Your notes

GCSE History: revision notes

Warfare and international conflict, 1919–2011

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The changing nature of warfare, 1919–39

- After 1918, armies improved the tanks, heavy artillery and aircraft of the First World War. Poison gas was banned by the Geneva Protocol (1925), but still used. Navies built submarines and the first aircraft carriers.
- Japan used bombers against Chinese cities after invading Manchuria (1931) and China (1937). Italy used aircraft and mustard gas against the Ethiopians in Abyssinia (1935–36).
- In the Spanish Civil War (1936–39), German bombers of the Condor Legion destroyed Guernica (1937), showing what bombing could do to civilians, and Republican fighters used guerrilla tactics behind the lines.

Land, air and sea in the Second World War, 1939–45

- **Blitzkrieg** ("lightning war"): Germany combined tanks, dive bombers and radio to overrun Poland (1939) and France (1940).
- Air war: in the Battle of Britain (1940) the RAF, helped by radar, beat the Luftwaffe. Then came the Blitz on British cities (1940–41), V1 flying bombs and V2 rockets (1944–45), and Allied area bombing of Germany, such as Hamburg (1943) and Dresden (1945).
- Sea war: German U-boats hunted convoys in "wolf packs" in the Battle of the Atlantic. Code-breaking at Bletchley Park, sonar, escorts and long-range aircraft beat them by 1943.
- D-Day (6 June 1944) combined landings from the sea, paratroopers and artificial Mulberry harbours. The airborne attack at Arnhem (September 1944) failed. Resistance movements, especially in France, sabotaged railways and passed on intelligence.
- In the Pacific, aircraft carriers mattered most: Pearl Harbor (1941) was a carrier attack, and at Midway (1942) the USA sank four Japanese carriers.

Nuclear weapons and guerrilla war, 1945–75

- The USA dropped atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August 1945 to end the war quickly without invading Japan, to justify the cost of building them, and some historians argue to warn the USSR.
- The arms race: the USSR tested an atomic bomb in 1949, both sides built hydrogen bombs (1952–53), and then missiles that could cross continents, launched from land and from submarines. Mutually Assured Destruction (MAD) meant neither side dared to strike first. Britain, France and China built their own bombs.
- After the Cuban Missile Crisis (1962) came the hotline, the Test Ban Treaty (1963), the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (1968) and SALT I (1972). Chemical and biological weapons were also built, and biological weapons were banned in 1972.
- Conventional war still mattered: in the Six-Day War (1967) Israel destroyed Egypt's air force on the ground, and in 1973 Egypt's anti-tank and anti-aircraft missiles surprised Israel.
- In Vietnam, Viet Cong guerrillas used tunnels, booby traps and the Ho Chi Minh Trail. The USA's bombing, napalm and Agent Orange could not defeat them, and US forces left in 1973.

Conventional war and new wars, 1976–2011

- Falklands War (1982): Britain sent a task force with two aircraft carriers and Harrier jets. The nuclear submarine HMS Conqueror sank the Argentine cruiser General Belgrano, and an Exocet missile sank HMS Sheffield. Argentina surrendered in June.
- In Afghanistan (1979–89), Soviet forces could not beat the mujahideen guerrillas, armed from 1986 with US Stinger missiles.
- Gulf War (1991): after Iraq invaded Kuwait, a US-led coalition used weeks of air attacks with stealth aircraft, laser-guided "smart" bombs and cruise missiles, then won the ground war in about 100 hours.
- President Reagan's "Star Wars" plan (1983) aimed to shoot down missiles in space. The INF Treaty (1987) and START (1991) began cutting nuclear weapons as the Cold War ended.
- 9/11: al-Qaeda terrorists flew hijacked planes into the World Trade Center and the Pentagon in 2001, killing nearly 3,000 people. The "War on Terror" followed in Afghanistan (2001) and Iraq (2003), with precision "surgical" air strikes but long guerrilla wars against roadside bombs.
- **Drones** such as the Predator and Reaper carried out strikes in Pakistan, and unmanned ground robots cleared bombs in Iraq and Afghanistan. Osama bin Laden was killed in Pakistan in 2011.

Your notes

Key terms

Blitzkrieg	"Lightning war": fast attacks combining tanks, aircraft and radio.
Guerrilla warfare	Small groups using hit-and-run attacks against a stronger army.
Mutually Assured Destruction (MAD)	The idea that a nuclear war would destroy both sides, so neither would start one.
Nuclear proliferation	The spread of nuclear weapons to more countries.
Asymmetric warfare	War between sides of very different strength, where the weaker side avoids open battle.
Drone	An unmanned aircraft controlled from far away.

Quick questions

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

1. What was Blitzkrieg?
2. What helped the RAF win the Battle of Britain?
3. Which town was bombed by the Condor Legion in 1937?
4. What were "wolf packs"?
5. At which battle did the USA sink four Japanese aircraft carriers?
6. What does MAD stand for?
7. Which treaty of 1968 tried to stop more countries getting nuclear weapons?
8. Which tactics did the Viet Cong use?

Answers

1. Fast attacks combining tanks, aircraft and radio
2. Radar
3. Guernica
4. Groups of U-boats attacking convoys
5. Midway
6. Mutually Assured Destruction
7. The Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty
8. Guerrilla tactics such as tunnels and booby traps

What to do next

Practise 11 questions on this topic

Try 3 exam questions, with mark schemes

Read the lesson, one step at a time

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