

2 Nature and practice of the Second World War

Timeline

1939 Germany invades Poland

1940 Germany conquers Norway, Denmark, Holland, Belgium and France

Winston Churchill becomes prime minister of Britain

Battle of Britain

War in North Africa

1941 Germany conquers Greece, Yugoslavia and Romania

Germany invades Russia

Japan attacks American, British, Dutch and Portuguese colonies in Far East

1942–43 turning points of Stalingrad, Midway and El Alamein

1943 Battle of Kursk

invasion of Italy by Allies; Mussolini falls

1944 D-Day invasion

Russian forces enter Eastern Europe

1945 battles of Iwo Jima and Okinawa

first and only use of atomic weapons

conferences at Yalta and Potsdam

Germany and Japan surrender

Key questions

- What was the nature of the Second World War?
- What were the main events and how were they influenced by new technology and tactics?
- What was the significance of the home front?
- What was the importance of resistance?

Overview

- The Second World War was the greatest of the 20th century's total wars. The First World War had been a prolonged conflict, bringing the total resources of the major participants to bear in a huge exertion of force. When the Second World War came, states, peoples and armies knew that once again war would be unlimited – that it would use every resource available. All industrial and human resources, all modern technology, and the whole power of the state would be applied to ensure a total victory.
- More than any previous conflict, this was a war between peoples and against peoples. The line between soldier and civilian was blurred – the great industrial cities and their factory workers kept the war effort going and so were targets for destruction. Some of the nations involved had grand plans for the annihilation of whole peoples they considered a threat to their existence. Ordinary men, women and children, therefore, became the enemy on an unprecedented scale.
- Modern weaponry grew even more destructive than it had been in the First World War, and huge casualties made a peaceful settlement even more difficult to achieve. In the end, the war was won only with the most enormous application of force against the total population of the enemy – whether or not they served in uniform.
- The state power of the participating countries exerted a control over all aspects of life. War was an all-consuming activity and became a fight for national survival which could not be abandoned until there was no alternative. In Germany's case, this point was reached when enemy forces occupied most of the country and its leader, Adolf Hitler, committed suicide. In Japan's case it came when the most destructive weapon ever used – the atomic bomb – wiped out two major cities, Nagasaki and Hiroshima.

What was the nature of the Second World War?

What differentiated the Second World War from the First was its general mobility and periods of rapid and decisive movement. Like the First World War, the Second World War:

- depended heavily on industry and the mobilisation of a range of resources by powerful states with a great deal of control over their populations
- technical developments came to be increasingly important.

Unlike the First World War, however, the development of air warfare and fluid fronts in which tank warfare predominated meant that successful leadership depended on movement, logistics and managerial-type planning. As this type of warfare also depends on civilian workers and a strong industrial base, the home front was just as important as the battlefield. Civilians were seen as essential targets for destruction to prevent war materials reaching the front lines, and to injure the morale and even national existence of the enemy. The racial element in this war meant that ethnic groups were regarded as enemies of the state who should be attacked and killed. This had occurred in the First World War – for example with the Turkish massacre of an estimated one million Armenians in 1915 – but not to the same extent. One historian called the Second World War ‘The War against the Jews’, but in fact persecution included several ethnic minorities during and immediately after the war in many countries.

What were the main events and how were they influenced by new technology and tactics?

For the purposes of study, the Second World War can be divided into three main phases.

1 *Blitzkrieg* and rapid advances, 1939–42

The initial phases of the war were characterised by rapid attacks which were far more successful than their equivalents in the First World War. Poland fell within weeks of the German invasion, as did Norway, Denmark, Belgium, the Netherlands and France. In contrast, between 1914 and 1918, sustained heavy fighting prevented decisive conquests. **Axis** forces quickly conquered the Balkans, and Russian forces overran eastern Poland and the Baltic States. Where Britain was able to attack in North Africa, it also achieved rapid victories over Italian forces – only to face equally swift defeats at the hands of the German Afrika Corps. After June 1941, Germany conquered vast areas of Russia until the onset of winter slowed the advance. Japan achieved quick victories by a series of attacks on US and European colonies from December 1941 to February 1942, and rapid conquest everywhere continued throughout the year. This period became known as the *Blitzkrieg*, or ‘lightning war’.

2 Counter-attacks from 1942

At the end of 1942, the situation began to reverse. The Allied powers mounted a series of successful counter-attacks. Russia began the long drive to expel Germany by a victory at Stalingrad. British forces drove the Germans back at El Alamein in North Africa. The Americans held the Solomon Islands in the Pacific, and, after the naval victory at Midway, the US was able to begin the long struggle to recapture lost territory. The British turned the tide of German U-boat success. By 1943, the initiative had passed to the Allies and the Axis powers found themselves on the defensive.

Axis The name given to German, Italian and Japanese forces from the Rome–Berlin Axis agreement of 1936. It became the Rome–Tokyo–Berlin Axis in September 1940.

Fact

The Battle of Midway, 4–7 June 1942, occurred when the Japanese hoped to lead the US fleet into a trap by attacking the island of Midway in the Pacific. However, US planes operating from aircraft carriers inflicted great damage on the Japanese fleet. This battle is seen as the turning point of the Pacific War, forcing Japan on to the defensive.

3 The heavy and costly fighting in the later part of the war

The Axis powers realised that victory was growing increasingly remote, but there was little they could do to end the war. The later stages were therefore characterised by costly and extensive campaigns designed to wear down the opposition. Civilian casualties increased and the element of attrition grew. The rapid successes of the German *Blitzkrieg* in Europe and of the Japanese general Isoroku Yamashita's invasion of Malaya and Singapore gave way to a large-scale industrial war. Massive resources were assembled and maximum force applied, regardless of casualties. Technical innovation, including widespread aerial bombing, became a key feature of the closing years of the war, and culminated in the use of atomic weapons.

Initial attacks and the theory of *Blitzkrieg*

The opening campaigns of the Second World War were similar to the closing ones of the First World War. The Germans were anxious to avoid more trench warfare and to build on the experiences of 1918, when they had relied on small groups of storm troops and sudden applications of force rather than extended bombardments involving large battalions. They also learnt lessons from the Allied counter-attacks of 1918, in which tanks, artillery, aircraft and infantry

were combined to avoid costly frontal attacks and to keep the battlefield moving. *Blitzkrieg* made use of fast-moving tanks and motor vehicles, which pushed as far and as fast as possible into enemy territory. These assaults were supported by air attacks and followed up by infantry, backed up by artillery.

Everything was done to create a sense of chaos among the enemy – cities were bombed, refugees attacked, false radio messages sent, rumours of spies encouraged. This rapid movement bewildered the defenders and cut them off from their supply bases. The German Stuka dive bombers were particularly effective in this kind of warfare, but the essence was maximum application of force at key points, followed by swift drives forward by mechanised troops.

The theory for *Blitzkrieg* had been provided by military writers like Captain Basil Liddell Hart and by the German **Heinz Guderian**, who led an armoured division into Poland.

The German Stuka dive bomber was effective in creating panic and disruption in initial Blitzkrieg attacks in Poland, France and the Low Countries



Poland

Between 1 and 17 September 1939, the Polish armies were encircled by two powerful German and Russian thrusts from north and south. Despite some brave resistance, when Russia invaded eastern Poland on 17 September Poland was forced to surrender.

This victory seemed to prove the value of *Blitzkrieg* tactics, which deployed highly trained forces capable of acting on their own initiative. Far from being dominated by orders from above, the German army was so well trained that even the middle ranks could take over in an emergency and make decisions about how to react to attacks. The commanders set broad objectives, but implementation was flexible, allowing strong points to be abandoned if it was deemed necessary and an overall rapid advance to go ahead without every unit waiting for support or reinforcements. Polish forces were spread over a huge frontier of nearly 3000 km (1860 miles), and the Polish high command did not consider the possibility of concentrating its main defence on a smaller area. Although this would have meant giving some ground in the initial attack, it would ultimately have made the Germans' task much more difficult. In addition, the Poles had no effective help from their allies. If Britain and France had come quickly to Poland's aid – as France had in 1914 – then Germany would not have been able to concentrate its forces against the Poles. The success of *Blitzkrieg* was thus largely due to the weakness of Germany's enemies.

France and the Netherlands

Many of the same factors came into play during the German invasions of France and the Low Countries in May 1940. British energies had been focused on an unsuccessful campaign in Norway, at the end of which Norway still fell to the Germans. As a result, the British took little initiative on the Western Front. The French relied on a vast fortification system called the **Maginot Line**, but – fatally – this line did not extend along the Belgian frontier. There was limited co-operation and planning between France and Britain. In the event of an invasion by Germany, British troops were to advance into Belgium. The German plan played on this. A heavy attack at the point where the French and British lines met drove a wedge between them. While the British and French pushed into Belgium, German tanks swept into France. The Germans massed their forces at Sedan and broke through. The Allies had erroneously believed that the Ardennes forest would prevent the Germans using tanks.

While German tanks and dive bombers outfought the French in Belgium, further south, at Sedan, a decisive battle took place. Co-ordination between the German air force and its dive bombers and rapid attacks by Guderian's tanks met with only weak resistance from the French. The better Allied troops and equipment were tied up in Belgium. On 12–14 May 1940, the Germans crossed the River Meuse and forced the French to retreat. The French seemed unable to cope with the speed of the German breakthrough, and a rapid German thrust cut off the British from the French. Refugees clogged the roads and German aircraft caused maximum disruption in areas leading to the battlefield. The attack was halted on 15 May, and this gave British forces enough time to gather at Dunkirk behind a defensive perimeter. From there, they were evacuated but lost considerable amounts of equipment (see page 104). The French tried to establish lines on the rivers Somme and Aisne, but successful German breakthroughs further south rendered resistance impossible. Paris fell on 14 June 1940, and the defenders of the Maginot Line found themselves attacked from the rear. On 22 June, France signed an armistice.

Heinz Guderian (1888–1954)

Guderian was the major military theorist of his generation, who advocated armoured thrusts to break enemy lines. He saw the potential of the tank not just to support infantry but as the key weapon of war. This was proved right at first, but when opponents developed large numbers of tanks, the shock value of attacks by armoured vehicles was lost.



Maginot Line An extensive static defence system built by France after 1931 along its eastern frontier with Germany. Though impressive, it did not extend along the frontier with Belgium, leaving a weak point that Germany exploited in 1940. The existence of the Maginot Line encouraged a false sense of security in France.

Fact

The advancing German army trapped the British and French armies on the beaches around Dunkirk. Some 330,000 men were caught here and became sitting targets for the Germans. From 26 May 1940, small ships transferred soldiers to larger ones, which carried them back to a port in southern Britain (800 of these legendary 'little ships' were used). Despite attacks from German fighter and bomber planes, Hitler's failure to order a full-scale attack on the troops at Dunkirk was his first fatal mistake of the war. Though the bulk of British equipment was lost, over 300,000 troops were saved, which allowed Britain to continue the war.

Nazi-Soviet Pact In this pact, signed on 23 August 1939, the USSR and Germany agreed not to fight each other and, in secret, to divide Poland between them. This pact allowed Hitler to invade Poland without fear of Russian retaliation, and for Stalin to occupy the Baltic States and eastern Poland. Stalin was surprised when, without first defeating Britain, Hitler invaded Russia in 1941.

Question

In 1914, Britain and France held back the German advance and forced Germany into a long campaign of attrition in the West. In 1940, the Germans defeated French and British resistance with ease and won a swift victory. What explains the difference?

- a Brainstorm in the class and find as many explanations as possible.
- b Write these explanations on sheets of paper and add supporting knowledge.
- c Put the sheets of paper into their order of importance.

Unlike in 1914, there was no heroic attempt to hold the line and no establishment of a firm defensive system. In the First World War, the Schlieffen Plan (see pages 40–41) had failed because Belgian and British resistance caused delays in the German advance. This time, Belgium quickly capitulated and British attempts to halt the German advance were weak in comparison to the actions at Mons and Le Câteau in 1914. German forces were not weakened by being deployed in the East. Relations between Germany and Russia were excellent and Germany was receiving large amounts of Russian imports to help it fight France. The German infantry did not tire as it had in 1914 – the tanks and armoured vehicles kept the advance going and made the front fluid. This time it was the British and French who were restricted by a rigid plan of advancing in Belgium, which took them further way from the German breakthrough point at Sedan.

In 1914, the French general Joffre had seen the exposed German flank and attacked at the Marne using flexibility and initiative. This time, despite seriously exposed flanks, there was no brilliant Allied attack. The violence of the air assaults and the rapidity of German movement left the Allies unable to respond except by withdrawal. It was only the fact that Hitler order the tanks to halt their advance on 15 May, and the failure of air attacks to destroy the army on the beach at Dunkirk, that prevented a total destruction of the British army.

Was the German success attributable only to *Blitzkrieg*?

Once again, victory depended on expert German planning and the tactical use of air forces, tanks, artillery and infantry, as well as an ill-prepared and weak enemy response. To the Germans it now seemed that *Blitzkrieg* was an unstoppable formula for victory. However, it is important to note that this method was effective because Germany was essentially fighting on one front at a time. In addition to this, Germany's enemies were not on a full wartime footing in 1939 and 1940, and were not co-operating well with each other. Opposing generals also had flawed defensive plans and they lacked the skill and decisiveness of their German counterparts.

It was also true that France, Britain and Poland had been unable to establish firm defensive fronts, and their air forces had not proved effective in supporting ground troops against sudden and concentrated attack. None of the Allied armies or air forces was prepared for offensive campaigns, and so the Germans were able to take the initiative.

Politically, the Allied civilian populations were not committed to war. Unlike the Germans, they had little to gain from war except maintaining the status quo. France had been divided in the 1930s between the political left and right; many in Britain had supported the policy of appeasement and wanted to avoid the high casualty rates of a modern war. Few in Poland had expected war, and the Polish state was not really prepared for a joint invasion by Russia and Germany – the **Nazi-Soviet Pact** of August 1939 had come as a surprise.

***Blitzkrieg* in Asia**

The lesson of successful rapid-movement warfare against an ill-prepared enemy was not lost on Japan. It also had a well-developed plan – influenced by the British attack on the Italian fleet at Taranto Bay in November 1940 – which involved a sudden and forceful assault against its enemy's main naval base at **Pearl Harbor**, followed by rapid assaults on the European colonies.

Just as France, Britain and Poland had little strategy for resisting Germany, so Britain, the USA, France and the Netherlands had little or no joint strategy

for resisting Japan. The homelands of the forces in French Indochina and the Netherlands' Indies had been conquered by Germany in 1940. Britain was fighting a war in North Africa and had to keep substantial forces for home defence. It relied on the naval base at Singapore and the threat of its navy to deter Japan, together with its forces in Malaya and Singapore, which could be reinforced from Australia. These forces were not well-trained or led, nor were they militarily or psychologically prepared for a rapid and unexpected advance. The Japanese dealt with the naval threat by sinking the two great British warships, the *Prince of Wales* and the *Repulse*, which were without air cover and prey to Japanese air attack. With numerically inferior forces led by General Yamashita, the Japanese landed in Malaya and fought their way through the jungle to Singapore. Just as in France, sudden movement and the appearance of tanks disoriented the British. The great naval guns pointed out to sea were turned round, but by the time they were used the Japanese were threatening Singapore.

Faced with the prospect of heavy civilian casualties from Japanese bombing and street fighting, the British general, Arthur Percival, chose to surrender. Australian reinforcements stepped off the ships almost directly into Japanese captivity. Successful amphibious landings led to rapid Japanese occupation of the US Philippines and the Netherlands' East Indies (Java and Sumatra). Japanese forces pushed into Burma and threatened India, and Australia feared an invasion of its northern territories. It was not troop numbers, but the effective use of air power and rapid movement, that was the key to Japanese victories. Given the relative smallness of Japanese forces and the problems of amphibious landings, the victories were by no means certain. What made them possible was a weak response by distracted and poorly prepared European and American enemies.

The key event of the war for the British Empire: Britain surrenders to a smaller force in Singapore

Pearl Harbor The Japanese attacked the major US naval base in the Pacific, Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, on 7 December 1941. Over 300 fighters, bombers and torpedo bombers took part, using six aircraft carriers. The most serious casualty was the warship *USS Arizona*, and 1177 sailors were killed; the *Utah* and the *Oklahoma* never sailed again, but all the other ships damaged in the attack were repaired. The Japanese did not destroy all the fuel installations, nor the US aircraft carriers, which were at sea. Roosevelt called the attack 'infamy' and it provoked a massive demonstration of support among the American people for total victory.



Why did the war continue?

For all their successes, the Axis powers still made some fatal miscalculations that contributed to their ultimate defeat.

1 The role of Britain

Germany could not end Britain's participation in the war. Its failure to destroy British forces at Dunkirk left Britain with over 300,000 soldiers as the nucleus of an army. The German air force lost control of the war in the air during the Battle of Britain, and failure to devote resources to the German navy before 1939 allowed Britain to maintain its domination of the Channel and the North Sea. This made any invasion of the British Isles potentially dangerous. In addition, the emergence of Winston Churchill as prime minister gave Britain a determined leadership. Churchill, hoping for US support, refused to negotiate with Hitler.

Not only did Britain not surrender but it took an active role in attacking Italian forces in North Africa from its base in Egypt. The support of its empire provided Britain with important resources of manpower (240 million people lived in the British Empire), overseas bases and raw materials. Britain remained a dogged opponent and was a central element in anti-German coalitions, and Britain's involvement effectively forced Hitler to fight the war on two front for most of its duration.

2 US aid to Britain

Germany's second miscalculation was also linked to the struggle with Britain. Britain depended not only on US credit but also on North American industries for war supplies. British naval forces escorted merchant convoys, but trade between the US and Britain was vulnerable to German U-boat attacks, just as it had been in the First World War. In March 1941, the Lend-Lease Act was passed by Congress, allowing the president to 'sell, transfer, exchange, lease or lend' war supplies to any nation whose defence was seen as vital to the defence of the USA.

In December 1940, Roosevelt spoke of the USA as the 'arsenal of democracy' and, throughout this year, America had already been gearing its economy towards war production. It became vital for Germany to cut off this line of supply. Incidents involving attacks on US shipping increased and culminated in a U-boat attack on the USS *Greer*, provoking Roosevelt to issue a 'shoot first' order to US naval vessels in the Atlantic if confronted with German U-boats. The failure to end the war with Britain had involved Germany in a struggle with the USA that ultimately proved disastrous. The miscalculation lay in assuming that US isolationism would prevent America from sustaining Britain.

3 German setbacks in Eastern Europe

The third miscalculation lay in German policy towards Eastern Europe. The successes against Poland and then Norway, Denmark, the Netherlands, Belgium and France were followed by similar victories in Greece, where a German force helped out an unsuccessful Italian invasion, and Yugoslavia. The Germans therefore had every reason to believe that an invasion of Russia – **Operation Barbarossa**, launched on 22 June 1941 – would be yet another success. Certainly, formidable forces were assembled. The Germans had superiority over Russia in aircraft, tanks and men (4:1 aircraft; 1.6:1 in men; 1.8:1 in artillery; 1.5:1 in tanks). The plans were built around previous successes, and involved three massive concentrations of force:

Operation Barbarossa This was named after a medieval German crusading emperor and was the biggest invasion in the history of warfare. It was the culmination of Germany's military preparations since 1933. Four and a half million troops invaded across 2900 km (1800 miles).

- in the north, aimed at Leningrad
- in the centre, aimed at Moscow
- in the south, pushing towards Kiev and then to the Black Sea.

The principles of concentrated force, rapid mechanised movement, strong air support, and encirclement of enemy forces were applied on a much larger scale. Just as in 1939 and 1940, the forces of Germany's enemies were poorly led, taken by surprise, disoriented by ruthless and rapid advance, and driven back. An incredible 4.5 million Soviet troops had been lost by the end of 1941. The unpopularity of Russian communist rule in many of the invaded areas was another advantage that the Germans could have exploited, but they were so confident of victory that they failed to do so. Conquered areas like the Ukraine or Belorussia suffered extreme violence, oppression and confiscation of property at the hands of the Germans. Russian armies surrendered and, by December 1941, 90 million Russians found themselves under German rule. Moscow and Leningrad had been bombed, and German forces were stationed in the outlying areas of the cities. However, unlike in France and Poland, the Russian forces managed to stabilise a front line by the end of October.

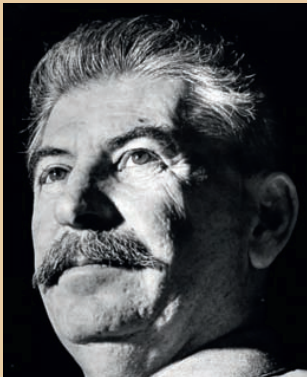
The Germans blamed bad weather for stopping the advance, but equally significant was the ability of the Russian forces to counter-attack and hold their positions. Moscow was defended and the German advance halted. An attack in the Rostov area of the northern sector prevented Germany deploying forces from their northern armies in support of the army group in the centre. Poor weather conditions made German advance difficult as winter set in.

German soldiers using horses and carts in the Ukraine during a snowstorm



Joseph Stalin (1879–1953)

Stalin started his political career as a revolutionary in Georgia. He rose in the Bolshevik Party to become general secretary under Lenin. By 1928, he had defeated his rivals to become the party leader, and created a dictatorship. He forced the Russian peasants into collective farms and established a police state, in which millions of people were imprisoned or killed. In 1939, Stalin signed a pact with Hitler, and was surprised when the Germans invaded in 1941. He rallied Russia to heroic resistance and after 1945 imposed his rule on much of Eastern Europe.



Fact

The theory that the US knew about the attack on Pearl Harbor and let it happen as a way of justifying war against Japan has not been convincingly proved.

Despite huge losses, the Soviets were able to call up increasing numbers of troops to aid their defence. The halt before Moscow was of enormous significance. During the First World War, advances had taken armies further from their own supplies and reinforcements and closer to enemy railheads, where additional reinforcements and supplies gathered. This had resulted in bitter struggles in which the industries and transport of the 'home side' blocked advance by the 'invading side'. In the Second World War, Germany had so far avoided this situation by rapid victories. Now *Blitzkrieg* failed to deliver – not dramatically, as German forces were still close to their objectives, but enough for the USSR to recover and bring its considerable industrial and manpower resources to bear. French leaders had not been prepared for the huge sacrifice of human life that continued resistance would have meant. **Joseph Stalin** had no such qualms. The powerful communist state he had developed imposed an iron discipline on its people. Failure meant death. There was no compromise and no sacrifice was too great. The Nazi invaders faced a regime as ruthless and determined as their own, and Hitler underestimated the economic potential and political strength of the USSR. By the beginning of 1942, German forces were no longer engaged in a rapid advance, but rather a protracted war of attrition. They also faced war on a number of fronts – the North African desert against Britain; the war at sea against the British and US navies, and an air war that placed German civilians and cities on the front line.

4 Japanese failures in the Pacific

Japan had also miscalculated. The sudden air attack on the US naval base at Pearl Harbor failed to destroy the US aircraft carriers, which were out at sea. However, US commanders had failed to take elementary precautions or pay heed to intelligence reports. Again, weakness helped victory. Despite this, the damage done to US battleships and destroyers was not a decisive element of success. Most of the ships sunk were later restored and took part in the war. The war in the Pacific was eventually dominated by aircraft and so the survival of the main US carriers, *Lexington* and *Enterprise*, was more important. The attack killed 2400 people, sank three battleships, damaged many smaller vessels and destroyed two-thirds of US naval aircraft. This was achieved with limited Japanese losses (29 aircraft and five midget submarines), and prevented any US interference with the Japanese invasion of Western colonies. However, the potential of the world's greatest economy to rebuild and extend its naval power, and the determination of the US to avenge the 'day of infamy', as Roosevelt called it, seem to have been underestimated by Japan.

The key element in Pacific warfare – the use of aircraft carriers and air power – gave the advantage to the US, due to its capacity to produce these weapons by a modern industrial economy. The defeat of the Japanese navy at the Battle of Midway in June 1942 prevented Japan securing its hoped-for defensive ring and destroyed vital Japanese carriers. This decisive battle, which halted further expansion, occurred soon after Pearl Harbor and showed the limited understanding Japan had of US resources and energy.

5 The high cost of war

In general, Germany underestimated the costs of modern war. Easy and relatively cheap successes in 1939 and 1940, together with products and loot taken from occupied countries, seemed to suggest that the Nazi state was delivering victory without the terrible sacrifices that Germany had faced between 1914 and 1918. However, losses began to mount on the Eastern Front from October 1941, and the first bombing raids by the Allies on Germany were signs that Hitler and

his people had miscalculated what could be achieved by modern 'scientific' warfare against weak opponents.

6 Inadequate preparation by Italy

As an ally of Germany, Italy had hoped for swift victories, but reverses in Greece and the need to supply forces for the Russian Front, together with losses in North Africa and the defeats in Ethiopia and Somaliland, had shown this to be an illusion by the start of 1942. Italian preparation for war had been inadequate.

Why did the tide turn in 1942–43?

There were a number of turning points in 1942:

- 1 Japan was defeated at the naval Battle of Midway, which stopped further advances.
- 2 The Germans were defeated at El Alamein in North Africa, which led to their withdrawal from Africa. This was the first major British victory of the war.
- 3 In Russia, the Germans were held at the Battle of Stalingrad, which led to a major defeat in February 1943.

The Battle of Stalingrad

One of the most significant turning points of the war was the Battle of Stalingrad. By 1942, the war had turned out to be one of prolonged sieges and assaults on cities – characteristics that made it quite different from the First World War. The battlefields of 1914–18 were in the countryside, and only small towns or villages that happened to be in the way were destroyed; the major cities of Europe suffered little damage. However, in 1942 great sieges took place in Moscow and Leningrad between German and Russian forces, while the Allies used air power to batter German cities – a tactic applied as soon as possible by the Americans to Tokyo and other major Japanese urban centres. The civilian casualty rate increased, while millions were drawn into the Russian campaigns. To break this, the Germans adopted their greatest plan of the war – an attack on the Southern Front that would win them the key city of Stalingrad. This would open up the possibility of a link between German armies in Russia and their forces in North Africa, and consequently enable Germany to take Egypt and the Suez Canal, and control the oil of the Middle East and southern Russia. In the event, the British were able to hold Egypt and the Russians held Stalingrad.

The Russians absorbed casualties that ran into millions and were on a scale unlike anything seen in the First World War, but they were working from their home bases and could pour reinforcements and supplies into the besieged cities. The Germans were working at a considerable distance from their home base and did not have reserves of manpower. Their industries were suffering from Allied bombing and their resources had to be spread to maintain control of their new European empire, to fight in North Africa and to guard against a possible invasion of France. Fatally, they had to rely on allies – Romania and Italy – and the Russians found their weak points. German troops at Stalingrad, weakened by the ice and snow of the Russian winter and unable to receive enough supplies, were encircled by a Russian attack on their weakest point and forced to surrender in February 1943. This was the first time that a German army had failed in this way, and Friedrich Paulus became the first German field marshal to surrender (Hitler promoted him to this rank in order that he should die rather than surrender, but he failed to shoot himself). The German North African army, short of fuel and outnumbered, had already been defeated and forced back at **El Alamein** in October 1942.

Fact

The sheer scale of the war in Russia is hard to comprehend. Russian losses amounted to eight million troops – the equivalent of the total losses in all countries between 1914 and 1918. More Russians died in the siege of Leningrad than the total of British forces in the whole of the First World War. Russia mobilised 30 million people in the war as a whole.

Discussion point

Why were these turning points more significant than so many of the battles of the First World War, and why did the Axis powers suffer so many reverses in fortune in 1942–43 without the war actually ending?

Fact

Stalingrad was a major industrial city in south-west Russia. If it had fallen, Germany would have been able to pour forces into the Caucasus region and gain vital oil supplies.

Fact

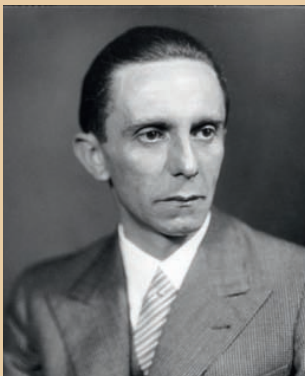
The Suez Canal was the major route from the Mediterranean to the British possessions in India and the Far East. It was considered vital that Germany should not capture the canal and be in a position to stop oil supplies reaching Britain or force all shipping to take the much longer route via South Africa.

El Alamein This was the first major British victory of the war. Under General Montgomery, the British defeated the German Afrika Korps under Rommel, which ended the threat to Egypt and subsequently pushed German forces out of North Africa. It enabled the Allies to invade Sicily and Italy in 1943, and showed that the German army could be defeated.

Holocaust The genocide of European Jews and others during the Second World War by the Nazis.

Josef Goebbels (1897–1945)

A fanatical and devoted follower of Hitler, Goebbels masterminded the propaganda that helped the Nazis win power. He became Reich minister of enlightenment – controlling propaganda and the media. He supported the idea of total war and the Holocaust. He and his wife killed their six children and then themselves in May 1945, when it was clear that Germany had lost the war.



Against the advice of his generals, Hitler sought to retrieve the situation by a breakthrough in the central part of the Russian Front. In the biggest tank battle in history, the Russians showed that in a great war between two heavily industrialised nations, the one defending and closest to its resources is likely to win. The Battle of Kursk ended the German advance permanently, and initiated the long retreat (6600 tanks took part; the Red Army had 3600 and the Germans 3000). After this, tanks were no longer used for dynamic forward movement. The Russian tanks wore down the German tanks in a brutal war of attrition.

The Far East and North Africa

The Japanese, too, found that dynamic and sudden attack had its limits. They could not conquer New Guinea and were driven back in a bloody and drawn-out encounter with determined US forces in the Solomon Islands, supported by the US navy and air force. Now that the US was on a sustained war footing, the weight of its resistance was far greater than it had been in early 1942.

With the US in support, the British succeeded in forcing the Germans out of North Africa. By 1943, the Allies were ready to begin their counter-attack in Italy.

The impossibility of compromise

Why did the war not end at this point? In terms of industrial capacity, the Axis powers could not match their enemies. Germany was no longer fighting an unwilling Britain and France and weak countries in Eastern Europe. It was under threat from Russia and the USA, whose resources were much greater. It had also lost the initiative – *Blitzkrieg* could not be applied to great invading forces. The German populace was under pressure from bombing and the only war aim that seemed likely to succeed was the annihilation of the Jews (the **Holocaust**), which was being undertaken with considerable energy in death camps.

Similarities can be seen here with the events of the First World War. With the masses of population mobilised, and with ideological war at the forefront, how could peace be brought about without complete victory or complete defeat? Hitler and his closest circle were essentially adventurers, not statesmen, and they actively sought death and destruction. They were not conventional leaders, and for men like **Josef Goebbels** the experience of wholesale slaughter was exhilarating. Stalin's Russia was bolstered by ideology, but from the very start he had also believed in victory, expansion, the recovery of lands lost in 1918 and the domination of Eastern Europe. Costs in human life and suffering were not considered any more than they had been in Russia in the 1920s and 1930s. The Allied democracies were pledged to exact unconditional surrender and post-war reconstruction. The violence of the attacks by Japan and Germany had rendered any negotiated settlement unacceptable. Finally, the Japanese ethical code, which despised surrender and regarded death as a noble way of serving its empire, made surrender difficult. Against the whole logic of the situation in 1943, the war not only continued but expanded.

The long final phase

The Allied counter-attacks from 1943 onwards were characterised by elements that had not figured prominently in the First World War.

Amphibious landings (seaborne invasions)

First were amphibious landings on an increasingly large scale. The only significant landings in the First World War had occurred at Gallipoli, when



Millions of Jews and other enemies of the Third Reich died in camps like Auschwitz, pictured here

Britain attempted to defeat Turkey by landing troops to seize Constantinople. These were not successful in achieving breakthrough. Hitler had not risked landings in Britain in 1940, though airborne landings did defeat British forces in Crete in 1941. However, from 1943, the Allies embarked on a number of seaborne landings following the success of Operation Torch – the US landings in North Africa in 1942. Sicily was invaded and this was followed by a seaborne invasion of Italy and an attempt to speed the occupation of Italy by landings at Anzio, south of Rome. The biggest invasion force in seaborne warfare came on 6 June 1944, with the invasion of Normandy – D-Day.

The US invasion forces had to control the island defences that Japan had set up in the Pacific – ‘**island hopping**’, for example, by forces of US marines, strongly supported by naval bombardments and air attacks, became a normal method of warfare. In 1945, this culminated in the assaults on Iwo Jima and Okinawa, technically part of the Japanese homeland. There were plans for an amphibious assault on the real homeland, but these were never executed because the use of the atomic bombs ended the war. Amphibious landings depended on a high level

Fact

The invasion of Normandy by British and US forces on 6 June 1944, called D-Day, opened up the long-awaited second front in Europe. Operation Overlord saw 175,000 British and American troops land on five beaches (Omaha, Utah, Gold, Sword and Juno), supported by 5000 ships and Allied air superiority. This was the greatest amphibious operation of the war, and enabled Allied forces to pour into northern France and begin the long struggle to invade Germany.

island hopping This name was given to the series of seaborne attacks on Japanese-held Pacific islands by the USA. The name suggests an easy and playful process, but in fact resistance was strong, and casualties were high on both sides.

Fact

German cities of over 500,000 population and the percentage destroyed

City	% destroyed
Berlin	33
Cologne	61
Dortmund	54
Dresden	59
Düsseldorf	64
Essen	50
Frankfurt	52
Hamburg	75
Leipzig	20
Munich	42

From: Travers Harris, A. 1995. *Despatch on War Operations, 23rd February, 1942, to 8th May, 1945*, Volume 3 of Cass series, *Studies in Air Power*. London, UK. Routledge. p. 35.

of co-operation between the different parts of the Allied forces, considerable logistical organisation, planning and control of the seas and the airspace. They would not have been possible if Germany had developed a stronger navy, or if US naval resources had not overcome the Japanese. Superior Allied resources, ship and aircraft building – in turn dependent on a strong industrial and technical base – made this type of warfare possible.

Air power

The second element of the Allied counter-attacks in the closing stages of the war was a much-increased use of air power. Germany and Japan had used air power in support of land forces, but lacked the resources for sustained engagement with the much larger Anglo-American force. German bombers had inflicted considerable damage on the civilian populations of its enemies. However, Allied bombing of Germany and Japan was on an altogether different scale.

Technically, both bombers and fighters developed rapidly during the war, and the advent of jet aircraft transformed air power. The use of RADAR made it possible to track air attacks and played a significant part in the Battle of Britain in 1940. There was a race to improve air technology. Germany developed rockets, but these came too late to be decisive in the outcome of the war and their bases were captured. The most profound technical development – that of atomic weapons – was only possible in an advanced industrial country with the resources available to develop scientific ideas and make them a reality.

In an effort to bring total victory and end the high casualties of infantry warfare, the Allies had few qualms about targeting the cities in enemy countries, and military and civilian targets alike were chosen, often with minimal justification. This bombing certainly had its origins in 1914 and was increasing by 1918, but the scale on which it was executed was entirely new. By 1944 the Germans had developed pilotless rockets, which inflicted considerable damage on Britain. These V1 and V2 weapons anticipated later missile systems and were difficult to stop. The V1s were produced on a large scale – 10,000 were fired, each carrying higher levels of explosives than a conventional bomb. Only the Allied capture of launching sites prevented them having a considerable impact on Britain.

Modern warfare weapons and techniques

The third feature of the war’s closing phase again derived from the later stages of the First World War, when tanks, smaller and more self-contained infantry units and air cover were used. However, the huge use of tanks – for example in the battles of Kursk, Orel and Kharkov in Russia in 1943, and on the Western Front after the invasion of Normandy – was unprecedented.

The nature of war, in which relatively small infantry units worked in units controlled by efficient radio communications by commanders aware of the overall plan, was also more characteristic of modern warfare than the mass assaults that dominated most of the First World War. The British campaigns against Japan in Burma were particularly characterised by high levels of devolved responsibility. The most spectacular of these were the behind-the-lines guerrilla activities of the so-called Chindits, led by Orde Wingate. But the main advance through Burma in 1944–45, led by General Slim, relied on British mastery of jungle warfare and the ability to work in small units – expertise that had advanced considerably since events in Malaya in 1941.



Tanks at the Battle of Kursk, western Russia, 1943; this was the largest tank battle in history

Determined attacks

The Italian fascist regime under Benito Mussolini fell easily in 1943, but Japan and Germany kept up a remarkably intense resistance, even when it was clear that victory could no longer be achieved. The battle for Berlin between Soviet invaders and German defenders in 1945, for example, was as heavy and determined as any engagement of the war. British forces met relentless resistance to the invasion of western Germany, and casualties in the campaigns that followed D-Day often had a rate as high as the bloodbaths of Passchendaele and the Somme in the First World War. The difference was that the front was mobile and, despite the casualties, progress was being made. Even disastrous setbacks did not stop the inexorable and optimistic progress of the British and Americans. One example of this was the misguided attempt to drop forces by parachute, which would then be joined by a rapid motorised advance to take the Rhine Bridge at Arnhem in the Netherlands. Poor planning and unexpected German resistance defeated Operation Market Garden, as it was known. Another major Allied setback was a German attack in the Ardennes in the winter of 1944, which caught inexperienced US defenders unawares. This showed how formidable the Germans still were, but it could not alter the outcome of the war.

Japanese resistance was equally strong, even when defeat loomed, as evidenced by the struggle for Iwo Jima in 1945. Here, Japanese forces tunneled into a barren island, allowed the US to land and then fought suicidally, inflicting massive casualties. The use of *kamikaze* (suicide) planes by Japan at the Battle of Okinawa, and the mass suicide of civilians on captured islands, also demonstrated the extent of Japanese resistance. Ironically, this heroism may have made the US all the more willing to use the atomic bombs to prevent equally terrible fighting if Japan itself were invaded.

Fact

Operation Market Garden took place on 17 September 1944. The plan was to drop air brigades by parachute to take the Arnhem bridge, and then bring up armoured vehicles and open up a crossing into Germany to end the war more quickly. The parachutists were dispersed. However, there were unexpected German troops in the area and the tanks had to advance along a single-track road vulnerable to enemy attacks and delays. The operation was a serious failure for the Allies.

Fact

Events at Monte Cassino consisted of four major attacks by Allied troops against the German Gustav Line, from 17 January to 18 May 1944. They destroyed one of Europe's most important religious sites, and showed that even with air power and numerical superiority, it was still difficult to take well-defended positions.

Ultra This was the biggest secret of the war. British code-breakers at Bletchley Park in Britain had used a captured German coding device, the Enigma machine, to break a complex German code, allowing Allied commanders to read German military and naval signals. The chief code-breaker, Alan Turing, virtually developed a computer and made a major contribution to Allied victory.

There were some similarities with the First World War. The slow progress made by Allied forces in the battle for Italy echoed the grim infantry struggles of the First World War. When Mussolini fell, German forces took over the defence of Italy and prepared formidable defensive lines. Despite modern air assaults, there were deadlocked periods of trench warfare, such as the German defence of Monte Cassino. However, the war did not solidify around lines of trenches. Tactics, firepower, the co-ordination of air, land and sea resources, and the relentless production of war supplies kept up the impetus of Allied attacks, bolstered by the power of the modern state and effective mass propaganda methods – far in advance of anything witnessed in the First World War.

The war at sea and in the air

During the First World War, an effective naval blockade had been imposed on Germany by Britain. In the Second World War, the tables were turned. The vast swathes of territory that Germany had gained meant that it had plenty of food and supplies. However, Britain was dependent on supplies from its empire and North America, and these were vulnerable to attacks by U-boats. This had been the case in the First World War, but now the submarine menace was even greater given the additional numbers and technical development of the German U-boat fleet. Germany's surface vessels could not rival the great British fleet, but in the Battle of the Atlantic, Germany very nearly cut off Britain from the means to wage war and feed its people. The dangers faced by the British Royal and Merchant Navies in crossing the Atlantic, as well as in sending supplies to Russia, were considerable. However, the use of convoys and the development of effective depth charges and radar detection meant that the German submarine threat had been countered by 1943. Vital to this was the interception of German signals by the British **Ultra** code-breaking machines, which used prototype computing techniques.

The war highlighted the importance of submarine warfare as well as air power. Without air cover, great ships were vulnerable to attack, as the sinking of the *Prince of Wales* and the *Repulse* showed in 1941 (see page 105). The war in the Pacific was fought by aircraft taking off from aircraft carriers – something new in this war. The invasions that the Allies made – of Sicily and Italy, of France in 1944, of the Japanese-held Pacific islands – were made using ships and landing craft, but also with careful co-ordination of air support.

The end of the war

Germany

By the time of Hitler's suicide and the subsequent surrender of Germany on 8 May 1945, there could be no doubt of the result. There was no repeat of the situation in 1918, when German commanders made a decision that the war could not be won, even though there were substantial numbers of forces intact and no occupation of German territory had taken place. Germany's major cities had been destroyed. British, US and Soviet occupying forces met on the River Elbe. The Russians occupied Berlin and placed the Soviet flag on the Reichstag (the German parliament building). Germany's civilian population faced starvation, as well as retaliation and abuse by Soviet troops. The discovery of the death camps disgraced Germany in the eyes of the civilised world. German minorities suffered persecution and expulsion in Eastern Europe. There could be no doubt about the scale of defeat.

Japan

By the time Japan surrendered on 2 September 1945, its cities too were in ruins, as shown by the statistics in the table (right). Its armies had been pushed back in all theatres of war (though not completely defeated). However, when Russia finally declared war and occupied Korea, Manchuria and Sakhalin, defeat was inevitable. The bulk of Japan's air force and navy had been destroyed in disastrous engagements in 1944 and 1945, and two hitherto untouched cities – Hiroshima and Nagasaki – had been destroyed by just two bombs in August 1945. The emperor bowed to the inevitable, and made his first broadcast to the nation, informing them that the war had not necessarily gone in a way that was to Japan's advantage. This massive understatement ended the Second World War on 15 August 1945.

Hiroshima after the atomic bomb, August 1945



Fact

Conventional bombing damage to Japanese cities in the Second World War

City	% destroyed
Yokohama	58
Tokyo	51
Toyama	99
Nagoya	40
Osaka	35.1
Nishinomiya	11.9

From: Caidin, M. 1960. *A Torch to the Enemy: The Fire Raid on Tokyo*. London, UK. Bantam War Books.

Discussion points

- 1 Was victory dependent on technology?
- 2 How did overall strategy affect the outcome?

Erwin Rommel (1891–1944)

Rommel, known as the 'Desert Fox', was the leader of the German Afrika Korps, which inflicted major defeats on British forces in North Africa, 1941–42. Only lack of resources and the dogged tactics of Montgomery led to his defeat at El Alamein. He was forced to commit suicide due to his involvement in a plot to overthrow Hitler in 1944.



Georgy Zhukov (1899–1959)

Zhukov was Russia's leading general. He masterminded the defences of Moscow and Stalingrad, and was behind the successful attacks on Berlin in 1945. Stalin was jealous of his popularity and his influence later declined.

What best explains the defeat of the Axis powers?

Japan and Germany had formidable war machines and their states exerted a powerful hold over the people. Their ideologies were strong and their leaders determined. However, in the long term they lacked the industrial resources to sustain a lengthy war, and they were vulnerable to attack on two fronts. As in 1914, the failure to win decisive victory in the opening campaigns proved fatal. British resistance provided a key link between the different elements of the war and so Britain played a part out of all proportion to its military contribution or losses. However, at the heart of any explanation for the defeat of the Axis nations must be the resources of the two post-war superpowers. The ability of the USA and the USSR to produce war materials on a scale hitherto unknown in world history, combined with their extensive manpower resources, made the defeat of the Axis powers inevitable.

This is not to discount the role of individual commanders of genius, however – among them **Erwin Rommel**, **Georgy Zhukov** and **Bernard Montgomery**. Nor should the role of military leaders of great organisational ability such as **Dwight D. Eisenhower** and statesmen of heroic determination, such as Churchill and Roosevelt, be forgotten. Indeed, the democratic nature of British and US war-making, with planning and decisions taken by military committees rather than an unstable dictator like Hitler (whose personal military decisions in Russia were disastrous), may have been a significant factor.

What was the significance of the home front?

Total war on such a scale needed a high level of commitment from the population and increasing amounts of government control. Even more than in the First World War, the distinction between the home front and the fighting front became blurred.

Propaganda

The need to rally opinion was greater in the Second World War than the First, because of the strong ideological element. The development of media between the wars – radio, the greater attendance at cinema, the rise of the 'talkies' (film with sound), even primitive television – also made it necessary for propaganda to be more sophisticated than during the First World War. No longer was propaganda characterised by crude posters and staged films of heroic battles. Germany and the Allies both shared much information with their populations. Goebbels' declaration of total war and the solemn admission of failure at Stalingrad united Germany more than any crude propaganda. Hitler and his people faced defeat heroically. In Britain, no attempt was made to minimise the sacrifices expected and emphasis was placed on pulling together, with the promise of a better post-war world. US propaganda used Hollywood's greatest skills, and offered a vision of a United Nations and future peace. Soviet propaganda made use of traditional patriotism and Russian values, as well as the power of the state in preventing defeatism and desertion, and deporting potential enemies. Stalin was portrayed as more of a national than a communist hero, and images of the Motherland were used cleverly.

The growth of government power

Even before 1939, the dictators of Italy, Russia and Germany, and the military leaders of Japan, had established considerable control by the use of secret police and restrictions on criticism. The war increased this still further. Any hint of

criticism was punished severely and the role of the German Gestapo and the Japanese Kempetai (secret police) was extended to occupied territory. Britain and the USA became more repressive. Censorship was imposed. Potential enemies were imprisoned without trial (German refugees in Britain ended up in camps and Japanese Americans were regarded as enemy aliens, regardless of how long they had been in the USA). Countries used every resource at their disposal – taxes were high, rationing was imposed, conscription both for armed service and for war work was universal. In Britain and the USA, however, normal political life continued – Churchill was criticised in the House of Commons and Roosevelt stood for re-election in 1944.

Dissent

In Britain, the treatment of conscientious objectors, which had been harsh in the First World War, was much less so in the Second. Although it was still not easy to oppose war, nevertheless there was not the degree of bullying and humiliation that dissenters had faced earlier. In the dictatorships, principled opposition to war was not a concept. However, there is evidence that reluctance to commit genocide was accepted as legitimate in the German army, though it was not possible to refuse to serve. Foreign workers brought in by Germany and Japan to sustain the war effort were subject to harsh discipline and often maltreatment; any dissent was ruthlessly suppressed.

Women

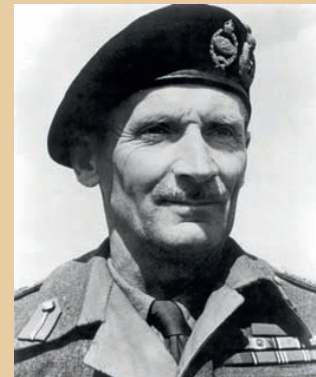
The need for war production and to mobilise the entire population meant that women became an essential part of the war effort. This war involved more women in sustaining the fighting than had been the case in the First World War, but the involvement of women in the war effort was no longer an innovation. Some 22 million women were participating in the production of war materials by 1945. The Nazis had to compromise their ideals of pure womanhood, removed from the world of politics and struggle, and came to depend on women in factories and essential services. Women were also used in the process of industrial death in the concentration camps.

In Britain and the USA, the experience of the First World War was developed, and women worked in factories, on farms, in transport, as well as being recruited into the armed services. Many women learnt to drive and pilot aircraft. With the increasingly 'total' nature of war, they became targets for bombing as much as men. More women served in the armed forces than during the First World War. In Britain, women were conscripted into key areas. In the USA, around 320,000 women served in uniform, although only 16 were killed in action. Some 2000 Polish women fighters were prisoners of war, and more were killed. In areas where there was guerrilla warfare or partisan fighting, it was common for women to play a combatant role and to suffer the consequences of defeat, death or capture. Women were an important element of the Soviet army, as well as being part of the industrial machine. Women were used in guerrilla warfare and in undercover operations in enemy territory. They were also of considerable importance in the Chinese communist armies and in the post-war liberation movements in Asia. Mao Zedong famously declared that 'Women hold up half the sky'. There was little that men did in the war that women did not also do, but on a more limited scale.

Huge advances were made in supporting working women with families – cheap restaurants and child care – but these measures did not survive into post-war Britain. In Russia, women were used in mass labour and in the fighting services.

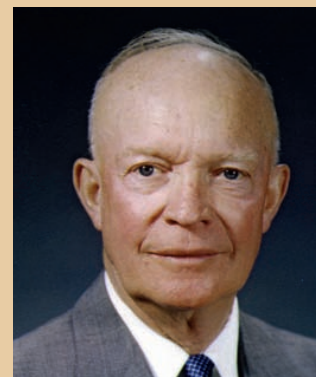
Bernard Montgomery (1887–1976)

Montgomery was Britain's most colourful war leader. The son of a bishop, he was an excellent communicator, and led the successful attack at El Alamein that drove the Germans out of North Africa. He also helped plan the D-Day invasion of France in 1944.



Dwight D. Eisenhower (1890–1969)

From June 1942 'Ike' was commander of the European theatre, and led the US invasion of North Africa and the Allied landings in Sicily and Italy. He was the overall commander of Operation Overlord (see page 111) and the subsequent campaign that led to Allied victory. Calm, diplomatic and realistic, Eisenhower coped well with the more fiery and temperamental Allied generals under his command.



genocide The killing of people from different racial or national groups, often with a view to eliminating them as a perceived threat.

As civilian bombing increased, women and children were victims. Family life was severely affected by the destruction of homes and the evacuation of children from areas likely to be bombed. In Britain this led to millions of children encountering different lifestyles as well as experiencing considerable hardship, both emotional and physical. In badly affected European war zones some children became feral and out of control. The emotional impact on children of loss on such a scale is incalculable. By the end of the war, boys as young as 12, often recruited from the Hitler Youth, were fighting for Germany on the front lines. Children were also victims of **genocide**.

Mass destruction

The First World War had witnessed civilian casualties in bombings and in attacks on civilians that arose out of war. However, the Second World War triggered or allowed genocidal fantasies to be made reality and removed restraints on racial hatred. The Japanese atrocities in the war against China did not spare civilians, and occupied territory saw very severe treatment of people considered by the Japanese as inferior. Rape and the murder of women and children were common, especially during the period of the Japanese retreat.

The Nazi regime made a determined attempt to eradicate the entire Jewish population of Europe. Other racial victims included the Roma and Sinti (gypsies) and large numbers of Slavs. Persecution of racial groups considered inferior had been ongoing since 1933, but the war ended any hopes of removing despised races and by 1941 the Nazi leadership had decided on a 'Final Solution' of annihilation. The details were established at a meeting of leading German party members at the Wannsee Conference in early 1942 and endorsed by government officials in Berlin. It has been argued that only the extreme conditions of war made such ambitious mass murder possible.

Reprisals against resistance in Nazi-occupied Europe commonly involved actions against men, women and children. When Russian forces entered Germany, there were tens of thousands of rapes and an onslaught against defenceless civilians. The German and Japanese civilians who died in Allied bombing raids included many thousands of children. In total war every civilian was seen as a potential asset that should be destroyed to prevent the enemy waging war.

What was the importance of resistance?

Resistance and revolution

Much more of Europe and Asia was occupied during the Second World War than the First. Between 1914 and 1918, Germany had shown some brutality to its occupied territories – repressing resistance, forcing inhabitants to work, maintaining low rations and imposing military rule. This became worse after 1939. Japan, too, was a brutal occupying power. Not surprisingly, resistance movements quickly formed. Some areas of Japan's new empire remained uncontrollable and there were heroic resistance efforts in Indochina, Burma, occupied China and the Philippines, often led by communists. In Europe, there was a fierce resistance in Yugoslavia, but often the opposing forces were deeply divided. This was true in Greece, where royalist and communists ended by fighting each other. The French resistance, too, was deeply divided. The importance of resistance has been questioned, and some historians regard the British and US policy of encouraging it as responsible for provoking German reprisals. The murder of the German leader Reinhard Heydrich in occupied Czechoslovakia was planned in Britain and led to the destruction of the Czech village of Lidice, which undermined support for Germany in Czechoslovakia but

Discussion point

Why did so many more civilians suffer in the Second World War than in any previous international war in the 20th century?

Fact

In July 1944, some high-ranking German military and civil service conspirators tried to kill Hitler in the Bomb Plot. They hoped to end the war before Germany was destroyed. Many were *Junkers* (aristocrats). The plot failed, although Hitler was injured by the bomb, which was left under a conference table by Count von Stauffenberg. The Nazis took revenge on the German aristocrats, and some leaders of the plot were hanged using piano wire, and their agonies filmed.

did not contribute greatly to the war effort. It should not be forgotten that some Germans resisted Hitler – a group of army officers tried and failed to assassinate him in 1944. The people of Denmark heroically resisted the deportation of Danish Jews and helped many to escape to neutral Sweden.

The most moving opposition came from people who suffered most. There was a rebellion in the concentration camp in Sobibor in 1943, and also in the Warsaw Ghetto in 1942, where thousands of Jews were confined in terrible conditions. These doomed risings were suppressed with great violence. The people of Warsaw rose against the Germans in 1944, expecting Russian aid which was not forthcoming. Having killed thousands of Polish officers and members of the Polish ruling class in 1941, Stalin was happy to see more killed by the Germans before he occupied Warsaw shortly after the rising failed. The only successful revolution occurred in Italy, where the king and key figures in the Italian élite removed Mussolini from power in 1943, after the Allies invaded. However, as this led to German occupation and widespread violence, it came at a high cost. There was no equivalent of the Russian Revolution in the Second World War.

End of unit activities

- 1 What features most made the Second World War so different from the First World War? Copy and complete the table below (one example has been done for you).

Feature	Explanation
The greater use of air power in co-ordination with armies. (Example feature)	This made it difficult for defenders to maintain trench warfare. It also helped sudden attacks like Blitzkrieg. It disrupted communications and helped amphibious attacks – so D-Day succeeded while the 1915 Gallipoli attacks failed.

- 2 Prepare a presentation on the battle of Iwo Jima, showing the experience of both the Japanese and American troops and discussing why there was such determined resistance.
 - a What was the importance of the battle?
 - b Do you think that the US experience on Iwo Jima was a factor in the decision to use atomic weapons? (The 2006 film *Letters from Iwo Jima* directed by Clint Eastwood is a good source to watch and discuss.)
- 3 Why do you think that trench warfare was so important in the First World War, yet the Second World War was much more mobile?
- 4 Do some more reading on bombing in the Second World War. Do you think that countries relied on it too much? Draw up a chart showing why bombing could be seen as important and why it could be seen as ineffective.

Fact

On 14 October 1943, a revolt broke out in the Sobibor concentration camp in Poland – 12 Germans were killed and 300 Jewish prisoners escaped. Only 53 survived and, as a punishment, the Germans launched a frenzied operation of extermination known as Operation Autumn Harvest.

Discussion point

Why was resistance in occupied Asia and Europe so difficult?



Theory of knowledge

Historians and the Holocaust – are some opinions unacceptable?

Some historians, notably David Irving, have questioned the Holocaust as a concept. Holocaust denial is a crime in some countries. Should there be a limit on the conclusions that a historian draws from a study of the past, or should all historical opinions – however wrong they seem to be – be considered with equal respect?

Discussion points

- 1 To what extent do you agree with the view that both world wars were won by the side with the greatest resources? What other factors could have been the most important?
- 2 Re-read this chapter and consider how far the result of the Second World War depended on the use of superior technology.

Review again the advances in technology discussed in this chapter. Write each one on a card. On the front explain the technology, for example, the atomic bomb, and on the back give it a number between 1 (not important) and 10 (very important).