World War II (1939–1945) was a major war fought between two groups: the Axis and the Allied Powers. The Axis Powers were composed of Germany, Italy, Japan, and their supporters. The Allied Powers consisted mainly of Great Britain, the United States, the Soviet Union, China, and France. The Second World War was the deadliest international war in history; millions of people were killed all over the world. One of the most well-known events of the war was the Holocaust, in which the Germans intentionally killed people belonging to a particular racial and cultural group.

A Global Conflict

There were only a few major participants in the war. However, the conflict spread to many parts of the world, including Europe, Africa, and Asia. Only a few nations remained neutral during the six years of fighting.

Some countries joined the war because they were allies of the nations involved. Other nations had to fight because the Axis tried to invade their territories or because they were colonies of more powerful nations, which forced them to fight. Other countries were already fighting their own wars, such as China and Japan. Over time, their conflict simply became part of World War II.

Nationalism

The German invasion of Poland on September 1, 1939 is traditionally considered as the start of World War II. However, some believe the war started much earlier because many issues remained unresolved after the end of World War I. After Germany was defeated in the First World War, it was forced to demilitarize and pay for its actions during the war. The Germans had an even harder time recovering from their defeat because of the Great Depression, a worldwide economic crisis that occurred after the war. Humiliated and discouraged, the German people were eventually influenced by the National Socialist German Workers' Party or the Nazi Party.

The Nazi Party, led by Adolf Hitler, was a political organization that believed in an extreme form of racial superiority. Hitler believed that the "Aryan race," which consisted of white Europeans like himself, was better than all other races. He considered the Jews, the Slavs, the Roma (more commonly referred to as "gypsies"), persons with disabilities, and homosexuals as "inferior" races. Further, Hitler believed that these
inferior races should not intermarry with the Aryan "master race" and should be totally destroyed. He also believed in the principle of Lebensraum ("living space"), which led Germany to seek to expand its territories during World War I.

Hitler rose to power in 1933, and his beliefs became the basis for German foreign policy. In Italy, a political party with similar beliefs to the Nazis had also become powerful. Like the Nazis in Germany, the Fascists in Italy believed in an extreme form of nationalism and wanted to become a major world power. Because they both wanted to expand their territories, Germany and Italy formed a pact in 1936. By 1939, their pact had become a full-blown military partnership, which was called the "Rome–Berlin Axis." This was where the Axis Powers later took its name.

Meanwhile, Japan was implementing its own plans to expand its territories. The Japanese also believed in their racial superiority, that is, that they were greater than all other Asians. They wanted to create a "Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere," a group of Japanese-occupied territories that would not be controlled by Western nations. At that time, China had grown weak because of the power struggles between its Communist and Nationalist groups. The country became an easy target for Japanese expansionism. The Second Sino-Japanese War thus began, which later became part of World War II. By 1940, the three members of the Axis finally came together. Their combined military goals were made official in the Tripartite Pact.

Lines Drawn

The Allies became involved in the war the day after Germany invaded Poland. The United Kingdom and France opposed the invasion and declared war on Germany. The Soviet Union, which had signed a non-aggression pact with Germany, joined the Axis Powers at first. They even divided conquered territories with their new ally. However, Germany invaded the Soviet Union in 1941, citing Lebensraum and its goal to destroy the Jews living in the region.

That same year, the Germans began capturing and killing large numbers of Jews and other "undesirables." This movement would later become known as the Holocaust. It is considered one of the most horrible and deadly events in history, in which about six million Jews were killed in Europe.

Meanwhile, the Soviet Union joined the Allies. It became involved in the war between Japan and China, eventually providing military support for the latter. The United States avoided the conflict, choosing to stay neutral and focus on its internal problems. Over time, however, it relaxed its policy of isolationism and offered limited aid to the Allied Powers. Thinking that the United States could interfere in its military activities in the Pacific region, Japan bombed Pearl Harbor in Hawaii on December 7, 1941. Instead of becoming discouraged, the United States finally joined the war on the side of the Allies.
The Allied Advance

The Allies began pushing forward in the next few years. In several key battles, they took back territories that the Axis had previously conquered. To further weaken U.S. involvement in the Pacific, Japan engaged the U.S. Navy in the Battle of Midway, only to suffer heavy losses.

Only a few months later, another major battle happened, as German and Soviet forces clashed over the city of Stalingrad in the Soviet Union. The Battle of Stalingrad was the largest and bloodiest battle fought in World War II, but it ended in a victory for the Allies. Other major battles included the 1943 invasion of Italy, in which Italy surrendered to the Allies, and the 1944 invasion of France, in which the Allies drove away the occupying Germans. Operation Neptune, or D-Day, was another major operation, in which the Allies freed Western Europe from German control. It was also the largest seaborne invasion in history. By 1944, the Allies began freeing the Nazi concentration camps, where many Jews were imprisoned and killed.

With Italy defeated and the Allies closing in on Germany, Hitler moved to an underground bunker in Berlin. He committed suicide in this same bunker on April 30, 1945. Europe was finally freed from Axis control on May 8, 1945 after Allied troops captured Berlin and obtained Germany's unconditional surrender.

Japan refused to surrender despite the events in Europe. The Allies threatened it with "prompt and utter destruction," but they knew this would not happen if they directly attacked the Japanese mainland. Hoping to quickly end the war, the United States used its most destructive weapon, the atomic bomb, on two Japanese cities. Hiroshima was bombed on August 6, and Nagasaki on August 9. The bombings instantly killed over a hundred thousand people. Many more died later due to the aftereffects of nuclear radiation. Seeing the destructive power of the Allies, Japan formally surrendered on August 15, 1945, ending the war for good.

Critical Thinking Questions

War is often costly in terms of people and resources, so why did each nation participate in World War II despite the risks?

How might the war have ended if the atomic bomb had not been
used as a "shortcut"?

What are some of the consequences of remaining neutral in a conflict as widespread as World War II?

What contributed to Germany playing a key role in escalating World War II?

**Words to Know**

**Demilitarization**
the reduction of a state's armed forces

**Nationalism**
the devotion to one's country

**Colonialism**
the practice of one country occupying another and exploiting its resources

**Isolationism**
a policy that discourages interference in other countries' affairs

Further Reading


**Source Citation** (MLA 8th Edition)
