

Topic: Victory and the Legacy of World War II

Essential Question: “How was victory achieved in World War II, and what were some of the significant changes that happened in the world and in American life as a result of the war?”

National Standard for United States History: Era 8, Standard 3

The origins and course of World War II, the character of the war at home Abroad, and its reshaping of the United States role on world affairs.

Instructional Objectives: Students will be able to:

1. Articulate how World War II ended in the Atlantic and Pacific theaters of the war.
2. Explain how the ideas over which the war was fought resulted in significant changes in the face of American life and in the direction of world history.

Background Description/Historical Significance:

Overview (These details can be used in a short lecture format to provide critical background information for students before they proceed with the activity.)

Unlike some conflicts which have imprecise starting and ending dates, World War II, for the United States, had a very distinct beginning-- Pearl Harbor--, and a definitive end—the surrender of Germany, May 8, 1945 and the formal surrender of Japan, September 2, 1945. However, the last months of the war, both in the Atlantic (Europe) and Pacific theaters of the war, were numbing in their brutality. Max Hastings’ book, *Armageddon, The Battle for Germany 1944-1945* (2004) outlines the carnage and destruction as Allied armies advanced into Germany and finally into Berlin. Fighting on the eastern front between Germans and Russians had been especially harsh during the three years after the Nazi surprise offensive of 1941. Hastings estimates that on the eastern front alone the German Army lost 2.4 million battlefield dead. He estimates Russian military dead at 8.7 million, in addition to “at least eighteen million Soviet civilians who died”.

In the Pacific, Japan lost thousands of its own troops in the fighting, and also inflicted huge casualties on Americans as Japanese defenders in the various island campaigns refused to surrender and fought nearly to the last man. In a book titled *The Twilight Warriors* (2010), author Robert Gandt vividly describes the brutal fighting on one island, Okinawa, where Japanese defenders and *kamikaze* suicide airplane strikes took the lives of 12,520 American soldiers, marines, airmen and sailors and left another 36,631 wounded. President Truman, in looking at these numbers, believed that thousands more American lives would be required if the main islands of Japan were invaded. These

considerations led to his authorizing a ramping up of the B-29 bombing raids on Japan, including his decision to drop the atomic bomb.

After so much carnage and loss of life, it was no surprise that when the announcements of surrender came, they resulted in a tremendous outpouring of relief and elation across the country. A conflict which had encompassed nearly the whole world, had galvanized the home front into full-time war production, and had consumed the lives of over 400,000 Americans—had now come to a close. Nearly every town had a spontaneous celebration with factory whistles blowing, church bells ringing and crowds dancing in the streets.

In 1945, on the battlefronts, there were similar outbreaks of euphoria when the surrender of Germany and then Japan were announced. The first-hand account by correspondent Theodore White of the actual surrender ceremony in Tokyo Bay on September 2 on board the *USS Missouri* gives one a sense of the devastation from the war but also of the military strength of the forces of the United States when the war ended.

Speaking of the destruction in nearby Yokohama, Japan, White described what he saw in Japan that day this way:

“There was no need to level any guns at Yokohama. It was cinder. We had told each other for years that the wood-and-paper houses of the Japanese would burn at the first touch of firebombing. So they had. The city was flat—acre after acre of rubble...factories had been burned out; the stubble of brick smokestacks rising high across the horizon; and a crust of corrugated-iron shacks, all rusting, where people still tried to live. Dreary, beshawled figures trudged about in these ruins. The city was dead. So apparently was Japan.”

At the end of the surrender ceremony, in a choreographed display of military power, the huge air forces that had leveled Japan made one last run over Tokyo Bay, this time without bombs. Theodore White witnessed it from the deck of the *Missouri*:

“It happened to the split second in the perfect timing of the victorious forces we then commanded. The rain of Saturday had ended, the skies were lightening, and now the clouds above the ship were breaking with sun patches when a drone sounded. It began as light buzzing in the distance, then a roar, then the deafening tone of the countless planes converging. Four hundred B-29’s, the fire-bombers that had leveled Japan, had taken off from Guam and Saipan hours before; the fleet carriers coordinated their planes. They were to appear over the Missouri all at once. And they did. The four hundred B-29’s came low, low over the Missouri, and fifteen hundred fleet planes rose above and around their wings. There they were, speckling the sky in specks of gray; it was American power at its zenith. They dipped over the Missouri, passed on over Yokohama, inland over Tokyo to brandish the threat, then back out to sea again.”

The last major event of World War II brought no new devastation. It signified an end to the most destructive war in history.

World War II, as John Keegan rightfully wrote, was “the largest single human event in human history”. For Americans, it ended in total victory. It was a victory celebrated in every town, village and city across the country. The war was over. It was time to bring home the troops and move to a peacetime economy. Although much of Europe and Asia lay in ruins, Keegan describes the United States as being the “least damaged” of the warring powers leaving it “in 1945 industrially more productive than the rest of the world put together”. It would be this America which would be called upon in the post-war years to lead the world down a path of peace and reconstruction. As President Truman said in his radio address to Members of the Armed Forces on September 2, 1945: “This is a time for great rejoicing and solemn contemplation. With the destructive force of war removed from the world, we can now turn to the grave task of preserving the peace.... Civilization cannot survive another total war”.

The victory that had been achieved had come at great cost and the sacrifice made had been incalculable. The world had come to a realization that another total war in the twentieth century was untenable. It would be the responsibility post-war generations to put in place new alliances, new structures and new legal mechanisms to create a world where such a war could not happen again. Supreme Court Justice Robert H. Jackson in his opening statement as Chief American Prosecutor at the trial of major Nazi defendants in Nuremberg, Germany, in November 1945, echoed the sentiments made by President Truman: “The privilege of opening the first trial in history for crimes against the peace of the world, he said, “imposes a grave responsibility. The wrongs which we seek to condemn and punish have been so calculated, so malignant and so devastating, that civilization cannot tolerate their being ignored because it cannot survive their being repeated.” (*Tyranny on Trial*, Whitney R. Harris, 1999). After a total, all-out, world war—it would now become the responsibility of a victorious America to lead in the difficult task of rebuilding and reconstructing a broken world.

Legacy:

Fortunately, the democracies of the world were victorious in World War II. The “Four Freedoms” as articulated in President Roosevelt’s State of the Union address in 1941 (Document “A”) had prevailed over the forces of fascism and dictatorship. This led to dramatic post-war changes focused on keeping the peace and establishing a more just world order. Among those “legacy” accomplishments are the following:

Our Enemies Became our Allies: At the end of the war, the citizens of German and Japan were destitute. Many of their cities had been destroyed and their economies were in a shambles. American and allied troops occupied Germany, and American troops under the leadership of General Douglas MacArthur were in control of Japan. Through the Marshall Plan in Europe (see document B) and similar commitments in the Far East, America helped rebuild the lands of its former enemies and urged adoption of new

democratic constitutions in those countries. Today, Germany and Japan are two of the strongest democracies in the world.

Establishment of the United Nations: The term “United Nations” had been used during the war to describe the Allies and their democratic cause. In April, 1945, prior to the end of the war, a conference began in San Francisco which would lead to the establishment of the United Nations as we now know it. The original charter of the United Nations can be viewed in Document C.

Adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights: This declaration was approved by the United Nations General Assembly in 1948 and is attached as Document D.

Establishing Norms for the Rule of Law: The International Military Tribunal held in Nuremberg, Germany (1945-'46) established a procedure for prosecuting and holding accountable leaders responsible for war crimes during World War II. For more on America’s role in these proceedings, see www.roberthjacksoncenter.org. War crime prosecutions, though on a smaller scale, were conducted in the Pacific against some of Japan’s military and governmental leaders. Efforts continue to this day to advance the rule of law in dealing with war and with international humanitarian crimes.

The Beginnings of the Civil Rights Movement: African Americans (and also Japanese Americans) fought in segregated military units during World War II. However, when they came home, they were unwilling to continue their status as second-class citizens. Forces had been set in motion during the war which would ultimately begin the process of establishing a more just and equal society within the United States itself. Some documents attached reflect policy changes on civil rights which developed as a result of World War II, and contributed to a growing recognition of equal rights for all citizens.

Document E: President Roosevelt’s 1941 issuance of Executive Order 8802 dealing with prohibiting discrimination in the defense industry.

Document F: President Truman’s Executive Order 9981 issued in 1948 desegregating the Armed Forces.

Women in the Workplace: In order to fill the need for defense production, thousands of women left home to go to work in factories. (See Lesson Plan on the Home Front.) When the war ended, many of them remained in active employment in the work place. Women also had played an important role in the military, and that involvement would continue and grow. (For more on this historical development, visit Women in the Military Service for America Memorial in Washington, D.C. , www.womensmemorial.org.)

Servicemen’s Readjustment Act (GI Bill of Rights): One of the most important results of World War II was the legislation known as the GI Bill of Rights. This legislation provided all manner of benefits to returning veterans, including low interest mortgage rates for housing, a path to a college education, and unemployment insurance. The GI Bill of Rights led to unprecedented prosperity in the United States in the post-war years and help to usher in the generation known as “baby boomers.” Document G.

Below are digital links to each of the documents utilized in this lesson. Documents A, B, C, E, F, and G are located in the holdings of the National Archives and Records Administration with the links below provided from their 100 Milestone Documents website.

Document A: President Roosevelt’s Four Freedoms Speech

Text:

<http://www.ourdocuments.gov/doc.php?doc=70&page=transcript>

Audio Recording:

<http://docsteach.org/documents/2174833/detail?menu=closed&mode=search&sortBy=relevance&q=Four+Freedoms&commit=Go>

Document B: The Marshall Plan

<http://www.ourdocuments.gov/doc.php?doc=82&page=transcript>

Document C: The United Nations Charter

<http://www.ourdocuments.gov/doc.php?flash=true&doc=79&page=transcript>

Document D: The United Nations Declaration of Rights

http://www.un.org/events/humanrights/2007/hrphotos/declaration%20_eng.pdf

Document E: Executive Order 8802

<http://www.ourdocuments.gov/doc.php?flash=true&doc=72&page=transcript>

Document F: Executive Order 9981

<http://www.ourdocuments.gov/doc.php?doc=84&page=transcript>

Document G: The GI Bill of Rights

<http://www.ourdocuments.gov/doc.php?doc=76&page=transcript>

Transfer Task/Activity

Break up your class into mixed ability groups. Assign to each group one of the eight documents in the lesson. Provide each group a piece of newsprint. Each group should assign a recorder who will place at the top of their newsprint the name of their document. Either using their textbook, or computer and digital device, each group should conduct some research regarding their assigned document and record the salient points of the document on the newsprint. These can be recorded as bullet points.

Each group will then report to the whole class the answer to the following essential question posed at the beginning of the lesson explaining how their document fits into the answer to the question.

How did the ideas over which the war was fought result in significant changes in the face of American life and in the direction of world history?

World War II at the Memorial:

1. The victory arches at the north and south entrance to the Memorial, underscore the accomplishment of the World War II generation. Four eagles sit atop four bronze columns, which, in turn, support a bronze victory laurel, some 25 ft. in diameter. An open oculus allows the sun to light and accentuate this sculpture during the day. The bronze arch within the stone arch is an architectural design known as a "*baldacchino*". This is one of the very unique features one sees at the World War II Memorial and is not often seen in American architecture.
2. On the floor of both arches is located a bronze replica of the World War II Victory Medal surrounded by the words: "1941-1945, Victory at Sea, Victory on Land, Victory in the Air". (This medal, which all World War veterans received, also was engraved on the reverse side with the "Four Freedoms".)

3. The National World War II Memorial was designed to be a memorial to the whole nation, to the home front as well as those fighting on war front. Note: The 56 pillars of the Memorial recognize all of the states as well as the territories of the United States who supplied troops for the war. The bronze ropes which “connect” these pillars in the open balustrade between them, symbolize the unity of the nation in the war effort.
4. The cost of the victory in human life is seen in the freedom wall, where each star represents one hundred Americans who died during the conflict.
5. The allies’ contribution to total victory is recognized in the engraved words of President Truman: “The heroism of our own troops...was matched by that of the armed forces of the nations that fought by our side....They absorbed the blows...and they shared to the full in the ultimate destruction of the enemy.”
6. The quote from Olveta Culp Hobby capsulizes the involvement in the war not only of women but of a whole generation: “this was a people’s war, and everyone was in it.”
7. The bronze *bas-reliefs* of sculptor Ray Kaskey located on both sides of the ceremonial entrance describe the historical transformation of America during the war. Note: the *bas-relief* located closest to the rainbow pool and plaza on the Atlantic side of the Memorial shows American troops meeting Russian troops at the Elbe River in Germany. The *bas-relief* similarly located on the Pacific side of the Memorial depicts the celebration in the streets of America when the war in the Pacific ended.
8. The names “Germany” and “Japan” are the final inscriptions of “names that resonate” on the north and south fountains. These mortal enemies from World War II are now two of our strongest democratic allies in the world.