

While much of World War II occurred across the European and African continents, many battles took place in what is known as the Pacific Theater, which included mainland Asia and the Southeast Asian islands.



Before Japan entered World War II on the side of the Axis powers, they invaded several neighboring countries throughout the 1930s. In 1931, Japan attacked Manchuria seeking raw materials for its industrial economy. In 1937, Japan started a full-scale war with China. The country began to run out of war supplies by 1939 as the war dragged on.

In September of 1940, Japan signed the Axis pact, officially allying themselves with Germany and Italy. The country began to expand into parts of Southeast Asia in search of more raw materials. Japanese forces were successful in capturing Thailand, Hong Kong, Malaya, Singapore, the Dutch East Indies, and many Pacific Islands.

In July of 1941, the U.S. and Great Britain imposed economic sanctions after Japan refused to withdraw from parts of China. Meanwhile, America provided more economic support to China. Japan began to see the U.S. as its biggest obstacle to expansion in Asia. The two countries were on their way to war.



Since Japan depended heavily on trade with the U.S., the economic embargo put Japan in a tight spot: should the country give up its overseas territories to please its trading partner?

The Japanese Prime Minister, Hideki Tojo, and other military leaders believed that the U.S. was unprepared for war and might be defeated by a quick strike. Emperor Hirohito allowed Tojo and other military leaders to plan the course of action. They decided to implement a surprise attack on the U.S. naval base in Pearl Harbor, Hawaii. On December 7, 1941, Japanese planes attacked U.S. forces, destroying several battleships, and killing two thousand four hundred American soldiers. The attack did not severely cripple the U.S. Navy, since all of its aircraft carriers were at sea. The U.S. declared war on Japan the next day. Four days later, Germany and Italy declared war on the U.S.

As the United States prepared for war, Japan moved quickly to take over as much of Southeast Asia as possible. Japanese forces overwhelmed the U.S. bases in the Philippines and took over Indonesia. As he retreated, U.S. General MacArthur vowed "I shall return." The Japanese empire now extended over six thousand miles, almost reaching Australia and Hawaii. As early as June 1942, American and Australian forces began to resist the advance of Japan.



The United States was now fighting on the side of the Allies with Great Britain and the Soviet Union. Although many Americans were outraged by the attack on Pearl Harbor and wanted to attack Japan first, the Allies jointly decided to follow a "Defeat Hitler First" strategy, putting most of their military forces in Europe.



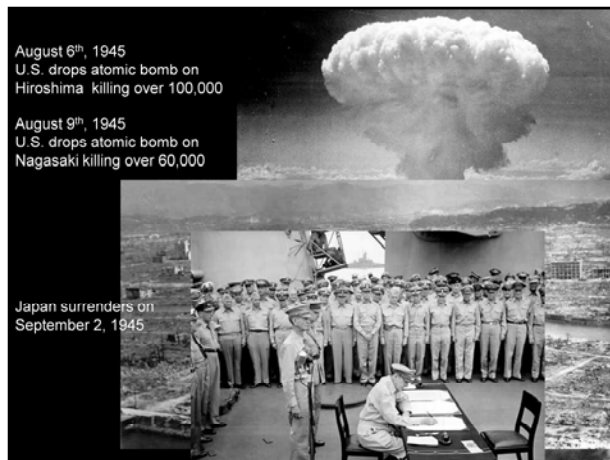
By late spring of 1942, as Japan expanded its territories in Asia, American troops began to have some victories. In the Battle of Midway, which took place near a small American atoll, or coral reef island, in the middle of the Pacific, the U.S. won a key victory. The Allies destroyed several Japanese aircraft carriers. This marked a major turning point for World War II in the Pacific theater, as the American forces went on the offensive.

As the war went on, the U.S. started using a military strategy called "island hopping." The Americans started seizing islands closer and closer to Japan and using them as bases for air attacks on Japan. At the same time, they tried to cut off supplies by using submarines to attack Japanese ships. George C. Marshall, the Supreme Commander of all U.S. troops, created the island-hopping campaign.



The American invasions of the islands of Iwo Jima and Okinawa brought American forces closer than ever to Japan. Both invasions cost thousands of American lives, and the lives of even more Japanese soldiers, as they fought fiercely over every square inch of territory. Many Japanese soldiers and civilians committed suicide rather than surrender to the Americans.

Over forty-five thousand American troops were killed in order to win these islands. As Japan's situation became desperate, its military implemented tactics like Kamikaze pilots who would fly their planes directly into their targets to inflict maximum damage. Japan was determined to use any means necessary in order to defend itself from invasion.



In April of 1945, President Roosevelt died just months after being sworn in for his fourth term. Harry Truman, his vice president, succeeded him in office. Shortly after he became president, the U.S. completed a successful test of the atomic bomb. This was a new weapon that was developed by American and international scientists, many of whom were refugees from the Axis powers. President Truman had to decide whether to use this devastating new weapon on Japan's civilians, or fight a long bloody war on Japanese soil. America had been fire-bombing dozens of Japanese cities for months, killing hundreds of thousands of people, with limited effect. Truman worried that an invasion might ultimately result in more casualties.

At the Potsdam conference in Europe, Truman warned the Japanese that they faced “utter destruction” if they did not agree to an unconditional surrender. On August 6, the U.S. dropped an atomic bomb on the Japanese city of Hiroshima, instantly killing over one hundred thousand Japanese civilians. Three days later, the Japanese government still had not offered to surrender. The U.S. dropped a second bomb on the city of Nagasaki, killing over sixty thousand people.

In between the bombings, the Soviet Union declared war on Japan and invaded Manchuria. With enemies surrounding the country, Emperor Hirohito intervened and ordered his generals to surrender. On August 15th, they finally agreed. The unconditional surrender was signed on September 2, 1945. World War II was finally over.

It is estimated that over 50 million people died in WWII:

Soviet Union - 20 million □ Germany - 4.5 million □ Poland - 4 million

China - 2 million □ Japan - 2 million □ U.S. - .5 million



As much of the world celebrated the end of World War II, the devastation and destruction that mankind had inflicted on one another became clear. Estimated war casualties totaled over fifty million people, many of them civilians. Whole cities had been bombed beyond recognition. In every country that fought in the war, almost every community suffered some impact.

Germany was in ruins, along with many others nations, including Poland, the Soviet Union, France, Japan, and China. Although many of the horrors of war were well known, people had yet to understand the full impact of Hitler's maniacal plan to exterminate the Jewish population and other "undesirables" in the death camps of the Holocaust. Likewise, the war crimes trials would expose Japan's brutality toward the Chinese and other countries in Asia.