

FOCUS QUESTIONS


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- What effect did World War II have on American society?
- How did the Allied forces win the war in Europe?
- How did the United States gain the upper hand in the Pacific sphere?
- What efforts did the Allies make to shape the postwar world?

The Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor ended a period of tense neutrality for the United States, and it launched the nation into a global conflict that would cost the lives of over 400,000 Americans. The war would also transform the nation's social and economic life, as well as its position in international affairs. The Second World War would become the most destructive and far-reaching conflict in history. It was so terrible in its intensity and obscene in its cruelties that it altered the image of war itself. Devilish new instruments of destruction were invented—plastic explosives, proximity fuses, rockets, jet airplanes, and atomic weapons—and systematic genocide emerged as an explicit war aim of the Nazis. The scorching passions of such an all-out war blanching many moral protocols from the conduct of war. Racist propaganda flourished on both sides, and excited hatred of the enemy caused many military and civilian prisoners to be tortured and executed. Over 50 million deaths resulted

from the worldwide war, two thirds of them civilians. The physical destruction was incalculable. Whole cities were leveled, nations dismembered, and societies transformed. The world is still coping with the consequences.

AMERICA'S EARLY BATTLES

At the end of 1941, the United States was woefully unprepared to wage a world war on multiple fronts. The army and navy were understaffed and underequipped. And it would take months for the economy to make the transition to full-scale military production. Yet time was of the essence. Japanese and German forces had seized the initiative and were on the move. Momentum was on their side.

SETBACKS IN THE PACIFIC For months after the attack on Pearl Harbor, the news from the Pacific was “all bad,” as President Roosevelt confessed. In quick sequence the well-armed and well-led Japanese captured numerous Allied outposts before the end of December 1941: Guam, Wake Island, the Gilbert Islands, and Hong Kong. Other British and American territories toppled like dominoes. The fall of Rangoon (present-day Yangon), in Burma, cut off the Burma Road, the main supply route to China. In the Philippines, where General Douglas MacArthur's army abandoned Manila on December 27, the main U.S. forces, outmanned and outgunned, held out on the Bataan Peninsula until April 9 and then retreated to the fortified island of Corregidor. General MacArthur slipped away in March, when he was ordered to Australia to take command of the Allied forces in the southwest Pacific. By May 6, 1942, when the American garrison at Corregidor



Early defeats

U.S. prisoners of war, captured by the Japanese in the Philippines, 1942.

surrendered, Japan controlled a vast new empire, (the "Rising Sun"), which stretched from Burma eastward through the Dutch East Indies and extending to Wake Island and the Gilbert Islands in the western Pacific.

The Japanese might have consolidated an almost impregnable empire with the resources they had seized. But leaders of the Japanese navy succumbed to what one of its admirals later called victory disease: intoxicated with easy victories and lusting for more conquests, they pushed on into the South Pacific, intending to isolate Australia, and strike again at Hawaii. Japanese war planners hoped to destroy the American navy before the productive power of the United States could be brought to bear on the war effort.

A Japanese mistake and a stroke of American luck enabled the U.S. Navy to frustrate the plan, however. Japan's failure to destroy the onshore facilities at Pearl Harbor left the naval base relatively intact, and most of the ships damaged on December 7 would be refitted to fight another day. The aircraft carriers that were luckily at sea during the surprise attack spent several months harassing Japanese outposts. Their most spectacular exploit, an air raid on Tokyo itself, was launched on April 18, 1942. B-25 bombers took off from the carrier *Hornet* and, unable to land on its deck, proceeded to China after dropping their bombs over Tokyo. The raid caused only token damage but did much to lift American morale amid a series of defeats elsewhere.

CORAL SEA AND MIDWAY During the spring of 1942, U.S. forces finally halted the Japanese advance toward Australia in two key naval battles. The Battle of the Coral Sea (May 7–8, 1942) stopped a fleet convoying Japanese troops toward New Guinea. Planes from the *Lexington* and the *Yorktown* sank one Japanese carrier, damaged another, and destroyed smaller ships. American losses were greater, but the Japanese threat against Australia was repulsed.

Less than a month after the Coral Sea engagement, Admiral Isoroku Yamamoto, the Japanese naval commander, steered his fleet for Midway, the westernmost of Hawaii's inhabited islands, from which he hoped to render Pearl Harbor helpless. This time it was the Japanese who were the victims of surprise. American cryptanalysts had by then broken the Japanese naval code, and Admiral Chester Nimitz, commander of the central Pacific, knew what was up. He reinforced Midway with planes and aircraft carriers.

The first Japanese foray against Midway, on June 4, 1942, severely damaged the island's defenses, but at the cost of about a third of the Japanese planes. American dive bombers struck back before another Japanese attack could be mounted. In the strategic Battle of Midway, the Japanese lost their four best aircraft carriers; the Americans, a carrier and a destroyer. The Japanese navy

was forced into retreat less than six months after the attack on Hawaii. The Battle of Midway was the turning point of the Pacific war. It demonstrated that aircraft carriers, not battleships, were the decisive elements of modern naval warfare, and it bought time for the United States to mobilize for a wider war.

SETBACKS IN THE ATLANTIC Early American setbacks in the Pacific were matched by setbacks in the Atlantic. Since the blitzkrieg of 1940, German submarine "wolf packs" had wreaked havoc in the North Atlantic. In 1942, German submarines appeared off American shores and began to attack coastal shipping. Nearly 400 ships were lost before effective countermeasures brought the problem under control. The naval command accelerated the building of small escort vessels, meanwhile pressing into patrol service all kinds of surface craft and planes, some of them civilian. During the second half of 1942, the losses to Nazi submarines diminished substantially.

MOBILIZATION AT HOME

Roosevelt's declaration of war ended not only the long public debate on isolation and intervention but also the long depression that had ravaged the economy during the 1930s. The war effort would require all of America's immense industrial capacity and full employment of the workforce. Mobilization was in fact already further along than preparedness had been in 1916–1917. The army had grown to more than 1.4 million men by July 1941. With the declaration of war, men between the ages of eighteen and forty-five were drafted. The average soldier or sailor was twenty-six years old, stood five feet eight, and weighed 144 pounds, an inch taller and eight pounds heavier than the typical recruit in World War I. Less than half the soldiers and sailors had finished high school. Altogether, more than 15 million men and women would serve in the armed forces over the course of the conflict.

ECONOMIC CONVERSION The economy, too, was already partially mobilized for war, by the lend-lease and defense preparedness efforts. The War Powers Act of 1941 had given the president the authority to reshuffle government agencies, and a second War Powers Act empowered the government to allot materials and facilities as needed for defense, with penalties for those companies that failed to comply.

The War Production Board, created in 1942, directed the conversion of industrial manufacturing to war production. Roosevelt established staggering