**EARLY AXIS GAINS**

On September 1, 1939, Nazi forces slammed into Poland. Using blitzkrieg, Germany quickly conquered Poland. While Germany attacked from the west, Stalin’s forces invaded from the east. Within a month, Poland ceased to exist. Hitler passed through the winter without much further action. Stalin’s armies, however, pushed into the Baltic states of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. Soviet forces also seized part of Finland.

During the first winter, the French hunkered down behind the Maginot Line. Britain sent troops to wait with them. Some reporters referred to this time as the “phony war”. Then in April 1940, the war exploded into action. Hitler launched a blitzkrieg against Norway and Denmark, both which soon fell. Next, his forces slammed into the Netherlands and Belgium.

**THE MIRACLE OF DUNKIRK**

By May, German forces were pouring into France. Retreating British forces were soon trapped between the advancing Nazis and the waters of the English Channel. In a desperate gamble, the British sent all available naval vessels, merchant ships, fishing and recreational boats to gather stranded troops.

Despite German air attacks, the improvised armada ferried more than 300,000 troops to safety. The heroic rescue, dubbed the “miracle of Dunkirk” greatly raised British morale.

**FRANCE FALLS**

German forces headed south toward Paris. Italy declared war on France and attacked from the south. Overrun and demoralized, France surrendered. On June 22, 1940, in a forest clearing in northeastern France, Hitler avenged the German defeat of 1918. He forced the French to sign the surrender documents in the same railroad car in which Germany had signed the armistice ending WWI. Following the surrender, Germany occupied northern France. In the south, the Germans set up a “puppet state”, with its capital at Vichy.

Some French officers escaped to England and set up a government-in-exile. Led by Charles de Gaulle, these “Free French” worked to liberate their homeland. Within France, resistance fighters used guerrilla tactics against German forces.

**AFRICA AND THE BALKANS**

Axis armies also pushed into North Africa and the Balkans. In September 1940, Mussolini ordered forces from Italy’s North African colony of Libya into Egypt. When the British army repulsed these invaders, Hitler sent a brilliant commander, General Erwin Rommel, to North Africa. The “Desert Fox”, as he was called, chalked up a string of successes in 1941 and 1942. He pushed the British back across the desert toward Cairo.

In October 1940, Italian forces invaded Greece. They encountered stiff resistance, and in 1941 German troops once again provided reinforcements. Both Greece and Yugoslavia were added to the growing Axis Empire. Even after the Axis triumph, however, Greek and Yugoslav guerrillas plagued the occupying forces.

Meanwhile, both Bulgaria and Hungary had joined the Axis alliance. By 1941, the Axis powers or their allies had controlled most of Western Europe.

**OPERATION BARBAROSSA**

Operation Barbarossa was the invasion of the Soviet Union. This invasion surprised the world because of the non-aggression pact signed between the two nations. In Operation Barbarossa, Hitler unleashed a new blitzkrieg. About three million Germans poured into the Soviet Union. They caught Stalin unprepared, his army still suffering from the Great Purge. The Russians lost two and a half million soldiers. As they were forced back, Russian troops destroyed factories and farm equipment and burned crops to keep them out of enemy ands. But the could not stop the German war machine. However, the German advance was stalled in early December when temperatures plunged to -4 degrees. Thousands of German soldiers froze to death.

The Russians also suffered appalling hardships. In September 1941, the two-and-a-half year siege of Leningrad began. Food was rationed. Desperate people boiled wallpaper or leather briefcases for food.

Stalin appealed to Churchill to open a second front. Although he could not offer much help, the two powers worked together.

**THE BATTLE OF BRITAIN**

With the fall of France in June 1940, Britain stood alone in Western Europe. Hitler was sure Britain would push for peace. Winston Churchill had replaced Neville Chamberlain as prime minister and had other plans. Faced with Churchill’s defiance, Hitler ordered his generals to make plans for Operation Sea Lion.

Beginning on August 12, 1940, German bombers began a daily bombardment of England’s southern coast. For a month, the British Royal Air Force battled the Luftwaffe. Then, the German changed their tactics, turning to the blitz, or bombing, of London and other cities.

All through the night, relays of aircraft showered high explosives and firebombs on the sprawling capital. The bombing continued for 57 nights. Much of the city was destroyed and 15,000 people lost their lives.

German planes continued to bomb London and other cities off and on until June 1941, but British morale would not be destroyed.