

# The USSR in World War II



*The Second World War was the bloodiest conflict in human history. The Soviet Union suffered far more human losses than any other country, losing more than 20 million soldiers and civilians throughout the course of the war. The colossal price of victory over Nazi Germany made World War II a defining moment in history for the Soviet Union and the independent states that emerged from it, especially Russia. Known to Russians as the Great Patriotic War, it remains a source of immense pride and is an important component of national identity in the region.*

## QUICK FACTS

**Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact**—A non-aggression agreement between the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany. Secret protocols of the agreement established spheres of influence over Eastern Europe. It was named for German Foreign Minister Joachim von Ribbentrop and Soviet Foreign Minister Vyacheslav Molotov.

**When Did the War Begin?**—Most European and American scholars consider the invasion of Poland in 1939 to be the beginning of World War II. However, in Russia the invasion of the Soviet Union in 1941 is usually considered the beginning of the war. Due to the German-Soviet pact of 1939, the beginning date of the war can be a sensitive political issue.



## DIVIDING EUROPE AND THE BRINK OF WAR

The 1930s were a decade of intense change in the Soviet Union as Joseph Stalin carried out a brutal campaign of purges against political enemies — both real and imagined. His policies of forced collectivization and industrialization led to the deaths of millions across the country. However, the USSR rapidly modernized and its industrial capacity grew at a staggering rate.

During the same period, Adolf Hitler was consolidating his grip over Germany and planning a campaign to create a land empire in Europe. He and Stalin both saw opportunities in the states bordering their countries. Stalin wanted to spread communism westward and recapture territories lost during the Russian Civil War two decades earlier. Hitler wanted to use Eastern Europe as a place to force “inferior” races to extract resources and to grow food to feed ethnic Germans, a policy known as “lebensraum” or “living space.”

In 1938 Germany annexed Austria and part of Czechoslovakia, beginning its eastward expansion. The Soviet Union looked on nervously as the German border moved closer while remaining skeptical of an alliance with the capitalist nations of France and Britain.

On August 23, 1939, the USSR and Nazi Germany signed a non-aggression agreement, known as the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, named after the two countries’ foreign ministers. During secret talks over the agreement, Eastern Europe was divided into spheres of influence, and the leaders agreed to split control over the countries between themselves.

On September 1 Germany invaded Poland from the west. Sixteen days later the Soviet Union invaded Poland from the east. The two countries set to work carrying out their respective ideological policies toward the local populations.

The next summer the Soviet Union invaded the Baltic states and the eastern portion of Romania, expanding the Soviet project further into Europe. Germany and the USSR, ideological enemies, agreed to improve trade relations.



## GERMANY INVADES THE SOVIET UNION

Soviet leaders had long known that Nazi Germany could invade, but they thought they would have enough time to prepare their military. In addition to restoring much of the Russian Empire's lost territory to the Soviet Union, Stalin and the Soviet leadership believed the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact would delay war with Hitler.

On June 22, 1941, Germany launched a massive invasion of the Soviet Union, surprising Stalin, who had ignored warnings from Western leaders that an invasion was imminent. The invasion, known as Operation Barbarossa, drove deep into Soviet territory. German troops quickly overwhelmed the Red Army, which had been left disorganized and ill-equipped for battle since Stalin's purges of the 1930s had decimated the military's leadership.

German troops scored quick victories, capturing the rest of Poland and driving deep into Ukraine, Belarus, and western Russia. Nazi security forces, known as the SS, soon began massacring the local Jewish populations. More than 1.5 million Soviet Jews were shot or gassed during the war.

Hitler believed the invasion would lead to the quick collapse of the Soviet Union, but total victory proved more difficult than expected. German and Soviet troops fought ferociously, and Nazi forces reached the outskirts of Moscow and Leningrad but failed to capture the cities. Leningrad suffered a devastating, 872-day siege during which more than a million civilians died from violence and starvation.

When the winter of 1941-1942 set in, German troops proved unable to push into Moscow. They also lacked adequate supplies to fight effectively in the flash floods of the autumn, which soon gave way to the freezing Russian winter. The Red Army by this time was reorganizing and preparing to push westward.

On December 7, 1941, Japan attacked Pearl Harbor, bringing the United States into the war. The US entry meant more German resources were needed to fight growing allied pressure on the Western Front.

Conditions for prisoners of war captured on the Eastern Front were horrendous on both the Soviet side and the German side. The barbaric treatment of Soviet and German POWs meant that for many soldiers it was preferable to fight to the death rather than be captured, which could mean torture, forced labor, or starvation. These policies, clear violations of international norms of the time, ensured prolonged battles and high death tolls. An order issued by Stalin also meant that officers who allowed their soldiers to retreat could be arrested.

Stalin reversed some of his international communist rhetoric in an attempt to stir up Russian nationalism, claiming the Red Army was fighting a "Great Patriotic War," a name that invoked the Russian Empire's defeat of Napoleon in 1812.



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*German soldiers occupy Kharkiv in eastern Ukraine.*

### QUICK FACTS

#### The Holocaust in the Soviet Union—

Between 1.5 million and 2.5 million Soviet Jews were murdered during the Holocaust, accounting for roughly one third of the total victims.

**Prisoners of War—**The USSR took an estimated 3 million German soldiers as prisoners. It is believed that around one third of them died while in captivity, although the USSR did not keep accurate records. Nazi Germany took more than 5.5 million Soviet soldiers prisoner. Around 57 percent died while in German prisons or concentration camps due to exceptionally brutal treatment. By contrast, only about 3.6 percent of American and British prisoners died while held by Germany.

**Changes of Policy—**Stalin made a number of concessions during the war to drum up patriotism and support for the war cause. For example, Stalin relaxed Soviet restrictions on religion and allowed churches to reopen.

**Katyn Massacre—**In 1940 the Soviet secret police, the NKVD, executed an estimated 22,000 Poles in a forest in western Russia. The victims were Polish military officers, police, and members of Poland's intelligentsia. The massacre was discovered in 1943 when Nazi soldiers found the mass grave. The USSR denied the massacre until 1990.

### USEFUL LINKS

[CIA World Factbook:](#)  
[BBC Country Page:](#)  
[National Geographic:](#)  
[Kyiv Post English](#)





## THE BATTLE OF STALINGRAD AND SOVIET VICTORY

Although they were unable to capture Moscow as Hitler had predicted, German soldiers continued advancing east into Russia. By summer 1942 the Nazi army had captured all of Ukraine, much of southern Russia, and the Caucasus.

In September Nazi forces began a siege of the city of Stalingrad (now known as Volgograd) on the Volga River. The battle is considered the largest and bloodiest in the history of warfare. More than 700,000 Nazi soldiers and 1.1 million Soviet soldiers were killed in five months of fighting.

By February 1943, German forces were surrounded, desperately low on supplies, and beginning to starve and freeze to death. The remaining soldiers surrendered, marking a major turning point in the war.

The Red Army began reclaiming territory, forcing German troops to retreat from Russia and recapturing Ukraine east of the Dniro River by autumn 1943.

By this point it was becoming clear that the Soviet Union would not collapse and that Germany would eventually be defeated. Stalin met with British Prime Minister Winston Churchill and US President Franklin D. Roosevelt in Tehran, where the leaders discussed their roles in the conflict and began making plans for the post-war order. A second conference was held in Yalta in Crimea in February 1945.

In spring 1944 Soviet forces were advancing into Poland. By October they had reached Warsaw. In January 1945 Red Army troops entered Germany and by May had encircled Berlin. On May 8 Germany surrendered. However, because the articles of surrender were signed after midnight Moscow time, the date is remembered as May 9 in much of the former Soviet Union.



*The “Big Three” — Churchill, Roosevelt, and Stalin — meet in Yalta in 1945.*



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*The Battle of Stalingrad is considered to be the largest single battle in human history*

### QUICK FACTS

**Kyiv Booby Trap** — As Soviet forces were being forced out of Ukraine’s capital, Kyiv, they planted explosives in buildings along the city’s main thoroughfare. Once German soldiers had captured the city and occupied the buildings, the explosives were detonated remotely, laying waste to much of Kyiv’s central district. The street was reconstructed in grand Stalinist architectural style in the 1950s.

**Postwar Demographic Crisis**—The war drastically reduced the population of the Soviet Union. While exact figures are not available, more than 20 million Soviet citizens are believed to have been killed during the war. Men were most affected due to the large number of military casualties. In 1946 there were an estimated seven men for every ten women in the Soviet Union.

**New Borders**—The Soviet Union kept much of the territory it gained following the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact. Poland’s borders were shifted westward and part of the country’s former territory was incorporated into what is now Belarus and Ukraine. The Baltic states also became Soviet republics. Germany’s border was also moved westward under Soviet occupation, and millions of Germans were expelled from territory that is now western Poland at the end of the war.

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## LEGACY OF WORLD WAR II IN THE FORMER SOVIET UNION

The price of Soviet victory in World War II was enormous. More than 13 percent of the population had been killed and 25 million were homeless by the end of the war. The postwar years saw a significant gender imbalance, since many of the country's men were killed as soldiers in battle. The USSR lost approximately seven times as many soldiers as all of the other allies combined in the European theater. In 1946 and 1947, a famine swept through the Soviet Union due to drought and devastation from the war.

Despite the massive loss of life and hardship, the Soviet Union emerged from the war as a global power. With British influence diminished due to heavy losses during the war and the effects of decolonization, the United States and the Soviet Union were left as the world's two unrivaled superpowers, a situation that would soon lead to decades of conflict.

Upon defeat Germany was forced to give up the territories it had annexed before it invaded the Soviet Union, including Czechoslovakia, Hungary, and the western part of Poland. The Soviet Union, however, kept the eastern piece of Poland it had taken in accordance with the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, incorporating it into the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic. That territory remains part of modern-day Ukraine and includes the city of Lviv. The three Baltic states also remained part of the Soviet Union, as did Moldova. Those countries gained independence in 1991 with the collapse of the USSR.



Russia celebrates Victory Day each year on May 9. The event includes huge parades and is often an opportunity to debut new military equipment. Soviet victory over Nazi Germany remains a major source of national pride. Victory Day is no longer an official holiday in some former Soviet Republics that have tense relations with Moscow and has been replaced by other ceremonies.



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A Soviet propaganda poster from World War II.

## DISCUSSION IDEAS

Why did the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany sign a non-aggression pact in 1939? Discuss the interests of both countries in pursuing the agreement.

Discuss how the war affected the course of Soviet and post-Soviet history. How did it change the Soviet Union?

What did Hitler hope to achieve by invading the Soviet Union? Why did the invasion eventually fail?

Why have some former Soviet republics chosen to replace Victory Day with other commemorations? What is the legacy of World War II in other former communist nations?

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Snyder, Timothy. *Bloodlands: Europe Between Hitler and Stalin*. Basic Books, 2012.

"The War of the Century: When Hitler Fought Stalin." — 1999 documentary series by the BBC.

"Soviet Storm: World War II in the East." — 2011 Russian television documentary series.

Glantz, David M. and House, Jonathan. *When Titans Clashed: How the Red Army Stopped Hitler*. University Press of Kansas, 1995.

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