**World War II**

**Key People**

**Neville Chamberlain**

The prime minister of Britain from 1937 to 1940, who advocated a policy of **appeasement** toward the territorial demands of Nazi **Germany**. This appeasement policy essentially turned a blind eye to Germany’s 1938 annexation of **Austria** and the **Sudetenland**.

**Winston Churchill**

The prime minister of Britain during most of World War II. Churchill was among the most active leaders in resisting German aggression and played a major role in assembling the **Allied Powers**, including the United States and the USSR.

**Dwight D. Eisenhower**

A U.S. Army general who held the position of supreme Allied commander in Europe, among many others. Eisenhower was perhaps best known for his work in planning **Operation Overlord**, the Allied invasion of Europe. After the war, he was a very popular figure in the United States and was elected to two terms as U.S. president, taking office in 1953.

**Tōjō Hideki**

Prime Minister of Japan during [**World War II**](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/648813/World-War-II) (1941–44), subsequently tried and executed for [**war**](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/635532/war) crimes.

**Hirohito**

Emperor of **Japan** from 1926 until his death in 1989. Despite the power of Japan’s military leaders, many scholars believe that Hirohito took an active role in leading the country and shaping its combat strategy during World War II. After Japan’s defeat, he was allowed to continue to hold his position as emperor—largely as a figurehead—despite the fact that Japan was under U.S. occupation. Although many countries favored it, Hirohito was never tried for war crimes.

**Adolf Hitler**

Chancellor and self-proclaimed **Führer**, or “leader,” of **Germany** from 1933 until his suicide in 1945. After a rapid political ascent as the leader of the far-right **Nazi Party** in the 1920s, Hitler achieved absolute power and maintained it throughout his time as chancellor. During his rule, he took a very active role in the government of Germany, making military decisions and implementing edicts regarding the treatment of Jews and other minorities, such as the notorious **“final solution”** that condemned Jews to death at **concentration camps** in German-controlled parts of Europe. Just before Germany surrendered in 1945, Hitler committed suicide together with his wife, **Eva Braun**, in his bunker in Berlin.

**Yamamoto Isoroku**

The Japanese navy admiral who planned the surprise attack on **Pearl Harbour** in 1941 and the attack on **Midway** in 1942.

**Curtis LeMay**

The commander of the U.S. Air Force’s 21st Bomber Command in the Pacific theater during World War II. LeMay is best known for developing the U.S. strategy of using massive incendiary bomb attacks on Japanese cities in order to break the Japanese will near the end of the war.

**Douglas MacArthur**

U.S. general who commanded the Southwest Pacific Theatre in [**World War II**](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/648813/World-War-II), administered postwar [**Japan**](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/300531/Japan) during the Allied occupation that followed.

**Bernard Law Montgomery, 1st Viscount Montgomery “Monty”**

In August 1942 Prime Minister [**Winston Churchill**](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/117269/Sir-Winston-Churchill) appointed him commander of the British Eighth Army in [**North Africa**](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/418589/North-Africa-campaigns), which had recently been defeated and pushed back to [**Egypt**](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/180382/Egypt) by German General [**Erwin Rommel**](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/508989/Erwin-Rommel). There **Montgomery** restored the troops’ shaken confidence and, combining drive with caution, forced Rommel to retreat from Egypt after the Battle of El-Alamein (November 1942). **Montgomery** then pursued the German armies across North Africa to their final surrender in [**Tunisia**](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/609229/Tunisia) in May 1943. Under the [**command**](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/127700/command) of U.S. General [**Dwight D. Eisenhower**](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/181476/Dwight-D-Eisenhower), he shared major responsibility in the successful Allied invasion of [**Sicily**](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/542755/Sicilian-Campaign) (July 1943) and led his Eighth Army steadily up the east coast of [**Italy**](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/297474/Italy) until called home to lead the Allied armies into France in 1944. He was first knighted (KCB) in 1942. Again under Eisenhower, **Montgomery** reviewed the plan for [**Operation Overlord**](http://www.britannica.com/bps/additionalcontent/8/400222/) (as the [**Normandy Invasion**](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/418382/Normandy-Invasion) was code-named) and recommended expanding the size of the invading force and landing area. Eisenhower approved the expansion plan (code-named [**Neptune**](http://www.britannica.com/bps/additionalcontent/8/400219/)), and **Montgomery** commanded all ground forces in the initial stages of the invasion, launched on D-Day, June 6, 1944.

**Benito Mussolini**

**Fascist** prime minister who came to power in 1922 and ruled Italy as an absolute dictator. In many ways, Mussolini served as an inspiration to **Adolf Hitler**, with whom he chose to ally himself during World War II. In 1943, Mussolini was overthrown in a coup orchestrated by some of his subordinates, and in 1945 he was executed by Italian partisans just prior to the end of the war in Europe.

**Friedrich Paulus**

A field marshal in command of the German Sixth Army at the **Battle of Stalingrad**. Paulus surrendered what was left of the German forces in February 1943, despite Chancellor **Adolf Hitler**’s express orders not to do so. While a prisoner of war in the USSR, Paulus publicly condemned Hitler’s regime.

**Philippe Pétain**

French general who was a national hero for his victory at the [**Battle of Verdun**](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/625946/Battle-of-Verdun) in World War I but was discredited as chief of state of the French [**government**](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/240105/government) at [**Vichy**](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/627430/Vichy) in [**World War II**](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/648813/World-War-II). He died in 1951 under sentence in a prison fortress.

**Erwin Rommel**

A field marshal in the German army’s Afrika Korps who specialized in tank warfare. Rommel came to be known by both friends and enemies as the “Desert Fox” for his brilliant strategies and surprise attacks in Germany’s **North Africa** campaign.

**Franklin Delano Roosevelt**

The 32nd U.S. president, who led the country through the bulk of World War II until his death from a cerebral hemorrhage in April 1945, just a few months before the war ended. Together with **Winston Churchill** and **Joseph Stalin**, Roosevelt played a decisive role in holding together the Allied coalition that ultimately defeated Nazi Germany.

**Joseph Stalin**

General secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union from 1922 until his death in 1953. In some ways, Stalin was responsible for the USSR’s severe losses at the beginning of World War II, as he failed to head the warnings of his advisors and did not allow the Russian military to prepare a proper defense. At the same time, he did succeed in holding the country together and inspiring among his people an awesome resistance against **Germany**, which ultimately forced a German retreat. Stalin’s own regime in the USSR was just as brutal as the Nazi regime in many ways, and the alliance between Stalin and the Western Allies always remained rather tenuous because of mutual distrust.

**Harry S Truman**

The 33rd U.S. president, who succeeded **Franklin D. Roosevelt** upon Roosevelt’s death in April 1945. Truman, who led the country through the last few months of World War II, is best known for making the controversial decision to use two **atomic bombs** against Japan in August 1945. After the war, Truman was crucial in the implementation of the **Marshall Plan**, which greatly accelerated Western Europe’s economic recovery.

**Key Terms**

**Allied Powers**

An alliance during World War II made up of the countries that opposed the aggression of Nazi Germany. **Britain**, **France**, the **United States**, and the **Soviet Union** were the most prominent members, although many other countries also joined.

**Anschluss**

Chancellor **Adolf Hitler**’s doctrine of German political union with **Austria**, which effectively enabled Germany to annex that nation in March 1938.

**Appeasement**

The British and French policy of conceding to **Adolf Hitler**’s territorial demands prior to the outbreak of World War II. Associated primarily with British prime minister **Neville Chamberlain**, the appeasement policy enabled Hitler to systematically take over the territories of several neighboring countries.

**Axis Powers**

The collective term for **Germany**, **Italy**, and **Japan**’s military alliance in opposition to the **Allied Powers**. Several smaller countries in Eastern Europe also became members of the Axis Powers temporarily.

**Battle of the Atlantic**

Battle fought throughout World War II between German U-boats (submarines) and Allied ships supplying Britain. Allied convoys fought U-boat 'wolf packs', which achieved their greatest successes in 1942. Radar-equipped convoy escorts and air cover provided by Liberator aircraft operating from Iceland allowed the Allies to win the battle's decisive action early in 1943, after which U-boats were no longer a major threat.

**Battle of Britain**

An extended campaign from July 1940 to the spring of 1941 in which British **air forces** fought off wave after wave of German bombers and denied Germany in its quest to attain air superiority over Britain. Although major cities in England sustained heavy damage, the British resistance forced Germany to abandon its plans to invade across the English Channel.

**Battle of the Bulge,** also called **Battle of the** [**Ardennes**](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/33320/Ardennes),

(Dec. 16, 1944–Jan. 16, 1945), **the** last major [**German**](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/231545/history-of-Germany) **of**fensive on **the** Western Front during [**World War II**](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/648813/World-War-II); an unsuccessful attempt to push **the** Allies back from German home territory.

**Battle of the Coral Sea**

A battle from May 4–8, 1942, in which U.S. naval forces successfully protected the Allied base at Port Moresby, **New Guinea**, the last Allied outpost standing between the Japanese onslaught and **Australia**. The battle, which caused heavy losses on both sides, was the first naval battle in history fought exclusively in the air, by carrier-based planes.

**Battle of El-Alamein**

An October and November 1942 battle that was the climax of the North African campaign. A resounding victory by the British over the Germans, the battle paved the way for the Allied takeover of North Africa and the retreat of German forces back across the Mediterranean.

**Battle of Guadalcanal**

A campaign from August 1942 to February 1943 in which U.S. Marines fought brutal battles to expel Japanese forces from the **Solomon Islands**, a strategically important island chain in the South Pacific near Australia.

**Battle of Iwo Jima**

A battle in February and March 1945 in which U.S. forces took Iwo Jima, a small but strategically important island off the Japanese coast. During the battle, an Associated Press photographer took a world-famous photograph of U.S. Marines raising the American flag on the summit of **Mt. Suribachi**.

**Battle of Midway**

A battle from June 3–6, 1942, in which U.S. naval forces severely disabled the Japanese fleet at **Midway Island** in the Pacific. Coming close on the heels of the **Battle of the Coral Sea**, the Battle of Midway forced Japan into defensive mode and turned the tide of the war in the Pacific theater.

**Battle of Okinawa**

The last large-scale battle in the Pacific theater, in which U.S. forces invaded the Japanese home island of Okinawa. The battle was very bloody, killing at least 100,000 Japanese soldiers and 80,000 to 100,000 Japanese civilians.

**Battle of Stalingrad**

A brutal, five-month battle between German and Soviet forces for the important industrial city of Stalingrad that resulted in the deaths of almost 2 million people. The battle involved very destructive air raids by the German **Luftwaffe** and bloody urban street fighting. In February 1943, despite direct orders from Hitler forbidding it, Field Marshal **Friedrich Paulus** surrendered the German forces to the Red Army.

**Blitzkrieg**

Literally “lightning war,” the term for Hitler’s invasion strategy of attacking a nation suddenly and with overwhelming force. Hitler applied the blitzkrieg strategy, with varying degrees of success, to the German invasions of **Poland**, **France**, and the **Soviet Union**.

**D-Day**

June 6, 1944, the day on which the Allied invasion of France via the **Normandy** coast began.

**Dunkirk**

(May 1940) in [**World War II**](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/648813/World-War-II), the **evacuation** of the [**British Expeditionary Force**](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/80219/British-Expeditionary-Force-BEF) (BEF) and other Allied troops from the [**French**](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/216231/history-of-France) seaport of [**Dunkirk**](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/173781/Dunkirk) to [**England**](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/616032/history-of-United-Kingdom). Naval vessels and hundreds of civilian boats were used in the **evacuation**, which began on May 26. When it ended on June 4, about 198,000 British and 140,000 French and [**Belgian**](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/59379/history-of-Belgium) troops had been saved.

**Fascism**

A system of government dominated by far-right-wing forces and generally commanded by a single dictator. Several Fascist governments were established in Europe in the early twentieth century, most notably those led by dictators **Adolf Hitler** of Germany, **Benito Mussolini** of Italy, and **Francisco Franco** of Spain.

**“Final Solution”**

The Nazi’s euphemistic term for their plan to exterminate the **Jews** of Germany and other German-controlled territories during World War II. The term was used at the **Wannsee Conference** of January 1942, in which Nazi leaders planned the Holocaust but made no specific mention of the **extermination camps** that ultimately killed millions.

**Gestapo**

The brutal Nazi secret police force, headed by the infamous **Hermann Göring**. The Gestapo was responsible for the relocation of many European Jews to Nazi **concentration camps** during the war.

**Hiroshima**

City on Honshu Island, Japan, destroyed by an atomic bomb, known as “Little Boy”. It was dropped by a US B-29 bomber (6 August 1945); in an attempt to end World War II in the Pacific. The device, employing uranium 235, caused 78,150 instant deaths.

**Holocaust**

The Holocaust was the systematic, bureaucratic, state-sponsored persecution and murder of approximately six million Jews by the Nazi regime and its collaborators. "Holocaust" is a word of Greek origin meaning "sacrifice by fire."

During the era of the Holocaust, German authorities also targeted other groups because of their perceived "racial inferiority": [Roma](http://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10005219) (Gypsies), the disabled, and some of the Slavic peoples ([Poles](http://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10005473), Russians, and others). Other groups were persecuted on political, ideological, and behavioral grounds, among them Communists, Socialists, [Jehovah's Witnesses](http://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10005394), and [homosexuals](http://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10005261). There were a further five million victims from these groups.

**Lebensraum**

Literally “living space,” **Adolf Hitler**’s justification for Germany’s aggressive territorial conquests in the late 1930s. Based on the work of a previous German ethnographer, Hitler used the idea of lebensraum to claim that the German people’s “natural” territory extended beyond the current borders of Germany and that Germany therefore needed to acquire additional territory in Europe.

**Luftwaffe**

The German air force, which was used heavily in campaigns such as the **Battle of Britain** in 1940.

**Maginot Line**

Elaborate defensive barrier in northeast [**France**](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/215768/France) constructed in the 1930s and named after its principal creator, [**André Maginot**](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/356761/Andre-Maginot), who was France’s minister of war in 1929–31.

Unfortunately, the line covered the French–German frontier, but not the French–Belgian. Thus the Germans in May 1940 outflanked the line. They invaded [**Belgium**](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/59268/Belgium) on May 10, continued their march through Belgium, crossed the Somme River, and on May 12 struck at Sedan at the northern end of the Maginot Line. Having made a breakthrough with their tanks and planes, they continued around to the rear of the line, making it useless.

**Manhattan Project**

The code name for the U.S. government’s secret program to develop an **atomic bomb**. Begun in 1942, the Manhattan Project utilized the expertise of world-famous physicists, including Albert Einstein and Enrico Fermi, to develop the weapon. It finally succeeded in conducting the first successful atomic bomb test in July 1945 at Alamogordo, New Mexico. After a difficult decision by President **Harry S Truman**, U.S. forces dropped two atomic bombs on the Japanese cities of **Hiroshima** and **Nagasaki** in August 1945, prompting Japan’s surrender.

**Munich Agreement**

A September 30, 1938, agreement among Germany, Britain, Italy, and France that allowed Germany to annex the region of western Czechoslovakia called the **Sudetenland**. The Munich Agreement was the most famous example of British prime minister **Neville Chamberlain**’s policy of **appeasement** prior to World War II.

**Nagasaki**

Japanese industrial city on the Kyushu coast, target of the second American atomic attack (9 August 1945) in World War II. Some 36,000 people died instantly; many more died slowly of radiation poisoning. The plutonium weapon ("Fat Man") dropped had the same destructive power as the bomb dropped over Hiroshima three days earlier. Nagasaki has since been rebuilt.

**Operation Barbarossa**

The code name for the German invasion of the **Soviet Union** in 1941, which Hitler predicted would take only six months but ended up miring the German armies for more than two years.

**Operation Overlord**

The code name for the Allied invasion of **France** in 1944, which commenced on the beaches of **Normandy** and ultimately was successful in liberating France and pushing German forces back east to their own territory.

**Pearl Harbour**

(Dec. 7, 1941) Surprise aerial **attack** on the [**U.S.**](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/617357/history-of-United-States) naval base at [**Pearl Harbor**](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/448005/Pearl-Harbor) on Oahu Island, Hawaii, by the [**Japanese**](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/300855/history-of-Japan) that precipitated the entry of the [**United States**](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/616563/United-States) into [**World War II**](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/648813/World-War-II). The **attack** climaxed a decade of worsening relations between the United States and [**Japan**](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/300531/Japan). Japan’s invasion of China in 1937, its subsequent alliance with the Axis powers (Germany and Italy) in 1940, and its occupation of French Indochina in July 1941 prompted the United States to respond that same month by freezing Japanese assets in the United States and declaring an embargo on [**petroleum**](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/454269/petroleum) shipments and other vital war materials to Japan. By late 1941 the United States had severed practically all commercial and financial relations with Japan. Though Japan continued to negotiate with the United States up to the day of the **Pearl** **Harbor** **attack**, the government of Prime Minister Tōjō Hideki decided on war.

**Phoney War**

(1939–40) a name for the early months of [**World War II**](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/648813/World-War-II), marked by no major hostilities. The term was coined by journalists to derisively describe the six-month period (October 1939–March 1940) during which no land operations were undertaken by the Allies or the Germans after the German conquest of [**Poland**](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/466681/Poland) in [**September**](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/535087/September) 1939.

**Siegfried Line**

System of pillboxes and strongpoints built along the German western frontier in the 1930s and greatly expanded in 1944. In 1944, during [**World War II**](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/648813/World-War-II), German troops retreating from [**France**](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/215768/France) found it an effective barrier for a respite against the pursuing Americans. This respite helped the Germans mount their counteroffensive in the Ardennes forest, and the Allies did not break through the entire **line** until early 1945.

**S.S.**

In German, Schutzstaffel (“protection detachment”), the elite German paramilitary unit. Originally formed as a unit to serve as Hitler’s personal bodyguards, the S.S. grew and took on the duties of an elite military formation. During World War II, the Nazi regime used the S.S. to handle the extermination of Jews and other racial minorities, among other duties. The S.S. had its own army, independent of the regular German army (the **Wehrmacht**), to carry out its operations behind enemy lines.

**Suez Canal**

The **canal** provides the shortest maritime route between [**Europe**](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/195686/Europe) and the lands lying around the Indian and western Pacific oceans. Theoretically, the **canal** was open to all belligerents during [**World Wars**](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/648813/World-War-II) I and II, but the naval and military superiority of the Allied forces denied effective use of the **canal** to the shipping of Germany and its allies.

**V-E Day**

May 8, 1945, the day on which the Allied forces declared victory in Europe.

**V-J Day**

August 15, 1945, the day on which the Allied forces declared victory over Japan.

**Vichy France**

The [**Franco-German Armistice**](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/216964/Franco-German-Armistice) of June 22, 1940, divided **France** into two zones: one to be under [**German**](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/231545/history-of-Germany) military occupation and one to be left to the French in full sovereignty, at least nominally. The unoccupied zone comprised the southeastern two-fifths of the country. Vichy [**France**](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/215768/France) was under the regime of Marshal [**Philippe Pétain**](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/453539/Philippe-Petain) from the Nazi German defeat of **France** to the Allied liberation.

**Wannsee Conference**

A January 1942 conference during which Nazi officials decided to implement the **“final solution”** to the “Jewish question”—a euphemism for the extermination of European Jews and other minorities at **concentration camps** in eastern Europe.

**Wehrmacht**

The term used for regular German army.