

WWII Part One: Origins of the War

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TOP: German troops enter Schonlinde (Krasna Lipa) in Czechoslovakia (the present-day Czech Republic), as Nazi Germany annexes the region on October 2, 1938; FPG/Hulton Archive/Getty Images. MIDDLE: The 12th panzer division of the German army, 1944; Wikimedia Commons. BOTTOM: Map of the Nazi-Fascist occupation in Europe in 1941 AP Photo.

The first of a four-part series

Who Fought in World War II?

ALLIED POWERS



United Kingdom



France



Soviet Union



United States

AXIS POWERS



Nazi Germany



Japan



Italy

Many other countries were involved, but these were the major ones on each side.

World War II was the central event of the 20th century. It involved all six major continents, all three of the great oceans on the planet, dozens of countries and billions of people. It caused 57 million deaths and unimaginable human suffering. It brought about the redrawing of national boundaries, made millions of families homeless and led to the near annihilation of the Jewish population of Europe.

By the time it was over in 1945, dozens of great cities around the world had been obliterated. And population centers that had mostly avoided the worst of the death and destruction continued to see poverty and hunger for many years. Meanwhile, the prisoners and the wounded would carry the cost of the conflict with them for the rest of their lives.

A world at war

There is no one date that can be said to mark the beginning of the greatest of global conflicts. In 1931, the Japanese army invaded Manchuria, a northern province of China. In 1936, German dictator Adolf Hitler moved aggressively into the Rhineland, an area of Europe to the west of Germany. According to the terms of the Treaty of Versailles, signed after Germany's

defeat in World War I, German military forces were not permitted in the Rhineland. Then, in 1938, Hitler incorporated Czechoslovakia and Austria into Nazi Germany, also known as the Third Reich.

By this time, the Western world was fully alert to the menace of this fanatically ambitious dictator. Then, in the early morning hours of September 1, 1939, Hitler sent his armies into Poland. Two days later, France and Great Britain declared war on Germany. Within a matter of weeks the Soviet Union, which had recently signed a nonaggression treaty with Hitler, attacked Poland from the east. World War II had begun.

In general, the American people did not want to have any part in a European war. They felt protected by great oceans on both sides of the North American continent. And they felt that, in World War I, American boys had fought and bled in France mostly to make fortunes for weapons makers. Moreover, the United States had allowed its armed forces to wither in the 1920s and 1930s. By the time World War II broke out in Europe, its army of 190,000 men ranked about 18th in the world.



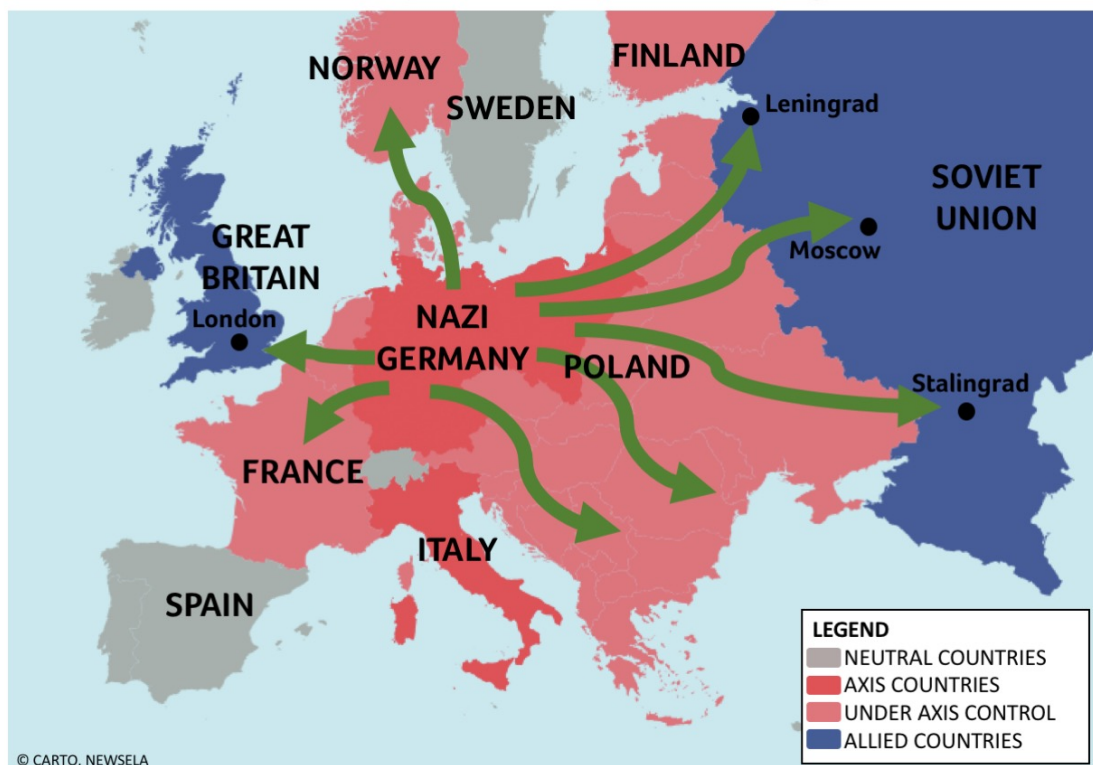
German aggression in Western Europe

The United States might never have entered World War II if Germany, Japan and Italy had stopped after their initial conquests. But the three Axis powers soon made astonishing gains.

After taking over Norway and neutralizing Sweden, the Nazis turned their attention to the big prize. Early in the morning of May 10, 1940, Hitler launched a blitzkrieg, or lightning war, against France, whose army had previously been considered the finest in the world. Instead of spreading out its tanks, the German army placed them all in a few specialized divisions. These arrangements were known as panzer formations. They allowed the German army to smash holes in the enemy line and then break out into the rear. This created chaos on the roads. It also prevented the Allies from plugging the gaps.

The British and French armies actually had more and better tanks than the attackers. However, new strategic and tactical ideas like the blitzkrieg were ultimately more effective. The German tank columns swept everything before them, and the French defenses soon collapsed. By the end of June 1940, essentially all of western Europe was under the control of Nazi Germany.

How did Europe look during the War?



Hitler and his troops conquered much of Europe. But pushing to the East and the West at the same time proved costly.

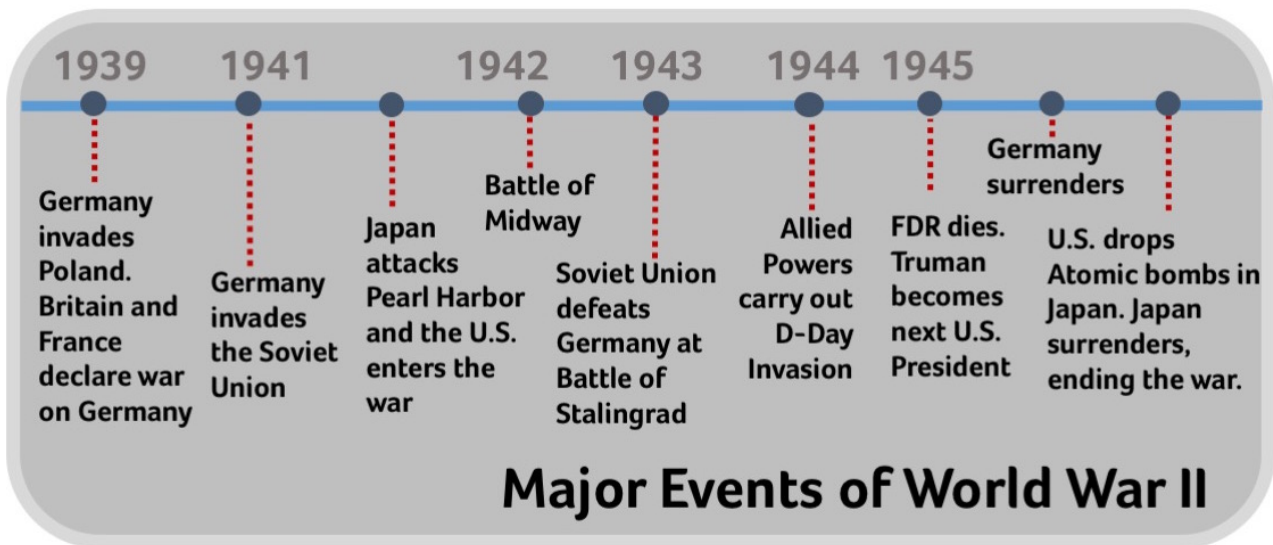
Hitler's miscalculation

Hitler expected Great Britain, his only remaining foe, to recognize the superiority of German arms. He wanted the country to remove itself from active involvement in Europe. After all, he thought, Germany sought growing space in the east and had no intention of dismantling the

British Empire. Why not just divide the world? Why would the British not be content with their vast holdings in Asia, on the other side of the world? When Great Britain refused to give in, however, Hitler unleashed the German air force on the English homeland. He expected that its heavy blows would bring Prime Minister Winston Churchill to his senses.

In 1941, however, Hitler made a huge mistake. In fact, perhaps no event in human history was as important and impactful as his decision to invade the Soviet Union in the early summer. He had not defeated Great Britain, and yet he was turning his armies to the east. As a result, Germany was fighting a war on two fronts. When his soldiers crossed the Soviet frontier on June 22, the Nazi leader’s new opponent became Joseph Stalin, a dictator as cruel and cunning as himself. Stalin was the head of both the largest country and the largest army on earth. The eastern front, which involved hundreds of combat divisions stretched over thousands of miles of land, would turn out to be a human furnace. Germany essentially bled to death in Russia, as four-fifths of all German soldiers who perished in the war died while fighting the Soviet army.

For the Soviet Union, the bloodshed was even worse. A staggering 27 million Soviet citizens died in what for them will always be “the Great Patriotic War.”



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Quiz

- 1 Select the paragraph from the section "A world at war" that explains which events MOST directly led to the start of World War II.

- 2 Which selection BEST explains how Hitler was able to take over Western Europe?
 - (A) After taking over Norway and neutralizing Sweden, the Nazis turned their attention to the big prize.
 - (B) Early in the morning of May 10, 1940, Hitler launched a blitzkrieg, or lightning war, against France, whose army had previously been considered the finest in the world.
 - (C) However, new strategic and tactical ideas like the blitzkrieg were ultimately more effective. The German tank columns swept everything before them, and the French defenses soon collapsed.
 - (D) When Great Britain refused to give in, however, Hitler unleashed the German air force on the English homeland. He expected that its heavy blows would bring Prime Minister Winston Churchill to his senses.

- 3 What was the MOST important reason why Hitler began an attack on Great Britain?
 - (A) He thought that defeating Great Britain would help him win in the Soviet Union.
 - (B) He thought that the British Empire should share its holdings in Asia.
 - (C) He was worried that the British Empire's army was superior to his.
 - (D) He wanted Churchill to end Great Britain's involvement in Europe.

- 4 Which of the following BEST describes how Hitler's invasion of the Soviet Union affected the outcome of the war?
 - (A) The Soviet Union had the strongest military in Europe, so the Soviet Union was quickly able to defeat the German troops.
 - (B) Germany was already fighting in Great Britain, so new battles against the powerful Soviet Union greatly weakened the German military.
 - (C) The Soviet Union was known throughout the world as having a strong military, so Germany's success in the Soviet Union gave Hitler encouragement to conduct more blitzkriegs.
 - (D) Germany had already conquered most other countries in Europe, so its military was weakened and not strong enough to compete against the Soviet Union's powerful army.