2. War in Europe: 1939 to 1945

Although the Germans took over Austria and Czechoslovakia in 1938, it was the Nazi invasion of Poland in September 1939 that triggered England and France to declare war on the Nazis, launching World War II in Europe. America’s decisive entry into World War II after Japan’s bombing of Pearl Harbor in December 1941 brought great relief and rejoicing in London and Moscow, where leaders had watched nation after nation topple before the Nazi onslaught and feared that without major reinforcements from abroad, theirs would be the next to fall. But it was by no means certain that even this newly formed “Grand Alliance” would achieve victory in what was now a truly global war. Indeed, over the course of the first six to eight months of 1942, the Allies suffered a string of defeats so devastating it seemed their coalition might come undone. The Axis powers—Germany, Italy, and Japan—were handily redrawing the map of the world.

In the Pacific, Japanese forces overran Hong Kong, the Dutch East Indies, Malaya, Singapore, the Philippines, and Burma. It looked as if the Japanese might also capture India,
Australia, and New Zealand—and finally prostrate China, driving it from the war.

Meanwhile, in North Africa, Axis forces under the command of General Erwin Rommel advanced to within sixty miles of the Suez Canal, where, by June 1942, they were in a position to cut off this vital link between Great Britain and her empire. In the North Atlantic, German submarine attacks on Allied merchant shipping intensified to a harrowing peak.

Most worrying was the situation in Russia. German forces had recovered from the Soviets’ heroic defense of Moscow in December 1941 and had launched a new offensive in the south of the country, designed to seize the Caucasus oil fields and cut off the Volga River at Stalingrad. If the Soviet Union were to fall to this new German offensive, the consequences for the West would be catastrophic.

In the years ahead, the leadership of President Franklin D. Roosevelt would be critical to the war effort. He already had pushed a major military buildup in the United States and a generous program of supplying arms to the British and Russians. Now FDR’s ability to work closely with British prime minister Winston Churchill and Soviet leader Joseph Stalin despite their differing hopes for a postwar world—and his unflagging nerve in the direst circumstances—would help steer America and its allies to victory.

FDR did not live to see the end of World War II. He died suddenly of a brain hemorrhage in Warm Springs, Georgia, on April 12, 1945. The people of America grieved deeply for the president they’d elected four times.

But nothing could restrain their joy when just a few weeks later, on May 8, the war in Europe ended with Germany’s unconditional surrender—just as FDR and his fellow Allied leaders had insisted it would. The nation’s flags still at half-staff to mark FDR’s passing, Americans poured into streets and public squares all over the country, cheering and embracing in a spontaneous outpouring of emotion. Against great odds and at great sacrifice, the Allies had consigned the Nazi juggernaut to history.
A First Move: Franklin D. Roosevelt and the Decision for North Africa, 1942

In late December 1941, America having finally jumped into the war after the December 7 bombing of Pearl Harbor, British prime minister Winston Churchill traveled to Washington, DC, to join Franklin D. Roosevelt in their first meeting as full-fledged allies. The two men agreed to focus their firepower on the Nazis before committing more resources to fighting off Imperial Japan, adhering to the so-called Germany First strategy established in secret international staff conversations earlier that year. They also agreed to create a Combined Chiefs of Staff made up of top military staff from both their countries; it would be based in Washington, DC, and report directly to FDR and Churchill.

The two leaders were in accord on the need for full unity of command among all British and American forces. But with the United States still working on all cylinders to ramp up its military preparedness, and the Pacific War placing enormous strain on resources, the best method for implementing the Germany First strategy remained uncertain.

One idea, favored by Churchill and the British Chiefs of Staff (COS), was to invade North Africa and try to reverse Axis incursions there. But the American Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) preferred a strategy concentrating all available Anglo-American forces in England for a cross-channel invasion of German-occupied France in late 1942 or early 1943. This would force the Germans to fight on two fronts in Europe, which the JCS argued was the best and fastest way to provide much-needed relief to the Soviet army.

But launching an attack on France was an ambitious undertaking, and by late spring it became apparent that a cross-channel operation was not feasible before the end of 1942. The JCS argued that the buildup of forces in England should nevertheless continue, in preparation for a cross-channel attack in 1943. This plan would have American forces standing idle for an entire year before getting the chance to confront their German foe. To Roosevelt, this was entirely unacceptable. With war also raging in the Pacific, he understood that it was critically important to get the American public and military engaged in the war in Europe as soon as possible. He also had promised the beleaguered Soviets that there would be a second front somewhere in the European theater in 1942.

Hence, FDR overruled his military leaders and—in spite of their insistence that an invasion of North Africa might delay a move on France until late 1943 or even 1944—insisted that an invasion of North Africa should go ahead promptly.
Operation Torch and the Birth of the Mediterranean Strategy, 1942–43

Code-named Operation Torch, the invasion of North Africa represented the first major joint Allied offensive of the Second World War. It began on November 8, 1942, when the Allies landed sixty-five thousand troops in three separate assaults along the Atlantic and Mediterranean coasts in French Morocco and Algeria, supported by a naval task force of more than 650 ships. The goal of the force, which soon numbered nearly two hundred thousand mostly American troops, was to seize French Morocco and Algeria, then drive eastward into Tunisia, while forces under the command of British general Bernard Law Montgomery drove westward from Egypt and Libya. In this way, the Allies hoped to clear North Africa of all Axis forces within a few months.

But in a surprise move, Adolf Hitler reacted to Operation Torch by pouring reinforcements into Tunisia. By the end of the year, with the arrival of German commander Erwin Rommel’s army retreating through Libya, German and Italian forces in Tunisia numbered well over 250,000. As a result, the campaign to take Tunisia involved heavy fighting—including a fierce battle between German and American forces at Kasserine Pass—that would not be brought to an end until mid-May 1943.

By this point it was clear that the Allies—much as the American Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) had predicted—would not be able to muster the forces needed to launch a cross-channel attack on France in 1943. As an alternative, British prime minister Winston Churchill and the British Chiefs of Staff (COS) argued that the Allies should press on to take Sicily and then Italy in what became known as the “Mediterranean strategy.”

Much as the British had predicted, the invasion of Sicily in July 1943 led to the collapse of the Italian government and the surrender of Italy. Hoping to take advantage of this development, the Allies landed in southern Italy on September 3. But all hopes for a rapid Allied advance up the Italian peninsula were soon lost as Hitler rushed massive German forces into Italy with the object of making the Allies fight hard for every inch of Italian ground. This Axis strategy became immediately apparent at Salerno, the site of the second Allied landing, where a German counterattack nearly drove the Anglo-American forces back into the sea. From this point on, the struggle for Italy became a torturously prolonged and bloody battle, the longest campaign fought by the Western Allies in the entire European war.
Recovering the dead at Omaha Beach, Normandy, France, after the D-day invasion of June 6, 1944. On the initial day of the operation, more than four thousand Allied personnel lost their lives. That evening, Franklin D. Roosevelt broadcast his stirring prayer for the men, “our sons,” carrying out the invasion. “They fight to liberate,” he said. “They fight to let justice arise, and tolerance and good will among all Thy people. They yearn but for the end of battle, for their return to the haven of home. Some will never return. Embrace these, Father, and receive them, Thy heroic servants, into Thy kingdom.”

The substantial resources the Allies committed to North Africa and the Mediterranean in 1942–43 made an attack on northwest France impossible until the spring of 1944. In the meantime, Soviet forces in the east handed the German army its first major defeat at Stalingrad in February 1943, and the Soviets achieved a second major victory at the Battle of Kursk in July. Events in Russia and in the Mediterranean clearly signaled that the tide was turning in the direction of the Allies.

Nevertheless, Joseph Stalin still insisted that a second front in France was vital. Franklin D. Roosevelt and the American Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) concurred, and at the Tehran Conference of November–December 1943, British prime minister Winston Churchill’s desire to expand operations in the eastern Mediterranean—even if it further delayed the cross-channel attack—was overruled by his fellow leaders The long-awaited attack on France was now the Allies’ number—one priority. Over the next six months, the massive buildup of men and equipment required to make it possible would proceed at a frantic pace.

The raid to retake France—D-day—began shortly after midnight on June 6, 1944, when British and American airborne units landed behind enemy lines to secure the flanks of the invasion site—the beaches of Normandy. There, on the first day alone, more than 130,000 troops made up of five divisions—two British, one Canadian, and two American—put ashore. Nearly seven thousand ships and landing craft were employed, as well as a staggering twelve thousand aircraft. The immediate objective of the invasion was to hold and expand the beachhead to make room for the additional troops and supplies required to launch the planned attack into France. By the end of June, more than 850,000 men were ashore, along with 148,000
vehicles and nearly six hundred thousand tons of supplies, all made possible in part by two artificial harbors that were towed from the south coast of England to Normandy, and by the laying of an undersea pipeline to carry gasoline.

Although the Allies were successful in expanding the beachhead, their highly anticipated breakout into France proper proved much more difficult. The Germans put up stubborn resistance at the French city of Caen; progress in other sectors was slow as well. It was not until July 25 that American forces under the command of Lieutenant General Omar Bradley finally broke through the German lines. Within weeks the Allies had taken most of Brittany and by August 25, the city of Paris was in their hands. The liberation of the French capital was an occasion for great celebration, with a French-American victory parade along the Champs-Élysées replacing, after four long years, the appalling spectacle of Nazis goose-stepping down this same broad avenue.

In the meantime, the Allies had launched a second invasion of France on the Mediterranean coast that drove northward in a rapid advance. By mid-September 1944, nearly all of France had been liberated.
Adolf Hitler’s Bold Move: The Battle of the Bulge, December 1944—January 1945

Impressed by the speed with which the Allies had captured most of France after breaking through German lines on July 25, many predicted the war would be over by Christmas of 1944. But after the Allies failed to outflank the Germans through the Dutch city of Arnhem in late September (Operation Market-Garden), their advance slowed, plagued in part by increasing supply difficulties as they approached the German border.

As the British, Canadian, and American forces consolidated their positions in preparation for a final strike on Germany, Adolf Hitler launched one of his most stunning surprises of the Second World War—the famous counteroffensive pushing west into the Ardennes Forest of France and Belgium, otherwise known as the Battle of the Bulge. His hope was to split the Western forces, recapture the port of Antwerp (which had become vital to the Allied supply effort), and perhaps even force a negotiated peace in the West.

Launched on December 16, 1944, the offensive depended on and achieved complete surprise. Hitler had managed to amass roughly a quarter of a million troops for the effort, supported by a thousand aircraft. Facing the Germans were eighty-three thousand American troops, many of them new recruits. In poor weather, which helped keep the vastly superior Allied air forces on the ground, the Germans pressed through the American lines, creating, in a matter of weeks, a German “bulge” roughly seventy miles deep. In the course of the attack, the Germans surrounded the vital transportation center of Bastogne, held by the 101st U.S. Airborne Division, whose commander’s famous response to a German demand to surrender was “nuts.” On January 3, 1945, the U.S First and Third Armies launched a counterattack at the base of either side of the bulge. Within two weeks the German bulge was destroyed and the battle was over.

Although the Allied forces had successfully countered Hitler’s daring move, the price was steep. Roughly seventy-seven thousand Allied soldiers had been killed, wounded, or taken prisoner. On the German side, an estimated two hundred thousand men were lost, more than half taken prisoner. These men represented the last combat-experienced reserves in Hitler’s army. Their loss, along with the loss of some two thousand tanks and other vehicles, meant the stage was set for the final Allied push across the Rhine River into the heart of Germany.
The Fall of Berlin and the End of the Third Reich, Spring 1945

Thanks in part to Adolf Hitler’s surprise counteroffensive in the Ardennes in December 1944, it was not until late winter 1945 that the Allies at last crossed the Rhine River to begin their final assault on Germany.

The first crossing of the Rhine came on March 7, when elements of the Ninth U.S. Army crossed a lightly defended bridge at the German town of Remagen. Seizing the span before the Germans had the chance to demolish it, more than eight thousand American troops poured over the bridge in the next twenty-four hours. Within days, several more bridgeheads on the east side of the Rhine were established, thanks largely to the bridging work of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. By March 25, a huge armored force had crossed the Rhine. On the left flank of the Allied line, British and Canadian troops now advanced rapidly across northern Germany. Further south, American forces did the same. By April 21, the Ninth U.S. Army found itself within seventy miles of Berlin, while the Third Army, under General George Patton, dashed through Czechoslovakia, Bavaria, and Austria. In the meantime, Soviet forces had driven toward Berlin from the east, supported by heavy Allied bombing at the Germans’ backs, including the famous firebombing of Dresden, which reduced much of the quaint historic city to rubble and killed more than twenty thousand.

On April 25, as arranged in advance, the meeting of Soviet and American troops took place at Torgau, south of the German capital on the Elbe River. Five days later, on April 30, while the Red Army fought to quell the last vestiges of German resistance in Berlin, Hitler, the architect of the most destructive war in human history, shot himself in his bunker deep below the Reichstag building, the longtime seat of German government. On May 2, the city finally succumbed to the inevitable. A week later, Hitler’s chosen successor, Grand Admiral Karl Dönitz, ordered Germany’s unconditional surrender, meeting the terms Franklin D. Roosevelt had insisted upon more than two years earlier in his meeting with Winston Churchill at Casablanca.

In a sad twist of fate, FDR had died on April 12, 1945, just weeks before Hitler’s suicide and the Third Reich’s demise. The beloved four-term president had lived long enough to substantially complete one of the most arduous and consequential tasks faced by any leader in history, if not to attend the celebrations. After nearly six long years of conflict, the Second World War in Europe was won.