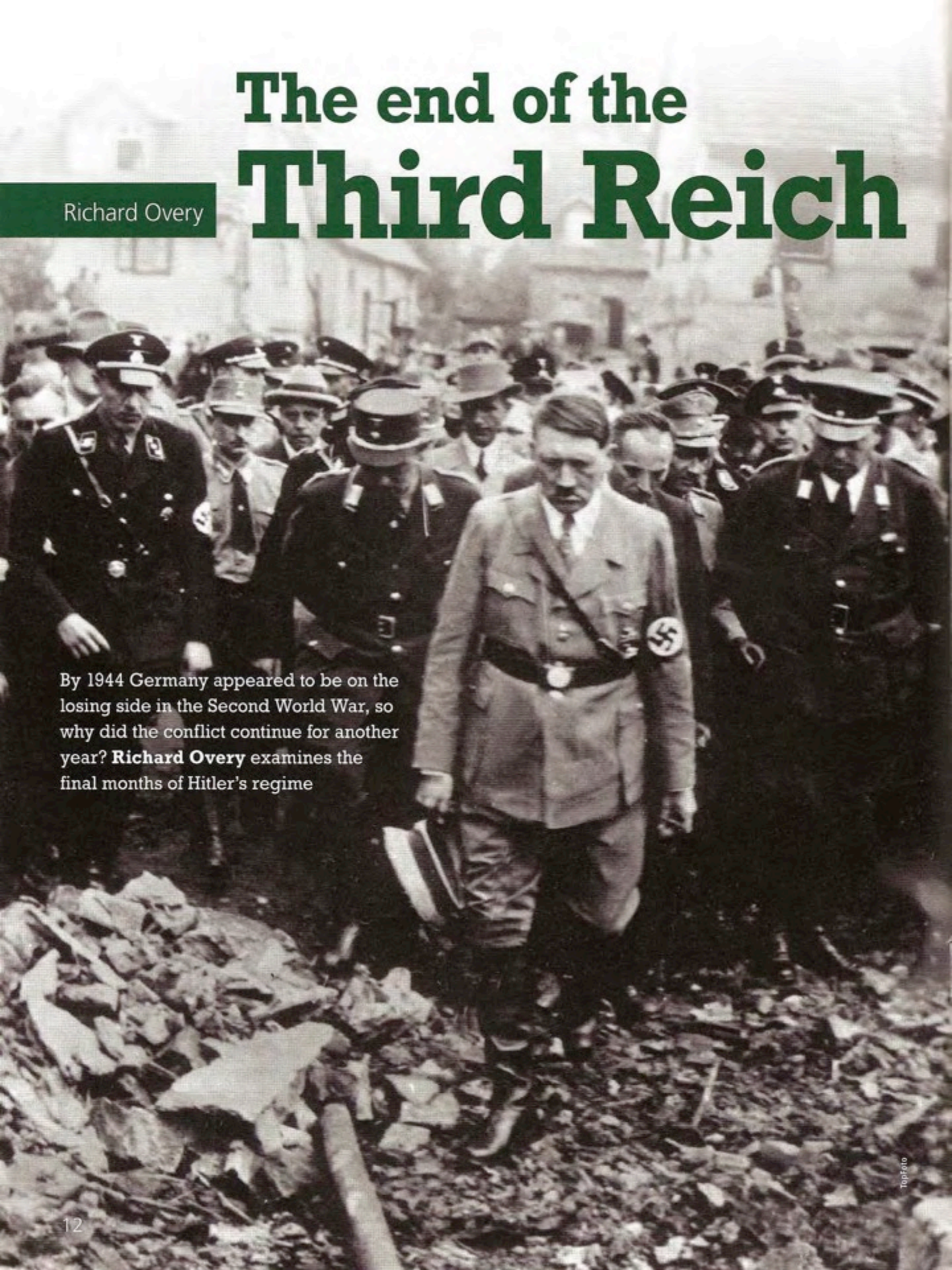
# The end of the Third Reich

Richard Overy



By 1944 Germany appeared to be on the losing side in the Second World War, so why did the conflict continue for another year? **Richard Overy** examines the final months of Hitler's regime

Hitler and other German officials inspecting bomb damage to a German city in 1944

## Exam links

**AQA AS** Life in Nazi Germany, 1933–45

**Edexcel AS** From Second Reich to Third Reich: Germany, 1918–45

**Edexcel A2** From Kaiser to Führer: Germany, 1900–45

**OCR (A) AS** Democracy and dictatorship in Germany, 1919–63

**OCR (A) A2** Nazi Germany, 1933–45

## Argument

### German forces fight to the last

The Allies hoped Hitler's Germany would collapse in 1944 after defeats on all fronts and heavy bombing. Instead, German forces fought to the bitter end and the home front experienced no social crisis as the population came to depend more on the state and party for food and protection.

In early 1944, the Allied powers thought that the military situation facing Germany would bring the Second World War to an end that year. Intelligence reports suggested that there might be a **revolution** in Germany, like the crisis on the German home front in 1918. Bookmakers offered odds on which month would see the collapse of Hitler's Third Reich. In the event, Germany did not surrender until May 1945, after another year of fierce combat. Defeated on all fronts, bombed remorselessly from the air, with streams of evacuees moving from region to region, the Hitler regime avoided internal crisis and kept fighting to the very end.

### The military factor

The most obvious explanation for the survival of the Third Reich into 1945 was the military capability of the German armed forces even in retreat, and the willingness of millions of German soldiers to continue the struggle when the situation they faced seemed suicidal. The mobilisation of the economy and population for total war reached its high point in 1944 when consumer production was cut back almost entirely and every effort was made to increase the output of weapons. Industry was dispersed among small producers or shifted to safer areas to avoid Allied attacks. The peak of German war production was reached in September 1944 (Table 1). Though greatly outnumbered by Allied forces on all three fronts — in Russia, Italy and, after the **Normandy landings** in June 1944, in France as well — enough weapons, explosives and vehicles were produced to make a tough defence possible.

**Table 1** German military production, 1940–44

| Type of weapon | 1940 | 1941 | 1942 | 1943 | 1944 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Munitions (tonnes) | 865,000 | 540,000 | 1,270,000 | 3,350,000 | 2,558,000 |
| Tanks, armour (tonnes) | 37,235 | 83,188 | 140,454 | 369,416 | 622,322 |
| Artillery (number over 7.5 cm) | 5,964 | 8,124 | 14,316 | 35,796 | 55,936 |
| Aircraft (number) | 10,250 | 11,776 | 15,409 | 28,807 | 39,807 |

### Trying to avoid defeat

Many Germans, including senior military and National Socialist party leaders, persuaded themselves that complete defeat might somehow be avoided. The German army in 1944 was still fighting hundreds of miles away from home soil and they assumed that the enemy could be held up long enough to reach a point of stalemate and perhaps a negotiated peace. They also hoped that the Allied powers would fall out among themselves. Almost to the end of the war Hitler counted on a crisis between the capitalist Western powers and the communist Soviet Union, which might split the alliance against him and allow him to reach a political settlement.

Hitler also gambled on a military solution. The V-weapons (V for 'vengeance') launched against Britain and Allied forces in the West, were expected in tens of thousands. The V-1 flying bomb and the V-2 rocket were supposed to turn the tide of the war, along with new jet aircraft and revolutionary new submarines. In the end, they could not be produced in enough quantity because of the heavy bombing and shortages of labour and materials.

### Fighting for their country

The hope for a solution short of unconditional surrender — which was what the Allies demanded — perhaps explains the willingness of German soldiers to

**revolution** Within a month of the end of the First World War, in October 1918, a political revolution turned Germany into a parliamentary democracy and overthrew the monarchy.

**Normandy landings** On 6 June 1944, a British-US-Canadian force landed on beaches in Normandy. They set up bridgeheads from which the liberation of France could be mounted over the next 2 months.

A soldier standing guard over German prisoners, April 1945

Goebbels visiting a food bank — German civilians became more reliant on the state and the party for assistance towards the end of the war

continue fighting, and dying, in increasing numbers. Their options were narrow and any defeatism or attempt to desert was punished with instant execution. There was an increasing willingness among German soldiers to surrender to the British and Americans in the months after the invasion of France, but most soldiers kept up a stiff resistance when they could, stirred as much by primitive German nationalism as by National Socialist ideology.

On the eastern front it was clear that every effort had to be made to protect German society from Soviet vengeance. Fear of what might happen if communism triumphed on the battlefield can explain why hundreds of thousands of young German soldiers died fighting to defend the eastern frontiers and Berlin at all costs, but also why German workers laboured to produce weapons.

**July Plot** On 20 July 1944, Colonel Claus von Stauffenberg left a bomb in Hitler's headquarters, but it failed to kill him. Stauffenberg and Army leaders who had conspired with him were executed.

## Terror on the home front

The prospect for any collapse of the German home front was slight despite the impact of the bombing, which reached its peak in the months from September 1944 to April 1945. The German regime had been prepared even before 1939 to make sure that any potential dissent would be brutally stamped out.

### Questions

- Why did the German armed forces continue to fight to the bitter end rather than surrender?
- Was terror the only factor to explain why German society did not collapse in 1944–45 under the strain of war?

During the war every effort was made to root out any hint of defeatism or political resistance. In a speech on 8 November 1943, Hitler announced: 'We have hundreds of criminals at home and we shall not shrink from handing them over for summary execution'. Alleged defeatists were executed and the cases given wide publicity. In August 1943, Heinrich Himmler, head of the SS and police, was also made minister of the interior.

The terror multiplied in the last year of war. It was directed at anyone who seemed to pose a threat to the united war effort. Looters were shot on the spot in bombed cities. When a group of German army officers tried to assassinate Hitler on 20 July 1944 and seize power, in what became known as the **July Plot**, they were defeated, imprisoned and executed (if your school subscribes to the 20TH CENTURY HISTORY REVIEW Online Archive, take a look at the article on pp. 23–27 of Vol. 5, No. 1). Police reports showed that many people approved of the executions and reconfirmed their faith in the Führer, though this evidence must be used with caution.

### The plight of forced workers

The terror only explains part of the story. It was directed in many cases not at ethnic Germans, but at the millions of foreign workers and prisoners-of-war in Germany. Most of the 750,000 people in concentration camps by 1944 were non-Germans. Ethnic Germans were better off than the 8 million prisoners or forced labourers. They had access to air-raid shelters and food supplies, and were able to move away from the bombed cities, which forced workers could not.

The increased bombing and the problems of food supply and housing made the population more reliant on the state and the party for assistance, extra rations, housing repair and **evacuation**. The regime understood this and made strenuous attempts to supply what was needed to the German civilians, even under the most difficult of circumstances, while camp prisoners slowly starved to death. There was some anxiety among party leaders that mass evacuation might create social problems and spread rumours and grumbles across the Reich, but even with almost 9 million evacuees by late 1944, there was little evidence of organised social unrest. There were complaints and occasional friction, but there were no channels for protest for a population largely composed of women, children and older men.

## The Third Reich's last stand

The final defeat of the German armies and air force explains the end of the Third Reich. From January 1945, the Red Army drove into eastern Germany and central Europe, smashing what was left of German resistance. In March 1945, British and US forces began the final drive into German territory, using their overwhelming air power to bludgeon the defending army into defeat. Allied aircraft destroyed almost all remaining German aircraft and subjected the population to routine strafing and low-level bombing. In Italy, the Axis forces were attacked in strength in April 1945 and the front crumbled in a matter of weeks.

### 'Business' as usual

Despite imminent defeat, the German authorities continued to function to the end of the war. Weapons continued to be made, welfare supplied (when possible), and police functions were maintained. There can be little doubt that most Germans by this stage wanted the war to end. Many now blamed Hitler for bringing Germany to defeat. Fanatical National Socialist Party members, SS and police continued to kill anyone with a defeatist attitude. Citizens who hung white bedding from their balconies as a sign of surrender as Allied troops approached ran the risk of being shot minutes before the enemy arrived. Hundreds of party leaders prepared to leave Germany and find sanctuary abroad. Those who could not find a way to escape killed themselves. A large number of suicides marked the final days of the Reich.

### Hitler's suicide

The best-known suicide was that of Hitler himself. Until the end, he continued to order German armies to move here and there on a battlefield over which he no longer had any real control. As Soviet soldiers neared the government quarter in Berlin and the underground bunker command centre, Hitler prepared his own death to avoid capture. On 30 April, Hitler and his wife, Eva Braun, whom he had married the day before, killed themselves. **Joseph Goebbels** and his wife, after killing their children, also committed suicide. The announcement told the public that they had died defending Berlin.

## An end to National Socialism

Whether believed or not, the death of Hitler broke the terrible spell of the Third Reich. Albert Speer, Hitler's minister for war production, recalled in his memoirs that he cried when he heard the news, but then felt an extraordinary sense of release, as if freed from some diabolical bond. All over Germany party members hid their badges and destroyed their records.

Belief in Hitler as Germany's saviour had kept the German people going. His death brought an abrupt end to the cult of personality. When the Allies took over Germany in May 1945 they were astonished to find that National Socialism had melted away almost overnight.

**Professor Richard Overy** is professor of history at the University of Exeter. He has written more than 25 books on the Second World War, the Third Reich and Stalin's Russia. His latest book, *The Bombing War: Europe 1939–1945*, will be published in September 2013.

## Weblinks

Historian Norman Stone's review of Antony Beevor's book *The Fall of Berlin 1945* is in itself a useful (and digestible) description of the end of the Third Reich: **www.tinyurl.com/bp3v73f**

Another report, which also includes a useful timeline, can be found at: **www.tinyurl.com/atjm5d**

For personal accounts of the fall of the Third Reich, see: **www.eyewitnesstohistory.com/berlin.htm**

## Further reading

Beck, E. (1986) *Under the Bombs: The German Home Front, 1942–1945*, Kentucky University Press.

Bessel, R. (2009) *Germany 1945: From War to Peace*, Simon & Schuster.

Kershaw, I. (2011) *The End: Germany 1944–45*, Penguin.

Mierzejewski, A. C. (1988) *The Collapse of the German War Economy 1944–1945: Allied Air Power and the German National Railway*, North Carolina University Press.

Stephenson, J. (2006) *Hitler's Home Front: Württemberg under the Nazis*, Continuum.

**evacuation** In 1943, women, children and elderly citizens were moved to places of safety. These so-called 'safe' areas were bombed later in the war as aircraft ranges increased.

**Joseph Goebbels** Minister for propaganda and popular enlightenment in Hitler's government. In 1944 he was appointed plenipotentiary for total war.