



Pre-Teaching World War II (European Theatre)

World War II lasted six years and embroiled more than 50 nations. Death toll estimates go as high as 70 million but the most scholarly sources estimate that a staggering 55 million people were killed, most of them civilians. In France, for instance, 210,000 soldiers, sailors, aircrew and support personnel were killed, but so too were 400,000 children, women, and non-military men. The Nazis methodically exterminated 14 million people that their leader, Adolf Hitler, deemed racial inferiors: Poles, Slavs, gypsies, and six million Jews.

The Roots of the Conflict

The seeds for Germany's discontent and susceptibility to a racist like Hitler began with the end of WWI. Defeated by the Allies, (France, Great Britain, the U.S., Italy, and Japan), Germany signed the Versailles Treaty which required it give up 13% of its territory including Alsace-Lorraine. That area alone included six million residents, vast raw materials (65% of Germany's iron ore reserves and 45% of its coal), and 10% of its factories. Germany also had to pay for the war's damages. Those reparations were enormous, costing Germany 38% of its national wealth.

The Versailles Treaty humiliated and impoverished the Germans and that's when people may look for scapegoats to blame for their troubles. Hitler joined the National Socialist German Workers Party. He began preaching that World War I had not been lost by the army but by Jews and Marxists (communists who followed Karl Marx's philosophies) undermining the war effort. He played on people's fears, anger, and envy. He called for the reunification of German lands and equality only for "Aryans," those of pure German blood. He claimed that Jews and "other aliens" should lose their rights and citizenship. He mesmerized his listeners. The party grew and became known as the Nazis.

The Rise of Hitler and the Nazi Party

Hitler's speeches against Jews, communists, and socialists prompted Nazi party members to lash out violently against them. (Communists and socialists called for a redistribution of wealth, power, and opportunities to benefit workers. They supported unions and state-run industry. In Russia, those philosophies had resulted in an oppressive totalitarian state with no individual rights — the Soviet Union. Democracies and extremely nationalistic societies were exceedingly distrustful of communists as a result.)

Hitler was imprisoned for being part of a mob beating up a rival politician. When he got out of jail, he formed his own army called Sturm Abteilung (Storm troopers). Hitler would march through the streets of Munich with these soldiers, carrying swastika flags. The local Bavarian government allowed Hitler's demonstrations. When officials in Berlin tried to silence Hitler, he gathered a mob of 40,000 supporters to rally in protest.

In 1923, emboldened by this growing enthusiasm for his rhetoric, Hitler led a coup. It failed. He was imprisoned, during which time he wrote *Mein Kampf* or *My Struggles*. A mixture of his life, political ideas, and propaganda, the book promoted the idea that the German people were the best — most creative, intelligent, and pure — and should control the world. It continued his attack on Jews.

When Hitler was released, Germany's economic situation had improved, so his movement lost momentum. The number of Nazi party members elected to office began to dwindle. But then the stock market crashed in October 1929. The Great Depression struck worldwide and changed everything.

By the end of 1930, four million Germans were out of work, nearly triple the number just the year before. Hitler had predicted economic disaster, so people turned to him for answers. In September 1930, 107 Nazi party members were elected to the German parliament. Hitler now led the second largest party in Germany. His Storm troopers including 400,000 men and was four times the size of the official German army — limited by the Treaty of Versailles. The Nazis began openly attacking anyone who criticized them. Hitler dismissed democracy as being the "rule of stupidity, of mediocrity, of half-heartedness, of cowardice, of weakness, and of inadequacy." Under pressure from many political and business groups, and fearing Hitler could spark a successful revolution with his storm troopers and mob support, the German government appointed Hitler chancellor in 1933. Within the year he was declared dictator.

Under Hitler, Germany became a fascist state. Hitler imprisoned and murdered his opponents. Patriotism and unquestioning loyalty were required and promoted through censorship, arrest, intimidation, and indoctrinating young people through the Hitler Youth. Hitler promoted the making of radios so that every citizen could hear his broadcasts. He increased male employment by forcing women out of the work place and back into the home and pushing manual labor over mass-production machines.

Hitler's Persecution of the Jews

Hitler also began systematically denying Jews their abilities to work or own businesses. He encouraged boycotts of their shops. In November 1938, on what is called *Kristallnacht*, the night of broken glass, the Nazis destroyed 7,500 Jewish shops and 400 synagogues. Ninety-one Jews were killed and 20,000 were sent to concentration camps. Originally known as "re-education" centers, these camps "concentrated" political undesirables, ethnic minorities, and disabled people who could not work in restricted and controlled areas. Soon, Hitler was confiscating Jewish homes and belongings. When he conquered other countries, he herded Jews into segregated ghettos and then sent them to concentration camps to their death. For more information on the Holocaust—Hitler's systematic, government-run murder and "extermination" of the Jewish people, which he called "the final solution," visit the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum website.

As soon as Hitler was officially in power, he began building fast-moving armored tanks called "Panzers." He would use them for his *Blitzkrieg* or "lightning war," a quick,

coordinated land and air attack with the Panzers, infantry soldiers moved by jeeps and trucks, and dive-bombing planes that strafed people on the ground.

Europe's Diplomatic and Military Response to Hitler

Fearing Hitler's military build-up, European powers began to align themselves against him, especially after Germany and Austria merged, an alliance forbidden by the Versailles Treaty. Alarmed, the Soviet Union's Joseph Stalin approached Great Britain about forming an alliance. But the British Prime Minister, Neville Chamberlain, distrusted Stalin, whose control over the Soviets was brutal. Chamberlain also believed that Germany had legitimate complaints against the Versailles Treaty. So, when Hitler demanded Germany be given back the Sudetenland, a territory it lost to Czechoslovakia after World War I, Chamberlain tried appeasement. He met with Hitler to negotiate. In the Munich Agreement, Germany was given the Sudetenland in exchange for Hitler's promise that he would make no further demands for land in Europe. Chamberlain, the French prime minister, Hitler, and the Italian dictator Benito Mussolini signed the accord. Czechoslovakia's head of state was not invited to the conference, nor was Stalin.

The agreement was popular within England, still weary and rebuilding from WWI. But Winston Churchill protested, saying Britain had behaved dishonorably. (He would later become prime minister and with eloquence and courage lead the Brits through WWII) It also angered Stalin. He signed a separate treaty with Hitler, the Nazi-Soviet Pact, in which the two countries agreed to remain neutral if either became involved in a war.

The Beginning of World War II in Europe

Within months, in March 1939, Hitler broke the Munich Agreement and took over all of Czechoslovakia. Then in September, without declaring war, he invaded Poland, using his *Blitzkrieg*. Germany and the Soviet Union divide Poland between them. Great Britain and France had promised to support Poland, and so declared war on Germany. Meanwhile the Soviet Union invaded Finland. Here in the United States, following the country's strong feeling of isolationism (protecting a nation by staying out of foreign alliances and wars), President Franklin Delano Roosevelt announced that the U.S. would remain neutral.

In the spring of 1940, again using his *Blitzkrieg* tactics, Hitler invaded and took over Denmark, Norway, Belgium, Holland, Luxembourg, and France. Italy joined Hitler as an ally in the Axis Powers.

By mid-June, Hitler had marched into Paris and occupied the northern half of France. The southern half was run out of Vichy, by a puppet government under an elderly French WWI hero, Marshal Henri-Philippe Petain. The Vichy government collaborated (cooperated and aided) with Nazi policies. It passed anti-Semitic (anti-Jew) laws such as the *Statut des Juifs*, which barred Jews from working in the government, being doctors, lawyers, or teachers, and confiscated their property. Many French citizens willingly collaborated with the Vichy and Nazis because they agreed with Hitler's racism and hatred of Jews. Other collaborated out of fear or greed or seeing a chance to grab power

within their community or as retribution for old slights. Because of such people, 76,000 Jews were rounded up in France and deported to concentration camps like Auschwitz. Only three percent survived. Just as feared as the Gestapo (Hitler's police) were the *Milice*, the French version of Hitler's "shock troops."

On the other hand, there were many French who resisted, including small guerrilla bands called the *maquis* (pronounced ma-KEE). These bands were often regarded as renegades, run by socialists and communists, teachers, even smugglers. Few had formal military training; one of the most successful groups in the Burgundy region was headed by a dance-band leader. They helped Allied airmen escape, attacked German convoys and trains, and caused as much confusion for the occupying Nazis as possible. The French Resistance was particularly important in supplying the Allies with strategic information about German strongholds in preparation for Operation Overlord, the D-Day invasion, June 6, 1944.

But back in late 1940, Britain was the only western European country left to stand against the Nazis. Hitler sent his Luftwaffe, the German air force, across the North Sea to break English resolve by dropping bombs on London nightly in the Blitz. At the onset of the raids, the Luftwaffe had 2,669 aircraft and the British 704. Of the Royal Air Force (RAF) pilots who bravely fought off the Luftwaffe bombers until American aircrew and planes joined the fight on July 4th, 1942, Winston Churchill said: "Never was so much owed by so many to so few." In September 1940, Germany, Italy, and Japan sign the Tripartite Pact, claiming the right to establish a new order in Europe and Asia. In early 1941, under a program called lend-lease, the United States began shipping ammunition, tanks, airplanes, trucks, fuel, and food to Great Britain in exchange for the right to use British naval bases in the Pacific, not expecting payment until after the conflict was over. The U.S. Navy also escorted the merchant ships carrying those items across the Atlantic Ocean to protect the cargo boats from German U-boat submarines trolling the waters.

When Hitler broke the Nazi-Soviet Pact to invade the Soviet Union in Operation Barbarossa in June 1941, the U.S. extended its lend-lease aid to Stalin. The Nazis had arrogantly thought they would take over Russia as quickly as France so didn't send their soldiers with winter uniform or lined boots. By winter, 100,000 had frostbite and 2,000 had to have amputations. Meanwhile, the Soviets wore 13 million pairs of felt-lined boots and moved in trucks the U.S. had sent.

The lend-lease program basically ended American neutrality. Japan had been building its war readiness as well during this time and had already invaded China. On Dec. 7, 1941, without a declaration of war, Japanese warplanes attacked Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, where the majority of the U.S. navy was anchored. Eight battleships and three destroyers were sunk or badly damaged and 2,403 Americans were killed. The next day, responding to what Roosevelt called a "date which will live in infamy," the United States declared war on Japan. Keeping to their alliance with Japan, Germany and Italy declared war on the U.S. During the next four years, 16 million Americans would serve in the armed forces and 400,000 died in the fight.