

The end of the Second World War



1945 – year of victory

Modern historians are putting more focus on how wars end. This article uses this idea to explore the events of 1945

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Crowds in London celebrate the end of the Second World War in May 1945

EXAM LINKS

AQA 2R The Cold War, c.1945–1991

Edexcel Paper 3, Option 37.1 The changing nature of warfare, 1859–1991: perception and reality

OCR Y223/Y253 The Cold War in Europe, 1941–1995

OCR Y315 The changing nature of warfare, 1792–1945

WJEC Unit 1, Part 8 Europe in an age of conflict and co-operation, c.1890–1991

Historians have tended to focus on why wars begin, but in the current age of interminable 'forever wars' that drag

on inconclusively, they have begun to put more emphasis on how they end. In the case of the Second World War, this is complicated by defining its chronology and also recognising that rather than being a simple struggle between two associated sides it was, in reality, a bundle of separate, intertwining wars.

The nature of the Second World War

The accepted chronology of the Second World War is that it started in September 1939 with Germany's invasion of Poland, then gradually expanded into a global conflict involving all the

world's great powers, and ended with the atomic bombing and surrender of Japan in August 1945.

That chronology has been challenged by historians who prefer the concept of a 'long' Second World War, dating from Japan's invasion of Manchuria in 1931 or its attack on China in 1937. Other historians frame the conflict as merely one phase in a 30-year-long European civil war that began in 1914 with the outbreak of the First World War.

Peace after war?

Both world wars resulted in tarnished victories for the winning coalitions, not least because they were followed by a chaotic 'peace' of civil wars, ethnic strife and political violence. Four million people died in such conflicts after the First World War.

Greece and China in 1945 saw the beginning of 5-year civil wars, while in Yugoslavia, Marshal Tito's communist partisans killed 70,000 so-called collaborators. In Poland and Ukraine, nationalist insurgents battled communist authorities until the mid-1950s. India's postwar struggle for independence culminated in partition and a sectarian bloodbath, while throughout South-East Asia indigenous national liberation movements that had fought Japanese occupation turned their guns on returning European colonialists.

The 'savage continent'

Europe in 1945 was, as Keith Lowe memorably put it, 'a savage continent' – a region of disorder and devastation inhabited by tens of millions of refugees, a maelstrom of vengeance and retribution (mostly against Germans) that witnessed ethnic cleansing on a massive scale.

The Red Army enters Prague in May 1945



Richard Overly describes it as 'the last imperial war', a conflict driven by a clash between have and have-not imperial powers. The Axis alliance of Germany, Italy and Japan sought territorial empires to match those of rivals Britain and France. The British and French went to war to defend their empires as well as their national security and societal values, but in the long run lost virtually all of their colonies. As Overly notes, perhaps the most fundamental outcome of the Second World War was an end to European imperialism and the creation of a new international political order based on a multitude of independent sovereign states in Africa and Asia as well as Europe and the Americas.

That outcome was far from pre-ordained. Without Hitler's intervention, European colonialism might have survived for many more decades. It was Hitler's miscalculation that he could attack Poland with impunity that led to the outbreak of a major European war between Germany, Britain and France. His military victories in Europe undermined Western imperial power and encouraged Japanese expansionism in Asia. The Nazis' barbarous campaign in Russia was noted for its many atrocities and Hitler's virulent antisemitism begat the Holocaust, which began with the murder of a million Soviet Jewish people in 1941–42.

Soviet Union and USA

Hitler's grab for world power was thwarted not by France – which surrendered to Germany in June 1940 – or by a defiant but isolated Britain. Two self-proclaimed anti-colonial powers – the Soviet Union and the USA – were the main victors. In East Asia, Japan's short-lived empire was destroyed by American sea and air power, while in Europe, Stalin's Red Army inflicted 10 million casualties on the Germans.

Ironically, both states had started the war, in 1939, as self-declared neutrals. Neither state entered the war until attacked, Soviet Russia by Nazi Germany in June 1941, and the USA by Japan at Pearl Harbor in December 1941.

Germany and Japan face defeat

The victory year of 1945 began with the Red Army's liberation of Auschwitz in January 1945. Auschwitz was by no means the first Nazi death camp captured by the Soviets, but it was by far the biggest. A million people died at Auschwitz. The majority were Jewish people, but Roma (Gypsies), homosexual people, Christians, communists and socialists were also victims. Gruesome reports from Auschwitz, followed by searing film images of the concentration camps at Belsen and Dachau, could not but reinforce the already-strong belief in the righteousness of the Allied cause.

The Red Army's capture of Auschwitz was part of the Vistula–Oder operation – an advance across Poland and Germany from Warsaw to the outskirts of Berlin. The German capital was itself taken by the Red Army in April 1945 (at the cost of 80,000 Soviet soldiers' lives). At the same time, Soviet troops advanced to Prague and Vienna. On 25 April, American and Soviet troops linked up at the Elbe river, just east of Leipzig and Dresden – a happy occasion that was re-staged for newsreel cameras.

To evade Soviet captivity, Hitler killed himself in his Berlin bunker on 30 April 1945, as then did propaganda minister Joseph Goebbels and his wife, Magda, who before she died administered cyanide to their six children. Hitler's death precipitated Germany's surrender but the country had been doomed to defeat since the Soviet victory at Stalingrad in 1943 and the Western Allied invasion of France in June 1944. The D-Day landings in Normandy were co-ordinated with a gigantic summer offensive by the Red Army that destroyed German Army Group Centre, the flower of Hitler's remaining military forces, and liberated Belorussia from Nazi occupation.

The Allies' plan for the postwar world

Summits, conferences and surrenders

After D-Day, political attention within the anti-Hitler coalition turned increasingly to the postwar peace settlement. The so-called 'Big Three' – Churchill, Roosevelt and Stalin – first met at Tehran in November 1943 and for a second time at the Crimean seaside resort of Yalta in February 1945. Both summits signalled a commitment to the long-term continuation of Soviet–Western collaboration – in effect, they marked a peacetime grand alliance.

A key institution of the new postwar order was the United Nations, which held its founding conference at San Francisco in April 1945. The UN looked a lot like its discredited predecessor, the League of Nations, but the UN's Security Council contained five permanent members – Britain, China, France, the USA and the Soviet Union – each of whom wielded a veto over all important decisions. The postwar order envisaged by the Big Three was a great power-imposed peace with a global reach.

By the time the Red Army captured Berlin, Germany was the last European Axis state standing. Italy, Finland, Romania, Hungary and Bulgaria had all surrendered in 1943–44. Like their former allies, the Germans were required to sign (on 8 May) an instrument of unconditional surrender. The victorious allies had no intention of signing an armistice with the Germans that would allow them to recover their military



The United Nations founding conference in April 1945

strength – as happened after the First World War. Germany would be occupied for as long as it took to demilitarise, denazify and democratise the country and its people.

Victory partnership and exclusion

Victory in Europe Day was jubilantly celebrated across the Allied world, but the parades and media coverage were predominantly white. Yet a million Africans fought in the war, as did 25,000 colonial troops from the Caribbean. Hundreds of thousands of soldiers from the Indian sub-continent fought in Europe and North Africa as well as Asia. Two hundred thousand black American soldiers passed through Britain during the war. China lost 15–20 million people in its decade-long battle with the Japanese.

Victory celebrations in the multinational USSR were more ethnically inclusive, but Stalin singled out the Russians for particular praise as the bulwark of the Soviet war effort. Stalin's global popularity peaked in 1945. The Soviet Union was seen as the country that had borne the brunt of the war against Nazi Germany and as an essential partner in an enduring peace.

In many quarters in the West, there was confidence in Stalin as a sagacious leader, presiding over a benign autocracy, whose socialist society had much in common with Western social democracies. Across Europe there had been a massive political swing to the left, with many governments consisting of coalitions that included

pro-Soviet communists, notably in France and Italy, where the 'Reds' had led the resistance to Nazi and Fascist occupation.

From Allied unity to confrontation

The euphoria of victory and Soviet-Western unity faded fast. Post-Yalta, the grand alliance began to crack, notably over the political composition of Poland's postwar government. Stalin wanted a regime friendly to the Soviet Union, while Churchill and Roosevelt sought a role for pro-Western Polish politicians. Matters were complicated by Roosevelt's untimely death on 12 April 1945 and Churchill's shocking landslide defeat by Labour in the British general election of July 1945.

But by the time Roosevelt's successor, Harry Truman, met Stalin at the Potsdam summit of July–August 1945, the Polish issue had been resolved by a compromise agreement that broadened the incumbent pro-Soviet government and promised free elections.

Japan fought on in summer 1945 – a war the Americans had been trying to get the Soviets into

since Pearl Harbor. Eventually, Stalin agreed to attack Japanese forces in Manchuria, but not until 3 months after the defeat of Germany. Truman was very happy with this arrangement since it would save many American lives, but his calculations began to change when, on 17 July, the USA tested its first atomic bomb.

The atomic bomb

The USA atom bombed Hiroshima on 6 August and Nagasaki on 9 August, while the Red Army invaded Manchuria on 8/9 August. The dual shock of the atomic and Soviet attacks prompted Japan's surrender on 14 August. Millions of lives were saved by this sudden end to the Far Eastern war, but it frustrated Stalin's plan to invade and occupy Hokkaido, Japan's northernmost home island. It also gave Truman the opportunity to keep the Soviets out of the postwar military occupation of Japan.

When Truman revealed the secret of the atomic bomb at Potsdam, Stalin evinced little interest but soon started a crash programme to develop a Soviet nuclear arsenal. By 1949, the Soviets – aided and abetted by their spies in the **Manhattan Project** – had their own atomic bomb.

The Council of Foreign Ministers

In Europe, the main point of tension was Stalin's determination that the fruits of victory would include a Soviet sphere of influence in Central and Eastern Europe. But the British and Americans refused to accept pro-Moscow governments in Bulgaria and Romania. Matters came to a head at the first meeting of the Council of Foreign Ministers (CFM) in London in September 1945, which broke up in disarray. Established as the institutional framework for Anglo-Soviet–American negotiation of the peace treaties that would frame the postwar order, the CFM's failure to agree was a harbinger of the coming Cold War.

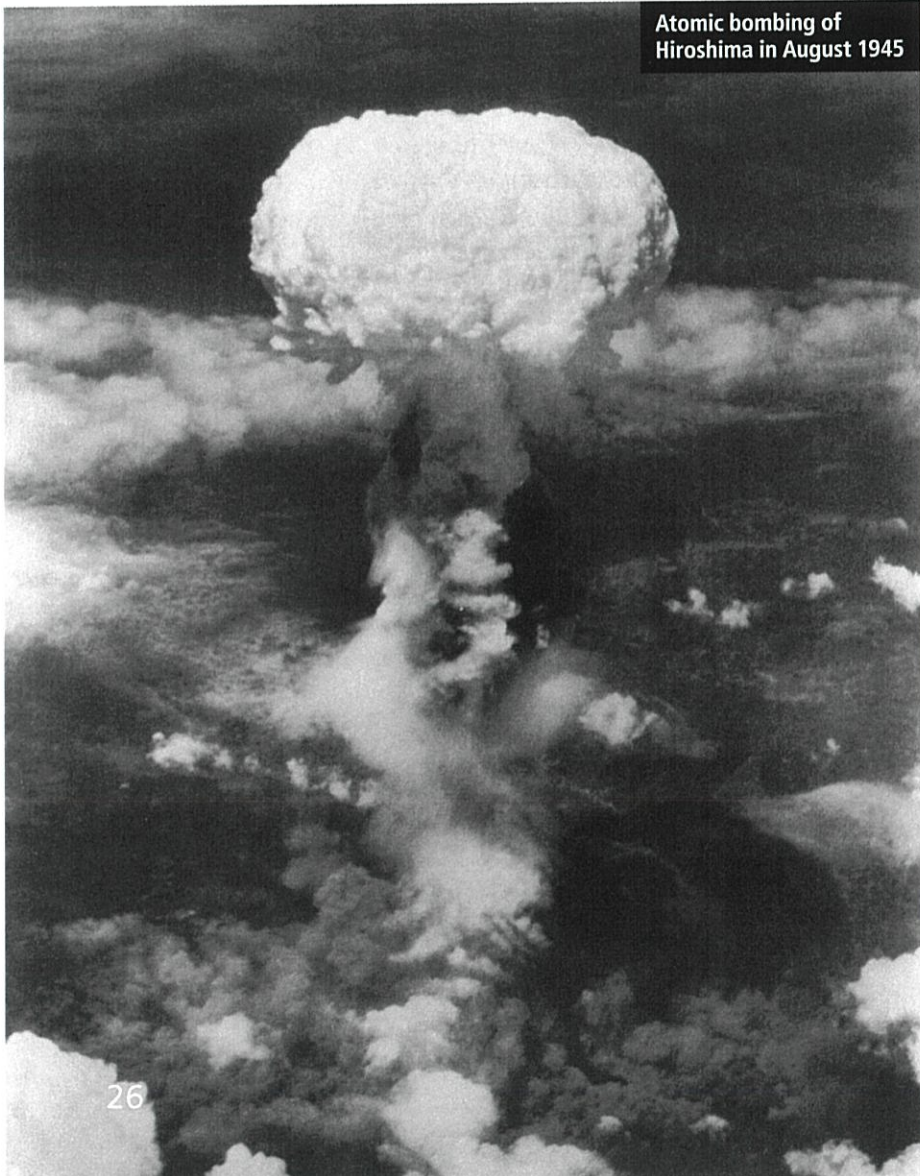
By 1948, the spectre of a new world war haunted Europe as the continent divided into competing military, political and ideological blocs and the Soviet Union and the USA confronted each other across what Churchill famously called the 'iron curtain'.

Nazi trials

A more enduring postwar achievement of the Soviet–Western alliance was an August 1945 decision to establish an international military tribunal to prosecute major Nazi war criminals. That trial took place at Nuremberg in 1946 when 24 top Nazi leaders were arraigned for crimes against peace, war crimes and crimes against humanity. Twelve of the 24 accused were found guilty and executed, three were acquitted, and

Manhattan Project
A secret American and allied programme to build nuclear weapons.

Atomic bombing of Hiroshima in August 1945



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the rest given long prison sentences. Luftwaffe chief Hermann Göring evaded execution by killing himself.

Inevitably, this exercise in victors' justice glossed over the war crimes of the winners. The Soviets had executed 20,000 Polish prisoners of war in 1940, and British and American bombers had killed upwards of a million German and Japanese civilians. But Nuremberg did establish the illegality of aggressive war and introduced the concept of crimes against humanity into international law. It also helped strengthen the rules of warfare – especially the principle that civilians were not legitimate military targets – and paved the way for agreements such as the Genocide Convention and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948.

RESOURCES

- Ó Gráda, C. (2024) *The Hidden Victims: Civilian Casualties of the Two World Wars* Princeton University Press.
- Jackson, A. (2006) *The British Empire and the Second World War*, Hambledon.
- Lowe, K. (2012) *Savage Continent: Europe in the aftermath of World War II*, Viking.
- Mawdsley, E. (2020) *World War II: a new history* (2nd edn), Cambridge University Press.
- Overy, R. (2021) *Blood and Ruins: the great imperial war, 1931–45*, Allen Lane.

Conclusion

There was hope as well as horror in 1945, heroes as well as villains. Slowly, Europe and much of the rest of the world began to recover and overcome the legacy of unprecedented savagery. Local horrors continued but the mass scale of the Second World War has, thankfully, not yet been repeated.

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QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- 1 'War rarely solves problems, rather it turns them into other problems.' Do you agree?
- 2 Was the collapse of the wartime Grand Alliance of America, Britain and Russia inevitable?
- 3 How important was the founding of the United Nations?

Using this article in your exam

EXAM FOCUS

How could this article be useful in your exam?

This article will be useful to those studying the causes, course and impact of the Second World War, but also to those following themes-based papers on the nature of warfare. In particular, the piece is helpful in:

- stressing that the topic of how wars end is sometimes neglected by students – there tends to be more focus on the causes and course of wars such as the Second World War
- pointing out that the Second World War was actually 'a bundle of separate, intertwining wars'
- showing how the temporal (time-related) aspect of the war is interpreted differently by historians. Some, for example, argue that it was a phase in a long, drawn-out European civil war
- indicating that wars do not necessarily immediately result in a period of peaceful relations between countries
- outlining some important pieces of historiography. How valid is Keith Lowe's view that Europe in 1945 was a 'savage continent'? How convincing is Richard Overy's interpretation of the Second World War as being 'the last imperial war'?
- emphasising that the Soviet Union and the USA were the main victors. How far do you agree with this interpretation?
- highlighting that VE Day was 'predominantly white'.

A typical exam question on this topic might be worded as follows:

'The most important consequence of the Second World War was the division of Germany'. How far do you agree with this view?'