

World War 2 Summary

World War 2, also known as the Second World War, was a war fought from 1939 to 1945. In Europe, the origins of the war are closely tied to the rise of fascism, especially in Nazi Germany. A discussion of how the Nazis came to power is a requisite in this context. During much of the 1930s and 1940s, in Asia

The war in Europe began in earnest on September 1, 1939 with the invasion of Poland by Nazi Germany, and concluded on September 2, 1945, with the official surrender of the last Axis nation, Japan. However, in Asia the war began earlier with Japanese interventions in China, and in Europe, the war ended earlier with the unconditional surrender of Germany on May 8, 1945.

The conflict spilled over into Africa, included a handful of incidents in the Americas, and a series of major naval battles.

It was the largest armed conflict in history, spanning the entire world and involving more countries than any other war, as well as introducing powerful new weapons, culminating in the first use of nuclear weapons.

However, despite the name, not all countries of the world were involved; some through neutrality (such as the U.S. - though the U.S. supplied some important secret information to the Allies; D-Day's date was decided on the basis of incoming Atlantic weather information supplied from Ireland - Sweden, and Switzerland), others through strategic insignificance (Mexico).

The war-ravaged civilians more severely than any previous conflict and served as a backdrop for genocidal killings by Nazi Germany as well as several other mass slaughters of civilians which, although not technically genocide, were significant.

These included the massacre of millions of Chinese and Korean nationals by Japan, internal mass killings in the Soviet Union, and the bombing of civilian targets in German and Japanese cities by the Allies. In total, World War II produced about 50 million deaths, more than any other war to date.

The European Theater

German Aggression

The war in Europe began in September 1939, when Germany, under Chancellor **Adolf Hitler**, invaded **Poland**. Britain and France responded by declaring war on Germany but took little action over the following months. In 1940, Germany launched its next initiative by attacking **Denmark** and **Norway**, followed shortly thereafter by attacks on **Belgium**, the **Netherlands**, and **France**. All of these nations were conquered rapidly.

The Battle of Britain

Later in the summer of 1940, Germany launched a further attack on **Britain**, this time exclusively from the air. The **Battle of Britain** was Germany's first military failure, as the German air force, the **Luftwaffe**, was never able to overcome Britain's Royal Air Force.

Greece and North Africa

As Hitler plotted his next steps, **Italy**, an ally of Germany, expanded the war even further by invading **Greece** and **North Africa**. The Greek campaign was a failure, and Germany was forced to come to Italy's assistance in early 1941.

The USSR

Later in 1941, Germany began its most ambitious action yet, by invading the **Soviet Union**. Although the Germans initially made swift progress and advanced deep into the Russian heartland, the invasion of the USSR would prove to be the downfall of Germany's war effort. The country was just too big, and although Russia's initial resistance was weak, the nation's strength and determination, combined with its brutal winters, would eventually be more than the German army could overcome. In 1943, after the battles of **Stalingrad** and **Kursk**, Germany was forced into a full-scale retreat. During the course of 1944, the Germans were slowly but steadily forced completely out of Soviet territory, after which the Russians pursued them across eastern Europe and into Germany itself in 1945.

The Normandy Invasion

In June 1944, British and American forces launched the **D-Day invasion**, landing in German-occupied France via the coast of **Normandy**. Soon the German army was forced into retreat from that side as well. Thus, by early 1945, Allied forces were closing in on Germany from both east and west. The Soviets were the first to reach the German capital of **Berlin**, and Germany surrendered in May 1945, shortly after the suicide of Adolf Hitler.

The Pacific Theater

Pearl Harbor

The war in the Pacific began on December 7, 1941, when warplanes from **Japan** launched a surprise attack on the U.S. Navy base at **Pearl Harbor**, Hawaii. By this time, Japan had already been at war with **China** for several years and had seized the Chinese territory of **Manchuria**. After the Pearl Harbor attack, Japan began a massive campaign of expansion throughout the Southeast Asia–Pacific region.

The U.S. Entrance and Battle of Midway

Although the Pearl Harbor attack provoked a declaration of war by the **United States** on Japan the very next day, it would be several months before U.S. forces would get seriously involved militarily. In late spring of 1942, the United States and Japan engaged in a series of naval battles, climaxing in the **Battle of Midway** on June 3–6, 1942, in which Japan suffered a catastrophic defeat.

The Solomon Islands and Guadalcanal

For the next year, the United States engaged Japan in a protracted struggle for the **Solomon Islands**, which lay near vital Allied shipping routes. Between August 1942 and February 1943, Allied forces carried out an invasion on the island of **Guadalcanal**—the beginning of a long series of Allied offensives that would eventually force the Japanese out of the Solomons and then pursue them from various other Pacific Island chains that the Japanese had earlier seized. In the meantime, British and Indian forces were combating Japanese troops in **Burma**.

The Approach to Japan

Fighting continued throughout the Pacific in 1944 and early 1945, including major battles at **Leyte**, **Iwo Jima**, and **Okinawa**. By the late spring of 1945, most of Japan's conquests had been liberated, and Allied forces were closing in on the Japanese home islands. As they neared Japan proper, the Allies began heavy bombing campaigns against major Japanese cities, including **Tokyo**. This process continued through the summer of 1945 until finally, in early August, the United States dropped two **atomic bombs** on the cities of **Hiroshima** and **Nagasaki**. Stunned by the unexpected devastation, Japan surrendered a few days later

People

Neville Chamberlain

The prime minister of Britain from 1937 to 1940, who advocated a policy of **appeasement** toward the territorial demands of Nazi **Germany**. This appeasement policy essentially turned a blind eye to Germany's 1938 annexation of **Austria** and the **Sudetenland**.

Winston Churchill

The prime minister of Britain during most of World War II. Churchill was among the most active leaders in resisting German aggression and played a major role in assembling the **Allied Powers**, including the United States and the USSR.

James Doolittle

A U.S. Army general best known for leading the famous "**Doolittle Raid**" in 1942, in which B-25 bombers were launched from an aircraft carrier to bomb **Japan** and then crash-landed in **China**.

Dwight D. Eisenhower

A U.S. Army general who held the position of supreme Allied commander in Europe, among many others. Eisenhower was perhaps best known for his work in planning **Operation Overlord**, the Allied invasion of Europe. After the war, he was a very popular figure in the United States and was elected to two terms as U.S. president, taking office in 1953.

Hirohito

Emperor of **Japan** from 1926 until his death in 1989. Despite the power of Japan's military leaders, many scholars believe that Hirohito took an active role in leading the country and shaping its combat strategy during World War II. After Japan's defeat, he was allowed to continue to hold his position as emperor—largely as a figurehead—despite the fact that Japan was under U.S. occupation. Although many countries favored it, Hirohito was never tried for war crimes.

Adolf Hitler

Chancellor and self-proclaimed **Führer**, or "leader," of **Germany** from 1933 until his suicide in 1945. After a rapid political ascent as the leader of the far-right **Nazi Party** in the 1920s, Hitler achieved absolute power and maintained it throughout his time as chancellor. During his rule, he took a very active role in the government of Germany, making military decisions and implementing edicts regarding the treatment of Jews and other minorities, such as the notorious "**final solution**" that condemned Jews to death at **concentration camps** in German-controlled parts of Europe. Just before Germany surrendered in 1945, Hitler committed suicide together with his wife, **Eva Braun**, in his bunker in Berlin.

Yamamoto Isoroku

The Japanese navy admiral who planned the surprise attack on **Pearl Harbor** in 1941 and the attack on **Midway** in 1942.

Curtis LeMay

The commander of the U.S. Air Force's 21st Bomber Command in the Pacific theater during World War II. LeMay is best known for developing the U.S. strategy of using massive incendiary bomb attacks on Japanese cities in order to break the Japanese will near the end of the war.

Benito Mussolini

Fascist prime minister who came to power in 1922 and ruled Italy as an absolute dictator. In many ways, Mussolini served as an inspiration to **Adolf Hitler**, with whom he chose to ally himself during World War II. In 1943, Mussolini was overthrown in a coup orchestrated by some of his subordinates, and in 1945 he was executed by Italian partisans just prior to the end of the war in Europe.

Friedrich Paulus

A field marshal in command of the German Sixth Army at the **Battle of Stalingrad**. Paulus surrendered what was left of the German forces in February 1943, despite Chancellor **Adolf Hitler**'s express orders not to do so. While a prisoner of war in the USSR, Paulus publicly condemned Hitler's regime.

Erwin Rommel

A field marshal in the German army's Afrika Korps who specialized in tank warfare. Rommel came to be known by both friends and enemies as the "Desert Fox" for his brilliant strategies and surprise attacks in Germany's **North Africa** campaign.

Franklin Delano Roosevelt

The 32nd U.S. president, who led the country through the bulk of World War II until his death from a cerebral hemorrhage in April 1945, just a few months before the war ended. Together with **Winston Churchill** and **Joseph Stalin**, Roosevelt played a decisive role in holding together the Allied coalition that ultimately defeated Nazi Germany.

Joseph Stalin

General secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union from 1922 until his death in 1953. In some ways, Stalin was responsible for the USSR's severe losses at the beginning of World War II, as he failed to heed the warnings of his advisors and did not allow the Russian military to prepare a proper defense. At the same time, he did succeed in holding the country together and inspiring among his people an awesome resistance against **Germany**, which ultimately forced a German retreat. Stalin's own regime in the USSR was just as brutal as the Nazi regime in many

ways, and the alliance between Stalin and the Western Allies always remained rather tenuous because of mutual distrust.

Harry S Truman

The 33rd U.S. president, who succeeded **Franklin D. Roosevelt** upon Roosevelt's death in April 1945. Truman, who led the country through the last few months of World War II, is best known for making the controversial decision to use two **atomic bombs** against Japan in August 1945. After the war, Truman was crucial in the implementation of the **Marshall Plan**, which greatly accelerated Western Europe's economic recovery.

Terms

Allied Powers

An alliance during World War II made up of the countries that opposed the aggression of Nazi Germany. **Britain**, **France**, the **United States**, and the **Soviet Union** were the most prominent members, although many other countries also joined.

Anschluss

Chancellor **Adolf Hitler**'s doctrine of German political union with **Austria**, which effectively enabled Germany to annex that nation in March 1938.

Appeasement

The British and French policy of conceding to **Adolf Hitler**'s territorial demands prior to the outbreak of World War II. Associated primarily with British prime minister **Neville Chamberlain**, the appeasement policy enabled Hitler to systematically take over the territories of several neighboring countries.

Axis Powers

The collective term for **Germany**, **Italy**, and **Japan**'s military alliance in opposition to the **Allied Powers**. Several smaller countries in Eastern Europe also became members of the Axis Powers temporarily.

Battle of Britain

An extended campaign from July 1940 to the spring of 1941 in which British **air forces** fought off wave after wave of German bombers and denied Germany in its quest to attain air superiority over Britain. Although major cities in England sustained heavy damage, the British resistance forced Germany to abandon its plans to invade across the English Channel.

Battle of the Coral Sea

A battle from May 4–8, 1942, in which U.S. naval forces successfully protected the Allied base at Port Moresby, **New Guinea**, the last Allied outpost standing between the Japanese onslaught

and **Australia**. The battle, which caused heavy losses on both sides, was the first naval battle in history fought exclusively in the air, by carrier-based planes.

Battle of El-Alamein

An October and November 1942 battle that was the climax of the North African campaign. A resounding victory by the British over the Germans, the battle paved the way for the Allied takeover of North Africa and the retreat of German forces back across the Mediterranean.

Battle of Guadalcanal

A campaign from August 1942 to February 1943 in which U.S. Marines fought brutal battles to expel Japanese forces from the **Solomon Islands**, a strategically important island chain in the South Pacific near Australia.

Battle of Iwo Jima

A battle in February and March 1945 in which U.S. forces took Iwo Jima, a small but strategically important island off the Japanese coast. During the battle, an Associated Press photographer took a world-famous photograph of U.S. Marines raising the American flag on the summit of **Mt. Suribachi**.

Battle of Midway

A battle from June 3–6, 1942, in which U.S. naval forces severely disabled the Japanese fleet at **Midway Island** in the Pacific. Coming close on the heels of the **Battle of the Coral Sea**, the Battle of Midway forced Japan into defensive mode and turned the tide of the war in the Pacific theater.

Battle of Okinawa

The last large-scale battle in the Pacific theater, in which U.S. forces invaded the Japanese home island of Okinawa. The battle was very bloody, killing at least 100,000 Japanese soldiers and 80,000 to 100,000 Japanese civilians.

Battle of Stalingrad

A brutal, five-month battle between German and Soviet forces for the important industrial city of Stalingrad that resulted in the deaths of almost 2 million people. The battle involved very destructive air raids by the German **Luftwaffe** and bloody urban street fighting. In February 1943, despite direct orders from Hitler forbidding it, Field Marshal **Friedrich Paulus** surrendered the German forces to the Red Army.

Blitzkrieg

Literally “lightning war,” the term for Hitler’s invasion strategy of attacking a nation suddenly and with overwhelming force. Hitler applied the blitzkrieg strategy, with varying degrees of success, to the German invasions of **Poland**, **France**, and the **Soviet Union**.

D-Day

June 6, 1944, the day on which the Allied invasion of France via the **Normandy** coast began.

Fascism

A system of government dominated by far-right-wing forces and generally commanded by a single dictator. Several Fascist governments were established in Europe in the early twentieth century, most notably those led by dictators **Adolf Hitler** of Germany, **Benito Mussolini** of Italy, and **Francisco Franco** of Spain.

“Final Solution”

The Nazi’s euphemistic term for their plan to exterminate the **Jews** of Germany and other German-controlled territories during World War II. The term was used at the **Wannsee Conference** of January 1942, in which Nazi leaders planned the Holocaust but made no specific mention of the **extermination camps** that ultimately killed millions.

Gestapo

The brutal Nazi secret police force, headed by the infamous **Hermann Göring**. The Gestapo was responsible for the relocation of many European Jews to Nazi **concentration camps** during the war.

Lebensraum

Literally “living space,” **Adolf Hitler**’s justification for Germany’s aggressive territorial conquests in the late 1930s. Based on the work of a previous German ethnographer, Hitler used the idea of *lebensraum* to claim that the German people’s “natural” territory extended beyond the current borders of Germany and that Germany therefore needed to acquire additional territory in Europe.

Luftwaffe

The German air force, which was used heavily in campaigns such as the **Battle of Britain** in 1940.

Manhattan Project

The code name for the U.S. government’s secret program to develop an **atomic bomb**. Begun in 1942, the Manhattan Project utilized the expertise of world-famous physicists, including Albert Einstein and Enrico Fermi, to develop the weapon. It finally succeeded in conducting the first successful atomic bomb test in July 1945 at Alamogordo, New Mexico. After a difficult decision by President **Harry S Truman**, U.S. forces dropped two atomic bombs on the Japanese cities of **Hiroshima** and **Nagasaki** in August 1945, prompting Japan’s surrender.

Munich Agreement

A September 30, 1938, agreement among Germany, Britain, Italy, and France that allowed Germany to annex the region of western Czechoslovakia called the **Sudetenland**. The Munich Agreement was the most famous example of British prime minister **Neville Chamberlain's** policy of **appeasement** prior to World War II.

Operation Barbarossa

The code name for the German invasion of the **Soviet Union** in 1941, which Hitler predicted would take only six months but ended up miring the German armies for more than two years.

Operation Overlord

The code name for the Allied invasion of **France** in 1944, which commenced on the beaches of **Normandy** and ultimately was successful in liberating France and pushing German forces back east to their own territory.

S.S.

In German, *Schutzstaffel* ("protection detachment"), the elite German paramilitary unit. Originally formed as a unit to serve as Hitler's personal bodyguards, the S.S. grew and took on the duties of an elite military formation. During World War II, the Nazi regime used the S.S. to handle the extermination of Jews and other racial minorities, among other duties. The S.S. had its own army, independent of the regular German army (the **Wehrmacht**), to carry out its operations behind enemy lines.

V-E Day

May 8, 1945, the day on which the Allied forces declared victory in Europe.

V-J Day

August 15, 1945, the day on which the Allied forces declared victory over Japan.

Wannsee Conference

A January 1942 conference during which Nazi officials decided to implement the "**final solution**" to the "Jewish question"—a euphemism for the extermination of European Jews and other minorities at **concentration camps** in eastern Europe.

Wehrmacht

The term used for regular German army.

