

# AOTEAROA

Our Whakapapa,  
Our Stories



World War Two



## **World War II**

### **Introduction**

After the First World War Germany was economically devastated after a draining defeat in World War I and, due to the Versailles treaty, was forced to pay sizeable reparations to France and Great Britain, and in addition give up thirteen percent of its land.

There was increasing unemployment so more money was needed for social spending. This combined with plummeting revenues and caused deficits. Foreign countries had placed protective tariffs on Germany's goods which further depressed the German economy. When the U.S. was hit by the great depression they immediately sought to get the loans which they had made to Germany paid back. This, in addition to all of Germany's other problems helped the German economy to collapse.

With Germany at its weakest and most vulnerable point, Hitler began his ascent to power. He convinced much of Germany that the Jews were to blame for the poor economic state because of a number of wealthy Jewish business owners. He then outlined a plan where in four years he would completely eliminate unemployment throughout Germany. This was a plan for military strength and victory. The German people were eager to see any economic success.

In this booklet we will cover the following:

- Causes of the conflict
- New Zealand before the conflict
- The Road to Ruin
- Battle of France
- Battle of Britain
- Early African campaign
- Greek Campaign
- Battle of Crete
- German invasion of Russia
- North African Campaign
- Home Defence
- Italian Campaign
- End of the War

## **Further Causes**

Germany was wracked by civil strife as communists, anarchists, monarchists, and democrats clashed in street battles with many being killed.

Once the initial violence had died down the 1920's saw a social boom for Germany with Berlin becoming the hedonistic capital of Europe. This did not last and in 1921, when hyper-inflation began, Germany was hit harder than most. The government was desperate to prevent another outbreak of violence, so continued to print money.

Germany had to establish a whole new currency known as the Reichsmark. When the Great Depression hit in 1929 the German economy again went into free fall, resulting in an increase in political violence and tension, as the effectiveness of democracy was called into question. The primary violence was between the various communist groups and the established national socialist democratic workers party, known as Nazi's for short.

## **Hitler and the Nazi Party**

The Nazi Party had first risen to prominence in 1923 when they attempted a forceful takeover of the Bavarian Government in Munich. This became known as the Beerhall Putsch. It was crushed when police opened fire on the Nazi's with Hermann Goering being shot and Adolf Hitler being arrested, tried, and imprisoned. While in prison he wrote the book, 'Mein Kampf', in which he outlined his vision for a new world order and labelled Jews, capitalists, and communists as the source of Germany's troubles.

When Hitler was released shortly afterwards, he realised that an armed takeover of Germany would be impossible, so the Nazi's began political campaigns with the aid of groups such as the Hitler Youth and the League of German Maidens. Communist attacks on Hitler Youth fuelled Nazi anti-communist propaganda as well as driving many families away from communist and trade union political groups. The Nazi's political manifesto promised to exterminate the threat of communism, protect the rights of business owners, ensuring fair wages and benefits for workers, and sharing the wealth hoarded by 'undesirables' i.e. Jews.

Despite the anti-Semitic tone this appealed to all three strata of society but there was still widespread condemnation of the Nazi's by moderates.

In 1931 Prussia banned the Nazi's after a violent clash between Nazi Brown Shirts and communists resulted in two dead. Goebells was banned from public speaking but he overcame this by recording and playing his speeches to crowds. The violence across Germany did not stop and by the end of 1931 the Nazi's had suffered 47 killed while the communists suffered 80 killed.

In 1932 Hitler attempted to run for President of Germany but gained only 36.8% of the vote, while the First World War General von Hindenberg received 53%. Three days after the presidential election, the Nazi paramilitary forces, Brown Shirts (SA), and the SS, were banned. (note SA were the grunts, and SS were Hitler's private bodyguards.) They were banned because of reports of widespread anti-Jewish attacks by these groups. The law was repealed less than a month later by the then Chancellor of Germany who was later identified as an anti-Semite.

In July 1932, the Nazi's won 37.3% of the vote, becoming the largest single party in the Reichstag. The communists then sparked a series of violent attacks across the country, including assassinating the SA leader, Axel Schaffeld. As the Nazi party was now the largest party in the Reichstag, Hermann Goering was made President, whilst Hindenberg remained President of Germany.

Goering made amendments to state law to target communists who were murdering party members. Acts of political violence were now punishable by lifetime imprisonment, 20 years hard labour, or the death penalty. Special courts were created to try anyone caught. Ironically, because this was still a democratic society, the first people tried and convicted were five members of the Nazi Party, sentenced to death for the murder of a communist party member. They were later freed by Hitler under a general amnesty in 1933.

In November 1932, the Communist International (international organisation that advocated world communism, controlled by the Soviet Union) described the moderate left wing as social fascists and ordered communist parties to destroy all moderate left political groups. The German Communist Party then refused an offer from the Social Democrats to form a coalition against the Nazis. Shortly after, the German Chancellor resigned, with Hitler being offered the position.

In 1934 Hitler ordered the arrest and extermination of high-ranking political opponents. This event was known as Operation Hummingbird and Nacht Der Langen Messer, (Night of the Long Knives). It was organised by Adolph Hitler as Chancellor of Germany, Hermann Goering as President of the Reichstag and Minister of the Interior for Prussia, Heinrich Himmler as head of the SS, and Reinhard Heydrich, head of the Geheime Staatspolizei (Gestapo), head of Kripo (state police force) and finally Sicherheitsdienst des Reichsfuhrers – SS, the Nazi Party Secret Intelligence Service.

### **New Zealand before the conflict**

NZ had been reduced from one of the best performing and functioning armies in the world to just 600 men. Equipment was not updated, there was no mechanisation or motorisation. Industry was agriculture-based rather than industrial. NZ carried on as normal with people picking up their lives post war. Many of these returning soldiers were given parcels of land, not all being useful or arable, and they tried to carve out a new life for themselves and their families.

There were upsets with dock workers and unions causing strikes, and these were dealt with using police, naval personnel, and even lightly armed civilian volunteer forces.

NZ was not taking too much notice of the emerging problems overseas but there was an active Legion operating throughout NZ. It was a political group, formed because the NZ government was accused of adopting socialist policies. In 1933 it had 20,000 members with support coming from small provincial towns, particularly in the Hawke's Bay. Robert Campbell Begg, the leader of the Legion, was approached by the Nazi's while touring in Europe but stated that he found their philosophy absurd.

## **The Road to Ruin**

Once established in power, Hitler turned his attention to a series of social and industrial reforms. He appeased workers by introducing benefit programmes, affordable cars in the form of the Volkswagen (people's car), and a rewards programme where workers could accumulate points and spend them on holidays, etc. The world's first motorways were built with the establishment of the autobahn system. Large amounts of money were invested in modernising Germany's national industries and infrastructure, while in secret, Germany's Army, Navy and Air Force were being re-equipped and modernised for conflict. Beneath all the reform and modernisation of Germany lay an underbelly of brutal anti-Semitism and the beginnings of the police state.

German military planners, ordered by Hitler to prepare for a conflict in 1945, picked up on the writings of J.C. Fuller, a British tank officer from the First World War who pushed for mechanisation and modernisation of the British Army. Due to his outspokenness and his spiritualism, he was forced to resign from the military. He went on to publish his ideas for close co-operation between air force and army in highly concentrated mechanised attacks - a strategy later known as blitzkrieg.

## **The Storm Clouds Gather**

Due to the heavy restrictions placed on the German Army by the Treaty of Versailles, German weapon development and production initially had to be carried out in other countries. Small arms production was conducted through shadow companies in Switzerland. Tank production and training was carried out via a treaty with the Soviet Union.

British intelligence picked up on the re-armament of Germany, but the British Government refused to act to avoid any tension. Frustrated by the Government's refusal to listen to their warnings, Air Force and Army officers frequently briefed a conservative politician in secret. That politician was Winston Churchill. He stood alone in British politics in voicing his distrust and eventual despising of the Nazi threat.

Churchill made speeches in Parliament where he revealed the secret build-up of the new German Air Force – the Luftwaffe. As a result, he was ridiculed by the Conservative and Liberal politicians as a warmonger. Encouraged by the lack of Anglo-French response, Hitler announced publicly the rearmament of Germany and remilitarised the Rhineland (a demilitarised zone since 1918) and sped up military production.

This build up was not without problems. German planners and theorists had different ideas on where the military budgets should be focussed. Added to this were the difficulties of preparing a national economy for war, in particular its industry for the mass production of complicated military hardware. It was predicted by Hitler that war would begin in 1945 so he geared the economy to steadily increase production to maintain a balance between military and civilian entities.

## **A Growing Strength**

Having new equipment presented a challenge to German military planners and commanders as there was no means of testing either equipment or theories in combat conditions. All that changed when Spanish military officers announced a coup against the democratically elected Republican government of Spain. Despite initial successes against the republicans, it soon became obvious that the Republican Government was receiving foreign aid, equipment, and volunteers.

The German high command saw this as an opportunity and sent large quantities of artillery, small arms, and armoured units to support the military officers. This included the Condor Legion, which was a group of volunteer pilots and their aircraft, including transport aircraft, ferrying 13,500 troops of the Spanish African army back to Spain. The Legion consisted of 7000 men. They used over 2,500 tons of bombs and were credited with shooting down 320 Republican aircraft.

The tactical lessons learned during this campaign as well as the use of their equipment set the scene for German military theory.

Eager to ride the wave of popularity, Hitler announced the successful annexing (anschluss) of Austria on 12 March 1938. Shortly afterwards, Hitler also claimed Sudetenland (western Czechoslovakia). Unlike Austria, the annexation of Sudetenland was protested by Czechoslovakia resulting in an armed standoff.

Hitler informed the French and British that this was his last territorial claim in Europe. The British Prime Minister, Neville Chamberlain, flew to the German city of Munich to prevent a crisis. Despite assuring the Czech people that they would not be forced to surrender their land Chamberlain agreed to appease Hitler and allow him to occupy Sudetenland unopposed.

What made this decision even more unfortunate was the German offer to Chamberlain prior to his leaving for Munich. Oberstleutnant Hans Oster of the German Abwehr (German military intelligence), numerous German conservative politicians, military officers, and civil servants planned to overthrow the Nazi regime and arrest Hitler to stand trial, before establishing a constitutional monarchy under Prince Wilhelm of Prussia. For their plan to succeed the plotters sent Theodor Kordt, head of operations at the German Embassy in London, to have a secret meeting with Chamberlain, and the British Foreign Secretary, Lord Halifax. In this meeting Kordt made it clear that the only hope for stable democratic rule to return to Germany was the removal of the Nazis and all that Chamberlain had to do was not allow Hitler to take Sudetenland. If Hitler declared war, the army would depose him rather than attack. Chamberlain said he would think about it before shocking the conspirators by giving Hitler what he wanted, meaning the plot could not work.

Following this, Hitler attempted to reinforce his image as a peaceful leader by signing the Molotov/Ribbentrop pact with the Soviet Union in which he secretly agreed with Stalin to a joint German Russian invasion of Poland.

## Lightning Strikes!

Hitler, having seen the lack of will to fight exhibited by European politicians, turned his gaze towards Poland, much of whose territory, including the free city of Danzig, was formerly German territory. Britain and France, as a safeguard against further German expansion, had guaranteed the independence of Poland, meaning that if Germany attacked both Britain and France would declare immediate war on Germany.

The German public was nervous and not eager to engage in a war. As a result, in September 1939 Hitler demanded that control of the free city of Danzig be handed over to him. The obsolete German warship, the *Schlesvig-Holstein*, steamed into Danzig Harbour for her usual annual visit. In the days leading up to the invasion, the Poles ordered the mobilisation of the army, only to find themselves forced to reverse the decision by the French who thought the Poles were adding unnecessary aggression to the situation.

Three days later, Germany attacked. The main armoured attacks pushed over the border as the *Schlesvig-Holstein* opened fire on Danzig City. German troops who had been hidden on board, successfully landed, and linked up with pre-existing Nationalist/Socialist paramilitary including SA and SS units and laid siege to the general Post Office which was defended vigorously by postal workers and volunteers. While the armed postal workers, army reservists and the post master's family defended the post office for 15 hours, they were eventually broken down, using flame throwers and armoured vehicles. Only four managed to escape while those who surrendered were executed a month later as illegal combatants.

Over Poland the new tactic of blitzkrieg was being demonstrated. The German Luftwaffe successfully wiped out most of the Polish air force while it was still on the ground. The Poles abandoned light positions near the border and retreated to pre-dug defensive lines.

Following the German invasion, Chamberlain's government continued to hesitate before finally announcing that they would declare war. New Zealand had beaten them to it by several hours. The French General Henri Giraud had already sent his forces across the border into the Saarland (Germany) and had advanced along a 32 km front, capturing 12 towns and villages with the loss of only four light tanks. After four weeks, General Maurice Gamelin then ordered the force to return to French territory, providing one of the biggest 'what if's?' in military history.

The retreating Polish army was fighting a series of effective rear-guard actions until the Soviets, adhering to their agreement with Germany, suddenly attacked Poland from behind. The Soviet forces, on Stalin's command, rounded up 8000 captured military officers, 6000 police officers and 8000 land, factory owners, lawyers, officials, teachers, and priests including the chief rabbi (Baruch Steinberg) of the Polish Army. They were all executed at the mass graves in Katyn Forest.

The entry of Russia into the war spelt the defeat of the Polish army in the field. A handful of Polish troops managed to escape, and the Polish fleet succeeded in making it to Britain.

## Supporting Links

<https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/the-katyn-massacre-april-1940>

<https://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-30685433>

## The 'Phony' War

Following the fall of Poland an uneasy period of combat followed with German raiders and pocket battleships being hunted across the world's oceans, including the HMNZS *Achilles*, taking part in the sinking of the KMS *Admiral Graf Spee* at the Battle of the River Plate on December 17<sup>th</sup>, 1939. The Germans laid mines, attempting to nullify the advantage of the numerically superior Royal Navy. Minor air skirmishes also occurred. During this time, the armies of both sides built up along the Franco/German border.

In New Zealand, our army scrambled to make up for 20 years of budget cuts and lack of equipment resulting in troops having to be issued with World War 1 weapons and uniforms.

The British Army had a combined strength of 300,000 men and was the only army in the world to be fully motorised/mechanised, making it highly valuable as a deterrent to the German blitzkrieg tactics.

In Britain, the government and public were aware that the only politician who had spoken out against appeasement and who had predicted the Nazi threat was Winston Churchill. The conservative party announced a motion of no confidence against Neville Chamberlain, forcing him to resign, and rejecting his proposal that Lord Halifax take his place. Winston Churchill became the Prime Minister of Great Britain and First Lord of the Admiralty.

One of the greatest challenges facing the new Prime Minister was the ideological element to this war with strong national socialist elements around the world, including countries such as Norway, America, and Ireland attempting to influence their national governments in favour of Germany, while the British attempted the opposite.

In Norway, this struggle of ideologies was looking favourable for the British. German High Command, realising the threat of an allied occupation of Norway, launched an airborne and amphibious attack on Norway, successfully overwhelming the limited British and French forces and the unprepared Norwegian defences.

The Germans also launched large scale invasions of Denmark and the Netherlands, with the Dutch taking only six days to surrender. This left only neutral Belgium as a way around the fortifications along the French border. German tank commanders such as Heinz Guderian and Erwin Rommel suggested another way through the Ardennes Forest. The Allies, particularly the British, were keenly aware of the threat posed by German panzers (tanks) but the Ardennes Forest seemed too dense to be passable for large tank formations. The Germans thought otherwise.

## Supporting Link

<https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/schlieffen-plan>

## **The German Advance**

Neutrality had not protected Belgium during World War 1, so they agreed to allow the British to advance into their territory. The British were eager to occupy as much of Belgium as possible, and sped in. The Germans took their chance, surging through the Ardennes. The German armoured forces broke out into the tank-friendly country of the northern French plains.

With most of their best forces defending the Maginot Line, and with tactics and unit structures ill-suited to mobile warfare, the French fought where they stood, but often found themselves cut off, isolated, and bombed into the ground by the Luftwaffe.

An example of brave actions was Captain Pierre Armand Gaston Billotte, at the Battle of Stonne, advancing his Char B1 Bis tank named Eure, to re-take the village. During this action he succeeded in knocking out two Panzer IV tanks, 11 Panzer III's and two enemy artillery pieces while sustaining 140 direct hits to his tank. What makes this even more impressive is that, due to French tank design, Bilotte was the commander, radio operator, loader, and gunner in the turret. However he was later forced to retreat and finally abandon his tank.

The French first army began to retreat towards the channel ports. The British, seeing that they could be surrounded, immediately began retreating towards the channel port of Calais, launching the only successful counterattack of the 1940 campaign at Arras. 74 British tanks routed the SS Totenkopf division and was only stopped by Rommel ordering his heavy artillery to fire at tanks point blank. The Germans managed to cut off Calais and its garrison, forcing the bulk of the British force with a large contingent of the French First Army, to retreat to the smaller port of Dunkirk. The French Democratic Government refused British assistance in evacuating key personnel and ministers to North Africa. Instead, they opted to surrender to the Germans. Some French military officers refused to respect this decision and were evacuated to either Britain or the areas loyal to the French army in Africa.

## **Supporting Link**

Battle of France Documentary: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7HBAaHPbYu0>

## **Dunkirk**

Faced with the destruction of the army at Dunkirk, King George VI called for a national day of prayer throughout Britain on 23<sup>rd</sup> March 1940. Shortly afterwards a one in a hundred-year storm hit the northern coast of Europe forcing most of the Luftwaffe to stay on the ground. The German Army ceased its advance on Dunkirk due to the suspicion that the British, having conducted such an orderly retreat, were laying an ambush.

The Royal Navy knew that evacuation by them from the port of Dunkirk was impractical and called on the people of Britain to allow the Navy to borrow all civilian boats. The public responded by sailing their own boats across the Channel. As a result, 320,000 out of 350,000 who had gone to France, were successfully evacuated. About 140,000 French and Belgian troops were also evacuated to England, albeit with the loss of all vehicles and heavy equipment.

## **Vichy, France**

The NZ Army, along with the rest of the world, was stunned by the collapse of what was thought to be the greatest army in Europe.

With the Germans occupying Northern France, a French Government that agreed to work with the Germans was set up in the town of Vichy. The Vichy government demanded that all French military units throughout their empire immediately report for duty in collaboration with the Germans. Instead many French armed forces opted to join De Gaulle and continue the war.

Winston Churchill was aware of the necessity of keeping the world's sea lanes in British hands, and saw the threat posed by the French fleet. The British demanded action of the French navy in Algeria. They requested the fleet either scuttle, make its way to a neutral port, or join the British. Admiral Francois Darlan refused. The following British attack sank one battleship and damaged the rest of the fleet, killing 1297 French sailors. This led to Vichy France cutting all diplomatic ties with the free French and the British.

In Britain there was a largely intact army but almost no transport, tanks, or heavy equipment. There was a very real threat of German invasion. This meant that the first echelons of the second NZEF were diverted from Egypt.

Italy had formally joined the war on Germany's side so the British stationed the rest of the NZEF, including the newly formed 28<sup>th</sup> Māori Battalion, in Egypt where they stayed, being re-equipped, motorised, and re-trained for modern warfare, while the British and African forces successfully took over Italian-controlled Abyssinia.

## **Battle of Britain**

Hitler now claimed he had no wish to fight a war with Britain. He offered the British a way to retain their empire if they would sign an armistice. Lord Halifax went behind Churchill's back to negotiate with Mussolini and Hitler. When he posed the idea, Churchill claimed, "You can't reason with a tiger when your head is in its mouth."

The German High Command were in no position to launch an invasion of Britain and advised Hitler against any action. The German Luftwaffe, buoyed by their successes, suggested an invasion of Britain could be achieved. The German army and navy were far less enthusiastic, but Hitler demanded that plans be drawn up. As well as this, the SS and Gestapo drew up the infamous Black Book, listing 2820 British and foreign nationals who were to be immediately arrested or executed upon the fall of Britain. Politicians, scientists, trade unionists, lawyers, authors, and aristocrats were among the names on 'The List'.

Under the command of Air Marshall Hugh Dowding, the RAF (Royal Air Force, Britain) had refused to send urgently needed planes and crews to France. This was a nation saving decision. The most likely area for an invasion of Britain was recognised to be the South of England which fell under the control of 11 Group, commanded by New Zealander Keith Park, a veteran of Gallipoli.

Dowding, who had attempted to retire before the war, set about establishing a highly efficient communication and plotting system that allowed commanders on the ground

to know the exact locations of both friendly and enemy formations, and relay them in real time to commanders in the air.

The Luftwaffe knew that the destruction or incapacitation of the RAF was vital to the success of Operation Seelowe and concentrated their first attacks on 11 Group's airfields.

On August 18<sup>th</sup>, 1940, Germany launched an all-out attack on 11 Group, launching everything they had in a concentrated attack on the south of England. As the size of the raid that was forming became obvious, Dowding scrambled every squadron in 11 Group. 11 Group, including 127 NZ pilots, launched themselves skywards despite already being exhausted by a week of continuous bombing and ever mounting casualties. Visiting the main 11 Group HQ at Biggen Hill, Churchill watched as the raid formed on the plotting table. Noticing something about the board, he asked Park, "Where are our reserves (of aircraft)?", to which Park replied, "There are none Prime Minister."

Eagle Day was a defining moment of the war with Luftwaffe Command urging Goering to cease costly daylight raids over Britain. Goering could not understand how the RAF was still in fighting condition so he decided to switch targets to aircraft production facilities rather than airfields. This decision immediately lifted the pressure on 11 Group, giving time for new pilots to be trained.

### **Supporting Link**

Operation Sealion: [https://drive.google.com/file/d/0B\\_JIBYcrqYoOdEVBS0dOWldlQ00/view](https://drive.google.com/file/d/0B_JIBYcrqYoOdEVBS0dOWldlQ00/view)

### **The Blitz**

During this time, it was understood by both sides that civilian targets were no go areas. That all changed in early September 1940 when a German bomber squadron became lost in the dark and accidentally bombed London. This led to the first British air raid on Berlin.

On September 7<sup>th</sup>, 1940, the Luftwaffe launched their first air raid of the Blitz with raids occurring on 56 of the next 57 nights.

### **Early African Campaign**

Allied actions in North Africa against the Italians met with success. The Italians were alarmed by the rapid collapse of the garrisons in Abyssinia and scrambled to defend their positions in Libya. The Germans decided to secure the North African front and capture the vital Suez Canal, and sent two panzer divisions under the command of Erwin Rommel to assist the Italians.

The Italians declared war on Greece from their protectorate of Albania. The Greek army had prepared defensive lines in the mountains of northern Greece which stopped the assault in its tracks. Unfortunately for the Germans the Greek government permitted the British to send an expeditionary force, including the NZ division, to assist. The Germans were determined to cut off the British from the Mediterranean and invaded and quickly conquered Yugoslavia. Six German

motorcycle scouts successfully captured 5000 Yugoslav soldiers and the capital city 24 hours before the German army caught up with them.

### **Greek Campaign**

The Greek reliance on static defence lines proved their undoing as German paratroopers (Fallschirmjäger) isolated and took key points and passes allowing the Panzers a way through the mountains. The British were reluctant to commit tanks to Greece without an assured victory, so what followed was a constant and well carried out retreat. The Luftwaffe quickly gaining air supremacy and the Allied forces were hard pressed to mount a significant defence. The Greek campaign, with exceptions of Olympus Pass and Thermopylae, ended in the evacuation of most of the expeditionary force.

### **The Battle of Crete**

Due to the army's emphasis on rescuing men rather than equipment, a large proportion of the New Zealand, British, Australian, and Greek soldiers were evacuated to the island of Crete, rather than back to Egypt. A German invasion of the island was anticipated and General Freyberg of the NZEF was placed in command of all forces on the island. Freyberg was not impressed by the situation he found himself in with thousands of soldiers populating the island, most without heavy weapons or much ammunition. There was little in the way of artillery or anti-aircraft defences and no air support at all so the troops were forced to hide during the day from German fighters and bombers. Adding to this already dire situation was a food and water shortage. There was little radio equipment available meaning the defenders had to rely on runners.

Germany was largely uninterested in Crete, being more concerned with the upcoming Operation Barbarossa, as well as the U-boat effort in the North Atlantic. Goering, still smarting from the defeat of the Battle of Britain, stated that he would launch an airborne invasion of Crete, citing the potential for the British to use it as an airfield to attack the vital Romanian oilfields as his excuse. The British had successfully cracked German ultra-messages and Freyberg was alerted to expect an airborne invasion. On 20<sup>th</sup> May 1941, the Germans launched the first wave of the world's first completely air borne invasion with para troopers and glider-borne troops of the much-vaunted 3<sup>rd</sup> Fallschirmjäger regiment landing across the island. One of the main targets was the NZ held airfield at Mellame.

A German doctrine dictated that any support weaponry would have to be landed by aircraft. The New Zealander's knew what to expect after their experience in Greece and many managed to steal German weapons cannisters and use the contents against their former owners. Both sides suffered a loss of communication and confusion reigned.

A critical mistake was made when the order was given to the Kiwis to abandon the RAF tents next to the airfield and their code books were left behind. Even though many of the German commanders were wounded, missing, or dead, the Germans were able to hold part of the airfield in time for the arrival of the second wave. This included transport planes landing on the airfield to drop off mountain troops (5<sup>th</sup>

Gebirgsjäger) under direct fire from the NZ defenders. After several bayonet charges by a variety of Kiwi units the Fallschirmjäger still held a portion of the airfield by nightfall. With little ammunition, dwindling manpower, and no communication with the rest of the island, a controversial decision was made by the officers on the ground to retreat, to escape with as many men as possible.

What the defenders did not know was a German Funker (radio operator) had succeeded in making a working radio out of several broken ones and, turning the steel bridge he was hiding under into a giant aerial, was able to alert his command to the failure of the attack. The next morning when it was discovered the airfield was abandoned, the paratroopers consolidated their defence and radioed high command that a miraculous victory had occurred. Within the next 12 days Crete had fallen.

### **The German invasion of Russia**

On the 22<sup>nd</sup> June 1941, the Germans launched the largest single invasion in modern history when 3.8 million men, 3,000 tanks, 5,000 aircraft and 23,000 artillery pieces attacked along the border between Germany and Russia.

The initial ineptitude of Russian command assisted the Germans with only small, isolated pockets of resistance. The citizens of Soviet-occupied territories including eastern Poland, Latvia, Estonia, and the Ukraine, greeted the advancing Germans as liberators from the communist regime. Many of these 'liberated' nations put forward volunteers to join the German army (SS).

Behind the advancing army came something much more sinister in the form of the SS Einsatzgruppen (Nazi death squads) whose purpose was the extinction of undesirables, including Jews, members of the communist hierarchy, gypsies, and homosexuals.

An example of their actions was the massacre of 33,771 Jews over a period of two days at Babi Yar near Kiev. 29 Jews survived. Later 150,000 Jews, Soviet prisoners of war, ethnic minorities, and Ukrainian resistance were killed on the same site.

During those first German advances which, at their peak, reached the outer suburbs of Moscow, the Soviets lost 566,000 killed, with 2.8 million captured or missing.

However the Germans soon found themselves in difficulty owing to Russia's large expanse of territories. They struggled to maintain the lines of supply. This meant that the German army was not as prepared as it would have liked when the Russian winter arrived, and a Soviet counterattack pushed the Germans back from Moscow.

### **The Far East**

Japan had been watching the events in Europe with great interest. As an ally of Italy and Germany Japan had managed to stay out of the conflict, being more concerned with securing her position in China. In 1941, having observed the British air attack on the French fleet, the Japanese military dictatorship ordered the Imperial Navy to launch a similar attack against the Americans at Pearl Harbour. Japanese Admiral Yamamoto was not pleased with the idea, predicting Japan would only have an advantage for six months. He also strongly recommended that he receive army support to defend the islands of the Pacific. The army refused, instead planning an

attack on British Malaya and the Dutch East Indies to seize the vital rubber plantations and oil wells. On December 7<sup>th</sup>, 1941, the Japanese navy attacked Pearl Harbour but failed in their objective to sink the US aircraft carriers or inflict permanent damage on the port installations.

The Japanese then attacked the international settlement in Shanghai, the British Crown colony of Hong Kong, and the poorly defended British Malaya and Burma.

On the 8<sup>th</sup> of December, the Royal Naval vessel defending Shanghai's international settlement, the HMS *Peterel*, under the command of 62-year-old Lt Stephen Polkinghorn, a New Zealander, was boarded by a Japanese delegation from the cruiser *Izumo*, who demanded her surrender. Polkinghorn, having witnessed the surrender of the American gunboat USS *Wake* was determined he would buy time for his ship to be scuttled and its codebooks destroyed. When the Japanese officers insisted, Polkinghorn loudly ordered them to "get off my 'bloody' ship". The Japanese left, returning to the *Izumo*, and opened fire on the *Peterel*. The crew of the *Peterel* returned fire with rifles and a Lewis gun, succeeding in killing several Japanese sailors before the *Peterel* was destroyed. The crew was taken prisoner and eventually shipped to Japan.

Hong Kong fell to the Japanese on Christmas Day with 2000 killed and 10,000 captured. These included Chinese, Canadian, and British soldiers and citizens. Many of the allied casualties were killed as prisoners of war.

### **1942 The Wannsee Meeting**

In the suburb of Wannsee, 15 members of Nazi organisations, including Reichard Heidrich, (chief of the Reich Security Office), Adolph Eichman, (chief of Department 4 B 4, Jewish Affairs), the head of Gestapo, and state secretary Roland Freisler, (head of Ministry of Justice) met in secret. Notably, representatives of the German armed forces, railways, and ministry of transport, were not included.

The goal of the conference was to come up with a "final solution to the Jewish problem". This was not to discuss whether to do it, but the most economical means of doing so. It was predicted that 11 million Jews would have to be disposed of from across Europe. It was during this conference that the decision was reached that existing concentration and labour camps would be expanded with the addition of gas chambers and incinerators.

Jews who were not immediately murdered, were to be used as labour for the construction of infrastructure, German weapon testing sites, and weapons production. Those who did not die from malnutrition or exposure, would be worked to death. This included thousands of Jews who had fought for Germany in the First World War. Following the meeting all participants were ordered to destroy any records they had. One neglected to inform the meeting that he still had his copy, and this was later handed to the allies once the war was over.

## **North Africa**

In North Africa both sides found themselves locked in a desperate struggle. The British and NZ forces had been pushed back to the defensive line at El Alamein, the last defensible point before Cairo and the Suez Canal. The newly appointed British Commander, General Bernard Montgomery, was determined to hold the German attack, and counter-attack with overwhelming firepower and supplies so as not to repeat the mistakes of previous advances by over-extending his supply lines.

Using misdirection to convince the Germans, 'Monty' launched his attack on 23<sup>rd</sup> October 1942. The attack, the New Zealanders at the forefront, successfully punched through the defensive lines and deep minefields to put the Germans on retreat, back into Libya. At the same time, the first American forces made costly but ultimately successful landings in Vichy French-held North Africa.

Montgomery's victory at El-Alamein was made possible by ongoing defence of the island of Malta where Keith Park had been sent following the Battle of Britain. The island had been under constant air attack and supply lines had been almost entirely blocked for two years with 30,000 buildings being destroyed or damaged and hundreds of aircraft lost. Park's air defence over the island, like the air defence he'd organised over England, is credited with being a major factor in the allied victory in the Mediterranean. Even Rommel stated that "without Malta, we will end by losing North Africa". In total, the German and Italian air forces flew 3000 bombing raids and dropped 6700 tons of bombs on the harbour alone. The efforts of commonwealth pilots not only defended the island, but sank 2304 axis merchant ships, starving Rommel's and the Italian forces in North Africa, beyond the point of recovery.

## **The Pacific**

New Zealand was facing a dilemma. After the Japanese bombing of Darwin, the Australians withdrew all their forces from the larger conflict to defend Australia. New Zealand refused to do the same, insisting that the Nazi threat be dealt with appropriately.

NZ created the largest standing force at home, 100,000 members of the Home Guard. Using WW1 uniforms and weapons, local units were organised through their RSA's and trained several times a week in the art of conventional and guerrilla warfare.

At the same time, the third NZ expeditionary force was created and sent to the Solomon Islands, New Caledonia, and Norfolk Island.

## **1943**

Following the success of the British advance from El Alamein, Rommel was pushed further back into Tunisia. Rommel demanded that his troops be evacuated but Hitler ordered the Afrika Korps to fight to the last, ending in its surrender.

## **Russia**

In Russia, the Germans were desperate to regain the initiative. Following the failures at Leningrad in the north and Stalingrad in the south the German high command realised that any hope of victory depended on the destruction of the Russian army.

The Germans focussed their attention on the Kursk salient, a large bulge in the front lines which the Russians were reinforcing.

It was thought that the Germans would cut off the salient, trapping the large Russian force within and destroying it. The Russians were equally aware of the need to gain the initiative.

Realising the tempting target the salient presented, the Russians prepared for two operations. The first was a defence involving minefields, barbed wire, hidden anti-tank guns, and artillery over a 100km deep to slow down and halt any German offensive. The second part was a counter offensive using the bulk of their tanks to push the Germans back and exhaust their manpower and vehicle reserves.

Both parts of the Battle of Kursk were one of the largest land battles in human history. The Germans had 780,000 men, the Russians met them with 1.9 million, but when the Russians counterattacked, they had 2.5 million.

3253 German tanks faced 7300 Russian tanks. The Russians were estimated to have lost 6000 of them, along with a quarter of a million killed or missing. Despite the Germans inflicting higher casualties on the Russians, they were able to absorb the losses with greater ease than their German foes.

The battle of Kursk marked a turning point on the Russian Front and destroyed any hopes of a German advance into Russia.

### **Italian Surrender**

In Britain, the Americans and French were pushing for a naval invasion of France as soon as possible. The British instead recommended that the 8<sup>th</sup> Army, along with the Americans, push from North Africa and attack Sicily. The planning, including the famous Operation Mincemeat, allowed the landings in Sicily to be carried out with fewer casualties than predicted, giving the Allies a jumping off point for the invasion of Italy. On September 8<sup>th</sup>, the surrender of the Italian government was announced.

### **1944**

This was one of the costliest years of the war for all sides. In Italy, the allied offensive stalled at the German Gothic defensive line. In Western Europe, the allies successfully landed in France and began pushing into Europe. On the Eastern Front, the Russians were at the borders of Germany itself.

### **Italian Front**

Allied advances up the Italian Peninsula had been slow due to the swift German reaction to the Italian surrender. The advance was further hampered by the Americans withdrawing as many of their troops as possible to take part in the invasion of France, This forced the commonwealth, including the NZEF, to shoulder the burden of the Italian campaign.

### **Monte Cassino**

New Zealand's key moment of the Italian theatre was the infamous battle of Monte Cassino starting on the 17<sup>th</sup> of January in 1944. The town of Cassino was a key point in the heavily defended German Gothic line, a defensive line running the width of

Italy. The mountainous and urban environment of Italy was drastically different to the desert where the Kiwis had been fighting for years, meaning our soldiers struggled to learn a completely different style of combat required for the terrain. The Sherman tanks the Kiwis used had been able to survive in the desert against light and early medium German tanks and had relied on their manoeuvrability. In the tight winding streets and unpaved roads of Italy, these tanks rapidly became known as “Zippos” due to their ability to be easily destroyed and set alight. The German’s simply referred to these tanks as “Tommy Cookers”.

The NZ forces rapidly gained a reputation as assault troops, always at the sharp end of major attacks. General Freyberg was keenly aware of his responsibilities to avoid heavy casualties.

With the initial attacks on Monte Cassino repulsed by the 3<sup>rd</sup> Fallschirmjäger (the same unit that had landed on Crete), the British senior commander of the Mediterranean, Field Marshall Harold Alexander, ordered the US General Mark Clark to land his forces behind the German front line at Anzio, just south of Rome. Clark was to then force his way across Italy as quickly as possible, ensuring that the German frontline forces were trapped and cut off from supplies when the next assault on Cassino came.

Instead, Clark landed unopposed at Anzio, waiting for over a week in his position. This allowed the Germans to redirect their forces and lead to the allies suffering 43,000 casualties. When Clark did fight his way out, he still refused to obey British orders. Instead of pushing across Italy and trapping the German forces, he attempted to restore his reputation by pushing north and taking Rome, a strategically useless city, allowing the German forces to retreat in good order to their next defence line.

### **Western Front**

It was known by both the allied and axis high commands that the British had been planning for the invasion of Europe ever since the retreat from Dunkirk. The question on everybody’s mind during the opening of 1944 was where and when.

Since 1940 the British, Canadians and Free French forces had been launching numerous raids up and down the French coast. Some, like the Dieppe raid, had been disastrous, where others, like St Nazaire, had been successful. Each raid had taught the allies vital lessons about beach landings, the standards of German garrisons, and the fluctuating degrees of reliability of the French Resistance which ranged from patriotic French citizens, to communists, to bandits.

Numerous agents had been sent into France by the Special Operations Executive, a branch of British Military Intelligence which specialised in espionage and other “ungentlemanly” forms of warfare. One of the more famous agents was Nancy Wake, a New Zealander codenamed “The White Mouse”.

These agents sent back intelligence to Britain and assisted in co-ordinating resistance groups and supplying them with weapons. It is estimated 104 SOE

agents, primarily women, were tortured and executed by the Gestapo and the French Police during the war.

The intelligence sent back to the allies was vital in planning Operation Overlord with other intelligence operations like Operation Double Cross, ensuring that the German Abwehr was kept completely in the dark as to the exact nature of the invasion.

The German's were hampered by a great deal of political infighting between the various branches of the armed forces, the SS, and individual generals, (Erwin Rommel and Gerd von Rundstedt.) With limited forces available in France, Rommel (who had been placed in command of the defences along the French Coast) had been suspicious of the Abwehr's declaration that the Allied invasion would occur in Calais, thinking it would be too obvious.

Having encountered British and Commonwealth deception and distraction tactics in North Africa, this was probably well founded. To this end he set about reinforcing the defences in France, and to move the German panzer divisions to be as close to the coast as possible to quickly counteract any landings. Rundstedt insisted that the panzers be kept in a central location to be deployed to any potential invasion site. Hitler decided to compromise by allowing Rommel and Rundstedt limited numbers of tanks each with the rest being kept in reserve and unable to move without a direct order from Hitler.

This decision came to haunt the Germans on the 6<sup>th</sup> of June when the Allies simultaneously attacked on five separate beaches in Normandy. While the Panzer units under Rommel's command were able to hold the British and Canadians back from the town of Caen (supposed to have fallen in the first few days) for several weeks, the panzers under Rundstedt were annihilated by RAF attacks as they attempted to move forward to meet the invasion. The panzers under Hitler's orders spent the first half of D-day unable to move as Hitler was sleeping in and none of his commanders dared to wake him.

### **Russian Front**

The Russian front, famous for its brutality and horrific losses on both sides, had been relatively quiet during the opening months of 1944. This was due to the Russians quietly building up their strength for Operation Barrington.

One of the most successful campaigns of the Red Army during WW2, Operation Barrington, was a huge scale offensive calling upon 2.5 million troops and 6000 tanks to shatter the German armies in Russia and push them back into Poland.

Out of 47 German divisional and Corps commanders, 31 were killed or captured. One senior officer who flew back to Berlin to personally convince the Führer that his "no retreat" order was simply wasting lives was sacked on the spot and replaced by a commander who immediately went behind Hitler's back and managed to get 35,000 soldiers to retreat before being cut off.

As the Russian Army pushed into Poland, the Polish resistance, famous for its hatred of Nazis and communists, saw the advance as a threat to their potential freedom after the war. As the Soviets came within artillery range, the Polish resistance

decided to go against the German garrison to prevent the Soviets from setting up a communist government in Poland.

The Soviets abruptly stopped their advance just short of the city as the SS went about trying to retake the city back from the Polish Resistance. The old city of Warsaw was almost destroyed in the fighting. Over 15,000 resistance fighters were killed along with 200,000 civilians. The Germans lost up to 17,000 men. Once the rebellion was crushed and the last of the Polish forces were taken into captivity or executed, the Soviets resumed their advance, taking the city from its exhausted German defenders.

### **Operation Valkyrie**

During the war, the numerous Wehrmacht officers and democratic politicians involved in the Oster plot were still determined in their mission to remove Hitler and the Nazis, re-establish democracy under a constitutional monarchy, and prevent the spread of communism across Europe. Due to the failure of the Oster plot because of Chamberlain's actions at Munich, the plotters were unable to make any moves during the early years of the war as German successes buoyed the population's spirits and saw Hitler become more popular than ever.

By 1944 that popularity had faded. German citizens lived in fear of the allied bombs raining from the skies, day and night. They also feared the Gestapo. Even their own children as the Hitler Youth were indoctrinated to follow the Führer over their own families.

The swelling number of plotters decided the time had come to act.

The plan was simple; assassinate Hitler in the "Wolf's Lair" in Eastern Prussia, then the army would seize control of all the major cities in Germany and the occupied territories, arresting all SS, Gestapo, and Nazi party officials. A cease-fire would then be ordered on all fronts while negotiations were carried out with the Western Allies.

The bomb that was designed to be used in a particular meeting room inside the main bunker of the Wolf's Lair was not used on the day of the attempt (20<sup>th</sup> of July 1944). Instead, the bomb only burst Hitler's eardrums and blew off his trousers while killing several others in the room.

The plotters were able to start the operation and could have succeeded but they were not quick enough to cut Goebbels telephone lines. He was able to contact the Ministry of Information with the fact that Hitler had not been killed.

Within days, the plot unravelled, and many of the plotters were either killed or committed suicide. The following weeks were filled with accusations against officers of all branches of the military and their executions, or, in the case of Erwin Rommel, their forced suicide. Heinrich Himmler used the plot as an excuse to consolidate his power, executing officers, including Admiral Canaris, head of the German Abwehr. He absorbed the whole of German military intelligence into the SD (the SS military intelligence wing). While it was intended to concentrate all intelligence under Himmler's control the German services fought back by not sending through certain intelligence, or just not co-operating.

The plotters attempted to contact the Western Allies before the operation took place to inform them of what was happening. The Allies never responded.

### **1945**

With his forces pressed on all sides, his national industry in a state of collapse, and with the vengeance weapons of the V1 and V2 rockets being unable to turn the tide, Hitler's situation was increasingly desperate.

On the 23<sup>rd</sup> of March 1945, British and American Troops crossed the River Rhine into Germany, seizing the Ruhr industrial area. British Troops discovered the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp.

The Russians were in Berlin, determined to take it before the Allies could.

The Russians, over the course of sixteen days, fought their way through the city, capturing stunned civilians and the remains of the German military. It is estimated that 125,000 civilians were assaulted or killed during this two-week period alone.

Trapped in his bunker beneath the Reich Chancellery, Hitler committed suicide on the 30<sup>th</sup> of April.

The fighting in Berlin continued until the 2<sup>nd</sup> of May, with SS-Charlemagne, a unit of French Volunteers, being the last one destroyed.

A brief power struggle between Himmler, Goebbels, and Admiral Donitz followed. In the end Donitz ordered the surrender of all German forces on the 9<sup>th</sup> of May, bringing the Western component of WWII to a close.

The war would not officially end until the 2<sup>nd</sup> of September when Japan formerly surrendered following the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

### **Supporting Links**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=atD-zqSpsNo>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aigpXmWSWxM>

Excerpt from the film "Pierrepoint" detailing the approach to the execution of Nazi War criminals:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=liOGS-81KU>