



Chapter 36

Fighting World War II

What military strategies did the United States and its allies pursue to defeat the Axis powers in World War II?

36.1 Introduction

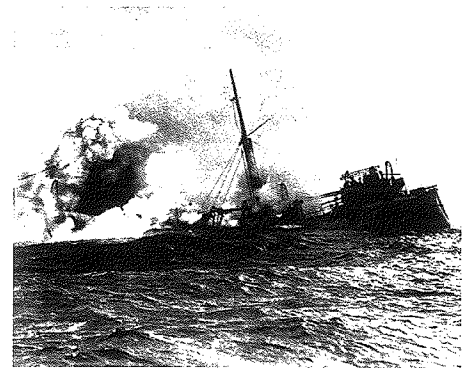
After the attack on Pearl Harbor, the United States began mobilizing troops for war. Some of these soldiers would end up in Europe, fighting the German army. First, though, they had to cross the Atlantic Ocean on troop ships, braving attacks by Germany's deadly U-boat fleet.

Since the start of the war, in 1939, German U-boats had been working to disrupt and destroy Allied shipping in the Atlantic. During this phase of the war, known as the Battle of the Atlantic, U-boats sank thousands of ships carrying vital war supplies.

When the United States entered the war, its Atlantic coastal waters were relatively unprotected. Freighters and oil tankers sailed along the coast without military escort. U-boats began to prowl the area, sinking ships on the East Coast and in the Gulf of Mexico. The United States was not prepared to respond to these attacks. It did not have enough naval vessels. Nor, at this point, did it require coastal cities to observe nighttime blackouts. The city lights made it possible for U-boats to spot ships as they entered or left American ports, thus making them easy prey for German torpedoes.

During the first several months of 1942, U-boats sank dozens of American ships off the Atlantic Coast. At night, coastal residents could hear the hum of U-boats just off shore. They could even see ships burning at sea. Oil spills and debris from wrecked ships washed up on beaches all along the East Coast.

These losses would not continue, however. As in World War I, the Allies reduced their losses by using the convoy system. Destroyers and other naval vessels would surround and protect unarmed ships. In addition, the United States began a feverish period of shipbuilding. By 1943, it was churning out enough ships to replace lost vessels and to defend against U-boat attacks. This new U.S. fleet would play a key role in naval battles and in supporting ground and air forces during World War II.



In 1939, German U-boats began attacking Allied shipping in the Battle of the Atlantic. The U-boats prowled in groups called "wolf packs." Eventually the convoy system, as well as increased American shipbuilding, helped turn the tide against the Germans.

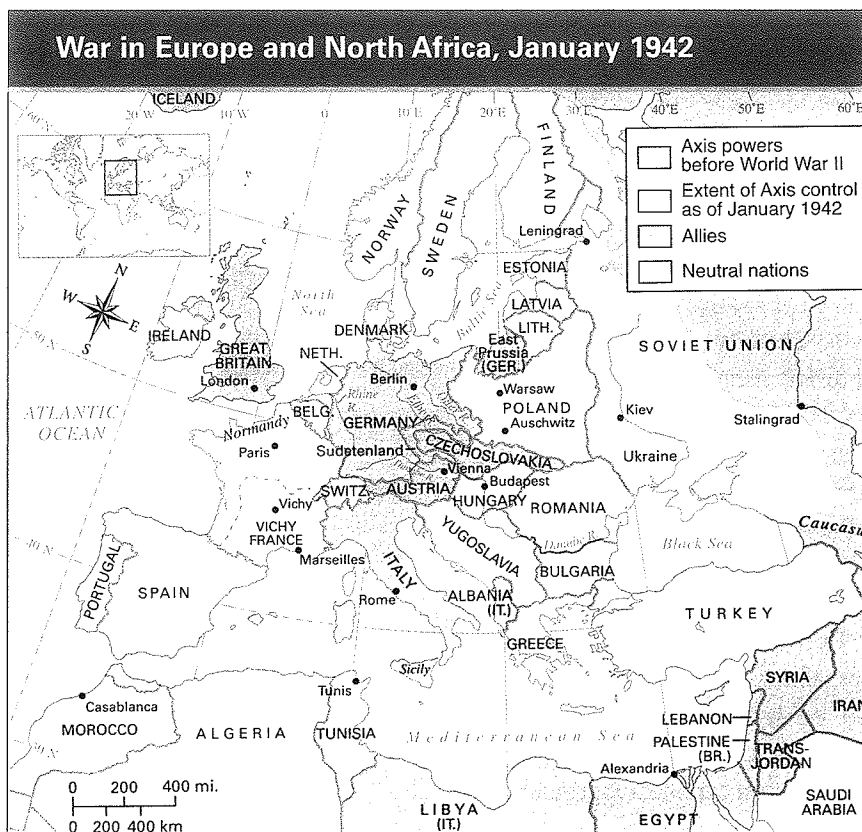
36.2 Preparing for War in Europe

In late December 1941, Franklin Roosevelt and Winston Churchill met in Washington, D.C. Their purpose was to devise a strategy to help the Allies defeat the Axis powers. They knew they could not afford to fight an offensive war on two fronts—Europe and the Pacific—at the same time. So, at this early date, they decided on a strategy of “Europe First.” They would concentrate most of their forces on winning back Europe, while initially fighting a defensive war against Japan in the Pacific.

Axis Powers Roll Across Europe into North Africa By the time the United States entered World War II, the Axis powers controlled most of Europe. Great Britain had saved itself by fighting off an intense German air attack during the Battle of Britain. But the country was running out of money and resources. On the eastern front, the Nazis had invaded the Soviet Union, using blitzkrieg tactics to overcome Soviet troops massed at the border. One large German force nearly reached Moscow before the onset of winter froze it in its tracks. Another force marched toward the Soviet Union’s oil-rich Caucasus region.

Oil played a key role in Axis strategy. Hitler already controlled oil fields in Romania, but he sought more oil to keep his war machine running. He also hoped to cut off Allied oil from the Middle East. But first he had to secure North Africa by pushing the British out of Egypt. In 1941, Hitler sent Field Marshal Erwin Rommel and his Afrika Korps, a tank-based German army division, to join the Italian army already in North Africa. By June 1942, Rommel’s force had taken much of the region and had driven deep into Egypt.

The Axis powers controlled much of Europe and North Africa at the start of 1942. The size of Axis-controlled territory suggests the huge task facing the Allies as they considered strategies for fighting the war.



Europeans Suffer Under German

Occupation In German-occupied Europe, many people were suffering. Some lived under puppet governments, like Vichy France. Others endured harsh military rule. The SS, a brutal military unit within the Nazi Party, forced millions of Europeans to work in the German arms industry. The SS treated Russians, Poles, and other Slavs with special contempt, partly because Hitler claimed the Slavs were subhuman. The Nazis worked them to death and killed large groups of them outright.

No group suffered more than the Jews. Hitler had long been obsessed with the “Jewish question”—how to rid Germany of Jews. He had stripped Jews of their civil rights, had them beaten or killed, and confined them to concentration camps. As Germany expanded, more Jews came under Nazi control. Thus, the “Jewish question” grew more critical. Hitler forced Jews from

all over Europe into overcrowded ghettos, small sections of cities that could be walled off and guarded. The largest ghetto established by the Nazis was the Warsaw Ghetto in Poland. Thousands of people died in the ghettos from starvation and disease.

Gradually, the Nazis decided on what they called the “final solution.” As part of this plan, they would systematically exterminate the Jews. The slaughter began in the Soviet Union, shortly after the invasion in 1941. Mobile killing squads rounded up and murdered thousands of Soviet Jews at a time. In early 1942, the Nazis built the first of six death camps in Poland. Jews, many from ghettos, were shipped to these camps by rail, often packed into cattle cars.

Unlike regular concentration camps, these death camps were equipped with gas chambers. Camp operators sealed groups of Jews and other prisoners inside these rooms and turned on the poison gas, usually carbon monoxide. Pregnant women, young children, the elderly, and the sick were killed soon after they arrived. Able-bodied prisoners were kept alive as long as they could work, often at a nearby factory. Each death camp could kill tens of thousands of people each month. In addition to Jews, the Nazis also gassed homosexuals, disabled people, captured Soviet soldiers, and Gypsies, among others.



The Nazis built death camps to imprison and kill Jews and other “undesirables.” The largest and most lethal of these camps was at Auschwitz, in Poland, where the Nazis used poison gas to murder more than a million people. This photograph shows bones piled up at Majdanek, another camp in Poland.

Allied Leaders Debate War Strategies When Roosevelt and Churchill met in Washington in 1941, they knew nothing about the Nazis’ “final solution.” Their goal was to figure out how to win the war in Europe. To do this, they had to choose from a number of possible strategies.

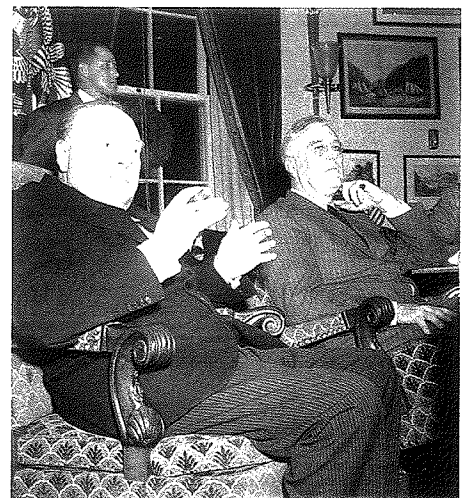
At the time, the Allies had limited resources. For a few months at least, while the United States gathered troops and war materials, the Allies would have to focus on defending territory against the Axis powers. After that, they would go on the attack, but they had to decide where.

They had several choices. Occupied France was a possibility, because the French people would support such an invasion. Also, nearby Britain could serve as a staging area for the massing of troops and resources before the assault. But the German army had a strong presence in France that would make such an invasion extremely difficult.

Some thought a direct attack on Italy made more sense. The Italian army was fairly weak, and Italy would provide a good base for securing the rest of Europe. Sailing through the U-boat-infested waters of the Mediterranean, however, would be dangerous.

Others wanted to launch the Allied offensive in North Africa, which was not as well defended and could serve as a gateway to Europe. But it was also far from the ultimate target, Germany, so it would test the Allies’ ability to transport and maintain their forces.

Another plan called for moving troops into the Soviet Union to help the Soviet Red Army push back the Germans. The USSR, now one of the Allies, greatly needed its partners’ help. But transporting and supplying forces so far from home would require a massive effort.



British Prime Minister Winston Churchill and President Franklin Roosevelt met several times during the war to plan strategy. They developed a strong relationship based on mutual respect.

36.3 War in Europe, 1942–1945

Britain's choice of strategy in early 1942 was clear. Already caught up in the battle against Rommel's forces, Churchill wanted the Allies to strike North Africa first. In contrast, the Soviet leader, Joseph Stalin, wanted an invasion of France to take pressure off his weakened army. Roosevelt's top military advisor, General George C. Marshall, also supported this option. But this plan had two problems. First, the U.S. Army did not have enough trained combat forces. That meant the exhausted British army would have to do most of the fighting. Second, German U-boats were sinking ships at an alarming pace in the North Atlantic. Transporting masses of soldiers and supplies to a staging area in Britain would be a dangerous, perhaps disastrous, process. In June, Roosevelt made his decision. U.S. forces would invade North Africa, starting in the fall.

Allies Invade North Africa and Italy In November 1942, Allied forces made sea landings in Morocco and Algeria. Led by the American general Dwight D. Eisenhower, they swept east into Tunisia. The Germans quickly sent reinforcements across the Mediterranean. Meanwhile, British forces stopped Rommel and forced him out of Egypt. Rommel's Afrika Korps retreated west toward Tunisia, with the British in hot pursuit.

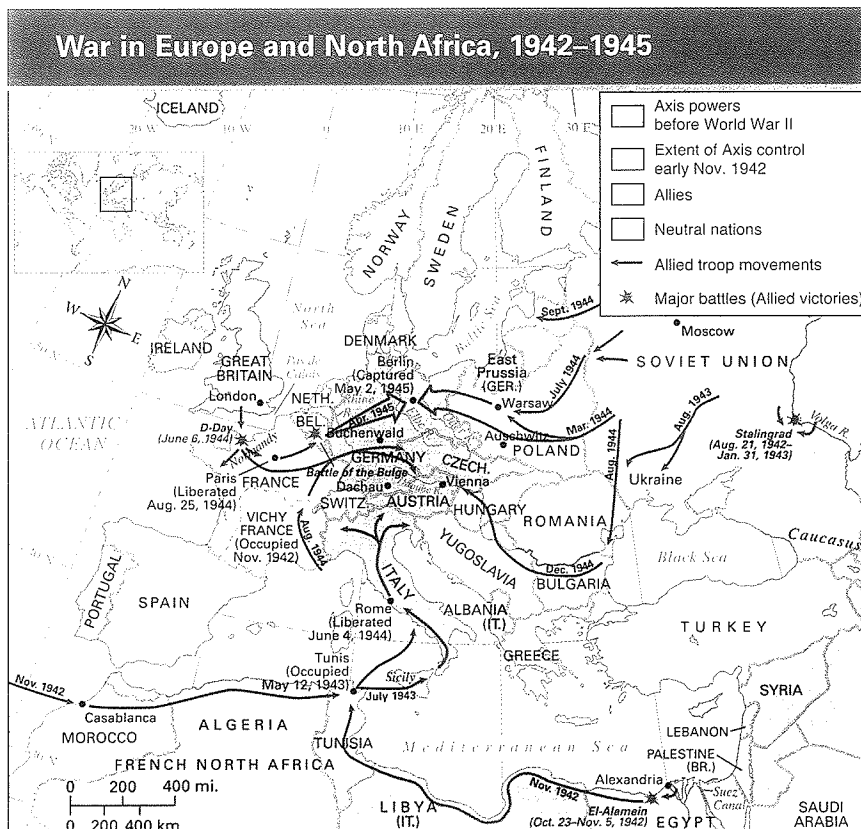
American soldiers did their first fighting of the war in a series of battles in the winter of 1942–1943. The U.S. II Corps, which saw much of the action in North Africa, benefited from the leadership of two generals—first George Patton and then Omar Bradley. They helped the combined Allied armies launch a final offensive in May 1943. Axis resistance in the region collapsed, leaving about

250,000 German and Italian soldiers in the hands of the Allies.

Using North Africa as a staging area, the Allies crossed the Mediterranean into Sicily, a large island in southern Italy. The massive Allied assault in July 1943 met little opposition at first. The success of the invasion put a scare into Italy's political leaders. Mussolini's North Africa campaign and several other failures had caused them to lose faith in *Il Duce*. The Fascist Grand Council met on July 24 and voted to restore the king and parliament. Mussolini resigned the next day. Italy soon surrendered to the Allies. Its government signed an armistice in September and declared war on Germany the next month.

German forces were still in Italy, however. As the Allies marched north, the Germans battled them every inch of the way. By October, the Allied army had taken about a third of the Italian peninsula, but they did not get much farther that year.

The Allies carefully planned how to free Europe from Axis control. Their strategy called for massive invasions of Axis-held territory. The ultimate focus of the Allied thrust was the German capital of Berlin, where Hitler had his headquarters.



A solid German defensive line completely stopped the Allies about 60 miles south of Rome, the Italian capital.

Soviets Fight Alone at Stalingrad The decision to invade North Africa had left the Soviets on their own. Hitler now had the chance to crush the USSR with a new summer offensive. Starting in June 1942, Axis troops thrust farther into Soviet territory. Hitler split his forces so they could seize the rest of the Caucasus and also take Stalingrad, a large city on the Volga River. At Stalingrad, German firebombs set most of the city on fire, but Stalin forbade his soldiers to retreat. “Not a step back!” he ordered. By mid-September, Axis troops had a large Soviet force trapped in a strip of the city along the Volga.

Fierce street-by-street fighting followed for two months. Then, in November, the Soviet Red Army began a **counteroffensive**, launching its defensive forces against the Nazi assault. In a few days, the Soviets had encircled the German troops. Hitler insisted that his soldiers fight to the death, which most of them did. In January 1943, the remains of the German force, starving and frozen, surrendered to the Soviets.

The **Battle of Stalingrad** cost Germany more than 200,000 troops, while more than a million Soviet soldiers died. Nevertheless, the USSR had forced the Germans to retreat, giving up all they had gained after June 1942, including the Caucasus.

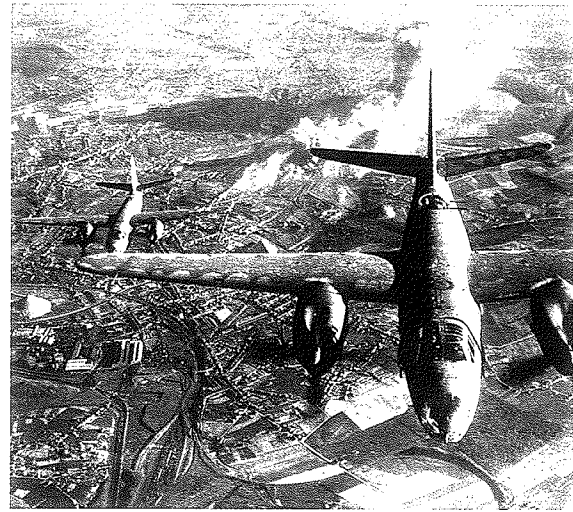
Taking the War to the Germans by Air With the loss of the Caucasus, Hitler had only one major source of oil—Romania. The Romanian oil fields became a prime target of Allied strategic bombing. Strategic bombing involves hitting vital targets to destroy the enemy’s war-making capacity.

American pilots in B-24 Liberator and B-17 Flying Fortress bombers typically launched daytime raids. They favored **precision bombing** of specific targets. Flying at high altitude to avoid antiaircraft fire, they dropped bombs on oil refineries, rail yards, factories, and U-boat bases. By the end of the war, Germany’s infrastructure and economy were in ruins.

British pilots relied mainly on **saturation bombing**, the rapid release of a large number of bombs over a wide area. They usually flew nighttime raids over enemy cities. The strategy behind the bombing of cities, with its appalling loss of life, was to destroy civilian morale and force a surrender. This strategy turned German cities like Dresden and Hamburg into rubble-strewn graveyards, but it did not bring an early end to the war.

In August 1944, American planes dropped more than a thousand bombs on an oil-production facility in Poland. Five miles to the west stood Auschwitz, the largest Nazi death camp. Jewish organizations, the War Refugee Board, and others urged the government to bomb Auschwitz. If the gas chambers or nearby rail lines were destroyed, they said, thousands of lives could be saved.

American military officials opposed bombing Auschwitz. They said they could not afford to divert resources from military targets. They also claimed that such bombing might kill many prisoners. Elie Wiesel, who had been a prisoner at Auschwitz, said he would have welcomed the bombs anyway. “We were no longer afraid of death; at any rate, not of that death,” he recalled. “Every bomb filled us with joy and gave us new confidence in life.”



The Allies’ strategy for winning the war included destroying vital German facilities. Long-range bombers carried out round-the-clock raids on Germany. They hit oil fields, factories, railroads, and other key targets. Through this strategic bombing, they hoped to destroy Germany’s capacity to wage war.

Operation Overlord Opens a New Front in France In the end, the Allies decided not to bomb Auschwitz because doing so would not hasten the end of the war. To meet that objective, the military focused most of its efforts in 1944 on the invasion of France. They code-named this mission Operation Overlord.

General Eisenhower directed the invasion. At his command were about 1,200 warships, 800 transport ships, 4,000 landing craft, 10,000 airplanes, and hundreds of tanks. Troops would cross the English Channel by ship and land on the beaches of Normandy, in northern France. **D-Day**—the day the invasion began—was June 6, 1944. Eisenhower sent off his first wave of 156,000 troops with a message of hope: “You will bring about the destruction of the German war machine, the elimination of Nazi tyranny over the oppressed peoples of Europe, and security for ourselves in a free world.” He knew that many of these men would not return.

The landing craft unloaded Allied troops on Normandy’s five beaches, while warships provided covering gunfire from offshore. German gun batteries took aim at the mass of invading soldiers, who by now were wading ashore, crawling along the sand, and climbing the dunes and cliffs. One soldier later described his arrival at Omaha Beach, scene of the bloodiest fighting:

It seemed like the whole world exploded. There was gunfire from battle-ships, destroyers, and cruisers. The bombers were still hitting the beaches. As we went in, we could see small craft from the 116th Infantry that had gone in ahead, sunk. There were bodies bobbing in the water, even out three or four miles.

—Lt. Robert Edlin, from Gerald Astor, *June 6, 1944: The Voices of D-Day*

After the chaos of the landing, the soldiers regrouped. By the end of the first day, the Allies held the entire 59-mile section of the Normandy coast. In July, the American army, under General Bradley, and the British army, under General Bernard Montgomery, began a rapid sweep across France. In August, the Allies liberated Paris. In September, the first American GIs crossed the German border.

President Ronald Reagan later described the D-Day invasion of France as the first step in the Allied attempt to “seize back the continent of Europe.” At least 2,500 American, British, and Canadian soldiers died in this effort. Their sacrifices helped turn the tide of the war and end Nazi hopes for world domination.



Allies Liberate Nazi Concentration Camps As the Americans carried out the invasion of France, the Red Army chased a retreating German force out of the Soviet Union and into Poland. SS officials frantically tried to hide evidence of concentration camps in Poland. They cleared out many of the forced-labor camps, marching prisoners westward and shooting any who fell behind. They also tried to dismantle some of the death camps, quickly killing the remaining prisoners. With the Red Army closing in on Auschwitz, the Nazis crowded about 60,000 Jews and others onto freight trains and shipped them west into Germany. The survivors ended up in camps such as Buchenwald and Dachau.

Allied soldiers fighting their way through Germany stumbled upon concentration camps. These camps, though not as grim as the death camps of Poland, shocked the soldiers. The camps held thousands of slave laborers, starved to near death. Many of these “living skeletons,” too sick to even eat, died in the weeks after they were liberated. At Dachau, the smell of rotting flesh led GIs to 28 railway cars packed with dead bodies. They also uncovered evidence of medical research. SS doctors at the camp had carried out inhumane experiments on more than 3,500 prisoners.

The Nazis had committed crimes so reprehensible that no word existed to describe them. In 1944, a Polish Jew coined the term **genocide** to refer to the systematic killing of a racial, political, or cultural group. The Nazis killed some 6 million Jews, or about 40 percent of the world’s Jewish population. An existing word that meant “sacrifice by fire”—*holocaust*—was capitalized and applied to this massive slaughter. The **Holocaust** was the systematic, state-sponsored persecution and murder of Jews and other minority groups by the Nazis.

The War in Europe Ends with Germany’s Surrender When the Allies crossed from France into Germany, they met fierce resistance. By December 1944, their offensive had stalled. Hitler made plans to burst through the Allied lines in the wooded Ardennes region of Belgium, where the American forces were weakest. He launched his counteroffensive on December 16. Eight German armored divisions smashed into the surprised Americans, creating a huge bulge in the American line. Allied air support and quick action by Patton’s Third Army forced the Germans to withdraw by mid-January. The Battle of the Bulge was the last German offensive on the western front.

By April 1945, the Red Army had fought its way through Poland and into Germany to the outskirts of Berlin. On April 30, with advancing Soviet soldiers just half a mile from his Berlin bunker, Hitler killed himself. German forces quickly began surrendering, and at midnight on May 8, the war in Europe officially ended. President Roosevelt did not live to celebrate Victory in Europe Day, or V-E Day. He had died on April 12. The new president, Harry S. Truman, dedicated the victory to Franklin Roosevelt.



The Granger Collection, New York

A GI described the newly freed inmates of Dachau: “Many of them were Jews. They were wearing black and white striped prison suits and round caps. A few had shredded blanket rags draped over their shoulders . . . The prisoners struggled to their feet [and] shuffled weakly out of the compound. They were like skeletons—all skin and bones.”

36.4 Preparing for War in the Pacific

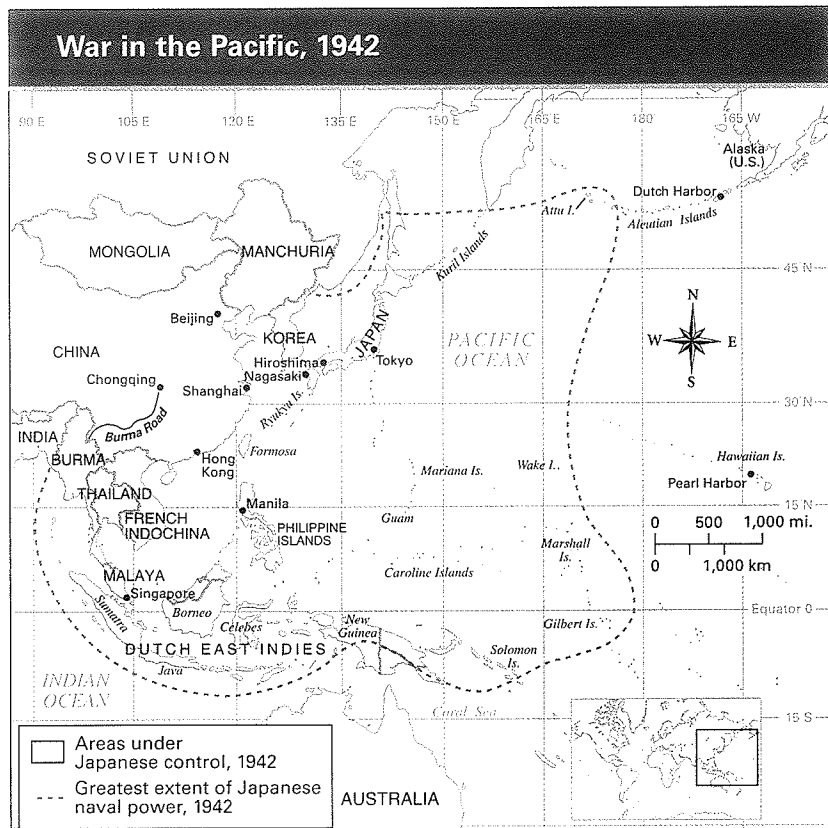
World War II took a very different course in Asia and the Pacific. After the shock of the Pearl Harbor attack, American forces in the Pacific needed several months to regroup. During this time, Japan took control of much of the region's natural resources, including oil and rubber. Through conquest, Japan formed what it called the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere. The "Co-Prosperity" in the title had nothing to do with sharing the wealth. Instead, Japan's goal was its own economic self-sufficiency, along with expanded political influence.

The Japanese Advance in Asia and the Pacific Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor was just the first in a series of strikes against Allied territory in the Pacific. By the end of March 1942, the Japanese had captured British Hong Kong and Singapore, the American islands of Guam and Wake, and the oil-rich Dutch East Indies. Japan had also invaded several larger possessions of the Allies, including the American-held Philippine Islands and the British colony of Burma.

In the Philippines, Americans and Filipinos under General Douglas MacArthur resisted a fierce Japanese onslaught. Disease and malnutrition killed many of the defenders. In March, Roosevelt ordered MacArthur to leave the islands. Upon his departure, the general promised, "I shall return." Two months later, Japan completed its conquest of the Philippines. On the largest island, the Japanese rounded up 70,000 starving, exhausted American and Filipino prisoners and marched them up the Bataan Peninsula near Manila to a prison camp. During the brutal 63-mile march, Japanese soldiers beat and bayoneted many of the prisoners. More than 7,000 died on the infamous Bataan Death March.

By mid-1942, Japan had taken Southeast Asia and much of the Central and South Pacific. Japan even captured the westernmost islands of Alaska's Aleutian chain. In August 1943, Allied troops finally pushed the Japanese out of the Aleutians.

The fall of the British colony of Burma, in May 1942, had serious consequences for China. Japan already controlled most of coastal China, including the main ports. No supplies could reach the Chinese army by sea. China relied on British and American supplies carried in from India over the Burma Road. Now Japan had cut this lifeline. If Japan defeated China, hundreds of thousands of Japanese soldiers would be free to fight elsewhere. To help China keep fighting, the Allies set up an airborne supply route over the Himalayas.



The Pacific War Begins in the Air and at Sea Japan's string of victories in the Pacific hurt American confidence. To boost morale, Roosevelt urged his military chiefs to strike directly at the Japanese home islands. They came up with a plan to fly B-25 bombers off an aircraft carrier. The B-25 could make a short takeoff and also had the range to presumably reach Japan and then land at Allied airfields in China.

On April 18, 1942, 16 bombers took off from the carrier *Hornet*, which had sailed to within 650 miles of Japan. Led by pilot Lieutenant Colonel James Doolittle, the bombers hit Tokyo and other Japanese cities. Although the bombs did little damage, this surprise attack thrilled Americans as much as it shocked the Japanese. Japan reacted by putting more precious resources into defending the home islands. It also decided to try to destroy the remaining American fleet, a plan that would prove disastrous.

During Doolittle's raid, American code breakers got news of enemy activity far to the south in the Coral Sea. Japan was moving into position to isolate Australia, a key American ally. To stop the Japanese, Admiral Chester Nimitz sent two aircraft carriers, several cruisers, and a few destroyers—all he could spare at the time. They would face a larger Japanese force that included three carriers.

The resulting Battle of the Coral Sea, in early May 1942, was fought entirely by carrier-based aircraft. It was the first naval battle in history in which the enemies' warships never came within sight of each other. Japanese aircraft sank the carrier *Lexington* and damaged the *Yorktown*. American planes sank one Japanese carrier and damaged the other two. Despite fairly even losses, the Americans gained a strategic victory. They blocked Japanese expansion to the south, and they learned a valuable lesson—the Japanese navy could be beaten.



American commanders faced a tough challenge in the Pacific campaign. Until the war in Europe was over, they had limited resources for fighting the Japanese. They had to devise a strategy to hold Japan in check until more soldiers and supplies became available.

Military Leaders Consider Their Options in the Pacific The “Europe First” strategy put Pacific commanders at a disadvantage. Because they had fewer ships, planes, and soldiers than the Japanese, a defensive strategy made sense. American naval forces would try to contain the Japanese, stopping their expansion in the Central and South Pacific. Critics in the navy pointed out that this strategy allowed the Japanese to strengthen their hold on newly won territories, making those lands harder to win back later. As part of the defensive strategy, these critics advised keeping the Japanese off balance with occasional attacks.

Some navy officials wanted to go on the offensive, and they debated different strategies. One idea was to build air bases in the Aleutian Islands, the part of Alaska that extends westward toward Japan. But pilots and their crews would have had to deal with the snow, wind, and fog that afflicted this region. Also, all supplies would have had to be shipped in from the U.S. mainland.

Another idea was to build bases in China. China's coast would have made an ideal staging area for an air assault on nearby Japan. However, the fuel, bombs, and parts needed to keep bombers in the air could best be delivered by sea, and the Japanese controlled China's ports. Inland air bases might have worked, but they would have had to be supplied by planes flying over the Himalayas from India.

A third offensive option called for liberating Japanese-held territory in the Pacific. By first freeing islands far from Japan, American forces could gradually move closer to get within B-29 striking distance. This would take time, though, and Japanese resistance would stiffen the closer the Americans got to Japan. Many of the islands were well fortified, so American casualties would be high.



The U.S. Marines recruited 29 Navajos to become code talkers. They used a code that replaced military terms with Navajo words. The code word for submarine was *beshe-lo*, or “iron fish” in Navajo, while the word for dive-bomber was *gini*, or “chicken hawk.” Japan was never able to break the Navajo code.

American forces in the Pacific used a leapfrogging strategy to move steadily toward Japan. Along the way, the fighting grew more vicious as Japanese resistance increased.

36.5 War in the Pacific, 1942–1945

The Americans led the Allied forces in the Pacific and did most of the fighting. When they went on the offensive, they chose a strategy of liberating Japanese-held islands in the Pacific and using them as stepping-stones. Each captured island served as a base for assaults on other islands as the Allied forces moved closer to Japan.

One of the keys to Allied success in the Pacific was the use of secret codes. The United States trained a special group of Navajo Indian “code talkers” for this task. Because Navajo is not a written language and is understood by very few people, it made an excellent basis for a code to transmit vital information. The Navajo code talkers played a key role in the Pacific campaign.

The Japanese Offensive Ends at the Battle of Midway Before the Allies could go on the offensive, they had to stop Japanese expansion. They achieved this goal at the **Battle of Midway**, in June 1942. The Americans intercepted a Japanese message telling of plans for a major offensive. They figured out that the target was the U.S. base at Midway, a pair of islands about 1,200 miles northwest of Pearl Harbor. With this knowledge, the navy sat in wait for the Japanese fleet.

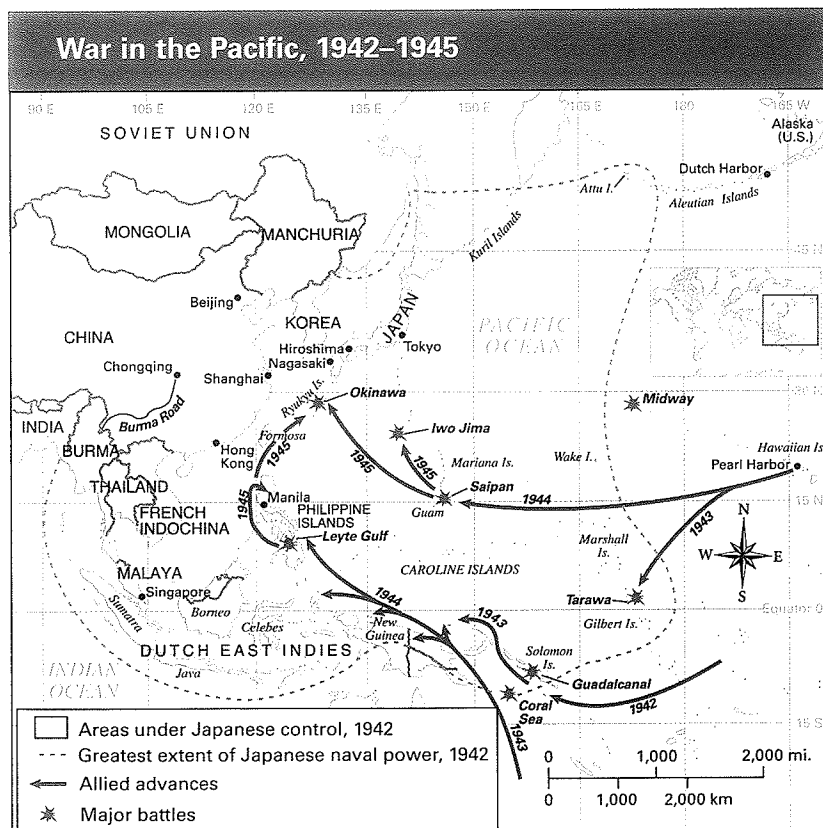
At Midway, Japanese naval strategists hoped to destroy the U.S. Pacific Fleet, which had been their plan since Doolittle’s raid on Tokyo. Instead, the U.S. Navy won a resounding victory. American planes from Midway and from three aircraft carriers demolished the enemy force, destroying all four Japanese carriers, a cruiser, and about 300 aircraft. Japan never recovered from the loss

of the carriers and so many experienced pilots. The Battle of Midway was Japan’s last offensive action. From then on, Japan would focus on defense.

Liberating the Pacific Islands Proves Costly

A strategy known as **leapfrogging** enabled the Americans to go on the offensive with limited resources. They would often leapfrog, or bypass, a heavily defended island and then capture a nearby island that was not well defended. The captured island was then used as an airbase to bomb the Japanese-held island and prevent ships from resupplying it. Cut off from reinforcements and supplies, the Japanese forces would be left to wither. General MacArthur described this leapfrogging approach as “hit ‘em where they ain’t—let ‘em die on the vine.”

Despite the success of leapfrogging, many of the island invasions came at a terrible cost. Thousands of soldiers died in the jungles of Guadalcanal, New Guinea, Tarawa, and Saipan. But they kept pushing the Japanese back, closer



and closer to the home islands. In October 1944, MacArthur made his triumphant return to the Philippines, where his forces would battle the Japanese until the end of the war. In August 1944, the marines finished retaking the Mariana Islands. The Marianas campaign was a landmark victory. It gave the Allied Pacific force secure bases from which long-range B-29s could make strategic bombing raids on Japan.

The Final Push Toward Japan Brings Heavy Losses The Allied push through the Pacific steadily shrank the defensive perimeter that Japan had established around the home islands. That perimeter would all but disappear if the Allies could capture the key islands of Iwo Jima and Okinawa. Iwo Jima's airfields would offer a place for B-29s to land in an emergency. They would also serve as a base for fighter planes escorting bombers over Japan. Control of Okinawa, just 310 miles south of Japan, would give Americans a prime staging area for the invasion of Japan. To meet these threats, Japanese military leaders moved their best army units from Japan and China to defend the two strategic islands.

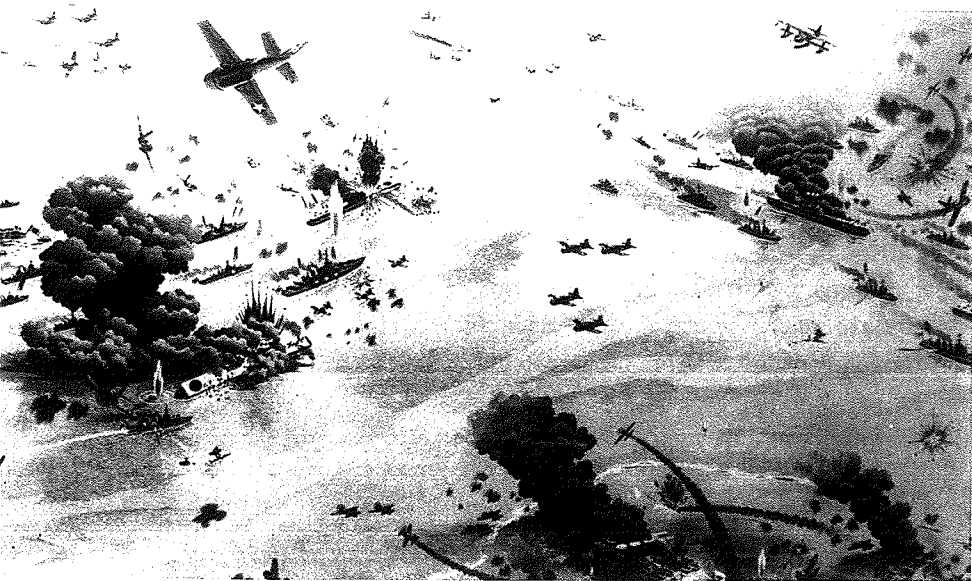
On the small volcanic island of Iwo Jima, the defenders dug caves, tunnels, and concrete-lined bunkers. Three months of Allied bombardment before the February 1945 invasion did little to soften the defense. The month-long Battle of Iwo Jima was among the bloodiest of the war. Nearly all of the 22,000 Japanese troops followed their commander's orders to fight to the death. To win the island, more than 6,800 American troops died. Admiral Nimitz noted that on Iwo Jima, "uncommon valor was a common virtue."

To take the much larger island of Okinawa, the Allies mounted a huge amphibious, or sea-to-land, invasion in April 1945. More than 1,200 American and British ships, including 40 aircraft carriers, supported a combined army-marine force of 182,000. As on Iwo Jima, the 120,000 troops defending Okinawa strongly resisted the American invaders. The bloody combat at the **Battle of Okinawa**, much of it hand-to-hand, continued for two months. It claimed the lives of some 12,000 American soldiers and more than 100,000 Japanese soldiers.

Meanwhile, another kind of combat was taking place in the surrounding waters. Earlier in the Pacific war, the Japanese had introduced a new weapon — **kamikaze** pilots. Hundreds of men flew their bomb-filled planes directly into the vessels of the Allied fleet. Kamikaze attacks sank or damaged hundreds of ships. But they failed to sink any aircraft carriers, which were their main targets.



Scientific advances helped win the war in the Pacific. New antiaircraft guns, radar, and other military technology enhanced combat operations. Improved medicines and blood products also helped save lives on the battlefield.



The Battle of Midway in 1942 marked a turning point in the war in the Pacific. The American victory in this air-and-sea battle halted Japan's advance and forced it to go on the defensive for the rest of the war.



The atomic bombs dropped on Japan had a devastating effect. The searing heat from the blasts turned thousands of people into ash. Birds caught fire in midflight. Clothing, trees, and wooden buildings exploded into flames. Survivors suffered from severe burns, radiation sickness, and, later, cancer.

The Manhattan Project Develops a Top Secret Weapon The stage was now set for an invasion of Japan. But the United States had its scientists working on another option. In 1939, German American scientist Albert Einstein had written to President Roosevelt explaining that scientists might soon be able to turn uranium into a new form of energy. That energy, he said, could be harnessed to build “extremely powerful bombs.” Einstein expressed his fear that Germany was already engaged in experiments to create such an **atomic bomb**. The power of this explosive weapon comes from the energy suddenly released by splitting the nuclei of uranium or plutonium atoms.

Three years after Einstein sent his letter, the government established the **Manhattan Project**, a top-secret program to develop an atomic weapon. A team of scientists, many of whom had fled fascist nations in Europe, carried on the research and development. Much of the work took place at a lab in Los Alamos, New Mexico. By the summer of 1945, their efforts had produced the first atomic bomb. On July 16, that test bomb was exploded on a remote air base in the New Mexico desert. Physicist J. Robert Oppenheimer witnessed the blinding flash of light, intense heat, and violent shock wave that the bomb produced. He later said the blast reminded him of a line from Hindu scripture: “I am become Death, the destroyer of worlds.”

Truman Faces a Decision to Drop the Bomb After the successful test of the atomic bomb, or A-bomb, President Truman had to decide whether to drop the bomb on Japan or to launch an invasion. After Iwo Jima and Okinawa, Truman knew an invasion would produce enormous casualties. The number of Allies killed and wounded might reach half a million, he was told.

Truman faced a stubborn enemy. American B-29s were already destroying Japan with conventional bombs, including incendiaries. These firebombs killed hundreds of thousands of people and turned large areas of major Japanese cities, with their masses of wooden buildings, into cinders. At the same time, a naval blockade cut off the supply of raw materials to Japan. The bombing and blockade had left many Japanese starving, and many of the country’s leaders realized that Japan could not possibly win the war. Yet the Japanese refused to accept the unconditional surrender Truman demanded. In fact, they seemed ready to fight to the last man, woman, and child, in the spirit of the kamikaze. Oppenheimer and others believed only the shock of an atomic bomb would end the Japanese resistance.

Some officials objected to dropping the A-bomb. General Curtis LeMay insisted that his B-29 bombing campaign would soon bring Japan’s surrender. General Eisenhower agreed. “It was my belief,” Eisenhower wrote later, “that Japan was, at that very moment, seeking some way to surrender with a minimum loss of ‘face’ [honor].” Others maintained that the Japanese would give up if Truman would agree to let them keep their beloved emperor.

The United States Bombs Hiroshima and Nagasaki Truman stuck to his demand for an unconditional surrender. He told Japan that the alternative was “prompt and utter destruction.” On August 6, 1945, a B-29 named the *Enola Gay* dropped an atomic bomb on Hiroshima, Japan, a city of 300,000 people.

Within seconds of the explosion, up to 80,000 people died. The blast's shock wave toppled nearly 60,000 structures, and hundreds of fires consumed the rest of the city. Three days later, the United States dropped a second atomic bomb. This one obliterated the city of Nagasaki, killing some 40,000 people instantly. As many as 250,000 Japanese may have died from the two atomic bombs, either directly or as the result of burns, radiation poisoning, or cancer.

Truman had no regrets. "Let there be no mistake about it," he said later. "I regarded the bomb as a military weapon and never had any doubt that it should be used." The destruction of Nagasaki brought a Japanese surrender. Truman received this informal surrender on August 14, Victory over Japan Day, or V-J Day. The terms of the surrender allowed the emperor to keep his office but only in a ceremonial role. The Allies officially accepted the surrender aboard the American battleship *Missouri* in Tokyo Bay.

Millions celebrated V-J Day, which marked the end of the Second World War. But they also mourned the loss of lives. About 55 million died—30 million of them civilians. The Soviet Union paid the highest human cost, with more than 20 million of its people killed. Some 400,000 Americans, nearly all in the military, gave their lives. Most Americans believed strongly that those soldiers, sailors, airmen, and others had died for a noble cause.

Summary

World War II lasted from 1939 to 1945. The United States played a major role in both main fronts of the war—Europe and the Pacific. To retake Europe, the Allies invaded North Africa, Italy, and France, and then moved on to Germany. To retake the Pacific, they fought island by island, until they closed in on Japan.

Allies versus Axis powers The Allies' strategy of "Europe First" set the United States, Britain, and the USSR against the Axis countries of Germany and Italy. In the Pacific, the United States and China battled Japan.

Battle of Stalingrad Hitler's effort to conquer the USSR ended at Stalingrad, where the Red Army forced the Nazis to retreat. The Soviets then pushed westward to Germany.

D-Day The Allies invaded France on June 6, 1944. Then they swept into Germany and took Berlin. Hitler committed suicide, and Germany surrendered.

Holocaust Moving through Poland and Germany, Allied forces liberated Jews and others from Nazi concentration camps and began to uncover the horrors of the Holocaust.

Battle of Midway The United States stopped Japanese expansion in the Pacific at the Battle of Midway. It then went on the offensive, using tactics like leapfrogging to overcome Japanese resistance.

Battle of Okinawa After the Battle of Okinawa, the Allies were poised for an invasion of Japan. Given the losses at Okinawa, however, they knew it would be a long and costly struggle.

Manhattan Project Scientists with the Manhattan Project developed an atomic bomb and tested it in July 1945. A month later, the United States dropped two bombs on Japanese cities, forcing Japan's surrender and bringing an end to World War II.