

# The Second World War, 1939–45

## SUMMARY OF EVENTS

Unlike the 1914–18 war, the Second World War was a war of rapid movement; it was a much more complex affair, with major campaigns taking place in the Pacific and the Far East, in North Africa and deep in the heart of Russia, as well as in central and western Europe and the Atlantic. *The war falls into four fairly clearly defined phases:*

### 1 *Opening moves: September 1939 to December 1940*

By the end of September the Germans and Russians had occupied Poland. After a five-month pause (known as the ‘phoney war’), German forces occupied Denmark and Norway (April 1940). In May, attacks were made on Holland, Belgium and France, who were soon defeated, leaving Britain alone to face the dictators (Mussolini had declared war in June, just before the fall of France). Hitler’s attempt to bomb Britain into submission was thwarted in *the Battle of Britain* (July to September 1940), but Mussolini’s armies invaded Egypt and Greece.

### 2 *The Axis offensive widens: 1941 to the summer of 1942*

The war now began to develop into a worldwide conflict. First Hitler, confident of a quick victory over Britain, launched an invasion of Russia (June 1941), breaking the non-aggression pact signed less than two years earlier. Then the Japanese forced the USA into the war by attacking the American naval base at Pearl Harbor (December 1941), and they followed this up by occupying territories such as the Philippines, Malaya, Singapore and Burma, scattered over a wide area. At this stage of the war there seemed to be no way of stopping the Germans and Japanese, though the Italians were less successful.

### 3 *The offensives held in check: summer 1942 to summer 1943*

This phase of the war saw three important battles in which Axis forces were defeated.

- In June 1942, the Americans drove off a Japanese attack on *Midway Island*, inflicting heavy losses.
- In October, the Germans under Rommel, advancing towards Egypt, were halted at *El Alamein* and later driven out of North Africa.
- The third battle was in Russia, where by September 1942, the Germans had penetrated as far as *Stalingrad* on the river Volga. Here the Russians put up such fierce resistance that in the following February the German army was surrounded and forced to surrender.

Meanwhile the war in the air continued, with both sides bombing enemy cities, while at sea, as in the First World War, the British and Americans gradually got the better of the German submarine menace.

#### 4 *The Axis powers defeated: July 1943 to August 1945*

The enormous power and resources of the USA and the USSR, combined with an all-out effort from Britain and her Empire, slowly but surely wore the Axis powers down. Italy was eliminated first, and this was followed by an Anglo-American invasion of Normandy (June 1944) which liberated France, Belgium and Holland. Later, Allied troops crossed the Rhine and captured Cologne. In the east, the Russians drove the Germans out and advanced on Berlin via Poland. *Germany surrendered in May 1945 and Japan in August, after the Americans had dropped an atomic bomb on Hiroshima and one on Nagasaki.*

### 6.1 OPENING MOVES: SEPTEMBER 1939 TO DECEMBER 1940

#### (a) Poland defeated

The Poles were defeated swiftly by the German *Blitzkrieg* (lightning war), which they were ill-equipped to deal with. It consisted of rapid thrusts by motorized divisions and tanks (*Panzers*) supported by air power. The *Luftwaffe* (the German air force) put the Polish railway system out of action and destroyed the Polish air force. Polish resistance was heroic but hopeless: they had no motorized divisions and they tried to stop advancing German tanks by massed cavalry charges. Britain and France did little to help their ally directly because French mobilization procedure was slow and out-of-date, and it was difficult to transport sufficient troops to Poland to be effective. When the Russians invaded eastern Poland, resistance collapsed. *On 29 September Poland was divided up between Germany and the USSR (as agreed in the pact of August 1939).*

#### (b) The 'phoney war'

Very little happened in the west for the next five months. In the east the Russians took over Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania and invaded Finland (November 1939), forcing her to hand over frontier territories which would enable the Russians to defend themselves better against any attack from the west. Meanwhile the French and Germans manned their respective defences – the Maginot and Siegfried Lines. Hitler seems to have hoped that the pause would weaken the resolve of Britain and France and encourage them to negotiate peace. This lack of action pleased Hitler's generals, who were not convinced that the German army was strong enough to attack in the west. It was the American press which described this period as the 'phoney war'.

#### (c) Denmark and Norway invaded, April 1940

Hitler's troops occupied Denmark and landed at the main Norwegian ports in April 1940, rudely shattering the apparent calm of the 'phoney war'. Control of Norway was important for the Germans because Narvik was the main outlet for Swedish iron-ore, which was vital for the German armaments industry. The British were interfering with this trade by laying mines in Norwegian coastal waters, and the Germans were afraid that they might try to take over some of Norway's ports, which they were in fact planning to do. Admiral Raeder, the German navy chief, realized that the fjords would be excellent naval bases from which to attack Britain's transatlantic supply lines. When a British destroyer chased the German vessel *Altmark* into a Norwegian fjord and rescued the 300 British prisoners aboard, Hitler decided it was time to act. On 9 April, German troops landed at Oslo, Kristiansand, Stavanger, Bergen and Trondheim; although British and French troops

arrived a few days later, they were unable to dislodge the Germans, who were already well established. After a temporary success at Narvik, all Allied troops were withdrawn by early June because of the growing threat to France itself. *The Germans were successful* because the Norwegians had been taken by surprise and their troops were not even mobilized; local Nazis, under their leader Vidkun Quisling, gave the invaders every assistance. The British had no air support, whereas the German air force constantly harassed the Allies. *This Norwegian campaign had important results:*

- Germany was assured of her bases and her iron-ore supplies, but had lost three cruisers and ten destroyers. This made the German navy less effective at Dunkirk than it might have been (see (d) below).
- It showed the incompetence of Chamberlain's government. He was forced to resign and *Winston Churchill became British prime minister*. Although there has been criticism of Churchill's mistakes, there is no doubt that he supplied what was needed at the time – drive, a sense of urgency, and the ability to make his coalition cabinet work well together.

#### **(d) Hitler attacks Holland, Belgium and France**

The attacks on Holland, Belgium and France were launched simultaneously on 10 May, and again *Blitzkrieg* methods brought swift victories. The Dutch, shaken by the bombing of Rotterdam, which killed almost a thousand people, surrendered after only four days. Belgium held out for longer, but her surrender at the end of May left the British and French troops in Belgium perilously exposed as German motorized divisions swept across northern France; only Dunkirk remained in Allied hands. The British navy played the vital role in evacuating over 338 000 troops – two-thirds of them British – from Dunkirk between 27 May and 4 June. This was a remarkable achievement in the face of constant *Luftwaffe* attacks on the beaches. It would perhaps have been impossible if Hitler had not ordered the German advance towards Dunkirk to halt (24 May), probably because the marshy terrain and numerous canals were unsuitable for tanks.

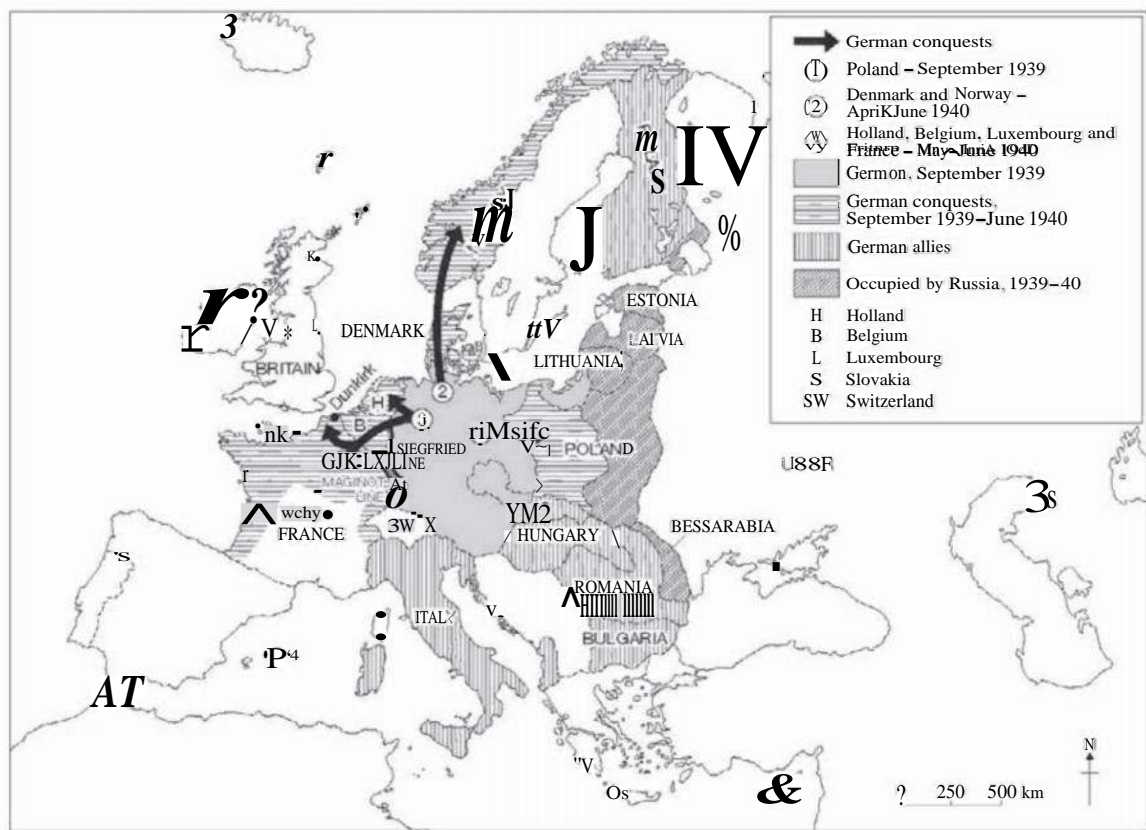
*The events at Dunkirk were important:* a third of a million Allied troops were rescued to fight again, and Churchill used it for propaganda purposes to boost British morale with the 'Dunkirk spirit'. In fact it was a serious blow for the Allies: the troops at Dunkirk had lost all their arms and equipment, so that it became impossible for Britain to help France.

The Germans now swept southwards: *Paris was captured on 14 June and France surrendered on 22 June*. At Hitler's insistence the armistice (ceasefire) was signed at Compiègne in the same railway coach that had been used for the 1918 armistice. The Germans occupied northern France and the Atlantic coast (see Map 6.1), giving them valuable submarine bases, and the French army was demobilized. Unoccupied France was allowed its own government under Marshal Petain, but it had no real independence and collaborated with the Germans. Britain's position was now very precarious. Lord Halifax, the Foreign Secretary, allowed secret enquiries to be made via Washington about what German peace terms would be; even Churchill thought about the possibility of a negotiated peace.

#### **(e) Why was France defeated so quickly?**

- 1 *The French were psychologically unprepared for war, and were bitterly divided between right and left.* The right was fascist in sympathy, admired Hitler's achievements in Germany and wanted an agreement with him. The communists, following





Map 6.1 The beginning of the war in Europe – main German thrusts, 1939–40

the non-aggression pact between Germany and the USSR, were also against the war. The long period of inaction during the 'phoney war' allowed time for a peace party to develop on the right, headed by Laval. He argued that there was no point in continuing the war now that the Poles, whom they were supposed to be helping, had been defeated.

## 2 *There were serious military weaknesses.*

- France had to face the full weight of an undivided German offensive, whereas in 1914 half the German forces had been directed against Russia.
- The French High Command was content to sit behind the Maginot Line, a line of defences stretching from the Swiss to the Belgian frontiers. Unfortunately the Maginot Line did not continue along the frontier between France and Belgium, partly because that might have offended the Belgians, and because Petain believed that the Ardennes would be a strong enough barrier; but this was exactly where the Germans broke through.
- France had as many tanks and armoured vehicles as Germany, but instead of being concentrated in completely mechanized armoured divisions (like the Germans), allowing greater speed, they were split up so that each infantry division had a few. This slowed them to the speed of marching soldiers (infantry).
- The German divisions were supported by combat planes, another area neglected by the French.

## 3 *The French generals made fatal mistakes.*

- No attempt was made to help Poland by attacking Germany in the west in September 1939, which might have had a good chance of success.
- No troops were moved from the Maginot Line forts (most of which were completely inactive) to help block the German breakthrough on the River Meuse (13 May 1940).
- There was poor communication between the army and air force, so that air defence to drive German bombers off usually failed to arrive.

## 4 *Military defeats gave the defeatist right the chance to come out into the open and put pressure on the government to accept a ceasefire.* When even the 84-year-old Petain, the hero of Verdun in 1916, urged peace, Prime Minister Reynaud resigned and Petain took over.

### **(f) The Battle of Britain (12 August to 30 September 1940)**

This was fought in the air, when Goering's *Luftwaffe* tried to destroy the Royal Air Force (RAF) *as a preliminary to the invasion of Britain*. The Germans bombed harbours, radar stations, aerodromes and munitions factories; in September they began to bomb London, in retaliation, they claimed, for a British raid on Berlin. The RAF inflicted heavy losses on the *Luftwaffe* (1389 German planes were lost as against 792 British); when it became clear that British air power was far from being destroyed, Hitler called off the invasion. *Reasons for the British success were:*

- Their chain of new radar stations gave plenty of warning of approaching German attackers.

- The German bombers were poorly armed. Though the British fighters (Spitfires and Hurricanes) were not significantly better than the German Messerschmitts, the Germans were hampered by limited range – they could only carry enough fuel to enable them to stay in the air about 90 minutes.
- The switch to bombing London was a mistake because it relieved pressure on the airfields at the critical moment.

*The Battle of Britain was probably the first major turning point of the war:* for the first time the Germans had been checked, demonstrating that they were not invincible. Britain was able to remain in the struggle, thus facing Hitler (who was about to attack Russia) with *the fatal situation of war on two fronts*. As Churchill remarked when he paid tribute to the British fighter pilots: ‘Never in the field of human conflict was so much owed by so many to so few.’

### **(g) Mussolini invades Egypt, September 1940**

Not wanting to be outdone by Hitler, Mussolini sent an army from the Italian colony of Libya which penetrated about 60 miles into Egypt (September 1940), while another Italian army invaded Greece from Albania (October). However, the British soon drove the Italians out of Egypt, pushed them back far into Libya and defeated them at Beda Fomm, capturing 130 000 prisoners and 400 tanks. They seemed poised to take the whole of Libya. British naval aircraft sank half the Italian fleet in harbour at Taranto and occupied Crete. The Greeks forced the Italians back and invaded Albania. Mussolini was beginning to be an embarrassment to Hitler.

## **6.2 THE AXIS OFFENSIVE WIDENS: 1941 TO THE SUMMER OF 1942**

### **(a) North Africa and Greece**

*Hitler's first moves in 1941 were to help out his faltering ally.* In February he sent Erwin Rommel and the Afrika Korps to Tripoli, and together with the Italians, they drove the British out of Libya. After much advancing and retreating, by June 1942 the Germans were in Egypt approaching El Alamein, only 70 miles from Alexandria (see Map 6.2).

*In April 1941 Hitler's forces invaded Greece,* the day after 60 000 British, Australian and New Zealand troops had arrived to help the Greeks. The Germans soon captured Athens, forcing the British to withdraw, and after bombing Crete, they launched a parachute invasion of the island; again the British were forced to evacuate (May 1941).

*The campaigns in Greece had important effects:*

- It was depressing for the Allies, who lost about 36 000 men.
- Many of the troops had been removed from North Africa, thus weakening British forces there just when they needed to be at their most effective against Rommel.
- More important in the long run was that Hitler's involvement in Greece and Yugoslavia (which the Germans invaded at the same time as Greece) may well have delayed his attack on Russia. This was originally planned for 15 May and was delayed for five weeks. If the invasion had taken place in May, the Germans might well have captured Moscow before the winter set in.



Map 6.2 North Africa and the Mediterranean

**(b) The German invasion of Russia (Operation Barbarossa) began on 22 June 1941**

*Hitler's motives seem to have been mixed:*

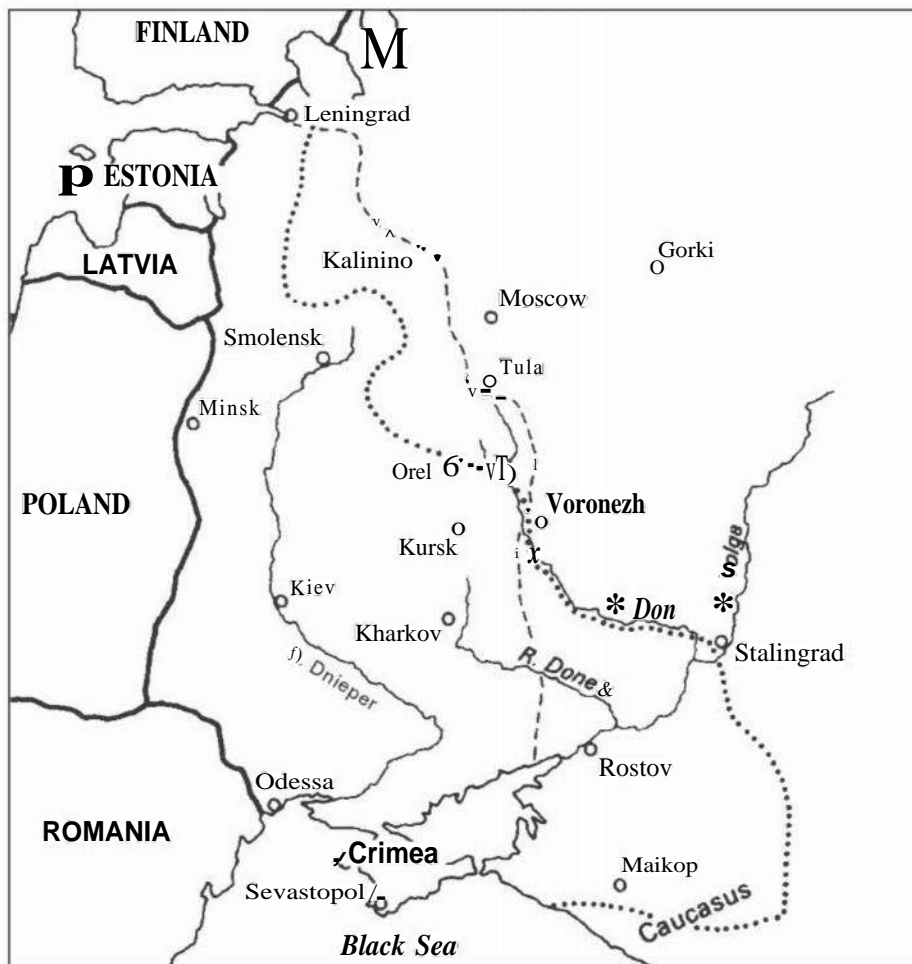
- He feared that the Russians might attack Germany while his forces were still occupied in the west.
- He hoped that the Japanese would attack Russia in the Far East.
- The more powerful Japan became, the less chance there was of the USA entering the war (or so Hitler thought).
- But above all there was his hatred of communism and his desire for *Lebensraum* (living space).

According to historian Alan Bullock, 'Hitler invaded Russia for the simple and sufficient reason that he had always meant to establish the foundations of his thousand-year *Reich* by the annexation of the territory lying between the Vistula and the Urals.' It has sometimes been suggested that the attack on Russia was Hitler's greatest mistake, but in fact, as Hugh Trevor-Roper pointed out, 'to Hitler the Russian campaign was not a luxury: it was the be-all and end-all of Nazism; it could not be delayed. It was now or never.' Hitler did not expect a long war; he told one of his generals: 'We have only to kick in the door and the whole rotten structure will come crashing down.'

*The German attack was three-pronged:*

- in the north towards Leningrad,
- in the centre towards Moscow,
- in the south through the Ukraine.





--- Line of the German advance in December 1941  
 ..... German line in November 1942

Map 6.3 The Russian front

It was *Blitzkrieg* on an awesome scale, involving close on 5.5 million men, and 3550 tanks supported by 5000 aircraft and 47 000 pieces of artillery. Important cities such as Riga, Smolensk and Kiev were captured (see Map 6.3). The Russians had been caught off their guard, in spite of British and American warnings that a German attack was imminent. Stalin apparently believed that Hitler could be trusted to honour the Nazi–Soviet non-aggression pact, and was extremely suspicious of any information which came from Britain or the USA. The Russians were still re-equipping their army and air force, and many of their generals, thanks to Stalin’s purges, were inexperienced (see Section 17.3(b)).

However, the German forces failed to capture Leningrad and Moscow. They were severely hampered by the heavy rains of October, which turned the Russian roads into mud, and by the severe frosts of November and December when in some places the temperature fell to minus 38°C. The Germans had inadequate winter clothing because Hitler had expected the campaigns to be over by the autumn. Even in the spring of 1942 no progress was made in the north and centre as Hitler decided to concentrate on a major drive south-eastwards towards the Caucasus to seize the oilfields.

### (c) The USA enters the war, December 1941

*The USA was brought into the war by the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor (their naval base in the Hawaiian Islands) on 7 December 1941 (see Illus. 6.1). Until then, the*





Illustration of the USS Arizona Memorial, Pearl Harbor, December 7, 1941: The battleship lies in ruins after the Japanese attack

After the attack on Pearl Harbor, the United States entered the war against Japan. The attack was a surprise, and the Japanese had provided no warning. The attack was a major blow to the United States, and it led to the United States entering the war.

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states deteriorated steadily. The Americans assisted the Chinese, who were still at war with Japan; when the Japanese persuaded Vichy France to allow them to occupy French Indo-China (where they set up military bases), President Roosevelt demanded their withdrawal and placed an embargo on oil supplies to Japan (26 July 1941). Long negotiations followed in which the Japanese tried to persuade the Americans to lift the embargo. But stalemate was reached when the Americans insisted on a Japanese withdrawal both from Indo-China and from China itself. When the aggressive General Tojo became prime minister (16 October), war seemed inevitable.

*The attack was brilliantly organized by Admiral Yamamoto.* There was no declaration of war: 353 Japanese planes arrived undetected at Pearl Harbor, and in two hours, destroyed 350 aircraft and five battleships; 3700 men were killed or seriously injured. Roosevelt called 7 December 'a date which will live in infamy'.

*Pearl Harbor had important results:*

- It gave the Japanese control of the Pacific, and by May 1942 they had captured Malaya, Singapore, Hong Kong and Burma (all part of the British Empire), the Dutch East Indies, the Philippines, and two American possessions, Guam and Wake Island (see Map 6.4).
- It caused Hitler to declare war on the USA.

*Declaring war on the USA was perhaps Hitler's most serious mistake.* He need not at this stage have committed himself to war with the USA, in which case the Americans might well have concentrated on the Pacific war. However, the Germans had already assured the Japanese that they would come to Japan's aid if she was ever at war with the USA. Hitler assumed that President Roosevelt of the USA would declare war on Germany sooner or later, so he wanted to get Germany's declaration of war in first, to show the German people that he, and not the Americans, controlled events. In fact the US Congress was naturally



Map 6.4 The war in the Pacific

determined to have their revenge on Japan, but was still reluctant to get involved in Europe. Roosevelt would have had a difficult job to persuade Congress to declare war on Germany; Hitler's action saved him the trouble.

As it was, Germany was now faced with the immense potential of the USA. This meant that with the vast resources of the USSR and the British Commonwealth as well, the longer the war lasted, the less chance there was of an Axis victory. It was essential for them to deliver swift knock-out blows before the American contribution became effective.

#### **(d) Brutal behaviour by Germans and Japanese**

The behaviour of both Germans and Japanese in their conquered territories was ruthless and brutal. The Nazis treated the peoples of eastern Europe as sub-humans, fit only to be slaves of the German master-race. As for the Jews – they were to be exterminated (see Section 6.8). As American journalist and historian William Shirer put it:

Nazi degradation sank to a level seldom experienced by man in all his time on earth. Millions of decent, innocent men and women were driven into forced labour, millions were tortured in the concentration camps, and millions more still (including nearly six million Jews) were massacred in cold blood or deliberately starved to death and their remains burned.

This was both amoral and foolish: in the Baltic states (Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia) and in the Ukraine, the Soviet government was so unpopular that decent treatment would have turned the people into allies of the Germans.

The Japanese treated their prisoners of war and the Asian peoples badly. Again this was ill-advised: many of the Asians, like those in Indo-China, at first welcomed the Japanese, who were thought to be freeing them from European control. The Japanese hoped to organize their new territories into a great economic empire known as a *Greater East Asia Co-prosperity Sphere*, which would be defended by sea and air power. However, harsh treatment by the Japanese soon turned the Asians against rule from Tokyo, and determined resistance movements began, usually with communist involvement.

### **6.3 THE OFFENSIVES HELD IN CHECK: SUMMER 1942 TO SUMMER 1943**

In three separate areas of fighting, Axis forces were defeated and began to lose ground:

- Midway Island
- El Alamein
- Stalingrad

#### **(a) Midway Island, June 1942**

At Midway Island in the Pacific the Americans beat off a powerful Japanese attack, which included five aircraft carriers, nearly 400 aircraft, 17 large warships and an invasion force of 5000 troops. The Americans, with only three carriers and 233 planes, destroyed four of the Japanese carriers and about 330 planes. *There were several reasons for the American victory against heavier odds:*

- They had broken the Japanese radio code and knew exactly when and where the attack was to be launched.
- The Japanese were over-confident and made two fatal mistakes: they split their forces, thus allowing the Americans to concentrate on the main carrier force; and they attacked with aircraft from all four carriers simultaneously, so that when they were all rearming, the entire fleet was extremely vulnerable.

At this stage the Americans launched a counter-attack by dive-bombers, which swooped unexpectedly from 19 000 feet, sinking two of the carriers and all their planes.

*Midway proved to be a crucial turning point in the battle for the Pacific*: the loss of their carriers and strike planes seriously weakened the Japanese, and from then on the Americans maintained their lead in carriers and aircraft, especially dive-bombers. Although the Japanese had far more battleships and cruisers, they were mostly ineffective: the only way war could be waged successfully in the vast expanses of the Pacific was by air power operating from carriers. Gradually the Americans under General MacArthur began to recover the Pacific islands, beginning in August 1942 with landings in the Solomon Islands. The struggle was long and bitter and continued through 1943 and 1944, a process which the Americans called 'island hopping'.

### **(b) El Alamein, October 1942**

At El Alamein in Egypt Rommel's Afrika Korps were driven back by the British Eighth Army, commanded by Montgomery. This great battle was the culmination of several engagements fought in the El Alamein area: first the Axis advance was temporarily checked (July); when Rommel tried to break through he was halted again at Alam Haifa (September); finally, seven weeks later in the October battle, he was chased out of Egypt for good by the British and New Zealanders.

*The Allies were successful* partly because during the seven-week pause, massive reinforcements had arrived, so that the Germans and Italians were heavily outnumbered – 80 000 men and 540 tanks against 230 000 troops and 1440 tanks. In addition, Allied air power was vital, constantly attacking the Axis forces and sinking their supply ships as they crossed the Mediterranean, so that by October there were serious shortages of food, fuel oil and ammunition. At the same time the air force was strong enough to protect the Eighth Army's own supply routes. Montgomery's skilful preparations probably clinched the issue, though he has been criticized for being over-cautious, and for allowing Rommel and half his forces to escape into Libya.

However, there is no doubt that *the El Alamein victory was another turning point in the war*:

- It prevented Egypt and the Suez Canal from falling into German hands.
- It ended the possibility of a link-up between the Axis forces in the Middle East and those in the Ukraine.
- More than that, it led on to the complete expulsion of Axis forces from North Africa. It encouraged landings of British troops in the French territories of Morocco and Algeria to threaten the Germans and Italians from the west, while the Eighth Army closed in on them from Libya. Trapped in Tunisia, 275 000 Germans and Italians were forced to surrender (May 1943), and the Allies were well-placed for an invasion of Italy.

The desert war had been a serious drain on German resources that could have been used in Russia, where they were badly needed.



### (c) Stalingrad

At Stalingrad the southern prong of the German invasion of Russia, which had penetrated deeply through the Crimea, capturing Rostov-on-Don, was finally checked. *The Germans had reached Stalingrad at the end of August 1942*, but though they more or less destroyed the city, the Russians refused to surrender. In November they counter-attacked ferociously, trapping the Germans, whose supply lines were dangerously extended, in a large pincer movement. With his retreat cut off, the German commander, von Paulus, had no reasonable alternative but to surrender with 94 000 men (2 February 1943).

If Stalingrad had fallen, the supply route for Russia's oil from the Caucasus would have been cut off, and the Germans had hoped to advance up the River Don to attack Moscow from the south-east. This plan had to be abandoned; but more than this was at stake – *the defeat was a catastrophe for the Germans*: it shattered the myth that they were invincible, and boosted Russian morale. They followed up with more counter-attacks, and in July 1943, in a great tank battle at Kursk, they forced the Germans to keep on retreating. Early in 1944 the Germans had to abandon the siege of Leningrad and to retreat from their position west of Moscow. It was now only a matter of time before the Germans, heavily outnumbered and short of tanks and guns, were driven out of Russia.

## 6.4 WHAT PART WAS PLAYED BY ALLIED NAVAL FORCES?

The previous section showed how the combination of sea and air power was the key to success in the Pacific war and how, after the initial shock at Pearl Harbor, the Americans were able to build up that superiority in both departments, which was to lead to the eventual defeat of Japan. At the same time the British navy, as in the First World War, had a vital role to play: this included protecting merchant ships bringing food supplies, sinking German submarines and surface raiders, blockading Germany, and transporting and supplying Allied troops fighting in North Africa and later in Italy. At first success was mixed, mainly because the British failed to understand the importance of air support in naval operations and had few aircraft carriers. Thus they suffered defeats in Norway and Crete, where the Germans had strong air superiority. In addition the Germans had many naval bases in Norway, Denmark, France and Italy. In spite of this the British navy could point to some important achievements.

### (a) British successes

- 1 *Aircraft from the carrier Illustrious sank half the Italian fleet at Taranto (November 1940)*. The following March five more warships were destroyed off Cape Matapan.
- 2 *The threat from surface raiders was removed by the sinking of the Bismarck*, Germany's only battleship at the time (May 1941).
- 3 *The navy destroyed the German invasion transports on their way to Crete (May 1941)*, though they could not prevent the landing of parachute troops.
- 4 *They provided escorts for convoys carrying supplies to help the Russians*. These sailed via the Arctic to Murmansk in the far north of Russia. Beginning in September 1941, the first 12 convoys arrived without incident, but then the Germans began to attack them, until convoy 17 lost 23 ships out of 36 (June 1942). After this disaster, Arctic convoys were not resumed until November 1943, when stronger escorts could be spared. Altogether 40 convoys sailed: 720 out of a total of 811 merchant ships arrived safely, with valuable cargo for the Russians; this included 5000 tanks, 7000 aircraft and thousands of tons of canned meat.

- 5 *Their most important contribution was their victory in the Battle of the Atlantic (see below).*
- 6 *Sea and air power together made possible the great invasion of France in June 1944 (see below, Section 6.6(b)).*

## (b) The Battle of the Atlantic

This was the struggle against German U-boats attempting to deprive Britain of food and raw materials. At the beginning of 1942 the Germans had 90 U-boats in operation and 250 being built. In the first six months of that year the Allies lost over 4 million tons of merchant shipping and destroyed only 21 U-boats. Losses reached a peak of 108 ships in March 1943, almost two-thirds of which were in convoy. However, after that the number of sinkings began to fall, while the U-boat losses increased. By July 1943 the Allies could produce ships at a faster rate than the U-boats could sink them, and the situation was under control.

*The reasons for the Allied success were:*

- more air protection was provided for convoys by long-range Liberators;
- both escorts and aircraft improved with experience;
- the British introduced the new centimetric radar sets, which were small enough to be fitted into aircraft; these enabled submarines to be detected in poor visibility and at night.

*The victory was just as important as Midway, El Alamein and Stalingrad: Britain could not have continued to sustain the losses of March 1943 and still remained in the war.*

## 6.5 WHAT CONTRIBUTION DID AIR POWER MAKE TO THE DEFEAT OF THE AXIS?

### (a) Achievements of Allied air power

- 1 *The first significant achievement was in the Battle of Britain (1940), when the RAF beat off the Luftwaffe attacks, causing Hitler to abandon his invasion plans (see Section 6.1(f)).*
- 2 *In conjunction with the British navy, aircraft played a varied role: the successful attacks on the Italian fleet at Taranto and Cape Matapan, the sinking of the German battleship Tirpitz by heavy bombers in Norway (November 1943), the protection of convoys in the Atlantic, and anti-submarine operations. In fact, in May 1943 Admiral Doenitz, the German navy chief, complained to Hitler that since the introduction of the new radar devices, more U-boats were being destroyed by aircraft than by naval vessels.*
- 3 *The American air force together with the navy played a vital part in winning the Pacific war against the Japanese. Dive-bombers operating from aircraft carriers won the Battle of Midway Island in June 1942 (see Section 6.3(a)). Later, in the 'island-hopping' campaign, attacks by heavy bombers prepared the way for landings by marines, for example at the Mariana Islands (1944) and the Philippines (1945). American transport planes kept up the vital flow of supplies to the Allies during the campaign to recapture Burma.*
- 4 *The RAF took part in specific campaigns which would have been hopeless without them: for example, during the war in the desert, operating from bases in Egypt and*

Palestine, they constantly bombed Rommel's supply ships in the Mediterranean and his armies on land.

- 5 *British and Americans later flew parachute troops in, to aid the landings in Sicily (July 1943) and Normandy (June 1944), and provided air protection for the invading armies. (However, a similar operation at Arnhem in Holland in September 1944 was a failure.)*

## **(b) Allied bombing of German and Japanese cities**

The most controversial action was the Allied bombing of German and Japanese cities. The Germans had bombed London and other important British cities and ports during 1940 and 1941, but these raids dwindled during the German attack on Russia, which required all the *Luftwaffe's* strength. The British and Americans retaliated with what they called a 'strategic air offensive' – this involved massive attacks on military and industrial targets in order to hamper the German war effort. The Ruhr, Cologne, Hamburg and Berlin all suffered badly. Sometimes raids seem to have been carried out to undermine civilian morale, as when about 50 000 people were killed during a single night raid on Dresden (February 1945).

Early in 1945 the Americans launched a series of devastating raids on Japan from bases in the Mariana Islands. In a single raid on Tokyo, in March, 80 000 people were killed and a quarter of the city was destroyed. There has been debate about how effective the bombing was in hastening the Axis defeat. It certainly caused enormous civilian casualties and helped to destroy morale, but critics point out that heavy losses were also suffered by air-crews – over 158 000 Allied airmen were killed in Europe alone.

Others argue that this type of bombing, which caused the deaths of so many innocent civilians (as opposed to bombings which targeted industrial areas, railways and bridges), was morally wrong. Estimates of German civilian deaths from Allied bombing vary between 600 000 and a million; German raids on Britain killed over 60 000 civilians. In 2001 Swedish writer Sven Lindquist, in his book *A History of Bombing*, suggested that what he called 'the systematic attacks on German civilians in their homes' should be viewed as 'crimes under international humanitarian law for the protection of civilians'. However, Robin Niellands (2001) defended the bombing, pointing out that this is what could be expected to happen during a total war – in the context of what the Germans had done in eastern Europe and the Japanese in their occupied territories, this was the necessary 'price of peace'.

This was by no means the end of the controversy: in 2002 a German historian, Jorg Friedrich, in his book *Der Brand (The Fire)*, published an account of the horrific suffering inflicted by Allied bombers on German citizens; an English translation came out in 2007. He blamed specifically Churchill and Arthur 'Bomber' Harris, the head of Bomber Command. Friedrich clearly believed that these bombing raids were war crimes. Many British historians immediately condemned Friedrich's book. Corelli Barnett called it 'a historical travesty' designed to move the spotlight away from Nazi atrocities. To mark the appearance of the English edition, York Membery, writing in *History Today* (January 2007), sought the views of some leading British historians. Richard Overy suggested that while it was time for a proper assessment of the bombing strategy, Friedrich played down the contribution of the Americans and felt that the general tone of his book was unhelpful. Overy went on to argue that the bombing was neither immoral nor strategically useless. Adam Tooze, an expert on the Nazi economy, wrote: 'unfortunately, if you start a war with Britain as Germany deliberately did, then this is the kind of war you have to be prepared to fight'. Bruce Kent, a peace campaigner and former secretary of CND, pointed out that the bombing raids probably were war crimes, but that the Nazis themselves were the first



to begin bombing innocent civilians in Guernica (during the Spanish Civil War), Warsaw and Rotterdam.

As to the question of whether the bombing helped to shorten the war, it used to be thought that the campaign had little effect until the autumn of 1944. However, evidence from German archives shows that the RAF attack on the Ruhr in the spring of 1943 had an immediate effect on production. From July 1944, thanks to the increasing accuracy of the raids and the use of the new Mustang fighter escorts, which could outmanoeuvre all the German fighters, the effects of the bombings reached disaster proportions; synthetic oil production fell rapidly, causing acute fuel shortages. In October the vital Krupp armaments factories at Essen were put out of action permanently, and the war effort ground to a halt in 1945. By June 1945 the Japanese had been reduced to the same state.

In the end, therefore, after much wasted effort early on, *the Allied strategic air offensive was one of the decisive reasons for the Axis defeat*: besides strangling fuel and armaments production and destroying railway communications, it caused the diversion of many aircraft from the eastern front, thus helping the Russian advance into Germany.

## 6.6 THE AXIS POWERS DEFEATED: JULY 1943 TO AUGUST 1945

### (a) The fall of Italy

This was the first stage in the Axis collapse. British and American troops landed in Sicily from the sea and air (10 July 1943) and quickly captured the whole island. This caused *the downfall of Mussolini, who was dismissed by the king*. Allied troops crossed to Salerno, Reggio and Taranto on the mainland and captured Naples (October 1943).

Marshal Badoglio, Mussolini's successor, signed an armistice and brought Italy into the war on the Allied side. However, the Germans, determined to hold on to Italy, rushed troops through the Brenner Pass to occupy Rome and the north. The Allies landed a force at Anzio, 30 miles south of Rome (January 1944), but bitter fighting followed before Monte Cassino (May) and Rome (June) were captured. Milan in the north was not taken until April 1945. The campaign could have been finished much earlier if the Allies had been less cautious in the early stages, and if the Americans had not insisted on keeping many divisions back for the invasion of France. *Nevertheless, the elimination of Italy did contribute towards the final Allied victory*:

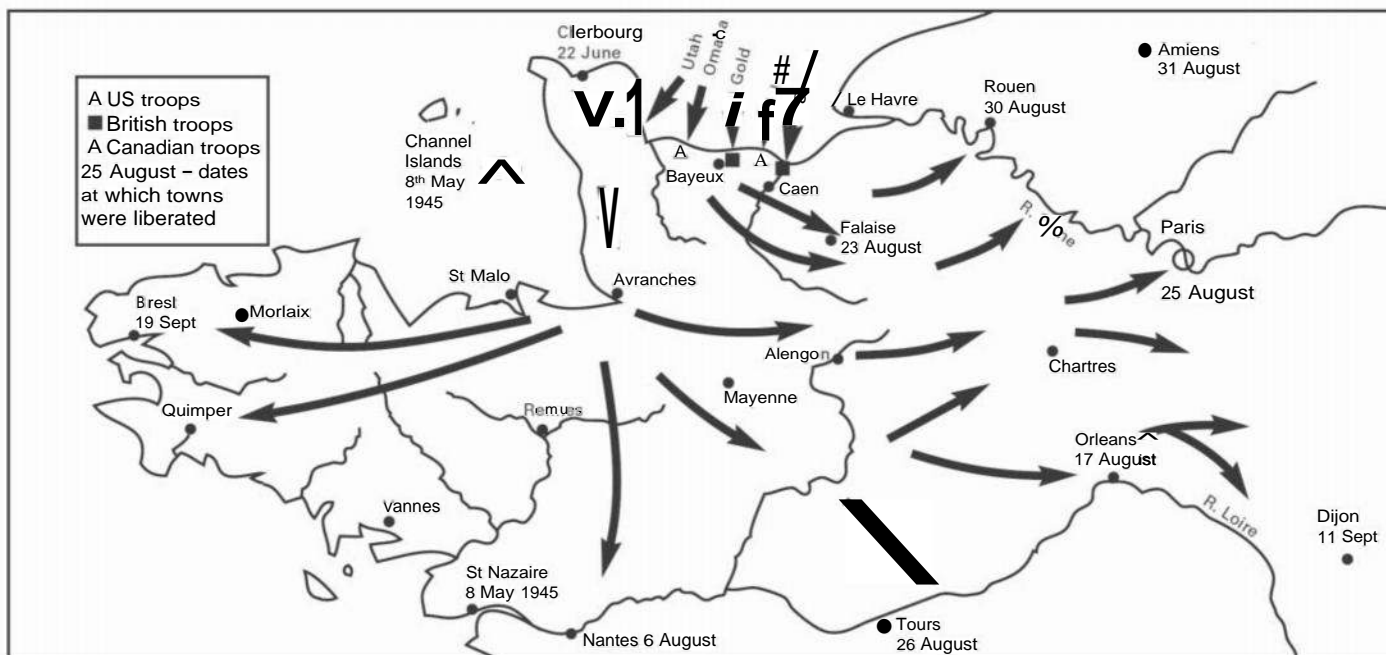
- Italy provided air bases for bombing the Germans in Central Europe and the Balkans;
- German troops were kept occupied when they were needed to resist the Russians.

### (b) Operation Overlord, 6 June 1944

Operation Overlord – the invasion of France (also known as the Second Front) – began on 'D-Day', 6 June 1944. It was felt that the time was ripe now that Italy had been eliminated, the U-boats brought under control and Allied air superiority achieved. The Russians had been urging the Allies to start this Second Front ever since 1941, to relieve pressure on them. The landings took place from sea and air on a 60-mile stretch of Normandy beaches (code-named Utah, Omaha, Gold, Juno and Sword) between Cherbourg and Le Havre (see Map 6.5). There was strong German resistance, but at the end of the first week 326 000 men with tanks and heavy lorries had landed safely (see Illus. 6.2).

*It was a remarkable operation*: it made use of prefabricated 'Mulberry' harbours, which were towed across from Britain and positioned close to the Normandy coast, mainly at





Map 6.5 The D-Day landings – 6 June 1944



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enemies tell us, we won't deal with you, our only aim is to destroy you, how can any German, whether he likes it or not, do anything but fight on with all his strength?"

Many leading Americans, including General Eisenhower, were against 'unconditional surrender' because they realized that it would prolong the war and cause further unnecessary loss of life. Several times in the weeks before D-Day, the American chiefs of staff put pressure on Roosevelt to change his mind, but he stubbornly refused, in case this was taken by the Axis powers as a sign of weakness. The policy was continued by Roosevelt until his death in April 1945, and by his successor, Harry S. Truman. No attempts were made to negotiate peace with either Germany or Japan until they had both surrendered. Thomas Fleming, writing in *History Today* (December 2001), calculated that in the period from D-Day until the end of the war in August 1945, close on two million people were killed. Many of these lives could perhaps have been saved if there had been the prospect of a negotiated peace to encourage the German resistance to overthrow Hitler. As it was, concludes Fleming, the policy of unconditional surrender was 'an ultimatum written in blood'.

#### (d) The assault on Germany

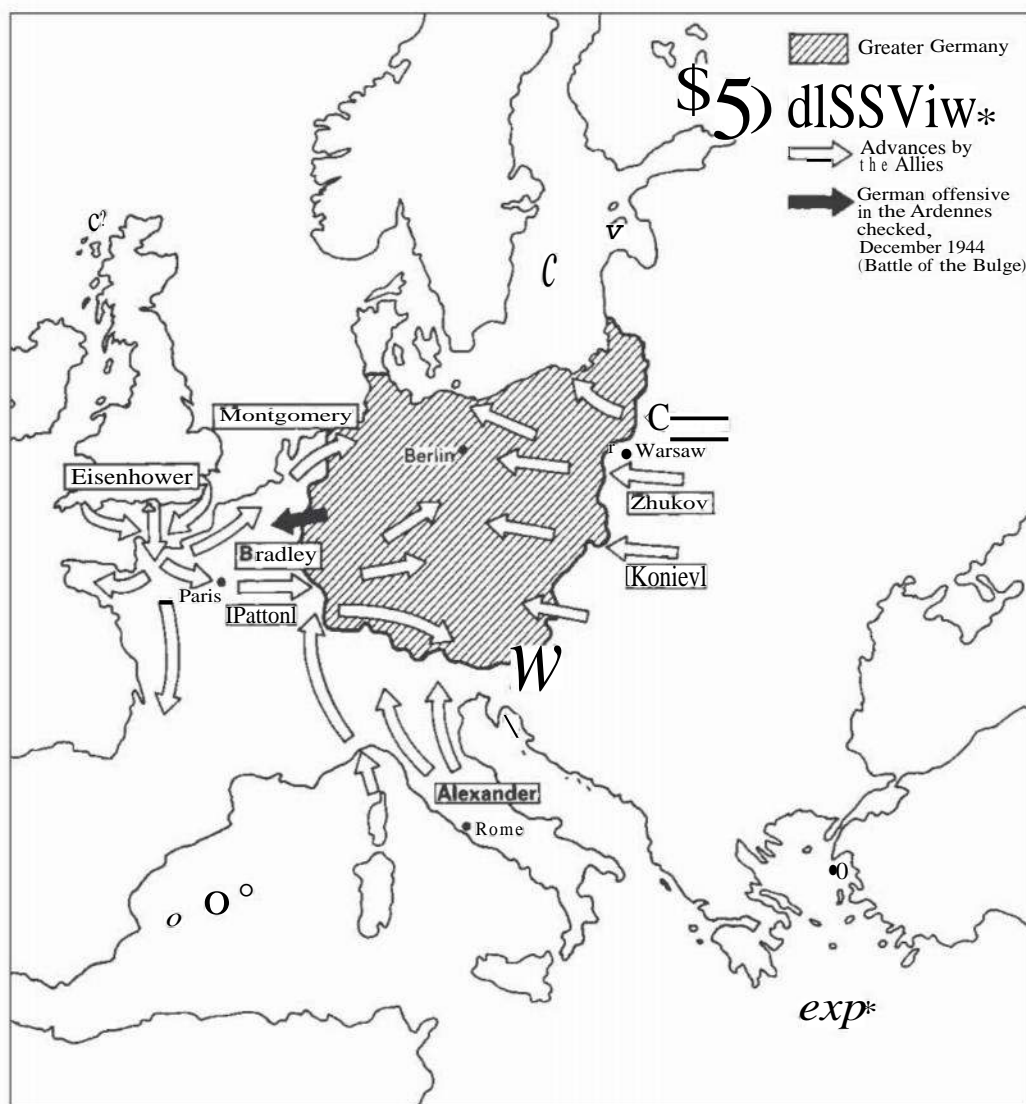
With the success of the Second Front, the Allies began to gather themselves together for the invasion of Germany itself. If they had expected the German armies to fall apart rapidly, they must have been bitterly disappointed. The war was prolonged by desperate German resistance and by further disagreements between the British and Americans. Montgomery wanted a rapid thrust to reach Berlin before the Russians, but Eisenhower favoured a cautious advance along a broad front. *The British failure at Arnhem in Holland* (September 1944) seemed to support Eisenhower's view, though in fact the Arnhem operation (an attempt by parachute troops to cross the Rhine and outflank the German Siegfried Line) might have worked if the troops had landed nearer the two Rhine bridges.

Consequently Eisenhower had his way and Allied troops were dispersed over a 600-mile front (see Map 6.6), *with unfortunate results*:

- Hitler was able to launch an offensive through the weakly defended Ardennes towards Antwerp;
- the Germans broke through the American lines and advanced 60 miles, causing a huge bulge in the front line (December 1944).

Determined British and American action stemmed the advance and pushed the Germans back to their original position. But *the Battle of the Bulge*, as it became known, was important because Hitler had risked everything on the attack and had lost 250 000 men and 600 tanks, which at this stage could not be replaced. Early in 1945, Germany was being invaded on both fronts, from east and west. The British still wanted to push ahead and take Berlin before the Russians, but supreme commander Eisenhower refused to be hurried, and Berlin fell to Stalin's forces in April. *Hitler committed suicide and Germany surrendered*.

The question has sometimes been asked: why did the Germans keep on fighting to the bitter end in 1945 long after it must have been obvious that the war was lost? Why was there not some sort of popular uprising to force the government to start peace negotiations? Adam Tooze believes that one of the reasons was that a large section of German society was completely committed to the war effort, and actually took or suggested many of the initiatives which made it possible for Germany to fight to the death. Ian Kershaw has addressed these questions in his recent book *The End: Hitler's Germany 1944–45* (2011). In his view, the main reason is obvious: it lies in the nature of the Nazi regime and in Hitler's belief that relations between states were a life and death struggle for survival and supremacy. Hitler's attitude was completely irrational: either Germany would be totally



Map 6.6 The defeat of Germany, 1944-5

Source: D. Heater, *Our World This Century* (Oxford, 1992), p. 90

victorious – the most powerful state in the world – or Germany would be destroyed. There could be no compromise. When it was all over, many Germans tried to blame the Allied policy of ‘unconditional surrender’ for their determination to fight on. However, Kershaw is adamant that the reason the Germans fought on has to be found inside Germany itself. Many Germans kept going because they were afraid of the enemy, especially the Russians, but also because they were afraid of Nazi officials. The Nazis hanged or shot people they described as defeatists, deserters and cowards, and generally bullied and terrorised the civilian population. Kershaw is not convinced by historians who claim that the Nazi regime was based overwhelmingly on popular consent. He concludes that terror was a vital element in sustaining the regime, just as it had been even in the years of peace before 1939.

### (e) The defeat of Japan

On 6 August 1945 the Americans dropped an atomic bomb on Hiroshima, killing perhaps as many as 84 000 people and leaving thousands more slowly dying of radiation poisoning. Three days later they dropped an atomic bomb on Nagasaki, which killed perhaps another 40 000; after this the Japanese government surrendered. The dropping of these bombs was one of the most controversial actions of the entire war. President Truman’s



justification was that he was saving American lives, since the war might otherwise drag on for another year. Many historians believe that the bombings were not necessary, since the Japanese had already put out peace feelers in July via Russia. One suggestion is that the real reason for the bombings was to end the fighting swiftly before the Russians (who had promised to enter the war against Japan) gained too much Japanese territory, which would entitle them to share the occupation of Japan. The use of the bombs was also a deliberate demonstration to the USSR of the USA's enormous power.

## 6.7 WHY DID THE AXIS POWERS LOSE THE WAR?

The reasons can be summarized briefly:

- shortage of raw materials;
- the Allies learning from their mistakes and failures;
- the Axis powers taking on too much;
- the overwhelming impact of the combined resources of the USA, the USSR and the British Empire;
- tactical mistakes by the Axis powers.

### (a) Shortage of raw materials

Both Italy and Japan had to import supplies, and even Germany was short of rubber, cotton, nickel and, after mid-1944, oil. These shortages need not have been fatal, *but success depended on a swift end to the war*, which certainly seemed likely at first, thanks to the speed and efficiency of the German *Blitzkrieg*. However, the survival of Britain in 1940 was important because it kept the western front alive until the USA entered the war.

### (b) The Allies soon learned from their early failures

By 1942 they knew how to check *Blitzkrieg* attacks and appreciated the importance of air support and aircraft carriers. Consequently they built up an air and naval superiority which won the battles of the Atlantic and the Pacific and slowly starved their enemies of supplies.

### (c) The Axis powers simply took on too much

Hitler did not seem to understand that war against Britain would involve her empire as well, and that his troops were bound to be spread too thinly – on the Russian front, on both sides of the Mediterranean, and on the western coastline of France. Japan made the same mistake: as military historian Liddell-Hart put it, 'they became stretched out far beyond their basic capacity for holding their gains. For Japan was a small island state with limited industrial power.' In Germany's case, Mussolini was partly to blame: his incompetence was a constant drain on Hitler's resources.

### (d) The combined resources of the USA, the USSR and the British Empire

These resources were so great that the longer the war lasted, the less chance the Axis had of victory. The Russians rapidly moved their industry east of the Ural Mountains and so

were able to continue production even though the Germans had occupied vast areas in the west. By 1945 they had four times as many tanks as the Germans and could put twice as many men in the field. When the American war machine reached peak production it could turn out over 70 000 tanks and 120 000 aircraft a year, which the Germans and Japanese could not match. Albert Speer, Hitler's armaments minister from 1942, gave the impression that he had worked some sort of miracle, enabling Germany's arms production to keep pace with that of the enemy. However, Adam Tooze has shown that Speer was more successful as a self-publicist than as an armaments minister. He claimed credit for successful policies that were actually started before he took over; he blamed everybody else when his policies failed, and continued right to the end to produce a stream of false statistics.

### **(e) Serious tactical mistakes**

- The Japanese failed to learn the lesson about the importance of aircraft carriers, and concentrated too much on producing battleships.
- Hitler should have defeated Britain before invading the USSR, which committed Germany to a war on two fronts. German plans for the invasion of Britain were vague and improvised, and they underestimated the strength of the enemy. Britain was saved for the Allies and was able to be used later as the base from which to launch the D-Day landings.
- Hitler failed to provide for a winter campaign in Russia and completely underestimated Russian resourcefulness and determination. The deeper the German army advanced into Soviet territory, the more its supply and communication lines became exposed to enemy counter-attacks. Hitler also became obsessed with the idea that the German armies must not retreat; this led to many disasters in Russia, especially Stalingrad, and left his troops badly exposed in Normandy (1944). This all helped to hasten defeat because it meant that scarce resources were being wasted.
- Hitler made a fatal mistake by declaring war on the USA after Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor.
- Another serious mistake was Hitler's decision to concentrate on producing V-rockets when he could have been developing jet aircraft; these might well have restored German air superiority and prevented the devastating bomb attacks of 1944 and 1945.

### **(f) Nazi racial policy**

Nazi treatment of Jews, gypsies and homosexuals in occupied territories of the USSR alienated many of the conquered peoples who, with decent treatment, could have been brought on board to fight the Stalinist regime. Soviet rule was especially unpopular in the Ukraine.

## **6.8 THE HOLOCAUST**

As the invading Allied armies moved into Germany and Poland, they began to make horrifying discoveries. At the end of July 1944 Soviet forces approaching Warsaw came upon the extermination camp at Majdanek near Lublin. They found hundreds of unburied corpses and seven gas chambers. Photographs taken at Majdanek were the first to reveal to the rest of the world the unspeakable horrors of these camps. It later emerged that over 1.5 million people had been murdered at Majdanek; the majority of them were Jews, but they also

included Soviet prisoners of war, as well as Poles who had opposed the German occupation. This was only one of at least 20 camps set up by the Germans to carry out what they called the 'Final Solution' (*Endlösung*) of the 'Jewish problem'. Between December 1941, when the first Jews were killed at Chelmno in Poland, and May 1945 when the Germans surrendered, some 5.7 million Jews were murdered, along with hundreds of thousands of non-Jews – gypsies, socialists, communists, homosexuals and the mentally handicapped.

How could such a terrible atrocity have been allowed to happen? Was it the natural culmination of a long history of anti-Semitism in Germany? Or should the blame be placed fairly and squarely on Hitler and the Nazis? Had Hitler been planning the extermination of the Jews ever since he came to power, or was it forced on him by the circumstances of the war? These are some of the questions that historians have wrestled with as they try to explain how such a monstrous crime against humanity could have taken place.

*Earlier interpretations of the Holocaust can be divided into two main groups.*

- *Intentionalists* – historians who believed that responsibility for the Holocaust rests on Hitler, who had hoped and planned to exterminate the Jews ever since he came to power.
- *Functionalists* – historians who believed that the 'Final Solution' was in a sense forced on Hitler by the circumstances of the war.
- There is also a small group of misguided writers with anti-Semitic sympathies, who try to play down the significance of the Holocaust. They have variously argued that the numbers of dead have been greatly exaggerated; that Hitler himself was unaware of what was happening; and that other Nazis, such as Himmler, Heydrich and Goering, took the initiative; a few have even denied that the Holocaust ever took place at all. All these writers have now been largely discredited.

### **(a) The intentionalists**

They argue that Hitler was personally responsible for the Holocaust. Right from his early days in Vienna he had been venomously anti-Semitic; in his book *Mein Kampf* (*My Struggle*) he blamed the Jews for Germany's defeat in the First World War and for all her problems since. In his speech to the Reichstag in January 1939 Hitler declared: 'if international finance Jewry inside and outside Europe should succeed in plunging the nations once more into a world war, the result will be, not the bolshevization of the earth, and thereby the victory of Jewry, but the annihilation of the Jewish race in Europe'. The intentionalists stress the continuity between his ideas in the early 1920s and the actual policies that were carried out in the 1940s. As Karl Dietrich Bracher puts it, although Hitler may not have had a master plan, he certainly knew what he wanted, and it included the annihilation of the Jews; the Final Solution 'was merely a matter of time and opportunity'. Critics of this theory question why it took until the end of 1941 – almost nine years after Hitler came to power – before the Nazis began to murder Jews. Why did Hitler content himself with anti-Jewish legislation if he was so determined to exterminate them? In fact, following *Kristallnacht* – an attack on Jewish property and synagogues throughout Germany in November 1938 – Hitler ordered restraint and a return to non-violence.

### **(b) The functionalists**

They believe that it was the Second World War which aggravated the 'Jewish problem'. About three million Jews lived in Poland; when the Germans took over the western part of



Poland in the autumn of 1939, and occupied the rest of Poland in June 1941, these unfortunate people fell under Nazi control. The invasion of the USSR in June 1941 brought a further dimension to the 'Jewish problem', since there were several million Jews living in the occupied republics of the western USSR – Belorussia and Ukraine. The functionalists argue that it was sheer pressure of numbers that led the Nazi and SS leaders in Poland to press for the mass murder of Jews. Hitler's views were well known throughout Nazi circles; he simply responded to the demands of the local Nazi leaders in Poland. Hans Mommsen, one of the leading functionalists, believes that Hitler was 'a weak dictator' – in other words, more often than not, he followed the promptings of others rather than taking initiatives himself (see Section 14.6(d)) for more about the 'weak dictator' theory). As late as 2001 Mommsen was still suggesting that there was no clear evidence of any genocidal bent before 1939.

According to Ian Kershaw in his biography of Hitler (published in 2000), 'Hitler's personalized form of rule invited radical initiatives from below and offered such initiatives backing, so long as they were in line with his broadly defined goals.' The way to advancement in Hitler's Third Reich was to anticipate what the Führer wanted, and then 'without waiting for directives, take initiatives to promote what were presumed to be Hitler's aims and wishes'. The phrase used to describe this process was 'working towards the Führer'. The intentionalists are not impressed with this interpretation because they feel it absolves Hitler from personal responsibility for the atrocities committed during the war. However, this conclusion does not necessarily follow: many of these initiatives would not even have been proposed if his subordinates had not been well aware of the 'Führer's will'.

Some historians feel that the intentionalist v. functionalist debate is now somewhat dated and that both approaches can be misleading. For example, Allan Bullock in *Hitler and Stalin* (1991), pointed out that the most obvious interpretation of the genocide was a combination of both approaches. Richard Overy in *The Dictators* (2004) claims that

both approaches to the hunt for genocide divert attention from the central reality for all Jews after 1933: whether or not the later genocide was explicit or merely implicit in the anti-Jewish policies of the 1930s. ... the vengeful and violent xenophobia promoted by the regime had the Jews as its primary object throughout the whole life of the dictatorship.

*What were Hitler's motives? Why was he so obsessively anti-Jewish?* It is clear from a secret memorandum which Hitler wrote in 1936, however crazy it may appear today, that he genuinely perceived the Jews as a threat to the German nation. He believed that the world, led by Germany, was on the verge of a historic racial and political struggle against the forces of communism, which he saw as a Jewish phenomenon. If Germany failed, the German *Volk* (people) would be destroyed and the world would enter a new Dark Age. It was a question of German national survival in the face of a worldwide Jewish conspiracy. In the words of Richard Overy:

The treatment of the Jews was intelligible only in the distorted mirror of German national anxieties and national aspirations. The system deliberately set out to create the idea that Germany's survival was contingent entirely on the exclusion or, if necessary, the annihilation of the Jew.

It was the convergence of Hitler's uncompromising anti-Jewish prejudice and his self-justification, together with the opportunity for action, which culminated in the terrible 'apocalyptic battle between "Aryan" and "Jew"'.



### (c) The 'Final Solution' takes shape

Alan Bullock argued that the best way to explain how the Holocaust came about is to combine elements from both intentionalists and functionalists. From the early 1920s Hitler had committed himself and the Nazi party to destroying the power of the Jews and driving them out of Germany, but exactly how this was to be done was left vague. 'It is very likely', writes Bullock, 'that among the fantasies in which he indulged privately ... was the evil dream of a final settlement in which every man, woman and child of Jewish race would be butchered. ... But how, when, even whether, the dream could ever be realized remained uncertain.'

It is important to remember that Hitler was a clever politician who paid a lot of attention to public opinion. During the early years of his Chancellorship, he was well aware that the so-called 'Jewish question' was not a main concern of most German people. Consequently he would go no further than the Nuremberg Laws (1935) (see Section 14.4(b), Point 11), and even they were introduced to satisfy the Nazi hardliners. Hitler allowed *Kristallnacht* to go ahead in November 1938 for the same reason, and to test popular feeling. When public opinion reacted unfavourably, he called an end to violence and concentrated on excluding Jews as far as possible from German life. They were encouraged to emigrate and their property and assets were seized. Before the outbreak of war, well over half a million Jews had left the country; plans were being discussed to forcibly remove as many Jews as possible to Madagascar.

It was the outbreak of war, and in particular the invasion of Russia (June 1941), that radically changed the situation. According to Richard Overy, this was seen not as an accidental or unplanned opportunity for a more vigorous anti-Jewish policy, but as 'an extension of an anti-Semitic Cold War that Germany had been engaged in since at least her defeat in 1918'. The occupation of the whole of Poland and large areas of the USSR meant that many more Jews came under German control, but at the same time the conditions of war meant that it was almost impossible for them to emigrate. In Poland, around two and a half million Jews were forcibly moved from their homes and herded into overcrowded ghettos in cities such as Warsaw, Lublin and Łódź. In 1939, for example, 375 000 Jews lived in Warsaw; after they captured the city, the Germans built a wall round the Jewish districts. Later, Jews from other parts of Poland were moved into Warsaw, until by July 1941, there were about 445 000 Jews crammed into this small ghetto. Nazi officials complained about the problems of coping with such large numbers of Jews – conditions in the ghettos were dreadful, food was deliberately kept in short supply and there was the danger of epidemics. Eventually 78 000 died from disease and starvation.

In December 1941, soon after Germany had declared war on the USA, Hitler stated publicly that his prophecy of January 1939, about the annihilation of Europe's Jews, would soon be fulfilled. The following day Goebbels wrote in his diary: 'The World War is here, the extermination of the Jews must be the necessary consequence.' There is no firm evidence as to exactly when the decision was taken to begin the implementation of the 'Final Solution' – to kill the Jews – but it was arguably in the autumn of 1941.

*The decision was the result of a combination of various developments and circumstances:*

- Hitler's self-confidence was at a new high point after all the German victories, especially the early successes of Operation Barbarossa.
- Hitler had already made it clear that the war in the east was something new. As Alan Bullock puts it: it was 'a racist-imperialist adventure ... an ideological war of destruction, in which all the conventional rules of war, occupation and so on, were to be disregarded, political commissars shot out of hand and the civilian population made subject to summary execution and collective reprisals'. It was only a short

step further to carry out the extermination of the Jews. In the words of Richard Overy: 'This was consistent with the long history of his anti-Semitism, which was always expressed in the idiom of war to the death.'

- It would now be possible to carry out the Final Solution in Poland and the USSR, *outside* Germany. Hitler would have no need to worry about German public opinion; there could be strict censorship of all news reporting in the occupied territories.

The Nazis wasted no time; as their forces advanced deeper into the USSR, communists and Jews were rounded up for slaughter both by SS units and by the regular army. For example, in two days at the end of September 1941, some 34 000 Jews were murdered in a ravine at Babi Yar, on the outskirts of Kiev in Ukraine. At Odessa in the Crimea at least 75 000 Jews were killed. Any non-Jew who tried to hide or protect Jews in any way was unceremoniously shot along with the Jews and communists.

In January 1942, soon after the first Jews had been sent to the gas chambers at Chelmno in Poland, a conference was held at Wannsee (Berlin) to discuss the logistics of how to remove up to 11 million Jews from their homes in all parts of Europe and transport them into the occupied territories. At first the general idea seemed to be to kill off the Jews by forced labour and starvation, but this soon changed to a policy of systematically destroying them before the war ended. Hitler did not attend the Wannsee Conference; he kept very much in the background as regards the Final Solution. No order for its implementation signed by Hitler was ever found. This has been taken by a few historians as evidence that Hitler ought not to be blamed for the Holocaust. But this position is difficult to sustain. Ian Kershaw, after an exhaustive consideration of the evidence, comes to this conclusion:

There can be no doubt about it: Hitler's role had been decisive and indispensable in the road to the 'Final Solution'. ... Without Hitler and the unique regime he headed, the creation of a programme to bring about the physical extermination of the Jews would have been unthinkable.

#### **(d) Genocide**

As the extermination programme gained momentum, the Jews from eastern Europe were taken to Belzec, Sobibor, Treblinka and Majdanek in eastern Poland; most of those from western Europe went to Auschwitz-Birkenau in south-west Poland (see Map 6.7). Between July and September 1942, some 300 000 Jews were transported from the Warsaw ghetto to the Treblinka extermination camp. By the end of 1942 over 4 million Jews had already been put to death. Even though the fortunes of war began to turn against the Germans during 1943, Hitler insisted that the programme should continue; and continue it did, long after it was perfectly clear to everybody that the war would be lost. In April 1943 the remaining Jews of the Warsaw ghetto rose in revolt; the rising was brutally crushed and most of the Jews were killed. Only about 10 000 were still alive when Warsaw was liberated in January 1945. In July 1944, after German forces had occupied Hungary, about 400 000 Hungarian Jews were taken to Auschwitz. As Russian forces advanced through Poland, the SS organized forced marches from the death camps into Germany; most of the prisoners either died on the way, or were shot when they arrived in Germany. On 6 August 1944, with the Russians only about a hundred miles away, the Germans moved 70 000 Jews from the Lodz ghetto, south-west of Warsaw, and took them to Auschwitz, where half of them were immediately sent to the gas chambers.





Alan Bullock provided this chilling description of what happened when each new batch of Jews arrived at one of the death camps:

They were put through the same ghastly routine. White-coated doctors – with a gesture of the hand – selected those fit enough to be *worked* to death. The rest were required to give up all their clothing and possessions and then in a terrified column of naked men and women, carrying their children or holding their hands and trying to comfort them, were herded into the gas-chambers. When the screaming died down and the doors were opened, they were still standing upright, so tightly packed that they could not fall. But where there had been human beings, there were now corpses, which were removed to the ovens for burning. This was the daily spectacle which Hitler took good care never to see and which haunts the imagination of anyone who has studied the evidence.

What sort of people could carry out such crimes against humanity? Historian Daniel Goldhagen, in his book *Hitler's Willing Executioners*, published in 1997, suggests that the German people were uniquely anti-Semitic and were collectively responsible for the many atrocities committed during the Third Reich. These included not just the 'Final Solution' of the 'Jewish problem', but also the euthanasia programme in which some 70 000 people deemed to be mentally handicapped or mentally ill were killed, the cruel treatment of the Polish people during the occupation, and the appalling way in which Russian prisoners of war and the civilian populations were treated. Michael Burleigh (2010) goes along with Goldhagen, suggesting that there was a sort of inherent anti-Semitism in the German people which the Nazis had only to tap into; there was no need to stir it up.

While Goldhagen's theory perhaps goes too far, there is no doubt that large numbers of ordinary Germans were willing to go along with Hitler and the other leading Nazis. Perhaps they were convinced by the arguments of men like Himmler, who told a group of SS commanders: 'We had the moral right, we had the duty to destroy this people which wanted to destroy us.' The SS, originally Hitler's bodyguard regiments, along with the security police, camp commandants and guards, and local *gauleiters* (governors), were all deeply implicated, and so was much of the Wehrmacht (the German army), which became increasingly ruthless and barbaric as the war in the east progressed. Leaders of big business and factory owners were willing to take advantage of the cheap labour provided by the camp inmates; others were grateful to get their hands on confiscated Jewish property and other assets; medical experts were prepared to use Jews in experiments which caused their deaths. At all levels of German society there were people who happily took the chance to profit from the fate of the helpless Jews.

But such behaviour was not confined to the Germans: many Polish and Soviet citizens willingly collaborated in the genocide. Only three days after the invasion of the USSR began, 1500 Jews were savagely murdered in Lithuania by local militias, and soon thousands more had been killed by non-Germans in Belorussia and Ukraine. Ion Antonescu, the ruler of Romania from 1941 until 1944, was not bullied into deporting Romanian Jews: Romania was never occupied by Germans, and the initiative was taken by the Romanians themselves. However, without Hitler and the Nazis to provide the authority, the legitimacy, the backing and the drive, none of this would have been possible. Romania, though not actually occupied, was firmly within Germany's orbit.

On the other hand it must be remembered that many Germans courageously risked their lives to help Jews, giving them shelter and organizing escape routes. But it was a very dangerous business – such people themselves often ended up in concentration camps.





These people were the victims of the Holocaust.

Similarly in Poland, there were many people who were willing to help Jewish fugitives. In a recent book, *The Polish Underground and the Jews, 1939-1945*, by Janina Jurek-Olszewska, she writes that perhaps 100,000 Poles helped Jews in various ways. This elite group, known as the *Zegota*, was directly or indirectly involved in saving Jews by various means. This elite group, known as the *Zegota*, was directly or indirectly involved in saving Jews by various means. This elite group, known as the *Zegota*, was directly or indirectly involved in saving Jews by various means.

## 6.9 WHAT WERE THE EFFECTS OF THE WAR?

The war was a time of great destruction.

There was a great destruction of lives, homes, industries and communications in the war.

Almost 40 million people were killed, well over half of them were civilians. 6 million Jews were killed, 4 million Poles, 2 million Chinese and 2 million Japanese. Britain got the most out of the war.

A further 21 million people had been captured from their homes. Some had been taken to Germany to work as slaves, but around seven million of these were killed in Germany; some had been put into concentration camps, and some had been forced to flee from the invading British. The British had a problem of how to repatriate the British.

Large parts of Germany, especially the industrial regions, had been completely destroyed, so that 25 million people had lost their homes. The British had a problem of how to repatriate the British.

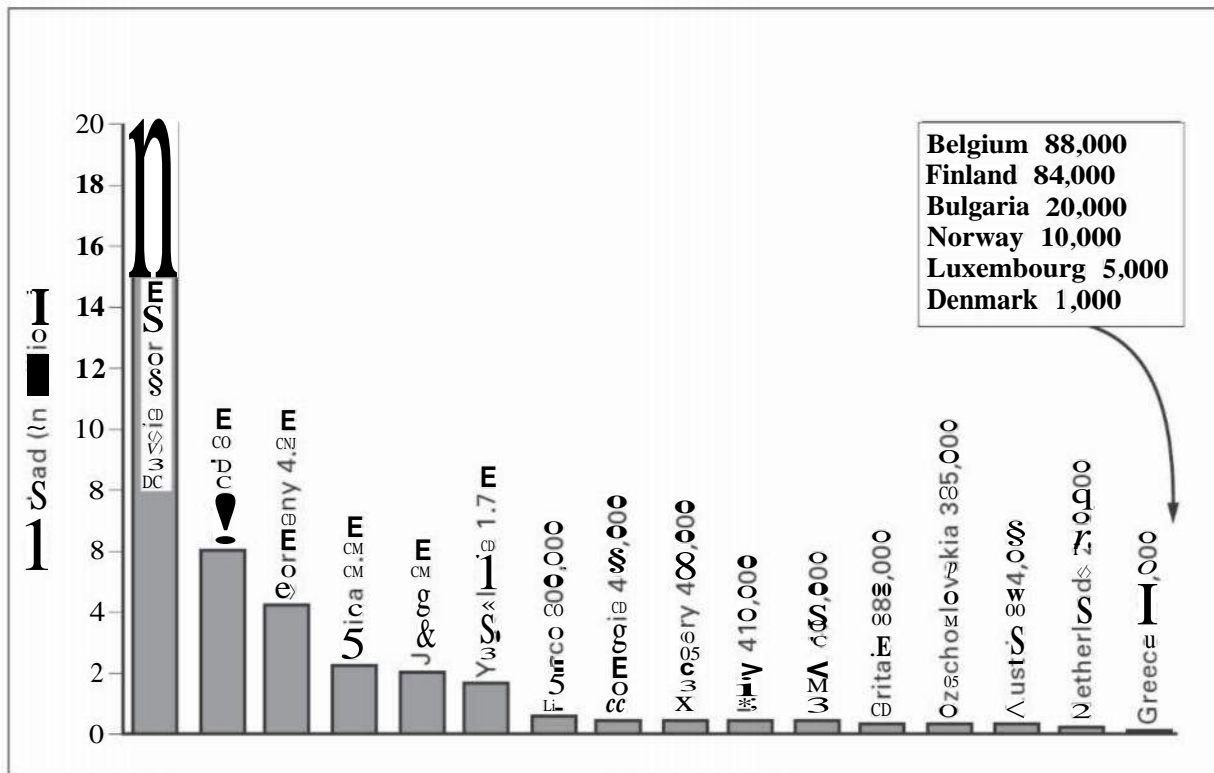


Figure 6.1 Second World War dead

Source: based on statistics in Jack B. Watson, *Success in World History since 1945* (John Murray, 1989), p. 3

wealth had been lost. In Italy, where damage was very serious in the south, the figure was over 30 per cent. Japan suffered heavy damage and a high death toll from bombings.

Though the cost was high, it did mean that the world had been rid of Nazism, which had been responsible for terrible atrocities. The most notorious was **the Holocaust** – *the deliberate murder in extermination camps of over five million Jews and hundreds of thousands of non-Jews*, mainly in Poland and Russia (see Section 6.8).

## (b) There was no all-inclusive peace settlement

This was different from the end of the First World War, when an all-inclusive settlement was negotiated at Versailles. This was mainly because the distrust which had re-emerged between the USSR and the west in the final months of the war made agreement on many points impossible.

*However, a number of separate treaties were signed:*

- *Italy* lost her African colonies and gave up her claims to Albania and Abyssinia (Ethiopia).
- *The USSR* took the eastern section of Czechoslovakia, the Petsamo district and the area round Lake Ladoga from Finland, and held on to Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia, which they had occupied in 1939.
- *Romania* recovered northern Transylvania, which the Hungarians had occupied during the war.
- *Trieste*, claimed by both Italy and Yugoslavia, was declared a free territory protected by the United Nations Organization.
- Later, at San Francisco (1951), *Japan* agreed to surrender all territory acquired during the previous 90 years, which included a complete withdrawal from China.

However, *the Russians refused to agree to any settlement over Germany and Austria*, except that they should be occupied by Allied troops and that East Prussia should be divided between Russia and Poland.

### **(c) The war stimulated important social changes**

In addition to the population movements during the war, once hostilities were over, many millions of people were forced to move from their homes. The worst cases were probably in the areas taken from Germany by Russia and Poland, and in the German-speaking areas in Hungary, Romania and Czechoslovakia. About ten million Germans were forced to leave and make their way to West Germany so that no future German government would be able to claim those territories. In some countries, especially the USSR and Germany, extensive urban redevelopment took place as ruined cities had to be rebuilt. In Britain the war stimulated, among other things, the Beveridge Report (1942), a plan for introducing a Welfare State.

### **(d) The war caused the production of nuclear weapons**

The first ever use of these weapons, on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, demonstrated their horrifying powers of destruction. The world was left under the threat of a nuclear war that might well have destroyed the entire planet. Some people argue that this acted as a deterrent, making both sides in the Cold War so frightened of the consequences that they were deterred or discouraged from fighting each other.

### **(e) Europe's domination of the rest of the world ended**

The four western European states which had played a leading role in world affairs for most of the first half of the twentieth century were now much weaker than before. Germany was devastated and divided, France and Italy were on the verge of bankruptcy; although Britain seemed strong and victorious, with her empire intact, the cost of the war had been ruinous. The USA had helped to keep Britain going during the war by sending supplies, but these had to be paid for later. As soon as the war was over, the new US president, Truman, abruptly stopped all further help, leaving Britain in a sorry state: she had overseas debts of over £3000 million, many of her foreign investments had been sold off, and her ability to export goods had been much reduced. She was forced to ask for another loan from the USA, which was given at a high rate of interest; the country was therefore closely and uncomfortably dependent on the USA.

### **(f) Emergence of the superpowers**

The USA and the USSR emerged as the two most powerful nations in the world, and they were no longer as isolated as they had been before the war. The USA had suffered relatively little from the war and had enjoyed great prosperity from supplying the other Allies with war materials and food. The Americans had the world's largest navy and air force and they controlled the atomic bomb. The USSR, though severely weakened, still had the largest army in the world. Both countries were highly suspicious of each other's intentions now that the common enemies, Germany and Japan, had been defeated. The rivalry of these two superpowers in the Cold War was the most important feature of international relations for almost half a century after 1945, and was a constant threat to world peace (see Chapter 7).



## (g) Decolonization

The war encouraged the movement towards decolonization. The defeats inflicted on Britain, Holland and France by Japan, and the Japanese occupation of their territories – Malaya, Singapore and Burma (British), French Indo-China and the Dutch East Indies – destroyed the tradition of European superiority and invincibility. It could hardly be expected that, having fought to get rid of the Japanese, the Asian peoples would willingly return to European rule. Gradually they achieved full independence, though not without a struggle in many cases. This in turn intensified demands for independence among the peoples of Africa and the Middle East, and in the 1960s the result was a large array of new states (see Chapters 24–5). The leaders of many of these newly emerging nations met in conference at Algiers in 1973 and made it clear that they regarded themselves as *a Third World*. By this they meant that *they wished to remain neutral or non-aligned* in the struggle between the other two worlds – communism and capitalism. Usually poor and under-developed industrially, the new nations were often intensely suspicious of the motives of both communism and capitalism, and they resented their own economic dependence on the world's wealthy powers.

## (h) The United Nations Organization (UNO)

This emerged as the successor to the League of Nations. Its main aim was to try to maintain world peace, and on the whole it has been more successful than its unfortunate predecessor (see Chapters 3 and 9).

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## QUESTIONS

- 1 Explain why Germany was successful in the Second World War up to the end of 1941, but suffered ultimate defeat in 1945.
  - 2 'Retreats and defeats marked the first two years of the war for Britain.' How far would you agree with this opinion?
  - 3 Explain why you agree or disagree with the view that the Allied victory in the Second World War was secured mainly because of the contribution of the USSR.
- IV** There is a document question on Hitler's thoughts about the future on the website.