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the Axis

Keith D. Dickson, PhD

Professor of Military Studies,
National Defense University



World War II

by Keith D. Dickson, Ph.D.

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Introduction

The Most Destructive War

The Second World War (1939–1945) was the most destructive event in history. It was total war covering the entire globe, and the nations that fought it employed every available resource, harnessing both technology and people to one purpose. The farmer and factory worker became just as important to the war effort as the soldier in the field. Aerial attack allowed cities and civilians to become legitimate targets of war. Because of its destructiveness and global scale, the human and material costs of the war were almost immeasurable. The war ended with the development of two new technologies that heavily influenced the course of the postwar world: atomic power and the ballistic missile.

Mass murder of noncombatants and prisoners of war occurred — tens of thousands of defenseless Russians, Poles, and Chinese died at the hands of their enemies. A state-run genocide killed 12 million people, including 6 million Jews. The war also cost millions of lives, resulting from battle as well as non-battle deaths. The Soviet Union lost 28 million people; Germany, nearly 5 million people. Japan lost about 5 million people; China, about 10 million. Great Britain and the Commonwealth lost nearly a half million people. France and Italy both lost over 400,000 combat deaths. The United States, Czechoslovakia, and Yugoslavia each suffered 290,000 combat deaths. Poland, Hungary, Belgium, the Netherlands, Norway, Bulgaria, Romania, and the Philippines suffered significant military and civilian losses as well. The physical destruction of most of the continent of Europe and several Asian nations left an indelible mark.

Undoubtedly, the war has cast a long shadow over recent history. The way that nations form strategy, wage war, make peace, and negotiate treaties is still shaped by the memories and lessons of the Second World War. For better or worse, a new world emerged from the ashes of the old, and we live in the shadow of this most terrible and destructive war. The world has been sensitized to the dangers of ethnic hatred and its accompanying acts of organized killing. The ever changing nature of United States–Chinese relations has its roots in the conditions in China after the war. The creation of Israel by the world community was a direct result of

the Jewish Holocaust. The need for collective defense in the form of alliances like the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) became the primary guarantor of peace in Europe. The United Nations was created to correct the failure of the League of Nations to oversee international norms of behavior. Traditional enemies became partners against a greater threat, and the role of government expanded to meet the burden of greater defense requirements. Nations were willing to take action to guarantee their interests to prevent another catastrophe like World War II.

But the memories of World War II are rapidly fading. Those who lived during this momentous period in twentieth century history will no longer be among us to provide witness to the past. The national World War II monument and local memorials, along with such films as *Saving Private Ryan*, will preserve some understanding of the virtue and sacrifice of the soldiers and civilians who ensured the survival of freedom in the world. The preservation of freedom in World War II became the ultimate weapon in the victory over tyranny in the Cold War. The end of the Cold War itself may be considered the final act in the drama initiated in the Second World War. The people of the Allied nations, through great sacrifice, guaranteed that freedom would be preserved in the face of forces that threatened the existence of civilization. This protection is undoubtedly their greatest bequest to the modern world.

Like all great stories, World War II has its unforgettable villains and heroes. Things are clearly drawn in terms of good and evil. And though often tragic, the story of World War II is nevertheless dynamic, colorful, and exciting. The dedication and courage of the soldier, sailor, marine, or airman in battle and the resilience and sacrifice of those on the home front still stirs the blood. Military professionals all over the world still study the tactics, strategy, and campaigns of the war.

World War II is a universal story, one that may leave you believing that these people were exceptionally heroic because they underwent such a traumatic experience and somehow managed to get on with their lives. For the most part, these people were quite ordinary, but because they were able to rise to extraordinary efforts, they have earned a measure of immortality. If you compare yourself to those who experienced the Second World War, you may find out a bit about who you are.

About This Book

The literature of World War II is large and continues to grow every year. *World War II For Dummies* meets the needs of the reader who wants to be informed without being overwhelmed with details. This book is directed toward several types of

readers. First, the person who desires accurate, easily accessible information about the major events and issues of World War II without encountering intimidating historical narrative or ponderous military interpretation. Second, the person who may want a refresher on the major events of the war, but does not want to struggle through the tomes of scholars or the arcane minutiae of military buffs. Third, the person who is looking for a different way to approach history and find out more about the war to enhance his or her appreciation and understanding of an event that has directly or indirectly shaped his or her life. To most people, the past appears remote and inaccessible. The main message of this book is that history is neither remote nor inaccessible! Politics, passions, and conflict (both armed and ideological) have always made up the good stuff of history. Thus, history in the proper context can connect you to the past and allow you to discover similarities to events in your own era.

Conventions Used in This Book

History doesn't have to be boring or intimidating. Everyone who hates history books says that they are nothing more than dry lists of names, places, dates, and jargon. That's true enough, in most cases, if you only look that far. Although this is a different kind of history book, it does follow certain conventions found in most history books. For example, this book is arranged chronologically, and it tells a story. There's a beginning, a middle, and an end. What is *different* about this book is that you can start wherever you want. You don't need to slog through the whole thing from beginning to end to figure out what is going on. You have maximum flexibility to pick and choose what you want to know. You can jump in at any point and still keep up with the story, or you can select a topic to read in a chapter that interests you.

As you move through this book, you encounter key terms. Wherever necessary, I define italicized terms for you, or I reference terms elsewhere with a detailed explanation. I also provide maps that can help you figure out the *whys* and *hows* of this global war.

Not surprisingly, World War II has many dimensions and complexities and therefore, many interesting topics and trivia that are part and parcel of discussions about the war. I include some of these facts in gray boxes called sidebars. If you want to dig into the weeds, these boxes are for you. If you are not interested in such detail, these boxes can be easily passed by with no effect on your overall understanding.

How This Book Is Organized

This book covers a span of about 26 years, from 1919 to 1945. This period seems short, but these years defined and shaped the future. To help you break down the years of the war, I've organized this book into seven parts, each dealing with a major period of the war. And the chapters within the parts take you through the major events of World War II, highlighting important facts and points of interest. Each chapter acquaints you with words and ideas that are important to the entire picture.

Every year, someone discovers another cause of the Second World War. Interpretations abound and continue to grow in breadth and imagination. However creative these interpretations may be, almost everyone agrees on several salient points related to the causes of the war. This book focuses on these basic causes.

Part 1: Origins and Causes of the War, 1919–1939

This part takes you from the peace settlement that ended World War I to the opening of the war in Europe — Germany's invasion of Poland. You can examine the time between the wars to get an overview of world events that led to the rise of totalitarian dictators who threatened peace in Europe and in Asia. You also examine the role the United States and the Soviet Union played during this period. This part tells you about the series of tensions, crises, and decisions that eventually led the to the outbreak of the Second World War.

The chapters introduce you to the leaders and the various political systems that existed at this time, as well as the foreign policies of the major states. You get acquainted with the interests and ambitions (and mistakes) that drove the key events that finally led nations to war. You can take a look at the strategies and military preparedness of the nations involved to help understand why and where the war began.

Part 2: Starting the War: The Axis Invades and Conquers, 1939–1942

This part looks at the stunning victories of the Axis powers — Germany, Japan, and Italy — and how they nearly won the war in one rapid blow. You can see how Germany was able to defeat its enemies and dominate the European continent so quickly, leaving a weakened Great Britain as the last remaining opponent. Japan, at war with China since 1937, became the dominant power in Asia. You can also examine Japanese strategy and the reasons for Japan's surprise attacks against

Great Britain and the United States in the Pacific. This part also explains why and how Germany initiated its own surprise attack on the Soviet Union and then declared war on the United States.

These chapters give you details about the most important campaigns in Europe: Poland, Norway, France, and the Battle of Britain. In addition, you find descriptions of Japanese operations in China and the attacks on Pearl Harbor, Singapore, the Philippines, and Wake Island in 1941–1942. You also find out about the first year of the greatest land war in history — the invasion of the Soviet Union.

Part 3: Behind Enemy Lines: Nations at War

This part addresses the contributions of the people who did not carry a weapon on the front lines but played a role that was just as important in waging war. All the resources of the nations were put to task to sustain the war effort. Because their contributions were so critical to victory, they also became targets of bombers seeking to destroy both industrial production capability and the morale of the citizens. Although each nation at war had to accomplish the same goals to conduct total war, each nation approached the total mobilization of its resources quite differently.

The chapters examine government policies and practices that centralized the war effort. You can observe the Allied nations individually to appreciate both the common and unique approaches to war production. On the Axis side, I address the story of German and Japanese slave labor efforts as well as the attempts to overcome shortages and limitations. Even as the war progressed, changes occurred in the societies engaged in war. You can find out how these changes affected the future of women and other people in these societies.

Part 4: Planning and Launching the Allied Counterattack, 1942–1943

This part looks at the strange bedfellows created by the war, especially among the Allies. At first, America and Great Britain formed an uneasy alliance. These democracies had to find common cause with Joseph Stalin's communist dictatorship. Basic and all-important strategic decisions had to be made, and scarce critical military resources had to be properly allocated to fight wars in Asia and in Europe. You also see how the Allies cooperated to strike several blows at the Axis during these critical years. These hits include the all-important Battles of Guadalcanal, the Coral Sea, and Midway in the Pacific; the North African and Italian campaigns and the epic defense of Stalingrad in Europe.

These chapters examine the numerous options the Allies had in conducting the war and how important the survival the Soviet Union was to eventual victory.

You can look at the Allied campaigns and key battles against the Axis in 1942 and why these victories spelled eventual defeat for the enemy. You can also get the lowdown on the Axis leaders' key mistakes, which helped seal their fate. The last chapter again provides you with an overall strategic assessment for 1942.

Part 5: The Long Haul, 1944

This part is an overview of the brutal and bitter campaigns to recapture territory occupied by the Axis. In the Pacific, this meant jungle fighting and amphibious assaults on heavily fortified islands. In Europe, this meant a cross-channel invasion of the continent and a simultaneous struggle against tough German defenses in Italy. The Russo-German War reached a climax, and the Germans were driven out of the Soviet Union. Italy was knocked out of the war and surrendered to the Allies.

Hitler's final offensive in the West began in 1944, even as the Eastern front crumbled. While stationed in the Pacific, the Allies pushed the Japanese even closer to their home defenses. The Allies took other actions against the Japanese in far away places like the Aleutian Islands and Burma. Americans invaded the Philippines while the American navy ended the last Japanese naval threat. Although any hope of victory was fading, Germany and Japan continued to fight on, even as their homelands were subjected to increasingly destructive bombing raids against their cities and industries.

These chapters provide overviews of the strategy that led to the campaigns in the Pacific and in Europe, and they also examine the more famous Battles of the Bulge, Kursk, Leyte, the Philippine Sea, and Leyte Gulf, as well as the terrible Battles of Tarawa, Saipan, and Peleliu. The last chapter looks again at the Allied leaders in conference and at how the strategic picture looked from the point of view of each nation involved in the war.

Part 6: Starting Over: The War's Aftereffects, 1945

This part outlines the last months of fighting that destroyed the Third Reich and the Japanese empire. The giant hammer blows of the Allied armies against the last of the German defenses left Germany devastated and its leader dead in the rubble of Berlin. American and Soviet troops met at the Elbe River, and Americans mourned the loss of their own Commander in Chief. Soviet armies drove deep into Eastern Europe, while American and British forces advanced into Czechoslovakia and Austria. By May, the war was over, and victory in Europe was declared.

The war against Japan appeared to be never ending. Some of the greatest and costliest battles of the war were fought at Okinawa and Iwo Jima. Despite the

mounting odds against them, the Japanese refused to surrender. The plans were set for the invasion of the Japanese main islands. This most devastating war ended with the employment of the most devastating weapon ever developed. The atomic bombs that fell on two Japanese cities finally brought the war to an end and opened an uncertain new era in world history.

Part 7: The Part of Tens

This is a standard concluding chapter in the . . . *For Dummies* books that provides the author with a place to put neat things he hadn't already said in the text. These purely arbitrary lists of ten things are intended to stir up a bit of discussion, debate, and appreciation for some different factors involved in World War II.

Icons Used in This Book

Sometimes, you may quickly need some help in finding out what's important. In this book, you find icons — little pictures next to the text that get your attention and point you to the information you want. Look for these icons throughout the book. Here's what each one means:



HISTORICAL
TRIVIA

This icon gives you a piece of historic information that can add to your understanding or appreciation of a particular event in World War II.



ARMY
ALLIED

This icon highlights information related to the Allies.



ARMY
AXIS

This icon highlights information related to the Axis.



REMEMBER

This icon points out especially important information that you need to keep in mind as subsequent events unfold.



MILITARY
STRATEGY

This icon points out the technical and strategic aspects in the book, such as how many weapons were used, how they were used, and the nuts and bolts of the offensives.

Where to Go from Here

This book is about war and politics. In most cases, wars are hard to understand unless you look into the political issues that led to conflict. If you have questions about how World War II started, you should start at the beginning of the book. If you are looking for specific campaigns, you can look at background information, move right into the battles, or look for tidbits in The Part of Tens. You can even skip around, switching from one part of the globe to another and come back to other parts of the story later on. Any way you choose to go, you can find what you need to fill in the gaps.

Beyond the Book

In addition to what you're reading right now, this book comes with a free access-anywhere Cheat Sheet. To get this Cheat Sheet, go to www.dummies.com and search for "World War II For Dummies" by using the Search box.

1

Origins and Causes of the War, 1919–1939

IN THIS PART . . .

Find out what the world was like during this period.

Understand how the world moved into yet another world war in just twenty years.

See how the aftermath of World War I led to the rise of totalitarian dictatorships bent on revenge.

Get an idea of how democracies failed to provide solutions to complex social and economic problems.