

## **9.2 Major Events and Battles of WWII**

### **The War in Europe:**

On September 1, 1939, Hitler launched World War II in Europe when he invaded Poland. The conflict became known as World War II because, like the First World War, it involved the world's major powers. Hitler chose to invade Poland because it stood between Germany and the Soviet Union. Ultimately, Hitler wanted to conquer the Soviet Union (USSR) and use Russia (territory within the USSR) for living space for his new empire. Interestingly, however, Hitler's first step in conquering Russia was to sign a peace treaty with the Soviets. Before invading the USSR to his east, Hitler felt he must defeat the French to his west. Otherwise, the French might come to the Soviet's aid and Germany would be caught in between its two enemies. To avoid this, Hitler lied to Soviet leader, Joseph Stalin, and signed a "non-aggression pact" in which the two agreed not to attack each other. Once he beat the French, Hitler reasoned, Germany could then forget the pact and invade the Soviet Union. Stalin was not fooled, however. He knew what Hitler was planning. Still, he agreed to sign the treaty because he needed additional time to prepare his army and people for the attack he knew would eventually come. Most of Poland fell to the Nazis in less than a month, while the Soviets took the remaining territory as agreed upon in the non-aggression pact. Meanwhile, Great Britain and France responded by declaring war on Germany because of a promise they had made to help defend Poland. Once again, Europe found itself at war.

### **The Fall of France and the Battle of Britain:**

After a lull in the fighting over the winter of 1939, Germany conquered Denmark and Norway in April 1940, and quickly overwhelmed Belgium, the Netherlands, and France less than a month later. As a symbol of redemption for Germany's defeat in WWI, and in an attempt to humiliate the French, Hitler insisted that France sign the armistice ending the fighting in the very train car where Germany had been forced to sign the armistice ending World War I years before. With France now defeated, Hitler hoped to establish peace with Great Britain and turn his attention east. However, once it became evident that Great Britain would not make peace with an aggressor like Germany, Hitler decided that it, too, must be defeated. With the US still neutral and the Soviet Union not yet involved in the fighting, Britain's new Prime Minister, Winston Churchill, found himself standing alone to resist German domination of Europe. Hitler knew that he had to destroy Britain's mighty Royal Air Force before he could cross the English Channel and launch an invasion of England. In the Battle of Britain that raged from July - October 1940, thousands of German planes bombed British airfields and cities. During the almost nightly air raids, residents of London slept in subways for cover and woke up to find more and more of their city reduced to smoke and rubble. Churchill, however, proved to be a great leader who inspired the British people with a strong sense of nationalism and hope. Thanks to the heroism of their Royal Air Force, the British were able to fight off the German assault and resist long enough to force Hitler to give up his plans of invading Great Britain.

### **The United States Enters the War:**

In 1940, Franklin Delano Roosevelt won a third term as president. Although the majority of US citizens favored neutrality, Roosevelt was already convinced that the United States could not afford to stay out of the war much longer. As Britain struggled in its fight against Germany, Roosevelt proclaimed to the United States public, "If Great Britain goes down, all of us in the Americas would be living at the point of a gun. We must be the great arsenal of democracy." In March 1941, Congress passed the Lend-Lease Act. Under this act, the president could send aid to nation whose defense was considered vital to the United States' national security. If the country had no resources to pay for the aid, the US could send it and defer payment until later. Roosevelt helped win public support for this policy by offering the analogy of a neighbor's house being on fire. "If your neighbor's house is on fire," Roosevelt reasoned, "you don't sell him a hose, you give it to him. Then, you take it back after the fire is out. This helps your neighbor and makes sure that the fire doesn't spread to your own house."

## **Pearl Harbor:**

While Hitler steamrolled through Europe, the United States also had one eye on Japan. In response to Japan's military actions in the Pacific, the US imposed an embargo (refusal to ship certain products to a country) on oil and steel. Japan's leaders then set their sights on the rich natural resources of the Dutch East Indies. Before Japan could after the territories it wanted, however, it had to deal with one major problem: the US naval fleet anchored at Pearl Harbor, Hawaii. Although he doubted Japan's ability to win a war with the United States, Japanese Admiral Isoroku Yamamoto knew that his country was determined to expand. He developed an all but impossible plan to sail six aircraft carriers (huge ships that carry war planes) across the Pacific undetected and launched a surprise attack on Pearl Harbor. Maintaining radio silence the entire way, the Japanese ships reached their destination as planned. U.S. intelligence knew that the Japanese were planning an attack of some kind; they just didn't know where. Believing that the waters of Pearl Harbor were too shallow for planes to drop torpedoes (explosive devices that hit the water and then are propelled towards a target), they focused on the Philippines and the threat of sabotage (people trying to damage US military equipment, such as planes parked in hangars). A few minutes before 8 a.m. on December 7, 1941, Japanese airplanes began the first wave of bombings on the Pacific fleet at Pearl Harbor. United States military personnel actually detected the incoming planes on radar but ignored them because they thought they were US planes flying in from the mainland. In less than two hours, the Japanese air attack sank or seriously damaged a dozen naval vessels, destroyed almost 200 warplanes, and killed or wounded nearly 3,000 people. The next day, President Roosevelt emotionally described December 7 as "a day which will live in infamy!" Both houses of Congress approved a declaration of war against Japan and later against Germany and Italy as well. Suddenly, the US was plunged into the middle of World War II.

## **Internment of Japanese, German, and Italian Americans:**

The Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor fueled suspicion and fear among US citizens. Many suspected that Japanese, German, and Italian Americans would end up supporting the Axis Powers. As a result, thousands of such citizens were forced to relocate to internment camps. These camps tended to be located in remote areas and were meant to keep potentially threatening citizens in an isolated location where the government could keep an eye on them. Although many German and Italian Americans were unjustly interned as well, Japanese Americans suffered the most. At President Roosevelt's order, the US military forced more than 100,000 Japanese Americans from their homes and businesses during the war and placed them in one of the various camps. A great number of these Japanese Americans lost everything as a result. Many of them were US citizens who had lived in the United States for several generations. Others had been born in the US to parents who had immigrated from Japan. In 1944, the US Supreme Court ruled that the government internment of Japanese Americans was lawful and justified due to "...the military urgency of the situation." Eventually, in 1983, the United States government formally recognized the injustice that had been done and authorized payments of \$20,000 each to all living Japanese Americans who had suffered under this policy.

## **The War in Europe:**

Three days after Pearl Harbor, Germany and Italy also declared war on the United States. By this time, Hitler had attacked the Soviet Union and was at war with Stalin as well. The United States, Great Britain, and the Soviet Union now stood together as the Allied Powers along with several other nations. After driving the Axis forces out of North Africa and taking parts of Italy, the Allies launched plans for a massive invasion of Western Europe.

## **D-Day:**

The three leaders, Roosevelt, Churchill, and Stalin finally met in December 1943. Because the Soviets had lost millions of lives fighting Germany in Eastern Europe, Stalin desperately wanted the Allies to launch an invasion of France and create a second front against Hitler in Western Europe. After initially being reluctant, the US and Britain finally agreed. They appointed US General Dwight D. Eisenhower to serve as the supreme allied commander in charge of planning Operation Overlord. The operation involved hundreds of thousands of troops and called for the largest amphibious invasion (invasion in which soldiers invade from the sea rather than by crossing borders over land) in military history. The date of the invasion, June 6, 1944, became known as D-Day. Hitting the

beaches at Normandy, France, the first soldiers ashore received overwhelming gunfire. Despite suffering heavy losses, it took the Allies less than a week to get over 500,000 troops ashore. From their established foothold, these forces were able to advance further into France. On August 25, 1944, the Allies fought their way into Paris, liberating the city from four years of German occupation. After successfully fending off Germany's final major attack at the Battle of the Bulge the following winter, the Allies marched on towards Berlin (Germany's capital). With Soviet forces bearing down on the capital, Hitler retreated to his bunker (underground fortress) in an attempt to somehow salvage victory. Even young boys were armed and placed in the areas around Berlin with orders to defend the city with their lives. Finally, in the spring of 1945, Berlin fell before the advancing Soviet army. In the face of certain defeat, Hitler committed suicide on April 30, 1945 rather than be captured. Shortly after, Germany surrendered, ending the war in Europe. Sadly, President Franklin Roosevelt died on April 12 and never saw the day of victory. After many long years of war, people in the Allied countries finally celebrated V-E Day (Victory in Europe Day) on May 8, 1945.

### **The Holocaust:**

The invasion of Europe by the Allies not only brought an end to the war, it also exposed the horrible atrocities committed by the Nazis against people they labeled as socially inferior and unfit to live. Among the groups so targeted, no group suffered in such great numbers as the Jewish people. Hitler had ascended to power in the early 30s in large part due to anti-Semitism (prejudice against Jewish people). He successfully portrayed the Jews as a major reason for Germany's financial problems and began implementing laws and policies that were discriminatory against Jewish citizens. Eventually, this progressed to what Hitler called the "Final Solution" to the "Jewish problem." The Nazis set about attempting to exterminate the Jewish race through mass genocide (murder of a race of people). Under Hitler's regime, Jews were rounded up, separated from their families, and either killed or shipped to concentration camps. In the camps, Jews and other prisoners were either immediately put to death or forced to provide slave labor before finally being executed or dying of disease or starvation. As Allied soldiers began liberating areas of Europe they found gas chambers for conducting mass executions and ovens for burning bodies. Troops also uncovered mass graves where victims had been thrown after they'd been killed or left to die in the camps. Roughly six million Jews died during this horrible episode in history known as the Holocaust.

### **War in the Pacific:**

Within hours of the attack on Pearl Harbor, Japan also attacked the Philippines, destroying nearly half of the US airplanes stationed there. A few days later, Japanese forces invaded and eventually took the islands. More than 75,000 U.S. soldiers and Filipinos became prisoners of war as a result. Forced to walk roughly 60 miles to trains waiting to carry them to prisoner of war camps, many of these prisoners died from injuries, sickness, and harsh treatment along the way. The horrid event was labeled the Bataan Death March and those held responsible for it were eventually tried as criminals after the war. The war in the Pacific had gotten off to a disastrous start for the United States. Not only was one of its most gifted military leaders, General Douglas MacArthur, forced to abandon the Philippines, but the attack at Pearl Harbor badly damaged its Pacific Fleet. Fortunately for the U.S., the aircraft carriers that the Japanese had hoped to destroy in the attack were not in port on December 7 and were still functioning. This proved to be crucial as the United States tried to turn the tide of the war in the Pacific.

### **The Battle of Midway and Island Hopping:**

Admiral Yamamoto, considered a military genius for orchestrating the attack on Pearl Harbor, felt that the remainder of the US Pacific Fleet must be destroyed if Japan had any hope of winning the war. He hoped to meet the U.S. Navy in a decisive battle before it could fully recover from Pearl Harbor. The Battle of Midway in June 1942 proved to be a turning point in the war. This time, it was the Japanese who failed to detect the location of its enemy's aircraft carriers and US planes were able to attack the Japanese as they were still attempting to load bombs onto their planes. Midway greatly boosted the morale of the United States' Pacific forces and allowed the US to finally go on offense in its war with Japan. The United States decided to advance on Japan from two directions. The first path was across the central Pacific under Admiral Chester Nimitz. The second was from the south under General MacArthur and Admiral William Halsey and involved an invasion of the Philippines. MacArthur argued strongly for such an invasion because he had publicly sworn he would return to liberate the islands after being

ordered to abandon them at the war's outset. The United States then began a process of island hopping, in which it attacked and conquered one group of islands, then moved on to the next as its forces made their way to Japan. In the South, MacArthur reached the Philippines and, in dramatic fashion, waded ashore before rolling news cameras to proclaim, "People of the Philippines, I have returned." As US troops fought their way inland, the largest naval battle in history raged off shore in the Battle of Leyte Gulf. In desperation, the Japanese turned to the use of kamikaze pilots to try and avoid defeat. Kamikazes were pilots who committed suicide by intentionally crashing their planes into US ships in an attempt to sink them. Meanwhile, Nimitz's forces won key battles at Guadalcanal, Iwo Jima, and Okinawa. Each battle was extremely fierce and bloody. Although overpowered, Japanese soldiers often preferred fighting to the death rather than surrendering.

### **The Atomic Bomb:**

The capture of Okinawa cleared the way for an invasion of Japan that would end the war. The invasion never happened. Soon after entering the war, the U.S. began work on developing the atomic bomb. The top secret endeavor was called the Manhattan Project. J. Robert Oppenheimer headed the project and most of the development took place in laboratories at Los Alamos, New Mexico. On July 16, 1945, scientists tested the new weapon in the New Mexico desert. The flash was blinding and the explosion so great that it shattered windows 125 miles away. Meanwhile, the new president, Harry S. Truman, was at the Potsdam Conference discussing postwar policies with Prime Minister Churchill and Joseph Stalin. Among the conditions of the Potsdam Declaration, the allied leaders restated their policy of "unconditional surrender." In other words, the Allies would only accept a surrender in which the Allies dictated the terms of peace without the defeated Japanese insisting on any conditions. When the Japanese refused to surrender unconditionally, but instead insisted that they be given a guarantee that the position of the Emperor would be protected, Truman authorized the use of the bomb. On August 6, 1945, a specially equipped B29 bomber called the Enola Gay, dropped the first atomic bomb on Hiroshima, Japan. The blast leveled the city and killed thousands of civilians and military personnel. Many more died later from radiation released in the blast. Two days later, the Soviet Union declared war on Japan and invaded Manchuria. When Japan delayed in issuing its surrender, the U.S. dropped another bomb on August 9 on the city of Nagasaki. In the face of the massive death and destruction caused by these attacks, and with the Soviet Union now involved in the fighting, Japan finally surrendered on August 14, 1945. World War II was over. The next day the US celebrated V-J Day (Victory over Japan Day). Although the world was shocked by the power of the atomic bomb, Truman defended his decision to use it. He pointed out that by dropping the bomb, an invasion of Japan had been avoided, thereby saving the lives of Allied soldiers.