

World War Two: Notes for UPSC World History

World War Two, also known as World War II, was a devastating global conflict that began in 1939 and ended in 1945. It involved 100 million people from over 30 countries.

World War II was the deadliest conflict in human history, marked by 70 to 85 million fatalities. Tens of millions of people died due to genocides (including the Holocaust), premeditated death from starvation, massacres, and disease. To this date, it remains the deadliest conflict in human history.

Origin of World War II

The causes of World War II are many and varied but in the end, it all boils down to the aggressive and expansionist policies of Adolf Hitler and his Nazi Party. Plus, the harsh Treaty of Versailles years before only laid the foundation of future conflicts.

Other events such as the Spanish Civil War and the Japanese invasion of China only served to highlight the ineffectiveness of the League of Nations that had been created following the signing of the Treaty of Versailles. Both the conflicts saw the involvement of these future Axis powers and it showed that they could carry out their imperialistic whims with no consequences to be faced from other nations. As a result, the conflict became inevitable.

Beginning of World War II

World War II began on September 3, 1939, two days after Hitler's armies invaded Poland. Poland's sovereignty was guaranteed by Britain and France. When the protests by the two fell on Hitler's deaf ears, they declared war. The war would be fought between the Axis Powers consisting of Germany, Italy and Japan and the Allies - Britain, France, the Commonwealth countries, the United States and the Soviet Union.

Initially, Hitler had signed a nonaggression pact with the Soviet Union. The Soviet Union launched an invasion of Poland from the east. It also took over Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and launched campaigns against Finland. Nazi Germany followed up its invasion of Poland with the conquest of Denmark, Norway, and Belgium in the Spring of 1940. The invasion of France later lasted from 10 May 1940 - 25 June 1940. It was the pinnacle of the German 'Blitzkrieg' campaign. Only Britain stood against the full might of Germany. Italy joined the war in June 1940.

To invade Britain, it was necessary to achieve total air superiority. Thus the German air force, the Luftwaffe, attacked southeast England and London in daylight raids. In August and September, the battle of Britain was fought over its skies in which the numerically inferior British Royal air force defeated the German air force. It shelved any future plans of the Germans to

invade Britain, but it did not stop bombing campaigns that saw the devastation of many British cities and towns in the following months.

Expansion of the Conflict

A new battlefield opened in September 1940 when Italian troops invaded Egypt. They clashed with the British troops stationed there. By February 1941, the British managed to defeat the Italian army and even managed to push into Italian held-Libya. By February 1941, the Italians had been defeated, but German troops, commanded by Field-Marshal Rommel, then arrived and managed to push back British troops back to the Egyptian border.

Buoyed by his success in Europe, Hitler declared war on his former ally, the Soviet Union in June 1941 invading the country with the help of Finland, Hungary and Romania. By the end of 1941, however, Allied fortunes were about to change as the United States joined the war, following the unprovoked attack on its navy at Pearl harbour in Hawaii, by the Japanese air force.

The attack on the Pearl harbour marked the start of the war in the Pacific and by May 1942, Japan had taken control of Southeast Asia including Burma, Singapore, the Philippines and New Guinea, from where they threatened the coast of Australia. The Japanese also took control of many islands in the Pacific, but by August 1942, the US Navy had defeated the Japanese at the battles of the Coral Sea, Midway Island and Guadalcanal and stopped them from invading any more territory. More victory followed in which several pacific islands held by the Japanese fell. This gave them bases from which they could bomb Japan.

The Tide turns against the Axis

In Africa, British troops led by Field-Marshal Montgomery won a decisive battle at El Alamein in October and November 1942. Montgomery quickly advanced across Libya to meet allied forces in Morocco and Algeria. The Axis armies trapped between the Allies were forced to surrender in May 1943.

German troops fighting in Russia fared no better. Although they had been within sight of Moscow by November 1941, the Russians had begun to fight back and they had defeated the Germans at the Battle of Stalingrad. It took until August 1944 to expel the last German troops from the Soviet Union, by which time they were needed in the west to defend Germany itself from an Allied invasion.

The Allied invasion of Europe started on June 6, 1944, and by July 2 one million troops had landed in Normandy, France and started to advance towards Germany via Belgium and via the Netherlands. Reinforced by troops coming from the Soviet Union, launched a last-ditch counter-attack to reverse their fortunes in December 1944. But by January 1945, the offensive had failed. In March 1945 Allied troops had crossed the Rhine and reached the Ruhr valley, the heartland of Germany's manufacturing production. At the same time, the Soviet army pushed in from the East

Realizing that the war was lost, Hitler committed suicide in his bunker on April 30, 1945. On May 2nd Soviet Troops captured Berlin. On May 7th, 1945 World War 2 came to an end with the surrender of Nazi Germany at Reims in France. This became official when the surrender documents were signed on May 9th in Berlin.

End of World War II and aftermath

Although the war ended in Europe the fighting in Asia still raged on. In September 1944, US troops began to recapture the Philippines and the British troops had begun a push into Burman following the battle of Imphal and Kohima. An Allied invasion of Japan was planned for late 1945, but dogged Japanese resistance led to Allied commanders looking for alternatives. The alternative came in the form of an atomic bomb dropped on Hiroshima on August 6, 1945. It was followed by the bombing of August 9th, 1945 on Nagasaki. The casualties that resulted from these two events prompted the Japanese government to surrender on August 14. The war was over.

The wide-scale destruction had caused massive military and civilian casualties on both sides, but none suffered more than the Jewish population of Europe. Out of the 9 million Jews that lived in Europe in 1939, 6 million would perish in concentration camps set up by the Nazis through Germany and occupied Poland.

After the war, Allied troops occupied the Western half of Europe while the Soviets occupied eastern Germany. The fragile alliance between the two would evolve into the Cold war.