

WORLD WAR II



U.S. World War II Recruiting Poster

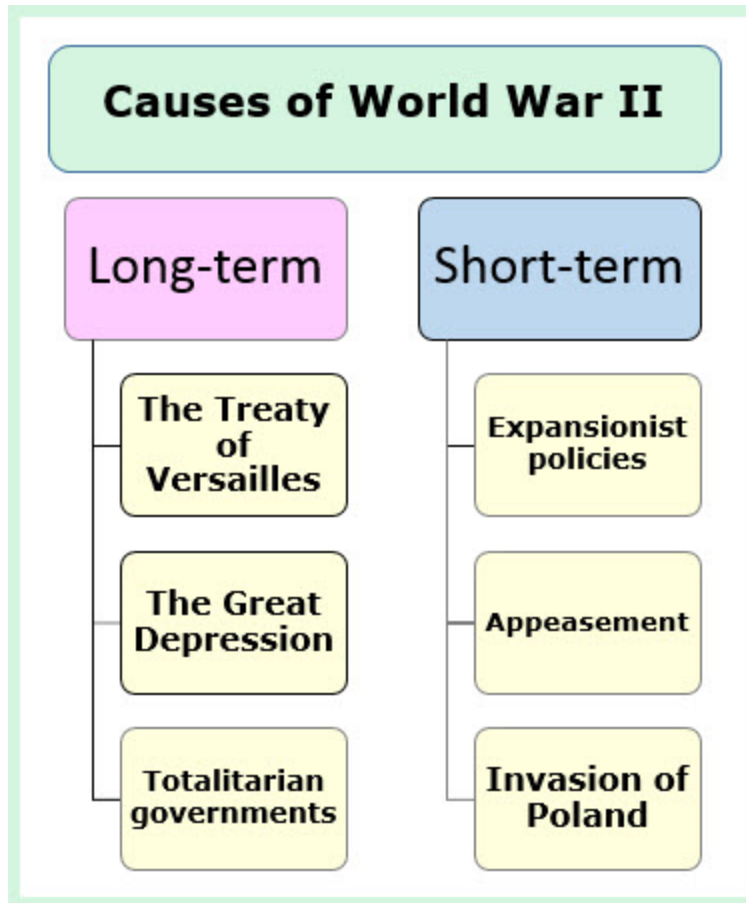
Unit Overview

In September of 1939, Adolf Hitler ordered his German forces to cross the border into Poland. Having realized that the Fuhrer's promises were meaningless, Great Britain and France reluctantly declared war. Thus, the most destructive conflict in human history began. Japan continued its aggressive policies in Asia, and the war soon reached global proportions. Advanced weaponry blurred the former lines between military and civilian targets as national leaders mobilized their citizens and industries for the massive struggle. Let's see how it all happened.

STOP: Answer Section A Questions

The Invasion of Poland

Although **Adolph Hitler** had assured both Britain and France that he would demand no more territory, the German leader ordered his military commanders to prepare for an invasion of Poland on September 1, 1939. On the night of August 31, a small group of German soldiers wearing Polish uniforms pretended to seize a German radio station on the border between **Poland** and Germany. Hitler announced that the Poles had violated the German border and gave this excuse for launching the attack. Over a million German soldiers, accompanied by air cover and tank columns, crossed the border and rolled across the flat landscape. Due to the extensive bombing raids, the Polish air force was wiped out before it ever left the ground. This fast-moving, enormous attack became known as **blitzkrieg**, or lightning warfare. It was to be Hitler's trademark battle plan. Since the Germans and the Soviets had secretly agreed to divide Poland as part of the Nazi-Soviet Non-aggression Pact, the **Soviet Union** also invaded the devastated nation from the east on September 17. In the meantime, Great Britain and France demanded that Hitler stop the attack and withdraw his troops. Now aware that negotiating with Germany was not a realistic option, Britain and France, who called themselves the **Allied Powers**, declared war and began to mobilize their forces.



STOP: Answer Section B Questions.

The Fire-Powered Invasions of 1940

Following the defeat of Poland, Western Europe experienced a six-month period of relative calm known as the **phony war**, but Hitler's war machine was again on the move in the spring of 1940. The blitzkrieg overwhelmed Denmark, Norway, Belgium and the Netherlands. The Nazis then prepared to overtake France from the north as **Benito Mussolini**'s troops attacked from the southeast. The British and French forces were not able to hold back the advancing armies and were forced to retreat. As a result, 370,000 soldiers were trapped on the beaches of **Dunkirk** in northern France. British citizens quickly organized a rescue by sending fishing boats and pleasure crafts across the English Channel. This daring rescue successfully evacuated the majority of the troops, but France fell to the advancing Germans in June, 1940. **Joseph Stalin** took advantage of this distraction and annexed Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania for the Soviet Union. He also demanded territory from Finland and sent over one million Soviet soldiers

across the border to emphasize the point. Although the Finns defended their country fiercely, they were eventually forced to accept Stalin's terms.

Timeline of Events	
1939 August	Germany and the Soviet Union sign the Nazi-Soviet Pact
1939 September	German Invasion of Poland
1940 April	German Invasion of Northern Europe
1940 May	Battle of Dunkirk
1940 June	Fall of France
1940 July	Battle of Britain
1940 September	Japanese Invasion of Indochina
1940 September	Japan, Germany and Italy Sign the Tripartite Pact
1941 June	German Invasion of the Soviet Union
1941 December	Japanese Attack on Pearl Harbor
1942 June	Battle of Midway
1942 August	Battle of Stalingrad
1942 October	Battle of El Alamein
1944 June	D-Day Invasion
1945 April	Soviet Capture of Berlin
1945 May	Surrender of Germany
1945 August	U.S. Use of the Atomic Bomb
1945 August	Surrender of Japan

Great Britain was now forced to stand alone against Germany and Italy as Adolf Hitler made plans to invade the island nation by sea. The British people blamed Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain and his appeasement policy for Germany's success. An election swept him out of office, and **Winston Churchill**, a long-time advocate of resistance to Hitler, became Britain's new prime minister. Churchill's frequent radio addresses reminded the British of their commitment to democratic government and the ideals of liberty. In July of 1940, Hitler ordered the aerial bombardment of Great Britain, and the **Luftwaffe** (German air force) targeted monuments, public buildings and industries in a series of air raids called the **Battle of Britain**. The British used the wealth and resources of their colonies to develop defensive equipment such as anti-aircraft weapons and radar. When 1940 ended, their airplane-related industries were out-producing the German factories, and Hitler was forced to abandon his plans for a naval invasion of Great Britain.

As events unfolded in Europe, Japan planned to extend its sphere of influence throughout Asia. The country's limited supply of natural resources such as oil, iron, rubber and tin energized the nation's desire for the conquest of China. In an effort to prevent this, **President Franklin Roosevelt** banned all U.S. shipments of

scrap iron, steel and airplane parts to Japan. Since these restrictions crippled Japan's intent to take over China, the island nation was forced to expand its quest for raw materials to drive its war machine. Although the Japanese were aware that this course of action would further antagonize the United States, **Emperor Hirohito** issued the order to attack Southeast Asia in a military campaign that became known as the **Vietnam Expedition** during September of 1940. In the same month, Japan signed the **Tripartite Agreement** with Italy and Germany resulting in the formation of the **Axis Powers**.



Japan Occupied Southeast Asia.

STOP: Answer Section C Questions.

The Game Changers

During the 1930s, many Americans still preferred to distance themselves from the affairs of foreign powers by following a policy called **isolationism**. To emphasize this type of diplomacy, Congress passed the **Neutrality Acts**, a series of laws which made it illegal for the United States to lend money or to sell weapons to countries at war. Roosevelt did not want to alienate the isolationists, but he also recognized that Americans also had strong cultural ties to Britain and France.

Therefore, he persuaded Congress to permit the sale of arms to warring nations as long as they paid cash and immediately removed them from American soil. During the Battle of Britain, Roosevelt provided the British with fifty destroyers in exchange for ninety-nine year leases on naval bases in Newfoundland and Bermuda. By 1941, American public opinion favored supporting the Allied cause and elected to Congress representatives who passed the **Lend-Lease Act**. The United States was now able to lend or to lease war materials to any nation fighting the Axis Powers. American industry quickly became an undeclared participant in the war against Germany and Italy.

Germany's lack of success in the Battle of Britain and a need for raw materials drew the Nazi nation's attention to the countries on its eastern border. Adolf Hitler forced Hungary, Romania and Bulgaria to become his allies. As a result, he gained access to their petroleum and food supplies, but the rich oil fields of the Soviet Union also beckoned. In June of 1941, Germany broke the Nazi-Soviet Pact and invaded the Soviet Union. Hitler assured his fellow citizens that this would be a short campaign and that the Soviets, led by Joseph Stalin, would fall quickly. By July, German troops were on the outskirts of **Moscow**, the Soviet capital. Although his generals wanted to focus on the battle for this city, Hitler formed a much grander battle plan and insisted that German troops attack several locations at the same time. Because of this strategy, Germany was unable to achieve a decisive victory against the Soviet Union before the onset of winter. Unlike their Russian counterparts, Hitler's forces had arrived wearing their summer uniforms and were totally unprepared for the harsh weather. As the Soviet resistance to the German onslaught stiffened, Joseph Stalin joined the Allies.



Poster Supporting the Soviet Resistance

In Asia, Japan ignored the demands from the Roosevelt administration to withdraw from Indochina and continued its invasion. The United States, therefore, cut off the sale of oil to Japan by issuing an **embargo** (an order prohibiting the sale of a particular product) which reduced the Asian nation's fuel supply by ninety percent. The Japanese were now convinced that war with the Americans was inevitable and that the United States was unprepared. Confident in their partnership with Italy and Germany, Japan's desperate leaders decided to launch a surprise attack on the American naval base at **Pearl Harbor** located in the Hawaiian Islands. On December 7, 1941, Japanese aircraft sank or severely damaged every American battleship. However, this would prove to be a limited success. Although the impairment was crippling, the American aircraft carriers were at sea when the attack occurred and escaped unharmed. This event, along with the Japanese attack on U.S. naval bases in the **Philippines** a few hours later, also united the U.S. populace in a spirit of determination and patriotism. With real resolve, the Americans declared war on the Axis Powers and joined the Allied cause.

STOP: Answer Section D Questions

The Turning Points of 1942

The early phases of World War II resulted in some serious setbacks for the Allies. However, three major victories in different regions of the world changed the course of the conflict.

1. The Battle of Midway

By the summer of 1942, the Japanese had conquered a huge expanse of land and water in the Pacific sector. Ruling an empire that measured 6000 miles by 5000 miles, they hoped to continue their conquests in the direction of Australia and the Hawaiian Islands. The Americans and the Australian naval forces successfully stopped the Japanese drive toward Australia in the **Battle of the Coral Sea** in May of 1942. After cracking the code used to send messages, the Allies learned that Japan next targeted **Midway**, a small island of strategic importance due to its close proximity to Hawaii. This advance information allowed American scout planes to locate the Japanese fleet. Operating from aircraft carriers, U.S. pilots destroyed 322 Japanese airplanes and four aircraft carriers. Japan was forced to withdraw, and Hawaii was not threatened again. The Allies began to move across the Pacific retaking each island in a series of bloody but successful battles.

2. The Battle of Stalingrad

After a long, hard winter, Hitler's troops were once again on the move in the southern regions of the Soviet Union by the spring of 1942. Along with the oil fields of the Ukraine, Hitler made the Soviet city of **Stalingrad** a prime objective. Joseph Stalin, for whom the city was named, ordered his troops to defend their position at all costs. After months of brutal, house-to-house combat, the Germans appeared to be in control, but late fall brought another round of severe, cold weather. In spite of Hitler's orders to resist, the German forces surrendered on January 31, 1943. The conclusion of the **Battle of Stalingrad** marked the beginning of the Soviet drive toward Germany and the Allied bombing of German cities. For Axis Powers, the war in Europe had become a defensive operation rather than an offensive one.



3. The Battle of Alamein

In October of 1942, American and British forces began a campaign in **Northern Africa** that would also impact the course of the war. With access to the **Suez Canal** and the oil fields of the Middle East at stake, both sides were determined to be victorious. The German **General Erwin Rommel**, nicknamed the Desert Fox, pushed the British forces across Egypt with his superior knowledge of tank warfare. Holding on to the city of **El Alamein**, the British maintained their position until General **Bernard Montgomery** arrived. This British officer spent several months lining up the British and American forces under his command. The attack, when it finally came, was swift and overpowering. Montgomery managed to push back the Germans and place the coast of North Africa in Allied hands.

After the victories at El Alamein and Stalingrad, the Allies attacked Italy from the North African coast by first invading **Sicily**. In a brief but bloody battle, the island fell to Allied forces in July, 1943. This defeat stunned the Italians, and Mussolini was forced to resign. **Pietro Badoglio**, Italy's new prime minister, renounced his country's pact with Hitler, but the Nazi leader was determined to halt the Allied advance. As a result, efforts to free Italy remained unsuccessful until 1945.

STOP: Answer Section E Questions.

The Push for an Allied Victory in Europe

The totalitarian powers tried to keep the news of their defeats and casualty figures from their civilian populations by controlling the press, but some reports leaked to

the public in spite of censorship. This helped to inspire **resistance movements** on the European continent. General **Charles De Gaulle** escaped Nazi-occupied France in 1940. He directed the Free French from outside the country as he gathered volunteers, colonials and Dunkirk survivors into a military force. They used small bombs to destroy bridges and planned to assassinate officials who profited from the Nazi regime based in Paris. The Polish resistors also worked tirelessly against their Axis captors. In Germany itself, a group of military officers tried to kill Adolf Hitler in July, 1944 as the possibility of an Allied victory increased.

The Allies knew that they were unlikely to end the war in Europe without a full-scale invasion of France. They went to great lengths to keep this plan a secret and even set up a phantom army consisting of cardboard planes and tanks visible from the air. Remembered as **D-Day**, the assault on the French peninsula of **Normandy** moved forward on June 6, 1944 under the direction of U.S. **General Dwight D. Eisenhower**. Incorporating over a million troops composed primarily of American, Canadian and British forces, this strategy launched history's largest amphibious attack under heavy German fire. On August 24, 1944, the Allies made a triumphant entry into **Paris** as the Germans retreated. Hitler's soldiers faced the Allied armies from the west as the Soviet's broke through their defenses on the eastern border. On May 2, 1945, the forces defending the city of **Berlin** conceded defeat to the Soviet army. On May 7, the German military commanders signed an unconditional surrender ending World War II in Europe.



Landing on D-Day

Allied March to Berlin

86th Operation Group: 194

The spring of 1945 also brought about major changes in leadership as well. On April 12, Franklin Roosevelt, who had been elected to an unprecedented fourth

term, died. His successor, **Harry Truman**, had only limited knowledge of Roosevelt's postwar plans and little experience in foreign policy. On April 28, Benito Mussolini was captured and executed with his corpse placed on public display in the Italian city of Milan. Italy was thrown into a state of economic and political confusion that eventually resulted in the formation of a new government and a new constitution. Germany's Third Reich experienced a complete collapse when Adolf Hitler committed suicide on April 30, 1945.

The Push for an Allied Victory in the Pacific

While the war concluded in Europe, the Allied forces were closing in on Japan. Victories on islands such as **Iwo Jima** and **Okinawa** paved the way for an invasion of the Japanese mainland. However, these were bitter battles with heavy casualties. Japan was determined to defend the homeland with its large army and **kamikazes**. These volunteer pilots were known for their suicide missions. Meanwhile, an American-based international team of scientists and technicians had been working on the **Manhattan Project**, a code name for the secret development of the **atomic bomb**. On August 6 and 9, President Harry Truman ordered the use of this new weapon on the Japanese cities of **Hiroshima** and **Nagasaki**. This caused the instantaneous deaths of 140,000 people along with thousands of serious injuries. Even though some Japanese commanders still favored a continuation of the war, Japan surrendered on August 14, 1945.

STOP: Answer Section F Questions.

What Does It All Mean?

World War II generated a series of sweeping social, political and economic changes that would forever change the ways we live and work. Governments intensified their efforts to mobilize their people, their industries and their resources. The British made use of their colonial soldiers from their holdings in Asia and Africa. Women also were pulled into manufacturing and the military, especially in the Soviet Union where they constituted more than half of the workforce during the war years.

The Second World War was the most destructive conflict in world history. The cost in property damage was enormous since vast areas of Japan, China and Europe were reduced to rubble. This resulted in millions of displaced persons with

no means of meeting even their most basic needs. Casualty figures were six times greater than those reached in World War I, and half of those numbers were civilians. Whole populations and entire cities were now designated as the enemy. The new technology of war, including heavy bombers, rocketry and atomic weapons, challenged and changed the traditional boundaries of the battlefield. When the war concluded in Europe, however, the global community was forced to face one of darkest aspects of the war, the Holocaust.



Additional Resources and Activities for this Unit

[Unit 16 Main Points Worksheet](#)

[Unit 16 World War II Timesheet Worksheet](#)

[Unit 16 World War II](#)

