

WWII Part Two: The U.S. Enters the War

By Kenneth T. Jackson, The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, adapted by Newsela staff on 01.04.17

Word Count **709**

Level **870L**



Cabinet members watch with mixed emotions as President Franklin D. Roosevelt, wearing a black armband, signs the United States' declaration of war against Japan at 4:10 p.m. Washington time on December 8, 1941. On December 7, Japanese planes bombed Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, in a surprise attack that destroyed a large portion of the fleet there, prompting the war declaration. Bettmann/Getty Images

The second in a four-part series.

Who Fought in World War II?

ALLIED POWERS



United Kingdom



France



Soviet Union



United States

AXIS POWERS



Nazi Germany



Japan



Italy

Many other countries were involved, but these were the major ones on each side.

U.S. President Franklin D. Roosevelt followed the fighting in Europe knowing that Americans did not want to be involved.

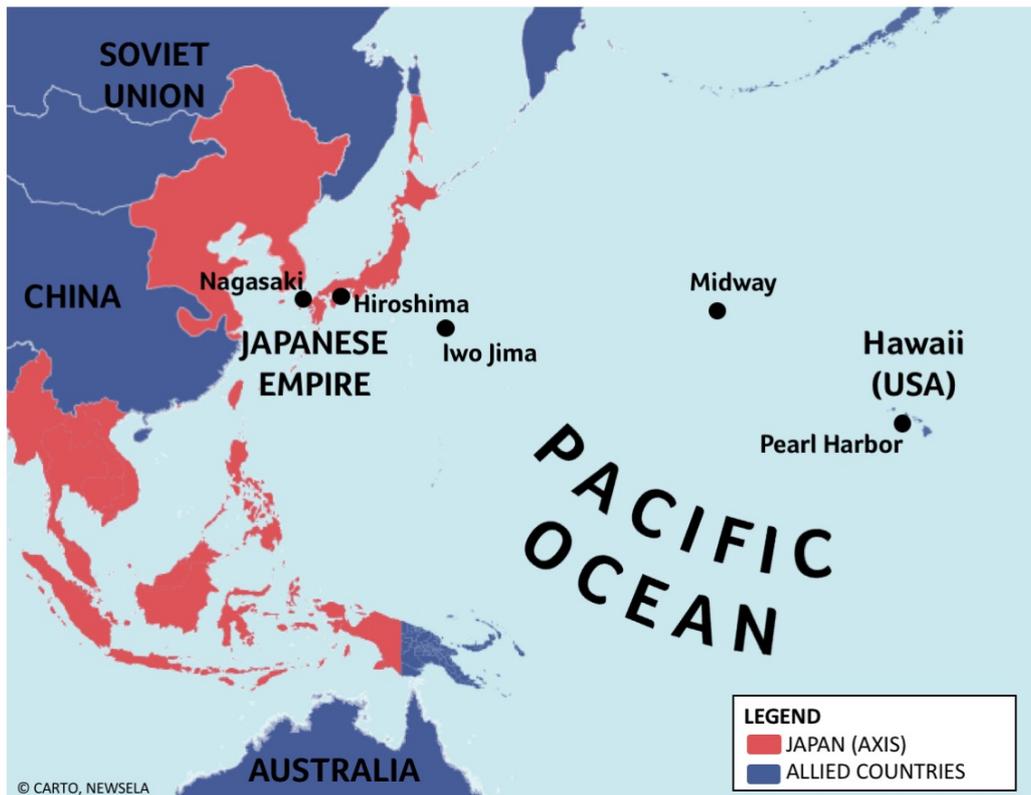
But, he also knew that if Germany ever controlled all of Europe, its power would be enormous. So, Roosevelt quietly increased the size of the U.S. Navy and Army. The president wanted America to be ready.

Japanese ambitions

At that time, the United States, Great Britain and the Netherlands controlled most of the natural resources, especially oil, south of Japan. Those countries said they would not sell resources to Japan if it did not remove its troops from China. Japan did not want to be told what to do. It wanted to be one of the great nations in the world.

This meant going to war with the West. Japan planned a bold surprise attack on the United States Pacific Fleet in Pearl Harbor, which is located in Hawaii. Japan knew that it would be waging war with a stronger country. Japanese Admiral Isoroku Yamamoto's plan was to first cripple the American fleet. This would start a battle in the Pacific between the two countries. If Japan won, America would be forced to meet its demands.

Japan and the Pacific Front



Japan attacks Pearl Harbor

Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, was a military success. Its warships crossed the Pacific without being spotted. They surprised the sleeping American fleet. All eight American battleships and dozens of smaller ships were hit. More than 2,000 sailors died that day. The Japanese lost only a few pilots and planes, but no ships. Still, Admiral Yamamoto was worried.

Yamamoto knew that Japan had attacked a strong country. He expected the United States to fight back against Japan. This would make his country's cause almost hopeless.

The uncertainty about whether the United States should get involved in World War II ended when the Japanese bombs fell on Pearl Harbor. The next day, Roosevelt asked that the U.S. go to war against Japan. It was approved by Congress. Then on December 10, Germany declared war on the United States. This was a surprise because Germany's treaty with Japan did not require it to do so.

Roosevelt was happy that the United States was at war with Japan. He had expected that Japan would start fighting. But, Roosevelt thought Japan would attack the Philippines. He was shocked by what happened at Pearl Harbor. Roosevelt funneled national anger at Japan into a war against Germany. He knew Germany was actually the greater danger to the U.S.

U.S. industry gears up for war

In December of 1941, the nation launched the greatest manufacturing growth in history. Orders for weapons, uniforms and vehicles employed workers who had been without jobs from the Great Depression. Old factories were expanded and modernized and new ones sprang up.

As early as 1942, American factories were making 48,000 airplanes, which was more than Germany and Japan combined. By 1945, the United States Navy was larger and stronger than the navies of all other countries put together.

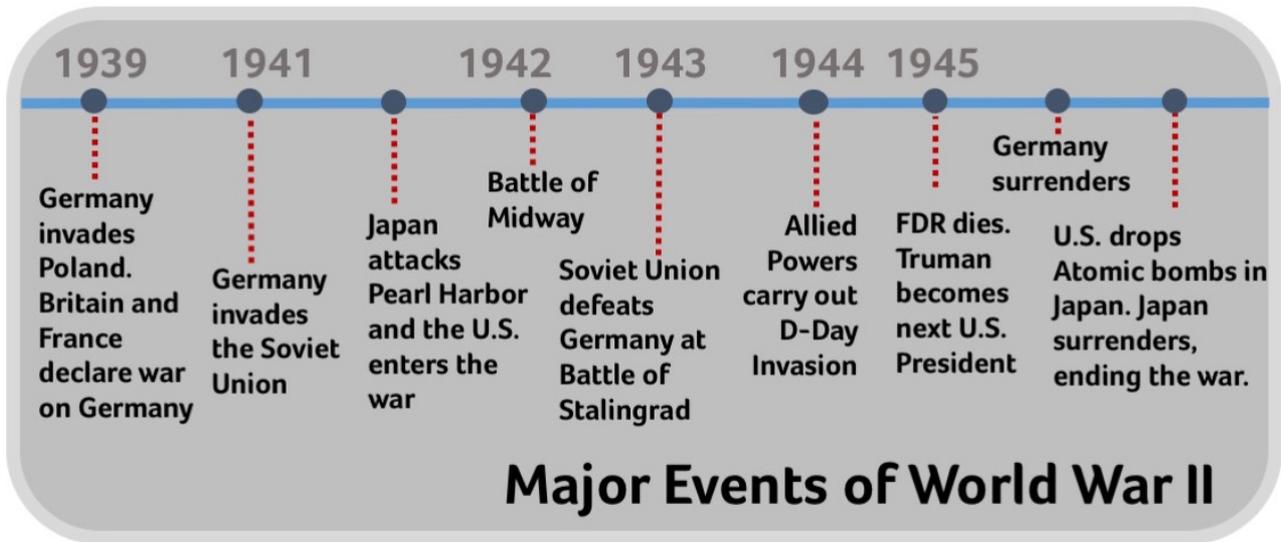
Women crucial to preparation efforts

With millions of men joining the Army, someone had to do the jobs they left behind. The growth in female employment between 1942 and 1945 was staggering. At first, they took jobs as clerks, cabbies, truck drivers, waitresses and streetcar conductors. Soon, women held jobs in shipyards and airplane factories.

Racial prejudices persist

Meanwhile, there was discrimination against Japanese-Americans and African-Americans. The Pearl Harbor attack meant that Japanese-Americans were suspected of being enemy agents and were sent to internment camps. But, many Japanese-Americans had actually been born in the U.S. and many served in the U.S. military.

At the same time, blacks were not allowed in the Marine Corps and were inducted as sailors only to serve as cooks. In the Army, they served in segregated units under mostly white officers.



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Quiz

- 1 Which sentence from the article BEST supports the idea that the U.S. was more powerful than Germany or Japan during the war?
- (A) So, Roosevelt quietly increased the size of the U.S. Navy and Army.
 - (B) At that time, the United States, Great Britain and the Netherlands controlled most of the natural resources, especially oil, south of Japan.
 - (C) Roosevelt funneled national anger at Japan into a war against Germany.
 - (D) By 1945, the United States Navy was larger and stronger than the navies of all other countries put together.
- 2 Based on information in the section "Japan attacks Pearl Harbor," which of the following statements is TRUE?
- (A) Roosevelt was more concerned about the threat of Germany than the threat of Japan.
 - (B) Japan expected that the United States would surrender after the attack on Pearl Harbor.
 - (C) Germany declared war on the United States because of an agreement it had made with Japan.
 - (D) Roosevelt was not sure whether the American people would support going to war against Japan after the attack on Pearl Harbor.
- 3 According to the section "U.S. industry gears up for war," how did the war affect industry?
- (A) It ran old factories out of business.
 - (B) It created more factories and more jobs.
 - (C) It made people work harder and longer hours.
 - (D) It created more jobs than there were people to fill them.
- 4 Based on the section "Women crucial to preparation efforts," why were women important to the war effort?
- (A) They took the jobs that were left empty when men went to war.
 - (B) They were willing to take jobs that men were no longer willing to do.
 - (C) They found new and better ways to do many of the jobs that men usually did.
 - (D) They earned large amounts of money to support the men who were fighting.