CHAPTER XXXIV

World War II. The Defeat Looms (1942-45)

The home front did not constitute a serious problem for the shapers of public opinion in Germany until after the first campaign against Russia. The brevity of the Polish and Norwegian campaigns, and even more, the colossal and relatively easy victory over France, seemed to bear out Hitler’s contention of the superior qualities of the Germans and specifically of Germans led by the Nazi movement. In Germany there was not much distress. Food supplies remained sufficient for a normal diet, and the government’s prudence in stockpiling strategic raw materials assured a constant flow of munitions. In fact, after the defeat of France Germany received a supply of luxury items such as she had not seen for years. Soldiers on leave in Paris and other French towns sent home silk stockings, perfumes, wines, and women’s clothing of a far superior quality to anything that German austerity had produced. All this gave to the war a sort of Alice in Wonderland quality which blinded the German people to possible dangers in the future. Even the beginning of British air raids over German cities, relatively ineffective at first, did not hurt German morale particularly, though it did serve to reduce Goering’s prestige.

The situation changed rapidly after the attack on Russia. In the first place, the invasion itself was a shock. After the Nazi-Soviet treaty of 1939 radio and newspapers told of the new friendship for the Soviet government and the Russian people. This line continued right into the spring of 1941, so that the Germans were psychologically unprepared for the new war. After June 22 the German propagandists discounted Soviet power and promised a victory as cheap and complete as the earlier ones. Even the German leadership seems to have succumbed to this over-optimism. As the months wore on and Moscow was still not captured, the truth gradually began to dawn. Casualty lists became longer and more
tragic. At first Goebbels blamed the setback on the abnormally early and severe winter, but soon he had to pay tribute to Russian might. At about the same time Germany’s supplies of accumulated materials began to run short. The usual wartime nuisances—delays in transportation, failures of consumer goods, and reliance on substitutes—began to make their appearance. By early 1942 the honeymoon period of the war was over, and Germany entered a period of sacrifice and austerity. The bright, shiny façade of the Nazi state became tarnished and eventually grimy and squalid.

In the first weeks of 1942 the German government decreed a national emergency program to repair at least some of the shortages and failures which had made their appearance simultaneously. In February the minister of armaments, Fritz Todt, whose reputation was largely connected with the construction of the great German highway system, the Autobahnen, was killed in an airplane accident. Hitler replaced him with one of his wisest appointments, Albert Speer, until that time the Führer’s architect, with whom he had planned vast remodeling of Berlin and other German cities. Speer proved himself an extremely efficient administrator and became almost a dictator in the economic sphere.

Obviously one of the most pressing problems was the supply of labor. As the fighting continued, the demand for more and more recruits for the Wehrmacht developed. It was necessary to conserve skilled workers in strategic industry and keep them from becoming cannon fodder. In March 1942 a new office was established, the commissioner general for labor supply. Its head was Fritz Sauckel, Gauleiter of Thuringia, who in the course of time became an absolute dictator for labor problems. Together, he and Speer ran the German economy. It is interesting to note which leading Nazis retained their power and importance during the trying years of war. Of the old names, Himmler and Goebbels increased in power and importance until by the end of the war Himmler was second only to Hitler. Others, notably Goering, declined in stature. The significant new men were Bormann, Speer, and Sauckel.

Sauckel immediately undertook an elaborate campaign to use the available labor force as efficiently as possible. Women were encouraged to go into industry and agriculture for the first time. A hierarchy of essential services was established. All sorts of programs to increase the output of the individual worker were undertaken. Perhaps most important, the importation of foreign laborers was started. They came from all over German Europe. By late 1942 there were several million foreign workers in Germany; by the end of the war, over five million. At first there was an effort to treat these people in terms of their racial provenance, from the favored Nordics to the despised Ostarbeiters (“workers
from the east”). Nevertheless, their working conditions and lives were in general deplorable. They were the slave laborers who later became the tragic displaced persons of the years after the war. Germany became a welter of industry, propaganda, and personal tragedy.

The military events of 1942 can be grouped under three general headings: submarine warfare, desert warfare in North Africa, and the Russian campaign. During that year the Allies lost close to eight million tons of shipping to the Axis, three-quarters of it in the Atlantic and six-sevenths as a result of submarine attack. This was the most urgent problem for the United States and Britain. Admiral Karl Doenitz, commander of submarines, established for himself a reputation as one of the greatest naval commanders of all time. Later he was to replace Grand Admiral Raeder as commander in chief of the navy.

In North Africa General Rommel led his Afrika Korps and its Italian allies in a powerful offensive against the British. It reached El Alamein, dangerously close to Alexandria and Cairo, where the Germans stopped and allowed British General Montgomery a period to reform and reequip his army, mostly with American supplies which began to arrive in large amounts.

The German command decided that the campaign of 1942 in Russia would be fought in the southern sector, perhaps with the initial objective of the Russian Caucasus oil fields and the eventual aim of encircling central Russia from the southeast. In May and June Generals Manstein, Bock, and Kleist undertook a ferocious campaign which started as auspiciously as the first attack the year before. The Crimea, the industrially important eastern Ukraine, and the Kuban steppes were captured. The right wing of the German army pushed rapidly to the southeast and reached as far as the Maikop oil fields, almost to the Caspian Sea. By August the left wing had reached the Volga in the neighborhood of the city of Stalingrad. There one of the most important battles of the war and of history was to be fought, but first the Germans paused to regroup and take a breathing spell.

By the autumn of 1942 German conquest reached its fullest extent. It was reasonable at that time to speak of German Europe. On the continent only Switzerland, Sweden, Turkey, and the Iberian Peninsula were maintaining a precarious neutrality; the coast of North Africa eastward well into Egypt was under Axis control. Hitler controlled more of Europe at this moment than anyone since the days of the Roman Empire.

This vast territory became the laboratory for what Hitler liked to describe as the “new order in Europe.” It is not easy to describe the new order briefly because here as everywhere in Nazism there was no uniform philosophy. The Nazis were opportunistic and variant in their
treatment of the conquered areas. There was some effort given to observing a racial hierarchy: conquered Nordics were treated better than conquered Latins or Slavs. Strategic, geographical considerations also determined in part the treatment of these areas.

Some territories were annexed into Greater Germany proper. These were lands occupied mainly by Germans or which had belonged to Germany before 1919. Among them were Austria, the Sudetenland, Posen (called the Wartheland), Danzig, West Prussia, Memel, Alsace-Lorraine, Luxemburg, Eupen-Malmédy, and parts of Slovenia. Cleansed of their foreign populations, these areas were to be part of the German core of the new Europe. The typical administrative process was to erect Reichsgaue, districts in which the government and the party leadership were merged, which had never been accomplished completely in Germany.

The protectorate of Bohemia-Moravia and the Government General were in a unique category. Their populations were technically part of Greater Germany but without the privileges of German citizenship. These areas were dependent territories. Here the Germans unleashed a particularly ferocious reign of terror designed to eliminate all educated people, who were potential forces of resistance. The future assigned for them was colonial, useful only to provide unskilled workers for the glory of Germany. They were left to the mercies of such tyrants as Hans Frank and Reinhard Heydrich with the support of the S.S. police organization.

Some areas were placed under military occupation. In this group were Belgium, Occupied France, Serbia, Macedonia, Crete, and parts of the conquered Soviet territory. Here the German police co-operated with the army in maintaining the peace of the grave, and recruited thousands for work in Germany.

In some places there was a mixed military and civilian occupation, sometimes with the aid of natives who were willing to collaborate with the Germans. Denmark, which the Germans tried to make into the ideal occupied state, was an example of this sort of control. So were Norway, the Netherlands (where Seyss-Inquart supervised a collaborationist government), and Unoccupied France. The lands conquered from Russia were a variant of this form, except that no natives took part in the control. Rosenberg, as minister for eastern occupied territories, established two commissariats, Ostland and the Ukraine, which were headed by two Gauleiter.

Italy was permitted to occupy some territories in France, Yugoslavia, and Greece. The satellite states—Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria, and Finland—each received increases of territory.


**Territory Annexed and Occupied by Germany, 1942**

- **Annexed Territory**
- **Occupied Territory**
Economically, every effort was made to despoil the conquered areas. In each case after conquest there was immediate seizure of assets. Jewish possessions were confiscated. An enormous amount of booty was transported to Germany. The nations were forced to pay the expenses of their own occupation. It is difficult to know just how the Germans intended eventually to organize Europe. They themselves probably did not know, except for some vague concept that the periphery of Europe would have the function of supplying raw materials to be manufactured in Germany for the benefit of the Germans. There was a good deal of talk in books and periodicals of Grossraumwirtschaft ("the economics of great space"), but much of it seems to have been the merest theorizing.

In the short run, except for the labor force which Germany recruited from the occupied countries, she did not receive the economic aid from them which she had counted on. This is particularly true of the Ukraine, which she hoped would solve her food problems. Removal of labor, resistance, sabotage, and the brutal treatment by the victors were all factors which militated against the usefulness of these areas. Except for industry close to Germany proper or for certain individual plants like the Phillips electrical works at Eindhoven, Holland, the Germans did not put the industrial machine of Europe to work at anything like its full capacity while the war was going on. Apparently it proved too hard a task to achieve. In other words, the new order never really came into existence.

The latter years of the war witnessed the culmination of German barbarism. This aspect of the struggle is intimately associated with the name of Heinrich Himmler, who in addition to his other functions became commissioner for the strengthening of Germanism and, late in the war, minister of the interior. He was in charge of the policy of Germanization. This was simply a euphemism for the destruction of all those whom the Germans considered inferior and the transplanting of good racial Germans into the cleared areas. The most tragic and virulent part of Himmler's work was the almost incredible drive to exterminate the entire Jewish people, a program lightly described as the "final settlement of the Jewish question." The German Jews had been almost wiped out or imprisoned before the war. Now it was the turn of the much larger Jewish populations of Poland, western Russia, and the Balkans. This was the worst period of tortures, hangings, mass shootings, gassings, and extermination camps. The accounts of these diabolic activities must not be considered as simply wartime atrocity stories. Their documentation is beyond question. In fact, they must be considered understatements, because words and statistics are unable to convey a full account of such unprecedented human misery. Probably not since the time of Tamer-
Jane has a conqueror been so brutal and inhuman as the Nazi conqueror.

The autumn of 1942 is generally considered to be the turning point of the war. At several widely distant spots events occurred that were to have important consequences. The first took place on October 23, when General Montgomery opened a major offensive against Rommel’s forces at El Alamein in Egypt. It was a triumphant success. The British pushed on across North Africa until by early 1943 the Germans and Italians were forced out of Libya and into Tunisia.

On November 7, 1942, a large force of American and British troops landed at a number of points along the coasts of Algeria and Morocco without serious opposition. The plan was to consolidate possession of these territories and then advance eastward to take Rommel’s German and Italian troops from the west while Montgomery was pushing them from the east. After a good deal of initial hesitation, resulting probably from inexperience, the plan was successful; by May 1943 the last Axis soldiers departed from African territory.

Far more impressive to the Germans at the moment was the tremendous and sanguinary battle of Stalingrad. The German army reached that neighborhood in the late summer of 1942 and started an attack on the city which lasted until November, when the Red army passed from the defensive to the offensive and launched the greatest battle of the war. The streets of Stalingrad and the waters of the Volga ran red with blood. The Russians succeeded in surrounding a large part of the German forces under the command of General F. Paulus. General Manstein, the senior group commander, tried to pierce his way through to the isolated units but without success. Hitler ordered Paulus to stand firm, and the bitter fighting dragged on through the frozen months of December and January. On January 31 Paulus could hold out no longer and surrendered himself and the remains of his forces, which numbered close to one hundred fifty thousand men.

It was not only in the neighborhood of Stalingrad that the Russians attacked. All along the southern half of the front they went on the offensive; by the spring of the new year the Germans, who had retreated steadily but stubbornly, found themselves approximately where they had been a year before. The Germans never managed to launch a general offensive again. For the rest of the war they were on the defensive, both in Russia and the west.

Stalingrad came as an appalling shock to the German population. When Paulus’ surrender was announced, the government ordered a period of national mourning; for days German radio stations played only elegiac Wagnerian music. Goebbels and Sauckel tried to make a victory out of the defeat, as the British had done after Dunkirk, by call-
ing on the German people for even greater sacrifices than they were already making. They decreed a total mobilization of labor, presumably even more complete than that of a year before. New comb-outs of manpower were ordered, and each German was expected to give unstintedly of his time, energy, and possessions. The bitter period of the war for Germany had begun, for in addition to the tragedies on the Russian front, the British and Americans were constantly increasing their air attacks on German cities, which wrought havoc in production, and even more, in transportation and morale.

The Germans made one last attempt at an offensive in Russia in July 1943. They launched a heavy attack on the central front near Kursk. However, the Soviets also had planned a thrust in the same general area and had built up their forces. The two great armies locked; after about a week of stubborn fighting the German impetus lessened and the Soviets assumed the offensive, which they maintained for the rest of the year. The German army retreated stubbornly according to plan, without panic, and selling dearly every inch of land; it was in this retreat that General Manstein proved himself one of the ablest German leaders. However, gradually the roll call of towns recaptured from the Germans became familiar through the daily Soviet communiqués. By the end of the year the Russians had liberated almost all of the Soviet Union as it had existed in 1938. The fighting was now in the newly acquired territories which had previously belonged to the three Baltic republics, Poland, and Romania.

In Italy serious developments from the German point of view filled the year 1943. After the British and Americans drove the Germans and Italians out of North Africa, they followed their success by landing a large force on Sicily in July. Within about a month the island was in Allied hands. However, the main development occurred in Rome, where on July 25 King Victor Emmanuel announced the dismissal of Mussolini and the appointment of a new government under Marshal Pietro Badoglio. The new authorities had to face almost immediately an invasion of the Italian mainland, for the Allies started to cross the Straits of Messina in mid-August. In less than a month the king decided that Italy had suffered enough. Accordingly his government offered to surrender to the Allies, and an armistice was announced on September 8.

The Germans reacted immediately. The Allies had hoped that they would be able to occupy most or all of Italy without serious fighting, but they were mistaken. The Germans solidified their control of northern Italy and rescued Mussolini from his prison. He promptly proclaimed a republican government with its headquarters in the north, another puppet state under German control. Field Marshal Kesselring, the German com-
mander in the area, rushed all possible troops southward; after a period of confusion a line was formed across Italy about halfway between Naples and Rome. Here the Allied advance halted throughout the autumn and winter. Bitter fighting ensued, particularly in the neighborhood of the great old Benedictine monastery, Montecassino. It was not until June 1944 that the Allies entered Rome, and August that they entered Florence. A new line was established in the last winter of the war in the mountainous country north of Florence.

The Allies had good reason to be proud of their progress in 1943. Both on the Russian front and in the west great gains were made, and at sea the statistics of German sinkings started to decrease. However, there was still a large reserve of German manpower in France and the Low Countries, which were poised to repulse any Allied landings in that area, the "second front" for which Stalin was so constantly clamoring. During the first months of 1944 the plans were completed for the great invasion under the supreme command of the American general, Dwight D. Eisenhower, while the British and American air forces continued to hammer relentlessly with their air raids on Germany.

The story of the Normandy landings has been told many times, but one cannot but marvel still at the sheer size of the operation and the multiplicity of detail involved. In the early hours of June 6, 1944, the first British and American units landed on French soil. Within a month almost a million equipped men were in northern France. The Germans had guessed that the landings would occur farther east where the Channel is narrower, but they had tried to entrench themselves along the whole coast and gave great publicity to their rapidly constructed fortifications, collectively known as the Atlantic Wall. The commander in the west was Field Marshal Gerd von Rundstedt, under whom was serving the hero of North Africa, Erwin Rommel. However, the German commitments in Russia were too great for them to maintain a sufficient force in the west. This was no longer the German army of several years before.

According to the Allied plan the British held the main weight of the German armor around Caen, while the Americans carried out a successful breakout to the west and south. By the end of August Paris was liberated. In southern France the Allies landed on the Riviera coast on August 15 and pushed northward through the Rhone Valley to meet the main force in the north. The Allied success was staggering in its rapidity, and optimists began to talk of an end to the war in Europe by Christmas. However, the Germans closed their ranks as they approached their own country, and the Allies, whose logistic lines were getting overextended, had to pause. By the end of the year there was still heavy fighting in Belgium and the Netherlands.
The Russians continued their triumphant march across central Europe, synchronizing their thrust with the landings in France. The events were similar to those of 1943. Mile by mile the Soviets advanced and the Germans retreated. In January 1945 Finland, Romania, Bulgaria, and Hungary had all submitted to the Soviet Union, and Russian troops were on German soil in East Prussia. Still Hitler was determined not to give in. He planned instead to make Germany a desert of destruction to serve as his sepulcher.

While these astonishing events were taking place at the front lines, a highly dramatic event occurred within Germany itself. On July 20, 1944, an attempt was made to kill Hitler which narrowly missed success. A young officer, Colonel Claus von Stauffenberg, placed a briefcase containing a bomb against the leg of a table at which Hitler was sitting during a conference at his eastern headquarters in East Prussia. The bomb exploded, but, although four people in the room were killed, the Führer suffered only cuts and burns. There were two principal reasons for his escape. It was a hot day, and the conference was held in a flimsy wooden building with open windows instead of the usual underground concrete shelter. Secondly, a moment before the explosion Hitler got up from his chair and walked across the room to look at a map. These two accidents saved his life. Stauffenberg heard the explosion, assumed that Hitler was dead, jumped into a plane, and flew to Berlin to help in the transfer of power to the anti-Nazi group which had planned the attempt.

In Berlin confusion reigned. The military heads of the conspiracy, General Ludwig Beck (chief of staff of the army until 1938) and Field Marshal von Witzleben, appeared at the war ministry, assumed control, and established contact with German army groups throughout Europe to announce the end of Hitler's rule. They had trouble in convincing General Fromm, commander of the home army, that Hitler was dead. Fromm put in a call to Hitler's headquarters and managed to get through, although the conspirators had tried to disrupt communications. He talked to General Keitel, who assured him that the Führer was alive and only slightly wounded, but the rebels refused to believe Keitel. Stauffenberg was back in Berlin, where he insisted that the bomb had done its work. The rebels actually surrounded the government quarter of the city with their troops.

The situation was clarified only when a propaganda officer persuaded Major Remer, commander of a guards battalion, to get in touch with Goebbels, who was in Berlin. Goebbels promised Remer that Hitler was alive, and indeed got Hitler on the telephone on his direct line. Hitler orally gave Remer and Goebbels plenary power to wipe out the rebels, in spite of Remer's relatively low rank. By the end of the day the
conspiracy had failed. That evening a shaky Hitler spoke over the radio to the German people. A wave of suicides, arrests, trials, tortures, and executions took place over the next few months accompanied by a new extreme of ferocity, the more extreme no doubt because it was a death agony. Very few of the conspirators escaped.

As the investigations progressed, the world was amazed at the widespread ramifications of the plot and the length of time it had been simmering. The two principal leaders were Beck and Dr. Karl Goerdeler, ex-mayor of Leipzig. These two were slated to become respectively the military and civilian heads of the new Germany. A surprising number of high-ranking military men were involved. Besides Witzleben and Beck, they included Rommel, Stuelpnagel, and even Admiral Canaris, head of the intelligence service. A special center of disaffection was the command in Paris, where the attempt came closest to success. Among the civilians there were Catholic intellectuals and others, of whom the best known was Ulrich von Hassell, a former ambassador to Italy. Some of the few remaining left-wing leaders were involved. Of the very few who were not executed the best known are Fabian von Schlabendorff and Hans Gisevius. Some of these men had been in contact as early as 1937 and 1938. They had hoped for victory at the time of the Munich conference, but were dismayed when the west yielded so completely and gave the Nazis another cheap triumph. During the war there were several assassination plots, but only the one of 1944 came within any measurable distance of success.

The mood of Germany in the winter of 1944–45 was desperate. For many months the propaganda ministry had been trying to revive failing spirits with predictions of new secret weapons, so lethal that the enemy would not be able to endure them. Observers were mystified at Allied air attacks on remote spots in Norway or at Peenemünde in the Baltic Sea. Later they were revealed to be experimental stations. A few days after the Normandy landings the Germans launched the first V-1 pilotless plane or "buzzbomb" toward London. This new mysterious weapon caused terrible damage. The Londoners had been free from attack for many months, and the prospect of its renewal brought many close to panic. The summer of 1944 was fraught with terror in the English capital; in fact, some wits talked of going to Normandy for a rest. However, as the Allies conquered more and more of the launching sites for these weapons along the coast of France and Belgium, the attacks lessened, since now the V-1's had to be launched from distant Holland or from the air. In the fall the Germans shifted their attack on London to attacks on the liberated coast, particularly Antwerp, where casualties were severe.
That same fall the V-2 rocket appeared. This weapon traveled faster than sound, so there was no defense against it. If the Germans had been able to produce these rockets in real quantity and to launch them rapidly, they might have created a desperately serious situation for the Allies. However, they did not succeed in this, and by the early months of 1945 the secret weapon scare was allayed.

By this time intelligent Germans realized that the end was in sight and could not be delayed much longer.