

History knowledge organiser – Year 9: World War Two

Key words and definitions

Air raid: An attack by planes dropping bombs.

Allies: Countries (including Britain, France, the Soviet Union and the USA) who joined forces to fight the Axis Powers.

Axis Powers: Germany, Japan, Italy and other countries that were allies in World War 2.

Blitz: German air raids, from a German word 'blitzkrieg' which means 'lightning war'.

Censorship: Controlling what people say or write.

D-Day: 6 June 1944, the date Allied forces landed in Normandy, France.

Evacuee: Someone who was evacuated, moved from a danger area to a safer place.

Rationing: Controlling the supply of food, clothes, petrol and other things.



Key events

1 September 1939: At 4.45am on 1 September 1939, the assault on Poland begins. A German battleship opens fire on the Polish garrison in Danzig (Gdansk). It is the first military engagement of World War Two. Simultaneously 1.5 million German troops march over the Poland border. They tear across the country aided by 1,300 German aircraft which bombard Polish towns and cities. On 2 September Chamberlain sends an ultimatum to Hitler: if he does not withdraw his forces by the following day, there will be war.

3 September 1939: Britain and France have agreed to defend Poland under the terms of the 1918 Treaty of Versailles. When Germany refuses to withdraw, Britain and France declare war. The small Polish army is hopelessly outdated and still has several cavalry divisions. They put up plucky resistance for three weeks but are finally defeated by Germany's powerful army. On 17 September, suspecting Hitler may attack the Soviet Union, Stalin sends the Red Army to occupy eastern Poland to protect Soviet interests and gain more influence in the region.

10 May 1940: German troops use Blitzkrieg tactics and unleash a surprise attack to storm through neutral Belgium, Luxembourg and the Netherlands before crossing the border into northern France. The French, with most of their forces on the Maginot Line further south, are outmanoeuvred and outfought. In the ensuing battles the German Army suffer 150,000 casualties, but the Allies suffer more with 360,000 casualties. Hopelessly outgunned, the British Army retreats towards the coast.

19 May 1940: Defeated and humiliated, around 340,000 men, including 121,000 French and Belgian soldiers, retreat north with their backs to the sea. They are no match for the ruthless German forces and their surrender looks inevitable, but an enormous rescue mission is undertaken to save them. Between 26 May and 4 June a ragtag fleet, ranging from battleships to pleasure boats braves the Channel to save the stranded soldiers. The incredible courage of the British civilians becomes known as 'Dunkirk spirit'.

19 July 1940: Hitler wants to attack Britain in the summer of 1940, but before he launches a ground invasion, he must gain air superiority by destroying the Royal Air Force. In July the RAF has only 640 fighters to combat the Luftwaffe's 2,600 fighters and bombers. But up step "the few". The RAF puts up an incredible fight and, over the course of the battle, downs 1,887 German planes. The Luftwaffe fails to dominate British skies and, by the end of October, the threat of invasion recedes.

7 September 1940: 43,000 civilians are killed and many wounded. In September 5,300 tonnes of high explosives are dropped on London in just 24 nights. Tens of thousands of city children are evacuated to the countryside. Industrial cities and ports across the country including Birmingham, Glasgow, Cardiff and Southampton are attacked. German bombers drop 500 tonnes of high explosives and nearly 900 incendiary bombs on Coventry in 10 hours devastating much of the city and all but destroying the Cathedral.

22 June 1941: Stalin is taken by surprise and the Soviets are forced to retreat. The Germans use Blitzkrieg tactics and one week into the invasion the Soviets suffer 150,000 casualties. The invaders are accompanied by SS teams, who round up and kill hundreds of thousands of Jews. By December the Germans reach the outskirts of Moscow. But their supply lines are stretched and Stalin is just as ruthlessly determined as Hitler. Aided by the harsh winter, the Soviet army holds the Germans at bay.

7 December 1941: Japan, allies to Germany, bombs the American fleet moored at Pearl Harbor on the Hawaiian island of Oahu. Japan feels embittered by a US oil embargo imposed in August 1941 to stop its expansionist ambitions in China. In response it launches a pre-emptive knock out attack on the US in an attempt to destroy the Pacific fleet. But the raid fails because Japan's main target, three US aircraft carriers, are at sea elsewhere and escape unscathed. Japan's actions waken sleeping giant and US President Roosevelt declares war on Japan and Germany.

2 February 1943: It is one of the bloodiest battles in history with nearly two million military and civilian casualties. House-to-house fighting drags on until 2 February 1943. With food and ammunition exhausted, the German commander Friedrich Paulus surrenders. This is a turning point in the war, and Hitler pays the price for underestimating the sheer size and determination of the Soviet forces, which begin the long push west towards Berlin.

6 June 1944: British, Canadian and US troops train in southern England for a year before they are given the green light to invade. The German defences stretch over 1,000 miles from Biarritz in southern France to Denmark. They have no idea where the allies might strike. Taking the Germans completely by surprise, 150,000 British, Canadian and US troops land on five beaches in Normandy. Although they sustain heavy casualties they gain a crucial beachhead – the liberation of France begins.

8 May 1945: The myth of German invincibility is smashed, and the resurgent Red Army gradually roll back the Third Reich into Germany. The Soviets evict the Germans from Poland and send troops into Romania, Hungary and the Balkans. Stalin is determined his troops will get to Berlin before the British and Americans, who are advancing from the west. As the Red Army reach Berlin, brutal fighting continues street by street and Hitler takes his life in his bunker with his newly wed wife Eva Braun. Nazi Germany is defeated.

6-9 August 1945: With her allies Germany and Italy both defeated, Japan fights on without any hope of staving off a similar fate. American planes bomb Japanese cities with impunity. It is feared tens of thousands of US troops – and millions of Japanese – will be killed in the event of an invasion. Churchill and Truman demand Japan's unconditional surrender. When the Japanese refuse, the Americans drop atomic bombs on Hiroshima and three days later, on Nagasaki. This terrifying new weapon causes unprecedented death and destruction. Emperor Hirohito surrenders and the most destructive war in history comes to an end.