Chapter 1

Toward the Second Twentieth Century: The Last World War

Outline

The Empires of Germany and Japan
The Alliance against the Axis
The Fall of the German and Japanese Empires

Highlight

Internationalism

Spotlight

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World history after the Second World War differed so fundamentally from earlier decades that it deserves to be called the “Second Twentieth Century.” The spread of nation-states, among all the historical changes that marked the half-century after 1945, has had the greatest impact on the lives of people throughout the world. In the history of humanity, the rise and fall of great empires provided a clear indication of the emergence and decline of civilizations. In modern times, the most influential empires were those of European states. Their age passed quickly, though. By the late twentieth century, none were left. Taking their place were nation-states. The transition had first begun in the early nineteenth century when Latin American nation-states emerged from the ruins of the Spanish Empire. It ended when, in the early 1990s, the Soviet Union fell apart, leaving in its place nation-states throughout its Eurasian realm. The decades following the end of the Second World War were the crucial moment when empires fell and nations replaced colonial territories. The story of this process is the major theme of this book.

Although new state borders spread across the map of the world to mark the frontiers of nations, international economic forces created regional and global links that transcended these barriers. An international economy, born of the industrial revolution, had emerged in the late nineteenth century out of the trading and investment activities of the Western countries. With the fall in the last decades of the twentieth century of the command economies of communist states, this economy penetrated deeply into the lives of peoples around the world. “Globalization” is the term used to describe its impact. Its driving power was the search for profit, for it operated as a market.
capitalist economy. Those regions that did not share in the benefits of this economic system belonged to a “Third World” where poverty and hunger were the lot of its inhabitants. The fate of these regions, although governed by independent nation-states, depended still on decisions made in far-away, prosperous centers of the global economy. The emergence of this new economic system after war’s end is our second theme.

The outcome of the Second World War itself led directly to the Cold War, which is the third major theme of this book. The war of 1939 to 1945 bore little resemblance to the First World War. The earlier conflict had been largely European in origins, and its armies and major battlefields were European as well. Only twenty years separated the end of one world war and the beginning of the next war, launched by the aggression of the Japanese Empire in East Asia and Nazi Germany in Europe. This war was followed in turn by a global ideological, political, and diplomatic conflict between the victorious western powers and their former ally, the Soviet Union. It lasted until the late 1980s. The impact of this so-called Cold War shaped in many ways the evolution of global relations among the world’s most powerful states; its end opened a new era in international affairs. All three trends—the appearance of nation-states throughout the world, the spread of a global economy, and the Cold War—emerged out of the turmoil of the Second World War.

This world war was truly global, for it came closer than ever in human history to uniting the peoples of the world in one vast, terrible, human endeavor. Involved in the conflict were countries from every continent, and its battlefields were scattered around the globe. Heroism was no longer the sole privilege of soldiers in battle. Resistance movements in countries occupied by the Axis powers kept alive visions of a better life to follow liberation. For the first time armies opened their ranks to women, who were not yet warriors but were no longer merely temporary workers and protectors of the home. The scope of death and destruction extended throughout the civilian population. New military technology gave mobility to armies, and made military aircraft the key element in naval battles and the means to carry the war far behind the front lines. At the end of the war, one single explosive device revealed the capacity of atomic energy to lay waste to an entire city. Human ingenuity put in the hands of statesmen and their military commanders fantastic weapons of destruction.

German and Japanese victories in the first stages of the war destroyed the old global balance of power. The conquests by the Axis powers marked deeply the population within those areas, obliterating old frontiers and overturning established governments. The Nazi New Order in Europe and the Asian empire of Japan both found supporters among their conquered peoples. The Nazis recruited fascists and sympathizers in the conquered areas for military service and administration, while the Japanese selected anti-Western nationalists to govern former European colonies. Opposition to the Axis empires centered on an international coalition of Allied states united for the defeat the aggressors.

Allied military victory proved, in the end, easier to achieve than political agreement on the postwar peace. By 1944 these victories had made clear that the forces of Great Britain, the Soviet Union, and the United States would soon defeat the German and Japanese empires. The war leaders of these nations—Winston Churchill, Joseph Stalin, and Franklin Roosevelt—agreed on the short-term objective of complete destruction of the Axis. But their wartime discussions revealed the great difficulties that they faced in shaping a stable peace. Later, Western critics condemned the failure of British and American leaders to force Stalin, deeply suspicious of his Western allies, to accept the restoration of prewar state borders in Europe and Asia. But these critics overlooked the limits to Western power, the new might of the Soviet Union, and the powerful revolutionary movements that emerged out of resistance
forces in formerly occupied lands. At war’s end, a new boundary was taking shape that divided the lands freed by Soviet troops and those freed by the Western Allies. The peace, like the war that preceded it, bore no resemblance to the First World War.

THE EMPIRES OF GERMANY AND JAPAN

By 1944 the outcome of the war was no longer in doubt. Both in East Asia and in Europe, the Axis coalition was falling apart, and its remaining military forces were in full retreat. Japan and Germany, the pillars of this coalition, had conquered vast territories. Their years of domination had provoked widespread opposition to their rule, yet among the conquered peoples were some who had chosen to collaborate with the conquerors. Each had created a vast empire, that is, a state whose peoples are gathered together by a conquering army and whose leaders govern these peoples in last resort by force of arms. In these terms their empires were heirs to a long tradition, as old as human civilization, of empire building.

But their leaders had justified their conquests in terms of nationalism. They claimed that the people in their homelands, Germany and Japan, were united as one nation under their leadership. They understood “nation” to refer to a population joined together by a presumed common ancestry and by a shared culture. Both Japanese and German leaders proclaimed the superiority of their own people, who they believed possessed a “natural” right to dominate other peoples. Both regimes welcomed the collaborators from among these peoples; the Japanese even asserted that they sought to free Asian colonial peoples from Western rule. But racism lay at the heart of these two conquering empires. The Nazis carried to monstrous lengths their assertion of racial superiority, branding certain conquered peoples (Jews, Gypsies) “subhuman” and creating a system of mass execution (termed “genocide”) to exterminate them. The empires of Japan and Germany were unlike any that came before them.

The Japanese Empire

At its largest, the Japanese Empire extended from China through the lands of southeast Asia and across the Pacific Ocean from the Philippines to Indonesia. Its expansion had begun in the 1930s, and culminated in the great offensives of 1941–42 that swept through southeast Asia and the eastern Pacific. It was the work of aggressive generals, backed by the emperor. Their domination of Japanese politics grew in the 1930s until they had created a militaristic regime. Civilian government never completely disappeared, for politicians continued to run important ministries, yet it was merely window dressing for rule by the generals. Militarism spread so deeply into the Japanese state and society that it resembled closely European fascism (but without the charismatic leader and single-party state). The emperor remained an object of worship; his compliance with the militaristic regime strengthened the power of the generals. From late 1941 until the end of the war, General Tojo was prime minister. The military ruled Japan.

In East Asia, China had been Japan’s first and greatest conquest, but remained still only partially under firm control. The great Chinese Empire had vanished decades earlier, but in its place new political movements had emerged that refused to submit to Japanese rule. In the western areas of China, the Nationalist People’s Party (Kuomintang, or KMT, in Chinese) led the forces of the Republic of China. Their leader, General Chiang Kai-shek, had refused to concede defeat despite the loss of the most populated coastal regions of his country. His government claimed to lead and to speak for the nation of China. But it was terribly weakened by the war, and held together largely by Chiang’s authoritarian rule and by the army under his command. The United States supported
Chiang’s state, but its forces were far away and it was incapable of delivering adequate military aid. The Republic of China could hope to govern all China only after the U.S. forces had defeated Japan.

The other Chinese movement fighting the Japanese was the Chinese Communist Party. Its leader, Mao Zedong, was an inspired revolutionary who had created a mass political movement and a peasant army. Fighting a guerrilla war, the Communists had been able to take control of large areas in northern and central China. They were allies with the Nationalist government in the fight against Japan. But their goal was ultimately to unite the country under their leadership and to bring to its peoples the revolutionary program of state socialism that Stalin had imposed on the peoples of the Soviet Union. At heart, the Nationalists and the Communists were bitter enemies. Their antagonism was only temporarily held in check by the war with Japanese forces.

The Japanese Empire encompassed almost all of southeast Asia. Indochina, Burma, and Malaysia lay under their occupation. There, as in the Philippines and Indonesia, Japanese authorities encouraged anticolonial nationalists to collaborate in governing the population. Everywhere they were partially successful, though their ruthless economic exploitation of the conquered lands stirred up resistance.

The Japanese were even able to recruit, from prisoners of war, an entire army group made up of soldiers from the British colony of India. Baptized the Indian National Army, its troops fought for the liberation of India from British rule. The British forces whom they confronted were Indians like themselves, who remained loyal to the British Empire. The British government of Winston Churchill proclaimed that its war against Japan sought to maintain the empire. Nationalist Indians, Malaysians, and Burmese, whether collaborating, neutral, or still loyal to the British Empire, expected liberation after war’s end. They were proven correct.

The German Empire

Since Germany’s great conquests of 1940–42, a New Order had reigned throughout the enormous territories of their “Third Reich” (“third empire”), from the shores of the Atlantic Ocean to the center of the Soviet Union. At its core was the Nazi Party, whose brutal nationalist ideology set the guidelines for rule over the entire empire. Nazism
is one variation of the extreme nationalist ideology described as “fascism.” The latter turned ethnic nationalism into a militaristic creed, for it idealized warriors as the embodiment of the mythical greatness of a nation. Fascist leaders believed it their right and duty to unify the nation under their command. Democracy tolerated diversity and dissent, both of which fascists despised. Hitler made this ideology his own. To it he added his own virulent hatred of the “subhuman” Jews. Anti-Semitism (anti-Jewish prejudice) infused the entire Nazi movement to such an extent that it made Nazism a uniquely brutal form of fascism.

Backed by his Nazi Party, Hitler had imposed on the German state and its people a dictatorial regime. The Nazi Party was the sole political movement, and it obeyed Hitler as its adored “Leader.” “Hitler is the Party, the Party is Hitler,” exclaimed one zealous Nazi leader. Nazis were the choice recruits for the state’s secret police, the Gestapo, and for the elite special military force, the SS. All its members swore an oath of absolute obedience to the Leader: “The word of Hitler has the force of law.” It controlled the prison camps, including the camps of mass execution of the “subhuman” subjects of the empire.

The Nazi empire’s principal characteristic was exploitation of the conquered lands. After 1941, all Europe lay at the disposal of the Nazi leaders; French agriculture helped to feed German armies.
and to sustain a comfortable standard of living in Germany; the industrial production of occupied Europe augmented German economic resources and supplied military equipment to German armies. German authorities considered the working population of Europe to be available for their needs. German workers had to serve in the armed forces.

This repressive policy hit with greatest brutality the Polish nation and the Jews of occupied Europe. Poland once again ceased to exist. Much of its western territory was incorporated into Germany and the Polish inhabitants forced to abandon everything to move to the east. The central region became simply the Government-General, which was an area under German rule open to exploitation by German businessmen provided with Polish forced labor.

These racist policies reached their most inhuman level in the extermination of the Jews of Europe. Nazi anti-Semitism constituted a powerful bond among all party members and found supporters among peoples in eastern Europe, where most of Europe’s six million Jews lived. Hitler sought a way to eliminate them all. His solution was to undertake the systematic mass extermination of an entire people. In late 1941 he had given his approval to the policy called by Nazi leaders the Final Solution. Its implementation began in 1942. His instrument for this inhuman policy was at hand—the SS organization, whose members were sworn to absolute obedience to his orders. The entire Jewish population of Europe was to be shipped by train in cattle cars to special camps in Polish territories. These were extermination camps, organized according to the same standards of industrial efficiency as slaughterhouses for animals. All that was left were mountains of clothing, gold teeth, hair, and other items taken from the victims. A few prisoners survived for a time to work as forced laborers, only to be killed in their turn.

The Final Solution remained in operation to the end of the war. By then more than five million Jews had been exterminated, the victims of insane Nazi racism and the moral cowardice of Germans. Historians still debate the circumstances and causes of this policy of genocide, a phenomenon so complex and terrifying that it defies adequate explanation. Germany’s New Order tore apart the old Europe, its peoples and its states. Nothing could return the continent to its previous condition.

THE ALLIANCE AGAINST THE AXIS

The alliance opposing the Axis states had formed gradually in reaction to Axis aggression. Nationalist China had fought alone against Japan for four years, and Great Britain had fought alone in Europe against Nazi Germany, until 1941. That year the German attack in June on the Soviet Union brought the British their first major ally. The Japanese attack on U.S. naval forces in Pearl Harbor gave the Chinese a U.S. alliance, and Hitler’s declaration of war on the United States sealed the alliance for the war in Europe. Military collaboration between the Soviet Union and the Western states was founded on a common enemy, Germany, against whom they had promised to fight until complete victory. But the Soviet Union and its Western allies were unlike one another in many respects: They fought on different battlefronts; they pursued differing aims for peace; their political systems were the product of antagonistic ideologies of communism and democracy. They had agreed through negotiations at international conferences on a set of short-term common objectives for victory in war and the reconstruction of Europe and East Asia. But their different long-term goals created enormous barriers to a stable post-war settlement.

The Soviet Union and the European War

The Soviet Union was a vital yet mysterious member of the Grand Alliance. Western statesmen
realized from the start that the U.S.S.R. would occupy a dominant position in central Europe when Germany was defeated. The greatest mystery for Westerners surrounded the international objectives pursued by the Soviet Union.

The Soviet Union, like Nazi Germany, was a dictatorship in which a single ruling party was led by an all-powerful dictator assisted by a vast secret police network. But Joseph Stalin and his Communist Party justified their regime on ideological principles absolutely contrary to those of the Nazis. When the Communists had seized power in Russia in 1917, their leader, Vladimir Lenin, had declared that his revolutionary regime sought to destroy international capitalism and imperialism. Their goal, he proclaimed, was to liberate the oppressed masses and to build a socialist society, as Karl Marx had forecast a century earlier.

Following Lenin’s death in the mid-1920s, Joseph Stalin had become the leader of the Communist Party and of the Soviet Union. In size and ethnic diversity, his country resembled the Russian Empire, for it stretched from eastern Europe to the Pacific Ocean, from the Arctic Ocean to Inner Asia. He had put in place in the early 1930s an intensive program, revolutionary in its impact, for the creation of a highly industrialized economy completely under the control of the state, of which he was the supreme leader. Later in the decade, he had proudly announced that the Soviet Union had, first of any land, created a socialist society. To him, this achievement meant that Soviet society had entered a higher stage of historical development that any other country in the world. Stalin spoke out against capitalism and imperialism and urged colonial peoples to revolt against their oppressors.

Soviet political realities under Stalin were the product of his dictatorial rule and of the state’s commitment to mobilize the population and the country’s resources to strengthen the state’s power. This multi-national land, termed officially a “union” of national republics, was in fact a communist empire. Stalin employed an enormous secret police network to eradicate any form of opposition to, or even suspected defiance toward, the dogmatic truths of the state ideology, baptised Marxism-Leninism-Stalinism and to his personal rule. His government exploited the country’s economic resources and labor by means of what is best described as a command economy, that is, an economy whose operations were commanded by the state and that lacked any legal market for investment, labor, land, or goods. All industrial and commercial enterprises were “nationalized,” that is, they were the property of the state; all farm land was “collectivized,” which in reality meant that the land was controlled by the state, and that the farmers received only what meager income that the state chose to give them. Controlling this vast economic operation was a system of state command planning, whose orders had the force of law. It was totally unlike the market economy of western countries.

From the moment he seized power, Stalin had claimed that his country was surrounded by enemies of socialism. It needed to be ruthless in its vigilance and its preparedness for war. Stalin himself referred to Western states as a “capitalist jungle” where “might made right” and powerful states became strong at the expense of the weak. Believing this the way of the capitalist enemies, he made these principles the guidelines of his own foreign policy until his death in 1953. He had conducted Soviet foreign policy from the moment he took power until 1941 on the principle that whatever was in the interest of Soviet territorial security and power had first priority for his country, and for world communism. When the opportunity arose in 1939–40 to seize territory from small states along the Soviet Union’s western borders, he did not hesitate to take it. Revolutionary expansion played no part in these foreign dealings. In appearance the Soviet Union was a revolutionary communist regime, but its policies were those of a great power. In both respects it constituted a troubling presence in the coalition.
Soviet objectives since the outbreak of war with Germany in mid-1941 had concentrated on the defense of the country. The war had begun with disastrous military defeats and the loss of most of western Russia and the Ukraine. In this crisis the country mobilized for total war. Stalin took direct control of political and military affairs. His dictatorial powers obliterated the distinction between political and military leadership; later they permitted him to adjust military operations to diplomatic interests of state.

The vast powers of the state and the Communist Party had turned to the war effort. The apparatus of the police state was directed to stiffling the will of the population to fight. Most of the population responded to war demands with extraordinary patriotic fervor. Among the Russian population, the war against Germany became a national cause for which they were prepared to sacrifice their well-being and their lives. The greatest sacrifice came from the front-line soldiers. In the first two years of war, the Red Army lacked sufficient military equipment and skilled officers to match the powerful German army. Soviet generals replaced the missing armaments by demanding suicidal heroism from their soldiers. By war’s end, Soviet military dead had reached ten million.
The battle that foretold the outcome of the German-Russian war had occurred in mid-1943 on the plains of central Russia. That summer Hitler made one last attempt to defeat the Soviet Union. His offensive produced the biggest tank battle in the entire war. But the Red Army was prepared this time with sufficient equipment, troops, and competent generals. The Soviet military machine proved mightier than the German army, which not only lost the battle but was forced into full retreat. By the late fall the German withdrawal had reached western Russia. Victory was at last becoming a tangible reality for the Soviet leaders.

The United States in the Grand Alliance

Throughout the 1930s the United States had taken no active role in European or Asian affairs. Its economy was in the grip of the depression, which left factories idle, farm land uncultivated, and millions of Americans unemployed. The people and their leaders had in these circumstances little concern for foreign conflicts; isolationism, that is, the refusal to take an active role in international affairs, was their preferred foreign policy. It had retained a powerful hold on America in the first years of war in East Asia, and even after war broke out in 1939 in Europe. The initial reaction of the U.S. Congress to the outbreak of the wars in East Asia and Europe was to adhere strictly to the isolationist policy. President Franklin Roosevelt had to declare the United States neutral in the war in East Asia, and later in the war in Europe.

Gradually U.S. isolationism had weakened as German power grew. Franklin Roosevelt had never shared the revulsion felt by many Americans at U.S. involvement in the First World War. He had begun his political career as a supporter of President Woodrow Wilson’s domestic and foreign policies and had been active in the war effort as secretary of the navy during the First World War. He shared the belief, first defended by his elder cousin Theodore Roosevelt in the early 1900s, that the United States had to take an active role in world politics. As German conquests multiplied, he began to speak out frequently against isolationism and in support of the British. He feared the Nazi threat to U.S. security, especially after German victories in western Europe in 1940. But his most successful speeches on international affairs discussed the war in Europe in idealistic terms. Roosevelt himself abhored Nazism and believed deeply in democracy. Yet his measures directed against Germany were based primarily on considerations of security and power. The American public understood far more readily, however, the rhetoric of internationalism (see “Highlight,” this chapter). The president explained the European conflict to the American public in terms that emphasized the defense of democracy and that largely omitted issues of U.S. national security. In the summer of 1941 he obtained Churchill’s approval for the Atlantic Charter, which committed both nations to “a better future for the world” following the “final destruction of Nazi tyranny.”

The Japanese attack in December 1941, had suddenly thrust the United States into the midst of the world war. U.S. participation gave the alliance a central focus for the global conflict. Decisions made in Washington were influential both in the course of the war in Europe and Asia and in the elaboration of the diplomatic aims of the Allies. This situation was the result primarily of the global military presence of U.S. forces and of the economic aid provided by the United States to its allies.

Early in the war, the United States had come to possess the greatest array of modern armaments of any belligerent. The U.S. fleets in the two oceans constituted the largest number of fighting vessels ever to sail under one flag. Only the United States had access through its naval forces to the shores of every continent and island where the war was being fought. The U.S. Air Force grew to surpass in size that of Great Britain. Only
the United States entered the war. This “Lend-Lease” aid began to go to the Soviet Union shortly after the German invasion of Russia.

Throughout the war Roosevelt was guided in making strategic military decisions by the determination to minimize U.S. casualties as much as possible. To do so, he sought to mobilize overwhelming superiority in armaments before launching major military campaigns. For this reason, he had to defer approval of the attack on Germany’s continental empire until 1944. Until then only the Red Army prevented total German victory on the European continent. Without an eastern front, the Western Allies would confront the bulk of German forces when they attempted their European invasion. The U.S. government judged the alliance with the Soviet Union indispensable also for military victory in East Asia. In both the European and Asian wars the Soviet Union was an extremely valuable ally.

The Alliance at War

By late 1943, the collaboration between the Soviet Union and the Western allies had become a real diplomatic alliance. At the conference of Teheran in the fall of 1943 Stalin finally met with Churchill and Roosevelt. The Western leaders made at that time a firm commitment to open a second front in Europe by invading France in the spring of 1944. That conference marked the high point of good relations among the Allies. The three leaders formulated there the basic terms of their Grand Alliance, focusing on three important objectives. First, they repeated their intent to pursue the war against Germany to total victory. Following German surrender, the country would be divided temporarily into occupation zones. Policies of demilitarization, denazification, and reparations payments would be imposed on the German population.

Second, Western leaders accepted Stalin’s demand that the Soviet Union retain its new western
lands. Informally, they also agreed that Poland, having lost eastern territory to the Soviet Union, would receive German lands along its western border. They reluctantly accepted Soviet territorial annexation and new Polish frontiers for the sake of the alliance, though in doing so they contributed to the creation of a new postwar Soviet sphere of domination in eastern Europe.

Third, the Soviet Union consented to enter the Asian conflict following victory in Europe. Roosevelt, heeding the advice of his military, was convinced that the Red Army was the only military force in position to defeat Japan in China and thus ease American casualties and bring the Asian war to a quick end. Stalin’s promise of military assistance constituted for the U.S. president a major achievement, for which he was ready to pay a high diplomatic price.

That price became terribly clear when the Allied leaders met at Yalta in February 1945 to discuss the future peace as well as the end of the war. Agreement on the disposition of German lands once the Nazis were defeated posed no problem; zones of occupation for the four European powers (including France) had emerged from discussions the previous year. Berlin was also divided among the Allied forces, though the city itself lay within the Soviet zone of eastern Germany.
that extended as far west as the Elbe River. Regardless of where troops from east and west met at war’s end, these zones set the limits to the area they would subsequently occupy.

Collaboration in the war in East Asia also raised no serious disagreements. In exchange for a Soviet offensive in northern China and Korea, Stalin requested Japanese territory (Sakhalin, the Kuril Islands) and concessions in Chinese territory (the same as those the Russian Empire had possessed before the 1917 revolution). Roosevelt promised to obtain agreement to these concessions from Chiang’s Nationalist government. He had become Stalin’s collaborator in redrawing the boundaries of other states to satisfy Soviet territorial demands. Even the question of Soviet participation in the United Nations did not create serious problems, probably because Stalin concluded that Roosevelt’s project, although useless to Soviet interests, posed no real threat. To this extent the Grand Alliance continued to function effectively.

Its limits were apparent when Poland was discussed. Roosevelt asked for Soviet acceptance of the principle of national self-determination and democratic elections. Stalin did agree to a Declaration on Liberated Europe promising free elections. But the statement left so many holes for Soviet evasion that, as one of Roosevelt’s advisers told him, “you can drive a truck through it.” Soviet domination in Poland could not be shaken by diplomatic declarations. Roosevelt asked for no more, however, so important to him was Soviet collaboration in the war against Japan. Historical debate continues on the failure of the United States to insist on real national self-determination for Poland. The imposition of a Soviet-backed communist regime in that country was probably not negotiable. When Roosevelt talked of a world of peace and great power collaboration, Stalin understood great power hegemony and spheres of influence. No real meeting of minds or permanent agreement could exist between statesmen of such differing convictions.

THE FALL OF THE GERMAN AND JAPANESE EMPIRES

The great battles of 1944 made the Alliance’s power apparent to Allied and Axis states alike. In June the combined naval and land forces of the Western Allies opened a front on the Normandy coast of France. After weeks of fighting, American armored columns were able to begin a rapid offensive through central France, capturing along the way several hundred thousand German prisoners. In August Allied forces liberated Paris. The hope that Allied armies would be able to penetrate German territory that fall was frustrated by the failure of the British offensive through Belgium and the Netherlands. Germany had suffered a major defeat in the west, but the war remained still outside German territory.

In the east Germany suffered a defeat as overwhelming as the Normandy battle. Stalin assisted the Allied invasion by ordering a major Soviet offensive that June along the entire Central Front, then in western Russia. Hitler’s instructions to the German Army were to fight without retreat, a hopeless task but one that his generals obeyed. The result was that the Red Army was able to defeat and to encircle most of the German military forces on the front, approximately three hundred thousand men. The destruction of the Central Front opened the Soviet path to Poland and to eastern Germany. By August its advance divisions had reached the outskirts of Warsaw. Despite Nazi fanaticism and the grim determination of German troops, Axis defeat was by then inevitable.

Reconstructing a war-torn Europe and East Asia was an Allied preoccupation in the last years of the war. The Soviet Union had its own plans to establish a sphere of influence over its neighboring states. Stalin talked of postwar “democracy” for these lands, but meant Soviet domination. The British government, under Winston Churchill, clung to the goal of reestablishing the British
HIGHCHT: Internationalism

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assuming that states were forever destined to struggle among themselves. They found inspiration in the liberal democratic ideology, especially its emphasis on human rights, and in economic trends of the nineteenth century that strengthened trade and financial cooperation among states. The First World War reinforced their conviction that they had to succeed in bringing a halt to wars that had become so destructive there could be no real victors or vanquished. Their belief in liberal democracy persuaded them that most human beings were reasonable and capable of understanding the importance of common interests shared by states and peoples. If the right democratic institutions and diplomatic methods of collective action were put in place, wars could be halted. Modern states had brought an end to feudal wars; internationalists proposed to do the same for wars among states.

The nineteenth century had given them special reasons to believe that their project was realizable. The spread of democracy placed power in the hands of masses of voters. They argued that the people had solid grounds to oppose a political leader who plotted military aggression, since their own lives and property would suffer most in the event of war. Internationalists believed that the interests of economic leaders also lay in the preservation of peace, particularly in conditions of a growing international economy. They expected that economic interests and common sense would combine to create an enlightened public opinion throughout Western countries. Generals or dictators, unaccountable to the people, were the likely source of conflict. They had to be restrained, but the means to that end was international cooperation. All peaceable states ought to agree among themselves to ensure the security of each state, for by standing together, they would dissuade aggression. They had to be prepared to act collectively, however. Their individual sovereignty (the right to act independently) would at times have to be subordinated to the need for collective action against aggressors. The preservation of peace among nations was certainly worth this sacrifice.

President Woodrow Wilson had been the first leader of a great power to make internationalism the core of his foreign policy. When at the close of 1916 he had called on the warring European states to end their fighting, he made clear his vision for the future. A “just and secure peace,” he had argued, would end the “organized rivalries” of the balance of power. Most important, it had to recognize the right of peoples to choose their own governments, whose “just powers derive from the consent of the governed.” “National self-determination” was the foundation for peaceful governments. Finally, these governments had to be prepared to cooperate in an organized “community of nations” charged with settling international disputes. It was an extraordinary proposal, called for by the catastrophe brought on the West by the war.
Wilson created a visionary plan for international relations that did not vanish with his political defeat after the war. "Wilsonianism" was the term by which political leaders in the United States often referred to internationalism. Franklin Roosevelt revived its essential elements. He appealed in the name of world peace to the American people to accept the terrible sacrifices of the new war. He promised that its victorious outcome would restore freedom and allow peoples around the world to proceed with the creation of their own nation-states. The League of Nations ceased to exist at the outbreak of the Second World War, but the Allies agreed to create at war's end the United Nations (U.N.). Once again, the U.S. took the lead. At the founding of the U.N. in 1945, President Truman reaffirmed his state's commitment to internationalism, which in his folksy words meant that "no matter how great our strength, we must deny ourselves the license to do always as we please" in decisions of war and peace.

Wilson's vision appeared closer than ever to fulfillment in the reordering of global relations that followed the collapse of Western empires, then the end of the Cold War. The U.N.'s membership grew rapidly with the entry of new nation-states. The dream of an international concert of states to protect peace grew stronger when, in the last decade of the twentieth century, peacekeeping forces operating under the United Nations flag and at the orders of the Security Council appeared in country after country where civil wars or regional conflicts threatened the lives of the population and the security of the region.

The United Nations' most ambitious peacekeeping effort came in Iraq. Following its defeat in 1991 by a coalition of states fighting under the U.N. flag, it took charge of destroying Iraq's weapons of mass destruction and supervising the economic embargo placed on the country's international trade. The 2003 war against Iraq ended that attempt at international containment of an aggressive state. Claiming that the United Nations was incapable of controlling Iraq's armaments and that Iraq was a threat to peace, President George W. Bush ordered U.S. armed forces (aided by those of Great Britain) to invade Iraq to overthrow the regime of Saddam Hussein (see Chapter 8). At the beginning of the twenty-first century, internationalism was a still a contested doctrine for international peace.

The Liberation of Europe

The Grand Alliance had promised cooperation both for war and for the peace to follow. More important than agreements among the Allies, however, was the location of Allied troops at war's end. Europe was divided between Soviet and Western armies. While new Allied plans were laid for a common future for Europe, a kind of partition of Europe had already begun to emerge. In the background, the United States and Great Britain proceeded on their own to set up new institutions for international trade that they judged vital for the recovery of the market economies of the West. In economic terms, the communist and capitalist world remained deeply divided.

Among Western statesmen, Roosevelt had the greatest potential influence for the rebuilding of postwar Europe. The American political system placed the formulation of foreign policy in his hands alone, although it left to Congress and the voters the decision to allocate the funds needed for foreign ventures. He was an astute politician who had lived through the hopes and the deceptions of President Woodrow Wilson's peace policies at the end of the First World War. The lesson he drew from that experience was that U.S. wartime influence would not extend into peace-time. The American people, through their elected representatives, would demand an immediate return to peacetime conditions—the demobilization of U.S. troops and an end to foreign aid. In these
circumstances the best Roosevelt could achieve would be a peace that was self-enforcing, that is, one that did not require permanent U.S. military commitments. He held out the promise of national self-determination for lands occupied by the Axis, even when these areas had previously been Western colonies. He looked forward to collaboration among the Great Powers within the framework of a new international peacekeeping organization, to be called the United Nations.

Roosevelt’s internationalist peace plans included the establishment of an international economy based on free trade and a stable financial system. The industrial regions of the world had suffered greatly in the global depression of the 1930s. It became clear to economists and government leaders in Britain and the United States that a major cause of the depression had been the collapse of international trade, brought about by high tariffs and the absence of international funding. In the midst of war, U.S. leaders looked ahead to peacetime when they hoped to promote stable global economic expansion. The growth of trade would stimulate production and new technology, which were of benefit both to the war-torn countries and to the American economy. Meeting in the United States in late 1944, British and American officials reached agreement for the development of a war of new institutions for the support of international trade. This “Bretton Woods system” promised a reinvigorated global market economy, buttressed by U.S. economic wealth.

As Allied forces moved toward central Europe, the key role of occupation authorities in restoring or founding nation-states became evident. France was the most important country liberated by the Normandy invasion. After its defeat by Germany in 1940, it had lost its independence. Its economy was in the service of the German war machine and its people were subject to German exploitation. As the years of occupation passed, opposition to the Germans grew and underground resistance forces gathered together in the Free French movement. Its leader was General Charles de Gaulle, a traitor to his army in 1940 when he refused to accept the armistice with Germany and fled to London. By 1944 his dedication and eloquence in the cause of French freedom had placed him at the head of the noncommunist movement opposing the Germans.

De Gaulle had much greater difficulty obtaining the recognition of Roosevelt. The American president believed that “national self-determination” meant the choice of new leadership by free elections, not by self-proclamation. Yet de Gaulle was the major noncommunist political leader in France, committed to free democratic government. This agreement on basic political principles, plus the popularity of de Gaulle among the French people and Resistance forces, finally earned him the diplomatic backing of the Western Allies. The French resistance forces also accepted his leadership. He in turn had to agree to their demand for substantial internal reforms in what they hoped would be a new France. In a manner consistent with the principle of national self-determination, France recovered its independence.

**SPOTLIGHT: John Maynard Keynes**

Until the Englishman John Maynard Keynes (1883–1946) revolutionized economic theory, economists devoted themselves to the scholarly study of what was known as the “dismal science.” Classical economics had no role to play in public life, and its specialists sought no place there. They referred to their theory as “laissez-faire” (meaning to “let alone”) capitalism, because they believed that the laws governing economics operated, and had to operate, without any outside intervention. Prosperity and depression followed one another in a natural cycle as inevitable
as the seasons. When depression hit, bankruptcies and unemployment spread widely. Recovery would again lead to renewed prosperity, businesses would again prosper and the laboring population would enjoy better times. But no one could alter the cycle.

Keynes challenged that theory and made economic well-being a central concern for governments. He was a rebel in his chosen career, just as he was a rebel in his personal life. He belonged as a young man to the Bloomsbury circle of bohemian intellectuals in London, who defied Victorian moral conventions for the sake of personal liberty. Among them, Keynes had no need to hide his homosexuality. His brilliance as an economist earned him a place among English negotiators at the Versailles peace settlement in 1919. Afterward, he taught quietly at Cambridge University, marrying a Russian ballerina and now and then speculating (and usually winning) on the stock market.

His real achievement came when he sought to explain the fundamental economic problems caused by the depression of the 1930s. In those grim years he challenged classical economical theory by arguing that the cyclical evolution of capitalist economies did not necessarily (or even
ordinarily) lead to full employment and long-term stability. The promise of laissez-faire capitalism to restore prosperity after major declines in economic activity was false. He spelled out his own theory in a book titled *The General Theory of Employment*, published in 1936. It created an uproar among economists, for it proposed that governments had the responsibility to use their financial resources (and the advice of economists like himself) to reform the imperfect capitalist system. His theory quickly attracted political leaders looking desperately for a solution to the social crisis caused by the depression. Like President Roosevelt, Keynes sought to protect the freedom of the market economy and liberal democracy on which it depended. At a time when communism and fascism were attracting supporters everywhere (including students at Cambridge University where he taught), he wished to find a “middle way between the anarchy of laissez-faire and the tyranny of totalitarianism.”

The Second World War carried him one step further to consider the entire global economic system. Recovery from depression and war required a new system of international trade and financial cooperation. The United States had to occupy the central position if the postwar world was to avoid the chaotic, destructive protectionism and economic stagnation of the 1930s. The British and U.S. governments welcomed his help. He was, they recognized, a “true genius.” At negotiations in 1944 during the Bretton Woods conference in New Hampshire, he played a key role in bringing agreement on the international institutions to stimulate reconstruction and multilateral trade after the war. That system did not begin full operation until after his death. It grew in importance to become a central feature of the late-twentieth-century global economy. Keynes had helped build that “middle way” on which the Western world depended.

*The Soviet Union in Eastern Europe*

Although the Western leaders urged national self-determination throughout occupied Europe, Stalin accepted it only where it suited Soviet power politics. His objectives and methods of building peace differed fundamentally from those of Roosevelt. The difference lay in the use of power. Whereas the U.S. authorities set out to create a new world order that would require the least possible U.S. international intervention, the Soviet leader proceeded to deploy his military power to ensure diplomatic or political domination in the areas around the Soviet Union liberated by the Red Army. As in the 1930s, Stalin honored the principle of power politics to “respect only the strong” and remained as suspicious as before of the “capitalist jungle.” The war against Germany had temporarily allied capitalist states and the Soviet Union, but in his opinion the fundamental antagonism between the two social systems remained. In Stalin’s world view, applied even more ruthlessly in his dealings with fellow Communists, no one could be trusted of their own free will to work for the common good. He recognized only political and military power.

He was true to these convictions in his dealings with his wartime allied states. He had to respect the might of the West, especially the United States with its undamaged, productive economy, great navies, and enormous air power. The Soviet Union had been bled dry and strained to the utmost to support the Red Army. For that reason, however, he assigned first priority to the strengthening of the Soviet international position. Even before the war was over Soviet scientists had begun work on nuclear weapons (spies in the United States had passed on word of the development of an American nuclear bomb). Of immediate importance to Allied relations, Stalin judged indispensable the creation of a Soviet sphere of domination around his country.
By 1943 he had begun to assemble the political and diplomatic parts of a postwar protective zone on the Soviet western borders. Its essential condition was that the small neighboring states renounce their independence in foreign relations. The Czech government-in-exile in London understood the future shape of central Europe. In 1943, it proposed to the Soviet Union diplomatic agreements by which the Czechs accepted Soviet international leadership in exchange for their internal freedom. Stalin agreed to the proposal. When the Red Army liberated Czechoslovakia, it passed control over to this government, which proceeded to reconstruct a parliamentary democracy and coalition government. In 1945 Stalin looked for diplomatic recognition of Soviet power, not communist revolution in Czechoslovakia. Realism, not communist ideology, dictated these agreements.

Where communist forces enjoyed substantial power Stalin was prepared to accept their rule on the condition that they too submit to Soviet leadership. Yugoslavia had by 1945 come under the control of the guerrilla forces under the leadership of Tito and his Yugoslav Communist Party. From their mountain bases they proceeded to occupy the country following the passage of the Red Army. Implementing their revolutionary plans, they immediately set up, on the Soviet model, a one-party dictatorship and a federal state made up of national republics to govern their multiethnic population. At Soviet insistence they accepted economic agreements providing cheap raw materials from their land for the reconstruction of the Soviet Union.

Events in Poland clearly revealed to the West Soviet aims in eastern Europe. Poland provoked the greatest controversy among the Allies even before war's end. When the Red Army reached Polish territory in 1944, the Soviet occupation authorities immediately began eliminating the remnants of the noncommunist resistance forces. At the end of the year they placed the Polish Communist Party at the head of a new provisional government. The U.S. and British governments protested this mockery of national self-determination in Poland. Their diplomatic efforts to protect Polish democracy were half-hearted, but they probably had no means to force a change in Soviet policy. Stalin's determination to dominate Poland was non-negotiable.

In the spring of 1945, the Allied armies defeated the remnants of the once-mighty German army. German generals kept the bulk of their troops in the east in an effort to halt the Soviet offensive. By April Western armies were advancing rapidly through central and northern Germany. Churchill, already foreseeing competition with the Soviet Union over European spheres, urged that Western troops occupy Berlin and Prague. These were politically important cities far within areas designated for Soviet liberation. General Dwight Eisenhower, Supreme Allied Commander, refused to alter his military priorities to make room for political calculations. In April Roosevelt died, replaced by his vice president, Harry Truman, an inexperienced former senator from the Middle West. The only course of action open to the new president was to follow Roosevelt's guidelines. After Hitler's suicide in late April, German leaders capitulated to the Allies. The European war ended in early May 1945, with Soviet troops in Berlin.

In July, Western forces in eastern Germany pulled back to allow the Soviet army to occupy its full zone. Carrying out their part of the occupation agreement, Soviet authorities opened to Western troops access to their half of Berlin, which became their occupied zones of the city. Demilitarization and denazification started, and arrangements for the imposition of reparations began in all areas of the defeated land. The German state had ceased to exist. What took its place depended on the four occupying powers, for the time being cooperating still as Allies.

Victory in East Asia

The war in the Pacific followed a very different course. It continued until the end to be primarily a
naval war. In early 1945 the British finally launched an offensive into Japanese-occupied Burma from India. The British Empire's greatest colony was India. In the century since the British conquest, Indians had become an integral part of colonial rule, serving both throughout the civil service and at all ranks of the Indian Army.

Nationalist opposition in India to British rule had by then become a powerful force. It was centered around the coalition movement called the Indian National Congress, led by Mohandas Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru. Gandhi was responsible for giving the Congress its mass following, drawn to his inspirational teachings of national rebirth of India. He had successfully argued in the Congress against Indian participation in the war against Japan. For that he and the other Congress leaders were kept in jail throughout the war.

But taking their place in aiding the British was a movement that spoke for the millions of Muslims in India. This Muslim League feared that Congress, made up largely of people of Hindu background, would worsen the condition of the minority Muslims. In collaborating with the British, the League looked forward to a free, but divided Indian subcontinent where a Muslim state they wished to call Pakistan would govern the areas where most Muslims lived. The impending, tragic partition of India was already moving forward.

While the war continued, Indians serving the British remained loyal to their imperial rulers. The Indian Army fought for its British commanders in
Asia, the Middle East, and Europe. The Indian civil service performed its duties as expected. Operating from India, the supreme commander of Southeast Asia, Lord Mountbatten, prepared for the offensives that would retake the lost British, Dutch, and French colonies of Burma, Indonesia, and Indochina. Before his forces could proceed beyond Burma, U.S. nuclear bombs exploded over two Japanese cities and Japan capitulated unconditionally.

The U.S. naval offensive had begun in 1943. The previous year U.S. naval forces, in battles in the Coral Sea and west of Hawaii near Midway Island, had blockaded Japanese efforts to destroy the U.S. fleet in the Pacific. Instead, the Japanese navy suffered serious losses in those battles, especially to the aircraft carriers that proved the decisive weapon in that far-flung war. Within a few months the U.S. Pacific fleet was superior in number and power to the Japanese ships. Gradually, U.S. naval and marine forces moved westward back across the Pacific, “island hopping” to establish ports and air bases closer and closer to Japan. In 1944 they controlled the seas as far west as the Philippine archipelago. That year, army divisions under General MacArthur’s command reconquered the former U.S. colony. By the end of 1944 the U.S. Air Force controlled the skies over the islands and operated from bases close enough for massive bomber attacks of Japan. Maritime commerce had been destroyed by U.S. submarines, depriving the Japanese military of vital raw materials. General MacArthur’s next objective was the invasion of Japan itself, where bitter fighting was expected before the Japanese surrendered.

In July 1945, the Japanese war cabinet began to consider peace negotiations. Military leaders defended a policy of war to the death to protect the honor of their country and their emperor. Other leaders sympathetic to peace negotiations continued to count on Soviet neutrality and Soviet mediation to obtain from the United States essential peace conditions, principally the protection of the emperor. They were misguided on all counts. Stalin was preparing for Asian war and the United States adhered to its demand of “unconditional surrender.”

The U.S. war in the Pacific was in its own way total war. Hatred of the Japanese was high, particularly when stories of Japanese mistreatment of Allied prisoners of war appeared. In the battles of 1944, many Japanese soldiers fought to the death, refusing to surrender in the face of hopeless odds. Their determination further strengthened the U.S. policy of total war. Japan’s defeat was to come in part through massive land offensives by the Soviet Union in north China and by the United States in Japan. But in the summer of 1945, the U.S. Air Force acquired a weapon of unimaginable power.

American development of the atomic bomb had first begun out of fear that Nazi Germany would develop the bomb. Germany’s defeat in May and the successful testing of the bomb in July 1945 presented the U.S. leaders with a new choice. A weapon of unprecedented power was available for use in the war on Japan. Its use was no longer a matter of deterring the enemy, but an opportunity to destroy an opponent defenseless against air attack but prepared to fight a land war to the death. The U.S. government chose with little hesitation (only some of the scientists advising restraint) to authorize its use by the U.S. Air Force. On August 6, one bomb obliterated the city of Hiroshima, killing more than one hundred thousand people; a second destroyed much of Nagasaki on August 9. The world had entered the age of nuclear war.

The Soviet land war against Japan ended almost as soon as it began. On August 8, the Red Army invaded Manchuria. Stalin had respected to the letter his agreement with Roosevelt at the Yalta Conference to begin war in Asia three months after hostilities ceased in Europe. Japanese forces were overwhelmed by the Soviet invasion, which swept down Manchuria and into Korea. Despite inevitable defeat, a week elapsed
before the Japanese war cabinet accepted surrender. On August 14 Emperor Hirohito personally ordered the empire’s armed forces to capitulate for, in his words, “the unendurable must be endured.”

The Soviet offensive and the nuclear bombing brought the Asian war to an abrupt end, U.S. invasion of the Mariana Islands proved unnecessary. The debate still continues whether the use of the atomic bomb was needed to avoid that invasion. Historical evidence now suggests that it was. The emperor and his advisers, in whose hands lay the choice of war or peace, continued to reiterate their demand that the Japanese people “smash the enemy nations.” Their appeal to carry on the war resembled Hitler’s refusal to accept defeat. The Japanese population appeared ready to obey. The two atomic bomb attacks, coupled with the Soviet invasion of Korea and Manchuria, forced the emperor to change sides and order the surrender. The concern of American military experts that without use of the bomb the war might endure for months, bringing with it enormous U.S. casualties, was well founded.

The Second World War had ended. The Allied countries had defeated the mightiest military empires in history, but at a terrible cost.

SUMMARY

The Second World War completed the slow process, begun in the previous war and the depression, that ended the era of empires. The defeat of Japan brought down its overseas empire; its destruction was followed soon by the collapse of the empires of the Western states in southeast Asia. Japanese authorities had exploited and mistrusted the peoples of their empire; yet their initial victory, coupled with their claim to defend “Asians” from Western imperialism, proved an effective means to undermine the authority of the Western colonial regimes that had once ruled these lands. In August of 1945 nothing was left of the Dutch and French empires. The British Empire was weakened and discredited in the eyes of many of its former subjects. The capitulation of the Japanese Empire was complete. Everywhere its troops prepared to leave the conquered lands where they had ruled until the war’s end. A vacuum of power opened up in that enormous area, and no one knew what its future would be.

The destruction produced by Nazi rule in Europe and the long war was appalling. Many millions of people had been reduced to misery, and governments lacked the means to help them. Nearly fifty million civilians and military personnel died in the war, a grim measure of the scale of devastation. The United States, which suffered relatively few casualties, emerged the most prosperous and powerful country in the world. But the Soviet Union, despite the suffering of its peoples, possessed the military and diplomatic strength of an international power. The war had created a worldwide division of spheres of influence dominated by the two states, each of whom had very different plans for a new global order.

DATES WORTH REMEMBERING

1937 Sino-Japanese war
1939 German war in Europe
1940 German conquest of western Europe
1941 German-Soviet war
1941 U.S. entry into European and Asian wars
1942-43 Stalingrad battle
1943 Teheran Conference
1944 Normandy landing
1944 Warsaw uprising
1944 Liberation of the Philippines
1944 Bretton Woods agreement on international trade
1945 Yalta Conference
1945 Soviet war on Japan
1945 Hiroshima atomic bomb explosion
1945 End of Second World War
RECOMMENDED READING

Twentieth-Century World

War in Europe

War in Asia

Memoirs, Novels, and Visual Aids
Guy Sajer, *The Forgotten Soldier* (1971). The vivid memoirs of an Alsatian volunteer in the German army, who survived the army’s great retreat from Russia to the Baltic.
*Saving Private Ryan* (1999). The best movie version to date of the Normandy Landing and the chaos of the enormous battle that followed.

The World at War Outstanding BBC series (in sixteen parts) on the Second World War (available through <http://www.shop.pbs.org>.)

*Indicates book available in paperback.*