

HISTORICAL OVERVIEW: WORLD WAR II IN EUROPE

Hitler's government envisioned a vast, new empire of "living space" (Lebensraum) in eastern Europe. Bringing about such German dominance in Europe, its leaders calculated, would require war.

After securing the neutrality of the Soviet Union (through the August 1939 German-Soviet nonaggression pact), Germany started World War II by invading Poland on September 1, 1939. Britain and France responded by declaring war on Germany on September 3. Within a month, Poland was defeated by a combination of German and Soviet forces and was partitioned between Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union.

The relative lull in fighting that followed the defeat of Poland ended on April 9, 1940, when German forces invaded Norway and Denmark. On May 10, 1940, Germany began its assault on Western Europe by invading the Low Countries (the Netherlands, Belgium, and Luxembourg), which had taken neutral positions in the war, as well as France. On June 22, 1940, after French defenses crumbled, France signed an armistice that provided for the German occupation of the northern half of the country and permitted the establishment of a collaborationist regime in the south with its seat in the city of Vichy.

With German encouragement, the Soviet Union occupied the Baltic states in June 1940 and formally annexed them in August 1940. Italy, a member of the Axis (countries allied with Germany), joined the war on June 10, 1940. From July 10 to October 31, 1940, the Nazis waged, and ultimately lost, an air campaign over England, known as the Battle of Britain.



Poles walk among the ruins of besieged Warsaw.

Warsaw, Poland, ca. September 1939

United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, courtesy of Julien Bryan

After securing the Balkan region by invading Yugoslavia and Greece on April 6, 1941, the Germans and their allies invaded the Soviet Union on June 22, 1941, in direct violation of the German-Soviet pact. In June and July 1941, the Germans also occupied the Baltic states. Soviet leader Joseph Stalin then became a major wartime Allied leader, in opposition to Nazi Germany and its Axis allies. During the summer and autumn of 1941, German troops advanced deep into the Soviet Union, but stiffening Red Army resistance prevented the Germans from capturing the key cities of Leningrad and Moscow. On December 6, 1941, Soviet troops launched a significant counteroffensive that drove German forces permanently from the outskirts of Moscow. One day later, on December 7, 1941, Japan (one of the Axis powers) bombed Pearl Harbor, Hawaii. The United States immediately declared war on Japan. On December 11, Germany and Italy declared war on the United States as the military conflict widened.

In May 1942, Britain's Royal Air Force carried out a raid on the German city of Cologne with a thousand bombers, for the first time bringing the war home to Germany. For the next three years, Allied air forces systematically bombed industrial plants and cities all over the country, reducing much of urban Germany to rubble by 1945. In late 1942 and early 1943, the Allied forces achieved a series of military triumphs in North Africa. The failure of French armed forces to prevent Allied occupation of Morocco and Algeria triggered a German occupation of collaborationist Vichy France on November 11, 1942. Axis military units in Africa, approximately 150,000 troops in all, surrendered in May 1943.

On the eastern front, during the summer of 1942, the Germans and their Axis allies renewed their offensive in the Soviet Union, aiming to capture Stalingrad on the Volga River, as well as the city of Baku and the Caucasian oil fields. The German offensive stalled on both fronts. In November, Soviet troops launched a counteroffensive at Stalingrad and on February 2, 1943, the German 6th Army surrendered. The Germans mounted one more offensive at Kursk in July 1943, engaging in the biggest tank battle in history, but Soviet troops blunted the attack and assumed a military predominance that they would not relinquish during the following course of the war.

In July 1943, the Allies landed in Sicily and in September went ashore on the Italian mainland. After the Italian Fascist Party's Grand Council deposed Premier Benito Mussolini (an ally of Hitler), the Italian military took over and negotiated a surrender

to American and British forces on September 8. German troops stationed in Italy seized control of the northern half of the peninsula and continued to resist. Mussolini, who had been arrested by Italian military authorities, was rescued by German SS commandos in September and established (under German supervision) a neo-Fascist puppet regime in northern Italy. German troops continued to hold northern Italy until surrendering on May 2, 1945.

On June 6, 1944 (D-Day), as part of a massive military operation, the Allies landed more than 150,000 soldiers in France, and liberated the country by the end of August. On September 11, 1944, the first American troops crossed into Germany, one month after Soviet troops crossed the eastern border. In mid-December, the Germans launched an unsuccessful counterattack in Belgium and northern France, known as the Battle of the Bulge. Allied air forces attacked Nazi industrial plants, such as those at the Auschwitz camp complex (though the gas chambers were never targeted).

The Soviets began an offensive on January 12, 1945, liberating western Poland and forcing Hungary (an Axis ally) to surrender. In mid-February 1945, the Allies bombed the German city of Dresden, killing approximately 35,000 civilians. American troops crossed the Rhine River on March 7, 1945. A final Soviet offensive



British troops land on the beaches of Normandy, France, as part of D-Day military operations.

Normandy, France, June 6, 1944
United States Holocaust Memorial Museum courtesy of Paul Grisso

on April 16, 1945, enabled Soviet forces to encircle the German capital, Berlin. As Soviet troops fought their way toward the Reich Chancellery, Hitler committed suicide on April 30, 1945. On May 7, 1945, Germany surrendered unconditionally to the Western Allies at Reims, France, and on May 9 to the Soviets in Berlin. In August, the war in the Pacific ended soon after the United States dropped atomic bombs on the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, killing 120,000 civilians. Japan formally surrendered on September 2.

World War II resulted in an estimated 55 million deaths worldwide. It was the largest and most destructive conflict in history.

FURTHER RESOURCES

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