

World War Two (1939 to 1945)

For nearly 20 years, there was an uneasy peace between Britain and Germany, but it was not to last. Rumbles were still going on and developments were being made in warfare technology.

What follows is a timeline of events that happened during the war that followed. Not every action is recorded here as there are far too many to mention. However, it will provide a guideline for you to delve deeper into areas that are more pertinent to your own family history.

Before the war

On 30th January 1933, Adolf Hitler became Chancellor of Germany. His Nazi Party, or the Third Reich, took power, with Hitler essentially becoming the country's Dictator.

On March 12th 1938, Hitler annexed Austria into Germany, the Anschluss.

The Second World War

1939

On **September 1st**, the world watched whilst Germany invaded Poland. This state of affairs did not last for long and two days later in defence of Poland, Britain, Australia, New Zealand and France declared war on Germany. The following day, September 4th, Britain's Royal Air Force attacked the German Navy. Meanwhile on the other side of the Atlantic, whilst the United States proclaimed its neutrality, by September 10th, Canada had also declared war on Germany.

Between September 1939 and April 1940, very little warfare happened in Europe, this period of time being referred to as *The Phoney War*, although battles had started in the Atlantic, with the German submarines torpedoing British supply ships.

1940

The British government had to cut down on the amount of food it brought in from abroad as a result of the attacks on the supply ships and so rationing was introduced on **January 8th**. This was not to end until midnight on 4th July 1954.

By **March 16th**, German bombers had attacked the Scapa Flow British naval base and between **April 9th** and June 9th, Germany had invaded and taken control of Denmark and Norway.

During **May**, the Nazis invaded France, Belgium, Luxembourg and the Netherlands, with Belgium and the Netherlands both surrendering. British and Allied troops found themselves cut off and surrounded by German troops in the Battle of France but Operation Dynamo saw their evacuation. Over 800 boats were used including fishing boats, pleasure craft and lifeboats as well as the British Destroyers and larger ships which were waiting off-shore. Between May 27th and June 4th 338,226 men were evacuated. Meanwhile, the Battles of Narvik were taking place both on land and at sea. The Allies had sea and air superiority until the very last stage of the operation, but did not take full advantage of it. The Germans lost

the naval battle, but achieved the main goal of their operation: the successful invasion and occupation of Norway.

As well as Norway surrendering on 10th **June**, that day also saw Italy declare war on Britain and the Allies as well as the start of Germany's lightning air-strikes on mainland Europe, the blitzkrieg.

The next month, on 10th **July**, Germany moved the airstrikes to Britain. Lasting until the end of October, the Battle of Britain had begun.

August 23rd saw the first German air raids on London and two days later, Britain retaliated by undertaking an air raid on Berlin.

The German Blitzkrieg against Britain began in earnest on **September 7th**, with London as the main target. However, other major cities were also targeted: Manchester, Bristol, Cardiff, Liverpool and Southampton. Meanwhile, the RAF won the Battle of Britain as it became clear to Hitler that his Luftwaffe had failed to gain air superiority. So, on 17 September, he postponed his plans to invade Britain.

While Germany invaded Romania on **October 7th**, Italy invaded Greece and Albania.

The following month saw Hungary on **November 20th** and Romania on 23rd joining with Italy and Germany.

On **December 9th**, Britain began a desert offensive in North Africa against the Italians, involving fighting in the Libyan and Egyptian deserts. This was to last until May 1943.

1941

On **January 21st** British and Australian troops took Tobruk in North Africa.

By St Valentine's day, **February 14th**, the first units of Germany's *Afrika Korps* had arrived in Tripoli, North Africa and by **March 7th**, the British forces had arrived in Greece.

However, throughout **April**, Germany invaded Greece and Yugoslavia, with both countries surrendering by the end of the month.

Meanwhile, at sea, the German ship *Bismarck* sunk the British ship *Hood*, with the loss of 1,415 British lives on **May 24th**. Three days later, the British Navy sunk the *Bismarck*. Out of her crew of 2,200, there were only 115 survivors. Only 2 officers out of 100 survived.

With a huge force of over four million troops, Germany and the Axis Powers attacked Russia on **June 22nd** in Operation Barbarossa.

On **July 31st**, instructions were issued by Hitler to prepare for the Final Solution, the plan to systematically exterminate the Jewish people in Nazi-occupied Europe. This was followed up on **September 3rd**, when the first experimental use of gas chambers was tried at Auschwitz.

At 15:41 hours on **November 13th**, the aircraft carrier *Ark Royal* was hit by a torpedo from a German submarine. She took just over 12 hours to sink and all hands were saved apart from one, Able Seaman Edward Mitchell, who was killed in the initial explosion.

On the morning of 7th **December**, the Japanese attacked the US Navy in Pearl Harbour, Hawaii. The next day the United States entered the war on the side of the Allies.

1942

The New Year saw President Roosevelt of the USA issue orders that allowed the internment of Japanese Americans from **February** 19th. This was followed up on **April** 18th with the Doolittle Raid on Japan, which showed Japan itself was vulnerable to American air attack, and as retaliation for the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbour, helped to raise American morale.

During the time from 4th to 7th **June**, the Americans fought the Battle of Midway with the Japanese. The end of this battle saw the loss of the American ship *Yorktown*, but the Japanese losses were worse. They lost 4 aircraft carriers, which put them on the defensive for the rest of the war.

Between 1st and 4th **July**, the first Battle of El Alamein took place, in which the Allies prevented the Axis drive into Egypt. On 10th of that month, the Allies took Sicily.

From **August** 2nd to February the following year, the Battle of Guadalcanal in the South-Western Pacific raged. Although when the Americans landed there was no opposition, the following 6 months saw a battle with the Japanese for what was a strategically important island for both sides in the Pacific War.

Later that same month, the Battle of Stalingrad began. This has been considered by many as the turning point in WW2. It stopped the German advance into the Soviet Union and marked the turning of the tide of the war in favour of the Allies. However, it was not without a high cost in human lives. It was one of the bloodiest battles in history and, by the time that it ended on February 2nd the following year, the combined military and civilian casualties totalled nearly 2 million.

The second Battle of El Alamein started on 23rd **October** and lasted until 5th **November**. Operation Torch, which started on 8th November, was the first time that the Americans and British worked together on an invasion plan and the combined forces overran North Africa, resulting in the surrender of the Afrika Korps in May of the following year.

1943

In Stalingrad, the Soviets began an offensive against the Germans on **January** 10th whilst that same week, the Casablanca Conference began with President Roosevelt of the USA demanding an unconditional surrender from the Axis powers.

However, the next month on 2nd **February**, Germany suffered their first major defeat by surrendering at Stalingrad. The Soviet Army then was able to recapture Kursk, Rostov and Kharkov.

The Allies were victorious in **March** as Germany began their withdrawal from Tunisia and a full invasion of Italy was launched. By **May**, the German and Italian troops in North Africa had surrendered.

Italy finally surrendered to the Allies on **September** 8th. However, Germany helped Mussolini to escape who then set up a Fascist Government in Northern Italy.

By **October** 1st, the Allies were entering Naples and, in a complete capitulation, Italy declared war on Germany on 13th.

Kiev was finally recaptured by the Soviets on 6th **November**

1944

Operation Shingle saw the Allies land at Anzio in Italy on **January 22nd**. Meanwhile, the siege of Leningrad, which had been in existence since 8th September 1941 when the Germans severed all lines of communication, ended on January 27th. It was one of the longest and most destructive sieges in history.

Worried that the monastery at Monte Cassino was a look-out post for the German, the Allies undertook a series of bombing raids, starting on 15th **February**.

By **April** 10th, the Soviets had captured Odessa in the Ukraine back from the Germans, who in turn surrendered in the Crimea the following month. Also in **May**, the Germans retreated from Anzio.

Operation Overlord began on D-Day, **June 6th** with landings on the Normandy beaches and continued until Allied forces crossed the River Seine on 19th August, pushing back the German forces.

Soviet tanks entered Minsk on **July 3rd**, recapturing it from the Germans. Six days later, the Allies captured Caen in North-West France. Claus von Stauffenberg, a German Army Officer, entered the German briefing room at Wolfsschanze (the Wolf's Lair) on July 20th, carrying a briefcase containing two small bombs. However, his attempt to assassinate Hitler failed.

Operation Dragoon, the Allied invasion of Southern France, began on **August 15th** and on 25th, they liberated Paris from German control.

September saw both Boulogne and Calais liberated, whilst the Soviet army occupied Estonia.

Following his nearly being killed on July 20th, Hitler's reprisals spread far and wide. Some suspects implicated Rommel in the plot, and consequently, Hitler ordered Rommel to commit suicide, which he did on **October 14th**. Meanwhile, Athens and Belgrade were liberated and the Soviets entered East Prussia.

The next month, on 4th **November**, the Axis forces in Greece surrendered.

On **December 16th**, the Germans launched a large attack through the Ardennes in the Battle of the Bulge. This was so called because a bulge or wedge was created by the German forces in order to split the American and British forces, which was roughly 70 by 50 miles. However, they lost to the Allies, thus sealing the fate of the German army.

1945

January saw the Germans withdraw from the Ardennes, the Soviets capturing Warsaw and the Japanese retreating to the Chinese coast. However, 27th January shocked the world as the Red Army liberated the Nazis' biggest concentration camp at Auschwitz in south-western Poland and images filtered out. When the Soviet Army arrived at the camp they found only a few thousand prisoners remaining who had been too sick to leave.

The Yalta Conference was held from **February 4th** to 11th, with the representatives of the United Kingdom, United States of America and the Soviet Union for the purpose of discussing Europe's post-war reorganization. Meanwhile, the US Marines invaded the island of Iwo Jima on February 19th and, after a fierce battle they captured the island.

Further concentration camps at Buchenwald and Belsen were liberated by the Allies on **April 12th**, the same day that the American President Roosevelt died.

Adolf Hitler was based in his bunker underneath the Reich Chancellery building. However, knowing that Germany had lost the war, he shot himself dead on April 30th.

Finally, on **May 7th**, Germany in the person of General Gustav Jodl, signed an unconditional surrender, bringing 6 years of war in Europe to an end. The official statement was made the following day – VE (Victory in Europe) Day.

However, war still raged with Japan. On **August 6th**, the United States dropped an atomic bomb on Hiroshima, which killed 80,000 people and devastated the city. Three days later, they also dropped an atomic bomb on Nagasaki, killing 70,000 people.

On **September 2nd**, a formal surrender ceremony was performed in Tokyo Bay, Japan, aboard the battleship USS Missouri.

The Second World War had ended.

It has been estimated that between 60 and 85 million people died, the worst number of casualties in warfare history. Whilst there were between 22 and 30 million military deaths, double that number of civilians also perished.

Although this is a brief timeline, it should provide the foundation for you to undertake further research in areas that are most relevant to your ancestors.

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If you would like advice about where to find further information about the Second World War and are not sure where to look, someone else might be able to assist you. Register for FREE at <http://www.genealogy-specialists.com/> and post your query. The members will be delighted to try to help you.

There is so much more to discover about the Second World War and listed below are just some products that will certainly help you to understand what happened, where and why. All of them are available from [www.parishchest.com](http://www.parishchest.com). Just pop the reference number in the website search box to see the details:

- Aircraft Casualties 1939-1940 Part 1 (Book) Ref: KFHS-3123
- Love is in the Air Ref: JFP-03
- Operation Quicksilver Ref: IHP-4151
- Royal Air Force Bomber Command Losses World War Two (CD1 & 2) Ref: MMP-CD4801 & MMP-CD4802
- Target Berlin: Mission 250: 6 March 1944 (USAAF) Ref: MJB-CB291
- 1943 The Dambusters Ref: FHI-CDDB

- Voices From The Battle Of Britain (DVD) Ref: FTL-DVD10229

Parish Chest has a complete section that is dedicated to Armed Forces where you will find **Navy Lists** for the time period covered as well as **Air Force Lists**. Don't forget to use the website search box as well and pop in search terms such as **WW2**.