

# Teachers' guide 1: The start and legacy of World War II



War Memorials Trust

**Background:** This is the first teachers' guide from War Memorials Trust designed to support your teaching of World War II while giving a focus on the war memorials that commemorate it and some of the specific events of the conflict. This guide covers two aspects of the war: the lead up to and reasons for the outbreak of the war, and the impact and legacy of the war on Britain and the wider world.

These notes and teaching suggestions are not intended to be completely comprehensive but can be used as a starting point and combined with other resources. There are many high quality resources available from some of the organisations listed at [www.learnaboutwarmemorials.org/links](http://www.learnaboutwarmemorials.org/links) which could be used to teach the activities and information suggested below. This is clearly a complex topic and the points below are general suggestions only, for you to adapt according to the needs of your class and curriculum and use over several lessons.

**Suitable for:** Key Stage 3

**Learning objective:** Pupils will learn:

- Key facts about World War II
- Some of the reasons why World War II began
- The impact of World War II and how it continues to be commemorated today

## Key information

### World War II: main facts

- War was declared in Britain on 3<sup>rd</sup> September 1939, having officially begun on the 1<sup>st</sup> with the invasion of Poland. VE (Victory in Europe) Day, the day the war ended in Europe, was 8<sup>th</sup> May 1945. Japan then surrendered on 15<sup>th</sup> August 1945.
- The war ended up involving most countries around the world, with the Allies (including Britain, the United States and the Soviet Union) fighting the Axis Powers (including Germany, Italy and Japan).
- World War II was the costliest war in history in terms of casualties. It was a 'total' war meaning that the entire population, industry and economy of the main countries involved was put towards the war effort and consequently the civilian as well as the military impact was high. This idea is explored more thoroughly in subsequent teachers' notes in this unit which look at the Blitz and its impact on civilians.
- Estimates of casualty rates vary and it is difficult to be precise, but it is generally accepted that there were around 60 million military and civilian deaths around the world, which represents about 3% of the population at the time.

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## The start of the war

- The causes of such a huge worldwide conflict are obviously complex. There were short and long term factors and some can be traced back many years.
- Adolf Hitler came to power in Germany in 1933 when the country was suffering the effects of a worldwide economic depression and the terms of the Treaty of Versailles, imposed on a defeated Germany at the end of World War I. In this climate, Hitler's aims for a stronger country appealed to more people.
- Hitler aimed to create a strong Germany and reverse many aspects of the Treaty of Versailles. His policies included building up Germany's armed forces and remilitarisation, taking back or annexing land such as the Sudetenland and Austria to increase Germany's resources and *lebensraum* for German Aryan people, and persecution of political opponents and Jewish people. During the late 1930s there were many events in Europe demonstrating political aggression and persecution.
- In 1938, the policy favoured by British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain of appeasement (negotiating and offering concessions to Hitler's demands) granted Germany the Sudetenland at the Munich Agreement. Chamberlain believed war could be avoided.
- Shortly after Munich, Hitler invaded the rest of Czechoslovakia, breaking the terms of the agreement and of the Treaty of Versailles. Austria was also annexed by the Anschluss. This showed that appeasement had failed and war was becoming inevitable.
- In 1939 Germany invaded Poland on 1<sup>st</sup> September. This event is seen as the start of the war. Britain declared war on Germany two days later following Germany's refusal to withdraw.

## Key events of the war

- Some of the key events and major campaigns of the war are covered elsewhere in this unit and you can use these to support your teaching of how the war was fought. The following points are intended to be a brief overview of key events.
- For the first few months of the war there was little military action and this period became known as the 'Phoney War.'
- Policies at home included the implementation of the blackout and the evacuation of hundreds of thousands of vulnerable people, mainly children, to safer areas away from the cities. However, as the Phoney War progressed, many of these were taken back because of the lack of any apparent action and danger.
- Britain as a great power largely stood alone in the first half of the war but withstood Dunkirk, the Battle of Britain and the Blitz (see lessons 2, 3 and 4 in this unit).
- In 1941 things began to improve for Britain as Russia and the United States entered the war on the Allied side; Russia following Operation Barbarossa and the US following the Japanese bombing of Pearl Harbor. Over the next couple of years the Allies won key victories at El Alamein and Stalingrad and this saw a major turning point in the war in favour of the Allies by 1943.
- D-Day, in June 1944, saw the Allies land in occupied France and start to drive the Germans back. Meanwhile the Russians advanced through Eastern Europe and reached Berlin in April 1945.
- Hitler committed suicide and many senior Nazis did the same or fled. Germany surrendered and the war ended on 8<sup>th</sup> May 1945.

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### **The end of the war and its legacy**

- 8<sup>th</sup> May 1945 became known as VE Day (Victory in Europe Day). While the immediate reaction was one of celebration the effects and consequences of the war were far reaching and significant, both on life in Britain and on the political and social landscape of the wider world.
- At home, rationing continued until well into the 1950s. The process of demobilisation of the military and civilian population began but clearly was not going to happen overnight, and some faced difficulties on returning home concerning the availability of work and housing. Britain had suffered significant damage and shortages and many accounts say that the mood in the days immediately after VE Day was more muted and uncertain than we might expect after the hardship of war was declared officially over.
- Churchill lost the 1945 election (there is more information about this in the teachers' notes about Churchill) and a Labour government came to power. This marked the start of the Welfare State.
- Elsewhere, fighting continued after VE Day. In August the United States dropped atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, leading to the Japanese surrender.
- The post-war period, as well as seeing social changes in Britain, saw a new political climate throughout the world. The atomic bomb changed the nature of warfare and international relations. For much of the rest of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the Cold War led to fear and uncertainty with America and the Soviet Union the world's new 'superpowers.'
- Germany was divided into East and West Germany until the 1990s.
- The United Nations was formed to replace the League of Nations. It was hoped this would avoid another war like World War II.

### **Commemoration and views of the war today**

- The end of World War II did not see quite the same scale of memorialisation in terms of the creation of war memorials in the UK as World War I had nearly 30 years previously. Of the 100,000 war memorials in the UK at least two-thirds of these were created after World War I. After World War II, many of these memorials were added to with the names of those involved in the latest conflict.
- The marking of Remembrance Day (then more commonly known as Armistice Day) had declined during the war as efforts focused on fighting the current war rather than remembering the last one, but was revived after World War II, with 11<sup>th</sup> November coming to be a time to remember the dead of both wars. In the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the support for marking Remembrance Day declined at times, especially as significant anniversaries came around but became more popular during the 1980s and 1990s. There is more information about this in War Memorials Trust's other secondary school learning resources.
- 2015 marked the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the end of World War II (and of course the centenary of World War I coincides with this). Governments around the world, including Germany, participated in commemorative events and many leaders praised those that had fought.
- In Britain, a service was held at the Cenotaph to mark the event. There were also more celebratory events including a concert and parade in London and various street parties to echo those held at the time.

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## Suggested teaching and activities

1. This guide can be used as the start and end of a chronological study of the facts of the war. The information above can be used to teach pupils the different causes of the war and pupils could divide these into long-term and short-term causes and try to identify the most important. You could follow this up by using the suggestions in other teachers' guides in this unit about the main events of the war such as Dunkirk and the Battle of Britain. Finally, you could conclude a study of this sort by teaching about the events outlined above that led to the war ending. Pupils could work on identifying the key turning points in the war and researching some of these events in more detail.
2. Having studied the events of the war, pupils should also develop an understanding of the immediate consequences of the war on Britain and the effect total mobilisation had had on the population and economy and how this recovered in the first years after 1945. They could research how many casualties there had been and link this, if applicable, to the local area – what was the overall impact on your local area of the war by 1945?
3. Rather than such an in depth study, an alternative way of teaching about the war would be to use this guide (and others in this unit) to teach an overview of the key events and focus on the consequences of the conflict rather than studying the key campaigns in depth. Having learned about the events of the war, pupils should come to understand the impact of war on the broader social and political changes in Britain and the world. This could include the start of the welfare state, the impact of the war on women, the Cold War and international relations that resulted from World War II and the United Nations.
4. Through these activities, pupils will come to understand that World War II has left an extensive legacy on the world, both politically and socially. As time goes on it, like World War I has done, it is moving beyond living memory. As well as discussing the details of the worldwide political and social legacy of the war as outlined above, pupils should examine how the war and those that fought it is viewed today and how remembrance of it has changed over the years.
  - a. What do war memorials tell us about the impact of the war on communities and how they wanted to commemorate it? Having focused on war memorials to specific events in previous sessions, pupils should now look at more general community memorials that commemorate local losses in World War II and consider their designs. There are many examples of World War II memorials in War Memorials Trust's online Gallery of war memorials at [www.learnaboutwarmemorials.org](http://www.learnaboutwarmemorials.org) and at [www.warmemorialsonline.org.uk](http://www.warmemorialsonline.org.uk). There were not, and still are not, any rules about what form war memorials take and they therefore can reveal interesting clues about community feeling at the time. What impression does your local war memorial give about this? How do you think the community felt having to commemorate more war dead so soon after World War I?
  - b. They could also research names on war memorials to discover some of the more personal impact of the war. You may find other resources from War Memorials Trust,

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such as our 'Introduction to war memorials' materials and online Gallery of war memorials, useful for this.

- c. Pupils could also look at what the major commemorations of the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of World War II, in 2015, tell us about how the war is seen now. Is it still important to remember? Has the war always been remembered this way?

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