

# CHAPTER THIRTEEN

## WAR AND DEFEAT



The face of defeat. A German officer amid the ruins of Berlin, 1945

### Timeline

1939	September	1	Germany invaded Poland.
	September	3	Great Britain and France declared war on Germany.
1940	April		Germany invaded Norway and Denmark.
	May		Germany invaded Holland, Belgium, Luxembourg and France.
	June		German troops entered Paris. France surrendered.
	July		The Battle of Britain began.
	September		Italy began its policy of aggression in North Africa.
	September		German bombers attacked London. The start of the Blitz.
1941	February		General Erwin Rommel and the <i>Afrika Korps</i> arrived in North Africa.
	April		Germany invaded Greece and Yugoslavia.
	June		Operation Barbarossa. Germany began the invasion of the Soviet Union.
	December		German troops were forced back before Moscow.

	December	7	Japan attacked the United States naval base at Pearl Harbor.
	December	11	Germany declared war on the United States.
1942	February		Albert Speer was appointed Minister for Armaments and Munitions.
	April		The German offensive was resumed in Russia with a push south to the Caucasus.
	May		The first RAF 'Thousand Bomber Raid' on Cologne.
	September		The Battle for Stalingrad began.
	October		The Battle of El Alamein.
	November		United States troops landed in North Africa.
1943	January		The first American bombing raids began over Germany.
	January		The German Sixth Army surrendered at Stalingrad.
	February		Goebbels called on the Germans to wage 'total war'.
	July		The Allies began their invasion of Sicily. Mussolini was overthrown in Italy.
1944	January		Soviet troops entered Poland.
	June	6	The Allied landing at Normandy in northern France (D-Day).
	August		Paris was liberated.
1945	January		Hitler returned to Berlin to make his last stand.
	February		The German city of Dresden was destroyed in a massive air raid.
	March		The Allied armies began to cross the Rhine River.
	April	12	The death of President Franklin Roosevelt.
	April	16	Soviet troops began the offensive to take Berlin.
	April	28	Mussolini was executed.
	April	30	Soviet troops took the ruins of the German Reichstag building.
	April	30	Adolf Hitler and Eva Braun committed suicide.
	May	1	Joseph Goebbels and his wife committed suicide after killing their six children.
	May	8	The war in Europe came to an end.

### Key words and terms

**blitzkrieg** Lightning war. Military tactics that emphasised mobility and the concentrated use of armour and air power to defeat the enemy. The tactic of blitzkrieg was used with great success in 1939–1940 during the attacks on Poland and on the Western Front.

**Blitz** The bombing of cities in Britain by Germany during the Second World War.

**bunker** A heavily protected shelter deep beneath the gardens of Hitler's Reich Chancellery in Berlin. It was here that Hitler lived from January 1945 and directed the last phase of the war. He committed suicide in the bunker on 30 April 1945.

**scorched-earth policy** A policy of deliberate destruction of material, industry and property in order to leave nothing for the advancing enemy.

by one of slow and unavoidable defeat. It was this total defeat in war which finally ended the Third Reich.

In 1939 the Poles were in no position to withstand the massive **blitzkrieg** attack of the German army and in five weeks Poland fell and the nation was partitioned between Germany and the Soviet Union. Hitler had achieved a swift and stunning victory. Although the British and the French declared war in the name of Poland, they failed to provide any military assistance. There was no major military action in western Europe in the winter of 1939–40, and this period came to be called the Phoney War. Britain and France were not prepared to negotiate an end to the conflict, nor were they prepared to launch an offensive.

In April 1940 Germany launched its long-awaited attack in the west with a surprise invasion of Norway and Denmark followed by an attack on Belgium, Holland, Luxembourg and France.

The Germans again used blitzkrieg tactics that were even more overpowering than the attacks against Poland. Holland was quickly overwhelmed and surrendered on 15 May and by 21 May the French and British armies in Belgium were trapped.

In late May and early June 1940, most of the trapped British and French troops were evacuated back to England by a fleet of small vessels and naval ships from the coast at Dunkirk. Over 330 000 men were carried across

### 13.1 War and defeat

#### FOCUS QUESTION:

How was Germany defeated in World War II?

#### Blitzkrieg 1939–1940

The pattern of World War II in Europe was one of swift decisive victory by the Germans and their allies followed



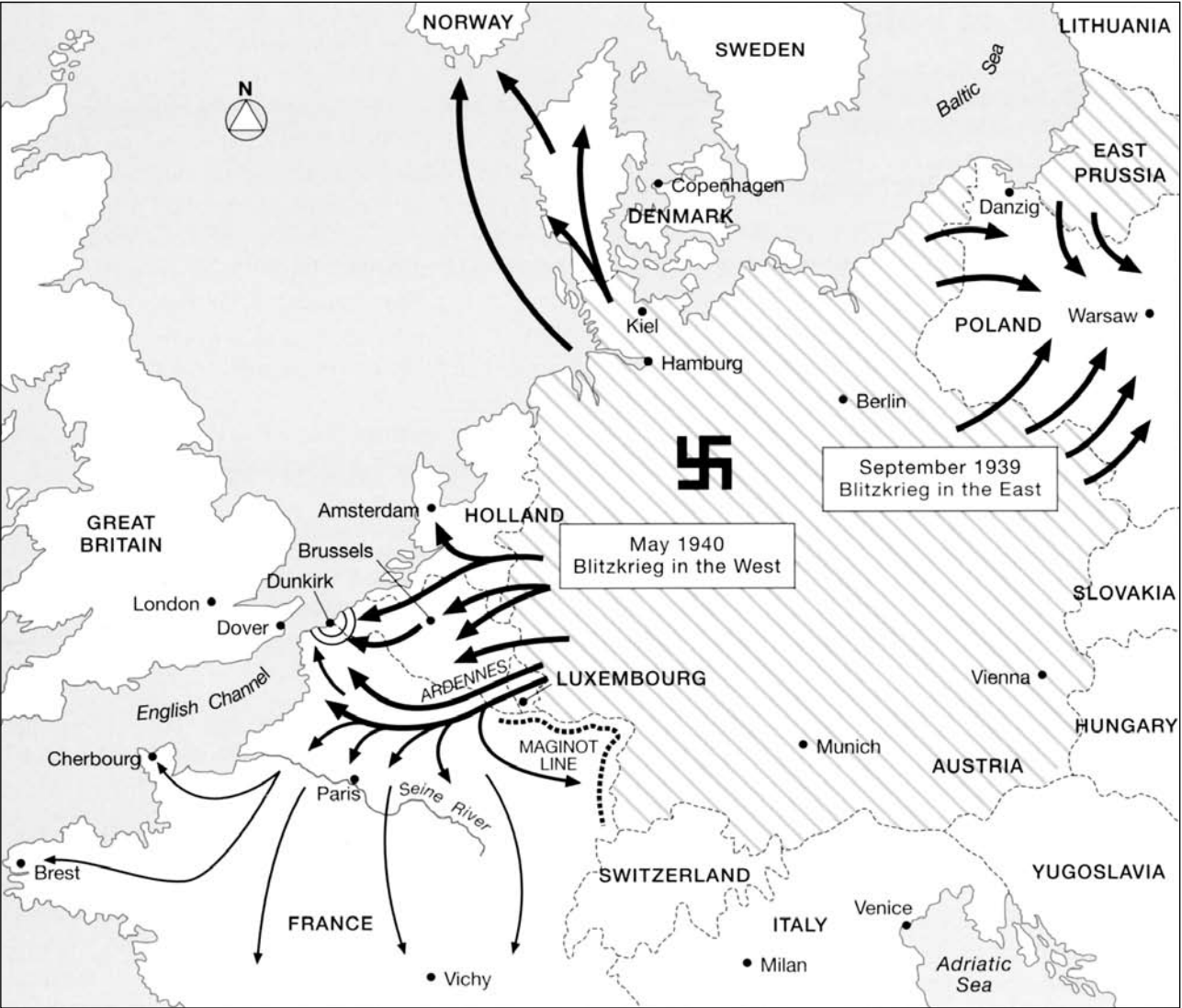
the English Channel to the relative safety of England; 40000 others were captured. ‘We must be careful not to assign to this deliverance the attributes of victory,’ Prime Minister Churchill told the British people. ‘Wars are not won by evacuations.’<sup>1</sup>

On 14 June the victorious German troops entered Paris. One week later France surrendered and Hitler accepted the French surrender in the same railway carriage in the forest of Compiègne that the French had used to accept the German surrender in 1918. In this symbolic act Hitler had avenged the German defeat of the First World War and finally erased the insult of the Treaty of Versailles. For Germans it was a supremely triumphant moment. In only seven weeks the German armies had achieved what the Kaiser’s armies had failed to achieve in the entire First World War. Norway, Denmark, Belgium, Holland, Luxembourg and France had been defeated and were under German control. Britain was left alone to face the enemy. To the German people Hitler appeared

as a triumphant war lord who had given the German people a great victory.

Hitler and the British

Hitler understood the difficulties of attempting an invasion of Britain; nonetheless he issued a directive to his military leaders to prepare for Operation Sea Lion. Any successful German invasion of Britain required control of the skies and from its new bases in France and northern Europe, the German air force began attacks on British targets. The Battle for Britain was fought in the skies over southern England from July to October 1940, the decisive factor being the skill and courage of the British fighter pilots. The casualty rate was high, with a life expectancy of only six weeks. In September the Germans began to bomb London and other major cities, but slowly the Royal Air Force broke the power of the *Luftwaffe*. In the Battle of Britain, the *Luftwaffe* had lost over 2000 aircraft and Hitler accepted the fact that Germany had lost control



Blitzkrieg 1939–1940

British Prime Minister Winston Churchill to the House of Commons, 4 June 1940

We shall defend our island home, if necessary for years, if necessary alone ... we shall not flag or fail. We shall go on to the end. We shall fight in France, we shall fight in the seas and oceans, we shall fight with growing confidence and growing strength in the air, we shall defend our island, whatever the cost may be. We shall fight on the beaches, we shall fight in the fields and in the streets, we shall fight in the hills. We shall never surrender.



David Low, ‘Very well, alone’, *Evening Standard*, 18 June 1940

of the skies over Britain. The fighter pilots of the Battle of Britain had saved the nation from almost certain invasion. Their achievement was acknowledged by Churchill when he said, ‘Never in the field of human conflict had so much been owed by so many to so few.’

The Blitz

Although Britain was never invaded, its major cities were severely bombed. In September 1940 and for the next 57 consecutive nights, German bombers attacked British cities. The bombing continued into 1941. The **Blitz**, as it was called, killed 43000 civilians but failed to break the spirit of the British people; indeed it hardened their resolve to defeat Germany. The mood was summed up in the slogan ‘We can take it’, and was reflected in the

attitude of one lone shopkeeper who, having lost the front of his shop in a bombing raid, reopened with a defiant sign, ‘More open than usual’.

The war widens

During 1940 the war expanded. In the Atlantic Ocean, German U-boats and surface vessels began the campaign to sink ships carrying vitally needed supplies to Britain. Italy entered the war on the side of Germany and from their colony in Libya the Italians invaded neighbouring Egypt. The following month Italy also invaded Greece and Albania. However by early 1941 the Italians were in retreat in North Africa and facing defeat in Greece. Hitler was forced to intervene with German military forces to save his ally.



The German attack on the Soviet Union, 1941

The widening war in North Africa and south-eastern Europe were distractions for Hitler from his real goal of attacking Russia. Although the British remained undefeated in the west, Hitler felt an urgency to begin the move to the east.

The invasion of Russia, Operation Barbarossa, was the largest military campaign of the war. The attack began on 22 June 1941 and the Russians were taken by surprise. Three powerful German armies made up of 153 divisions, 3 million men and 46 tank battalions moved into Russia; Army Group North headed for the northern city of Leningrad, Army Group Centre moved towards Moscow, and Army Group South advanced to capture the food-producing area of the Ukraine. Once again the technique of blitzkrieg was used, with the German tanks and air power spearheading the attack. The Germans were amazed at the speed of their advance and the series of encirclements that captured over 400 000 Russian soldiers.

In December, as the winter set in, Army Group Centre reached the outskirts of Moscow. The night-time temperature fell to as low as minus 50 degrees and as German soldiers lacked adequate winter clothing there were 100 000 cases of frostbite. Fuel froze in the tanks, weapons jammed or failed to recoil, and the German armies were dangerously overstretched, with supply lines at their limits. The Russians, reinforced with troops moved from the Far Eastern Front, launched a major counter-attack, driving the Germans back over 150 kilometres before they stabilised their line. For the first time in the war German forces had suffered a defeat. The swift victory Hitler had demanded did not come.

The first six months of the Russian campaign had been costly. The Red Army suffered greater losses than any army in history, with five million killed or wounded, and another five million taken prisoner. The German army had lost over one million. There is no single cause for the failure of the 1941 campaign. The Germans had seriously underestimated the strength and resolve of the Russians. Russia had over 17 million men of military age

and Stalin also tapped the powerful force of nationalism when he called on the Russian people to defend not the state but ‘Mother Russia’ against the invaders. Germany’s military strategy was flawed also, as it sought to achieve too many military goals at once. The front was too wide. There was not one principal target but three, and only one (the Ukraine) was taken. Finally, with arrogant certainty about their ability to achieve a swift victory, the German military planners had almost ignored the consequences and reality of a winter campaign.

Germany declares war on the United States

In the very week that the Russian commander General Zhukov inflicted the first defeats on the German army in the snow outside Moscow, Japan entered the war by attacking the American naval base at Pearl Harbor in Hawaii. Japan was Germany’s ally and on 13 December Hitler honoured this alliance by declaring war on the United States. Within six months Germany had attacked the Soviet Union and declared war on the United States, in the words of the British historian A. J. P. Taylor, ‘two world powers who only asked to be left alone’.<sup>2</sup> The war had ceased to be a European conflict and had become a truly world war. Despite the fact that the United States had been attacked by Japan, President Roosevelt understood the real danger of Germany, and from the start the United States’ military strategy and policy was based on the decision to give first priority to the defeat of Germany.

The Russian campaign resumes

In April 1942 Hitler, who had taken over himself as commander-in-chief of the army, ordered a new summer offensive in Russia. Confident in his strength, Hitler then made the mistake of dividing his southern army. One group would move south to take the Caucasus and the oil fields, and the Sixth Army with its Hungarian, Rumanian and Italian allies would move east to take the city of Stalingrad on the Volga River.

In the weeks of savage fighting that followed, the Germans slowly took most of the city. Stalin ordered that the city that bore his name was to be defended at all costs, and two powerful armies were assembled to the north and south of Stalingrad. By 1942 the Russian supply position was much better, as factories far to the east in Soviet Asia and the huge labour force in the distant parts of the Soviet Union produced weapons and equipment for the Red Army.

As another Russian winter set in the Russian armies broke the German lines at their weakest point and in a sweeping movement encircled the city. The German Sixth Army, in all some 300 000 men, was trapped. The German commander at Stalingrad, von Paulus, asked for permission to break out, but Hitler refused and ordered the Sixth Army to fight to the end. The Germans endured the winter, starvation and the Russian attacks, and in January 1943, a day after Hitler had promoted him to

Field Marshal, von Paulus surrendered what was left of his army to the Russians. Of the 300 000 men who made up the once mighty Sixth Army, 91 000 survivors were captured. Only 6000 ever saw Germany again.

By 1943 the German armies had lost the initiative on all fronts and they never regained it. The Russian army began the push that would force the *Wehrmacht* back towards the Reich itself. The cost for Germany of Hitler’s dream for *Lebensraum* in the east was one million dead, four million wounded, three million captured and over another million missing.

The great offensives of the early years of the war now gave way to Germany on the defensive. In North Africa, Rommel’s advance towards Egypt was stopped by the British Eighth Army at the Battle of El Alamein in October 1942, and the Germans were pushed back towards Libya. By May 1943 all enemy forces in North Africa had been eliminated.

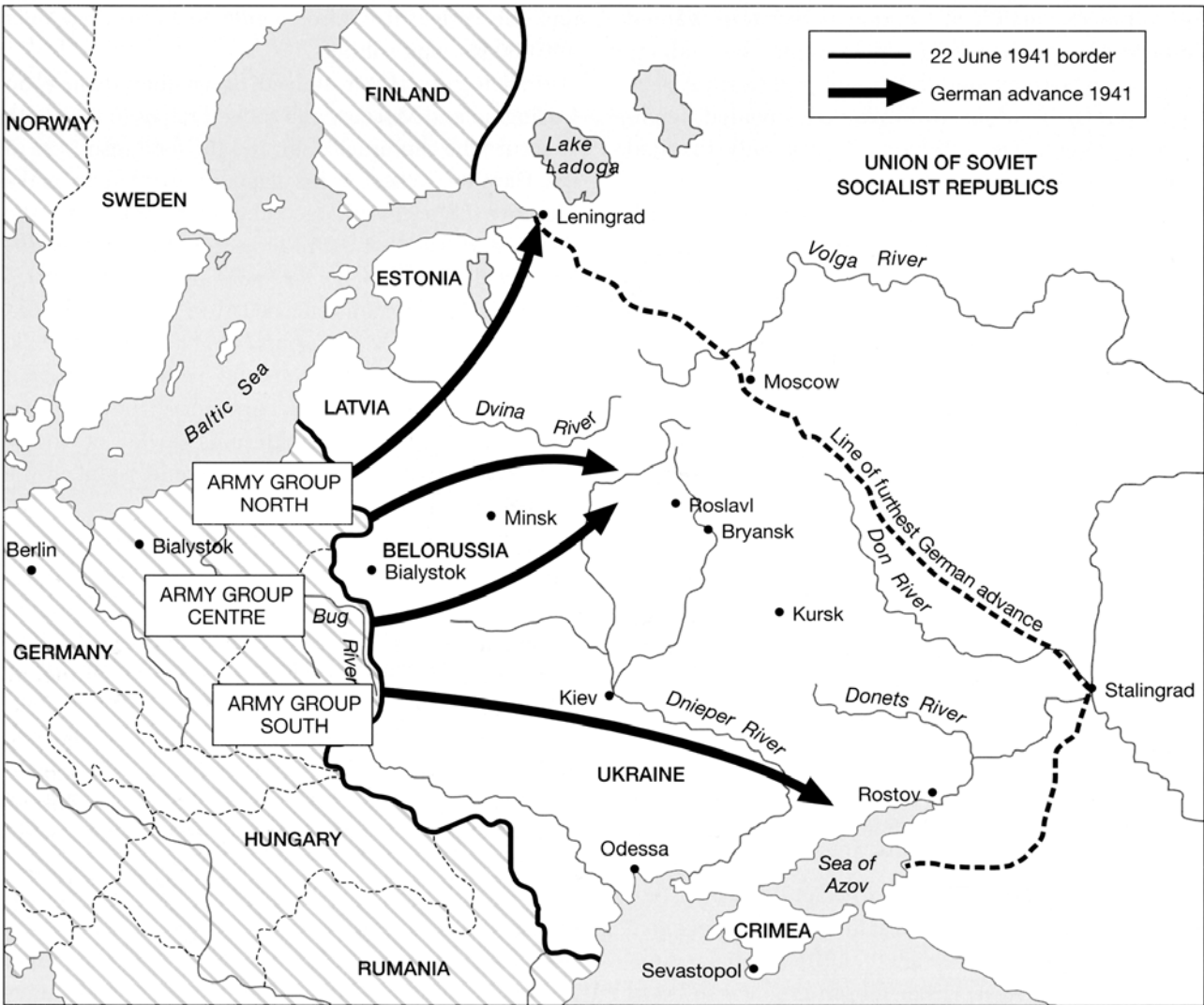
The second front

As the Russians turned the tide of war in the east, the Allied forces prepared for the massive invasion from the west. By 1944 an enormous force of almost three million men, 4000 vessels and 11 000 aircraft had assembled on the southern coast of Britain. Operation Overlord, the Allied invasion of Europe, was about to begin.

While preparations for the invasion continued, the British and American air forces increased their bombing of German cities and industrial targets. In May 1942 Cologne became the first German city to be attacked by a ‘Thousand Bomber Raid’. Fifteen thousand tons of bombs dropped in two hours destroyed half of the city. By 1943 the Americans bombed targets by day and the British carried out the night raids.

D-Day: The Normandy Landing

On 6 June 1944 D-Day (Deliverance Day), the Allied invasion of Hitler’s so-called Fortress Europe (*Festung Europa*), began. The German commander in the west, Field Marshal von Rundstedt, expected the attack to come at the narrowest point between Britain and France. In fact the landings took place further to the west on the beaches of Normandy. Despite determined German resistance, the landing succeeded and on the first day some 150 000 men came ashore. Within four weeks a million men had followed. In August the Allied armies broke out from their bridgehead at Normandy and Paris was liberated on 25 August. Hitler now faced the consequences of his failure to defeat Britain in 1940—invasion from two fronts, the Russians advancing from the east, and the British and American armies with their Allies starting their move from the west. The German armies were on the defensive and German cities were being bombed day and night. In February 1943, in a powerful speech in the Sportsplatz in Berlin and broadcast on every radio station, Goebbels called on the German people to wage total war.



The German attack on the Soviet Union, 1941



**Extracts from the ‘total war’ speech by Dr Joseph Goebbels, 18 February 1943**

The English allege that the German people have lost their belief in victory. I ask you: Do you believe with the Führer and with us in the final total victory of the German people? I ask you: Are you determined to follow the Führer through thick and thin in the struggle for victory and put up with even the heaviest personal burden? ... The English allege that the German people are no longer in the mood to shoulder the ever-increasing war work demanded by the government. I ask you: Are you and the German people determined, if the Führer orders it, to work ten, twelve, and if necessary fourteen and sixteen hours a day and to give your utmost for victory?

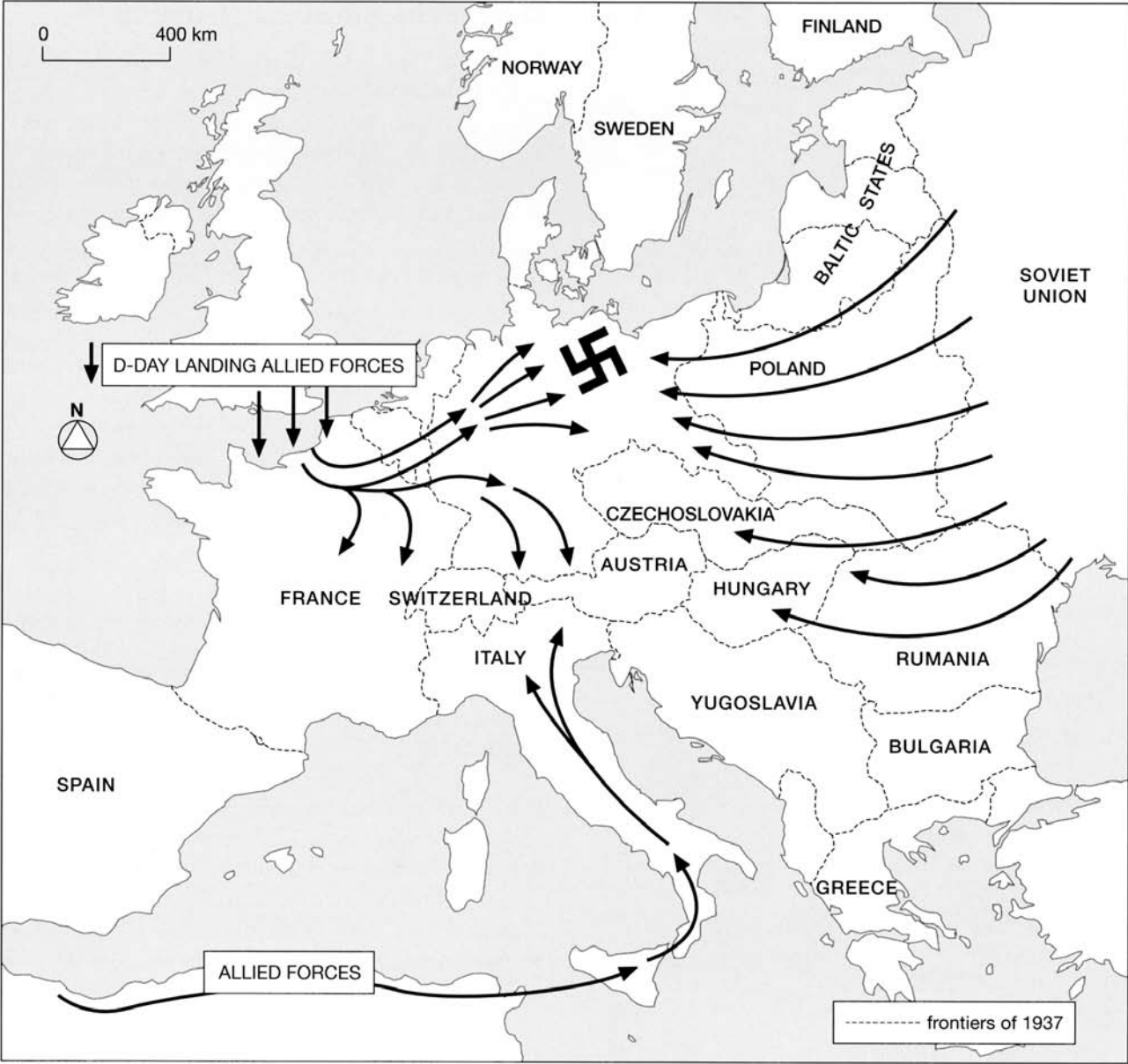
... I ask you: Do you want total war? Do you want it, if necessary, more total and more radical than we can ever imagine? ... If we ever truly believed in victory, it was in this hour of national reflection and inner revival. We see it right ahead of us, we have only to grasp it ... This is the order of the hour. And therefore the motto is *Now let the Nation rise and storm break!*

**The defeat of Nazi Germany**

By 1944, as cities were bombed and the enemy advanced towards the borders of Germany, Hitler no longer appeared in public and refused to visit the ruined cities of his Reich. Goebbels came into his own, appearing at rallies and making speeches. He took the lead in urging



Loyal to the end. Propaganda Minister Joseph Goebbels meets members of the *Volkssturm*, who were used in the final defence of Berlin against the advancing Russians in 1945



The defeat of Nazi Germany

the German people not to accept defeat. After 1943 even Goebbels could not hide the reality of the worsening war situation and he mastered the tactic of using bad news to reinforce morale. The bombing did not break the will of the German people, and although many now no longer believed in victory, loyalty to the nation refused to allow them to give in. Goebbels and Speer both displayed their true abilities in the last two years of the Reich, Speer by increasing armaments production and Goebbels by strengthening the will of the people. By their actions, these men prolonged the ability of Germany to continue the war.

**Hitler as a military commander**

Hitler’s overwhelming preoccupation from 1939 to 1945 was waging war and there is no doubt that Hitler was responsible for all the major decisions of the war. He surrounded himself with military men who were not prepared to oppose his decisions or question his judgment. He believed that the army leadership had been far too cautious and lacked daring and imagination. His

dominance and control was such that no major military decision could be made without him.

Hitler was not without military skills. Those who knew him were amazed at his memory, his grasp of detail and his understanding of weaponry. But he lacked military experience and the ability to handle great armies in the field. The fact that Germany was fighting on many fronts reinforces Rommel’s view that Hitler had a poor understanding of overall strategy. Unlike other great military commanders, he also lacked humanity. In his world, where struggle and force were part of life, the enormous loss of human life and the suffering of war meant very little.

Germany’s early military victories in the west in 1940 encouraged Hitler to believe in his own abilities and judgment. He was convinced of his sense of mission. But as the war situation turned against Germany from 1943, Hitler became increasingly irrational, to the point where in the end reasoned argument and analysis became impossible. He refused to surrender ground when the military situation was hopeless, ordering troops to



stand when a more rational strategy would have required a withdrawal. He refused to accept the reality of the situation, believing that one could overcome reality by refusing to admit its existence. As always, he held to his belief in the power of the will. This absolute belief in will-power, according to the panzer leader General Guderian, was Hitler's most significant quality. As a military commander, he 'compelled men to follow him'.<sup>3</sup>

What is extraordinary is that to the very end Hitler's hold over the Germany military and the conduct of the war remained absolute.

### Defeat, 1945

The Allied advance that had begun after the D-Day landing in June 1944 faced heavy German resistance, particularly as the troops neared the borders of Germany. In the east, Soviet armies crossed the Oder River into eastern Germany in January 1945. Berlin was only 100 kilometres away. In March the Allied armies crossed the Rhine River, the last natural barrier into the heart of Germany. 'If the war is lost the German nation will also perish,'

Hitler told Speer in 1945. 'There is no need to take into consideration the basic requirements of the people for continuing even the most primitive existence ... in any case only those who are inferior will remain after this struggle, for the good have already been killed.'<sup>4</sup> Hitler ordered a **scorched-earth policy**, but Albert Speer countermanded the order.

In January 1945 Hitler returned to Berlin and from his **bunker** beneath the garden of the ruined Reich Chancellery he presided over the last days of the Reich. Hitler was by now in a state of physical and mental collapse. Stopped and grey, he had difficulty in moving and he had developed an uncontrollable trembling on his left side. 'The once hypnotic eyes were now glazed over with weariness and exhaustion,' wrote one observer. 'He was kept on his feet by will alone and the trembling of his limbs tormented him partly because it belied his view that the iron will could achieve anything.'<sup>5</sup>

On 16 April the Soviet offensive to take Berlin began. Resistance to the Russian advance was determined and at times fanatical. The Hitler Youth joined in the final



Defeat: one of the last photos taken of Hitler shows him with his adjutant Julius Schaub standing in the ruins of the Chancellery Berlin in March 1945. Hitler committed suicide a few weeks later

defence of the city, as did the *Volkssturm*, a people's militia of older men and women. By the time Berlin fell, over 100 000 Russians had been killed.

On 30 April Russian troops took the Reichstag building and hoisted their flag from its roof. On that same afternoon, less than a kilometre away, Hitler committed suicide with a pistol shot to the head. The German radio announced his death on the following day:

'It is reported from the Führer's headquarters that our Führer Adolf Hitler, fighting to the last against Bolshevism, fell for Germany this afternoon in his operational headquarters in the Reich Chancellery.'

The war in Europe officially ended one week later with the total and unconditional surrender of all German forces.

### Summary: Why Germany lost the war

- Germany failed to make adequate military and economic preparations for a long conflict.
- Germany failed to mobilise for 'total war' from the start of the conflict.
- Germany made the strategic mistake of opening a second front against the Soviet Union before the war in the west had been won.
- The technique of lightning war on the Soviet Union failed.
- The German action of declaring war on the United States of America in December 1941 was a mistake.
- Germany was unable to equal or better the industrial and military power of the nations against it.
- Germany's resources were weakened by involvement in lesser theatres of war to support Mussolini's war policies.
- Hitler's dominance in the military decision making and his unbreakable hold over the German people and the German military machine led to Germany's defeat.

## 13.2 Aftermath

In 1945 Germany faced total defeat and ruin. Unlike the First World War, which ended when the German government negotiated an armistice with the enemy, the Second World War was fought to the bitter end.

The war had been fought to destroy the Nazi regime. This goal was achieved. Nazism died with Hitler. The surviving leaders of Hitler's Reich were rounded up, put on trial, and many of them were executed. But the legacy of the Nazi regime could not be erased so easily.

The most visible legacy of the war was the physical destruction of much of Germany. The major cities had been bombed, and the transport and industrial structure



A Soviet soldier hoists the communist flag over the ruins of the Reichstag building in Berlin in May 1945

was in ruins. In 1918 Germany had been spared physical destruction, but this was not the case in 1945. In human terms, about 6.8 million Germans were dead, about 3.5 million of them civilians. Germany lost twice the number of military dead in the Second World War as in the First World War. On a wider scale, the total loss of life among all the European nations at war numbered 40 million.

Unlike in 1918, Germany did not survive as a united nation. Seventy-five years earlier, in 1871, Bismarck had created the unified Germany. The war ended this unity, and defeated Germany was occupied and divided into four zones by the four major victorious powers—the Soviet Union, the United States, Britain and France. The last of these occupying troops would not leave German soil until 1990.

One of the major goals of the Nazi movement had been to destroy Soviet Russia and drive German power into the east. In 1945 the reverse happened. One of the results of Germany's defeat was that half of Europe and half of Germany now lay under the effective control of the Soviet Union. Instead of the German army driving east, the Red Army had driven west.

The Second World War was, in fact, won by the two great super-powers, the United States and the Soviet Union, one the strongest capitalist power and a great