

World War II

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Author: Dan Gorman , York University

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Description Taken as a single event, the Second World War was perhaps the most "global" moment of the twentieth century. The war was fought between the Axis Powers - Germany, Italy, and Japan - and the Allied Powers, the most important of whom were the Soviet Union, the United States, and the British Empire/Commonwealth. The war began in Europe in 1939 after Germany invaded Poland, and in Asia in 1941 when Japan, already at war with China from 1937, simultaneously attacked British and American territories across the Pacific, including Pearl Harbour in Hawaii. The war ended in 1945 with the defeat of German armies in Europe and the catastrophic atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in Japan. The prime cause of war in Europe was German expansionism, particularly its search for lebensraum (living space) at the expense of the Slavic nations to its east. The Asian war was caused by Japan's desire to secure raw materials abroad and create a "Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere."

The Second World War was a total war which negated the traditional separation between soldier and civilian, a pattern which has defined most subsequent civil and inter-state conflicts. The war's military campaigns and attendant devastation also displaced millions of men and women across the globe, and precipitated the Holocaust, where six million Jews were murdered.

The war did have positive global consequences. It deepened a moral awareness of, and a sense of empathy towards, other parts and peoples of the world. Its depravities and mass suffering also gave rise to a global conception of human rights. However, it remains the war experience itself, its death, destruction, and dislocation, which placed an indelibly global mark on human history. Henceforth, the fates of individuals and states have become ever more closely intertwined, mixing the local and the global.

Suggested Reading: **Dear, I. C. B. and M. R. D. Foot. eds.** 2001. *The Oxford companion to World War II*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Overy, Richard. 1997. *Why the Allies won the war*. New York: Norton.

Weinberg, Gerhard. 1994/2005. *A world at arms*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.