

1942

THE MAXIMUM EXTENT OF AXIS ADVANCE IN THE SECOND WORLD WAR

Up until 1939, Hitler's territorial demands had concerned only areas of German ethnic settlement. Britain and France had acquiesced, hoping that German unity represented the limit of his ambitions. After Hitler's annexation of what remained of Czechoslovakia in March 1939, it was all too clear that this was not the case. When Germany invaded Poland in September 1939, Britain, France, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa and Canada declared war, beginning the Second World War.

To ensure Germany would not be faced with a two-front war, Hitler agreed with Stalin to divide Poland between them. Polish resistance was quickly crushed by the German combination of fast-moving armoured divisions and close air support, known as blitzkrieg (lightning war). In 1940 Germany conquered Denmark, Norway, the Netherlands, Belgium and France in just three months. France was partitioned, with German occupation of the north and a collaborationist government in the south at Vichy. France's colonies were divided between those loyal to Vichy and those loyal to the Free French government in exile.

Following France's surrender and the expulsion of British forces from the Continent, Hitler expected Britain to seek peace. However, the British government, led by Winston Churchill, resolved to continue the war. Hitler's hastily made plans to invade Britain were abandoned after the German air force was defeated in the Battle of Britain. The war widened to the Balkans and Africa after Italy joined Germany in June, forming the Axis Powers. However, the poorly equipped Italians needed to be rescued by the Germans in 1941 after suffering defeats by the Greeks and by the British in Libya and East Africa. Hitler's attempt to woo Spain's new fascist dictator Francisco Franco failed: Spain had not yet recovered from its devastating civil war.

With Britain still undefeated, Hitler turned on his former ally and invaded the USSR in June 1941, taking Stalin completely by surprise. The Germans advanced rapidly through the summer but were unprepared for the onset of the bitter Russian winter and they were fought to a halt outside Moscow in December. Despite the speed of the German advance, the USSR successfully removed much of its industrial capacity to safety beyond the Ural Mountains. Officially neutral, the USA under President Franklin D. Roosevelt gave Britain considerable material support through the Lend-Lease scheme begun in March 1941.

