

World War Two: Global War 1931-1945

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- The Second World War was the bloodiest and most violent war in all of human history. ~~It was also~~ More than 60 million people lost their lives, including more than 35 million noncombatants, ~~was~~ to military action, aerial bombing, malnutrition, disease, and genocide.

→ It was also unprecedented in terms of its scale & scope. Beginning with Japan's invasion of Manchuria in 1931, and ending with Japan's surrender in 1945, the war expanded well beyond East Asia, into the Pacific, Europe, North Africa, and across the world's other oceans. Across the globe, large & small nations from North America, Asia, Europe, Africa and Australia formed alliances and battled each other for global and regional supremacy.

→ Beyond its immense geographic scope, World War Two exceeded the 1914-1918 war in its totality, that is, the level of commitment required of nation-states and their populations to make enormous sacrifices in lives and resources to achieve complete victory. In this total war, contacts with enemies, occupiers, and liberators affected and transformed populations around the world. World War Two redefined gender roles and relations between colonial peoples and their masters, as women contributed to their nations'

war efforts and as colonial peoples exploited the war's weakening of imperial controls.

→ The war also ushered in a new economic, diplomatic, and technological age. Economically, new institutions appeared designed to re-organize the global economy, such as the World Bank. Diplomatically, the international system, stillborn under the League of Nations, was reborn as the United Nations, ushering in a new era of international relations. Technologically, the war accelerated or led to the development of most of our contemporary technology; nuclear power and weaponry, rocketry, jet aircraft, computers, radar, even cellphones.

→ New sets of allies and newly independent nations emerged after the war, signaling the emergence of a new global order. Two new superpower nations, the continental powers of the United States and the Soviet Union, gained strength from the war at the expense of the European Great Powers. Over the next forty-five years they competed with each other for global influence in what became known as the Cold War. This bipolar division was complicated by another of the war's consequences, decolonization, which saw previously ^{subject} colonial peoples successfully remove colonial control and construct their own independent sovereign states.

Origins of the War

By 1941 two major alliances faced each other:

The Axis Powers : Nazi Germany, Fascist Italy, & Japan

versus

The Allied Powers: France & its Empire
Great Britain, its Empire and Dominion Allies
(Canada, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa)

The Soviet Union

China

The United States and allies in Latin America

→ ~~These~~ The Axis powers are often described as revisionist powers, in the sense that they sought to use aggression to revise the system of international relations established after the First World War. It is important to understand the Second World War, therefore, as a direct consequence of the First.

→ Compelled also by the economic impact of the Global Depression, Japan, Italy and Germany engaged in territorial expansion that directly confronted other nations committed to the post-World War One system of international co-operation.

To expand their global influence, the revisionist nations remilitarized and conquered territories they regarded as important to their needs and desires. Initially, the Allied nations acquiesced, but by the late 1930s and early 1940s the Allies abandoned negotiatory efforts and engaged the Axis Powers in war. Until 1942, the Axis held the upper hand, but over the following three years, the Allies' superior numbers and resources allowed them to defeat their enemies and end the conflict.

Phase One: Japan's War in China

- Japan began the Second World War by invading and occupying Manchuria in 1931, an area long considered a vital "frontier" ~~area~~ region by Japanese imperialists. ~~Seeing~~ Seeing increased conquest in Asia as vital for the future survival of Japan, the Japanese Army in Manchuria, known as the Kwantung Army, fabricated a border incident with Chinese troops at Beijing's Marco Polo Bridge in July 1937 that soon led to a full-scale invasion. Japanese troops took Beijing and then moved south toward Shanghai, and China's capital, Nanjing.
- As a result, China became the first nation to experience the horror and brutal racist violence that characterized the Second World War.

During its war in China, Japanese military forces used methods ~~of~~ and tactics that led to mass suffering and death on an unimaginable scale. Chinese civilians were the first to die in thousands due to ^{deliberate} aerial bombing. What has become known as the Rape of Nanjing demonstrated the war's horror in graphic detail, as the city's residents became victims of Japanese soldiers whipped into a frenzy by the brutal nature of war and a deliberately enhanced sense of racial superiority. Over two months, Japanese soldiers repeatedly raped thousands of women, murdered and mutilated hundreds of thousands of Chinese civilians and prisoners-of-war, and burned and looted throughout the city. Four hundred thousand Chinese were murdered, as Japanese soldiers used them for bayonet practice and machine-gunned them into pits.

→ Despite knowledge of these and other Japanese actions, other nations refused to intervene to stop the war, which by 1938 and until 1945 tied down over half the Japanese military, which gained control of most of coastal China but lacked the resources to conquer the interior. Dogged resistance from Chinese Nationalist and Communist groups further frustrated the Japanese invaders, who as the war progressed, even used chemical and biological weapons in an attempt to break Chinese resistance. By the end of the war in 1945, 20 million Chinese were dead, and Chinese-Japanese

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relations have remained strained ever since. Failure to defeat China motivated Japan's military leaders to initiate expansion into Southeast Asia, primarily in search of resources to sustain the Chinese war effort. This strategy, aided by a neutrality pact with the Soviet Union in April 1941, ultimately led to Japan's surprise attack on U.S. forces at Pearl Harbor and in the Philippines in December 1941.

→ For China, the Japanese invasion meant occupation and political turmoil. The ruling Guomindang, or Nationalist Party, saw its political position weakened by the rise of the Chinese Communist Party, whose guerilla operations against the Japanese captured the loyalty of many Chinese peasants. In the Chinese Civil War that followed the Japanese defeat, the Communists defeated the Guomindang, which escaped to Taiwan ~~and~~ and formed a rival government. On the mainland, the victorious Communists began building a socialist society that they still rule today.

→ Aggression in Europe, 1935 - 1939
- In Italy, Fascist dictator Benito Mussolini, emboldened by the lack of concerted action against Japan, sought a restoration of Italy's imperial tradition when he invaded Ethiopia in 1935; like Japan in China, Italian troops behaved brutally in Ethiopia, deploying tanks,

napalm-armed aircraft, and poison gas against the Ethiopians, who fought bravely but lacked modern weapons. 275,000 Ethiopians died; 2,000 Italians lost ^{their} lives.

→ Italian and Japanese aggression in turn emboldened Adolf Hitler, the Führer (leader) of the National Socialist Party that had come to power in Germany in 1933 on a wave of public discontent over the post-World War One settlements and the suffering caused by the Great Depression. Blaming both events on Germany's internal "enemies" - Jews, Communists and liberals - he vowed to create a racially "pure" Germany that would regain past glory and territory. Behind this aim lay a far more bold plan; creation of a vast Eurasian empire through the acquisition of lebensraum, or "living space", in Eastern Europe & Russia. This would be the springboard for eventual global domination.

→ After withdrawing Germany from the League of Nations in 1933, Hitler moved to rearm Germany, first secretly, then openly after 1935, when German troops entered the Rhineland that bordered France. Germany joined Italy in the Spanish Civil War, where Hitler's military, especially the air force, gained combat experience and learned the value of terror bombing - Picasso's famous painting Guernica, which hangs in the main hallway of the United Nations

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declared war and sent additional troops; Stalin was surprised by the attack along a 1,900 mile line, and Soviet forces reeled back in disarray. ~~By October 1941~~ By December 1941 German forces had surrounded Leningrad and entered Moscow suburbs. They also held Russia's industrial and agricultural heartland and had captured millions of prisoners. German victory seemed assured.

→ Yet, beneath the surface, concerns mounted.

- ① The Blitzkrieg tactics that worked so well in Europe failed in Russia, due to logistical overstretch, lack of roads, and dogged, even suicidal, Soviet resistance. ^② Hitler and his generals vastly underestimated Soviet personnel ~~so~~ and industrial reserves - although German troops captured over 2 million Russian soldiers, Soviet troops still outnumbered their German adversaries, who by ^{troops} December 1941 had lost 800,000 of their own.
- ③ Allied supply assistance, particularly American trucks and felt-lined boots, helped the Russian war effort.
- ④ For the Germans, unfortunately, no winter equipment had been provided, and as winter set in - the worst in decades - thousands of troops froze to death, or suffered permanent frostbite injuries.

→ By early 1942, desperate Soviet counterattacks - often at night in temperatures below -20°F - had stopped the German advance. Although German forces regrouped and advanced

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manpower, was unlikely to win. That outcome appeared more likely after the titanic battle around and within the city of Stalingrad in 1942/1943. By February 1943, Soviet forces defeated German units, capturing 500,000 troops, and regained the initiative. Soviet industrial potential now took over, as mass-produced weapons like the T-34 tank and Katyusha rocket launchers combined with intense Soviet propaganda to propel the Red Army westward. By early 1944 a series of massive victories saw German forces evicted from Russian soil. At the time of the Allied D-Day landings in June 1944, Russian forces were deep into Central Europe - less than a year later, they entered Berlin in April 1945, having inflicted more than six million casualties - over twice the original invading force - on the German Army.

→ The Soviet soldiers had suffered a heavy price; millions lay dead across Eastern Europe, and in their last battle - for the German capital, Berlin - their combat casualties, over 300,000 dead - exceeded the total U.S. Army deaths in all theaters for the entire war. Small wonder then that when an ~~American~~ Russian war correspondent asked a Red Army soldier how his comrades had defeated Nazi Germany, he replied; "with flesh."

→ Europe lay in ruins after six years of brutal mobile war and Allied bombing. For the next forty-five years, Europe's political

future lay in the hands of the two superpowers created by the war; the United States and the Soviet Union. Hitler's 1000 year Reich lasted only 12 years.

Life in Wartime

More than any other group, including military personnel, civilians suffered terribly during the Second World War. The widespread bombing of civilian areas, from its beginning in China to its end in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, meant there was no safe home front during the war. So did the arrival of brutal occupation forces in the wake of German & Japanese conquests, particularly in Asia and Eastern Europe.

Strategic bombing killed men, women and children across the world, and occupation troops forced civilians to work and die in labor and extermination camps. As a result, civilian deaths far exceeded military casualties.

→ Despite these horrors, the war's brutality also revealed the 'resilience' of the human spirit, in the forms of resistance movements battling occupation forces, in the millions of women who as both workers and combatants joined the fight, and in the survivors of bombings and the camp systems.

→ Racist ideology and desire for resources and plunder characterized German and Japanese occupation regimes throughout Eurasia. Japanese and German authorities sought to use resources and labor from conquered

regions to augment their own industrial capacity, often with shockingly inhumane results. Slave labor was the worst of these efforts. As total war created unlimited manpower demands, Japanese and German occupation authorities ^{illegally} created forced labor systems using local civilians and prisoners of war. In Poland, the Soviet Union, France, Italy and the Balkans, German occupiers forced millions of people to work in camps and war industries, and the Japanese did likewise in China, Korea, and across Southeast Asia - these slave laborers worked under horrific conditions and received little food or water - tens of thousands died from disease and malnutrition.

→ Even worse, both powers' racial ideologies drove them to commit mass murder and genocide. Japanese troops killed millions of "subhuman" Chinese peasants, while in Occupied Europe, Nazi Germany's military and security forces, centrally coordinated by the feared SS, physically murdered millions of Jews, Slavs, Gypsies, homosexuals, Jehovah's Witnesses, communists, the physically and mentally handicapped, and others targeted as undesirable, or "life unworthy." The principal targets of the Holocaust, as it would become known, were European Jews ^{at least} 5.7 million were murdered, by shootings, or by gassings in specially-designed extermination centers, located in eastern Poland. Hundreds of thousands of Europeans participated in the genocide, which increasingly took on an organized and

technologically sophisticated character as the war continued. Included in the effort was repeated use of language and action to obscure and cover up the genocide, which Hitler had ordered was to be erased from history. The systematic murder of the Jews and other groups has come to epitomize the horrific, ideological nature of the Second World War. Sadly, despite the appearance of international law defining genocide as a "crime against humanity," it has continued to occur, in Rwanda, Bosnia, and Darfur over the last twelve years.

→ In Asia, Japanese occupation and racial policies fell heavily on young women; the Japanese Army forcibly recruited over 300,000 women ~~from~~ aged 14 to 21 to serve in military brothels, known as euphemistically as "comfort houses" or "consolation centers". Presented as a gift to the troops from the Emperor, these "comfort women" from Korea, Manchuria, Taiwan, the Philippines and other areas of S-E Asia were forced to have sex with 20-30 men a day. Stationed in war zones, the women confronted the same risks as soldiers, and many became casualties. Others were killed or permanently maimed by Japanese soldiers, especially if they tried to escape or contracted STD's. At the war's end, soldiers massacred large numbers of the women to cover up the operation. Comfort women who survived the war experienced deep shame - many were shunned by their families, and

large numbers committed suicide. For them, as for Holocaust survivors, the war's end brought neither peace nor comfort. Many remained infertile or permanently traumatized by their experiences.

→ Although the peoples of victorious nations danced and embraced in the streets on V-E and V-J Day, they also faced the daunting challenge of reconstructing a shattered world;

At least 60 million people were dead

25-30 million Soviets

15-20 million Chinese

6 million European Jews

6 million Poles

4 million Germans

2 million Japanese

400,000 British

300,000 Americans

→ Tens of millions of refugees, or DP's (displaced persons) roamed throughout Europe & Asia, seeking new homes, lives, and for many, vengeance.

This huge demographic shift reversed centuries of immigration and colonization patterns across Eastern Europe and North Asia, all as the Cold War coalesced and deepened.

→ As noted earlier, the U.S. and the Soviet Union emerged as superpowers - either through territorial & military expansion in the USSR's case or through enormous economic & industrial expansion in the U.S. case. The dislocation of

Europe and Asia greatly facilitated the emergence of the "bipolar" world, as did the idealism and commitment of both superpowers. Each superpower wanted to guard its precious - and hard-won victory by creating alliances and alignments that would support & protect its way of life*. The ensuing struggle, together with decolonization, helped shape and define the contemporary world.

→ The Second World War also encouraged the development of a supranational organization dedicated to preserving world peace known as the United Nations. Initially created through the joint signatures of fifty nations in San Francisco in January 1945, the U.N. became both a platform ~~for~~ for Cold War tensions and an alternative forum for global reconstruction ^{and dialogue}. Although the U.N.'s track record over the last 61 years has been mixed, few would argue it represents perhaps the most tangible symbol of international desires to prevent a recurrence - or a worsening - of the conflicts of 1931-1945.

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