by General Erwin Johannes Rommel. Despite Rommel's great skill and tactical ability, his forces were outnumbered and he lost ground at the Battle of El Alamein. The Allies soon controlled North Africa and blocked supply lines between Italy and Germany. In May 1943, the Allies forced the surrender of Axis troops in Tunisia, their last African stronghold. The combinations of the Soviet and North African victories turned the tide of war in the Allies' favor.

With North Africa under their control, the Allies invaded Sicily in July 1943, using it as a base from which to plan their attack on the Italian mainland. Italy gave way promptly. Many Italians had come to despise the Fascists, and the nation as a whole felt little loyalty to Mussolini by this time.

The king of Italy had Mussolini arrested and replaced him with a new prime minister. In September, the Germans rescued Mussolini and helped him establish a new Fascist power base in northern Italy. Meanwhile, the new Italian government signed an armistice with the Allies. Allied forces, including Italian troops, liberated Naples in October 1943 and Rome in June 1944. By then, Italian rebels had located Mussolini and executed him.

The Western Front

The Allies bombed Germany throughout 1943. The goal of the bombing was twofold: first, to destroy strategic locations such as railroad lines and factories, and second, to break the spirit of the German people by destroying their civilization, just as the Germans had tried to do against Britain. Allied bombs killed tens of thousands of German civilians and reduced virtually every large German city to rubble. The Allied bombing of the ancient and beautiful city of Dresden later became a byword for senseless, vicious destruction far beyond what was necessary in strategic terms.

The navies carried on the Battle of the Atlantic. Until 1943, German U-boats held the upper hand, attacking Allied ships with great success. The tide turned when the Allies developed sonar technology that helped them pinpoint the U-boats' locations, invisible far below the surface. By 1944 the Allies had regained control over the oceans.

The Allies agreed that the war would be won or lost on the western front. The United States and Britain combined forces to launch a surprise offensive in Normandy, on the French side of the English Channel. Working with Allied military staff, Eisenhower laid a trail of misinformation and false clues that led the Germans to expect an invasion at Calais, some distance away.

On D-Day, June 6, 1944, 150,000 Allied troops crossed the English Channel, landed on the beaches of France, and began marching toward Paris. No German troops were there to stop them; Eisenhower's deception had fooled Hitler. On August 25, 1944, the Allies liberated Paris.

After the shock of losing the French capital, the Germans launched a fierce assault on the Allied troops in the Ardennes region. They pushed Allied troops

so far back at one location that they nearly broke through the line of defense, forming a “bulge” in the front line and thus giving the Battle of the Bulge its name. The Allies, outnumbered by nearly two to one, held out until reinforcements arrived and helped them push the Germans back. By January, it was clear that the Germans had lost any chance at victory.

In February 1945, Churchill, Roosevelt, and Stalin met at Yalta to plan for the peace they knew lay in the near future. Stalin promised that after Germany surrendered, Soviet troops would help the United States defeat Japan. (The Soviets made good on this promise; Japan surrendered in September 1945.) The three leaders then agreed to occupy Germany after the war, and discussed plans for a new League of Nations.

The End of the War

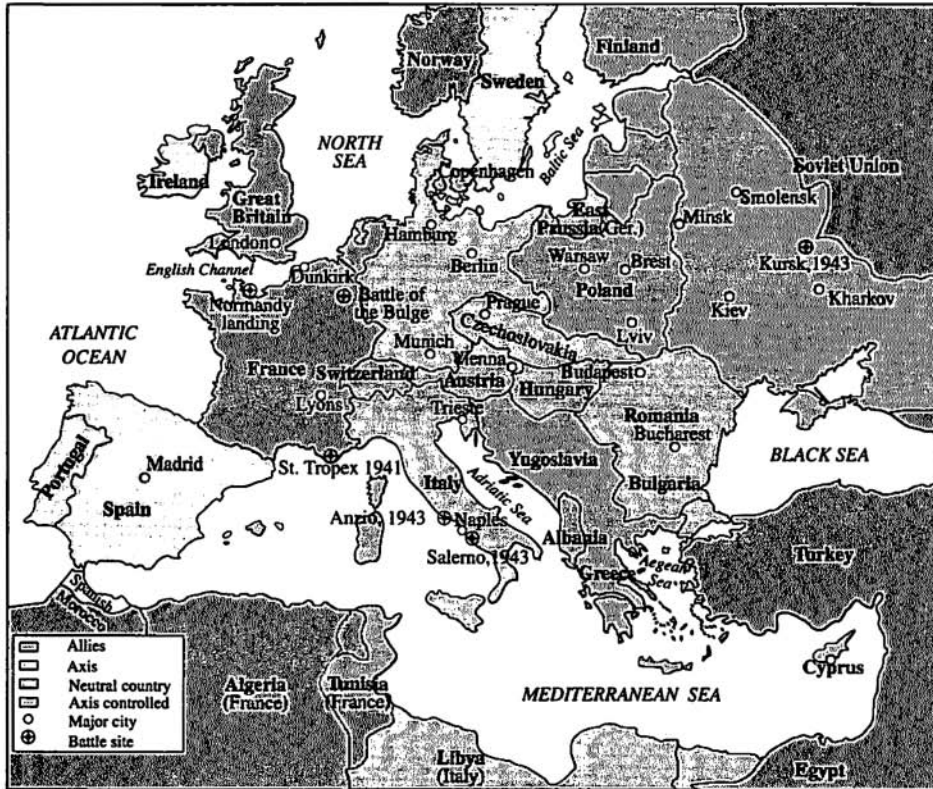
In 1945, Soviet troops were marching westward toward Berlin, while Allied troops approached it from the southeast. In April, the Soviets were the first to march into Hitler’s capital city, where they took brutal revenge on the people. Unable to face the loss of his power, or to contemplate the punishment and public humiliation he would undergo as the loser of the war, Hitler committed suicide on April 30. Germany surrendered a week later, ending the war in Europe.

As the British and American troops marched eastward, liberating Austria and Poland, they discovered the concentration camps where millions of Jews and other “non-Aryans” of central and eastern Europe, notably the migratory Sinti and Romany peoples, had been rounded up for slaughter in a deliberate massacre of innocents known to history as the Holocaust.

Since the camps were in their own backyards, and since their own friends and neighbors had been dragged away and imprisoned in them, a fair number of Europeans, especially Germans and Poles who lived nearby, were more or less aware of the camps and their significance. Across Europe, many courageous individuals helped to hide their Jewish friends or aid them in other ways. However, no nation made any official attempt to put a stop to what was happening. Historians continue to debate the leaders’ reasons, with explanations ranging from deep-seated racism to the belief that the survival of Europe as a whole was a more urgent priority than protecting the inmates of the camps.

The Allied troops, particularly the Americans, were unprepared for what they found when they liberated the camps. The prisoners had been shorn of

their hair and starved to two-thirds or one-half their normal body weight; registration numbers were tattooed on their arms; exhaustion and disease had robbed them of all their vitality. There was large-scale cremation equipment at some camps, and massive common graves at all of them. There were huge, neatly sorted piles of human hair, gold dental fillings, eyeglasses, clothing, and shoes. Almost all the camp guards had committed suicide or fled in terror of the approaching Allied armies.



World War II 1939-1945

Results of the War

The Allied forces had crushed the German attempt to conquer Europe. The Nazi Party was disbanded and discredited; many of its key figures killed themselves or fled to South America. A number of the rest were tried as war criminals. Germany lost all the territory it had conquered during the war.

Europe's population was devastated by the war. The Soviet Union was the hardest hit of all, with 9 million soldiers and 19 million civilians dead. The total deaths for all other European nations combined were about 5 million soldiers and about 7 million civilians, including the refugees of all nations who died of starvation, disease, or stray bullets. Approximately 6 million Jews, Sinti, and Romany were massacred in the Nazi concentration camps. Thousands more Europeans were lucky enough to emigrate overseas before or during the war; most would never return.

Not only people but whole cities were casualties of the war. Much of central Europe lay in ruins. Germany was utterly destroyed by Allied bombs. The beautiful cities of Berlin and Vienna were unrecognizable, nothing but smoking heaps of loose bricks, chunks of concrete, and wrecked hulks of buildings. Cities and villages across Italy and Poland had been reduced to piles of stones. Transportation systems across the continent were wrecked. Everyday necessities such as fresh water, fuel, electricity, and food were unavailable. Sanitation was impossible in bombed-out cities. Governments were in disarray or had been removed from power.

The war ended a long era of European domination of the globe. For the next fifty years, only two nations dominated world affairs: the United States and the Soviet Union. The tremendous power the Soviet Union would soon wield was not immediately apparent at the end of World War II; the case was quite otherwise with the United States. The United States emerged strong from the war for three reasons. First, the munitions industry had completely reinvigorated the American economy. Second, American casualties had been very low compared to European losses. Third, the war had had only a minimal impact on American civilians, since apart from the one bombing attack on Pearl Harbor, they were far removed from the combat zones.

The leaders meeting in Potsdam for the peace conference had an enormous rebuilding task before them.

Provisions of the Potsdam Conference

- Austria and Germany would each be divided into four zones of occupation: Soviet, British, U.S., and French.
- The capital cities of Vienna and Berlin would be divided into four zones of occupation, as above.
- The Allies would help to rebuild German industry and reestablish local German governments.

- German refugees would be helped to return to their homes.
- Poland would retain German territory it had taken during the war.
- Germany would pay reparations to all Allied nations, with the Soviet Union taking the largest share as the greatest sufferer.

The leaders at Potsdam were outwardly civil but inwardly distrustful of one another. Stalin did not want the United States imposing a capitalist economy on Germany. In addition, he deeply resented the fact that the Allies had waited until 1944 to invade Normandy, while Soviet soldiers were fighting desperately in the east. On his side, U.S. President Harry Truman did not want the Soviets to gain too much control over Poland and Eastern Europe. These mutual suspicions grew as time went on. Before long, they led the world into the Cold War.

The United Nations

The League of Nations had failed to prevent World War II. National leaders agreed that they needed to design a new, stronger peacekeeping organization. Delegates from the United States, China, the Soviet Union, and Britain wrote a proposal for an organization to be called the United Nations. Delegates from fifty nations then met to discuss the proposal and write a UN charter. It established a General Assembly in which all member nations would have an equal voice, and a fifteen-member Security Council. Ten of the fifteen seats on the Security Council would rotate among nations; the other five would be permanently held by Britain, China, France, the Soviet Union, and the United States.

QUIZ

- 1. Stalin joined the Allied nations in 1941 because**
 - A. Germany invaded Poland.
 - B. Germany reneged on the nonaggression pact.
 - C. the United States entered the war.
 - D. Italy entered the war.
- 2. Why did the Germans fail to prevent the Allied invasion at Normandy in 1944?**
 - A. They did not believe the Allies intended to invade France.
 - B. They were concentrating on winning the war at sea.
 - C. They already knew that they would lose the war.
 - D. They expected the Allies to invade at a different location.
- 3. Which European nation suffered by far the heaviest losses in the war?**
 - A. Austria
 - B. Germany
 - C. Poland
 - D. Soviet Union
- 4. Which nation changed sides in the war once it was liberated?**
 - A. Austria
 - B. Britain
 - C. France
 - D. Italy
- 5. Which best sums up Germany's main foreign-policy goal at the beginning of the war?**
 - A. to annex other central European nations
 - B. to conquer Britain and France
 - C. to subjugate all of Europe
 - D. to divide Poland with the USSR
- 6. When the Americans arrived in Europe, they began a concerted war effort**
 - A. on the eastern front.
 - B. on the western front.
 - C. in North Africa.
 - D. in the Balkans.

- 7. What eventually became of Benito Mussolini?**
- A. He surrendered to the Allies.
 - B. He escaped to South America.
 - C. He was executed by Italian rebels.
 - D. He committed suicide when Italy was liberated.
- 8. The Danzig Corridor was strategically important because**
- A. it provided an overland route from central Europe to a major Baltic port.
 - B. it had once been controlled by the Russian Empire.
 - C. it was a demilitarized buffer zone between Austria and Poland.
 - D. it was the heart of the Polish coal reserves.
- 9. When Germany invaded France, the British army _____**
- A. asked for an armistice.
 - B. began bombing Germany.
 - C. attacked the German troops.
 - D. retreated to Britain.
- 10. What was the immediate effect of Germany's invasion of Poland?**
- A. The United States declared war on Germany.
 - B. Britain and France declared war on Germany.
 - C. The Soviet Union abandoned the nonaggression pact.
 - D. The Soviet Union joined the Allies against Germany.