

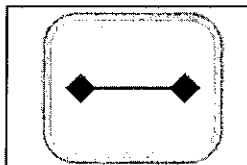
22.5 World War II

How did the outcome of World War II change the global balance of power?

Explore

Hitler Advances Through Europe

How did the European war progress in its early months?



The Second World War: Timeline

As you read pages 3–6, use the top of this Timeline to track major events in the European theater and the bottom to track major events in the Pacific theater.

Just days before the Nazi invasion of Poland, Germany and the Soviet Union signed the **Nazi-Soviet Nonaggression Pact**. In the pact, Germany and the Soviet Union agreed not to go to war with one another. The pact also included a secret agreement to divide Poland and Eastern Europe between the two powers. The Pact left Hitler free to invade Poland without worries of Soviet intervention.

Blitzkrieg and Phony War

The German invasion of Poland in September 1939 marked the official start of World War II. Germany made this rapid-fire conquest using a technique called **blitzkrieg**, a German word meaning “lightning war.” It consisted of quick and brutal strikes using both ground and air forces to punch holes in a country’s defenses. German forces then rushed in and caused chaos and confusion until target countries surrendered. Using its **blitzkrieg** strategy with the help of the Soviet Union, Germany conquered Poland in only five weeks. It faced no opposition from the **Allied powers**.

For six months after the invasion of Poland, very little happened in Western Europe. This six-month pause in military action in Western Europe was called the “Phony War.” The Phony War ended abruptly in March 1940. Over the next two months, Germany captured and occupied a large number of European nations. Denmark fell in April 1940. Belgium, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, and Norway all fell in the next several weeks. The next would be France.

An Ally Falls

In May 1940, German forces invaded France after capturing the neighboring country of Belgium. The French military hoped to stop Germany by using a defensive structure called the **Maginot Line**. This heavily defended fortress covered the French-German border. It did not, however, protect the border between France and Belgium. So, instead of attacking France directly, Hitler sent his forces through Belgium and avoided the Maginot Line entirely.

The strongest units of the French army, led by General Charles de Gaulle, were placed to defend the Maginot Line and therefore too far away to halt the German advance through the Ardennes forest. As the German army advanced, more than 300,000 cornered Allied troops were forced to escape across the English Channel from the French port city of Dunkirk. German soldiers marched into the capital city of Paris on June 14, and by June 22, all of France had surrendered to the invading Nazi forces. As an added insult, Hitler forced the French government to sign the surrender documents in the same train car and at the same spot where Germany had surrendered at the end of World War I.

After the fall of France, the country was divided into two sections, Occupied France and unoccupied Vichy France. The German military controlled Occupied France, while French who collaborated with the Nazis governed Vichy France, named after its capital city of Vichy. Germany invaded Vichy France in April 1942, putting the whole country under direct German control to prevent French cooperation with the Allies.

After France's surrender, French citizens began organizing groups to fight against Germany from within. These groups collectively became known as the French Resistance. By 1942, de Gaulle had united the various resistance groups into a single organization. It attacked German supply lines, destroyed factories and train engines, and provided intelligence to the United Kingdom and the other Allied forces.

The London Blitz

Germany's attacks against the United Kingdom, which followed the conquest of France, were less successful. The English Channel, a body of water separating the United Kingdom from mainland Europe, protected the island from invading forces as it had for centuries. As a result, Germany began its planned attack on the United Kingdom through the air. The United Kingdom, with its powerful navy and air force, was able to hold back the German forces.

In summer 1940, the Battle of Britain, a battle between the British and German air forces, failed to destroy the British Royal Air Force. This meant that Germany could not risk a land invasion. Germany changed tactics and began bombing civilian targets in London in September 1940 in what is known as the Blitz. Although the almost continual bombing of London and other British cities continued until May 1941, killing 43,000 civilians, the United Kingdom never surrendered. Hundreds of thousands of London residents were able to find shelter in the Underground (subway stations) to protect themselves from the bombing and fires throughout the city. Hitler called off the **London Blitz** in May 1941, so he could focus on invading the Soviet Union.

Operation Barbarossa

Germany had several reasons for wanting to conquer the Soviet Union. Hitler believed the Soviet Union's Red Army was the biggest threat to his conquest of Europe and that communism was a threat to German dominance. He also wanted to destroy the Soviet Union's Jewish population and enslave the inferior Slavic people to provide lebensraum for the German people. Finally, Hitler sought to capture the oil fields in the Soviet Caucasus region. After the long, unsuccessful London Blitz, Germany wanted a quick, decisive victory. Hitler believed that a blitzkrieg attack on the Soviet Union, codenamed Operation Barbarossa, would provide that victory.

On June 22, 1941, German forces invaded the Soviet Union. This act of aggression broke the 1939 Nazi-Soviet Nonaggression Pact and drove the Soviet Union to join the Allies. Although the Red Army was initially overwhelmed, the Soviet Union did not fall as Germany expected. Instead, the Germans were forced to fight a long, difficult campaign in the bitter Soviet winter. In addition, Hitler had now committed Germany's forces to fighting a costly two-front war, dividing resources between Western Europe and the Soviet Union.