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Level: LMD3

Module: Anglo-Saxon Civilization

Course Number: 6

Title: The United States during WWII

1.Introduction

World War II was the biggest and deadliest war in history, involving more than 30 countries. Sparked by the 1939 Nazi invasion of Poland, the war dragged on for six bloody years until the Allies defeated Nazi Germany and Japan in 1945.

2.Causes of WWII

The instability created in Europe by the First World War (1914-18) set the stage for another international conflict—World War II—which broke out two decades later and would prove even more devastating. Rising to power in an economically and politically unstable Germany, Adolf Hitler and his National Socialist (Nazi Party) rearmed the nation and signed strategic treaties with Italy and Japan to further his ambitions of world domination.

Hitler's invasion of Poland in September 1939 drove Great Britain and France to declare war on Germany, and World War II had begun. Over the next six years, the conflict would take more lives and destroy more land and property around the globe than any previous war. Among the

estimated 45-60 million people killed were 6 million Jews murdered in Nazi concentration camps as part of Hitler's diabolical "Final Solution," now known as the Holocaust.

3. Outbreak of World War II (1939)

In late August 1939, Hitler and Soviet leader Joseph Stalin signed the German-Soviet Nonaggression Pact, which incited a frenzy of worry in London and Paris. Hitler had long planned an invasion of Poland, a nation to which Great Britain and France had guaranteed military support if it was attacked by Germany. The pact with Stalin meant that Hitler would not face a war on two fronts once he invaded Poland, and would have Soviet assistance in conquering and dividing the nation itself. On September 1, 1939, Hitler invaded Poland from the west; two days later, France and Britain declared war on Germany, beginning World War II.

4. USA Getting Involved in WWII

After the December 7, 1941, Japanese attack on the American naval fleet at Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, the U.S. was thrust into World War II (1939-45), and everyday life across the country was dramatically altered. Food, gas and clothing were rationed. Communities conducted scrap metal drives. To help build the armaments necessary to win the war, women found employment as electricians, welders and riveters in defense plants. Japanese Americans had their rights as citizens stripped from them. People in the U.S. grew increasingly dependent on radio reports for news of the fighting overseas. And, while popular entertainment served to demonize the nation's enemies, it also was viewed as an escapist outlet that allowed Americans brief respites from war worries.

During World War II, as an alternative to rationing, Americans planted "victory gardens," in which they grew their own food. By 1945, some 20 million

such gardens were in use and accounted for about 40 percent of all vegetables consumed in the U.S.

In the earliest days of America's participation in the war, panic gripped the country. If the Japanese military could successfully attack Hawaii and inflict damage on the naval fleet and casualties among innocent civilians, many people wondered what was to prevent a similar assault on the U.S. mainland, particularly along the Pacific coast. This fear of attack translated into a ready acceptance by a majority of Americans of the need to sacrifice in order to achieve victory.

During the spring of 1942, a rationing program was established that set limits on the amount of gas, food and clothing consumers could purchase. Families were issued ration stamps that were used to buy their allotment of everything from meat, sugar, fat, butter, vegetables and fruit to gas, tires, clothing and fuel oil. The United States Office of War Information released posters in which Americans were urged to "Do with less—so they'll have enough" ("they" referred to U.S. troops). Meanwhile, individuals and communities conducted drives for the collection of scrap metal, aluminum cans and rubber, all of which were recycled and used to produce armaments. Individuals purchased U.S. war bonds to help pay for the high cost of armed conflict.

From the outset of the war, it was clear that enormous quantities of airplanes, tanks, warships, rifles and other armaments would be essential to beating America's aggressors. U.S. workers played a vital role in the production of such war-related materials. Many of these workers were women. Indeed, with tens of thousands of American men joining the armed forces and heading into training and into battle, women began securing jobs as welders, electricians and

riveters in defense plants. Until that time, such positions had been strictly for men only.

A woman who toiled in the defense industry came to be known as a “Rosie the Riveter.” The term was popularized in a song of the same name that in 1942 became a hit for bandleader Kay Kyser (1905-85). Soon afterward, Walter Pidgeon (1897-1984), a Hollywood leading man, traveled to the Willow Run aircraft plant in Ypsilanti, Michigan, to make a promotional film encouraging the sale of war bonds. One of the women employed at the factory, Rose Will Monroe (1920-97), was a riveter involved in the construction of B-24 and B-29 bombers. Monroe, a real-life Rosie the Riveter, was recruited to appear in Pidgeon’s film. During the war years, the decrease in the availability of men in the work force also led to an upsurge in the number of women holding non-war-related factory jobs. By the mid-1940s, the percentage of women in the American work force had expanded from 25 percent to 36 percent.

5. Social Consequences of the War

Despite the vast number of men and women in uniform, civilian employment rose from 46,000,000 in 1940 to more than 53,000,000 in 1945. The pool of unemployed men dried up in 1943, and further employment increases consisted of women, minorities, and over- or underage males. These were not enough to meet all needs, and by the end of the year a manpower shortage had developed.

One result of this shortage was that blacks made significant social and economic progress. Although the armed forces continued to practice segregation, as did Red Cross blood banks, Roosevelt, under pressure from blacks, who were outraged by the refusal of defense industries to integrate their labour forces, signed Executive Order 8802 on June 25, 1941. It prohibited

racial discrimination in job training programs and by defense contractors and established a Fair Employment Practices Committee to insure compliance.

By the end of 1944 nearly 2,000,000 blacks were at work in defense industries. As black contributions to the military and industry increased, so did their demands for equality. This sometimes led to racial hostilities, as on June 20, 1943, when mobs of whites invaded the black section of Detroit. Nevertheless, the gains offset the losses. Lynching virtually died out, several states outlawed discriminatory voting practices, and others adopted fair employment laws. Full employment also resulted in raised income levels, which, through a mixture of price and wage controls, were kept ahead of inflation. Despite both this increase in income and a no-strike pledge given by trade union leaders after Pearl Harbor, there were numerous labour actions.