



Glossary of World War II Vocabulary and Concepts (European Theatre)

World War II lasted six years and embroiled more than 50 countries. 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. In Europe, the Nazis methodically exterminated 14 million persons that their leader, Adolf Hitler, deemed "racial inferiors:" Poles, Slavs, gypsies, and six million Jews.

Visit [World War II: The Roots of the Conflict](#) for a helpful synopsis of the causes and course of the War.

People

Neville Chamberlain

British Prime Minister (1937 to 1940). Feeling Germany had been unfairly penalized by the Versailles Treaty and wanting to maintain peace, Chamberlain was the leadership at the Munich Conference (Sept. 1938) which promoted "appeasement," granting Hitler's demands for return of the Sudetenland in exchange for his promise that he would not seek any more territory.

Winston Churchill

Great Britain's Prime Minister, Churchill was an eloquent speaker, who steeled the British to defy the Nazis, even as the Luftwaffe bombed London nightly. At the fall of France, which left the Britons entirely alone to fight off Hitler, Churchill said: "We shall prove ourselves once again able to defend our Island home, to ride out the storm of war, and to outlive the menace of tyranny, if necessary for years, if necessary alone... we shall fight on the beaches, we shall fight on the landing grounds, we shall fight in the fields and in the streets, we shall fight in the hills; we shall never surrender."

Charles de Gaulle

The French general who escaped to England after the fall of France and led the Free French forces during the Allied invasion of Europe. From England he broadcast on the BBC urging resistance. He would later serve as France's president.

General Dwight D. Eisenhower

U.S. commander of the European Theater of Operations (ETO). After commanding U.S. forces in North Africa and directing the invasions of Sicily, he became the Supreme Commander of the Allied Expeditionary Forces, and masterminded the D-Day invasion. After WWII, he served two terms as our 34th president.

Adolph Hitler

The fascist leader of Nazi Germany and the architect of the Holocaust which killed six million Jewish people.

Marshall Henri-Philippe Petain

A highly decorated WWI hero, Petain surrendered France to Hitler and then was installed as the head of a pro-Hitler, collaborationist government called the Vichy. Petain believed France's military lost because of moral weakness and laziness. He agreed to work with Hitler to re-establish nationalistic values of "work, family, and country" in France and to help Hitler establish a "new European order."

Franklin Delano Roosevelt

FDR served four terms as the U.S. 32nd president, during the Great Depression and WWII. An optimist and activist, FDR inspired the country with his broadcast "fireside chats." He created the New Deal, social reform legislation that established social security and public works projects that helped put Americans back to work. During WWII, he argued against isolationism and maintained a necessary but uneasy alliance between the U.S. and Britain with communist Soviet Union.

Joseph Stalin

The communist leader of the Soviet Union.

Harry Truman

FDR's vice-president who had to take over the presidency when FDR died of a stroke on April 12, 1945, before the final victories of WWII. As such, Truman was the one who had to order the dropping of the atomic bomb on Hiroshima and Nagasaki to avoid a land-invasion of Japan that could cost thousands of American lives.

Politics and Diplomacy

Lend-Lease Program

To help Britain, the United States would "lend" weaponry such as ships, trucks, tanks, parts, etc. in exchange for the use of naval bases and ports, mostly in the Pacific. The U.S. continued to "lend" supplies without expectation of payment until after the war. We also provided naval escorts for the ship convoys that transported the materials across the Atlantic.

Munich Pact

(September 1938) When Hitler demanded Germany be given back the Sudetenland, a territory it lost to Czechoslovakia after WWI, the British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain, met with Hitler, the French prime minister, and the Italian dictator Benito Mussolini to negotiate. Trying to maintain peace in Europe, he proposed appeasement: Germany was given the Sudetenland in exchange for Hitler's promise that he would make no further demands for land in Europe.

Nazi-Soviet Non-Aggression Pact

Angered by being excluded from the Munich Conference regarding the Sudetenland, the USSR's Stalin negotiated a separate treaty with Hitler, in which both countries agreed to remain neutral if the other became involved in a war. The pact paved the way for Hitler and Stalin to divide Poland between them.

Neutrality Acts

U.S. laws passed in the 1930s, in reaction to the growing turmoil in Europe and Asia. After the many losses of WWI, American sentiment was predominantly isolationistic, hoping to avoid involvement in any armed conflict.

Nuremberg Trials

Military tribunals which tried defeated Nazis for war crimes, the most publicized ones being of those involved with concentration camps and the extermination of Jews. Named for the city in which they were held, the Nuremberg War Trials began in 1946 and continued for four years.

Marshall Plan

An American program to repair and rebuild the countries torn apart by WWII. The U.S. donated \$13 billion to reconstruct Western Europe.

Potsdam Conference

The final meeting of the Allies to clarify the post-war administration of Germany and the rebuilding of Europe. Held July 17-Aug. 2, 1945.

The Tripartite Act

Also called the Axis Pact, joining Germany, Italy, and Japan as allies, signed on September 27, 1940.

The Versailles Treaty

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 6 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.

Vichy France

The puppet government established in southeastern France and controlled by Marshal Philippe Petain that collaborated (cooperated) with Hitler. Called Vichy after its capital city, the Vichy leaders had their own sense of national supremacy and aided Hitler's war machine and persecution of the Jews.

Yalta Conference

The second of three wartime meetings held among the "Big Three" — FDR, Churchill, and Stalin — in Crimea in February 1945. Anticipating victory against Hitler, which would come in May, they discussed Europe's postwar reorganization and how to govern and demilitarize Germany. The main agreements included: Nazi Germany would have to unconditionally surrender and be split into four occupied zones. The United Nations was outlined. The three could not agree on allowing Poland to have free elections. FDR compromised on this to get Stalin's agreement to declare war on Japan once Hitler was defeated.

Military terms

Allies

The "Big Three" were the United States, Great Britain, and the Soviet Union. Also with the Allies were Canada, Australia, New Zealand, China, France (after the Normandy invasion), Belgium, Brazil, Czechoslovakia, Ethiopia, Greece, India, Mexico, the Netherlands, Norway, the Philippine Commonwealth, Poland, the Union of South Africa, and Yugoslavia.

Axis

Germany, Italy, and Japan

B-24

U.S. bomber known as the Liberator. The B-24 had a slim wing design that allowed it to fly faster and higher and to carry a heavier bomb load than the better known B-17, or Flying Fortress. The B-24's unusual tail — two fins popping up off a crossbeam — combined with the slimmer wings also gave it a tendency to stall and spin. The B-17 also held up a bit better under battle damage, even capable of making it back to base on just one of four engines. See:

A B-24 poster from 1944

A slideshow of bombers from World War II

"Most Honorable Son: a Japanese-American B-24 Gunner in World War II (Webcast)

The Battle of the Atlantic

Britain survived to fight the Nazis because of sea convoys bringing in supplies. To protect the merchant ships from U-boat or submarine attack, the British and U.S. would escort the cargo boats with naval ships and planes.

Battle of the Bulge

December 1944 — January 1945. Hitler's final, surprise counteroffensive to the Allied invasion. Took place in the Ardennes, a densely forested mountain range between France and Belgium, and was an attempt to recapture Antwerp, the Allies' major supply port. A blizzard kept Allied airplanes grounded, but the U.S. Army was able to move its troops through the snow to double its number of soldiers and triple its armored tanks in four days. It was the largest and bloodiest battle the Americans fought, with 19,000 soldiers killed. The hard-won Allied victory was a turning point in the war.

The Blitz (or The Battle of Britain)

Hitler sent his Luftwaffe to bomb British cities, primarily London, targeting civilians as a way of breaking the resolve of the English. 40,000 were killed but the British held.

Blitzkrieg

"Lightening war," a surprise attack devised by Hitler, in which land-and-air attacks were coordinated, quick and brutal. Hitler used fast-moving tanks called Panzers, with infantry transported by trucks and dive-bombing planes that strafed soldiers and refugees. Battle maps from the Combat Studies Institute offer more information about Blitzkrieg and paths taken during the war.

D-Day

June 6, 1944, the Allied landing on France's Normandy beaches to begin the liberation of Europe. The D doesn't stand for anything other than "day." About 156,000 American, British, and Canadian troops landed in Normandy under heavy attack by German strongholds. Of those, the American forces numbered 23,250 on Utah Beach, 34,250 on Omaha Beach, and 15,500 airborne troops. Millions more men and women were involved in its preparations. For instance, in April and May 1944, the Allied air forces lost nearly 12,000 men and over 2,000 aircraft in bombing raids to pave the way for D-Day. During the Battle of Normandy, more than 425,000 Allied and German troops were killed,

wounded or went missing. Between 15,000 and 20,000 French civilians were killed, mainly as a result of Allied bombing. Thousands more fled their homes to escape the fighting. The PBS series *American Experience* offers more [information about D-Day](#).

ETO

European Theater of Operations. The war in Europe against Hitler and the Nazis and Mussolini and the Italians.

Luftwaffe

The Nazi Air Force

Maginot Line

A trench-line of defense along the northern border of France, stretching from Belgium to Switzerland, that had held throughout WWI but fell to Hitler's blitzkrieg within six weeks.

Messerschmitt

One of the Luftwaffe's most feared fighter planes.

Operation Barbarossa

Hitler's surprise attack on the Soviet Union, June 1941. The largest invasion force ever assembled — 3.6 million soldiers, 3,700 tanks, and 2,500 planes.

P-51 Mustang

The American fighter plane that escorted bombers to their missions and engaged in dog-fights with Luftwaffe pilots. In radio contact, bomber crews would call them "little friends." Colonel Clarence E. "Bud" Anderson shares his experiences as a P-51 Mustang pilot in this [webcast from the National Air and Space Museum](#).

Panzer

Fast-moving, armored tanks. Hitler experimented with four models, the final one weighing 17.3 tons, carrying a short 75mm gun in the turret, two machine guns, and a crew of five men. More than 9,000 were produced. The Panzer divisions were the backbone of the Blitzkrieg. Ironically, the idea of using fast-moving tanks supported by mobile infantry and planes was first suggested by a British military strategist. While England ignored his ideas, Hitler studied and adopted them. [Panzer tanks](#) were used throughout Europe well after World War II.

Operation Overlord

The code-name for the Allied invasion of France.

U-boats

Short for *Unterseeboote*, German submarines.

V-E Day

Victory in Europe Day, May 8, 1945. The Germans surrendered unconditionally, a week after Hitler committed suicide as the Allies battled his remaining troops in Berlin. L.M. Elliott offers a selection of [videos of V-E Day](#).

Germany

Aryan

A person of pure German heritage and blood, which Hitler considered the superior race. Typically blond and blue-eyed.

Auschwitz

The largest of Hitler's concentration camps, where 1 million Jews are believed to have lost their lives, gassed and then their bodies incinerated in crematoriums. Visit the [Auschwitz-Birkenau Memorial and Museum website](#) for more information.

Concentration Camps

Hitler also began systematically denying Jews their abilities to work or own businesses. He encouraged boycotts of their shops. In November 1938, on Crystal Night, 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 concentration camps gathered political undesirables, ethnic minorities, and disabled people who could not work into 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.

Einsatzgruppen

SS "action squads" sent into Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union that conducted mass executions of Jews by shooting groups of them to fall into ditch-graves. In six months in 1941, they killed 1.4 million Jews.

Fascism

A political system promoted by Hitler and his ally, Italian dictator Mussolini, that called for citizens to be unquestioningly loyal to the nation and obedient of its leader. The needs of the state outweighed the needs, beliefs, or freedoms of the individual. Emphasis was on national pride, traditions, and racial purity. There was no freedom of speech. Foreigners — those who were simply minority ethnic or religious groups included — were hated and persecuted.

The "Final Solution"

Hitler's systematic plan for exterminating the Jewish people. At the Wannsee Conference, January 1942, Hitler and his closest advisors decided that Jews would be rounded up and concentrated in controlled areas then shipped by train to camps to be worked to death in slave labor or gassed. Visit The [U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum website](#) for more information.

The Fuhrer

The German word for leader and Hitler's title.

Gestapo

Geheime Staatspolizei, the official Nazi secret police. A branch of the SS, the Gestapo was responsible for uncovering and investigating acts of sabotage, spying, or treason without any judicial oversight.

The Holocaust

The Nazi murder of six million Jews and the torture and exploitation of millions more, plus the systematic extermination of 5 million other persons Hitler deemed "racially inferior," among them gypsies, Slavs, homosexuals, and Jehovah Witnesses. Visit The [U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum website](#) for more information.

Liebensraum

The excuse used by Hitler to justify his invasions of Eastern Europe. He claimed that Germany was overpopulated and he needed "living space" for his people.

Nazi

A member of the National Socialist German Workers' Party that Hitler came to lead. A believer in Hitler's fascism, anti-Semitism, and Aryan supremacy.

National Socialist German Workers Party

The Versailles Treaty humiliated and impoverished the Germans, and that's often when people may look for scapegoats to blame for their troubles. Hitler joined the National Socialist German Workers Party. He began preaching that the war 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, equality only for "Aryans," those of pure German blood. He claimed that Jews and "other aliens" should lose their rights and citizenship. Hitler's speeches against Jews, communists, and socialists prompted Nazi party members to lash out violently against them.

Third Reich

Reich means empire. Hitler named it the third German empire after the Holy Roman Empire (962-1806) and the German-Austrian Empire (1871-1918), which was unraveled by WWI.

Waffen SS

An elite part of Hitler's *Schutzstaffel* ("Protective Squadron") or SS. It began as Hitler's private bodyguard and grew into a fanatical fighting force nearly one million strong. SS fought in battles and ran death camps.

Resistance/Home FrontFree France

French soldiers who had managed to escape to England or North Africa who refused to accept German occupation. They fought on under the leadership of General Charles de Gaulle. Another important member of the Free French was Jean Moulin, who went back into France to coordinate and unify the many different groups of the secretive Resistance. He was arrested and died during Gestapo interrogation.

Manhattan Project

The codename for the U.S. project to produce an atomic bomb. The Manhattan Project began as a small research program, but grew to become a multi-billion dollar investment involving three countries.

Maquis

Armed guerilla groups in the countryside that resisted German occupation. They were instrumental in helping downed Allied airmen, in blowing up bridges and railways to prevent Hitler reinforcing his troops on the Normandy beaches after D-Day, and in supplying critical intelligence about Nazi strongholds and plans that helped the Allies plan their bombing raids and the invasion. "Maquis" (ma-KEE) is a Corsican word for shady undergrowth covering the hills of that island. This compilation of links offers more information about the French Resistance.

Rationing

Things like meat, gasoline, silk for parachutes, and rubber for tires needed to go to the military first, so the government set up quotas to ensure everyone received a fair share of what was left. Here in the United States, for instance, "nonessential" drivers (meaning they were not going back and forth to jobs forwarding the war effort) were limited to 3 or 4 gallons of gas per week. In Europe, it was far harsher; few civilians were allowed meat which was requisitioned for German troops. Many had to rely on the black market (illegal sales) to have enough to eat.

Rosie the Riveter

Many women worked in factories, making important war munitions, even welding together bombers and bombs. Their efforts were celebrated in a 1942 hit song Rosie the Riveter and a Saturday Evening Post cover by Norman Rockwell. This Library of Congress clip documents the evolution of Rosie the Riveter as the war progressed and women's roles continued to change.

WAAC (Women's Army Auxiliary Corps), WAVES (Women Accepted for Volunteer Emergency Service), and WASP (Women Airforce Service Pilots)

Hundreds of thousands of women joined these female units for non-combat duty, including jobs like flying cargo and transport planes, driving ambulances, being mechanics, clerical workers, or parachute riggers. Serving in the Army, Navy, and Air Force, many women took active roles to help their country throughout World War II.

War Production Board

Regulated the production and distribution of materials and fuel during WWII. The WPB turned peacetime industries to producing war munitions and supplies and oversaw the rationing of essential war items such as gasoline, heating oil, metals, rubber, paper and plastics.