

Chapter 9: World War II, 1939-1945

Introduction

World War II was the most devastating conflict in human history, involving the **Axis Powers** (Germany, Italy, Japan) and the **Allied Powers** (Britain, France, USSR, USA). The war began with Hitler's invasion of Poland in September 1939 and ended in September 1945 with the surrender of Japan. Major events included blitzkrieg tactics, the Battle of Britain, Operation Barbarossa, the Holocaust, the D-Day landings, and the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. This chapter explores the key battles, strategies, and turning points that shaped the war.

1. The Outbreak of War (1939-1940)

The Nazi-Soviet Pact and the Invasion of Poland (1 September 1939)

- Germany and the USSR secretly agreed to divide Poland.
- Germany invaded Poland using blitzkrieg tactics (fast-moving tanks, aircraft, and mechanised infantry).
- Britain and France declared war on Germany (3 September 1939) but could not assist Poland.
- Poland surrendered by 6 October; it was partitioned between Germany and the USSR.
- USSR invaded Finland (Winter War, 1939-40) and annexed Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania.

The Phoney War (October 1939 - April 1940)

- Britain and France prepared for German attacks but took little action.
- Germany built up its forces for a major assault.
- Denmark and Norway invaded (April 1940) - Denmark surrendered immediately, but Norway resisted until June.
- Winston Churchill replaced Neville Chamberlain as British Prime Minister (May 1940).

2. The Fall of France and the Battle of Britain (1940)

The Invasion of France (10 May - 22 June 1940)

- Germany attacked Belgium, the Netherlands, and Luxembourg to bypass the Maginot Line.
- The German army advanced through the Ardennes Forest, catching France off guard.
- The British Expeditionary Force (BEF) was evacuated at Dunkirk (Operation Dynamo, 26 May - 4 June 1940).
- France surrendered (22 June 1940); Germany occupied northern France.
- Vichy France, a pro-German regime, was established under Marshal Pétain.

The Battle of Britain (July - October 1940)

- Hitler launched Operation Sea Lion (planned invasion of Britain).
- The Luftwaffe bombed British airfields and radar stations.
- The RAF defended successfully (Spitfires and Hurricanes, radar technology).
- The Blitz (September 1940 - May 1941): German bombers attacked London and other cities.
- Germany failed to achieve air superiority; Hitler postponed the invasion.

3. The War Expands: The Eastern Front and North Africa (1941-1943)

Operation Barbarossa (22 June 1941)

- Germany invaded the USSR with 3 million troops.
- Captured Kiev, Smolensk, and besieged Leningrad (900 days).
- Soviets used scorched-earth tactics to deny Germans resources.
- Battle of Moscow (December 1941): Soviet counterattack pushed Germans back.

The War in North Africa (1940-1943)

- Italy invaded British Egypt (1940) but was defeated.
- Germany sent the Afrika Korps under Erwin Rommel ('The Desert Fox').
- Battle of El Alamein (October-November 1942): British victory under Bernard Montgomery.
- Operation Torch (November 1942): US and British troops landed in North Africa, forcing Axis surrender in May 1943.

4. The USA Joins the War (1941-1945)

The Attack on Pearl Harbor (7 December 1941)

- Japan attacked the US Pacific Fleet in Hawaii.
- 2,500 Americans killed, battleships destroyed.
- USA declared war on Japan (8 December); Germany and Italy declared war on the USA (11 December).
- The USA joined the Allies, providing major resources.

5. The Turning Points of the War (1942-1943)

The Battle of Stalingrad (August 1942 - February 1943)

- German Sixth Army trapped and forced to surrender (91,000 POWs).
- First major defeat for Germany; turning point on the Eastern Front.

The Allied Invasion of Italy (July 1943 - 1945)

- Sicily invaded (July 1943); Mussolini overthrown.

- Italy surrendered (September 1943) but Germans continued to fight.
- Rome liberated (June 1944).

The Battle of Kursk (July 1943)

- Largest tank battle in history.
- Soviets defeated German counter-offensive; Germany lost initiative in the East.

6. The D-Day Landings and the End of the War (1944-1945)

Operation Overlord (D-Day: 6 June 1944)

- 156,000 Allied troops landed on Normandy beaches (Utah, Omaha, Gold, Juno, Sword).
- Paris liberated (August 1944); Allies pushed into Germany.

The Battle of the Bulge (December 1944 - January 1945)

- Last major German offensive; Germans temporarily broke through Allied lines.
- Allies counterattacked and advanced into Germany.

The Fall of Berlin and Hitler's Death (April-May 1945)

- Soviets captured Berlin (2 May 1945).
- Hitler died by suicide (30 April 1945).
- Germany surrendered unconditionally (8 May 1945 - V-E Day).

7. The Pacific War and Japan's Defeat (1945)

Island Hopping Strategy

- US forces under Douglas MacArthur captured Pacific islands from Japan.
- Battle of Midway (June 1942): Japan lost four aircraft carriers.
- Iwo Jima and Okinawa (1945): Heavy casualties on both sides.

The Atomic Bomb and Japan's Surrender (August 1945)

- Hiroshima bombed (6 August 1945, 140,000 dead).
- Nagasaki bombed (9 August 1945, 80,000 dead).
- Japan surrendered (2 September 1945 - V-J Day).

Conclusion

- Over 61 million people killed (including 6 million Jews in the Holocaust).
- Nuremberg Trials (1945-1946): Nazi leaders prosecuted for war crimes.
- The Cold War began between the USA and USSR.
- The United Nations (UN) was created (October 1945).

Key Terms

- **Blitzkrieg:** German lightning warfare.

- **The Blitz:** German bombing of British cities.
- **D-Day:** Allied invasion of Normandy (June 1944).
- **Final Solution:** Nazi plan to exterminate Jews.
- **Hiroshima & Nagasaki:** Cities destroyed by atomic bombs.
- **V-E Day & V-J Day:** Victory in Europe (8 May 1945) and Victory over Japan (2 September 1945).