

Tom Marshall's Weekly News, May 11, 2015

Seventy Years Ago: The events of the first eight days in May 1945 were historic ones, indeed. On May 8 in most places on the globe, what was left of the Third Reich surrendered unconditionally to Allied Forces in a Berlin ceremony. Adolf Hitler had committed suicide in his Berlin bunker on April 30 as the Western Allies and the Soviets were closing in. The long winds of war and World War II itself had lasted from the time Hitler came to power in the early 1930s, when he successfully began brain washing a generation of Arian German youth.

Prior to the massive capture of most of the western European countries with the Nazi's rapid-fire "Blitzkrieg," Hitler's armies had first taken over the Sudetenland and made overtures into Austria when in 1938 he assured Neville Chamberlain, Britain's gullible Prime Minister, that he had no further territorial ambitions. He had also signed a non-aggression pact with the Soviet Union. In the first few days of September, 1939, however, with the Nazi invasion of a helpless Poland, Great Britain and France declared war on Germany. The British sent massive ground forces to France and the Low Countries (the Netherlands and Belgium), and the French thought they could defend against a German onslaught by their infamous Maginot Line, based on World War I strategies.

The onslaught came early in the spring of 1940. The Nazi Blitzkrieg soon overran the Low Countries and circumvented the Maginot Line into France itself. Paris fell within weeks, and the British army was almost annihilated on the beaches at Dunkirk. Only the Royal Air Force and the hundreds of small boats of all kinds made an escape possible for most of the ground forces. At the same time, Hitler was swallowing up Denmark, and soon thereafter Norway fell. The Baltic nations of Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia were easy targets. Finland put up a good fight but was no match for the Nazi war machine. The Italian dictator Benito Mussolini, while a weak partner in the overall Nazi strategy, made Italy one of the big three Axis partners, which also included the Empire of Japan. Austria, under German control before 1940, Czechoslovakia, and the Balkan nations were easy targets, after which the Nazis swallowed up Greece. A scary situation? You bet it was. I was in the 11th grade during that 1939-40 season, and each day we would read of the latest conquest in the daily newspapers in the school library. Nevertheless, we in America tried to stay above it all, living our lives as if nothing was happening, and I started to drive on my 16th birthday, which greatly changed my life.

During the next winter, the Nazi Luftwaffe pounded Britain mercilessly night after night, and by this time I had a car radio on which I'd get the latest news while driving to school. While the U.S. had an active Lend-Lease agreement with Britain, a majority of Americans wanted to stay out of the European war at all costs. Bundles for Britain, a humanitarian effort by American women, provided much-needed clothing and household supplies. By the spring of 1941, Germany had invaded North Africa, and invasion of the British Isles appeared imminent. Then Hitler made a fateful strategic error, ignoring the advice of his top commanders. He broke the truce with the Soviet Union and invaded from Poland in June 1941, dividing his forces between his Western and Eastern fronts. The assault on Britain eased slightly. While Nazi armies fought their way eastward toward Moscow and the oil fields near Baku on the Caspian Sea, they never reached either when the advance ended in 1943 after the bloodbath at Stalingrad (now Volgograd).

The fate of the European war changed dramatically on December 7, 1941, when the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor brought the United States into the war on the side of the western allies. Within days, we had declared war on Germany and Italy as well as Japan. Lend-Lease changed to a full-blown effort to send military supplies to Great Britain and the Soviets, where our hastily built Victory ships dodged German U-boats across the Atlantic. In the fall of 1942, the British turned back the Germans at El-Alamein, dashing Hitler's hopes to reach Cairo. The invasion of North Africa through Morocco and Algeria at the same time marked the first engagement of U.S. troops in the European war. The end of 1942 was the high mark of Hitler's conquered empire. For the next 2½ years, the Allies would be on the offensive.

By the summer of 1943, with millions of U.S. service personnel in Europe or on their way, southern England became the hub for the heavy bombardment of Germany and its wartime industries and a busy staging ground for the invasion of the Continent. In Pre-Meteorology School at Brown University, my friends and I used to bet on where the major landings would take place. Some thought across the English Channel, some thought through Scandinavia, while others believed it would be from the Mediterranean. All of us thought this major event was imminent; why did it take so long? The Russians were starting to push the Nazis westward, but Germany was still 3,000 miles away. No matter how successful the outcome, many lives would be lost before the end came.

I have written about D-Day on June 6, 1944. In the 11 months that followed, the Allies pushed across France and the Low Countries, sometimes meeting a lot of resistance and sometimes moving quickly. Paris fell in late August. The Soviets, largely with U.S. armaments, were picking up speed in their western advance. During the summer of '44, a large map on the wall at Roswell Army Air Field in New Mexico informed interested viewers how Nazi Germany was shrinking on a daily basis. The winter of '44-'45 was a tough one for the western Allies, however, then fighting on Germany's western border. A severe winter storm in mid-December allowed the Nazis to launch their last major offensive, commonly known as the Battle of the Bulge. Once the skies cleared and the western fighter planes and bombers could fly again, the game was up and the Allied advance into Germany continued. Almost daily the news contained stories of the Allies' progress, the crossing of the Rhine, and the capture of more German cities. By mid-April, with Berlin surrounded, it was only a matter of time.

And so, on May 8, pandemonium broke out in London and many cities in America and around the world. Just 70 years ago! Although the defeat of Japan was nearly four months away and the U.S. had to fight that one alone, there was no question of the final outcome. The Soviets under Stalin had survived only because of American aid and entered the war against Japan after V-E Day so they could confiscate the industries of Manchuria at war's end. A historian writing about the despotic acts of Napoleon in the early 19th century characterized him as a saint when compared to Hitler and Stalin in the 20th century.