

# 6 The Second World War in Europe and North Africa: A return to total war

## 6.1 Causes of the Second World War

### Long-term causes

- roots of Second World War in unsatisfactory conclusion of the First WW (popular view)
- victors are near to ruin too (except US)
- Nazi party gains popularity due to promise on revising Versailles treaty
- Bolshevik government falls into civil war
- international issues are not solved in WWI and are still outstanding
- Britain focuses on its own empire
- Britain thinks that compromises are the diplomatic approach; war as last resort
- problems in 1930's are remaining
- Germany feels dissatisfied with position in Europe
- Nationalism poses threat to more established empires
- Russia's position is a mystery
- Britain and France control a third of the world
- having colonies is good for economy; but if colonies cause problems it can destabilize Europe
- having colonies means to invest a lot in military to keep it safe: can't afford it: do it with limited military power: international interests are maintained only by diplomacy
- population has attitude of change in inter-war period: sense of unease and pacifism
- legacy of First WW as weakness: fascism challenges it
- catastrophe of First WW convinces that liberal democracy is unable to govern modern states
- Fascism based on ultra-nationalism with expansionism
- Mussolini invokes the grandeur of the Roman Empire
- Italy expands military
- Italy's forays in Balkans are insufficient: invade Abyssinia in quest for an empire of its own
- Germany's premise of racial superiority and need to expand
- expansion to east as there are the inferior people
- restoration of territory fuels Nazi ideology
- German speaking people in Poland, Czechoslovakia, Austria: excuse for war is built in

### Short-term causes

- any healthy economy after WWI was US
- recovery is dependent on US
- Ruhr crisis: Germany loans from US, reparations from Germany to France and Britain, wartime loans from Britain and France to US: triangular flow
- after Wall Street Crash, US recalls German loans
- depression causes countries to adopt protectionist economic policies
- increased economic rivalry between European powers in South America, China, Balkans
- economic hardship hampers the rearmament of western allies
- Hitler sets goal to undo the Versailles treaty
- 1935: Hitler tears up disarmament clauses, announces conscription and rearmament
- when Britain and France do not react to his actions he accelerates rearmament
- tries Western powers again (1936): re-arms Rhineland
- 1937: Germany intervenes in Spanish Civil War: Britain and France uphold their non-interventionist stance
- if there is no objection in expanding west, why should the allies care if Hitler expands east?

- Versailles treaty is seen as nonexistent when *Anschluss* happens
- when Britain and France promise Poland's borders Hitler has no reason to believe these are more solid than the Versailles treaty and other agreements
- appeasement: give in on demands in order to prevent conflict
- in hindsight British Prime Minister's actions are seen as weak
- British appeasement: discussion and negotiation, based on economic and military strength, global scope of Britain's interests, treating each issue separately, avoiding war, resorting to war if it were in Britain's interest
- Hitler's actions in no way impede the operation of the British empire, nor do they threaten it
- the question posed is, why the allies fought for Poland and not why they didn't fight for Czechoslovakia
- appeasement had worked until it did not

## 6.2 Combatants

### Axis Powers

- Germany analyses Versailles treaty and plans expansion beyond restrictions even before Hitler
- 1939: Germany surpasses Versailles limits by far; huge costs are generated
- German command believes that German economy is incapable of sustaining a fight over the long term
- throughout the war Germany is handicapped by Italy
- Mussolini comes to power due to economic crisis
- Italy rearms, but does not have the economic resources to modernize and material is obsolete

### Allied Powers

- WWI affects military expenditure in the inter-war period
- debts cause that less money is available for rearming
- huge reliance on expensive Maginot line
- in Britain public voting demands that British policy turns inwards
- economic crisis would have hindered rearmament anyway
- Royal Navy is the largest in the world but has to defend areas as far as Hong Kong and Singapore

### Wartime production

- Germany's economic strategy mirrored its military strategy: designed for quick victory
- the same can be said for the Japanese economy
- Allied production facilities are out of reach from Axis forces
- Germany and Japan do not have that advantage: Germany's industrial complex is constantly bombed
- Japan decentralizes production centers to make it harder to target
- until 1942 Germany produces consumer goods to maintain standard of living for women who are not used to augment in the industrial workforce
- occupied territories help to meet economic demands; as war goes on this is not sufficient; esp. after 1944 when Germany's territory shrinks
- Britain (and also other Allies) understand that they must sacrifice consumer goods production
- nevertheless, both Britain and USSR depend on aid from North America

## 6.3 Strategy

### Axis powers

- Hitler seeks Lebensraum and wants to readjust the Versailles settlement

- thinks Allies will not intervene in Poland, it will be taken quickly and German forces can then focus on western Europe
- believes in struggle between fascism and communism: forms core of his strategic thinking
- France's defeat: Britain does not accept: Hitler thinks whether to invade Britain or focus on Soviet Union: after air force is defeated by RAF he concentrates on invasion of Soviet
- Hitler's strategy: circumstances help dictate the course of events
- from 1942: strategy is search for resources (esp. oil)
- invasion of southern Russia: securing oil of caucasus mountains
- 1943-45: Germany's defensive posture: overstretched fronts (Soviet, Balkan, Greece)
- Italian collapse adds to Germany's responsibilities
- invasion at Normandy adds immeasurably to Germany's defensive burden
- tactics dominated by Blitzkrieg: requires open spaces and definitive end point
- Soviet Union has no definitive point: swallows German army

## The Allied powers

- Jan.-March 1941: GB, US, Canada meet in Washington to discuss common strategic approach
- US is still neutral (secrecy is important)
- strategic schemes: eliminate Italy quickly, defeat Germany before Japan, strategic bombing as key component, GB and US holdings in Pacific are defended
- Allies prioritize victory in Europe: suspicion Germany is working on atomic bomb
- US goes on offensive in Pacific after economy is fully mobilized for war
- even before US enters war: key Allied strategy is to outproduce the enemy
- Lend-Lease policy: US sends aid to Allies; immediate payment not required
- Germany produces less and has to distribute it over multiple fronts

## 6.4 Operations

### Poland

- Poland is first trial of Blitzkrieg
- ideal terrain: large, open plains for unrestricted movement
- Polish army is driven east where Soviet army is located
- before 5AM on 1. Sept. 1939: massive air raids: destroy air force facilities, infrastructure
- air raids cause panic: people on the streets: hamper operation of civilians and Polish military
- German army: two groups: one goes north and then east, main group goes to Warsaw
- Polish forces set up defensive perimeter around capital
- civilians are a deliberate target in this war from the beginning
- siege of Warsaw begins 17. Sept.; authorities surrender on 27. Sept.
- British and French declare war on Germany

### Battle for western Europe

- Hitler hopes his army can be quickly turned west to conquer hesitant and weak France
- Germany has to wait until spring 1940: interim is known as phoney war: British improves army, France reinforces Maginot line, Germany corrects its deficiencies which get apparent in Poland
- Norway is attacked first: though neutral it provides Germany with naval base of operation and secures resources obtained from Sweden
- Norway, Britain and France try to defend it: decide that prospects of victory are slim
- German plan on France: small force attacks Belgium and Netherlands pulling French and British forces north, large force goes through (apparently) impenetrable Ardennes forest, last force attacks Maginot line, main force cuts off France from their troops; codename "Sickle Stroke"
- French rely on Maginot line and deploy their troops in the north
- 10. May launch operation Sickle Stroke
- Allies rush their troops in the north: do not want to make the same mistake as in 1914
- Germans only take three days through Ardennes
- Allies still believe the main attack will come from the north
- Hitler's tanks outstrip the infantry and he orders them to stop

- British soldiers are trapped against coast and Germans think a sea evacuation is negligible
- 400'000 troops trapped at Dunkirk: operation Dynamo uses Royal Navy vessels and civilian boats to evacuate them
- miracle of Dunkirk comes at a cost
- France is not strong enough: surrender on 17. June
- Terms of surrender include: 60% of France are occupied by Germany, 40% and colonies are under puppet government with Vichy as capital under Pétain, French army is reduced, French prisoners of war are kept in captivity, pay "occupation costs", navy turned over to Germany

## Barbarossa to Stalingrad

- autumn 1940: Hitler's attention increases to the east
- not only territorial conquest, but also ideological war
- massive attack: use the equipment from all over Europe
- Red Army still healing from purge of their officers (1937-38), still have a big army
- Soviet leader is willfully blind to the coming invasion: no military preparation is made: does not want to offend Hitler
- Blitzkrieg blueprint is used again
- German troops encircle and capture many Soviet soldiers
- by midsummer German army shows cracks: outstripped supply lines esp. fuel shortages
- infantry cannot keep up with tanks
- Red Army shows no sign of total collapse
- advance is slowing down: high casualties, logistics with many prisoners, rapid use of fuel, gaps between infantry and tanks, Russian railway cannot be used, poor quality roads, exhausted infantry and panzer troops, efforts to supply three full army groups
- Hitler sends part of troops to north and Kiev; they return in winter: snow and mud appears
- citizens of Moscow defend: men and women help
- German tanks and soldiers freeze
- Red Army assembles massive force behind Moscow including Siberian troops trained for winter
- Soviets use German tactic: encirclement: regain all lost territories since operation beginning

## Stalingrad

- Russian spring brings mud again; German army is not to move until May 1942
- Soviet factories are dismantled before they fall to Germans and are reassembled in relative safety behind Ural mountains
- German troops are ordered southwards to secure Caucasus for oil
- Germans destroy cities: Soviets use every space for fighting (Rattenkrieg): turns into series of small units fighting: Germany does not have its advantage of armor
- many citizens help
- Stalin's famous "Not One Step Backward": idea for a line behind troops which gun those down who turn around to flee
- while defending Stalingrad with the smallest force possible, the Soviets create huge force north of Stalingrad
- Soviets outproduce Germans by far
- Soviets launch encirclement and it's completed within days
- Stalingrad is the furthest point Germany reaches

## North Africa

- 1940-43 between three combatants
- lack of roads, harsh climate, interminable sand and dust make matters more complicated
- mobility is limited to a strip along the coast
- Italy tries to attack Egypt but is pushed back by British troops short after
- British advancing cannot maintain supplies and manpower further than to Tripoli
- Erwin Rommel from Germany with Afrika Corps comes to aid
- pushes British back and overstretches his supply lines

## El Alamein

- British try a massed infantry attack supported by massive bombardment; battle of attrition
- goal is to create a breach in the German defense line and then use it
- British plan works; Rommel is not allowed to retreat and weakens his troops
- German troops are further pushed back and their supplies get sunken by British navy
- last of Axis powers surrender in May 1943

## Sicily and Italy

- British invasion to increase chance of revolt against Mussolini's increasingly unpopular regime and divert German forces from the eastern front
- peninsulas make outflanking difficult; Italy has an additional mountain range splitting it
- Allies have to divide and advance along the coasts
- US command sees the invasion as a distraction to the invasion of western Europe
- German forces have to defend as Italy signs an armistice with the Allies
- Allies are slowed before Rome at a shore to shore defense line
- cannot succeed until two days before Normandy landings

## Normandy

- Allied strategy is to involve Germany in a two-front war
- Stalin presses for this action and is impatient
- Sicily invasion is to divert German forces from the eastern front
- main second front is to be in France: operation Overlord
- Operation includes: attack open beaches (not ports), sand beaches, land tanks after beaches are secure, absolute air superiority important for amphibious landings, landing craft has to be improved by navy
- operation of this size requires unprecedented logistical planning and material build-up
- US, GB and Canada will attack five beaches: Omaha, Utah, Gold, Sword, Juno
- paratroopers will land behind German lines
- from there troops will drive north and east
- action requires great level of cooperation between all three armies
- necessary contact to French resistance and Free French (escape France and form military formations under Charles de Gaulle)
- amounts of material have to be produced, stored, kept secret from German army intelligence
- Supreme Commander is US General Dwight Eisenhower
- tactical command during landings is British General Bernard Montgomery
- Rommel is placed in command of Atlantic Wall; defenses are formidable
- Rommel disagrees with his superior: seeks to destroy enemies on the beach; Field Marshall von Rundstedt however wants to destroy the enemy while they move inland with mobile armor
- Rommel orders strengthening of coastal defenses: numerous landing obstacles are placed
- obstacles wreck landing craft at high tide and at low tide the enemy cannot advance as far
- main defensive effort is from armor; also estimations have to be made because the 2'600km front is too long to fully cover
- Hitler personally divides tank forces between two generals and says the reserve cannot be used without his permission
- these premises almost guarantee a delayed and weak response to Allied landing at Normandy
- obvious invasion route is at Pas de Calais (narrowest point): Allies support that impression: created fake army, wooden tanks, false radio traffic
- suspicion made until dummy paratroopers fall behind actual place in Normandy
- once Germans realize they are dummies they should send troops to Pas de Calais
- Allies bomb Pas de Calais more than Normandy
- preparation from May 1942 - May 1944
- amass a huge amount of troops, supplies and materials
- invasion on 6. June 1944
- night before paratroopers land behind enemy lines to secure strategic points
- amphibious landings have different experiences
- Utah (US): limited resistance, small amount of casualties

- Omaha (US): heavy seas push landing craft off course, defended by most experienced German troops, high banks overlook the stretch of land (clear fire from Germans), after one day Allies get the beachhead, huge losses
- Gold (GB): airborne troops cause disorientation, mediate amount of casualties, by evening move inland, meet Juno and Sword attackers
- Juno (Can): at first stiff resistance, by evening move inland, meet Gold forces, many casualties
- Sword: landings encounter little resistance, later are attacked by tanks, mediate casualties

## The Road to Berlin

- Red Army marches West after surrender of Germans at Stalingrad
- Germans plan another attack: largest tank battle in history
- Soviets are forewarned and are able to destroy the tanks
- Soviets dramatically outproduce enemy and continuously gain men
- Allies also advance into Germany
- Red Army reaches Berlin by 2. May 1945

## The war at sea

- Battle of Atlantic refers to ongoing effort to bring supplies
- England requires a lot of materials to survive
- for every 14 merchant ships there is one escort ship dealing with threat provided by Germans
- after big losses of Kriegsmarine, German high command is convinced to start U-boat program
- U-boats adopt a "wolf pack" strategy
- once a U-boat makes contact with Allied ship it notifies the other U-boats
- escort ship of British cannot defend from multiple attacking vessels
- over time Allies defeat U-boat threat through production and technology
- US produce more ship tonnage than can be sunk by Germans
- anti-submarine technology is improved: by end of 1943 Allies sink twice the U-boats as Germany can produce

## The air war

- when France surrenders (June 1940), German high command expects British to ask for terms of peace
- Germany hence wants a military solution: operation Sealion: amphibious invasion of Britain
- Sealion lacks planning and Germany does not have the naval resources
- Germany believes they can succeed with their Luftwaffe: task is to eliminate RAF's ability to operate
- attempt is the Battle of Britain
- RAF's advantages: radar installations, Luftwaffe suffers more in battle of France, British outproduce German aircraft, recovery is easier as it is near British grounds, Luftwaffe has to rely on medium-sized flight bombers as they have no heavy bombers, fighters cannot stay long as they are operated from France, British Intelligence can decipher Luftwaffe radios
- Germany continuously bombs RAF airfields
- Germany always has higher numerical losses but it is unclear how long the RAF can go on
- Hitler decides to concentrate on London to break morale
- Germany concentrates on terror bombings of urban centers (called Blitz)
- two functions: crush civilian morale, impede on British war production
- strategic bombing: area bombing (indiscriminant to structures in the area), precision bombing (smaller target areas of importance)
- Luftwaffe is never able to carry out heavy bombing over enemy's territory
- British mostly conduct night bombing missions deep in the enemy's territory
- British rely on night as they have no long-distance fighters to protect the bomber fleets
- arrival of US Air Force bring new tactics: suited for daylight bombings, increased precision, do not need other protection
- daylight bombings and without protection turn out bad for US air force

## 6.5 Effects of the Second World War

### Immediate effects

- as a whole USSR and US win and emerge as global superpowers
- complete devastation: human, cultural, economic
- most immediate effect is human cost
- immense damage to cultural heritage through bombings
- only French and Danish buildings survive devastation from above: they surrender beforehand
- cultural institutions hide their art collections; nevertheless a lot of art is stolen or damaged
- realization that Europe cannot be left on its own with recovery
- Allied leaders plan re-establishment of trade and currencies as soon as hostilities cease
- global economy depends on European recovery
- Europe does not want a long-term dependence on US economy
- US emerges as dominant economy of the globe
- by 1947: Europe regains its lost industrial capacity but ability to be self-sustaining is in doubt
- US sends aid credits for improvement of infrastructure and free trade (Marshall Plan)
- US economy benefits from wartime demand
- US-Soviet relations are worsened through Marshall Plan and it is major accelerant of Cold War
- trials are held for war crimes in form of tribunals in which representatives of the four occupying powers would sit in judgement
- when Cold War intensifies the will to continue trials dissipates

### Long-term effects

- Grand Alliance comes together to defeat Axis powers (common enemy)
- when Germany is defeated the differences between Allies come to force again
- some aspects of WWII make the Cold War more likely: devastation of Soviet Union, Stalin looks for security after being invaded, Stalin interprets appeasement policy as anti-Soviet policy, US decision of not sharing nuclear weapon technology causes distrust and competition, Stalin sees delays of Operation Overlord as deliberate, difficult questions regarding post-war settlement are asked during wartime conferences
- ideological differences, mutual misunderstanding and ignorance of values predate WWII
- United Nations with one country one vote principle is created for a balanced system for collective security; great powers should not join together
- both wars weaken France and Britain (old colonial powers) to an extent where they cannot maintain their empires: decolonization