

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Class: \_\_\_\_\_

# Introduction to World War II

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2017

*World War II was the second global war that lasted from 1939 to 1945. The war involved a majority of the world's countries, and it is considered the deadliest conflict in human history. One major cause of World War II was the rise of fascism in Europe. Fascism is a political system that gives total power to a dictator. This informational text gives a comprehensive summary of the causes, events, and conclusion of the war. As you read, take notes on how WWII encouraged social and economic change in America.*

- [1] Storm clouds gathered around the world throughout the 1930s. Americans struggled to make ends meet during the Great Depression. Meanwhile, fascism swept Italy and Germany. Elsewhere, the Japanese government was controlled by those who favored a strong military. Fascism began to dominate the world as nations fell to aggressive leaders that resembled dictators. Remembering World War I, Americans hoped against hope to remain distant from the increasingly dangerous world.



*"Approaching Omaha" by Taak is in the public domain.*

War seemed bound to happen. Japan struck first, plunging into Chinese Manchuria. Next Italy struck at Ethiopia. Germany, under the leadership of Adolf Hitler, fueled the most fear. Germany had impressive power. And Europeans and Americans both remembered how strong the German army was in World War I. By the end of the decade, the nations surrounding Germany began to fall like dominoes. In 1939, Hitler seized Austria, then Czechoslovakia. As Hitler set his sights on Poland, the world prepared for another great conflict.

Meanwhile, Americans tried to stay isolated. The U.S. had created a series of Neutrality Acts<sup>1</sup> in order to avoid the traps that led them into World War I. Poll after poll showed the American public did not want the country to become involved in international disputes. "Isolationist" clubs spread across the land.

Eventually though, Great Britain became the last defender of freedom standing against a Nazi-controlled Europe. Americans reluctantly began to act. Led by President Franklin D. Roosevelt, the United States used its industrial power to start supporting the Allies — the democratic countries fighting against the fascist "Axis" countries of Germany, Japan, and Italy.

- [5] In the end, it was Japan that brought the United States into the war. The United States was the only nation standing against complete Japanese control of the Pacific Ocean. One way it did this was through economic sanctions<sup>2</sup> against Japan. Japan was so angry that in 1941 it launched a brutal surprise attack against American naval bases at Pearl Harbor in Hawaii. After the attack, the United States finally entered the Second World War.

1. laws passed in 1935, 1936, 1937, and 1939 to limit U.S. involvement in future wars

The government quickly began to encourage the American people to support the war effort. Factories had to produce lots of weapons, food, uniforms, and other materials for soldiers. There were major operations in both the Atlantic and Pacific “theatres,”<sup>3</sup> which meant that American industries literally fueled two wars at the same time. The war effort produced many social and economic consequences. African Americans moved from the rural South to the industrial North for jobs faster than ever before. New opportunities opened for women who were encouraged to work in factories and hospitals to support the war. The economy got a huge boost from all of this wartime production. Because of the increased employment opportunities, Americans who had been struggling since the Great Depression finally enjoyed a high standard of living again.

But the war effort also had a darker side. Civil rights were compromised. After Pearl Harbor, Americans feared potential Japanese spies or supporters. As a result of this fear, and anti-Japanese racism, over 110,000 Japanese Americans were forced from their homes and sent to distant relocation camps. These camps had poor living conditions. Japanese Americans would live in these camps for over four years, even after Americans liberated Jews from Nazi concentration camps.

In both Europe and Asia, the Axis powers had established a firm foothold prior to American entry into the conflict. However, slowly but surely, the Allies closed in on Nazi Germany. Big battles at El Alamein and Stalingrad helped the Allies weaken the Germans. In 1943, after the Allies invaded Sicily and bombed Rome, Italy quit the Axis. First Italy's fascist Prime Minister was fired; then the Italian King arrested him and signed a secret agreement with the Allies. The Allies were able to land on Italy's southern shores without any fighting and head North, forcing Germans in Italy to retreat. Then, in 1944, the Allies landed successfully on the French shores of Normandy to begin an invasion of German-occupied France. It was only a matter of time before Allies smashed the Nazi machine.

Failures marked the early war in the Pacific theatre. Things looked bad when Japan captured the Philippines from the U.S. in 1942. But then the U.S. damaged Japan's naval fleet of ships at the Midway Islands just six months after the attack on Pearl Harbor. After that, Americans "island hopped" their way to Japan. Island hopping let Americans strategically avoid areas the Japanese had heavily defended. Still, some of the islands Americans did take were sites of bloody battles. It took a long time for the U.S. to force Japan to retreat. Americans took back the Philippines in 1944, then closed in on Japan by invading Iwo Jima and Okinawa in early 1945.

- [10] New technologies emerged during the war as well. Radar helped the British locate incoming German planes, and sonar made it much easier to find submarines. Germans developed rockets that could travel great distances, creating a new era of long-range warfare. But no weapon compared in destructive power to the atomic bomb. The nuclear weapon was developed after a massive, secret research project spearheaded by the United States government. World War II did not officially end for America until President Harry S. Truman dropped two atomic bombs on Japan, at Hiroshima and Nagasaki, in August of 1945.

World War II was fought over differences left unresolved after World War I. Over 400,000 Americans were killed in four years of involvement. The only deadlier war for Americans was the Civil War. The Nazis murdered over six million Jews in the Holocaust, and killed over five million other “enemies” of Germany. Over 20 million Soviets died, many of them civilians, devastating Soviet communities. Because other Allied countries experienced far fewer casualties, many Soviets lost trust in their western Allies.

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2. commercial and financial penalties applied by one or more countries against a targeted country  
3. an area in which important military events occur or are progressed

After much bloodshed and sacrifice, the Axis powers were defeated. But the Grand Alliance that won the war, of the United States, Great Britain, and the Soviet Union, did not last long. Soon the globe was involved in a 45-year struggle between America and the Soviet Union known as the Cold War.

*"Introduction to World War II" is a derivative of "The Road to Pearl Harbor" and "America in the Second World War" by USHistory.org.  
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## Text-Dependent Questions

**Directions:** For the following questions, choose the best answer or respond in complete sentences.

1. PART A: Which of the following identifies the central idea of the text?
  - A. WWII was a global war, with battlefronts in many countries, and the war had a dramatic impact.
  - B. While many suffered during WWII, the United States was primarily benefited by an improved economy and an increase of national morale.
  - C. The United States was an eager participant in WWII, as it realized that the spread of fascism would compromise their right to a democracy.
  - D. While WWII resulted from the unresolved conflicts of WWI, it ushered in a time of peace.
  
2. PART B: Which section from the text best supports the answer to Part A?
  - A. "Storm clouds gathered around the world throughout the 1930s. Americans struggled to make ends meet during the Great Depression. Meanwhile, fascism swept Italy and Germany." (Paragraph 1)
  - B. "Led by President Franklin D. Roosevelt, the United States used its industrial power to start supporting the Allies — the democratic countries fighting against the fascist 'Axis' countries of Germany, Japan, and Italy." (Paragraph 4)
  - C. "Because of the increased employment opportunities, Americans who had been struggling since the Great Depression finally enjoyed a high standard of living again." (Paragraph 6)
  - D. "In both Europe and Asia, the Axis powers had established a firm foothold prior to American entry into the conflict. However, slowly but surely, the Allies closed in on Nazi Germany." (Paragraph 8)
  
3. How do paragraphs 6-7 contribute to the development of ideas in the text?
  - A. They prove that the United States primarily benefited from WWII as the Great Depression ended.
  - B. They show that the United States experienced negative and positive consequences from the war.
  - C. They emphasize the United States' desire to preserve the civil liberties of citizens.
  - D. They reinforce the idea that the United States never should have entered WWII.

4. How does the author develop the idea that World War II created positive change in the United States?

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## Discussion Questions

**Directions:** Brainstorm your answers to the following questions in the space provided. Be prepared to share your original ideas in a class discussion.

1. In the context of the text, how are we changed by war? How was America changed by its involvement in WWI? What new changes did it undergo due to WWII? In what ways were these changes permanent or temporary?
2. In the context of the text, what can we learn from tragedy? How did America's experiences with previous wars impact their handling of WWII? What did the countries involved in WWII learn from the losses they experienced?
3. In the context of the text, how has America changed over time? How did WWII expand the opportunities available to women and African Americans in America? Cite evidence from this text, your own experience, and other literature, art, or history in your answer.