

Leading up to World War II

The devastation of the Great War (as World War I was known at the time) had greatly destabilized Europe, and in many respects World War II grew out of issues left unresolved by that earlier conflict. In particular, political and economic instability in Germany, and lingering resentment over the harsh terms imposed by the Versailles Treaty, fueled the rise to power of Adolf Hitler and his National Socialist (Nazi) Party.

After becoming Reich Chancellor in 1933, Hitler swiftly consolidated power, anointing himself Führer (supreme leader) in 1934. Obsessed with the idea of the superiority of the "pure" German race, which he called "Aryan," Hitler believed that war was the only way to gain the necessary "Lebensraum," or living space, for that race to expand. In the mid-1930s, he began the rearmament of Germany, secretly and in violation of the Versailles Treaty. After signing alliances with Italy and Japan against the Soviet Union, Hitler sent troops to occupy Austria in 1938 and the following year annexed Czechoslovakia. **Hitler's open aggression went unchecked, as the United States and Soviet Union were concentrated on internal politics at the time,** and neither France nor Britain (the two other nations most devastated by the Great War) were eager for confrontation.

Outbreak of World War II (1939)

In late August 1939, Hitler and Soviet leader Joseph Stalin signed the German-Soviet Nonaggression Pact, which incited a frenzy of worry in London and Paris. Hitler had long planned an invasion of Poland, a nation to which Great Britain and France had guaranteed military support if it was attacked by Germany. The pact with Stalin meant that Hitler would not face a war on two fronts once he invaded Poland, and would have Soviet assistance in conquering and dividing the nation itself. On September 1, 1939, Hitler invaded Poland from the west; two days later, France and Britain declared war on Germany, beginning World War II.

On September 17, Soviet troops invaded Poland from the east. Under attack from both sides, Poland fell quickly, and by early 1940 Germany and the Soviet Union had divided control over the nation, according to a secret protocol appended to the Nonaggression Pact. Stalin's forces then moved to occupy the Baltic States (Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania) and defeated a resistant Finland in the Russo-Finish War. During the six months following the invasion of Poland, the lack of action on the part of Germany and the Allies in the west led to talk in the news media of a "phony war." At sea, however, the British and German navies faced off in heated battle, and lethal German U-boat submarines struck at merchant shipping bound for Britain, sinking more than 100 vessels in the first four months of World War II.

World War II in the West (1940-41)

On April 9, 1940, Germany simultaneously invaded Norway and occupied Denmark, and the war began in earnest. On May 10, German forces swept through Belgium and the Netherlands in what became known as "blitzkrieg," or lightning war. Three days later, Hitler's troops crossed the Meuse River and struck French forces at Sedan, located at the northern end of the Maginot Line, an elaborate chain of fortifications constructed after World War I and considered an impenetrable defensive barrier. In fact, the Germans broke through the line with their tanks and planes and continued to the rear, rendering it useless. The British Expeditionary Force (BEF) was evacuated by sea from Dunkirk in late May, while in the south French forces mounted a doomed resistance. With France on the verge of collapse, Benito Mussolini of Italy put his Pact of Steel with Hitler into action, and Italy declared war against France and Britain on June 10.

On June 14, German forces entered Paris; a new government formed by Marshal Philippe Petain (France's hero of World War I) requested an armistice two nights later. France was subsequently divided into two zones, one under German military occupation and the other under Petain's government, installed at Vichy. Hitler now turned his attention to Britain, which had the defensive advantage of being separated from the Continent by the English Channel. To pave the way for an amphibious invasion (dubbed Operation Sea Lion), German planes bombed Britain extensively throughout the summer of 1940, including night raids on London and other industrial centers that caused heavy civilian casualties and damage. The Royal Air Force (RAF) eventually defeated the Luftwaffe (German Air Force) in the Battle of Britain, and Hitler postponed his plans to invade. **With Britain's defensive resources pushed to the limit, Prime Minister Winston Churchill began receiving crucial aid from the U.S. under the Lend-Lease Act, passed by Congress in early 1941.**

