

**HEROES: A RENDEZVOUS WITH DESTINY**  
**COMPONENT 2: THEIR FINEST HOUR – THE EUROPEAN THEATER**  
**TOPIC 1: NEVER GIVE IN – KEY POINTS**



**COMPONENT: THEIR FINEST HOUR**

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**HISTORY/SETTING**

**THE EUROPEAN THEATER**

1. World War II was fought chiefly between two major alliances: the Axis and the Allies. The Allied Forces were led by the “the Big Three”—the British Empire, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), and the United States of America. They fought the Axis powers of Nazi Germany, Fascist Italy, and Imperial Japan. The European Theatre of Operations (ETO) was an area of heavy fighting across Europe.

**WORLD WAR I**

2. Many historians trace the causes of World War II to problems left unsolved by World War I. Germany was blamed for the five bloody years of WWI. To ensure that it would not happen again, it was forced to sign the Treaty of Versailles. The treaty crippled Germany’s military and devastated it economically because of a bill of thirty-three billion dollars in war damages—called reparations bill. The government printed money to help its people survive, but this only created runaway inflation.

**AXIS**

**THE RISE OF HITLER**

3. Germany under Adolf Hitler (1933-1945) is referred to as the Third Reich. *Reich* is translated as Empire or Realm. Adolf Hitler, known as *Der Fehrer*, or the leader, became the undisputed dictator of Germany in 1933. He gained support by exploiting nationalism, anti-Semitism and anti-communism with charismatic oratory and propaganda. Many Germans thought Adolf Hitler was the Savior of their Country. Hitler pursued a foreign policy with the goal of seizing *Lebensraum* ("living space" or more land for the Germans).

**STALIN**

4. In the Soviet Union, the Communists, led by Lenin, had seized power in 1917. After Lenin’s death, Joseph Stalin became the Soviet dictator in 1929. Although the Soviet Union played a major role in the defeat of Nazi Germany in the Second

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World War, Stalin is also credited with starting World War II by entering into a secret agreement with Nazi Germany to carve up the nation of Poland.

### **MUSSOLINI**

5. In Italy, economic distress after World War I led to strikes and riots. Benito Mussolini, leader of the Fascists, promised to bring order and prosperity to Italy in the aftermath. He vowed to restore to Italy the glory it had known in the days of the ancient Roman Empire. Known as *Il Duce*, or the leader, Mussolini became one of the main figures of the Axis powers and, on 10 June 1940, Mussolini led Italy into World War II on the side of Axis.

### **U.S. RESPONDS**

6. As Britain warred with Nazi Germany, Roosevelt provided Lend-Lease aid to Winston Churchill and the British war effort before America's entry into World War II in December, 1941. Roosevelt led the United States as it became the 'Arsenal of Democracy'. Roosevelt made the United States the principal arms supplier and financier of the Allies.

### **EARLY AXIS VICTORIES – THE INVASION OF POLAND AND THE LOWLANDS**

7. The invasion of Poland on September 1, 1939 marked the start of World War II in Europe, with Poland's western allies declared war on Germany on September 3. It was a decisive Axis and Soviet victory with Poland territory split between Germany and the USSR. The Low Countries— Belgium, Luxembourg, and the Netherlands—hoped to remain neutral after World War II began. However, Germany launched a blitzkrieg against them on May 10, 1940.

### **BLITZKRIEG**

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### **THE FAILURE OF APPEASEMENT**

9. Appeasement means giving in to someone provided their demands are seen as reasonable. During the 1930s, many politicians in both Britain and France came to see that the terms of the Treaty of Versailles—the Treaty that ended WWI—had placed restrictions on Germany that were unfair. Hitler's actions were seen as understandable and justifiable. It was also argued that a stronger Germany would prevent the spread of Communism to the west. British Prime Minister Chamberlain wished to preserve peace at all cost. He believed that war could be prevented by meeting Hitler's demands. That policy became known as appeasement.

### **THE PHONY WAR**

10. G Great Britain and France declared war on Germany on Sept. 3, 1939, two days after the invasion of Poland. But the two countries stood by while Poland collapsed. France moved troops to the Maginot Line, a belt of steel and concrete fortresses it had built after World War I along its border with Germany. Britain sent a small force into northern France. Germany stationed troops on the Siegfried Line, a strip of defenses Hitler built in the 1930s opposite the Maginot Line. Because both sides avoided fighting in late 1939 and early 1940, journalists called the period the Phony War.

PARALLELS—Our own phony war  
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sN9cqtJTvF4&NR=1>

### **FALL OF FRANCE & THE VICHY GOVERNMENT**

11. France had expected to fight long a stationary battlefield and had built the Maginot Line for its defense. But German tanks and aircraft went around the Maginot Line. The Germans passed north of the Maginot Line as they swept through Luxembourg and Belgium and into northern France in May 1940. German troops entered Paris on June 14, 1940. The French government had already fled the capital. A new French government agreed to an armistice. Southern France remained in French control under a regime authorized by the Germans, until November 1942, when German troops occupied all France.

### **THE BATTLE OF BRITAIN**

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12. The Battle of Britain was one of the most famous battles of World War Two. The German Air force took on the Royal Air Force and lost. Hitler believed that Great Britain would seek peace with Germany after the fall of France. But Britain fought on alone. Hitler made preparations to cross the English Channel and invade southern England. He wanted to conquer Britain before the United States arrived. Before the Germans could invade, however, they had to defeat Britain's Royal Air Force (RAF). The Battle of Britain, which began in July 1940, was the first battle ever fought to control the air.

### **INVASION OF THE SOVIET UNION**

13. Germany's invasion of the Soviet Union, which was code-named Operating Barbarossa, began on June 22, 1941. It took the Soviet Union by surprise because Hitler had signed a nonaggression pact with Stalin in 1939, but this served merely to keep the Soviet Union out of the war while Germany overran western Europe.

### **THE BATTLE OF THE ATLANTIC**

14. Britain's survival in World War II depended on shipments of food, war materials, and other supplies across the Atlantic Ocean from North America. The greatest threat to British shipping came from German submarines, called *Unterseeboote* or U-boats. To combat the U-boats, Britain began to use a convoy system. Under that system, cargo ships sailed in large groups escorted by surface warships. But Britain had few such ships available for escort duty.

### **AFRICA AND THE SUEZ CANAL**

15. The Italians opened battlefronts in Africa at about the time of the Battle of Britain. Axis control of Egypt would have cut Britain off from oil fields in the Middle East and from the Suez Canal, the shortest sea route to Britain's empire in Asia. Britain struck back at the Italians in December 1940, sweeping them out of Egypt and back into Libya. However, an Italian invasion of Greece then drew part of Britain's force from Africa and ended the advance.

### **BATTLE OF THE BULGE**

16. The Battle of the Bulge was the bloodiest of the battles that U.S. forces experienced in World War II--the 19,000 American dead were unsurpassed by those of any other engagement. **The German Ardennes offensive was a desperate**

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attempt, initiated by [Hitler](#), to reverse the tide of the war in the west. This attack of about 200,000 German troops created a backward "bulge" in the line, earning it the nick-name "The battle of the Bulge". The weather was frightful - bitterly cold and snowing. Led by General Patton

### **D-DAY AND THE INVASION OF NORMANDY**

17. D-Day was the largest seaborne invasion in history. On June 6, 1944, the Allies Invaded France. The allies landed on five beaches code-named Juno, Gold, Sword, Omaha and Utah. During the night about 2,700 ships carrying landing craft and 176,000 soldiers crossed the channel. Paratroopers dropped behind German lines to capture bridges and railroad tracks. At dawn, battleships opened fire on the beaches. All five Allied landing beaches were secure by the end of D-Day.

### **THE AIR WAR**

18. Before World War II began, some aviation experts claimed that the long-range bomber was the most advanced weapon in the world. They believed that bombers could wipe out cities and industries and so destroy an enemy's desire and ability to go on fighting. The theory was tested during World War II.

### **THE WIZARD'S WAR**

19. As the clouds of war grew darker over the European landscape, the elite of the scientific establishments in the hostile countries laid aside their peacetime endeavors at universities and in industry and lent their genius to their governments. In hidden laboratories and clandestine workshops far from prying eyes, they strove to invent new weapons that would give their country an edge over the enemy.

### **RADAR**

20. It has been said that radar won the war for the Allies in World War II. While that's an overstatement, it is true that radar had a huge impact on how World War II was fought on both sides. Radar is, in essence, a very basic way of obtaining information. That very simplicity makes it highly adaptable—during the war scientists and engineers found dozens of ways of using it. Germany's air defenses rapidly improved during WWII. The Germans used radar to spot incoming bombers, and they used fighter aircraft to shoot them down.

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**V-E DAY**

21. Victory in Europe Day was May 7 and May 8, 1945, the dates when the World War II Allies formally accepted the unconditional surrender of the armed forces of Nazi Germany and the end of Adolf Hitler's Third Reich. On April 30, Hitler committed suicide during the Battle for Berlin, and so the surrender of Germany was authorized by his replacement, President of Germany Karl Dönitz. The administration headed up by Dönitz was known as the Flensburg government. The *act of military surrender* was signed on May 7 in Reims, France, and May 8 in Berlin, Germany.