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World War Two: How the Allies Won

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Professor Richard Overy discusses how the Allies overcame the initially overwhelming setbacks of World War Two, and succeeded in finally defeating the Axis Powers.

Introduction

In his prison cell at Nuremberg, Hitler's foreign minister, Joachim von Ribbentrop, wrote a brief memoir in the course of which he explored the reasons for Germany's defeat. He picked out three factors that he thought were critical: the unexpected 'power of resistance' of the Red Army; the vast supply of American armaments; and the success of Allied air power.

This last was Hitler's explanation too. When Ribbentrop spoke with him a week before the suicide in the bunker, Hitler told him that, 'the real military cause of defeat' was the failure of the German Air Force.

For the Allies in World War Two, the defeat of Germany was their priority.

For all his many failings Ribbentrop was closer to the truth than he might have realised. For the Allies in World War Two, the defeat of Germany was their priority. Italy and Japan never posed the same kind of threat as the European superpower they fought alongside. Their defeat, costly though it was, became irresistible. The key to ending the world crisis was the defeat of Hitler's Germany.

This outcome was not pre-ordained, as is so often suggested, once the British Empire was joined by the USSR and the USA in 1941. The Allies had to mobilise and utilise their large resources effectively on the battlefield and in the air. This outcome could not be taken for granted.

British forces were close to defeat everywhere in 1942. The American economy was a peacetime economy, apparently unprepared for the colossal demands of total war. The Soviet system was all but shattered in 1941, two-thirds of its heavy industrial capacity captured and its vast air and tank armies destroyed. This was a war, Ribbentrop ruefully concluded, that 'Germany could have won'.

Soviet resistance was in some ways the most surprising outcome. The German attackers believed that Soviet Communism was a corrupt and primitive system that would collapse, in Goebbels' words 'like a pack of cards'.

The evidence of how poorly the Red Army fought in 1941 confirmed these expectations. More than five million Soviet soldiers were captured or killed in six months; they fought with astonishing bravery, but at every level of combat were out-classed by troops that were better armed, better trained and better led.

This situation seemed beyond remedy. Yet within a year Soviet factories were out-producing their richly-endowed German counterparts - the Red Army had embarked on a thorough transformation of the technical and organisational base of Soviet forces, and a stiffening of morale, from Stalin downwards, produced the first serious reverse for the German armed forces when Operation Uranus in November 1942 led to the encirclement of Stalingrad and the loss of the German Sixth Army.

Soviet transformation

The transformation in Soviet fighting power and morale has a number of explanations. In the first place the Red Army learned a great deal from German practice and from their own mistakes.

The air and tank armies were reorganised to mimic the German Panzer divisions and air fleets; communication and intelligence were vastly improved (helped by a huge supply of American and British telephone equipment and cable); training for officers and men was designed to encourage greater initiative; and the technology available was hastily modernised to match German.



Stalin ©

Not until the later stages of the war did Stalin begin to reimpose control, when victory was at last in sight.

Two other changes proved vital to allow the army to profit from the reform of operational practice. First, Soviet industry and workforce proved remarkable adaptable for a command economy long regarded as inherently inefficient and inflexible.

The pre-war experience of economic planning and mobilisation helped the regime to run a war economy on an emergency basis, while the vast exodus of workers (an estimated 16 million) and factories (more than 2,500 major plants) from in front of the advancing Germans allowed the USSR to reconstruct its armaments economy in central and eastern Russia with great rapidity.

The second factor lay with politics. Until the summer of 1942 Stalin and the Party closely controlled the Red Army. Political commissars worked directly alongside senior officers and reported straight back to the Kremlin. Stalin came to realise that political control was a dead hand on the army and cut it back sharply in the autumn of 1942.

He created a deputy supreme commander under him, the talented Marshal Zhukov, and began to step back more from the day-to-day conduct of the war.

Given the freedom to work out their own salvation, the Soviet General Staff demonstrated that they could match the Germans on the battlefield. Not until the later stages of the war did Stalin begin to reimpose control, when victory was at last in sight.

The Soviet Union did not turn the tide on the Eastern Front on its own. Though for decades Soviet historians played down the role of American and British Lend-Lease aid, its real significance has now been acknowledged. From 1942 a flow of food and raw materials and engineering equipment sustained the Soviet war effort.

There was enough food in the end to ensure a square meal for every Soviet soldier; most of the Soviet rail network was supplied with locomotives, wagons and rails made in the USA; one million miles of telephone wire, 14 million pairs of boots, 363,000 trucks, all helped to keep the Red Army fighting with growing efficiency. Without Allied aid, Stalin later admitted, 'we would not have been able to cope'.

American power

The reliance on American aid indicates just how much the Allied war effort owed to the exceptional material and logistical strength of the United States.



American troops on D-Day, about to land on a Normandy beach ©

The ability of the world's largest industrial economy to convert to the mass production of weapons and war equipment is usually taken for granted. Yet the transition from peace to war was so rapid and effective that the USA was able to make up for the lag in building up effectively trained armed forces by exerting a massive material superiority.

This success owed something to the experience of Roosevelt's New Deal, when for the first time the federal government began to operate its own economic planning agencies; it owed something to the decision by the American armed forces in the 1920s to focus on issues of production and logistics in the Industrial War College set up in Washington.

But above all it owed a great deal to the character of American industrial capitalism, with its 'can-do' ethos, high levels of engineering skill and tough-minded entrepreneurs. After a decade of recession the manufacturing community had a good deal of spare, unemployed capacity to absorb (unlike Germany, where full employment was reached well before the outbreak of war, and gains in output could only really come from improvements in productivity).

Even with these vast resources to hand, however, it took American forces considerable time before they could fight on equal terms with well-trained and determined enemies.

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This gap in fighting effectiveness helps to explain the decision taken in Washington to focus a good deal of the American effort on the building up of a massive air power. Roosevelt saw air strategy as a key to future war and a way to reduce American casualties.

At his encouragement the Army Air Forces were able to build up an air force that came to dwarf those of Germany and Japan. At the centre of the strategy was a commitment to strategic bombing, the long-range and independent assault on the economic and military infrastructure of the enemy state.

Such a strategy was already underway in Britain, when the USA entered the war in December 1941. In January 1943 the two states finally decided to pool their very large bomber forces in a Combined Offensive against the German economy.

German errors

It has always been fashionable to see the Combined Offensive as a failure. Yet its effect was to distort German strategy and economic capability decisively between 1943 and 1945. This was achieved in three distinct ways.



Destroyed German tank ©

Bombing provided the key difference between the western Allies and Germany.

First, bombing forced the German Air Force to divert most of its fighter force to the defence of Germany, and to reduce sharply the proportion of bomber aircraft produced. The effect was to denude the German frontline of much needed bomber and fighter aircraft; by 1944 German air power was easily eroded around the periphery of German-controlled Europe, where pilot losses reached exceptionally high levels.

Second, bombing placed a ceiling on the ability of the German-dominated European economy to produce armaments in quantities that matched the vast resource base of the occupied economies. This was achieved through direct destruction, the interruption of raw material, transport and energy supplies on a large scale, and the forced dispersal of German industry away from the most threatened centres.

Third, bombing forced Hitler and the German leadership to think of radical ways to combat the threat it posed. Huge resources were diverted to the production of vengeance, or 'V', weapons, which had a very limited impact on Britain when rockets and flying bombs began to fall in the late summer of 1944.

A gigantic construction project for an underground economy was authorised by Hitler in 1943. Organised by Himmler, using camp labour under the most rigorous and deadly regime, millions of man-hours and billions of marks were spent trying to achieve the impossible.

Bombing provided the key difference between the western Allies and Germany. It played an important part in sustaining domestic morale in Britain and the USA, while its effects on German society produced social disruption on a vast scale (by late 1944 8 million Germans had fled from the cities to the safer villages and townships).

The use of bombers and fighter-bombers at the frontline helped to ease the path of inexperienced armies that threatened to get bogged down in Normandy and Italy.

Conclusion

The long-range fighter, introduced from late 1943, made bombing more secure, and provided the instrument to destroy the German fighter force over the Reich.



Emperor Hirohito of Japan ©

The debilitating effects on German air power then reduced the contribution German aircraft could make on the Eastern Front, where Soviet air forces vastly outnumbered German. The success of air power in Europe persuaded the American military leaders to try to end the war with Japan the same way.

City raids from May 1945 destroyed a vast area of urban Japan and paved the way for a surrender, completed with the dropping of the two atomic bombs in August 1945. Here, too, the American government and public was keen to avoid further heavy casualties.

Air power provided a short-cut to victory in both theatres; British and American wartime losses were a fraction of those sustained by Germany, Japan and the USSR, and this in turn made it easier to persuade democratic populations to continue fighting even through periods of crisis and stalemate.

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There are many other factors that explain victory and defeat beside von Ribbentrop's trio. Yet without Soviet resistance and reform, American rearmament and economic mobilisation, and western air power, the ability of the three major allies to wear down German and Japanese resistance would have been highly questionable.

This still leaves open the question of German miscalculation. There were weaknesses and strengths in Hitler's strategy, but no misjudgements were more costly in the end than the German belief that the Red Army was a primitive force, incapable of prolonged resistance, or Hitler's insistence that the USA would take years to rearm and could never field an effective army, or the failure to recognise that bombing was a threat worth taking seriously before it was too late.

Military arrogance and political hubris put Germany on the path to a war she could have won only if these expectations had proved true.

Find out more

Books

Why the Allies Won by Richard Overy (Pimlico Press, 1996)

The Battle by Richard Overy (Penguin Books, 2001)

The Road to War by Richard Overy and Andrew Wheatcroft (Penguin Books, 2000)

A War to Be Won: Fighting the Second World War by Williamson Murray and Allan R Millett (Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2000). **(Review)**.

About the author

Richard Overy is professor of history at the University of Exeter. His publications include *Russia's War* (1998) , *The Battle* (2000) and *Interrogations: The Nazi Elite in Allied Hands* (2001). For a lifetime's contribution to military history, Professor Overy was awarded the Samuel Eliot Morison Prize by the Society for Military History in 2001.