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INTRODUCTION

Between 1939 and 1945, a terrible war was fought around the world. It was called World War II. It was named that because World War I had taken place earlier, from 1914 to 1918.

Many countries took part in World War II. The United States joined with France, Great Britain, and the Soviet Union to battle their enemies—Germany, Italy, and Japan.



Europe at the height of Nazi occupation, 1941-42

World War II lasted six years. It became the bloodiest war ever fought. Over 70 million people died in the war. What caused such a horrible conflict to occur?

World War II began partly because of the way World War I had ended. Germany was one of the losing countries in the first war. It was forced to pay huge amounts of money to the winning countries for damages they had suffered. As a result, Germany's government soon went **bankrupt**. German businesses failed. Many Germans found themselves out of work and starving.



Hungry poor on the streets of Berlin, 1931



The Reichstag building in Berlin, seat of the German parliament

The German people desperately wanted a new leader to end their **economic** suffering. In 1921, Adolf Hitler rose to power. He led a **political** group called the Nazi Party. He promised Germans a better future. In 1933, Hitler became Germany's new leader—and **dictator**. He had his political opponents arrested and killed.

Hitler believed that all the problems in Germany and elsewhere were caused by the Jewish people. He created the "Final Solution"—a plan to kill all the Jews in Europe.

To increase his power, Hitler joined forces with Italy. The Nazi armies began to conquer much of Europe. By the middle of 1939, Germany had taken control of Austria and Czechoslovakia.

On September 1, 1939, Germany invaded Poland. Two days later, Great Britain and France declared war on Germany. World War II had officially begun.



Newspapers on the streets of London announcing Britain's declaration of war

At first, America stayed out of the war. The President of the United States was Franklin Delano Roosevelt. He didn't want to get involved in Europe's conflict.

However, two years after the war began, a shocking event changed Roosevelt's mind. On December 7, 1941, Japanese airplanes bombed a U.S. Navy base in Pearl Harbor, Hawaii. Nineteen American ships and over 300 airplanes were destroyed or damaged. More than 2,400 Americans died in the surprise attack.

**U.S. Navy destroyer *USS Shaw*
exploding in Pearl Harbor**



Why did Japan attack Pearl Harbor? Like Germany, Japan wanted to gain land to build its economy. It had invaded China in 1937. The U.S. tried to stop Japan from taking over more countries. It blocked shipments of badly needed goods, such as oil, to Japan.

By 1941, bitter feelings between the United States and Japan had grown worse. After Japan's deadly attack on Pearl Harbor, America entered World War II.

Men waiting
to join the
army in San
Francisco,
California
(December
1941)

