

Turning Points

Goal: Students will gain a sense of the geographical scope of World War II and will relate the conflict to territorial disputes created by the imperialistic tendencies of the Axis Powers.

Objectives:

- 1) Students will gain map skills by working with maps of Europe, Asia, the Pacific Islands, and North Africa.
- 2) Students will locate 21 countries on a map of Europe.
- 3) Students will locate 18 countries or territories on a map of Asia and the Pacific Islands.
- 4) Students will locate 5 countries on a map of North Africa.
- 5) Students will mark the site of 4 “Turning Point” battles of World War II.

Soldiers fought World War II on many fronts. Initially, German armies turned from their conquests in Eastern Europe through Finland, into Denmark and Norway and finally France and Belgium. As France toppled, Italy declared war on Hitler’s enemies – Great Britain and the French Resistance. Mussolini opened fronts in North Africa and Greece, and Hitler had to come to his aid to avoid an Italian defeat. Hitler also began an assault against Great Britain. In 1940, Japan joined Germany and Italy in an alliance known as the Tripartite Pact. Japan occupied French Indo-China and parts of China in the hopes that they might re-open sources for supplies such as oil and rubber.

In June of 1941, Hitler went against the 1939 German-Soviet Non-Aggression pact he had made with Stalin saying that Germany would not attack Russia. German soldiers poured into the Soviet Union, doing much damage and eventually causing the deaths of 20 million Russians. After surrendering Moscow and Leningrad, the Soviets finally stopped the Germans at Stalingrad.

The conflict became worldwide when Japan launched a surprise attack on Pearl Harbor, Hawaii. The next day, the U.S. declared war on Japan and within a week, America joined the Allies in their fight against Germany and Italy.

On a map, have your students locate Germany, Italy, and Japan (the Axis Powers) and Great Britain, France, the Soviet Union, and the United States, together known as the Allies.

In 1942, at the peak of its power, Germany had conquered:

Poland	Belgium	Lithuania	Latvia	Estonia
Austria	Czechoslovakia	Netherlands	Denmark	
Norway	Yugoslavia	Albania	Greece	
Parts of France	USSR to Stalingrad			

Allies of Germany included:

Hungary
Romania
Bulgaria
Finland
Italy
Japan

The Japanese in August 1942 held:

The Kurile Islands	The Ryukyu Islands	The Caroline Islands
The Marshall Islands	The Marianas Islands	The Solomon Islands
The Philippine Islands	Parts of New Guinea	Burma
Thailand	French Indochina	Hong Kong
Formosa	Hainan	Manchuria
Korea	Parts of China	
The Netherlands Islands	(Sumatra, Java, Borneo, Celebes)	

Together, Germany and Italy in 1942 controlled:

Northern Egypt Northern cities in Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, and Libya

Also have the students chart the territories held by the Axis powers in 1942. Students should shade areas controlled by Germany in Brown, those controlled by Italy in Green, and those controlled by Japan in Red.

Finally, students will mark the sites of key “Turning Point” battles. These battles turned the tide of war for the Allies and gave them the upper hand in each respective theater. A short description of each “Turning Point” battle is included.

1) **Stalingrad**: The Germans invaded the Soviet Union in June of 1941, breaking the Non-Aggression Pact that Hitler and Stalin had negotiated in 1939. The Soviet army was weak because Stalin had killed or imprisoned Army leaders he though were plotting against him. As a result, the invading German army experienced many victories and pushed into the Soviet interior during 1941 and 1942.

Having taken Leningrad and Moscow, German forces under General Friedric von Paulus began attacking Stalingrad in August 1942. Fighting hard, the Germans were able to pierce through some of the city’s defenses. House to house fighting took place in the streets of the city.

However, as the bitter Soviet winter set in, the Germans were running low on supplies and ammunition. Hitler refused to allow a retreat. As German troops froze and starved, the Soviets were able to surround them, completely cutting off their supply line. By the end of January, 1942, 95,000 Germans had been killed and 70,000 captured. The invading German army was forced to surrender, marking the beginning of the end of German successes in the east.

2) **El Alamein**: Although the British were able to halt the Italian attack on Ethiopia in

March 1941, fighting in North Africa was far from over. Hitler sent reinforcements led by General Erwin Rommel. With this newly fortified army, Rommel pushed towards Egypt in hopes of capturing the Suez Canal, an important transportation route between the Mediterranean Sea and the Pacific Ocean. Rommel rolled through El Adem, Belhamed, Acroma, and Tobruk in Libya before moving into Egypt.

The Germans met heavy British and American resistance in El Alamein, Egypt. The Allies attacked Rommel's forces on the evening of October 23, 1942, and despite suffering heavy losses, captured 20,000 German soldiers.

In November, the Allies began "Operation Torch" by parachuting 100,000 troops into Northern Africa. The fighting was harsh, especially after German troops regrouped and increased their numbers to 50,000. However, by bombing Axis transport planes and ships, the allies were able to maintain the upper hand, eventually capturing 150,000 prisoners of war. This victory ensured the safety of the Suez Canal and secured future Allied success by providing a foothold in Africa from which to launch an attack against Italian Sicily.

3) Battles of Coral Sea and Midway Island: Just after their attack on Pearl Harbor, the Japanese launched a series of attacks on large Southeast Asian countries and on a number of small but important islands in the South Pacific. Early on, the Japanese had already conquered Hong Kong, Malaya, Singapore Island, Rangoon, and Burma, bringing them within striking distance of India and the Philippines.

The Philippines, which had been an American possession from 1898 to 1935, still remained under American influence. Because of the U.S.' close connection to the Philippines, the safety of the islands was very important to the Army. As 57,000 Japanese troops entered the Philippines, the U.S. sent many troops to defend the islands. Despite valiant fighting in the Philippines, the Americans were pushed back and trapped in the Bataan Peninsula where many were taken prisoner and forced to march 60 miles to a Japanese Prisoner of War camp in what came to be known as the Bataan Death March.

Now, with Japanese troops stationed in New Guinea, it seemed that Australia was also in danger of falling. Americans began bombing raids on Japanese cities such as Tokyo. In order to win the war, Americans knew that they would have to gain ground in the Pacific, opening supply routes and providing a base for future attacks. Preventing the capture of Australia was very important to reaching this goal.

In the Battle of Coral Sea, Americans won their first major victory, but a more important battle was the Battle of Midway Island in June. These battles wreaked havoc on the Japanese Navy, and the Battle of Midway Island put the Japanese on the defensive so that Allies could begin "Island hopping" (capturing Japanese-controlled Pacific Islands one by one) their way closer to the Japanese mainland.

4) D-Day: By 1944, the Allies were feeling tremendous pressure from Stalin to open a second front, diverting some German troops to Western Europe and away from the Soviet Union. A lot of planning had to go into an invasion of France to ensure its success. The Allies carefully and quietly made preparations, gathering 2 million troops in Britain.

On June 6, 1944, the invasion began just after midnight. First, paratroopers jumped into key areas, then gliders carrying troops and anti-tank guns were put into place. The brunt of Allied forces struck the beaches at 6:30 a.m. They faced heavy fortifications on

the coast of France. The Germans placed these obstacles – barbed wire and mines along the beaches to slow down the Allies. They were called the “Atlantic Wall.” The Allies pushed slowly inland under heavy German fire. After establishing a beachhead along the Normandy coast, more allied troops and supplies poured into German-occupied France.

The progress was slow, but finally in mid-August, the Allies were able to isolated a group of Germans in Falaise (in northern France) and by doing so to take 50,000 prisoners. Within the month, the Allies managed to liberate Paris, and continued to push the Germans back.

Allied victories came steadily for the next few months. In the autumn of 1944, Hitler launched a final offensive push. The Germans advanced through thick forests in Belgium and northern France and were able to create a dent, or bulge, in Allied lines. The “Battle of the Bulge” was one of the bloodiest European battles, but also Hitler’s worst and final defeat. Victory in the “Battle of the Bulge” meant that the Allies could continue to push eastward with little opposition from the Germans.





