



World War 2 |History, & Causes

World War 2 Causes



World War 2 was one of the largest and most devastating events in human [history](#), leading to over 55 million deaths worldwide. Between 1939 and 1945, relentless battles took place on land, sea, and air, with all populated continents touched by its ravages. Many horrible events occurred in its name, including the Holocaust and the atomic bomb, leaving the world shaken in its wake. But what motivated these events to unfold? And how did the entire world become involved in a battle that would last six years?

The beginning of WWII had several strands contributing to an all-out war. Land, resources, and bitter rivalry all pushed towards this outcome. This video covers the reasons for WWII as well as what happened in the first half. First, it is important to look at WWII as two separate areas – [Europe](#) and East Asia. During the conflict, these continents were increasingly intertwined. However, from the outset, each country's



reasons and levels of involvement were different. Some 20 years prior, World War II severely affected several countries throughout Europe, including [Germany](#).

The Allies had brutally punished the country for its involvement in the war through the Treaty of Versailles. The Austria-Hungarian Empire was no more, and there was a strong sense of instability in the east. The Russian empire had also overthrown their government, becoming the **U.S.S.R.**, and was now a communist country. Across Europe, far-right-wing parties became popular – promising to succeed where their previous rulers had failed.

These ideologies were often ultra-nationalistic, accompanied by views of racial superiority and a hatred of communism. This fear made it even easier to scapegoat outsiders as the problem – and their removal as the solution. The first major fascist party was started in Italy by Benito Mussolini. He rallied the disenchanted let down by those currently in charge. Through persuasion and intimidation, he became Prime Minister in 1922. Once in power, he changed various laws one by one, leading to a dictatorship, and turned his attention to becoming a colonizing force by successfully conquering Abyssinia in 1935.

Fascist Movement



Adolf Hitler



The most famous of all in the **fascist movement** was, of course, [Adolph Hitler](#). A veteran of World War I, Hitler was strongly opposed to the Treaty of Versailles, which imposed severe restrictions on Germany in many respects. His fascist ideology was infused with a racist, homophobic and anti-communist sentiment.

In 1933, he was elected Chancellor through the use of his oratory skills. War was on Hitler's mind from the outset of his rise to power. Like Mussolini once in power, he removed the opposition, making himself the "Führer," which means leader or guide. Almost immediately, he began to focus his attention on rearming Germany. Both Hitler and Mussolini involved themselves in the Spanish Civil War.

Although they did not directly join the fight, they sent armed forces to aid the right-wing Franco, which helped him win. In doing so, they believed that they would have an ally for the upcoming war. However, this was not the case as Franco remained neutral during WWII. March of 1936 saw Hitler challenging the rest of Europe by occupying the Rhineland – a part of Germany that had been demilitarized after WWI.

He also seized his own homeland of Austria, which had a large German-speaking population. Later that year, he occupied Czechoslovakia. Europe repeatedly backed down to appease him and avoid conflict. In Asia, the Chinese Revolutions of 1911 and 1913 and the Chinese Civil War of 1927 created political instability. Nationalists and communists continuously struggled to gain power. During this period, [Japan](#) became very ambitious, wanting to expand and gain greater access to raw resources.

The West had also become involved in their colonies and navy in 1930, interventions that the Japanese resented and saw as foreign meddling. Then in 1931, the Japanese invaded Chinese Manchuria and started to take over Chinese territory. In 1937, Chinese Nationalist Leader Chiang Kai-Shek had had enough of trying to appease them, which escalated into the Second Sino-Japanese War.

The seeds were already sewn in Asia for a major move towards war. However, it would be Hitler who would bring it to the West in 1939. Hitler wanted more space for the racially superior German people. Poland, just over the border to the east, was ideal.



Invasion of Poland



Invasion of Poland

On September 1, 1939, German troops charged into Poland. Both Germany and the **U.S.S.R.** had agreed to keep the peace by using Poland as a buffer. However, German forces had been gathering along the border. The German divisions that forced their way into Poland consisted heavily of tanks and motorized infantry. The Luftwaffe, the German air force, outnumbered the outdated Polish aircrafts five to one. They began to use "**Blitzkrieg**" – or lightning war – in their air battles.

The Germans easily destroyed the Polish defenses. With Polish forces ruined, soldiers and high command fled the country. On September 28, the Warsaw garrison



surrendered. However, the Poles had powerful allies in [France](#) and Britain, who declared war on Germany on September 3. The Allies began a naval blockade of Germany. America was not yet playing an active role in WWII, but it supplied the allies with equipment sent to Britain and France. The Germans countered this by attacking with submarines or “**U-boats**.” In April 1940, Germany invaded Denmark and Norway to protect their supply of iron from Sweden. Despite allied troops rushing to Norway, the Germans were again victorious.

That year, **Winston Churchill** took over as Prime Minister from Neville Chamberlain. Churchill was prepared for war, and his decisive leadership would be key in its outcome. At the same time, Germany was preparing for the invasion of France. Many German army divisions gathered for invasion, slightly outnumbering the French, Belgian and British forces. On May 10, 1940, the Germans launched their attack, starting with the Netherlands.

The Dutch Army lost, surrendering after four days of fighting. Belgium also fell quickly, and half its Air Force was rapidly destroyed. German Panzer tanks plowed through the Ardennes in southern Belgium and burst into France. The Germans quickly broke through, reaching the English Channel on May 20, splitting the Allied forces in half. The **British**, along with French and other Allied troops, were surrounded.

On May 26, the British began evacuating troops through the port of Dunkirk, while the French held off the Germans. Three hundred thirty-eight thousand men, including 120,000 French, were evacuated. The Germans went south, surrounding the remaining French troops who surrendered on June 22.

The country was now mostly under German control, while the right-wing Vichy was controlling the southeast. Meanwhile, on June 10, Mussolini sent troops across the Alps into southeastern France. This was a token gesture that would officially bring Italy into the war. Britain was one of the only countries in Europe that could take a firm stance against the Germans. The majority of countries that were not invaded, such as Sweden and Ireland, were neutral.



America Goes to War



The British armed forces now had more reinforcements in the form of refugees from conquered countries. The **French**, led by General de Gaulle, also substantially contributed. Polish researchers studying German communications and trying to crack the infamous Enigma code ended up in Britain – still helping with the war effort. America became more involved from December 1940,

when **President Franklin D. Roosevelt** declared his intention to help the Allies in Europe fight against Germany and Italy. Roosevelt's decision to move away from



neutrality helped with the success of the Atlantic convoys providing food and arms for Britain. [Hitler](#) had plans to invade the U.K. Operation Sealion (Germany's code name for their plan to invade the United Kingdom) was to send 43 German divisions across the Channel to London to force a surrender of the British government.

The Luftwaffe was to take control of the airspace above Britain. From August 8, 1940, hundreds of aircraft bombed British radar stations and airfields daily. The Germans far outnumbered the Allies, with 1300 German bombers and 1,200 fighters deployed in the Battle of Britain.

600 Squadron R.A.F



600 R.A.F Squadron



The **R.A.F.** had only **600 fighters**, but they had one major advantage – their crafts were the superior Hurricanes and Spitfires. The British also had a complete radar network covering the coastline; they could better prepare for the Germans and redirect planes more efficiently.

The Germans attacked airbases in an exhausting few months before moving to ports and airfields, finally focusing on radar stations. Everything changed dramatically when on August 24, a German plane accidentally bombed a civilian area in London. **Churchill** ordered a strike in retaliation, which ended in British bombers attacking Berlin. Hitler was infuriated and began to attack British cities with terror bombings.

Russia was another superpower with a large role to play in the fight against the fascists. Following the First World War, **the Soviets** and **Swedes** helped the Germans rebuild their military despite the stipulations of the Treaty of Versailles. In 1939, the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact had seen the nations agree to divide Eastern Europe and avoid confrontation. Hitler still hated communism despite this truce. He also wanted more land for his citizens.

In 1940, he came up with a directive to conquer the U.S.S.R. entitled **Operation Barbarossa**. Both British and American intelligence discovered Hitler's plan and informed Stalin in the hopes of turning him against the Führer. Stalin, however, believed Hitler to be loyal to the **Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact**. However, Stalin was mistaken. Over three million German soldiers prepared for action. Hitler had even ensured extra allies for Germany by enlisting Romania and Finland, who wanted to reclaim the land they had lost to the Soviets.

On June 22, 1941, the German ambassador in Moscow delivered the declaration of war, stating that the Soviets had violated the terms of their pact. Troops began to advance across the border from the Black Sea to the Baltic. Initially, the Germans appeared to have the upper hand. The Soviets and Germans had roughly the same amount of troops. However, the Germans had better equipment and training, as many soldiers fought in previous invasions across Europe.

The German tanks and planes may have numbered significantly less, but they were better. Stalin's purges had also killed off many experienced leaders, so the Soviets



lacked experienced commanders. By the end of July, the Germans had advanced past Minsk, Smolensk, and Kiev, forcing over 1,200,000 Russian soldiers to give up. The Germans took most of Ukraine's summer harvest for their soldiers but – perhaps more importantly – depriving the Soviets of that important food source. During the first few weeks, the invasion appeared to be a success.

The German advance, however, was slowing down. Two hundred more divisions of Soviet troops arrived, giving Stalin a numbers advantage. In 1941, the Siege of Leningrad started, where the Soviet armies remained until 1944 and killed over 800,000 civilians.



Germans lost some of their strength

The Germans lost some of their strength; here because the Finns resigned from the war, having reclaimed their land and no longer wishing to aggravate the Soviets. Russia could compete with the Germans due to their level of industry; they had learned how to



rebuild their tanks and vehicles. Under Stalin, the armaments industry created plenty of uniform products based on tractor designs.

This blueprint meant that farmers could repair or build army vehicles. Stalin's focus had always been on the quantity of production, and he moved his factories east to avoid German attacks. America and Britain also aided Russia by providing supplies to the Russians. What followed was the coldest Russian winter in 140 years. The Germans, unprepared for these temperatures, suffered from frostbite. Oil froze in engines. Artillery shells stuck together as the grease they were packed in solidified. Soldiers could not dig trenches in the frozen ground. Further east, the situation with Japanese actions in East Asia would start a **global war**.

In 1940, Japan had signed a treaty with Germany and Italy, making their allegiances known. The war with China continued with the American government providing aid to Chiang Kai-Shek to fight the Japanese invasion. The Americans also placed sanctions on Japan, a move that increased resentment towards the West. For Japan to take hold of the European colonies in Asia, it needed to act fast. Hitler had already been quite successful in Europe. Japan feared that if it waited too long and Hitler gained control of Europe, he would claim the various colonies. They needed to deal with China quickly before it was too late.

Pearl Harbor the Attack



Pearl Harbor Attack



In November 1941, the Japanese demanded that the U.S. government stop helping the Chinese and sell them the oil they needed for war – leaving the U.S. in a very awkward position. Hostile countries would surround the Americans, Britain would lose resources, and the Axis would control Europe. America refused to accept these terms.

On December 7, 1941, Japan launched a **surprise attack** on the **American naval base** at **Pearl Harbor** in the **Hawaiian Islands**. Although most certainly a horrible attack, it did not hit its target as the American aircraft carriers were not in the port at the time. The Japanese also invaded Hong Kong, Guam, Wake Island, and Midway on the same day. In their attack on the Philippines, a large American contingent surrendered. The actions of the Japanese had forced America's hand.

The next day the **U.S. declared war on Japan**, formally making America a major player in the remainder of the war. Britain also joined the Americans in their fight against Japan. British territory was invaded, and resources were still needed, despite the war raging on in Europe and Africa. On December 10, Japanese forces sank the **H.M.S. Prince of Wales** and the **H.M.S. Repulse**; the two most powerful British warships in the region. Germany and Japan were not particularly close, and their alliance was more of a practical one. Japan did not join the Germans when they declared war on their rivals, the Soviets.

On December 11, Hitler declared war on the U.S. to ensure they would fight in Europe also. This move cemented their relationship in the war together and made it a worldwide event. These separate issues had now become so entangled they had devolved into one conflict that circled the globe. America quickly filled its ranks, with many naval pilots recruited. Factories increased their production lines producing huge quantities of munitions, weapons, and vehicles.

Japan's biggest concern was Australia, a part of the Commonwealth and a source of troops for the British and a trading partner with America. Along its way to Australia, Japan took the East Indies, Guam, and Wake Island. May 1942 saw the first major battle between Japan and the Allies. With some Australian support, an American fleet took on the Japanese. Known as **The Battle of the Coral Sea**, these ships fought without even seeing each other, as planes from carriers attacked the other side.



The Allies suffered terrible damage. However, this was the first time that the Japanese had stopped. It was a move in the right direction for the Allies. A month later, a Japanese fleet headed toward Midway Island, defended by American aircraft and ground forces. Taking Midway would mean a base from which the Japanese could attack **Pearl Harbor** and threaten America's presence.

On approaching Midway, the Japanese fleet was attacked by planes from both the island and the rear. The Japanese lost four aircraft carriers, which they could not replace, and so retreated. In contrast, the Americans, who had plenty more ships on the way, only lost one carrier. However, despite this victory for the Allies, December 1941 saw a new front open to keep Japan in the fight until the end. Japanese and Thai allies had invaded Burma, a part of the [British Empire](#).

They had driven back British forces, including imperial [Indian](#) and [Chinese](#) troops. Initially, they were very successful, occupying most of Burma, but the fighting was far from over. The reasons for the hostilities ranged from post-World War I ill will to a fight for resources and land. The aggressors were ambitious and determined, eventually forcing many other powers to become involved.

The fight was definitely not an easy one. World War II would rage on for seven years and ravage many of the countries involved around the globe. However, turning points were on the horizon for the Allies.