

Reading Essentials and Study Guide



World War II and the Holocaust, 1939–1945

Lesson 2 World War II

ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

Why do political actions often lead to war? How does war impact society and the environment?

Reading HELPDESK

Academic Vocabulary

resolve determination; a fixed purpose

involvement a commitment or a connection to

Content Vocabulary

blitzkrieg German for “lightning war”; a swift and sudden military attack; used by the Germans during World War II

isolationism a policy of national isolation by abstention from alliances and other international political and economic relations

neutrality the refusal to take sides or become involved in wars between other nations

TAKING NOTES: *Determining Cause and Effect*

ACTIVITY As you read, use a chart like the one below to list key events during World War II and their effect on the course of the war.

Event	Effect

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IT MATTERS BECAUSE

During the first years of World War II, Hitler's Germany gained control of much of western and central Europe. He used the military tactic called blitzkrieg. However, he was unable to conquer Britain or the Soviet Union. Then the United States entered the war after Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor. The Allies—Great Britain, the United States, and the Soviet Union—agreed to fight until the Axis Powers—Germany, Japan, and Italy—agreed to a total, or complete, surrender.

Europe at War

Guiding Question *What were Germany's gains and losses during the early years of the war?*

Hitler surprised Europe with the speed and efficiency of the German attack on Poland. His **blitzkrieg**, or "lightning war," used fast armored columns called panzer (German for armor) divisions. Panzer divisions were supported by airplanes. Each panzer division was an attack force of about 300 tanks. The tanks were accompanied by soldiers and supplies.

The forces of the blitzkrieg broke quickly through Polish lines. They encircled the confused Polish troops. Regular infantry units, or soldiers who fight on foot, then moved in to hold the newly conquered territory. Poland surrendered within four weeks. On September 28, 1939, Germany and the Soviet Union divided Poland.

Hitler's Early Victories

Hitler waited through the winter before his next move. He resumed the attack on April 9, 1940 with another blitzkrieg against Denmark and Norway. One month later, on May 10, Germany began an attack on the Netherlands, Belgium, and France. The main assault, or attack, was through Luxembourg and the Ardennes Forest. German panzer divisions broke through weak French defenses along that part of their border. The Germans then raced across northern France.

French and British forces were taken by surprise. The French had anticipated a German attack along the border it shared with Germany. France had built a defense system, called the Maginot (MA-zhuh-NOH) Line, there. The line was a series of concrete and steel structures containing heavy artillery. The Germans decided not to cross the Maginot Line. Instead, they went around it. They attacked France from its border with Belgium.

By going around the Maginot Line, the Germans split the Allied armies. French troops and the entire British army were trapped on the beaches of Dunkirk. The only way out was across the English Channel and back to Britain. Soldiers fled into the water in hopes of being rescued by the ships of the Royal Navy. The Royal Navy and civilians in private boats managed to evacuate 338,000 Allied (mostly British) troops from France. They were taken back to Britain.

On June 22, 1940, the French signed an armistice, or an agreement to stop fighting. German armies now occupied about three-fifths of France. Germany set up an authoritarian regime to control all of France. It was known as Vichy France. The aged French hero of World War I, Marshal Henri Pétain, led the regime. Germany was now in control of western and central Europe. However, Britain had still not been defeated. In fact, British **resolve** heightened after Dunkirk. Winston Churchill had become prime minister in May 1940. His powerful emotional speeches rallied the British people.

President Franklin D. Roosevelt denounced, or condemned, the aggressors. However, the United States followed a strict policy of **isolationism**. They avoided political and economic relationships with other countries. Also, Congress passed a series of **neutrality** acts in the 1930s. They prevented the

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United States from taking sides or becoming involved in any European wars. Many Americans felt that the United States had been drawn into World War I as a result of U.S. economic **involvement** in Europe. They did not want that to happen again. Roosevelt was convinced that the neutrality acts actually encouraged Axis aggression. The neutrality acts were gradually made less strict. The United States supplied more and more food, ships, planes, and weapons to Britain.

The Battle of Britain

Hitler realized that Germany had to gain control of the air over Britain. Germany could only make a successful amphibious (land-sea) invasion of Britain if it first controlled the air. Air control would prevent British planes from attacking Germans invading by sea. At the beginning of August 1940, the Luftwaffe (LOOFT·vah·fuh)—the German air force—launched a major offensive. German planes bombed British air and naval bases, harbors, communication centers, and war industries.

The British fought back with determination. They were supported by an effective radar system that gave them early warning of German attacks. Still, the British air force suffered important losses.

In retaliation for a British attack on Berlin, Hitler ordered a change in strategy in September. Instead of bombing military targets, the Luftwaffe began bombing of British cities. Hitler hoped attacks on civilians would break British morale, or their confidence and will to fight. Instead, the British were able to rebuild their air strength quickly because military targets were no longer being hit. Soon, the British air force was causing major damage to the Luftwaffe bombers. At the end of September, Hitler postponed the invasion of Britain indefinitely.

Attack on the Soviet Union

Hitler did not want to carry out war on two fronts. However, he became convinced that Britain was remaining in the war only because it expected Soviet support. If the Soviet Union was defeated, Britain's last hope would be eliminated. Hitler had also convinced himself that the Soviet Union had a poor army. He believed the Soviets could be defeated quickly.

Hitler planned to invade the Soviet Union in the spring of 1941. The attack was delayed because of problems in the Balkans. Hitler had already gained the political cooperation of Hungary, Bulgaria, and Romania. However, Mussolini's invasion of Greece in 1940 had failed. As a result, Hitler's southern forces were exposed, or left without protection, to British air bases in Greece. Hitler seized both Greece and Yugoslavia in April to protect his Balkan forces.

Hitler was reassured by his success. Germany invaded the Soviet Union on June 22, 1941. He thought the Russians could be decisively defeated before the terrible, harsh Russian winter weather began. The massive attack stretched out along a front some 1,800 miles (about 2,900 km) long. German troops advanced rapidly. These troops captured 2 million Russian soldiers. By November, one German army group had swept through the Ukraine. A second army was attacking the city of Leningrad. A third army was within 25 miles of Moscow, the Soviet capital.

An early winter and fierce Soviet resistance stopped the German advance. The Germans had not brought winter uniforms. They had been certain of a quick victory. For the first time in the war, German armies had been stopped. The Soviet army launched a counterattack in December 1941. It was an ominous ending to the year for the Germans.

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Reading Progress Check

Predicting Consequences What assumptions did Hitler make about invading the Soviet Union? Do you think the invasion would have gone differently if he had not made those assumptions?

Japan at War

Guiding Question *What brought the United States into the war?*

Japanese aircraft bombed the U.S. naval base at Pearl Harbor in the Hawaiian Islands on December 7, 1941. The surprise attack damaged or destroyed over 350 aircraft, damaged or sunk 18 ships, and killed or wounded more than 3,500 Americans. The same day, the Japanese attacked the Philippines, which was under the control of the United States at the time. They also advanced on the British colony of Malaya. Later, they invaded the Dutch East Indies and number of islands in the Pacific Ocean. By the spring of 1942 almost all of Southeast Asia and much of the western Pacific had come under the control of the Japanese.

A triumphant Japan now declared the creation of a community of nations. This new “community” was called the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere. The Japanese would now control the entire region. Japan also announced its plan to free areas of Southeast Asia from Western colonial rule. Japan needed the resources of the region for its war machine. As a result, the countries under its rule were treated as conquered lands.

Japanese policy was now largely dictated by Prime Minister Hideki Tōjō. He had been a general. He acted like a military dictator during the war. Tōjō had hoped that Japan’s lightning strike at American bases would destroy the U.S. fleet in the Pacific. He thought the Roosevelt administration would now accept Japanese domination (control) of the Pacific.

But the Japanese made a bad judgment. The attack on Pearl Harbor unified American opinion about the war. Americans were now ready to fight. The United States joined European nations and Nationalist China in an effort to defeat Japan. Hitler believed American involvement in the Pacific would make the United States ineffective in the war in Europe. As a result, Hitler declared war on the United States four days after Pearl Harbor. Another European conflict had become a global war.

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Reading Progress Check

Identifying Why did the United States stay out of World War II until the Pearl Harbor attack?

The Allies Advance

Guiding Question *How did the involvement of the United States change the war?*

A new coalition, or partnership, called the Grand Alliance was created when the United States entered the war. The three major allies in the coalition were Great Britain, the United States, and the Soviet Union. The Allies agreed to stress military operations and ignore their political differences to make the coalition work. At the beginning of 1943, the Allies agreed to fight until the Axis Powers—Germany, Italy, and Japan—surrendered unconditionally. Unconditional surrender required the Axis nations to give up without any favorable conditions and to accept complete defeat. This agreement cemented the Grand Alliance. It was now nearly impossible for Hitler to divide his foes, or opponents.

The European Theater

Defeat was not on Hitler's mind at the beginning of 1942. Japanese forces advanced into Southeast Asia and the Pacific. At the same time, Hitler and his European allies continued fighting Britain and the Soviet Union in Europe.

Until late 1942, it seemed that the Germans might still succeed. In North Africa, German forces broke through the British defenses in Egypt and advanced toward Alexandria. Germany renewed the offensive in the Soviet Union. As a result, the Germans captured the entire Crimea, an area on the Black Sea, in the spring of 1942. However, the war had turned against the Germans by the fall of that year.

The Tide Turns

In the summer of 1942, British forces had stopped General Erwin Rommel's troops at El Alamein (EHL a-luh-MAYN) in North Africa. The Germans retreated back across the desert. British and American forces invaded French North Africa in November 1942. They forced the German and Italian troops there to surrender in May 1943.

On the Eastern Front, after the capture of the Crimea, Hitler's generals wanted him to concentrate on the Caucasus (a region between the Black Sea and the Caspian Sea) and its oil fields. Instead, Hitler decided that Stalingrad, a major industrial center on the Volga River, should be taken first. Between November 1942 and February 2, 1943, the Soviets started a counterattack—perhaps the most terrible battle of the war. German troops were stopped and then encircled. Supply lines were cut off in the frigid winter conditions. The Germans were forced to surrender at Stalingrad. The entire German Sixth Army, considered the best of the German troops, was lost. Its troops were dead, wounded, or captured.

By February 1943, German forces in Russia were back to their positions of June 1942. By the spring of 1943, even Hitler knew that the Germans would not defeat the Soviet Union.

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The Asian Theater

In 1942 the situation in the East also changed dramatically. In the Battle of the Coral Sea, American naval forces stopped the Japanese advance on May 7 and 8. This saved Australia from invasion.

The turning point of the war in Asia came on June 4. At the Battle of Midway Island, U.S. planes destroyed four attacking Japanese aircraft carriers. By defeating the Japanese navy, the U.S. navy established naval superiority in the Pacific.

By the fall of 1942, Allied forces in Asia gathered for two operations. One was commanded by a U.S. general, Douglas MacArthur. His operation would move into the Philippines through New Guinea and the South Pacific Islands. The other operation would move across the Pacific with a combination of U.S. Army, Marine, and Navy attacks on Japanese-held islands. The strategy they followed was called “island hopping.” The point was to capture some Japanese-held islands and bypass, or go around, others to reach Japan itself. After a series of bitter battles in the waters off the Solomon Islands from August to November 1942, the Japanese started to lose ground to the Allies.



Reading Progress Check

Summarizing Why was the German assault on Stalingrad a crushing defeat for the Germans?
