

# WORLD WAR II

## PART ONE • THE WAR IN EUROPE

**W**orld War I left unresolved the question of who would dominate Europe. The tremendous dislocations caused by the war laid the groundwork for the collapse of democratic institutions there and set the stage for a second German attempt at conquest. A worldwide depression that began in 1929 destroyed the fragile democratic regime in Germany. In 1933 Adolf Hitler led to power the National Socialist German Workers' (Nazi) Party, a mass movement that was virulently nationalistic, antidemocratic, and anti-Semitic. He ended parliamentary government, assumed dictatorial powers, and proclaimed the Third Reich. The Nazi government increased the strength of the German armed forces and sought to overturn the Versailles Treaty, to recover German territory lost at the peace settlement, and to return to the so-called Fatherland German-speaking minorities within the borders of surrounding countries.

The ultimate goal of Hitler's policy was to secure "living space" for the German "master race" in eastern Europe. A gambler by instinct, Hitler relied on diplomatic bluff and military innovation to overcome Ger-

many's weaknesses. He played skillfully on the divisions among the European powers to gain many of his aims without war. With the Italian Fascist dictator Benito Mussolini he announced a Rome Berlin alliance (the Axis) in 1935. Meanwhile, in the Far East, the Japanese—the only Asian industrial power—coveted the natural resources of China and Southeast Asia, but found their expansion blocked by European colonial powers or by



**Benito Mussolini and Adolf Hitler**

the United States. Having seized Manchuria in 1931, they began a war against China in 1937. The League of Nations failed to counter effectively Japanese aggression in Manchuria and an Italian invasion of Ethiopia.

Soon Germany, Italy, and Japan became allies, facing Western democratic governments that wanted to avoid another war and the Soviet Union whose Communist government was widely distrusted.

---

**The people of the United States remained largely indifferent to most international concerns.**

---

The people of the United States, having rejected the Versailles Treaty and the Covenant of the League of Nations after World War I, remained largely indifferent to most international concerns. They firmly discounted the likelihood of American involvement in another major war, except perhaps with Japan. Isolationist strength in Congress led to the passage of the Neutrality Act of 1937, making it unlawful for the United States to trade with belligerents. American policy aimed at continental defense and designated the Navy as the first line of such defense. The Army's role was to serve as the nucleus of a mass mobilization that would defeat any invaders who managed to fight their way past the Navy and the nation's powerful coastal defense installations. The National Defense Act of 1920 allowed an Army of 280,000, the largest in peacetime history, but until 1939 Congress never appropriated funds to pay for much more than half of that strength. Most of the funds available for new equipment went to the fledgling air corps. Throughout most of the interwar period, the Army was tiny and

insular, filled with hard-bitten, long-serving volunteers scattered in small garrisons throughout the continental United States, Hawaii, the Philippines, and Panama.

Yet some innovative thinking and preparation for the future took place in the



Hitler accepts the ovation of the Reichstag after announcing the peaceful acquisition of Austria. It set the stage to annex the Czechoslovakian Sudetenland, largely inhabited by a German-speaking population. Berlin, March 1938.

interwar Army. Experiments with armored vehicles and motorization, air-ground cooperation, and the aerial transport of troops came to nothing for lack of resources and of consistent high level support. The Army did, however, develop an interest in amphibious warfare and in related techniques that were then being pioneered by the U.S. Marine Corps. By the outbreak of war the Signal Corps was a leader in improving radio communications, and American artillery practiced the most sophisticated fire-direction and -control techniques in the world. In addition, war plans for various contingencies had been

drawn up, as had industrial and manpower mobilization plans. During the early 1930s Col. George C. Marshall, assistant commandant of the Infantry School at Fort Benning, Georgia, had earmarked a number of younger officers for leadership positions. Despite such preparations, the Army as a whole was unready for the war that broke out in Europe on 1 September 1939.

### THE OUTBREAK OF WAR

**D**uring March 1938 German troops had occupied Austria, incorporating it into the Reich. In September Hitler announced that the “oppression” of ethnic Germans living in Czechoslovakia was intolerable and that war was near. England and France met with Hitler (the Munich Pact) and compelled Czechoslovakia to cede its frontier districts to Germany in order to secure “peace in our time.” Peace, however, was only an illusion. During March 1939 Hitler seized the rest of Czechoslovakia by force of arms and then turned his attention to Poland. Although Britain and France had guaranteed the integrity of Poland, Hitler and Josef Stalin, dictator of the Soviet Union, signed a secret, mutual nonaggression pact in August 1939. With the pact Stalin bought time to build up his strength at the expense of Britain and France, and Hitler gained a free hand to deal with Poland. When Hitler’s army invaded Poland on 1 September 1939, World War II began.

While German forces overran western Poland, Soviet troops entered from the east to claim their portion of that country. France and Britain declared war on Germany and mobilized their forces. The subsequent period of deceptive inactivity, lasting until spring,

became known as the Phony War. Nothing happened to indicate that World War II would differ significantly in style or tempo from World War I.

---

**A number of students of war believed that armored vehicles held the key to restoring decision to the battlefield.**

---

But the years since 1918 had brought important developments in the use of tanks. A number of students of war—the British Sir Basil Liddell Hart and J. F. C. Fuller, the Frenchman Charles de Gaulle, the American George S. Patton, and the Germans Oswald Lutz and Heinz Guderian—believed that armored vehicles held the key to restoring decision to the battlefield. But only the Germans conceived the idea of massing tanks in division-size units, with infantry, artillery, engineers, and other supporting arms mechanized and all moving at the same pace. Moreover, only Lutz and Guderian received the enthusiastic support of their government.

In the spring of 1940 their theories were put to the test as German forces struck against Norway and Denmark in April; invaded the Netherlands, Belgium, and Luxembourg in May; and late in the same month broke through a hilly, wooded district in France. Their columns sliced through to the English Channel, cutting off British and French troops in northern France and Belgium. The French Army, plagued by low morale, divided command, and primitive communications, fell apart. The British evacuated

their forces from Dunkerque with the loss of most of their equipment. The Germans entered Paris on 14 June, and the French government, defeatist and deeply divided politically, sued for an armistice. The success of the German Blitzkrieg forced the remaining combatants to rethink their doctrine and restructure their armies.



Senior British Army officer, Bernard L. Montgomery, in a military tank, fought in both World War I and World War II.

With his forces occupying northern France and with a puppet French government established in the south, Hitler launched the Luftwaffe against the airfields and cities of England to pave the way for an invasion. Britain's survival hung by a thread. From July to October 1940, while German landing barges and invasion forces waited on the Channel coasts, the Royal Air Force, greatly outnumbered, drove the Luftwaffe from the daytime skies in the legendary Battle of Britain. At sea the British Navy, with increasing American cooperation, fought a desperate battle against German submarine packs to keep the North Atlantic open. British pugnacity finally forced Hitler to abandon all plans to invade England.

In February Hitler sent troops under Lt. Gen. Erwin Rommel to aid the Italians who were fighting against the British in North Africa. German forces coming to the aid of the Italians in the Balkans routed a British expedition in Greece, and German paratroopers seized the important island of Crete. Then, in June 1944, Hitler turned against his supposed ally, the Soviet Union, with the full might of the German armed forces.

---

**Nazi expectations of a quick victory evaporated, and the onset of winter caught the Germans unprepared.**

---

Armored spearheads thrust deep into Soviet territory, driving toward Leningrad, Moscow, and the Ukraine and cutting off entire Soviet armies. Despite tremendous losses, Russian military forces withdrew farther into the country and continued to resist. Nazi expectations of a quick victory evaporated, and the onset of winter caught the Germans unprepared. Thirty miles short of Moscow their advance ground to a halt, and the Soviets launched massive counterattacks.

The Germans withstood the counterattacks and resumed their offensive the following spring. The Soviets, now locked in a titanic death struggle, faced the bulk of the German land forces—over two hundred divisions. The front stretched for 2,000 miles, from the Arctic Circle to the Black Sea. Soon casualties ran into the millions. Waging war with the implacable ruthlessness of totalitarian regimes, both sides committed wholesale

atrocities—mistreatment of prisoners of war, enslavement of civilian populations, and, in the case of the Jews, outright genocide.

In the United States preparations for war moved slowly. General George C. Marshall took over as Chief of Staff in 1939, but the Army remained hard pressed simply to carry out its mission of defending the continental United States. Defending overseas possessions like the Philippines seemed a hopeless task. In early 1939, prompted by fears that a hostile power might be able to establish air bases in the Western Hemisphere, thus exposing the Panama Canal or continental United States to aerial attack, President Franklin D. Roosevelt launched a limited preparedness campaign. The power of the Army Air Corps increased; Army and Navy leaders drafted a new series of war plans to deal with the threatening international situation. The focus of military policy changed from continental to hemisphere defense.

---

**The Army concentrated on equipping its regular forces as quickly as possible and in 1940 held the first large-scale corps and army maneuvers in American history.**

---

After the outbreak of war in Europe the President proclaimed a limited emergency and authorized increases in the size of the Regular Army and the National Guard. Con-

gress amended the Neutrality Act to permit munitions sales to the French and British, and large orders from them stimulated retooling and laid the basis for the expansion of war production in the future. The Army



Exhausted soldiers marching down a muddy road in France.

concentrated on equipping its regular forces as quickly as possible and in 1940 held the first large-scale corps and army maneuvers in American history. The rapid defeat of France and the possible collapse of Britain dramatically accelerated defense preparations. Roosevelt directed the transfer of large stocks of World War I munitions to France and Britain in the spring of 1940 and went further in September when he agreed to the transfer of fifty over-age destroyers to Britain in exchange for bases in the Atlantic and Caribbean. In March 1941 Congress repealed some provisions of the Neutrality Act. Passage of the Lend-Lease Act, which gave the President authority to sell, transfer, or lease war goods to the government of any country whose “Barrage Balloon” by Alexander Brook. The reported ability of balloons to interfere with low-level bombardment in Great

Britain and Germany spurred the Army to develop a barrage balloon force for continental defense. (Army Art Collection) defenses he deemed vital to the defense of the United States, spelled the virtual end of neutrality. The President proclaimed that the United States would become the “arsenal of democracy.” In the spring of 1941 American and British military representatives held their first combined staff conferences to discuss strategy in the event of active U.S. participation in the war, which seemed increasingly likely to include Japan as well as Germany. The staffs agreed that if the United States entered the war the Allies should concentrate on the defeat of Germany first. The President authorized active naval patrols in the western half of the Atlantic, and in July, American troops took the place of British forces guarding Iceland.

Meanwhile, General Marshall and Secretary of War Henry L. Stimson made plans to expand the Army to 1.5 million men. On 27 August 1940, Congress approved inducting the National Guard into federal service and calling up the reserves. A few weeks later the lawmakers passed the Selective Service and Training Act, the first peacetime draft in American history. By mid-1941 the Army had achieved its planned strength, with 27 infantry, 5 armored, and 2 cavalry divisions; 35 air groups; and a host of support units. But it remained far from ready to deploy overseas against well-equipped, experienced, and determined foes.

---

### Next up: The United States Enters the War...

---