

Germany encircled

JULY 1944

On 27 June 1944, the Cherbourg dockyard surrendered, leaving only a few strongholds still in German hands around the port. But the German power of retaliation elsewhere was not yet over. In Britain, 1,600 civilians had now been killed by flying bombs. 'After five years of war', the Minister of Home Security, Herbert Morrison, told the War Cabinet in London, 'the civil population were not as capable of standing the strains of air attack as they had been during the winter of 1940-41.' That day, a flying bomb, falling on Victoria Station in London, killed fourteen people.

In Russia, June 27 saw the first ton of steel produced by the rebuilt Izhorsky steel mill in Leningrad. That day, as Mogilev was liberated in White Russia, Soviet troops on the Karelian front entered Petrozavodsk, releasing several thousand Soviet citizens held in a concentration camp there.

On June 28, as the Normandy battle continued, with the last German strong-points in Cherbourg on the verge of surrender, but with Caen still held by the Germans, the figures of Allied dead since June 6 were calculated: 4,868 of the deaths were American, 2,443 British and 393 Canadian.

In Paris, on June 28, in an act of revenge by the Resistance, the Milice leader Philippe Henriot was shot dead. On the Eastern Front, that day, the advancing Soviet troops approached the Maly Trostenets concentration camp near Minsk. Russian aircraft attacked the camp itself. That day, the camp guards, Latvian, Ukrainian, White Russian, Hungarian and Roumanian SS auxiliaries, were replaced by a special SS detachment, all German, under German SS officers. This detachment locked all the surviving prisoners, Russian civilians, Jews from the Minsk ghetto, and Viennese Jews who had been brought from Theresienstadt, into the barracks, and then set the barracks on fire.

All those who were able to flee from the blazing buildings were shot. About twenty of the Jews from Theresienstadt managed to escape the blaze and the bullets, and to hide in the forest until the arrival of Soviet forces six days later.

On June 28 the Red Army entered Bobruisk, killing 16,000 German soldiers and taking 18,000 prisoner. 'This is the moment', Churchill telegraphed to Stalin three days later, 'for me to tell you how immensely we are all here impressed

with the magnificent advances of the Russian Armies which seem, as they grow in momentum, to be pulverizing the German Armies which stand between you and Warsaw, and afterwards Berlin. Every victory that you gain is watched with eager attention here.'

Churchill went on to tell Stalin: 'I realize vividly that all this is the second round you have fought since Teheran, the first which regained Sevastopol, Odessa and the Crimea and carried your vanguards to the Carpathians, Sereth and Pruth.'

That day, in Italy, General Alexander continued to push the German forces northward. In Normandy, more than three-quarters of a million British and American troops were now ashore, and 40,000 Germans had been taken prisoner. 'The enemy is burning and bleeding on every front at once,' Churchill telegraphed to Stalin, 'and I agree with you that this must go on to the end.'

On June 29, the last German strongpoints in Cherbourg surrendered. That day, Rommel and von Rundstedt went to see Hitler at Berchtesgaden, to demand massive reinforcements, particularly of aircraft and anti-aircraft guns, for Normandy. Both of them also asked Hitler 'how he imagined the war could still be won'. Within three days, von Rundstedt was relieved of his post, to be replaced by Field Marshal von Kluge.

On the Eastern Front, by June 29, more than 130,000 Germans had been killed in a week of fighting, and 66,000 had been taken prisoner. In Berlin, Heinz Bello, a twenty-five-year-old sergeant in the German Army Medical Corps, and a holder of the Iron Cross, Second Class, the East Medal, and the Badge for wounded soldiers, had expressed, while on fire-watching duty, his hostility to Nazism and militarism; denounced by two 'friends', he was found guilty of 'undermining morale' and sentenced to death. He was executed on a machine-gun range.

In the Far East, June 29 saw the execution by the Japanese of a leading Malayan resistance fighter, General Lim Bo Seng.

Over London, the flying bombs continued to wreak their havoc; on June 30, in the Strand, 198 people were killed, while at Westerham in Kent, twenty-four babies under a year old, and eight staff, at a children's home were killed when a flying bomb was brought down by anti-aircraft fire on their rural refuge. Five of the babies were only one month old. They had mostly been evacuated to Kent for safety. In sixteen days of bombardment, the flying bomb had killed 1,935 British civilians.

On the last day of June, the 1,795 Jews deported from Corfu reached Auschwitz. An eye-witness of their fate was a Hungarian Jewish doctor, Miklos Nyiszli, himself a deportee, who later recalled that these Greek Jews had travelled for twenty-seven days in sealed railway wagons, with only the food and water that they had taken with them at the start of the journey. 'When they arrived at Auschwitz's unloading platform', Nyiszli wrote, 'the doors were unlocked, but no one got out and lined up for selection. Half of them were already dead, and the other half in a coma. The entire convoy, without exception, was sent to number two crematorium.'

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In Denmark, on the last day of June 1944, a strike began against the curfew and other occupation restrictions; by the time it ended four days later, a hundred Danes had been killed. In Belgium, however, the lack of reprisals led to the recall of the German Military Governor, General von Falkenhausen: accused of being too lenient, he was placed under arrest, and then sent to Dachau.

In Italy, an anti-partisan sweep began on July 1. That day, Field Marshal Kesselring, the Commander-in-Chief of the German forces in Italy, issued an order stating that his earlier warning of 'severest measures' against the Italian partisans must not prove to have been an empty threat. Two hundred partisans were killed during this sweep, carried out between Parma and Piacenza. Forty-three of the partisans, captured alive, were brutally tortured, and then shot.

On the night of July 1, sixty-four British and American bombers renewed Operation Gardening – a general code-name for aerial minelaying – dropping a total of 192 mines in the River Danube near Belgrade; sixty more mines were dropped on the following night. Further north, in Budapest, Admiral Horthy now demanded a halt to the deportation of Hungarian Jews to Auschwitz. On the morning of July 2, Budapest was already under air bombardment, oil refineries and oil storage tanks being hit by American bombers flying from southern Italy, and set ablaze. Hundreds of bombs had fallen on residential areas; several hundred Hungarian civilians had been killed, as were a hundred Hungarian Jews holding British or American nationality, when the villa in which they were confined received a direct hit.

As well as bombs, the Americans dropped leaflets over Budapest, informing 'the authorities in Hungary' that the United States Government was closely following the persecution of the Jews 'with extreme gravity', and warning that 'all those responsible' for carrying out orders to persecute Jews would be punished.

Within forty-eight hours of the American raid and its leaflets, Admiral Horthy informed the Germans that the deportations would have to stop. As a result of publicity given to the report of the four escapees from Auschwitz, protests had been made to him by the International Committee of the Red Cross, the King of Sweden, and Pope Pius XII. The Germans, whose deportation plans depended upon the support of Hungarian policemen and railway workers, had no choice but to halt the deportations. A total of 437,000 Hungarian Jews had already been deported from the provinces and countryside. But more than 170,000 remained in Budapest, saved from deportation on the very eve of their intended departure.

The deportation of Hungarian Jews stopped on July 8. On the following day, a Swedish diplomat, Raoul Wallenberg, reached Budapest from Sweden with a list of 630 Hungarian Jews for whom Swedish visas were available. No longer in danger of deportation to Auschwitz, these Jews were desperate nevertheless for whatever protection they could receive.

Raoul Wallenberg, the man who now sought to protect the Jews of Budapest from further disasters, was the great-great-grandson of Michael Benedics, one of the first Jews to settle in Sweden, at the end of the eighteenth century, and a convert to Lutheranism.

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In Germany, the Army officers close to Count von Stauffenberg were nearing their planned assassination of Hitler, calling it Operation Valkyrie. Their first idea was to kill Hitler, Goering and Himmler with a single bomb at Berchtesgaden on July 2. As, however, Hitler was alone that day, the attempt was called off. Meanwhile, the build-up of Allied forces on the Normandy beach-head continued; by July 2, a million men were ashore, together with 171,532 vehicles. Even in the narrow perimeter under Allied control, 41,000 Germans were being held prisoner-of-war.

On the Eastern Front, the German position had become precarious by the beginning of July, with twenty-eight German divisions encircled on July 2; and more than 40,000 soldiers killed fighting inside the trap, or trying to break out of it. On July 3, Soviet forces entered Minsk, the capital city of White Russia. More than 150,000 German soldiers were taken prisoner, and two thousand tanks captured. That day, Count von Stauffenberg went to Berchtesgaden. There, within Hitler's own headquarters, he was given, by the chief of the Organization Branch of the Army High Command, Major-General Helmuth Stieff, a bomb with a silent fuse, small enough to hide inside a briefcase. Stauffenberg took the bomb away, determined to use it on July 11, when he would have to return to Berchtesgaden.

Since the first day of the Normandy landings, a British Special Air Service team, headed by J. E. Tonkin, had been parachuted into the Poitiers region; for nearly a month the team, eventually nearly fifty strong, and code-named Operation Bulbasket, hampered German rail traffic between Poitiers and Tours, as well as providing valuable information for the Royal Air Force, including the 'best petrol fire' of the campaign, at Châtellerault. But on July 3 the team was trapped by an SS infantry battalion, and a third of them captured, and then shot. Tonkin was also captured, but survived torture and captivity. The other survivors of Operation Bulbasket were brought out of France by a Special Operations Executive flight. For his successful sabotage activities, Tonkin was awarded the Military Cross.

Over London, throughout the first week of July, the flying bombs continued to cause damage and death. On the morning of July 3, a flying bomb fell in Lambeth. From across the river, twenty-nine American servicemen then at their Central Base Section at Turk's Row, in Chelsea, were loaded into a truck to go to the aid of the wounded, while seventy others waited for more trucks to arrive. At that moment, a flying bomb fell on Chelsea, hitting the loaded truck and bringing down the fronts of the buildings on either side of the road. Sixty-four of the Americans were killed, and ten British civilian passers-by.

The British Chiefs of Staff, alarmed at the rate of deaths from the flying bombs, and their possible adverse effect on morale in London, authorized the diversion of bomber resources from the Normandy beachhead to the flying bomb sites. On July 4, in a precision bombing attack using deep penetration bombs, an underground storage depot at St Leu was hit, and two thousand flying bombs buried in the ruins. A German top-secret message, decrypted in Britain, indicated that flying bombs intended for the store at St Leu would be

diverted to Nucourt; six days after the St Leu raid, Nucourt was therefore the target of a similar bombing attack. After two attacks, Nucourt's flying bombs were also buried. Meanwhile, the death roll continued to rise; by six o'clock on the morning of July 6, as Churchill told the House of Commons that day, 2,754 flying bombs had been launched, and 2,752 people killed – 'almost exactly one person one bomb'. The drug penicillin, Churchill added, which had hitherto been restricted to military use, would be made available to treat all those wounded by flying bombs.

The Germans were also taking special measures to deal with the effects of bombing. On July 4, a thousand Jewish women, then in the barracks at Auschwitz, were sent away from Auschwitz altogether, and taken by train to Hamburg, where they had to demolish houses which had been too badly bombed to be repaired. Throughout German-occupied Europe, slave labourers were being used to clear rubble and repair roads and railways. Also on July 4, more than two hundred prisoners in a camp on the Channel Island of Alderney, most of them Jews who had been deported from France, were put on board ship to be sent to tasks on the mainland. The ship was attacked by British warships, and sunk. All the prisoners on board were drowned.

By July 4, as Ultra decrypts revealed, the Germans were still concerned that further Allied landings might be imminent, between the Seine and the Somme, against one of the ports in Brittany or on the French Mediterranean coast. This latter landing was in fact being planned, using forces from Italy. In Northern France, the only activity outside the Normandy bridgehead was sabotage; in Operation Gain, a British Special Air Service group, commanded by Ian Fenwick, a popular cartoonist, was attacking German supply columns thirty to fifty miles south of Paris, between the Loire and the Seine. On the night of July 4, however, a reinforcing party from England arrived to find their dropping zone under fire. Fenwick was killed during the struggle. A dozen of his men, unable to get away, were captured, interrogated for a month by Josef Kieffer of the German Security Service, and then shot. One of them managed to escape. His testimony was later fatal to his captor.

Executed on July 6, in a wood outside Paris, was the former French Minister of Colonies, Georges Mandel, a leading Government opponent of the capitulation in 1940, and a Jew. 'To die is nothing,' he said as he was handed over by the German Security Service to the French Milice. 'What is sad is to die without seeing the liberation of the country and the restoration of the Republic.'

French soldiers were already fighting on French soil to liberate France when Mandel, a French patriot, was murdered by Frenchmen. The murderers in their turn, were later brought to trial, found guilty, and executed.

In the Pacific, on Saipan Island, on July 7, the 4,300 surviving Japanese troops threw themselves against the Americans in a final 'banzai' charge; in bitter hand-to-hand fighting, almost all 4,300 Japanese were killed, for the loss of 406 American lives. A few hundred Japanese soldiers managed to swim out to the coral reefs. A small flotilla was sent across to persuade them to surrender, but, clinging to the reef, the Japanese opened fire on the Americans, who returned

the fire with devastating effect. On one reef, the Americans saw a Japanese officer beheading his men with his sword. He was shot by the Americans before he could commit suicide himself.

As the Americans on Saipan searched the caves for Japanese survivors, but found none, they came across the remains of the bodies of two senior officers who had committed suicide rather than surrender. General Saito had opened his artery with a sword, after which his adjutant shot him in the head. Admiral Nagumo, the former commander of the Pearl Harbour Striking Force, had killed himself with a pistol shot.

That day, in northern France, British bombers dropped 2,500 tons of bombs on Caen in preparation for an attempt to capture the town. On the following day, as Caen was bombarded by sixteen-inch shells from the British battleship *Rodney*, from a safe anchorage in the Channel, Hitler issued a new directive, warning that the Normandy bridgehead must not be allowed to increase in size, 'otherwise our forces would prove inadequate to contain it, and the enemy will break out into the interior of France, where we do not possess any comparable tactical mobility with which to oppose him'.

'Every square kilometre must be defended tenaciously', this was the final message of Hitler's directive of July 8. It was certainly obeyed, as the Americans found on the following day as they tried to advance from La Haye-du-Puits towards Périers. After a month of fighting, the bridgehead had still not turned into a spearhead. But, for the Germans, the spectre, not only of retreat but of defeat, had begun to loom. Hardly had Hitler's new directive to fight for every kilometre reached the German commanders who had to carry it out, when an SS general, Kurt Meyer, ordered his men to pull back from their forward positions into the suburbs of Caen. In the previous month's fighting, every one of Meyer's battalion commanders had been killed. 'Officers and men know that the struggle is hopeless,' Meyer wrote that day, and he added: 'Silent but willing to do their duty to the bitter end, they wait for their orders.'

On July 9, the day of Meyer's order to withdraw into Caen, the German military conspirators, their date for Hitler's assassination only three days away, contacted Rommel at his headquarters at La Roche-Guyon. Their emissary was Colonel Caesar von Hofacker, a member of the staff of the German Military Command in Paris. Another of the conspirators of the group centred in Paris was Major von Falkenhausen, the nephew of the German Military Governor in Brussels who had just been arrested for leniency.

On the Eastern Front, the evening of July 10 marked the start of the Soviet offensive against the German Army Group North. Within forty-eight hours the Soviet commander, General Yeremenko, had torn a fifty mile gap in the German line, and was advancing deep into German held territory. One by one the German strongpoints fell, first Drissa, then OPOCHKA, then Sebez. Germany's last line of defence inside Russia was broken.

On July 11, Count von Stauffenberg was ordered to Berchtesgaden, to report to Hitler on the military situation. He took his bomb with him, but did not use it; Hitler was about to go to his East Prussian headquarters at Rastenburg, and

the Count had been summoned there also. On the day that Stauffenberg was at Berchtesgaden, Churchill, in London, was shown further details, based on the information set down by the four escapees from Auschwitz, of the murder there of 1,700,000 Jews, some gassed, some shot, some buried alive, in the previous two years. 'There is no doubt', Churchill wrote that day to Anthony Eden, 'that this is probably the greatest and the most horrible crime ever committed in the whole history of the world, and it has been done by scientific machinery by nominally civilized men in the name of a great State and one of the leading races in Europe. It is quite clear' - Churchill added - 'that all concerned in this crime who may fall into our hands, including the people who only obeyed orders by carrying out the butcheries, should be put to death after their association with the murders has been proved'.

Against any partisans or resistance fighters who were caught, German savagery continued. On July 8, thirty captured Polish partisans had been shot in public at Garwolin, outside Warsaw. That same day, in France, the Resistance leader Lieutenant Joly, code name 'Valentin', had been killed in an anti-Maquis sweep around Ecot. On July 12, forty-eight Italian partisans, led by Eugenio Calò, were captured near Arezzo. After being cruelly tortured for two days, but having revealed nothing, they were forced to dig a deep pit, then buried in it up to their necks. Sticks of dynamite were put next to their heads, but still no one talked. The dynamite was then ignited.

Eugenio Calò was posthumously awarded the Italian Gold Medal for Military Valour.

On July 12, a German spy was hanged at Pentonville Prison in London. Joseph Jan Vanhove was a Belgian waiter who had claimed to have escaped from German-occupied Europe to Sweden, in order to enlist in the Allied armies. While in northern France, his job had in fact been to betray French and Belgian forced labourers who were sympathetic to the Resistance. He had been taken into custody on reaching Scotland in February 1944. Tried at the Old Bailey in May, Vanhove was found guilty of treachery. His appeal had been dismissed in June. He was the sixteenth German spy to be executed in Britain during the war, and the last.

On July 13 a Russian Army under General Koniev began a two-pronged offensive to cross the River Bug and to capture the East Galician city of Lvov. As the Red Army advanced to the town of Brody, it encircled forty thousand German soldiers, of whom, after a seven day battle, thirty thousand were killed. The River Bug marked the Curzon Line, which Stalin, with Churchill's support, wished to establish as the western border of the Soviet Union. Lvov, one of the principal cities of pre-war Poland, lay on the Soviet side of the new line. To the north of Koniev's assault, July 13 saw the fall of Vilna, another city which pre-war Poland claimed, but which now lay within the Soviet sphere. With each military victory, the post-war political map of Europe was being drawn.

On July 14, Soviet forces entered Pinsk, less than two hundred miles from East Prussia. That very day, Hitler left Berchtesgaden for his East Prussian

headquarters at Rastenburg. In Kovno, a mere 130 miles from Rastenburg, more than a hundred Jews then in hiding in a cellar were discovered by the Gestapo, who locked them in the house beneath which they had been hiding, and set the house on fire. None survived. Nor, on July 14, Bastille Day in France, were there any survivors of the twenty-eight French prisoners at the Santé Prison in Paris, who rose up in defiant revolt on that day of historic defiance; all were put up against the prison wall and shot.

It was at this time also that four British women agents, Vera Leigh, Diana Rowden, Andrée Borrel and Sonia Olschansky, who had been held in prison at Karlsruhe since their capture, were taken to Natzweiler concentration camp in Alsace. Two British agents already at Natzweiler, among them the Belgian doctor, Colonel Guérissette, saw them arrive; that same evening, all four were taken to the camp crematorium, given a lethal injection, and put into the ovens.

By July 15, by a strange coincidence which Churchill pointed out to his War Cabinet, 3,582 flying bombs had fallen on Britain, and 3,583 British civilians had been killed by flying bombs. But the rising death toll in London was of no solace to the Germans fighting in France. On July 15, Rommel wrote to Hitler of the enormous casualties and material losses, the lack of adequate reinforcements, and the danger that with the Allied air and artillery superiority 'even the bravest army will be smashed piece by piece, losing men, arms and territory in the process'.

Rommel also wrote of how no new forces could be brought up to the Normandy front 'except by weakening Fifteenth Army front on the Channel, or the Mediterranean front in southern France'. 'Fifteenth Army front on the Channel' was still in place to meet the non-existent threat of the First United States Army Group, as the Allied deception plan, more than five weeks after the Normandy landings, still influenced German strategy. A telegram from the Japanese Ambassador in Berlin, sent to Tokyo and decrypted at Bletchley on July 15, reiterated that the Germans still thought that this fictional formation would be sent across the Straits of Dover, and used to cut off the German forces in Normandy by an attack in the rear. As Churchill wrote to Eisenhower, in sending him the decrypt of the Japanese Ambassador's telegram: 'Uncertainty is a terror to the Germans. The forces in Britain are a dominant preoccupation of the Huns.'

Unknown to Churchill, July 15 was the day on which Count von Stauffenberg and his fellow Army conspirators had decided to carry out Operation Valkyrie, the assassination of Hitler. In Berlin, one of the conspirators, the Chief of Staff of the Reserve Army, General Friedrich Olbricht, confident that the attempt would be made as planned, gave orders two hours before the 'assassination' for his troops to march on Berlin. At the last moment, because Hitler shortened the length of the conference, Stauffenberg decided to postpone the attempt until his next visit to Rastenburg in five days' time. Meanwhile, General Olbricht's troops continued to march towards Berlin. Quickly halting them, Olbricht explained to his superior, General Fromm, that it was a 'surprise exercise'.

On July 16, a massive German gun on the Channel coast, known as the 'England'

gun, was almost ready to fire its heavy shells against the British south coast towns. That day, in a sustained bombing attack, the gun's site, at Marquise-Mimoyecques, was destroyed. That day, over the Russian front, a French pilot, Maurice de Seynes, a member of the Free French fighter regiment, which had been active on the Eastern Front for the past nine months, was blinded in his cockpit during an action over the German lines. He refused to bail out, however, because his co-pilot, mechanic Vladimir Belozub, a Russian, was trapped in his seat. 'Nobody', wrote Soviet Air Force General Georgi Zakharov, 'could force Maurice de Seynes to save his own life.' The plane exploded in mid air; had de Seynes tried merely to save himself, his mother wrote, 'it would have been a stain upon the whole of our family. My son acted nobly'.

Forty-two French pilots gave their lives fighting on the Eastern Front; four were made Heroes of the Soviet Union. De Seynes' heroic act of July 16 entered into the annals of Soviet history.

On July 16, Colonel Caesar von Hofacker was in Berlin, where he went to Count von Stauffenberg's home in the suburb of Wannsee. There, the decision was made to go ahead in four days' time with the assassination of Hitler. During the meeting, Hofacker told the conspirators of the imminent collapse of the Normandy defence perimeter, and the inevitable subsequent failure of the German armies in the West. Rommel, indeed, in whose name Hofacker partly spoke, had stated bluntly, in his letter to Hitler on the previous day: 'The troops are everywhere fighting heroically, but the unequal struggle is approaching its end.' Rommel also sought Hitler's permission to bring over to Normandy most of the 28,000 German troops still stationed in the Channel Islands, and badly needed in France, but Hitler refused.

The conspirators needed Rommel's support and prestige, if they were to win over the support of the German officers in the West. But, as Rommel was being driven from south of Caen to his headquarters at La Roche-Guyon on July 17, and had reached Livarot, he was severely wounded by machine gun fire from a low-flying fighter-bomber, piloted by a South African air ace, Squadron Leader J. J. Le Roux. Rommel's wounds were dressed by a French pharmacist in Livarot. Later, he was taken to a German Air Force hospital at the nearby town of Bernay, his roles both as commander and conspirator brought prematurely to an end.

For Squadron Leader Le Roux – with twenty-three 'kills' to his credit, the top scoring pilot over Normandy since D-Day – the identity of his victim was unknown. Le Roux himself was to disappear over the Channel during a flight back to England eight weeks later.

In Moscow, on July 17, more than 57,000 German prisoners-of-war were marched through the streets of the city. These were some of the men captured in the White Russian offensive which had opened on June 22. Nineteen German generals led the parade, each still wearing his Iron Cross; at their head, wearing his Knight's Cross, was General Friedrich Gollwitzer, commander of an army corps, who had been captured near Vitebsk.

On the day after this Moscow parade, Soviet forces reached Augustow, on

the Polish side of the East Prussian border, and only eighty miles from Rastenburg. There, they were halted by a ferocious counter-attack. Behind German lines, July 18 saw the first day of a massive sweep by ten thousand German troops against French Resistance forces in the Vercors. Five hundred Resistance fighters, and two hundred civilians, were killed. 'As the Germans overran the plateau,' one historian has written, 'they behaved with customary barbarity, burning and torturing, slaying everyone they could reach as nastily as they could.'

In London, the evacuation of civilians had begun to exceed the numbers evacuated at the time of the Blitz in 1940. By July 17, more than half a million Londoners had left the capital, and within the next two months the number had risen to more than a million. Among those who were aware of German rocket developments, this seemed prudence rather than panic; among the senior Government scientists and Intelligence experts, there was concern on July 18 that the Germans would soon launch a successor to the flying bomb that would be even more lethal. That day Dr R. V. Jones warned the War Cabinet's 'Crossbow' Committee that as many as a thousand V2 rockets might already exist, each weighing more than eleven tons, and capable of an unprecedented speed of about four thousand miles an hour. This rocket would only take three to four minutes to travel from its launching site in northern Europe to its target – London.

If such a rocket attack should develop, Churchill told the committee, 'he was prepared, after consultation with the United States and the USSR, to threaten the enemy with large-scale gas attacks in retaliation, should such a course appear profitable'.

It was on July 18 that the Western Allies launched the first phase of Operation Goodwood, for the capture of Caen, an attack by a hundred bombers over the German defences. Much of the city was destroyed, and as many as three thousand Frenchmen killed. Then the artillery opened fire, four hundred guns in all, supported by the naval gunfire of two British cruisers, and the monitor *Roberts*, whose fifteen-inch guns had last been fired in action at the Battle of Jutland in 1916. British and Canadian armoured forces then moved forward. That same day, but too late to save Caen, Hitler at last agreed to move such units of the Fifteenth Army as were mobile from the Pas-de-Calais, and rush them to the Normandy battle zone. The deception of Operation Fortitude was over; but Operation Goodwood was won.

As British and Canadian troops fought throughout July 20 to capture Caen and push the Germans back from the Normandy bridgehead, Hitler was at Rastenburg, in one of his headquarters' wooden huts, being given an account of the worsening situation on the Eastern Front. As he studied the map, there was a violent explosion. A bomb, left in a briefcase by Count von Stauffenberg, had gone off, devastating the room in which Hitler and his generals had gathered. But Hitler survived the blast, saved at the last moment because one of those present, General Brandt, in trying to get a better look at the map laid out on

the table, had pushed the briefcase to the far side of the frame holding up the table.

As the bomb went off, at 12.42 p.m., von Stauffenberg was already about two hundred yards away; looking back, he saw the hut blown up into the air. Assuming that Hitler was dead, he hurried from the 'Wolf's Lair' to the airport at Rastenburg, and flew back to Berlin. All now seemed set for Operation Valkyrie to come into effect – the military overthrow of a leaderless Nazi régime. At 4.30 p.m. von Stauffenberg's plane reached Berlin; there, he learned that, although four officers in the hut had been killed, Hitler was alive. Nevertheless, the conspirators still hoped to activate their plan, and within an hour, von Stauffenberg and General Olbricht arrested the Commander of the Reserve Army, General Fromm. Plans had been made by the conspirators to surround the Government offices in the Wilhelmstrasse, and orders were given by the Berlin Fortress commander, General von Hase, for this to be done. The officer chosen for the task was Major Otto Ernst Remer; but, from his office in the Wilhelmstrasse, Goebbels telephoned Remer, and persuaded him, before taking action, to speak by telephone to Hitler. Having done so, Major Remer declined to support the conspirators further. At 6.45 p.m. that same evening, Goebbels broadcast over German radio that Hitler was alive and well.

Too late, at 8.10 p.m., was a telegram sent out in the name of Field Marshal von Witzleben, which began: 'The Führer is dead. I have been appointed Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces, and also ...' At this point, the message broke off. The conspiracy had failed.

Believing that Hitler had been killed, the conspirators in Paris had ordered the arrest of all senior Gestapo and Security Service officers. By nightfall, however, it was learned in Paris that Hitler was alive. General von Stuepnagel, the commander of the Paris garrison, was ordered back to Berlin. Driving as far as Verdun, the battlefield on which he had fought in the First World War, he tried to commit suicide, but succeeded only in blinding himself.

A terrible revenge was now exacted against the conspirators, and against all those associated with them. General Fromm, having earlier been released by Olbricht and von Stauffenberg, who had both assumed that he would join their cause, turned swiftly against them; that evening, Olbricht and von Stauffenberg were shot in the courtyard of the War Ministry in Berlin.

More than five thousand Germans were to be executed in the months ahead. Others, like Major-General Henning von Treschkow, committed suicide. Before killing himself, he declared: 'God once promised Abraham to spare Sodom, should there be ten just men in the city. He will, I hope, spare Germany because of what we have done, and not destroy her.'

Another of those who committed suicide was General Ludwig Beck, whom the conspirators had designated Head of State in place of Hitler. Beck had resigned as chief of the Army General Staff in 1938, in protest against Hitler's plans to invade Czechoslovakia. On July 20, he was given by General Fromm the opportunity to shoot himself. Twice he tried, unsuccessfully, to blow out his brains; finally, and already gravely wounded, he was shot by an Army sergeant.

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In the explosion at Rastenburg, Hitler had been badly shaken and scratched, but was otherwise unhurt. At the moment of the explosion he had been leaning right across the table, to look at the situation in Kurland, which lay at the extreme north-east corner of the map. The table top, and the table frame behind which the briefcase had been pushed, saved his life. During the afternoon he showed the shattered hut to his first visitor, Benito Mussolini.

That midnight, Hitler broadcast to the German people. He was alive and well, and the war would go on. At the same time, Admiral Dönitz telegraphed to all naval commanders that only orders from Himmler 'were to be complied with'. Similar messages were sent out to the German Air Force and Army commanders. Hitler, Himmler and Goebbels were now in effective control of the German war machine. One by one, their enemies, even on the furthest fringes of the conspiracy, were eliminated; among those executed was the Kaiser's former Private Secretary, Freiherr von Sell, who after his master's death in Holland in 1941 had returned to Germany, and had joined those who feared that Hitler's excesses would lead to Germany's destruction.

The bomb plot also led to honours; Major Remer, who, after speaking to Hitler on the telephone, had declined to help the conspirators, was awarded the Knight's Cross with Oak Leaves.

On July 21, as the German Army accepted that Hitler would continue to lead it, American forces landed on Guam. In the Japanese conquest of the island in December 1941, only a single Japanese soldier had lost his life; now, in a twenty day battle, 18,500 Japanese defenders were killed, for the cost of 2,124 American lives. Three days after the Guam landings, American troops landed on Tinian Island. Once more, the Japanese refused to accept that they could not win; 6,050 Japanese soldiers died, and 290 Americans, before Tinian was overrun.

The pace of the Allied advance was now accelerating on all fronts. On July 22, Soviet forces crossed the River Bug, to capture the town of Chelm, inside the area which Russia had accepted as part of a future post-war Poland. That same day, Radio Moscow announced the establishment, on Polish soil, of a Polish Committee for National Liberation.

On the Baltic front, Pskov fell to the Russians on July 23. That day, Hitler appointed Goering as Reich Commissar for Total War Mobilization.

In Poland, Soviet troops, reaching the outskirts of Lublin, overran the German concentration camp at Majdanek, finding there hundreds of unburied corpses, and seven gas chambers. This was the first death camp to be reached by the Allies. More than a million and a half people had been murdered at Majdanek in the previous two years, among them Polish opponents of German rule, Soviet prisoners-of-war, and Jews. Photographs of the corpses at Majdanek provided the West with the first visual evidence of the horrors of the concentration camp system. Hitler, who had been told that all such evidence of mass murder had been destroyed, spoke angrily of 'the slovenly and cowardly rabble in the security services' who had not erased 'the traces' in time.

Even as Majdanek's barbarities were being revealed, the 1,700 Jews living in the island of Rhodes, in the Eastern Mediterranean, and the 120 Jews on the

nearby island of Kos, were taken by boat to Salonica, then by train to Auschwitz. Soviet troops were only 170 miles away. But with the gas chambers at Majdanek, Treblinka, Sobibor and Belzec no longer in operation, those at Auschwitz worked harder and faster. On July 24, despite Admiral Horthy's order two weeks earlier that no more Hungarian Jews were to be deported, 1,500 Jews from the Hungarian town of Sarvar were taken away; they were the last Hungarian Jews to be sent to Auschwitz; Adolf Eichmann, his work completed as far as he had been able, was awarded the Iron Cross, Second Class.

The battles for Poland and France

SUMMER 1944

On 25 July 1944, the Americans launched Operation Cobra in Normandy. Within a few days, American troops succeeded in breaking out of the Cherbourg peninsula, enabled to do so by a major British assault on the far more heavily defended German positions between Caen and Falaise. That week, behind the German lines in Poland, an experimental V2 rocket failed to explode, was hidden in a river by the Polish underground, salvaged, dismantled, and then flown out of Poland, together with a Polish engineer. The flight was in a Royal Air Force Dakota which made the dangerous journey across German-occupied Hungary from southern Italy, for that sole purpose. Flown back to Britain, the parts of the bomb revealed essential details about the imminent heavy German rocket attack, although there was nothing the British could do to forestall it. The Polish engineer was flown back to Poland. Later he was caught by the Gestapo, and shot.

In the former Polish capital, Warsaw, the presence of Soviet troops west of the River Bug led to a decision, by Poles loyal to the Government-in-exile in London, to try to throw off the German yoke before the Soviets arrived. 'We are ready to fight for the liberation of Warsaw at any moment,' the Home Army's commander, Lieutenant General Tadeusz Bor-Komorowski, telegraphed to London on July 25, and he added: 'Be prepared to bomb the aerodromes around Warsaw at our request. I shall announce the moment of the beginning of the fight.' On the following day, a senior Home Army officer in Warsaw, General Tadeusz Pelczynski, telegraphed to the expectant forces in Warsaw: 'It might be necessary to begin the battle for Warsaw at any time.'

On July 26, eleven Soviet partisans, led by Captain P. A. Velichko, were parachuted into German-occupied Slovakia, near Ruzomberok, with weapons and radio-transmitters. Their task was to prepare the way for a drop of substantial numbers of partisans and supplies, to create a network of anti-German bases and activity. That day, in Lyon, a bomb was thrown at a restaurant frequented by the Gestapo. No one was seriously hurt. But on the following day five prisoners of the Gestapo, including the Resistance leader Albert Chambonnet, were shot, and their bodies left in the street as a warning.

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