

International Scenario: World War II (1939-1945)

Background

The consensus among historians is that the roots of World War II can be traced to the ending of World War I in 1918. Americans had fought in that war too, in the words of U.S. President Woodrow Wilson, "make the world safe for democracy." However, the peace treaties that ended World War I did not have that effect, instead causing bitterness, resentment, and anger in the defeated nations. For instance, Germany lost one-sixth of its territory, was forced to accept sole responsibility for having caused the war, and was responsible for paying a huge amount of reparations (payments by a defeated country for the damages it caused). After the war, the German economy suffered from high unemployment and hyperinflation. Inflation is when the same amount of money gets you less and less over time. German money became virtually worthless. Many Germans were angry about the peace treaty ending the First World War- many believed they hadn't been fairly defeated.

The Rise of Dictatorships

In the early 1930s, the world was hit by the global Great Depression. Many workers lost their jobs, trade fell, and times were hard. People looked for leaders who could bring about change and restore pride in their nation. In Italy, Benito Mussolini, leader of the Fascist Party, took power in 1922. In the early 1930s, military leaders took control of Japan. In Germany, Adolf Hitler, leader of the Nazi Party, gained power in 1933, promising to undo the hated treaty ending World War I. These leaders promised to restore their countries to greatness. They set up totalitarian governments, where political power is held by a single political party that allows no opposition.

In the mid-1930s, Mussolini sent Italian troops to conquer the nation of Ethiopia in Africa. Japan invaded China. Hitler meanwhile began to re-arm Germany for war. The League of Nations, formed to keep the peace after World War I, proved unable to head off these crises.

The March to War

Hitler began his plans slowly. First, claiming that he simply wanted to repair the German economy, he began a massive rearmament program to rebuild the German army, violating the treaty ending World War I. Claiming that he simply wanted to reunite all German-speaking peoples under one nation, he annexed Austria, followed by the German-speaking part of Czechoslovakia. Within months he took the rest of Czechoslovakia. Seeking to avert another catastrophic war within a generation, Britain and France largely gave in to Hitler's demands, a policy called appeasement. Winston Churchill, who later became Britain's wartime Prime Minister, said, "Britain and France had to choose between war and dishonor. They chose dishonor. They will have war."

The red line for Britain and France became Poland, a nation that had been brought back after World War I and contained much former German territory. Nevertheless, on September 1, 1939, German troops invaded Poland. World War II in Europe had begun. Meanwhile, in Asia and the Pacific, Japanese armed forces invaded country after country and island after island.

American Involvement

At the outset of the war, the United States maintained neutrality, much as it had at the start of World War I, although it did send financial support and lent military supplies to the Allies- first

Britain, and then, with Germany's invasion of the Soviet Union, to the Soviets- through a policy called lend-lease. President Franklin Roosevelt described the U.S.'s role as being the "arsenal of democracy." Meanwhile, tensions with the United States over Japan's invasion of China and aims in the Pacific were rapidly coming to a head. On December 7, 1941, Japanese planes launched a surprise attack on the U.S. Navy base at Pearl Harbor in Hawaii, hoping to destroy the U.S. Pacific Fleet. The next day, Congress declared war on Japan. Days later, Hitler declared war on the United States, bringing the United States fully and openly into the European conflict as well. U.S. troops fought in North Africa, Europe, and the Pacific. Meanwhile, at home, Americans not in the armed forces went to work by the millions, throwing the massive industrial resources of the United States into producing all the material- weapons, ammunition, tanks, planes, and ships- to achieve victory.

A Changed World

Utterly exhausted, Germany surrendered in May 1945, ending the war in Europe. Japan meanwhile fought on through the summer of 1945, only surrendering in August after the United States dropped the first (and thus far only) two atomic bombs ever used in warfare on the cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The war was over.

War Crimes

Following the war, the Allies set up a series of trials to hold the surviving leaders from Germany and Japan accountable for their crimes. They had violated the rules of war according to the Geneva Conventions and had also committed crimes against humanity, including carrying out (on the part of Germany) the Holocaust. Many of these leaders were sentenced to death for their terrible crimes.

The United Nations

One outcome of the war was the Allies formed the United Nations, with the goal of again trying to prevent future world wars through diplomacy and peace-keeping efforts. There were 51 original member nations, including 5 permanent Security Council members: China, France, the Soviet Union, the United Kingdom, and the United States.

125 ¶ "December 7, 1941 — A Date Which Will Live in Infamy" — Address to the Congress Asking That a State of War Be Declared Between the United States and Japan.

December 8, 1941

Mr. Vice President, and Mr. Speaker, and Members of the Senate and House of Representatives:

YESTERDAY, December 7, 1941 — a date which will live in infamy — the United States of America was suddenly and deliberately attacked by naval and air forces of the Empire of Japan.

The United States was at peace with that Nation and, at the solicitation of Japan, was still in conversation with its Government and its Emperor looking toward the maintenance of peace in the Pacific. Indeed, one hour after Japanese air squadrons had commenced bombing in the American Island of Oahu, the Japanese Ambassador to the United States and his colleague delivered to our Secretary of State a formal reply to a recent American message. And while this reply stated that it seemed useless to continue the existing diplomatic negotiations, it contained no threat or hint of war or of armed attack.

It will be recorded that the distance of Hawaii from Japan makes it obvious that the attack was deliberately planned many days or even weeks ago. During the intervening time the Japanese Government has deliberately sought to deceive the United States by false statements and expressions of hope for continued peace.

The attack yesterday on the Hawaiian Islands has caused severe damage to American naval and military forces. I regret to tell you that very many American lives have been lost. In addition American ships have been reported torpedoed on the high seas between San Francisco and Honolulu.

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Yesterday the Japanese Government also launched an attack against Malaya.

Last night Japanese forces attacked Hong Kong:

Last night Japanese forces attacked Guam.

Last night Japanese forces attacked the Philippine Islands.

Last night the Japanese attacked Wake Island.

And this morning the Japanese attacked Midway Island.

Japan has, therefore, undertaken a surprise offensive extending throughout the Pacific area. The facts of yesterday and today speak for themselves. The people of the United States have already formed their opinions and well understand the implications to the very life and safety of our Nation.

As Commander in Chief of the Army and Navy I have directed that all measures be taken for our defense.

But always will our whole Nation remember the character of the onslaught against us.

No matter how long it may take us to overcome this premeditated invasion, the American people in their righteous might will win through to absolute victory.

I believe that I interpret the will of the Congress and of the people when I assert that we will not only defend ourselves to the uttermost but will make it very certain that this form of treachery shall never again endanger us.

Hostilities exist. There is no blinking at the fact that our people, our territory, and our interests are in grave danger.

With confidence in our armed forces — with the unbounding determination of our people — we will gain the inevitable triumph — so help us God.

I ask that the Congress declare that since the unprovoked and dastardly attack by Japan on Sunday, December 7, 1941, a state of war has existed between the United States and the Japanese Empire.

NOTE: Less than 24 hours after the foregoing message to a joint session of the Senate and the House of Representatives. The President drove to the Capitol to deliver

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President Franklin D. Roosevelt's "Day of Infamy" Speech, December 8, 1941



Scan the QR Code or click [here](#) to listen to the audio recording of the speech

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