

## Chapter 5

### War in Europe

By 1942, much of the world had fallen under the control of the Axis powers. Having capitalized on its December 7 attacks, Japan occupied practically the entire western Pacific. Germany dominated continental Europe, and Italy possessed conquests in the Balkans and North Africa. In contrast, the Grand Alliance of the United States, USSR, and Britain was at bay. Britain was under air attack and threatened with a cut-off of Middle-Eastern oil. German invaders occupied most of European USSR. The United States, still licking wounds inflicted at Pearl Harbor, retreated before the Japanese offensive in the Pacific.

At war with Germany and Italy as well as Japan, US leaders had to decide two basic questions. First, where should the bulk of America's armed forces be used, in Europe or the Pacific? Early in 1942, President Roosevelt opted for a "Germany first" policy. Second, America's war planners had to determine how to wage war in Europe. Should the British and US forces begin the struggle in Europe with an immediate frontal assault on Germany? Or should the Allies launch a long series of attacks along the edges of Hitler's empire in order to disperse German troops? Stalin and Roosevelt called for a landing as soon as possible to divert German troops from battle in the USSR. Churchill, mindful of British losses in the trenches during World War I, argued against a premature invasion to free France.

#### War in the Desert

The question of how to attack Germany was settled in 1942. Churchill got Roosevelt to agree to Anglo-American operations in North Africa. The struggle there had begun on June 10, 1940, when Mussolini declared war on Britain and attacked British forces in Egypt. The British responded by driving Italian troops back into Libya. With the British on the verge of snuffing out all Italian resistance in February 1941, Hitler came to Mussolini's rescue by sending General Erwin Rommel to Africa. Rommel's daring, cunning, and confident leadership were to earn him the nickname "The Desert Fox." Commanding the crack Afrika Corps, Rommel found many ways to trick the commanders of larger British units. For instance, Rommel once deceived a British opponent into surrendering to a smaller number of German troops by dragging brush behind his tanks. This fooled the British into believing Rommel was getting reinforcements. Using such tactics, along with speed and good intelligence, Rommel forced the British to retreat 350 miles toward Alexandria, Egypt. Only lack of supplies and a German setback at Alam Haifa in the summer of 1942 prevented a complete British collapse.

In November 1942, the tide of battle turned against Rommel. After building up a vastly superior tank corps, British General Bernard Montgomery managed to break through Rommel's lines at El Alamein on November 4, 1942. On November 8, American troops landed at Casablanca and moved on Tunisia and Rommel's rear positions. In February 1943, reinforced with fresh troops, Rommel cleverly wheeled west to defeat the inexperienced Americans at Kasserine Pass, but his subsequent attempt to break Montgomery's lines in the east failed. Now the Allied forces came at Rommel from both the east and the west. They captured nearly 1/2 million enemy soldiers in Tunisia. With North Africa in their hands, the Anglo-Americans decided to invade Italy through Sicily, a tactic that would put the Allies in a position to attack Germany by way of the "soft underbelly" of Europe: the Italian peninsula. Accordingly, Allied planners once again postponed an invasion of France across the English Channel.

## **Sicily and Italy**

On July 10, 1943, in history's largest amphibious operation, 160,000 British and American soldiers landed on Sicily's south coast. Lacking defensive artillery, the Italians put up only token resistance. German reinforcements, however, were able to delay the Allied conquest of Sicily for a month. Meanwhile, the Italian government headed by Mussolini was overthrown. A new government under Marshal Badoglio promptly began to negotiate an armistice with the Anglo-Americans. When Badoglio announced the armistice in September 1943, German troops occupied Rome, placed Mussolini back in power as their puppet, and set up defensive positions.

In the Italian campaign, American and British generals faced a series of German defensive lines that took full advantage of the rivers, valleys, and mountains that criss-crossed the peninsula. In addition, Montgomery's cautious style of generalship always seemed to give the Germans the chance to fall back to new entrenched positions. Consequently it took the Anglo-Americans eight months to advance the hundred miles from Naples to Rome, less than one-half miles per day. They were not able to push the Germans back to Florence until August, 1944. In fact, when the war in Europe ended in May 1945, parts of Italy were still in German hands. Europe's soft underbelly had proven to be rock-hard.

## **Operation Barbarossa**

On June 22, 1941, during the early stages of the African campaign, the German army and other Axis forces attacked the Soviet Union along a 200-mile-long front. Ever the restless gambler, Hitler was impatient with the stalemate against Britain that dated back to his futile attempt following the fall of France to gain superiority over England's skies. He was also fearful that Stalin might attack Germany while his armies were preoccupied in the west. On the first day of battle, the German Luftwaffe destroyed most of the Soviet air force on the ground. With air superiority thus assured, 190 German, Italian, Hungarian, Finnish, and Romanian divisions smashed across the Soviet frontier from the Arctic Ocean to the Black Sea. German bombing and the confusion of Soviet authorities broke down military lines of command and supply. Employing 19 panzer divisions, blitzkrieg tactics, and long flanking maneuvers, Germany cut off and surrounded large elements of the Red Army. In these great battles of encirclement, the German army beat 200 Soviet divisions and captured 1.5 million prisoners by mid-August. (Most of these Soviet POW's later died in German concentration camps. A six-week halt in the German advance to permit capture of the Ukraine—as well as the early arrival of winter—gave Stalin time to reorganize Soviet defenses. Still, on December 2, German tankers in the outskirts of Moscow caught sight of the onion-domed Kremlin towers. Further north, in Leningrad, Germany began a siege that lasted three years and caused 1,000,000 civilian casualties.

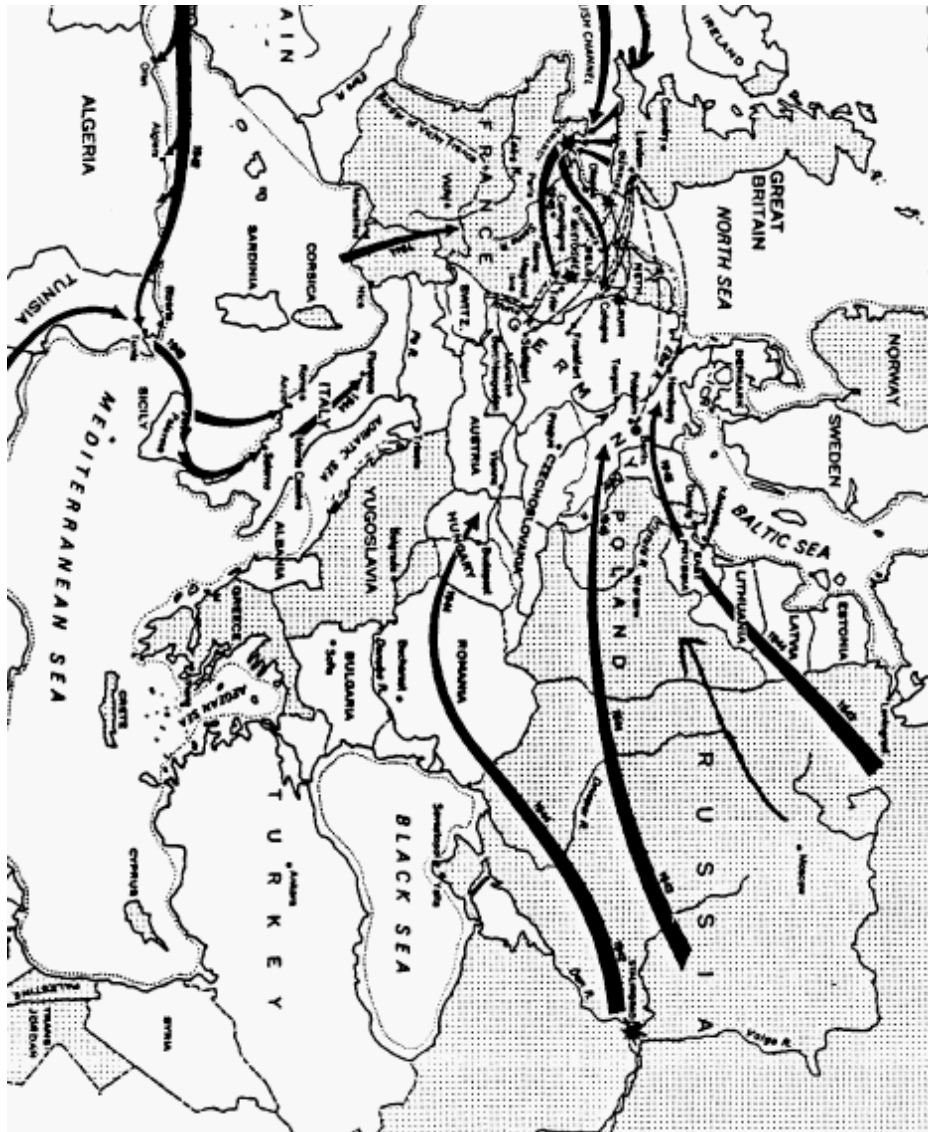
## **War in Russia**

By the end of 1941, German troops had occupied most of European Russia. The coldest winter in 100 years, troop exhaustion, and supply shortages caused the German advance to slow to a halt. Nevertheless, the battle front extended from the gates of Leningrad in the north through the outskirts of Moscow to the Black Sea in the south before Stalin threw his Siberian reserves into a whirlwind winter offensive against German lines before Moscow. In fighting from December 1941 to May 1942, the Red Army managed to create a protective zone around the nation's capital. Meanwhile, the Luftwaffe lost hundreds of planes and air superiority in the east while attempting to support the hard-pressed German infantry.

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In the summer of 1942, Hitler ordered his generals to resume offensive operations, but on a new front. He planned to attack in the south, across the Don River. This offensive had two objectives. One army was to drive south into the Caucasus Mountains and take the oil fields in Georgia. The other army was to seize Stalingrad as a base for a future attack on Moscow and as the northern flank of the Caucasus expedition. By August 23, 1942, General Paulus's 6th Army reached the Volga 30 miles north of Stalingrad.



**Europe at war, 1939-45**

## Source: unknown

At this point, traffic on the Volga could have been halted and Stalingrad put under siege. Eager for the glory of taking Stalin's namesake city, however, Hitler sent Paulus's tanks into street warfare in Stalingrad. On the first day of the attack, Luftwaffe air raids killed 40,000 civilians — 10 percent of the city's population. The Volga bobbed with the bodies of Russians strafed as they fled the city by boat. Still, determined worker militia and Red Army assault groups fought German soldiers house by house in hand-to-hand combat. Soviet anti-tank guns, sent from new factories east of the Urals, took a toll in German tanks. Axis reserves were chewed up in relentless battle in ruined factories and apartment

buildings. In the words of one German Stalingrad veteran, "Dogs flee howling from this hell. Rocks break under this strain. Only men survive."

On November 19, 1942., Soviet Marshall Zhukov attacked German lines north and south of Stalingrad. Surprise was complete, as Soviet tank columns smashed through lightly held defenses to encircle the 6th Army at Stalingrad and threaten the northern flank of the Caucasus offensive. German generals had to decide whether to permit the 6th Army to fight its way out of the trap, or to leave it in place to cover the retreat of the Caucasus invasion. Hitler chose the latter, and the southern expedition fled northwest to safety. The price was sacrifice of the 270,000 men of the 6th Army. What remained of this force surrendered to the Red Army on February 2, 1943.

After the fall of Stalingrad, desperate Germans retreated to shorten their front and their over-extended supply lines. The flanks of the advancing Red Army were exposed in frontline bulges, called salients, such as the one at Kursk. Hitler hoped to regain the offensive by pinching off the Kursk salient from the north and south. The Soviets received advance warning of German plans and hardened their defenses with deep mine fields and anti-tank guns. German forces launched their attack on July 5, 1943, spearheaded by virtually all the panzer units in the East. This attack stalled against Soviet defenses. On August 3, the Red Army struck back and in an epic battle involving 8,000 tanks threw the Germans back across the Dnieper.

After the Battle of Kursk, the Germans were on the defensive in the USSR. The Red Army fielded more and better tanks, artillery, and rifles, all flowing from factories in the Urals. Lend-Lease trucks from the US provided sufficient transportation for Red Army troops. Allied bombing of Germany deprived Hitler's armies of tanks and ammunition. Again and again, Soviet tank divisions cut through German positions, slashing supply and communication lines and surrounding pockets of prisoners. German generals were not aided in their attempts to repel Red Army attacks by Hitler's insistence that every position be held to the last man. This wasted troops and sapped German counter-offensives. Thus, with each Red Army attack, Germany and its Axis allies reeled back. First, they surrendered the European USSR, then Poland, then Romania and Bulgaria. In February 1945, virtually all of eastern Europe was in Soviet hands. The Red Army's 215 divisions had pushed the German forces back to the borders of the Reich, but the cost of victory had been high: 1700 destroyed cities and towns in the USSR and an estimated 25 million Soviet dead.

## Operation Overlord

At the end of 1943, the Allies finally agreed upon a cross-Channel attack on Germany by way of France. This decision, made at the Teheran Conference, pleased Stalin because it would cause Germany to transfer soldiers from the USSR to France. Overlord, as this operation was called, had actually been in preparation for a long time. Since British intelligence had gained access to German coded messages in 1939, Allied generals knew the troop strength of the units defending the Normandy beaches. German spies in England had been turned into double agents who sent false information back to their spy masters. To confuse German generals as to the target of the cross-channel invasion, fake armies were created through camouflage and false radio messages. Dummy paratroops divisions, radar blinding devices, and loud-speakers that played the sounds of a mock invasion were all part of the "wizard war" to fool German defenders. A network of French saboteurs, RAF air supply, and British commandos were set up to attack the German rear.

Thanks to these preparations, the Anglo-American invasion fleet of 6,100 ships achieved complete surprise at Normandy on June 6, 1944. Paratroopers took over roads leading to the beaches early in the day. Then, behind shelling from 600 warships, 150,000 men – American, British, and Canadian troops –

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under command of US General Dwight Eisenhower, stormed ashore. Bombardments from 14,000 Allied bombers and fighters kept German heads down. Nevertheless, members of the first invasion group, as shown in the popular war movie *Saving Private Ryan*, suffered near ninety percent casualties. Later, portable harbors were towed across the Channel and pipelines were quickly installed to fuel the Allied war machine as the Allied beachheads linked up and deepened.



**Destruction in Germany, March, 1945**

The German strategy, master-minded by the legendary Edwin Rommel, to drive the invaders back into the sea had thus been defeated. Three reasons for the Allies success include: First, inferior weather forecasting which caused German generals to leave their posts, because they thought the seas were too rough for a landing; second, the Allied deceptions, such as false radio instructions to Luftwaffe pilots which misdirected counterattacks; third, and perhaps the most important, Hitler's believing planted intelligence reports that Normandy was a diversion for a second and bigger invasion, which led to his refusal to release tank reserves for combat in Normandy until the end of July.

By mid-July, the Allied build-up in Normandy was so strong that Hitler's reserves could no longer make the critical difference. Montgomery's 2nd Army of 250,000 men with 1500 tanks simply overwhelmed German manpower and armor in grueling battle. The fact that the Red Army engaged three out of four available German soldiers was of great help to the Anglo-American cause. By the time General Omar Bradley attacked the southern end of the German line at Avranches, the last German reserves had already been committed to battle. Thus, on July 31, when General Patton's tanks poured through the Avranches gap, they had only the open plains of France before them.

In face of the Allied breakout of over 2,200,000 troops, the German army pulled back to the Fatherland's border defenses. In December, as the Anglo-American forces massed for the final assault on Germany, Hitler made one last desperate gamble. Secretly, he moved all available troops into position in the Ardennes Forest, as he had four and a half years before. On December 16, under cover of cloudy weather, German soldiers attacked US Army units and drove a deep bulge into American lines (hence the name the Battle of the Bulge). Once they recovered from their surprise, Allied troops fought back bravely. They stopped the intended German drive to the Channel. Better weather allowed the Allies to bomb German positions, while British and American armies counterattacked. Meanwhile, a Soviet offensive in Poland prevented the arrival of German reinforcements. By February, the demoralized Germans had been pushed back to the Siegfried Line of 1939. The mighty Allied armies now stood at the east and west borders of a drained and defeated Germany. On April 30, 1945, Hitler committed suicide in his Berlin bunker, and a week later, his government surrendered. Victory had finally been achieved in Europe.

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## Suggested Student Exercises:

1. Identify or define and briefly show the importance to this chapter of each of the following:

- |   |                          |                        |
|---|--------------------------|------------------------|
| a. Decisions on theater of war and strategy | e. Marshall Badoglio     | j. Kursk               |
| b. The Desert Fox's tricks                  | f. difficulties in Italy | k. Eisenhower's tricks |
| c. El Amanein                               | g. Barbarosa             | l. Normandy invasion   |
| d. 160,00 Allied soldiers                   | h. Leningrad             | m. Battle of the Bulge |
|   | i. Stalingrad            | n. VE Day              |

2. Assuming the role of a British, American, or Soviet general, describe your country's war effort against the Axis in terms of three of the following:

- Major battles
- Suffering of soldiers and civilians
- Contribution to ending the war

3. Talk to relatives of your grandparents' generation and come to class prepared to share their World War II experiences.