

## **Years Between the Wars**

Post World War I Europe was in shambles due to the massive destruction of human and economic resources. Once the smoke had cleared and the tally had been completed, it became obvious that Europe would need a major shot in the arm to recover emotionally and economically. Tremendous casualties (civilian and military), loss of resources, and virtual destruction of traditional cultural mores are just a few of the issues which emerged.

Perhaps the most significant post war event which developed was the signing of the Treaty of Versailles. This treaty held Germany responsible for the entire war. As a result, the new German government (Weimar Republic) was not able to recover politically and economically. The French and Belgium desire for revenge held the Germans to an indemnity it simply could not meet. The end result for Germany was the wholesale printing of German marks with no resource backing, creating a situation of hyperinflation in Germany.

It was this situation of national humiliation and economic punishment which paved the way for the rise of German Fascism. In addition to punishing Germany, the Allied powers rewrote the map of Europe creating new democracies as the great empires were dismantled.

This political restructuring created new democracies using ethnic identity and self-determination as the criteria. While this criteria for the redrawing of Europe seemed a good idea, the end result was that the European continent became even more unstable due to these new and unstable nations. Former colonial holdings by and large demanded independence from their controlling European state.

As World War I was to be the "war to end all wars," all considerations were made to create a political situation which would promote international peace. The Fourteen Points (a component of the Treaty of Versailles) were designed to address the issues and concepts which pushed the world into war: militarism, the alliance system, and Imperialism.

The end of the war also marked a shift in the social attitudes and values of societies around the world. Populations of the belligerent nations emerged from the war disillusioned due to economic chaos, mass casualties, and political impotence.

# Lesson 147: WWII Notes (cont.)

World History

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## **The Rise of Fascism**

Fascism initially developed in Italy under the leadership of Benito Mussolini and later spread to Germany, adopted by Adolf Hitler's National Socialist Party. Fascism is characterized by a combination of intense nationalism and totalitarian leadership.

The Fascist Party was able to gain a majority in both Germany and Italy as the people were looking for strong, take-charge leadership, which was anticommunist.

While Mussolini turned out to be more talk than action, Hitler immediately began to act. He violated numerous terms of the Treaty of Versailles hoping the Allied nations would not challenge him, and he formed an alliance with Stalin of the USSR. Hitler invaded Poland in 1939, ultimately setting the stage for World War II.

## **World War II**

World War II began when Germany, led by Hitler, invaded Poland, an action which was followed by the Soviet Union's invasion into eastern Poland and Finland. With that action, France and Britain declared war on Germany.

By summer of 1940, most of Europe had fallen to the German war machine, leaving only Great Britain to stand alone against the powerful nation. For six months, Britain was subject to daily air raids (Battle of Britain). Despite Britain's pleadings, the United States chose to stay out of the European conflict and didn't get involved in the conflict until the Japanese (allied to Germany) bombed Pearl Harbor.

The bombing of Pearl Harbor resulted in the United States declaring war on Japan followed by Germany (ally of Japan) declaring war on the U.S. At this point in the war, two fronts of conflict developed: the European Theatre and the Pacific Theatre.

The two major belligerents in the Pacific Theatre were the U.S. and the Japanese, creating a two-front war for the U.S. The Pacific Theatre was characterized by the military tactic of "island hopping," a strategy which called for the physical invasion and occupation of every other island in the South Pacific. These islands served as military bases which were critical for victory in

## Lesson 147: WWII Notes (cont.)

World History

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the Pacific. When the U.S. was able to control two outer islands, the Japanese occupying the island in the middle would effectively be cut off. The Pacific war was a war on water and in the air. Therefore, aircraft carriers and island bases were extremely important to ultimate victory.

In 1941 the Germans invaded the Soviet Union, pushing the Soviets into the arms of the Allies. It is this action that many historians believe turned the tide of the war to the Allies. The "Big Three," the Soviet Union (Joseph Stalin), United States (Franklin Roosevelt), and Britain (Winston Churchill), dominated the Allied forces.

After the Allied invasions of Italy and Normandy, the western Allies squeezed from the north and the Soviets marched from the east toward Germany ultimately to encircle Berlin. In April 1945 after it had become clear that Germany was lost, Hitler committed suicide, enabling Germany to surrender. Tragically, Franklin Roosevelt died (succeeded by Harry Truman) shortly after Hitler and was never able to see the end of the war in Europe (VJE Day).

One of the tragic legacies of this war was the German attempt to wipe out the entire Jewish race (genocide) through mass extermination. This plan was known as the Final Solution and was well on its way to success by using death camps. Through these camps, some six million Jews had been murdered along with six million others who had been targeted by the Germans.

The war in the Pacific ended in the summer of 1945 as a result of the United States dropping atomic bombs on the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.