Conflict in Europe 1935-1945

Part 2 Teachers' Notes

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INTRODUCTION

Hitler's invasion of Poland ended the Anglo-French policy of appeasement and brought about war in Western Europe. By 1941 Germany dominated much of Europe and only Britain stood between Hitler and victory. Britain valiantly held out in the Battle of Britain and the Blitz and Germany turned their attention to the USSR, with disastrous consequences. In December 1941, Japan attacked the American Fleet at Pearl Harbour, bringing the USA into the European War. From mid 1942 the Axis powers, Germany, Italy and Japan found the tide starting to turn against them

THE RUSSIAN CAMPAIGN

THE BATTLE OF STALINGRAD

Germany resumed their offensive against the Soviet Union in the spring of 1942. Hitler ordered an advance towards the oil fields of the Caucasus. By mid September, the German army had reached Stalingrad. The fighting that followed was some of the most ferocious of the war, as both sides poured huge resources into the battle for the city. Hitler gave orders to Field Marshal Von Paulus, to fight to the end, while Stalin gave orders that Stalingrad must not fall whatever the price. The Soviet supply line was vastly improved to what it had been earlier in the war, while German resources were stretched to the limit. By late November 1942, Soviet forces encircled the city. Von Paulus finally surrendered in January 1943. The German Sixth Army of 300,000 was now reduced to only 91,000. The remaining German forces began the long and difficult retreat from the USSR with only 6000 making it back to Germany. Stalingrad was significant to the course of the war. It was not only a Soviet victory, but it was important for Soviet morale. For the Germans it was a major disaster.

THE BATTLE OF KURSK

On July 5, 1943, Hitler launched another major offensive against the USSR at Kursk. Kursk had been liberated by the Red Army following the Soviet victory at Stalingrad. The German Field Marshal Walter Model had 2700 tanks and assault guns at his disposal, supported by 1000 aircraft. The Soviet commander Zhukov had anticipated the German course of action and the Soviet forces were able to outnumber the German forces. In the battle many of the larger German tanks became stuck in the mud and hundreds were also immobilised by mines. Backed by a superior numbers of guns, tanks and aircraft, Zhukov counter attacked and forced the Germans to retreat. The Germans lost 70 000 men, 1500 tanks and most of their aircraft. Kursk was the scene of one of the greatest tank battles in history. The battle raged for over two weeks and ended when Hitler withdrew forces to deal with the Anglo-American threat in southern Europe. The conflict was significant as the German army was never again able to mount a major offensive on the Eastern Front.

Stalingrad, Kursk and the other major campaigns in the east demoralised and weakened the German army. German losses in the east were in the millions and could not be replaced. It can be argued that Germany lost the war on the eastern front. Following the Battle of Kursk German successes in the east were more concerned with minimising losses and planning orderly retreats. Throughout the remainder of 1943, the Red Army pushed the Germans back.

Belgorod was retaken on August 5, Kharkov on August 23, Donetsk on September 8 and Kiev on November 6.

Understanding the issues

1. Explanation of terms and events: Caucasus; Red Army
2. Map Study: On a map of the Soviet Union, mark the extent of the German advances and retreats in the period 1942-1943
3. List the reasons why Germany was defeated in the Battle of Stalingrad
4. Debate: Stalingrad and Kursk 'tore the guts out of the German army' (Winston Churchill)
5. Discussion: How significant was the weather in the Soviet Union to the defeat of German forces at Stalingrad?
6. Film Study: How does the film add to your understanding of why the German forces were unsuccessful at both Stalingrad and Kursk

ALLIED VICTORY IN NORTH AFRICA

General Erwin Rommel had been ordered to North Africa by Hitler to recapture the areas lost by Italy. By July 1942 he had advanced deep into Egypt, causing concern to Britain that they might lose control of the Suez Canal. To counter this threat, the British built up their forces in North Africa. In August 1942 the British Eighth Army was taken over by General Montgomery, while supreme command in the Middle East was given to General Alexander. The British forces were also far better equipped with men, tanks and aircraft than the Axis forces. In October 1942, Montgomery's Eighth Army launched a counter attack at El Alamein, 80 kilometres west of Alexandria. The British attack began with a barrage of 1000 guns firing on Rommel's troops, followed by tanks. The British had control of the air and were also able to attack German supply ships in the Mediterranean. Within twelve days, Rommel's forces had been defeated and pushed through Libya. The Battle of El Alamein was a major defeat for Germany, with the loss of 60,000, 500 tanks and 1000 guns. Montgomery proved to be an inspiring and imaginative general and boosted British morale.

While the conflicts in North Africa were not of the same stature as those on the Eastern Front and in France, they had a major impact on the war in Europe. The Battle of El Alamein could be seen as pivotal to the course of the war in that control of the Suez Canal did not fall into German hands and oil supplies from the Middle East remained in allied hands. The campaign in North Africa also depleted Axis resources at a time when they were needed on the Eastern Front. In November 1942 Anglo-American forces moved into Morocco and Algeria and by January 1943 had reached Tunisia.

Victory in North Africa also prepared the way for a direct attack on Italy. On July 10, 1943, Anglo-American forces landed in Sicily and soon captured the whole island. This led to the dismissal of Mussolini by the king. The allies next landed in Southern Italy, capturing Naples in October. Italy then signed an armistice with the allies. The German forces retreated to south of Rome. Battles took place at Anzio in January 1944 and at Monte Cassino in May. Rome fell in June followed by Florence in August. Milan in Northern Italy fell in April 1945.

The defeat of Italy meant Germany lost a significant ally. Air bases in Italy could also now be used for attacks on Germany.

Understanding the issues

1. Explanation of terms and events: Suez Canal; Operation Lightfoot; Operation Torch
2. Map Study: On a map of North Africa plot the progress of the conflict between the Axis powers and Allies
3. Research the final days of Benito Mussolini
4. Outline the role of Rommel and Montgomery leaders in the conflict in North Africa
5. Discussion: How important was the conflict in North Africa to the course of the war?
6. Film Study: What does the film reveal about the leadership and tactics used by both sides in North Africa

CIVILIANS AT WAR - Part 2 Rationing & Women in the War Effort.

BRITAIN

The British economy was fully mobilized by 1942 .There was also minimal industrial unrest, apart from the mining industry. The biggest threat to civilians was the reliance on imported food and raw materials. However by 1943 the threat posed by the German U-Boats began to decline. Civilians accepted the need for rationing of food, clothing and petrol and many grew some of their own food in 'victory gardens'. In Britain, women played a vital role during wartime. Many joined the Women's Voluntary Services (WVS), with responsibilities for such areas as evacuations and air raid shelters. Others joined civil defence services such as Air Raid Precautions (ARP). Women joined the Women's Royal Navy Service or "WRENS", and the Women's Auxiliary Air Force or "WAAF". They worked as clerks, drivers, meteorologists, radar operators, and aircraft plotters, debriefed air crews, and flew planes from factories to airfields. Over 60 000 women joined the Women's Land Army, allowing males to join the armed forces. Nearly two million women worked in vital areas such as heavy industry, transportation and munitions.

GERMANY

Hitler believed that the breakdown of the Home Front played a prominent role in the defeat of Germany in 1918 and was determined to maintain morale. During the early years of the war life in Germany did not change drastically. Rationing ensured adequate food supplies, and the economy was not entirely geared to war production. Goebbels used his resources to create pride in the feats of the German military. Germany's early successes suggested that their needs could be met from the conquered territories. However by late 1942, the war was turning against Germany and with the impact of allied bombing and the impending defeat at Stalingrad, it was clear that the Home Front policy needed to be changed. Albert Speer, who became Minister for Armaments Production in 1942, put the economy on to a war footing achieving spectacular success. Slave labour was also brought into Germany from occupied territories to work in war industries. Repressive measures increased and the already weakened legal system all but disappeared.

The Gestapo and the SS were given unrestricted power to deal with any dissent. The use of concentration camps grew rapidly both in Germany and the occupied territories and more offences earned the death penalty.

1. Outline the methods used by the Gestapo and the SS in maintaining law and order in wartime Germany

Discussion: Why were there differing attitudes to women in the workforce during the war in both Britain and Germany?

'D' DAY AND THE LIBERATION OF FRANCE

In November 1943, Roosevelt, Churchill and Stalin met at Tehran. Stalin was informed that the second front in the west that he had been arguing for since 1941 would be opened within six months. The allies were becoming dominant at sea and increasingly so in the air, which augured well for an invasion of Western Europe. The planned invasion of France was code named Operation Overlord and the aim was to invade and liberate France, pushing the Germans back to their original borders. The US General Dwight D Eisenhower was made supreme commander of the allies and Field Marshal Rommel was the German commander responsible for defending the English Channel. One and a half million US forces were in Britain waiting for the invasion to take place along with supplies and arms. The logistics of transporting the armed forces across the English Channel and landing them in France needed careful planning Likewise, keeping such a massive plan secret from the enemy posed many problems and the allies tried to give the impression the invasion would take place near Calais, rather than around Normandy.

The invasion was initially held up by bad weather, but D-Day or Deliverance Day finally began on June 6, 1944. The allies had gained air and naval supremacy and cleared the area with minesweepers. Prefabricated harbours or 'mulberries' were towed across the English Channel. Over 4000 craft were used to transport troops and equipment to Normandy. 150,000 troops came ashore on the first day and by the end of the first week this totalled over 330 000. By early July more than one million allied troops were in France. The allies were able to establish an 80 kilometre bridgehead along the Normandy coast despite fierce German resistance and heavy casualties on both sides. Paris was finally liberated on August 25 and by late August there were two million allied forces in France with the German presence virtually gone. The military forces of the USSR were able to take advantage of Germany's stretched resources by making major advances against the Axis powers from the east.

Understanding the issues

1. Explanation of terms and events: Operation Overlord; 'Falaise pocket'; D-Day; 'mulberries'
2. Map Study: On a map of the coast of France locate Normandy and mark in the allied landings at 'Utah', 'Omaha', 'Gold', 'Juno' and 'Sword'
3. Research: Why had Stalin urged the allies to set up a second front in Europe since1941? Why did it take so long to create this new front?

4. Outline the reasons for the success of the allies on D-Day
5. Discussion: The methods employed by the allies to disguise the nature, time and place of the D-Day landing
6. Film Study: What does the film reveal about the planning and strategies employed by the allies in the invasion of France?

RUSSIAN COUNTER-OFFENSIVES 1944

Since 1941 Stalin had urging the Allies to invade France and set up a second front in Europe to draw German troops away from the USSR. It was to be three years before such an attack took place and Stalin believed that Churchill was delaying an invasion so that the USSR would be weakened by German attacks. The Allied command however, believed that it was not until 1944 that they were strong enough to invade France.
The Soviet forces took advantage of Germany's stretched resources during the second front to make major gains in the east. Germany's Allies the Finns were driven out of Russia and signed an armistice in September 1944. The Baltic states of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania were reconquered. Soviet forces reached the border of East Prussia and Warsaw in August 1944, although they failed to help the Polish resistance in their battle against German forces. Pro communist partisan forces under Tito in Yugoslavia and Hoxha in Albania played a significant role in pushing back the Axis forces in the Balkans. By the end of August 1944, Soviet forces had gained control of Romania and Bulgaria. In January 1945, Hungary surrendered to the Soviet forces and by this stage the USSR controlled most of Eastern Europe from Finland to Greece.

Understanding the issues

1. Explanation of terms and events: 'Rassenkampf'; 'Untermenschen'; partisans; Slavs
2. Make a list of the countries/regions lost by the Axis powers on the Eastern Front in 1944
3. Research: Why did the Soviet Union fail to help the Polish resistance in their action against Germany? What was the result of this resistance for the Poles?
4. Debate: Stalin was more concerned with his own political and territorial agenda than with supporting his allies against Germany
5. Discussion: Why did Germany keep fighting when there was no real hope of victory?
6. Film Study: What does the film reveal about the atrocities committed by both sides on the Western Front?

NAZI RACIAL POLICIES AND THE HOLOCAUST

Hitler's views on race had been well documented in *Mein Kampf* and his treatment of German Jews in the pre-war years made his intentions clear. The Nuremburg Laws of 1935 took away the right of Jews to be German citizens and *Kristallnacht* on November 9, 1938, was a government organised pogrom unleashed against Germany's Jews.
During the war the treatment of the occupied population depended on how the Germans viewed their racial background.

While all the occupied countries were forced to supply a variety of items such as raw materials, food supplies, art treasures and even workers, those nations in the West, populated by what the Germans regarded as *Aryans,* were treated much more leniently than those in Eastern Europe. Eastern Europe was populated by Slavs, whom Hitler regarded as sub humans or *Untermenschen*. Five million Soviet soldiers were taken prisoner by the Germans and were transported to Germany as slave labour.

Despite the fact that the Gestapo and SS dealt severely with opposition to Nazi rule, resistance movements grew up in most occupied countries. In the USSR partisans carried out acts of sabotage with the result that the Germans often punished whole villages.
Hitler's hatred of the Jews and his belief in the supremacy of the Aryan race had horrific consequences in the war. In 1941 the Nazis decided that the 'Final Solution' to the Jewish problem was to kill all the Jews in Europe. Over the next four years some six million Jews perished in what became known as the Holocaust, including German Jews, some of whom had fought for Germany. The first mass slaughter of Jews occurred in the USSR. Special mobile death squads, *Eintsatzgruppen*, rounded up and killed Soviet Jews in occupied territories.

However the majority of Jews were killed in the concentration camps, such as Auschwitz in Poland, which were set up by the Nazis for the purpose of gassing Jews and disposing of their bodies, usually in gas chambers. On arrival at these camps the Jews were divided into those fit for work and those to be gassed, including old people, pregnant women and children. Victims were led into large chambers which were sealed and gas crystals were released killing all the inmates within minutes. Sometimes death camp inmates were subjected to medical experiments often resulting in death. As Allied armies liberated central Europe and entered the camps at places such as Dachau, Belsen, Chelmo and Majdanek, the horror of the Holocaust was plainly obvious.

Hitler in the period up to 1941 also carried out a program of euthanasia in Germany which resulted in the gassing of 90,000 physically and mentally handicapped people. By the end of the war over 275,000 handicapped people had been killed by the Nazis. Gypsies who were seen as parasites also became victims of Nazi policies to purify the so called Aryan race. In 1943 the Nazis rounded up over 250,000 gypsies and sent them to the gas chambers at Auschwitz. The Nazi regime also sent over 15,000 homosexuals to concentration camps.

Understanding the issues

1. Explanation of terms and events: Final solution; Holocaust; Aryan; Eintsatzgruppen; *Untermenschen; Kristallnacht;* concentration camps; euthanasia
2. Research the racial policies of Hitler as outlined in *Mein Kampf*
3. Outline the different actions the Nazis took against German Jews between 1933-1939
4. Discussion: Why did Hitler believe it necessary to persecute minorities?
5. Debate: Many Germans claimed after the war that they couldn't be blamed for the Holocaust because they didn't know what was happening to the Jews.

6. Film Study: In what ways does the film document Germany's crimes against humanity?

FINAL DEFEAT 1944-1945

Following D-Day, Paris had been liberated on August 25, 1944 and by September the whole of Northern France, Belgium and Luxembourg were in Allied hands. Although the end was in sight, German forces did not collapse immediately. From the middle of 1944, Hitler introduced his secret weapon, the V1 rocket or 'doodlebug'.

They did much damage and caused alarm amongst people in London. In late 1944, the V1 was replaced with the more sophisticated V2 rockets.
Plans did not always go smoothly for the Allies. At Arnhem in Holland in September, 1944, the Allies tried to capture a bridge across the Rhine which would enable them to advance into Germany. They lost almost all of the 10,000 men who had parachuted in. The last significant German resistance came in December 1944, with a German counter attack in the Ardennes in Southern Belgium, known as the Battle of the Bulge, where the Allies were pushed back. Allied losses were high but German success was short lived.
By 1945 the German position was near desperate. Previously German occupied territory was now under Soviet control. Soviet forces had control of the air in the east and were able to bomb Germany with impunity. By April the USSR controlled all of Eastern Europe from Finland to Greece and was ready to move on Berlin, which was being systematically destroyed by Soviet air attack and artillery.
At the same time Anglo-American forces were gaining control in the west. The Allies had the control of the air and they carried out massive bombing raids on German cities such as Dresden. This had a devastating effect on German industry and civilian morale. Allied forces closed in on Germany from both the east and west. On April 25, 1945 Allied forces joined up with Soviet forces on the outskirts of Berlin. On April 28, Mussolini was captured and killed by resistance fighters, and by May 2 all fighting had ended in Italy. On Aril 30, Hitler realised the war was lost and committed suicide in his bunker in Berlin. Admiral Doenitz assumed control and surrendered to the Allies on May 7, 1945. The war in the west was over.

Understanding the issues

1. Explanation of terms and events: V1 and V2; Battle of the Bulge; The Berlin bunker
2. Draw a timeline setting out the months from July 1943 to May 1945. Record the events leading up to Germany's surrender in 1945
3. Outline why the Allied supremacy of the air and sea was in the end such a significant factor
4. Discussion: Why did Britain and the USA bomb German cities? What was the impact of this bombing?
5. Debate: Hitler's invasion of the Soviet Union was a fatal error.
6. Film Study: What does the film reveal about the tactics and strategies of both sides in the final months of the war?

NUREMBURG WAR CRIMES TRIALS

When the war ended the Allies decided that prominent Nazis should be put on trial to show the world that their actions were totally unacceptable. The Allies also wanted to show that the atrocities had resulted from government policy and were not isolated incidents by soldiers. This obviously raised difficult moral questions, since Stalin's forces had also carried out atrocities in Poland. Some Germans also argued that it was wrong to punish only Germans for crimes against humanity when the Allies had killed over half a million civilians during the bombing raids on Germany.

The Nuremburg War Crimes trials began on October 18, 1945 with the final verdicts announced on October 1, 1946. Twenty four Nazis were accused of war crimes, although only 21 actually stood trial. Robert Ley, the German Labour Front leader committed suicide, Gustav Krupp was too ill to stand trial and Hitler's wartime deputy Martin Bormann was never captured and was tried 'in absentia'. Four charges were laid against those on trial namely, conspiracy to wage aggressive war, crimes against peace, war crimes and crimes against humanity. Twelve Nazi leaders were sentenced to death including Hans Frank the Governor of German occupied Poland, Hermann Goring, Wilhelm Keitel the Chief of the Armed Forces High Command, Joachim von Ribbentrop the Foreign Minister and Martin Bormann. Three were sentenced to life imprisonment including Rudolf Hess who was Deputy Fuhrer until 1941. Four were given sentences of varying years including Hitler's successor Karl Doenitz who was given 10 years and Albert Speer the Armaments Minister who was sentenced to 20 years. Three were acquitted. Himmler and Goebbels committed suicide before capture and Hermann Goring committed suicide before he could be executed.

Understanding the issues

1. Explanation of terms and events: Crimes against humanity; conspiracy to wage aggressive war; 'in absentia'; *Fuhrer*
2. Research the setting up and organisation of the Nuremburg War Crimes Trials. Who was responsible for the judgements?
3. Outline the reasons why the Allies decided that there needed to be war crime trials.
4. Discussion: Why were only German leaders put on trial for war crimes at Nuremburg and not political or military leaders from other countries?
5. Debate: Should the victor's justice be imposed on the vanquished?

THE AFTERMATH OF WAR

The cost of the war was appalling. 15 million military and 35 million civilians had perished; of these 20 million were Soviet citizens. Some 6 million Jews were exterminated. Anglo-American saturation bombing reduced many German cities to rubble. 25 million people in the Soviet Union were left homeless. Europe was in ruins and already the differences between the victorious powers were visible.