

Conflict in Europe 1935-1945

Part 1 Teachers' Notes

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GROWTH OF EUROPEAN TENSIONS

The Great War of 1914-1918 was referred to as the 'war to end all wars.' It was the most bloody and destructive war that Europe had ever known. However when the victor nations assembled at Paris in January 1919 to plan for post-war Europe, they were far from united in their views on how Germany should be treated. Germany unsuccessfully argued that the treaty was too harsh and contrary to the spirit of President Wilson's Fourteen Points. It is not surprising that the imposed *diktat* left many Germans bitter and seeking revenge.

The ensuing League of Nations with its 'collective security' presented the best hope for peace in Europe after 1919. However by the early 1930s the ability of the League to maintain peace was eroding quickly and it lacked the military force to support its decisions. It proved incapable of preventing Japanese aggression in Manchuria in 1931 and of dealing with the aggressive policies of Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany.

Benito Mussolini became dictator of Italy in 1922, following years of turmoil in the country and dissatisfaction over the Paris Peace Conference. Under Mussolini, Italy's foreign policy was based on national glory and the building of an Italian Empire. This marked a shift away from Britain and France. Italy's refusal to allow the League to intervene in its clash with Greece during the 'Corfu Incident' of 1923, exposed the weakness of the League in dealing with major powers. Italy gained Fiume from Yugoslavia in 1924 and by 1927 was dominating Albanian domestic affairs. In October 1935 Italy attacked Abyssinia, ending the Stresa Front with Britain and France.

Adolf Hitler became Chancellor of Germany in January 1933 and by 1934 was dictator. Hitler embarked on an aggressive foreign policy showing contempt for the Treaty of Versailles. In 1933 Germany left the League of Nations and the Disarmament Conference and began rearmament. In 1935 Hitler brought back conscription and the Anglo-German Naval Agreement enabled Germany to build up her naval forces, in contravention of the Treaty of Versailles. In 1936 Germany remilitarised the Rhineland and supported General Franco's fascist forces in the Spanish Civil War. In the same year Hitler signed the Rome-Berlin Axis with Mussolini and the Anti-Comintern Pact with Japan. In 1937, Italy joined with Germany and Japan in the Rome-Berlin-Tokyo Axis. The future of peace in Europe was less promising.

Understanding the issues

1. Explanation of terms and events: Corfu Incident, Stresa Front; Il Duce; *diktat*, Anti-Comintern Pact
2. Research: Nazi ideology as outlined in *Mein Kampf*
3. Outline the position of the League of Nations and collective security
4. Debate: Some of the objectives and actions of Hitler and the Nazi Party in the period to 1937 were justified by events of the time
5. Discussion: Why was Hitler able to flout the terms of the Treaty of Versailles?
6. Film Study: How does the film enhance your understanding of the rise of fascist governments in Italy and Germany?

FROM APPEASEMENT TO WAR

The failure of Britain and France to help the Spanish Government discredited them in the eyes of their allies, encouraging Italian and German aggression. Although Hitler continued to flout the Treaty of Versailles, Britain and France took no real action as they had to deal with the economic problems created by the Great Depression, and did not wish to outlay expenditure on armaments and preparations for war. People in Britain remembered the horrors of the Great War and wanted to avoid another one. Some believed Germany had been treated too harshly at Versailles and had no major objections to Germany rearming and regaining some lost territory. There was also the view that Hitler had brought stability to Germany and was an important opponent of communism. When Neville Chamberlain became Prime Minister in May 1937, he believed that war should be avoided at all costs. Britain followed a policy of appeasement and it became a central part of its foreign policy. Since France was facing political problems during these years, it tended to follow Britain's lead in foreign affairs.

The union of Austria and Germany or *Anschluss*, was a major objective of Hitler and he made his intentions clear with the annexation of Austria in 1938. Once Hitler had seized Austria he turned his attention to Czechoslovakia. In June 1938, Hitler began a campaign to bring the Sudetenland into Germany. On the pretext that Sudeten Germans were being victimised by the Czech Government, Germany made preparations for war. President Benes of Czechoslovakia appealed to France, but France was reluctant to act without British support. On September 29, a conference was held at Munich in an attempt to avoid war. The meeting was attended by Hitler, Mussolini, Chamberlain and the French Prime Minister Daladier. The Czech Government was not invited to attend. It was agreed at the Munich Conference that Sudetenland be handed over to Germany. Chamberlain flew back to Britain to a hero's welcome proclaiming 'peace for our time.' In March 1939, Germany took over the rest of Czechoslovakia, thus tearing up the Munich Agreement. In April 1939 Italy annexed Albania. This further exposed the reluctance of the western powers to act decisively. Whether an alliance with the Soviet Union would have halted the aggressors is a matter of dispute. However when negotiations between the Soviet Union and the Western powers broke down in 1939 and the USSR signed the Nazi-Soviet Non-Aggression Pact, war was inevitable. On September 1, Hitler invaded Poland. On September 3, Britain and France declared war on Germany.

Understanding the issues

1. Explanation of terms and events: Appeasement; *Anschluss*
2. Map Study: Locate and list the areas of German and Italian expansion, 1935-1939
3. Research: The steps leading to the union of Germany and Austria
4. Outline the aims of Hitler's foreign policy. How successful were these aims up to 1939?
5. Discussion: Can Chamberlain be defended for trying to pursue a policy of appeasement for so long?
6. Film study: What does the film reveal about German tactics to obtain control of both Austria and Sudetenland?

COURSE OF THE WAR IN EUROPE

Hitler's invasion of Poland on September 1, 1939 brought an end to the Anglo-French policy of appeasement and brought about war. The Germans used a new type of warfare called *blitzkrieg* or lightning war, concentrating their resources on one major target. Dive bombers from the *Luftwaffe* first softened up the enemy, followed by *Panzer* divisions, with the infantry mopping up remaining resistance. This format was highly effective in the early period of the war. The Polish army fought bravely but were no match for the superior German forces. Stalin was alarmed by the rate of the German advance and sent his forces into Poland from the east on September 17, 1939. By the end of September Polish resistance came to an end. While Britain and France had promised to support Poland, there was little they could effectively do to help.

The period between October 1939 and April 1940 is known as the 'phoney war.' In April 1940, the lull in major fighting came to an end when German troops invaded Norway and Denmark. The defeat of Norway was a major setback for Britain, as the forces they had sent there were captured. This defeat ended Chamberlain's career and he was replaced as Prime Minister by Winston Churchill on May 10, 1940. In early May Hitler launched Operation Yellow. Holland, Belgium and Luxembourg were overrun by the German *blitzkrieg* tactics. As German troops poured into France, by-passing the near impregnable Maginot Line, Anglo-French forces were trapped on the coast. This resulted in 340,000 allied troops being evacuated from Dunkirk between May 27 and June 4, 1940. Following the evacuation at Dunkirk, the German forces continued their advance in France. Italy also entered the war on Germany's side. Paris was occupied on June 14. Rather than occupying the whole country, the southern part of France was placed in the hands of the Vichy Government of General Petain, becoming basically a 'puppet' government.

After the defeat of France, Hitler made preparations for Operation Sea Lion, the invasion of Britain. However before he could send troops across the channel, he needed to defeat the Royal Air Force. This was the responsibility of Goering's *Luftwaffe*. From July 1940 to mid-September Hitler began attacking Channel ports, British shipping, RAF bases, aircraft factories and radar installations. During this period the *Luftwaffe* and the RAF fought the Battle of Britain. Hitler did not realise how close the RAF was to exhaustion and on September 17 called off operation Sea Lion. From mid-September until well into 1941, Hitler then focussed his attacks on London and other industrial cities in what was known as the Blitz.

Understanding the issues

1. Explanation of terms: *Blitzkrieg*; *Luftwaffe*; *Panzer*; 'phoney war'; Vichy Government; Maginot Line
2. Map Study: On a map of Europe mark in the German military advance in the period 1939-1943
3. Research: Operation Sea Lion; Operation Yellow; British Expeditionary Force (BEF)
4. Debate: That the Dunkirk evacuation was one of the great moments of British military history

5. Discussion: Was the Battle of Britain 'won' by the RAF or did the Germans fail to take advantage of their own success?
6. Film Study: What does the film reveal about the advantages and disadvantages of both sides in the Battle of Britain?

CIVILIANS AT WAR Part One

BRITAIN – Evacuation of Children & Effects of Bombing

The impact of the war on civilians in Britain was greater than that during the Great War. Civilians came under direct attacks from bombing, faced the threat of invasion, and experienced greater government influence on their daily life. Civilian casualties were far greater than in World War I. Hundreds of thousands of people were evacuated to safer areas in the countryside. Barrage balloons, sandbagged buildings and barbed wire protection on beaches became common sights. Strict censorship laws were enforced by the government and police and wardens were given wide ranging powers. A Home Guard (LVD) was organised, largely from those too old or too young to join the regular armed forces, with the responsibility for rescue work, the capture of German pilots and patrolling key areas.

The impact of German bombing had a major impact on civilians causing nearly 60,000 deaths and 85,000 serious injuries as well as the destruction of over one million houses. However the bombing did not have the impact that Germany had hoped for. Morale amongst civilians remained high and war production was not severely affected. The health of civilians in Britain actually improved during the war largely as a result of government initiatives, such as the 1941 Determination of Needs Act.

GERMANY

German civilians suffered far more than their British counterparts from air attacks. Cities like Hamburg and Dresden were virtually destroyed. Loyalty to Hitler remained high despite the military failures and constant bombing. Opposition to the Nazi regime remained limited. Wartime Germany lacked the efficiency one would expect from a totalitarian state and rivalries and a lack of co-ordination were major factors affecting the war effort. Even after Goebbels 'total war' speech in February 1943, there were difficulties in mobilising the nation. While women had registered for work the German Government was reluctant to use them for fear of affecting morale. Hitler to the end was obsessed with maintaining the support of the Home Front.

Understanding the issues

1. Explanation of terms and events: Home Guard/LVD; Determination of Needs Act; Gestapo; SS; totalitarian; *autarky*
2. Research the impact of the V1 and V2 flying bombs when they were unleashed on the people of Britain
3. Debate: The bombing of civilians cannot be justified in war

Film Study: In what ways does the film enhance your understanding of how people got on with their lives during the weeks and months of heavy bombing?

OPERATION BARBAROSSA

The success of the RAF in the Battle of Britain forced Hitler on September 17, 1940 to call off the projected invasion of Britain. Since the fall of France in June 1940, Britain had largely stood alone against Hitler. But in June 1941, they found an ally in the USSR when Hitler invaded that country. Despite the Nazi-Soviet Pact of 1939, the two countries had remained bitter enemies and Hitler had always intended to launch an attack to gain *lebensraum* in the USSR. Hitler's generals predicted the campaign would be over in eight weeks. Operation Barbarossa, the code name given to the German invasion of the Soviet Union, was Hitler's most ambitious scheme.

The attack was launched on June 22 and involved 3 million men, 153 divisions and 46 tank divisions. The attack was on three fronts, one aiming for Leningrad, one heading for Moscow and the third targeting the farming areas of the Ukraine. The German *blitzkrieg* met with great success and within weeks hundreds of thousands of Soviet troops were killed or captured. In addition the Soviet air force was decimated. Smolensk fell in July, Kiev in September, Odessa and Kharkov in October, Rostov in November. Leningrad was also besieged. As the Soviet troops pulled back, a scorched earth policy was used to hinder German supplies, leaving Germany with extended lines of communication heading into a Soviet winter. Operation Typhoon, the German advance on Moscow began on October 2, 1941. However the attack on Moscow was abandoned on December 5 and the following day Marshal Zhukov launched a massive counter attack on the German forces, which were ill equipped for winter warfare. The Soviet Union had survived, although the cost in casualties and prisoners was enormous. The failure of Germany to defeat the USSR quickly and the entry of the USA into the war would become very significant factors to the outcome of this conflict.

Understanding the issues

1. Explanation of terms and events: *Lebensraum*; scorched earth policy; Operation Typhoon
2. Personality study: The impact Marshal Zhukov in saving the USSR
3. Research the extent to which the USSR was prepared for a conflict in June 1941
4. List the reasons why Operation Barbarossa failed
5. Discussion: To what extent did Moscow's survival depend on weather conditions?
6. Film Study: What were the different techniques and tactics used by the USSR and Germany in this conflict?

THE BEGINNINGS OF CONFLICT IN NORTH AFRICA

By mid-1941 only Britain remained free from Axis control. Poland had been carved up between Germany and Russia. Western Europe had fallen by June 1940; Italy joined the war in 1940 and controlled Albania. Hungary and Rumania joined the Axis camp in November and Bulgaria and Yugoslavia followed by March 1941. British troops were also driven out of Greece and Crete. The war moved to North Africa in September 1940, when Mussolini attempted to add the British colony of Egypt to Italy's existing possessions in the area. The Italian army was easily defeated by the British who had little difficulty pushing the Italians

back into Libya, taking 130 000 prisoners and 400 tanks. The British captured Eritrea, Somaliland and Abyssinia from the Italians.

Hitler, fearing that British troops would gain control of the North African coastline sent one of his key generals Erwin Rommel, along with fresh German troops, to remedy this situation in February 1941. Hitler ordered Rommel to capture the Suez Canal, which was Britain's direct route to India and the valuable Middle East oil fields. The arrival of Rommel radically changed the balance of forces in the desert as British forces were simultaneously siphoned off to aid Greek resistance against the Axis powers. By June 1942, Rommel's *Afrika Korps* had taken Tobruk, pushed the British out of Libya and in July 1942 were in Egypt. There was genuine concern on the part of the British that they might lose control of the Suez Canal. On August 31, a major battle was fought west of Alexandria. However Rommel failed to break through the British lines and retreated. The outcome of the conflict in North Africa would have a major impact on the European War.

Understanding the issues

1. Explanation of terms and events: *Afrika Korps*; Suez Canal
2. Map Study: On a map of North Africa, mark in the colonies and acquisitions of the conflicting nations and the major areas of combat
3. Outline the Siege of Tobruk, April 1941-June 1942
4. Research the career of Erwin Rommel during the war. Why was he highly respected by both sides?
5. Discussion: Why was North Africa so important to the outcome of the war?
6. Film Study: What does the film reveal about the nature of the conflict in North Africa?

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