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# The End of World War II

Throughout the years of World War II, the Allied nations (led by the United States, Great Britain, and the Soviet Union) struggled against the tyranny and aggression of Hitler's Germany, Mussolini's Italy, and the imperialism of Japan.

In May of 1945, the war in Europe came to an end, with the German army, navy, and air force surrendering to the Allies (Italy had surrendered as early as 1943). That summer, the United States and Britain successfully tested a new type of weapon—the atomic bomb—which they used to bring the Japanese government to its knees after dropping two of these highly destructive devices on the Japanese mainland cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in early August.

World War II was a conflict of monumental scope. Nearly 50 million people worldwide lost their lives during the war. From Europe to Asia, cities and infrastructures such as roads, bridges, tunnels, and airports lay in ruin.

Unlike World War I, which was fought on a limited scale across the farmlands of rural France and the eastern front, World War II was a conflict of modern weapons, high mobility, and much urban destruction. The brutality of war produced tens of millions of homeless refugees and many starving people. In the Netherlands, occupied by the Germans since 1940, people were on the brink of starvation until the Allies organized an airlift of food. Not only did millions of soldiers lose their lives on hundreds of battlefields, but many civilians suffered the trials of war. Some of the refugees of the war were former inmates in Nazi concentration camps, liberated by victorious Allied armies.

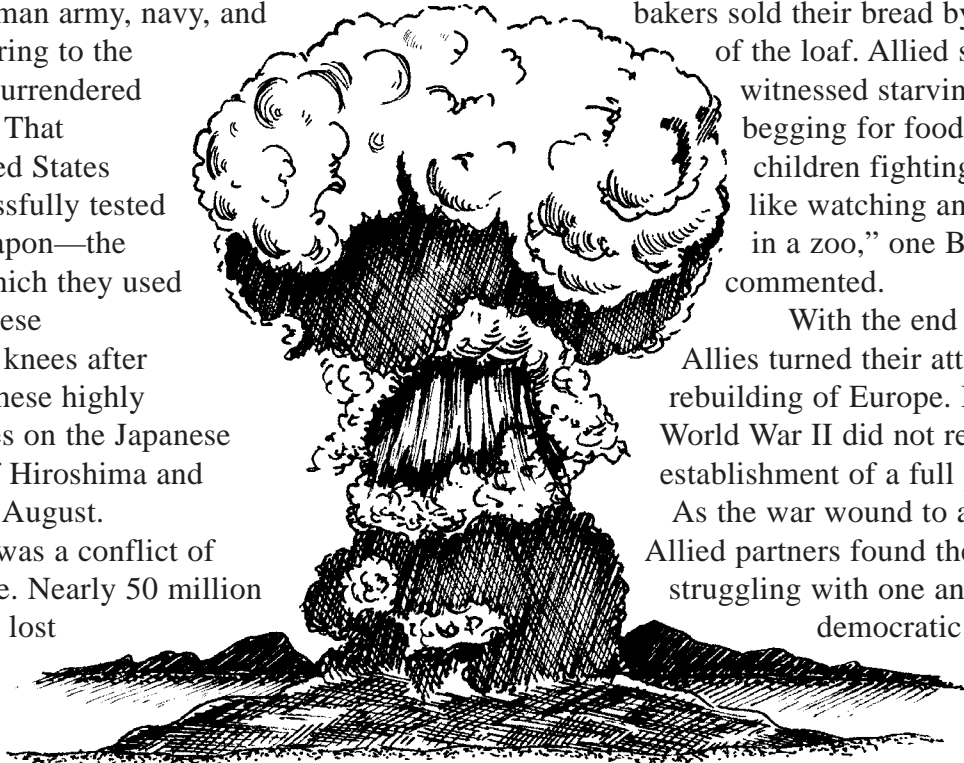
The devastation of the war was evident everywhere. Cities were reduced to rubble. Bridges were destroyed. In Europe, several key rivers did not

have a single standing bridge. In the Soviet Union alone, 70,000 peasant villages were destroyed, plus several major cities. There were shortages of all the necessities of life, from fuel to food. No one had money, so those in need bartered for what little was available. In Italy, food was in such shortage that bakers sold their bread by the slice instead of the loaf. Allied soldiers witnessed starving children begging for food. "To see the children fighting for food was like watching animals being fed in a zoo," one British soldier commented.

With the end of the war, the Allies turned their attention to the rebuilding of Europe. But the end of World War II did not result in the establishment of a full peace.

As the war wound to a conclusion, the Allied partners found themselves struggling with one another. The democratic nations of the United States and Great Britain faced a new challenge from their

former communist ally, the Soviet Union. What brought about this conflict between former allies amid the ashes and rubble of World War II—this conflict which would soon be termed the *Cold War*?



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## Review and Write

1. How and when did World War II end in Europe and in the Pacific?
2. Describe in detail the extent of the devastation experienced by Europe at the end of World War II.

# The Beginning of the Cold War

At the outset of World War II, the Allied nations relied on the leadership of Great Britain and France. However, France fell to the Nazis in the summer of 1940, leaving the British at war with Germany. But, by 1941, two other major powers were at war with the Axis nations. Germany's invasion of the Soviet Union and the Japanese attack on the American bases in Hawaii brought both the U.S. and the USSR. into the war.

These three nations—the United States, the Soviet Union and Great Britain—and their leaders—Franklin Roosevelt, Joseph Stalin, and Winston Churchill—formed a wartime alliance of grand proportions. Only through their combined efforts did the Allies achieve ultimate success against their fascist and imperialist enemies. But their decisions during the war directly affected not only its outcome, but the direction of the postwar world. Ultimately, their different views of Europe after the war caused the development of another type of conflict—one eventually labeled the *Cold War*.

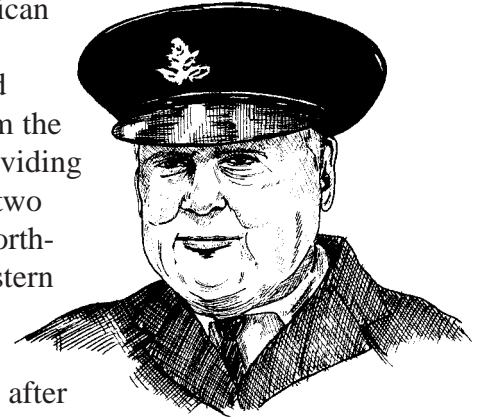
Despite their common wartime goals, relations between the three Allied leaders were often strained. Typically, these men disagreed on details of strategy for pursuing the war. After the entrance of the United States into the war, Stalin demanded the U.S. and Britain establish a second front in western Europe to aid the Soviet Union's struggle against German forces in the east.

Such an invasion of western Europe did not take place, however, until the summer of 1944. Churchill and Roosevelt instead pursued the Germans by establishing a front in northern Africa to protect vital oil fields and provide a springboard site for an invasion of southern Europe in Italy. This series of campaigns, although valuable to the overall Allied war effort, was not to Stalin's liking.

A turning point in determining the future of Europe after the war was the Allied conference held in November 1943 at Tehran (the capital of Iran). Stalin, Roosevelt, and Churchill were in attendance. It was at that conference that Roosevelt promised Stalin that a U.S.-British invasion of western Europe would take place by the spring of 1944.

This decision proved momentous. It signaled that the final Allied campaigns in Germany would cause

British and American forces to advance from the west and Soviet forces from the east, creating a dividing line between the two armies running north-south, leaving eastern Europe occupied by Soviet troops.



*Winston Churchill*

Three months after the Tehran meeting, the Allied leaders met again, this time at Yalta in southern Russia. By this time, the defeat of Germany was clearly approaching. The Red Army of the Soviet Union, 11 million men strong, had occupied both eastern and much of central Europe.

A worried Roosevelt expressed concern for the political future of eastern Europe. He insisted that Stalin promise free elections in these Soviet occupied states. Stalin hedged, then promised "free and unfettered elections in Poland." (Actually, he had no intention of allowing any elections which were not friendly to the Soviet Union.)

With the defeat of Germany close at hand, the Grand Alliance of democratic America and Britain and the communist Soviet Union was already collapsing. As one conflict was ending, another was beginning.

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## *Review and Write*

1. What common goals did Stalin, Roosevelt, and Churchill share during World War II?
2. Why did the Alliance between them collapse in 1945?
3. What major problems between the Allies were discussed at the Yalta Conference?

# Rebuilding Postwar Europe

With the end of World War II, Europe was in ruins. As the Nazi-controlled government of Germany surrendered in May of 1945, many Europeans lived in states formerly occupied and controlled by the Nazis.

With the collapse of Nazi control across Europe came the desire for revenge by those formerly held by German military and political control. As liberating Allied armies drove across Germany and eastern Europe in the latter days of the war, they discovered the many Nazi death camps established to exterminate ethnic minorities such as Jews and Slavs. Local leaders, angered and frustrated after years of Nazi persecution, rounded up and executed tens of thousands of German officers and party officials.

They turned on any of their citizens who cooperated with the German occupation of their land. In France, any woman accused of associating with the Germans had her head shaved and was forced to walk the streets of the local community naked.

As political control returned to the citizens of formerly occupied areas, local authorities organized denazification programs to reestablish local law and ban any remnants of fascism the Nazis had established. Among the more public instances of denazification were the Nuremberg Trials.

These Allied tribunals brought 24 high-ranking Nazi officials to trial for war crimes in Nuremberg, Germany. The judges at these trials ordered 12 of the defendants to be executed and the others imprisoned. (One of those ordered executed—Hermann Goering—cheated his captors by committing suicide in prison.)

Meanwhile, new European governments were formed, restoring national rule once again. The French established a new republic and a new constitution in 1946, which included granting women the right to vote. Formerly fascist Italy eliminated its monarchy. Other political reforms brought the Labour

Party to power in Great Britain (Prime Minister Winston Churchill was voted out of office just weeks following the end of the European war), promising increased social programs for the poor.

As the western European powers set out on a course of reform and restabilization, eastern Europe began facing new oppressive challenges from the Soviet Union. The Soviets systematically cracked down on democratic movements in central and eastern Europe. Between 1945 and 1948, the USSR forced communist governments in Bulgaria, Poland,

Hungary, Romania, Czechoslovakia, and East Germany. With the Soviet army in control of these eastern states, Stalinist control was taken with ease.

Only two eastern European nations escaped Soviet dominance after World War II—Yugoslavia and Albania. But communists controlled these two states as well. While Albania remained closely tied to the Stalinist movement, Yugoslavia went its own way under the leadership of Josip Broz, popularly known as Tito, who had led the communist

resistance against the Nazis during the war. During the years following World War II, most of the nations of Europe were lined up in two distinct camps—the democratic West, and the communist East.



*Josip Broz (“Tito”)*

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## *Review and Write*

1. How did European nations respond to the defeat of Germany and the end of Nazi control? What were some of the goals of “denazification programs?”
2. During World War II, the Allies were led by Churchill, FDR, and Stalin. By the summer of 1945, what leadership changes had occurred?
3. Describe the Soviet Union’s extension of power over eastern Europe after World War II.