

LESSON 2

World War II

ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

- Why do political actions often lead to war?
- How does war impact society and the environment?

READING HELPDESK

Academic Vocabulary

- resolve
- involvement

Content Vocabulary

- blitzkrieg
- isolationism
- neutrality

TAKING NOTES

Key Ideas and Details

Determining Cause and Effect As you read, use a chart like the one below to list key events during World War II and their effect on the course of the war.

Event	Effect

IT MATTERS BECAUSE

In the first years of World War II, Hitler, with his blitzkrieg, had gained control of much of western and central Europe. Victories over Britain and Russia remained elusive, however. When the United States entered the war, the Allies agreed to fight until the Axis Powers surrendered unconditionally.

Europe at War

GUIDING QUESTION *What were Germany's gains and losses during the early years of the war?*

Hitler stunned Europe with the speed and efficiency of the German attack on Poland. His **blitzkrieg**, or "lightning war," used armored columns, called panzer divisions, supported by airplanes. Each panzer division was a strike force of about 300 tanks with accompanying forces and supplies.

The forces of the blitzkrieg broke quickly through Polish lines and encircled the bewildered Polish troops. Regular infantry units then moved in to hold the newly conquered territory. Within four weeks, Poland had surrendered. On September 28, 1939, Germany and the Soviet Union divided Poland.

Hitler's Early Victories

After a winter of waiting, Hitler resumed the attack on April 9, 1940, with another blitzkrieg against Denmark and Norway. One month later, Germany launched an attack on the Netherlands, Belgium, and France. The main assault was through Luxembourg and the Ardennes Forest. German panzer divisions broke through weak French defensive positions there and raced across northern France.

French and British forces were taken by surprise. Anticipating a German attack, France had built a defense system, called the Maginot (MA • zhuh • NOH) Line, along its border with Germany. The line was a series of concrete and steel fortifications armed with heavy artillery. The Germans, however, decided not to cross the Maginot Line. Instead, they went around it and attacked France from its border with Belgium.

BIOGRAPHY



Franklin D. Roosevelt (1882–1945)

President Franklin D. Roosevelt was the only U.S. president elected to serve four terms in office. He led the United States during two major crises—the Great Depression and World War II. Before Pearl Harbor, President Roosevelt convinced the U.S. Congress to send “all aid short of war” to Britain and the Soviet Union to help fight the Nazis. The United States sent ships and guns in exchange for military bases in Britain. After the attack on Pearl Harbor, the United States entered the war in earnest. Roosevelt led the war effort until his death in office in 1945.

► CRITICAL THINKING

Making Inferences How did the Great Depression prepare Roosevelt for the war effort?

blitzkrieg German for “lightning war”; a swift and sudden military attack; used by the Germans during World War II

resolve determination; a fixed purpose

isolationism a policy of national isolation by abstention from alliances and other international political and economic relations

neutrality refusal to take sides or become involved in wars between other nations

By going around the Maginot Line, the Germans split the Allied armies, trapping French troops and the entire British army on the beaches of Dunkirk. Only by the heroic efforts of the Royal Navy and civilians in private boats did the British manage to evacuate 338,000 Allied (mostly British) troops. An English skipper described the scene:

PRIMARY SOURCE

“The soldiers were coming off the beach clinging to bits of wood and wreckage and anything that would float. As we got close enough we began . . . picking up as many as we could . . . [and taking] them off to one of the ships lying off in the deep water.”

—quoted in *Blood, Tears and Folly*, 1993

The French signed an armistice on June 22, 1940. German armies now occupied about three-fifths of France. An authoritarian regime under German control was set up over the remainder of the country. It was known as Vichy France and was led by an aged French hero of World War I, Marshal Henri Pétain. Germany was now in control of western and central Europe, but Britain had still not been defeated. In fact, after Dunkirk, the British **resolve** heightened. Especially helpful in rallying the British people were the stirring speeches of Winston Churchill, who had become prime minister in May 1940.

President Franklin D. Roosevelt denounced the aggressors, but the United States followed a strict policy of **isolationism**. A series of **neutrality** acts, passed in the 1930s, prevented the United States from taking sides or becoming involved in any European wars. Many Americans felt that the United States had been drawn into World War I due to economic **involvement** in Europe, and they wanted to prevent a recurrence. Roosevelt was convinced that the neutrality acts actually encouraged Axis aggression and were gradually relaxed as the United States supplied food, ships, planes, and weapons to Britain.

The Battle of Britain

Hitler realized that an amphibious (land-sea) invasion of Britain could succeed only if Germany gained control of the air. At the beginning of August 1940, the Luftwaffe (LOOFT • vah • fuh)—the German air force—launched a major offensive. German planes bombed British air and naval bases, harbors, communication centers, and war industries.

The British fought back with determination. They were supported by an effective radar system that gave them early warning of German attacks. Nevertheless, the British air force suffered critical losses.

In September, in retaliation for a British attack on Berlin, Hitler ordered a shift in strategy. Instead of bombing military targets, the Luftwaffe began massive bombing of British cities. Hitler hoped in this way to break British morale. Instead, because military targets were not being hit, the British were able to rebuild their air strength quickly. Soon, the British air force was inflicting major losses on Luftwaffe bombers. Hitler postponed the invasion of Britain indefinitely.

Attack on the Soviet Union

Although he had no desire for a two-front war, Hitler became convinced that Britain was remaining in the war only because it expected Soviet support. If the Soviet Union were smashed, Britain’s last hope would be eliminated. Moreover, Hitler had convinced himself that the Soviet Union had a pitiful army and could be defeated quickly.



World War II in Europe and North Africa 1939–1941



GEOGRAPHY CONNECTION

By 1941, Germany had conquered most of continental Europe.

1 PLACES AND REGIONS

What offensive did the Axis powers carry out in Africa?

2 THE USES OF

GEOGRAPHY Why was it significant that Germany failed to control Moscow by 1941?

Hitler's invasion of the Soviet Union was scheduled for the spring of 1941, but the attack was delayed because of problems in the Balkans. Hitler had already gained the political cooperation of Hungary, Bulgaria, and Romania. However, the failure of Mussolini's invasion of Greece in 1940 had exposed Hitler's southern flank to British air bases in Greece. To secure his Balkan flank, Hitler seized both Greece and Yugoslavia in April.

Reassured, Hitler invaded the Soviet Union on June 22, 1941. He believed that the Russians could still be decisively defeated before the brutal winter weather set in. The massive attack stretched out along a front some 1,800 miles (about 2,900 km) long. German troops advanced rapidly, capturing 2 million Russian soldiers. By November, one German army group had swept through the Ukraine. A second army was besieging the city of Leningrad, while a third approached within 25 miles (about 40 km) of Moscow, the Soviet capital.

An early winter and fierce Soviet resistance, however, halted the German advance. Certain of quick victory, the Germans had not planned for winter uniforms. For the first time in the war, German armies had been stopped. A counterattack in December 1941 by a Soviet army came as an ominous ending to the year for the Germans.

✓ READING PROGRESS CHECK

Predicting Consequences What assumptions did Hitler make about invading the Soviet Union? Do you think the invasion would have gone differently if he had not made those assumptions?

Japan at War

GUIDING QUESTION *What brought the United States into the war?*

On December 7, 1941, Japanese aircraft attacked the U.S. naval base at Pearl Harbor in Hawaii. The surprise attack damaged or destroyed more than 350 aircraft, damaged or sunk 18 ships, and killed or wounded more than 3,500 Americans. The same day, the Japanese attacked the Philippines and advanced on Malaya. Later, they invaded the Dutch East Indies and occupied several islands in the Pacific Ocean. By the spring of 1942, almost all of Southeast Asia and much of the western Pacific had fallen to the Japanese.

A triumphant Japan now declared the creation of a “community” of nations: the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperty Sphere. The entire region would now be under Japanese direction. Japan also announced its intention to liberate areas of Southeast Asia from Western colonial rule. For the moment, however, Japan needed the resources of the region for its war machine and treated the countries under its rule as conquered lands.

Japanese policy was now largely dictated by Prime Minister Hideki Tōjō—formerly a general—who in the course of the war became a virtual military dictator. Tōjō had hoped that Japan’s lightning strike at American bases would destroy the U.S. fleet in the Pacific. The Roosevelt administration, he thought, would now accept Japanese domination of the Pacific.

But the Japanese miscalculated. The attack on Pearl Harbor unified American opinion about becoming involved in the war. The United States joined with European nations and Nationalist China in a combined effort to defeat Japan. Believing American **involvement** in the Pacific would make the United States ineffective in the European theater of war, Hitler declared war on the United States four days after Pearl Harbor. As in World War I, another European conflict had turned into a global war.

READING PROGRESS CHECK

Identifying Why did the United States stay out of World War II until the Pearl Harbor attack?

involvement a commitment or a connection to

Analyzing PRIMARY SOURCES

Hitler in August 1942

“As the next step, we are going to advance south of the Caucasus and then help the rebels in Iran and Iraq against the English. Another thrust will be directed along the Caspian Sea toward Afghanistan and India. Then the English will run out of oil. In two years we’ll be on the borders of India. Twenty to thirty elite German divisions will do. Then the British Empire will collapse.”

—quoted in *Spandau*, 1976

ANALYZING

Why was Hitler so optimistic after he captured the Crimea?

The Allies Advance

GUIDING QUESTION *How did the involvement of the United States change the war?*

The entry of the United States into the war created a new coalition, the Grand Alliance. To overcome mutual suspicions, the three major Allies—Great Britain, the United States, and the Soviet Union—agreed to stress military operations and to ignore political differences. At the beginning of 1943, the Allies agreed to fight until the Axis Powers—Germany, Italy, and Japan—surrendered unconditionally, which required the Axis nations to surrender without any favorable condition. This cemented the Grand Alliance by making it nearly impossible for Hitler to divide his foes.

The European Theater

Defeat was far from Hitler’s mind at the beginning of 1942. As Japanese forces advanced into Southeast Asia and the Pacific, Hitler and his allies continued fighting the war in Europe against Britain and the Soviet Union.

Until late 1942, it seemed that the Germans might still prevail. In North Africa, German forces broke through the British defenses in Egypt and advanced toward Alexandria. A renewed German offensive in the Soviet Union led to the capture of the entire Crimea in the spring of 1942. However, by the fall of 1942, the war had turned against the Germans.

The Tide Turns

In North Africa, British forces had stopped General Erwin Rommel's troops at El Alamein in the summer of 1942. The Germans then retreated back across the desert. In November 1942, British and American forces invaded French North Africa. They forced the German and Italian troops there to surrender in May 1943.

On the Eastern Front, after the capture of the Crimea, Hitler's generals wanted him to concentrate on the Caucasus and its oil fields. Hitler, however, decided that Stalingrad, a major industrial center on the Volga River, should be taken first. In perhaps the most terrible battle of the war, between November 1942 and February 2, 1943, the Soviets launched a counterattack. German troops were stopped and then encircled, and supply lines were cut off, all in frigid winter conditions. The Germans were forced to surrender at Stalingrad. The entire German Sixth Army, considered the best of the German troops, was lost.

By February 1943, German forces in Russia were back to their positions of June 1942. By the spring, even Hitler knew that the Germans would not defeat the Soviet Union.

The Asian Theater

In 1942 the tide of battle in the East also changed dramatically. In the Battle of the Coral Sea on May 7 and 8, 1942, American naval forces stopped the Japanese advance and saved Australia from being invaded.

The turning point of the war in Asia came on June 4, at the Battle of Midway Island. U.S. planes destroyed four attacking Japanese aircraft carriers. The United States defeated the Japanese navy and established naval superiority in the Pacific.

By the fall of 1942, Allied forces in Asia were gathering for two operations. One, commanded by U.S. general Douglas MacArthur, would move into the Philippines through New Guinea and the South Pacific Islands. The other would move across the Pacific with a combination of U.S. Army, Marine, and Navy attacks on Japanese-held islands. The policy, called "island hopping," was to capture some Japanese-held islands and to bypass others to reach Japan. After engagements near the Solomon Islands from August to November 1942, Japanese fortunes began to fade.

READING PROGRESS CHECK

Summarizing Why was the German assault on Stalingrad a crushing defeat for the Germans?



▲ A group of U.S. fighter planes fly over the reefs at Midway Island, November 14, 1942.

► CRITICAL THINKING

Assessing What Allied strategies helped change the tide of battle in the East?

LESSON 2 REVIEW

Reviewing Vocabulary

1. **Explaining** What is a blitzkrieg, and what supplies and equipment did it require?

Using Your Notes

2. **Determining Cause and Effect** Use your notes to explain the effects of key events in World War II.

Answering the Guiding Questions

3. **Analyzing Information** What were Germany's gains and losses during the early years of the war?

4. **Determining Cause and Effect** What brought the United States into the war?

5. **Making Generalizations** How did the involvement of the United States change the war?

Writing Activity

6. **Narrative** Research one of the battles described in this lesson. Then write a descriptive account of the battle from the perspective of a soldier fighting in that battle.