

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 will 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

Working with historical text sources / Cooperative work

The following exercise can be used as:

- a refresher
- consolidation
- a summary
- a supplement

Working with historical text sources

Documents as historical sources are traces from the past. They can be:

- newspaper articles or radio announcements
- diaries or memoirs of witnesses of the war
- speeches
- official papers or reports
- interviews
- photographs
- objects ...

Cooperative work

During the lesson, activities will take place in three phases:

Individual or Pair work **Expert**

A student or a pair of students work on a task on their own or together, and combine their pre-existing knowledge with new knowledge, thereby achieving expert status.

Small group work **Expert group**

The expert students come together in expert groups to work on one topic, to present their results, and to discuss possible questions.

Plenary

The expert groups present their results in the plenary, discussing their topic with the other expert groups and answering their questions.



Before the lesson

Texts containing general information on events from 1939, 1941 and 1945 are to be studied by every student in preparation for the lesson (as homework). About 700-800 words each text.

Note: Texts are written from the German point of view. Teachers in Poland, Belarus and Russia are advised to study the texts carefully, and if necessary to choose country-related texts

Worksheet 1, on which every student is to make notes on the ‘texts containing general information’

During the lesson

- 1 **A task** (with questions as a guideline), with instructions telling the students in the expert groups what to do
- 2 **Different kinds of historical documents**, to be studied by the students in each expert group (one group for 1939, one for 1941, one for 1945)
- 3 **'Worksheet 2'**—a guideline on how to read the historical documents and what to concentrate on



Your group is expert group 1 and will be studying historical text sources about “The beginning of World War II (WWII) on 1 September 1939”. You should:

- **Perform** an analysis of the text sources by using the guideline questions on worksheet 2 and the notes you have made on worksheet 1 (on the texts you’ve studied in preparation for this class);
- **Answer** the following questions by finding arguments and/or evidence from the texts:
 - How was this date perceived by the Polish in the historical documents?
 - How was this date perceived by the Germans in the historical documents?
 - Why do you think this date did not play a major role in the media or in the memoirs of the Belarusians and Russians (both parts of the former Soviet Union)?
- **Discuss** with the other two expert groups (22 June 1941, 9 May 1945) the following questions from the multicultural perspective of Germany as the perpetrator, and Poland, Belarus and Russia (the latter two were then part of the former Soviet Union) as countries that were invaded, occupied, and devastated:
 - Why is 1 September 1939 (the date that marks the beginning of WWII in Europe for some of these four countries) more or less important in their modern cultures of remembrance? Justify your answer.
 - How do you think this date is perceived in today’s culture of remembrance by the people: in Russia, in Belarus, in Poland, and in Germany?

Historical Documents

1 September 1939

Historical Documents

Poland

- Radio address on Polish radio on 1 September 1939 in Polish and in English (youtube)
- Article by Piotr Abryszenski on the 80th anniversary of the beginning of WWII: 1 September 1939: The beginning of hell

Germany

Excerpts from:

- The daily newspapers “Deutsches Nachrichtenbüro GmbH”, the official central press agency of the German Reich during the National Socialist era
- The “Teltower Kreisblatt”, the daily newspaper for the Teltow district, on 1 September 1939

Diaries or memoirs of witnesses of war

Poland

Three children’s memoirs from Poland: My wartime experiences (children’s writings from June 1946)

Germany

Werner Mork (born 1921) from Germany. Werner recalls the announcement of the beginning of the war on 1 September 1939, when he was 18 years old.



Your group is expert group 2 and you will study historical text sources about “The Attack by German troops on the Soviet Union on 22 June 1941” (Polish and German term: “The beginning of the German-Soviet War / Russian term: “The beginning of the Great Patriotic War”). You should:

- ➔ **Perform** an analysis of the text sources by using the guideline questions on worksheet 2 and the notes you have made on worksheet 1 (on the texts you’ve studied in preparation for this class);
- ➔ **Answer** the following questions by finding arguments and/or evidence from the texts:
 - How was this date perceived by the Belarusians and Russians (both parts of the former Soviet Union) in the historical documents?
 - How was this date perceived by the Germans in the historical documents?
 - Why do you think this date did not play a major role in the media and in the memoirs of the Polish?
- ➔ **Discuss** with the other two expert groups (1 September 1939, 9 May 1945) the following questions from the multicultural perspective of Germany as the perpetrator, Poland, Belarus and Russia (the latter two were then part of the former Soviet Union) as the countries that were invaded, occupied, and devastated:
 - Why is 22 June 1941 (the date that marks the beginning of the Great Patriotic War for some of these four countries) more or less important in their modern cultures of remembrance? Justify your answer.
 - How do you think this date is perceived by the people in today’s culture of remembrance: in Russia, in Belarus, in Poland and in Germany?

Historical Documents

22 June 1941

Historical Documents

Russia/Belarus (Soviet Union)

Speech by Molotov, the Foreign Minister of the Soviet Union, on the invasion of the Soviet Union by the National Socialists on 22 June 1941

Germany

Excerpts from the “Baruther Anzeiger”, a daily newspaper in the town of Baruth

Diaries or memoirs of witnesses of war

Russia (Soviet Union)

Excerpts from memoirs written by three children/adolescents from Leningrad, born between 1925 and 1929, who experienced the blockade of Leningrad

Belarus (Soviet Union)

Excerpts from memoirs recalling the attack on the Soviet Union by German troops on 22 June 1941, written by four Jewish children/adolescents born between 1925 and 1932 from Minsk, Gomel and Novy Svershen in Belarus

Germany

Excerpts from the 1941 diary of Günter Roos (born 1924 in Brühl), a 17-year old admirer of Adolf Hitler and a passionate Wehrmacht soldier, with some critical comments made by himself in 1989



Your group is expert group 3 and you will be studying historical text sources about “The end of World War II (WWII) on 9 May 1945”. You should:

- ➔ **Perform** an analysis of the text sources by using the guideline questions on worksheet 2 and the notes you have made on worksheet 1 (on the texts you’ve studied in preparation for this class);
- ➔ **Answer** the following questions by finding arguments and/or evidence from the texts:
 - How was the end of the war perceived by the Russians in the historical documents?
 - How was the end of the war perceived by the Belarusians in the historical documents?
 - How was the end of the war perceived by the Polish in the historical documents?
 - How was this date perceived by the Germans in the historical documents?
- ➔ **Discuss** with the other two expert groups (1 September 1939, 22 June 1941) the following questions from the multicultural perspective of Germany as the perpetrator, Poland, Belarus and Russia (the latter two were then part of the former Soviet Union) as the countries that were invaded, occupied, and devastated:
 - Why is 9 May 1945 more or less important in their modern cultures of remembrance? Justify your answer.
 - How do you think this date is perceived by the people in today’s culture of remembrance: in Russia, in Belarus, in Poland and in Germany?

Historical Documents

9 May 1945

Historical Documents

Russia/Belarus (Soviet Union)

- Radio announcement about the end of the war read out by the famous radio reporter Levitan
- Stalin’s speech and an article “Yesterday in Moscow”, from the newspaper “Pravda” for 10 May 1945

Poland

Excerpts from newspaper articles for 8 May 1945 in the “Dziennik Zachodni”, a daily newspaper in Katowice, and “Zycie Warszawy”, a Warsaw daily newspaper

Diaries or memoirs of witnesses of war

Belarus / Russia (Soviet Union)

Excerpts from memoirs recalling the end of war written by a soldier of the Red Army in Berlin, by a survivor of the Minsk ghetto (Belarus), and a child who survived the blockade of Leningrad

Germany

Excerpt from memoirs recalling the end of the war written by Hermann Lohmann (born 1925), who was 13 years old when the war started and never thought of going to war, but had to at the age of 17 in 1943



Worksheet 2

To be used by each student as a guideline for performing analysis of the text sources and for the subsequent discussion

Worksheet 2: Source Analysis

Title of the text source (provided there is one)

A | Description of the text source

⇒ **author / date of creation / occasion**

What do you learn about the **author**, his or her origin, age and position as well as his or her thinking (political orientation, values)? What do you learn about the time the source was created and the reason for its creation?

⇒ **source type / addressee**

What kind of **text source** is it? (e.g. memoir, letter or report, diary, newspaper article, chronicle, speech, etc.)
Who was the **addressee** of the text? Is the whole source available or just an excerpt?

The questions in this worksheet are as follows:

A Description of the text source

- author / date of creation / occasion
- source type / addressee
- topic / content / argumentation
- intention

B Placing the text source in its historical context

- historical context

C Evaluation of the text source

Keep in mind that we cannot judge the thoughts and actions of people who lived in the past by today's standards alone.

- the student's assessment of the text source
- the student's own attitude towards the source

D Which questions remain open?

What is new for you?

What have you not understood?



Material for teachers

- A map of Europe or the world, to indicate where countries, regions or places can be found geographically
- (possibly:) Historical maps dating from (1) 1938, (2) after 17 September 1939, and (3) after the end of WWII in 1945



- Blank cards in three different colours, to write on during the 'reflections' at the end of the lesson



Lesson plan

Before the lesson

Individual work

→ In preparation for the lesson, the students will study the texts with general information for 1 September 1939, 22 June 1941, and 9 May 1945, so that they understand the context. In order to have an overview of this background information with them in the lesson, they will fill in worksheet 1.

During the lesson

The class will be divided into 3 expert groups, one for each of the three dates (1 September 1939, 22 June 1941, 9 May 1945) and given the appropriate folder with the task, historical text sources, and worksheet 2.

Individual or Pair work: expert/s

Every student or pair of students in the expert group:

- **chooses** a historical text source covering the group's topic;
- **studies** the text, following the guideline questions on worksheet 2 and using the notes they themselves made on worksheet 1 (context) on the texts with general information that they studied in preparing for this class;
- **develops** arguments/viewpoints, following the questions outlined in the task.

Group work: expert group

Every student or pair of students in the expert group:

- presents their document to their fellow students in the expert group;
- presents arguments on the questions to be discussed, and;
- answers possible questions from his or her group members.

The expert group decides to what extent and how the documents are to be presented to the whole class.

Plenary with all expert groups

Each expert group

- gives the whole class an overall presentation of the historical text sources they have been studying;
- presents arguments on the questions to be discussed, and;
- answers questions from the other students.

Reflection (plenary)

Students are given a couple of minutes to think about the following three questions, to write one key word or phrase on one blank card (they can use more cards if they wish), pin the card(s) on the wall, and explain what they have written.

What made me think?	What surprised me?	What do I want to know more about?
...
...
...

