World War II: Crash Course World History #38

Crash Course: World History
https://youtube.com/watch?v=Q78COTwT7nE
https://nerdfighteria.info/v/Q78COTwT7nE

Hi, I'm John Green. This is Crash Course World History and today we're going to talk about World War II. Finally, a war with some color film! So, here at Crash Course we try to make history reasonably entertaining, and fortunately, World War II was hilarious... said no one ever.

Mr. Green, Mr. Green! Is this, like, gonna be one of the unfunny ones where you build to the big melodramatic conclusion about how I have to imagine the world more complexly?

Me from the Past, as long as you have that eighth rate soup-strainer, I'm not even going to acknowledge your existence.

(Intro)

Right, so you've probably heard a lot about World War II from movies and books, The History Channel, before it decided that Swamp People were History, the incessant droning of your grandparents, etc. We're not gonna try to give you a detailed synopsis of the war today. Instead, we're going to try to give a bit of perspective on how the most destructive war in human history happened, and why it still matters globally.

So one of the reasons history classes tend to be really into wars is that they're easy to put on tests. They start on one day and they end on another day. And they're caused by social, political, and economic conditions that can be examined in a multiple choice kind of manner. Except, not really.

Like, when did World War II start? In September 1939, when the Nazis invaded Poland? I'd say no - it actually started when Japan invaded Manchuria in 1931, or at the very latest when the Japanese invaded China in 1937, because they didn't stop fighting until 1945. Then again, you could also argue 1933, when Hitler took power, or 1941, when America started fighting. It's complicated.

But anyway, in China the fighting was very brutal, as exemplified by the infamous rape of Nanking, which featured the slaughter of hundreds of thousands of Chinese people and is still so controversial today that:
1. It affects relations between Japan & China and
2. Even though I have not described it in detail, you can rest assured that there will be angry comments about my use of the word "slaughter."

But the World War II we know the most about from movies and TV is primarily the war in the European theater, the one that Adolf Hitler started. Hitler is the rare individual who really did make history - specifically he made it worse - and if he hadn't existed, it's very unlikely that World War II would've ever happened. But he did exist, and after coming to power in 1933, with the standard revolutionary promises to return the homeland to its former glory, infused with quite a bit of paranoia and anti-Semitism, Germany saw rapid re-militarization and eventually, inevitably, war.

In the beginning, it was characterized by a new style of combat made possible by the mechanized technology of tanks, airplanes, and especially, trucks. This was the Blitzkrieg, a devastating tactic combining quick movement of troops, tanks, and massive use of air power to support infantry movements. And in the very early years of the war, it was extremely effective. The Nazis were able to roll over Poland, Norway, Denmark, the Netherlands, and then all of France, all within about 9 months between the fall of 1939 and the summer of 1940.

So after knocking out most of central Europe, the Nazis set their sights on Great Britain, but they didn't invade the island, choosing instead to attack it with massive air strikes. I mean, you look at this poster and think, "Man, the Queen wants me to finish my term paper, so I can do it," but when this poster was first produced in 1939, it was to quell terror in the face of bombardment.

The Battle of Britain was a duel between the Royal Air Force and the Luftwaffe, and while the RAF denied the Nazis total control of British airspace, the Nazis were still able to bomb Great Britain over and over again in what's known as the Blitz. STAN, NO. NO JOKES this time. Yes, the Blitz.

Meanwhile, Europeans were also fighting each other in North Africa. The Desert campaigns started in 1940 and lasted through 1942 - this is where British general "Monty" Montgomery outfoxed German general Irwin "the Desert Fox" Rommel. It's also the place where Americans first fought Nazis in large numbers. But most importantly, it's where Indiana Jones discovered the Ark of the Covenant. Okay, let's go to the Thought Bubble.

1941 was a big year for World War II. First, the Nazis invaded Russia, breaking a non-aggression pact that the two powers had signed in 1939. This hugely escalated the war, and also made allies of the most powerful capitalist countries and the most powerful communist one, an alliance that would stand the test of time and never end... until like three seconds after the defeat of the Nazis.

The Nazi invasion of Russia opened the war up on the so-called Eastern Front, although if you were Russian, it was the Western Front, and it led to millions of deaths, mostly Russian. Also, 1941 saw a day that would "live in infamy" when the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor, hoping that such an audacious attack would frighten the United States into staying neutral, which was a pretty stupid gamble because:
1. The U.S. was already giving massive aid to the Allies and was hardly neutral and
2. The United States is not exactly famed for its pacifism or political neutrality.

1941 also saw Japan invading much of Southeast Asia, which made Australia and New Zealand understandably nervous. As part of the British commonwealth, they were already involved in the war, but now they could fight the Japanese closer to home. And shut up about how I never talk about you Australians. I just gave you 1.5 sentences.

But by the time the Americans and Australians started fighting the Japanese, it was already a World War. Sometimes this meant fighting or starving or being bombed; other times, it meant production for the war - you don't think of Argentina as being a World War II powerhouse, for instance, but they were vital to the Allies, supplying 40% of British meat during World War II. Thanks, Thought Bubble.

So, not to sound jingoistic, but the entry of the U.S. into the war really did change everything, although I doubt the Nazis could've taken Russia regardless. No one conquers Russia in the wintertime, unless you are - wait for it - the Mongols.

Okay, we're going to skip most of the big battles of 1942 - like the Battle of Midway, which effectively ended Japan's chance of winning the war - and focus on the Battle of Stalingrad. The German attack on Stalingrad, now known as Volgograd because Stalin sucks, was one of the bloodiest battles in the history of war, with more than two million dead. The Germans began by dropping more than 1,000 tons of bombs on Stalingrad, and then the Russians responded by "hugging" the Germans, staying as close to their front lines as possible so that German air support would kill Germans and Russians alike.

This kind of worked, although the Germans still took most of the city. But then, a Soviet counterattack left the sixth army of the Nazis

completely cut off. And after that, due partly to Hitler's overreaching megalomania and partly to lots of people being scared of him, the sixth army slowly froze and starved to death before finally surrendering. And of the 91,000 Axis POWs from Stalingrad, only about 6,000 ever returned home.

Stalingrad turned the war in Europe and by 1944, the American strategy of "island hopping" in the Pacific was taking GIs closer and closer to Japan. Rome was liberated in June by Americans and Canadians; and the successful British, Canadian, and American D-Day invasion of Normandy was the beginning of the end for the Nazis. Oh, it's time for the Open Letter?

An Open Letter to Canada. But first, let's see what's in the secret compartment today. Oh, it's Canadian mittens. I wanna thank the Canadian Crash Course fans, who sent us these mittens. Canadians are just so nice, Stan. Like, all we ever do on this show is make fun of them, and they're just like, "It's so kind of you to mention us. Here's some mittens!"

Dear Canada,

We're not always nice to you here on Crash Course, but you are awesome. I'm pointing, but you can't tell because I'm wearing mittens. 45,000 Canadians died fighting for the Allies in World War II, which means that, per capita, Canada lost more people than the United States.

You fought with the Royal Air Force to defend Great Britain from the beginning of the war and you were there on D-Day, successfully invading Juno Beach. And, as many of you have pointed out in comments, you defeated the United States in the War of 1812, meaning that, arguably, Canada, you are the greater military power.

Plus, you have lumberjacks, and excellent beer, and hockey, and universal healthcare, and Justin Bieber. I'm jealous! That's what it is - I'm jealous!

Best Wishes, John Green.

So, by the end of 1944, the Allies were advancing from the West and the Russian Red Army was advancing from the East and then, the last-ditch German offensive at the battle of the Bulge in the winter of 1944-1945 failed. Mussolini was executed in April of 1945. Hitler committed suicide at the end of that month. And, on May 8, 1945 the Allies declared victory in Europe after Germany surrendered unconditionally.

Three months later, the United States dropped the only two nuclear weapons ever deployed in war, Japan surrendered, and World War II was over.

The war had a definite cause: unbridled military expansion by Germany, Japan, and, to a small extent, Italy. Now, it's easy to claim that Hitler was crazy or evil, and, in fact, he was certainly both, but that doesn't explain the Nazis decision to invade Russia, and it sure doesn't explain Japan's decision to bomb Pearl Harbor.

And there are many possible explanations beyond mere evil; but the most interesting one, to me, involves food. Hitler had a number of reasons for wanting to expand Germany's territory, but he often talked about Lebensraum or living space for the German people. German agriculture was really inefficiently organized into lots of small farms, and that meant that Germany needed a lot of land in order to be self-sufficient in food production.

The plan was to take Poland, the Ukraine, and Eastern Russia, and then resettle that land with lots of Germans, so that it could feed German people. This was called the Hunger Plan because the plan called for 20 million people to starve to death. Many would be the Poles, Ukrainians, and Russians who'd previously lived on the land. The rest would be Europe's Jews, who would be worked to death.

Six million Jews were killed by the Nazis, many by starvation, but many through a chillingly planned effort of extermination in death camps. These death camps can be distinguished from concentration camps or labor camps in that their primary purpose was extermination of Jews, Roma people, communists, homosexuals, disabled people, and others that the Nazis deemed unfit. Some historians believe that the Nazis opened the death camps because the Jews weren't dying as fast as The Hunger Plan had intended.

This was a sickening plan, but it made a kind of demented sense. Rather than becoming more involved in global trade, as the British had, the Germans would feed themselves by taking land and killing the people who'd previously lived there.

Similarly, Japan, at the beginning of the war, was suffering from an acute fear of food shortage because its agricultural sector was having trouble keeping up with population growth. And the Japanese too, sought to expand their agricultural holdings by, for instance, resettling farmers in Korea.

So while it's tempting to say that World War II was about the Allies fighting for democratic ideals against the totalitarian militaristic imperialism of the fascist Axis powers, it just doesn't hold up to scrutiny. For instance, a hugely important Allied power, Stalin's Soviet Union, was, like, the least democratic place, ever. Stan just said that was hyperbole, but it's not. Stalin's Soviet Union is tied with all of the other completely undemocratic countries for last place on the democracy scale. It's a big community there, at last place, but they're definitely in there somewhere.

And, by far, the biggest imperialists of the war were the British. They couldn't have fed or clothed themselves - or resisted the Nazis - without their colonies and commonwealth. So, why is World War II so important? Well first, it proved the old Roman adage homo homini lupus: Man is a wolf to man. This is seen most clearly in the Holocaust, but all the statistics are staggering.

More than a million Indian British subjects died, mainly due to famine that could have been avoided if the British had redistributed food. And their failure to do so helped convince Indians that the so-called superior civilization of the British was a sham. More than a million Vietnamese died, mainly due to famine. 418,000 Americans. More than a million noncombatants in both Germany and Japan. And 20 million people in the Soviet Union, most of them civilians.

These civilians were targeted because they helped sustain the war, mostly through industrial and agricultural production. In a total war, when a nation is at war, not just its army, there is no such thing as a non-military target. From the firebombing of Dresden to Tokyo to Hiroshima, the line between soldier and civilian blurred.

And then, of course, there is the Holocaust, which horrifies us because the elements of Western progress - record-keeping, industrial production, technology - were used to slaughter millions. World War II saw modern industrial nations, which represented the best of the Enlightenment and the Scientific Revolution, descend into once unimaginable cruelty.

And what makes World War II such a historical watershed is that in its wake, all of us - in the West or otherwise - were forced to question whether Western dominance of this planet could, or should, be considered progress.

Thanks for watching. I'll see you next week.

Crash Course is produced and directed by Stan Muller. Our script supervisor is Meredith Danko. Our associate producer is Danica Johnson. The show is written by my high school history teacher, Raoul Meyer, and myself. And our graphics team is Thought Bubble.

Last week's phrase of the week was "an end to history." If you want to guess at this week's phrase of the week or suggest future ones, you can do so in comments, where you can also ask questions about today's video that will be answered by our team of historians.

If you enjoy Crash Course, make sure you're subscribed. Thanks for watching, and as we say in my hometown, Don't Forget To Be Awesome.