

**S6 History - 4hr**  
 Compulsory Core 3 – World War II  
**What was the Second World War?**

Based on Culpin and Henig – *Modern Europe 1870-1945*, Stewart -*The Changing Nature of Warfare 1700-1945* and Jones-Nerzic and Keys *IB Course Companion for the History of Europe*

The Second World War can only be described in superlatives; it was the most destructive war in history causing more deaths, and involving more countries, than any previous conflict. Six years of war had left Europe in a state of utter devastation. Europe experienced ‘total war’ on a terrifying scale, destroying lives not just where formal military conflict occurred but throughout civilian populations suffering bombing, occupation, persecution, exploitation and extermination. Hopeful ideas of human progress and the superiority of “European Civilisation” had already been battered by the horrors of World War One, the economic disasters of the 1930s, and the political extremism that followed. The liberation of the Nazi concentration camps exposed a further, barely comprehensible depth of industrialised cruelty. The process of rebuilding a broken continent would take place in the shadow of these events.

This era of ‘European Civil War 1914-91’, can be said to have concluded with the revolutions in Eastern Europe (1989), the reunification of Germany (1990) and the collapse of the Soviet Union (1991). However, the social, political and economic structures that emerged and have endured from the post-war situation have done so in response to that defining conflict. In particular, the European Union has its origins in a shared desire to avoid any return to mass unemployment, political extremism, German militarism, war and revolution. For the Western Allies, despite the alliance with Stalin, it was also a ‘just war’, an unusually clear cut case of conflict between Good and Evil and as such has served as an enduring historical example, used by later politicians to rally their nations, or to invoke when faced by new threats. The enormity of the crimes committed in Germany’s name inevitably cast a shadow over the remainder of the century. Globally, the War marked a shift in power from the shattered nations of Western Europe to the USA and the Soviet Union. The discredited, ruinous rivalry of European states was replaced by a bipolar struggle between the two new superpowers with an added ideological dimension. Western European states would have to accept their diminished roles, abandon their global empires and seek security under America’s protection.

Few countries in Western Europe were able to avoid the traumas of war. Between allied victory and axis defeat countries such as France, Belgium, the Netherlands, Luxembourg, Denmark and Norway suffered invasion by Nazi Germany followed by occupation, exploitation, and eventually, liberation. The United Kingdom, though undefeated, endured the threat of invasion and the bombing of its cities. For Italy, war brought defeat, invasion and civil war as Axis and Allied forces fought across Italian territory. Spain, Switzerland, Sweden, Portugal and Ireland maintained varying degrees of precarious neutrality as war raged around them. It is not to belittle the scale of these events to acknowledge that the War in Western Europe was less destructive than in the East. Nazi racial ideology could accommodate a degree of respect for the peoples of Western Europe that was absent in the East where the conflict was a ‘war of annihilation’, carried out with the aim of destroying entire categories of people.

	Total Deaths	% of Pre-War Population	Military Deaths	Civilian Deaths
France	810,000	1.9%	340,000	470,000
UK	388,000	0.8%	326,000	62,000
Belgium	88,000	1.1%	76,000	12,000
Italy	410,000	0.9%	330,000	80,000
Germany	6,850,000	9.5%	3,250,000	3,600,000
Soviet Union	20,600,000	10.4%	13,600,000	7,000,000
Poland	6,123,000	17.2%	123,000	6,000,000
Yugoslavia	1,706,000	10.9%	N/A	N/A

**How similar was the Second World War to the First?**

The two world wars punctuate the period covered by the course, profoundly influencing all the themes, countries and people we have discussed. What similarities and differences are there between them? (see diagram below)

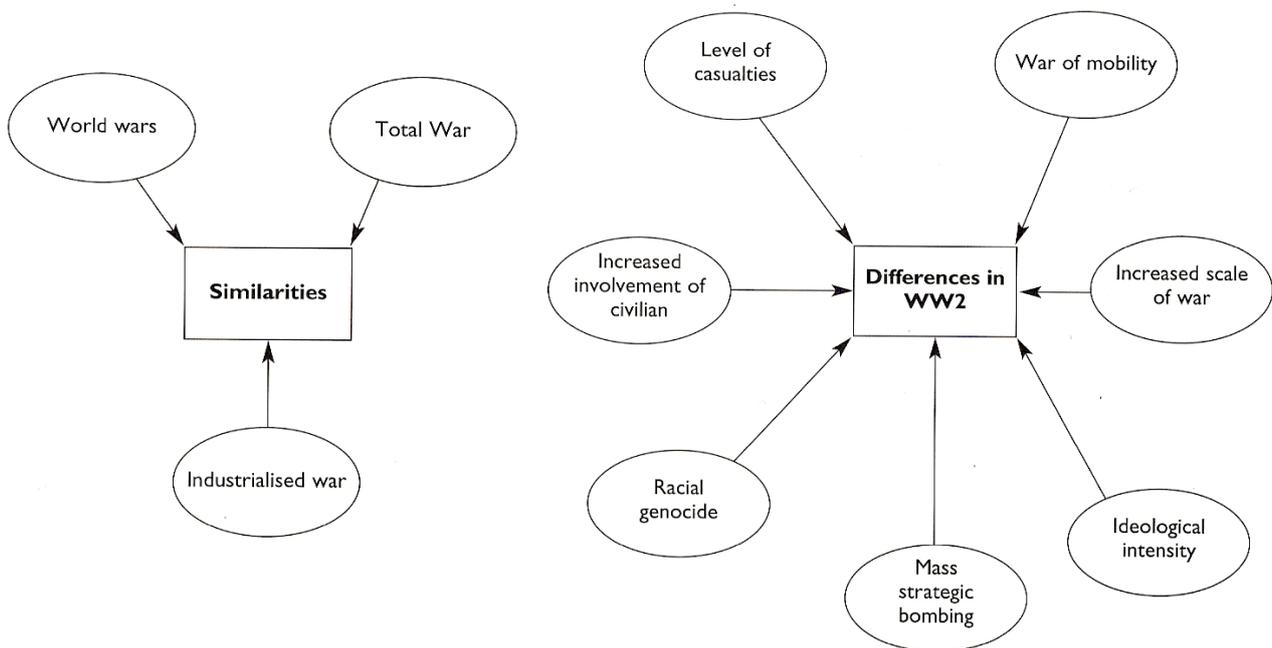
Some similarities are obvious. Both were 'total wars', involving civilians as well as combatants. Because both wars stretched nations' resources to the limit, the overwhelming strength of the USA was a crucial factor in determining the result. In both 1914 and 1940-41 Germany had startling initial successes but in the end could not hold out against the superior resources of their opponents.

Some apparent similarities conceal important differences. Britain, France, the USA, Russia and Belgium fought together against Germany in both wars, but in the First they were joined by Serbia, Italy and Japan, and in the Second by Czechoslovakia, Poland and the Netherlands (neutral in the First World War). Turkey and Bulgaria joined Germany and Austria-Hungary in the First World War, while Italy and Japan changed to fight in alliance with Germany in the Second. The 1914-18 war was called a world war, and indeed there was fighting outside Europe - in the Middle East, Africa and on at sea. The 1939-45 war, however, was more genuinely a world war: more of Europe saw fighting, as did north Africa and the Atlantic Ocean. But this time there was also another war over a wide expanse of another part of the globe: the Pacific War from December 1941 to August 1945.

Both wars brought tremendous casualties, but the 17 million deaths of the First World War are overshadowed by the 37.6 million (excluding the Holocaust - see below) of the Second. An important difference was that the proportion of civilians among those killed increased from about 15 per cent to around 35 per cent.

Clearly, the two wars were different for every country, but in the cases of Russia and Germany the differences are so great that they require comment: Hitler was initially more successful than the German High Command of the First World War, but his decision to fight on to the bitter end left his country shattered and divided. This contrasts with the German search for an armistice in autumn 1918 and underlines the significance given to it in chapter 9. As for Russia, the early disastrous defeats must have looked like history repeating itself. However, the fight back of the Second World War was in complete contrast to the sequence of events leading up to the humiliating Treaty of Brest-Litovsk of 1918.

**Summary Diagram**  
Similarities and Differences Between World War One and World War Two



**Why did Germany do so well up to the winter of 1942-3?**

The answers to this question reveal that Hitler learned the lessons of the First World War more creatively than the Allies.

France and Britain adopted defensive strategies, relying in France's case on the Maginot Line and in Britain's case on the Channel and a naval blockade of Germany. Hitler, like Schlieffen, knew the dangers of a two-front war for Germany and avoided it much more successfully than the High Command in 1914. The conquest of Poland in September 1939 was carried out without the intervention of France or Britain. The Nazi-Soviet Pact kept Russia from interfering in the astounding conquest of western Europe in May-June 1940. The German

invasion of the USSR in June 1941 admittedly left an undefeated Britain in the west, but Britain was not, at that time, able to inflict much damage on Germany.

Hitler did not have to face a two-front war until D-Day (June 1944), unless we count the Allied invasion of Sicily which took place in July 1943.

German forces in western Europe in May 1940 were roughly equal in size to those of the Allies. French tanks were supposedly better than Hitler's, but Hitler had more airplanes. The crucial difference was that Hitler used airplanes, tanks (fitted with radio, unlike the French *ones*) and motorised infantry in rapid, coordinated thrusts: the technique called *blitzkrieg*, or lightning war.

Hitler prepared a huge army of 3 million men, 3,580 tanks and 1,830 aircraft for the invasion of Russia. Remembering the Russian defeats in 1914, the chaos which enveloped Russia for much of the interwar period and the wholesale slaughter of the upper ranks of the Red Army in the purges of 1937, it is not at all surprising that Hitler thought that 'we have only to kick the door in and the whole rotten edifice will collapse'. He understood that the huge size of the USSR made it difficult to defeat, but reasoned that if he could drive Stalin's forces out of European Russia the Communists would be forced to sue for peace. Even over the much greater distance, the German Army's *blitzkrieg* tactics were successful. Hitler's front line was 1,000 kilometres into Russia by the end of 1941.

### **What were the consequences of Germany's early successes?**

German forces defeated Poland within weeks. The Blitzkrieg tactics overwhelmed the Polish Army. The Soviet Union subsequently invaded the Eastern half of Poland as agreed in a secret deal with Germany. Poland's geographical isolation from Britain and France meant that there was no practical assistance to be offered. Having secured his Eastern flank, Hitler's attention turned to Western Europe.

Blitzkrieg – literally 'lightning war'. Rapid advances involving infantry supported by tanks and aircraft. In May 1940, German troops attacked the Netherlands, Belgium and France. The British Army was forced to abandon the Continent. As the German advance briefly paused, over 300,000 British and French troops were rescued from the beaches at Dunkirk and taken to Britain to fight another day. As German troops closed in on Paris, the British and French governments discussed the idea of uniting their nations in a Franco-British Union to sustain 'France' even through military defeat. This embryonic proposal of European union came to nothing and the French Government collapsed soon after. General de Gaulle escaped to London and assumed leadership of the 'Free French'; those who had escaped and those who were determined to continue the struggle from France's overseas territories. Marshal Petain stayed in France as head of a Nazi controlled puppet state which was to be economically exploited for the German war effort and from which the Jewish population would be transported to concentration camps.

Suspicions remained between Germany's enemies. De Gaulle felt that the RAF could have provided more planes for the defence of France, but Churchill would not risk losing these aircraft that would be vital to the defence of Britain. By acting cautiously in case France should be defeated did Churchill actually guarantee that it did? Further ill feeling arose from Royal Navy attacks on the French Mediterranean Fleet, the loyalties of which were uncertain. To the British this was a military necessity to prevent the ships falling into enemy hands but the incident exposed the strain put on the Allies by their failures against Germany. Fruitless Anglo-French attempts at unity, French ingratitude, suspected British lack of commitment to continental allies, mutual incomprehension; these themes were to resurface in the post-War era as a new Western Europe took shape.

Hitler made preparations for Operation Sealion; the German plan to invade Britain. To succeed, Germany would first have to achieve air superiority by destroying the fighter planes of the Royal Air Force. The Battle of Britain was a decisive defeat for Hitler, the first of the War. Throughout August and September, 1940, the two air forces fought each other over Southern England until German losses became unsustainable and the invasion of Britain was postponed. This victory was, in Churchill's phrase, Britain's "finest hour", achieved by pilots from Britain, the British Empire, Poland, Czechoslovakia, France and other Allied nations. The strategic implications of victory were crucial as Britain's survival provided the Allies with an impregnable base beyond the reach of Germany's superior land forces. From this base the Allies could develop their air power to eventually achieve air supremacy in Western Europe. The victory also provided hope for the people of occupied Europe and bought time to develop the Alliance that would defeat Hitler.

The two air forces continued to bomb each other's cities; German attacks on civilian targets were held up as examples of Nazi barbarism, though the British were also bombing civilian targets in Germany. By the final year of the War, Germany was suffering raids on a devastating scale. Hundreds of thousands of innocents were killed in the destruction of Cologne, Hamburg, Dresden (see image below) and other cities. Of the approximately 60,000 British civilian victims of German bombing raids, 9,000 were killed in the final year of the War by

missiles launched from Germany. These unmanned weapons were totally indiscriminate – they were simply aimed at London.



Whether or not the bombing of cities could destroy an enemy's morale and his will to continue the War is uncertain; British propagandists made much of London's ability to "take it", disregarding the possibility that German cities might be able to "take it" too. The destruction of factories could temporarily disrupt production but required greater accuracy than was achievable.

### **Why was 1941 a turning point?**

In June 1941, Hitler launched Operation Barbarossa, the invasion of the Soviet Union. Over 3 million German soldiers participated in what was the largest military assault in history. They were assisted by smaller contingents from Romania, Hungary and Italy. Despite Spain's declared neutrality, General Franco agreed to the deployment of 20,000 Spanish troops, the Falange shirted 'Blue Division' on the condition that they were used only against the Soviet Union and not in Western Europe. Within months this invasion force had advanced hundreds of kilometres, vastly extending the territory of German controlled Europe. Approximately 5.5 million Soviet soldiers were taken prisoner by the Germans during the War and of these 3.3 million died, or were murdered, in captivity.

However, Germany was unable to achieve victory; the Soviets were able to concede territory in order to buy time. Factories were moved east beyond the range of German planes and production steadily increased. In an ever more destructive war of attrition the Soviets could replace troop losses at a rate the Germans could not match. During the first winter of the campaign the Soviets halted the German advance and over the following year fought bitterly to turn back the invaders. Following the devastating German defeat at Stalingrad in January 1943, the Red Army began to drive the Germans back in a series of emphatic victories. 75% of Germany's total war casualties occurred on the Eastern Front where all restraints were abandoned in what had become a war of annihilation.

Meanwhile, the United States had entered the War, following the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbour in December, 1941. Germany had declared war on the US soon after. The defeat of German and Italian forces in North Africa was followed by the Allied invasion of Italy beginning in July, 1943. A vast invasion force of Allied troops from the USA, Britain, Canada and other allied nations gathered in southern England. On June 6th, 1944, (D-Day) these troops landed in France opening another front against Germany. Hitler's Empire was now being squeezed on three sides.

### **Why was Germany defeated?**

*1 Hitler made some bad decisions.* He had been so successful up to the end of 1942 that he believed he knew better than his generals. He often overruled their advice. There are several instances: his turning aside from an all-out drive to get to Moscow in order to capture Kiev, in late 1941; his refusal to allow von Paulus to retreat from Stalingrad, leading to the humiliating surrender of 91,000 troops and 24 generals in February 1943 - a turning-point in the war. Hitler's meddling and increasing errors of judgement undermined the morale of his generals,

*2 Germany was over-extended.* Like the Kaiser, Hitler was denied his need for a short war. He was obliged to come to the rescue of his ally, Mussolini, in Yugoslavia and Greece - a distraction which pushed the start of the attack on Russia dangerously late into 1941. Once he had failed to crush Russia by the end of 1941, Hitler was committed to a war of attrition against a better-resourced enemy fighting on home territory. The extended German supply-lines, across inadequate roads in appalling winter weather, put German forces at a serious disadvantage. The demands of the Eastern Front drew resources away from North Africa so that by October 1942 Rommel had to face Montgomery at El Alamein with outnumbered forces. His defeat was another turning-point.

3 *The enormous resources of the United States* - in materials, money and morale - tipped the scales increasingly against the Axis powers. After Pearl Harbor (December 1941), Roosevelt could openly support the Allies: the USA provided about half of all the Allied war effort. The war cost them £84 million and they advanced another £12 million to the Allies.

4 *The capacity of the USSR to resist and fight back.* There are several elements to this, some of which are attributable to Stalin's regime and some of which are not:

- The Five-Year Plans had succeeded in creating enormous industrial capacity which was turned to making armaments. Much of this was in new areas in the east, beyond the reach of the German invasion, or was moved there. By 1942 Soviet production of aeroplanes, tanks and guns was nearly double Germany's.
- The invasion of their country united the Russian people and drove both soldiers and civilians to superhuman efforts and sacrifices. Nearly 20 million Russians died in what they call 'The Great Patriotic War'.
- Stalin panicked at first, but when he found his nerve he was able to tap into this Russian patriotism quite effectively. He even allowed a religious revival in the USSR as a source of nationalism, and his personal standing was high.
- German forces were welcomed into western USSR in 1941: Ukrainians and Byelorussians had good cause to hate Stalin. However, Hitler's vicious racism made it impossible for the German army to capitalise on these internal Russian divisions. All were, to him, 'inferior people'. They were ferociously treated and soon ready to join groups of partisans in acts of sabotage and resistance against the German invaders. As in occupied western Europe, resistance groups may not have had a direct effect, but they did tie down troops who were thus not available for front-line fighting

### **The Holocaust**

In March 1945 Red Army soldiers entered Auschwitz; on 4 April, US soldiers arrived at the small camp of Ohrdruf where 3,000 Jews had been murdered four days before the liberators arrived. Generals Eisenhower and Patton were with them and Lewis Weinstein, one of the US soldiers, described their reactions: 'I saw Eisenhower go to the opposite side of the road and vomit. From a distance I saw General Patton bend over, holding his head with one hand and his abdomen with the other. I suggested to General Eisenhower that cables be sent immediately to President Roosevelt, Churchill and de Gaulle, urging them to send representatives.'

There was no need: as the Allied armies moved into Germany in the last weeks of the war the full extent of the Holocaust became visible. The British saw the awful facts in their newspapers after reporters entered Belsen with British forces on 15 April 1945. It should not have been news to the world's public. Nazi persecution of the Jews in Germany before the war was well-known. The 'Final Solution' began in 1941 when the expanding German Reich found itself ruling over many millions of Jews in Poland and Russia. The real figures for those killed were not known with any degree of accuracy until years later: 6 million Jews, 3 million non-Jewish Poles, 3 million Russian prisoners-of-war, a million gypsies and hundreds of thousands of homosexuals and people with disabilities.

In 1945 news of the Holocaust had two effects: firstly, the Allies were not inclined to be merciful to the Nazis and the German people; secondly, it helped to put an end to the belief that Europeans were more civilised and culturally advanced than other peoples.

### **The devastated continent**

Europe was far more devastated in 1945 than in 1918. Huge areas had been fought over, air raids had left few cities untouched, and both Germany and the USSR had used '**scorched earth**' tactics when they were retreating. Industrial production was crippled and transport systems were in ruins. The labour needed to rebuild cities and work in industry was simply not available, as millions of people tried to put their shattered lives together. The contact between mainly industrial western Europe and mainly agricultural eastern Europe was broken and there was a real danger of famine. Far from thinking about recovery, most people in Europe were struggling to keep fed, housed and warm.

### **The Cold War**

As the Red Army moved westwards, eight states which had been independent countries before the war came under Soviet occupation: Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, Poland, Romania, Bulgaria, Hungary and Czechoslovakia. It was clear that Stalin intended to establish pro-Soviet governments in most of the areas of eastern Europe which his armies had liberated.

From 1870 to 1945 Europe had been at the centre of the world's events. The economic and political power generated by capitalism, and especially by industrialisation, permitted the countries of Europe to exert an influence over the lives of most of the people in the world.

In 1945 there was a real shift of emphasis. World power now lay with two 'superpowers': the USA and the USSR. Both were larger, with more people, and clearly richer, than any European country could ever be. Over the next 50 years Europe was sometimes the cockpit in which these two non-European superpowers fought out their 'Cold War'. But more often the crises occurred outside Europe: in Asia, in the Middle East, in Africa and in Central and South America.

### **European unity**

1945 was also a dramatic turning-point in the history of the nations of western Europe. Throughout the 75 years up to 1945 we have seen how, in different ways across Europe, the new forces of industry and social change clashed with old institutions and attitudes. Out of the tremendous strain produced by these processes came new ideologies and two devastating world wars.

After 1945 a new dynamic appears: European unity. For some it was a matter of security, of making Europe strong enough to resist the military power of the Soviet Union on the one hand and the economic power of the USA on the other. For others, the economic advantages of closer relations between western European nations were predominant. More idealistically, there was the intention of making a further outbreak of the 'European Civil War' impossible.

We should not see these events from the suspicious point of view of successive British governments. Britain was offered the leadership of the movement to revive and unify western Europe in the late 1940s and rejected the offer: one of the most spectacular miscalculations of the postwar period. In mainland Europe from 1945 many people seriously committed themselves to greater unity - economically, militarily and politically. This commitment went beyond mundane thoughts of profit and loss. It was a matter of belief, rooted in the experience of the last 70 years, that cooperation was not only better than conflict: it was the only way to rebuild Europe.

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