

Contents

List of Illustrations	ix
Acknowledgments	xiii
Introduction	i
1. In the Cauldron: The Battle of the Korsun Pocket	18
2. In the Mountains: The Battle for Italy	59
3. On the Beach: Normandy and Beyond	109
4. In the Middle: The Smashing of the Central Front	157
5. In the West: The Campaign in France	226
6. On the Run: The East	272
7. On the Run: The West	313
8. The Last Battle	365
9. Five Minutes Past Midnight	404
10. The Last Stand	446
Notes	473
Bibliography	561
Index	599



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Illustrations

Maps

- Map 1.1 In the *Kessel*: The Encirclement at Korsun (January 1944) 43
Map 1.2 Slaughter in the Ukraine (March–April 1944) 55
Map 2.1 Failure: The Allied Landing at Anzio (January 1944) 76
Map 2.2 Diadem: Smashing the Gustav Line (May 1944) 98
Map 3.1 Hopeless Task: Defending France (June 1944) 119
Map 4.1 Threadbare: German Defenses on the Central Front
(June 1944) 169
Map 4.2 The Avalanche: Operation Bagration (June 1944) 173
Map 4.3 The Vitebsk Stronghold (June 1944) 178
Map 5.1 Mortain Counteroffensive: Operation *Lüttich* (July
1944) 261
Map 5.2 Death in the West: The Falaise Pocket 267
Map 6.1 Death in the Crimea: The Destruction of 17th Army
(April–May 1944) 306
Map 6.2 Sixth Army’s Second Death: The Conquest of Romania
(August 1944) 308
Map 7.1 Anvil-Dragon: Allied Landing on the Riviera (August
1944) 316
Map 7.2 Coming to a Halt in the West (September 1944) 346
Map 8.1 *Wacht am Rhein*: The “Big Solution” (December 1944) 374
Map 9.1 Last Gasp in the West, Part 1: *Nordwind* 411
Map 9.2 Last Gasp in the West, Part 2: *Nordwind* 414
Map 9.3 Annihilation: Encirclement in the Ruhr (March–April
1945) 436
Map 10.1 Last Gasp in the East: Operation *Sonnenwende* (February
1945) 449
Map 10.2 Endgame: The Soviet Drive on Berlin (April–May
1945) 453

x Illustrations

Photographs

FIRST GALLERY

- Marder II light self-propelled antitank gun 216
Captured “German” equipment in Normandy 216
Captured *Jagdpanzer* 38 Hetzer light tank destroyer 217
Captured Grille 150mm self-propelled artillery 217
Two Marder 38Ts of 17th *Panzergrenadier* Division next to the church of Roncey in Normandy 218
A young paratrooper of the 3rd *Fallschirmjäger* Division 218
A King Tiger of the 501st SS Heavy Tank Battalion clatters down a road near Kaiserbaracke 219
Men of the 17th SS *Panzergrenadier* Division *Götz von Berlichingen* head into battle near Carentan on June 13, 1944 219
Mortarmen of the 17th SS *Panzergrenadier* Division *Götz von Berlichingen* advance through the hedgerows near Saint-Lô and Carentan on June 13, 1944 220
Two views of Rommel 220, 221
Field Marshal Gerd von Rundstedt takes a tour of the Atlantic Wall with members of his staff prior to the Allied invasion of France 221
Two paratroopers of *Fallschirmjäger* Regiment 6 keep watch near St. Come du Mont, June 8, 1944 222
American soldiers inspecting the hull of the unfinished E-100 super-heavy tank prototype 222
A Tiger II heavy tank of *Schwere SS-Panzer-Abteilung* 101 223
Abandoned Tiger I of *Schwere SS-Panzer-Abteilung* 101 in Marle, France, being inspected by US forces 223
Propaganda photo of a Tiger II 224
SS-Brigadeführer Fritz Witt salutes officers of his 12th SS Panzer Division *Hitlerjugend*, June 1944 225
German prisoner with bruised and bloodied face. Anzio, Italy, January 1944 225

SECOND GALLERY

- An MG-42 gunner of *Fallschirmjäger* Regiment 6 advances near St. Come du Mont on June 8, 1944 353
A young soldier of the 91st *Luftland* Division 353
A hardened veteran of *Fallschirmjäger* Regiment 6 takes cover alongside a comrade during the heavy fighting near the town of Carentan in June 1944 354

- Panther of the Panzer *Lehr* Division, knocked out near Le Désert, Normandy, on July 11, 1944 354
- Knocked-out Panther of the Panzer *Lehr* Division in Normandy being inspected by US forces 355
- US soldiers, accompanied by a Light M5 Tank, pass a knocked-out Panther in Normandy 355
- Waffen-SS grenadiers take cover in a ditch alongside a road to avoid incoming fire early in the fighting for Normandy 356
- A Panzergrenadier of *Kampfgruppe* Hansen moves down a drainage ditch past burning vehicles of the US 14th Cavalry Regiment near the Poteau road junction during the Battle of the Bulge 356
- A *Sturmgeschütz* IV of the 17th SS *Panzergrenadier* Division *Götz von Berlichingen* moves behind advancing Panzergrenadiers near the town of Saint-Lô in Normandy shortly after the Allied invasion 357
- Dug-in Nashorn tank destroyer 357
- Paratroopers of the 3rd *Fallschirmjäger* Division move along the road to Carentan to engage US forces 358
- Captured Sd Kfz 251 armored personnel carrier 358
- Destroyed Wirbelwind self-propelled quad 20mm anti-aircraft gun 359
- Pz Kpfw IIIs and Pz Kpfw IVs from 233rd Reserve Panzer Division in Viborg, Denmark 359
- Soldiers riding a *Sturmgeschütz* III assault gun at a mountain pass 360
- German infantry armed, respectively, with a *Panzerschreck* and a *Panzerfaust* on the Western Front 361
- Sturmgeschütz* III assault gun and Sd Kfz 252 ammunition carrier 361
- Panzerfaust* manual 362
- German prisoners of war are marched through the destroyed streets of Aachen following the city's capture by the US 1st Army in late October 1944 363
- A member of the Waffen-SS following his capture by Americans in the Ardennes 363
- Sixteen-year-old Hitler Youths taken prisoner during 2nd Armored Division's drive through Lichtenburg 364



University Press of Kansas

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xiv Acknowledgments

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THE WEHRMACHT'S LAST STAND



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Introduction

The Weight of History

Ponder for a moment this dramatic scene from the pages of German history. A long, expensive, and bloody war is nearing its end. Enemy armies are driving on Berlin itself, and life and death seem to hang in the balance:

* * *

BERLIN. *“Finally . . . finally!” the leader muttered under his breath. He savored the news that had just arrived in his headquarters. His bitterest and most determined adversary had died after a long and debilitating illness. He knew what that meant: a body blow to the enemy, a wound so grievous that it just might tear apart the coalition he was facing. The news from the fronts had been horrible of late, so bad that he could feel his own fragile health deteriorate with each new dispatch. He couldn’t eat or sleep; he trembled. The slightest disruption—a sudden noise, a defeatist comment, a long face among his entourage—worked him into a rage that might come on suddenly but took a lot longer to depart.*

He knew that the men at the front were still holding out, fighting bravely and to the death. But their ranks were full of teenagers and old men and mercenaries, not to mention wounded soldiers who should still be convalescing in hospital. They were certainly not the men of five or six years ago, when he had started this whole adventure. One bloody campaign after another, especially the last two years of ceaseless combat, had worn them down.

His own generals were useless against such odds. Useless! At best they were orthodox and dull, at worst incompetent and—as he now knew—disloyal. They

2 Introduction

had never believed in him, and that was why defeat was staring them all in the face, why Russian armies were marching on Berlin this very instant. He hated them for their weakness. He hated them all.

If not for him, where would they be? Only his iron will had held them together when nothing else could. He had pulled them through disasters, huge and well-supplied armies coming at them from all directions, a world of enemies howling for their blood—blows that would have broken a lesser will or destroyed a lesser man altogether.

But now it had finally happened. The miracle he had been waiting for. No, “waiting for” didn’t go far enough. Somewhere deep in his soul, he’d been expecting it. A last-second reprieve. He had triumphed after all. He savored the sweet taste of vindication, then snorted a single joyless laugh. Such a change of fortune might have caught some men by surprise, but he had too much faith in his own star. Providence had always guided him, and like so many times in the past, fortune had smiled on him at the last possible minute.

He turned back to his maps, noting the twists and turns in the front, his enemies closing in on him, the thin line of defenders in front of Berlin. But it no longer mattered.

He had won after all. Fate had given him a sign.

* * *

The reader will have no difficulty guessing the provenance of this famous *mise-en-scène*. The date is April 12, 1945, and the “leader,” of course, is the Führer, Adolf Hitler.¹ The dictator has just received news of US president Franklin Roosevelt’s death, and for a brief moment, the bulletin had galvanized the morose mood in Hitler’s headquarters—the Führerbunker deep under Berlin. The man whom the German press spuriously called “Rosenfelt” (a reference to his allegedly Jewish ancestry) had been a determined enemy of Nazis and National Socialism long before the war. Once in the fight, Roosevelt had concentrated the enormous military, financial, and industrial power of his country against the enemy in Europe, even to the extent of placing the struggle against Japan—the real target of the American people’s hatred—on the back burner.

And now America’s leader was dead. With Hitler’s nemesis gone and a virtual unknown about to take office, the Grand Alliance facing Germany might be wavering. The coalition had been an unnatural thing to begin with—an uneasy marriage of capitalists and Bolsheviks. Perhaps now it might collapse altogether. Indeed, Hitler had been selling this notion to his entourage for months, but no one had believed him. Those present in the gloom during the final moments of

the Third Reich now had no choice but to believe. One of them wrote: “We felt the wings of the Angel of History rustle through the room.”²

However, the reader’s guess is likely wrong. In the scene’s original incarnation, at least, the date was not 1945, but 1762. The beleaguered “leader” was not Hitler, but the *roi-connétable* (soldier-king) of Prussia, Frederick II. The dead adversary was not the president of the United States, but the Tsarina of all the Russians, Elisabeth II.³

The king had just suffered through a very bad year, and five years into the Seven Years’ War, Prussia seemed lost. Defeated on all fronts, worn down by the superior resources of his enemies, Frederick could see the end approaching and even declared repeatedly that he would not survive defeat—he intended to kill himself. The Tsarina’s death and the succession of her Prussophile son Peter III to the Russian throne changed all that. At the last second, a lost war passed into the win column. The Miracle of the House of Brandenburg would enter the history books, and King Frederick II would go down in history as the Great.⁴

This book will look at a similar, apparently lost war: the fight of the German Wehrmacht against the Allies from January 1944 to May 1945. It bases its argument on a relatively simple premise: history matters. It matters to the way people view their own lives and problems. It matters to the things they say and the things they do. Very often—and Germany’s situation in the last four years of World War II is a classic example—we do not so much experience things as *re-experience* them. This principle is especially true with regard to one of the most pressing questions of World War II: What kept the German army going in an increasingly hopeless situation? What kept the General Staff planning, the commanders commanding, and the soldiers fighting—even when the situation clearly seemed hopeless?

Over the years, historians have posited various answers. The traditional view places Hitler front and center. A man of magnetism and charisma, Hitler seems the key reason that Germany fought on when most nations would have cracked. The irresistible, steely gaze of his blue eyes was proverbial, especially in the memoir literature of the German military and political elite. Hitler, his generals and ministers claimed, could make them do things they did not really want to do. Albert Speer is the classic example, an educated and apparently smart man who turned to jelly, so he tells us, in the Führer’s presence. Hitler appears in Speer’s memoirs as Mephistopheles, offering fame and wealth and career if Speer/Faust will only bow down and serve him.⁵ Moreover, the generals had taken a personal oath to Hitler, a

4 Introduction

fact they never failed to mention when defending their loyal service to the Third Reich. They had taken other oaths, however—to the constitution of the Weimar Republic, for example—which they seemed to take rather lightly, as the mood suited them. And what of the generals' responsibility to the men under their command, who died in the tens of thousands in senseless operations up to the very last day of the war? Was that bond not a kind of oath?⁶ Finally, to the notion that they were afraid of Hitler (another fact that enters the discussion from time to time): if there is one thing we can say with assurance about German officers, it is that they were absolutely fearless, and they proved it by leading from the front and dying in great numbers—some 220 generals in the course of the war.⁷ It is simply difficult to believe that they were afraid of Hitler.

In contrast to this unsatisfying personalist explanation, other scholars point to the role of ideology and to National Socialist indoctrination as the heart of Germany's prolonged resistance.⁸ Here we may be on firmer ground. It is now clear that the Wehrmacht professed a strong, even fervent belief in Nazi ideology, racism, and anti-Semitism, and that was as true for the ordinary German soldier (the *Landser*, he was called, the German equivalent of "GI Joe") all the way up to the General Staff. At least on the Eastern Front, the Wehrmacht really did believe that it was fighting a crusade against Jewish Bolshevism and that it was justified in casting off all moral restraint and engaging in mass murder in order to win it. The notion that the army fought a clean fight, while the *Waffen-SS* (the armed SS) carried out battlefield atrocities and the *SS-Einsatzgruppen* ("SS action teams") shot civilians wholesale, is no longer credible. The German army murdered its way east, then did so again as it fought its way back west. Today, the crimes of the Wehrmacht are among the few settled questions in the historiography of the war.

A third explanation for the army's steadfastness is a simpler argument from history. By the twentieth century, the Germans had evolved a distinct military culture, or "way of war."⁹ Starting in the seventeenth century with Frederick William, the "Great Elector" of the Duchy of Brandenburg, Prussian rulers recognized the vulnerabilities of their small, impoverished state. Prussia was the *Macht in der Mitte* ("power in the middle"), surrounded by potential enemies and lacking clearly defined or defensible boundaries.¹⁰ Neither its geography nor its resources would allow it to fight and win a long war of attrition. On the contrary, Prussia had to find a way to fight wars that were "short and lively" (*kurtz und vives*).

For Germany, the solution to the problem lay in a way of war they called *Bewegungskrieg*: “war of movement.” It stressed maneuver on the operational level—using large units like divisions, corps, and armies to strike the foe a sharp, annihilating blow within weeks of the opening of the campaign. Using “separated portions of the army” (*getrennter Heeresteile*) that operated independently but united on the day of battle to hit an opponent in the front, flanks, and rear, German commanders like Frederick, Field Marshal Helmuth von Moltke (the Elder), and Field Marshal Erich von Manstein won some of the most dramatic battlefield victories in history.¹¹ The desired end was a battle of encirclement (*Kesselschlacht*, literally, “cauldron battle”), which aimed not merely to surround enemy forces but to destroy them rapidly through a series of concentric (*konzentrisch*) operations.

The German way of war required brisk maneuver, high levels of aggression, and a flexible system of command that left initiative in the hands of the man in the field as opposed to the headquarters in the rear. German analysts at the time described their command system as the “independence of the lower commander” (*Selbständigkeit der Unterführer*),¹² although the term *Auftragstaktik* (mission tactics) has become more common today among scholars and military professionals.¹³ In other words, the higher commander devised a general mission (*Auftrag*), then left the means of achieving it to the officer on the spot. Independence of the lower commander was a useful force multiplier for an army that needed it, allowing the Prussians to decide, react, and move more rapidly than their enemies.

And the Germans had been doing it ever since, developing a sense of superiority over neighboring armies, fighting one aggressive campaign after another, seeking the enemy’s flank and rear not in a merely tactical sense but on the operational level—surrounding and destroying entire enemy armies. When German officers thought of “war,” they thought of *Bewegungskrieg*. In that sense, the last two years of the war—with the Wehrmacht still on the prowl, still seeking attacks against every target of opportunity, still trying to fight the war of movement—were merely the continuation of a very long, very old story.

But perhaps the officer corps needed to think a bit more deeply about its predicament. Hard-hitting *Bewegungskrieg* worked well often enough for Prussia but was by no means a panacea. The classic illustration of its strengths and weaknesses was the Seven Years’ War from 1756 to 1763. In 1757, Frederick the Great assembled a huge force and invaded Bohemia, pounding the Austrian army in front of Prague and driving it back into the city with a series of aggressive attacks. His own

6 Introduction

losses had been high, however, and when the Austrians sent an army to relieve Prague, Frederick attacked it, too, at Kolin. It may have been his own fault, or the fault of overambitious Prussian subordinate commanders, but Frederick's intended attack on the Austrian right flank degenerated into a frontal assault against a fully alerted adversary who outnumbered him 50,000 to 35,000. Accurate Austrian fire mauled the Prussians, and Frederick and his army had to retreat in disarray.

With the Austrians resurgent, the Russians advancing from the east, and the French moving on him from the west, Frederick was in serious trouble. He retrieved the situation by two of the most decisive victories of the era, crushing the French at Rossbach in November 1757, where another ambitious subordinate, cavalry commander Friedrich Wilhelm von Seydlitz, played the critical role; and at Leuthen, where Frederick's keen penchant for maneuver resulted in the entire Prussian army appearing in dramatic fashion on the perpendicular against a weakly defended Austrian flank. Finally, in August 1758, he warded off the Russian army at Zorndorf, a murderous encounter that saw him march his entire force clear around the Russian flank to attack from the rear.¹⁴

Frederick had saved himself for the moment, but his foes refused to make peace, and the strategic situation remained dire. Still ringed by powerful enemies, his only hope now was to fight from the central position: holding secondary sectors with smaller forces (commanded ably by his brother, Prince Henry), rushing armies to whichever sector seemed most threatened, bringing the enemy to battle, and giving him a bloody nose. His opponents, especially the Austrians, grew skilled at countering, and on one occasion—at Hochkirch in October 1758—they gave him a “shock and awe” moment he never forgot.¹⁵ But they never lost their wariness of him, and he never stopped attacking, whether the disastrous assault at Kunersdorf in August 1759, the impressive victory at Liegnitz in August 1760, or the attempted flank-march on the enemy's rear at Torgau later that year in November.

We should also note that he failed. By the end of 1761 Frederick was staring disaster in the face. The Austrians had just stormed the Silesian fortress of Schweidnitz. The Russians had overrun East Prussia and had taken the major Pomeranian fortress of Kolberg after a well-conducted siege. Worst of all, the cash that had sustained him thus far in the form of English subsidies was about to vanish with the fall from power of William Pitt the Elder. And then in January 1762, the Tsarina died. Weeks later, Peter III was signing a separate peace with Prussia.

Frederick the Great had survived, but perhaps he should also be known as “Frederick the Lucky.”

The Problem: Fighting a Lost War

The Germans never did solve the problem of what to do if *Bewegungskrieg* failed and quick victory eluded them. Their inability to do so haunted them in World War I, and in the latter years of World War II they found themselves in the same old trap. After a spectacular opening to the war, in which the Wehrmacht smashed every army it met, the conflict settled into a familiar pattern, with Germany fighting a “poor man’s war” (*Krieg des armen Mannes*) against the world’s most powerful empire, Great Britain; the greatest land power, the Soviet Union; and the world’s financial and industrial giant, the United States.¹⁶

The Wehrmacht first paid the piper in front of Moscow in December 1941, enduring a thrashing at the hands of a Soviet counteroffensive commanded by General G. K. Zhukov that inflicted massive casualties and for a time threatened to destroy German Army Group Center altogether. Things went from bad to worse in 1942 with the catastrophe at Stalingrad and the encirclement and destruction of the German 6th Army, the largest in the German order of battle by far. The hammer fell at Stalingrad virtually the same moment as General Bernard Law Montgomery’s signal victory at El Alamein in Egypt, which mauled another Axis field army (Field Marshal Erwin Rommel’s *Panzerarmee Afrika*), making November 1942 a dark month indeed for the Wehrmacht.¹⁷

By 1943, most German officers realized the war was lost. The Western Allies had landed in North Africa at the end of 1942 and—after an initial hiccup for the US Army at Kasserine Pass—the British and American armies cleared the Axis armies out of their Tunisian beachhead. Axis clumsiness in the delicate timing of littoral warfare delayed an evacuation until it was no longer feasible, and the Axis went down in Tunisia in May 1943 with the loss of all hands, a shocking level of sacrifice for a nondecisive sector.¹⁸

The Allies followed up the win at Tunis by invading Sicily in July, then landed on the Italian mainland in September. The former overran Sicily and forced Mussolini from power; the latter drove Italy out of the Axis, a body blow to the German strategic position.¹⁹ A weak power with little in the way of a military tradition, raw materials, or industrial

8 Introduction

base, Italy was still Germany's main ally in Europe, and the only one even approaching Great Power status. The Germans reacted to Italy's collapse by initiating Operation Axis, the occupation of Italy, the disarming of the Italian army, and the interning of hundreds of thousands of former soldiers for forced labor in the Reich. Often praised for its speed and decisiveness, Operation Axis was in fact a brutal act of aggression, and its principal result was to force the Germans to deploy an entire field army, and eventually an army group, to defend the Italian peninsula—perhaps the last thing the Wehrmacht needed in 1943.

Events in the east compounded these disasters. The last great German offensive in the Soviet Union, Operation Citadel, took place in July 1943. It was a classic German operation: meticulous preparation, mountains of tanks, a *konzentrisch* maneuver scheme against the city of Kursk. Unfortunately, it was also a complete and utter misfire, hitting a brick wall of deeply echeloned Soviet defenses and lurching to a full stop within days.²⁰ The Soviets coolly held, then counterpunched hard both in the north against Orel and to the south against Belgorod, inflicting massive casualties—again—and throwing the Germans back into a retreat that did not stop until the Dnepr River. The Soviet pursuit was so close by this point—literally nipping at the heels of the retreating Wehrmacht, with intermingled columns and operational confusion of the most unimaginable variety—that the Germans were unable even to hold the line of the great river. By the end of September, the Soviets were across the Dnepr at numerous places, eventually linking up to form a huge bridgehead on the western bank. In November, Soviet forces fought their way into Kiev, liberating the mother of Russian cities, but an attempt to break out of the Kiev Salient to the west came to grief against a skillfully conducted and very aggressive defensive stand by the German XXXXVIII Panzer Corps under General Hermann Balck. One of the Wehrmacht's most able Panzer commanders, Balck inflicted a heavy blow on the Soviets between Zhitomir and Brussilov, encircling and destroying the Soviet 1st Guards Cavalry Corps and the 5th and 8th Tank Corps. Closing the Zhitomir *Kessel* ended the operational sequence that had begun at Kursk.²¹

While their focus for 1943 was in the south, the Soviets were active elsewhere across the great front as well. Army Group North spent the year handing over divisions, tanks, and equipment to the fierce fight for survival in the south. By July, the army group—two complete field armies, the 18th on the left and 16th on the right—had just forty serviceable tanks, and the number shrank to seven by September. The army group commander, Field Marshal Georg von Küchler, repeatedly

tried to draw divisions out of the front line to create a reserve, but the usual result was an order from Hitler or the General Staff removing the division from Küchler's authority altogether. On October 6, the Soviets made them all pay with a brisk assault by 3rd Shock Army toward the key road and rail junction of Nevel. Soviet staff had honed the ability by now to target a German weak spot, and the designated victim this time was the hapless 2nd Lufwaffe Field Division, deployed on the seam between Army Groups North and Center. The 2nd Lufwaffe melted away under a storm of heavy artillery and rocket fire, and soon the Soviets were pouring through Nevel and heading west. They had, for the moment, pried apart 16th Army (on the right of Army Group North) from 3rd Panzer Army (on the left of Army Group Center).

Tough back-and-forth fighting ensued before the Germans closed the gap in November, but the Nevel scrap was one more sign of their plight in the Soviet Union. The Wehrmacht was outnumbered in manpower, but even more so in tanks, artillery, and heavy equipment. And with German rear areas crawling with agents and partisans, the Soviets never had a problem finding weak divisions, operational seams, or incomplete defenses to attack. Moreover, when the Soviets penetrated these vulnerable sectors, the first concern of the German army or group commander was usually to draw in and protect the integrity of his own formation, rather than maintain contact with neighboring formations. His generals bristled when Hitler sent Führer Order No. 10, telling them to "consider it a point of honor" to keep in contact with friendly forces on their flank. The generals viewed Hitler's recommendation as an insult to their professional acumen, but indeed they often seemed to forget this basic operational concept. In private, Hitler was more pointed. Nevel, he spat, was a *Schweinerei*—a "rotten mess."²²

For the Germans, the same description might apply to all of 1943. True to their form, they had spent much of the year on the attack. The war may have changed, but it was the same old Wehrmacht, still trying to do the same thing it had done in the war's first three years, perhaps the only thing it knew how to do: fight *Bewegungskrieg*. This was an army that stressed fighting power (*Kampfkraft*) over less glamorous aspects of warmaking like administration, logistics, and intelligence. And though the Germans historically produced great philosophers of war like Karl von Clausewitz, Moltke the Elder, or General Hans von Seeckt, they also had an abiding respect for the man of action. General Paul Conrath of the Hermann Göring Parachute Panzer Division, for example, the formation that gave the US Army all it could handle

10 Introduction

during the invasion of Sicily, once summed up his art of war in fairly nonartistic terms: “You want an immediate, reckless rush [*sofortige Drauflosmarschieren*] at the enemy,” he declared—“that’s me.”²³ Conrath’s self-description could stand as the Wehrmacht’s motto for 1943. Facing disaster, it remained kinetic, hyperaggressive, and dangerous.

By 1943, rational calculation told the senior officers of the Wehrmacht that the war was lost, and they admitted it often enough in their records and writings, both contemporary records and later memoirs. But tradition, reinforced in a thousand different ways, urged them all to keep the faith and to keep going. And here, yet another old Prussian tradition played a key role in crystallizing their attitudes: the *Totenritt*, or “death ride.”

At the battle of Mars-la-Tour in the Franco-Prussian War, Prussian III Corps under General Konstantin von Alvensleben launched a reckless attack against the main body of the French Army of the Rhine under Marshal Achille Bazaine.²⁴ Alvensleben’s men were soon in trouble, facing both greater numbers and superior firepower. Facing disaster, he ordered an immediate charge by the 12th Cavalry Brigade under General Friedrich Wilhelm von Bredow to restore the situation. Even though Bredow had a clear line of sight to the unbroken French gun line in front of him, he obeyed the order, muttering “*koste es, was er wolle*” (“It will cost what it costs,” or perhaps more evocatively, “whatever it takes”):

Having at his right the three squadrons of the 16th Uhlans, under Major von Dollen, men of the *Alte Mark*, and to his left those of the 7th Cuirassiers, under Major von Schmettow, men of Halberstadt, he gallops across the highway up the steep path of glory. The squadrons wheel to the right, advance, and in full gallop they dash at the foe. Now their batteries are reached, and the artillerymen, amazed by this unexpected maneuver, are cut down.²⁵

Bredow did indeed silence the French guns and save the III Corps, but then he ran into a second line of infantry and suffered heavy losses to French small-arms fire. By the time the brigade returned to its start line, it had lost over half its strength, perhaps 420 men out of 800.²⁶

The French were the first to describe Bredow’s attack as a *chevauchade de mort*, but German writers soon took up the phrase—and the *Totenritt* was born.²⁷ The death ride was an order that a commander obeyed no matter how dim the prospects for success or what it was going to cost him or the men under his command. It existed in a realm beyond

rational discourse or sober reflection. It was the culminating point of innumerable old Prussian traditions that emphasized the importance of spirit and will over crass material factors, notions that harkened back to Frederick, Field Marshal Gebhard Leberecht von Blücher, or Prince Frederick Charles, a bold commander in the Franco-Prussian War who once uttered the immortal words, “You aren’t beaten until you feel that you are, and I didn’t have that feeling.”²⁸

The Work: Death Ride

This book will analyze German military operations in World War II during the sixteen months from January 1944 (with simultaneous Allied offensives at Anzio and in Ukraine) until May 1945, the collapse of the Wehrmacht in the field and the Soviet storming of Berlin.

We will begin, appropriately enough, in the east, the theater that eventually swallowed the Wehrmacht whole. The year 1944 would begin with massive Soviet attacks breaking across the front. A great January offensive by all four Soviet army groups (also referred to as “fronts”) in the south cleared Ukraine, encircling two German corps at Korsun in February 1944, overrunning the large German tank and supply depot at Uman in March, and reconquering Crimea in April. Our focus will be on the greatest *Kesselschlacht* of the Ukrainian campaign: the battle of the Korsun Pocket.

From there we turn westward, to Italy. In any other war in human history, the German defense of the Italian peninsula from 1943 to 1945 would receive epic treatment as one of the largest and most destructive campaigns of all time. In World War II it barely seems to register. A secondary and geographically separated theater; no real strategic target at stake; hostile forces facing off over someone else’s homeland: all these factors have conspired to remove the Italian campaign from most accounts of the war. But Italy mattered, not only for the sheer number of casualties (nearly 750,000 including both sides) but also for the pressure it put on a Wehrmacht already bleeding to death and certainly not capable of sustaining such losses. The focus here will be on the Allied landing at Anzio, the ferocious set of German counterattacks that nearly broke the beachhead, and the immense Allied offensive, code-named Diadem, that finally smashed the German position south of Rome. In the end, Italy was one front too many for the Wehrmacht. The German theater commander there, Field Marshal Albert Kesselring, has a reputation today as a defensive genius, and in a purely

12 Introduction

technical sense he did put up a successful defense against all odds.²⁹ But it is still fair to ask: Exactly what was Marshal Kesselring defending in Italy?

As bad as the situation was on the Eastern Front, Hitler and the High Command of the Wehrmacht (*Oberkommando der Wehrmacht*, OKW) could not afford to dwell on it. The OKW's gaze soon turned farther westward with the Allies' invasion of France at Normandy on June 6, 1944, which is detailed in Chapter 3. Usually portrayed in terms of its difficulty, complexity, and risk, Operation Overlord seemed very different to the Germans. Trying to defend France with too few men, too few divisions, and meager mechanized reserves, army officers faced the campaign without a great deal of optimism. German propaganda boasted of the Atlantic Wall, a fortified rampart that would repel the Allied landing, but in truth—as our detailed recounting of the first day of the invasion will show—it didn't even come close to blunting the assault.³⁰

This catastrophic year for the Wehrmacht was hardly half over, however. Chapter 4 will shift back to the east. The Allied D-Day landing is, for Americans, the best known episode of the entire war, especially now that the “greatest generation” memory industry in the United States has gotten hold of it.³¹ What happened in Byelorussia in June 1944 dwarfed Overlord by any reasonable yardstick: the sheer geographical sprawl of the operation, the sizes of the land forces involved, and the level of destruction it wrought on the Germans.³² During the successful Soviet January offensives in Ukraine and at Leningrad, German Army Group Center had gone mostly untouched. With Soviet progress on both its northern and southern flanks, the army group now lay in a gigantic bulge toward the east, with Soviet forces threatening it from the Baltic region in the north and the Pripet Marshes in the south. The four component armies were not only holding extended fronts; they had surrendered their reserves and virtually all their Panzer divisions to shore up creaking fronts to the north and south. In the iron logic of the Eastern Front, this threadbare sector became the target for the next Soviet offensive—perhaps the most successful campaign by any force in military history. Operation Bagration demolished not merely a German army but an entire army group, “a far greater catastrophe than that of Stalingrad,”³³ and still rewards careful study—if only to ask how an officer corps as skilled as that of the Germans could have fallen prey to such an absolute debacle.

With the Allies ashore successfully in the west and Soviet armies rampaging through Byelorussia, we will pause, remove ourselves from

the operational action for a moment, and discuss in some detail the attempt of a relative handful of German officers to assassinate Hitler. The focus of this excursus will be on a few critical questions. Why were so few officers on board with the conspirators? Why did so many of them stay loyal to Hitler? What was the real significance of the “oath” in German military history? Could German officers ever be justified in disobedience?

Chapter 5 will shift back west, where another highly mobile campaign was taking place. The great Allied breakthrough offensive, Operation Cobra, ruptured the weakened German line, and the victors spent August motoring at top speed in open space across France. Hitler’s order to launch a great counterattack by his Panzers toward Mortain collapsed almost immediately. As a result, most of the German force in the west, including virtually all of 7th Army and 5th Panzer Army, found itself herded into a small pocket near Falaise. It looked like the campaign in the west was finished. Indeed, with the Wehrmacht broken in both east and west, it seemed that perhaps the war might be over.

But it wasn’t over. Chapter 6 will return to the east, where Field Marshal Walter Model was knitting a front back together after the disaster in Byelorussia. No sooner had he done so, however, than the Soviets launched another massive offensive, this one striking Army Group North Ukraine in Galicia. After slashing through the front line and encircling another large German force at Brody, the Soviets wheeled north and stood poised to cross the Vistula River, take Warsaw on the run, and perhaps continue their drive to the east. Model was about to have an even tougher test.

Chapter 7 will open with the broken remnants of the German army in the west scurrying back to the German border. They were panic-stricken and had thrown off all discipline, at least for the moment. The mood in General Dwight D. Eisenhower’s Allied headquarters was giddy with optimism about ending the war before Christmas. Not for the first time, however, the Wehrmacht was able to right itself. Under a new commander—Field Marshal Model, no less—the Germans fought a series of tough defensive battles at Arnhem, Aachen, Lorraine, and the Hürtgen Forest and managed to reestablish a defensive position along the fortified Siegfried Line. To many German officers it was like a miracle, and to the Allies an almost inexplicable disappointment. In fact, as we shall see, it was neither.

The pursuit across Western Europe brought Allied armies to the German border, but they were an exhausted lot operating at the end

14 Introduction

of an increasingly long logistical chain. Prussian-German armies had a long history of counterpunching exhausted enemies, and Hitler chose this moment for the Wehrmacht's last great offensive of the war, the subject of Chapter 8. Operation *Wacht am Rhein* would revisit the site of Hitler's greatest victory, the Ardennes Forest, a relatively quiet sector of the front where Allied divisions were resting, taking in replacements, or getting used to life in the field. With the OKW stripping the rest of the contested fronts to gather the assault divisions, the Germans assembled three armies for the assault. They would smash American defenses in the Ardennes, cross the Meuse River, and seize Antwerp, the main Allied supply port in Europe. The attack eluded US intelligence services, enjoyed complete surprise, tore a great hole in the American line—and fizzled. The Ardennes offensive was a perfect encapsulation of how far the Wehrmacht had fallen, how much the US Army had improved, and how different the war of 1944 was from that of 1940.

Chapter 9 will bring us to the New Year, as the war came to a rapid, bloody climax. We will trace the origins and course of the last great German offensive of the war, the nearly forgotten Operation *Nordwind* (“Northern Wind”), and see what a close call it was. We then move east, as the Soviets launched two simultaneous offensives in January, one that overran East Prussia and a second that lunged out of the Vistula bridgeheads and drove all the way to the Oder River, 300 miles in two weeks. For the first time, the horrors of land warfare came to the German civilian population, as a revenge-minded Red Army wasted no opportunity to visit atrocities upon them: vengeance being offered here as an explanation but certainly not as an excuse. By now, the Soviets had a potent doctrine for offensive warfare known as “deep battle,” a carefully choreographed assault involving multiple waves (called “echelons”) pounding home the attack along the same relentless axis until achieving a complete breakthrough. But the Germans had by now recovered from the collapse of the previous summer. Fighting on home ground with a greatly shortened front, they contested every yard, quite literally, and the loss of life for everyone involved in these campaigns—Germans, Soviets, civilians—was prodigious.³⁴ We might say the same for the great Soviet campaign in Southeast Europe, rolling up through Hungary (January 1945) and Austria (March), and, in the case of the Hungarian capital Budapest, conducting a siege of a great city with the entire civilian population trapped inside.³⁵

We will write about the final days of the German Wehrmacht in Chapter 10, as Germany's two-front war finally merged into one single,

inescapable fate. The last great Soviet thrust from the Oder to Berlin was a classic example of planning, power, and ruthless execution, and it set up the main event: the urban fight for Berlin. Pressing ahead over those final few city blocks generated a bloodbath for all concerned—a fitting ending to this most horrible of wars.

The Wehrmacht fought to the end, as it had always promised it would: *koste es, was er wolle*. At no point in the entire year and a half under discussion did Germany have a hope of winning the war, and the officers of the High Command knew it—the operations chief of the OKW, General Alfred Jodl, for example, or Colonel Adolf Heusinger, Jodl's counterpart in the Operations Section (*Operationsabteilung*) of the General Staff. The army was outnumbered and outgunned on every level, its training standards had collapsed, and it was increasingly reliant upon second- and even third-rate formations like *Volksgranadier* divisions or *Volkssturm* battalions, not to mention foreign manpower, even to form a cohesive line. Every move it made in the west was under enemy air observation and bombardment, and Allied strategic airpower was bombing its rear areas—cities, factories, railroad marshaling yards—into smithereens. German engineers might design amazing weapons in this phase of the war—the Pzkw. Tiger II heavy tank, the Me-262 jet fighter, the Me-163 rocket aircraft, the V-1 buzz bomb, and the V-2 rocket, for example—but the Reich's industrial plants, relying on millions of slave laborers in underground factories, could never produce them in the numbers required to make a difference on the battlefield, nor could the transportation system ship them to the front, nor was there enough fuel to use them.

Going down in the face of a mechanized juggernaut in east and west, the Wehrmacht had little to offer beyond its traditional human qualities. Key elements of the classic German way of war may well have been dead by 1944. The *Kesselschlacht* was no longer a possibility, and the idea of independent command (*Auftragstaktik*) seemed like a distant memory to officers who were being hauled before “courts of honor” after the attempt to kill Hitler in July 1944.³⁶ But the Prussian army had a long wartime history of holding on grimly and fighting against the odds, and that tradition was very much alive. *Hartnäckigkeit* (stubbornness), *Beharrlichkeit* (tenacity), *Rücksichtslosigkeit* (ruthlessness), *Kaltblütigkeit* (coldbloodedness), and *Willenskraft* (strength of will): these were the powerful watchwords of 1944–1945.³⁷

Historians often accuse Hitler of “unprofessional and defective”³⁸ decision-making in his insistence on holding every position to the last man and gun, designating every town a fortress (*Festung*), every village

16 Introduction

a fortified place (*feste Platz*), and “fighting for every meter of earth.”³⁹ Such talk was irrational, yes, but the Führer’s pose—standing defiantly against the odds, facing a world of enemies, and shaking his fist at fate—was very much in the tradition of Frederick the Great. The regime had spent a great deal of time and energy posing itself as the rightful successor to Old Prussia, most famously in staging the Day of Potsdam in 1933, and now in its demand to “hold at all cost” (*halten um jeden Preis*). Like Prussian leaders of old, the Third Reich was summoning its officers to do or die, and the call instinctively appealed to many of them, especially those in the field.⁴⁰ Indeed, their response might not even have been entirely conscious. And when news of Roosevelt’s death hit the bunker in April 1945, it might well have seemed like the second “Miracle of the house of Brandenburg.”⁴¹

Whatever long-term factors from the Prussian past were at work, however, issues of more recent vintage were equally important. One thing that kept German officers fighting was their fear of the Red Army’s revenge if it broke into Germany. They knew exactly what they had done to the Soviet Union and had good reason to be worried, and the atrocious behavior of Soviet troops in Germany offers all the justification required for this point. Another factor was the Allied declaration in early 1943 of Germany’s unconditional surrender as a principal war aim. By now, the Allies had decided that Hitler had not acted alone in launching the war; the Junkers of the German officer corps had aided and abetted him. And since the war began, Hitler’s own atrocious behavior had closed off the possibility of any sort of negotiated peace. Like it or not, Hitler and the generals were all in it together. Indeed, Hitler spent a great deal of money during the war bribing his generals—giving them fat payments and immense landed estates, the infamous “dotations”—in order to keep it that way.⁴²

But the most important issue keeping the generals going was the specter of 1918. If there was one searing experience that every man in this officer corps shared, it was the end of World War I, when, they were convinced, the army had stood on the edge of victory until a stab in the back (*Dolchstoß*) by the politicians and by an assortment of anti-national traitors on the home front—pacifists and socialists, Spartacists and Jews. The *Dolchstoß* wasn’t true, and indeed, it was the German Army High Command itself, under General Erich Ludendorff, who first demanded peace in the fall of 1918.⁴³ But calling the “stab in the back” false is not the same thing as saying that the German officer corps didn’t believe it. Human beings have an infinite capacity for believing falsehoods, fairy tales, and self-justifying rationales for their

own failure, and here also the officers of the Wehrmacht were all too human. This time, they swore, they would not weaken or waver: they would fight on till the end, till midnight, “even five past midnight,” if that’s what it took.⁴⁴

And that’s exactly what they did.

