



The failed Treaty of Versailles created a weakened and humiliated Germany – a status that made the country vulnerable to a dictatorial takeover. When Adolf Hitler took power, he blamed Jews and other minority populations for the country's economic problems. The economic collapse was a convenient way to justify his anti-Semitic beliefs. He also vowed to rebuild the army and restore glory to the country.

In 1938, Hitler annexed Austria and territories in Czechoslovakia. Britain's policy of appeasement encouraged Hitler to try and take more territories. This set the stage for another world war. At the Munich Conference, Hitler convinced Neville Chamberlain, the British Prime Minister, that the Sudetenland was the last foreign territory that Germany wanted. In March of the following year, Hitler invaded the remaining parts of Czechoslovakia. Since Poland contained lands that were part of the former German Empire, it was Hitler's next target. Britain and France vowed to protect Poland in the event of a German attack, hoping this would stop Hitler from invading the country.

In August of 1939, Germany and the Soviet Union signed the Nazi-Soviet Pact. This agreement divided up Eastern Europe between the two countries into spheres of influence. It was obvious that Hitler's dreams of German expansion were still alive, and that the only way to stop him would be through military conflict.

Germany Invades Poland

- September 1, 1939
- “Blitzkrieg” or lightning war
- September 17
Soviet Union invades Poland
from the east



Adolf Hitler used deception to create an opportunity to attack Poland. German troops dressed as Polish soldiers and made it appear as though Poland had attacked the German border. Hitler invaded Poland on September 1, 1939. Two days later, France and Britain declared war on Germany.

Germany launched a full-scale invasion of Poland using blitzkrieg tactics. They combined fast-moving tanks, highly-mobile soldiers, and coordinated air power designed to catch the enemy off guard. The German air force, or Luftwaffe, attacked targets inside Poland as the fast-moving tanks encircled the enemy. As Hitler expected, there was little to no response from France and Britain. About two weeks after Germany invaded Poland from the west, the Soviet Union invaded Poland from the east. Within a month, the country was completely occupied.

[Image of tank courtesy German Federal Archive.]



Although Britain and France were technically at war with Germany, troops from both sides did not fight on the battlefield for over six months. At this time, Britain and France were the Allied powers. They gathered their forces along the French-German border, where they expected Hitler to attack. Germany and the Soviet Union started attacking other neighboring countries.

In late 1939, the Soviet Union conquered the Baltic states, and then in the spring of 1940, invaded Finland. Meanwhile, Germany invaded Denmark and then Norway, easily defeating both. With all out war becoming a greater possibility, Britain chose Winston Churchill as its new leader.

[Map courtesy Listowy on Wikipedia.]



French leaders assumed that their country would be Germany's next target, since they shared a border. In preparation, France strengthened the Maginot Line, an elaborate series of defenses which they built after World War I along the German and Italian borders. In May of 1940, Germany invaded France, entering through neutral Belgium instead. The Allied commanders were completely unprepared for this action.

Then, in June, Italy entered the war on the side of Germany. The Allied forces were pushed back quickly. The British army was forced to retreat from the city of Dunkirk back to Britain. This was only possible with the aid of hundreds of private and civilian ships.

On June 22, 1940, Hitler forced France to surrender in the same railroad car where Germany signed the armistice that ended World War I. France was almost completely occupied by the German army. With the approval of Germany, a French government was established at Vichy. This new French government was not independent and cooperated closely with the Nazi government.

Not all of France surrendered. The French General Charles de Gaulle formed an underground group known as the Free-French to help liberate France. This group sabotaged the Nazi forces whenever possible. Britain was the only remaining Allied power and one of the only European countries not under Germany or Italy's control. The signs were clear for Britain; the country had to prepare for the arrival of Hitler's troops.

Germany Attacks Britain

"Never in the field of human conflict was so much owed by so many to so few."

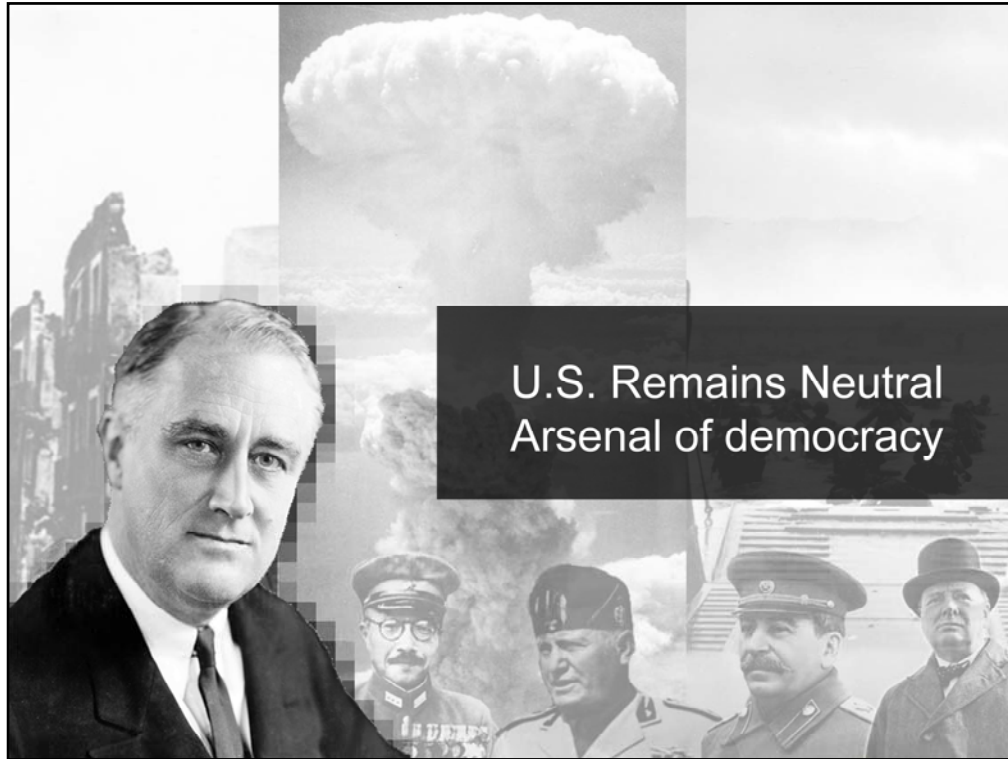
Winston Churchill

Observer corps keeps watch over London

In July of 1940, Hitler took the first steps to invade Britain. His plan was to use aerial attacks to bomb military targets and neutralize Britain's air force. Then, Germany would invade by sea. For three months, the air forces of Germany and Britain engaged in fierce battles known as the Battle of Britain. Although Britain had a smaller air force, it had radar technology, which had recently been developed, and this technology enabled them to better detect German attacks.

After failing to make any real progress attacking military targets, Germany started bombing the civilian population to try and break the country's will. Britain's forces fought back, and British citizens, inspired by Winston Churchill, held out. After realizing that the air campaign was not going to work, Hitler put off his goal of invading Britain until later.

Churchill addressed his victorious pilots with the famous words "Never in the field of human conflict was so much owed by so many to so few." This marked a key moment in the war, since it was the first time that the Allied Powers had stopped Hitler from achieving a military goal.



Although the United States was officially neutral, it still shipped war supplies to the British. American President, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, declared that the U.S. was the “arsenal of democracy.” Many Americans wanted to stay out of the conflict, but President Roosevelt still found ways to help Britain without declaring war against the Axis powers.



After failing to invade Britain, Germany turned against the Soviet Union in the east. Hitler had stated in his book *Mein Kampf* that he wanted to invade the Soviet Union to get access to the country's raw materials, including oil. In June of 1941, after six months of planning, Germany voided the Nazi-Soviet Pact by invading the Soviet Union. The attack was one of the largest in the history of warfare, with roughly 4.5 million troops from the Axis powers leading the invasion. Hitler focused on three primary targets which he believed would lead to a quick victory: Leningrad, now St. Petersburg, Moscow, and Stalingrad, now Volgograd.

Hitler believed that Germany could quickly defeat the Soviet Union and began the attack in the early summer. By November of 1941, the German army had surrounded Leningrad and was within sight of Moscow. Before they could conquer Leningrad, the brutal Soviet winter set in. German troops were totally unprepared for the cold. The attack stalled, and the Soviets were determined to defend the country. The two sides settled in for a long battle which lasted until January of 1944.

In summer of 1942, Hitler ordered a new offensive on Stalingrad, but Germany could not break through the Soviet troops. As winter set in again, the Soviet forces took the offensive. Although the siege lasted only six months, close to two million people were killed in the conflict. Despite Hitler's orders to fight to the last man, his generals defied him and surrendered in February of 1943. The defeat at Stalingrad marked a turning point for the war since the German military was severely weakened. Despite attempts to capture Leningrad and other territories, the Axis powers gained no more territory in the east, and were on the defensive.

[Image of German soldier courtesy German Federal Archive. Image of rocket launchers courtesy Russian International News Agency.]



The battles of World War II were fought in North Africa and the Middle East as well, since France and Britain controlled mandates in these regions after World War I. Italy invaded Ethiopia in 1936, and as early as 1940, Italian troops were battling in a number of countries.

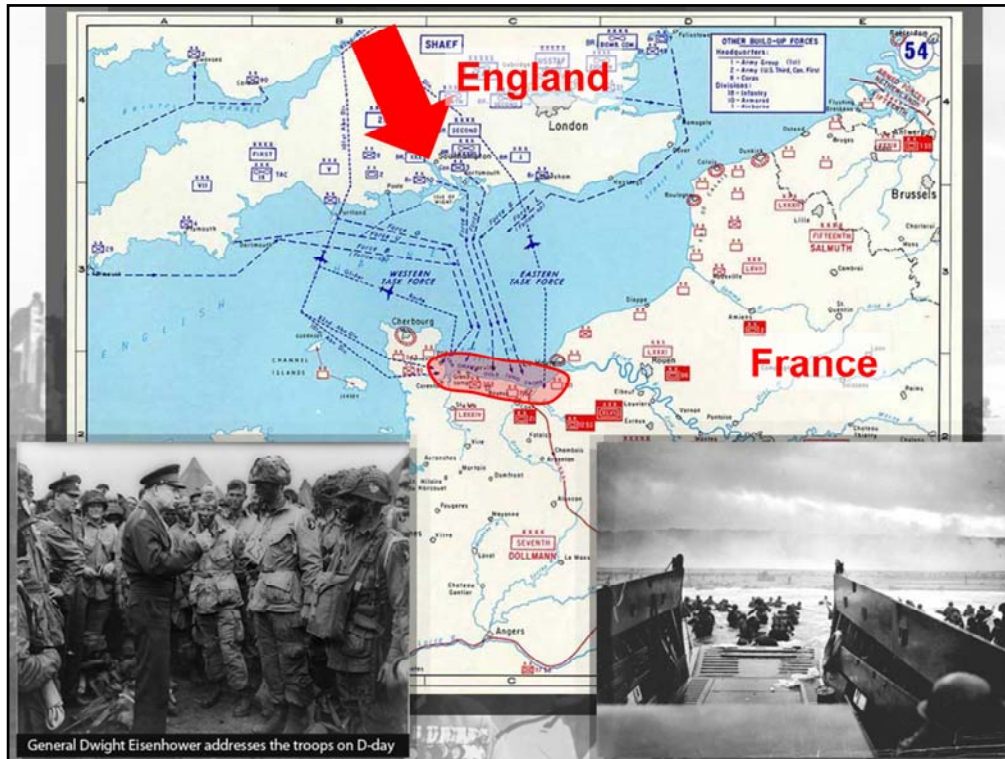
The Middle East was important because of its contained oil, which was crucial to fighting the war. Also, it was important because it contained the Suez Canal, which linked Europe to the Indian Ocean and the Far East. In 1942, Britain defeated the German soldiers that attacked Egypt in an attempt to get control of these strategic resources. At first, the Germans were very successful under Erwin Rommel, also known as the “Desert Fox.” After the Allied forces defeated the Nazis at the Battle of El-Alamein, they were able to push the Axis forces out of North Africa by the spring of 1943.



Success in North Africa gave the Allies the opportunity to invade Italy. In the spring of 1943, the Allies invaded the island of Sicily, located off of the Italian peninsula. Although the invasion resulted in many casualties on both sides, the Allies were able to control the Sicilian beaches. Italy's army soon collapsed.

By the summertime, Mussolini was arrested by the Italians and replaced by a government that joined the Allies. Hitler quickly responded by invading Italy. Italy remained in conflict and was partially controlled by Germany until the end of the war.

[Image courtesy German Federal Archive.]



The Allies focused on freeing France from German control. On June 6th, 1944, in an amphibious invasion code-named “D-Day,” thousands of military ships filled with troops landed on the French beaches at Normandy. These troops were under the command of U.S. General Dwight Eisenhower.

After five days of intense fighting against German soldiers and suffering heavy casualties, the Allies were able to control a part of the French coast. Now, the Allies could reinforce their troops. Within weeks, there were a million Allied soldiers in France moving towards Paris and then towards Germany.



In December of 1944, Hitler sent as many soldiers as he could to fight against the Allies in the Battle of the Bulge. This conflict got its name from the German advances and retreats that appeared like a bulge and then retreated as seen in these maps.

On the verge of defeat, the American forces made a heroic stand at the town of Bastogne in Belgium. By January 1945, the Allies were able to stop Germany's attack and put the Nazi military on the defensive. After the Battle of the Bulge, Hitler did not have enough soldiers to attack again, and the Nazis were forced to retreat and to try to defend Germany.

VE Day- May 8, 1945
American, British, French, and Soviet Forces Enter Berlin



The end of the war in Europe came relatively swiftly over the first few months of 1945. As the Soviet Army attacked Germany from the east and British and American forces moved in from the west, Hitler's situation became so desperate that he started living in the bunker he had built in case of air raids.

Facing certain capture by the Soviets, Hitler committed suicide on April 30th, 1945. German forces surrendered to the Allies a few days later, ending the war in Europe.