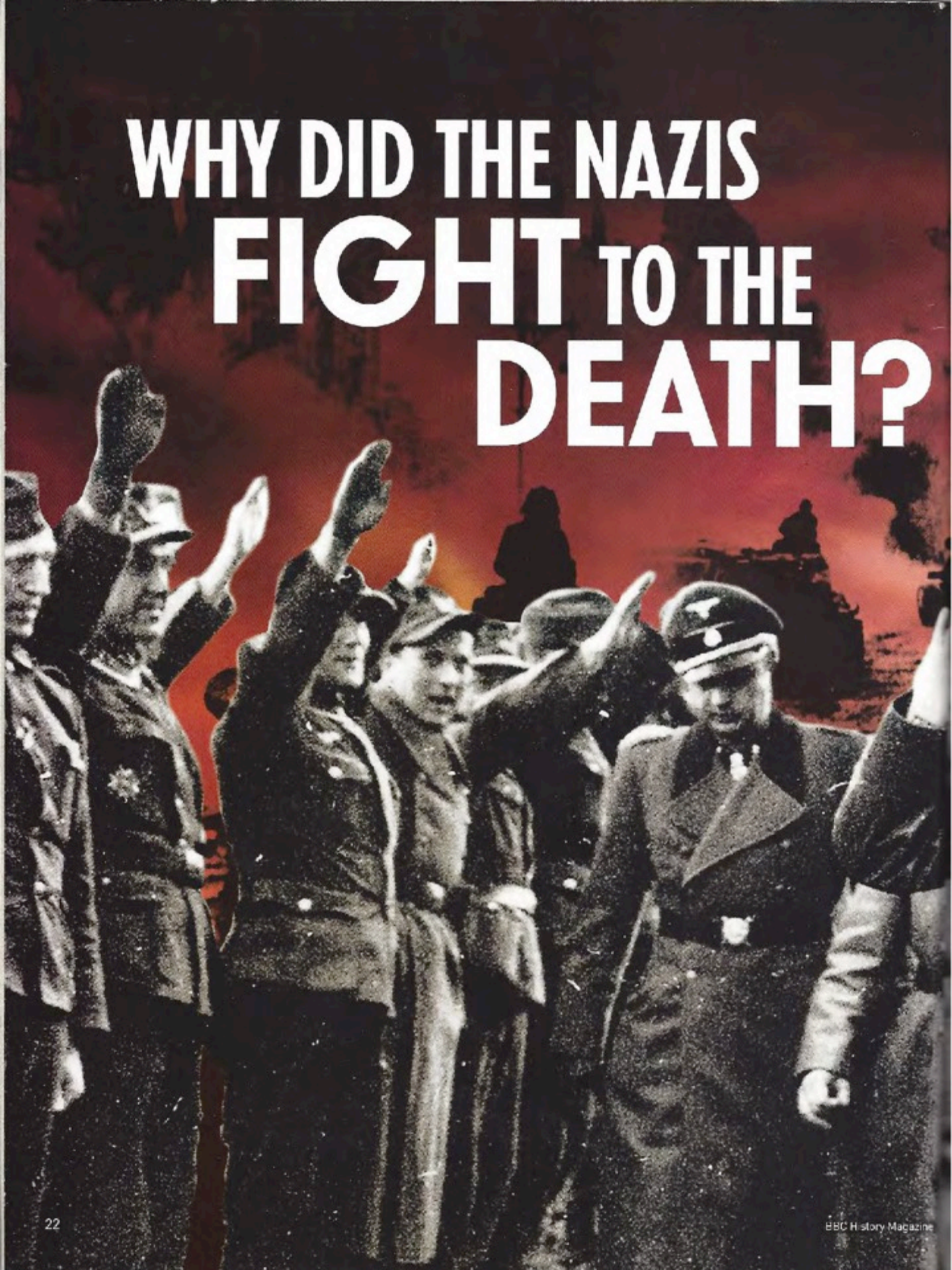
WHY DID THE NAZIS FIGHT TO THE DEATH?



Defiant gesture
German troops on the Oder front, 25 miles east of Berlin, salute Adolf Hitler in March 1945. This was to be the German leader's final visit to the front line

ON THE PODCAST THIS MONTH

Hundreds of thousands of Germans were killed fighting for the Nazi regime long after defeat had become inevitable. **Sir Ian Kershaw** explains why so many were willing to follow Hitler to the end

ON 18 April 1945, a 19-year-old theology student, Robert Limpert, decided to act to prevent the senseless destruction of the picturesque town of Ansbach in Franconia. He had already taken big risks by circulating leaflets pleading for the surrender of the town without a fight. Now he went further, cutting communication wires to a Wehrmacht unit outside the town, but was spotted doing so by two boys from the Hitler Youth. Following arrest by the local police, he was brought before the local military commandant, a Luftwaffe colonel with a doctorate in physics – and a fanatical Nazi. The commandant immediately set up a three-man tribunal which lost no time in sentencing Limpert to death.

As a noose was placed round his neck outside the town hall, the young man struggled free, but was caught within a hundred yards, kicked, punched and pulled by the hair before being hauled back to the place of execution. No one in the small crowd that had gathered and witnessed the scene stirred to help him. After further moments of torment when the rope broke, Limpert was finally hoisted to his death. The commandant said the body had to be left hanging "till it stinks". He then fled from the town on a requisitioned bicycle. Four hours later, the Americans entered Ansbach without a shot being fired and cut down Robert Limpert's body.

The Limpert tragedy was not just a matter of the rabid fanaticism of the Nazi town commandant. The local constabulary and civilian administration played their part, choosing to carry out what they saw as their duty even though they knew that American occupation could only be a few hours away. Civilians showed Limpert no sympathy. As in many other places, while most people were desperate to avoid futile destruction in what were obviously the dying days of the regime, some were even now prepared to back the savage repression of real or presumed opponents of Nazism. Similar horror stories were registered in numerous German towns and cities in the last weeks of Nazi rule.

Amid mounting military collapse, in areas not occupied by enemy forces the regime still somehow functioned in limited fashion even in April 1945. The Reich had shrunk by now to little more than a sliver of territory. Communications and transport ➤

Fighting on to the end in a lost cause is rare. Nearly all wars in modern history finished with some form of negotiation

ILLUSTRATED LONDON NEWS (X3)

were near total breakdown, millions were without gas, electricity and water. But there was no descent into anarchy.

The state bureaucracy functioned, if under enormous difficulties. Wages and salaries were paid in April 1945. A leading academic body was still awarding grants to foreign students, seen even now as an investment for German influence in a 'new Europe'. Newspapers, though drastically reduced in size and number, were still published. Improvised attempts were made to deliver post.

There was even some escapist entertainment. The Berlin Philharmonic held its last concert on 12 April, four days before the Soviet assault on the capital began. Citizens of Stuttgart could shut out their trauma for an hour or two to see *The Woman of My Dreams* at the cinema, only days before the city's surrender on 22 April. The last football match of the war took place on 23 April, when Bayern Munich beat their local rivals, TSV 1860 Munich, 3-2. It was hardly Premiership standard, but remarkable that football was played at all only a week before Hitler's suicide.

Signs of disintegration

Above all, the Wehrmacht kept fighting. Losses were staggering. Between 300,000 and 400,000 German soldiers were dying every month as the end of the war approached. But there was no widespread mutiny, as there had been in 1918. Most soldiers by now, like the civilian population, longed for the end of the war. Signs of disintegration were unmistakable. Thousands of soldiers deserted, despite draconian punishment if they were caught. They were nonetheless a small minority. The Wehrmacht continued to function. Had it not done so, the regime would have collapsed. But generals still issued their orders, however hopeless the circumstances. And the orders were obeyed.

The writing had been on the wall ever since summer 1944 when the western Allies consolidated their landing in Normandy and the Red Army advanced deep into Poland. But the German leadership, not just Hitler, held on to the belief that, if not outright victory, something at least could still be gained from the war. New, devastating weapons, it was thought, were on the way. If some terrible damage could be inflicted upon their enemies, the thinking ran, the unholy wartime coalition of the western powers and the Soviet Union would split apart. The Allies would then be driven to negotiations, leaving Germany with some of her territorial gains intact.

Many German leaders only slowly and reluctantly abandoned such illusions. Only following the swift collapse of the last major German offensive in the Ardennes, and, even more calamitously, the devastating onslaught of the Red Army in January 1945 was it obvious that the war was irredeemably lost. Once the western Allies crossed the Rhine in March, the advance into the heartlands of the Reich was rapid. In the east, the Red Army was poised for the final assault on Berlin. There was no rationale to continuing the war. But the Wehrmacht fought on.

Between 300,000 and 400,000 German soldiers were dying every month in the final stages of the war

Fighting on to the very end in an obviously lost cause is rare. Nearly all wars in modern history, like the First World War, finish with some form of negotiation. Even authoritarian regimes, plainly seen to be heading for the buffers, are not normally able to hold out to the point of total

Irresistible advance American troops at the bridge at Remagen, Germany, 22 March 1945. The Allies' crossing of the Rhine made a German defeat in the west a near certainty. Yet still the Nazis fought on

Soviet solders in a burning German town, early 1945

Timeline The road to defeat

20 July 1944

Colonel Claus von Stauffenberg (right) attempts to **assassinate Hitler and launch a coup d'état.** Its failure further radicalises the Nazi regime and strengthens its internal hold.

11 September 1944

Following the breakthrough in France in mid-August, **the first American troops reach German soil, just outside Aachen.** The city only falls, however, on 21 October.

18 October 1944

Soviet troops cross the German frontier in East Prussia, committing atrocities against the population. They are **forced back before the end of the month.**

Rapid retreat By May 1945 the Nazis' vast empire had shrunk to a few slivers of land. Despite this, German generals still issued their orders – and most soldiers obeyed them

destruction. Usually, they are toppled beforehand, either by revolution from below, or, more frequently, by internal coup within the ruling elites. But Nazi Germany refused to surrender. Why?

It is often claimed that the Allied demand for 'unconditional surrender', laid down at Casablanca in January 1943, ruled out all prospects of German capitulation. It certainly played into the hands of propaganda as the regime exploited it to justify the fight to the end. But it did not eliminate expectations of peace negotiations. Most Nazi leaders proposed at one time or another approaching the western Allies, or even the Russians, to seek a way out of the impending doom. But Hitler adamantly refused to contemplate negotiation except from a position of strength – a prospect diminishing by the day. So should we look no further than Hitler himself, the supreme leader who was prepared to take his country into the abyss rather than entertain another 'cowardly' surrender like that, as he saw it, of November 1918?

Hitler's intransigence was obviously crucial. And because he had no future after any negotiated surrender, holding out for him was easy. He knew it would have to end in his suicide. But how could he continue to exercise such baleful power when all knew that his days were numbered? Why was no further attempt made to kill him, remove him, or at least confront him with an alternative to total destruction? An answer takes us beyond the dictator himself, to the structures of Nazi rule and the mentalities that underpinned them.

A big part of the answer is undoubtedly terror. Fear was a rational response to a terroristic and terrifying regime. From February 1945 onwards the regime's inbuilt terror exploded in a final paroxysm of unbound fury directed at all who stood in its way. The unrestrained readiness to extreme violence even against its own citizens ruled out the possibility of a revolution from below, as had happened in 1918.

The population in 1945 was browbeaten, exhausted and resigned, but not rebellious. The terror apparatus still functioned. Some 15,000 German soldiers were executed for desertion (compared with 18 in the First World War), the number rising steeply as the end of the war approached. Itinerant drumhead courts left a trail of arbitrary executions, also of civilians. Any defeatist comment could invite swift and brutal reprisal. ➤

A German soldier in action during the Battle of the Bulge, December 1944

16 December 1944

A last major German offensive, planned for months, is launched through the Ardennes. Despite early successes, it **rapidly becomes clear that it has disastrously failed.**

12 January 1945

The Red Army's huge offensive begins, reaching the Oder by the end of the month, 50 miles from Berlin. **The German population flees in panic.**

15 February 1945

Summary court martials are established within Germany. They are a sign of the **intensified terror** directed at the German population itself as well as perceived internal enemies.

7 March 1945

US troops find the bridge at Remagen intact and are able to cross the Rhine. The breakthrough allows the subsequent swift **penetration into German heartlands.**

16 April 1945

The beginning of **the Red Army's final assault on Berlin.** The capital is soon encircled, and **Soviet troops battle their way towards Hitler's Reich Chancellery.**

Hundreds of German citizens fell victim to untrammelled violence in the last weeks of the Nazi regime as local party representatives, with their last act of power, ensured that longstanding opponents would not live to enjoy their downfall. Now as before, however, the targets of the worst of the murderous violence were those dubbed racial and political enemies. Foreign workers and prisoners, seen as security threats, were killed mercilessly. Aimless 'death marches' through German townships, in full view of the population, left concentration camp prisoners, many among them Jews, wholly at the whim of their guards, who despatched them without a thought. An estimated quarter of a million are thought to have perished on the marches. Most Germans watched passively, whether from lack of sympathy with the marchers or for fear of repercussions should they try to offer any assistance.

Widespread detestation

Terror is not, however, a full explanation for Germany's continuation of the war. The regime's droves of petty functionaries and officials, who continued to serve it and make it function, were not terrorised. Nor were military leaders. Generals, though often dismissed, were not executed (apart from those involved in the 1944 conspiracy).

It was not, though, as is often claimed, that a consensus behind the regime held until the end. Countless internal reports provide testimony to the widespread detestation of the party, and even the collapse of belief in Hitler, long before the end. However, there was an obvious ambivalence. Though Germans overwhelmingly longed for the war to end, few wanted foreign occupation, least of all by the feared Russians. In fighting to their utmost to fend off the enemy, Germans were, however much they might have hated the regime, actually helping it to continue functioning.

The terrible war in the east created a kind of negative integration, for soldiers and civilians alike. The justified horror at falling into Soviet hands made soldiers fight like demons, seldom by now from Nazi convictions, but for family, comrades and ultimately for their own survival.

In any case, there was no alternative. Whatever their individual feelings and motives, ordinary soldiers had little choice but to obey the orders of their officers or face execution as deserters. Petrified civilians fled wherever they could, or otherwise braced themselves for the worst. Suicide numbers rocketed, especially in eastern parts of Germany. Estimates suggest that some 20 per cent of women were raped as many Red Army soldiers did their best to match the caricatures of Nazi propaganda.

In the west, there was no equivalent fear. Defeatism was widespread but the Wehrmacht fought on here, too, despite obvious indications of intense war-weariness. Apart from the determination to prevent Germany's occupation by foreign powers – and notwithstanding the small numbers of outright Nazi fanatics, especially in the Waffen-SS – fighting on had become an end in itself.

In the last months of the war, German citizens were oppressed, marshalled, and corralled as never before by the party and its myriad affiliates which had occupied all organisational space. Given wide-ranging powers to orchestrate all civil defence measures in their areas, the Gauleiter – the hard-bitten Nazi regional chieftains who had burnt their boats with the regime – and their subordinates at district and local levels, acted brutally to maintain control.

Local military commanders and party functionaries took matters more and more into their own hands. Whether a town or village surrendered without a fight or was nearly obliterated in pointless last-minute shows of defiance rested on the behaviour of those with power and influence in the

Four Nazi grandees FROM LEFT TO RIGHT: **Martin Bormann, Joseph Goebbels, Heinrich Himmler and Albert Speer. Combining brutal fanaticism with organisational genius, they were instrumental in keeping Germany in the fight until May 1945**

Forced to walk **Prisoners from Dachau concentration camp pass through Starnberg, southern Germany, 1945. Around 250,000 people are thought to have died on such 'death marches'**

30 April 1945

With Soviet troops at the portals, Hitler commits suicide. Grand-Admiral Dönitz (right) learns next day that he has been nominated as the new head of state.

7 May 1945

With the Wehrmacht at an end, Dönitz is compelled to concede total capitulation, signed first at Rheims then shortly afterwards repeated at Karlshorst, near Berlin.

On the run
A woman flees explosions rocking a German town in 1945. Many towns were flattened as a result of last-minute shows of defiance

locality. Despite dire threats facing any perceived 'defeatist', few wanted to end their lives in a show of futile 'heroism' and see their homes and workplaces blown up senselessly. Many mayors and even party functionaries, often following the initiative of groups of respectable 'worthies' in a township, defied orders to fight on, though this could bring savage reprisals if local desperadoes – usually party fanatics or SS units with nothing to lose – gained the upper hand.

Why was there no further attempt to change the regime from above after the failed plot of July 1944? Crucial was the radicalisation of the structures of power since then. Beneath Hitler, four Nazi grandees, three of them brutal fanatics, the fourth a power-hungry organisational genius, ran Germany in the last months.

Martin Bormann, secretary to the Führer and head of the party administration, extended the controlling hand of the party over almost all facets of daily life. Joseph Goebbels combined the key areas of propaganda and manpower mobilisation. Without the million extra men that he dredged up by the end of 1944, the immense losses suffered by the Wehrmacht could not have been replaced. Heinrich Himmler, the head of the SS and the Reich's enormous security apparatus, now penetrated the Wehrmacht, too, adding to his vast powers the command of the Replacement Army, from whose headquarters the attempted coup in July 1944 had been planned.

Last but not least among the quadrumvirate, Albert Speer, minister of armaments of war production, performed near miracles of organisation in ensuring that the troops still had weapons to fight with. If Speer had worked half as hard, Germany could not have held out for remotely so long.

Crucially, the regime could depend too upon the backing of the military leadership. At the very top, Field-Marshal Keitel and General Jodl, the key figures in the high ➢

Though Germans overwhelmingly longed for the war to end, few wanted foreign occupation, least of all by the Russians

Staring defeat in the face
In one of the last photographs ever taken of him, Hitler leaves the safety of his bunker to award decorations to members of the Hitler Youth

INSET: General Jodl (centre) signs the terms of unconditional surrender in Rheims, 7 May 1945. Only when Hitler was dead could the Nazi power elite bring themselves to seek a negotiated end to hostilities

command of the Wehrmacht, were ultra-loyalists, firm believers in Hitler even now. After the failed bomb plot, Nazi penetration of the armed forces was intensified. Many middle ranking officers had swallowed tenets of Nazi doctrine in the Hitler Youth and were now doubly anxious to display their loyalty. Only loyalists were left, too, among the generals in command positions. Few were fully-fledged Nazis, but their nationalist mentalities easily blended with Nazi dogma.

Field-Marshal Kesselring rejected moves to surrender in Italy as long as Hitler was still alive

Some generals had serious disputes with Hitler and were dismissed. But even where they disagreed fundamentally with Hitler's tactics, they did not doubt his right to issue them. Divided among themselves, they were neither temperamentally nor organisationally capable of challenging Hitler. Some, most notably the extraordinarily brutal Field-Marshal Schörner, remained fanatical backers of Hitler. Grand-Admiral Dönitz was another ardent believer in Hitler and unbending in demanding a fight to the last.

Even those who had broken inwardly with Hitler could not contemplate doing other than their utmost in the defence of the Reich, seen as their highest duty. Faced with increasingly impossible orders for the defence of Berlin, for instance, Colonel-General Heinrici felt that to refuse them was to commit treason. Even in late April 1945, Field Marshal Kesselring rejected moves to surrender in Italy as long as Hitler was still alive.

Hitler's hold among the power elite – in the dwindling area where his writ still ran – was sustained to the end. Partly this was a matter of his domineering personality and ruthlessly intransigent determination to fight on even if the German people should be destroyed in the process. But it was not simply personality. Confronting Hitler in an organised body, political or military, was impossible. An equivalent in Hitler's Germany to the Fascist Grand Council which had toppled Mussolini in July 1943 did not exist. There was no cabinet, senate, politburo or military council that could challenge Hitler. And there was no alternative source of loyalty. Hitler's popularity had long been in steep decline. But the fragmented structures of authority, all of them dependent upon Hitler, persisted to the end.

As soon as Hitler was dead, after his suicide in the bunker on 30 April 1945, his chosen successor, Grand-Admiral Dönitz, until then an arch-fanatic in his unbending advocacy of the fight to the last, saw the need to bow to reality and seek a negotiated end. The whole surviving political and military apparatus immediately followed suit. This sudden reversal is the clearest demonstration of how much the fight to complete defeat and destruction was owing not just to Hitler in person, but to the character of his rule and the mentalities that had upheld his charismatic domination.

Ultimately, the dominant elites possessed neither the collective will nor the mechanisms of power to prevent Hitler taking Germany to total destruction. That was decisive.

Sir Ian Kershaw is a leading historian of 20th-century Germany. His latest book, *The End: Hitler's Germany, 1944–45*, was published by Allen Lane in August

JOURNEYS

Books

▶ **The End: Hitler's Germany, 1944–45** by Sir Ian Kershaw *(Allen Lane, August 2011)*
▶ **Armageddon: The Battle for Germany 1944–45** by Max Hastings *(Macmillan, 2004)*

TV

The Man Who Crossed Hitler will be broadcast this summer on BBC Two (see our feature on page 30). Sign up to our TV newsletter for exact details:
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BBC TWO

On the podcast

Ian Kershaw discusses Nazism on our weekly podcast (online from 19 August)
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