

The beginning and end of World War II – Dates and events at a glance

Belarus, Germany,
Poland and Russia

Objectives

1 September 1939 and 9 May 1945 are official dates today that mark the beginning and end of World War II (WWII) in Europe.

Through this exercise, students come to understand from the perspective of four different countries when WWII began and ended for each of these countries and how these events were perceived by the people in these respective countries. These countries are Germany as the perpetrators, Poland, Belarus (the western part was part of Poland, the eastern part was part of the former Soviet Union) and Russia (part of the former Soviet Union) as the countries that were invaded, occupied, and devastated.

Each of these four countries has its own view of this time and its own story to tell, a story that most of us do not know. World War II unites and separates us to this day. It is now more than 70 years since the end of the war. Nevertheless, we can still feel its consequences today.

With a little more understanding and knowledge of neighbouring countries with their people and their histories and stories, we as individuals will be able to contribute to ensuring that there are no more wars between peoples.

Methodology

Visual timeline / Working in groups

The following exercise can be used as:

- a refresher
- consolidation
- a summary
- a supplement

When teaching about the history of the beginning and end of WWII, sometimes you need to use a timeline to list out the typical events in chronological order so as to help students:

- ➔ **Understand** the overall course of events (in our case: in Germany, Poland, Belarus and Russia),
- ➔ **Analyse** causes and effects and
- ➔ **Comprehend** information.

A visual timeline:

- is visual
- can be used flexibly
- promotes understanding of historical contexts
- puts events, people, dates and backgrounds in context
- promotes the ability to classify time periods and information
- promotes the ability to analyse on different levels
- promotes critical discussion
- can embrace a variety of learning styles (images, data, texts ...)



Overview of dates, events, and brief descriptions

In addition to the two official dates of the beginning and end of WWII in Europe – **1 September 1939 and 9 May 1945** — the following overview contains other dates and events that are directly or indirectly related to the first two dates, in particular the attack by German troops on the Soviet Union on **22 June 1941** (other terms: the beginning of the German-Soviet War or Great Patriotic War), and also the date of the official end of WWII with the surrender of Japan on **2 September 1945**.

With regard to the **first and last acts of war in the four countries** (Russia, Belarus, Poland and Germany), we have concentrated, as far as possible, on major events in the main cities of Moscow, Minsk, Warsaw and Berlin.

Depending on the educational background of the students and national specifics in the four countries concerned, **data can be omitted or added**. It may be useful to add dates and events from local history.

1939

23 August	Signing of the German-Soviet non-aggression pact In Moscow, the Foreign Ministers von Ribbentrop (for Hitler) and Molotov (for Stalin) signed a German-Soviet non-aggression pact and a secret supplementary agreement to which allocated spheres of interest in Eastern Europe to Germany and the Soviet Union.
1 September	Beginning of the Second World War with the invasion of Poland by German troops The attack on Poland, and with it the Second World War, began when the German ship "Schleswig-Holstein" opened fire on the Polish ammunition depots on the Westerplatte near Gdansk. The German Wehrmacht invaded Poland without declaring war.
17 September	Soviet troops invade eastern Poland Soviet troops marched into Poland and occupied the areas agreed by Hitler and Stalin in the secret supplementary agreement. The Polish government fled first to Romania, then to France and England.
23 September	Occupation of Poland by the Wehrmacht The report by the Wehrmacht High Command begins by summarizing the situation in Poland as follows: "The campaign in Poland is over."
27 September	Bombing of Warsaw by German troops The German air force bombed Warsaw massively - an unnecessary attack that claimed more than 10,000 lives. The city of Warsaw surrendered, and 140,000 Polish soldiers were taken prisoner by Germany.
28 September	Dissolution of Poland as a real state The Soviet Union and the German Reich agreed on a common border, dividing the areas of Poland they occupied. An underground state emerged in Poland, led by the government-in-exile in London.



1941

22 June

Attack on the Soviet Union by German troops (other terms: the beginning of the German-Soviet War or Great Patriotic War)

Without a declaration of war, German troops began to invade the Soviet Union along a line between the Baltic Sea and the Carpathian Mountains. The troops were followed by task forces set up to carry out the systematic murder of the Jewish population, functionaries of the Communist Party, Sinti and Roma, and prisoners of war.

24 June

Bombing of Minsk by German troops

German air force bombers bombed the city of Minsk (at that time the capital of the Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic with about 270,000 inhabitants). Since the water supply was destroyed, no fires could be extinguished and the city was evacuated.

2 October

Attack on Moscow by German troops

Ministries, authorities, and industrial companies were evacuated from Moscow. The German leadership expected to attack Moscow and secure victory over the Soviet Union, but this failed in early December 1941.

1943 -1945

2 February 1943

Battle of Stalingrad

With the surrender of the last Wehrmacht troops in Stalingrad, over 100,000 German soldiers were taken prisoner by Soviet troops.

3 July 1944

Liberation of Minsk

The battle of Minsk (capital of the then Belarussian Soviet Socialist Republic) ended with the liberation of the city by Soviet troops.

17 January 1945

Liberation of Warsaw

The last German units in Warsaw capitulated to Polish troops.

27 January 1945

Liberation of the Auschwitz concentration camp

The Red Army liberated the Auschwitz extermination camp, in which there were still 7,600 prisoners.

4 – 11 February
1945

Yalta conference

The Soviet party and government leader Josef W. Stalin, the British Prime Minister Winston Churchill, and US President Roosevelt met at the Yalta Conference. The main topics of the conference were the division of Germany, the distribution of power in Europe after the end of the war, and the war against the Japanese Empire.

2 May 1945

Liberation of Berlin

The fighting in Berlin ended with the surrender of the Wehrmacht troops.

8/9 May 1945

Official Liberation Day, marked by the signing of the declaration of surrender

The act of surrender was repeated at the Soviet headquarters in Berlin-Karlshorst and the declaration was signed by the Chief of the Wehrmacht High Command, Field Marshal Wilhelm Keitel, in the presence of Soviet Marshal Georgi K. Zhukov.

9 May 1945

Official Victory Day

In his victory speech, Stalin gave assurances that he did not intend to "dismember or destroy Germany". In doing so, he publicly moved away from the Allies' partition plans, which he had supported at the Yalta Conference.

17 July – 2 August
1945

Potsdam Conference

The conference of the "Big Three" Harry S. Truman (USA), Winston S. Churchill (Great Britain) and Josef W. Stalin (Soviet Union), took place in Potsdam-Cecilienhof. The so-called Potsdam Agreement established the future policy of the Allies in respect of the German Reich.

2 September 1945

Official end of the Second World War with the surrender of Japan

After the unconditional surrender of the German armed forces on 8/9 May 1945, Japan remained as the only opponent of the Allies. Atomic bombs were dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August, killing over 200,000 people. Japan had no choice, and signed the deed of unconditional surrender. Thus the Second World War was finally over.



Material for students

Four sets of cards

Teachers will have to prepare four sets of cards for the group work, preferably each set of cards in a different colour so that they can be easily distinguished one from another. Templates for use in the classroom are provided in an extra folder.

Set 1

Cards with dates related to the beginning and end of the war in the 4 different countries. Example:

**1 September
1939**

3 July 1944

8/9 May 1945

Set 2

Cards with the events corresponding to these dates. Example:

**Beginning of the Second
World War with the invasion
of Poland by German troops**

**Liberation of the
city of Minsk**

**Official Liberation Day,
marked by the signing of
the declaration of surrender**

Set 3

All cards with a brief description of the events. Example:

The attack on Poland, and with it the Second World War, began when the German ship "Schleswig-Holstein" opened fire on the Polish ammunition depots on the Westerplatte near Gdansk. The German Wehrmacht invaded Poland without declaring war

The battle of Minsk (capital of the then Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic) ended with the liberation of the city by Soviet troops.

The act of surrender was repeated at the Soviet headquarters in Berlin-Karlshorst and the declaration was signed by the Chief of the Wehrmacht High Command, Field Marshal Wilhelm Keitel, in the presence of Soviet Marshal Georgi K. Zhukov.

Note

It is possible to combine sets 2 and 3 by writing the event on the front of the card and the brief description of the event on the back.

Set 4

Blank cards or paper slips for the students to write down their own questions and/or comments. Example:

question and/or comment



Material for teachers

Visual timeline

Teachers will have to prepare the space for the timeline in the classroom. The timeline should be either laid out on the floor or pinned to the wall or drawn on the board, so that students may move around freely while adding their cards to the timeline. They may read the information and look at the photos from different angles. In addition, in this way extra material, such as photographs, etc., can be added quite easily.

Examples



Map of Europe (and historical maps)

A map of Europe and historical maps to indicate the countries, regions and places as well as the border changes would be helpful, as the students hardly know where the regions and places are. If the map is large enough, names of cities, names of war witnesses, photos and even dates could easily be placed on it using pins or tags.

Example



Photos, pictures or images of the events

Some historical photos, pictures or images can be used to illustrate the events to be discussed. These can be photos of general and/or local events, photos of witnesses of the war, etc. A selection of photos of general events is provided for use in the classroom in an extra folder.

Example



Excerpts from diaries or memoirs

Excerpts from diaries or memoirs can also be added to the timeline and used to personalize the events to be discussed. A selection of excerpts from witnesses of the war from Russia, Belarus, Poland and Germany is provided for use in the classroom in an extra folder.

Example: Janusz Tarnowski from Poland, writing about the bombing of Warsaw on 27 September 1939 (written on 17 June 1946)

When the war began, German planes came over and bombed Warsaw. The bombardment lasted for somewhere between three and five hours. During that time I was down in the basement with my entire family, except for my father, who had gone to fight.

We stayed in the basement for whole nights or days. When we ran out of food, I went with my older friends to get food from demolished shops—it was all we could do. *Janusz Tarnowski (6th grade), from Poland*

Suggestion for a lesson plan

This exercise should be organised as group work.

Group work

→ The class will be divided into groups, preferably of no more than 5 students each. Each group is given:

- [At the teacher's discretion] **either** a complete set of all the cards on which are written the dates/events/brief descriptions [described above], i.e. all of 'set 1', 'set 2' and 'set 3' **or** a selection of the cards from 'set 1' and the corresponding cards from 'set 2' and 'set 3'.
- one or two pictures, photos or images that reflect an event on the cards they have been given
- one excerpt of a diary/memoir that reflects an event on the cards they have been given.

Work in small groups

- The students in the groups match the cards of 'set 1' (dates) with the corresponding cards of 'set 2' (events) and 'set 3' (short descriptions).
- If photos, pictures and/or images are provided, students match them with the events.
- If excerpts of memoirs from witnesses of the war are provided, students match them with the events.

Work in class

→ The groups of students are asked to place the cards of set 1, 2 and 3 on the timeline.

- If photos, pictures and/or images are provided, students are asked to describe the picture, to place the picture on the timeline beside the particular event, and to justify their decision.
- If excerpts of memoirs from witnesses of the war are provided, students are asked to summarize the story, to place them on the timeline beside the particular event, and to justify their decision.

Class discussion in connection with the event shown on the photo or picture or told in the story of the witness of the war: All students in class are asked by the teacher to take a different perspective, i.e. they should think about how people in the other countries (Belarus, Germany, Poland or Russia) were involved in this particular event.



Reflection

Work in pairs

→ After studying the timeline with the dates, events, descriptions, pictures and excerpts, each pair of students writes down their questions and/or comments on the blank cards of 'set 4' or simply on pieces of paper.

Alternatively, the teacher chooses max. three events beforehand. The pairs of students are given one event each by the teacher and try to have a look at this event from a different point of view. Their task will be to:

- briefly discuss with their partner the role each of the four countries played during this event. They should discuss the political background to the role and the actions of individuals
- write their reasoning on the blank cards.

Work in class

→ Students should place their cards in the appropriate places on the timeline and ask their questions and/or make their comments.

→ Depending on the scope of the questions, the teacher will decide which questions will (can) be answered by the students themselves and/or by the teacher, or which questions will be discussed later. It is important that all questions are collected by the teacher and discussed with the students either immediately or at a later time.

Alternatively, the students should use their reasoning about the role each of the four countries played during this event in a class discussion.

Some general alternative ideas ...

... for the organisation of the lesson on the topic: Russia, Belarus, Poland and Germany. The beginning and end of WWII - Dates and events at a glance. Please find them below:

If teachers prefer working with the whole class, this exercise can also be organised as individual or pair work rather than group work:

- Each student or pair of students is given one card from 'set 1' and the corresponding card from 'set 2' and 'set 3'.
- The students will then be asked to take turns placing their cards on the appropriate places on the timeline in chronological order. They should read out loud what is written on the cards.
- The students are then given either a photo of an event or an excerpt of the memoirs written by witnesses of the war. They will be asked to describe the picture or summarize the story, to match it with the right event on the timeline, and to justify their decision.

Additional questions

Here is an additional list of questions which could be discussed with the students at the beginning or at the end of the lesson:

- How do you define the word 'war'?
- When does a war start?
- When does a war end?
- Which dates would you suggest are important for the Russians as a nation to mention in talking about the beginning and the end of WWII? Justify your answer.
- Which dates would you suggest are important for the Belarusians as a nation to mention in talking about the beginning and the end of WWII? Justify your answer.
- Which dates would you suggest are important for the Poles as a nation to mention in talking about the beginning and the end of WWII? Justify your answer.
- Which dates would you suggest are important for the Germans as a nation to mention in talking about the beginning and the end of WWII? Justify your answer.
- If you asked your great-grandmother or great-grandfather, what dates would they give for when the war started or ended for them as individuals?

