CHAPTER XXXIII

World War II. The Victorious Phase (1939-42)

In 1870 and in 1914 the German armies marching off to fight were accompanied with enthusiasm, bands, speeches, and parades. Those wars were popular and welded the population into a unit prepared to do its share willingly and with gusto. This situation did not obtain in 1939. Tears, quiet, a deep seriousness—such was the atmosphere of Berlin and the other German cities. There were still too many alive who remembered the privations and horrors twenty years before and who could not help but believe that Britain and France were the same formidable foes of yore. The Nazi leadership was dismayed at this attitude, and Goebbels had to account for it by talking of the spiritual maturity of the Nazi-trained people.

Good news came, however, from the front in Poland. The lightning war (blitzkrieg) tactics worked out by the Germans were put into effect almost like an operation in a textbook. The German air force wiped out the Polish aviation in a few days and caused terror and destruction in its attacks on military objectives and large cities alike. Speedy mechanized units of tanks and armored cars raced ahead of the infantry and neutralized much Polish territory, simply bypassing the centers of heavy defense. This was a war of movement, not of position. There was no time or desire to dig in. Within little more than a week the Polish army was disorganized and demoralized. Centers of resistance stood heroically, notably Warsaw and the Hel Peninsula on the bay of Danzig, but the later weeks of the campaign constituted simply a mopping-up operation. The Polish leaders escaped to the south through Romania, and before a month had elapsed the Polish state ceased to exist.

In accordance with the secret provisions of the treaty signed in Moscow, the Red army entered Poland on September 17, 1939. It advanced from the east without opposition and joined its German friends at ap-
proximately the line established in the treaty. Ribbentrop flew a second
time to Moscow to settle the details. He found that Stalin had stiffened in
his attitude a good bit and now demanded that Lithuania be placed
within the Soviet sphere of influence. The Germans were willing to agree
to any Russian demands, and the two powers drew up a new line of
demarcation. The Germans reintegrated into Germany proper all the
territories (Upper Silesia, Posen, West Prussia, and Danzig) which had
formed part of Germany before 1918. The remainder of Poland, an
area roughly the same as the old “Congress Poland” of the nineteenth
century, was organized under the name of the Government General, a
state dependent on Germany and without any native government. Its
capital was moved from Warsaw to Cracow, and it was placed under the
brutal control of Hans Frank and the S.S. Immediately the familiar
story of terror, torture, and fear began; thousands of Poles, Christian
and Jewish, were arrested and placed in camps. The Germans had not
the slightest sympathy for the Poles, whom they considered a barbarous
race. The plight of Poland was tragic in the extreme and has probably
been best told in John Hersey’s poignant and brilliant novel, The Wall

There was little or nothing that Britain and France could do to help
Poland directly, given the attitude of the Soviet Union. The British sent
an expeditionary force to France and placed it under the unified com-
mand of the French general, Maurice Gamelin. The two armies settled
into the heavily fortified Maginot line facing Germany. The French
tried a minor offensive into the Saar region, but soon withdrew. On
October 6, after the conquest of Poland, Hitler in a speech in the Reich-
stag invited Britain and France to withdraw from a futile war, since the
Polish question was settled once and for all. However, both Chamberlain
and Daladier announced their intention to persist.

The period from October 1939 to April 1940 was one of almost
complete quiet on land. Some called it the Phony War, others the
Sitzkrieg. The British and French armies were entrenched behind the
Maginot line, the Germans behind the West Wall or Siegfried line. They
fired a few shots at each other every day, but undertook nothing of
importance. The general feeling seemed to be that this would be a war
of economic attrition in which the vastly superior industrial resources of
the western allies would prove decisive. This attitude neglected the im-
pressive preparations which the Germans had made and also the fact
that Germany was not nearly so isolated in 1939 as she had been in 1914.
Now she had access to Russia and through Russia to the Far East.

The interest of the early months of the war lies mainly in the war at
sea. Hitler lost no time in getting his submarines into action. In fact, on
the first day of the war the Germans sank the British passenger liner “Athenia” and revived memories of the “Lusitania.” During September and October the Germans sank two major British naval vessels—one of them, the “Royal Oak,” in Scapa Flow itself, the British base in the Orkney Islands. Most impressive was the career of the German pocket battleship, “Admiral Graf Spee,” which broke out to the open sea and, after destroying a good deal of British tonnage, was finally caught and pursued by several British vessels off the east coast of South America. She put in to the harbor of Montevideo, where her crew scuttled her in order to avoid capture.

Hitler was more active than his armies during the winter of 1939–40. He had made up his mind to open a heavy offensive in the west as soon as possible. His eventual aim was to achieve “living space” for Germany in the east, and he did not lose sight of the attack on Russia which had to come sooner or later. Yet at the moment, spurred on by his success in Poland, he found himself in the happy position of being temporarily secure in the east. Thus he had to behave properly toward the Soviets and to sit back while they reduced the three little Baltic republics to dependent status and opened war on the Nordic Finns. This was not palatable to Germany; neither was the Italian attitude, which was very suspicious of the Russian friendship. Mussolini dared to be sharply critical of the Führer in these months. The need for action in the west appeared urgent. So from November dates were set for the attack planned against the Netherlands, Belgium, Luxemburg, and France, dates which were always postponed. Hitler seemed to be very fearful of assassination; since he considered himself indispensable, this was a serious matter—especially after a bomb, probably placed by the Nazis themselves to increase Hitler’s popularity, exploded a few minutes after he left the old beer hall in Munich on November 8. The generals did not share Hitler’s enthusiasm for an attack on the west. They were fearful of French superiority and very much worried about the outcome. It was from this time that Hitler’s scorn of the military mentality seems to have dated. In any case, the attack was postponed because of the bad weather that winter.

In early 1940 a new idea captured Hitler’s imagination. It seems to have originated with Admiral Raeder. Raeder was dismayed that the war had broken out before the German navy had completed its building program. He was also unhappy that Germany’s geographical position made it relatively easy for the British to bottle up the German fleet. His desire was to acquire naval bases on the northern coast of Norway, less accessible to British power. Control of Norway, he reasoned, would also ensure the vital shipments of Swedish iron ore via the Norwegian port
of Narvik. Vidkun Quisling, leader of the small Norwegian Nazi party, might be counted on for assistance. Hitler approved the idea right away and appointed General Falkenhorst to work out the details.

On the morning of April 9, 1940, German troops occupied Denmark without any opposition. King Christian X bowed before superior force and ordered no resistance. Denmark maintained her own organs of government but operated under a German military occupation.

The same morning German naval and air units appeared at the main Norwegian ports, where they met British units which were mining Norwegian territorial waters to stop the ore shipments. The Germans suffered severe losses but not enough to endanger the operation. In Oslo Quisling’s attempted coup was a failure, but German troops seized control of the city. King Haakon VII and his son, Crown Prince Olav, retreated with their army into the north where they tried to hold off the Germans. On April 14 British troops started to land at various points in central and northern Norway, but the Germans maintained control of the air and in early May the British had to withdraw from everywhere except Narvik. Here they remained for another month under relentless attack, but in early June had to retire. The Germans tried to set up a native Norwegian government under Quisling; when this failed, they appointed a Gauleiter, Josef Terboven, who ran the country with the help of the German military and police. The king and his son escaped to London, where they set up a government in exile. The British sense of humiliation from the Norwegian campaign led to the fall of the Chamberlain cabinet and the appointment, on May 10, of Winston Churchill as prime minister.

Hitler, of course, was delighted at this campaign which, inexpensive in men and materials, had so profitably extended his base of operations. There could be no further talk of delay. The attack on the west was scheduled for early May.

On the morning of May 10 German forces swept into Holland, Belgium, and Luxemburg under the pretext that they were simply forestalling the Allies. The events of the next six weeks have been told and retold, and yet the imagination is staggered by the nightmarish quality surrounding the fall of France. The German plan was not markedly different from the Schlieffen Plan of 1914, except that this time there were light, highly mobile, mechanized units which could dash ahead of the infantry, and also quantities of bomber and fighter planes which could bombard, strafe, and demoralize the civilian population. In spite of efforts to flood their canals, the Dutch were able to hold out for only five days. Queen Wilhelmina, the Dutch gold reserve, and most of the Dutch
navy sought refuge in England. Belgium resisted a bit longer, although her great fort of Eben Emael fell in a day. Four French armies raced north to help the Belgians, but French equipment was no match for the new equipment and tactics of the Germans. Probably the most important moment in the campaign was the breakthrough of the principal German mechanized army under General Kleist at the Ardennes Forest, which the French had thought would be a formidable obstacle. On May 28 King Leopold surrendered himself and the Belgian army.

The German army entered France at several points, including historic Sédan, spreading out over the terrain like a gigantic hand. One finger swept along the Channel coast cutting off from the bulk of the French nearly all the British army and a number of French units, which retreated to the only available port, Dunkirk. Here occurred the extraordinary and heroic evacuation of almost three hundred fifty thousand British, French, and miscellaneous refugees, stripped of their equipment but rescued to fight again.

Paul Reynaud, who had succeeded Daladier as premier earlier in the spring, dismissed Gamelin and appointed General Weygand. He also reformed his cabinet and appointed Marshal Pétain, the aged hero of Verdun, as vice-premier. The government moved from Paris to Tours and then to Bordeaux. Paris was declared an open city and surrendered on June 14, 1940. The Maginot line was turned. The battle of France was over.

It was at this moment that Mussolini, sure of an easy victory, in a particularly squalid gesture abandoned his policy of neutrality and came into the war against France and Britain on June 10. This action made no difference to the immediate outcome. Reynaud resigned on the sixteenth and was succeeded by Pétain, who immediately asked for an armistice.

It was typical of Hitler's vindictive personality that he chose as the spot for the armistice to be signed the same place where the armistice of 1918 was signed and indeed the same railway dining car in which Foch had dictated to Erzberger. There on June 22 Hitler experienced possibly his most exhilarating moment. The armistice terms were strict but not overwhelming. More than half of France, including both the Channel and Atlantic coasts, was to be occupied by the Germans. The only concession Hitler made was that he promised not to use the French navy in the war. Pétain and his government retired to the little resort city of Vichy, where they reorganized the French state in a conservative sense and maintained a policy of collaboration with the victors. Hitler visited Paris, went to the top of the Eiffel Tower, and stood in awe before the tomb of Napoleon. Some days later he created a new rank of Reichsmarschall for
Goering and promoted a number of his generals to field marshal. His speech on that occasion included a "final" invitation to Great Britain to get out of the war.

Hitler seems to have been aggrieved that the British did not follow the French example of surrender. He permitted almost a month to elapse after the French armistice before he signed the order for operation Sea Lion, the code name for the invasion of Britain. As always, his preoccupation was with the east. He had thought of the campaign in the west simply as a means to free his rear to carry out the major warfare against the Soviet Union. France was now defeated; by all the rules Britain should surrender. However, the British did not oblige, and, in fact, Churchill's speeches became more determined and more bellicose than ever. The only alternative was to cross the Channel and defeat the British on their own home island.

The Germans envisaged this invasion with very little enthusiasm. In particular, the navy was worried. It had suffered serious damage in the invasion of Norway and was far from optimum strength. It was not equipped with much in the way of self-propelled landing craft. It would have to depend on towed barges across a very rough stretch of water toward an enemy which would not be surprised and which was full of high morale for resistance. The only possibility for success lay in the achievement of absolute superiority in the air. Thus everything depended on the Luftwaffe. The invasion date was at first set for August 15; the air attack was to begin a week earlier.

On August 8 Goering launched his Luftwaffe into the battle of Britain, concentrating at first on the south coast of England, the eventual invasion point, and some days later shifting the main impact to R.A.F. bases, aircraft factories, and defense installations. The resistance of the R.A.F. to the German attack has been sung time and again and has become legendary in military history. Although there was exaggeration on both sides, the fact is that the R.A.F. prevented the Luftwaffe from controlling the air over England. The Germans shifted their target again to London and began the intensive grueling raids over the British capital which lasted all through the following autumn and winter. However, the danger of invasion was over. The date for the operation was postponed until October, when it was put off until 1941. In fact, it was shelved and never seriously thought of again. The raids continued on the off-chance that they might force a decision in Britain. In any case the planes, otherwise unemployed, could certainly cause serious damage to the British and lower their morale.

By the fall of 1940 the friendship with Russia was wearing thin, and the Russians were achieving entirely too much to please the Germans.
During the French campaign the Russians quietly annexed Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. They also demanded and obtained from Romania the cession of Bessarabia and northern Bukovina. Once again affairs in the Balkans were leading to serious rivalry between Germany and Russia. Hitler had no notion of letting the Soviets entrench themselves in areas which he considered part of the German living space. A straw in the wind was the ceremonious signature on September 27, 1940, of the Tripartite Pact among Germany, Italy, and Japan, calling for mutual aid if a presently nonbelligerent power should attack one of them. The Soviet Union was explicitly excepted from this provision; the pact seemed to be directed against the United States, but it did not please the Russians.

It is puzzling to decide exactly when Hitler resolved on his attack on the Soviet Union. He was the sort of man who likes to play with alternative possibilities until the last minute. In any case, there was no possibility of attacking Russia until the following spring. In November Molotov visited Berlin at German invitation. The Führer grandly described to him a future in which the world would be divided among Germany, Italy, Japan, and Russia, and tried to get Molotov interested in rosy pictures of a future Soviet expansion south to the Persian Gulf and maybe India. The hardheaded Molotov replied with factual questions about such nearby places as Finland, Sweden, and Bulgaria, and indicated Russian discontent at German activities in the Balkans. Ribbentrop handed Molotov a draft treaty dividing up the Eastern Hemisphere. Molotov took it to Moscow but gave little expectation that it would find favor there. Stalin, to everyone’s surprise, was interested and sent a letter to Berlin asking for fuller details. Perhaps he, too, was stalling for time. It does not really matter, for the Germans never answered this letter. Hitler had made up his mind. By December 18, 1940, the plan for the invasion of Russia, whose code name was Barbarossa, was ready and approved.

This plan called for a gigantic push along a front reaching from Finland to the Black Sea. It became important, therefore, to ensure the loyalty of the Balkan states. Romania was the first sufferer. She had already lost territory to Russia, and King Carol announced his solidarity with Germany. Yet worse was to come. Romania had to part with land to Bulgaria; moreover, in August 1940 at Vienna Ribbentrop in a lordly way handed down the Vienna Award, by which Romania was forced to relinquish to Hungary a large part of the gains she had made in the Treaty of Trianon in 1919. The result was that King Carol abdicated, and Romania fell under a military dictatorship subservient to Germany. In November 1940 Hungary, Slovakia, and Romania adhered to the Tripartite Pact, and early in 1941 Bulgaria followed suit. Only Yugoslavia
remained out of the system, but this appeared to be only a matter of time because the government of Prince Paul, regent for his young nephew, Peter II, was very pro-German. The Yugoslavs adhered to the Tripartite Pact on March 25, 1941. The only obstacle that seemed to be in Germany’s way arose from the visit of the Japanese foreign minister, Matsuoka, to Berlin in the spring of 1941. He received rather casual treatment from the Germans, but Hitler promised that if Japan became involved in a war with the United States, Germany would stand by her. The bombshell was thrown, however, when Matsuoka, on his way back to Japan, stopped at Moscow and signed a nonaggression treaty with the old enemy of the Japanese, the Soviet Union. This served notice to Hitler that he could not expect Japanese help in his invasion of Russia. The Japanese did not want to have their hands tied in Siberia when their ambitions were directed against the United States, Britain, France, and the Netherlands.

Hitler’s timetable for the spring of 1941 was upset mainly as a result of Mussolini’s precipitate action. In October 1940, against the advice of his generals, he invaded Greece through Albania. The result was pitiful. The Greeks not only held off the Italians but actually pushed them back into Albanian territory. At the same time the British repulsed an Italian invasion of Egypt and drove them well back into their colony of Libya. Hitler was disgusted at the ineptitude of the Italians and did not plan to pull their chestnuts out of the fire. However, he did permit a force under the command of Erwin Rommel to cross to North Africa to train for African fighting. This was the origin of the famous Afrika Korps, which eventually took over the command in North Africa from the Italians.

In early 1941 Hitler began to consider the necessity of invading Greece to free Europe of any foothold for British troops, even though this might postpone the invasion of Russia. The British made the difficult decision of reinforcing Greece at the expense of their own undermanned army in Libya. This decided Hitler to invade Greece through Bulgaria. However, the unforeseen occurred. A few days after Yugoslavia adhered to the Tripartite Pact, a military coup in Belgrade overthrew the pro-German government of Prince Paul and installed young King Peter on the throne with an anti-German ministry. The Soviet reaction to this was most instructive. The Russians signed a treaty of nonaggression and friendship with the new government. The Nazi-Soviet pact was clearly a thing of the past.

Hitler was, of course, furious at these developments; his reply was immediate. On April 6 the Germans bombed Belgrade and invaded Yugoslavia and Greece both from the north and through Bulgaria, where German troops were assembled. Yugoslavia capitulated after little more than a
week. The Greeks, aided by British reinforcements, held out longer, but by the end of April the British and Greek armies had to evacuate the mainland and try to defend Crete. In late May the Germans launched an amphibious attack on Crete and conquered the island in about ten days. At the same time Rommel pushed the British back into Egypt. Except for the loss of the largest German battleship, the “Bismarck,” in the North Atlantic, it seemed a triumphant spring for Germany. However, it did not become clear until much later that the Balkan campaign, which forced the Germans to postpone their invasion of Russia for five or six weeks, might have been decisive in this much greater effort—for if anything is determinant in an invasion of Russia, it is the weather.

Military preparations for the invasion of Russia had been going on since late 1940. By the spring of 1941 the German armies were lined up along the eastern boundaries ready to spring. Plans were co-ordinated with Finland to provide for a simultaneous “reopening” of the Russo-Finnish war in the north and with the Romanians, who were prepared to march in the south to regain Bessarabia. Political preparations were made too. In March Himmler, in his function as Reichsführer S.S., was given almost unlimited political authority in the territories to be conquered to effect the change from Communism. This was the legal basis for the frightful crimes of the future. A month later Hitler appointed the party ideologist, Alfred Rosenberg, commissioner for the eastern occupied areas. To these contradictory arrangements must be added the responsibilities of the army in the operational areas. The groundwork was thus laid for the foolish ineptitude and frightful brutality of German behavior in occupied Russia.

The most bizarre prelude to the attack on Russia occurred on May 10 when Rudolf Hess, Hitler’s beloved old party comrade, piloted himself from an air base in Germany to a field in Scotland, where he claimed to be looking for the duke of Hamilton. The world will probably never know just what was in Hess’s mind, which has lacked lucidity ever since. He seems to have convinced himself that when Germany attacked Russia, Britain would reverse herself and join the Germans in the anti-Communist crusade, and that he could warn the right-wing forces in Britain to be ready. Hitler was shocked at the defection of his old friend. In the party councils Martin Bormann took over Hess’s former functions and became one of the most powerful Nazis in the years to come.

Hitler launched his great attack on the morning of June 22, 1941, without official warning. On that day along a front of over a thousand miles Finnish, Romanian, and German planes, tanks, and infantry were set in action. Along with the military action came confident predictions by Goebbels and his assistants that the Soviet Union would be crushed in
a matter of weeks. These promises were constantly repeated, and by October the world was told that the Soviet Union was in fact defeated. Yet there was no Russian request for peace.

It is difficult to describe the epic magnitude of the German campaigns in Russia where no less than nine million men were deployed at a single time. This was no old-fashioned warfare in which the movements of an army can be followed by a pencil line on a map, nor was it the warfare of 1914–18 in which the shifting front can be indicated by lines moved back and forth. There really was no front. Sometimes the “front” was many miles in depth where rapidly moving units bypassed strong points, where air attacks were miles removed from infantry fighting, where pockets of resistance held out sometimes for months. It was the French campaign enlarged many times; it was an elemental struggle of vastly powerful and complex forces locked in combat unto death. The author had the official responsibility for many months of following this front from day to day and never felt that he could visualize it; how then to describe it in retrospect?

For a number of weeks it looked as if Hitler’s optimistic prediction about the duration of the fighting were accurate. Within about a month the Germans swept through the defenses the Russians had constructed in the areas they had gained since 1939 and went into Russia proper. From week to week the names of cities captured were spread across the communiqués: Smolensk, Novgorod, Kiev, Kharkov, Orel, and Rostov, to name only a few of the larger ones. By late fall the Germans had advanced about six hundred miles. Together with the Finns, they had encircled Leningrad. They were within a few miles of Moscow itself, and the Russian government offices were moved to Kuibyshev on the Volga. Goebbels seemed to be right.

The world now knows that these months were not so easy for the Germans as they looked at the time. Hitler was so fascinated by the progress of his forces that he began to conceive of himself as one of the master military minds of all times. He spent most of his time for the rest of his life at his headquarters in the east and constantly interfered in the decisions of his generals, whom he often treated with scorn. There was a real difference of opinion in the autumn of 1941 when Hitler ordered concentration on the industrial areas in the Ukraine, while the generals wanted to center their attention on the capture of Moscow. More important was the weather. As the autumn wore on toward winter, the soldiers started to suffer frightfully. They were not outfitted with cold-weather equipment. The high command expected the campaign to be over before it would be necessary. By November the snows had started, daylight was brief, and one of the severest winters in years set in. In the
early days of December the Germans, within sight of the towers of Moscow, made a desperate effort to capture the capital before they had to cease fighting, but failed in their attempt.

Worse was in store. Immediately after the Germans had ended their offensive, the Russians with about a hundred fresh divisions opened a counteroffensive which lasted throughout the winter and not only relieved Moscow but pushed the Nazis back a considerable distance on the central front. The importance of this lay not only in the actual achievement but also in the fact that it was the first time in the war that the Germans had suffered a setback, which showed that the Russians were far from defeat.

Hitler’s reaction was rapid. He ordered his soldiers to stand firm and dispute every step with the enemy. Now the Germans had to retreat over barren wasteland, which the Russians had burned in their original withdrawal. Many thought of Napoleon’s retreat in 1812. Yet in spite of the most lamentable suffering the Germans did not break, and in the spring of 1942, reinforced by new levies from home and from satellite lands, were ready for a new offensive. Sometime later every soldier who had been in Russia in the winter of 1941–42 was declared eligible for a new medal, which German slang called the “frozen meat” medal. The propaganda ministry whined in complaint to God Who had decreed such a severe winter; it also complained that the Soviets had not informed the world of their immense reserve manpower.

One of the most important results of the Soviet counteroffensive was a shift in the high command of the army. Hitler blamed most of the misfortunes of the army on the generals and in early 1942 dismissed the commander in chief, Brauchitsch, as well as other important generals, including Rundstedt, Leeb, and Guderian. In addition to his title of commander in chief of the armed forces, he made himself commander in chief of the army. From this point on Hitler was in daily immediate command of the forces. Since the war the German generals in their memoirs have lamented this development. Most of them agree that Hitler had a sort of intuitive genius which was often of great importance, but they blame him for a lack of detailed training and also for a careless refusal to enter into the details of administration.

In December 1941 another event occurred which was in the long run to prove decisive in the defeat of Germany. This was, of course, the entry of the United States into the war. This is not the place to describe the gradual American drift toward war between 1939 and 1941. That subject has been combed thoroughly, and some parts of it are still unsettled. By 1941 the United States was helping Great Britain and the other anti-Nazi powers through the technique of lend-lease. In 1941 the
Allies lost over four million tons of merchant shipping, mostly in the Atlantic and mainly to German submarines. This brought the war home to Americans. However, affairs in the Far East seemed to concern the United States most, and it was the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, which pushed the United States into the war.

One of the extraordinary aspects of German behavior at this moment is the cavalier, and indeed casual, attitude which Hitler, Goebbels, and others took at the prospect of American intervention. One is reminded of 1917. The Germans seemed to think that the United States would be so occupied in her struggle with Japan that she would have little or no energy left to help Britain and Russia in the war against Germany. They also thought that the United States was simply a flabby, luxurious, materialistic democracy, which in time of trial would prove as rotten as France or Britain from the German view. On December 11 Hitler went to the Reichstag and gave a violent speech devoted mainly to personal attacks on President Roosevelt and the American Jews. He stood by his promise to Japan and declared war on the United States.

By the end of 1941 things looked bad for the Allies. The victories of the Axis since 1939 had been stupendous and unimagined. They were to be further immensely increased by the conquests of the Japanese in the next few months. However, in the broader picture the whole situation had changed. The Axis wantonly called down upon itself forces against which it would be ultimately powerless. However, it was going to take more than three years of bitter warfare before this truth was brought home to the Führer.