

Europe in Crisis: Class 8 – The fall of the Thousand Year Reich  
Lecture Notes

*Slide 3*

Russia Moves West

- After Stalingrad, the Germans were in a very bad situation. They had lost a huge number of troops and supplies. The Russians now had numeric and material supremacy. In some ways, they were even better organized than the Germans, because Hitler monitored the Nazi Army more closely than Stalin monitored the Red Army.
  - The Germans did have superior strategy, though. Their best hope for success was the create an elastic defense that could stalemate the Russians. The Germans hoped that this might frustrate them so much that the Russians would give in.
  - The Germans actually made some gains after being pushed back by the Russians from Stalingrad. They still had a fighting chance.
- Hitler was starting to lose his grip on reality. He was convinced that the German army could still conquer Russia, even though it was clear at this point the best the Germans could hope for was to stalemate the Russians. He kept encouraging his generals to attack. These maneuvers were futile and wasted valuable resources and men.

*Slide 4 and 5*

- **Battle of Kursk:** The Germans were going to try to encircle a bulge that had formed in the Soviet front line. It was blitzkrieg all over again – punch a hole in the lines to encircle. However, the Russians found out about this plan ahead of time, and prepared defensive strategies.
  - German offensive was launched July 5. The Germans did little more than dent the Soviet army, but lost a huge number of their own tanks. Germany ended the offensive on July 12.
  - The Germans were outnumbered: Troops: 900,000: 1,300,000, Tanks: 2700: 3300, Artillery: 10,000: 20,000
  - This was the largest artillery battle ever fought, and was extremely bloody.

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- The Soviets in Eastern Europe
  - After the battle of Kursk, the Germans really lost the initiative. The Soviets plowed through the Ukraine, and by November, they had recaptured Kiev.
  - Hitler begins to retreat from the world at this point. He meets with few advisors, except for a few yes-men, and becomes convinced that his General Staff is entirely incompetent.
  - The Germans are too tired and have too few resources to fight the Russian army anymore. The Germans have already scrapped the bottom of the barrel in terms of

manpower – the Russians have vast reserves that they haven't even begun to tap. The Russians also have a much larger industrial base. Even when Germany starts running on a wartime economy in early 1943, they simply could not produce as many tanks as the Russians did. Also, America is now running on a war economy, and is sending supplies over to the Soviet Union. This was not instrumental in German defeat, but it certainly helped.

- For the rest of the war, the Soviets basically press through Eastern Europe on the way to Berlin.
- **The Warsaw Uprising:** There were two major resistance groups in Poland during WWII. One, the Home Army, was associated with the exiled Polish government. The other was associated with the communists. As the Russians marched through Poland, they gave support to communist resistance fighters. The Home Army was worried that the Russians were going to try to make Poland into a satellite communist state, with help of these resistance groups. They decided to try and take Warsaw from the Nazis before the Russians got there. The Home Army expected to only fight for a few days, and then have help from the Russian army. However, the Russian army stopped short on the outskirts of the city, and let the Home Army fight to the death. Afterwards, the Nazis sent all Poles left in the city to concentration camps. By the end of 1944, there were no Poles left in the Polish capital of Warsaw.
- As the Russians marched through Poland to Germany and Austria, they enacted brutal revenge, killing and raping many German civilians, just as the German army had done to so many Russian civilians.

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#### The Anglo-American Alliance: Invading German and North Africa

- Once the US decided to enter the war, the Americans and the British started working very closely together. In fact, no allied forces have ever worked as closely as the Americans and the British in WWII. They did, however, have difficulty deciding what course of action to pursue.
  - At first, the British wanted to continue trying to starve the Germans out via **blockades and air raids**, as well as distract them in places outside Europe, like North Africa (currently the British were trying to defend their North African colonies from General Erwin Rommel).
  - Later, the British wanted to “probe the underbelly of Europe” by **attacking Italy**, and making their way to France and Austria from there. The Americans were suspicious that a desire to maintain the British Empire in the Mediterranean was the impetus behind this strategy. This is unlikely, but it is important that the Americans *thought* it was true.
  - The Americans, however, favored an amphibious invasion of **Northern France**. They believed this was the quickest way to bring victory. However, the British did not believe the Allies had enough strength for such an attack, and were worried that they would be bogged down, once again in a bloody war of attrition in France.
  - Meanwhile, Stalin was anxious for the Western Allies to open another front and relieve the pressure on the Eastern Front.

- **Unconditional Surrender:** The allies demanded unconditional surrender for the Germans in 1943.
    - They hoped this declaration would convince Stalin the allies were serious about the war effort, so Stalin wouldn't think about seeking a separate peace. Did not ultimately have this effect, in 1943, Stalin was too angry that the allies still hadn't opened up another front.
    - This demand made the German people more wary of the allies, and convinced them they would be vindictive victors. The German people supported the Nazi government to the bitter end.
- The Allies eventually decide to attack Italy, and then attack Northern France when they had enough strength.

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- They started in the occupied French territories in North Africa, so they could gain control of the region before attacking Italy. The attack was commanded by **General Dwight Eisenhower**. Though Eisenhower did not have any field experience, he was personable and helped smooth over the sometimes tense Anglo-American alliance.
  - While the French military in these regions was loyal to Vichy France, they were not looking for a fight, and surrendered to the Allies quickly. Rommel moved across North Africa to prevent the Allies from taking any more territory. At first the Allies faced some difficulty, mainly because the fresh American troops were incompetent. The troops improved after Eisenhower replaced one of his subordinates with the harsher **General George Patton**. Patton was a fanatical soldier with a short temper, but he was able to inspire fear in the American troops, which caused them to improve.
    - The Germans eventually lost in mid-May, 1943. However, this distraction helped push the Allied invasion of France from 1943 to 1944, giving Hitler some time.
  - **General Bernard Montgomery** was in charge of the British troops. He was personally unpleasant, but he was very popular with his men.
- The Allies chose to start their invasion in Sicily.
- The Allies cleverly diverted Hitler's attention from Italy:
  - They took the corpse of a vagrant, and dressed it as a British officer. They then dumped the body on the coast of Spain, where it was discovered by German agents who found falsified documents about how the Allies were planning to invade Greece. After receiving this information, Hitler sent precious manpower to Greece.
- Mussolini tried to defend Sicily with both German and Italian troops, but was unsuccessful. The fall of Sicily led to the fall of Mussolini – he was disposed of in a coup. The new government tried to agree on an armistice with the Allies. Shortly after the armistice was achieved, the Germans took over the Italian government, and re-installed Mussolini as a puppet leader.
- The Allies were able to take most of Southern Italy quickly, but the Germans defended Northern Italy tenaciously. They were aided by Northern Italy's mountainous terrain. The fighting in this region did not stop until the end of the war. Many military historians question the decision to

keep pounding the German defensive line in Italy when these troops probably would have been more useful in Northern France.

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#### The Allied Invasion of Normandy

- In 1944, the Allies were finally ready to invade France from Britain.
  - Some say they were ready in 1943, when France wasn't as strongly defended, but the Allied commanders didn't feel comfortable taking a risk. Historians still argue about whether or not the Allies should have delayed their invasion or not. Had they not delayed, the Russians would not have penetrated deeply into Eastern Europe, and the Cold War might have been averted.
- They gathered together the largest armada in history for the largest amphibious invasion ever. Now, they had to decide where they would attack. The British had already tried, and failed invading the well defended French ports and harbors. They would have to try to attack on an open beach. There were a few candidates for the site of attack, but we will only discuss two.
  - **Calais:** the closest suitable site to Britain, and also close to the industrial Ruhr, which would be a valuable region for the Allies to capture.
  - **Beaches of Normandy:** Closer to major French ports that would be the best place to ship supplies to. Also unexpected, the Allies would have a better chance of surprising the Nazis if they attacked Normandy instead of Calais.
  - The Allies worked very hard to make sure that the Nazis thought they would attack at Calais. They fed the Germans false information through their double agents. They even set up a dummy headquarters in southeastern Britain, close to Calais. These also tricked the Germans into thinking the allies had more troops than they actually did.
- *German advantages: While the Allies had a numerical and material advantage, as well as the first attack, the Germans had advantages, too:*
  - The Germans knew the Allies were planning an amphibious attack on Northern France. Rommel was placed in charge of defense. He laid 4 million mines on the beaches, constructed underwater obstacles, and built defensive lines near the beaches.
  - The Germans had a reasonably good idea of when and where the attack would come. They knew the attack would:
    - Come at dawn.
    - Come on a wide, open beach.
    - Come at low tide, because the Germans had laced the sea with underwater obstacles.
    - There were only a few places and times that met these requirements.
  - German troops were battle-hardened veterans from the Eastern Front and North Africa. Many American and British troops were fresh recruits, or had seen very little action.
  - The Germans were fighting for their home country. They knew that if they could not repel the Western invaders, Germany would be invaded by the Allies or the Russians

eventually. However, if the Allies could be repelled, the Germans could focus their efforts on the Eastern front, and stood a good chance of stalemating the Russians.

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- General Eisenhower, who was in charge of the Allied forces in Northern Europe, set the date of the invasion for June 5, one of the few days of the month when there was low tide at dawn. However, the weather was bad, and Eisenhower thought he would have to cancel the attack, until he received information the weather would be fine on June 6.
  - Many German generals, seeing that the allies couldn't launch an attack in the rain on June 5, left the front to go back to Germany for a little bit. This meant the Germans were unprepared for the attack.
  - The Germans were so sure that the attack would come at Calais, they initially assumed the attack at Normandy was a feint, and did not divert the bulk of their forces from Calais to Normandy until late afternoon.
- The attack started around midnight, when troops started parachuting behind the German defensive lines on the beaches. Around 3 AM, German radar picked up the 7,000 boats that were moving across the channel, carrying troops. As soon as daylight broke, around 5:30, they began shooting at the attackers. Allied troops started landing on the beaches around 6:00 AM, and by the end of the day over 100,000 Allied troops had landed in France. Within ten days there would be 500,000 allied troops in France.
  - The fighting on the beaches was gruesome. Omaha beach, where the American divisions invaded, had particularly high casualty rates because there were unusually good defenders there.

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- Once they landed, Allied troops moved inland more slowly than expected. The invaders had worried so much about getting past the beaches, that they had not paid through attention to the inland terrain, which was made of mostly fields and hedges which were difficult to get large troops through. However, they managed to get past the German defenders, and began to break out and make rapid progress.
- Paris: The Allies wanted to bypass Paris, because they wanted to avoid risky street fighting. They also did not want to be remembered as the army that had destroyed the City of Lights. However, de Gaulle and the Free French insisted they liberate Paris, and eventually took the initiative by attacking the capital themselves. The Allies were forced to join in. The German general surrendered quickly, despite orders from Hitler to fight until the city was "reduced to rubble." The general was also reluctant to destroy the beautiful city, so he left and the Allies and the Free French were greeted as liberators.
- True to form, Hitler decided to launch a massive counter attack against the Allies in August when defensive warfare would have been the smarter move. The attack failed, and Hitler lost 60,000 troops

- By August, the Allies were in Belgium. They decided to try crossing the Rhine River here, but were ultimately unsuccessful.
- **The Battle of the Bulge:** Once more, Hitler decided to try for an all-out offensive that would divide the Allied forces, and force them to sue for peace. He chose to attack through the Ardennes Forest, like he had in 1940, and aimed to separate Montgomery's troops in Antwerp from the rest of the army. Hitler was very careful to make sure that very little intelligence leaked out about the offensive, and the Allies were caught by surprise when on December 16, the Germans launched their offensive.
  - American confusion was augmented when English-speaking Germans snuck behind enemy lines in American uniforms, and wreaked havoc. Americans had to come up with obscure pop-culture questions to figure out who was German and who was American
  - The Bulge, however, did not have enough troops to protect its flanks, and by January 3, 1945, the bulge had been encircled by Allied troops. Hitler had diverted many men from the East to fight this battle, and then he lost them. There was no hope of victory for the Germans now. However, Hitler refused to surrender, and insisted that his troops fight for every inch of German soil, even if the attempt was suicidal.
- **The Battle of Berlin:** The Soviets launched an attack on Berlin on April 16. With typical fanaticism, Hitler insisted that all the men in Berlin, who, at this point, were only young boys and old men, defend the city. However, within a few weeks it was clear, even to Hitler that Berlin would fall, that the Third Reich would fall. Hitler committed suicide on April 29. On May 7, Germany surrendered unconditionally, and armistice was declared.

### *Slide 13*

- Postwar and the Seeds of the Cold War
  - WWII destroyed five former powers: Italy, France, Britain, Germany and Japan. Though Britain was strong throughout the war, it became painfully clear that its debt ridden economy, and Blitzed cities could not compete with the unscathed Americans. The only great powers remaining are the USA and the USSR.
  - Everyone wants different things:
    - USSR: Afraid of being attacked again. They wanted **satellite states**. Basically, that means they wanted a bunch of communist countries in Eastern Europe run by Communist puppets that could serve as a buffer in the event of another invasion. Some countries that became satellite states were Romania, Poland and Hungary.
    - USA: "Grand Design" The US thinks it can solve everyone's problems, insists on an unconditional surrender from the Germans, and wants to redesign Europe. Originally, thought everyone could just be friends, and wanted to develop a "concert system," like the Congress of Vienna had. He believed that all Europeans had a vested interest in peace, because modern war had proved to be so destructive. However, Stalin did not trust the west, and was not interested in participating.
    - Britain: Just wants balance of power. Is also afraid of Stalin's mighty Red Army.

- As the post-war environment developed, there was a general belief that another world war was inevitable, and that if it was going to happen, the US should do everything in its power to make sure it won.
  - During the war, Stalin, Roosevelt and Churchill had three big conferences:
    - Tehran: Nov 1943, plans for endgame of WWII are made, issues like what to do with Eastern Europe are brought up, but not discussed seriously.
    - Yalta: Feb 1945, plan to divide up Germany is decided on, but transportation to Berlin is left fuzzy. It's agreed that Europe should be allowed to develop (with help from the Allies) through "democratic" means, though its left very unclear what that means, as a concession to Stalin. Stalin is given a free rein in Poland. Stalin is also promised Japanese territory in return for helping the US out with Japan after the end of the war in Europe.
    - Potsdam: dealt with treatment of German war criminals, German reparations, confirmed Poland.
      - Did not want to be too harsh to Germany, recognized the importance of Germany to a healthy European economy.
      - Stalin was especially aggressive during this conference.
  - The Communization of Eastern Europe
    - The Soviet Union had control of Eastern Europe because it had liberated these states. They wanted to establish a number of communist countries on their borders to act as buffer zones from a possible attack from Western Europe. Such an attack would be backed by the US, though the Russians claimed they wanted protection from the Germans. These new states were called **satellite states**. These included Poland, Romania, Bulgaria, Hungary and East Germany. The term **iron curtain** was used to describe the militarized boarder between the East and the West. There was great fear that sooner or later, hostilities would arise, and war would break out along the fault line of the iron curtain.

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