**World War II**

World War II (often abbreviated to WWII or WW2), also known as the Second World War, was a global war that lasted from 1939 to 1945. The vast majority of the world's countries—including all the great powers—eventually formed two opposing military alliances: the Allies and the Axis. It was the most global war in history; it directly involved more than 100 million people from over 30 countries. In a state of total war, the major participants threw their entire economic, industrial, and scientific capabilities behind the war effort, blurring the distinction between civilian and military resources. World War II was the deadliest conflict in human history, marked by 50 to 85 million fatalities, most of whom were civilians in the Soviet Union and China. It included massacres, the genocide of the Holocaust, strategic bombing, premeditated death from starvation and disease and the only use of nuclear weapons in war.

The Empire of Japan aimed to dominate Asia and the Pacific and was already at war with the Republic of China in 1937,[5][b] but the world war is generally said to have begun on 1 September 1939,[6] the day of the invasion of Poland by Nazi Germany and subsequent declarations of war on Germany by France and the United Kingdom. From late 1939 to early 1941, in a series of campaigns and treaties, Germany conquered or controlled much of continental Europe, and formed the Axis alliance with Italy and Japan. Under the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact of August 1939, Germany and the Soviet Union partitioned and annexed territories of their European neighbours, Poland, Finland, Romania and the Baltic states. The war continued primarily between the European Axis powers and the British Commonwealth, with campaigns in North Africa, East Africa, the Balkans, the aerial Battle of Britain, the Blitz bombing campaign, and the long Battle of the Atlantic. On 22 June 1941, the European Axis powers launched an invasion of the Soviet Union, opening the largest land theatre of war in history, which trapped the Axis, most crucially the German Wehrmacht, into a war of attrition. In December 1941, Japan attacked the United States and European colonies in the Pacific Ocean, and quickly conquered much of the Western Pacific. The European Axis powers quickly declared war on the United States in support of their Japanese ally. The Japanese conquests were perceived by many in Asia as liberation from Western dominance; as such, several armies from the conquered territories aided the Japanese.

The Axis advance halted in 1942 when Japan lost the critical Battle of Midway, and Germany and Italy were defeated in North Africa and then, decisively, at Stalingrad in the Soviet Union. In 1943, with a series of German defeats on the Eastern Front, the Allied invasions of Sicily and Italy which brought about Italian surrender, and Allied victories in the Pacific, the Axis lost the initiative and was forced into strategic retreat on all fronts. In 1944, the Western Allies invaded German-occupied France, while the Soviet Union regained its territorial losses and invaded Germany and its allies. During 1944 and 1945 the Japanese suffered major reverses in mainland Asia in South Central China and Burma, while the Allies crippled the Japanese Navy and captured key Western Pacific islands.

The war in Europe concluded with an invasion of Germany by the Western Allies and the Soviet Union, culminating in the capture of Berlin by Soviet troops, the suicide of Adolf Hitler and the German unconditional surrender on 8 May 1945. Following the Potsdam Declaration by the Allies on 26 July 1945 and the refusal of Japan to surrender under its terms, the United States dropped atomic bombs on the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki on 6 and 9 August respectively. With an invasion of the Japanese archipelago imminent, the possibility of additional atomic bombings and the Soviet invasion of Manchuria, Japan surrendered on 2 September 1945. Thus ended the war in Asia, cementing the total victory of the Allies.

World War II changed the political alignment and social structure of the world. The United Nations (UN) was established to foster international co-operation and prevent future conflicts. The victorious great powers—China, France, the Soviet Union, the United Kingdom, and the United States—became the permanent members of the United Nations Security Council.[7] The Soviet Union and the United States emerged as rival superpowers, setting the stage for the Cold War, which lasted for the next 46 years. Meanwhile, the influence of European great powers waned, while the decolonisation of Africa and Asia began. Most countries whose industries had been damaged moved towards economic recovery. Political integration, especially in Europe, emerged as an effort to end pre-war enmities and to create a common identity.

**Background**

**Europe**

World War I had radically altered the political European map, with the defeat of the Central Powers—including Austria-Hungary, Germany, Bulgaria and the Ottoman Empire—and the 1917 Bolshevik seizure of power in Russia, which eventually led to the founding of the Soviet Union. Meanwhile, the victorious Allies of World War I, such as France, Belgium, Italy, Romania and Greece, gained territory, and new nation-states were created out of the collapse of Austria-Hungary and the Ottoman and Russian Empires.

The League of Nations assembly, held in Geneva, Switzerland, 1930

To prevent a future world war, the League of Nations was created during the 1919 Paris Peace Conference. The organisation's primary goals were to prevent armed conflict through collective security, military and naval disarmament, and settling international disputes through peaceful negotiations and arbitration.

Despite strong pacifist sentiment after World War I,[20] its aftermath still caused irredentist and revanchist nationalism in several European states. These sentiments were especially marked in Germany because of the significant territorial, colonial, and financial losses incurred by the Treaty of Versailles. Under the treaty, Germany lost around 13 percent of its home territory and all of its overseas possessions, while German annexation of other states was prohibited, reparations were imposed, and limits were placed on the size and capability of the country's armed forces.

Adolf Hitler at a German National Socialist political rally in Nuremberg, August 1933

The German Empire was dissolved in the German Revolution of 1918–1919, and a democratic government, later known as the Weimar Republic, was created. The interwar period saw strife between supporters of the new republic and hardline opponents on both the right and left. Italy, as an Entente ally, had made some post-war territorial gains; however, Italian nationalists were angered that the promises made by the United Kingdom and France to secure Italian entrance into the war were not fulfilled in the peace settlement. From 1922 to 1925, the Fascist movement led by Benito Mussolini seized power in Italy with a nationalist, totalitarian, and class collaborationist agenda that abolished representative democracy, repressed socialist, left-wing and liberal forces, and pursued an aggressive expansionist foreign policy aimed at making Italy a world power, promising the creation of a "New Roman Empire".

Adolf Hitler, after an unsuccessful attempt to overthrow the German government in 1923, eventually became the Chancellor of Germany in 1933. He abolished democracy, espousing a radical, racially motivated revision of the world order, and soon began a massive rearmament campaign.[23] Meanwhile, France, to secure its alliance, allowed Italy a free hand in Ethiopia, which Italy desired as a colonial possession. The situation was aggravated in early 1935 when the Territory of the Saar Basin was legally reunited with Germany and Hitler repudiated the Treaty of Versailles, accelerated his rearmament programme, and introduced conscription.

To contain Germany, the United Kingdom, France and Italy formed the Stresa Front in April 1935; however, that June, the United Kingdom made an independent naval agreement with Germany, easing prior restrictions. The Soviet Union, concerned by Germany's goals of capturing vast areas of Eastern Europe, drafted a treaty of mutual assistance with France. Before taking effect though, the Franco-Soviet pact was required to go through the bureaucracy of the League of Nations, which rendered it essentially toothless.[25] The United States, concerned with events in Europe and Asia, passed the Neutrality Act in August of the same year.

Hitler defied the Versailles and Locarno treaties by remilitarising the Rhineland in March 1936, encountering little opposition.[27] In October 1936, Germany and Italy formed the Rome–Berlin Axis. A month later, Germany and Japan signed the Anti-Comintern Pact, which Italy would join in the following year.[28]

**Asia**

The Kuomintang (KMT) party in China launched a unification campaign against regional warlords and nominally unified China in the mid-1920s, but was soon embroiled in a civil war against its former Chinese Communist Party allies[29] and new regional warlords. In 1931, an increasingly militaristic Empire of Japan, which had long sought influence in China[30] as the first step of what its government saw as the country's right to rule Asia, used the Mukden Incident as a pretext to launch an invasion of Manchuria and establish the puppet state of Manchukuo.[31]

Too weak to resist Japan, China appealed to the League of Nations for help. Japan withdrew from the League of Nations after being condemned for its incursion into Manchuria. The two nations then fought several battles, in Shanghai, Rehe and Hebei, until the Tanggu Truce was signed in 1933. Thereafter, Chinese volunteer forces continued the resistance to Japanese aggression in Manchuria, and Chahar and Suiyuan.[32] After the 1936 Xi'an Incident, the Kuomintang and communist forces agreed on a ceasefire to present a united front to oppose Japan.

**Pre-war events**

The Second Italo–Ethiopian War was a brief colonial war that began in October 1935 and ended in May 1936. The war began with the invasion of the Ethiopian Empire (also known as Abyssinia) by the armed forces of the Kingdom of Italy (Regno d'Italia), which was launched from Italian Somaliland and Eritrea.[34] The war resulted in the military occupation of Ethiopia and its annexation into the newly created colony of Italian East Africa (Africa Orientale Italiana, or AOI); in addition it exposed the weakness of the League of Nations as a force to preserve peace. Both Italy and Ethiopia were member nations, but the League did little when the former clearly violated Article X of the League's Covenant.[35] The United Kingdom and France supported imposing sanctions on Italy for the invasion, but they were not fully enforced and failed to end the Italian invasion.[36] Italy subsequently dropped its objections to Germany's goal of absorbing Austria.

**Spanish Civil War (1936–1939)**

The bombing of Guernica in 1937, during the Spanish Civil War, sparked Europe-wide fears that the next war would be based on bombing of cities with very high civilian casualties.

When civil war broke out in Spain, Hitler and Mussolini lent military support to the Nationalist rebels, led by General Francisco Franco. The Soviet Union supported the existing government, the Spanish Republic. Over 30,000 foreign volunteers, known as the International Brigades, also fought against the Nationalists. Both Germany and the Soviet Union used this proxy war as an opportunity to test in combat their most advanced weapons and tactics. The Nationalists won the civil war in April 1939; Franco, now dictator, remained officially neutral during World War II but generally favoured the Axis.[38] His greatest collaboration with Germany was the sending of volunteers to fight on the Eastern Front.

Japanese invasion of China (1937)

In July 1937, Japan captured the former Chinese imperial capital of Peking after instigating the Marco Polo Bridge Incident, which culminated in the Japanese campaign to invade all of China.[40] The Soviets quickly signed a non-aggression pact with China to lend materiel support, effectively ending China's prior co-operation with Germany. From September to November, the Japanese attacked Taiyuan, engaged the Kuomintang Army around Xinkou,[41] and fought Communist forces in Pingxingguan.[42][43] Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek deployed his best army to defend Shanghai, but, after three months of fighting, Shanghai fell. The Japanese continued to push the Chinese forces back, capturing the capital Nanking in December 1937. After the fall of Nanking, tens of thousands if not hundreds of thousands of Chinese civilians and disarmed combatants were murdered by the Japanese.