



How did the Allies Win World War 2?

In the spring of 1942, the Axis powers were winning everywhere. Germany had swept across Europe, Japan controlled the Pacific, and Britain stood nearly alone. Then, in a single year, three battles turned the tide. But it wasn't only battles that won the war.



0:00

OER logo; 'Why Did the Allies Win World War 2'; historical map of World War II geopolitical and military alignments overlaid with black and white war footage; map zoomed in to Germany, then Northern Europe, then England; video of fighter aircrafts; video of submarines with text 'Battle of the Atlantic begins: 1940-1941.'

1:10

Troops on motorcycles; German invasion of the Soviet Union with text 'Operation Barbarossa June-December 1941'; map of Asia with inset of occupied Pacific territories; footage of the bombing of Pearl Harbor; soldiers marching in uniform and covered in grass.

2:06

Text 'The Hinge of Fate June 1942-February 1943'; map illustrating the global alliances of World War II with text 'The Turning Point: 1942' and markers over three crucial battle locations; visual of Japan moving toward Midway; footage of bombing over a large body of water; war footage of the battle of El Alamein.

3:10

An army on foot; arrows surrounding and pointing to Stalingrad; photo of Winston Churchill next to one of his quotes; historical map of Russia with notes and dates; military tanks; soldiers running on a train track; large submarine; facility with bomber aircrafts.

4:15

Historical map zoomed in to Italy; people celebrating in front of graffiti that reads 'Viva England Viva U.S.A USSR'; troops crossing water on foot

It's Spring of 1942, and the Axis powers are triumphant everywhere. Germany, Italy, and Japan have won battle after battle. The flames of fascism sweep across the globe. Nazi Germany seems unbeatable in Europe. In 1939, they occupy Czechoslovakia and Poland. In early 1940, they take Denmark and Norway. Then, in a lightning summer campaign – called Blitzkrieg – German armored columns defeat the French army. Britain stands alone, protected by the waters of the English Channel and the Royal Air Force. The valiant efforts of British fighter pilots repel the Nazi Luftwaffe in the Battle of Britain.

Aiming to isolate the island nation, the Nazis launch the biggest submarine campaign in history. Their U-boats claim hundreds of kills.

Turning south, German and Italian forces conquer Yugoslavia and Greece and march across North Africa. In the east, Nazi troops launch a surprise attack against the Soviet Union. The Soviets halt the Nazi advance just miles from Moscow.

In Asia, the Allies fare no better. Japan had occupied large parts of China and Southeast Asia.

Then, on December 7th, 1941, Japanese planes launched a sneak attack against the US Navy at Pearl Harbor in Hawaii. With the American navy weakened, Japanese naval forces spread across the Pacific, conquering the Philippines and other islands. Their army pushes down the Malay Peninsula, capturing the critical British base in Singapore. The war seems lost.

The war seemed lost, but the tide was about to turn.

In 1942, three critical battles – all brilliant traps – shift the balance of war for the Allies.

In the Pacific, Japanese forces approach the island of Midway. American dive-bombers ambush them. The American navy arrives and sinks four Japanese aircraft carriers. In a single day, the war in the Pacific is transformed.

Half a world away, in the sands of the Egyptian desert, another trap is sprung. This time, it is British Imperial forces – including Indians, Africans, Australians, and New Zealanders. They dig in around the town of El Alamein and strike with overwhelming force. German and Italian forces are sent reeling.

Finally, in the depths of the Soviet Union, Soviet forces lure a German Army into the city of Stalingrad. Their stubborn six-month resistance draws more and more German soldiers into the city. In November, the Red Army strikes, encircling and defeating the Nazis trapped in the city. These three battles re-set the war.

British Prime Minister, Winston Churchill, later remarked on this turning point: "Before Alamein we never had a victory, after Alamein we never had a defeat."

By 1943, the Axis powers were retreating everywhere. In Russia, the Soviets win history's largest tank battle, the Battle of Kursk. Both sides suffer mass casualties, but the Nazis are overwhelmed by the Soviet numbers.

In the West, Britain and America use advanced technology to defeat German submarines while building huge fleets of bombers and fighter aircraft.

In 1943, American and British forces invade Italy from North Africa. Mussolini and his fascist government falls.

On June 6th, 1944, D-Day is launched, and a huge Allied invasion force lands in Normandy, France. The liberation of Europe begins.



and in tanks, overlaid is 'D-Day, Normandy, France'; footage from the Battle of the Bulge on a snowy landscape; map of Germany with footage of destruction; vintage map of Southeast Asia and the South China Sea; troops in jungle and tropical settings.

5:30

Historical map highlighting Japan with footage of a bombed landscape and the signing of documents, overlaid is 'Hiroshima and Nagasaki'; text 'Why Did the Allies Win'; celebratory procession with troops holding American and British flags and leaders saluting; bar graph titled 'Population, 1939' comparing the populations of Axis and Allied powers.

6:46

Bar chart comparing the percentage of Axis and Allied share of key resources in 1939 for Coal, Iron, and Wheat; bar chart titled 'Percent of World Oil Production, 1939' comparing the oil production of the United States, Germany, and Japan; Poster titled 'The Democratic Advantage' featuring Allied soldiers and flags; footage of Axis dictators; Allied leaders shaking hands.

7:54

Photo of African soldiers along a dirt path; women working on weapons and parts; Allied leaders in discussion; American troops celebrating on a large ship; couple walking down an empty neighborhood road.

But the Germans still have cards to play. A winter campaign, the Battle of the Bulge – attempts to push the Allies back to the English Channel. The losses are staggering, but the Allies prevail.

On April 30th, 1945, Adolf Hitler dies by suicide. In May, Berlin falls to the Soviet army, and the Germans surrender.

In the Pacific, the Allies push back Japanese forces. Allied troops from Britain, India, and Africa liberate Burma. American Marines and soldiers take island after island from the Japanese. In October 1944, they work with resistance fighters to push the Japanese from the Philippine Islands.

Still, it takes most of 1945 to defeat Japan. The dropping of the first atomic bombs on the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and the Soviet invasion of Manchuria — finally force a Japanese surrender.

The Second World War was won with the blood of Allied soldiers, sailors, and airmen. But war isn't just a story of battles. The Allies also triumphed thanks to large populations, industrial production, and the advantages that democracies have over autocratic governments.

Let's start by looking at human power. The German population in 1939 was about 80 million, and Japan came in at about 70 million. Compare that to the Soviet Union, at 168 million; the US, at 133 million, and the 500 million inhabitants of the British Empire: Indian, Canadian, Australian, African, and Caribbean troops who contributed to the war effort. The Allies had similar advantages when it came to raw materials.

Coal, iron, wheat. You name it, they had more of it. Most important of all was Allied oil. The US controlled 70% of the world's oil production – about 1.3 billion barrels. Germany could produce only 10 million barrels, and Japan a tiny half million barrels.

And there's one more big factor to consider. The Allies included free and open societies that made decisions democratically and rationally.

Germany, Italy, and Japan were led by dictators who ignored their generals. They created an environment in which officers competed with each other for the dictator's favor. Axis leaders were also suspicious of each other, and never really cooperated. By contrast, the Western democracies – Britain and the United States – cooperated very closely. They even coordinated with their Soviet allies. Their generals worked together. As a result, the Allies developed better strategies.

So, what won the war? Was it a few key victories in 1942? Larger populations? Industrial production? Or better cooperation and decision-making?

There is no singular answer. All of these factors contributed and helped shape the world in the second half of the twentieth century.

Our thanks should go to the veterans who fought in the war, but also the women and men who worked in the fields and factories that made their victories possible. The world would be a darker place today had the Allies failed and fascism triumphed.