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World War II

Have you ever read a book or watched a video about World War II? Maybe you learned about the weapons used or the experiences of soldiers who were there. But what was the war about in the first place?

To understand World War II, we need to understand fascism. Fascism is a political ideology that consists of military dictatorship with strong elements of racism, nationalism, and imperialism, as well as the violent suppression of dissidents.

In the leadup to World War II, fascists seized power in what would become the major Axis states. In 1922, Benito Mussolini installed himself as prime minister of Italy. He transformed the country into a dictatorship and installed a brutal colonial regime in East Africa. Meanwhile, militarists gained control in Japan and invaded China in 1937, inciting the Second Sino-Japanese War.

Poor economic conditions—from the Great Depression and the aftermath of World War I—precipitated the rise of fascism in both Italy and Japan. But this association was especially clear in Germany. Adolf Hitler and his Nazi Party seized on the financial crisis in order to gain power, blaming Germany's problems on minority communities, particularly Jewish people. The Nazis then tried to expand their regime elsewhere in Europe.

Most historians place the official start of World War II in 1939 when Germany invaded Poland. In response, Great Britain and France—the Allied powers—declared war on Germany. But the Nazi regime was powerful, and by 1941, Germany had also conquered Denmark, Norway, Belgium, the Netherlands, and France.

One of the hallmarks of the Nazi regime was the imprisonment of those they deemed undesirable, including Jewish people, Romani people, gay people, and people with disabilities. This persecution escalated in the early 1940s when the Nazis began to carry out the Final Solution: a plan to systematically murder the entire Jewish population and other “undesirables.” More than 10 million people were killed in Nazi concentration camps, including at least six million Jews. This genocide would come to be known as the Holocaust.

In June 1941, Hitler made the critical mistake of invading the Soviet Union. Unable to defeat the massive Soviet Army or survive the bitterly cold winter, the Germans were forced to retreat. And in the process, they'd made a new enemy—one that would make it very difficult to eke out a victory.

So where was the United States all this time? Well, the US had adopted a policy of isolationism and stayed out of the war. But in December 1941, Japanese fighter pilots attacked the American naval base at Pearl Harbor, destroying hundreds of ships and aircraft and killing more than 2,000 Americans. After this attack, the US joined the Allies in three campaigns. In the Pacific theater, they staged an island-hopping campaign to overwhelm Japanese forces. In the Mediterranean, they began to drive the Axis powers out of Italy and Northern Africa. And at the same time, Allied troops fought to reclaim territory from Nazi Germany elsewhere in Europe.

The Allies secured a major victory on June 6, 1944, also known as D-Day. More than 160,000 troops landed on the beaches of Normandy and forced the Germans to retreat. Between this monumental defeat and the Russian attack from the east, Germany was on the brink of collapse. But Hitler would sooner let his country be destroyed than admit defeat. He remained in power until the following April when he descended into his bunker for the last time and died by suicide. Germany surrendered a week later, on May 8, 1945.

The conflict in Europe had ended, but the war wasn't over yet. When Japan refused to surrender, the US responded with unprecedented force: by dropping a newly developed atomic bomb on the city of Hiroshima. Three days later, the US dropped another bomb, this time on Nagasaki. More than 200,000 people were killed in these attacks, and Japan surrendered on August 15, 1945.

After the war, Allied forces occupied Germany and Japan, conducted war-crime tribunals against Axis leaders, and established the United Nations, an organization that aims to promote international cooperation. This tremendous conflict may have ended decades ago, but it's critical to continue learning from it today.