



NORMANDY, 1944

**“The destruction of the enemy’s landing is the sole decisive factor
in the whole conduct of the war and hence in its final results.”**

—Adolf Hitler

prelude to battle

Fortress Europe

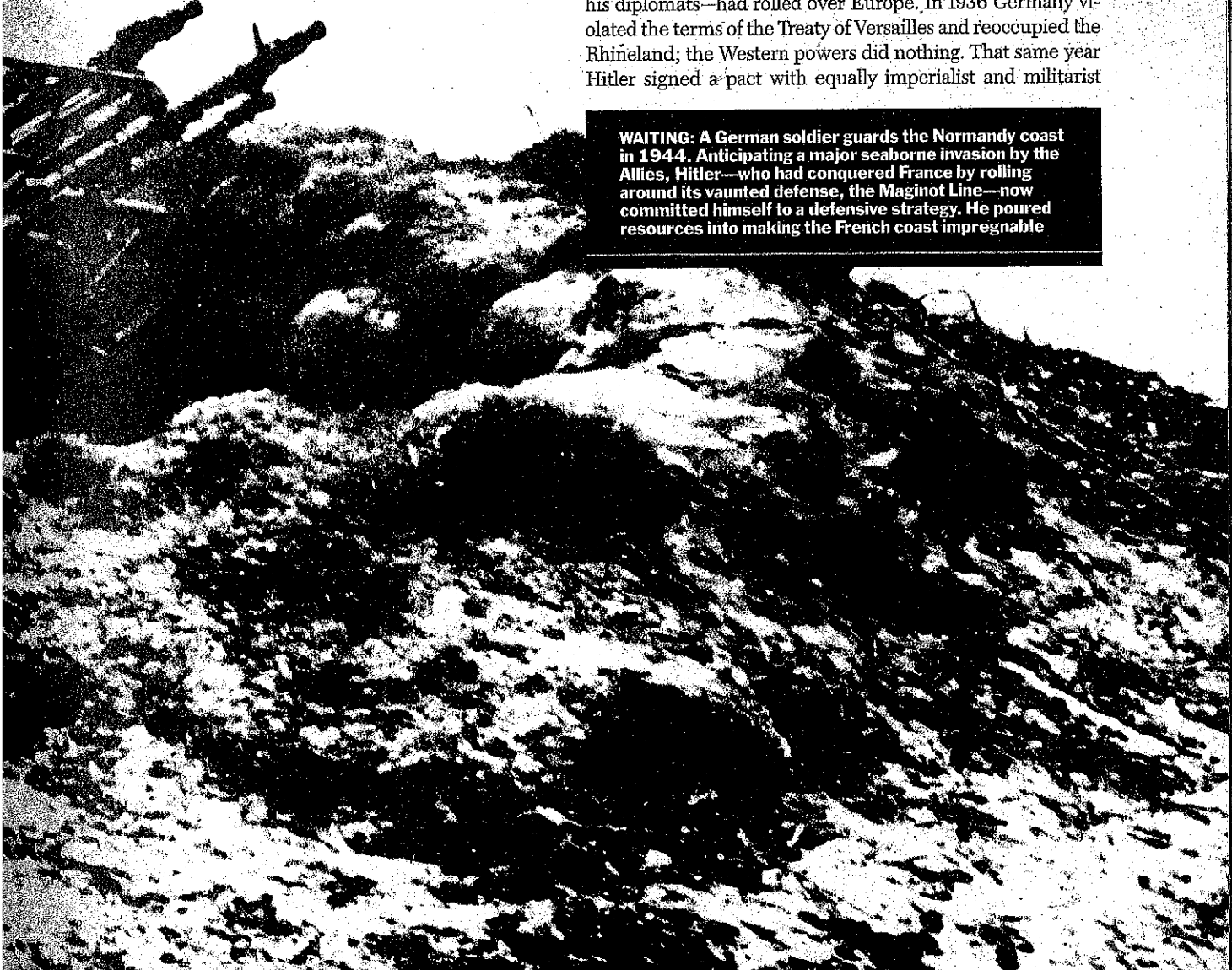
In 1941 Adolf Hitler dominated Europe. Three years later, his empire was crumbling—and, at last, the Allies were preparing to strike back

JUNE 1941: ADOLF HITLER REIGNED AS EUROPE'S MASTER. It was an incredible achievement. Less than ten years before, the Austrian-born World War I veteran had tricked and blustered his way into the leadership of a penniless and disarmed Germany. Now, from the Pyrenees to the Arctic Circle, from Normandy to Warsaw to Crete, the Nazi dictator ruled virtually unchallenged over more of Europe than any one man had governed since the days of the Roman Empire. And his friends and allies ruled in Moscow, Tokyo, Rome, Madrid. His only remaining enemy, Britain, was badly mauled and begging for U.S. supplies. Yet Americans remained strictly neutral and isolationist, even if most favored the British. Besides, the U.S. was pitifully weak: it boasted an Army of barely three divisions and an Air Force of some 300 fighters.

That same month—June 1941—Hitler attacked his “ally,” Soviet Russia. The decision sealed his doom. Three years later, in June 1944, the Germans were on the defensive. Hitler's armies were bogged down in Russia. In Africa his panzers had been defeated by British and U.S. forces. His divisions were now engaged in Italy, fighting a bitter holding battle along the spine of the peninsula against tenacious Allied armies. And in England, his enemies were harnessing the vast supplies of armaments produced in America—now President Franklin D. Roosevelt's “arsenal of democracy”—and were preparing to launch the long dreamed-of invasion of occupied France.

That invasion, D-day, is the subject of this book, and to understand its importance, we must review the events that brought the world's great nations to this fateful hour.

In the five years from 1936 to 1941, Hitler's armies—and his diplomats—had rolled over Europe. In 1936 Germany violated the terms of the Treaty of Versailles and reoccupied the Rhineland; the Western powers did nothing. That same year Hitler signed a pact with equally imperialist and militarist



WAITING: A German soldier guards the Normandy coast in 1944. Anticipating a major seaborne invasion by the Allies, Hitler—who had conquered France by rolling around its vaunted defense, the Maginot Line—now committed himself to a defensive strategy. He poured resources into making the French coast impregnable



GRAPHIC PHOTO UNION

GETAWAY: The Anglo-British army was bottled up in Dunkirk in 1940, but Hitler, for reasons unknown, held his panzers in check, allowing a massive evacuation. The curious decision would be echoed in Normandy four years later, when Hitler again held back his tanks

Japan. In March 1938 Hitler seized Austria. In September he enticed Britain's idealistic Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain to Munich, where the Sudetenland of Czechoslovakia was ceded to Germany as the price of "peace for our time." With memories of World War I still running deep, the leaders of Western Europe pursued the policy of appeasement with pride, committed to negotiating with Hitler rather than fighting him.

In March 1939 Hitler occupied the rest of Czechoslovakia. In April he made territorial demands on Poland, and Britain threatened war. On Aug. 23 Hitler's Nazi Germany and Stalin's Marxist-Leninist Russia, previously bitter enemies, agreed to sign a nonaggression pact. Only one week later, with his eastern flank now secure, Hitler launched a blitzkrieg (lightning attack) on Poland, propelling Europe into war.

A series of incredible victories followed: German troops crushed Poland, easily rolled over Norway, the Balkans and the Netherlands, then surged past the "impenetrable" Maginot Line to conquer France. In June 1940, the main Anglo-French army was cut off, encircled by German armies at the Belgian port of Dunkirk. For reasons still not fully understood, Hitler halted his panzer divisions, allowing the Allied force—almost 350,000 soldiers—to be safely evacuated. That bungled decision

would later return to haunt him.

Through the summer of 1940, Hitler contemplated an invasion of Britain, dubbed Operation Sea Lion. In fact, the Germans did not even have enough ships to ferry the 90,000 soldiers envisioned for the invasion across the English Channel, much less the 170,000 more troops slated to follow in two days. But Hitler's air force, the Luftwaffe, controlled the skies, and the Germans decided to bomb England—now led by Hitler's ardent foe, Winston Churchill—into submission and surrender.

Adlertag (Eagle Day) was the name for the first massive bombing raids on Aug. 13, 1940. Some 1,500 Luftwaffe warplanes swept across R.A.F. airfields in southeast England, badly damaging five of them and knocking out one. The next day the Luftwaffe was back, then the day after, and so began the Battle of Britain, the first ever to be fought entirely in the skies. German Air Marshal Hermann Göring had roughly 1,400 bombers and nearly 1,000 fighters, the R.A.F. defenders fewer than 900 fighters. The outnumbered British fought with a kind of desperation that inspired Churchill to say of them, "Never in the field of human conflict was so much owed by so many to so few." The British weathered Hitler's airborne blitz, though it continued into the spring of 1941. Some 30,000 British lives were lost, but the essential result was that for the



 prelude to battle

MASTER OF PARIS: France and Britain declared war on Germany in September 1939, following Hitler's invasion of Poland. After a calm winter, German armies subdued France in only six weeks in the spring of 1940. On June 23, the Führer visited the conquered City of Light. With only a day to spare, he claimed he was just another harassed tourist

JUNE 1940



prelude to battle

first time, Hitler's military had been beaten completely stymied.

The virus of war now infected new fronts. An outnumbered British army beat off an attempt by Hitler's Axis partner, Italian strongman Benito Mussolini, to seize the Suez Canal. Hitler sent one of his ablest tank commanders, General Erwin Rommel, to rescue the Italians in North Africa, and "the Desert Fox" pushed the weakened British back into Egypt.

In the Balkans, meanwhile, a British-backed coup overthrew the pro-German government of Yugoslavia in March 1941. Hitler was so angered that he decided almost overnight to invade, and he conquered his prey in about a week. While he was at it, he took over a bungled Italian invasion of Greece and subdued that country in less than a month.

HITLER'S POWER WAS NOW AT ITS HEIGHT. BUT IN THIS moment of supreme triumph, in the spring of 1941, he boldly made the error that was to destroy him: he decided to invade his ally of convenience, Soviet Russia. Exactly why he made this catastrophic miscalculation may never be known. In part it was ideology. He had begun his political career by attacking the Bolsheviks, and he dreamed of Germany's finding *Lebensraum*. (living room) by colonizing the vast lands to the east.

In part, too, it was a matter of paranoia. Hitler suspected that Churchill fought on largely because he hoped to inveigle Stalin into joining him. And Hitler was himself so treacherous that he could not believe Stalin was not planning to betray him. Stalin intensified those suspicions by his own aggressiveness: in the late spring of 1940, the Soviets seized the Baltic states of Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia, then demanded and got Romania to give up its provinces of Bessarabia in north-

ern Bukovina. Hitler saw this as a threat to his access to Rumania's rich oil fields.

Hitler was finally a victim of his own successes. He could not believe that backward Russia, which had had trouble subduing hapless Finland, could resist the German army, the Wehrmacht. Even before the Battle of Britain, Hitler wanted his generals to start planning an invasion of Russia for the fall of 1940. They managed to talk him into delaying it until the following May. Germany signed a trade agreement with the U.S.S.R. as late as January 1941, but a month earlier Hitler had told his commanders, "The German armed forces must be prepared to crush Soviet Russia in a quick campaign." The battle plan called for some 148 divisions—more than 3 million men—to attack in three main drives along a 1,000-mile front. One army group would strike northward, toward Leningrad; another would move north of the Pripet Marshes toward Moscow, which Hitler planned to level and leave uninhabitable; a southern army, from Rumania, would storm across Ukraine toward Kiev and Stalingrad. "Operation Barbarossa," the Führer believed, would smash Russia within six months.

Hitler's impulsive attack on Yugoslavia in May 1941 delayed his invasion of Russia by a month—which was to become critically important when the first snows began to fall. But the Germans expected little trouble when they rescheduled Operation Barbarossa for June 22. They were right: despite major German troop movements, the supposedly crafty and suspi-

SNOWED UNDER: Outmanned, outfought and out in the cold, German troops trudge through the snow as they retreat from Moscow in the fall of 1941. Like Napoleon before him, Hitler was beaten not only by Russia's people but also by its vast size and its brutal weather.

RUSSIA, 1941



icious Stalin foresaw nothing. When the Wehrmacht's panzers rolled, the Red Army was caught napping; hundreds of thousands of soldiers fell prisoner. Within three weeks the German line had moved forward some 400 miles, almost to Leningrad. But with the central army group in striking distance of Moscow, Hitler delayed its advance to concentrate on capturing Ukraine's industrial resources, and it was not until October that he began a new drive on the capital. Now the Soviets proved tougher than expected. The Germans originally estimated Soviet strength at about 200 divisions; Moscow eventually fielded some 400 divisions—roughly 6 million men.

Soon a cold rain began to fall; the first snows followed on Oct. 6. A month later, the temperatures fell below zero. Tank engines began to freeze. The troops, who had been issued no winter clothing, suffered frostbite. On Dec. 1 Hitler ordered the start of an all-out drive on Moscow, which the Wehrmacht now surrounded on three sides, only 20 to 30 miles outside the city. One infantry unit got as far as the suburb of Khimki, from which the Germans could actually see the towers of the Kremlin, but that was as far as they could go before Soviet tanks drove them out again. All along the front, the Soviet defenders held fast. Then, on Dec. 6, the Soviets somehow produced 100 new divisions and launched a furious counteroffensive that sent the Germans reeling back 50 miles by the end of the month. Moscow was saved. One day later, the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor.

ONE OF THE FEW MEN OVERJOYED BY THAT BAD NEWS WAS Churchill. "So we had won after all," he thought on hearing it. "How long the war would last or in what fashion it would end no man could tell, nor did I at this moment care. Once again in our long island history, we should emerge, however mauled or mutilated, safe and victorious."

Archives

The March to Stalingrad

Over the bodies of Russians who died fighting, the Germans advanced. With every mile lost and every day gone, Russia seemed to have fewer guns, tanks and planes for her sons. Defeat at Stalingrad would mean victory for the Germans in their summer campaign; a Russia dismembered, isolated, weakened; German hordes and German planes free for battle in Western Europe or in the Middle East; a disaster possibly worse than all the other disasters of World War II.

Winston Churchill had said, "It is the eighth of September," inviting the Russians and their allies to believe that winter, if not the Second Front, was coming soon enough to founder the German armies. But if winter is all that Russia's allies can promise, and Russia cannot save herself, then the war in Russia is lost.

The Germans inched on into the environs of Stalingrad. Day by day, for four weeks, they had sent mountains of men and machines to batter the Red Army back across dusty steppes toward the Volga. Colossal expenditures bought each hillock, each ravine, each village, exacting of the Russians losses at least as heavy. Fresh Russian plane, tank and artillery forces were moved up to the front in an attempt to offset the weight of German numbers.

—TIME, Sept. 21, 1942





America, he knew, was an ally whose massive resources could swing the pendulum of history against Hitler.

The America that entered the war was steeped in isolationism, and its cupboard of armaments was bare. So the year 1942 was devoted to holding actions in Europe, while U.S. Army Chief of Staff George C. Marshall began turning thousands of young farmers and laborers into soldiers, and industrialists like Henry Ford converted their auto assembly lines to churn out bombers. The war in the Pacific commanded the primary attention of the U.S. in 1942, as giant aircraft-carrier battles at Midway and the Coral Sea and the seaborne invasion of Guadalcanal halted Japan's previously unstoppable march of conquest in Asia.

But if all was quiet along Hitler's western front in 1942, his war in the east was sapping his strength. By March 1942, a Red Army offensive had pushed Hitler's front line in Russia back by 150 miles in some regions—at a cost of perhaps 4 million Russian lives. In June Hitler launched a major offensive in southern Russia, which culminated in the decisive Battle of Stalingrad. On Aug. 19 Field Marshal Friedrich von Paulus and some 300,000 German soldiers attacked the industrial city on the Volga River. In the next few months the city was destroyed in desperate house-to-house fighting. When Soviet reinforcements arrived in November, the Germans were trapped: they finally surrendered in January 1943. Later that year, German divisions were again repulsed by the Red Army

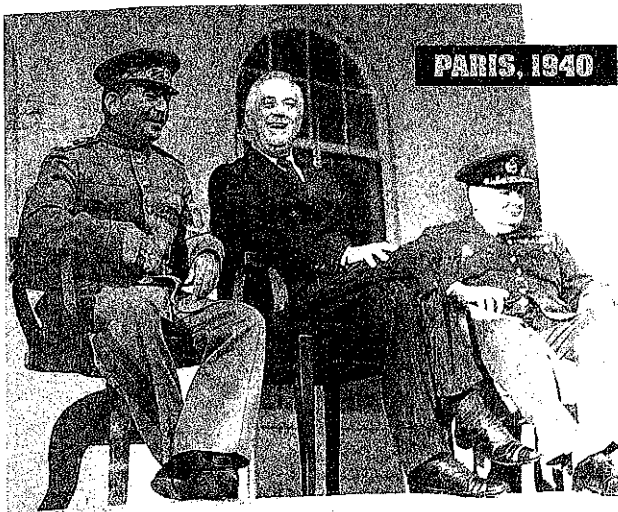
DESERT WAR: Australian tanks roll through Libya in 1941. The war in North Africa found the Germans and Allies trading victories under General Erwin Rommel and Britain's Field Marshal Bernard Montgomery. The German forces held out in Tunisia until 1943.

in a massive tank engagement, the Battle of Kursk. Somehow, Stalin and his defiant people had beaten back Hitler's invasion.

But the German empire could not be defeated on a single front. Since the first days of America's entry into the war, the need for a "second front" in Western Europe had been evident. Roosevelt and Churchill had persuaded Stalin to give them time to build up their forces before launching a major attack on Hitler's *Festung Europa*, his "Fortress Europe." In fact, the Allies directed several thrusts against Hitler's domain in 1942 and 1943. In November 1942, in Operation Torch, a mostly American force landed in the French colonies of Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia. Morocco and Algeria were soon under Allied control; but the Germans, under General Rommel, held off the Allied armies in Tunisia until May 1943.

WITH AFRICA FINALLY CLEARED OF GERMAN ARMIES, the Allies turned their attention across the Mediterranean. In July 1943 they invaded Sicily from the sea. Directed by General Dwight D. "Ike" Eisenhower and led by such charismatic generals as tank commander George C. Patton, Allied soldiers quickly rolled over the weak Italian forces.

prelude to battle



PARIS, 1940

THE "BIG THREE": The depth of Hitler's threat may be judged by the unusual alliance of enemies he created. Franklin Roosevelt and Winston Churchill first met with unlikely bedfellow Joseph Stalin at Tehran late in 1943; the two promised Stalin they'd invade France in 1944

Soon dictator Benito Mussolini was deposed—and Italy's de facto new master became Adolf Hitler, who rushed German divisions into the peninsula. The Allied drive now bogged down; when British and U.S. forces launched a surprise seaborne invasion behind the German lines at the port of Anzio on Jan. 22, 1944, they suffered enormous losses and were bottled up for 123 days. The Germans fortified a strong defensive line across the midsection of Italy's "boot," just south of Rome. It was not until the late spring of 1944—after

Polish forces stormed the Germans' seemingly impregnable stronghold at Monte Cassino and the forces at Anzio broke through the German line—that Hitler's grip over Italy was broken. Allied troops entered Rome on June 5, 1944, one day before the Allies finally opened the "second front."

THE DECISION TO LAUNCH A POTENTIALLY DECISIVE thrust at Hitler's western flank was confirmed in November 1943 at the first meeting of Stalin, Roosevelt and Churchill in Iran's capital, Tehran. While Soviet Russia was staving off the German dictator's armies at an exorbitant cost in lives in 1942 and 1943, Stalin had demanded that his allies open a front on the west, but Churchill and Roosevelt convinced him their armies weren't ready. Now the three men agreed: in 1944, Allied armies would invade occupied France and launch a major offensive to bring down Hitler's empire.

The grand strategy was now in place, but three links critical to its success remained to be fully forged: a plan of attack must be conceived, a leader strong enough to implement it must be found, and a vast force to carry it out must be assembled. The answers to those three questions would soon take shape, in the form of Operation Overlord, General Dwight D. Eisenhower and the Allied Expeditionary Force. The calendar toward D-day had begun to count down.

WAR'S TOLL: The Allied assault on Italy bogged down at Monte Cassino, a 1,700-ft. peak that was home to a historic Benedictine monastery. After months of fighting reduced the monastery to rubble, the German grip was broken. Rome fell to the Allies one day before D-day



ITALY, 1944