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Stalingrad and Beyond, 1942-1943 Transcript

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STALINGRAD AND BEYOND 1942-43

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For Hitler, 1939-45 was in many ways a rerun of 1914-18, except that he was determined of course that it should end in victory rather than defeat. The Nazis aimed both to recreate the spirit of national unity they believed had been summoned up by the declaration of war in August 1914, and avoid the stab-in-the-back by Jewish revolutionaries at home that they thought had been the main cause of the German defeat four years later. In Hitler's paranoid and extremist ideology, not only Stalin but also Churchill and Roosevelt were tools of an international Jewish conspiracy that united plutocrats and communists in a mutual determination to destroy the Third Reich. As soon as Operation Barbarossa was launched, Hitler and Goebbels unleashed a furious and sustained propaganda offensive that linked Churchill's obduracy and Stalin's stubbornness with the increasing quantities of vital supplies being shipped across the Atlantic under Roosevelt's direction. In numerous broadcasts, speeches, wall posters and newspaper articles pumped out by the Propaganda Ministry in the second half of 1941, the refrain was always the same: the Jews were trying to destroy Germany, so they must be destroyed in their turn. Hitler and Goebbels made frequent reference to Hitler's 'prophecy' in the Reichstag on 30 January 1939, when he said that if the Jews started a world war, they and not Germany would be annihilated.

All of this created a genocidal mentality that exerted a strong influence over ordinary German soldiers and above all the SS Task Forces sent in to the Soviet Union in the wake of the invading armies. Soon the Task Forces were carrying out mass shootings of Jewish men, women and children, egged on by the SS chief Heinrich Himmler, who frequently visited their areas of operation and encouraged them to spare no-one. In October 1941, as the strain of these shootings on the SS men became obvious, Himmler organized the construction of special camps at Belzec and Chelmno, whose sole purpose was to put to death large numbers of Jews by gassing; by the spring of 1942 the Jews imprisoned in the ghettos the Nazis had created in major Polish cities were being taken there, and to additional extermination camps at Sobibor and Treblinka, for immediate killing, and a new camp was opened at Auschwitz where Jews from Nazi-occupied countries all over Europe were taken to be murdered. Altogether in the course of the war nearly six million Jews were killed. From the point of view of Hitler and the Nazis, this removed a potent internal threat to the security of the German empire in Europe. It was an act of war, a necessity. It was not a by-product of the war, not did it stand apart from the conduct of the war, it belonged integrally to it.

Hitler did not launch this unprecedented campaign of genocide out of a sense of euphoria following the victories of June, July and August 1941; it already began in effect on the very day on which German forces invaded the Soviet Union. However, during the autumn of 1941 the optimism of the summer months gradually began to subside. The German Army General Staff started to realize that the Red Army had millions of men in reserve and was using them to replace the millions killed or taken prisoner by the invading armies. Hitler started to realize that the Soviet system was not going to collapse at the first signs of military defeat. German losses started to mount - 213,000 missing, killed or wounded by the end of July 1941 already. It became clear to the German leadership that Army Groups North, Centre and South could not advance in equal strength. A choice had to be made. The generals, following the traditional Clausewitzian doctrine that the object of a war was to destroy the main enemy force, wanted to push on to confront the large Soviet army defending Moscow. Hitler decided however to transfer troops to the southern sector of the Eastern Front, to conquer the remainder of the Ukraine and push on towards the Caucasus. Further massive victories followed, and at the end of September Army Group Centre was strengthened once again, and resumed its march on Moscow.

But now the advance began to run into difficulties. First of all, the relentless October rains turned the unmade Russian roads into impassable sludge. Railway lines were few and far between, and the broad gauge caused difficulties in transferring munitions and supplies from the standard-gauge German system. The Russians had destroyed rolling stock and sabotaged tracks, bridges and viaducts. The Germans had thrown most of their forces into the fray and had few reserves left. By contrast, Stalin decided to transfer 400,000 experienced troops, 1,000 tanks and 1,000 combat aircraft from eastern Siberia on learning from his spy in Tokyo, Richard Sorge, shortly before his arrest in mid-October, that the Japanese had other targets in mind than the Soviet Union; in a few weeks' time indeed they were to launch their assault on Pearl Harbor.

When the cold weather came, in November, and the Germans were able to resume their advance, temperatures down to minus 40 degrees Celsius began to wreak havoc among the troops, who had not been issued with winter clothing because

they had been expected to overwinter in Moscow rather than on the open steppe. Cases of frostbite multiplied, and a personal appeal to the German public to provide warm clothing for the troops on 20 December 1941 came too late. Snowstorms prevented supplies getting through. The soldiers were already tired from their almost ceaseless fighting since the previous June. They were easy prey for the fresh Russian forces Stalin and his leading general Zhukov now threw at them.

The German generals had only been trained to attack, in the classic Prussian tradition. They were now forced to retreat, with Zhukov threatening to encircle them. There was only one railway line open from the Moscow front to the German rear, and almost all the roads were blocked by snow. As General Gotthard Heinrici wrote in his diary:

Hampered by the snow and especially the snowdrifts, often shoveling ourselves out metre by metre, and traveling with vehicles and equipment that are by no means adequate for the Russian winter, behind us the enemy pressing on, concern to bring the troops to safety in time, to carry the wounded along, not to let too many weapons or too much equipment fall into enemy hands, all this was sorely trying for the troops and their leaders...Kitted-out with fabulous winter equipment, the Russians everywhere push through the wide gaps that have opened up in our front...The retreat in snow and ice is absolutely Napoleonic in its manner. The losses are similar.

So great was the strain on the German generals, men mostly in their sixties, that they started to fall ill. Fedor von Bock, commander of Army Group Centre, went on sick leave on 16 December, Walther von Brauchitsch, Commander-in-Chief of the Army, had a heart attack in mid-November, Gerd von Rundstedt, commander of Army Group South, sacked by Hitler for allowing General von Kleist to withdraw from Rostov in a manoeuvre Hitler soon afterwards conceded had been correct, had a heart attack in early December, and his successor Walter von Reichenau died of a heart attack on 17 January 1942. Hitler took over command of the army himself and ordered it to make a stand. Contrary to what many of them later claimed, the generals and troops welcomed the replacement of confusion by clarity. Men like Bock had known that their forces were too weak and poorly equipped to overrun Moscow in the winter yet they had failed to prepare defensive positions for overwintering on the steppe. The later legend that they would have won the war if Hitler hadn't interfered was no more than that - a legend.

But once he had decided to take a stand, Hitler would not be gainsaid, and he fired a number of generals, including Ritter von Leeb, Heinz Guderian and Erich Hoepner, who insisted on retreating anyway. Nevertheless the front was stabilized by mid-January. German losses were huge. While only 19,000 German troops had been killed in 1939 and 83,000 in 1940, no fewer than 357,000 were killed in 1941, more than 300,000 of them on the Eastern Front. By the end of the war, more people were to fight and die on both sides on the Eastern Front than in all the other theatres of war put together, including the Far East. The proportion of the German armed forces engaged on the Eastern Front from 22 June 1941 to the end of the war was never less than two-thirds. This, more than any other part of the war, was to prove the decisive arena of battle.

Despite the reverse at Moscow, the German armies on the Eastern Front began campaigning in 1942 with a fresh series of successes. Nothing much could be done before the spring rains ceased in May 1942. Rash and poorly prepared Soviet counter-attacks were repelled with heavy losses. Hitler knew that he needed to acquire the oilfields of the Caucasus. Field Marshal von Bock, now recovered from his illness, was put in command of Army Group South, but after capturing the city of Voronezh, the Field Marshal, sobered by his experiences of the previous winter, paused to regroup and re-equip; Hitler considered him over-cautious, and fired him too, dividing the Army Group into two and ordering one to advance through the Caucasus to Chechnya and the oilfields of Baku, while the other would take the city of Stalingrad and push on via the lower Volga to the Caspian Sea.

The German armies occupied the Crimea, taking hundreds of thousands of prisoners, and pushed on south. But the Red Army had a new tactic, withdrawing rather than facing encirclement; and the new equipment from the factories moved to safety behind the Urals was now coming on-stream. The Russian generals were learning to co-ordinate tanks, infantry and air support for the first time, and began to mount serious counter-attacks. Chief of the Army General Staff Franz Halder was sacked by Hitler when he tried to point out that mounting German losses were making it increasingly unlikely that the new offensives would succeed. Hitler was not always entirely opposed to tactical withdrawals and retreats when he could see the need for them; but fundamentally he believed, as the title of the film made about him by Leni Riefenstahl in 1934, in the "triumph of the will". As General Erich Hoepner noted shortly before Hitler fired him: '-Fanatical will' alone won't do it. The will is there. The strength is lacking.'

The next general to go was Field Marshal Wilhelm List, who was in command of the armies invading the Caucasus. List told

Hitler he did not have the resources to complete the job before winter set in. Hitler appointed Field Marshal Ewald von Kleist to take over; but he too considered the only option was to withdraw. So Kleist got Hitler's reluctant permission to retreat all the way to Rostov. The bid to take the oil reserves of the Caucasus had failed. One reason was simply that the German forces, split into three, were trying to do too much. Troops and equipment were tied up in the siege of Leningrad, the present-day St Petersburg, in the north, where Hitler had decided to starve the city out; a million of its inhabitants died before the siege was finally lifted. But the main reason was that the push towards the city of Stalingrad had begun to encounter serious difficulties. Unlike the Caucasus, Stalingrad has tremendous symbolic significance for Hitler; it carried Stalin's name, and while there were good strategic reasons for attacking it, capturing Stalingrad soon became an end in itself.

The commander of the German Sixth Army, General Friedrich von Paulus, had spent his whole career in staff positions and had almost no combat experience. He was completely in awe of Hitler's genius as a military commander, as he saw it. Yet in early October 1942 along with other senior generals he advised Hitler that it would be best to withdraw. His men had overrun two-thirds of the city but the resistance they were encountering was causing heavy casualties. But Hitler insisted that the city had to be taken. German bombers had destroyed most of the city's buildings but in doing so they had created ideal conditions for house-to-house fighting. The Red Army brought in over a million men and large quantities of tanks for a counter-attack. By this stage Russia was producing more than 2,000 tanks a month while Germany was building only 500. Trying to break the deadlock, the Germans moved their best troops in to the city and left defensive positions to the west in the hands of soldiers from the Third Reich's allies Italy and Romania. Paulus also moved his tanks up to the city, where they were in fact of little use, instead of keeping them in reserve on the open steppe. On 19 November 1942 the Red Army attacked the Romanian lines almost 100 miles west of the city and broke through.

As T-34 tanks poured through the gap, forcing the Germans in neighbouring positions to retreat, Paulus failed to realize what was in progress until it was too late. A Russian thrust from the south punched another hole in the rear defences of the German armies, and the two Red Army groups met up on 23 November, surrounding Paulus and his men completely. An attempt by Field Marshal von Manstein to break through from the south was defeated when the Marshal Georgi Zhukov, in command of the Red Army forces in the area, attacked the Italian forces holding the north-west perimeter, broke through and threatened to cut Manstein off in the rear; Manstein was forced to abandon his attempt to relieve the besieging forces and retreat in order to avoid being surrounded himself.

Hitler repeatedly refused Paulus permission to withdraw from the city; but in any case this would have been difficult if not impossible. The problem was not, as it had been in Moscow the year before, the cold: the German troops at Stalingrad were warmly clad and well prepared for winter fighting. The problem was the difficulty of supplying them with arms, ammunition, food and fuel. Paulus had to tell Hitler he could not break out anyway because his army only had enough fuel to take it 12 miles before it ran out, while the furthest Manstein's armour got before being forced to retreat was 35 miles from the city boundary. Planes found it difficult to land in the snow, and the airfields were under constant bombardment. Gradually supplies ran out. The results can be read in the German soldiers' letters home. 'All the horses have been eaten in a few days', reported General Heinrici not long before he himself was airlifted out. One soldier reported his entire company had been given only a single loaf for six men to last three days. 'Although I am exhausted', wrote another on 10 January 1943, 'I cannot sleep at night, but dream with open eyes again of cakes, cakes, cakes. Sometimes I pray and sometimes I curse my fate. In any case, everything has no meaning or point.' 'How much we wish we could really shoot properly once again', wrote another; but they simply didn't have the ammunition.

Bombarded by artillery and aircraft, with Russian tanks and infantry pouring through their weakened defences to the south and west, the bedraggled soldiers of the German Sixth Army were driven back into the ruins of the city, sick, starving, frostbitten, exhausted, and driven half-mad by the lice that crawled over them and found ideal breeding-places in their warm winter clothing. 100,000 German troops had been killed by the time the first offer of surrender came. But Hitler refused to allow Paulus to accept it. Indeed, he now promoted him to the rank of Field Marshal with a clear hint that he was expected to kill himself rather than capitulate. Paulus finally turned against his master on 31 January, surrendering with all the troops still under his command; the rest of the army laid down its arms two days later. 200,000 of the German forces had been killed by this point. 235,000 were taken prisoner. The Russians were unprepared for dealing with such numbers, especially since the Germans were in such poor condition, weakened by starvation and disease. Eventually fewer than 6,000 of the German prisoners made it back home after the war.

This was a defeat of enormous magnitude and significance. Hitler, Goebbels and Göring tried to dress it up in the rhetoric of self-sacrifice, and glorious heroic death for Germany, but most ordinary Germans were unimpressed. They had already

heard the truth from the millions of letters that reached families, friends and relatives before the last airfield in Stalingrad was cut off. SS Security Service reports noted that people everywhere were saying that Stalingrad should have been relieved sooner, or the German armies allowed to retreat. Many considered it a turning-point in the war. Most significantly of all, perhaps, criticisms of Hitler himself could now be heard, even in a muted way. Rumours began to spread about him - his hair had turned white, for example - and jokes as well. 'What's the difference between the sun and Hitler?', went one: 'the sun comes up in the east, Hitler goes down in the east.' People began to stop saying *Heil, Hitler!* to each other and started saying 'Good morning' again. And there were reports that people were increasingly listening to foreign radio stations, though it was a criminal offence punishable by death. The BBC reckoned that its German-language broadcasts were attracting an audience of more than 15 million by this time.

Hitler had risen to power not least because of his charismatic oratory, and during the first years of his rule, he was tireless in visiting different parts of the country, speaking at rallies, and broadcasting on the radio. But now, obsessed with the direction of the war, he stopped addressing the German public, sacrificing what was in many ways his best asset. He did not broadcast after Stalingrad until 21 March, nearly two months after the surrender, and listeners were taken aback by the dull, rapid monotone in which he read his speech, some of them even refusing to believe he was delivering it himself at all. In 1940 Hitler gave 9 public addresses, in 1942 he gave 5, and in 1943 only 2. He delivered a radio speech on 30 January 1944, and a brief announcement on 21 July 1944, and that was it; he was never heard directly by the German public again. Goebbels implored him to visit cities devastated by Allied bombing, but he refused. His Arms Minister Albert Speer later reported how he was travelling with Hitler in the Leader's private train on 7 November 1942 when it stopped fortuitously beside a stationary goods train in which wounded German soldiers were being taken back from Stalingrad in cattle trucks. As Hitler and his companions began their ample dinner, eating with silver cutlery and drinking from cut-glass tumblers laid out on the elegant dining car tables with flower arrangements and starched tablecloths and napkins, Hitler 'noticed the somber scene two metres from his window. Without as much as a gesture of greeting in their direction', wrote Speer, 'he peremptorily ordered his servant to draw the blinds.'

Part of the problem was that Hitler himself was suffering from deteriorating health by this time, including progressive arteriosclerosis and heart disease, repeated stomach cramps possibly caused by the increasing number of pills prescribed him by his doctor, Theo Morell, and a tremor in his left hand and jerking movements in his left leg that were obvious to many by the end of 1942 and signalled the onset of Parkinson's disease. But though he was increasingly reluctant to show himself in public, he still insisted on keeping his hands on the reins of power. He more or less lost interest in domestic affairs, concentrating on the direction of the war instead. As a result, in-fighting between different parts of the regime grew fiercer. While the civil administration simply continued on its routine way, promulgating new rules and regulations as it thought necessary, the Party, and particularly the ambitious head of the Party Chancellery Martin Bormann, along with Heinrich Himmler's SS, steadily increased their influence; Bormann in particular benefited from the fact that his erstwhile chief Rudolf Hess, nominally at least Hitler's deputy, had flown to England on a harebrained, self-appointed peace mission on 10 May 1941, leaving the effective powers of his office, which was immediately formally abolished, in Bormann's hands.

It was another Nazi radical, Propaganda Minister Joseph Goebbels, who now took the initiative. Acting with Hitler's approval, Goebbels had 14,000 of the most fanatical Nazi Party activists summoned to a mass rally in the Berlin Sports Palace on 18 February 1943 to hear him deliver a rabble-rousing speech in favour of what he called 'total war'. 'Are you and the German people', he shouted, 'determined, if the Leader orders it, to work ten, twelve and, if necessary, fourteen and sixteen hours a day and to give your utmost for victory' [*Loud shouts of "Yes!" and lengthy applause*...I ask you: Do you want total war? [*Loud cries of "Yes!" Loud applause*] Do you want it, if necessary, more total and more radical than we can even imagine it today? [*Loud cries of "Yes!" Applause*]. This stage-managed occasion was broadcast on national radio and reported in full in the daily press. In alliance with Armaments Minister Albert Speer, Goebbels introduced a series of measures cutting back even further on luxuries, closing down restaurants and cafés, and began a new drive to mobilize women for the war effort at home.

But ordinary German citizens commented rightly that they had been waging total war for a long time already. Real per capita output of all consumer goods had already fallen by nearly a quarter between 1938 and 1941, and by 1942 government regulations were squeezing civilian consumption even further by providing the armed forces with the bulk of consumables, so that per capita meat consumption in the armed forces was four times higher than among civilians, half of all textile sales went to the armed forces, and 90 per cent of the furniture made in Germany went to the military. Taxes had increased by an average 20 per cent for ordinary workers and over 50 per cent for the better-off. Food and clothing rationing had already been severe since the spring of 1942. People did not starve, but they were seldom able to purchase

food and clothing up to the maximum ration because they simply weren't available - and the maximum allowance in 1943 stood at 9 kilos of bread a month, just under 2 kilos of meat, and just under a kilo of fat including butter and margarine. Few people were able to live off these amounts. Clothing consumption was reduced to a quarter of peacetime levels by October 1941, and the difficulty of obtaining cotton, leather and wool meant that many clothes were made of inferior substitutes. 'A man who is tired of life tries in vain to hang himself', went a joke heard on the streets of Berlin in April 1942: ' - impossible: the rope is made of synthetic fibre and snaps. Then he tries to jump into the river - but he floats, because he's - wearing a suit made from wood. Finally he succeeds in taking his own life. He has been existing for two months on no more than he got from his ration card.'

If it wasn't possible to squeeze living standards and consumption levels any further, then neither did Goebbels succeed in mobilizing more women for war production. To begin with, Germany had a far higher proportion of adult women in the workforce than Britain or the USA before the war, particularly because of their employment in small farming. Then the generous allowances paid by the state to the wives and widows of men on active service, designed by the regime to avoid the kind of domestic poverty and discontent that Hitler thought had been so important in undermining the German forces in the First World War, deterred many from going out to work. Nazi propaganda in any case emphasized women's role in bearing children for the Reich and giving support to their menfolk. There was no German equivalent of the American propaganda icon 'Rosie the Riveter' doing a man's job in what had previously been seen as a man's industrial world. Employers in any case found it easier to recruit cheap but skilled foreign labourers, for whom they did not have to provide many of the safety regulations, benefits and privileges that the law demanded for women workers from Germany.

Total war was thus little more than a slogan. One thing Goebbels's speech did achieve, however: it broadened and deepened the apprehension among ordinary Germans that the military situation after Stalingrad had now become very serious for Germany. In the course of 1943, it worsened even more. In the East, the Germans transferred fresh troops from western Europe, then after the spring rains were over, launched a major assault on a bulge in the front around the city of Kursk, hoping to cut off the Russian troops by simultaneous attacks from north and south. But the Russians were waiting for them. Informed in advance about the German plans, they had brought up huge masses of men and equipment. Over three months, some 300,000 civilian conscripts had constructed defences in depth, with deep ditches, tank traps, bunkers and artillery arranged in eight lines, one behind the other. The result was the largest land battle in history, involving a total on both sides combined of more than 4 million troops, 69,000 artillery pieces, 12,000 tanks and self-propelled guns, and nearly 12,000 combat aircraft.

The Battle of Kursk began badly for the Red Army. The Germans shot down 425 Soviet planes with the loss of only 36 of their own. The new German Tiger and Panther tanks proved so effective that Soviet tank commanders were forced to bury their own inferior tanks in the ground with only their camouflaged turrets visible, to fire on the German armour at close range. When Field-Marshal Manstein broke through the Soviet defences in the south, the Red Army generals sent 600 tanks in to try and stop his forces getting any further. Facing a mere 117 German tanks, they seemed almost bound to succeed. But the Soviet tank-drivers failed to notice a 4.5 metre deep anti-tank trench dug shortly before by Soviet pioneers as part of the defensive lines, and as they charged down the hill outside the town of Prochorovka, they fell into it, with those following veering to avoid the wreckage, crashing into one another and bursting into flames. The German tank soldiers, who had been asleep when the assault began, opened fire, increasing the chaos. By the end of the day, 235 Russian tanks had been destroyed; the Germans lost only three. Frightened at the likely consequences for themselves when Stalin discovered what had happened, the Soviet tank commander Pavel Rotmistrov and the leading Party official in the area, one Nikita Khrushchev, concocted a report that claimed 400 German tanks had been destroyed in a vast and heroic battle that had ended in a Soviet victory, thus giving birth to the long-lived legend that Kursk had witnessed the largest tank battle in history, whereas in reality it had been one of history's greatest military blunders.

These setbacks did not, however, alter the fact that the Red Army possessed an overwhelming superiority in men, armour and equipment at Kursk. On 12 July 1943 more than a million fresh Russian troops, with 3,200 tanks and self-propelled guns, and nearly 4,000 aircraft, were thrown into the fray. While Soviet-backed partisans harried the German rear, preventing fresh reinforcements, fuel and ammunition from being sent in, the Soviets launched a huge counter-offensive, driving the German armies back. Hitler was forced to call the operation off. The Russians lost 1,677,000 men dead, wounded or missing in action, they lost 6,000 tanks and more than 4,200 aircraft. Stalin was astonishingly profligate with the lives of his men. German losses were far smaller: 170,000 men dead, wounded or missing; 760 tanks destroyed; 524 aircraft shot down. But the Germans were far less able to sustain their losses. Kursk was the last serious German counter-attack in the east. It did not destroy the German army, but it left it far weaker. It inaugurated a long retreat that was to continue for the rest of the

war.

What had happened to the missing German tanks at Kursk, the tanks Rotmistrov and Khrushchev claimed had been destroyed? Hitler had ordered them to be pulled out and transferred to Italy to defend the peninsula in the face of a looming Allied invasion. Rommel's advance in North Africa had been brought to a halt at the Battle of El Alamein in October 1942, where his forces were overwhelmed by an Allied army with more than twice his numbers of men and tanks. As he retreated, the Allies used their command of the Mediterranean to land 63,000 men in Morocco and Algeria. In March 1943 Rommel returned to Germany on sick leave; in May 1943, a quarter of a million Axis troops, half of them German, surrendered to the Allies in North Africa. The following year Rommel reflected on his defeat. He still thought he could have seized the Suez Canal and gone on to take the oilfields of the Middle East. But 'the war in North Africa', he concluded, 'was decided by the weight of Anglo-American material. In fact', he added, 'since the entry of America into the war, there has been very little prospect of our achieving ultimate victory.'

Following on the expulsion of the Axis forces from North Africa, the Allies launched an invasion of Sicily on 10 July 1943. The British forces made slow progress largely because their over-cautious commander Montgomery divided his forces into a coastal and an inland column, allowing most of the Germans to make their escape to the mainland when it became clear that the island was going to fall. It was this prospect that caused Hitler to withdraw his key tank regiments from Kursk and call a halt to the advance there. By the time they arrived, the Italian dictator Mussolini was on the way out. Tired of the seemingly endless string of failures, the Fascist Grand Council voted to strip him of his powers on 24-5 July 1943. Weary, confused and ill, Mussolini offered no effective resistance and was carried off to prison after being dismissed as Prime Minister by the Italian monarch. The Fascist Party disintegrated and was banned. On 3 September 1943 the new military-dominated government of Marshal Pietro Badoglio signed an armistice with the Allies, who were landing at Salerno and Calabria on the same day. Five days later, Italy surrendered.

The consequences of these events were dramatic. In order not to arouse German suspicions, Badoglio had agreed to let German armies into northern Italy across the Alpine passes, while German troops arriving from Sicily took up defensive positions on the mainland. As the Italians surrendered and threw down their arms, the Germans seized nearly two-thirds of a million soldiers and deported them to Germany as forced labourers, where popular hostility to them for having betrayed the Axis cause ensured that they were treated more harshly than any other foreign labourers except the Russians; 50,000 Italian prisoners of war died, a death rate five times that of British prisoners of war. In Italy itself, an SS commando unit under the Austrian Otto Skorzeny flew gliders over the Alpine hotel where Mussolini was being held, parachuted in and overran the area without firing a shot. The former dictator was taken off to Germany in a small plane, then installed in a puppet regime in northern Italy, where he exacted his revenge on the leading Fascists who had deposed him, having five of them shot, including his son-in-law Count Ciano. As the Germans occupied the rest of Italy, SS forces arrived to round up the 34,000 Jews who lived in the area under German or Italian Fascist control. Antisemitism was traditionally weak in Italy, and ordinary people went to some lengths to protect them; 80 per cent of the country's Jewish population survived the war.

The war at sea also took a turn for the worse, as conventional surface ships were torpedoed or bombed one after another, while the Germans, having neglected to build any aircraft-carriers, were unable to bomb Allied warships in return. In January 1943 Hitler dismissed the commander of the navy, Grand Admiral Raeder, replacing him with the head of the submarine fleet, Karl Dönitz. Early in the war, German U-boats, taking advantage of the success of German codebreakers in decrypting British radio transmissions, sank over two-thirds of a million tons of British merchant shipping, but the slow rate of production of U-boats, combined with losses, breakdowns and lengthy periods in dock for repairs, meant that only 25 U-boats operated in the Atlantic at any one time. The introduction of the convoy system, where merchant ships were accompanied by warships, and British success in deciphering German radio traffic meant a decline in the tonnage lost to U-boats in 1941. By 1942, however, the advantage had swung the other way. Hitler had ordered a large increase in submarine production, and by the beginning of 1943 there were 120 in operation in the North Atlantic. In November 1942 alone they sank 720,000 tons of Allied shipping. The disruption caused to vital supplies crossing the Atlantic was very real. British attempts to bomb U-boat harbours failed, and the Germans had a new cipher that the British could not break.

In December 1942, however, the new code was finally broken. Convoys were able to steer away from the areas where the U-boats operated. Lacking spotter planes, the submarines sailed in loose groups known as wolf-packs, easily visible from the air since they were only able to dive for small periods at a time and could not fire their torpedoes from under the surface. Small aircraft carriers began to accompany the convoys, making it easier to locate the wolf-packs. By May 1943 the Germans were losing on average more than one U-boat a day and the Allies were building ships much faster than the Germans could sink them. On 24 May 1943 Dönitz recognized the inevitable and moved the submarine fleet out of the North Atlantic. The

Battle of the Atlantic was over.

If reverses on land and at sea damaged morale at home in Germany in 1943, it was in fact the war in the air that had the most serious effect on people's attitudes to the Third Reich. Despite the Blitz on London, both Hitler and Göring, the head of the German air force, preferred to use aerial bombardment tactically, to support ground troops, rather than strategically; Stalin had a similar concept for the Soviet air force. But though he never launched a strategic bombing offensive himself, he put increasing pressure on the Western Allies to do so, especially since they were from his point of view unreasonably delaying the invasion of France. The British and Americans had indeed been producing heavy bombers since the late 1930s. They were not ready in any real numbers until 1942, and while there were numerous small raids on German towns and cities in the first two and a half years of the war, they did relatively little damage. At the beginning of 1942, however, the British and Americans began a large-scale strategic bombing offensive against Germany, led by Arthur Harris. Harris demonstrated the effectiveness of large-scale bombing with an attack on the north German coastal town of Lübeck in March 1942, which destroyed roughly half the city's buildings. In May he staged a thousand-bomber raid against Cologne, following it with a similar attack on Essen, in the Ruhr. After this, however, the targets were switched for a while to U-boat pens on the Atlantic coast of France in view of the threat posed by German submarines at the time. It was only in January 1943 that Roosevelt and Churchill decided to begin a strategic bombing campaign in earnest.

The Combined Chiefs of Staff told British and American airmen that the aim of the campaign was to bring about 'the progressive destruction and dislocation of the German military, industrial and economic system, and the undermining of the morale of the German people to a point where their capacity for armed resistance is fatally weakened.' This time the raids were on a far larger scale than before, and far more frequent. By the end of June 1943, some 15,000 people had been killed in a long series of raids on the Ruhr industrial area, which severely disrupted steel and arms production. At the end of July and the beginning of August 1943 a series of raids, the first two of them with more than 700 bombers each, caused far greater devastation in the seaport of Hamburg, Germany's second city. Harris deployed small pathfinder aircraft that dropped flares onto the targeted area, then the main fleet of bombers came in and dropped their payloads of incendiary bombs. So intense was the heat generated in the second and largest raid in the sequence, that a firestorm was created near the centre of the city, sucking in the air from all around into a vast superheated conflagration that turned buildings to ashes within minutes. 40,000 people were killed in the raids on Hamburg, more than half the city's housing stock was destroyed, 900,000 people were made homeless, and more than three-quarters of a million people fled the city.

Bombers were necessarily heavy and slow-moving if they were to carry effective payloads. Fighters could only accompany them as far as the German border before they were forced to turn back until the end of 1943, when long-range fighters, notably the American-built Mustang, were developed. Flying high to avoid ground-to-air anti-aircraft fire, bombers could only hit very large targets such as major towns and cities, and if weather conditions were poor, with high winds or rain, they frequently missed them. Bombing could never attain precision: the 'dam-buster' raid on the Eder and Möhne dams in May 1943 was a notable exception to an otherwise general rule that strategic bombing could not be anything other than indiscriminate. The Germans had radar equipment, but the Allied bombers dropped strips of metal from the bombers to confuse it. German fighters were relatively successful in attacking squadrons of Allied bombers, but so many fighters were transferred from the Eastern Front that by early 1944 only 500 combat aircraft were left there to confront more than 13,000 Soviet planes. 39,000 anti-aircraft guns were in action across Germany by this time, manned by over half a million gunners, but this absorbed a third of all artillery production, weakening the position of troops on the ground, especially on the Eastern Front. Still, flying bombers over Germany remained a dangerous business. Overall some 80,000 Allied air crew were killed in the bombing raids.

In the last 18 months of the war, British and American aircraft factories were out-producing their German counterparts many times over and effectively overwhelmed German air defences by sheer weight of numbers. Allied bombers steadily increased their range and roamed freely over the German Reich, destroying one town after another. At a late stage of the war, they devastated the city of Dresden, where another firestorm was created by the intensity of the bombing, killing up to 35,000 people. Over the whole course of the war, more than half a million Germans were killed, and around 40 per cent of housing stock in German towns and cities with more than 20,000 inhabitants was destroyed; in some cities like Hamburg and Cologne the figure was as high as 70 per cent. The disruption to the German war economy and communications was immense. By the end of January 1945, Albert Speer's Ministry of Munitions calculated that the bombing alone had caused the economy to produce 25 per cent fewer tanks, 31 per cent fewer aircraft and 42 per cent fewer lorries than planned. By the time the western Allies launched their Normandy landings in June 1944, Germany had lost command of the skies; the landings would not have been possible otherwise.

The Nazi regime's preparations for the bombing campaign were less than effective. By March 1944 it was officially estimated that nearly 2 million people were homeless, but few new dwellings were built, and in December 1944 Goebbels described the remaining inhabitants of the Ruhr town of Bochum as 'camping out in cellars and holes in the ground'. By this time there were more than 8 million refugees and evacuees, with more than a million urban children living in camps in the countryside set up by the Hitler Youth and the Nazi People's Welfare organization. The construction of air-raid shelters was slow, and their number completely inadequate. More labour and more concrete were used to build Hitler's own bunkers in Berlin and Rastenburg and the underground headquarters complex at Ohrdruf in Thuringia than in the entire programme of civil defence bunker construction for the whole of Germany in the years 1943 and 1944 put together. In Dresden the only bomb-proof underground air-raid shelter was located below the villa of the regional Party boss Martin Mutschmann. This did not endear him to the town's inhabitants.

People widely blamed the Nazi regime for the death and devastation caused by the bombing. After the 1943 raids on Hamburg Party officials were openly attacked in the streets and the Nazi insignia ripped off their clothes. Popular anger was directed particularly against Hermann Göring for his failure to create an air force that could defend Germany's cities. People tried to relieve the tension by telling jokes, as so often in such situations. The Security Service of the SS reported in August 1943 that people all over the Reich were spreading one that went like this:

A man from Berlin and a man from Essen are discussing the extent of the bomb damage in their respective cities. The man from Berlin explains that the bombardment of Berlin was so terrible that the window-panes were still falling out of the houses five hours after the attack. The man from Essen answers, that's nothing, in Essen, even a fortnight after the attack, portraits of Hitler were flying out of the windows.

Surprisingly, perhaps, there was little anger or resentment against the British and the Americans. Demands for the British to be bombed were widespread, but only because people thought this was the best way to stop them. Some Allied airmen who baled out were lynched by angry mobs when they hit the ground, but these made up no more than 1 per cent of the total. Despite massive propaganda from Goebbels, the SS Security Service was obliged to report in 1944 that 'one cannot speak of hatred for the English people as a whole.' And to illustrate this point, they quoted a woman who had lost her home in a raid: 'It hurts me that all my things have gone for good. But that's war. Against the English, no, I don't have anything against them.'

What people did feel, however, was a sense that the destruction was a form of retribution for the atrocities committed by Germany against the Jews. Knowledge of the shootings in the east was spread among the civilian population in soldiers' letters and in stories from men returning home on leave; the BBC German service broadcast detailed accounts of the gassings in Treblinka and elsewhere at the end of 1942. Goebbels's propaganda machine had been drumming into the German population for most of the war the message that the Allies were run by sinister Jewish interests, a message for which, of course, there was no evidence at all. In 1943 the SS Security Service reported that people in Bavaria were saying that 'Würzburg has not been attacked by enemy airmen because no synagogue was burned down in Würzburg.' Similar reports came from many parts of Germany over the following months. The Bishop of Württemberg wrote to the head of the Reich Chancellery at the end of 1943 informing him that the German people regarded 'the sufferings that they have had to endure from enemy air attacks as retribution for what has been done to the Jews'. By this time most Germans no longer believed the war could be won. There were widespread fears that the Jews would exact a terrible retribution once it was finally lost. 'The Jews alone will repay us for the crimes we have committed against them', claimed an anonymous letter to the Propaganda Ministry in July 1944. These fears were one of many factors that kept Germans, military and civilian, in line until almost the very end. How that end came, and why there was no successful revolt in Germany against a regime that most people knew to be criminal as well as doomed, I will discuss next month in my fourth and final lecture.