

OVERVIEW OF WORD WAR II: EUROPE

Blitzkrieg 1939-1941

German Attack on Poland (9-1-1939)

-960,000 German troops quickly defeated 600,000 Polish troops; Warsaw capitulated 9-27-1939
 -new doctrine of **lightning warfare**: Germans did not use tanks like artillery, but as means of spearheaded offense, guarded by dive bombers, to advance far into enemy territory without flank protection

-**France and Britain** did not aid Poland, even though they had promised support (French air support)

-goals of **race war** in the East: conquer “living space” for Aryan Germans by removing and murdering allegedly inferior races and ethnic groups

-9-25-1939: 400 German bombers killed at least 40,000 civilians in **Warsaw**

-after annexing western Poland, Hitler **deported 325,000 ethnic Poles and 330,000 Jews** into occupied central Poland (so-called General Government)

-**S.S. Einsatzgruppen** (death squads) terrorized civilian population, killing at least 15,000 people

-**2 million Polish Jews were in ghettos** by 1940: 160,000 in Lodz ghetto and 450,000 in Warsaw ghetto

-in eastern Poland **Stalin’s secret police** arrested over 260,000 Poles and deported them to slave labor camps in Soviet Union; tens of thousands died there; Soviets also took 230,000 prisoners of war, including 15,000 officers (many executed and buried in mass graves in Katyn Forest in spring 1940)

German Attack on West (Spring 1940)

-German divisions overran **Denmark and Norway** in April 1940

-German military attacked **Holland, Belgium, and France** on May 10, 1940: Germany’s successful rationale was to “feint” an attack on Holland and Belgium and to surprise the French at an unfortified sector north of the Maginot Line

-Holland capitulated on May 15 after murderous bombing of civilians in **Rotterdam**

-**Belgium** surrendered on May 28, after the Germans had defeated 20 French divisions in support of Belgian divisions (in one week of fighting)

-German troops took Paris on June 14; France surrendered a week later: the northern two-thirds of France were occupied by the Germans, the French paid the occupation costs; the new capital of “Free” France was at **Vichy**; Hitler reduced its army and navy to the same low levels Germany had to accept in 1919; 1.5 million French stayed in German captivity as POWs

-Hitler exploited the **lack of democratic solidarity and lagging rearmament**

-first defeat for Hitler’s Blitzkrieg: “**Battle of Britain**” in August and September 1940; after heavy losses in air war Hitler “postponed” British ground invasion, but continued terror bombing until spring 1941: 40,000 British civilians killed, mainly in London, but also in Coventry, Birmingham and other cities

Hitler Turned South (March 1941)

-Sept. 1940: **Tripartite Pact** allotted Southeast Asia to Japan, Europe to Germany, and the Mediterranean and Africa to Italy, but Italy's invasion of Greece and British Egypt failed in late 1940

-March 1941: German **General Erwin Rommel** ("Desert Fox") pushed British forces back hundreds of miles to Egypt in thirty days

-April 1941: German forces attacked **Yugoslavia and Greece**. After 20,000 civilians died in Belgrade in one night, Yugoslavia surrendered on April 17; Athens fell 10 days later. Germany took Crete in May.

German Attack on the Soviet Union (6- 22-1941)

-Hitler was concerned that the **Soviet Union** would join Britain (now receiving aid from the United States) in an anti-German alliance, even though he had signed a non-aggression pact with Stalin on 8-23-1939

-152 German divisions, supported by a small Rumanian contingent and 14 Finnish divisions attacked and **completely surprised the Red Army**. By late August 1941 German troops stood 200 miles west of Moscow. Northern armies besieged Leningrad in early September; Kiev fell a few weeks later. In 3 months nearly 3 million Red Army troops had been killed, wounded, or captured. This figure climbed above **4 million** as the Germans drove to the outskirts of Moscow in November 1941.

-The Red Army counterattack in December 1941 drove the Germans far away from Moscow, **end of Blitzkrieg**

-German **race war**: belief in a Jewish-Bolshevik conspiracy and racist contempt for Slavic peoples explains the unprecedented levels of German brutality and criminality: Close to 3 million Soviet POWs died in captivity before spring 1942, half a million were shot by the Wehrmacht, most perished from willful neglect.

Decline of the Axis, 1942-1944

Grand Alliance

-change of nature of warfare after failure of Operation Barbarossa and US entry after Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941: from Blitzkrieg to **warfare of attrition** as Hitler faced a multifront war against an alliance of communist and democratic countries . "**GNP War**": the prewar industrial outputs of the United States, Soviet Union, and Great Britain (Grand Alliance) were first, third, and fourth, whereas Germany's had been second in 1939.

-Winter 1942/43: Allies gained upper hand in the **Atlantic**; German submarines only managed to sink 20% of the tonnage of previous year and allied ships and planes began to sink 40% of German submarines in May 1943. Allies could use sea lanes to build invasion force for "D-Day."

Stalingrad

-after massive losses of materiel and men, Hitler aimed for the **oil-producing region of the Caucasus** and Caspian Sea in 1942; one army group went into the Caucasus, the other to Stalingrad (to cut supplies going northbound on Volga); Stalingrad was terror-bombed by Luftwaffe

-Soviet troops clung to Stalingrad street by street; Hitler did not allow slightest retreat; entire **sixth army** was taken prisoner along with its commander

-Stalingrad represents a **major turning point** of World War II; even though a million Soviet soldiers perished, the Red Army was psychologically recharged

-Germans tried to regain their momentum in the spring of 1943, but the Soviets gained their first summer victory in the tank battle of **Kursk** in July 1943 and from then on, the Soviets were permanently on the offensive; by December 1943 the front had been pushed 500 miles farther west and Kiev was retaken

North Africa

-by September 1942 Rommel's advance toward Cairo petered out as Hitler denied reinforcements; in October 1942 a British army under General Bernard Montgomery counterattacked at **el-Alamein**; in November 1942 an Anglo-American army landed in Morocco and Algeria and moved westward

-May 1943: **238,000 German and Italian soldiers were captured**; Rommel had advised retreat, but Hitler had refused

Soviet War Costs

-**8-11 million Soviet soldiers died**

-during the 3-year siege of **Leningrad 1.5 million civilians died**, most from starvation

-**1.5 million Soviet Jews were murdered by Nazis; 1.5 million killed by Wehrmacht** in "anti-partisan" sweeps

-in total: **14 -17 million civilians died on Eastern Front**

German Home Front

-allied bombing intensified in early 1943: over **half a million German civilians perished** in raids on Hamburg, Berlin, Cologne, Dresden, Nuremberg and other cities; and another 800,000 were badly maimed; at the end of the war 40% of all German homes reduced to rubble

Fissures in the Grand Alliance

-Stalin insisted on control over eastern **Poland** even though he had signed January 1942 agreement to restore sovereignty and self-government to lands liberated from the Axis; and the West signed an armistice with Italy even though it had pledged not to sign any separate peace treaties

- Roosevelt and Churchill held on to their demand for "**unconditional surrender**" first announced in January 1943 at Casablanca

- **Teheran**, December 1943: first "Big Three" summit meeting: Soviet would receive Eastern Poland and West would open Second Front in spring 1944

Life in Occupied Europe

The Nazi New Order

-phrase of "**new order**" coined by Nazi propagandist Joseph Goebbels shortly after fall of France: Germans to control Europe along autarkical, racial, and authoritarian anti-communist lines

-**Collaborators:** hundreds of thousands of young men joined the German crusade voluntarily; among them were 20,000 French, 50,000 Dutch, and 40,000 Belgians

-**official tributes** exacted from defeated nations amount to equivalent of **40 billion dollars**, almost twice the total of all American loans and Marshall Plan aid to Western Europe from 1945 to 1952

-Nazis engaged in outright **looting of property** on unprecedented scale

-by 1945: 7 million civilians from occupied Europe worked for Germans (20% of German labor force); another million Soviet POWs toiled as **slave laborers**

Resistance

-300,000 Poles joined the "**Home Army**" led by London-based Polish government in exile

-French resistance groups under **General Charles de Gaulle** numbered 200,000-400,000; De Gaulle launched anti-German activities from Algeria; thousands of young French men went into the mountains to evade forced labor deportations

-**Italian** communists led strike wave in 1942 and 1943; 90,000 Italian communists resisted Mussolini by early 1944; **general strike** in March 1944 was the largest work stoppage in World War II

-**Communist partisans** especially strong in Greece and Yugoslavia: by early 1944 **Tito** had a quarter of a million well-armed men who succeeded in tying down 14 German divisions

-uprising in **Warsaw Ghetto**: April-May 1943: hundreds of lightly armed resistance fighters tried to derail S.S. deportations from Warsaw.

-by mid-1944 **200,000 partisans** fought Nazis in White Russia and Ukraine

Genocide

-Hitler aimed for **annihilation of Jews in Europe**, but was willing to proceed pragmatically (ex.: Night of the Broken Glass in November 1938)

-**330,000 Jews had left Germany by 1939**

-1941: existing POW and work camps in Poland were transformed into **death camps**, following Heinrich Himmler's order

-January 1942: **Wannsee Conference**: S.S. laid out "final solution"

-by the summer of 1944 525,000 people populated German concentration camps; on average there were **7,000 gassings a day in Auschwitz from May to July 1944**

-**only allied victory ended killings**

From D-Day to V-E Day 1944-1945

-by 1944 **Grand Alliance** produced nearly four times as many tanks and planes than Germany

-June 6, 1944: **Normandy Invasion**: Anglo-American forces crossed the English Channel and opened "Second Front" in France; 12,000 allied soldiers were killed or wounded in one day; Paris was liberated on

August 24; as British, French, and American forces pushed toward Germany 500,000 German soldiers were dead or wounded

-June 22, 1944: **Red Army** launched a massive offensive against Germany's most powerful force in the East; by the end of July it had pushed German forces 350 miles back west close to Warsaw; over 550,000 German soldiers were killed or wounded; the Soviets lost over a million men, but were able to replace them

-July 20, 1944: German resistance (**Colonel Claus von Stauffenberg**) tried to assassinate Hitler; in response 5,000 suspected conspirators were killed, among them Erwin Rommel (because he openly advocated negotiations with the West to end the war)

-August 1, 1944: **Warsaw Uprising**: Polish Home Army, led by London Poles, rose against Nazis; Stalin did not help them and stopped his advance; the Nazis killed 245,000 Warsaw residents and deported 700,000 to concentration or slave labor camps; Hitler's forces destroyed 93% of Warsaw; the Red Army occupied the bombed-out remains in January 1945

-over **2 million soldiers died in Europe during final five months of combat** until V-E Day on May 8, 1945; Battle of the Bulge in Belgium (100,000 Americans died and 120,000 Germans died); 35,000 residents of Dresden died in one night of British firebombing (February 13, 1945); 12 million Germans fled west to escape Soviets; 600,000 German refugees died, another 2.2 million individuals were never located, probably dead; estimates of German women raped by Red Army soldiers range from a few hundred thousand up to two million

-overall death toll of WWII: close to 60 million

Sources:

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