The first in a four-part series

World War II was the most important event of the 1900s. It involved many countries and billions of people. It caused 57 million deaths.

The war lasted from 1939 to 1945. By the time it was over many great cities had been destroyed. Even those that survived continued to suffer for many years. They experienced many years of hunger and poverty. People carried memories of the war for the rest of their lives.
A world at war

From 1933 to 1945, Germany was ruled by the Nazis. Their leader was Adolf Hitler. He wanted to rule the world. In 1936, Hitler sent soldiers into the Rhineland. This was a part of Europe next to Germany. After the first World War, Hitler was not supposed to send soldiers there. In 1938, Hitler also made Czechoslovakia and Austria part of Nazi Germany. His actions alarmed the other countries in Europe.

On September 1, 1939, Hitler sent his armies into Poland. Two days later, France and Great Britain declared war on Germany. Soon the Soviet Union attacked Poland. World War II had begun.

In general, Americans did not want to be part of a war in Europe. They felt protected by the oceans on either side of the country. They stayed out of the fighting for several years. The United States finally joined the war in 1941.

German aggression in Western Europe

During World War II, Germany, Japan and Italy fought together. They were known as the Axis powers. Great Britain, France, the Soviet Union and the United States fought against them. They were known as the Allied powers.

On May 10, 1940, Hitler attacked France. The attack was known as a blitzkreig. This means "lightning war" in German. It was a fast, focused attack. It was meant to confuse and overcome the enemy.

The Germans used their tanks to defeat the French. Soon Nazi Germany controlled almost all of western Europe.
Hitler's miscalculation

Hitler only had one enemy left. This was Great Britain. Hitler wanted Great Britain to stay out of the European continent. But Great Britain refused. Hitler sent planes to drop bombs on the British homeland. He expected that this would lead to its surrender.

But in 1941 Hitler made a huge mistake. While still fighting Great Britain, he decided to attack the Soviet Union. As a result, Germany was fighting a war in two places. It was fighting Great Britain in the west. It was also fighting the Soviet Union in the east. Many German soldiers died fighting the Soviet Union. For the Soviets, it was even worse. Twenty-seven million Soviet people died in the fighting.

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