The first in a four-part series

World War II was the central event of the 20th century. 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. It brought about the redrawing of national boundaries in Europe and Asia, forced the relocation of many ethnic groups, made millions of
families homeless and led to the virtual annihilation of the Jewish population of Europe.

By the time it was over in 1945, Tokyo, Berlin, Leningrad, Stalingrad, Warsaw, Hiroshima, Dresden, Nagasaki, Cologne and dozens of other great cities had been obliterated. And population centers that had mostly avoided the worst of the death and destruction continued to see poverty and hunger linger for years after the surrender documents had been signed. 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

There is no one date that can be said to mark the beginning of the greatest of global conflicts. In 1931, the Japanese army invaded Manchuria, a northern province of China. In July 1937, the Japanese moved again, this time directly against the regime of Chiang Kai-shek, then the military leader of the Republic of China. The atrocities that followed shocked the world.

Meanwhile, in 1936, German Chancellor Adolf Hitler moved aggressively into the Rhineland, a previously demilitarized zone along the Rhine River in western Germany. In 1938, he incorporated Czechoslovakia and Austria into Nazi Germany, also known as the Third Reich. By this time, the Western world was fully alert to the menace of this fanatically ambitious and confident dictator. Then, 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, and within a matter of weeks the Soviet Union, which had recently signed a nonaggression treaty with Hitler, attacked Poland from the east. World War II had begun.

In general, the American people did not want to have any part in a European war. They felt protected by great oceans on both sides of the North American continent. And they felt that, in World War I, American boys had fought and bled in France mostly to make fortunes for weapons makers and arms merchants. Moreover, the United States had allowed its armed forces to wither in the 1920s and 1930s. By the time World War II broke out in Europe, its army of 190,000 men ranked about 18th in the world, about on a par with Romania and Bulgaria.
German aggression in Western Europe

The United States might never have entered World War II if Germany, Japan and Italy had stopped after their initial conquests. But the three Axis powers made astonishing gains in the years before Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941.

After taking over Norway and neutralizing Sweden, the Nazis turned their attention to the big prize. Early in the morning of May 10, 1940, Hitler launched a blitzkrieg, or lightning war, against France, whose army had previously been considered the finest in the world. The revolutionary nature of the German offensive was to concentrate all available tanks into a few specialized divisions rather than to spread them out evenly among infantry units. These offensive formations, known as panzer formations, were designed to smash holes in the enemy line and then break out into the rear. This created chaos on the roads and prevented the Allies from plugging the gaps.

The British and French armies actually had more and better tanks than the attackers, but new strategic and tactical ideas carried the contest. The German tank columns swept everything before them, and the French defenses soon collapsed. In fact, the almost total collapse of the proud French army in May 1940 remains one of the most incredible events in all of military history. In June, France sued for peace – an act that initiates the peace process between warring nations – and Hitler's victorious troops marched past the Arc de Triomphe in Paris. By the end of June 1940, essentially all of western Europe was under the control of Nazi Germany.

Hitler's miscalculation

Hitler expected Great Britain, his only remaining foe, to recognize the superiority of German arms and to remove itself from active involvement in Europe. After all, he reasoned, Germany sought growing space in the east and had no intention of dismantling the British Empire. Why not just divide the world? Why would the British not be content
with their vast holdings in Asia, on the other side of the world? When Great Britain refused to give in, Hitler unleashed the German air force on the English homeland, expecting that its heavy blows would bring Prime Minister Winston Churchill to his senses.

In 1941, however, Hitler made a colossal blunder. In fact, perhaps no event in human history can match in significance his decision to invade the Soviet Union in the early summer. He had not defeated Great Britain, and yet he was turning his armies to the east, initiating a two-front war. When his soldiers crossed the USSR frontier on June 22, the Nazi leader's new opponent became Joseph Stalin, a dictator as ruthless and cunning as himself, and the head of both the largest country and the largest army on earth. The eastern front, which involved hundreds of combat divisions stretched over thousands of miles of land, would turn out to be a human furnace. Germany essentially bled to death in Russia. Four-fifths of all German soldiers who perished in the war died while fighting the Soviet army. For the Soviet Union, the bloodshed was even worse. A staggering 27 million USSR citizens died in what for them will always be "the Great Patriotic War."

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).