World War II Part 1: Crash Course US History #35

Crash Course: U.S. History
https://youtube.com/watch?v=Objoad6rG6U
https://nerdfighteria.info/v/Objoad6rG6U

Hi, I'm John Green. This is Crash Course U.S. History and today we're going to talk about a topic so huge to history buffs that we could only discuss a tiny little fraction of it. I am of course referring to paratroopering. No, World War II. World War II is the only historical event that has like, its own cable channel. Well I should say it *used* to have its own cable channel. These days the history channel is, of course, devoted primarily to lumberjacks and oh-my-gosh-is-that-guy-really-going-to-shoot-an-alligator? Who knew how nostalgic we could be for documentaries about Joseph Stalin.

Mr. Green! Mr. Green! Finally we get to the good stuff like Patton and Rommel and Churchill and Eisenhower! Stalingrad! Gomer Pyle!

Aw, I'm sorry to disappoint you me-from-the-past but while Patton and Eisenhower were Americans, Rommel was a German (or General Monty Montgomery's dog). Regardless, they were both from the green parts of not-America. Also no Americans fought at the Battle of Stalingrad. Although we did talk about that in Crash Course World History. And Gomer Pyle was a television character played by Jim Neighbors. I believe that you mean to refer to journalist, Ernie Pyle.

(Intro)

So here at Crash Course we like to focus on causes and effects of wars rather than strategy and tactics. But given the importance that World War II has in the American imagination, we're gonna discuss those a bit to today.

We're gonna defy Maria von Trapp and start before the very beginning because America's ideas about foreign policy were shaped by two things: The Great Depression and World War I.

After the experience of World War I it's not surprising that Americans were just a smidge gun shy about involvement in foreign affairs. Seriously Stan? A gun pun? Now? No.

Now America actually came out of World War I stronger than ever but man did a lot of people die for not much change. I mean, I guess the Treaty of Versailles sort of remade Europe but it didn't make it better. And the League of Nations was a flop. And generally there was a lot of disappointed idealism. The period of time between 1920 and the U.S. entry into World War II has been called an Age of Isolationism, although that isn't 100% accurate. I mean, for one thing the U.S. sponsored a series of arms reduction negotiations that resulted in the Washington treaties limiting the number of battleships that a country could possess. But of course those negotiations led to a fat lot of nothing because the idea of a nation limiting it's battleships was a bigger joke even than the League of Nations which I will remind you we invented and then did not join.

Another way that the U.S. was less than isolationist was our pursuance of the Good Neighbor policy with Latin America. So called because we were not a good neighbor. Our idea was to be less intrusive in Latin American politics and we did remove troops from the Dominican Republic and Haiti, which was something, but good neighbor is a bit of an exaggeration. I mean, we continued to support repressive dictators like Samosa and Nicaragua and Batista and Cuba. You know, we've never really been great neighbors. However we were isolationist in the sense that the United States was much less involved in world trade. Largely because of the Depression. You know, that meant that there wasn't much world trade. But also because of tariff policies. But there was also something isolationist about the formal actions of Congress, like after Europe and Asia began to become belligerent in the 1930s with Japan's invasion of China and Italy's invasion of Ethiopia. And the rise of fascist dictators in Spain and of course Germany, Congress responded by passing a series of neutrality acts which banned the sale of arms to belligerents. Even if they were really nice, tea drinking belligerents who we were pals with. And that points to another reason why people tend to regard this as a time of isolationist sentiment, our old friend Eurocentrism. We were generally neutral in terms of foreign intervention when it came to Europe. Popular groups like America First with celebrity members from Charles Lindbergh to E.E. Cummings cautioned against involvement in foreign affairs. But they mostly meant European affairs. The U.S. didn't officially get involved in the war until two years after Hitler invaded Poland. But America was deeply in the European war before we actually sent troops. F.D.R. really wanted to help the allies, especially the Brits, who after the French surrendered in 1940, were the only ones actually fighting the Nazis until 1941 when there were a whole lot of Russians also fighting them. Even Congress recognized that the Nazis were a threat and in 1940 it agreed to allow cash and carry arms sales to Great Britain.

By the way, Cash and Carry is the name of a liquor store near Stan's house. But anyway, the sale of arms were cash sales meaning that they were not paid for with loans or IOU's and the carry part meant that the British would carry their own arms over you know, to Britain.

It's the difference between buying a pizza at a grocery store and getting it delivery except it's not like that at all and...I just want pizza.

Then in September 1940, Congress created the nation's first peace time draft taking the next step toward involvement and that was a huge deal because you know, you don't muster an army with no desire to eventually use it. By 1941, in spite of all our neutrality FDR had pretty clearly sided with the Allies. America became the arsenal of democracy with the Lend Lease Act authorizing military aid to countries that promised to pay it back somehow after the war we promised we'll figure it out. So this essentially gave billions of dollars' worth of arms and war materials to Britain and after the Nazis invaded in June of 1941 to the USSR as well. And the US also froze Japanese assets here and basically ended all trade between America and Japan. But of course the event that pushed us fully into the war happened on December 7th, 1941 when Japanese pilots attacked the American naval base at Pearl Harbor in Hawaii. 187 aircraft were destroyed 18 naval vessels were damaged or destroyed and more than 2,000 American service men were killed. FDR asked Congress for a declaration of war which they granted voting 477 to 1 and the day after that Germany declared war on the United States and World War II officially became a world war.

We almost always start the American story of World War II in Europe because, you know, Hitler. So I'm gonna start in the Pacific where until 1944 there were actually more American personnel deployed than in Europe. Things didn't start well in the Pacific. Let's go to the thought bubble.

Perhaps worse than Pearl Harbor was the surrender of 78,000 American and Filipino troops at Bataan. This was the largest surrender by American troops in history and it resulted in thousands dying on the Bataan Death March to prisoner of war camps where thousands more would die. But in May 1942 we protected Australia from the Japanese fleet by winning the battle of the Coral Sea and then in June we won a huge victory at Midway Island, midway between Hawaii and Japan I guess, and probably named by historians. The US strategy in the Pacific has been called Island Hopping and it involved taking Japanese controlled islands one at a time to be used as bases for bombers that could then be used against Japan itself. It was a slow process and the fighting over these jungle-y South Pacific islands was fierce and extraordinarily

costly. The battle at Guadalcanal went from August 1942 to February 1943 and they didn't freeze like in Stalingrad but conditions weren't much better and now let's switch to the European theatre. We call this the European war because we were fighting against Europeans and it ended in Europe but the first US to fight against Nazis actually did so in North Africa so it's kinda a misnomer. American weaponry was pretty poor but after our initial invasion in North Africa in 1942 we got into it and by 1943 we and the British defeated Rommel in the desert and we were ready to invade Europe which should have made Stalin happy because up to this point Russians had been doing the bulk of the dying in the war. But Stalin wasn't happy. First because he was a mean and nasty person and those kinds of people are rarely happy and secondly because rather than invading France and striking at Germany more directly the Allies invaded Sicily and Italy where we fought for most of 1943 and much of 1944 until finally on June 6, we joined some Brits and Canadians in invading Normandy on D-Day. And that was the beginning of the end for the Nazis. Thanks Thought Bubble.

Oh it's time for the mystery document already? Alright. The rules here are simple. I read the mystery document and usually I get it wrong and I get shocked.

"They seemed terribly pathetic to me. They weren't warriors. They were American boys who be mere chance of fate had wound up with guns in their hands, sneaking up a death-laden street in a strange and shattered city in a faraway country in a driving rain. They were afraid, but it was beyond their power to quit. They had no choice. They were good boys. I talked with them all afternoon as we sneaked slowly along the mysterious and rubbed streets, and I know they were good boys. And even though they weren't warriors born to the kill, they won their battles. That was the point."

Man that is some good writing Stan, by famous war correspondent Ernie Pyle. Pchkow! That was me being a warrior. Pchick! Pchick! I can't even make finger guns. That's how much of a not warrior I am. I'm a worrier. I knew it was Ernie Pyle for two reasons. First he's talking about cities so it's the European theatre. Secondly he's the best European theatre American writer in World War 2, by far.

So while Americans did liberate Paris and were part of the final assault on Germany and also liberated a number of concentration camps, Russians did most of the fighting in Europe, losing at least twenty million people and in the end it was the Russians who captured Berlin. Although the Nazis never really had a chance to win the war after they started fighting the Russians and the Americans entered into it. It didn't actually end until May 8th or 9th, 1945. Depending on when you got the news. And the war in the Pacific continued until August. Japan surrendered unconditionally after the United States dropped an atomic bomb on Hiroshima on August 6th and Nagasaki on August 9th. We don't celebrate the end of World War 2 in the United States and I guess this is because we would have to decide whether to celebrate the end of the war in Europe or in Japan or maybe it's just difficult to celebrate the use of atomic weapons.

Atomic bombs were developed through the Manhattan project so called because the bombs were partly invented in Chicago and then built and tested in New Mexico, trickery. That was the sort of covert thing the US used to do really well before we developed the internet. Although we weren't that good at it. Since the Soviets did steal our technology and build a nuclear bomb like three years later.

The two atomic bombs that were eventually dropped were the most destructive weapons the world had ever seen. The one dropped on Hiroshima killed 70,000 people instantly, and by the end of 1945 another 70,000 had died from radiation poisoning. The bomb that was dropped on Nagasaki also killed 70,000 people; in fact, the death toll from those two bombs was greater than the number of American fatalities in the entire Pacific war. And that leads to one of the most hotly debated questions in recent history. Was the use of atomic bombs justified or ethical? Those arguing against their use often point out that the Truman administration had good evidence that Japan would surrender if they were allowed to keep their Emperor on the throne. And some also point out that the primary targets were not military, although there were 40,000 troops stationed in Hiroshima. Others argue that the real reason the United States dropped the bomb was to threaten the USSR and prevent them from taking more territory in the East. And then there's the argument that using such a destructive weapon was morally reprehensible because it was so destructive as to be qualitatively different from other weapons. For a couple centuries our weapons had had the theoretical capability of eliminating all humans, but never before had it been so easy.

But other reply that dropping the bombs helped save American lives, some of Truman's advisers worried that invasion of Japan would result in 250,000 American deaths, and at least that many Japanese deaths. And that's important to note because if there was one thing truly horrible innovative about World War 2, it was bombing. Sure there was radar and jets, but they weren't nearly as significant as aerial bombardment and by the time the A-Bombs dropped the idea of precision bombing only military targets, wasn't an option; in part because incredibly risky to planes and pilots. And by 1945 it was an acceptable and wide spread strategy to target civilians as part of a total war. In World War 2, perhaps 40% of the estimated 50 million people killed were civilians. Compare that with World War 1 where it was only 10%. We should be horrified that 140,000 people were killed in Hiroshima but we should be horrified by all the civilian attacks in World War 2. 25,000 people died in Dresden, more than 100,000 died in the firebombing of Tokyo in March of 1945.

Thinking about Truman's decision to drop the atomic bombs is important because it forces us to consider our understanding of history. Part of why we say that using atomic bombs was worse than conventional bombing, is because we know what came after; the Cold War, the threat of nuclear annihilation. From the present the dawn of atomic warfare is indeed terrifying. But people living at the time were living amid a different kind of terror, and they couldn't have known that there would be a nuclear arms race that threatened all of humanity. The Japanese didn't look like they were going to give up, and people on both sides were dying every day. So before we pass judgment, let's try to put ourselves in the shoes of both the soldiers who were fighting who didn't have to fight on mainland Japan and the civilians who were killed by the bombs.

There's no answer to be found there but the opportunity of studying history is the opportunity to experience empathy. Now of course we're never going to know what it's like to be someone else, to have your life saved or taken by decisions made by the allied command. Studying history and making genuine attempts at empathy helps us to grapple with the complexity of the world not as we wish it were, but as we find it. Thanks for watching, I'll see you next week.

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