World War II was the central event of the 1900s. It involved all six major continents, all three of the great oceans on the planet, dozens of countries and billions of people. It caused 57 million deaths and unimaginable human suffering.

By the time it was over in 1945, dozens of great cities around the world had been destroyed. Those that survived continued to
see poverty and hunger for many years. Meanwhile, the prisoners and the wounded would carry the cost of the conflict with them for the rest of their lives.

**A world at war**

Germany was ruled by the Nazis from 1933 until 1945. Their leader was Adolf Hitler, who wanted to conquer the world. In 1936, Hitler sent troops into the Rhineland. This was an area of Europe next to Germany. As part of the treaty signed at the end of World War I, Germany was not supposed to place soldiers in the Rhineland. Hitler's decision to do so was seen as a hostile act. In 1938, he also incorporated Czechoslovakia and Austria into Nazi Germany. By this time, the Western world was fully alert to the danger of the German dictator, who ruled with total power.

In the early morning hours of September 1, 1939, Hitler sent his armies into Poland. Two days later, France and Great Britain declared war on Germany. Within a matter of weeks, the Soviet Union attacked Poland from the east. World War II had begun.

In general, the American people did not want to have any part in another European war. They felt protected by great oceans on both sides of the North American continent. And they felt that American boys had died in World War I for no good reason. Moreover, the United States had allowed its military to shrink in the 1920s and 1930s. By the time World War II broke out, its army was much smaller than it had once been.

**German aggression in Western Europe**

During World War II, there were many alliances between countries. 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 the morning of May 10, 1940, Hitler launched an attack against France. The attack was known as a blitzkrieg, or lightning war. A blitzkrieg is an intense military campaign. It is meant to confuse and overwhelm the enemy.
Germany also had a unique approach to how it deployed its military tanks. Instead of spreading out its tanks, the German army placed them all in a few special divisions. These arrangements were known as panzer formations. They were able to smash holes in the enemy line, creating chaos.

The British and French armies actually had more and better tanks than their attackers. However, new military ideas like the blitzkrieg made the Germans more powerful. Their tank formations destroyed everything before them, and the French defenses soon collapsed. By the end of June 1940, Nazi Germany controlled almost all of western Europe.

**Hitler's miscalculation**

Hitler's only remaining enemy was Great Britain. The German leader wanted the country to stay out of the European continent. When Great Britain refused to give in, Hitler sent the German air force to attack the English homeland. He expected its heavy blows would lead to a British surrender.

But in 1941 Hitler made a huge mistake. While still fighting Great Britain, he decided to invade the Soviet Union. As a result, Germany was fighting a war on two fronts. The eastern front involved hundreds of soldier divisions stretched over thousands of miles of land. Germany essentially bled to death in Russia. Four out of five of all the German soldiers who died in the war died while fighting the Soviet army. For the Soviet Union, the bloodshed was even worse. A staggering 27 million Soviet citizens died in the fighting.

*Kenneth T. Jackson is the Jacques Barzun Professor in History and the Social Sciences. He is also the director of the Herbert H. Lehman Center for American History at Columbia University. His publications include "Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States" (1987), "Empire City: New York through the Centuries" (2002), and "The Encyclopedia of New York City" (2nd ed., 2010).*