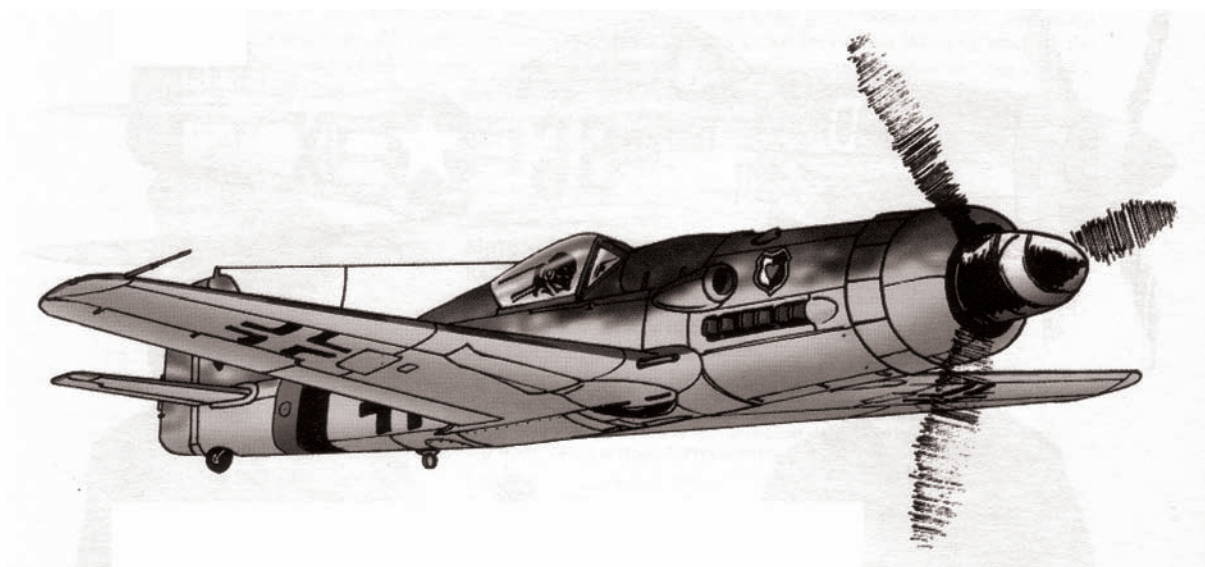


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IN THE BEGINNING

I spent my first 10 years of my life in Japan and can only remember the second half of that in detail, yet a strong connection with my country of birth is still with me, and whenever people start to compare Japan and the United States on any given subject, I look upon both points of view equally.

I knew very little about the period called the Second World War when I was growing up in Japan. My first real indication that this important period happened was when I was in first grade in the elementary school, Fussa's Dai-Ichi Shogakko. I was helping other students carry out school supplies from an abandoned classroom converted into a storeroom when I noticed a poster showing a long list of Japanese chronology just above the chalkboard. What caught my eye was a puzzling period during Showa years 16-20 (1941-1945) called the "Pacific War." My first impression was that this was a time when the Japanese, Australians and the Americans fought against the island nations of the Pacific Ocean. I actually let it go at that assumption until I reached second grade, when I read a particular episode of "Obake no Q-taro" ("Q-taro the Ghost") in the weekly Shorten (Boys') Sunday anthology manga (comic book). In that episode, the friendly ghost Q-taro was playing baseball with the rest of the kids when he fell into a hole in the catcher's mound. When he woke up, he later found out he was in a duplicate of a town that was built underground during the "war" to avoid getting hit by enemy bombers. I didn't know who this enemy was until I read the "Tetsujin 28-go" ("Ironman #28") series, created by Mitsuteru Yokoyama, in the monthly Shonen anthology manga that the same year.

It was from this series that I realized that the "Pacific War" was bigger than I'd suspected because Japan had fought against the mighty America. For those who aren't familiar with Tetsujin 28-go, it's a fictional story about Japan's attempt to build a giant armored robot to defend against attack from the United States based on a popular Japanese political cartoon from the latter part of the war showing a supergiant robot walking over and crushing New York. Although the 1950s version of Tetsujin 28-go started as a large, human-type robot (about 15 feet tall) looking like a Frankenstein monster, the updated version was closer to the war-time cartoon style, though much smaller (about 35 feet tall). In the early 1960s version, Tetsujin 28-go began its life as a secret weapon project conducted inside a large bunker hangar on a remote island.

This idea may have been influenced by a real Japanese secret bunker hangar that was unknown to the Allies during World War II and was discovered after the war, in December 1945, by a surprised US Marine Corps study team on an remote island called Chichi Jima, which had been a target of many American sorties (including one by a young Ensign George Bush, who nearly lost his life when his Avenger torpedo bomber was shot down, killing his two other crew, in September 1944) against its above-ground radar station, which could track the flight of the B-29 bombers heading for Japan. The true nature of its existence was never revealed, yet the underground bunker hangar, named the Kiyose vault, was huge, measuring 120 feet long and 16 feet wide, large enough for stolen treasures, an idea popularized by the discovery of secret Nazi loot just a few months earlier, or an assembly area

for a military secret weapon, as many Japanese hoped to believe. Such secret projects, in addition to the existence of the previously unknown giant battleships Yamato and Musashi only known as the Superbattleship Number 1 and 2 to a limited number of military personnel, not to mention the virtually unknown supercarrier Shinano, were enough to fuel the imagination of the postwar Japanese population.

Gojira, released in 1954, contained a hidden message against the American bombings of the war. It was obvious to the veterans, but when I saw it much later in the theaters, I was more fascinated by the details of the sets than the monster in a rubber suit. Of course, after it was revised and reintroduced in the United States as Godzilla in 1955 with the addition of Raymond Burr, much of the anti-war message was lost in the succeeding series of films. I was far more interested in the mechanical aspects of the story than the political message. The first real science fiction series that I was interested in was Tetsuwan (Mighty) Atom, better known as Astroboy in the United States, created by Osamu Tezuka. This was my first conversion.

Tetsuwan was cute enough for a youngster like me to enjoy without the fear of getting scared, and the best part of the series was the clever storyline. You really got to know the characters, especially the supporting ones like Ochanomizu Hakase and Higeoyaji. This was when I was introduced to the wonder of "phony tech," technological drawings that looked good enough to be convincing but were realistically impossible. While both my younger sister and I enjoyed the Tetsuwan Atom series for years, I was beginning to grow out of it and started to look for something little more serious. I didn't have to wait too long because, in the same Shonen anthology series was aforementioned giant robot series "Tetsujin 28-go," better known to Americans as Gigantor.

This brainless giant robot, controlled by a kid, filled the average boy's fantasy of having a big brother and/or guardian to protect him. Since I myself never felt threatened during my childhood days, I saw Tetsujin 28-go as a mechanical fantasy, just like Atom. Mechanics that were involved in science-fiction interested me greatly, especially where internal and/or exploded views were profiled. The main difference was Tetsujin was based in the past (World War II history) and the present, while Atom was in the future. Ironically, in the Gigantor version, the year is supposed to be 2000, while Tezuka's Atom was born on April 7, 2003.

Eight Man (Tobor the Eighth Man), Atom, Tetsujin, Submarine 707 and Super letter all provided me the will to draw my own mechanical designs. The only main drawback was that back then, when I was just 8-10 years old, I couldn't figure out exactly how Tetter's timewatch and Ryusei-go (Meteor) timecar worked.

My last mechanical task in Japan was when* my schoolmates and I were designing a five-foot-tall walking robot for our 4th-grade school project and I was the design leader. It was made of wood, rope and actual mechanical gears that I adapted from a walking Tetsujin toy by up-scaling them. When I was told that my family was moving to the United States, I thought it was temporary. So when I left, I also left my project by turning the responsibility over to my teammates. I thought that I would return in a week or two, but it turned out to be permanent. I never did find out if my teammates finished the project or not.

A year before our family's departure, a curious subject came to my attention: Germans. Called Doitsu-jin (Deutsch people) by the Japanese, to me they were no different from Igrisu-jin (English), Furansu-jin (French) or Roshia-jin (Russians). But when Tezuka created the V-3 series to counter the popular Tetsujin, I thought that since they built their own giant robot around the same time, they must be like us. This notion was reinforced when my cousin took me to a movie in 1965 (which became known as *Frankenstein Conquered the World* in 1966) in which Germans and Japanese share information by submarine. This movie also gave me the first clue that a massive explosion had occurred in Hiroshima. Little did I know that this subject of Germans, and Nazis in particular, would become a big deal in my lessons in history.

In my new life in the United States, I maintained my interest in Japanese manga, but it gradually changed, because at the height of the Vietnam War, there were far more war comics than science fiction ones. Some of the best artists were working on the subject at the time, and the one that really caught my eye was Russ Heath. His works became my second conversion.

Heath, who did most of his work in DC Comics' Sgt. Rock and G.I. Combat series, had mechanical detail, along with his human drawings, that looked far superior to those of any Japanese comics I'd seen. I was converted, and after that, my main drawing subject became the World War II era. Japanese manga became a secondary influence until 1973, when Kodansha introduced the "Ai to Makoto" (Ai and Makoto) series by Takumi Nagayasu in their Shonen Magazine weekly anthology manga. That became my third conversion.

Nagayasu's style was nearly as detailed as Heath's, but with more emotional scenes set in a high school drama that fit this teenager's imagination perfectly. Although my high school experiences were far milder than this fictional story, the characters were still a strong part of it, and as a whole, it became a prototype for my own style of drawing. My attention to female characters evolved from my girlfriends, and my mechanical interests were spawned again after I got my first motorcycle. Joining the USAF after that completed the circle. With new fighters being tested at my first base assignment at Edwards AFB, the subject of World War II almost took a back seat—that is until the subject, or more accurately, censorship of the swastika came up.

Originally, my main interest in World War II was the American warplanes. Compared to the dull-colored planes from other major nations, the Americans made theirs works of art. They were bright, colorful, and often decorated with pin-up art of jmlf-naked ladies. Even the B-29s, the very bombers that killed hundreds of thousands of Japanese, looked almost beautiful in the air, so much so that even the Japanese fighter pilots had respect for them. I started to buy mostly plastic models of the late-war American warplanes, but occasionally bought "enemy" ones to balance the play battle scenes, especially after I started to watch the Twelve O'Clock High TV series.

The first plastic model of a German fighter I got was 1/48th-scale Monogram's Me-109 kit, which was based on the Bf-109E-3. I liked the toy-like foldable landing gear, but there were markings for just one aircraft (with a flight leader's single chevron) and no swastika! Since all the photos, TV shows and even comics

depicting the Bf-109 showed the swastika, I thought this was a rare mistake. I ended up drawing the swastika by hand, but I was never satisfied with it. The Japanese Zero kit from the same company had incorrect, Army-type fin markings also, so I thought this was a common thing. After all, the models were still toy-like. Then I got their excellent Fw-190 kit. I was so amazed by their range of choices for weapon systems and markings that despite it not featuring the folding gear, I was very satisfied with its quality. And it featured an accurate-sized swastika! I took Monogram's kits more seriously and abandoned the less accurate Aurora and Lindbergh kits of the same scale. The quality of Monogram kits continued with their excellent Me-262 and Do-335 kits.

But size-wise, I still liked Revell's big 1/28th (actually closer to 1/27th) World War I and 1/32nd-scale World War II warplane kits. The level of accuracy was not as good as Monogram's later kits, but at least their Me-109F and Me-109G kits had the swastika. Then came the big disappointment. The new Ju-87B Stuka kit had great-looking cover art, but no swastika! The kit cost \$3 back then, and since I didn't want to go through the hassle of drawing swastikas again, I dropped the kit from my list of buys. The same went for their Fw-190D kit. Then in mid-1970s, the Monogram Fw-190 kits had their swastikas removed! That was the final straw. I stopped buying Monogram and Revell kits and switched my choices to the slightly more expensive Japanese-made brands. At least they had the swastika, even though some of their kits were 1/50th rather than 1/48th as the labels claimed. During the 1980s, when the MFC brand (England's Airfix molds repacked in the USA) included the swastika on their German kits, they also include careful idiot-labeling indicating that this was for historical accuracy and not in support of its ideology. I bought many of their kits, but unfortunately their production didn't last long enough. By then, swastika decals had become more affordable and I was able to switch back to my favorite Monogram brand, but then they quit making German kits!

Being educated in America and thus thinking that we're a free-press society, I found the obvious censorship of history highly insulting to my intelligence. Thus at the beginning of the early 1970s, I made a more careful study of Nazi Germany and found out that their atrocities were not much worse than what other major countries had done to their people and their neighbors throughout the centuries of warfare. Focusing on only a selected few seemed not only unfair but inaccurate. Telling only half-truths was just as bad as telling half-lies. Hatred among people for others seems to depend on where you came from. Fortunately, I was not taught to hate anybody, and since you can't hate people that you've never met, I couldn't hate the bomber pilots who killed a lot of people. It wouldn't have made a difference if I had. Unless they've committed crimes personally, you can't blame others just by association. Unfortunately for many others, many innocent people have died throughout the centuries just because somebody told them that they should hate others. Stupidity is not a crime, but it should be. If God created humans, then he must've made us stupid for a reason, because hate is grown, not born.

For this reason, I started to create stories based on fact and not ideology. Since most of the famous works in books and Hollywood have fictional characters corrupting the accuracy of history,

I decided to create a fictional history with fictional characters. The genesis of Luftwaffe: 1946 was born. The year was 1969.

It was in this year that I finally got to see two excellent movies, 2001: A Space Odyssey and Planet of the Apes. 2001 gave a glimpse of one possible future, though I was more fascinated by the concept of the "Monkey Planet." That movie made me wonder if some intelligent beings had lived before there were humans. The concept forced me to rethink our established history, and after only a little reading, I discovered that Earth is full of myths and misconceptions. The stories started to grow in many fragments. Then in 1981, it was decided to combine them all into what became part of the "Families of Altered Wars" concept, and first of the series, titled Tigers of Terra, was introduced in 1986.

The rest, as they say, is history—my history that is.

Ted Nomura



INTRODUCTION

Luftwaffe 1946 is part of Ted Nomura's arcine story of another universe; *Families of Altered Wars*. Ted is a Japanese-American who grew up with an avid interest in comic books, motorcycles, airplanes, and girls. He enlisted in the US Air Force and served in both the regulars and the active reserve. His Air Force exposure to hot aircraft only fueled his desire to create and publish a fantastic alternate universe in graphic form.

Families of Alternate Wars tells the story of our world, diverging from our familiar history with the mysterious Tunguska incident that occurred in 1908. In Ted Nomura's alternate history, this incident was caused by the destruction of an alien spacecraft. The repercussions of that destruction have had a domino effect down through the twentieth century and continue into the twenty-first, as the courses of lives and the historical impact of those lives change history irrevocably.

Ted Nomura tells his story through the history of several important pivotal families. His graphic novels touch again and again on these families down through the years, showing how they react and impact to the historical events of this and the next century.

Ted's love of airplanes led him to use them as the signposts of his alternate universe. *Luftwaffe 1946* and *Tigers of Terra* enabled him to showcase the most unusual and the most significant aircraft ever conceived- even those planes that only existed on paper or as wooden mockups. In the *Families of Altered Wars* universe they live anew and you get to see the Horton flying wings, the jet-powered Shinden, and the mach three F-108 Rapier.

Ted also loves to draw the female form. In his *Families of Altered Wars* world, men and women are equal in the skies over the battlefields, and in the future of *Tigers of Terra*, after a devastating biological attack, it is the women who take on the primary responsibility for fighting in the conflict for the planet Terra on the far side of the Sun. While his stories have many important male protagonists, it is the women, such as Reina Siddely and Dora Oberlicht, which are the primary focus. In the *Luftwaffe 1946* stories, it is the Angels of the Luftwaffe, the Screaming Angels, and the Nightwitches, that provide the tense drama (and relieving comedy) for Ted's universe.

It is this mix of airplanes, women, and combat that are the hallmark of Ted Nomura's sweeping epic. I hope that we have conveyed some of that with this first book of role playing rules based on the *Families of Altered Wars*.

WHAT'S A ROLE-PLAYING GAME?

Many people think they don't know what a role-playing game is. We have all taken part in interactive storytelling in one way or another. As children we role-played "Cops and Robbers" and "Cowboys and Indians" along with other make-believe games. Sometimes a dispute would arise as to who could do what. As children, many of these issues worked themselves out. Adults are often exposed to role-playing in improvisational theater, corporate and technical training classes, counseling sessions and so on. In fact, most law enforcement academies use role-playing to evaluate the performance of recruits as part of their "final exams," before they are allowed to graduate.

Simply put, a role-playing game (RPG) is a form of interactive storytelling with rules. The rules guide play, gauge the performance of our fictional characters, and provide a sense of "fairness."

During a game session, all of the players act, or "play," the roles of characters in the story. These roles are called Player Characters (or PCs for short). One player acts as a moderator or "referee" and is called the Game Master (or GM for short). The GM generally prepares the basic elements of the story ahead of time, describes the scenes and events of the story as they unfold, and tells the other players the results of their characters' actions.

In *LUFTWAFFE 1946 ROLE PLAYING GAME*, dice are used to generate random numbers to resolve certain events, such as whether a character can successfully navigate a car through an obstacle course or jump over a rolling barrel without falling.

The following section gives an overview of the rules. If you're new to role-playing, you should read through this section first.

WHAT DO I NEED TO PLAY?

The only things you need to play *LUFTWAFFE 1946 ROLE PLAYING GAME* are this book and three six-sided dice.

This Book

The rules of the game are found throughout this book. They describe everything from creating your character through how to resolve combat to the effects of falling. All of the essential tools you need to play a role-playing game are here. You should read through the rules to become familiar with them and knowledgeable about how to play, especially if you are going to be the GM.

You can always refer to the book during the game if you have a question.

Dice

You'll need at least three regular six-sided dice to play the game. It's best if all of the players have their own set of three dice. Only one person will need to roll dice at a time, however, so if you don't have enough for everyone you can just use one set and share them.

THE BASICS

In this section we present a quick overview of the most basic rules of the game.

Dice

The game rules use three six-sided dice. It's traditional to abbreviate "three six-sided dice" by writing "3d6." In this custom, the first number is the number of dice being used (in this case 3) and the second number represents the type of dice being used (specifically, number of sides they possess), so "d6" means "six-sided dice."

Six-sided dice are the common, square-shaped dice that can be found in many board games. They can also be purchased in many general department stores, but chances are you have at least three of these dice somewhere in your house, in other games.

There are options to use other numbers and kinds of dice, which are discussed later and in other optional rules. For now all you need to play the game are 3d6—three six-sided dice.

The GM

One member of the group assumes the role of moderator and controls the Non-Player Characters (“NPCs” for short). This player is known as the Game Master, or GM.

In situations when the rules are unclear or need to be applied in a new or unique way, the GM uses his or her best judgment. The GM also constructs the basics of the game. Basics include the setting, theme, NPCs and some goals for the players’ group, normally called a Party, but also referred to as a Team, Troupe, Group, or Cabal. We’ll talk more about what makes a good Game Master later in this book.

Players and Characters

Each player has a fictional character, called a Player Character (or “PC”), a made-up person that the player will use during the game. The player chooses what his character does and says during the game.

Players are in no way assumed to actually *be* their characters. Players are real people. Characters are pretend. Think of the player as an actor, and the PC as a role that the actor is playing in a movie or play, and you’ll begin to get the idea.

Attributes & Skills

Each character has attributes and skills that represent the character’s personal ability or aptitude in various areas or for performing certain tasks.

Each attribute and skill has a numerical score. This score tells you how strong or proficient the character is in that area. Most characters will have scores from 1 to 10, which represents the normal human range of ability.

Attributes

There are six attributes, which are arranged in two groups: Body and Mind.

Each group contains a Power Attribute, an Aptitude Attribute and a Resistance Attribute.

New attribute groups can be added, providing more variety and additional attributes for characters, but the core rules use only these two.

Skills

Each character also has skills, which represent the character’s general ability or aptitude in various tasks. There are skills for arts and crafts, using weapons, and even diplomacy. Skills reflect how good your character is at what he knows.

Skills are also arranged into groups. Each group contains from 5 to 8 related skills.

Each skill is associated with a specific Attribute Group. Persuasion, for example, is associated with the Mind Group, whereas the Swords skill is associated with the Body Group.

When a character attempts a simple task, such as walking or opening an unlocked door, the player doesn’t need to roll dice.

When a character attempts an action that has a chance of failure, however, such as attacking an opponent or maneuvering a car through an obstacle course, the player must make a skill roll.

Skill Checks

Skill rolls are used to determine if a character is successful at some attempted action or task.

Players decide if they want their character to perform an action. An action can be as simple as walking through a door, which would not require a skill roll. Sometimes there is a level of skill involved in performing the action, however, so the player may need to make a skill roll for his character. The GM decides whether or not an action requires a skill roll.

Attribute + Skill

If the GM determines that a player’s chosen action requires a skill roll, the GM determines which Skill and which Attribute (from the Attribute Group associated with the skill) apply to the task.

If a character attempts to shoot an opponent with a revolver, the player must make a Pistols skill roll. Because the Pistols skill is associated with the Body Group, the GM must choose Strength, Reflexes, or Health as the attribute that the player uses with the Pistols skill. The logical choice is Reflexes, the Aptitude Attribute for the Body Group.

Difficulty Levels and Target Numbers

The GM then determines the Difficulty Level (or “DL”) of the action being attempted. Each Difficulty Level has an associated Target Number (abbreviated as “TN”; see the *Difficulty and Target Number Chart*). The more difficult the action being attempted is, the greater the Difficulty Level and the higher the Target Number.

The Target Number is the number that the player must meet or beat when making a dice roll in order for the task to be successful. A Target Number of 18 would be shown as “(TN 18).”

Making the Roll

To make a skill roll, a player rolls 3d6 and adds his character’s attribute and skill scores to the number rolled on the dice. If this new total is equal to or more than the Target Number, the attempted action is successful. If the total is lower than the Target Number, the attempt fails.

Attribute Checks

Attribute rolls are made much the same as skill rolls, with the GM determining a Difficulty Level and assigning a Target Number. The difference is that instead of adding an attribute score to a skill score, the player simply rolls against the character’s attribute score without any modifiers.

John’s character has a Reflexes score of 8. The GM tells John to make an Difficult attribute roll (TN 21) using his character’s Reflexes. He then rolls 3d6, and gets 13. Because 13 plus 8 equals 21, John’s character’s attribute roll is successful.

Damage

If a character suffers injury, such as from being hit by a weapon or falling into a pit, the injury is represented by *damage points*. Damage points are subtracted from the character's Life Points. When a character's Life Points are reduced to 0, the character is dying.

Attributes are scores that reflect the character's basic physical and mental abilities. In short, the core attributes define the character's "body and mind."



CHAPTER ONE: THE WORLD AT WAR

At first glance, history appears to be set in stone, and events happen because they are meant to...ordained to occur on an arbitrary date on a calendar by a supreme plan. This is entirely an illusion, and sometimes, like rolling dice, the fortunes of individual people--and even the destinies of nations and planets--make unexpected turns and run in unforeseen directions.

Such was the epic conflict of the Second World War.

The central character of this tragedy of nations was Germany. Defeated and destitute at the end of the "War to End All War", Germany plunged into chaos in the 1920s. The country's savior--and curse--emerged from this maelstrom, the National Socialist Party, better known as the Nazis, led by the Austrian-born German Adolf Hitler. Hitler, a soldier in the German Army, was assigned to infiltrate and report on the Nazis just after the end of the First World War. Instead of spying on them, he usurped the Party leaders, and transformed the Party from a mob of lunatic fringe misfits into a disciplined militant force. Hitler led an uprising to overthrow the German government in Munich in November of 1923--and failed.

Imprisoned briefly for his crimes, Hitler found a new vision for the Nazis and for Germany, and codified this vision into the book *Mein*

Kampf. With the profits of the book's sales and the millions of new Nazi converts he transformed the Nazis again, making them a mainstream political force in Germany. As the Great Depression came and many ordinary Germans suffered from hardship, Hitler maneuvered the Nazi Party into becoming the perceived remedy for the nation's economic and political ills. By 1932, the Nazi Party has risen to the heights of supremacy, and Hitler was elected the chancellor of Germany, under the president Paul von Hindenburg. With the death of Hindenburg the following year, Hitler took the title of *Fuhrer*--becoming the supreme leader of the Germans.

As he transformed the Nazi Party, Hitler would transform the German people. He oversaw a massive military buildup and achieved a series of bloodless conquests of Germany's immediate neighbors. By the middle of 1939, Adolf Hitler had unified the entire German-speaking world under his swastika banner. The Nazis brought about a total restructuring of German society: all other social organizations were either banned and forcibly dismantled or co-opted by subsidiaries of the Nazi Party. The Nazis ran the legal courts, the schools, the medical system, and the civil service--and

replaced the local police forces with the SS (a cabal that originally was merely the bodyguard force protecting the Nazi elite). One result was that the Nazi's anti-Jewish doctrine became law, and the Jewish minorities in Europe were stripped of their citizenship and property...and at first deported to other countries...until the extermination camps for the "Final Solution" were established after the start of the War.

The rebirth of the German military machine was a particular triumph for Hitler, which he brought about in spite of the Versailles Treaty, which forced many limits on what Germany could do with its Army and Navy. At first, the German generals and admirals found loopholes in the Treaty and exploited them. They embraced new technologies, especially in regards to tanks, submarines and air power. New machines meant new warfare doctrine, which they tested initially in military training exercises...and tested again under fire in a war that served the Germans as a combat laboratory--the Spanish Civil War of the later 1930s. When Hitler finally renounced the Versailles Treaty in 1935, the German war machine was rapidly becoming the best in the world.

Hitler's ambitions were of global scope, and he needed partners. He found them in dictatorial regimes like his own. His first and most important ally was Italy, led

since the early 1920s by the Fascists under Benito Mussolini--Il Duce. The Italians received much of the territory ceded to the Allies from the Turks at the end of World War One, mainly in Africa and the Middle East. Italy accomplished an arms buildup of its own, with the excuse of policing its own empire. Together, the Germans and the Italians helped the "Nationalist" cause to victory in Spain. Like Germany, Italy won new lands in the Thirties by unprovoked invasions, namely Ethiopia and Albania--the latter with German diplomatic assistance. By the middle of 1939, the two nations formalized their relationship as the Pact of Steel--the Axis.

Germany's second ally was Japan, which had been conquering portions of the Asian mainland since the early Thirties. By 1937, while the Spanish Civil War kept the European nations occupied, Japan's war with the Chinese Republic escalated to full intensity. The Western powers were content to play both sides of the Sino-Japanese War against each other, often selling arms to both nations (in particular, the United States). As well, there was a border conflict with the Soviet Union in Outer Mongolia that led to a brief undeclared war. Finally, Japan was undermining the



disarmament treaties the other nations in the world had imposed on one another, to the benefit of her navy. With her own territorial ambitions in conflict with Great Britain, France, the Netherlands and the United States--and in harmony with the Axis plans--Japan was a ready ally.

The democracies of the West were at first too much involved with internal problems to pay attention to the exploits of the Axis dictators. The Great Depression meant that politicians were forced to deal with domestic economics and social programs before the rebuilding of armies and navies. When press of the carnage and horror in Spain and China appeared in the West, the shock brought about a call for rearmament--which was slow to find momentum.

The next point of conflict was Poland. Relations between the Poles and the Germans were turning sour fast, after the German annexation of Czechoslovakia. The Poles had a mutual defense pact with Great Britain and France--but Hitler's main obstacle was Russia. Even though the Nazis and the Bolsheviks were enemies in the contest for the German people, the current regime in the Soviet Union, led by Josef Stalin, had enough common ground with Hitler's that a diplomatic solution was possible. After months of high-level talks between Hitler and Stalin, Germany and the Soviet Union signed a non-aggression pact. Within days, a crisis on the German-Polish border broke--giving the Germans an excuse to invade Poland. Within 48 hours, the French and British declared war on Germany.

Poland was defeated in less than a month--divided between the Germans and the Russians. The speed and horror of the German side of the conquest brought a new word to the language: Blitzkrieg. But the greater war was mostly limited to sea battles between the German and British navies...and leaflet raids by the Royal Air Force on Germany. There was a bizarre dichotomy of events in Europe as 1939 closed; war in Poland--and later Finland, as the Soviets invaded there in a bid to consolidate their hold on the Baltic Sea; uneasy peace on the Western Front, as Britain and France braced for German action. The West tried to intervene in Finland, with the French and British raising expeditionary forces...but Sweden drew a line of death in the sea, threatening to join the Russians against the Finns if the West tried to send their forces through Swedish waters. The Russian invasion faltered for a while under tough Finnish resistance, but finally broke through in the early spring of 1940 and forced the Finns to surrender.

There were other sideshows to the war. In the Near East, the Turks and French Syria (which had been taken from Turkey as part of the partitioning of the fallen Ottoman Empire after the First World War) struggled over the hinterland of Hatay, claimed by both sides. When war was declared in Europe, the Turks took the opportunity to side with the Axis against the West. With material aid from Germany and Italy, the Turks drove through both Syria and British-held Iraq in their own blitzkrieg. The Turks made a new military alliance with the Shah of Iran, who was also in the Fascist camp.

The next high tide of the war came in spring of 1940. The German armed forces invaded Norway, the Low Countries and France, repeating the rapid success of the Polish campaign over Western Europe. By the end of June, the French were done with the war--and events would drive a wedge through what remained of the Anglo-French Alliance. Just when it looked like there would be a showdown between the German Luftwaffe and the British Royal Air Force over England, the unthinkable happened--a cease-fire was announced in August and hostilities between Britain and the Axis tapered off. Once again, there was an uneasy peace in Europe, which the British took advantage of by rearming and by strengthening their political relations with America. The Germans seized the French fleet for its own--converting some of the capital ships into aircraft carriers to challenge the Royal Navy's air superiority.

With France and Holland conquered, the Axis could cede the vanquished nations' Eastern Asia colonies to Japan, who immediately took over French Indochina and now had its eyes on Dutch Indonesia and Malaysia. Before the war, the French were in another dispute--this time with the Kingdom of Siam. With the French removed from the table, the Siamese welcomed the Japanese as neighbors and allies.

The peace in Europe would break again--this time in the Balkans. Just as the British and the Germans were taking a breather from the chaos of the French campaign, the Italians invaded Greece from Albania--and were beaten. The Greeks even had the audacity to counter-invade into Albania and by the start of 1941 had seized a 30-mile thick area off the southern side of Albania. This left the Axis no choice but to plot new vengeance with the new year.

The Germans used the time of the Axis/Britain truce to move troops and materiel east, to the Axis satellite nations of Hungary, Rumania and Bulgaria. In April, they invaded Yugoslavia and Greece (the latter brokered a new defense treaty with Britain, who supplied an expeditionary force mainly made up of colonials from Australia and New Zealand) and conquered them both in about a month. (The excuse for the Yugoslavian conquest was a military coup by the Yugoslav army against its kingdom.)

With the truce now broken, the British retaliated in Northern Africa in the Libyan deserts and the Ethiopian mountains--and on the high seas of the Med and the Atlantic. The British also attempted an invasion of Iran--and failed, because of new German weapons in the hands of the Persians.

In May, the epic clash of the German flotilla led by the superbattleship Bismark against the cream of the British Home Fleet off the coasts of Ireland and France. As well, the German U-Boat war against British merchant shipping shifted into high gear--causing the United States to take a more active role in partnership with the British.