

Modern European History

Unit 9 – WWII and the Holocaust

The Home Front and Civilians Reading and Questions

The Mobilization of Four Nations

Even more than World War I, World War II was a total war. Fighting was much more widespread and covered most of the world. Economic mobilization was more extensive; so, too, was the mobilization of women. The number of civilians killed—almost 20 million—was far higher than those killed in World War I. Many of these victims were children.

World War II had an enormous impact on civilian life in the Soviet Union, the United States, Germany, and Japan. We consider the home fronts of those four nations next.

The Soviet Union

Known to the Soviets as the Great Patriotic War, the German-Soviet war witnessed the greatest land battles in history, as well as incredible ruthlessness. The initial military defeats suffered by the Soviet Union led to drastic emergency measures that affected the lives of the civilian population. The city of Leningrad (now St. Petersburg), for example, experienced 900 days of siege. Its inhabitants became so desperate for food that they even ate dogs, cats, and mice. Probably 1.5 million people died in the city.

As the German army made its rapid advance into Soviet territory, Soviet workers dismantled and shipped the factories in the western part of the Soviet Union to the interior—to the Urals, western Siberia, and the Volga regions. Machines were placed on the bare ground. As laborers began their work, walls went up around them.

Stalin called the widespread military and industrial mobilization of the nation a “battle of machines.” The Soviets won, producing 78,000 tanks and 98,000 artillery pieces. In 1943, 55 percent of the Soviet national income went for war materials, compared with 15 percent in 1940. As a result of the emphasis on military goods, Soviet citizens experienced severe shortages of both food and housing.

Soviet women played a major role in the war effort. Women and girls worked in industries, mines, and railroads. Overall, the number of women working in industry increased almost 60 percent. Soviet women were also expected to dig antitank ditches and to work as air-raid wardens. Also, the Soviet Union was the only country in World War II to use women in battle. Soviet women served as snipers and in aircrews of bomber squadrons.



The United States

The home front in the United States was quite different from that of the other major powers. The United States was not fighting on its own territory. Eventually, the United States became the arsenal of the Allied Powers; it produced much of the military equipment the Allies needed. The height of war production came in November 1943. At that point, the country was building 6 ships a day and 96,000 planes per year.

The mobilization of the American economy and workforce resulted in some social turmoil, however. The construction of new factories created boomtowns. Thousands came there to work but then faced a shortage of houses and schools. Sixteen million men and women were enrolled in the military and moved frequently. Another 16 million, mostly wives and girlfriends of servicemen or workers looking for jobs, also moved around the country.

More than a million African Americans moved from the rural South to the cities of the North and West looking for jobs in industry. The presence of African Americans in areas in which they had not lived before led to racial tensions and sometimes even racial riots. In Detroit in June 1943, for example, white mobs roamed the streets attacking African Americans. One million African Americans joined the military, where they served in segregated units. For some, this treatment later led to a fight for their civil rights.

Japanese Americans faced even more serious issues. On the West Coast, 110,000 Japanese Americans, 65 percent of whom had been born in the United States, were removed to camps surrounded by barbed wire and required to take loyalty oaths. Public officials claimed this policy was necessary for security reasons. California governor Culbert Olson expressed the racism in this policy:

When I look out at a group of Americans of German or Italian descent, I can tell whether they're loyal or not. I can tell how they think and even perhaps what they are thinking. But it is impossible for me to do this with inscrutable Orientals, and particularly the Japanese.

~ quoted in Spickard, Japanese Americans: The Formation and Transformation of an Ethnic Group

Germany

In August 1914, Germans had enthusiastically cheered their soldiers marching off to war. In September 1939, the streets were quiet. Many Germans did not care. Even worse for the Nazi regime, many feared disaster.

Hitler was well aware of the importance of the home front. He believed that the collapse of the home front in World War I had caused Germany's defeat. To avoid a repetition of that experience, he adopted economic policies that may have cost Germany the war.

To maintain the morale of the home front during the first two years of the war, Hitler refused to cut consumer goods production or to increase the production of armaments. Blitzkrieg gave the Germans quick victories and enabled them to plunder the food and raw materials of conquered countries. In this way, they could avoid taking away resources from the civilian economy. After German defeats on the Russian front and the American entry into the war, however, the economic situation in Germany changed.

Early in 1942, Hitler finally ordered a massive increase in armaments production and in the size of the army. Hitler's architect, Albert Speer, was made minister for armaments and munitions in 1942. Speer was able to triple the production of armaments between 1942 and 1943, in spite of Allied air raids.

A total mobilization of the economy was put into effect in July 1944. Schools, theaters, and cafés were closed. By that time, though, total war mobilization was too late to save Germany from defeat.

Nazi attitudes toward women changed over the course of the war. Before the war, the Nazis had worked to keep women out of the job market. As the war progressed and more and more men were called up for military service, this position no longer made sense. In spite of this change, the number of women working in industry, agriculture, commerce, and domestic service increased only slightly. The total number of employed women in September 1944 was 14.9 million, compared with 14.6 million in May 1939. Many women, especially those of the middle class, did not want jobs, particularly in factories.

Japan

Wartime Japan was a highly mobilized society. To guarantee its control over all national resources, the government created a planning board to control prices, wages, labor, and resources. Traditional habits of obedience and hierarchy were used to encourage citizens to sacrifice their resources, and sometimes their lives, for the national cause.

The calls for sacrifice reached a high point in the final years of the war. Young Japanese were encouraged to volunteer to serve as pilots in suicide missions against U.S. fighting ships at sea. These pilots were known as kamikaze, or "divine wind."

Japan was reluctant to mobilize women on behalf of Japan's war effort. General Hideki Tōjō, prime minister from 1941 to 1944, opposed female employment. He argued in October 1943:

The weakening of the family system would be the weakening of the nation. . . . We are able to do our duties . . . only because we have wives and mothers at home.

~ quoted in Valley of Darkness: The Japanese People and World War Two, 1978

Female employment increased during the war but only in areas such as the textile industry and farming, in which women had traditionally worked. Instead of using women to meet labor shortages, the Japanese government brought in Korean and Chinese laborers.

The Bombing of Cities

Bombing was used in World War II against military targets, enemy troops, and civilian populations. Bombing made the home front a dangerous place.

Although a few bombing raids had been conducted in the last year of World War I, the aircraft of the time were limited by how far they could fly and by how much they could carry. The bombing of civilians had led to a public

outcry, leading many leaders to believe that bombing civilian populations would force governments to make peace. As a result, European air forces began to develop long-range bombers that carried enormous payloads in the 1930s.



Britain

The first sustained use of civilian bombing began in early September 1940. Londoners took the first heavy blows. For months, the German air force bombed London nightly. Thousands of civilians were killed or injured, and enormous damage was done to the buildings of London. In spite of the extensive damage done to lives and property, Londoners' morale remained high.

The blitz, as the British called the German air raids, soon

became a national experience. The blitz was carried to many other British cities and towns. The ability of Londoners to maintain their morale set the standard for the rest of the British population. The theory that the bombing of civilians would force peace was proved wrong.

Many children were evacuated from cities during the war to avoid the bombing. The British moved about 6 million children and their mothers in 1939. Some British parents even sent their children to Canada and the United States. This, too, could be dangerous. When the ocean liner *Arandora Star* was hit by a German torpedo, it had 77 British children on board. They never made it to Canada.

Germany

The British failed to learn from their own experience, however. Churchill and his advisers believed that destroying German communities would break civilian morale and bring victory. Major bombing raids on German cities began in 1942. On May 31, 1942, Cologne became the first German city to be attacked by 1,000 bombers.

Bombing raids added an element of terror to the dire circumstances caused by growing shortages of food, clothing, and fuel. The Germans, too, sought to protect their children from the bombings by evacuating them from the cities. They had a program that created about 9,000 camps for children in the countryside. Especially fearful to the Germans were the incendiary bombs, which created firestorms that swept through cities. The ferocious bombing of Dresden from February 13 to 15, 1945, created a firestorm that may have killed as many as 35,000 inhabitants and refugees.

Germany suffered enormously from the Allied bombing raids. Millions of buildings were destroyed; half a million civilians died. Nevertheless, it is highly unlikely that Allied bombing sapped the German morale. Instead, Germans, whether pro-Nazi or anti-Nazi, fought on stubbornly, often driven simply by a desire to live. At times, even young people were expected to fight in the war. In the last years of the war, Hitler Youth members, often only 14 or 15 years old, served in the front lines.

Nor did the bombing destroy Germany's industrial capacity. Production of war materials actually increased between 1942 and 1944, in spite of the bombing. However, the widespread destruction of transportation systems and fuel supplies made it extremely difficult for the new materials to reach the German military.

Japan

Japan was open to air raids toward the end of the war because its air force had almost been destroyed. Moreover, its crowded cities were built of flimsy materials that were especially vulnerable to fire.

Attacks on Japanese cities by the new U.S. B-29 Superfortresses, the biggest bombers of the war, had begun on November 24, 1944. By the summer of 1945, many of Japan's industries had been destroyed, along with one-fourth of its dwellings. To add to the strength of its regular army, the Japanese government decreed the mobilization of all people between the ages of 13 and 60 into a People's Volunteer Corps.

In Japan, the bombing of civilians reached a new level with the use of the first atomic bomb. Fearing high U.S. casualties in a land invasion of Japan, President Truman and his advisers decided to drop atomic bombs in August 1945. The result was the deaths of thousands of Japanese civilians.

Use complete sentences with correct spelling and grammar to answer the following questions. Be sure to use specific information from the text in every answer.

1. At the beginning of the war, how was Germany's increased need for raw materials satisfied?

2. Which of the countries mentioned in the text used women in battle in WWII?

3. What shortages did civilian populations experience as their countries mobilized for war?

4. What happened to Japanese Americans on the West Coast of the United States?

5. How did Japan solve its labor shortages?

6. Why did U.S. president Harry S. Truman want to avoid an invasion of Japan?

7. Why were the bombing raids in Germany successful?

8. In 1943, what percentage of the Soviet national income went into war materials? _____

9. What were German air raids on London known as?

10. Why did Japan create a planning board?

11. How were war preparations in Germany different from war preparations in the United States?

12. How did the bombing of cities impact the home front?

13. How did the development of airplanes change the way militaries fought?
