

Conducting World War II

We shall not flag nor fail. We shall go on to the end. We shall fight in France and on the seas and oceans; we shall fight with growing confidence and growing strength in the air. We shall defend our island whatever the cost may be; we shall fight on beaches, landing grounds, in fields, in streets and on the hills. We shall never surrender.

—British Prime Minister Winston Churchill (June 4, 1940)

Essential Question: What similarities and differences were there in the methods governments used to conduct war?

During World War II, governments rallied all their resources in the war effort. The call to intense nationalism, as illustrated in Winston Churchill’s speech in the British House of Commons, was part of concerted policies that used all forms of communication to mobilize the population. Appeal to ideological beliefs, including fascism and communism, dominated daily life during the conflict and minimized resistance to militarism.

Governments also used new military technology and tactics, including the atomic bomb and “total war,” disregarding previously accepted laws of war. These policies increased the level of wartime casualties.

Japan and Imperialist Policies

With the military in control of the government, Japan harbored imperialist ambitions that would lead to a world war in the Pacific. The Mukden Incident and the takeover of land in Manchuria in a state called Manchukuo (see Topic 7.5) were early efforts in this drive.

New Order in East Asia The occupation of parts of China was but one step in Japan’s overall strategy, which was to create a “New Order in East Asia.” The Japanese had looked to expand into Soviet Siberia, but when Germany and the Soviets signed the **Nonaggression Pact** of 1939, Japan had to look elsewhere for new territory. Nearby Southeast Asia, which had been under the control of imperial powers in Western Europe and the United States, was the most obvious target. However, Japan faced obstacles. Its occupation of China led to economic sanctions by the United States. Because Japan’s economy relied on oil and scrap iron from the United States, sanctions threatened to strangle



its economy and undercut its military expansion. Therefore, Japan began to plan to retaliate against the United States with military force in the hope that by doing so, the Western powers would submit to Japan’s imperial ambitions.

Germany’s Early Victories and Challenges

Once war broke out in Europe, Hitler moved swiftly to acquire territory. He embarked on a strategy called **blitzkrieg**, or lightning war, to quickly subdue Poland. Germany used rapidly moving tank divisions supported by the air force in its four-week campaign. At the end of September 1939, Germany and the Soviets divided the country as they had planned when they signed the German-Soviet Nonaggression Pact.

Germany’s rapid success in Poland encouraged Hitler to attack and conquer Denmark and Norway in April 1940 and the Netherlands, Belgium, and France in the following month. Germany then proceeded to bring the government and resources of the conquered nations under its control. As the Germans approached Paris, the French government fled to Bordeaux, in southern France. Germany took direct control of the northern two-thirds of the country. The French set up a new pro-Nazi regime based in **Vichy** under Marshal Henri-Philippe Pétain, an aged World War I hero. (Connect: Create a table comparing the conquests of Hitler and Genghis Khan. See Topic 2.2.)

Major Battles of World War II



British-American Relations Fearing that it would be the next victim in Germany’s relentless and rapid campaign, Britain asked the United States for support. Despite a long history of isolationism from European troubles, President Roosevelt believed the United States should help the British.

In 1940, the two powers signed the **Destroyers-for-Bases Agreement**, in which the United States promised delivery of 50 destroyers in exchange

for eight British air and naval bases in the Western Hemisphere. In the 1941 **Lend-Lease Act**, the United States gave up all pretensions of neutrality by lending war materials to Britain. Also in 1941, Britain and the United States forged a policy statement known as the **Atlantic Charter**, which set down basic goals for the post-war world. The charter included such provisions as the restoration of self-government to those deprived of it, the abandonment of the use of force, and the disarmament of aggressor nations.

The Battle of Britain In Europe, Britain was the last major holdout against Nazi power. In July 1940, Hitler ordered a large campaign against the small island nation by the **Luftwaffe**, the German air force. He believed that bombardment from the air would sufficiently weaken the country so that German sea and land forces could mount a successful invasion. Initially targeting military bases in this **Battle of Britain**, the Germans turned to bombing British cities after the British Royal Air Force conducted a raid on Berlin. **Winston Churchill** termed this Britain's "finest hour" as the civilian population in London and other cities withstood months of relentless bombing.

The targeting of cities did provide one advantage for Britain: the British military was able to rebuild after the earlier raids on its bases. Ultimately, Britain's superior planes and radar system allowed it to destroy German planes faster than they could be replaced. By May 1941, Hitler was forced to postpone indefinitely any attempted invasion of Britain.

War on the Soviet Union After failing to invade Britain, Hitler turned east. He attacked the Soviet Union to eliminate Bolshevism and to create *Lebensraum*—land for settlement and development—for the German people. Germany's turning its focus to the east took pressure off Britain. Germany began its invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941. Initially the Nazis experienced rapid success as they had in Western Europe, capturing large amounts of territory and two million Soviet troops. However, the German forces soon found themselves at the mercy of the harsh Russian winter. The Soviets defended the city of Leningrad in the **Siege of Leningrad**, which lasted three years and led to the deaths of a million Soviet men, women, and children.

Japan Overreaches

Japan experienced rapid victories in the Pacific. It launched a surprise air attack on the U.S. naval base at **Pearl Harbor** in Hawaii on December 7, 1941, destroying much of the U.S. Pacific fleet. Japan then seized the Philippines, the Dutch East Indies, British Malaya, Burma, and numerous Pacific islands.

Japan believed that the surprise attack and the damage to the U.S. Pacific Fleet would prompt the United States to negotiate a settlement favorable to Japan immediately. Instead, U.S. isolationism disappeared overnight; public opinion demanded retaliation against Japan. Great Britain and China joined the United States in the fight against Japanese aggression. The war truly became global when, within days, Hitler responded to the U.S. declaration of war against Japan with his own declaration of war against the United States.

Colonial Armies As the Axis powers expanded into new territory, Western colonies began to join the Allies in the war effort. For example, the Indian Army, which had started the war with only 200,000 men, ended the war as the largest volunteer army in history with more than 2.5 million men. Although the Indian Army sent troops to North Africa, the bulk of its troops fought against the Japanese in Southeast Asia.

Home Fronts

Like World War I, World War II was a total war. Most countries mobilized all their resources, including the civilian population, to achieve victory. The United States started with the strongest industrial sector of any country in the world and it added stringent government planning to provide factories what they needed. In addition, unlike anywhere in Europe, U.S. industry operated without threat of military attack. The United States ramped up production of the resources required for war, including ships, tanks, planes, landing craft, radar equipment, guns, and ammunition. With the enlistment of large numbers of men in the armed forces, women found far more opportunities to work in factories and offices. The U.S. government promoted art of “Rosie the Riveter” to encourage women to succeed at jobs that were once thought to be for men.

Instead of mobilizing all available citizens in the war effort, German leaders relied on forced labor, some of it in concentration camps. At its peak, 20 percent of the wartime workforce was forced labor, with 600,000 French citizens working in German war plants and 1.5 million French soldiers working in prisoner-of-war (POW) camps. The solution was counterproductive, however. The workers were treated so poorly that productivity was low.

In Japan, efforts on the home front were confused. The government presented an optimistic view of the war instead of trying to mobilize resources. The government took pride in not using women in the war effort, claiming that the enemy is “drafting women but in Japan, out of consideration for the family system, we will not.” The government was able to systematically remove children from cities to the countryside when bombing of cities started late in the war. It was also successful in rationing food throughout the war. (Connect: Write a paragraph comparing and contrasting warfare during World War I with the warfare before and during World War II. See Topic 7.3.)

The Tide Turns in the European Theater

With its entry into the war in December 1941, the United States joined the other Allied powers, Great Britain and the Soviet Union. In spite of political differences, the three nations were united in their determination to achieve a military victory and agreed that Axis surrender must be unconditional.

In early 1942, the Allies were struggling in Europe and North Africa. General **Erwin Rommel**, the “Desert Fox,” led German troops in Egypt and threatened to take the northern city of Alexandria. But in the second half of 1942, the tide turned. The British defeated Rommel at the **Battle of El**

Alamein. And after months of fighting, a Soviet counteroffensive successfully defeated the pride of Hitler's military, the German Sixth Army, in the **Battle of Stalingrad.** Although the Germans remained in control of most of Western Europe, the momentum of the war in Europe had turned against the Nazis.

The Tide Turns in the Pacific Theater

The year 1942 was also crucial in the war against Japan. The first Allied victory occurred in May in the **Battle of the Coral Sea**, when the U.S. Navy stopped a Japanese fleet set to invade New Guinea and the Solomon Islands, thus helping to prevent a future invasion of Australia. The following month, with the destruction of four Japanese aircraft carriers at the **Battle of Midway Island**, Allied naval forces demonstrated their superiority in the Pacific. These battles stopped the advance of the Japanese. The first major Allied offensive was on the island of **Guadalcanal**, which ended in early 1943 with an Allied victory.

The Allied forces in the Pacific under U.S. General **Douglas MacArthur** used a strategy called **island-hopping**. The Allies attacked islands where Japan was weak and skipped those where Japan was strong. The Allies slowly, and at great human cost, moved through the Philippines, getting closer to Japan itself.

Technology was critical to Allied success. The development of fleets of **aircraft carriers**, ships that allowed planes to take off from and land on their decks at sea, provided air support for battleships and increased the range and flexibility of naval forces. Aircraft were used for raids on enemy ships and bases and for intelligence gathering. Submarines sank about 55 percent of the Japanese merchant fleet, severely damaging Japan's supply lines.

The Last Years of the War

The Allied successes of 1942 put the Axis powers on the defensive in 1943. The Allies identified Italy as the weakest point under Axis control in Europe. In spite of German forces sent to aid Italy, the Allies gained control of the island of Sicily in July 1943, leading to the fall of Mussolini. After the Allies invaded southern Italy in September 1943, Italy turned against its former ally. After months of slow and costly progress, the Allies finally recaptured Rome on June 4, 1944.

June 6, 1944, has become known as **D-Day**, when about 150,000 Allied forces under the command of U.S. General Dwight Eisenhower launched an amphibious invasion from England, landing on the beaches of Normandy in northern France. Allied casualties were high. Eventually, however, the Allies established a base to begin the march toward Paris, which was liberated in August. With control of Western Europe slipping away, Germany's defeat was drawing closer.

The Germans made one final push against the Allies during the winter of 1944. The **Battle of the Bulge** was fought in the Ardennes Forest across parts of France, Belgium, and Luxembourg. An Allied victory left Germany with no

realistic expectation of winning the war, yet Hitler refused to give up. Allied air raids began to systematically destroy Germany's infrastructure and Allied troops crossed the Rhine River into Germany in March 1945. One month later they were approaching Germany's capital city of Berlin.

On the Eastern Front, Soviet troops were also moving rapidly toward Germany. In July 1943, the largest tank battle of the war, the **Battle of Kursk**, was fought about 300 miles south of Moscow. The Soviets challenged this instance of German Blitzkrieg by successfully holding their defensive position and then counterattacking. The Soviets then made rapid progress through the Ukraine and the Baltic States in 1944. After taking control of Warsaw, Poland, in January 1945, the Soviets moved on to Hungary, Romania, and Bulgaria. In April 1945, they advanced on Berlin.

Victory in Europe Hitler spent the war's final days hiding in a bunker, a fortified underground shelter, in Berlin. Although the country was falling apart, he continued to live under the delusion that somehow Germany would triumph. The end came on April 30, 1945, when Hitler committed suicide. His ally Mussolini had been killed by members of the Italian resistance two days before. After Hitler's death, members of Germany's High Command acknowledged that continuing the war would be futile. In the first days of May, Germany surrendered to the Allies. May 8, 1945, marked the official end of the war in Europe and was designated as Victory in Europe Day or **V-E Day**.

Victory over Japan In early 1945, U.S. forces captured the islands of Okinawa and Iwo Jima and prepared to attack the Japanese mainland. In March 1945, U.S. troops fire-bombed Tokyo, killing about 100,000 people and leaving about a million others homeless. Although the island-hopping campaign had weakened Japan's hold on the Pacific, the emperor was not ready to surrender. The United States was beginning to consider the costs of invading the Japanese homeland, which it feared might lead to enormous Allied casualties. Despite initial hesitations about using nuclear weapons, President Truman ordered the U.S. Army Air Force to drop the first atomic bomb on the Japanese city of **Hiroshima** on August 6, 1945. The nuclear age had begun. Three days later, a second bomb was dropped on **Nagasaki**, resulting in an estimated total of 140,000 Japanese civilian deaths. The months of Allied victories, combined with these devastating nuclear attacks, caused Japan to surrender unconditionally on August 14. Truman designated September 2, the day of the formal surrender ceremonies, as Victory over Japan Day or **V-J Day**.

Consequences of World War II

World War II was the bloodiest war in human history. It resulted in the deaths of around 75 million people, two-thirds of whom were civilians. As later topics explain, it changed how people thought about racism, colonial empires, and international relations. Further, it provided the context for a fierce ideological battle between the United States and the Soviet Union that would shape global affairs for the following five decades.

KEY TERMS BY THEME**GOVERNMENT: War**

Vichy

Lend-Lease Act

Battle of Britain

Siege of Leningrad

Pearl Harbor

Battle of El Alamein

Battle of Stalingrad

Battle of the Coral Sea

Battle of Midway Island

Guadalcanal

island-hopping

D-Day

Battle of the Bulge

Battle of Kursk

V-E Day

Hiroshima

Nagasaki

V-J Day

GOVERNMENT: Treaties

Nonaggression Pact

Destroyers-for-Bases

Agreement

Atlantic Charter

GOVERNMENT: Leaders

Winston Churchill

Erwin Rommel

Douglas MacArthur

TECHNOLOGY: Warfare

blitzkrieg

Luftwaffe

aircraft carriers