Hitler's Victories, 1939-41

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On 1 September 1939, sixty divisions of German troops poured across the Third Reich's borders with Poland. Numbering one and a half million, they barely outnumbered the Polish armed forces in manpower. But in terms of equipment it was a different story. German armoured and motorized divisions outnumbered their Polish equivalents by 15 to 1, German combat aircraft 3 to 1. German planes were modern, since they had all been built since Hitler came to power in 1933; Polish planes were mostly obsolete, and the Poles had only 100 anti-aircraft guns to try and bring down more than 800 German planes who bombed Polish towns and cities, strafed Polish troops, and wrought havoc on Polish communications. The Poles fought bravely. Stories of Polish cavalry charging German tanks are probably untrue, but they captured the basic nature of the conflict. On 17 September the Polish government fled the country, and the last military units surrendered on 6 October. The ruin of Poland was completed when the Red Army marched in from the East on 17 September, occupying around a third of the country as agreed under the Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact negotiated as a security measure by both sides shortly before the outbreak of war.

Altogether the Poles lost 70,000 killed in action against the Germans and 50,000 against the Russians, 133,000 wounded on the western fronts and probably around 100,000 on the eastern, and a million men taken prisoner, two thirds of them by the Germans and one third by the Russians. 150, 000 Polish troops and airmen fled abroad, particularly to Britain, to continue the struggle. By contrast the Germans lost just short of 15,000 dead and 30,000 wounded, the Russians 700 dead and not quite 2,000 wounded. This was a completely unequal conflict. It was also the first example of the famous Blitkrieg, the "lightning war", in which German aircraft bombed enemy airfields, military positions and communications, while armoured columns smashed through enemy defences followed by swiftly advancing infantry to complete the rout.

Hitler had hoped for British neutrality in the conflict, and he had been dismayed when war had been declared. He was aware of Chamberlain's weakness and desire for peace and still hoped that it could be achieved. Moreover, the army leadership in Germany warned that time was needed to build up its resources after the losses of equipment and expenditure of ammunition during the Polish conflict. On 23 November 1939 Hitler hauled senior generals over the coals. He had proved them wrong on every occasion when they had urged caution before, he reminded them. The ultimate goal was "living-space" in the east. The German people would die out if it was not conquered. "We can oppose Russia only when we are free in the west", he told them. To defeat Britain it would be necessary to occupy the coast of the English Channel and the North Sea. British and French rearmament had not, he said, got very far; nor had Russian. Above all, no other country had Germany's supreme asset: himself. "I am convinced of the powers of my intellect and decision... The fate of the Reich depends on me alone...I shall shrink from nothing and shall destroy everyone who is opposed to me." Appalled, senior generals around the Chief of Staff Franz Halder started preparing to overthrow him once more, and Halder even carried a loaded revolver around with him for a while in the hope of finding Hitler alone and unguarded. But it all came to nothing. Halder thought Hitler's address of 23 November meant he had got wind of the plot, and pulled out. The rest of the plotters were panicky and confused and did nothing.

What worried the generals was the fact that while tactic of "lightning war" worked against a poorly equipped enemy like the Poles, who were strung out along an extensive border on three sides of the country, it would surely not work against a more formidable and better equipped military force of the kind deployed by the French and the British. Vastly larger forces and quantities of munitions and equipment would be needed, and while production was going ahead at a furious pace, most of the generals thought it had not yet achieved enough. Nevertheless, they began the next phase of the war by planning a conventional, three-pronged attack on Belgium, Holland and France. There was no thought here of easing the economic burden on the German people by fighting a war on the basis of a peacetime economy, as has sometimes been claimed. On the contrary, every aspect of the economy had been put on to a war footing well before 1939. Consumer spending had been depressed, investment diverted as far as possible into a massive expansion of the armed forces, rationing introduced for a whole variety of good from butter to leather, and iron and steel supplies boosted by tearing down park railings and forcing ordinary citizens to surrender surplus metal utensils. There had been a massive drive to make Germany self-sufficient, to avoid the disasters of the First World War, when more than half a million Germans died of starvation; German dependency on imports of oil and rubber, the government hoped, could be reduced by the manufacture of artificial substitutes, and money was poured into firms like IG Farben for research and development. Germany's economic manager Hjalmar Schacht had been elbowed aside when he began to raise objections to the speed and scale of rearmament in 1937; it would all be paid for by the conquest of other countries, so the rapidly growing indebtedness of the state would not matter in the long run.

Nevertheless, the Nazis had had only seven years in power, starting more or less from scratch, in which to build up their military strength, and the British and French had themselves been furiously rearming since 1936. German prospects of success in a conventional war were far from certain. But chance came to Hitler's aid. A staff officer carrying the invasion plans had to make a forced landing of his plane in Belgium and was unable to destroy the documents before he was arrested. Hitler and the ambitious General Erich von Manstein came up with a daring new plan. There would indeed be a conventional invasion of Holland and Belgium, drawing the French and the British Expeditionary Force up to meet it. Meanwhile, however, armoured columns would move through the narrow wooded valleys of the Ardennes, generally regarded as impassable to a large military force, and once across the river Maas, would race north-west, cutting off the enemy from behind and then together with the rest of the invasion force they would force the enemy back towards the sea. War games confirmed the viability of this plan, though many senior generals had serious doubts. General Fedor von Bock, for example, thought that the Ardennes advance would "run into the ground unless the French take leave of their senses". Nevertheless, this was the plan now adopted. All that was needed was favourable weather; but the winter and spring of 1939-40 were unusually wet, making it difficult for armoured forces to move rapidly, so the invasion was repeatedly postponed.

Meanwhile, Hitler and Grand Admiral Raeder, head of the Geman navy, became concerned that the British were about to launch a pre-emptive strike to secure the Norwegian North Sea ports for themselves, while Raeder wanted to acquire them as bases for a submarine war against British supply lines. For obvious geographical and logistical reasons, an invasion of Norway would have to take in Denmark as well. On 9 April 1940 the Germans invaded Denmark early in the morning; the government surrendered in less than an hour. Norway proved a more difficult nut to crack. The British navy sank a German battle cruiser, ten destroyers and fifteen transport ships, and damaged two battleships, theScharnhorst and the Gneisenau. But they were too far from the Norwegian coast to stop the main invasion force, they had failed to mine the harbours, and they had not worked out a co-ordinated plan with the British army units that landed in and around Narvik and further south. The expeditionary force failed to advance swiftly enough, German reinforcements arrived, and the British had to evacuate. The debacle led to a rebellion in the British House of Commons, forcing Chamberlain's resignation and bringing Winston Churchill to Number 10 Downing Street. In Norway the fascist Vidkun Quisling was installed in power by the Germans, but he had almost no public support; nevertheless, the small Norwegian defence force was no match for the Germans and was effectively defeated by early May.

This was the signal for the invasion of France, Belgium and Holland, which began on 10 May 1940, as soon as the spring rains had cleared away and the ground was reasonably firm. The opposing forces were evenly matched, with 3,000 modern tanks on the French side facing 2,500 generally less well armed

German tanks, 11,000 French artillery pieces to 7,500 German ones, 93 divisions of troops on each side, and around 3,500 combat aircraft on each side including the Belgian and Dutch air forces; but the German advance through the Ardennes took the British and French by surprise. The advance was carefully planned, with fuel dumps placed in advance at strategic points along the way, and the tank and transport drivers, who had to keep going for three days and nights without a break, supplied with amphetamines ("Panzer chocolate") to help them stay awake. At any time the whole plan could have been wrecked if French aircraft had spotted the slow-moving columns of armour and bombed just a few in the vanguard. But the French did not suspect, and in any case they had not learned to use aircraft in support of ground troops the way the Germans had.

Once through the Ardennes and across the Maas, the Germans bombed Allied positions with over 1,000 planes, then pushed on rapidly north-west instead of turning round to the south-east to attack the defensive fortifications of the Maginot Line from the rear, as the French had expected. The French generals, stationed far behind the lines, were too slow to react; co-ordination between the British expeditionary force, the French, the Dutch and the Belgians was minimal, not least because Belgian neutrality meant there had been no joint military planning before the war, and in the north, the German forces swept all before them, leading to Belgian capitulation on 28 May 1940. In the greatest military encirclement in history, the Allied forces were pushed back against the sea, where the British began to evacuate them from the port of Dunkirk, taking off 200,000 British and 140,000 French , while the German troops held back for three crucial days because Hitler was persuaded that they needed to recuperate from their rapid advance and the German air force would finish off the remnants of the Allied army anyway.

Soon the Germans were sweeping southwards. Paris fell on 14 June 1940. 8 million panicky refugees clogged the roads south. French society and the French political system collapsed. German troops looted at will, stealing everything they could lay their hands on in the deserted towns and villages. Meanwhile the French government fled to Bordeaux, where the Prime Minister Paul Reynaud was forced to resign because of his opposition to an armistice, and was succeeded by the hero of Verdun in the First World War, Marshal Philippe Pétain, who announced an end to hostilities on 17 June 1940. Just to rub salt into the wound, Hitler ordered the railway carriage in which the victorious French had signed the armistice on 11 November 1918 taken out of its museum and removed to the same spot in Compiégne, where peace was agree;d all hostilities ceased on 24 June 1940.

This was the greatest German victory of the war. 50,000 German lives were lost; 120,000 French, 10,500 Dutch and Belgian, and 5,000 British servicemen died and a million and a half were taken prisoner. The death toll showed that the French defeat was caused not by cowardice or demoralization but by poor intelligence, bad communications and indecisive leadership. In Germany, Hitler's popularity reached an all-time high. There was spontaneous rejoicing in the streets and squares of Germany's towns and cities. But this was not least because German popular opinion now overwhelmingly expected the British to sue for peace and the war to come to an end. As he listened to the news of the British rejection of Hitler's offer of peace to the British on 19 July 1940 with a group of German military and civilian officials, the American journalist William L. Shirer was taken aback by their reaction. "The officials could not believe their ears", he wrote. "One of them shouted at me: Can you make it out? Can you understand those British fools? To turn down peace now?" "The Germans I talk to", he added the next day, "simply cannot understand it. They want peace."

What would have happened if Britain had agreed to Hitler's peace offer in 1940? Various scenarios have been proposed. Some, like the historian John Charmley, have suggested that this would have left Germany and Russia to slug it out on the Continent to a state of mutual exhaustion; Britain would not have spent its resources in a futile and unnecessary war, and as a result would have been in a position to preserve the British Empire intact. But a separate peace would have opened the way to growing pressure by Hitler's Third Reich on a Britain most likely denied the crucial supply of American military resources. Antisemitic laws would have been introduced and British Jews shipped off to Auschwitz. Churchill's government would have been forced out and replaced by one more amenable to the Nazis, possibly even under the British Union of Fascists led by Sir Oswald Mosley. Before long Hitler may well have begun demanding the

cession of major parts of the British Empire to Germany.

The likely victor in a German-Soviet war would, however, have been the Russians, as we'll see in the later lectures in this series. Andrew Roberts has accordingly painted a plausible scenario of a postwar Europe dominated by Stalin from the North Sea to the Adriatic. The Americans would most probably have stepped in at some point, and under these circumstances a Third World War might well have broken out. We shall never know. What we can say, however, is that the British Empire came to an end not because Britain had spent the resources needed to govern it, but because indigenous colonial nationalist and independence movements became too powerful, and because the postwar international climate, with both America and Russia in the ascendant, was fundamentally hostile to old-style colonial empires.

Although Churchill was deeply committed to the preservation of the British Empire, he fully realized the starkness of the choice facing Britain in the spring of 1940. Any separate peace with Hitler would only weaken Britain and the Empire, and open the way to further demands, as had been the experience with other countries. It would be likely to include provisions stopping further rearmament on Britain's part. Whatever the cost, therefore, there was in practice no alternative but to fight on. Hitler reluctantly realized that there would be no separate peace. So he began preparations for the invasion of the British Isles. 2,000 barges were assembled to carry the troops, landing manoeuvres took place, signs were put up along the Channel coast showing troops where to embark, handbooks were written to help soldiers deal with the perfidious and hypocritical British once they arrived. How serious was all this? The barges were only suitable for use in flat calm, and the naval and army chiefs advised that in any case it would not be possible to launch the invasion until May 1941. Naval losses in the Norwegian campaign needed to be made good, and there was interminable argument about the best place for a landing.

It does seem in the end that Hitler, while obviously reluctant, was relatively serious about invading Britain. But he knew that the whole operation would be impossible unless Germany established complete command of the skies over the Channel and the landing sites. The Royal Air Force would simply destroy the slow-moving barges, and they would also be easy prey for the submarines and surface ships of the Royal Navy. By the same token, however, if British planes were driven from the skies, then British ships would be destroyed by German bombers, and German ships would be left free to lay mines around the crossing passage and hunt down enemy submarines if they tried to disrupt the invading force as it made its way across the Channel. So from 18 August 1941 German planes began to stage bombing raids on British airfields. The two air forces were evenly matched in numbers of planes and pilots. But the British fighters were faster than their German counterparts, at least at the lower altitudes at which German bombers flew, German fighter pilots were not used to protecting bomber fleets rather than giving ground forces support, British radar and coastal spotters gave enough advance warning for the fighters to be airborne instead of, like the Polish air force, being sitting targets on their airfields, and the British were producing twice as many fighter planes every month as the Germans were and so found it easier to make good their losses. By the end of August 900 German planes had been shot down against 444 British. The Battle of Britain ended in the failure of the Germans to secure supremacy in the air.

Yet this is not how it appeared to the German air force leadership. They thought indeed that half the British fighter fleet had been lost, against only 12 per cent of the German. So in early September 1940, Hitler switched the war in the air to a series of heavy bombing raids on London and other major cities in order to destroy British industry, transport and morale. This was the "Blitz", as it was known in Britain. On 7 September 1940, 350 German bombers attacked the London docks in a daylight raid; others followed on an almost daily basis, roughly half on London. The British gained advance warning by radar, and kept fighter squadrons permanently in the air on a rota to anticipate the raids. In the second week of September 1940 alone, nearly 300 German aircraft were shot down, as against 120 British. The German bombers were not only slow moving but also carried a relatively small payload; planes like the Junkers 88 had not been designed for large-scale strategic bombing. As German losses mounted it became clear that this tactic was not succeeding either and that British losses during the Battle of Britain had been exaggerated. In total, 40,000 British civilians had been killed. But morale had not been shaken and aircraft production continued unabated. 365 German planes were lost in October, and the losses continued. In mid-September

1940 Hitler postponed the invasion indefinitely. In the early spring of 1941, finally, the raids were scaled down.

By this time, a new and unpredictable factor had entered the war. Fascist Italy had been kept out of the conflict by its dictator Benito Mussolini, but when it became clear that Germany was sweeping all before it, he joined it on the German side. Mussolini's ambition was to create a new Roman Empire in the Mediterranean, but the scope for doing this was extremely limited. His hope of gaining France's North African colonies was dashed when Hitler divided the defeated nation into two parts, allowing the south to be run as an independent state from the spa town of Vichy under the leadership of Marshal Pétain. Vichy France retained control over the colonies, and as an ally of Germany could not be attacked. Nor were the colonies held by neutral Spain under General Franco, the victor, with German and Italian backing, in the Spanish Civil War, available for the new Roman Empire either. So Mussolini decided instead to invade Greece, which he did, without informing Hitler, on 28 October 1940, sending troops in from neighbouring Albania, which was already under Italian control. The result was a disaster. Without winter fighting equipment, without naval support, without even maps to guide their way across the mountains, the Italians were repulsed all along the line. The Greeks had substantial support from the British, who might now be able to use Greece as a base. A furious Hitler had little alternative but to order an invasion in support of his Italian ally.

The situation was further complicated by a coup d'état in Yugoslavia on 27 March 1941 by anti-German Serb officers who thought their government's German alliance favoured the Croats within the composite state. So Hitler felt compelled to restore German-Italian influence more generally in the Balkans. Early in April 1941 allied with Hungary and Bulgaria, German and Italian forces invaded Greece and Yugoslavia in overwhelming force, crushing the opposition and expelling the British expeditionary force first from the Greek mainland and then from the island of Crete. These were major victories. Hitler cemented them by carving up Yugoslavia into a large Croat client state and a smaller Serbia under military occupation, and by dividing Greece with the Italians. Chunks of Greek and Yugoslavian territory were carved off and given to the Bulgarians, Hungarians, Italians and Albanians and in the north indeed to the Germans themselves. The whole of the northern coast and hinterland of the Mediterranean was under the control of Germany and its allies by the end of May 1941. Here once again modern military technology combined with - as for example in Crete - the surprise use of airborne landings and in general the co-ordination of forces by land, sea and air, overwhelmed a more backward and less well equipped enemy.

Yet these victories did not destroy British naval command of the Mediterranean. Key naval bases, notably at Malta and Gibraltar, remained in British hands. A large part of the modern Italian navy had been destroyed by British warships and carrier-based aircraft. To make matters worse for the Rome-Berlin Axis, an attempt to invade British-controlled Egypt from the Italian colony of Libya had been defeated in December 1940 with 130,000 Italians taken prisoner, while the Italian force occupying Ethiopia since 1936 was defeated by British-led African troops, who went on to overrun Eritrea and Somaliland in May 1941, all with the vital assistance of decrypts of Italian battle orders. The importance of all these activities was not so much in their frustration of Mussolini's grandiose vision of a new Roman Empire in the Mediterranean, as in the threat they posed to the German war economy. Without adequate supplies of oil, the German war machine would soon grind to a halt. Hitler had managed to secure considerable quantities from Romania and Hungary, but production of synthetic fuel in Germany itself was minimal, and there were few if any other sources available. It was vital therefore to gain access to the huge oilfields of the Middle East and the Caucasus.

But the Italian defeats in North Africa made it impossible to launch an attack through British-held Egypt to the Gulf. So in February 1942 Hitler appointed General Erwin Rommel to rescue the situation. He arrived in North Africa with the newly formed Africa Corps, well-trained and equipped troops who were used to the combined deployment of air power and armour. Rommel could anticipate British moves from decrypts of ciphers from the US military attaché in Cyprus, while his messages were often deliberately misleading. The British forces were weakened by the removal of many of them to help defend Greece. Rommel pushed them back and drove on towards Egypt, extending his supply lines too far so that the reinforced British

army pushed him back again, before he acquired new tanks and fuel and took the key seaport of Tobruk in June 1942, opening the way to an invasion of Egypt.

Rommel was much admired in Britain both at the time and subsequently for the boldness of his conduct of the war in North Africa, but of course what he conquered was largely empty desert, and his superiors in Berlin were sharply critical of what General Halder called his "pathological ambition". His victories spelled disaster for the Jews of Tunis and Libya, where the Gestapo moved in to institute a reign of terror against them. Meanwhile in the summer of 1941 a German attempt to overthrow British rule in Iraq as a short-cut to obtaining oil supplies was easily frustrated, and was followed by a British takeover of the Vichy French colony of Syria. So Rommel's push towards the Middle East from the south-west became more vital than ever before.

Yet there was an alternative. The Soviet Union controlled large oilfields in the Caucasus, especially at Baku on the Caspian Sea. Securing them became for Hitler an important by-product of the invasion of the Soviet Union, which went under the name of Operation Barbarossa, after a medieval German emperor. Hitler began talking about this as early as July 1940. There were for him essentially two main reasons for going ahead. First, he thought that defeating Russia would deprive the British of their last significant ally and bring them at last to the negotiating table. Secondly, it was time to win the much-vaunted "living-space" that would secure vital supplies of food and raw materials for the German war effort. Once these were obtained, it would surely only be a matter of time before the British were brought to their knees. Haste was needed because Hitler was beginning to fear that the United States would enter the war on the British side, and he wanted to get in his blow against the Soviet Union before that happened.

Planning for the invasion went ahead through the winter of 1940-41. Hitler later blamed Mussolini for the subsequent delay in putting them into effect; if he had not been forced to rescue the Italians in Greece and North Africa, he later said, the invasion of Russia would have been launched two months earlier than it was. But in fact wet weather made the roads impassable through April and May. Throughout the early part of June, troops and equipment were moved up to the Soviet borders in vast numbers. Hungary, Romania, Italy and a few other allies of the Germans added their contingents. On 22 June 1941, all was ready. 3 million German troops and half a million supplied by other nations, making the largest invasion force ever assembled, crossed the border, along with 3,600 tanks, 600,000 motor vehicles, and 700,000 artillery pieces. 2,700 aircraft flew overhead, and went on to destroy 1,200 Soviet planes on 66 airfields on the first day alone; the total reached 4,000 by the end of the first week.

The Russians were completely unprepared. The German-Soviet Pact of 1939 was still in force, and to strengthen the element of surprise, Joseph Goebbels's propaganda apparatus had not repeated the kind of barrage of insults and accusations that had preceded the invasions of Poland and Czechoslovakia. The Soviet dictator Joseph Stalin had even increased the supplies of raw materials sent to Germany under the terms of the pact, to try and reduce the threat of an invasion; from the point of view of his rigid, dogmatic version of Marxist-Leninist ideology, the Third Reich was run by monopoly capitalists, and keeping them supplied would keep them happy, so that they would not see any reason to attack Russia. Soviet intelligence reports of an invasion planned for May, though correct at the time, proved to be wrong when the Germans changed the date, and Stalin thus regarded all such reports as misleading. An ex-communist soldier in the German army who crossed the lines on 21 June to warn the Russians the invasion was due to be launched the following day was arrested and shot on Stalin's personal orders for spreading false information.

In the long run, Stalin none the less thought that "war with Germany is inevitable", as he said in early May 1941. But he did not think the Red Army would be ready for it until 1942 or even 1943. The general staff had not drawn up plans either for an attack on the Germans or for defence against them. Stalin personally vetoed suggestions that his forces should launch small-scale disruption operations across the German lines, in case this provoked the Germans to invade. He knew that his mass purges of generals and officers, munitions factory managers and administrators during the 1930s had seriously weakened the leadership of

the armed forces. He brought many of those he had purged back into their former posts, but the damage would take many months to make good all the same. So the Red Army was caught unprepared on 22 June. The result was a series of absolutely calamitous defeats, as the German armour raced forward to surround huge numbers of Soviet troops time after time in a series of vast encircling movements carried out by the three main army groups in the invading force. By the end of the second week in July, Army Group Centre had taken over 600,000 prisoners and vast quantities of arms and equipment. By early December Army Group North was besieging Leningrad, the present-day St Petersburg, Army Group Centre was approaching the suburbs of Moscow, and Army Group South had taken Kiev and Rostov-on-Don, securing the huge agricultural resources of the Ukraine and the industrial region of the Donets Basin and opening up the prospect of a push into the Caucasus.

Hitler and his leading generals, most notably Franz Halder, considered that these extraordinary victories spelled the end of the Soviet regime in Russia. Surely the ramshackle edifice of Stalinist Communism would now collapse, totally discredited, leaving a mass of primitive and disorganized peasants at the mercy of the German invaders. Stalin himself despaired, withdrew to his dacha and cut off all communication with the outside world. When a delegation of the Communist Party Politbureau came to see him, he sank back in his armchair, evidently thinking they were going to put him under arrest and have him shot. All of this confirmed Hitler's view that, as he said during the planning of Operation Barbarossa, the conquest of the Soviet Union would be child's play in comparison to the defeat of France. The Russians were racially inferior, their armies without competent leadership, poorly equipped and badly supplied. In December 1940 he predicted that it would take no more than five months to crush the Soviet Union completely.

By the time that Operation Barbarossa was launched, too, Hitler had the additional benefit of all the resources of some of Europe's richest and most advanced economies at his disposal. Already in 1940 the German sphere of influence in Europe had a population of 290 million with a prewar Gross Domestic Product greater than that of the USA. Still more was added with the conquest of the Balkans and then large swathes of territory in Eastern Europe in 1941. Already in May 1940 representatives of key ministries in Berlin met to discuss setting up a "New Order" in Europe, as they called it, mobilizing the resources of the Continent in a single economic bloc to pit against the economies of the USA and the British Empire. Autarky, or self-sufficiency, Hitler admitted in early June 1940, had not succeeded within Germany; it had to be reconstituted on a European basis. It was agreed that while German interests naturally had primacy, international co-operation rather than direct, one-sided exploitation had to be the pattern for the future; and indeed some of the young economists involved in the planning process, like Ludwig Erhard, later played an important part in establishing international economic co-operation in Europe after the war was over.

Hitler and the leading Nazis saw this very much in terms of an empire built to rival the British Empire, except that it was located in Europe rather than scattered across the globe. Yet under Nazi leadership the Germans had no coherent idea of how their huge new empire was to be made to serve the global geopolitical purposes for which it was intended. It was governed by a huge variety of administrative arrangements, from collaborationist regimes like Slovakia or Vichy France through military government running alongside a surviving native civil service, as in Belgium, or a specially created German apparatus of rule, as in the Reich Commissariat of the Ukraine or the Polish General Government. Some areas were incorporated directly into the Reich, including large swathes of western Poland, while others were regarded as likely to be absorbed at some future date, including the Netherlands, whose people the Nazi leadership considered as predominantly "Aryan".

There was no central direction of this huge empire, and no co-ordination of the way it was run. The Germans never created any equivalent of the Greater East Asia Ministry through which the Japanese governed their conquests. Hitler bypassed the civil service in favour of committed Nazi fanatics whom he could trust to construct the new Greater Germany along racial lines. As a consequence, the Nazi Party, led by "Old Fighters" who had been members since the 1920s, and particularly by the regional leaders, the Gauleiter, gained power at the expense in particular of the Interior Ministry, whose officials began to lament the absence of any kind of centralized administration of the vast new territories. For his part, Hitler complained that "among us, the conception of the monolithic state implies that everything should be

directed from a centre...The English in India do exactly the opposite." (p. 229). "There is no possibility of ruling this huge empire from Berlin", he concluded.

Adding to the confusion was the inexorable growth of Heinrich Himmler's SS, which bypassed civilian and Party administrations in pursuit of its openly proclaimed purpose of redrawing the racial map of Europe. German military and civilian administrators across Europe, from Holland to the Ukraine, were faced with the choice of either turning a blind eye as the SS rolled in to massacre or deport the Jews under their control, or of putting their own resources at its disposal in the genocide. Despairing of existing arrangements, some senior civil servants, like the Interior Ministry's Wilhelm Stuckart, turned to Himmler in the hope of providing some kind of overall central direction. If there was to be a new colonial elite in the long run, then perhaps Himmler's cohorts of highly educated and efficiently organized young SS officers would provide it.

Hitler repeatedly returned in his mealtime monologues, recorded for posterity on the orders of Martin Bormann, to the example of British India. "Let's learn from the English", he said, "who, with two hundred and fifty thousand men in all, including fifty thousand settlers, govern four hundred million Indians". "What India is for England", he remarked on another occasion, "the territories of Russia will be for us". He did not ask, however, how the British had managed to retain their hold on the Indian sub-continent with such limited forces at their disposal; he simply assumed it was because of their racial superiority. "The Russian space", he said, "is our India. Like the English, we shall rule this empire with a handful of men." (He considered that German colonialism had failed not least because it had imported the German schoolmaster into the colonies. "It would be a mistake to claim to educate the native. All that we could give him would be a half-knowledge - just what's needed to conduct a revolution!". In the occupied west of the European continent, the racial affinities the Nazis assumed could lead to rule through existing administrative channels. But there was to be no collaborationist, educated indigenous elite in the new German empire in Eastern Europe. Germany would rule by force.

Thus any chance of co-opting nationalist groups in countries like the Ukraine, where Soviet rule had caused untold misery and starvation and where local people welcomed the invading German troops with traditional gifts of bread and salt, regarding them as liberators from the Communist yoke, was firmly rejected despite the advocacy of men like the Nazi ideologue Alfred Rosenberg, who ran the largely powerless Reich Ministry for the Occupied Eastern Territories. A Baltic German driven by hatred of Communism, Rosenberg thought of the Germans as liberators of the oppressed masses from the curse of Stalinism. He urged the creation of independent states purged of their Communist administrations, and warned that "the conquered territory as a whole must not be treated as the object of exploitation". But Hitler was dismissive of any idea that a people like the Ukrainians could have any racial affinity with the Germans. They too were Slavs, to be used as helots and then discarded when they had served their purpose. The result was, as one of Rosenberg's aides pointed out in February 1944, the German occupiers had "within a year, chased into the woods and swamps, as partisans, a people which was absolutely pro-German and had jubilantly greeted us as their liberator".

Hitler thought of the Slavic inhabitants of Eastern Europe as the equivalent of the Australian aborigines or the Native Americans: to be enslaved and exterminated. In his Table Talk monologues he waxed lyrical about the future that awaited the region: German towns and cities would be established, linked by motorways and broad-gauge, high-speed railways, and surrounded by German farms and estates. The existing towns and cities like Leningrad (the present-day St Petersburg) would be allowed to wither away and their inhabitants perish. Hitler's view was that they should be denied medical assistance of any kind; they should be used as cheap and expendable labour and worked until they dropped. Under Himmler's supervision, German academics drew up a General Plan for the East that envisaged the death from starvation and disease of between 30 and 45 million Slavs over the coming years. A start was made with Leningrad, which was almost totally cut off by German troops in 1941; by the time the siege was lifted three years later, a million of its inhabitants had died of starvation. In Kursk, the German army arrested all the healthy male inhabitants, put them into camps, and set them to work. "The streets are empty", a Soviet intelligence agent reported: "The shops have been looted. There is no mains water and electricity. Kursk

has collapsed." More than five million Red Army soldiers were taken prisoner; mostly they were penned into makeshift, barbed-wire enclosures and left without food or medication until they died of hunger or disease. Altogether three and a third million perished, a death rate of 57 per cent.

In Poland, hundreds of thousands of farmers were driven off the land to make way for incoming ethnic German settlers brought in from the Soviet Union, mostly before the beginning of Operation Barbarossa. All Polish property, industry and business was forcibly expropriated. Hitler ordered the Polish intelligentsia to be exterminated, and thousands of professionals were arrested and shot or taken off to concentration camps. In the annexed areas in the west of Poland, towns and villages were forcibly Germanized: Lodz for example became Litzmannstadt, the beginnings of a new German town of the sort imagined by Hitler in his lunchtime monologues. Thousands of Ukrainian, Belarussian and Russian villages were razed to the ground, and an unknown number of civilians, running into the millions, killed. Food supplies were requisitioned without consideration for the local people and used either to feed the army or to ship back to Germany.

As the German war economy expanded and its demand for labour grew beyond anything the German population could supply, the German authorities began to arrest Eastern Europeans and take them to Germany, where they were forced to work in the fields and on the farms, or, if they had the right skills, in the factories and the mines. They were subjected to harshly discriminatory laws, kept in unhealthy and overcrowded camps, and not allowed to go on leave or communicate with their families. Infringements of regulations forbidding fraternization with Germans were punished by death. By late 1944 there were some eight million foreign workers in Germany, the great majority of them from Eastern Europe.

All of this quickly alienated the civilian population in the areas occupied by the Germans in Eastern Europe. Recovering his nerve, Stalin urged them to form partisan bands to harry the Germans behind the front. Increasing numbers of young men and women fled to the forests to avoid labour conscription and formed armed groups of resisters. Stalin effectively abandoned his Marxist-Leninist ideology for the duration of the war in favour of the call to defend the Russian motherland in what now became known as the "Great Patriotic War". He ordered Russia's industrial plant to be dismantled as far as possible and transported hundreds of miles to the East, behind the Ural Mountains, where it could be reassembled and begin war production out of range of German air and land forces. This all took several months, but by the middle of 1942 the Russian war economy was back in full swing. In 1940, for example, the Soviet Union produced 21,000 aircraft; in 1943 the number was 37,000. By contrast, 10,000 new aircraft were built in Germany in 1940, 15,000 in 1942, and then, as rationalization measures introduced by the new Armaments Minister Albert Speer began to have an effect, 26,000 in 1943 and 40,000 in 1944. But even this was less than the aircraft production of the British Empire, which reached 47,000 in 1944, and was dwarfed by the USA, which produced 114,000 aircraft in the same year. The German war economy in other words simply could not keep up.

Of course, Germany had the advantage of control over the war production industries of France and the Benelux countries. Immediately after the defeat of France, the Germans took over 300,000 French rifles and more than 2,000 tanks, together with vast stocks of railway engines and more than 140,000 goods wagons. They acquired a year's supply of tin and nickel, large reservoirs of oil, and major resources of coal and iron ore. All this looting was backed up by purchases of all kinds made easy by the deliberate over-valuation of the Reichsmark. Companies like I.G. Farben took over French competitors, while the state-owned Hermann Göring works acquired much of the iron and steel industry of Lorraine. The occupied countries were required to pay the Germans huge quantities of "occupation costs" amounting to 23 billion Reichsmarks by the end of 1943; this was far more than was actually needed to pay the costs of occupation, of course - in the French case it has been calculated that the amount paid was enough to support an occupying force of 18 million men.

All of this gave Germany a boost in the short term but in the medium to long term was seriously counter-productive. Deprived of fuel, raw materials, rolling stock and coal for power, the French economy ground to

a virtual standstill. Food was in short supply, malnutrition became commonplace, and growing conscription of labour for work in Germany took skilled labourers away and spread resentment among the population; in France too, young men and women began to flee to the hills and form resistance groups. The clack of railway engines and rolling stock and the virtual cessation of motor traffic on the roads because of the German requisitioning of oil and petrol made it difficult to move coal and other raw materials to where it was needed. In the arms factories and coalmines, labour productivity collapsed. During the whole of the war the occupied western countries produced fewer than 3,000 combat aircraft for the German air force. The grain harvest in France fell by half between 1938 and 1940. A black market in food emerged everywhere and helped stimulate resistance still further.

All of this meant in the end that the German empire in Europe did not become the economic powerhouse Hitler thought it could be. In 1942 to 1944, for instance, the total production of tanks for the German army was running at around 6,000 per annum, compared to Britain and the Dominions, which produced up to 8,000 a year, the Soviet Union, where the figure was 19,000, and the USA, where it rose from 17,000 in 1942 to 29,000 in 1944. The German policy of ruthless exploitation was proving counter-productive, though even had there been a policy of co-operation, it is hard to see how it could have given the German war economy anything like parity with the combined might of its enemies. Hitler of course knew this, and he was particularly concerned at the prospect of the huge wealth of the American economy coming in to play on the Allied side. In the course of 1941, and particularly after the German invasion of the Soviet Union, US President Franklin Delano Roosevelt became increasingly concerned at the prospect of German domination of the European Continent, which he rightly feared would provide the springboard for a German confrontation with America. So he secured the agreement of Congress for a vast increase in war production, and began to supply Britain and then the Soviet Union with growing amounts of military, naval and aerial hardware. On 7 December 1941, Japanese planes attacked the US fleet at Pearl Harbor. Hitler saw his chance. The Americans would be preoccupied with the war against Japan for some time. The moment was right, he thought, to declare open war on the USA, cut off American supplies to Britain and Russia, and defeat them before American rearmament reached a level at which it became a serious threat to Germany. On 11 December he declared war on the USA. The submarine war in the Atlantic got under way immediately and soon began to score significant successes. Things seemed to be going the German way. 1941 had in many ways registered the greatest German successes of the war. But the tide began to turn even before the year had come to an end; and it's to the series of reverses that set in at this point that I'll turn in my next lecture.