Notes – World War II

When World War II began in 1939, there was little enthusiasm, not even a noble slogan about the glory of war. Many saw the war as a continuation of the problems created in World War I. Dissatisfaction with the Versailles Treaty, the War Guilt Clause, the question of protection, problems created by new nationalist states, and the failure of collective security all contributed to the start of World War II. The Axis Powers (Germany, Italy, and Japan) pursued aggressive actions to redress perceived inequities that arose out of World War I. In 1936, the Italian leader Mussolini gave a speech in which he referred to a vertical line between Rome and Berlin as “an axis around which all European states” could collaborate. This treaty of friendship between Germany and Italy was later extended to Japan by the Tripartite Treaty of 1940. At first, democratic nations, such as the United States, England, and France chose to follow a policy of appeasement. But when that course of action failed to stop Germany from invading Poland, World War II began. Unlike World War I, which was fought primarily in Europe, World War II was truly a global war in that it was fought in all the major areas of the world, except for the Americas. Initially, the Axis powers were victorious, but the entry of the United States and the failure of the German invasion of the Soviet Union changed the tide in favor of the Allies – England, France, the United States and the Soviet Union.

The war was one of the most devastating conflicts in history. New mechanized warfare and advanced technology made it even more damaging and destructive than World War I. Civilian populations also felt the war’s full effects: Cities were bombed by saturation bombing, or fire bombing, such as used in Dresden and in Hamburg, Germany. The use of the atomic bomb over Hiroshima and Nagasaki in Japan (World War II ushered in the Atomic Age) demonstrated the horrors of nuclear war and modern technology. The aftereffects of the war were massive. There were enormous losses of lives and properties. Over 75 million people were killed worldwide and civilian deaths reached record numbers. Germany’s defeat also exposed the horrors of the Nazi’s policy of genocide that had led to the Holocaust and the deaths of millions of people.

World War II accelerated the decline of Britain and France as major powers, and the United States and Russia emerged as the two superpowers. Although the United States and Russia were Allies in the war, they were strange bedfellows. The fear of the spread of Communism eventually led to the ideological conflict of the Cold War that dominated international relations for the latter half of the twentieth century.

Outbreak of World War II (1939-1945)

Hitler’s Empire

Poland

On September 1, 1939, Germany invaded Poland. On September 3, Britain and France finally decided to honor its agreement to defend Poland, and declared war on Germany. The Germans believed that they had a strategy to end the fighting in a short time. Their method was called Blitzkrieg – “lightning war.” It involved tanks, airplanes, and trucks. By October of that year, Hitler’s armies had crushed Poland. Germany soon annexed Western Poland. As agreed in the Non-Aggression Pact of 1939, Russia seized the eastern half as well as the Baltic countries. In November, Russia seized parts of Finland, which put up a valiant but unsuccessful resistance.
October 1939 – March 1940

This was a time of Sitzkreig, or “phony war.” Hitler consolidated his gains in Poland and equipped his military in preparation for the coming attack against Europe. The French remained behind the Maginot Line and Britain sent troops there to wait for the expected attack. The Maginot Line was a series of concrete fortifications that extended 200 miles along the French border with Germany.

Conquest of Denmark and Norway

In April of 1940, lightning war struck again. Germany invaded Norway and Denmark in order to secure iron ore supplies. Both of these countries failed to overcome the Germans and fell within days.

Defeat of France, 1940

In May, the German army invaded Northern France by going through neutral Holland and Belgium. Within weeks, Germany defeated these countries. The Germans had managed to bypass the Maginot Line (which did not extend into the Belgium frontier), split the Franco-British forces, and trap the entire British army on the beaches of Dunkirk. In a desperate gamble to triumph over the Germans, the British sent every available naval vessel, even pleasure ships, across the English Channel to rescue the troops. The Miracle of Dunkirk resulted in the ferrying of over 300,000 troops to safety.

Meanwhile, Mussolini, sensing an easy victory, declared war on France and proceeded to attack from the south in June.

On June 22, 1940, German forces captured Paris. The Germans soon occupied all of Northern France. In the south, a puppet state called the Vichy Government was established, headed by Marshall Petain (1856-1951). Not
willing to accept defeat, French resistance forces, led by Charles de Gaulle (1890-1970), escaped to England where they worked to liberate their homeland; throughout the remainder of the war, the Vichy Government faced many battles with DeGaulle’s resistance forces. The swiftness of the Nazi’s victories caught the world by surprise. Most nations expected a conflict involving trench warfare, as was the case in World War I, where the war became stalemated and there were no quick victories. By 1940, Hitler ruled over all of continental Europe. Like Napoleon, he dominated the continent, with the exception of Britain. Italy was his ally, while the Soviet Union remained neutral.

**Battle for Britain**

Hitler hoped that Britain would recognize that it was standing alone and ask for peace. However, Winston Churchill (Prime Minister from 1940-1945 and 1951-1955), who succeeded Neville Chamberlain as prime minister in May 1940, refused to surrender. Churchill inspired the nation with his plea that he had nothing to offer but “blood, toil, tears, and sweat.” When faced with this defiance, Hitler attacked.

On August 15, the German Luftwaffe (air force) began to bomb Britain in preparation for an invasion across the English Channel. Up to 1000 planes attacked British airfields and key factories. The British Royal Air Force was able to defend itself and its country against these attacks with the help of radar that detected incoming planes. Losses were heavy on both sides. Following the advice of the leader of the Luftwaffe, Hermann Goering (1893-1946), Hitler ordered the bombing of British cities, in hopes of weakening British morale. From August 1940 until June 1941, London and other various cities were attacked through the night until dawn. Despite heavy losses for the British, this new plan turned out to be a mistake on the part of Germany. As a result of the increased bombing of civilian sites, Britain boosted its military production, and its anti-aircraft defense improved with the help of radar. By June 1941, Hitler abandoned his efforts to invade England in favor of a new campaign in Eastern Europe, specifically Russia.

**Critical Turning Points in the War**

**INVASION OF RUSSIA**

On June 22, 1941, Hitler launched a major attack against Russia called Operation Barbarossa after the German king who had participated in the First Crusade during the eleventh century. The goal of the Russian invasion was to gain control of the Ukraine’s vast wheat fields and the Caucasus’s oil fields. Hitler ordered a massive Blitzkrieg of three million men along a 2000-mile border, catching Stalin by surprise. By October 1941, German troops surrounded Leningrad in the North, which was within 25 miles of Moscow, and had conquered most of the Ukraine. Hitler’s propaganda machine proclaimed the war to be over, but it was mistaken. Russia did not collapse; instead, history repeated itself. Like Napoleon’s forces, the German invaders were not prepared for the cold Russian winter. Germans, in summer uniform, froze to death as the temperature plunged to -20 degrees Fahrenheit. Their fuel and oil froze as trucks and weapons became useless. At the Siege of Leningrad, which lasted 900 days, the Russians fought valiantly. More than 1.5 million citizens died during this siege and some inhabitants even resorted to cannibalism to survive. Hitler’s failure to conquer Russia drained Germany’s resources and caused him to have to fight two fronts simultaneously, which ultimately contributed to Germany’s defeat.’
Entry of the United States

Although the United States had declared its neutrality in 1939, President Franklin D. Roosevelt realized that a Nazi victory would be a threat to the nation’s interests. He worked closely with Churchill to provide support during the Battle for Britain. In 1940, President Roosevelt traded 50 old destroyers to Britain in exchange for military bases in Newfoundland and the Caribbean.

In March 1941, Congress approved the Lend Lease Act, which allowed the president to lend or sell war materials to any country that he deemed vital to that country’s defense. Roosevelt declared that the United States would become the “arsenal of democracy.” The Lend Lease Act created a British-Soviet-U.S. economic alliance, providing the groundwork for the title of the Big Three, as these countries were later known. Hitler proclaimed the Lend Lease Act an economic declaration of war and began attacking American merchant ships.

In August 1941, Roosevelt and Churchill signed the Atlantic Charter, a broad set of peace principles, such as freedom from fear, want, and belief in national sovereignty, which was very similar to items contained in Wilson’s Fourteen Points. The Atlantic Charter also called for a permanent system of general security, which laid the foundation for the United Nations. Meanwhile, the United States had taken economic steps to stop Japanese aggression in Asia. When Japan advanced into French Indochina and the Dutch East Indies (present-day Indonesia), the United States banned the sale of oil to Japan. This move angered the Japanese. In retaliation, on December 7, 1941, the Japanese launched a surprise attack upon the United States military base at Pearl Harbor, Hawaii. Close to 2500
Americans were killed. On December 8, 1941, the United States and Britain declared war on Japan. Soon after, on December 11, 1941, Germany and Italy declared war on the United States. The conflict became a global war involving all the major powers. The American entry into the war was crucial because the U.S. aid to the Allies, along with the heroic support of the British and Soviet people and the assistance of the resistance groups in Europe, contributed eventually to an Allied victory.

**The Road to Victory (1942-1945)**

Churchill convinced Roosevelt that the focus of the war should be to defeat Germany first and then concentrate on Japan.

- **May 1942:** In North Africa, the British, under the command of the British General **Bernard Montgomery** (1887-1976), defeated German and Italian forces led by the brilliant General **Erwin Rommel** (1891-1944), known as the Desert Fox, at **El Alamein**, only seventy miles from Alexandria, Egypt. In November 1942, American General **Dwight D. Eisenhower** (1890-1969) took command of joint Anglo-American forces in Morocco and Algiers. Combining with Montgomery’s forces, they destroyed Rommel’s army.

- **May-June 1942:** The United States defeated the Japanese at the **Battle of the Coral Sea** and later Midway. American victories stopped the Japanese advance in the Pacific and prevented another attack on Hawaii. The **Battle of Midway** established American naval superiority in the Pacific.

- **August 1942:** Under the command of the American General **Douglas MacArthur** (1880-1964), the American Marines launched their first offensive at **Guadalcanal** in the Solomon Islands. The attack was the beginning of an island-hopping strategy the goal of which was to capture strategic Japanese-held islands and bypass others. These islands would serve as stepping-stones for a direct invasion of Japan.

- **August 1942-February 1943:** The **Battle of Stalingrad** began and – following a six-month struggle that involved house-to-house fighting – the Soviet forces defeated Germany. By January 1943, the Germans had lost over 300,000 men. The Battle of Stalingrad was the turning point in the war because the Russians had struck a deadly blow to Hitler’s war machine and seized large quantities of German military equipment. The Russian forces took the offensive and slowly began to drive the Germans out of the Soviet Union.

- **January 1943:** Roosevelt and Churchill met at **Casablanca** and agreed to launch an invasion of Sicily and Italy and to fight until the Axis surrendered unconditionally. Roosevelt called this meeting the “**Unconditional Surrender Conference**.” The reason for the announcement of unconditional surrender was to reassure Russia, who was fearful that the Allies might sign a separate treaty with Hitler. Russia was also suspicious about the failure of the Allies to establish a genuine second front through France. The Russians had suffered enormous losses on the Eastern Front and claimed that a second front would divert German forces from Russia.

- **July 1943-August 1944:** The Allies, under Generals Montgomery and **George Patton** (1885-1945), invaded Sicily and then mainland Italy. Mussolini resigned and Italy surrendered. In September, however, Nazi troops returned Mussolini to power. The Allies faced German resistance for the next 18 months until Germany was defeated.

- **November 28-December 1, 1943:** The leaders of the **Big Three** (Churchill, Stalin, and Roosevelt) met in **Teheran**, Iran, for the first time. They agreed on postwar occupation of Germany, demilitarization of Germany, and the creation of an international peace organization. Churchill and Roosevelt promised to open up a second front of warfare through France. This decision to invade Germany via France meant that the American, British, and Russian troops would meet along a north-south line in Germany and that only Russia would liberate Eastern Europe – a strategy that had a profound impact upon post-World War II Europe.
- **Invasion of Normandy (D-Day), June 6, 1944:** Eisenhower directed the largest amphibious assault of the war on the beaches of Normandy in France. This established the second front; by August, Paris had been liberated, and by the end of 1944 all of France had been liberated. The next goal was Germany. Hitler was under attack on the Eastern and Western Fronts.

- **Battle of the Bulge, December 1944:** Germany launched a last-grasp counterattack in Belgium through the Argonne Forest. It slowed the Allied advance but the Allies continued to press forward toward Germany.

- **January 1945:** The Russian forces marched westward through Poland.

- **February 1945:** The allied firebombing of Dresden killed over 135,000 people.

- **February 4-February 11 1945:** The Big Three leaders met at Yalta in Southern Russia on the Black Sea. The **Yalta Conference** drew up the structure of postwar Europe. They agreed that Germany would divided into four zones of occupation. Stalin agreed to hold free elections in Eastern Europe and declare war against Japan in return for land from Japan that had been lost in the Russo-Japanese War. The Big Three leaders also agreed to the veto system of voting in the Security Council of the United Nations. The Yalta Conference would be a source of controversy in the future because the concessions worked out over the status of the countries in Eastern Europe eventually broke down and became a source of friction between the United States and Russia.
- **March 1945:** The American firebombing of Tokyo killed more than 80,000 Japanese. The Battle of Iwo Jima ended after a vicious struggle, leaving 26,000 Americans dead.

- **April 1945:** Japan was defeated at the Battle of Okinawa. The Allies moved closer to Japan.

- **Mussolini attempted to escape Italy but was caught and killed on April 28; on April 30, Hitler and his associate committed suicide in a Berlin bunker.**

- **May 8, 1945 (VE Day):** The war in Europe ended.

- **July/August 1945:**
  - Churchill (after July 28, Atlee, the new British prime minister, took his place), Stalin, and Harry Truman (1884-1972) attended the Potsdam Conference in Germany. The conference addressed the issues of postwar Germany and free elections in Eastern Europe. Truman demanded that Stalin carry out free elections in the countries of Eastern Europe. Stalin refused and the sown seeds of distrust would severely hamper the friendship between the United States and the Soviet Union as the war drew to an end.

- **August 6, 1945:** United States troops dropped the atomic bomb on Hiroshima and over 130,000 people were killed and 90% of the city was destroyed.

- **August 8, 1945:** The U.S. dropped an atomic bomb on Nagasaki, resulting in the death of 75,000 people. The Soviet Union declared war on Japan and invaded Manchuria.

- **September 2, 1945 (VJ Day):** Japan surrendered.
**Holocaust**

The effort of Hitler and the Nazis to destroy all the Jews of Europe is known as the **Holocaust**. In his policy of anti-Semitism, Hitler set out to drive Jews from Germany. In 1935, the **Nuremberg Laws** placed severe restrictions on the Jewish people. They were prohibited from marrying non-Jews, denied citizenship, forced to wear a yellow star of David, and prohibited from attending or teaching at German schools or universities.

On November 9, 1938, the **Kristallnacht** (Night of Broken Glass) riots took place. Nazi-led mobs attacked Jewish synagogues, businesses, and homes. The night of violence initiated a period of intense persecution for the Jews in which hundreds of people were killed and 30,000 people were sent to concentration camps.

In 1939, German Jews had lost all their civil rights, and after the fall of Warsaw, the Nazis began deporting them to Poland. Jews from all over Europe were moved into ghettos surrounded by barbed wire, forced to wear the Star of David, and turned into slave labor. By 1941, Hitler was carrying out the **Final Solution of the Jewish Question** – the murder of every single Jew. Jews, in all parts of Hitler’s Empire, were systematically arrested and shipped like cattle to their death or to concentration camps. Victims were sent to “shower” rooms that were really gas chambers. Special camp workers stripped the victims’ gold teeth or hair. Bodies were cremated while bones were crushed for fertilizer. The most infamous of these death camps was at Auschwitz in Poland, where 12,000 Jews were killed each day and close to 1 million in total. When the war finally came to an end, over 8 million Jews had been killed, as well as millions of homosexuals, gypsies, Communists, and Slavs. The ultimate monstrosity of the Nazi policy of genocide had contributed to the death of millions of people.

**Impact of World War II**

The human losses in World War II were staggering. The Soviet Union alone lost 28 million people. Throughout Europe and Asia, parts of cities were in ruins. Heavy bombings had destroyed major cities such as Hamburg and Dresden in Germany, and both European and Asian nations faced difficult problems of economic recovery.

Britain and France’s colonial powers declined and they were forced to gradually relinquish their empires. Their colonies, now Asian and African nations, embraced nationalism and rejected the remnants of European imperialism.

Building on their foundation of the League of Nations, the Allies established a **United Nations** as an international organization to secure peace. In April 1945, representatives from 50 nations met in San Francisco to draft the charter for the United Nations. Unlike 1920 when the United States rejected the League of Nations, the United States became a member of the United Nations and the headquarters were set up in New York. The United States and Russia emerged as the two superpowers. The two countries had cooperated with each other to defeat Nazi Germany but by 1945, the alliance was slowly disintegrating. Conflicting ideology between democracy and Communism, and mutual distrust between the Allies and Russians eventually led to the rivalry known as the **Cold War**. The Cold War became the driving force that determined events for over 45 years.
**Chronology of World War II**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Event</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>September 1, 1939</td>
<td>World War II begins; Germany invades Poland</td>
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<tr>
<td>1940</td>
<td>Germany conquers Norway, Denmark, Netherlands, Luxembourg, and France; Battle of Britain</td>
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<tr>
<td>1941</td>
<td>United States adopts Lend-Lease Act; Germany invades Russia; Soviet Union signs a Non-Aggression Pact with Japan; Japan bombs Pearl Harbor</td>
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<td>1942</td>
<td>Battle of Midway; Battle of Stalingrad – German offensive stopped</td>
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<td>1943</td>
<td>Casablanca Conference; Allied Forces take Sicily; Teheran Conference – First meeting of Big Three</td>
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<tr>
<td>1944</td>
<td>D-Day, June 6, at Normandy</td>
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<tr>
<td>1945</td>
<td>Yalta Conference; VE Day (May 8), Germany surrenders; Potsdam Conference – First meeting of Stalin and Truman; August 6 – atomic bomb dropped on Hiroshima; VJ Day (September 2), Japanese surrender</td>
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**Be able to identify the significance of the following terms:**

- Mein Kampf
- Lebensraum
- Stresa Front
- Appeasement
- Maginot Line
- Falangists
- Francisco Franco
- Rome-Berlin Axis
- Ani-Commitemn Pact
- Anclhuss
- Neville Chamberlain
- Sudetenland
- Munich
- “I have no more territorial demands to make in Europe”
- Danzig
- Polish Corridor
- Nazi-Soviet pact
- September 1, 1939
- Blitzkrieg
- Sitzkrieg
- Dunkirk
- Henri Petain
- Battle of Britain
- Winston Churchill
- Franklin Roosevelt
- Luftwaffe
- RAF
- Operation Barbarossa
- “The Desert Fox”
- “new order”
- Untermenschen
- Holocaust
- Hideki Tojo
- Pearl Harbor
- El Alamein
- Coral Sea
- Midway
- “Second Front”
- “soft underbelly of Europe”
- Dwight D. Eisenhower
- Stalingrad
- “precision bombing”
- “area bombing”
- Dresden
- June 6, 1944
- The Bulge
- “island hopping”
- kamikaze
- Hiroshima/August 6, 1945
- Nagasaki
- U.S.S. Missouri
- Albert Speer
- Vichy
- Charles de Gaulle
- “Free French”
- Resistance
- Lord Beaverbrook
- “The Great Patriotic War”