SUPPLY LINE

The Second World War

The Second World War, sometimes called World War II, was the deadliest armed conflict the world has ever known. This overview provides a Canadian perspective on the war. Other countries and peoples had different wartime experiences, including whom they fought, and when the fighting began.

Dates

For Canada, the war began on **September 10, 1939** and ended on **August 15, 1945.**

Causes

- Adolf Hitler and his National Socialist — or Nazi — party had ruled Germany since 1933. They wanted more territory and control across Europe.

- The war broke out when Germany invaded Poland on 1 September 1939.

- Having promised to protect Poland, France and the United Kingdom declared war on Germany on 3 September 1939. Canada declared war on 10 September 1939.

- The Soviet Union invaded Poland on 17 September 1939. From 1939 until June 1941, the Soviet Union and Germany agreed not to fight one another.

War on a Global Scale

Europe

- Soon after Germany invaded Poland, other countries joined France and the United Kingdom to fight Germany. Many were countries with colonial ties to Britain, including Canada, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa and India.

- Germany continued to invade countries across Europe. Between April and June 1940, Denmark, Norway, France, Belgium, the Netherlands and Luxembourg were all occupied by Germany.

- In June 1940, Italy entered the war on the side of Germany. Italy attempted to take over areas of the Mediterranean, including parts of France, East Africa, Egypt and Greece. Germany joined in many of these efforts.

- These events meant that Canada had to take on a greater role alongside Britain than had initially been expected.

- Germany broke its agreement with the Soviet Union, attacking the country on 22 June 1941. The Soviet Union switched sides, joining the Allies in the war against Germany.

Asia

- Throughout the 1930s, Japan and China had clashed several times. Japan took over part of China in 1931. By 1937, the two countries were openly at war. This contributed to increased tension between Japan and other countries, including the United States.

- Japan, Italy and Germany became known as the Axis Powers. They agreed to mutually defend and support one another.

- On 7 December 1941, Japan attacked the United States at Pearl Harbor in Hawaii. This brought the United States into the conflict when it declared war on Japan. Because of the Axis coalition, Germany and Italy declared war on the United States on 11 December 1941.

- Also in December 1941, Japan invaded other parts of Southeast Asia and the Pacific, including the Philippines, Malaya (present-day Malaysia and Singapore), the Dutch East Indies (present-day Indonesia), Thailand, Shanghai, Hong Kong and Borneo.

- Japan attacked or occupied other areas in Asia, including Burma (present-day Myanmar) and French Indochina (present-day Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos and part of China).

The Allies and the Axis

Allies — Major Countries and Year They Entered the War

- United Kingdom (1939)
- France (1939)
- British Commonwealth countries: Canada, Australia, New Zealand, India, South Africa (1939)
- Soviet Union (1941)
- China (1941, at war with Japan since 1937)
- United States (1941)

Many other countries, colonies and regions were also involved. Some of the countries occupied by the Axis Powers were also at war.

Axis - Major Countries and Year They Entered the War

- Germany (1939)
- Italy (1940)
- Japan (1941, at war with China since 1937)

Some countries remained neutral. These included Ireland, Spain, Portugal, Switzerland and Sweden.

Why Canada Entered the War

Canada during the 1930s still had a close relationship with the United Kingdom. Most of its English-speaking population supported going to war with the United Kingdom against Germany.

Although Canada's ties to the United Kingdom were very strong, Canada declared war on Germany independently, seven days after the United Kingdom's declaration of war. Canada also declared war on Italy on 10 June 1940, and on Japan on 7 December 1941.

These are some of the major ways Canada participated in the war.

Military

- More than one million Canadian men and women served in the military — in the Canadian Army, the Royal Canadian Navy and the Royal Canadian Air Force.

- Canada trained pilots and aircrew from Allied nations — including Britain, Australia, New Zealand and Canada — via the British Commonwealth Air Training Plan. Trainees from other countries also took part.

- More than 42,000 members of the Canadian military were killed during the war.

- June 1941. The Soviet Union switched sides, joining the Allies in the war against Germany

Industry

- Canadian workers made enormous quantities of equipment and vehicles for the Allies — including more than 800,000 motor vehicles.

- Canadians worked in natural resources, such as forestry and mining, producing raw materials for the war effort.

Food and Agriculture

- Farmers increased their production and harvests to send food to the United Kingdom, and to feed military personnel and civilians in other countries.

- Canadian households had to ration — or limit — certain foods such as meat and sugar, to help ensure that troops had enough to eat.

Finance

- Canada loaned money to the United Kingdom interest-free, presented that country with a gift of war supplies in January 1942, and donated surplus production to other Allies.

- Canadians used their own money to buy War Certificates and Victory Bonds, which were essentially loans to the government to help pay for the war effort.

The Holocaust

Hitler wanted Germany to have more territory and resources. His plan had two main parts: take over other countries, and get rid of any groups of people he considered undesirable. His primary target was all European Jews.

The Holocaust is the name given to the persecution and murder of six million Jews by Hitler's Nazi regime and its collaborators. Mass killings began in the summer of 1941 and became systematic in 1942, when the Nazis and their collaborators began to deport Jews from across Europe to death camps. Nearly two out of every three Jews in Europe were killed in the Holocaust.

Other groups were also targeted. The Nazis murdered about 200,000 Roma (Gypsies), as well as at least 250,000 people with mental or physical disabilities. Polish civilians, forced labourers, homosexuals, political and religious dissidents, and three million Soviet prisoners of war were also killed.

Germany's early military successes and its occupation of much of the European continent made the Holocaust possible. Most of its victims were from countries other than Germany.

Pearl Harbor

Pearl Harbor is an American naval base on the island of Oahu in Hawaii. On 7 December 1941, following increased tensions with the United States, Japan launched an attack on Pearl Harbor, sinking warships and killing more than 2,000 Americans.

The United States declared war on Japan shortly after the attack. Germany and Italy (both allies of Japan) then declared war on the United States. These events brought the United States into the Second World War.

D-Day

D-Day was 6 June 1944. On that day, the Allies — especially the United Kingdom, the United States and Canada — launched a massive invasion to liberate Western Europe from the Germans. Ships, planes, vehicles and thousands of soldiers made the crossing from England to land on beaches in Normandy, France. D-Day is often seen as the beginning of the end of the war in Western Europe.

Hiroshima and Nagasaki

On 6 August 1945, the United States detonated an atomic bomb over Hiroshima, Japan. On 9 August 1945, they detonated another over Nagasaki. Although the exact numbers will never be known, the two bombs killed between 130,000 and 225,000 people, either immediately or in the months that followed. Most were civilians.

The United States used the bombs as part of an ongoing Allied campaign to force the Japanese to surrender. In addition to continued air and naval attacks, this included the Soviet Union entering the war against Japan on 9 August 1945. Japan surrendered at noon on 15 August 1945. Because of the difference in time zones, it was late on 14 August in Canada.

Aftermath of the Second World War

- The United States and the Soviet Union became the world's two major military powers. They also became rivals and enemies, setting the stage for the Cold War.

- The United Nations was founded in 1945 with the aim of preventing future wars.

- The economic boom that had started in Canada during the war continued. Canada became a more prosperous country than ever before.

- Parts of Europe, Africa and Asia had been destroyed, and millions of people were homeless or refugees.

The human devastation of the war is hard to comprehend. Estimates vary widely, and are sometimes contentious. Death tolls range from 50 to 80 million people — mostly civilians.