1. Intro

World War II (WWII or WW2), also known as the Second World War (after the recent Great War), was a global war that lasted from 1939 to 1945, though related conflicts began earlier. It involved the vast majority of the world's nations—including all of the great powers—eventually forming two opposing military alliances: the Allies and the Axis. It was the most widespread war in history, and directly involved more than 100 million people from over 30 countries. In a state of "total war", the major participants threw their entire economic, industrial, and scientific capabilities behind the war effort, erasing the distinction between civilian and military resources. Marked by mass deaths of civilians, including the Holocaust (during which approximately 11 million people were killed)[1][2] and the strategic bombing of industrial and population centres (during which approximately one million people were killed, including the use of two nuclear weapons in combat),[3] it resulted in an estimated 50 million to 85 million fatalities. These made World War II the deadliest conflict in human history.[4]

The Empire of Japan aimed to dominate Asia and the Pacific and was already at war with the Republic of China in 1937,[5] but the world war is generally said to have begun on 1 September 1939[6] with the invasion of Poland by Germany and subsequent declarations of war on Germany by France and the United Kingdom. From late 1939 to early 1941, in a series of campaigns and treaties, Germany conquered or controlled much of continental Europe, and formed the Axis alliance with Italy and Japan. Following the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact, Germany and the Soviet Union partitioned and annexed territories of their European neighbours, including Poland, Finland and the Baltic states. The United Kingdom and the British Commonwealth were the only Allied forces continuing the fight against the Axis, with campaigns in North Africa and the Horn of Africa as well as the long-running Battle of the Atlantic. In June 1941, the European Axis powers launched an invasion of the Soviet Union, opening the largest land theatre of war in history, which trapped the major part of the Axis' military forces into a war of attrition. In December 1941, Japan attacked the United States and European territories in the Pacific Ocean, and quickly conquered much of the Western Pacific.

The Axis advance halted in 1942 when Japan lost the critical Battle of Midway, near Hawaii, and Germany was defeated in North Africa and then, decisively, at Stalingrad in the Soviet Union. In 1943, with a series of German defeats on the Eastern Front, the Allied invasion of Italy which brought about Italian surrender, and Allied victories in the Pacific, the Axis lost the initiative and undertook strategic retreat on all fronts. In 1944, the Western Allies invaded France, while the Soviet Union regained all of its territorial losses and invaded Germany and its allies. During 1944 and 1945 the Japanese suffered major reverses in mainland Asia in South Central China and Burma, while the Allies crippled the Japanese Navy and captured key Western Pacific islands.

The war in Europe ended with an invasion of Germany by the Western Allies and the Soviet Union culminating in the capture of Berlin by Soviet and Polish troops and the subsequent German unconditional surrender on 8 May 1945. Following the Potsdam Declaration by the Allies on 26 July 1945, the United States dropped atomic bombs on the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki on 6 August and 9 August respectively. With an invasion of the Japanese archipelago imminent, the possibility of additional atomic bombings, and the Soviet Union's declaration of war on Japan and invasion of Manchuria, Japan surrendered on 15 August 1945. Thus ended the war in Asia, and the final destruction of the Axis bloc.

World War II altered the political alignment and social structure of the world. The United Nations (UN) was established to foster international co-operation and prevent future conflicts. The victorious great powers—the United States, the Soviet Union, China, the United Kingdom, and France—became the permanent members of the United Nations Security Council.[7] The Soviet Union and the United States emerged as rival superpowers, setting the stage for the Cold War, which lasted for the next 46 years. Meanwhile, the influence of European great powers waned, while the decolonisation of Asia and Africa began. Most countries whose industries had been damaged moved towards economic recovery. Political integration, especially in Europe, emerged as an effort to end pre-war enmities and to create a common identity.[8]

2. Chronology

See also: Timeline of World War II

The start of the war in Europe is generally held to be 1 September 1939,[9][10] beginning with the German invasion of Poland; Britain and France declared war on Germany two days later. The dates for the beginning of war in the Pacific include the start of the Second Sino-Japanese War on 7 July 1937,[11] or even the Japanese invasion of Manchuria on 19 September 1931.[12][13]

Others follow the British historian A. J. P. Taylor, who held that the Sino-Japanese War and war in Europe and its colonies occurred simultaneously and the two wars merged in 1941. This article uses the conventional dating. Other starting dates sometimes used for World War II include the Italian invasion of Abyssinia on 3 October 1935.[14] The British historian Antony Beevor views the beginning of the Second World War as the Battles of Khalkhin Gol fought between Japan and the forces of Mongolia and the Soviet Union from May to September 1939.[15]

The exact date of the war's end is also not universally agreed upon. It was generally accepted at the time that the war ended with the armistice of 14 August 1945 (V-J Day), rather than the formal surrender of Japan (2 September 1945); it is even claimed in some European histories that it ended on V-E Day (8 May 1945).[citation needed] A peace treaty with Japan was signed in 1951 to formally tie up any loose ends such as compensation to be paid to Allied prisoners of war who had been victims of atrocities.[16] A treaty regarding Germany's future allowed the reunification of East and West Germany to take place in 1990 and resolved other post-World War II issues.[17]

3. Background

Main article: Causes of World War II

World War I had radically altered the political European map, with the defeat of the Central Powers—including Austria-Hungary, Germany and the Ottoman Empire—and the 1917 Bolshevik seizure of power in Russia. Meanwhile, existing victorious Allies such as France, Belgium, Italy, Greece and Romania gained territories, and new Nation states were created out of the collapse of Austria-Hungary and the Ottoman and Russian Empires.

To prevent a future world war, the League of Nations was created during the 1919 Paris Peace Conference. The organisation's primary goals were to prevent armed conflict through collective security, military and naval disarmament, and settling international disputes through peaceful negotiations and arbitration.

Despite strong pacifist sentiment after World War I,[18] its aftermath still caused irredentist and revanchist nationalism in several European states.These sentiments were especially marked in Germany because of the significant territorial, colonial, and financial losses incurred by the Treaty of Versailles. Under the treaty, Germany lost around 13 percent of its home territory and all of its overseas colonies, while German annexation of other states was prohibited, reparations were imposed, and limits were placed on the size and capability of the country's armed forces.[19] In addition, the Russian Civil War had led to the creation of the Soviet Union.[20]

The German Empire was dissolved in the German Revolution of 1918–1919, and a democratic government, later known as the Weimar Republic, was created. The interwar period saw strife between supporters of the new republic and hardline opponents on both the right and left. Italy, as an Entente ally, had made some post-war territorial gains, however Italian nationalists were angered that the promises made by Britain and France to secure Italian entrance into the war were not fulfilled with the peace settlement. From 1922 to 1925, the Fascist movement led by Benito Mussolini seized power in Italy with a nationalist, totalitarian, and class collaborationist agenda that abolished representative democracy, repressed socialist, left-wing and liberal forces, and pursued an aggressive expansionist foreign policy aimed at forging Italy as a world power, promising the creation of a "New Roman Empire".[21]

The League of Nations assembly, held in Geneva, Switzerland, 1930

In Germany, the Weimar Republic was attacked by right-wing elements such as the Freikorps and the Nazi party, resulting in events such as the Kapp Putsch and the Beer Hall Putsch. With the onset of the Great Depression in 1929, domestic support for Nazism and its leader Adolf Hitler rose and, in 1933, he was appointed Chancellor of Germany. In the aftermath of the Reichstag fire, Hitler created a totalitarian single-party state led by the Nazis.[22]

The Kuomintang (KMT) party in China launched a unification campaign against regional warlords and nominally unified China in the mid-1920s, but was soon embroiled in a civil war against its former Chinese communist allies.[23] In 1931, an increasingly militaristic Japanese Empire, which had long sought influence in China[24] as the first step of what its government saw as the country's right to rule Asia, used the Mukden Incident as a pretext to launch an invasion of Manchuria and establish the puppet state of Manchukuo.[25]

Too weak to resist Japan, China appealed to the League of Nations for help. Japan withdrew from the League of Nations after being condemned for its incursion into Manchuria. The two nations then fought several battles, in Shanghai, Rehe and Hebei, until the Tanggu Truce was signed in 1933. Thereafter, Chinese volunteer forces continued the resistance to Japanese aggression in Manchuria, and Chahar and Suiyuan.[26]

Adolf Hitler at a German National Socialist political rally in Weimar, October 1930

Adolf Hitler, after an unsuccessful attempt to overthrow the German government in 1923, eventually became the Chancellor of Germany in 1933. He abolished democracy, espousing a radical, racially motivated revision of the world order, and soon began a massive rearmament campaign.[27] It was at this time that multiple political scientists began to predict that a second Great War might take place.[28] Meanwhile, France, to secure its alliance, allowed Italy a free hand in Ethiopia, which Italy desired as a colonial possession. The situation was aggravated in early 1935 when the Territory of the Saar Basin was legally reunited with Germany and Hitler repudiated the Treaty of Versailles, accelerated his rearmament programme and introduced conscription.[29]

Hoping to contain Germany, the United Kingdom, France and Italy formed the Stresa Front; however, in June 1935, the United Kingdom made an independent naval agreement with Germany, easing prior restrictions. The Soviet Union, concerned due to Germany's goals of capturing vast areas of eastern Europe, wrote a treaty of mutual assistance with France. Before taking effect though, the Franco-Soviet pact was required to go through the bureaucracy of the League of Nations, which rendered it essentially toothless.[30] The United States, concerned with events in Europe and Asia, passed the Neutrality Act in August of the same year.[31] Two months later, Italy invaded Ethiopia through Italian Somaliland and Eritrea;[32] Germany was the only major European nation to support the invasion. Italy subsequently dropped its objections to Germany's goal of absorbing Austria.[33]

Hitler defied the Versailles and Locarno treaties by remilitarising the Rhineland in March 1936. He received little response from other European powers.[34] When the Spanish Civil War broke out in July, Hitler and Mussolini supported the fascist and authoritarian Nationalist forces in their civil war against the Soviet-supported Spanish Republic. Both sides used the conflict to test new weapons and methods of warfare,[35] with the Nationalists winning the war in early 1939. In October 1936, Germany and Italy formed the Rome–Berlin Axis. A month later, Germany and Japan signed the Anti-Comintern Pact, which Italy would join in the following year. In China, after the Xi'an Incident, the Kuomintang and communist forces agreed on a ceasefire to present a united front to oppose Japan.[36]

4. Pre-war events

4.1. Italian invasion of Ethiopia (1935)

Main article: Second Italo-Abyssinian War

Italian soldiers recruited in 1935, on their way to fight the Second Italo-Abyssinian War

The Second Italo–Abyssinian War was a brief colonial war that began in October 1935 and ended in May 1936. The war began with the invasion of the Ethiopian Empire (also known as Abyssinia) by the armed forces of the Kingdom of Italy (Regno d'Italia), which was launched from Italian Somaliland and Eritrea.[32] The war resulted in the military occupation of Ethiopia and its annexation into the newly created colony of Italian East Africa (Africa Orientale Italiana, or AOI); in addition, it exposed the weakness of the League of Nations as a force to preserve peace. Both Italy and Ethiopia were member nations, but the League did nothing when the former clearly violated the League's own Article X.[37]

4.2. Spanish Civil War (1936–39)

Main article: Spanish Civil War

The bombing of Guernica in 1937, sparked Europe-wide fears that the next war would be based on bombing of cities with very high civilian casualties

During the Spanish Civil War, Hitler and Mussolini lent military support to the Nationalist rebels, led by General Francisco Franco. The Soviet Union supported the existing government, the Spanish Republic. Over 30,000 foreign volunteers, known as the International Brigades, also fought against the Nationalists. Both Germany and the USSR used this proxy war as an opportunity to test in combat their most advanced weapons and tactics. The bombing of Guernica by the German Condor Legion in April 1937 heightened widespread concerns that the next major war would include extensive terror bombing attacks on civilians.[38][39] The Nationalists won the civil war in April 1939; Franco, now dictator, bargained with both sides during the Second World War, but never concluded any major agreements. He did send volunteers to fight on the Eastern Front under German command but Spain remained neutral and did not allow either side to use its territory.[40]

4.3. Japanese invasion of China (1937)

Main article: Second Sino-Japanese War

Japanese Imperial Army soldiers during the Battle of Shanghai, 1937

In July 1937, Japan captured the former Chinese imperial capital of Beijing after instigating the Marco Polo Bridge Incident, which culminated in the Japanese campaign to invade all of China.[41] The Soviets quickly signed a non-aggression pact with China to lend materiel support, effectively ending China's prior co-operation with Germany. Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek deployed his best army to defend Shanghai, but, after three months of fighting, Shanghai fell. The Japanese continued to push the Chinese forces back, capturing the capital Nanking in December 1937. After the fall of Nanking, tens of thousands if not hundreds of thousands of Chinese civilians and disarmed combatants were murdered by the Japanese.[42][43]

In March 1938, Nationalist Chinese forces got their first major victory at Taierzhuang but then the city of Xuzhou was taken by Japanese in May.[44] In June 1938, Chinese forces stalled the Japanese advance by flooding the Yellow River; this manoeuvre bought time for the Chinese to prepare their defences at Wuhan, but the city was taken by October.[45] Japanese military victories did not bring about the collapse of Chinese resistance that Japan had hoped to achieve; instead the Chinese government relocated inland to Chongqing and continued the war.[46][47]

4.4. Japanese invasion of the Soviet Union and Mongolia (1938)

See also: Nanshin-ron and Soviet–Japanese border conflicts

Japanese forces in Manchukuo had sporadic border clashes with the Soviet Union, culminating in the Japanese defeat at Khalkin Gol. After this, Japan and the Soviet Union signed a Neutrality Pact in April 1941, and Japan turned its focus to the South Pacific.

4.5. European occupations and agreements

Further information: Anschluss, Appeasement, Munich Agreement, German occupation of Czechoslovakia and Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact

Chamberlain, Daladier, Hitler, Mussolini, and Ciano pictured just before signing the Munich Agreement, 29 September 1938

In Europe, Germany and Italy were becoming more bold. In March 1938, Germany annexed Austria, again provoking little response from other European powers.[48] Encouraged, Hitler began pressing German claims on the Sudetenland, an area of Czechoslovakia with a predominantly ethnic German population; and soon Britain and France followed the counsel of prime minister Neville Chamberlain and conceded this territory to Germany in the Munich Agreement, which was made against the wishes of the Czechoslovak government, in exchange for a promise of no further territorial demands.[49] Soon afterwards, Germany and Italy forced Czechoslovakia to cede additional territory to Hungary and Poland.[50]

Although all of Germany's stated demands had been satisfied by the agreement, privately Hitler was furious that British interference had prevented him from seizing all of Czechoslovakia in one operation. In subsequent speeches Hitler attacked British and Jewish "war-mongers" and in January 1939 secretly ordered a major build-up of the German navy to challenge British naval supremacy. In March 1939, Germany invaded the remainder of Czechoslovakia and subsequently split it into the German Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia and a pro-German client state, the Slovak Republic.[51] Hitler also delivered an ultimatum to Lithuania, forcing the concession of the Klaipėda Region.

German Foreign Minister Ribbentrop signing the Nazi–Soviet non-aggression pact. Standing behind him are Molotov and the Soviet leader Joseph Stalin, 1939

Alarmed, and with Hitler making further demands on the Free City of Danzig, France and Britain guaranteed their support for Polish independence; when Italy conquered Albania in April 1939, the same guarantee was extended to Romania and Greece.[52] Shortly after the Franco-British pledge to Poland, Germany and Italy formalised their own alliance with the Pact of Steel.[53] Hitler accused Britain and Poland of trying to "encircle" Germany and renounced the Anglo-German Naval Agreement and the German–Polish Non-Aggression Pact.

In August 1939, Germany and the Soviet Union signed the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact,[54] a non-aggression treaty with a secret protocol. The parties gave each other rights to "spheres of influence" (western Poland and Lithuania for Germany; eastern Poland, Finland, Estonia, Latvia and Bessarabia for the USSR). It also raised the question of continuing Polish independence.[55] The agreement was crucial to Hitler because it assured that Germany would not have to face the prospect of a two-front war, as it had in World War I, after it defeated Poland.

The situation reached a general crisis in late August as German troops continued to mobilise against the Polish border. In a private meeting with the Italian foreign minister, Count Ciano, Hitler asserted that Poland was a "doubtful neutral" that needed to either yield to his demands or be "liquidated" to prevent it from drawing off German troops in the future "unavoidable" war with the Western democracies. He did not believe Britain or France would intervene in the conflict.[56] On 23 August Hitler ordered the attack to proceed on 26 August, but upon hearing that Britain had concluded a formal mutual assistance pact with Poland and that Italy would maintain neutrality, he decided to delay it.[57] In response to British pleas for direct negotiations, Germany demanded on 29 August that a Polish plenipotentiary immediately travel to Berlin to negotiate the handover of Danzig and the Polish Corridor to Germany as well as to agree to safeguard the German minority in Poland. The Poles refused to comply with this request and on the evening of 31 August Germany declared that it considered its proposals rejected.[58]