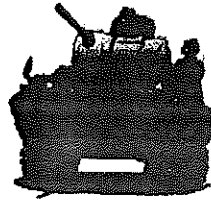


The Second World War in Europe

(NOTES)



The Second World War began with Germany's invasion of Poland on 1 September 1939. German forces unleashed a blitzkrieg across the Polish Plains in the first phase of Hitler's drive on the east. Within a few days, western Poland became a Reich protectorate. On September 17th the Russians invaded Poland from the East to claim its share of the prey. By the end of the month, Poland had been partitioned between Germany and the USSR. Poland had disappeared from the map of Europe. The Russians continued to expand their sphere of influence by reclaiming the Baltic States and then attacking Finland. The Russians were determined to regain territory lost in WWI when Lenin withdrew Russia from the war. (**Brest-Litovsk Treaty**). Soviet expansion caused considerable debate as to which of the aggressors was a greater threat to international stability.

Anglo-French guarantees of mutual defense given to Poland were meant to be a warning to Hitler, not an actual offer of assistance. However, Britain and France declared war on Germany after betrayal over Czechoslovakia and both countries agreed that they would not be tricked again. Although France and Britain declared war on Germany on September 3rd 1939, no actual battles took place until May 1940. England and its allies needed time to build up and train their armies. The US remained in isolation.

THE FALL OF FRANCE: 1940

On May 10th 1940 fighting began with the German invasion of France. Britain had sent its small army and some air force units onto the continent while the French continued to strengthen the **Maginot Line**. Plans called for a dash forward into Belgium to meet the Germans head on. However, German forces smashed through Belgium and Holland in a matter of days and the French were still in France. A major German thrust through the Ardennes Mountains brought German Panzer divisions breaking through the Maginot Line. The French had neglected to plan that area for defense because it was thought to be too difficult a terrain for tank operations. The Germans got through.

By June 1940, the Germans entered Paris and the French government had fled to Bordeaux. The French set up a temporary Government at **Vichy**. The French army had fallen. The fall of France had left Britain and Germany as the only real adversaries left in Europe. Hitler hoped that with its ally gone, Britain would make peace. The British refused to make peace. Germany then set its sights on England.



THE BATTLE OF BRITAIN: 1940



Plans for the invasion of Britain, **Operation Sea Lion**, were drawn up after the fall of France. Hitler's priority in the mission was to gain command of the air over the English Channel. He hoped that once command of the air was achieved, German submarines and surface ships could block the channel and prepare for an invasion in London. The German Luftwaffe began the Battle of Britain on June 10th with attacks on coastal ports. The strategy was to bring the Royal Air Force to battle over the channel. When this did not work, the Luftwaffe moved inland and began bombing English cities. Buckingham Palace was hit by a bomb as well as many other major buildings in London.

The German raids on British cities did not have the desired effect hoped for by the Germans. Instead of demoralizing the British, they hardened British determination to fight until the end. By mid-September 1940 it was apparent that the Luftwaffe was not going to gain control of the skies. For the rest of 1940 the Luftwaffe continued to bomb Britain until the air fleet was withdrawn for an assault on the USSR.

OPERATION BARBAROSSA: 1941

Although Germany and the Soviet Union had signed a Non-Aggression Pact (Nazi-Soviet Pact), Nazis forces attacked the Soviet Union on June 22nd 1941. The fighting in Europe began to shift in early 1941 with the Italians losing strength in N. Africa. Hitler sent forces to help his ally, Mussolini, and had **General Rommel** take over the N. African German troops. Hitler also began focusing on the eastern front including Greece and Yugoslavia in 'Operation Punishment'. Hitler was attempting to take over the Balkans. Britain was concerned with the possibility of the Middle East siding with Germany and began talks with Russia. Stalin was told of the possible German attack by the British but refused to believe it could happen. When the Germans poured into Russia, Stalin was taken by surprise.

On June 22nd, German armies poured into Russia and crushed the Soviet army and air force. In the first 24 hours, the German Panzers slashed their way through Soviet lines and took all key targets the Germans had wanted. Within weeks the Germans had destroyed 5000 Soviet aircraft, 15,000 Soviet tanks, and entire Soviet armies. More than 3 million Soviets were killed or taken prisoner. Yet despite the staggering Soviet losses, the Soviets still had 4.7 million people under arms and could call up millions more. The Soviet Red Army was still in the game.

However, as the Germans continued to advance towards Moscow and Leningrad, winter began to set in and German supply lines were beginning to break. Heavy autumn rains turned fields into mud not allowing any vehicles to pass. On some days, an advance of 2-3 km was considered outstanding. By November the winter had set in and with the ground frozen, snow, and sub-zero temperatures, the Germans began to suffer. There were 100,000 cases of German frostbite. German soldiers were freezing, their guns and

machines could not operate in the extreme cold, and supply lines were unable to get to the Germans. The Germans had believed that the Soviet Union could be taken in 6 weeks and had not prepared for such an extensive war on the east, especially not preparing for winter conditions. By December 8th 1941 the German forces had reached their level of endurance and gave up the attack. Space, snow, and time had saved Moscow. A day before, the Japanese had invaded Pearl Harbour...the USA was now entering the war on the side of the Soviets.

The German's failure to defeat the USSR had placed them in a precarious position. Europe now knew that Germany did not have the resources to fight a pro-longed war. However, the Germans would try to take the Soviet Union again. In August 1942 Hitler planned another attack on the Soviets, the **Battle of Stalingrad**. However, by February 1943, the Soviets had taken control and the Germans had suffered another massive defeat. The German army was no longer invincible and Stalingrad began a series of retreats for the Germans that would continue until the end of the war in 1945.

