The Rise of Dictators and World War II

MAIN IDEA
In the 1930s, the rise of dictators and their military aggression led to World War II.

WHY IT MATTERS NOW
Lessons learned in fighting aggression in World War II continue to influence American foreign policy.

TERMS & NAMES
- Benito Mussolini
- fascism
- Adolf Hitler
- Nazi
- World War II
- Dwight D. Eisenhower
- Holocaust

ONE AMERICAN’S STORY
Margaret Bourke-White was a photographer. Beginning in the 1930s, her powerful pictures in magazines and books helped Americans understand the events of their time. She was one of Life magazine’s first photographers.

As you will read in this section, during the 1940s the United States joined Britain in fighting a war against Nazi Germany. As the first female photographer attached to U.S. forces, Bourke-White risked her life to send home vivid images of combat. She joined stunned soldiers entering Nazi concentration camps and was one of the first photographers to record the horrors they saw there.

Dictators Take Power
The Great Depression spread around the world. In Germany and Italy, dictators appealed to desperate citizens by promising to restore prosperity. In Italy, Benito Mussolini built a political movement called fascism—a system under which the government rules through terror and by appealing to racism and nationalism. Using black-shirted followers to enforce his rule, Mussolini became prime minister in 1922. He won over nationalists by promising to turn Italy into a new Roman Empire. In 1935 his fascist troops invaded Ethiopia in Africa. The League of Nations had been formed to halt such aggression. However, it had little success.

In Germany, Adolf Hitler joined the National Socialist German Workers’, or Nazi, Party. He tapped the bitter anger many Germans felt about the unfairness of the peace agreement ending World War I. The treaty required Germany to pay millions for war damages. Hitler skillfully blamed the nation’s economic woes on Jews and other groups. After coming to power in 1933, he jailed critics. His expansion of German territory began with a violation of the World War I peace agreement. He sent troops into the Rhineland, a part of Germany near the French border.
1938, he invaded Austria and attached it to Germany. Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain of Britain met with Hitler in Munich, Germany, in September 1938. Chamberlain agreed to allow Germany to take parts of Czechoslovakia. In return, Hitler promised not to demand any more land.

During this same period, dictator Joseph Stalin controlled the Soviet Union. Communist parties loyal to the Soviet Union had followers throughout Europe. Both Nazis and Fascists won many supporters by opposing the Communists. People feared Communist governments would seize their businesses and outlaw private property.

In Japan, military leaders held a powerful position in the government. In 1931, Japan invaded Manchuria, a province of China. This signaled the beginning of a planned Asian expansion. The League of Nations did little. In 1940, Japan, Italy, and Germany formed the Axis Powers.

**War Breaks Out in Europe**

On September 1, 1939, the Nazis invaded Poland. Germany’s massive air and ground attack finally made Britain and France understand that Hitler could only be stopped by force. Two days later, Britain and France declared war on Germany. **World War II** had begun.

The early war years were dark ones for the Allies, which included Britain, France, and the Soviet Union, among others. The German military seemed unstoppable. In the spring of 1940, German troops conquered Norway, Denmark, the Netherlands, and Belgium. Paris and much of France fell to the Germans in June.

In 1941, German forces smashed through Eastern Europe and invaded the Soviet Union. Great Britain now stood alone against Hitler. Despite nightly bombings of London and other cities by the Germans, Britain’s prime minister, Winston Churchill, inspired Britons to hold on. In the United States, isolationists still urged Americans to stay out of European affairs and avoid war.

**Surprise Attack on Pearl Harbor**

Roosevelt began his third term in 1941. He was the first and only president to serve more than two terms. He believed that failure to stop the
Nazis and Fascists would endanger the United States. In early 1941, he gave a speech to Congress to prepare the public to aid the Allies.

**A VOICE FROM THE PAST**

We look forward to a world founded upon four... human freedoms. The first is freedom of speech and expression—everywhere in the world. The second is freedom of every person to worship God in his own way... The third is freedom from want... The fourth is freedom from fear... anywhere in the world.

*Franklin D. Roosevelt, State of the Union speech, January 6, 1941*

Freedom required arms for its defense. Congress enacted the Lend-Lease Act in 1941. This law allowed the United States to ship arms and supplies, without immediate payment, to Britain and its allies.

On December 7, 1941, Japan launched an attack against the U.S. naval base in Pearl Harbor, Hawaii. Calling December 7 “a date which will live in infamy,” FDR requested and Congress passed a declaration of war against Japan. Japan’s allies—Italy and Germany—then declared war on the United States.

In 1942, the Axis Powers (Germany, Italy, Japan) seemed close to victory. By this time, the Soviet Union had joined the Allied Powers, following Germany’s invasion of its territory in June 1941.

**The Home Front in America**

Once the United States entered the war, its automobile plants and other factories were turned into defense plants. Airplanes, ships, weapons, and other supplies rolled off production lines at a rapid pace. By 1944, American assembly lines were producing 50 percent more armaments than those in the Axis nations combined.

Americans put up with wartime shortages so that resources such as steel, tin, and rubber could be redirected to military uses. Gasoline was in short supply. So were meat, butter, coffee, cheese, and sugar. Every family received ration books of stamps to buy goods.

With millions of men at war, women went to work in factories, shipyards, and offices. At first, heavy industries resisted hiring female workers, but by 1944 some 3.5 million worked on assembly lines turning out cargo ships and bombers.

As they had during World War I, hundreds of thousands of African Americans left the South for such cities as Cleveland, Chicago, and Detroit. More than 2 million took jobs in the defense industry. Roosevelt outlawed discrimination in industries with federal contracts.
On the home front, Japanese Americans on the West Coast faced harsh treatment. By executive order, more than 100,000 loyal Japanese Americans were forced to leave their jobs, businesses, and homes. They were sent to internment camps throughout the West.

**War Continues in Europe and Asia**

The invasion of Italy got under way with an attack on the island of Sicily in July 1943. The Allies forced the Germans out of Sicily and then swept into Italy. By this time, the Italians had imprisoned Mussolini. The new Italian government surrendered to the Allies in September 1943.

Meanwhile, in August 1942, German forces attacked the Russian city of Stalingrad, an important industrial center. A brutal battle took place. Soviet forces encircled and trapped the German army. As winter approached, the German commander begged Hitler to let him retreat. The *Führer* (or “leader”) refused. The trapped Germans had no food or supplies. Each day, thousands of Nazi soldiers froze or starved to death. In late January 1943, the German troops surrendered. Each side had suffered staggering losses. With its defeat at Stalingrad, Germany’s hopes of conquering the Soviet Union ended.

Another turning point in World War II came on June 6, 1944, known as D-Day. About 156,000 Allied troops crossed the English Channel and landed on the beaches of Normandy in northern France. They were
part of a vast Allied invasion under the command of American General **Dwight D. Eisenhower**. British and American forces advanced on Germany from the west. The Soviets closed in from the east. In early May of 1945, Germany surrendered.

In the Pacific, the Japanese fought on. After 12 years as president, FDR died suddenly in April 1945, making Harry S. Truman the president. Truman decided to end the war before an invasion of Japan caused huge losses. In August 1945, American bombers dropped atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. In Hiroshima about 70,000 people died instantly. On September 2, 1945, Japan surrendered.

**The War Is Over**

World War II had been the costliest and most destructive war in history. Approximately 55 million people died. Among them were some 6 million Jews, or almost two-thirds of Europe’s Jews. Victims were shot, gassed, and worked to death in Nazi concentration camps, death camps, and slave labor camps. This systematic mass murder of 6 million Jews and other ethnic minorities by the Nazis became known as the **Holocaust**.

At war’s end, the United States joined the United Nations, the international peacekeeping organization that replaced the League of Nations. New York City became its headquarters. The Soviet Union joined as well. Nevertheless, conflict between the former allies would lead to a new era of tension, as you will read in the next section.

**Activity Options**

**Language Arts**

Research women working in wartime factories. Write a **diary entry** of one woman’s experiences or plan the contents of a **Web page** about women in World War II. (REP4)