

1939-1945

World War II

Before and during World War II, nations align themselves as follows: the Axis powers include Germany, Italy, Japan, Bulgaria, Hungary and Romania; the Allied powers, or the Allies, include the United States, Britain, France, the Soviet Union, Australia, Belgium, Brazil, Canada, China, Denmark, Greece, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Poland, South Africa and Yugoslavia. Sweden remains neutral during the war.

1939, Europe. Adolf Hitler's German forces occupy Czechoslovakia; in March Britain and France agree to support Poland. Italian troops invade Albania, and Hitler and Mussolini sign a mutual accord in May. Germany and the Soviet Union sign a nonaggression pact in August. On September 1, German forces begin a bombing attack on Poland, forcing Britain and France to give Hitler an ultimatum. This is followed by a declaration of war on Germany two days later. German forces invade Poland and annex Danzig. The Soviet Union invades Poland from the east; by the end of September, Poland is divided between the Soviet Union and Germany. British troop arrivals in France are complete by November; Soviet forces invade Finland the same month. The European Western Front sees limited activity ("Sitzkrieg").

1939, South America. In mid-December the Battle of the River Plate is fought, with the British cruisers H.M.S. *Exeter* and *Ajax* and New Zealand's *Achilles* against the German battleship *Admiral Graf Spee*. The German vessel is disabled off Montevideo, Uruguay, and Hitler orders it blown up on December 17 to prevent it from falling into British hands.

1940, Europe. In March the Soviet Union and Finland sign a peace treaty. In April and May, German forces invade Denmark, Norway, the Netherlands, Belgium, and Luxembourg. Several hundred Danish ships, outside their home ports at the time of the invasion, sail in Allied service throughout the war. Neville Chamberlain resigns as Britain's prime minister; Winston Churchill takes over. The German army crosses the French frontier, moving past the Maginot defensive line by using combined air, tank and infantry "Blitzkrieg" tactics. In the Dunkirk evacuation in late May and early June, 335,000 out of 400,000 British and French soldiers are rescued from Belgium by British civilian and naval craft. In June Italy declares war on France and Britain, and invades France. German forces enter Paris and the city is undefended. France, under Premier Henri Philippe Pétain, and Germany sign an armistice at Compiègne on June 22, bringing France under German control. Soviet forces attack Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania in June and make them part of the Soviet Union. The Battle of Britain from July into October consists of almost daily airplane battles in British airspace. German armies capture Romanian oil fields in October and annex that country. The Italians' attempt to invade Greece in November fails because British forces come to Greece's defense. The Nazis bomb Coventry, England; the British Royal Air Force is victorious at the Battle of Britain; German losses are heavy enough that Hitler abandons his plan of conquering Britain.



Two Puerto Rican soldiers

1940, Africa and Asia. In July French ships of the pro-Nazi regime are sunk by the British navy at Oran, Algeria, in North Africa, causing the Vichy government to break diplomatic ties with Britain. General Charles de Gaulle escapes to Britain, signs an alliance with the British government, and forms a Free French government in exile. The Italian army invades the Sudan and follows with attacks on British Somaliland in August, but is severely beaten by the British by December. Japanese forces invade French Indochina in September.

1941, Europe. In April German troops launch attacks in the Balkans, occupy Estonia, and capture Albania and Macedonia. Yugoslavia surrenders but Nationalist General Draja Mikhailovich continues guerilla warfare; Marshal Tito leads left-wing guerillas. German tanks enter Athens; remnants of the British army retreat from Greece late this month and from Crete in late May. In May, Rudolf Hess, Hitler's deputy *führer* (*leader*), makes an unexplained trip to Scotland, where he is arrested. In a great naval battle, the H.M.S. *Hood* is sunk by the *Bismarck* which is then sunk by British air and naval fire—loss of life is heavy. In his Operation Barbarossa, Hitler attacks the Soviet Union on June 22. Finland declares war on the Soviet Union in hopes of regaining some of its conquered territory. After heavy fighting during the summer, German troops capture Smolensk. With the Atlantic Charter, United States President Roosevelt and British Prime Minister Churchill agree in August on war aims. German forces move to within 25 miles of Moscow and by September, Leningrad (formerly St. Petersburg) is under attack. The fighting around Moscow is a standoff during the winter months as the German army is unprepared for the cold. Germany and Italy declare war on the United States, thus ending United States neutrality in Europe. Hungary declares war on Britain, the Soviet Union and the United States. The United States Congress declares war on Germany and Italy on December 11.

1941, Africa and Asia. In January British forces enter East Africa and Haile Selassie returns to Ethiopia. German troops under Field Marshal Erwin Rommel cross north Africa in February and engage British troops, leading to a German counteroffensive in March. British forces arrive in Iraq in May and join Free French forces in their invasion of Syria and Lebanon in June to prevent a German takeover. By July Japanese forces have control of French Indochina and in late November Japan's carrier task force sails for Hawaii. The December 7 Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor cripples the United States Pacific fleet. Britain and the United States declare war on Japan. Japan declares war on the Allies and invades the Philippines and Guam the following week.

1942, Europe. In March Britain's air force begins "saturation bombing" of German targets; Cologne is struck at the end of May. The village of Lidice in Czechoslovakia is razed by German forces on June 10 in retaliation for the death of deputy Gestapo chief Reinhard Heydrich at the hands of Czech resistance fighters. Fighting continues in the Soviet Union. In July German forces capture

Sebastopol in the Crimea. In August the German army begins an attack on Stalingrad. The siege of the city, which lasts until early February 1943, claims almost 1.5 million lives. In November the Vichy French scuttle most of their navy at Toulon, France, to prevent the ships from falling into Allied hands; additional German troops enter France.

1942, Africa and Asia. Manila, Philippines, falls to the Japanese in early 1942. On February 15 Britain surrenders Singapore to Japan. Allied forces are defeated in the Battle of the Java Sea, and Japanese forces land on the Solomon Islands in March. In early spring Burma (Myanmar) is overrun by Japanese troops. United States troops on Bataan peninsula in the Philippines surrender and, on April 9, the infamous "Death March" begins. United States and Filipino troops on Corregidor Island in Manila Bay surrender to the Japanese on May 6. United States forces are victorious over Japanese troops in the Coral Sea, the first sea battle fought by aircraft from ships. Rommel prepares a German attack on Egypt from Libya. Americans are victorious over Japanese forces at Midway June 3-6. This victory marks the turning point of the Pacific campaign. In Syria, Tobruk falls to German forces in June. In August United States Marines under General Douglas MacArthur take Guadalcanal in the Solomon



Dr. Charles Drew

Islands. In late October and early November, British General Bernard L. Montgomery leads Britain's 8th Army in a successful defense of Egypt, with a resounding victory at El Alamein. Troops from the United States and Britain land in French North Africa on November 8. Rommel and his men are forced to retreat and lose Tobruk and Benghazi. MacArthur becomes commander-in-chief of the Allied forces in the Far East.

1943, Europe. General Dwight D. (Ike) Eisenhower is appointed supreme commander of the Allied Expeditionary Force. Soviet forces annihilate the Hungarian 2nd army near the Russian city of Voronezh; 100,000 Hungarian soldiers die. In early February an exhausted German 6th Army under Field Marshal Friedrich von Paulus surrenders at Stalingrad; this event marks the turning point of the war in the Soviet Union. Soviet forces drive the German army back to the Donets River. Germany's last major offensive campaign, at Kursk in July, is unsuccessful. Benito Mussolini is removed from power on the orders of Victor Emmanuel III on July 25, and Pietro Badoglio is named premier of Italy. Allied troops under General George Patton land on the Italian mainland in early September after the conquest of Sicily. The Italian government surrenders on September 8 but German troops in Italy continue to fight. Mussolini sets up a puppet "government-in-exile" in the German-controlled region. Allies land at Salerno with heavy casualties on September 9 and German forces seize Rome on September 10. Soviet forces retake Smolensk from the Germans on September 25. In October Italy declares war on Germany. At the Teheran Conference, November 28 through December 1, Roosevelt, Churchill and Stalin agree on plans to invade France.

1943, Africa and Asia. The British 8th Army enters Tripoli and defeats the Axis forces at the end of January. At the Casablanca Conference in mid-January, Churchill and Roosevelt agree on the goal of unconditional Japanese surrender. In March the Japanese are defeated at the Battle of the Bismarck Sea. On May 7 the Axis forces surrender in Tunisia. Remnants of the German army are trapped on Cape Bon, ending the war in Africa on May 12. In August, the Allied initiative against the Japanese in Burma begins. Allied forces land in the Solomon and Gilbert Islands in November. At the Cairo Conference in late November, Roosevelt, Churchill and Chiang Kai-shek of China pledge the defeat of Japan and the liberation of Korea.

1944, Europe. In January United States and British troops land at Anzio on the western coast of Italy. German U-boat activity in the Atlantic Ocean is brought to an end in March. The Allies take control of Monte Cassino, Italy, in May, after months of bombing. The Allied bombing of Berlin in March uses the highly secret Norden bombsight. Soviet troops invade German-occupied Bulgaria. The Crimea is liberated by the end of May with the recapture of Odessa and Sebastopol. Soviet forces also regain control of Estonia. German bombing of Britain uses new V-2 rockets designed by Wernher von Braun. United States and British forces enter Rome on June 4. On D-day, June 6, Allies under the command of General Eisenhower launch an invasion of the Normandy peninsula. Hitler is wounded in a bomb attempt on July 20. Romania joins the Allied forces. Paris is liberated by Free French troops under General de Gaulle on August 25. British troops defend the Rhine bridges against German attack at the Battle of Arnhem, Netherlands, September 17-25. Athens is freed by the Allies on October 13. Ukrainians and Yugoslavs retake Belgrade on October 20. The Allies capture Strasbourg November 24 but on December 16 the Germans launch a counteroffensive in Belgium, the Battle of the Bulge, which draws heavy casualties.

1944, The Pacific. In February Allied forces attack the Japanese base at Truk (an island group in the Western Pacific Ocean) and land on the Marshall Islands. Japanese forces abandon Rabaul in April and Allied forces land in New Guinea. United States planes control the skies in the Battle of the Philippine Sea in June, inflicting heavy losses on the Japanese air force. On July 9 United States forces capture Saipan on the Mariana Islands, giving the newly designed B-29 bombers a base to fly the 1,300 miles to bomb Tokyo. Americans invade the Philippines on October 20 and gain control by early January. American troops defeat the Japanese fleet in Leyte Gulf, October 25-26.

1945, Europe. In January Soviet forces begin an attack on East Prussia. The Yalta Agreement signed by Roosevelt, Churchill and Stalin establishes the basis for Allied occupation of Germany and returns some Soviet lands. The Soviet Union agrees to a friendship pact with China on February 11. Allied troops reach the Rhine in March and capture Cologne, Germany. Mussolini is killed at Lake Como on April 28, and Italy is surrendered the following

day. Admiral Karl Doenitz takes command in Germany; Hitler's suicide is announced May 1. Berlin falls the next day. Germany signs unconditional surrender terms at Rheims on May 8, V-E Day. At the Potsdam Conference, which ends August 2, Truman, Stalin and Churchill (and later Atlee) establish a council of foreign ministers to prepare peace treaties and plan German postwar government and reparations. The Nuremberg trials of Nazi leaders, which will last almost one year, begin in Germany in November.

1945, Africa and Asia. United States marines attack Iwo Jima on February 19 and Okinawa in April and May. American air strikes devastate major Japanese cities beginning in March. United States troops capture Iwo Jima on March 16. Allied troops recapture Okinawa on June 21 after three months of intensive fighting. British forces drive the Japanese army out of Singapore. Atomic bombs are dropped on Hiroshima on August 6, and Nagasaki on August 9. The Soviet Union declares war on Japan on August 8 and immediately sends an occupation force into Manchuria. Soviet and United States troops invade Korea and force the Japanese to surrender. On V-J Day, August 14, Japan surrenders. Terms are signed on September 2, aboard the United States battleship *Missouri* in Tokyo Bay.

The war results in more than 15 million military casualties and 35 million civilian deaths, including approximately 20 million from the Soviet Union; more than 25 million people are left homeless.