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# Hitler's Lightning War

## TERMS & NAMES

- nonaggression pact
- blitzkrieg
- Charles de Gaulle
- Winston Churchill
- Battle of Britain
- Atlantic Charter

## MAIN IDEA

Using the sudden, mass attack called the blitzkrieg, Germany overran much of Europe and North Africa.

## WHY IT MATTERS NOW

Hitler's actions set off World War II. The results of the war still affect the politics and economics of today's world.

**SETTING THE STAGE** During the 1930s, Hitler played on the hopes and fears of the Western democracies. Each time the Nazi dictator grabbed new territory, he would declare an end to his demands. Peace seemed guaranteed—until Hitler started expanding again.

## Germany Sparks a New War in Europe

After his moves into the Rhineland (March 1936), Austria (March 1938), and Czechoslovakia (September 1938 and March 1939), the Führer turned his eyes to Poland. On April 28, 1939, Hitler spoke before the Reichstag. He demanded that the Polish Corridor, along with its port city of Danzig, be returned to Germany. After World War I, the Allies had cut out the Polish Corridor from German territory to give Poland access to the sea.

This time, Great Britain and France decided to resist this threat of aggression. At this point, as was mentioned in Chapter 15, Soviet dictator Joseph Stalin signed a 10-year **nonaggression pact** with Hitler on August 23. After being excluded from the Munich Conference, Stalin was not eager to join with the West. Also, Hitler was promising him territory. In the public part of the pact, Germany and the Soviet Union promised not to attack each other. Secretly, however, they agreed that they would divide Poland between them. They also secretly agreed that the USSR could take over Finland and the Baltic countries (Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia).

**Germany's Lightning Attack on Poland** The new nonaggression pact removed the threat to Germany of a Soviet attack from the east. Hitler then quickly moved ahead with plans to conquer Poland. His surprise attack took place at dawn on September 1, 1939. German warplanes invaded Polish airspace, raining bombs and terror on the Poles. At the same time, German tanks and troop trucks rumbled across the Polish border. The trucks carried more than 1.5 million soldiers into the assault. German aircraft and artillery then began a merciless bombing of Poland's capital, Warsaw. The city crumbled under the assault. A stunned world looked on. No one yet realized that the Polish invasion had unleashed World War II.

France and Great Britain declared war on Germany on September 3. But Poland fell three weeks before those nations could make any military response. After his victory, Hitler annexed the western half of Poland. That region had a large German population.



A propaganda poster proclaims to the German nation: "One People, One Reich, One Führer!"

### Background

Hitler hated communism, as Stalin despised fascism. Nonetheless, Hitler did not want to fight both the Allies and the Soviet Union. And Stalin wanted to keep his country out of a costly European war.



## World War II: German Advances, 1939–1941



### GEOGRAPHY SKILLBUILDER: Interpreting Maps

- 1. Region** Which countries did Germany invade?
- 2. Location** In what way was Germany's geographic location an advantage when it was on the offensive in the war?

The German invasion of Poland was the first test of Germany's newest military strategy—the **blitzkrieg** (BLIHTS-kreeg), or “lightning war.” It involved using fast-moving airplanes and tanks, followed by massive infantry forces, to take the enemy by surprise. Then, blitzkrieg forces swiftly crushed all opposition with overwhelming force. In the case of Poland, the strategy worked.

**The Soviets Make Their Move** On September 17, after his secret agreement with Hitler, Stalin sent Soviet troops to occupy the eastern half of Poland. Stalin then began annexing the regions in the second part of the agreement. Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia fell without a struggle, but Finland resisted.

In November 1939, Stalin sent nearly 1 million Soviet troops into Finland. He thought that his soldiers would win a quick victory. So, Stalin did not worry about the Finnish winter. This was a crucial mistake. The Finns were outnumbered and outgunned, but they fiercely defended their country. In the freezing weather, they attacked on swift skis. Meanwhile, the Soviets struggled through deep snow, crippled by frostbite. Despite their losses, the Soviet

invaders finally won through sheer force of numbers. By March 1940, Stalin had forced the Finns to accept his surrender terms.

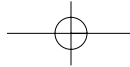
**The Phony War** For almost seven months after the fall of Poland, there was a strange calm in the land fighting in Europe. After their declaration of war, the French and British had mobilized their armies. They stationed their troops along the Maginot (MAZH-uh-NOH) Line, a system of fortifications along France's border with Germany. There they waited for Germans to attack—but nothing happened. With little to do, the bored Allied soldiers stared eastward toward the enemy. Equally bored, German soldiers stared back from their Siegfried Line a few miles away. Germans jokingly called it the *sitzkrieg*, or “sitting war.” Some newspapers referred to it simply as “the phony war.”

Suddenly, on April 9, 1940, the phony war ended. Hitler launched a surprise invasion of Denmark and Norway. He planned to build bases along the Norwegian and Danish coasts to strike at Great Britain. In just four hours after the attack, Denmark fell. Two months later, Norway surrendered as well.

## The Battle for France and Great Britain

In May of 1940, Hitler began a dramatic sweep through Holland, Belgium, and Luxembourg. This was part of a strategy to strike at France. Keeping the Allies' attention on those countries, Hitler then sent an even larger force of tanks and troop trucks to slice through the Ardennes (ahr-DEHN). This was a heavily wooded area in northeastern France and Luxembourg. Moving through the forest, the

**THINK THROUGH HISTORY**  
**A. Analyzing Motives** What would you say were the political reasons behind Stalin's actions in Europe at the beginning of World War II?



Germans “squeezed between” the Maginot Line. From there, they moved across France and reached France’s northern coast in 10 days.

**France Battles Back** When the Germans reached the French coast, they swung north again and joined forces with German troops in Belgium. By May 26, 1940, the Germans had trapped the Allied forces around the northern French city of Lille (leel). With a German victory inevitable, Belgium surrendered. Outnumbered, outgunned, and pounded from the air, the Allies escaped to the beaches of Dunkirk, a French port city on the English Channel. They were trapped with their backs to the sea.

In one of the most heroic acts of the war, Great Britain set out to rescue the army. It sent a fleet of some 850 ships across the English Channel to Dunkirk. Along with Royal Navy ships, civilian craft—yachts, lifeboats, motorboats, paddle steamers, and fishing boats—joined the rescue effort. From May 26 to June 4, this amateur armada, under heavy fire from German bombers, sailed back and forth from Britain to Dunkirk. The boats carried an incredible 338,000 battle-weary soldiers to safety.

**France Falls** Following Dunkirk, France seemed doomed to defeat. On June 10, sensing a quick victory, Italy’s Benito Mussolini joined forces with Hitler and declared war on both Great Britain and France. Italy then attacked France from the south. By June 14, Paris had fallen to the Germans. Nazi troops marched triumphantly down the city’s main boulevard.

Two days later, seeing defeat approaching, the French parliament asked Marshal Henri Pétain (pay-TAN), an aging hero from World War I, to become prime minister. On June 22, 1940, France surrendered. The Germans took control of the northern part of the country. They left the southern part to a puppet government headed by Pétain. The headquarters of this government was in the city of Vichy (VEESH-ee).

After France fell, a French general named **Charles de Gaulle** (duh GOHL) fled to London. There, he set up a government-in-exile committed to reconquering France. On June 18, 1940, he delivered a broadcast from England. He called on the people of France to resist:

#### A VOICE FROM THE PAST

It is the bounden [obligatory] duty of all Frenchmen who still bear arms to continue the struggle. For them to lay down their arms, to evacuate any position of military importance, or agree to hand over any part of French territory, however small, to enemy control would be a crime against our country. . . .

GENERAL CHARLES DE GAULLE, quoted in *Charles de Gaulle: A Biography*

De Gaulle went on to organize the Free French military forces that battled the Nazis until France was liberated in 1944.

**Germany Attacks Great Britain** With the fall of France, Great Britain stood alone against the Nazis. **Winston Churchill**, the new British prime minister, had already declared that his nation would never give in. In a speech, he said, “We shall fight on the beaches, we shall fight on the landing grounds, we shall fight in the fields and in the streets . . . we shall never surrender.”

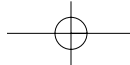


Hundreds of British soldiers crowd aboard ship during the mass evacuation at Dunkirk.

#### Background

Hitler demanded that the surrender take place in the same railroad car where the French had dictated terms to the Germans in World War I.





## HISTORYMAKERS



**Winston Churchill**  
1874–1965

Probably the greatest weapon the British had as they stood alone against Hitler's Germany was the nation's prime minister—Winston Churchill. "Big Winnie," Londoners boasted, "was the lad for us. . . ."

Although as a youngster Churchill had a speech defect, he grew to become one of the greatest orators of all time. He used all his gifts as a speaker to rally the people behind the effort to crush Germany. He declared that Britain would

. . . wage war, by sea, land, and air, with all our might and with all the strength that God can give us . . . against monstrous tyranny.

Hitler now turned his mind to an invasion of Great Britain. His plan—*Operation Sea Lion*—was first to knock out the Royal Air Force (RAF) and then to land 250,000 soldiers on England's shores. In the summer of 1940, the Luftwaffe (LOOFT-VAHF-uh), Germany's air force, began bombing Great Britain. Badly outnumbered, the RAF had 2,900 planes to the Luftwaffe's 4,500. At first, the Germans targeted British airfields and aircraft factories. Then, on September 7, 1940, they began focusing on the cities, especially London—to break British morale. Bombs exploded daily in city streets. They killed civilians and set buildings ablaze. However, despite the destruction and loss of life, the British fought on.

With the pressure off the airfields, the RAF hit back hard. Two secret weapons helped turn the tide in their favor. One was an electronic tracking system known as radar. Developed in the late 1930s, radar could tell the number, speed, and direction of incoming warplanes. The other was a German code-making machine named Enigma. A complete Enigma machine was smuggled to Great Britain in 1938. With Enigma in their possession, the British had German secret messages open to them. With information gathered by these devices, RAF fliers could quickly get to their airplanes and inflict deadly harm on the enemy.

To avoid the RAF's attacks, the Germans gave up daylight raids in October 1940 in favor of night bombing. At sunset, the wail of sirens filled the air as Londoners flocked to the subways. There they spent the night in air-raid shelters. Some rode out the blasts at home in basements or in smaller air-raid shelters.

The **Battle of Britain** continued until May 10, 1941. Stunned by British resistance, Hitler decided to call off his attacks. Instead, he focused his attention on Eastern Europe and the Mediterranean. The Battle of Britain had ended. And, from it, the Allies had learned a crucial lesson: Hitler's advances could be blocked.

### Background

*Luftwaffe* in German means "air weapon."

### Vocabulary

**morale:** state of mind.

## The Eastern Front and the Mediterranean

The stubborn resistance of the British in the Battle of Britain caused a shift in Hitler's strategy in Europe. Although the resistance surprised Hitler, it did not defeat him. He would deal with Great Britain later. Instead, he turned his attention east to the Balkans and the Mediterranean area—and to the ultimate prize, the Soviet Union.

**Germany and Italy Attack North Africa** Germany's first objective in the Mediterranean region was North Africa—mainly because of Hitler's partner Mussolini. Despite Italy's alliance with Germany, the country had remained neutral at the beginning of the war. With Hitler's conquest of France, however, Mussolini knew he had to take action. Otherwise, Italy would not share in Germany's victories. "I need a few thousand dead," he told a member of his staff. After declaring war on France and Great Britain, Italy became Germany's most important Axis ally. Then, Mussolini moved into France along with the Nazis.

Mussolini took his next step in September 1940. While the Battle of Britain was raging, he ordered Italy's North African army to move east from Libya. His goal was to seize British-controlled Egypt. Egypt's Suez Canal was key to reaching the oil fields of the Middle East. Within a week, Italian troops had pushed 60 miles inside Egypt, forcing British units back. Then both sides dug in and waited.

**Great Britain Strikes Back** Finally, in December, the British decided to strike back. The result was a disaster for the Italians. By February 1941, the British had swept 500 miles across North Africa. They had taken 130,000 Italian prisoners.

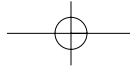
### THINK THROUGH HISTORY

#### B. Drawing

**Conclusions** How could "a few thousand dead" have helped Mussolini's position in the Axis powers?

### Background

The Middle East is an area that includes the countries of Southwest Asia and northeast Africa.



Hitler had to step in to save his Axis partner. In February 1941, he sent General Erwin Rommel, later known as the “Desert Fox,” to Libya. His mission was to command a newly formed tank corps, the Afrika Korps. Determined to take control of Egypt and the Suez Canal, Rommel attacked the British at Agheila (uh-GAY-luh) on March 24. Caught by surprise, British forces retreated 500 miles east to Tobruk.

However, by mid-January 1942, after fierce fighting for Tobruk, the British drove Rommel back to where he had started. By June, the tide of battle turned again. Rommel regrouped, pushed the British back across the desert, and seized Tobruk. This was a shattering loss for the Allies. Rommel later wrote, “To every man of us, Tobruk was a symbol of British resistance, and we were now going to finish with it for good.”

**The War in the Balkans** While Rommel campaigned in North Africa, Hitler was active in the Balkans. As early as the summer of 1940, Hitler had begun planning to attack his ally, the USSR, by the following spring. The Balkan countries of southeastern Europe were key to Hitler’s invasion plan. Hitler wanted to build bases in southeastern Europe for the attack on the Soviet Union. He also wanted to make sure that the British did not interfere.

To prepare for his invasion, Hitler moved to expand his influence in the Balkans. In the face of overwhelming German strength, Bulgaria, Romania, and Hungary cooperated by joining the Axis powers in early 1941. Yugoslavia and Greece, which had pro-British governments, resisted. On Sunday, April 6, 1941, Hitler invaded both countries. Yugoslavia fell in 11 days. Greece surrendered in 17. In Athens, the Nazis celebrated their victory by raising swastikas on the Acropolis.

**Hitler Invades the Soviet Union** With the Balkans firmly in control, Hitler could move ahead with his plan to invade the Soviet Union. He called that plan *Operation Barbarossa*. Early on Sunday morning, June 22, 1941, the roar of German tanks and aircraft announced the beginning of the blitzkrieg invasion. The Soviet Union was not prepared for this attack. With its 5 million men, the Red Army was the largest in the world. But it was neither well equipped nor well trained.

The invasion rolled on week after week until the Germans had pushed 500 miles inside the Soviet Union. As the Russians retreated, they burned and destroyed everything in the enemy’s path. Russians had used this same strategy against Napoleon.

By September 8, Germans had surrounded Leningrad and isolated the city from the rest of the world. If necessary, Hitler would starve the city’s 2.5 million inhabitants. German bombs destroyed warehouses where food was stored. Desperately hungry, people began eating cattle and horse feed, as well as cats and dogs and, finally, crows and rats. More than 1 million people died in Leningrad that terrible winter. Yet the city refused to fall.

Seeing that Leningrad would not surrender, Hitler looked to Moscow, the capital and heart of the Soviet Union. A Nazi drive on the capital began on October 2, 1941.

#### Background

The Balkan countries include Albania, Bulgaria, Greece, parts of Romania and Turkey, and most of the former Yugoslavia.



A Soviet photo taken in 1942 shows the horrors of the war in the Soviet Union. Civilians in the Crimea search over a barren field for their dead loved ones.

By December, the Germans had advanced to the outskirts of Moscow. Soviet General Georgi Zhukov (ZHOO-kuhf) counterattacked. He had 100 fresh Siberian divisions and the harsh Soviet winter on his side.

As temperatures fell, the Germans, in summer uniforms, retreated. Their fuel and oil froze. Tanks, trucks, and weapons became useless. Ignoring Napoleon’s winter defeat 130 years before, the Führer sent his generals a stunning order: “No retreat!” German troops dug in about 125 miles west of the capital. They held the line against the Soviets until March 1943. Nonetheless, Moscow had been saved and had cost the Germans 500,000 lives.

**THINK THROUGH HISTORY**  
**C. Making Inferences** What does the fact that German armies were not prepared for the Russian winter indicate about Hitler’s expectations for the campaign in the Soviet Union?

U.S. industry achieved amazing rates of speed when it began to produce for the war effort. This ship, for example, was produced in a U.S. shipyard in only 10 days.



## The United States Aids Its Allies

As disturbing as these events were to Americans, bitter memories of World War I convinced most people in the United States that their country should not get involved. Between 1935 and 1937, Congress passed a series of Neutrality Acts. The laws made it illegal to sell arms or lend money to nations at war. But President Roosevelt knew that if the Allies fell, the United States would be drawn into the war. In September 1939, he persuaded Congress to allow the Allies to buy American arms. According to his plan, they would pay cash and then carry the goods on their own ships.

Under the Lend-Lease Act, passed in March 1941, the president could lend or lease arms and other supplies to any country vital to the United States. By the summer of 1941, the U.S. Navy was escorting British ships carrying U.S. arms. In response, Hitler ordered his submarines to sink any cargo ships they met.

Although the United States had not yet entered the war, Roosevelt and Churchill met secretly on a battleship off Newfoundland on August 9. The two leaders issued a joint declaration called the **Atlantic Charter**. It upheld free trade among nations and the right of people to choose their own government. The charter later served as the Allies’ peace plan at the end of World War II.

**Background**  
Newfoundland is a province of Canada.

On September 4, a German U-boat suddenly fired on a U.S. destroyer in the Atlantic.

Roosevelt ordered navy commanders to respond. They were to shoot German submarines on sight. The United States was now involved in an undeclared naval war with Hitler. To almost everyone’s surprise, however, the attack that actually drew the United States into the war did not come from Germany. It came from Japan.

## Section 1 Assessment

### 1. TERMS & NAMES

Identify

- nonaggression pact
- blitzkrieg
- Charles de Gaulle
- Winston Churchill
- Battle of Britain
- Atlantic Charter

### 2. TAKING NOTES

Create a chart like the one below. Identify the effects of each of these early events of World War II.

Cause	Effect
First blitzkrieg	
Allies stranded at Dunkirk	
British radar detects German aircraft	
Lend-Lease Act	

### 3. MAKING INFERENCES

Great Britain and the Soviet city of Leningrad each fought off a German invasion. Other countries gave in to the Germans without much resistance. What factors do you think a country’s leaders consider when deciding whether to surrender or to fight?

**THINK ABOUT**

- the country’s ability to fight
- the costs of resisting
- the costs of surrendering

### 4. THEME ACTIVITY

**Economics** In groups of 3 or 4, prepare a dramatic scene for a play or film that focuses on an economic problem that might have been suffered by Europeans during World War II.