





The Fall of the Third Reich, 1944-45 Professor Sir Richard Evans FBA 11 December 2008

I ended my third lecture last month by suggesting that it was increasingly fear that kept ordinary Germans behind the regime to the end, even though the vast majority of them knew by the middle of 1943 that the war was lost: fear of retribution by the Allies, fear of retribution by the Jews; but also fear of what the regime itself would do to those who stepped out of line. Increasingly through 1944 and into 1945, the positive forces that had previously held German society together were replaced by negative ones. This applied to the armed forces as well as to the civilian population. Fear played a vital role in keeping the men fighting on. Many felt a strong nationalist commitment to prevent Germany falling into Soviet hands, and a substantial proportion of the younger troops were also strongly Nazi and continued to believe in the cause and its leader. More important than either of these two factors was a desire on the part of the troops not to let their comrades down. But increasingly the troops kept fighting out of sheer fear - fear of what would happen to them if they surrendered to the enemy, especially on the Eastern Front, and fear of their superiors should they show signs of flagging.

Over the whole course of the war, it has been estimated that German courts-martial tried a staggering total of 3 million cases, of which only 400,000 were brought against civilians or prisoners of war. The rest involved offences by members of the German armed forces themselves, ranging from undermining morale to cowardice, from the theft of food parcels to deserting the ranks. Looting, rape and the maltreatment of civilians in occupied areas by contrast were barely prosecuted at all. Hitler himself issued guidelines laying down the most draconian levels of punishment. As a result, no fewer than 30,000 men were condemned to death, and at least 21,000 of these were executed, in contrast to the experience of the German armed forces in the First World War, when the number of executions carried out by courts-martial reached the grand total of 48.

Terror was also ratcheted up on the Home Front. The Ministry of Justice declared at the beginning of 1940 that 'during the war the task of the judicial system is the elimination of the politically malicious and criminal elements who, at a critical moment, might try to stab the fighting front in the back' (as in 1918). As soon as the war broke out, the death penalty was applied to anyone convicted of publicly trying to 'subvert the will of the German people to military self-assertion', while another decree made theft carried out during the blackout also punishable by death. Anyone causing a 'disadvantage' to the German war effort in any way could be executed. By early 1940, more than 40 different offences, many of them, like the ones I've mentioned, extremely vaguely defined, were punishable by execution. As a result the number of offenders sentenced to death rocketed from 137 in 1939 to nearly 1,600 in 1942 and nearly 4,500 the following year. Altogether nearly 16,000 offenders were sentenced to death by the courts during the war, 12,000 of whom were executed, mainly by guillotine, while the rest were commuted; half of these offenders were Germans, the rest foreign workers.

Hitler argued in 1942 that, as he said, in war 'it's always the best men who get killed. All this time, the absolute ne'er-do-well is cared for lovingly in body and spirit' in prison. To stop the 'balance of the nation' shifting towards degenerate elements, he ordered 20,000 criminals taken out of the state prisons in 1942 and transferred to the SS for what was known as 'extermination through labour' in a concentration camp. Meanwhile the total prison population of the Old Reich in the borders of 1937 grew from 100,000 at the beginning of the war to 158,000 in 1944; a quarter of these were women, compared to less than 10 per cent in 1939. Prisons had always been more important in controlling deviance and dissent than

concentration camps, but from 1942 the camps became a key source of labour for the German war economy, and their population rocketed from 21,000 in 1939 to 110,000 in September 1942 and 715,000 at the beginning of 1945. State and Party terror reached their height in the final months of the war as they were applied ruthlessly to an increasingly war-weary population. Summary justice, if it can be called justice, was meted out to anyone favouring surrender or negotiating with the enemy now advancing through Germany, and people were condemned on the spot and hanged in public. The role of coercion and terror in keeping Germans fighting on must not be underestimated.

Nevertheless, there were positive factors at play too, at least until the final months. The first of these was propaganda; not just the threat of annihilation by the enemy, which largely came to replace the earlier emphasis on victory by the middle of 1943, but also the promise of a last-minute rescue by a new generation of miracle or wonder-weapons.

German science led the world in a number of areas by the beginning of the 20th century, and during the Second World War scientists developed a number of research projects which Goebbels presented to the German public as capable of bringing about a reversal of Germany's declining fortunes. In 1943, Hitler himself held out the prospect of what he called 'hitherto unknown, unique weapons' that would soon come into action. Significantly, however, the best publicized of these were named 'V' weapons, standing for Vergeltung or retribution; in other words, their stated purpose was to pay back the Allies for the damage they had done. The V-1 was a pilotless flying bomb powered by an intermittent pulsejet set to run out of fuel as it reached London. In effect it was what we would now call a cruise missile. The psychological effect was far from negligible, as Londoners waited nervously for the intermittent throbbing of the noisy engines to stop, counting the seconds of silence until the explosion came. More than 22,000 were fired from mid-June 1944 until the end of the war. But they were relatively slow-moving, and were easily shot down by anti-aircraft guns. Many ran out of fuel too soon and as a result of all these factors nearly half of them failed to reach their target. When the Allies overran the coastal launch-ramps, the V-1's were fired at Belgium instead.

More dangerous, at least in principle, was the V-2, a liquid-fuel ballistic rocket developed by the young scientist Wernher von Braun. By October 1942 he had solved the difficult problems of creating a stable trajectory, effective guidance systems, and aerodynamic reliability, and Hitler ordered mass production to begin. The rockets shot skywards and descended vertically at an unstoppable speed. The Allies were aware of the threat and bombed the manufacturing and testing site on the Baltic coast. Himmler, Speer and von Braun relocated the factory to an underground site in central Germany, causing delays in production, but from September 1944 onwards the first rockets were launched against London; 3,200 were launched, though most of them were again directed at Belgium. Altogether some 5,000 people were killed by the V-2. The rockets were made by concentration camp inmates who were housed in such terrible conditions, subject to damp, overcrowding, disease, malnutrition and the brutality of the SS, that 20,000 of them, a third of the total, died; thus, more people died producing the weapon than died from being hit by it.

The V-2 could not turn the tide of war because it was unable to carry a warhead that could cause really major damage. The prospect of such a warhead was brought nearer by the scientists who were working on the creation of an atomic bomb. However, they were never able to discover how to control the nuclear fission process, and they lacked the necessary raw materials including for example wolframite and uranium. The production and development of the bomb would have taken years, and Germany did not have the time. Far easier to manufacture were nerve gases, including Sarin, invented by German scientists in 1938. But they were so lethal, and caused so many deaths and injuries among those who manufactured them, that it was clear to everyone that deploying them on the battlefield, or from aircraft, posed far too great a risk, and in any case, it was thought, if they were used, the Allies were likely to have far larger stocks of nerve gases that they would then bring into action. Millions of gasmasks were produced in Germany in the later stages of the war to provide against this threat. In the end, gas was never used. Many other weapons were under development, including the V-3, a huge gun that could be aimed at London, a jet-engined fighter plane, a heat-seeking missile, a ground-to-air rocket, a new generation of submarines that could stay underwater for long periods of time, a long-range reconnaissance aircraft, a solid-fuel rocket, and much more.

And this was precisely the problem: the regime was unable to prioritise, and the production of the weapons was beset by the political in-fighting so typical of Nazi Germany. Thus, the V-1 and V-2 were rival products of the air force and the army respectively, Werner Heisenberg's atom-bomb team competed with another based in the Postal Ministry, and funds were constantly being switched from one project to another as one set of backers got the upper hand then lost it again. In any case, the raw materials were lacking for many of

these projects; the time needed to develop, test and then mass-produce them had to be counted in years rather than months, and Allied bombing repeatedly damaged or destroyed manufacturing sites and fuel dumps. The wonder-weapons were most successful as a propaganda device, persuading at least some Germans, and particularly strong supporters of the regime, that the war could still be won. But well before the end of 1944 jokes were circulating among the public that indicated people were ceasing to swallow such propaganda. '1950', went one of them, citing an imaginary report: 'Meeting in Hitler's headquarters about the date fixed for Retribution. It is postponed once more because there's no agreement on whether the two airplanes should fly side-by-side or one in front of the other.'

In the end, therefore, the promise of the 'wonder-weapons' only succeeded in reassuring a few diehards, and for not very long. More significant in keeping German civilians going was nationalism, a force that in the first and middle years of the Nazi regime had aligned many Germans with the Third Reich and its policies. In the last years of the war, more and more Germans began to believe that the Nazis had betrayed Germany by their extremism and their over-ambition. Increasingly, if people did think Germany should fight on, it was to save the country rather than to rescue the Nazi movement. This, essentially, was what was at the centre of the German resistance to Hitler. During the 1930s, Communist and Social Democratic resistance groups had been destroyed by the Gestapo, and only a very few were able to keep going during the war: most notable perhaps was the so-called Red Orchestra, a loosely knit network of leftwing socialists and Communists who tried to rouse opinion against the Nazis by secretly printing and distributing leaflets. They helped political fugitives to leave Germany, and they took up contacts with the Soviet and American embassies and sent them information about the war economy. In 1942 the group was broken up by the Gestapo and 50 of its members were executed. In Munich, an idealistic group of students inspired by the youth movement of the 1920s also printed and distributed leaflets denouncing the genocide of the Jews and the atrocities committed against Poles and Slavs. Calling themselves the 'White Rose', they too were discovered and executed.

None of this was going to overthrow the regime, however, because none of these people was in a position to do so. Only the military possessed the means to carry out a coup d'état, and while they had started to draw up plans for this in the late 1930s in the belief that Hitler's precipitate foreign policy was leading Germany to ruin, they put them all on the backburner in the early 1940s while German armies were scoring their greatest successes. Discussions continued during 1942 but it was the dramatic reversal of German military fortunes in the following year that really galvanized them into action again. Several distinct but overlapping groups emerged. There were conservative politicians grouped around Carl Goerdeler, the former mayor of Leipzig, there were military officers, particularly in Army Intelligence and in the middle and junior ranks of the staff of Army Group Centre on the Eastern Front, and there were the young aristocrats who met at the estate of Helmuth von Moltke at Kreisau in Lower Silesia to discuss the nature of a post-Nazi Germany.

Many if not most of these men had supported Nazism at one time or another, and a good few had actually implemented policies against the Jews. Yet there was an undeniable element of moral outrage in the emergence of the military-aristocratic resistance, especially in the Kreisau Circle, at the mass murder of the Jews, even while Gordeler and others were drawing up plans for continued, if relatively mild racial discrimination against Jews in a post-Nazi world. As Goerdeler put it, 'The Jewish persecution... [under the Nazis] has taken the most inhuman, merciless and deeply shaming forms'. All of these groups rejected the parliamentary democracy of the Weimar Republic, which they thought had been a major cause of the triumph of Nazism; they thought it shallow, divisive and irresponsible, a view of course not far removed from that of the Nazis themselves. They wanted instead some form of authoritarian regime, dominated by the aristocracy, or alternatively in the case of the Kreisau Circle, a decentralized state with power wielded by self-governing local and regional communities. All of them agreed that Germany would have to be refounded on the basis of conservative Christian values. In many ways they all looked back to the radical Prussian reformers of the early 1800s like Baron Karl vom Stein.

In addition, the nationalist convictions of the military-aristocratic resistance came through in their assumption that once Hitler was gone, they could negotiate a peace with the Allies on the basis of the German frontiers of 1914, plus Austria, the Sudetenland and the South Tyrol, and an autonomous Alsace-Lorraine, a completely unrealistic idea that was still being touted in May 1944, well after the Allies had agreed that only an unconditional surrender would be acceptable from the Germans.

The Kreisau Circle and some of the civilian politicians rejected the idea of assassination as immoral, but the younger army officers realized that Hitler had to be removed by force. A number of attempts failed, sometimes through sheer chance, but on 20 July 1944 Colonel Claus Schenk, Count Stauffenberg, a

much-decorated army officer recently given a posting that enabled him to visit Hitler's field headquarters in Rastenburg, succeeded in priming a bomb which he left in his suitcase when he departed from the hut where Hitler was holding a review of the military situation. As he walked away, the hut was blown apart by a huge explosion. Convinced that Hitler was dead, Stauffenberg managed to bluff his way onto a small plane and fly to Berlin. Here his assurance of Hitler's death triggered the launching of 'Operation Valkyrie', an elaborate plan for a military coup.

As army units moved to take over government buildings, however, it became clear that Hitler had survived. Stauffenberg, handicapped by the fact that he had lost an arm and several fingers of his other hand in battle, and disturbed by an orderly while priming the bombs, had only managed to set half the explosives before being forced to pack his briefcase. Hitler had been standing on the other side of a heavy wooden table when the bomb went off, and the blast blew out the windows and destroyed the walls of the flimsy hut, thus dissipating its force. The conspirators had failed to cut telephone links with Rastenburg, and Hitler, Himmler and Goebbels moved quickly to tell wavering army commanders in Berlin, as well as in Paris and Vienna, where Operation Valkyrie was also getting under way, that the Leader was still alive. Indeed, Hitler himself came onto the radio to reassure the public that the plot to kill him had failed. It now became clear, too, that the conspirators had only managed to secure the support of a relatively small number of army officers; the others considered their personal oath of allegiance to Hitler binding, or were afraid that a 'stab-in-the-back' of the sort they all believed had destroyed Germany's fortunes in the First World War would only be counter-productive. Hitler's charismatic authority was certainly fading, but when backed by Göring, Goebbels and Himmler it was still enough to persuade a number of senior officers to withdraw their support or move against the conspirators.

Stauffenberg and some of the principal resisters were arrested at Army headquarters in Berlin and shot; others committed suicide; up to 5,000 people, including the families of some of the key figures, were arrested on Himmler's orders. A series of show trials followed, at which many of the accused were showered with verbal abuse by the judge, the Nazi lawyer and President of the People's Court Roland Freisler. They behaved with calm dignity; they were denied any opportunity to put their views to the court, but a few managed to get a word in edgeways. When Freisler told one of them he would shortly roast in hell, the defendant bowed and responded swiftly: 'I'll look forward to your own imminent arrival, your honour.' Altogether about 1,000 people died, the main surviving conspirators being hanged with specially thin rope to ensure they would die of slow strangulation. Ordered by Hitler, this deliberately humiliating execution was filmed for him to gloat over in late-night sessions in his apartment. Well before the attempt, the most clear-headed conspirators had realized that their plan would not rescue Germany; it was a moral gesture that would go some way to rescuing Germany's honour. Had they succeeded, the most likely result would have been a civil war between their supporters in the army and the rest of the armed forces, backed by the SS and the Nazi Party; but this would have shortened the war and saved millions of lives, including German lives; that surely was justification enough for the attempt.

The timing of the bomb attempt was in part coincidental - there had been a number of previous attempts going back many months - but there is no doubt that the Allied invasion of Normandy lent the project greater urgency. After the Battle of Kursk, the Red Army recaptured the initiative, and in what has been dubbed by some military historians the 'forgotten year of the war', from July 1943 to June 1944, the Soviets pushed relentlessly forward, annihilating 120,000 German and Romanian troops in the Crimea in April and May 1944 and launching a massive encircling movement with more than one and a half million Soviet troops in the central sector of the Eastern Front in June 1944. Codenamed 'Operation Bagration', this succeeded in killing or capturing 300,000 German troops in less than two weeks. 57,000 German prisoners were paraded through Moscow in a kind of Roman Triumph. Many had surrendered; they were not willing to endure the kind of suffering the German troops had gone through at Stalingrad. Soon the Red Army had advanced another 200 miles west and was outside the gates of Warsaw. Here Stalin called on the city's inhabitants to rise up against the Nazis, but when they did so on 1 August 1944, led by the Polish nationalists, Stalin held back until German SS and police units wiped them out, razing most of the city to the ground; in two months of desperate street fighting, 26,000 German troops were killed, against 200,000 Polish men, women and children. The scenes of murder and destruction mirrored those of 18 months before, when the last remaining survivors of the Warsaw ghetto rose up against the German occupying forces rather than be deported to the death camps, and were similarly annihilated.

One of the reasons for the German defeat in 'Operation Bagration' was that once more, Hitler had transferred troops to the West, this time to meet the anticipated cross-channel invasion of the western Allies. On the night of 5-6 June 1944 more than 4,000 landing ships and over 1,000 warships ferried Allied

n measures

troops onto the Normandy coast, which was relatively lightly defended because Allied deception measures had convinced the Germans that the landings were going to come elsewhere. The German navy and air force were too weak to offer much resistance. The war was now being fought on two fronts. Towards the end of 1944, as the Allied armies were approaching the German border, Hitler launched a counterattack, with German armour pushing a large salient through the Allied lines in an attempt to repeat the success of 1940 and giving the engagement its name - the Battle of the Bulge. But there was no breakthrough this time. The Allied forces were far too numerous and powerful, the German generals were sceptical and halfhearted, and the German forces were soon being pushed back to where they had started from, and beyond. This was the last serious effort by the Germans to stop the Allied advance. 700 German tanks and armoured vehicles were destroyed in the battle; these were by now irreplaceable, while the Americans had no difficulty in making good their losses. As the Red army approached the borders of the Reich from the East, the end was clearly in sight.

By this time, too, German society was clearly in the throes of dissolution. Following the bomb attempt Hitler transferred more powers to the SS and the Party. Himmler had already been Reich Interior Minister for nearly a year. The civil service carried on its routine business as usual, but the army leadership was increasingly sidelined, above all by the SS, whose military sections increasingly took over a leading role in the fighting. But the defeat of the bomb plot and the rapid tightening of security and terror could not stop the disintegration of German society in the last months of the war. Up to this point there had at least been some semblance of normal social and cultural life. Theatres in Germany had enjoyed a boost in ticket sales early in the war, with some 40 million tickets sold in 1940. Cinema too underwent something of a boom in this pre-television era, with over a billion tickets sold in 1942, more than 5 times the number in 1933. Audiences of more than 20 million each week went to see the weekly newsreel, which gave news from reporters and camera crews 'embedded' in units fighting at the front. They also bought larger numbers than ever of the major daily papers. There was a widespread thirst for news, especially from the many families with sons, husbands, or fathers fighting at the front. Correspondingly, however, the newsreels avoided mention of defeat and never showed the wounded or the dead; the picture of the war they presented, just like that drawn by official war artists, was sanitized and heroic rather than realistic. This was accepted in the early, victorious phases of the war, but later on, when people knew from their friends and relatives that the German armed forces were suffering defeat after defeat, they began to distance themselves and to complain that they were no longer being told the truth.

But most of all people at home in Germany wanted entertainment. Goebbels realized this. Of course, his Propaganda Ministry pumped out huge quantities of propaganda, including more than 32 million wall-posters and 65 million leaflets, but as Goebbels remarked in 1942: 'It's important for the war to keep our people in a good mood. We failed to do that during the [First] World War, and we had to pay for it with a terrible catastrophe. This example must under no circumstances be repeated.' Goebbels made sure, therefore, that there were plenty of entertainment films produced, with titles like Request Concert and The Great Love. 41 out of the 74 movies made in Germany in 1943 were comedies. Goebbels's attempt to whip up anti-Semitic feeling in the crude propaganda film The Eternal Jew was commented on adversely by many people who went to see it, according to the reports of the SS Security Service. By contrast, Jew Süss, a lavishly produced feature film with top-ranking actors and a dramatic story involving the rise and fall of an 18thcentury Jewish court financier, was widely popular and had its desired effect; it was frequently reported that members of the audience rose from their seats and shouted abuse at the screen when the Jewish anti-hero committed some of his most dastardly crimes and misdeeds.

It was a similar story with the radio. As late as 1944, the 190 hours broadcast a week on the main state radio channels contained 71 hours of popular music, 55 hours of general entertainment, and 24 of classical music, with 32 hours left for talk and propaganda and 8 for general cultural broadcasts. Soldiers and civilians alike particularly enjoyed the request concert programmes; troops huddled round their bunkers in Stalingrad to listen to radio broadcasts of sentimental songs as Christmas approached. The most famous of all wartime German songs was, of course, Lili Marleen; but it has a chequered and controversial history. Describing a soldier saying goodbye to his girl-friend underneath a street-lamp outside the barracks, it spoke to many of the pangs of separation; yet its message was a pessimistic one, as the soldier ended by asking who she would be standing with when he was dead. Piquancy was added to the song by the fact that its singer was a woman, the popularchanteuse Lale Andersen. In September 1942 Goebbels had her arrested for undermining the troops' morale with the song and banned her from appearing in public. When he relented it was only on condition she did not sing Lili Marleen; but at her first concert, when she refused

the audience's request for the song, they sang it themselves. In August 1944 it was banned altogether, but by this time the Allied forces, who had originally picked it up from the powerful German radio transmitter in Belgrade, were broadcasting it back to the Germans across the lines in an attempt to demoralize them, thus of course proving that in the end Goebbels had perhaps been right.

The semblance of normality provided by such entertainments came to an end in the summer and autumn of 1944. The Allied bombing campaign was destroying German cinemas, concert halls and theatres, artworks had long since been packed away in coalmines and similar sites to avoid being damaged in the raids, and when he was appointed Reich Plenipotentiary for Total War in July 1944 Goebbels closed down the few that remained. Goebbels also drafted 16,000 university students to the front and 31,000 for service in the war industries; only war-relevant subjects like physics, maths, ballistics and electronics continued to be taught. University buildings and libraries were increasingly being put out of action by bombing and study became more or less impossible as a result. During the last year or so of the war, people's energies became increasingly focused on simply trying to stay alive.

As the military situation deteriorated, and more and more German soldiers were killed or taken prisoner, the regime lowered the age limit for recruiting until 14- and 15-year-olds were being conscripted to fight. Girls and boys were drafted into man anti-aircraft batteries and searchlight units. On 26 September 1944 Hitler ordered the formation of the Volkssturm, the 'People's Storm', a kind of dad's army including all remaining civilian men aged 16 to 60. Himmler likened the creation of this organization to the popular uprising that had supposedly defeated Napoleon in 1813. But, short of uniforms, weapons and equipment, barely given any training at all, they were a sorry apology for an army. Jokes began to circulate about them: a notice appeared on an Old People's Home: 'Closed because of the call-up'. Two men are walking through a graveyard - an old man shouts after them: 'So you want to dig out reinforcements for the People's Storm?' The reality was less of a joke: 175,000 members of the People's Storm were killed fighting the battle-hardened troops of the Allies.

As the Allied bombing disrupted road and rail communications, obtaining food and other basic necessities of life became steadily more impossible. Electricity and gas supplies began to be shut off at increasingly frequent intervals, and longer interruptions were caused by air-raid damage to generating plants and distribution networks. Up to the end of 1944 food rations had been kept at more or less the same level, but now they were drastically reduced, forcing people to trade on the black market. Cigarettes became a form of currency. Looting became commonplace; in Essen for example more than 90 grocery stores were looted within a fortnight in the autumn of 1944. Foreign workers who went underground, living in bombed-out buildings, formed large bands dealing in stolen and looted food and clothing, and in the Ruhr in particular there were pitched battles with the police involving revolvers and even machine-guns. The Gestapo responded with summary public executions, but these had little effect.

As the Red Army advanced into Germany from the east, Himmler ordered the evacuation of the concentration camps that lay in its path. SS guards marched the inmates out westwards, often aimlessly, shooting stragglers or sometimes massacring whole groups; the rest were weakened by disease and malnutrition, and many did not survive; of the 715,000 prisoners in the camps at the beginning of 1945, half were dead by the middle of the year. Many of the marches ended at the collection camp of Bergen-Belsen, where their numbers overwhelmed the facilities and thousands died while the SS commandant stood idly by. Still obsessed with the example of 1918, Hitler now ordered a number of prominent prisoners to be killed, including the former Communist Party leader Ernst Thälmann, and members of the resistance such as Admiral Canaris and Dietrich Bonhoeffer. A large group including the former Army Chief Franz Halder, himself involved in the bomb plot, the former French Prime Minister Léon Blum, the Austrian ex-Chancellor Kurt Schuschnigg, and many others, were taken into the Alps in April 1945 to be shot but were rescued by the intervention of the local army commander.

The chaos was heightened by the growing influx of German refugees from the East - numbered in February 1945 at more than 8 million, cold, hungry, dragging their possessions with them on lorries or carts, looking for somewhere to stay. With complete mastery of the skies, British and American bombers roamed ever further across Germany, bombing at will; in February 1945 they destroyed the Baroque city of Dresden in a massive firestorm that took nearly 30,000 lives. The progress of the Allied armies on the ground was slow, with the Germans holding the interior lines and fighting to defend their own soil, but the more they advanced, the fewer resources were available to the German forces, and the faster they lost cohesion and direction. Germany's allies began to desert the Third Reich in 1944, and in a desperate attempt to secure Hungary's oil supplies, Hitler occupied Hungary, ousting the long-time authoritarian national leader Miklos Horthy. It was not just oil, however, that Hitler wanted; he had also tried more than

once, and failed, to persuade Horthy to hand over the country's large Jewish population; now, in the summer and autumn of 1944, Adolf Eichmann and the SS arrived in the wake of the German armed forces and sent more than 400,000 Hungarian Jews to their death in Auschwitz.

The occupation of Hungary did little to halt the inexorable advance of the Red Army. The Russian soldiers' anger with the Germans, both military and civilian, already deep and bitter as a result of the sufferings and losses they had endured in the years since the German invasion in June 1941, became incandescent when they discovered the killing centres of Majdanek and Auschwitz. Reaching Germany itself, they marvelled at its wealth. Why had they invaded Russia when they lived in such comfort at home? 'We will take revenge', wrote one Red Army soldier as he crossed into East Prussia in January 1945, 'revenge for all our sufferings.' Looting and requisitioning were as much a part of Soviet policy as they had been of German earlier on; the Americans discovered for example that 80 per cent of industrial machinery in Berlin had been taken off to the Soviet Union by the time they arrived. Individual soldiers also looted at will - wristwatches were a favoured prize, but also radios, bicycles, almost anything. By the middle of May, 20,000 railway wagons of loot were waiting at Kursk to be unloaded for posting to soldiers' homes. The Russian troops also unleashed a systematic campaign of rape against German women, who now formed the great majority of the civilian population on the Home Front. The number of victims is uncertain, but there is little doubt that it ran into hundreds of thousands, and it may even have exceeded a million.

With the Russians approaching Berlin, Hitler retreated into his bunker underneath the Reich Chancellery, where he continued to direct his armies in the defence against the encroaching enemy forces, even though most of the battalions he moved around on the map now existed in his imagination only. In March 1945 he issued his so-called 'Nero Order', commanding the destruction of all remaining industrial and basic infrastructural facilities so that they did not fall into enemy hands. The main effect would of course have been to make the situation of the German civilian population even more desperate and to hamper the work of reconstruction after the war. Armaments Minister Albert Speer attempted to frustrate the order by going around persuading local officials to disregard it; Hitler stripped him of most of his powers as a result, but after a tense interview in which Speer issued an emotional but vague pledge of loyalty, Hitler allowed him to implement the order himself, which permitted Speer to continue his work of undermining it.

On his last birthday, 20 April 1945, Hitler appeared in public a final time, to review a unit of Hitler Youth soldiers who had been fighting to defend the capital. Most of the leading figures in the regime now left Berlin. Hitler gave way briefly to despair, telling those who remained that everything was lost, and he was going to shoot himself. His resolve was strengthened when he learned of the ignominious death of the Italian Fascist dictator Mussolini, who was captured by Communist partisans on 27 April 1945 and shot; his body and that of his mistress Clara Petacci were dumped on a square in Milan, where a crowd desecrated the corpses and hung them upside-down from a filling station gantry. As the Red Army penetrated to the centre of Berlin, and the last futile attempt to relieve the city from outside failed, Hitler married his long-time partner, Eva Braun; on 30 April 1945 she took poison, and he shot himself in the head; the bodies were taken up to the Chancellery Garden and incinerated, to be identified later only by their dental remains. In his last will and testament, Hitler enjoined posterity to continue his struggle against 'the world poisoner of all peoples, international Jewry', and claimed that he had caused millions of Jews to be killed in reprisal for the war which, he wrote, they had started.

Hitler's suicide was at the crest of a vast and historically unprecedented wave of suicides that had been sweeping across Germany since March. Other leading Nazis also killed themselves at this point or shortly afterwards, including Goebbels and his wife, who poisoned their six children first; Himmler, after his capture and identification by British troops; Martin Bormann, who took poison when he was about to be captured by Red Army troops; Hermann Göring, many months later, when faced with the prospect of hanging after his condemnation for war crimes; Hans Krebs, last chief of the army general staff, Labour Front leader Robert Ley, Minister of Justice Otto-Georg Thierack, Education Minister Bernhard Rust, leader of the Sudeten Germans Konrad Henlein, Reich Doctors' Leader Leonardo Conti, and many others, including 8 out of 41 Gauleiters, 7 out of 47 top SS officials, 53 out of 554 army generals, 14 out of 98 air force generals, and 11 out of 53 admirals. Magda Goebbels expressed the beliefs that caused them to kill themselves and, in some cases, their families as well, when she wrote: 'The world that will come after the Leader and National Socialism will not be worth living in.' Hitler had provided their lives with meaning and purpose, and now they could not see any point in carrying on.

For some military leaders there was the added factor of shame at the prospect of having to surrender or go on trial for war crimes. Many ordinary Germans also felt disoriented, in despair, overwhelmed by the huge problems of keeping going amidst the chaos, or unable to imagine a future without Nazism. Recorded

rend

suicides in Berlin jumped from 238 in March 1945 to 3,881 in April, declining again to 977 in May, a trend followed in many other places. Particularly in the eastern parts of Germany, whole families killed themselves out of fear of the Red Army, and many women committed suicide out of shame after being raped. All along, Nazism had preached the doctrine of self-sacrifice and heroic death for a cause; at the end, many Germans for one reason or another followed it.

For the great majority of Germans, however, the end of the Third Reich probably came as a welcome relief. The Nazi Party crumbled, and there was no serious attempt to revive it. Goebbels tried before his death to create a resistance movement, which he called 'Werewolf', but it had virtually no supporters. Everywhere in Europe occupied by the Germans, resistance movements had emerged, but - apart from in Serbia - only when it had become clear that the Germans were not going to win the war. In the years of their greatest triumphs, from 1939 through 1941, nobody much saw the point in starting a resistance movement. In Germany after the end of the war, it was even clearer that the Allies had won a crushing victory and that resistance was pointless. Germany had been almost completely destroyed, and many people blamed Hitler for continuing to fight to the end instead of surrendering earlier. Belief in him had cemented the regime together and bound the people to it; once he was dead, many no longer saw anything to fight for. And Nazism had pumped out propaganda all along to the effect that might was right to the victor the spoils, and winner takes all; now such beliefs turned on the Third Reich itself, as it collapsed more utterly and completely than any previous regime in German history. Finally, the Allied occupation was so comprehensive, and in such overwhelming strength, that the prospects of a successful resistance even by those remaining Nazi fanatics who contemplated it were clearly virtually nil.

In retrospect what is surprising is not that Germany lost the war but that the Third Reich was so successful in its early years. It was better prepared than its enemies, it beat them with novel tactics that they were slow to learn how to counter, it had surprise on its side, and a good deal of luck. Its enemies were divided, confused, and poorly co-ordinated. But Germany lacked the economic resources to fight against the British Empire, the Soviet Union and the United States of America combined, and even when it acquired the advanced economies of western Europe and the grain reserves of the Ukraine, it squandered these by its brutal policies of exploitation. It's futile in the end to ask what might have happened had things been different - if Hitler had not invaded the Soviet Union, for instance, or if he had not declared war on the United States, or if Britain had signed a separate peace, or if the Nazis had called a halt to the war when they were winning it. None of these things was a realistic prospect. Nazism was not a rational ideology of Realpolitik and power politics; it was limitless its aim of world domination and its doctrine of perpetual war and conflict, without bounds in its loathing and contempt for Jews, Slavs and others it regarded as its racial enemies, unbridled in its glorification of violence and its willingness to use it whatever the cost.

At the end, indeed, Nazism left nothing but destruction. The cost of the war was enormous. More than five million Germans in the armed forces died, and another half a million civilians. 11 million Germans fled or were expelled from Eastern Europe. According to its own estimates the Red Army lost 11 million men; other estimates give a figure more than twice as high. The Russians lost 100,000 aircraft, 300,000 artillery pieces, and nearly 100,000 tanks and self-propelled guns. 6 million Jews were killed, and many thousands of other minorities, including Gypsies, homosexuals, so-called 'asocials', the mentally ill and handicapped (200,000 in Germany alone); millions of civilians perished from massacres, shooting, starvation and disease in Greece, Serbia, Croatia, and Eastern Europe. The physical destruction of towns and cities across Central and Eastern Europe took many years to make good.

The Allied occupation of Germany lasted in effect for nearly half a century, until 1990. It began with a massive programme of denazification and war crimes trials, which for all their inadequacies and imperfections can be seen in retrospect as successful. The experience of Nazism and war destroyed completely the old traditions of German nationalism, as well as overcoming the legacy of class conflict that had played such a baleful part in bringing the Nazis to power. There has been no revival of Nazism, except on the outer fringes of politics; there will be no Fourth Reich; and Fascism and anti-Semitism, and beyond them racism more generally, have been largely discredited. The Second World War changed Germany and the Germans forever; it also changed the world, and nearly 70 years on, we still live in its shadow even if it is in ways more subtle and less obvious than half a century ago.