

Chapter XX: The Second World War

“Revisionist” nations were dissatisfied with the Treaty of Versailles--Germany, Italy, Japan, and the USSR. Other major powers were satisfied (status quo), but lacked faith in its conditions and were unwilling to risk war to uphold the Treaty.

Section 105. The Weakness of Democracies: Again to War

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Dictators were encouraged by Western pacifism (peace, regardless of consequences) and their acceptance of German claims. A main reason was war losses; with 1.4 million dead, France turned to the “Maginot Line Mentality,” security behind its border fortress; also, French fascism was developing. British fears led to Chamberlain’s appeasement of Hitler. FDR condemned aggression, but many isolationists in the US opposed any political involvement in Europe. USSR resentment of anti-Bolshevik feelings, their desire to revise borders (to 1914), and fear of German attack led to their call for collective security and “Popular Fronts” against Hitler. But European nations, distrusting Soviet motives, failed to respond.

The result was a weakness that Hitler played on cleverly, using Western hopes/fears to gain his goals. In 1933, Germany pulled out of the League; in 1934, Hitler attempted the forbidden *Anschluss* with Austria--to be stopped only by the anger of Mussolini, who formed the Stresa Front (with Britain and France) against Germany. In 1935, Hitler began rearming Germany, and in 1936 he militarized the Rhineland; the West did nothing. In 1938 he gained Mussolini’s support and marched into Austria in March. He then manipulated the summer crisis over the Sudetenland. Italy, which had gained no colonies at Versailles, in 1935 attacked Ethiopia. The League imposed economic sanctions, but refused to include oil (fearing to upset the US) or to close the Suez Canal to Italian shipping.

In Spain, a new Republican government in 1931 had begun reforms which angered the Catholic Church and many nationalists. In the 1936 elections, a Popular Front government won, leading to a right-wing insurrection led by conservative General Francisco Franco. The rehearsal” for WWII. France and Britain refused to help; only Russia sent aid, though individuals from the US (3500) and Western Europe took part. Germany and Italy supported Franco with troops and arms, beginning the fascist partnership. Mussolini was motivated by anger; his Stresa partners had objected to his Ethiopian attack. The final result was the Rome-Berlin Anti-Comintern Axis. In 1937 the Japanese launched a full-scale attack on China. In spite of US support for strong, unified action, the League of Nations acted ineffectually. Japan then made the Axis powers a threesome.

The culminating crisis of the pre-war period was Czechoslovakia, with three million dissatisfied Sudeten Germans occupying a key border zone. Czech was a strategic keystone of the defense against Germany, and was allied to both France and the USSR. It had a strong army, good munitions, good fortification; it had the Little Entente alliance with Yugoslavia and Rumania. Nazi agitation in the Sudetenland brought a brief March crisis; the British began negotiations in the summer. The crisis seemed to threaten war when Hitler announced a conference to be held in Munich with Mussolini, Daladier, and Chamberlain--but no Soviets. Hitler’s terms were accepted in September and the Czechs forced to agree; left defenseless, all Czech fell without a shot fired in March, 1939. Chamberlain returned to Britain with “peace in our time.” Since that time, Munich and Chamberlain have been twin symbols of the evils of appeasement. The West was unprepared to fight, was overawed at German power, and was uncertain of their own moral cause. Hitler now seized Memel and claimed full right to the Polish Corridor and the port of Danzig; his partner Mussolini crossed the Adriatic to attack Albania. It was now clear that appeasement was a vain hope. Britain guaranteed to defend Poland, and attempted to ally with the USSR. The USSR, seeing western actions as only a ploy to bring about a German-Soviet war, began negotiations which culminated in late August in the Nazi-Soviet Non-Aggression Pact. One week later, Poland was invaded and World War II had begun.

Section 106. The Years of Axis Triumph

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Hitler buried Poland in a one-month **blitzkrieg**; the USSR moved at the same time to take eastern Poland and the Baltic republics. Finland resisted Soviet demands and the result was war in November, with the USSR expelled from the League. [Finland lost the war.] “Action” in the west was termed the Phony War: troops faced each other across the Maginot and Siegfried Lines. But the Blitzkrieg resumed in April. Denmark fell in hours, followed several weeks later by Norway. The *Wehrmacht* then sped through the Low Countries and into France, successfully completing the WWI Schlieffen Plan and cutting off the British forces--which were evacuated in the “Miracle of Dunkirk”. France signed an armistice on June 22--having lacked armor, an air force--or unity. Northern France was occupied, with Vichy France in the south under collaborationist forces led by General Petain (a hero of WWI). Italy also attacked

France--and later Greece and north Africa. Germany proceeded to create a “New Order” in the style of Napoleon, running western Europe to coordinate and exploit resources, industry, and labor.

Only Britain held out, under Churchill--who immediately sought US help. Interventionists wanted war to destroy fascism, but isolationism remained strong. FDR amended the Neutrality Acts allowing the US to become the “arsenal of democracy” to secure the Four Freedoms. He made the Destroyer-Base deal (an executive agreement, not requiring Congressional approval) in 1940 (50 over-age destroyers in exchange for US use of British Caribbean bases) and Lend-Lease in 1941, on the premise that it was only neighborly to loan Britain the means to keep fighting to stop fascism. The US began to build an army with conscription. The US occupied bases in Greenland and Iceland to ease the problems of Britain in securing its life-line to the West. Britain soon faced the Battle of Britain, with German bombing raids--but the RAF controlled the air: use of radar and information provided due to the breaking of the German secret codes. Britain was disrupted, but far from defeated.

Meanwhile, there was an uneasy peace in the East, with the Germans upset over Russ moves into the Baltic and Balkans. By 1941, Hitler had made alliances with Rumania, Bulgaria, and Hungary; his goal was to take over the Ukraine. He began the war with a sudden blitzkrieg on June 22, quickly besieging Leningrad and moving on Sebastopol in the Crimea and on Moscow. Russian resistance proved stubborn; the attack had been delayed a month while Hitler cleaned up Mussolini’s mess in Greece and took Crete from Britain. The delay, plus an early winter, aided the Soviets in defeating the Nazi assault in a counterattack. In 1942 Hitler renewed his attack, taking the Crimea and moving on Stalingrad, while continuing the attack on Moscow and besieging Leningrad. Division of forces, in combination with the Soviet “scorched earth” policy and the growing partisan resistance behind the lines, ultimately made possible a stalemate that in 1943 and 1944 was turned into a rout. Another important reason for failure was the German treatment of Russians as *untermenschen* (sub-human).

Hitler also sent Rommel into North Africa to rescue the Italian forces; Rommel then launched an attack on the Suez Canal through late 1942. The British had thrashed the Italians, both in East Africa (Ethiopia and Somaliland) and in Libya, but Rommel’s *Afrika Korps* pushed the British back close to Alexandria. At the same time, the Japanese had launched their attack on the Allies, catching the US unprepared at Pearl Harbor and in the Philippines, and rapidly sweeping through British, French, and Dutch colonial possessions. The attack was a reaction to the US move to embargo oil and scrap metal for Japan; without these vital raw materials Japanese expansionist aims would have been totally thwarted. In the Atlantic, German U-boats were at their peak and sinking incredible tonnage of Allied shipping. Thus 1942 was the Allied nadir.

Section 107. The Western-Soviet Victory

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By 1942 the Grand Alliance/United Nations was forming, with 26 nations declared against the Axis. Britain and the US pooled forces under a combined Chiefs of Staff, with coordinated strategy. The decision was made to give the Far East second priority; command was given to General MacArthur, with Admiral Nimitz controlling the Pacific fleet, and with a separate China-India-Burma command. The Battle of the Coral Sea held the Japanese to existing gains in early 1942, and in June the decisive Battle of **Midway** destroyed any Japanese hopes. MacArthur’s idea of “island hopping” across the Pacific toward Japan began with Guadalcanal (1942) and Tarawa (1943), but a bloody struggle remained.

In Europe the western Allies continued with an air war rather than the “second front” desired by Stalin. The US was still mobilizing and the Nazi sub packs took a huge toll of Atlantic shipping--until the Allies won the Battle of the Atlantic (using sonar and “Jeep Carriers”) in 1943. In November of 1942 the US launched an amphibious assault on Vichy French North Africa against limited resistance. DeGaulle, the Free French leader, was ignored by FDR and Churchill. The Germans occupied all France after French sailors in Toulon scuttled their fleet. Eisenhower moved east toward Tunisia while the British, who had stopped Rommel at the decisive Battle of **El Alamein**, moved westward under General Montgomery. At the same time the Russians were defeating the Germans at **Stalingrad**, aided greatly by US Lend-Lease, with trucks, machinery, and war supplies. By early 1943 a major bag of German and Italian troops were cut-off in Tunisia. Soon western forces captured Sicily and invaded southern Italy. The Italians threw out Mussolini, and the new Italian government joined the Allies. Germany was forced to commit over 2 million men to the defense of the Italian peninsula until the end of the war.

Germany now prepared *Festung Europa*--fortress Europe--for the expected Allied invasion. Churchill opposed a cross-Channel invasion in 1943 (to weaken the USSR?), and the US reluctantly agreed to delay until late spring of 1944. After months of detailed planning, 10,000 planes, 400 ships, and 150,000 men moved into action on D-Day, the 6th of June. By September, Allied forces were in Germany. Hitler attempted an abortive counter-attack--the Battle of the Bulge, in December, 1944--through the Ardennes Forest. The Rhine was crossed in March, in spite of the German use of the V-2 “Vengeance Weapon”. A minor incident was the revenge bombing of the city of Dresden by 1000

British and American bombers--resulting in a firestorm that perhaps killed as many as 100,000. The Russian advance had been briefly stopped in Poland, a move perhaps premeditated by the Russians. The Russian advance led to a rising of the Warsaw resistance fighters; when Russian forces stopped at the Vistula, the Germans crushed the resistance (led by anti-Communists). The Russians moved quickly to "liberate" Romania, Bulgaria, and Hungary. The Germans stopped the Russians at the Oder, but US forces had stopped at the Elbe to allow the Russians to capture Berlin. Thus in 1945 the Russians controlled all major capitals of Eastern Europe. Germany surrendered on May 8, two weeks after Hitler's suicide. Soon the world had full proof of the horrors of Nazi rule--from atrocities like Lidice, Czechoslovakia where a whole village was executed in reprisal for the attack on a Nazi leader, to the mass extermination centers of Auschwitz, Dachau, Treblinka, Buchenwald, where as many as 6 million Jews, Gypsies, Poles, Russians, and other minorities had died in Hitler's genocidal "Final Solution".

The war in the Pacific consisted of a series of amphibious assaults on islands such as Guadalcanal (1942) and Tarawa (1943) and carrier group assaults on strong points such as Truk to weaken the Japanese navy and naval air force. In 1944 the US returned to the Philippines, narrowly dodging a bullet in the Battle of the Philippine Seas. In early 1945 the marines captured the island of Iwo Jima, the army was bogged down on Okinawa, where the navy faced kamikazis; but the end was in sight. **See maps in text.** The US launched B-29 raids from Saipan (Marianas) and Okinawa, with fighter and rescue planes located on Iwo Jima. Japan was shattered, but the Allies insisted on face-destroying unconditional surrender. The result was the bombing of Hiroshima (8/6) and Nagasaki (8/9). Fulfilling promises made at Yalta and Potsdam, the USSR declared war on August 8. V-J Day followed soon. Deaths in the war are estimated at 45 million, of whom two-thirds were civilians.

Section 108. The Foundation of the Peace

pp.860-866

There was no clear-cut peace settlement, though terms gradually emerged, resulting first from conferences and then de facto agreements. The Atlantic Charter set the basic US-GB goals in 1941: sovereign rights of nations, equal access to world trade, increased security (including the famous "four freedoms"). At Casablanca in 1943 unconditional surrender was set as a goal, to avoid the ambiguity of defeat in 1918. The Teheran Conference of 1943 provided the first meeting of Roosevelt, Churchill, and Stalin--and began plans for post-war Germany and an international organization. FDR wanted to postpone tough decisions to preserve unity; Churchill was more anxious to get key promises from Stalin. The West pledged a Normandy invasion as soon as possible, and the Russ pledged an offensive. No political agreements were made, virtually giving hegemony over East Europe to the USSR.

The most important war-time conference was held at **Yalta** in the Crimea in February of 1945, while US troops were still cleaning up the Bulge and Russian troops were moving rapidly through east Europe. Stalin promised to allow free elections to provide representative, provisional governments in East Europe; USSR would get 1/2 of reparations from Germany. Stalin also agreed to enter the war with Japan within 3 months of the defeat of Germany--in exchange for the other 1/2 of Sakhalin, the Kurile Islands, dominance over Mongolia, and Manchurian concessions lost to Japan in 1905. Both sides agreed to a UN, with a Security Council of the Big Five, each with veto power, and a General Assembly where the USSR would have three votes. Basically, all the concessions were unnecessary (with hindsight of 20/20); FDR believed help was needed to defeat Japan. Churchill was more anxious for frank political divisions, with spheres of influence for each power; Roosevelt believed concessions would help post-war harmony.

Shortly after the defeat of Germany the **Potsdam** Conference was held (July, 1945). FDR had died and the US was represented by Truman; Churchill opened the conference but was defeated in the first British post-war elections and was replaced by Clement Atlee; and Stalin represented the USSR. Disagreement was already deepening, but the two camps agreed on post war disarmament, deNazification, and demilitarization of Germany; a stripping of "reparations in kind" from Germany, with the Soviets given additional materiel from the West. Poland gained territory in the West; Russian areas of Poland in the east were returned, and German East Prussia was given to the USSR. Millions of Germans were driven from their homes in Poland and the Sudetenland and resettled in the new Germany.

Peace treaties were signed with Italy, Rumania, Hungary, Bulgaria and Finland in February, 1947--all paying reparations and agreeing to territorial settlements (mostly favoring the USSR). Much rancorous debate between eastern and western foreign ministers. In 1951 the western Allies made peace with Japan (in San Francisco), without participation of the USSR; the Soviets made a separate peace in 1956. No final agreement was ever concluded on Germany.