

# Blitzkrieg and Nazi control of Europe

Enquiry: When was the turning point of the Second World War?

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**Nazi** Germany invaded Poland on the 1<sup>st</sup> September 1939. This caused Britain and France to declare war on Germany on the 3<sup>rd</sup> September as they had promised to protect Poland. Hitler, the leader of Germany, had been preparing for war for a number of years. He was determined to gain back land that Germany lost after the First World War, and he promised that he would reunite Germany with its lost land and gain **‘living space’** for his people. Britain and France were desperate to avoid a Second World War so at first, when Hitler began to try and expand Germany, they had allowed it. This was a policy known as **appeasement** – attempting to give Hitler what he wanted to avoid war later down the line.



One of the things that Hitler wanted before the outbreak of war was to **annex** part of Czechoslovakia. Czechoslovakia had many German-speaking people living there, so Hitler claimed that it rightfully belonged to Germany. Britain and France eventually agreed that Hitler should be able to take over this territory in the Munich Agreement of 1938. Britain and France made this agreement in exchange for a promise that Hitler would stop expanding further. They had hoped that this would please Hitler and prevent war. Their plan backfired and put them in a dangerous position. Not only did Hitler continue to expand further, but their agreement to allow Hitler to annex part of Czechoslovakia worried the USSR. The USSR was made up of Russia and surrounding territories that it had absorbed. Russia had been allied with Britain and France against Germany in the First World War. If Germany declared war on Britain and France, the USSR would have been a powerful ally. However, the leader of the USSR (Joseph Stalin) worried that if Britain and France would not protect Czechoslovakia that they wouldn't protect the USSR either. So, in August 1939 the USSR signed a **non-aggression pact** with Germany in order to protect themselves. They promised not to invade each other, and to split Poland between themselves. This left Britain and France vulnerable – their previous powerful ally was now allied with their enemy!



As well as allying with the USSR, Nazi Germany had an advantage because they had been planning for war for a long time. They had been building up their military forces since 1935. Germany had also organised youth camps and public work projects just like the military so that their population would be thoroughly trained and ready for war. In contrast, Britain and France had been so focused on trying to prevent war that they had not been preparing for a second one. This meant that Germany had a big advantage at the beginning of the war. Germany's plan was to defeat and conquer Poland quickly, before Britain and France were able to mobilize their armies. They achieved a very quick defeat of Poland by using the tactic of **Blitzkrieg**. Blitzkrieg means 'lightning war' and consists of quick and concentrated attacks from land and air at the same time. The Germans invaded Poland from three different directions, using 1.5 million men on the ground and support from the **Luftwaffe** in the air, and **U-boats** in the sea. It worked: Poland surrendered on the 28<sup>th</sup> September 1939 and was divided between Germany and the USSR. Britain and France had taken little offensive action in this time, preferring instead to wait and built up their **fortifications**. This caused some to accuse them of fighting a 'phoney war' and not helping Poland.



After their defeat of Poland, Germany turned their attention to the rest of Europe in the Spring of 1940. They invaded and brought their Blitzkrieg tactics to Norway and Denmark, while Britain and France got ready. The French advanced to their defensive **fortification** – the **Maginot Line**, while the British army crossed the channel to defend the northern French-Belgian border. Between April and May of 1940, German Blitzkrieg tactics saw them defeat Norway, Denmark, the Netherlands, and Belgium. They were now racing towards the French border to attack the Allies, Britain and France.



The Allies were now in real trouble. As well as rapidly defeating much of Europe, the Germans had managed to get through the Ardennes Forest, which the French had not expected. The French suffered heavy losses at the Battle of Sedan and then the Germans raced to the sea using Blitzkrieg tactics. The Germans closed in on the Allies, taking Calais on the 26<sup>th</sup> May. Approximately 400,000 Allied troops were trapped in a tiny pocket surrounding Dunkirk. They had to make a drastic decision. Between 26<sup>th</sup> May and 4<sup>th</sup> June 1940, **Operation Dynamo** was mobilised to evacuate the soldiers trapped at Dunkirk. Over 338,000 soldiers were evacuated by 860 boats. It was painted as a heroic event, but the reality was that 68,000 British soldiers had been lost and most of their equipment had been left behind. The Germans had sunk six British and three French **destroyers**, and captured thousands of **prisoners of war**. The Germans had successfully occupied France, and the French surrendered on 22<sup>nd</sup> June 1940. This meant that the Germans had successfully defeated Denmark, Norway, the Netherlands, Belgium, and France. With the help of the USSR, they had defeated and conquered Poland. Britain had not surrendered, but they were now very vulnerable.



# Glossary

**Nazi:** An extreme party that governed Germany throughout the Second World War.

**Living space:** A political promise made by the Nazis to gain more land.

**Appeasement:** A political policy associated with Britain and France, where they allowed Hitler and Germany some land in the hope that it would avoid war.

**Annex:** Where one country absorbs part of another into it.

**Non-Aggression Pact:** A military promise between two countries not to invade one another.

**Blitzkrieg:** Lightning war, use of intense concentrated attacks from land and air.

**Luftwaffe:** The German Air Force.

**U-Boats:** German submarines.

**Fortifications:** Reinforcements to protect against attack.

**Maginot line:** A defensive line built by France to protect against German attack.

**Operation Dynamo:** The code name for the plan to evacuate British and French forces from the beaches of Dunkirk, 26th May-4th June 1940.

**Destroyers:** War ships.

**Prisoners of War:** Soldiers who survive battle and are captured by the enemy.



## Comprehension questions:

1. When did Germany invade Poland?
2. When did Britain and France declare war on Germany and why?
3. What did Britain and France allow Hitler to do in 1938 and why?
4. Why did the USSR sign a non-aggression pact with Germany?
5. Why were Germany at an advantage at the beginning of the war?
6. What is Blitzkrieg?
7. Which countries did Germany defeat between 1939 and 1940?
8. What was Operation Dynamo?

Challenge: Why were Britain in a vulnerable position by June 1940?

Sentence starter: Britain were in a vulnerable position by June 1940 because...

Evidence to support this is... This meant that...



# Turning point table

Date	In your opinion, who looks likely to win the war at this point?	Evidence to justify your view
June 1940		



# Extension Question

Which country had the most success in the Second World War by June 1940?  
Use the sentence starters and key words below to help you

Sentence starters:	Key words
The most successful country in the war by June 1940 was...	Preparation
Evidence to support this point is...	Advantage
This meant that...	Blitzkrieg
Therefore they were the most successful country because...	Invasion
	Evacuation
	Defeated
	Surrender

