

AP United States History

Unit 7: A Colossus Emerges

Topic- World War II: The Military Conflict and Postwar Diplomacy

World War II

Explain the causes and effects of the victory of the United States and its allies over the Axis powers.

Americans viewed the war as a fight for the survival of freedom and democracy against fascist and militarist ideologies. This perspective was later reinforced by revelations about Japanese wartime atrocities, Nazi concentration camps, and the Holocaust.

The young American men and women who fought in World War II shaped the modern America that we live in today, and indeed, helped shape the modern world. When the war began, Americans actually knew little about the sheer scale of the atrocities that had been committed by the Axis Powers, whether we are referring to the Holocaust, initiated by the Nazis in Germany throughout Central Europe, or by the Japanese in places such as Nanjing, China. However, throughout the war, it became clear to Americans— in uniform and on the homefront, that the war was being fought in the name of human rights and freedom. Though Americans may have been fighting against fascism and militarism in Europe and the Pacific, the conflict would have a tremendous influence on changing the perspective of Americans about their own racial problems at home, which led directly to the Civil Rights Movement that would follow the war experience. American troops would provide the decisive counterweight to the Soviets in defeating Nazi Germany in Europe and in the Pacific would use an island-hopping strategy to defeat Japan. Over 400,000 American men and women, soldiers, sailors, and airmen would give their lives in the fighting in World War II. But, it is also important to note that the American homefront was left relatively untouched by the conflict, whereas most of Europe and much of Asia lay in ruins with millions of lives lost in comparison. America emerged from the war as a superpower and as a nation that would, from that point forward, become much more involved in global affairs.

Military service provided opportunities for women and minorities to improve their socioeconomic positions for the war's duration, while also leading to debates over racial segregation.

The experience of World War II began to shape the perspectives that Americans had of one another in an extremely profound manner. Throughout the war, units of African-Americans, Hispanic-Americans, Asian-Americans, and Native Americans fought with distinction— though these units fought under the policy of segregation. The Tuskegee Airmen, a unit of African-American fighter pilots, were among the most heralded of the entire conflict, with a record of safety that was unmatched in escorting bombers to their targets deep inside of Nazi-controlled Europe. The Navajo Code Talkers played a very unique role in encrypting and decoding messages in the Pacific theater of the war— keeping the Japanese off-guard and consistently guessing where the next Allied strike or landing would come from in the island-hopping strategy of the conflict. While Asian-Americans fought with distinction in Europe, Mexican-Americans fought with distinction in both theaters of the conflict. Despite fighting in segregated units, soldiers, sailors, and airmen from each minority group rose through the ranks to become officers and acquitted themselves and their units with distinction. But, as they fought with distinction against ethnocentrism and racial hatred, it was difficult to ignore the segregation and discrimination that they encountered on a daily basis despite the sterling record of their experience in serving their country and the Allied cause. Time and again, throughout the conflict minority groups consistently performed well above the expectations that were placed upon them. At the end of the war, due to their record of performance with distinction in World War II, the first steps at integrating American society would occur in the

armed forces of the United States. The first branch of the U.S. military to be integrated was the U.S. Air Force which was formed out of the development of the U.S. Army Air Corps shortly after the war came to a conclusion.

The United States and its allies achieved military victory through Allied cooperation, technological and scientific advances, the contributions of servicemen and women, and campaigns such as Pacific "island-hopping" and the D-Day invasion. The use of atomic bombs hastened the end of the war and sparked debates about the morality of using atomic weapons.

During World War II, Americans fought in a conflict that was based on two fronts— one in North Africa and Europe against the forces of Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy, and the other in the Pacific Rim against the forces of Imperial Japan. While Great Britain and America formed an easy partnership as Allies, both fighting alongside one another with the Canadians and the Australians in Europe and the Pacific Rim, the Soviet Union was an uneasy partner from the beginning. From June, 1941, to November, 1942, the Soviet Union had borne the majority of the onslaught against Nazi Germany. In fact, if the Battle of Britain, in which the Nazis failed to be able to invade and conquer Great Britain, can be seen as a turning point in the conflict, the next turning point in the war came when the Soviet Union halted the German war machine at the Battle of Stalingrad. After Stalingrad, the Soviet forces slowly began pushing toward German-occupied territories that had surrounded their borders. In doing so, 20 million Russians perished while forcing the Nazis out of their homeland. During the conflict, the Allied leaders, Roosevelt, of the United States (later Harry S. Truman), (Winston) Churchill of Great Britain (later Clement Atlee), and Joseph Stalin of the Soviet Union, met on three different occasions to discuss how to defeat the Axis powers, how to cooperate with one another, and later, what the world would look like after the conflict came to a conclusion. During their first conference in Tehran, in modern-day Iran, in 1943, America and Great Britain pledged to launch an invasion of Western Europe to relieve the pressure on the Soviet Union and to make Germany fight a two-front war, while the Soviet Union pledged to enter the war against Japan on the side of the Allies once Nazi Germany had been defeated. The creation of the future United Nations and the division of Germany into zones of occupation after the war were also discussed. The second meeting, would be the final one to feature FDR and Churchill, but in this conference, at Yalta, in Crimea, on the Black Sea in the winter of 1945 (a part of the Soviet Union at the time), the Allies agreed to allow the Soviet Union to maintain a presence in the nations of Eastern Europe, as long as the Russians allowed free and fair elections after the war and kept their promise to enter the war against Japan once the victory over Nazi Germany had been assured. The final conference or meeting came after the war in Europe had come to a conclusion and was held in Potsdam, in the heart of a defeated Germany in the summer of 1945. In this final conference, tensions between the Soviet Union and America and Great Britain meant that very few issues were resolved— but, it ominously was where American president, Harry S. Truman (after the death of FDR) announced that unless Japan accepted the terms of an immediate and unconditional surrender, it would suffer mass destruction on a scale that would be unimaginable. Less than two weeks later, the first of two atomic bombs would be dropped on Japanese industrial cities which effectively brought the conflict to a conclusion.

After the attack on Pearl Harbor, America entered the war in a period of mobilization. It would be the late summer of 1942, before the first American troops would reach the European theater of the conflict. The first American troops in Europe were sent to North Africa where they helped the British defeat the Germans and drive them out of Egypt, Libya, Tunisia, Algeria, and Morocco. It may seem strange to us that the first Allied action in the West in which Americans participated was in North Africa, but the goal was to help the British secure the Suez Canal which allowed for trade to flow from India and China through the Red Sea and into the Mediterranean. It also served another strategic purpose. It helped the Allies secure the rich oil supplies of the Middle East and to keep them from falling into the hands of the Nazis. Whoever controlled the flow of oil, would win the war. By 1943, the Allies now had complete control of the oil coming from the Middle East. Next, the Allies invaded the island of Sicily by using North Africa as a base of operations. It was a pivotal moment, which then set-up the full-scale invasion of Italy in the spring of 1944. As American and British forces captured Rome, the Allies set themselves up for taking Nazi Germany's most important ally out of the conflict. Taking Italy and

the islands of Corsica (off the coast of southern France) and Sardinia, enabled the Allies to begin a new process that had already started in Great Britain, but now became much more lethal and an essential component for defeating the German war machine— bombing industrial cities, railroad hubs, bridges, and manufacturing centers. From Italy and Great Britain, now the Allies could bomb German factories around the clock effectively (as new radar and early computer technologies allowed for more accurate targeting and even for bombing at night) crippling the ability of the Germans to continue to manufacture and or repair its weapons of war. On June 6, 1944, the Allies invaded Normandy (northern France) on D-Day, and after heavy fighting began liberating France, so while Germany's major ally Italy was being occupied by the Allies and taken out of the war, now France was being brought back into it. In the winter of 1944-1945, as the Allies slowly advanced through Belgium toward the German border, the Nazi forces made their last stand in the Battle of the Bulge— the largest land battle ever fought by American soldiers. Slowly, the Americans, the British, and the Canadians pushed the Nazi forces back into the heart of Germany, itself. As the Allied forces advanced into the German heartland and the armies of the Soviet Union began to encircle the capital city of Berlin, a startling series of discoveries were made as the concentration and death camps used by the Nazis to perpetuate the Holocaust were discovered and liberated. This act of genocide which slaughtered 8 million Jewish people (and others including: Gypsies, the disabled and those from the LGBTQ community) shocked and horrified the civilized world. On April 21, 1945, while taking a brief rest, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt died after suffering a stroke. On April 30, 1945, Hitler committed suicide rather than risk capture. On May 8, 1945, Germany surrendered ending the war in Europe. By this time, the new American President, Harry S. Truman had taken the oath of office and now had a fateful decision to make as the war with Japan continued in the Pacific Rim. A terrifying weapon of unbelievable destructive power was being tested in the early summer of 1945— originally it was being developed to be used against Nazi Germany, but with the war still ongoing and Japan still not willing to back down, this new weapon would be used to bring the deadliest conflict in human history to a chilling and frightful conclusion.

In the Pacific Rim, World War II took on a new dimension. In June, 1942, the Allies won a stunning victory over the Japanese fleet by knocking out several of the aircraft carriers which had been pivotal to the attack on Pearl Harbor at the Battle of Midway. From that point forward, slowly the Allies— the Americans, the British, and the Australians went on the offensive using an island-hopping strategy. The island-hopping strategy involved the following process— bomb an island, occupy it with troops by removing the Japanese defenders (who quite often fought to the death to defend it), and then use the island as a base of operations to continue the process. By the fall of 1944, the Allied forces had fought their way to the islands of Saipan and the Philippines. After liberating these two crucial islands, the final steps would involve taking the islands of Iwo Jima and Okinawa, from which the Allies could now bomb Japan around the clock and or mount an invasion of the Japanese home islands. On Saipan, the Japanese had jumped off of the jagged cliffs rather than surrender. In the Philippines, at the final Battle of Leyte Gulf, the Allies faced the onslaught of kamikaze suicide pilots for the first time, who simply flew their fighter planes as suicide bombers into American naval destroyers, carriers, and battleships. In the early spring of 1945, American forces took the island of Iwo Jima after some of the most brutal fighting of World War II. Using Iwo Jima as a base, American bombers began to bomb Japan around the clock. It had taken over a month to sweep Iwo Jima of resistance. The final island, Okinawa, was where the Japanese made their final stand and it was one of the bloodiest battles in World War II. After months of fighting, Allied forces (mostly U.S. Marines) finally took Okinawa. The bloody victory convinced the Allied leaders that trying to mount an invasion of the Japanese home islands would be suicidal and could result in more than a million casualties. On June 16, 1945, while the fighting raged for the island of Okinawa, the Manhattan Project reached its final phase. Originally developed based on the fears of scientists such as Albert Einstein, who feared that Germany might create such a weapon of mass destruction first, the Manhattan Project featured scientists working across the country to create a weapon that they hoped would bring the war to an end— and possibly all wars to an end. The atomic bomb which first exploded in the New Mexico desert on June 16, 1945, ushered in a new age in scientific research and development. It also unleashed the forces of nuclear war for the very first time. On August 6, 1945, the first atomic bomb was dropped on an industrial target, the city of Hiroshima. Three days later, a second atomic bomb was dropped on another industrial target, the city of Nagasaki. Both cities were

totally destroyed and hundreds of thousands of people— most of them civilians were killed instantly. On September 2, 1945, Japan surrendered, which brought the deadliest and most destructive conflict in human history to an end.

The war-ravaged condition of Asia and Europe, and the dominant U.S. role in the Allied victory and postwar peace settlements, allowed the United States to emerge from the war as the most powerful nation on Earth.

Once World War II came to a conclusion, the United States became much more involved than ever before in securing agreements to try to create a peaceful world and to avoid the mistakes that had led to the two previous global conflicts. In doing so, it is with great irony that many of what had been Woodrow Wilson's Fourteen Points to avoid a global conflict after World War I were incorporated in the process of peace that concluded World War II. Prior to the war ending, the United States hammered out two important agreements— GATT (the General Agreement on Trade and Tariffs) which promoted global free trade and at the Bretton Woods Conference helped establish the IMF (or, International Monetary Fund) to prevent another global economic catastrophe. The United States and the former Allied powers also created the United Nations in an effort to solve global conflict and to bring peaceful resolutions to disputes between nations, in order to avoid costly wars. With much of Germany, Italy, and the Allied nations of Western Europe, as well as Japan, in ruins, the United States would institute the Marshall Plan, which through American investment began to rebuild the economies of the war-torn countries that had been directly impacted by the conflict. America also participated in the Nuremberg Trials— a first in global history, in which the leaders of the nations who had committed war crimes were held accountable for their actions throughout 1946-1947. It also, along with the other Allied nations oversaw the occupation of Germany and Japan, to rebuild both nations with democratic institutions and market-based economies. Though America had emerged as a superpower by the end of the conflict, tensions with the Soviet Union which had been on display during the war, emerged by 1947 as America and the Soviet Union disagreed over how to handle a divided Germany and the process of post-war reconstruction. The Cold War that would ensue between the two superpowers would last until the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991.

But, for Americans, with both the experiences of the depression and the war now behind them, it was time to focus on issues at home, as well. America now entered into a new era— one in which the nation would now be front and center in global affairs for the very first time and too, there would be a new focus on human rights and freedoms in America, as well.