

History project 2025

Introduction:

A black page in the history of Europe: World War II. From 1939 to 1945 there was a global conflict that claimed countless lives and produced many economic, cultural and political consequences. Much is known about this global disaster, but when it comes down to it, history classes often focus only on the European side of this story. What about the American perspective of this war? We take a closer look at this issue. We talk with World War II veteran Arnold Strauch, who fought in the final stages of the battle.

The war divided the world into two power blocs: the Axis powers (Germany, Italy and Japan) and the Allies (Britain, the United States, the Soviet Union and China, among others). For a long time, Hitler and his Nazi Germany held power in Europe. The United States hoped World War II would pass them by. After World War I, they believed they had learned their lesson. Although they did not fight directly in the beginning, they offered much support to the Allies to help them move forward. They did this by sending war materials. However, the threat from the Axis powers was a major factor, so the U.S. government decided to send troops to Europe. The U.S. viewed the rise of Nazi Germany as a direct threat against democracy and economic stability.

Pearl Harbor

On Dec. 7, 1941, at 7:55 local time, the lives of many U.S. Marines changed. The first Japanese bomber lost her bombs over the U.S. Naval Base Pearl Harbor. This marina is located in the state of Hawaii and this is where the Pacific fleet of the U.S. Navy had been stationed since April 1940. From this moment on, the participation of the United States in World War II was a fact. Most of the damage was done in the first half-hour, but in total the entire attack lasted about two hours. Two American battleships were sunk and six others severely damaged. The damage done to the maritime force was irreparably damaged and destroyed. In this short two hours, damage was done that was barely repairable.

Operation Bagration, Operation Overlord, Battle of the Bulge

It all began in 1939 when Germany invaded Poland. The successful Blitzkrieg tactics of which speed and surprise were the basis - combined with light tanks leading the attack, supported by infantry and aircraft (IsHistory, s.d.) - led to the conquest of Poland, Denmark, Norway, the Netherlands, Belgium and France in a short time. However, the Third Reich was not at its peak then, this point came only when Operation Barbarossa was launched in 1941. The largest military operation ever, nearly four million German, Romanian and Finnish troops invaded the Soviet Union (STIWOT, 2024). Initially, Germany scored spectacular victories, but the wind turned after heavy defeats at

Alamein (1942) and Stalingrad (1943) and so the Germans were unable to defeat the Soviet Union in one campaign.

Meanwhile, the Allies were strengthening themselves with the United States, among others, joining the war in 1941 after the attack Pearl Harbor. In the later years of the war, Germany was beset by increasing pressure from the Soviets in the east, the Allies in Italy and Africa and strategic bombing. By 1944, therefore, the Third Reich was exhausted and hemmed in by enemies on multiple fronts. Consequently, 1944 saw many battles and offensives from both sides to still gain power over several pieces of land. Three major offensives, which contributed drastically to defeating Germany, are “Operation Bagration,” “Operation Overlord” and “The Battle of the Bulge.

How the Germans were crushed on three fronts

In 1944, the world was in the throes of an all-decisive battle. Nazi Germany, once invincible, was beginning to show cracks on all sides. The Eastern Front was succumbing to the strength of The Red Army (the Soviets), while the Western Allies were preparing to invade Europe through Normandy. Toward the end, Germany desperately tried to regain control with a surprise attack in the Ardennes. Together, these three crucial campaigns marked a turning point in World War II and heralded the end of Nazi Germany.

The first and most devastating battle for the Germans took place in the east, where Operation Bagration was launched on June 22, 1944 (May 1940 Editorial, s.d.). The Soviets used a strategy called Maskirovka to trick Germans into believing the attack would take place elsewhere. This moved the German reserves south while the central sector would come under fire.

The offensive began with the German defensive lines being laid in ruins by artillery barrage. After which Soviet forces broke through the German lines, using weapons strategies involving tanks, infantry and air power. Crucial cities fell within the first few weeks and by July 3, 1944, Minsk was liberated. German losses were crushing: more than 400,00 troops were killed, captured or wounded. By August the Soviets were on the outskirts of Poland, ready to march on Germany (Editorial May 1940, s.d.)

Operation Overlord

Around the same time, the Western Allies were preparing for their own offensive: the invasion of Normandy. Forty-seven divisions, most of them British or American, were mustered to overrun the Germans on the beaches of northern France (D-Day Info, s.d.). The Allies had been engaged in a complex preparation campaign for months. the beaches of Utah, Omaha, Gold, Juno and Sword each faced varying levels of resistance. German machine guns and artillery on fortified cliffs wreaked havoc and colored the waters of the beaches dark red, especially that of Omaha Beach. After the heavy fighting

on the beaches, Allied forces were able to establish a base on the mainland (Schrever, 2024).

However, the battle was not over. The Germans' defensive belts proved more substantial than anticipated, causing setbacks for the Americans and delaying progress toward Paris. After several operations, the Americans broke through and the Germans were only able to retreat. In the end, Paris was not captured until three months after the Allies landed.

Battle of the Bulge

At the end of 1944, with the Eastern Front in ruins and the Western Front under pressure, Germany pinned its hopes on a final offensive. This attack, which began on Dec. 16, was intended to take the Allies by total surprise. The 6th Panzer SS Army, the 5th Armored Army and Brandenberger's 7th Army moved out with only one goal in mind: To capture the port at Antwerp. The terrain of the Ardennes and the bad weather of that winter seemed ideal conditions for a surprise offensive.” (Liberation Route Europe, s.d.)

the German attack began with a massive artillery barrage, followed by a rapid advance of tanks and infantry. In the first days, German forces achieved considerable success, with deep penetrations into Allied lines. Bastogne, a strategically hugely important town, was surrounded. American troops led by General Anthony McAuliffe held firm against the German offensive and refused to surrender, even when the Germans sent negotiators to McAuliffe. These weaved off McAuliffe with the famous word: "NUTS!" (Lendering, 2024).

the situation changed dramatically when the weather cleared and the Allies were able to use their strong air forces to bomb the German supply lines. The Allies' tactical bombing caused the offensive to lose momentum and by January 1945 it was completely repulsed. The battle was a strategic disaster for Germany: the losses of tanks, aircraft and experienced troops were irreparable. For the Allies, it represented a final breakthrough into Germany: a path to victory. (Editorial May 1940, s.d.).

After the Battle of the Bulge, the Germans were finished. Exhausted, broken and defeated, they retreated. This created a lot of noise in Europe, and in order to maintain security, several American divisions were sent to European areas, toiling under German rule in time of fighting. In one of these divisions, specifically the "86th division" was a man named Arnold Strauch. On the next two pages he does his story: how he joined the Army, what it was like to fight in the aftermath of a war and how he was able to leave the Army after a few years.

Arnold's story:

I was 18 years old when I signed up for the army in 1943. Until then I was just a student living at home with my parents. World War II had been going on for two years by then, but at that time I was not that concerned about it. I was still young, only 16 years old, and the war seemed like a distant memory to me.

However, when I graduated, I was faced with an inevitable choice: enlist or be drafted. That was the law. If you were healthy and physically able, you had to serve your country. There was no other option: refusing meant imprisonment.

There were a lot of different service options within the Army, so I did a lot of research.

The Army had instituted a program titled "Army Specialized Training Program" that sounded quite interesting.

This program was so interesting because after 13 weeks of training, it sent recruits on to a university to study military engineering. My basic training took place at a large Army base in Georgia. Here we were prepared as best we could for possible deportation. In fact, I was prepared for a possible invasion of Japan.

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Unfortunately, everything changed when we heard that our division was being deployed to Europe instead of Japan. We had been trained for an invasion of enemy beaches, but were now suddenly sent to a place in the middle of Europe. Indeed, the war in Germany had reached a crucial stage. The Battle of the Bulge had taken its toll on Allied troop numbers and reinforcements were urgently needed.

The journey to Europe was anything but easy. It was dangerous: all around me I saw signs of war.

There was definitely a lot of fear: German submarines could destroy our ship, destroyed train tracks, bombarded bridges.

Winter in Cologne was icy and freezing, and although I myself had not participated in the Battle of the Bulge, we felt its aftermath. The German army was weakened, but that didn't make the situation any less dangerous. I was totally inexperienced on the "front," and it was only on the "front" that I really gained experience. Even though the war seemed almost over, after the great loss of the Germans at the Battle of the Bulge, the German troops did not immediately give up. There were several moments when I and my comrades were under fire. One moment I remember very well:

We were walking on a road, when all of a sudden machineguns started firing at us. Some of us got hurt. Luckily I was never wounded.

When the war in Europe ended, there was little time to celebrate. The fighting in Germany may have ended, but the war in Japan was still going on. We were the first division to be sent back to the US, but soon had to leave again. This time to the Philippines where we guarded Japanese prisoners of war who did not yet know the war was over. Once I accumulated enough service point there, I took an honorable discharge.

Once back in America, it was a challenge: I wanted to continue my education, but because of a thousand ex-soldiers with the same idea, this became difficult.

Conclusion:

World War II remains a poignant chapter in our history. Veterans, like Arnold Strauch, play a crucial role in being able to continue to tell these stories. His story gives us insight into the perspective of an American soldier. He was one of many who, from different places around the world, fought for freedom. These stories tell us the complexity of war: from Pearl Harbor to the important battles for freedom and its aftermath. Arnold's words remind us how important it is to keep telling the stories of individual soldiers, because if we remember the past, we can protect the future.

Thank you Arnold!

(The word document is the paper translated into English. The other document is what our project ended up looking like, but it was too difficult to translate that whole file, which is why we split it up.

We would like to thank you immensely for sharing your experiences and we hope that we have put them well into words.)

Kind regards,

Yentl, Faas and Vivian

Yentl van Sint Fiet , Jan 20, 2025