

Global Impact of World War II

The end of World War II in 1945 led to profound changes not just in Europe but the world as a whole. Above all, it forever ended colonialism and imperialism that had been the mainstay of early 20th-century politics.

This article will further explain the global impact of World War II within the context of the Civil Services Examination.

A shift in Political and Economic Balance

The shift in the economic balance of power at the end of the Second World War in favour of the United States was matched by a corresponding shift in the political balance. In 1939 Europe was still thought to be the leading forces in world affairs, and Hitler had ambitions to turn Germany into a global super-power. By 1945 the United States and the Soviet Union, both of which had stood aside from Europe's quarrels in the inter-war years, became major players in the world order as a result of their efforts to defeat the Axis powers.

Dynamics of World War II

When World War II broke out in 1939, it was not a global conflict but consisted of a number of different localised conflicts: A German-Polish War; a war between Germany and the French and British Empires; and a war between Japan and China. Over the next two years, various other conflicts merged. In 1940 the Balkans were drawn in. When Germany attacked the Soviet Union in June 1941 and Japan attacked the US in December, the war became genuinely global in extent linked by the fact that the Axis faced a common enemy in the US and Britain, stretching across three oceans.

The three Axis states, Germany, Italy and Japan, had no formal military alliances. They collaborated poorly. Italy and Japan did not inform Germany of their attacks on Greece and Hawaii; Germany did not reveal the assault on the Soviet Union. The Allies too had no binding military alliance either, although Britain and the USSR signed a mutual cooperation pact in May 1942. But the three major Allies were bound by an informal commitment to the unconditional surrender of the Axis powers, announced at the Casablanca Conference in January 1943 by President Roosevelt without prior consultation with his allies.

They were also bound by the terms of the Atlantic Charter first signed by Churchill and Roosevelt in August 1941 but signed subsequently by other states joining the Allied side.

What was the Atlantic Charter?

The Atlantic Charter was a commitment to creating a free world after the end of the war on the basis of the self-determination of peoples. It was similar to the vision of erstwhile United States president Woodrow Wilson, but after the failure of the First World War American leaders were committed to making the new post-war order work. Roosevelt referred to the Allied powers as the United Nations, a term first employed in January 1942. By the end of the war, 45 states, including the Soviet Union, had subscribed to the ideals of democratic freedom.

In reality, agreements were made between the three major Allies at a series of conferences - Tehran in November 1943, Yalta in February 1945, Potsdam in July of that year - which made a mockery of self-determination. Furthermore, the Soviet Union was determined to safeguard its interests in Eastern Europe at the expense of popular nationalism, particularly in Poland.

Rise of a New World Order

Regardless of the covert implications of the Atlantic Charter, the commitment to the principle of national independence had an impact on the empires that Britain and France had gone to war in 1939 to defend. During the war, both the British and the French empires faced serious challenges. Nationalism, particularly in India, became a potent force in the face of British and French defeats during the initial years of the conflict.

Japan and Germany encouraged independence movements or set up puppet regimes. Both the United States and the USSR were hostile to colonialism and keen to encourage decolonisation. The moral authority of the remaining imperial states was blunted by the defeat of Italian, Germany and Japanese imperialism and the western empires were gradually relinquished in the next 30 years.

The defeat of the Axis exposed the transformation of the world order. The Soviet Union dominated Eastern Europe. The United States was now both willing and able to take the lead in the Western world. In April 1945 a conference was convened to formally establish a United Nations organization. Disagreements between the US and the USSR were resolved sufficiently for the new structure to be set up. The US, the Soviet Union, China, Britain and France became members of the United Nations Security Council.

By the time the conference ended in June, Germany was federated. The Prospect now lay open for the establishment of a new world order based on the principles of peaceful co-operation and national independence.

