

Germany Sparks a New War in Europe

What caused Britain and France to declare war?

In 1939, Adolf Hitler decided to move on Poland. He had already conquered Austria and Czechoslovakia. When Hitler signed a nonaggression pact with Joseph Stalin of the Soviet Union, they agreed not to attack each other. Secretly, they also agreed to split Poland between them. This deal removed the threat of the Soviets attacking Germany from the east.

So, on September 1, the German army invaded Poland in a surprise attack. Using planes, tanks, and troops, it moved suddenly in a technique called blitzkrieg, or “lightning war.” Britain and France declared war, but Poland fell before they could help.

On September 17, after secret agreement with Hitler, Stalin invaded eastern Poland. Stalin then began annexing the regions covered in a second part of the agreement. Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia fell without a struggle. However, Finland fought back. In March 1940, Finland was forced to surrender. For seven months after Poland fell to the Germans, Europe was calm. France and Britain got their armies ready. They waited for Hitler’s next move.

The Fall of France; The Battle of Britain

What happened when France and Britain were attacked?

Suddenly in April 1940, Hitler’s armies invaded Denmark and Norway. Within two months, they also captured Belgium, the Netherlands, Luxembourg, and France. Part of the French army, led by Charles de Gaulle, escaped to Britain to remain free and continue the fight. By then, Italy’s Benito Mussolini had joined Hitler’s side.

Great Britain - now led by Winston Churchill - stood alone. The German air force began bombing Britain. It wanted to weaken the country. Germany was getting prepared to invade Britain. But the British air force fought back. It was helped by the recently developed radar. This was an electronic tracking system that warned of coming attacks. Also, the British had broken the German army’s secret code. The Battle of Britain lasted many months. Unable to break British defenses, Hitler called off the attacks in May 1941.

The Mediterranean and the Eastern Front

What countries did Hitler invade?

Hitler then turned his attention to the east and to the Mediterranean. Germany sent troops under General Erwin Rommel to North Africa to help Italy fight the British. In April 1941, German armies quickly took control of Yugoslavia and Greece. In June, Hitler began a surprise invasion of the Soviet Union. The Red Army was the largest in the world. But it was not well-equipped or well-trained. The Germans quickly pushed deep into Soviet territory. The Red Army was forced to retreat.

To keep supplies out of German hands, the Red Army destroyed everything left behind. The Germans were stopped from taking Leningrad in the north. They then turned on Moscow, the Soviet capital. A strong Soviet counterattack, combined with fierce Russian winter weather, forced the Germans back. Moscow had been saved, and the battle had cost the Germans 500,000 lives.

The United States Aids its Allies

How did the United States take sides?

The United States watched these events. Many Americans did not want to join in the war. President Roosevelt wanted to help the Allies, however. He asked Congress to allow Britain and France to buy American weapons. Soon, American ships were escorting British ships carrying guns bought from the United States. By the fall of 1941, U.S. ships had orders to fire on German submarines that threatened the ships. The United States and Germany were fighting an undeclared naval war.

Roosevelt met secretly with Churchill in August of 1941. Although the United States was not officially in the war, the two leaders issued a statement called the Atlantic Charter. It supported free trade and the right of people to form their own government.