Your notes

GCSE History: revision notes

The Second World War in Europe and Asia, 1939–45

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The war in Europe, 1939–42

- Germany invaded Poland in September 1939, and Britain and France declared war. Using **Blitzkrieg** ("lightning war"), with tanks, aircraft and fast-moving troops, Germany conquered Denmark and Norway (April 1940), then the Netherlands, Belgium and France (May to June 1940). By the end of 1940 it controlled most of western and central Europe.
- About 338,000 British and French troops were rescued from Dunkirk. In the Battle of Britain (summer 1940) the RAF, helped by radar and Spitfire and Hurricane fighters, stopped the Luftwaffe winning control of the skies, so Hitler put off his invasion. The Royal Navy and the English Channel also stood in the way.
- In June 1941 Hitler invaded the USSR (**Operation Barbarossa**): he wanted living space (**Lebensraum**) in the east, to destroy communism, and the USSR's wheat and oil. German forces reached Moscow but were stopped by the winter and the Red Army.
- At Stalingrad (August 1942 to February 1943) the German Sixth Army was surrounded and surrendered. It was a **turning point**: Germany lost a whole army, and from then on the Red Army pushed west.

The war in the Asia–Pacific, 1941–42

- Japan had invaded Manchuria (1931) and China (1937). When it moved into French Indochina, the USA cut off its oil and froze its money in 1941, so Japan decided to seize the oil and rubber of South-East Asia.
- On 7 December 1941 Japan attacked the US fleet at Pearl Harbor, sinking or damaging eight battleships. But the US aircraft carriers were at sea, and the fuel tanks and repair yards survived, and the attack brought the USA into the war.

- Japan then quickly took Hong Kong, Malaya, Singapore (February 1942), the Philippines, the Dutch East Indies and Burma. It succeeded through surprise, well-trained forces and air power, while Britain and the Netherlands were stretched by the war in Europe.
- At Midway (June 1942), US code-breakers learned the Japanese plan, and four Japanese aircraft carriers were sunk. Japan never recovered the initiative.

Civilians and resistance

- The Blitz (1940–41) killed about 43,000 British civilians; children were evacuated from cities. Allied bombing of Germany killed far more: a firestorm in Hamburg (1943) and the bombing of Dresden (1945).
- In Nazi-occupied Europe, people faced forced labour, food shortages and terror. Six million Jews were murdered in the Holocaust. **Resistance** movements, such as the French **Resistance** and the Polish Home Army, gathered intelligence, sabotaged railways and helped Allied airmen escape.
- Under Japanese control, prisoners of war and local workers were used as forced labour, such as on the Burma Railway, and many civilians suffered harsh rule. Guerrilla fighters resisted in the Philippines, China and elsewhere.

Allied victory, 1943–45

- The Allies invaded Sicily and Italy in 1943. Mussolini was overthrown and Italy surrendered, but German forces fought on there, tying up troops.
- On D-Day (6 June 1944) the Allies landed in Normandy. With the Red Army advancing from the east and Allied bombing destroying industry and fuel, Germany was collapsing by April 1945. Hitler killed himself on 30 April, and Germany surrendered in May.
- In the Pacific, US forces "island-hopped" towards Japan. After atomic bombs were dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August 1945 and the USSR declared war, Japan surrendered.
- Germany was divided into four zones, and Nazi leaders were tried at Nuremberg. Japan was occupied by the USA, given a new constitution, and its leaders were tried in Tokyo.

Key terms

Blitzkrieg	"Lightning war": fast attacks combining tanks, aircraft and troops.
Operation Barbarossa	The German invasion of the USSR in June 1941.
Lebensraum	"Living space": land in the east that Hitler wanted for Germans.
Turning point	An event after which the course of the war changed.
Island-hopping	The US strategy of capturing key Pacific islands one after another on the way to Japan.

Your notes

Resistance	Secret opposition to an occupying power, such as sabotage and spying.

Quick questions

Cover the answers and test yourself: remembering is what makes it stick.

1. What was Blitzkrieg?
2. Which country did Germany invade in September 1939?
3. What helped the RAF win the Battle of Britain?
4. What was Operation Barbarossa?
5. Why was Stalingrad a turning point?
6. Why did the USA's oil embargo matter to Japan?
7. Why was the attack on Pearl Harbor not a complete success for Japan?
8. What happened at the Battle of Midway?

Answers

1. Fast attacks combining tanks, aircraft and troops
2. Poland
3. Radar and fighter aircraft such as Spitfires and Hurricanes
4. The German invasion of the USSR
5. A whole German army surrendered and the Red Army began pushing west
6. Japan needed oil, so it decided to seize it in South-East Asia
7. The US aircraft carriers were at sea and survived
8. Four Japanese aircraft carriers were sunk

What to do next

Practise 10 questions on this topic

Try 3 exam questions, with mark schemes

Read the lesson, one step at a time

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