

THE LAST DAYS OF THE THIRD REICH

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Lest we forget, lest we forget (Kipling). Yesterday was the 76th anniversary of the end of World War II in Europe.

Ever since the 1942 triple turning point of Midway, El Alamein and Stalingrad, the Axis had been on the retreat. After the battle of Kursk in Summer 1943, the Wehrmacht was unable to undertake any further offensive on the Eastern Front. Later that year, the Red Army broke through the Maginot-like fortifications of the Eastern Wall or the Panther-Wotan Line.

On 6 June 1944, American and British armies landed in Normandy and opened the Western Front. Back in the East, over 23 June – 19 August 1944 Operation Bagration destroyed 28 out of the 34 divisions of Army Group Centre, and completely shattered the German front-line. In January 1945, the Vistula-Oder offensive saw the Red Army advance nearly 500 kilometres from the first to the second river, capturing Krakow, Warsaw and Poznan, liberating many concentration or death camps, and ending up only 70 km from Berlin, when Zhukov had to call a halt. On 16-19 April, the Seelow Heights fell to the Soviets. It was Götterdämmerung. The Twilight of the Gods. The ring was closing around their last refuge in Valhalla.

On 16 January Hitler and his senior staff had moved into the Führerbunker, the deep shelter and command centre nearly 9 metres below the Chancellery's (prime ministry's) garden, with a main concrete roof 3 metres thick and reaching 4 metres over the smaller rooms. Hitler made his last trip to the surface on his 56th birthday, 20th April. That afternoon, Soviet artillery shells started falling on Berlin.

Eva Braun and the entire Goebbels family came down into the bunker on 22nd April. Hitler and Eva Braun committed suicide on 30th April 1945, when Soviet troops were only 500 metres from the Führerbunker. Joseph and Magda Goebbels followed suit the next day (after killing their six children with cyanide). Heinrich Himmler, head of the SS, was arrested on 21st May, identified on 23rd May, and as he was being questioned immediately committed suicide, again by cyanide. Hermann Goering surrendered to advancing US army units on 6th May, tried and sentenced to death at Nuremberg, and on 15th October 1946, hours before he was due to be hanged also committed suicide by cyanide.

Meanwhile, a day after the Goebbels cruelty, i.e. on 2nd May 1945, Red Army soldiers put up the Soviet flag over the Reich Chancellery (see the picture above). On 7th May 1945, General Alfred Jodl, representing the German High Command, signed the unconditional surrender of all German forces, East and West at the French city of Reims. The war in the Pacific lasted for another three months. After Hiroshima (6th August) and Nagasaki (9th August) were destroyed by two atomic bombs, Japan finally signed the instrument of surrender on 2nd September 1945.

The World War I death toll had been over 17 million (more than 9 million combatants and more than 7 million civilians). World War II, in contrast, over six long years claimed more than 70 million, perhaps as many as 75 million lives. Moreover, it was a completely different military/civilian ratio. Now it was more than 45m civilians as against more than 25m combatants.

The reversal was due to both technology and ideology. Due to advances in air power, the distinction between the front and the rear was largely erased. Long-range bombardment of Polish, British and Soviet cities by the Nazis, and then of German cities by the Allies, led to widespread devastation even before Hiroshima and Nagasaki. And then there were new ideologies of mass murder, of superior and inferior races (or subhumans), which had been missing from WWI. They led to savage treatment of civilians under both Axis and Soviet occupation — reprisals, massacres, starvation, disease. They also led to camp systems. Together with the Soviet forced labor camps, the Gulag, they led to the even greater horror of Nazi concentration camps, death camps, and the Holocaust.

