

Seven Common Misconceptions about World War II

World War II ended three-quarters of a century ago. Now only a tiny and fast-dwindling number of Americans still possess an active memory of the conflict, and most of the rest of us view what happened through the gauzy tissue of fiction and faulty memory. The United States won the war, didn't we? Through the unparalleled courage of the "Greatest Generation" and the awesome industrial power of our economy, we overwhelmed the Nazi juggernaut in little more than three years and brought Imperial Japan to her knees in less than four. Well, yes. There's more than a fair measure of truth in all that. In fact, it's true as far as it goes. But the story of the Second World War is far, far bigger, and far more complex. Most Americans labor under misconceptions about its true nature. And that truth is hiding in plain sight for anyone willing to look closely. Here goes . . .

#1. World War II lasted for four years.

Some historians consider World Wars I and II to be part of a single protracted conflict—a twentieth-century [Thirty Years' War](#), if you will. Others argue that the second global war began in 1931 when Japan's renegade [Kwantung Army](#) engineered the [Mukden Incident](#) and subsequently [invaded Manchuria](#). Others still might contend that the Italian [invasion of Abyssinia](#) (Ethiopia) in 1935-37 or the German and Italian involvement in the [Spanish Civil War](#) in 1936-39, usually thought a dry run for the Axis, should be considered of a piece with the global conflict.

Although the historical consensus in the West dates the launch of World War II to September 1, 1939, when Nazi armies forced their way into Poland, from a global perspective the war had already been underway for at least two years. On [July 7, 1937](#), Chinese and Japanese troops exchanged fire in the vicinity of the [Marco Polo \(or Lugou\) Bridge](#), a crucial access route to Beiping (today Beijing). What began as confused, sporadic skirmishing soon escalated into a [full-scale battle](#) in which Beiping and its port city of Tianjin fell to the Japanese. *That was more than four years before Pearl Harbor* (December 7, 1941). And the US military became actively engaged in hostilities in the European theater only on November 8, 1942, when American and British troops under the command of Dwight Eisenhower [invaded Morocco and Algeria](#). Less than four years of active warfare later, World War II staggered to a close on September 2, 1945, when the Empire of Japan surrendered on board the battleship *Missouri*.



Japanese officials arriving onboard the USS Missouri, September 2, 1945, to sign the instrument of unconditional surrender. Image credit: Stars and Stripes.

#2. The US lost as many dead as our allies.

American families—and our nation as a whole—paid a terrible price in the deaths of more than 400,000 soldiers, sailors, and airmen. But the numbers of dead paled by comparison with those of our allies, as you can see in the following table. There, you'll find a comparison of the mortality rates suffered by both the combatant nations and those inadvertently drawn into the war. (You can see a more comprehensive list on Wikipedia's article, "[World War II casualties](#).") Please note that most historians use the range 20,000,000 to 25,000,000 dead for the Soviet Union—I've seen estimates as high as 27,000,000—with 15,000,000 to 20,000,000 for China and 6,900,000 to 7,400,000 for Germany. I've used the lower numbers in each case.

| World War II deaths in proportion to population | | | | |
|--------------------------------------------------------|------------------|--------------------------------------------|-------------------------------|---------------------------------------------|
| Country | Coalition | 1939 pop (millions) | Deaths | Deaths as % of total |
| Poland | | 34.8 | 5,900,000 | 16.95 |
| USSR | Allies | 168.5 | 20,000,000 | 11.86 |
| Germany | Axis | 69.3 | 6,900,000 | 9.96 |
| Yugoslavia | | 15.5 | 1,027,000 | 6.58 |
| China | Allies | 267.6 | 15,000,000 | 5.64 |
| French Indochina | | 24.7 | 1,000,000 | 4.04 |
| Philippines | | 16 | 557,000 | 3.48 |
| Japan | Axis | 71.9 | 2,500,000 | 3.47 |
| Netherlands | | 8.7 | 210,000 | 2.41 |
| France | Allies | 42 | 600,000 | 1.43 |
| Italy | Axis | 43.4 | 492,400 | 1.13 |
| Belgium | | 8.4 | 88,000 | 1.05 |
| Britain | Allies | 47.8 | 450,900 | 0.94 |
| India | | 377.8 | 2,200,000 | 0.58 |
| Australia | | 7 | 40,400 | 0.58 |
| Norway | | 2.9 | 10,200 | 0.40 |
| Canada | | 11 | 43,600 | 0.38 |
| USA | Allies | 131 | 419,400 | 0.38 |
| World | | 2,300 | 70,000,000 | 3.04 |

The greatest impact of World War II in lives lost was—by far—suffered in Eastern Europe and East Asia. From a geopolitical perspective, the Western Front was a sideshow. And the US, despite the horrific cost we paid in lives, was by comparison far less affected. (Note: I've identified as Allies only the five principals considered central to the pursuit of the war—the US, Britain, France, the USSR, and China—although forty-six nations signed the [Declaration of the United Nations](#) and were thus engaged on our side.) We Americans justifiably dwell on the enormous sacrifice our country endured because fanatical leaders thousands of miles away sent the world spinning out of control for years on end. But it's only fitting that we honor historical truth and recognize that we were far from alone in the struggle—and others lost far, far more.

#3. The Normandy invasion was the biggest battle of the war.

In the West, we tend to think of the American, British, and Canadian invasion of Normandy—[Operation Overlord](#)—as the biggest event of World War II. In fact, the

operation was immense. The action on June 6, 1944, involved 5,000 ships, 1,200 aircraft, 2,200 tanks and assault guns, and (initially) 156,000 soldiers. It was the largest and most complex amphibious operation ever mounted in human history. Eventually, the invasion force grew to 680,000, and by the end of August 1944, more than two million Allied soldiers were on French soil. Still, other military operations in the war were bigger. *Much bigger.*

For example, consider [Operation Bagration](#) around the same time as Normandy. Hitler's invasion of the Soviet Union on June 22, 1941 had involved three enormous army groups. Army Group Center was the force intended to drive straight through the USSR and take Moscow. Three years later, by June 1944, Army Group Center had fallen back to positions in Belarus and was on the defensive. With an initial force of 1,670,000 troops—which grew to 2,500,000—Soviet commanders [Konstantin Rokossovsky](#) and [Georgy Zhukov](#) attacked the German lines shortly after the Normandy invasion in a pincer movement from both north and south. Within two weeks they destroyed twenty-eight of thirty-four divisions in Army Group Center, killing or capturing as many as half a million Germans. Some historians speculate that these losses triggered [Operation Valkyrie](#)—[Claus von Stauffenberg](#)'s attempt to assassinate Adolf Hitler—while the slaughter was still underway a month after the initial attack. *Yet even the extraordinary Operation Bagration wasn't the biggest military event of the war.*



Late in 1944, Soviet forces were on the verge of reversing the invasion and pushing the Germans entirely out of the USSR. Every red rectangle represents hundreds of thousands of Soviet soldiers. Image credit: Pinterest.

In the table below, you'll find a selection of what records show to have been the largest named operations of World War II as defined by the number of men engaged. Of course, war is uncommonly messy, and few large military operations can be precisely defined by dates or numbers. They often involve months of preliminary steps and weeks or months of follow-up. And counting the numbers of divisions, or the troops enrolled in them, is only a rough guide to an operation's scope. In modern warfare, air force (and sometimes naval) personnel are often involved as well, occasionally in large numbers. In some cases, especially late in the Second World War, partisans also became involved in significant strength, most notably on the [Eastern Front](#), in [Yugoslavia](#), and in [France](#) following the Normandy invasion. But one number—representing the tally of troops engaged in the operation on the attacking side—is a rough guide to its scope.

| The Biggest Military Operations of World War II | | | | |
|-------------------------------------------------|--------|------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------|------------|
| Operation | Side | Description | Dates | # Soldiers |
| Barbarossa | Axis | Nazi invasion of the USSR | June 22 – December 5, 1941 | 3,800,000 |
| Bagration | Allies | Soviet destruction of German Army Group Center | June 23 - August 19, 1944 | 2,500,000 |
| Kutuzov & Rummyantsev | Allies | Soviet counteroffensive at Kursk | July 12 – August 3, 1943 | 2,500,000 |
| Downfall | Allies | Planned US invasion of Japanese Home Islands | Planned for November 1, 1945 and March 1, 1946, but never carried out | 2,500,000 |
| Citadel | Axis | German offensive at Kursk | July 5 – August 23, 1943 | 781,000 |
| Overlord | Allies | Normandy Invasion | June 6 – August 30, 1944 | 640,000 |
| Ichi-Go | Axis | Japanese attacks on Nationalist Chinese Army | April 19 – December 31, 1944 | 500,000 |

Wikipedia contains a much more [extensive list](#) of the military operations of the war. Those on the Eastern Front are [listed separately](#), as are those in the [Pacific Theater](#).

#4. The Allies defeated the Axis against great odds.

It's plausible to argue that all three Axis nations—Germany, Japan, and Italy—went to war in the late 1930s ill-prepared and destined to lose. It was conceivable that if they could win the war in a matter of months, as both Hitler and Hirohito fantasized, victory might have been within their reach—but only if Japan had managed a genuine knockout blow at Pearl Harbor and Germany had never invaded the Soviet Union or declared war on the United States. And the reigning ideology in both aggressor nations

made it imperative for them to act exactly as they did. However, two strategic factors of overarching import undermined their efforts from the start.

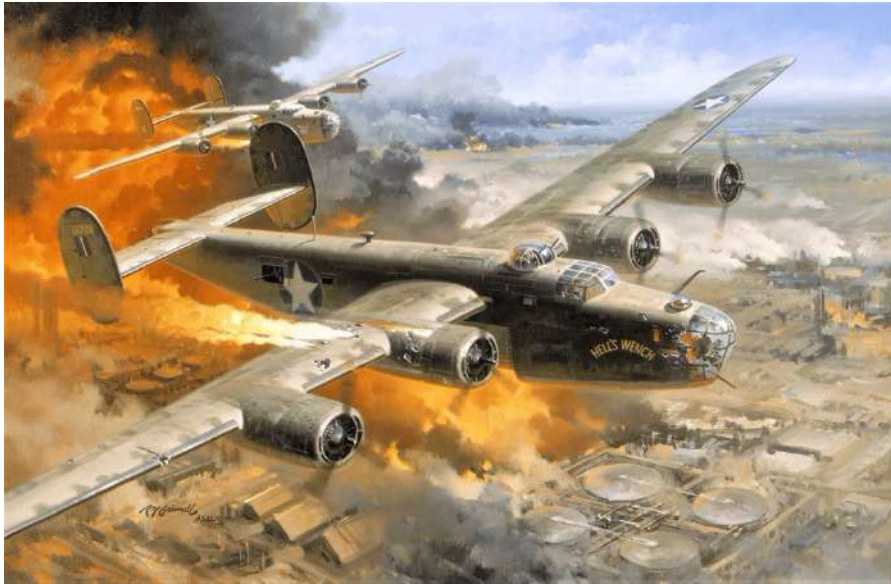
Demographics matter.

The combined population of the Axis was 185 million, less than half that of the 390 million people who lived in the four Allied nations of Britain, France, the USA, and the USSR. And that doesn't even count the 268 million people of China—or the enormous populations of the global British and French empires. (India alone had a population of 378 million.) In other words, the Allies possessed manpower reserves that were orders of magnitude greater and were thus capable of bringing up millions of freshly trained soldiers long after the Axis had begun to scrape the bottom of the demographic barrel. That was certainly the case in both Germany and Japan, which mobilized teenagers and middle-aged conscripts in the final stages of the war.

Oil fuels modern wars.

None of the three Axis nations possessed rich deposits of natural resources. Most important of all, the three countries were all dependent on imported oil. Other commodities such as iron ore (to make steel), rubber (for tires), and coal (for both heating and fuel) are necessary. But without question the single most important natural resource in a modern war economy is oil. Germany, Japan, and Italy had none; in fact, Germany was forced to utilize several complex and expensive manufacturing processes to produce [synthetic oil](#) from coal and other readily obtainable resources. By contrast, the Soviet Union and the USA both harbored huge oil reserves—the USA was by far the world's largest producer at the time—and the British and French empires possessed oil reserves as well.

Unsurprisingly, the [importance of oil](#) figured in the strategic calculations of the Axis nations. Japan launched its attack on Pearl Harbor primarily in response to a US oil embargo. At the same time, the Empire rushed its forces to Indonesia to tap the oilfields there. And Germany dispatched Rommel to North Africa to push the British across the Suez Canal and gain access to Middle Eastern oil. In addition, Hitler devoted as many troops in his attack on the USSR toward the [Caucasus oilfields](#) as toward Moscow and Leningrad.



American B-24 Liberator heavy bomber on a raid over Romania's Ploiești oilfields, October 12, 1944. Image credit: WW2aircraft.net Forums

Of course, the Allies were fully aware that Germany's war machine was fueled by oil from the [Ploiești oilfields](#) in Romania—and directed [massive bombing campaigns](#) there in 1943-44 to take out the source. They succeeded in causing severe damage at Ploiești only by returning again and again with enormous numbers of bombers (since few individual bombs even came close to their [targets](#)). In the war's final months, most of what little was left of Hitler's vaunted Panzer divisions quickly ground to a halt for lack of fuel.

But there were additional factors that unfavorably weighed in the balance as the Axis went to war.

Italy's strategic deficit

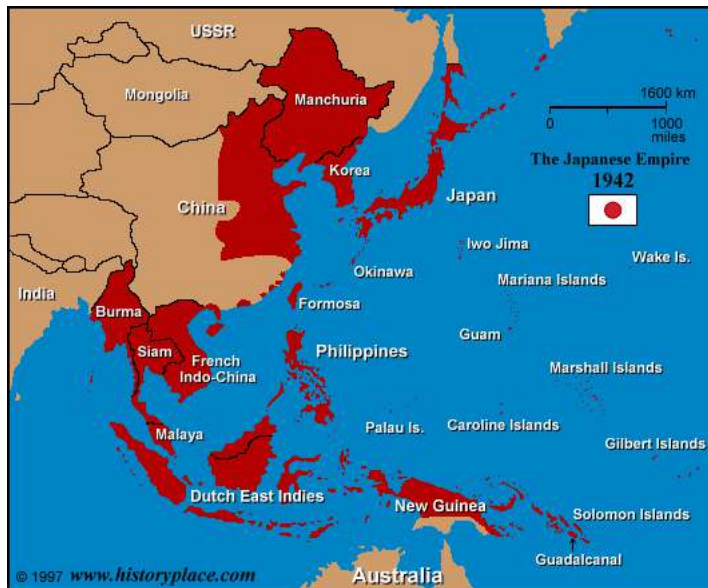
The [case of Italy](#) is straightforward. On paper, the Italians mustered the world's fourth-largest navy (after Britain, Japan, and France) and the fourth-biggest army (after the USSR, Germany, and France). The Italian navy rivaled the British in the Mediterranean in numbers, but it proved no match in practice. Its army, though numbering three million men when fully mobilized, was poorly equipped, lacked training, and suffered from low morale. The country's natural resources were severely limited and its manpower reserves shallow in a population of little more than forty million. And Mussolini's strategic leadership was flawed from the first, his plan to recreate the Roman Empire sheer fantasy. Everywhere—Abyssinia and Spain in 1935-39, the Balkans and Greece in 1939-40, and North Africa in 1940-43—Italian troops faltered.

Imperial Japan's fatal errors

The fanatics who gained ascendancy in the Japanese military in the 1930s were not to be reasoned with. And they made two fundamental mistakes.

Hubris. Of course, there were rational and intelligent senior officers within the Imperial High Command—Admiral [Isoroku Yamamoto](#), most prominently—who were perfectly well aware that Japan could not defeat the United States in a lengthy war. Yamamoto opted for the surprise [attack on Pearl Harbor](#) because he hoped—without much confidence—that it would cripple the US Navy and persuade the American people not to go to war. The task force secretly sent steaming toward Hawaii was massive, including six aircraft carriers, two battleships, and more than four hundred aircraft. The Japanese inflicted grievous losses on the US, sinking four battleships, severely damaging the other four, destroying or damaging more than three hundred airplanes, and killing more than 2,400 Americans. But it wasn't enough. The attackers failed to sink all of America's Pacific Fleet; three strategically important aircraft carriers were hundreds of miles away on December 7. (Two were on their way to Wake and Midway Islands, the third being refitted at San Diego.) And attacking Japanese planes unaccountably failed to bomb the gasoline storage tanks on the island of Oahu. The [Battle of Midway](#) half a year later is generally taken to be the turning point in the Pacific War, but it can be argued that the die was cast for US victory even at Pearl Harbor. Admiral Yamamoto would probably have agreed: Japan had failed to keep the Americans out of the war. The Japanese Empire might drag out the conflict and inflict heavy losses on the US military, but it was not going to win.

Overextended forces. Japan's ambitions far outran both her resources and her capabilities. Within a matter of months, she had millions of soldiers, sailors, and airmen [scattered over territory](#) that sprawled more than four thousand miles from north to south and five thousand from east to west. The Japanese army was formidable, but its more than [three million soldiers](#) were spread across China, French Indochina, Indonesia, Malaya, Singapore, the Philippines, and scattered among smaller islands throughout the China Seas and the Central and Southern Pacific. It was dramatically overextended and vulnerable to cuts in its supply lines, which the Americans naturally obliged in severing as the war went on. The navy, too, was powerful—the world's second largest, after the British Royal Navy—but Japanese manufacturers weren't up to the task of replacing the three thousand [ships sunk](#) in the course of the war. The Americans were. The United States [built six thousand ships](#) and ended World War II nearly on par with the Royal Navy, still the world's most powerful fighting force on the seas.



The Japanese Empire at its full extent in World War II. Image credit: www.historyplace.com

In fact, Imperial Japan was vulnerable to a two-front war she could not possibly have won under any conceivable circumstances. Senior military planners were intensely aware of the potential threat in the event that the USSR entered the conflict. And historical circumstances—the longstanding Russian involvement in Manchuria and the 1904-5 [Russo-Japanese War](#), which the Russians lost badly—provided Stalin with ample motivation to take on Imperial Japan. In fact, in the runup to Pearl Harbor in 1940-41, the Japanese military actively weighed the tradeoffs between driving south toward Indonesia, the Philippines, and Indochina, on the one hand, and west and north toward Manchuria and the Soviet Union on the other.

Sandwiched between the United States to the east and the Soviet Union to the west, the Japanese might well have found her adventure in Manchuria and even her home islands under attack. Many observers are convinced that the eventual [Soviet entry](#) in the war on August 9, 1945—the same day the second American atomic bomb (“[Fat Man](#)”) fell on Nagasaki—was an even bigger factor than the bomb itself in persuading Hirohito to submit to [unconditional surrender](#).

Nazi Germany's built-in disadvantages

Military weaknesses. When Hitler launched the European war in 1939, the German [Wehrmacht](#) and [Kriegsmarine](#) were both widely considered to be inferior to the combined forces of Britain and France. The British Royal Navy was indisputably the world's most powerful force on the seas; by contrast, the German navy was in a frantic race to reach parity . . . by 1945. And at the war's outset, the [French Army](#) was believed—with good reason—to be superior to the German. Although slightly smaller (at 90 divisions versus 100), the French could muster an additional five million trained soldiers, and its tanks

were arguably superior to the early-generation [Panzers](#) brought to the fighting when the Nazis invaded in 1940. It was a clever strategy ([Blitzkrieg](#)), brilliant tactics by German tank commanders, and an extraordinarily stupid [French defense plan](#) that enabled the Nazis to prevail, and so spectacularly.

Britain lived in fear of a Nazi invasion for at least two years following the French collapse in May 1940, and in fact Hitler did order the German general staff to draw up plans for [Operation Sea Lion](#). The invasion was to proceed in September 1940. The fact that the *Führer* called it off is usually ascribed to the *Luftwaffe's* failure to gain ascendancy in the skies in the Battle of Britain, and that certainly was a critical factor. However, the *Kriegsmarine* fell short, too. Not only could the German navy not gain supremacy in the English Channel, which Hitler had specified as necessary. But, also, Germany had far too few barges and landing craft to pull off an amphibious operation even if the preconditions had been met.

Only in the air was Nazi Germany clearly more powerful in 1939, but that was problematic in its own way. The [Luftwaffe](#) was ideally equipped to support Hitler's plans for land warfare, with [Stuka](#) dive-bombers and [Heinkel](#) and [Junkers](#) medium bombers to savage Allied troop emplacements, transportation networks, and supply lines and [Messerschmitt](#) and [Focke-Wulf](#) fighters capable of protecting the slower aircraft as they moved into enemy territory. The deficits in the *Luftwaffe's* planning emerged only later: the slowness and vulnerability of the Stuka, the lack of heavy bombers to increase the damage to English cities, and the inability of German industry to produce new planes quickly enough and in sufficient quantities to keep the air force at full strength. Problems with industrial production also cropped up with German tanks, which were what manufacturers call "over-engineered" and thus more difficult and slower to produce.

Nazi ideology. Hitler's rabidly anti-Semitic ideology hobbled Germany's war effort in at least two major ways—by depriving the country of many of its best scientists, and by ensuring the passionate resistance of the Soviet people by murdering so many Jews and other civilians.

First, the scientists. Many if not most of the [half-million Jews](#) in Germany considered themselves Germans first and Jews often a distant second; they represented the most assimilated Jewish population in the world. Many were fiercely patriotic—a great many older Jewish men had fought for Germany in World War I—and the younger men would no doubt have joined the war effort had the Nazi regime not driven them out of their jobs and forced so many of them to flee the country. Most importantly, a disproportionate number of the country's leading scientists were Jewish. Consider just

the physicists, whose work was central to the development of the atomic bomb. (Many subsequently played leading roles in the [Manhattan Project](#).) As [Physics Today](#) (September 26, 2018) revealed, “three of the displaced scientists—Einstein, [Franck](#), and [Schrödinger](#)—were already physics Nobel Laureates; five more would eventually receive the prize. A [2016 study](#) found that the 15% of physicists who were dismissed from German universities accounted for 64% of all German physics citations.”

But Hitler’s rabid anti-Semitism played itself out in a far more ferocious way as well—even before the construction of the death camps where millions were gassed. In the wake of Operation Barbarossa, when German forces invaded the Soviet Union (June 22, 1941), the [Schutzstaffel](#) (SS) dispatched [Einsatzgruppen](#)—paramilitary death squads—to carry out operations ranging from the murder of a few people to operations which lasted over two or more days, such as the massacre at [Babi Yar](#) with nearly 34,000 Jews killed in two days, and the [Rumbula massacre](#) (with about 25,000 Jews killed in two days of shooting). Between 1941 and 1945 the *Einsatzgruppen*, related agencies, and foreign auxiliary personnel killed more than two million people, including 1.3 million of the six million Jews murdered during the [Holocaust](#). And, as the numbers suggest, it was not just Jews who died at the hands of the *Einsatzgruppen*. Nazi ideology held that Communism and Judaism were closely interrelated, and Hitler’s orders covered commissars as well. And since Nazis considered *all* Russians and other Slavs to be [Untermenschen](#), or subhuman, they acted accordingly. When, later in the war, Germans were in retreat over the same ground they’d won in 1941-42, they paid the price in the passionate [resistance](#) they met from the survivors.

#5. Adolf Hitler was a military genius.

In the conventional view Adolf Hitler receives middling marks as a military strategist. Historians tend to acknowledge at least some of his poor decisions but point to the successes he engineered early in the war through the [Blitzkrieg](#) strategy he adopted so enthusiastically and the possible breakthrough in the [Battle of the Bulge](#) (December 16, 1944-January 25, 1945). However, it can be plausibly argued that, in the final analysis, Nazi Germany lost the war because of Hitler's strategic blunders.

First, there were his several costly errors of judgment:

- When the Nazis invaded Poland on September 1, 1939, Hitler was convinced that Britain and France would dither and storm but do nothing in the end. After all, Britain and France had repeatedly caved at Hitler’s provocations in [1936](#), in [1938](#), and again the same year at [Munich](#). But he was shocked when they declared war just two days later on September 3. And at least some among his generals were

unhappy, feeling they had needed more time to prepare for war in the west. The admirals certainly were.

- In May 1940, the Nazi *Blitzkrieg* had overwhelmed the powerful French army and the [British Expeditionary Force](#). Half a million Allied troops were cornered in a small area around the port of Dunquerque ([Dunkirk](#)). The Wehrmacht was eager to crush them. But Hitler held them back, naively believing that the British would open negotiations if he permitted their troops to live. Presumably, he had counted on Neville Chamberlain's fecklessness and was unprepared for the resolve displayed by Winston Churchill, who took office as Prime Minister on May 10, 1940. As a result, more than 300,000 [soldiers escaped](#) to fight again in the [Dunkirk evacuation](#) (May 26 – June 4, 1940).
- [Operation Barbarossa](#), the German invasion of the Soviet Union on June 22, 1941, was grounded on the premise that the Russian people would welcome the Nazis. Hitler anticipated that the Soviet government would collapse in short order. In fact, in the early days of the conflict some Soviet citizens, especially in the Ukraine, cheered the arrival of the Germans. But the sadistic behavior of the Nazis, who murdered entire communities without provocation, soon soured the mood and ensured popular resistance. The result was that [Soviet partisans](#) became a significant factor in the Germans' defeat—unlike the ballyhooed [Resistance](#) movements in France, Italy, Poland, and Greece.



This map depicts the three main thrusts of Operation Barbarossa, the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union on June 22, 1941. Image credit: Google Sites

But Adolf Hitler erred far more than simply exercising bad judgment at critical times. In impulsive and deliberative ways, he actively blundered frequently enough to establish a pattern. Here are just a few examples:

- Operation Barbarossa was originally scheduled for May 15, 1941. Hitler elected instead to shift some of the forces earmarked for the invasion to the Balkans, where his ally [Benito Mussolini](#) had foundered in his [invasion of Albania and Greece](#). The decision delayed Barbarossa by more than a month. When the German advance into Russia slowed in the fall, the delay ensured that the Nazi forces would encounter what Russians call [rasputitsa](#)—when autumn (or spring) rains turn the roads to mud, making them impassable to tanks and trucks—and later to "[General Winter](#)," which had sabotaged Napoleon's adventure one and a half centuries earlier.
- When planning Operation Barbarossa, Hitler's generals implored him to mass their considerable forces in a drive directly toward Moscow. Instead, Hitler insisted on a three-pronged invasion, heading north toward Leningrad, at Moscow in the center, and south toward the resource-rich Caucasus. The generals were almost certainly right that overwhelming German striking power would have permitted them to capture Moscow in 1941—and possibly then end the war with victory over the Soviet Union. In fact, most military observers argue that Hitler's later decision merely to divert the lion's share of his tank armies from the campaign against Moscow to the battles to the north and south was alone enough to prevent the Nazis from taking the Soviet capital.
- Following Pearl Harbor, Franklin Roosevelt asked Congress for a declaration of war against Japan. He pointedly did not propose to go to war with Nazi Germany, which in fact he regarded as the main enemy. Hitler played into his hands on December 11, 1941, when he unaccountably declared war on the USA. While it seems likely the two countries would eventually have faced off, Hitler's surprising decision to support his Japanese ally permitted Roosevelt to do what he had hoped to do for more than a year: vault into the European conflict feet first, acceding to Winston Churchill's plea to place a higher priority on the war in Europe than that in the Pacific. For Hitler's Germany, that was a fatal decision.
- Military strategy is by no means all about battles. At its foundation, strategy rests on the availability and allocation of resources, including both fighting men and women, the tools they need to prosecute war, and the natural resources necessary to manufacture them. In allocating scarce resources, some argue, Hitler made decisions that cost his country dearly. For instance, [Admiral Karl Dönitz](#), commander of Germany's submarine forces early in the war, had begged for German factories to

produce more U-boats. Had Hitler given him what he wanted, it's entirely possible, even likely, that Germany would have won the [Battle of the Atlantic](#) and ended the war in the West in 1940 or 41 by starving out the British. (In fact, the Nazis came perilously close to doing so even with a much smaller U-boat fleet.) Hitler may have made a similarly bad decision not to direct the necessary resources for [Willy Messerschmitt](#) to expand production of the [ME-262](#) jet fighter. The plane first flew in April 1941. Had the Germans diverted sufficient resources to permit Messerschmitt to iron out the plane's production problems without delay, they might have begun turning out jet aircraft in significant numbers before mid-1944, when the plane finally went into production. As it was, the ME-262 was responsible for shooting down more than 500 Allied aircraft in less than a year.



The Germans' Messerschmitt ME-262, the [world's first operational jet fighter](#) plane, introduced to combat in April 1944. Image credit: Wikipedia

#6. The USA won because of our military strength.

As you've seen, from a global perspective the Soviet Union and China bore the brunt of the fighting for the Allies, and the Axis powers themselves did far more to ensure their own defeat than the US or any other one of the Allies (the USSR included). There is, of course, no disputing that the United States mobilized the world's second largest military force in the course of the war, and many units engaged in some of the bloodiest and most protracted fighting. US soldiers, sailors, and airmen fought courageously on all fronts, and no doubt made a huge difference in North Africa, Italy, France, Belgium, and Germany. However, from a geopolitical perspective, the United States proved central to the Allied victory not because of our military strength but in three other principal ways.



Tanks rolling off the production line at [Chrysler](#), which built more than 21,000 tanks in WWII. Image credit: War History Online

[Arsenal of Democracy](#)

The awesome industrial capacity of the United States—and the country’s ability to mobilize it in astonishingly short order—was by most credible accounts its single most important contribution to winning the war for the Allies. And the effort was set in motion in May 1940—eighteen months before the US entered the war—when Franklin Roosevelt called for the production of 185,000 aircraft, 120,000 tanks, 55,000 anti-aircraft guns, and 18 million tons of merchant shipping. But the phenomenon didn’t gain its name until a half-year later, on December 29, 1940, in the “Arsenal of Democracy” [speech by FDR](#). In the event, the numbers did indeed prove to be staggering. From 1940 to 1945, the United States [economy produced](#):

- 297,000 aircraft
- 1,200 large fighting ships
- [19.4 million tons](#) of merchant shipping (2,710 [Liberty cargo ships](#))
- 86,000 tanks
- 2,000,000 army trucks
- 2,600,000 machine guns
- 41 billion bullets

To give some sense of how important the American industrial capacity proved to be in just one critical area, consider the [following table](#) produced by the [National WWII Museum](#):

| WWII Aircraft Production by Country, 1941-1945 (all types) | | | | | |
|------------------------------------------------------------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|
| Country | 1941 | 1942 | 1943 | 1944 | 1945 |
| United States | 19,433 | 47,836 | 85,898 | 96,318 | 46,001 |
| Great Britain | 20,094 | 23,672 | 26,263 | 26,461 | 12,070 |
| Germany | 12,401 | 15,409 | 24,807 | 40,593 | 7,540 |
| Japan | 5,088 | 8,861 | 16,693 | 28,180 | 8,263 |

As you can see above, US aircraft production dwarfed that of the other belligerents. And there was similar imbalance between that of the Allies, the USA in particular, and the Axis in every other significant area of military production as well. But of course the US wasn't in the fight alone. Although it's not listed in the table, the [Soviet Union](#) also turned out dramatically more tanks and other armored fighting vehicles (120,000) and artillery (516,000) than the Axis and equaled Germany and its European Allies in the production of aircraft (136,000 vs 133,000). Britain, too, was a manufacturing powerhouse. But it was the full weight of American productive capacity that made the difference in arming and equipping the millions of combatants who fought for the Allies. Under [Lend-Lease](#) (1941-45), the United States shipped \$50 billion worth of armaments and supplies to our allies. That's more than \$575 billion in terms of 2020 US dollars, an amount approaching what the country spends in a year on defense today and equivalent to 39% of the country's [\\$129 billion](#) Gross Domestic Product in 1941 — and it was *only seventeen percent of total US war expenditures*.

[The Pacific Theater](#)

Together with China, the United States carried the ball in the Pacific war. But China's role was defensive—bogging down on the Asian continent as many as three million of Japan's six million soldiers—while that of the US was primarily offensive. In [South and Southeast Asia](#), Indian, Australian, and Philippine forces were heavily engaged in the fighting, too. However, it was principally American soldiers, sailors, marines, and airmen who prosecuted the war across the vast stretches of the Pacific to the outer reaches of the Japanese home islands. They fought some of the fiercest battles on those islands in the history of the US Army, Marine Corps, and Navy.

Consider what the United States military was up against in taking on the Japanese Empire.

- At the outset of the conflict, the [Imperial Japanese Navy](#) was the world's second most powerful force on the seas. It counted fifteen fleet carriers and ten light and escort carriers, twelve battleships, forty-three cruisers, 169 destroyers, and 195 submarines. And Pearl Harbor had virtually destroyed the American Pacific Fleet, leaving behind only three aircraft carriers and four heavily damaged battleships.
- At the beginning of World War II, the [Imperial Japanese Army](#) included some 1,700,000 men, most of them in China. It grew to more than six million soldiers in the course of the war.

Yet by war's end in 1945, the United States Navy had added nearly 1,200 major combatant ships, including twenty-seven aircraft carriers, eight battleships, and ten prewar battleships, totaling over seventy percent of the world's total numbers and total tonnage of naval vessels of 1,000 tons or greater. Meanwhile, the Japanese navy could count on few functional capital ships. Its merchant fleet was largely on the bottom of the ocean. And the Japanese army—though still strong in numbers at six million men—had suffered more than [2.1 million casualties](#) and was resorting with increased frequency to suicidal head-on attacks from defensive positions because it had long since lost the initiative.

The [contrast](#) between the wars in Europe and the Pacific was huge. In Europe, the war was fought largely on land and in the air. In the Pacific, the most consequential battles were carried out on the sea, on isolated islands hundreds or thousands of miles from the Asian mainland, and in the air involving American and Japanese forces. On land, the action was largely in China, where the Chinese engaged the Japanese, and in Burma, with British and Chinese forces opposing the invaders. The US Navy went to war against Japan; for the US Army, the primary enemy was Nazi Germany. The distribution of American forces reflected the strategic decision made at the outset by Roosevelt and Churchill to place a priority on defeating Adolf Hitler. Some three-quarters of US servicemen and women served in the European Theater. And a similar proportion of American deaths in battle were in Europe (roughly 300,000 out of 400,000).

Massive manpower

Counting the numbers of soldiers, sailors, marines, and airmen yields only a rough indication of the relative strength of the combatants, but it's still one of the best ways to gauge how they stack up in a long war like World War II. And, as you can see in the [following table](#), the United States brought simply enormous numbers to the conflict. At peak strength, the US military nearly equaled that of the Soviet Union. Nearly one in

eight Americans was mobilized during the course of the war. Two million served in combat. Size matters.

| Size of Armed Forces in World War II | | |
|---------------------------------------------|------------------------|----------------------|
| Country | Total mobilized | Peak strength |
| USSR | 21,000,000 | 13,200,000 |
| Germany | 17,900,000 | 9,500,000 |
| USA | 16,354,000 | 12,000,000 |
| China | 14,000,000 | 5,700,000 |
| Japan | 9,100,000 | 7,500,000 |
| Italy | 9,000,000 | 3,100,000 |
| Great Britain | 5,896,000 | 4,683,000 |
| France | 3,500,000 | 2,680,000 |
| India | 2,581,000 | 2,200,000 |
| Poland | 2,400,000 | 2,200,000 |

In addition to the central role played by US manufacturing capability, its primacy in the Pacific Theater, and its massive manpower reserves, there is a fourth factor that I believe played a significant role in bringing about the Allied victory: American leadership.

Leadership

Any assessment of the leadership exercised in World War II is bound to be controversial. Commanders who were famous at the time all had their advocates as well as their detractors. However, most serious accounts of the war tend to include the following on any [list of the conflict's most effective military commanders](#).

| Most Effective Military Commanders in World War II | | |
|-----------------------------------------------------------|----------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Name | Country | What they accomplished |
| Vasily Chuikov | USSR | Successfully defended Stalingrad and instrumental in capturing Berlin |
| Karl Doenitz | Germany | Architect of the U-boat strategy that nearly starved Britain |
| Hugh Dowding | Great Britain | Headed RAF Fighter Command during the Battle of Britain |
| Dwight D. Eisenhower | USA | Led the Normandy Invasion and smashed Hitler's armies on the Western Front |
| Heinz Guderian | Germany | Tank commander considered "the father of the Blitzkrieg" |
| Ivan Konev | USSR | Liberated Odessa, Kharkov, and Kiev, and played a key role in capturing Berlin |
| Douglas MacArthur | USA | Achieved remarkable success in the Pacific despite limited manpower and ships |
| Carl Gustav Mannerheim | Finland | Though vastly outnumbered, defeated the initial Soviet invasion during the 1939-40 Winter War |
| Erich von Manstein | Germany | Mastermind of German defeat of France in 1940 and successful on the Eastern Front |
| Bernard Montgomery | Great Britain | Defeated Rommel at El Alamein, led British forces at Normandy, and drove into Germany |
| Chester Nimitz | USA | As commander in chief in the Pacific, led history's greatest armada to victory |
| George S. Patton | USA | Rushed the US Third Army across France in 1944 and overwhelmed Germany |
| Konstantin Rokossovsky | USSR | Instrumental in decisive Eastern Front victories at Moscow (1941), Stalingrad (1942), and Kursk (1943) |
| Erwin Rommel | Germany | Distinguished in battle in France (1940), North Africa (1941-43), and Normandy (1944) |
| William Slim | Great Britain | Against monumental odds, defeated the Japanese in Burma in 1945 |
| Holland M. Smith | USA | "The father of amphibious warfare," led Marines in Pacific island invasions (1943-45) |
| Raymond Spruance | USA | Defeated the Japanese Navy at Midway (1942) and Leyte Gulf (1944) |

| | | |
|------------------------------------|-------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Isoroku Yamamoto | Japan | Conceived and led the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor (1941) |
| Tomoyuki Yamashita | Japan | Captured the “impregnable fortress” of Singapore, inflicting Britain’s greatest defeat |
| Georgy Zhukov | USSR | The savior of Moscow and conqueror of Berlin |

The list above includes military leaders from all the principal combatants, except for Italy. However, it’s notable that so many observers of the war credit the United States with fielding so many commanders—nearly one-third of the twenty names found above—who demonstrated superior military gifts on the battlefield.

Every one of the twenty men listed in the table above commanded fighting men in the field, on the ocean, or in the air. But modern wars are not won by field commanders alone. In the final analysis, they’re won or lost at the level of [grand strategy](#), where the fateful decisions are made about whether and how to open or abandon a front in the conflict and how to marshal and allocate the resources of men and matériel needed in the field. Those decisions are, effectively, political, and they rest in the hands of heads of state and their closest advisers. And in that respect the leadership supplied by the United States truly excelled.



Generals and admirals commanded in the field. But decisions on the level of [grand strategy](#) were in the hands of three men, Stalin, Roosevelt, and Churchill, pictured here in [conference at Tehran](#), November 28 to December 1, 1943. Image credit: Wikipedia

For the USA, three men primarily determined the strategic direction of the war: President [Franklin Delano Roosevelt](#); Army Chief of Staff [George Marshall](#); and Admiral [William D. Leahy](#), Chief of Staff to the Commander in Chief. But FDR alone called the shots. At times, he declined to accept Marshall or Leahy's recommendations. And history shows that Roosevelt proved to be an essential counterweight to British Prime Minister Winston Churchill in two important ways: overriding Churchill's views at critical times when the great man was demonstrably wrong and mediating the fraught relationship between Churchill and Soviet Premier Josef Stalin.

Churchill was a brilliant wartime leader, and it may not be too much to say that he saved Great Britain with his clearheaded recognition of the Nazi threat, his ringing rhetoric that lifted British spirits, and his single-minded focus on persuading FDR to maneuver the United States into the war. But Churchill was a poor military strategist: the catastrophic [Gallipoli campaign](#) (1915-16) he engineered as [First Lord of the Admiralty](#) in World War I was only the first sign that he was a terrible judge of military priorities. In the second war, he demonstrated that failing again and again:

- in forcing the [Dieppe Raid](#) (August 19, 1942) on his reluctant military advisers,
- in doggedly insisting on directing the main Allied attack on the Axis through the Balkans,
- and in adamantly refusing to accede to an invasion of France until American pressure forced him to accept it. While it's true that the British general staff joined him in resisting the Normandy invasion, Churchill might have overruled them, as FDR had done in dealing with his fractious commanders in the Pacific.

#7. For the USA, WWII was a white man's war.

[Rosie the Riveter](#) was the least of it. The lingering image of women at work in factories and fields to replace the men sent off to war is, of course, accurate. [Five million](#) women entered the workforce from 1940 to 1945. But that doesn't tell the full story. Not by a long shot. Nor does the stereotype of soldiers, sailors, and airmen with white skin and surnames with origins in England and Ireland and Eastern Europe, and, yes, Italy and Germany. Although racism was both pronounced and often vocally expressed in American society of the day—and fully reflected in the US military and government—the [Selective Service Act of 1940](#) required *all* men between the ages of 21 and 45 to register for the draft. And, despite deeply ingrained sexism, women filled many essential roles in the country's armed forces, too.

The following table incorporates the best estimates I can find for the numbers of women and people of color who served in the American armed forces in World War II.

| They Served, Too: Women and Ethnic-Americans in the WWII Military | |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------|
| Women | 350,000 |
| African Americans | 1,000,000 |
| Latinos | 500,000 |
| Native Americans | 44,000 |
| Japanese Americans | 33,000 |
| Filipino Americans | 16,000 |
| Chinese Americans | 20,000 |
| Arab Americans | 15,000 |

Consider a few of the most outstanding examples of the work of these courageous people:

The 442

Twenty thousand of the estimated 33,000 Japanese Americans who served in the US military during World War joined the Army. Approximately 800 were killed in action. Japanese American soldiers filled several segregated units. The most distinguished of these was the [442nd Infantry Regiment](#), which became the most decorated unit for its size in U.S. military history. Beginning in 1944, the regiment fought primarily in the European Theatre, in particular Italy, southern France, and Germany. The unit earned more than 18,000 awards in less than two years, including more than 4,000 Purple Hearts and 4,000 Bronze Stars. The 442 was awarded eight [Presidential Unit Citations](#) (five earned in one month). Twenty-one of its members were awarded Medals of Honor.

The WASPs

One thousand female pilots completed training and were enrolled as [Women's Army Service Pilots](#). Their role was to free male pilots for combat service, replacing them in testing and ferrying aircraft and training other pilots. They flew over 60 million miles; transported every type of military aircraft; towed targets for live anti-aircraft gun

practice; simulated strafing missions; and transported cargo. Although the WASPs' function was military, they were not recognized for their military service.

Combat nurses

More than 59,000 American nurses served in the [Army Nurse Corps](#) during World War II. They served under fire in field hospitals and evacuation hospitals, on hospital trains and hospital ships, and as flight nurses on medical transport planes. The growing respect they gained led the Army to grant its nurses officers' commissions and full retirement privileges, dependents' allowances, and equal pay. Moreover, the government provided free education to nursing students between 1943 and 1948.

The OSS

Women served with great distinction in the [Office of Strategic Services](#) (OSS), the precursor to the CIA. As the [New York Times](#) noted on March 16, 2019, "Their ranks included Marlene Dietrich, the actress, and Margaret Mead, a pioneering anthropologist. Julia McWilliams, later known by her married name, Julia Child, cooked up shark repellent. Jane Wallis Burrell went on to become one of the first C.I.A. operatives killed in the line of duty. Thousands of others broke barriers and demolished stereotypes without ever seeking recognition."

The Tuskegee Airmen

Of the 125,000 African Americans who served overseas in the war—some 6.25% of all combat personnel—the most famous were the nearly one thousand men who formed the unit called the [Tuskegee Airmen](#). They were unwelcome in the segregated Army Air Force and instead shunted aside to a training program and a unit all their own. In all, 992 pilots were trained in Tuskegee from 1941 to 1946. Three hundred fifty-five were deployed overseas, and 84 lost their lives. The toll included 68 pilots killed in action or accidents, 12 killed in training and non-combat missions, and 32 captured as prisoners of war. They flew 1,578 combat missions, 179 bomber escort missions, and destroyed 112 enemy aircraft in the air and another 150 on the ground.



The segregated 761st Tank Battalion fought with great valor in France and Germany under General George S. Patton. Image credit: War History Online.

The Black Panthers

The segregated [761st Tank Battalion](#), known as the Black Panthers, served under General George S. Patton in France. In 1944 the unit endured 183 days of continuous operational employment. In December that year, the battalion was rushed to the aid of the storied [101st Airborne Division](#), which was famously under siege at Bastogne by German forces in the [Battle of the Bulge](#). Later, the Black Panthers opened the way for the U.S. 4th Armored Division into Germany during an action that breached the [Siegfried Line](#) and advanced rapidly through the Reich.

The Six Triple Eight

In a featured section, “75 Years After World War II,” the *New York Times* ran a [fascinating story](#) entitled “The Battalion of Black Women Who Stood Up to a White Army.” It’s the story of the [6888th Central Postal Directory Battalion](#), which eventually numbered 855 African American women assigned to Birmingham, England, and later to Rouen, France. They were under the command of Major Charity Adams, a 26-year-old who was the first African American commanding officer in the [Women’s Army Corps](#) to be deployed to a theater of war. The task of the Six Triple Eight was to untangle a backlog of more than 17 million letters and packages addressed to Allied military personnel scattered across Europe. Seven thousand five hundred of the letters and packages were for servicemen named Robert Smith—which gives some sense of how daunting was their assignment. The women were expected to fail. But as the *Times*

reported, “the initial shock of the workload eventually gave way to collective determination. Before long, the Six Triple Eight was operating the fastest and most reliable mail delivery in the European Theater.”

And there were many other myths and misunderstandings.

It should be no surprise that the biggest and most complex event in the history of the human project should spawn so many myths, misconceptions, and misunderstandings among the American public. The seven listed above loom most prominently in my memory. But others come to mind as well, the product of simple confusion, sensational treatment in books and film, and politically convenient lies and exaggerations.

- *Espionage.* Spies and saboteurs were not a major factor in the Allied victory. Not even close. The spies and saboteurs of the many national [Resistance](#) and [partisan](#) movements and the officers of the British [Special Operations Executive](#) (SOE) and the American [Office of Strategic Services](#) (OSS) made valuable contributions—but, with the exception of a few extraordinary individual spies and partisan units, achieved little impact on the outcome of the war. What today we understand as *intelligence* was a significant factor, but it was *sigint*, not *humint*—the work of the codebreakers, not spies, the people who deciphered the German [Enigma](#) code and the [Japanese diplomatic codes](#) and made sense of Japan’s [JN25B naval code](#). Their work enabled the Allies to win the [Battle of the Atlantic](#) and the [Battle of Midway](#), among many other crucial battles. (The exceptional spies who did, in fact, impact the course of history were the German Communist working from Japan for the USSR, [Richard Sorge](#), whose intelligence enabled Stalin to move half a million men from the Far East to the defense of Moscow in 1941 . . . the motley collection of double agents pressed into service by [MI6](#) who played critical roles in the [D-Day deception](#) that misdirected German forces toward the [Pas de Calais](#) instead of Normandy. . . and the young refugee German physicist [Klaus Fuchs](#) who passed along the nuclear research secrets of the British [Tube Alloys](#) program and American [Manhattan Project](#) to the Soviet Union—and directly to Josef Stalin himself.)
- *Strategic bombing.* The strategic bombing campaigns by the British [RAF Bomber Command](#) and the US strategic air forces that devastated German and Japanese cities caused a great deal of damage and killed as many as a [million people](#)—but their contribution to the ultimate victory was limited. Even with the vaunted [Norden bombsight](#), the accuracy of Allied bombing campaigns was notoriously low: few bombs came even close to their targets, eventually forcing the US Army and Navy to abandon pinpoint bombing. (Bomber Command under [Sir Arthur “Bomber” Harris](#) had already turned in February 1942 to the [indiscriminate](#)

[bombing](#) of cities.) And contrary to the expectations of military planners on both sides—British, American, and German—the destruction of the enemy’s cities didn’t lower civilian morale . . . it raised it.

- *Tank warfare.* World War II conjures up images of hordes of German Panzer tanks bounding through Allied lines and demolishing all in their wake. While it’s true that the *Blitzkrieg* strategy was devastating in Poland, the Low Countries, France, and Russia alike, the *Wehrmacht* was far from fully mechanized. Germany, France, and the Soviet Union all relied heavily on the use of—[you’ve got it—horses](#). During the war, the Soviet Union employed 3.1 million horses and France half a million while Germany depended on 2.75 million. *The Reich had three times as many horses as vehicles when the war began.* And, by the way, the widely repeated image of Polish cavalry charging Panzer tanks was the product of German propaganda. The action on September 1, 1939, that gave rise to that claim was against infantry, not tanks.



German cavalry in World War II. Image credit: The National Interest.

- *The Holocaust.* Some six million Jews perished at the hands of the Nazis. But that number, so widely quoted as to take on the character of a cliché, says nothing of the estimated [eleven million others](#) who were murdered by the Germans. In addition to the Jews, the Nazis used their *Einsatzgruppen* and death camps to exterminate civilians coming from many diverse groups. Viewing the picture more broadly, the [United States Holocaust Museum](#) notes that the total of [seventeen million](#) dead included enormous numbers of Slavs (especially Russians and Poles), Roma, LGBT

people, the mentally or physically disabled or mentally ill, Soviet POWs, and many others. An estimated 5.7 million Soviet civilians (excluding 1.3 million Jews) died at the hands of the Nazis, as did 2.8 to 3.3 million Soviet POWs and 1.8 to 3 million Poles. Tyrants other than Hitler—Josef Stalin and Mao Zedong come most readily to mind—are responsible for much larger numbers of deaths. But even they didn't set out methodically to eliminate whole populations to conform to their twisted views.

For further reading

So, you may be wondering, how is it that I could write at such length about an event that took place eight decades ago? I'm old—in fact, I was born six months before Pearl Harbor—but obviously I have no personal memory of any of the events I've described. All I do recall was looking from across the dinner-table at the maps upside down on the front pages of my father's newspaper, fascinated by the bold arrows that showed troop movements.

Well, I read. A lot. You'll find the books about World War II that I've read and reviewed since 2010 listed in the following:

- [5 top nonfiction books about World War II \(plus many runners-up\)](#)
- [The 10 best novels about World War II \(with 30+ runners-up\)](#)
- [The 10 most consequential events of World War II](#)

However, I didn't suddenly start reading about World War II in 2010. The war has been a long-standing interest of mine. My undergraduate degree is in history from the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor. I specialized in Latin American and Late European history there and in Russian and Soviet history during my graduate studies at Columbia University.

More recently, I've taken a number of courses online about the Second World War and watched several documentaries. Clearly, I'm not a professional historian. But I've learned enough from all this to feel comfortable advancing the interpretation you've found in the pages above.

You'll find a different selection of myths to debunk than those I've tackled above in an article published in the *BBC History Magazine* (May 16, 2013) entitled "[The Great Misconceptions of the Second World War](#)."