

# The Electronic Passport to the World Wars

## A Terrifying Legacy

The primary legacy of the twentieth century just passed is war. The rich industrial nations of the world developed destructive technology and used it in ways that came close to destroying the earth. The century included two global conflicts, World War I and World War II, and climaxed with the invention of a weapon that killed hundreds of thousands of people, and eventually had the potential to destroy the earth itself.

The world has come to accept the recklessness of World War. Today there are organizations such as the United Nations to help keep peace, and instantaneous communication allows people to understand what is happening throughout the world. We are unlikely to experience a global conflict in our time, but it is important to understand how close the world came to ruin, and how the forces of the past century influence our lives.

It is impossible to describe a topic as vast as the World Wars in a few short pages. The villains are more monstrous, the heroes more courageous, and the victims more tormented than most imaginations allow. Steven Spielberg's films, *Schindler's List* and *Saving Private Ryan*, are graphic and inappropriate for younger students, but they help demonstrate the evil, the daring, and the grief of global warfare.

## A Powder Keg in Europe

Europe dissolved into many cultures at the end of the Roman Empire. Several smaller empires emerged, but none matched the power and glory of Rome. By the turn of the twentieth-century, most of the smaller states of Europe combined or were conquered into larger nation-states. Germany and Italy became unified nations in the latter part of the nineteenth century. They joined Great Britain, France, Austria-Hungary, and Russia as European world powers. These nations were filled with nationalism, or great national pride. They expanded their borders by building imperial colonies in Africa and Asia. Most Europeans believed their nation to be superior to any other, and



**Francis Ferdinand**



many were willing to go to war to demonstrate their will.

Europe had been at peace for many years by the spring of 1914. There had not been a multinational war since Napoleon's defeat 99 years earlier. Germany, France, and Russia fought minor wars, but they were of little consequence. Ethnic minorities chafed in Austria-Hungary, the final remnant of the Holy Roman Empire, but it was reasonable in 1914 to assume that Europe would remain peaceful for many years. That assumption would be false.

Europe in 1914 is often compared to a powder keg: safe and secure until a fuse is lit. That summer, a minor event lit a fuse that exploded across the entire continent. The result was known as "the Great War," the greatest and most destructive conflict then known to

humankind.

The city of Sarajevo is at the foot of the Balkan Mountains. Sarajevo was a city of great unrest. Austria-Hungary seized the city and the surrounding region in 1908. On June 28, 1914, Archduke Francis Ferdinand and his wife visited the city. Ferdinand was the heir, or next in line to be emperor of Austria-Hungary. There was talk of an assassination attempt by ethnic Serbians in Sarajevo, but the Archduke and his wife wandered through the city believing they were safe. The Black Hand proved otherwise.

The Black Hand was an ethnic Serbian terrorist organization composed mainly of teenagers. Several Black Hand terrorists were in Sarajevo with orders to kill the Archduke. That morning, one terrorist attempted to throw a bomb into the Archduke's car. The driver sped up. The bomb bounced off the Archduke's arm and landed behind the crowd. Several people in the crowd were injured. The next car in the procession was destroyed.

The Archduke gave a speech, and then changed his plans to visit the city. He wanted to go to the hospital to visit the people wounded in the attack. The Archduke's driver was unfamiliar with the route and had taken a wrong turn. The car slowed to a halt in front of a café, where Gavrilo Princip sat sipping coffee only five feet away. Princip was a Black Hand terrorist who thought the opportunity to kill the Archduke had passed. Suddenly and by coincidence, he was presented with another chance. Princip shot three times, killing the Archduke and his wife.

Gavrilo Princip set events in motion that would lead to worldwide conflict. He died in prison, but he was a hero to many Serbian people. The store in front of the site where the Archduke was killed was a museum that honored Princip, but it closed in 1992 because ethnic violence made it a target of snipers. The ethnic violence that led to World War more than eighty years ago is still a factor in the Balkan region today.

## Alliances Lead to World War

The leaders of Austria-Hungary held Serbia responsible to the Archduke's death. They hoped to rally the citizens of their fading empire by going to war against the much smaller Serbia.



## Europe in 1914

Austria-Hungary believed a victory would remind their ethnic minorities of the empire's strength, and remind other ethnic groups that terrorism would be punished. Wars are expensive, but they can also help the economy. Workers throughout Austria-Hungary would soon be going to work in factories to create weapons and to feed and clothe the soldiers. What Austria-Hungary did not count on was fighting two nations.

Russia has a large Serbian minority and many ties with the Balkan region. Russia was displeased with Austria-Hungary's seizure of Sarajevo, and did not want Austria-Hungary to expand into the Balkan Mountains region. Russia agreed to join Serbia if Austria-Hungary attacked. Austria-Hungary had a military alliance with Germany. An alliance is an agreement to act together. Germany agreed to join Austria-Hungary in its war against Serbia.

Germany and France had been rivals for many years. Germany defeated France in a small war in 1870, and claimed land along their border. The French people were filled with nationalism and hoped to relive the glory days of Napoleon. France had an alliance with Russia, so it prepared to join the conflict.

Austria-Hungary declared war on Serbia on July 28. Russia, Germany, and France joined the



Gavrilo Princip

fighting within a week. Belgium hoped to remain out of the conflict, but when German soldiers marched into it to reach France, the Belgians called on an alliance with Great Britain to help resist the Germans. Like a snowball rolling downhill, European alliances entangled almost the entire continent into what became known as “the Great War.”

## The Conflict Widens

The Great War was a conflict between the Allied Forces and the Central Powers. The Allied Forces included Great Britain, France, Russia, Serbia, and eventually the United States. The Central Powers included Germany, Austria-Hungary, the Turkish Ottoman Empire, and Bulgaria.

Turkey was known as the Ottoman Empire before the Great War. The Ottoman Empire extended from Algeria in the west to Mesopotamia in the east, but its hold over its territories was weak. The Ottoman Empire was called the “sick man of Europe.” Most people believed that it was only a matter of time before one of the European colonial powers took over the Ottoman Empire.

A group of idealistic military officers known as the Young Turks had seized control of the Ottoman Empire in a 1908 revolution. The Young Turks decided to join the Great War on the side of the Central Powers when it seemed that Germany would win the conflict. The Turks feared two of the Allied Powers. Russia was north of Turkey and wanted access to a “warm water port.” All of Russia’s other ports were frozen during the winter months. The Young Turks feared Russia would conquer part of Turkey in order to gain access to the Black Sea. Great Britain’s empire included India, east of oil-rich Mesopotamia. The Young Turks felt their needs would be best met by joining forces against these two rivals. Bulgaria also joined the war because it hoped to gain land from Serbia once the Allies were defeated.

## The Great War

Both sides expected the conflict to end quickly, but neither understood how technology made a long, terrible war possible. Prior to the nineteenth century, most guns shot a single load. The invention of the machine gun and rapid-fire artillery made warfare more deadly. Both sides were forced to defend their territory by fighting from deep trenches.

The trenches were terrifying. Machine gun fire erupted whenever a soldier allowed his head or

weapon to appear above the trench. Even more terrifying were the large artillery guns that launched shells from behind the trenches. One soldier described the shelling as being inside a thunderclap. He said it was the only noise you felt with your entire body. The soldiers had more to fear than bullets and shells. The Great War marked the beginning of the use of chemical weapons. Tear gas caused blindness, while chlorine gas suffocated the soldiers. Mustard gas was an oily, sticky substance that left its victims blinded, blistered, and fighting for breath.

Heavy rain made the trenches even more hazardous. Thousands of soldiers drowned; many more were wounded as they fell in the mud. It was not uncommon for a soldier to stand many days in parasite-filled water as high as his chest. One result of this was a disease called trench foot. Many soldiers had to have their feet or arms amputated because of standing in the water-filled trenches.

In previous wars, soldiers met on a battlefield and carried off their dead after the fighting ended, but trench warfare in the Great War was different. Wounded soldiers could often not be rescued. Dead bodies from both sides of the conflict became part of the landscape. The decomposing bodies attracted rats, which sometimes grew to the size of small dogs. Soldiers were often afraid to sleep at night, fearing an attack of rats. As one soldier said, “If ever there is a true hell on earth, it is here in the trenches.”

High above the trenches another even more deadly war took place in the skies above Europe. The average life expectancy of a new pilot was between three and six weeks, but American recruiters managed to build an air force of more than 200,000 men.

There were several reasons why many young men risked their lives as pilots in the Great War. The pilots had more control over their lives than regular soldiers. A soldier in the trenches might be killed by a bullet or shell without warning, but an agile flying “ace” had a good chance of staying alive. Air battles were quick and decisive, unlike life in the muddy trenches. Above all, the flying “aces” were glamorous. After their missions, they returned to their air bases far from the enemy lines. As one American soldier wrote from the trenches, “The glamour boys are sleeping on real beds with pillows and sheets, while we wallow in the lice and vermin. I don’t begrudge them their due—I’m simply jealous as hell.”

## New Opportunities in Black America

When the United States entered World War I, most black Americans lived on farms in the south. They were technically “freed” after the Civil War, but most black Americans lived in extreme poverty. There were better paying jobs in factories and railroads in the North, but those jobs were usually filled by European immigrants.

The flood of immigrants stopped when war broke out. The factory jobs they usually filled were now open to black workers. By 1920, more than 350,000 black people moved to the North. They settled in railroad and industrial centers such as New York, Boston, Chicago, Detroit, St. Louis, and Cleveland.

White farmers and business owners in the South depended on black workers to fill low paying jobs. Communities in Georgia and Mississippi passed laws limiting the number of black people who could ride trains. The mayor of New Orleans made a formal request to the president of the Illinois Central Railroad to stop all northbound trains carrying black passengers.

The black people found jobs in the North, but they also found resentment and prejudice. Almost all unions were closed to blacks. In some cases, the resentment erupted into violence.

Black men did serve in the American army, but most were only allowed to work in menial jobs. They worked as kitchen staff or dockworkers.

There were three all-black divisions who fought at the front, but white officers commanded those divisions. The American army did not integrate until after the Second World War.

## A Separate Peace

The German army fought the Great War on two fronts. They battled the French, British and Belgians on the Western Front, while they faced Russia on the Eastern Front. By 1917, the Russian people were too busy solving their own problems to continue fighting.

Civil war broke out twice in Russia. Disastrous military defeats sapped public morale.



**W.E.B. DuBois**

Czar Nicholas II abdicated in March and a democratic provisional government formed. Radical forces led by Vladimir Lenin toppled the provisional government in November.

The new government had no interest in making the same mistakes as the Czar. It agreed to a “separate peace” with Germany. This took Russia out of the war by February 1918. The terms of the agreement were harsh. The new government in Russia lost a great deal of land to Germany, but would eventually develop into a military empire known as the Soviet Union.

Germany could now move its soldiers to the Western Front, just in time to face a new opponent.

## America Enters the Great War

The United States did not want to engage in the Great War. The United States included many people of English, French, and German ancestry, so it was difficult to choose sides. The American people had a strong feeling of isolationism, believing that they should not become entangled in foreign wars.

Woodrow Wilson was re-elected to the presidency by a narrow victory in 1916 with the slogan, “He Kept Us Out of War,” but within months the United States would be drawn into the conflict.

Many Americans were enraged when a German submarine sunk the *Lusitania*. More than twelve hundred passengers boarded the British luxury ship sailing from New York to Liverpool, England.

The German embassy placed advertisements in New York newspapers warning passengers they were sailing into a war zone, but not a single person cancelled. On May 7, 1915, the Germans sunk the *Lusitania*, killing all on board, including 128 Americans. A later investigation showed the hull of the ship was filled with weapons to be used against Germany. Many Americans urged President Wilson to join the war.



**Woodrow Wilson**

### Two Perspectives

Many Black American leaders opposed participation in the Great War. A. Philip Randolph argued that Black Americans should not participate because they were denied “full citizenship.” W.E.B. DuBois disagreed, arguing, “while the war lasts [we should] forget our special grievances and close our ranks shoulder to shoulder with our white fellow citizens and allied nations that are fighting for democracy.”



**Gen. John J. Pershing**

In the spring of 1917, the British decoded a secret message from Arthur Zimmerman, the German Foreign Secretary, to the government of Mexico. The Zimmerman note urged Mexico to declare war on the United States. Once America was defeated, Germany would insist on peace terms that would force the United States to return Texas, New Mexico,

and Arizona to Mexico.

President Wilson spoke before a joint session of Congress on April 2, 1917, less than one month after beginning his second term in office. He asked Congress to declare war on Germany to keep the world “safe for democracy.” Great Britain and France were democracies, while a Kaiser ruled Germany and an Emperor ruled Austria-Hungary.

### The Doughboys

America declared war, but several months passed before soldiers reached the front. First, Americans had to be persuaded to join the war. The idea of conscription, drafting soldiers to fight, was unpopular with many Americans, but 2.8 million Americans were ultimately called to duty. Once drafted, the soldiers were quickly trained and dispatched to Europe.

The war weary French people were thrilled to see American soldiers march through the streets of Paris on July 4, 1917. The soldiers were treated as celebrities. Many French people threw candy or cigarettes to the soldiers to show their appreciation. An American officer announced *Nous voici, Lafayette!* (Lafayette, we are here!) The Marquis de Lafayette helped train George Washington’s troops in the American Revolutionary War. The phrase suggested that America was ready to repay an old debt to an old friend.

The British and French planned to use the Americans as reinforcements for their fallen forces, General John J. Pershing, the leader of the American forces, disagreed. Pershing insisted that the Americans fight together and not be spread among other Allied Forces. He understood the importance of the spirits of the soldiers. George M. Cohan captured the feelings of many soldiers in “Over There,” a song popular in the United States during the war, and proudly sung by soldiers on their way to the front.

*Over there, over there,  
Send the word, send the word, over there  
That the Yanks are coming,  
the Yanks are coming,  
And we won’t be back  
‘Till it’s over over there.*

### Social Darwinism

Social Darwinism is the belief that all personal and social problems were inherited. The proponents of social Darwinism believed poverty and many other social ills were the result of bad genes. In the 1920s, eugenics movements were popular in many countries, including the United States and Germany. Eugenics is the study of human improvement by genetic means. Many eugenicists saw themselves as visionaries who would one day create a world free of poverty, and physical and mental illness. Some American lawmakers cited eugenics in their efforts to limit immigration from Asia, Latin America, Eastern Europe, and Ireland.

Adolph Hitler’s racial theories were based on social Darwinism. “The stronger has to rule and must not mate with the weaker,” Hitler wrote in *Mein Kampf*. “Only the born weakling can consider this cruel.”

Social Darwinism was popular among many intellectuals in the nineteenth century, but has since been rejected. Subsequent research has undermined rather than supported the theories of social Darwinism.

The American soldiers fighting the Great War were often called “doughboys.” The meaning of the term is obscure, but the spirit of that nickname and many others helped build a sense of camaraderie among the fighting men. The eager doughboys helped lead the Allied Forces to victory in the Great War.

### Allied Victory

Over the course of many years, the nations supporting the soldiers at the front lost their will to continue the war. Russia was the first to leave, but the rest of the Allies remained. The Central Powers left the fighting one by one, leaving only Germany to fight the Allies.

Bulgaria left the war, followed by the Ottoman Empire. The Turks were forced to accept terms that whittled their empire to

approximately the borders of modern Turkey. The British took possession of Mesopotamia. Mustafa Kemal became the leader of Turkey. Kemal urged his people to modernize in order to strengthen his nation and keep any foreign powers from attacking in the

future. In 1934, the Turkish assembly gave Mustafa Kemal the name Ataturk, or “Father of the Turks.”

The various ethnic groups within Austria-Hungary forced the empire to crumble. Many minorities deserted the Austro-Hungarian army and joined the Allied forces. By 1918, independence movements formed in Czechoslovakia, Poland, Yugoslavia, and Romania. Hungary left the empire at the end of the summer, followed by Austria. When the imperial government surrendered to the Allies, the empire no longer existed.

Germany was left alone to fight the Allies, but the weary German people had lost their strength. Strikes and civil disorder were common by 1918. Germany no longer had the industrial capability or the money to continue fighting. After months of negotiations, Germany and the Allied Forces agreed to end the fighting. On the eleventh hour of the eleventh day of the eleventh month of 1918, the fighting ended and the Western Front was quiet for the first time in more than four years.

## The Rise of Hitler

At the completion of the war, American president Woodrow Wilson argued for fair treatment of Germany by the Allied Powers. Wilson believed that a League of Nations was needed to prevent future wars. However, France and England wanted vengeance

The resulting Treaty of Versailles imposed terrible hardships on Germany. The treaty stripped Germany of its overseas colonies and its coal-rich Saar region. Germany was limited to a small army and was forbidden to build large ships. The treaty also forced Germany to pay Great Britain and France for the damage caused by the war. The German people were quite proud, but they were in no position to oppose the terms dictated by England and France.

Life for the German people became very difficult after the Treaty of Versailles. Germany was forced to borrow vast sums of money from America in order to pay its war debt to England and France. In 1929, the United States experienced an economic depression. A depression is a time when business is bad and many people are out of work. America was unable to continue lending money to Germany during

the depression. Without the income from American loans, Germany was unable to pay its war reparations to England and France. The result was a severe depression in Germany. German money became close to worthless. They German people were angry with the Treaty of Versailles; they felt the terms were unfair. Many Germans believed a strong leader could return their nation to greatness.

In 1923, Adolph Hitler attempted to overthrow the German government. He was unsuccessful, and sent to prison for nine months. While in prison, Hitler wrote *Mein Kampf*, which means “my struggle.” Hitler suggested that there were easy solutions to the complex problems the German people faced in the 1920s. Hitler blamed Germany’s problems on its weak government. He said Germany had lost the war because of “a stab in the back.”

Hitler spoke in a charismatic style that impressed the German people. He blamed outsiders for causing problems in the nation. He argued that if pure Germans known as Aryans controlled the destiny of Germany, it would return to greatness. Hitler placed the blame for many of Germany’s problems on one group: the Jews.

By January 1933, Hitler and his National Socialist (Nazi) party controlled Germany. Hitler became a dictator, a leader with complete control. The Nazis acted quickly against all who opposed their rule. They outlawed all other political parties. People who opposed the new regime were often murdered.

The Nazis focused on teenagers, and trained them to follow Hitler’s beliefs. The Boy Scouts and other teenage organizations were outlawed. Teens were encouraged to join the “Hitler Youth,” where they chanted Nazi slogans and were taught that they had the power to fulfill Germany’s destiny as a world power.

### Aryan Superiority?

The International Olympic Committee agreed in 1931 to hold the 1936 Olympics in Berlin, Germany. They had no idea that Adolph Hitler would come to power. Hitler attempted to use the Olympics as a forum to prove the superiority of the Aryan race, but a black athlete from the United States spoiled his plans. Jesse Owens was the star of the games, winning four gold medals.

## The Holocaust

People who did not fit Hitler’s view of the perfect Aryan German race faced extermination. Targets included Jews, Slavs, the Roma (Gypsy) people, homosexuals, the mentally handicapped, and others.

On November 9, 1938, the world got its first glimpse of the terror that lay ahead for Jews in

Germany. German gangs attacked and burned synagogues and Jewish business throughout Germany. Jewish hospitals, homes, schools and cemeteries were also vandalized. The night became known as *Kristallnacht*, or the “night of the broken glass.” Some 30,000 Jews were arrested and placed in prisons called concentration camps.

The Nazis used the concentration camps for many atrocities. Camp prisoners were used as slave laborers and were often worked to death. The Nazis conducted cruel medical experiments without using anesthesia.

In time, the Nazis adopted a policy of genocide, the deliberate and systematic extermination of a group of people based on their race, religion, or culture. The concentration camps became death camps with gas chambers for mass killings. Many prisoners were forced to dig their own graves. Once the graves were dug, the prisoners were shot. Those who survived the shooting were buried alive. Other prisoners were starved to death, or died from lack of medical care. One of the cruelest atrocities involved “showers.” Naked men, women, and children were herded into a large room expecting to be showered with water. Instead, poison gas filled the room, causing a cruel, painful death. The bodies were then removed and cremated.

Altogether, as many as six million Jews and five million others perished in what became known as the Holocaust. After the war, the Allied Powers convicted the Nazi leaders for “crimes against humanity,” for their atrocities. The few survivors of the Holocaust have implored the world to never let the world forget the tragedy for the Jewish people, or for any people. More than half a century after the Holocaust, institutions, memorials, and museums continue to teach the history of the Holocaust to future generations.

## Germany Attempts to Dominate Europe

Once Hitler became dictator of Germany in 1933, he began to make his nation the most powerful in Europe. He ignored the Treaty of Versailles by



**Franklin  
Roosevelt**

building a large military force. He then marched troops into Austria and a region of Czechoslovakia in 1938. Many people believed that Germany was treated unfairly in the Treaty of Versailles, and that it has a right to these territories. After meeting with British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain, Hitler agreed that he would conquer no more land. Chamberlain agreed to allow Hitler to control the new areas. The Prime Minister then announced to the media that he had accomplished “peace in our time.”

Britain and France feared that Hitler would attack Poland. Both countries declared they would defend Poland from German attack. They attempted to get the dictator of the Soviet Union, Josef

Stalin, to join their alliance against Germany, but Stalin signed a separate pact with Germany. In September 1939, Germany attacked Poland from the west, while the Soviet Union attacked from the east. The attack caused Britain and France to declare war on Germany.

The German army called their method of attack *Blitzkrieg*, or “lightning war.” They used fast moving tanks coordinated with airplanes to conquer Poland in less than three weeks. The German *Blitzkrieg* swept across

Denmark, Norway, the Netherlands, and France by the spring of 1940. The Germans had defeated all of its rivals, except for Great Britain.

By June 1941, Hitler ignored his agreement with Stalin and attacked the Soviet Union. Germany was now in the same position as in World War I, fighting on two fronts. The decision to attack Russia would cost millions of lives on both sides, but ultimately led to the destruction of Germany.

## The Empire of the Rising Sun

Japan is a crowded nation with few natural resources. Traditionally, the Japanese islands were the easternmost point of the Asia. The Japanese people call their islands the “Land of the Rising Sun” because it seems the sun rises from Japan, then spreads across the rest of Asia. Japan became an industrial leader in the early twentieth century but it was unable to expand their economy.

### The Jehovah’s Witnesses in Nazi Germany

Hitler filled his concentration camps with people of many races, but one group stands out. The Jehovah’s Witnesses are a Christian sect that began in America. The Witnesses believe it is wrong to salute any secular (or non-religious) flag or person. The Nazis sent thousands of German Jehovah’s Witnesses to concentration camps when they refused to pay homage to the Nazi dictator. They could leave at any time, but few did.

The Japanese believed that it was their destiny to liberate the people of Asia from European control. In 1894, Japan expanded into Korea. In 1937, as Germany was preparing to expand across Europe, Japan conquered Manchuria, a province in northeast China. By 1938, the Japanese controlled many important Chinese port cities and a great deal of the Chinese coastline.

Indochina is a peninsula between China and India in Southeast Asia. France had controlled Indochina for many years. Japan was able to assume control of Indochina when Germany occupied France in 1941. The United States demanded that Japan leave Indochina, and halted oil sales. Japan depended on American oil to fuel its industries. The Japanese were forced to search for new sources of oil. The Dutch colonies on the islands of East Asia were an obvious target. The Japanese knew that they would face war with the Americans if they attempted to conquer the Dutch colonies while war raged in Europe. Japan decided to strike America by surprise.

On a quiet Sunday morning, more than 500 Japanese fighters and bombers attacked the American Naval Base at Pearl Harbor in Hawaii. In little more than an hour, the surprise attack killed more than two thousand Americans and significantly damaged the American war fleet in the Pacific. President Roosevelt announced that that date, December 7, 1941, was “a date which will live in infamy.” The Japanese believed they could destroy the American’s ability to contain their empire in Asia by destroying the naval ships in Pearl Harbor. They did not count on American resolve and industrial might.

## America Responds

America tried to avoid becoming part of World War II, but it clearly had a preference. President Franklin Roosevelt convinced Congress to lend warships and other weapons to Great Britain. Many Americans opposed the President. These “isolationists” believed that Americans should not be involved in a war fought in Europe. This attitude changed when the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor.

The Japanese and the Germans underestimated the determination of the American people. Factories began operating like never before. Americans worked double-shifts to create war materials. Movies and popular music focused the American people on the war effort. The American people were able to out-produce the combined German and Japanese war industries.

The war had many unexpected

consequences. Virtually every young man was fighting overseas, and factories needed workers to supply the soldiers. Women left their homes and joined the workforce for the first time. The military remained segregated during the war, but black soldiers served the nation with bravery and courage. The valor and heroism of these patriots were a factor in the eventual desegregation of the armed forces after the war, and played a key role in the beginning of the American Civil Rights movement. Finally, the government provided low cost loans to the soldiers when they returned home from the war. Many impoverished Americans had the opportunity to attend college and start businesses. The war offered new opportunities for many Americans for the first time in history.

## Global Conflict

Once America joined the war, it truly became a global conflict, with participants from every populated continent. The United States, along with Great Britain, France, and the Soviet Union became known as the Allied Forces, while Germany, Japan, and Italy were the Axis Powers.

America decided first to focus on the threat from Hitler. 1942 marked the turning point in the war. American soldiers and military might of the factory workers joined the effort while Germany was forced to fight enemies on all sides.

By 1945, Germany was in ruin. Allied bombers destroyed cities from the air, while their armies marched across Germany. The nation was completely devastated. When Hitler learned the enemy was within thirty miles of his underground bunker, he shot himself to death. The Nazi terror was over.

## Japanese Internment Camps

The American government responded to the mass hysteria that followed the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor by ordering more than 110,000 Japanese Americans forcibly relocated to “internment camps” in California, Arizona, Idaho, Utah, Wyoming, and Arkansas. Many of the Japanese-Americans were born in America; their only connection to Japan was their ancestry. America was also at war with Germany and Italy, but there were no restrictions on Americans of German or Italian descent.

In 1988, the U.S. Congress apologized for the imprisonment of Japanese-Americans and provided monetary payments to the approximately 60,000 surviving Japanese-Americans who had been incarcerated during World War II.



**J. Robert Oppenheimer**

## The Manhattan Project

In 1934, German scientists discovered nuclear fission, the splitting of an atom of uranium into two elements. If fission became a chain reaction, the energy of the nucleus of the uranium atom might be released. A very large number of atoms split very quickly might result in a massive explosion.

Five years later, Albert Einstein wrote a letter to President Roosevelt describing the potential power of a nuclear bomb. Einstein was a German-born Jewish scientist who left Europe shortly before Hitler came to power. Einstein opposed the use of nuclear weapons, but he feared what might happen to the world if Germany discovered the technology before America.

American military leaders decided they needed to build a laboratory to create a nuclear weapon. They searched for a location at least 200 miles from a coastline or international border. The site needed to be sparsely populated because an accident might cause horrendous damage. They settled on a secluded school for boys in the desert land of Los Alamos, New Mexico. Robert Oppenheimer led a group of almost 6000 scientists in what became known as the top secret Manhattan Project.

The scientists recruited to work on the Manhattan Project, and their families, had to work in complete secrecy. Their drivers' licenses listed only numbers, not names. Even relatives could not know where the scientists were working. All of their mail was screened to ensure they said nothing to give away their location. Photographs could not include anything that might identify the landscape of New Mexico. The American government had to ensure that the Axis Powers had no idea what was happening at the isolated site in New Mexico.

Many of the scientists working at Los Alamos were Jewish refugees from Germany. Edward Teller left Germany for America in 1933. Otto Frisch and Felix Bloch were also German Jews who were instrumental in creating the bomb. Enrico Fermi was married to a Jewish woman. He left Italy at about the same time to escape anti-Semitism. Anti-Semitism is the hatred or persecution of Jews. If Jewish scientists had been allowed to stay in Germany, Hitler might have gotten the bomb before America.

Nobody was certain what would happen once the nuclear chain reaction began. One scientist

believed the entire state of New Mexico would be incinerated. The governor of New Mexico was alerted that an evacuation of the state might be necessary.

The scientists were ready to test their work at sunrise on a summer morning in 1945. The awakening sky filled with light brighter than anything seen before on earth. Early risers more than 150 miles away heard the unimaginable roar of the bomb. Oppenheimer later remarked, "We knew the world would never be the same."

## Hiroshima and Nagasaki

Franklin Roosevelt died suddenly on April 12, 1945, and Harry Truman became president. Many Americans believed he was unqualified for the job. One person said, "If Harry Truman can be president, my neighbor can be president." This "common man" would make the most important decision of the twentieth century.

America was winning the war against Japan, but the Japanese were fighting valiantly. The enemy would not be defeated unless the American army invaded Japan. Experts concluded more than one million Americans would die in the assault on the Japanese home islands.

Some people urged the president not to use the atomic bomb on Japan. General Dwight Eisenhower was the commander of the Allied forces in Europe, and would eventually succeed Truman as president. Eisenhower opposed the bomb for two reasons. "First, the Japanese were ready to surrender and it wasn't necessary to hit them with that awful thing. Second, I hated to see our country be the first to use such a weapon."

President Truman gave the order to drop an atomic bomb on the Japanese city of Hiroshima in August 1945. Even after testing, the American scientists were unsure of what would happen. The Americans thought about warning the Japanese first, but the enemy might have moved Allied prisoners to the site. The Americans rejected dropping the bomb in the ocean. They decided the war would not end unless the Japanese government understood the damage America would inflict.

The world entered the frightening atomic age at 8:14 a.m. local time in the Japanese city of Hiroshima. One minute later, an atomic bomb destroyed the city. The first flash of the explosion was as bright as a



**Mushroom cloud over Hiroshima**

thousand suns. It is estimated that 80,000 people were instantly vaporized. The blast created violent winds that caused firestorms. Co-pilot Robert Lewis said he could taste the atomic fusion. He later wrote in his journal, "My God, what have we done!" Another member of the crew said, "Thank God the war is over and I don't have to get shot at. I can go home."

Truman later said he did not agonize over using the bomb. He wanted to make Japan surrender without an invasion. "The atom bomb was no 'great decision,'" he later said. "That was not any decision you had to worry about." A second bomb destroyed the city of Nagasaki. Japan agreed to surrender a week later.

The Japanese feared brutal treatment after their defeat, but General Douglas MacArthur, the Supreme Commander of the Occupied Forces, was determined to treat his former enemy with dignity and respect. He decreed that any American soldier that so much as slapped a Japanese would be imprisoned for five years. The Japanese were courteous and respectful toward the Americans. The climate of trust and respect between the two nations allowed Japan to develop into one of the world's richest nations.

## Postwar

The Allied forces emerged victorious from the war by the end of the summer of 1945, but at a horrible price. More than fifty million people lost their lives. The world lost not just the soldiers, but it also lost the contributions they would have made later in their lives.

Europe had been devastated by the war. Allied and Axis bombs had laid waste to large portions of the continent. All that remained in many cities were the burned out shells of what were once buildings.

Two military "superpower" nations emerged from the rubble: the United States and the Soviet Union. The Soviets used the end of the war as an opportunity to expand their empire. Britain, France, and America briefly occupied the conquered nations, and then gradually allowed them to return to self-rule. The Soviets imposed totalitarian governments throughout the land they occupied in Eastern Europe.

An uneasy "Cold War" followed as the United States and the Soviet Union, competed for supremacy. Both nations stockpiled enough arms to guarantee the destruction of the planet many times over. This policy was known as "Mutually Assured Destruction," and while costly and terrifying, it worked. Neither nation used their deadly arsenal, but both nations funded

smaller wars to advance their interests. The Cold War ended with the breakup of the Soviet Union in 1991.

Immediately after the Second World War, the United States feared that the Soviets would impose their totalitarian style of government on the ruined European nations. The United States decided that rebuilding Europe would prevent Soviet expansion. The Marshall Plan provided more than \$35 billion in aid to Europe after the war.

Representative of 51 nations met in San Francisco in August 1945. They formed the United Nations, an international body that would resolve disputes through diplomacy rather than armed conflict. Today more than 180 nations belong to the United Nations. The United Nations has made many contributions to world peace, but has not prevented war.

Almost all European Jews perished in the Holocaust. The few remaining Holocaust survivors did not want to return to the countries that participated in their destruction. Anti-Semitic sentiment still existed in many European nations even after the terrible war had ended. Some found it was still not safe to return to their homes.

Many Jews wished to return to their traditional homeland on the eastern shore of the Mediterranean Sea. The British controlled the land, but it was occupied mainly by Arab Muslims. The Arabs were upset with Jewish immigrants on what they felt was their land. The United Nations declared Israel an independent Jewish homeland in 1948. After more than two thousand years, the Jewish people finally had a nation of their own, but they would remain in conflict with its neighbors to this day.



**Gen. Douglas MacArthur**



**The United Nations building in New York City**