

4. WORLD WAR II

Blitzkrieg



To ensure that his plan to invade Poland would be successful, Hitler neutralized the Soviet Union with a "non-aggression" pact in 1939, signed here by Soviet Minister Molotov as Stalin looks on.

For the British and the French, Hitler's takeover of Czechoslovakia was the last straw. In capturing non-German Czechoslovakia, Hitler made it perfectly clear that his promises to stop the expansion of Germany were empty.

The end of appeasement meant that the British and the French refused to make any more concessions to the Nazis. It did not, however, mean that they regarded war as inevitable. Many high-ranking British and French officials continued to hold out hope that Germany could be contained without a major conflict. Still, both the British and the French hastened to rearm themselves in the event of a German attack.

The Soviets, meanwhile, were trying to come to terms with both Hitler and the western democracies. Stalin and other Soviet leaders feared Hitler's vehement anti-communism, but they were also aware

that they had few supporters in Britain or France. Stalin believed that the British and the French wanted to see the Nazis and the Soviets destroy each other in a major conflict.

Like Mussolini, Stalin eventually decided that being tied to Hitler rather than to the West was the lesser of two evils. In August 1939 the Soviets signed a treaty of friendship with Nazi Germany. They agreed to stay out of a war between Germany and Poland, or Germany and the West. In return the Germans agreed to give the Soviets some Polish territory in the event they captured Poland and to allow the Soviets to dominate the Baltic territories of Europe: Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Finland.

Western leaders were horrified at the Nazi-Soviet pact. They had always assumed that nazism and communism were completely incompatible. With the Soviets out of the picture, Hitler was freed from worrying about having to fight a two-front war. Now, war between Germany and

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Britain and France was all but inevitable.

While the Nazis were negotiating with the Soviets, Hitler took another bold step: he ordered Poland to turn over a strip of its land to Germany. In keeping with their commitment not to make further concessions to Hitler, the British and the French announced that they would support Poland in the event of a German attack.

That attack came on September 1, 1939. On September 3 Britain and France declared war on Germany. World War II had begun.

The Germans tore through Poland, eliminating all resistance in a month. They introduced a new style of war they called *blitzkrieg*, or “lightning war.” Using the massive power of the new German air force, the *Luftwaffe*, for support, the Germans launched an all-out ground attack that chewed up Polish resistance. Their extensive use of planes, tanks, and other mechanized weapons signaled that the technology developed during World War I had come of age.

After Poland surrendered, the Germans occupied the western part of the country. The Soviets then moved into eastern Poland, in accordance with their treaty with the Nazis. In November the Soviets also began to move troops into the Baltic territories.

In one of those territories, Finland, the Soviets encountered strong resistance. The Finns put up a fierce fight, delaying the Soviet takeover of the country until March 1940. Because of their aggression in eastern Europe, the Soviets were expelled from the League of Nations in December 1939.

Meanwhile, the British and the French waited in anticipation of a German attack in the West. Instead, both sides settled down to what the British called the “phony war.” Both the Allies, as the British and French came to be called, and the Nazis settled behind their lines of defense and refused to budge.

After World War I, the French had organized their defense against Germany along the Maginot Line, a fortified line on the German-French border. The Germans built a fortified strip called the Siegfried Line to defend the same border. The Allies assumed that the bulk of the

fighting would occur on those lines.

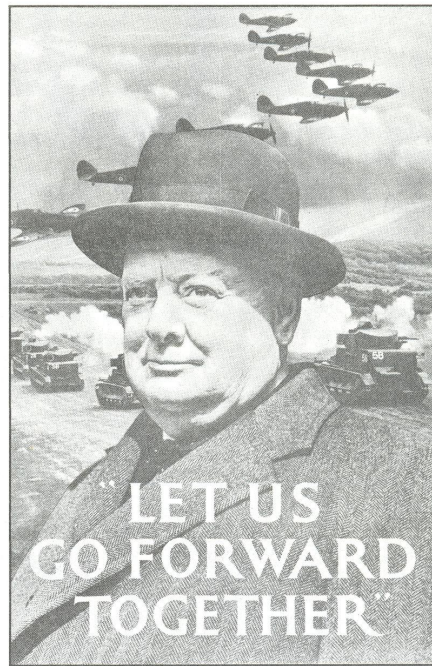
This, however, proved not to be the case. When the Nazis decided to end the “phony war” in 1940, they used a more northerly route to strike against France.

In April 1940 the Germans invaded and captured Norway and Denmark. This enabled them to set up air and naval bases for attacks on France and Britain.

In May the Nazis struck at the Netherlands and Belgium. Using massive tank battalions, they overran the two countries. The Dutch and the Belgians were quickly forced to surrender. Allied troops in Belgium retreated to the French coastal city of Dunkirk, where in late May and early June more than 300,000 of them were miraculously evacuated to Britain.

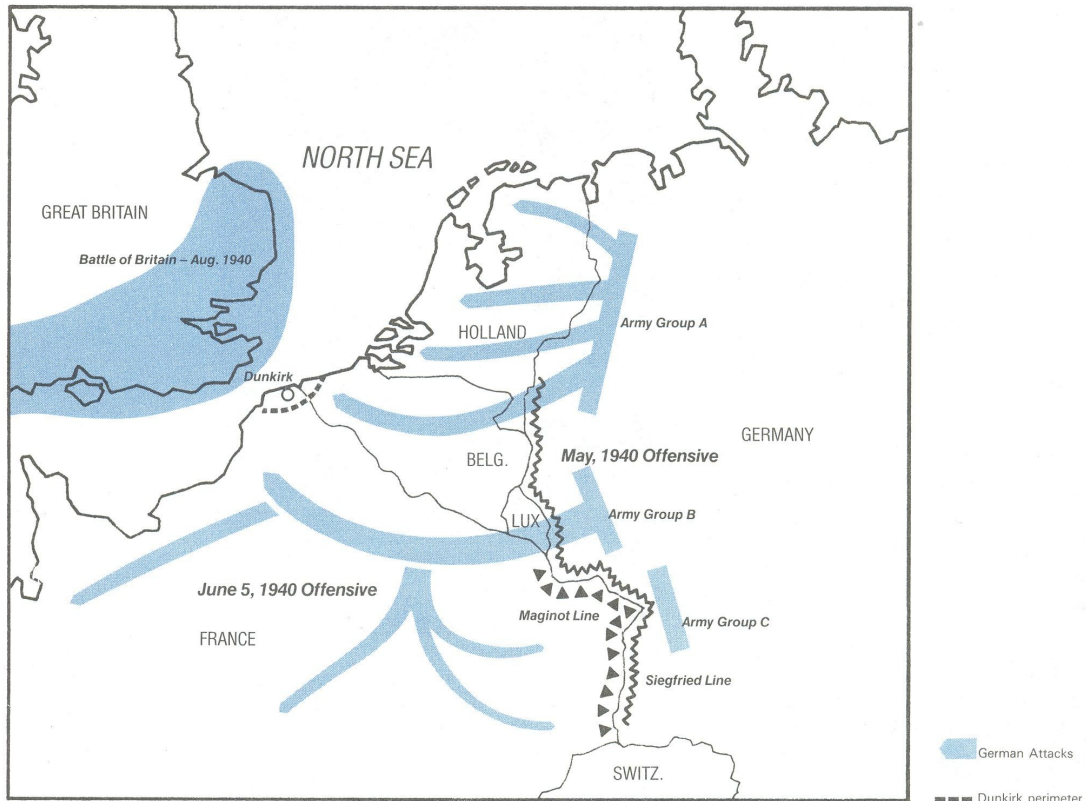
On June 5, 1940, the Nazis launched another offensive, skirting the northwest edge of the Maginot Line and driving straight into France. They quickly advanced deep into the country.

At this point, Mussolini decided to officially join the Nazi effort. The alliance between Italy and Germany became known as the Rome-Berlin Axis, and the two



Churchill's brilliant leadership of Britain during World War II led him to be regarded as one of the outstanding figures of the twentieth century.

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countries came to be called the Axis Powers.

The Axis march through France was swift and relentless. On June 14 the Nazis took Paris. On June 22 the French surrendered.

The world was stunned that France had fallen so quickly to the Nazi blitzkrieg. In France itself, many government leaders came to believe that no one in Europe could defeat the Nazis. They decided to capitulate to Hitler and try to live with German rule over Europe.

After France surrendered, the Germans occupied the northern part of the country. In the south, a nominally independent pro-Nazi government, led by the World War I hero Henri Philippe Pétain, was set up in the city of Vichy. This collaborative

regime came to be called the Vichy government.

At the same time, another group of French people fled to Britain and set up the Free French movement. The Free French worked throughout the war to help the Allies defeat Germany and to reestablish an independent France. They were led by General Charles de Gaulle.

For the time being, however, the Axis powers controlled virtually all of Europe. The last stronghold was Britain. Believing that a Nazi attack was imminent, the British worked desperately to regroup.

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Under pressure from all of Britain's political parties, Neville Chamberlain resigned in May 1940. A new coalition government came to power, led by Winston Churchill, a Conservative. The British people believed that Churchill would provide them with the strong leadership they would need to defeat Germany.

After the French surrendered, Hitler knew that he still needed to defeat Britain to be able to dominate Europe. He hesitated to attack Britain, however, because he believed that Nazi troops were unprepared for a coordinated land, sea, and air battle. He decided to try to defeat Britain entirely with the use of air power. This proved to be a fateful decision.

The Germans began their air assault on Britain in August 1940. They started by attacking military bases and airfields. Later, they stepped up their efforts to include civilian targets, especially in London. Nazi bombing raids caused massive destruction but failed to break British morale.

Nevertheless, the situation looked bleak for the Allies in late 1940. The Nazis had advanced quickly through western Europe and seemed poised to finish off the British. But the war was about to take a completely new turn.



Most of London was destroyed or burned by the German Luftwaffe air attacks beginning in August 1940.

4. THE PREWAR WORLD: REVIEW

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A. Cause/Effect Relationships

DIRECTIONS: In the space provided, write the cause of each of the following situations.

1. The Germans invaded and captured Norway and Denmark.

CAUSE: _____

2. Hitler decided to defeat Britain entirely by aerial assault.

CAUSE: _____

3. The British worked desperately to regroup and prepare for an attack by Germany.

CAUSE: _____

4. Britain and France declared war on Germany on September 3, 1939.

CAUSE: _____

5. The Soviets signed a treaty of friendship with Nazi Germany.

CAUSE: _____

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B. Fill in the Blank

DIRECTIONS: Fill in the missing word or words.

6. The collaborative regime in France was called the _____ government.
7. The Free French movement was based in _____ and worked to defeat _____ and to reestablish a free independent _____.
8. _____ became British prime minister in 1940.
9. Stalin decided to make an alliance with Hitler because it would give the Soviets a section of _____ and dominance over the Baltic areas of Europe.
10. The Nazis managed to defeat the French quickly by first turning _____ to invade Norway and Denmark, and then overrunning the _____ and _____ to advance into France northwest of the _____ Line.

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C. Time Line

DIRECTIONS: Insert the following events of the German blitzkrieg in the time line below. List each month's events in chronological order.

Germany attacks Poland.
Germans occupy the western part of Poland.
Hitler takes over Czechoslovakia.
Germany invades and captures Norway and Denmark.
Britain and France declare war on Germany.
Soviets are expelled from the League of Nations.
Germany advances deep into France.
The Nazis take Paris.
Poland surrenders to Germany.
Soviets sign a treaty of friendship with Nazi Germany.
Germans begin an air assault on Britain.
France surrenders to the Germans.
The Nazis invade the Netherlands and Belgium.
Italy joins the Nazi effort, forming the Axis Powers.
Soviets move into eastern Poland and the Baltic territories.

THE GERMAN BLITZKRIEG

MARCH 1939	_____
AUGUST 1939	_____
SEPTEMBER 1939	_____

OCTOBER 1939	_____

DECEMBER 1939	_____
APRIL 1940	_____
MAY 1940	_____
JUNE 1940	_____

AUGUST 1940	_____