World War II: Crash Course European History #38

Crash Course: European History
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===== (00:00) to (02:00) =====

Hi, I'm John Green and this is Crash Course European History!

So on August 23rd, 1939, the USSR and Germany concluded a non-aggression pact. The pact caused shocks across Europe for a couple reasons.

First, the USSR, while it did conduct extensive trade with Hitler's Germany, also like roundly denounced Nazism, fascism and capitalism, and secondly, Hitler had come to power by railing against so-called "Judeo-Bolshevism", a concept that merged anti-semitism with his attacks on communism.

They say that politics makes strange bedfellows, but war makes really, really strange bedfellows.

The pact between the USSR and Germany stipulated that if one party became involved in a war, the other would remain neutral. Secretly, it also divided up Poland and the Baltic states, and also bought Stalin some time to repair the USSR's military leadership, which you'll recall had been decimated by Stalin's own purges. Another example of tyranny solving the problems that tyranny has created.

Then, on September 1st, 1939, a mere 9 days after the pact was signed, German forces launched a huge attack on Poland, beginning World War II in Europe. Airplanes bombed cities, while tanks and motorized infantry rolled in rapidly as part of an overall strategy called "blitzkrieg", or "lighting war".

The idea of blitzkrieg is that it would do away with the stationary trench warfare of World War I, along with that war's massive casualties and unending need for material.

This was supposed to result in lower costs and less suffering for Germans, and by gaining lots of land, "living space" or "lebensraum" on which to farm and build German industry, Hitler would end the German depression and the humiliation of World War I.

===== (02:00) to (04:00) =====

(02:01)
Of course, it didn't work out that way; one reminder among literal thousands that the promises made before wars are rarely kept.

As for Poland, Polish armies fought valiantly but were utterly inequipped. Both because the nation was new, and because it had far less sophisticated military equipment.

Britain and France declared war on Germany just two days after the invasion of Poland, and seventeen days later, as Poland collapsed, the USSR invaded Poland from the east, picking up the territory that their pact with Germany allowed them.

(02:33) By the spring of 1940, after a quiet period called "The Phony War", the Germans proceeded to use blitzkrieg to defeat Norway and Denmark, and then in May and June, The Netherlands, Belguim, and France.

These defeats happened so quickly that hundreds of thousands of French and British soldiers were trapped in the French port city of Dunkirk. And as the French government surrendered, most of those soldiers were rescued by fishing boats and other small craft that came over from the British side of the English Channel.

(03:04) So of course, Hitler's next target was Britain. He ordered an air attack, convinced that overwhelming air power would lay the groundwork for Germany to cross the English Channel and conquer it

And in this moment, I just want to pause to note that, you know, like, we know how World War II ends. Philip Roth described history as a field, quote, "where everything unexpected in its own time is chronicled on the page as inevitable". And the defeat of Nazism does feel inevitable to us, but imagine how it felt in Europe when the Nazi bombing of Europe began in July of 1940.

And I don't want to minimize how uncertain the war felt in the minds of those who were fighting in it, or those who were living amidst it.

(03:45) So during the three month Battle of Britain, the German forces pounded cities and towns and industrial sites and monuments, and over ten thousand British civilians were killed, but the British eventually outsmarted the Nazis.

===== (04:00) to (06:00) =====

Partly because of a code-breaking group called 'Ultra' that was able to decrypt Nazi attack plans, partly because of the development of radar, and partly because the British maintained far higher industrial productivity than Germany could achieve.

But also, contrary to the always fallible theory that bombing breaks civilian resolve, the British public refused to give in. They were fortified by a stalwart royal family, and the stirring oratory of Prime Minister Winston Churchill, who summoned them to "blood, toil, tears and sweat" in the cause of defending liberty.

(04:34) By the fall of 1940, Hitler had quit the failed Battle of Britain, but despite that defeat he began to plan a much larger undertaking: the invasion and conquest of his erstwhile frenemy, The Soviet Union.

As his generals planned, the seeming invincibility of the German army brought Hungary and Romania and Bulgaria in to what was now known as "The Axis", an alliance centered on the agreement among three authoritarian regimes, Germany, Italy, and Japan.

(05:02) Britain and its empire had as an ally only the remnants of the French army which was in exile. In fact, many of them were in Britain.

So Hitler considered himself a military genius, and to him, invading the USSR was a no-brainer. Now, his generals wanted a concentrated, targeted attack, an operation called "Barbarossa", that would take the military directly to Moscow.

(05:24) But Hitler demanded a showy 2,000 mile warfront, entailing attacks across the USSR.

That turned out to be a mistake. Beginning in June 1941, 3 million German soldiers and others from conquered territories rolled toward the USSR, with the enigmatic Stalin disappearing from view for the first days of the attack. He seemed ill, or maybe in denial, even though his agents provided detailed information about German preparations.

Stalin did, however, soon reappear, and roused Soviet citizens to an amazing resistance.

===== (06:00) to (08:00) =====

The USSR and Britain became allies, united despite radically different governments, by their shared existential threat.

Again, in war, you make weird friends. Hitler's ultimate imperial goal was to colonize Eurasia from Central Europe to the Pacific, and the so called "inferior" inhabitants of this region would be ruled military style with ideas of rights and citizenship completely discarded.

And this gets at something really important, which is that racism pervaded every aspect of Nazism. In two episodes time, we'll be discussing the horrors of the Holocaust in detail, but racism also permeated Nazi military planning and concepts of proper governance. And so as the German army swept through Central and Eastern Europe, Hitler ordered tests of citizens, promising those who could read good jobs, but then literate captives were routinely shot on the spot so they couldn't provide leadershipin future resistance, paving the way for military dictatorship.

The illiterate were more likely to survive with the idea that they would serve as slave workers on vast agricultural estates directed by the German elite to provide the German master race a better standard of living and plentiful food. For a time, the German advance eastward was monumentally successful, especially as anti-Semites and captured regions joined in the killing of Jewish neighbors and the theft of their property, the German army captured, killed, or wounded some 2.25 million Soviet soldiers. In total, as many as forty seven million Soviet citizens died as a result of World War II.

For context, around four hundred eighteen thousand Americans died in the war. And with such widespread devastation within the Soviet army, leading German military officials declared the war "virtually won." Hitler ordered military production to switch from making winter gear and tanks and artillery to fight the Soviet Union and instead to focus on battle ships and planes so they could capture territory beyond Europe.

===== (08:00) to (10:00) =====

(8:02) But the Soviet Union wasn't defeated and Soviet officials drove citizen resistance mercilessly, including the transport of the USSR's massive industrial infrastructure eastward to escape German attacks.

Also, the Soviets knew something that the Germans seemed not to, "winter was coming." And as the weather grew colder, the German offensive bogged down, we've said it before and we'll probably have to say it again, "Don't invade Russia in winter," unless you're the Mongols. That same winter in December 1941, the Japanese, with imperialist designs similar to those of Germany, bombed the US naval base at Pearl Harbor and US air bases in the Philippines.

Japan then proceeded to scoop up islands in the Pacific and territory in Southeast Asia while also continuing its attack on China. "The era of democracy is finished," Japan's foreign minister announced along with promises that Japan would free Asians and other world citizens from Western tyranny and replace it with a new kind of tyranny. In response the United States declared war on Japan and joined what came to be called the Grand Alliance of the USSR, Britain, the Free French, and several dozen other nations against the Axis Powers. And that meant the balance was extremely lopsided because Britian and the USSR both individually produced more weaponry, tanks, and other material than Germany in every year of the war, and the United States was also a huge industrial power.

Japan, meanwhile, had relied on US oil and copper in the years before the war, which obviously the U S became reluctant to share after war was declared, so the Allies decided on a Europe first strategy after which they would turn to take on the Japanese. Stalin pushed with the Allies to open a European western front to divide Axis resources that up to now were targeting the USSR almost exclusively, but Churchill, aiming to protect the British Empire, demanded that priority go elsewhere, specifically to the southern Mediterranean and the Middle East, which was flushed with oil.

===== (10:00) to (12:00) =====

(10:09) In the Middle East in North Africa, German general Erwin Rommel's motorized armies moved rapidly and successfully against the Allies, arguably too successfully as their supply lines couldn't keep up with them.

Also, critically, the code-breaking skills of the Allies tipped them off to German movements. By the fall of 1942, Algeria and Morocco were under Allied control, but still Churchill insisted on not opening a Western Front and under his influence the Allies instead launched a costly invasion of Italy in 1943 that lasted until April of 1945.

Amid these developments, in 1942 and 1943, the USSR fought the expensive and agonizing Battle of Stalingrad, important because of its industry and its role as a shipping hub. Hitler decreed that, "On victory all men in the city would be executed and all women deported." In house-to house fighting massive German bombing and horrific ground warfare, some two million people were killed and wounded, including tens of thousands of civilians. The USSR eventually emerged from this nightmare victorious, and it was a huge turning point in the war.

The Soviets proceeded to move westward across the continent toward Germany. Let's go to the Thought Bubble. Franklin Delano Roosevelt, then President of the United States, finally insisted on the cross-channel invasion of France in Normandy, which began in June 1944.

Allied forces disembarked from landing craft to confront German firepower from the well fortified shores, but because of Allies disinformation campaigns, the Germans had not sufficiently massed their forces on those specific beaches. Paratroopers dropped from the sky behind German lines and together with troops moving from the beaches, began the eastward march toward Paris and Berlin. Then in July 1944 a group of elite German military men made an attempt on Hitler's life, an attempt that failed to kill Hitler, but did increase his erratic and paranoid behavior.

===== (12:00) to (14:00) =====

(12:10) A bloodbath followed, leading to the torture and murder of hundreds of the plotters, their families, and completely unaffiliated Germans.

Some downplay the importance of this plot. There were several thoughts plots against Hitler during his rise and reign, but other historians point out that had the plot succeeded, it might have saved the lives of the five million Germans who died in the last nine months of the war, along with millions more Allied soldiers and other civilians who also perished.

Regardless, as Allied forces advanced from the East and West, Hitler came to see the Germans as a nation unfit for the superior destiny he was forging for them, but he refused to talk peace. Moreover, the Germans were experiencing the deprivation and losses of their loved ones that Hitler had promised would never happen. Greatness was not materializing.

Thanks, Thought Bubble. So as the Allies descended on Berlin, in

the spring of 1945 Hitler and his wife Eva Braun killed themselves, as did other high-ranking officials. At about the same time resistance fighters captured Italian leader Benito Mussolini along with his mistress Clara Petacci, shot them and hung their bodies upside down on the roof of a gas station for public display.

On May 7th, 1945 Germany surrendered. The next day was celebrated as "Victory Europe" Day or VE Day. But World War II was not over because the Allies were confronting the Japanese in the Pacific, moving to reclaim islands and their people from Japanese rule.

Their first significant move was to destroy elements of Japan's navy at the battles of of Midway Island and Guadalcanal. These significant advances allowed the Allies to control the movements of supplies and troops in the Pacific. And then there was the atom bomb.

Almost since the beginning of the war an international team of scientists had been working on creating the atom bomb.

===== (14:00) to (16:00) =====

The code name for the secret venture was "The Manhattan Project." Once developed and tested, actual use of the bomb was hotly debated.

Not least because people did not yet know and in fact still do not fully know the long term environmental and human consequences of atomic bombs but also the short-term consequences were known to be horrendous. Ultimately it was decided to drop an atomic bomb on the Japanese city of Hiroshima on August 6th 1945.

On August 9th, a second bomb was dropped on the city of Nagasaki. By August 15th, Japan had surrendered. Around 20,000 Japanese soldiers died in the bombing of Hiroshima.

Only 150 soldiers died in Nagasaki. Over a hundred thousand civilians died in the bombings. So the course of World War II unfolded among heads of states and diplomats, among soldiers suffering cruel deprivation and death on the frozen battlefields of the USSR and the roasting deserts of northern Africa, in the labor, death, and refugee camps of Eurasia, and in the lives of often terrified civilians.

Among all these, new research speculates that the global death toll may have reached as high as 100 million people, nearly five percent of all humans on earth at the time. War is hell, don't forget it. And yet how else could the world respond to totalitarian aggression?

When we consider the big question - which wars are worth it and why - let's not forget to shift perspectives. I mean, the value of a war changes if you're an arms manufacturer or if you're a schoolteacher murdered for being literate. We'll try to examine some of those perspectives in detail next time.

Thanks for watching, I'll see you then. Thanks for watching Crash Course, which is filmed here in the Jaden Smith Studios in Indianapolis. And thanks to all of our patrons at patreon.com/crashcourse for making it possible.

===== (16:00) to (16:15) =====

If you want to watch more Crash Course we have some cool learning playlists including one in business entrepreneurship.

I hope you'll check them out. Thanks again for watching, and as they say in my hometown, "Don't forget to be awesome!"