CHAPTER XXXV

Defeat in 1945

The German armed forces, under the immediate control of Hitler, made one final effort at an offensive to repulse the British and American troops, some of which were already on German soil. In mid-December 1944 they launched the Battle of the Bulge in the Ardennes Forest in eastern Belgium. This desperate drive had intelligent reasoning behind it. It was an effort to drive a wedge at the point of juncture of the British and the Americans. It was aimed at the possession of Antwerp, the one major port which the Allies had captured in a reasonably usable condition. General Eisenhower sent every possible reinforcement to the threatened area and placed the American troops in the north under the command of Montgomery. Air attacks were intensified in spite of the bad weather. The fighting was severe, but by the end of January the Germans were pushed back to their original lines. Thenceforward there were no German successes.

The last three months of the war witnessed uninterrupted advance of the Allied armies into Germany from the west, south, and east. On March 7 an American unit crossed the Rhine at Remagen, not far south of Cologne. Some days later the British crossed in their sector. In Italy the Allies continued their offensive northward and by late April had cleared the Germans from almost the whole peninsula. Mussolini was killed by Italian partisans on April 28, and on May 2 hostilities in that area ceased. The Russians captured Warsaw in January, Budapest in February, Danzig in March, and Königsberg and Vienna in April. By that time the suburbs of Berlin were invested by Soviet forces. On April 25 American and Soviet units met on the Elbe River. Germany was cut into two parts. This was the end.

Hitler had spent most of the later years of the war at his eastern headquarters near Rastenburg in East Prussia. He devoted himself almost exclusively to intimate supervision of military operations, and for relaxation held lunch parties at which he delivered himself of pontifical
statements on all subjects. After the attempt of July 20, 1944, his physical and mental health deteriorated noticeably, not as a result of his injuries but of general nervous strain, physical inactivity, and the increasing numbers of phony and even dangerous pills and injections with which he stuffed himself. At times he burst into hysterical tantrums, railing against the German people for not measuring up to his greatness.

In the early winter Hitler made a brief visit to Berlin and then went to his western headquarters near Bad Nauheim, where he directed the offensive in the Ardennes. Then on January 16, 1945, he returned to Berlin, never again to leave the chancellery building and its air-raid shelter. He refused to face the inevitable and accused as traitors those who talked of defeat or surrender. He was determined to bring down all Germany around him in a final immolation. The comparison with the last scene of Wagner's Götterdämmerung is hackneyed and threadbare but almost irresistible. Hitler ordered the most complete sort of scorched-earth policy. If his commands had been carried out to the letter, Germany would have consisted only of charred wood, twisted steel, and broken stone. It is to his credit that Albert Speer determined to avoid this tragedy. He sabotaged Hitler's policy at great personal risk by countermanding the Führer's orders and substituting for them directions to retire without destruction.

Hitler celebrated his fifty-sixth and last birthday on April 20, 1945. For some weeks he had existed in the cramped conditions of the underground shelter (Führerbunker). On that day occurred the last gathering of the faithful. Eva Braun, Hitler's mistress, had arrived from the south. Goering was there; so were Himmler, Goebbels, Döenitz, Keitel, General Jodl, Ribbentrop, Bormann, and Speer. After they tendered congratulations, they sat once more in council. The paladins pleaded with Hitler to leave Berlin and go to the south. Berlin was not defensible, but the so-called Alpine Redoubt in Bavaria and Austria, where most of the remaining German troops were located, could, it was thought, be held almost indefinitely because of the difficult mountainous terrain. Hitler had not made up his mind. That evening he took a cool last farewell of Goering, whom he now despised on account of the failure of the Luftwaffe. The paladins separated, some never to meet again and others only as prisoners.

Two days later Hitler had made his decision. He determined to remain in Berlin to the last and to kill himself when the final moment came. All who wished could go, but he would stay in his capital. Bormann remained; so did Goebbels with his wife and children; and so did a shifting group of military figures, secretaries, aides, and servants. By April 25 the Russians had surrounded Berlin and the only possible means
of egress for the group around Hitler were improvised airstrips in the Tiergarten. The only communication was by radio.

The last few days of Hitler's life are not important to German history. He had done his worst and the rest was out of his hands. However, these days are fascinating and macabre as a study in abnormal psychology. A good deal of the time was spent in attacking "traitorous" high Nazis. Speer paid a last visit to the Bunker and admitted the degree to which he had undermined Hitler's demand for a scorched-earth policy. Hitler let him go unscathed. He was exhausted, and his affection for Speer had been remarkable. Goering, acting on verbal information from the Bunker, sent a message to Hitler suggesting that since Hitler was no longer a free agent, he, as successor to Hitler, should assume control. Goering set a deadline after which he would start to act as Führer. Hitler replied violently, stripping Goering of all his titles and positions and threatening him with death. A final blow came with the news, intercepted from a British report, that Himmler had been negotiating with the Swedish Count Folke Bernadotte to act as an intermediary to obtain peace from the Western Allies. Himmler was prepared to assume personal responsibility. This defection was almost unbearable to Hitler; even the faithful Himmler had deserted. After a frightful scene Hitler ordered the arrest of the S.S. leader.

On the night of April 28–29 Hitler made his final plans. Shortly after midnight a municipal official of Berlin was brought into the Bunker to perform a brief marriage ceremony uniting Hitler and Eva Braun, with Bormann and Goebbels as witnesses. There followed hours of conversation and reminiscing over champagne. In the intervals of the conversation Hitler retired and dictated his two testaments, a political one and a personal one. The political testament begins with sweeping generalities in the old familiar manner. It then expels from the party both Goering and Himmler and names Grand Admiral Doenitz as president and commander of the armed forces. It names other officials to carry on the work: Goebbels as chancellor, Bormann as party chancellor, and Seyss-Inquart as foreign minister. The personal testament explains to the world Hitler's marriage, announces his impending death, and bequeaths his personal possessions. These testaments were drawn up in several copies and sent out of the Bunker by messengers. They never reached their destinations and were discovered accidentally months later.

Hitler carried out his decision on April 30. After a formal lunch he and Eva Braun took leave of their companions in the Bunker and retired to their rooms. A few moments later a shot was heard. Frau Hitler had taken a rapid poison, but her husband had shot himself through the head.
The faithful carried the bodies outside, poured gallons of gasoline on them, and set them alight. They burned for hours until they were charred bones. Outside the walls a greater fire, the fire of Berlin, was burning too. The two conflagrations were not unconnected.

There was a curious confusion about getting the news of his appointment and of Hitler's death to Doenitz, who was at his headquarters at Ploen in Schleswig-Holstein. It was obviously up to Bormann and Goebbels to carry out the Führer's wishes. Bormann sent a radio message to Doenitz informing him that he was the successor to Hitler but not telling him that Hitler was dead. It would appear that Bormann still nursed political ambitions and wanted to reach Doenitz as soon as possible after the news of Hitler's death. Goebbels, however, had decided to disobey Hitler's appointment of him as the new chancellor and instead to commit suicide. The two made an unsuccessful attempt to negotiate with the local Russian command. The next morning, May 1, Bormann sent a cryptic message to Doenitz. It read: "The Testament is in force. I will join you as soon as possible. Till then, I recommend that publication be held up." (Quoted in H. R. Trevor-Roper, The Last Days of Hitler, New York: Macmillan, 1947, p. 210.) He was still anxious to reach the new seat of power. Some hours later Goebbels sent a more informative message announcing the time of Hitler's death and listing the officials whom Hitler had named for the new government. Goebbels then returned to his private rooms and poisoned his six children. He and his wife walked out of the Bunker and stood still while they were shot by an S.S. man. Their bodies were only partially burned and were discovered by the Russians the next day.

Late that night the remaining occupants of the Bunker, including Bormann, attempted a mass escape. Some were successful, but Bormann was never heard of again. There is a reasonably reputable story that he was seen dead on a Berlin street.

Doenitz was astonished at the news, which he heard for the first time in Bormann's message, that he was Hitler's successor. He apparently assumed that Himmler would get the appointment and was prepared to work with him, though he disliked him. However, as a military man, he was ready to obey. On the evening of May 1 over the Hamburg radio, to the strains of music by Wagner and Bruckner, Doenitz announced the death of Hitler to those Germans who had the time or energy to listen.

Doenitz was not, and never claimed to be, a political figure. He was a highly competent naval officer and a man endowed with solid common sense, a quality which he used during the next few days. He immediately moved his headquarters from Ploen to Flensburg on the Danish border and started to form a government. He realized that the Nazi leaders
would be a liability in his efforts to negotiate with the Allies. He thus disobeyed Hitler and, instead of appointing Seyss-Inquart as foreign minister, appointed the innocuous former finance minister, Count Schwerin Krosigk. Dönitz' greatest annoyance during the first few days was the presence of Himmler and a large entourage of the S.S. The admiral, anxious to be rid of this specter, simply sent him a note relieving him of all his functions and thanking him for his services to Germany. Himmler, irresolute and confused, stayed around for some days; after the surrender he tried to escape, wandered into a British control post, gave himself up, and swallowed poison as British soldiers were searching his body.

The men at Flensburg realized that their only hope for favorable treatment from the victors lay with surrender to the British and Americans rather than to the Russians. They tried to approach General Montgomery. However, Montgomery, supported by his chief, Eisenhower, had to remain true to the Allied policy of no separate peace and of unconditional surrender. On May 4 Admiral von Friedeburg, who had succeeded Dönitz as commander in chief of the navy, surrendered the troops in northwest Europe to the Allies. On May 7 he and General Jodl of the OKW traveled to Rheims where they offered the unconditional surrender of Germany to the Allies in the presence of a Russian observer. On May 9 he and General Keitel performed the same duty in Berlin to the Russians before British and American observers. World War II in Europe was over, and Nazi Germany was at an end.

Life at Flensburg was unreal for the next ten days. As small groups of Allied control officials arrived there, they were greeted aboard the headquarters ship, "Patria," as guests rather than victors, and guarded by armed German soldiers and sailors. Dönitz arranged meals and conferences. This fiction became unbearable, and on May 21 Dönitz and his shadow government were arrested and sent to join the other Nazi leaders who had been found.

The epilogue to the career of the Nazi hierarchy occurred a year and a half later in a courtroom on the outskirts of Nuremberg. The four major victorious powers—the United States, Great Britain, the Soviet Union, and France—organized an international military tribunal to try the Nazi leaders for war crimes, crimes against peace, and crimes against humanity. A good deal of criticism has been levied against the right of victors to try the vanquished for crimes which had not been defined previously. At least it can be said that the trial was not a kangaroo court, but was held soberly with every possibility given to the accused for their defense. It lasted for almost a year from November 1945 to October 1946. The testimony was mostly documentary from German sources.
Twenty-two men were tried, including Bormann in absentia. Three were acquitted: Papen, Schacht, and Fritsche (an underling from the propaganda ministry standing in for his master Goebbels). Seven were given prison terms ranging from ten years to life at an international prison at Spandau in Berlin: Döenitz, Neurath, Speer, Schirach, Raeder, Funk, and Hess. Twelve were condemned to be hanged: Goering, Ribbentrop, Keitel, Jodl, Rosenberg, Frick, Seyss-Inquart, Sauckel, Bormann, Kaltenbrunner (one of Himmler’s principal subordinates), Frank, and Streicher. At the last moment Goering managed to cheat the hangman by somehow procuring poison and committing suicide. The rest were executed. The drama which began when Adolf Hitler made his first speech at a beer hall in Munich in 1919 had reached its terrifying catharsis.