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The War and Western Europe, 1944

Wojna i Europa Zachodnia w 1944 r.

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EUROPA ŚRODKOWO-WSCHODNIA 1944: KONIEC ZŁUDZEŃ?

EUROPA ZACHODNIA
II WOJNA ŚWIATOWA
"OVERLORD"
OKUPACJA NIEMIECKA
WOLNI FRANCUZI

WESTERN EUROPE
SECOND WORLD WAR
'OVERLORD'
GERMAN OCCUPATION
FREE FRENCH

Abstrakt

Rok 1944 był decydującym okresem wojny w Europie Zachodniej. Alianci zachodni – Wielka Brytania, Stany Zjednoczone i Kanada – przeprowadzili inwazję, która wyparła siły niemieckie z Francji i Belgii. Cztery lata wyzysku ekonomicznego, pracy przymusowej i pogarszających się standardów życia dobiegły końca. Demokracja i prawa obywatelskie zostały przywrócone, w przeciwieństwie do tego, co się działo, gdy Armia Czerwona wkraczała do Europy Wschodniej. Komuniści odegrali ważną rolę w organizowaniu oporu we Francji i Włoszech, lecz komunizm nie został narzucony Europie Zachodniej po 1945 r.

Abstract

1944 was the decisive year in the war in Western Europe as the Western Allies, Britain, the United States, and Canada mounted an invasion that drove German forces from France and Belgium. Four years of economic exploitation, forced labour, and declining living standards were brought to an end, and democracy and civil rights were restored, in contrast to what was happening as the Red Army advanced into Eastern Europe. Communists played a major part in the resistance in France and Italy, but Communism was not established in Western Europe after 1945.

The year 1944 was intended by the Western Allies (Britain, United States, Canada) to be the year of liberation for the states of Western Europe under German occupation – France, Belgium, The Netherlands, Luxembourg, and Italy. The fate of Eastern Europe, in January 1944 still under German domination, was something to be decided only when Germany was defeated. The West assumed that liberation of this region, if it came in 1944, would be at the hands of the Red Army. The contribution of the West would only involve military and economic aid to the Soviet war effort, indirect rather than direct assistance. The priority for the democratic Allies was to prise open the German grip on Western Europe and to restore democracy as it had existed in 1940.

WESTERN EUROPE FROM 1939 TO 1943

No-one in September 1939 would have predicted that in only six weeks, the German armed forces would conquer the Netherlands and Belgium, defeat the French army, expel the British forces from continental Europe, and create a new zone of German domination over the whole of Western Europe

except for Spain and Portugal, both sympathetic to the German cause, and Germany's ally, Italy. The only way Britain and the British Empire could dislodge the German forces from Western Europe was by mounting an invasion, and this was far beyond the capability of British armed forces in 1940 and would not have been possible at all later in the war without the participation of the United States. Instead, Britain was threatened by invasion from Germany in September 1940 and succeeded in avoiding it only because the German air force could not establish air superiority over southern England. The threat was never renewed because Hitler calculated that defeating the Soviet Union first would create a situation where Britain had no choice but to submit.

Britain's wartime prime minister, Winston Churchill, supported the idea of undermining Germany's war effort by a major bombing effort and encouraging popular resistance against the occupier – 'set Europe ablaze', as Churchill put it. But in the first two years of war there was little prospect of either strategy succeeding. RAF Bomber Command had no heavy bombers, only poor navigation aids, bombs of small calibre, and too few aircraft. Most bombs missed the designated target by a wide margin, often by kilometres. The idea of fomenting popular resistance against the German occupation, to be undertaken by an organisation named the Special Operations Executive (SOE), supported by a Political Warfare Executive that drafted propaganda leaflets and organized broadcasts, failed entirely. Local resistance movements were small and isolated, easy prey for the German security services. Only later, in 1944, did SOE begin to play a significant role. For Britain a major problem was the attitude of the new French government under Marshal Philippe Pétain, based at the spa town of Vichy, which was generally hostile. Churchill's government supported the refugee general, Charles de Gaulle, who established a Free French movement in London as a permanent threat to the Vichy regime. At the same time, London became home to other exile governments from the Netherlands, Belgium, Norway, and Poland. There was little that Britain could do for Poland, either in 1940 or in 1944, but Polish soldiers, aviators, and seamen who had escaped to England did contribute to Britain's war effort.

The occupied states in Western Europe were ruled in different ways. The Netherlands were placed under a German commissar, Arthur Seyss-Inquart, who ruled together with senior Dutch officials. Belgium and north-eastern France were under military government because the areas faced the direction from which a British attack might have been expected. France was divided in two, the northern and western areas under German control, and the south ruled by Pétain's new regime. The southern regime was still responsible for policies on the economy, social welfare, civil defence, and health in the occupied zones, resulting in a hybrid system of rule in which the German authorities had the final say. Democracy

was suspended, and Pétain imposed an authoritarian system maintained by the police and a militia force, the milice. His government survived until November 1942, when in response to the Allied invasion of North Africa, Hitler ordered the occupation of the whole of France. The Vichy regime was not suspended, but it had to observe the conditions imposed by the occupiers.

The occupied countries in Western Europe were forced to reach an accommodation with the occupiers, supplying goods, foodstuffs, and finance for the German war effort. French factories also began to produce vehicles, components, and trainer aircraft for the German armed forces. German submarines operated from Atlantic bases in the French ports of Lorient and Brest. As a result, the British government approved the bombing of targets in France, Belgium, and the Netherlands, where the poor level of accuracy produced regular complaints about the killing of civilians who were supposed to be on Britain's side. These raids had little effect on the Germans, but contributed in the first years of war to alienating the occupied populations from the idea of British 'liberation'. This situation changed slowly during 1941 and 1942. Despite the German invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941, Britain faced little chance of influencing events in Western Europe, while the war in the East produced new enemies for Britain in Romania, Hungary, and Slovakia. British influence in Europe reached a low level by 1942, but by then the United States had joined the war, and despite strong pressure from the United States Navy to concentrate American efforts against Japan in the Pacific, Roosevelt agreed a 'Europe first' strategy that meant eventual help in launching a war of liberation.

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The United States' contribution was nevertheless limited in the first two years of combat. A bombing campaign was mounted from British bases, but it did not begin to show results until late in 1943. American vessels and aircraft helped keep open the sea lanes across the Atlantic without which no joint invasion of Europe would have been possible. Roosevelt was attracted to the idea of establishing what was called a 'Second Front' in France in 1942 to aid the Soviet war effort in the East, but there was no possibility of providing the trained men, aircraft, armaments, or landing craft needed for a major amphibious landing. The one trial operation carried out by British and Canadian forces against the French port of Dieppe in August 1942 ended in disaster, and encouraged both Western Allies to develop strategy in the Mediterranean basin until there was enough material and enough trained manpower to risk a cross-Channel assault. The Mediterranean strategy was finally agreed by Roosevelt, against the strong resistance of his military chiefs, because he wanted American soldiers fighting somewhere before the end of 1942. In November

1942, a combined Anglo-American force landed in Morocco and Algeria to liberate the French colonies and to link up with British Empire forces which were attempting to drive Italian and German armies out of North Africa. The decision was reached in January 1943 to aim for invasion of France a year later, but to focus on forcing Italy out of the war and liberating the Italians from fascist rule.

None of this activity had any effect on the areas of occupied Eastern Europe. The propaganda leaflet campaign focused on Western Europe. There were no leaflet drops over Poland after 1940, and a very small quantity over Czechoslovakia. In 1941 and 1942 a handful of Poles were parachuted into occupied Poland. By contrast 159 million leaflets were dropped over France, Belgium, and the Netherlands in 1942, 303 million in 1943. Western air supplies of arms and equipment to Poland amounted to only 305 tons from 1940 to 1944 because it was thought the risks were too high that much of the material would fall into German hands. By contrast, 415 SOE agents were parachuted into France between 1941 and 1943, and 9,400 tons of supplies in 1943 and 1944 for the resistance movements. Despite Polish and Czech complaints, little was done to alter the priority since flights across German or German-occupied territory in the east were long and dangerous. The French resistance was by far the largest and most effective network before 1944, although regularly penetrated by or betrayed to the German security forces. The British and American governments were uncertain about how to deal with the resistance, which was disunited for much of the time on political grounds and uncertain in its commitment to de Gaulle as the nominal head of the French liberation movement. Roosevelt accepted de Gaulle's position with great reluctance and Churchill remained wary of him, but no invasion of France could take place without his involvement at some level.

Anglo-American strategy for Western Europe only took on a more formal shape in 1943 when with much delay, Italian–German forces were finally defeated in Tunisia in May. Western strategy was now to try to eliminate Italy from the war and liberate the Italian people, then in late spring or early summer 1944 to launch a large-scale amphibious assault on the coast of northern France, a 'Second Front' a year later than Stalin had wanted. Instead, Allied efforts were devoted to the invasion of Sicily in July 1943, and then from September onwards the occupation of the southern Italian peninsula. The German army had time to occupy most of Italy and the campaign proved a long and costly one of limited strategic value. By the end of 1943 the Allied armies were stalled in the first attempt to liberate Western Europe, even though an Italian government that replaced Mussolini in July had surrendered unconditionally by September. The situation was a disappointment not only for Italians who now found themselves to be an occupied people when they had been a German ally, but

also for other populations in Western Europe who had high expectations in 1943 of an early Allied invasion of mainland Europe and were now frustrated by the long delay.

The plan to invade the French coast at Normandy could not be overtly revealed to the resistance movements in the occupied countries. Instead, the volume of bombing of factories and military bases accelerated, inflicting regular civilian casualties on the occupied population, and undermining the popular support Britain and the United States needed once invasion had begun. Moreover, the obvious threat now posed in the West brought an increase in German army units and compulsory labour to help construct the so-called 'Atlantic Wall' along the north coast of France and Belgium as the first line of defence against an amphibious assault. German efforts to combat the resistance also increased both in France and the Low Countries, as well as in central and northern Italy where an estimated 70,000 partisans, based in the Italian mountain ranges, challenged the German army and the Fascist militia, who supported the Italian Social Republic set up by Mussolini under German protection late in 1943. For Western Europe, the reality was still a powerful German presence, declining living standards, and increased state terror. Most of the military action was in the East, as the Red Army moved across Ukraine, driving the Germans back towards the former Soviet frontier, with the prospect that Eastern Europe would be liberated before Western. Allied strategy was finally co-ordinated at the Tehran Conference in November 1943, where Stalin secured a firm promise from Roosevelt (and more cautiously from Churchill) that a cross-Channel invasion would take place in May 1944.

Until then, the German war machine continued to exploit the territories in Western Europe to serve the German war effort. One important source was labour. By 1944, there were 654,000 civilian workers in France, a minority volunteers but most of them the result of forced labour programmes. For them liberation would have to wait until German defeat. France was also Germany's chief source of finance to cover occupation costs: in 1943 France contributed 273 billion francs, much of which was covered by printing money, fuelling a rising inflation and placing even greater pressure on the civilian population. By autumn 1944 there were also 254,000 Dutch and 199,000 Belgians working in Germany. Much industrial production was destined to serve the German armed forces or civilian economy, cutting consumption levels in Western Europe. There were also programmes of forced labour for populations that were not deported, particularly for major construction projects such as the Atlantic Wall or the V-weapon sites. By spring 1944 there were more than 100,000 French, Dutch, and Belgian workers employed by the German *Organisation Todt* and an estimated 1,000–1,500 French construction companies worked on German projects. Food was another resource for the German war effort, and the

largest contribution came from France. As a result, rations for the occupied populations fell steadily over the war period. In France, daily calorie consumption of rationed goods fell from 1,300 to 1,080 between 1941 and 1943; in the Netherlands, 1,925 to 1,580. This was not very different from the General Government in Poland, where calorie levels were 1,135 in 1943, and considerably lower than calorie levels in the Czech Protectorate, which remained almost as high as German consumption levels during the war.

For many firms in the occupied west of Europe there was no alternative to trading with the Germans if they were to keep going and maintain their workforce, but also because in the early years of occupation it seemed probable that Germany would win, and it was expedient not to challenge the occupier by refusing to comply with production orders. This meant that from at least 1942 onwards, the RAF and the American Eighth Air Force targeted 'collaborating' firms, imposing the penalties of the bombing war on populations that were supposed to be on the Allied side. Around 18,000 Belgians, 10,000 Dutch, and 53,000 French were killed by bombing, some of them for tactical military reasons, some from bombing the industry working for the Germans. Despite protests from the exile governments in London, the bombing was never suspended from the argument that every raid that undermined the German economic war effort was a possible contribution to victory – a claim that was difficult to demonstrate. The bombing did contribute to sustaining an ambivalent attitude towards the Allies, who claimed to be liberating and killing at one and the same time.

LIBERATING WESTERN EUROPE, 1944

The battles of 1944 were to prove decisive in ending domination of Europe by Germany and its Axis allies, but for Britain and the United States this was the hardest year of the war in terms of casualties and the costs of fighting. The focus in the West was almost entirely on the campaign in Italy and the projected invasion of Normandy, both of which, it was hoped, would lead to German defeat in the course of 1944. Eastern Europe was outside their reach, and both states understood that it was the region the Red Army would liberate, though to what extent the Western powers could be involved in the occupation and rule of these areas was unclear. Stalin had reacted with hostility to the Western Allies' insistence that only they could impose military government on Italy, without Soviet involvement. The West was to find that Stalin now believed the areas in Eastern Europe should similarly be exclusive zones, in which the West would have no effective involvement.

The plans for the invasion of France were developed in the last months of 1943, and in January General Dwight Eisenhower was appointed Allied

Supreme Commander with the British general Bernard Montgomery as the commander of land forces. Despite the promise to Stalin, there were hesitations on the British side, not least from Churchill himself, about the feasibility of Operation 'Overlord'. It was an amphibious operation of a colossal scale, and the consequences of failure would be severe – little prospect of renewal until at least 1945, and forfeiting the support of the French, Belgians, and Dutch, who would have to cope with a further year of occupation. The operation relied on an extensive bombing campaign to try to weaken the German war economy and the German air force in particular, but most of the responsibility rested with the United States Eighth Air Force. It had specific directives to attack the aircraft industry and, from December 1943, send a trio of long-range fighters (the P-51 Mustang, P-47 Thunderbolt, and P-38 Lightning) to fly deep into Germany to combat the German air force directly. This proved an able strategy, and by summer 1944 the German Air Force was unable to provide any effective air defence in France when the invasion was undertaken, which reduced the element of risk considerably.

The second strategic issue was the campaign in Italy, which now tied down shipping, troop numbers, and munitions on a much larger sale than anticipated. The Allied assumption that it would be possible to reach the Pisa–Rimini line in central Italy by at least the spring of 1944, freeing resources for 'Overlord' proved over-optimistic. The stalemate on the Gustav Line south of Rome slowed down the Allied campaign and threatened to hamper the more important invasion of France. Not until May 1944 did the Allied high command find a strategy to break the line, including the heroic storming of Monte Cassino by General Anders' Polish corps, and Rome was captured on 5 June, the day initially scheduled for the start of 'Overlord'. The German army in Italy survived the breakthrough. It is doubtful that the campaign helped the invasion of France. There were 23 Allied divisions in Italy faced by a smaller number of under-strength German divisions. Some of those resources might have helped to speed up the advance across France.

One of the reasons the Italian campaign was sustained on a significant scale was Churchill's belief that more might be achieved by fighting in Italy and the Balkans against Axis forces rather than meet the German army head-on in France. He had visions of Allied forces in Italy under General Harold Alexander storming up the peninsula and entering Austria from the south, but this was entirely unrealistic, and Churchill never pressed it to the disadvantage of 'Overlord'. The other alternative to the invasion of France was held out by the commander-in-chief of RAF Bomber Command, Air Chief Marshal Arthur Harris, who believed that after a few more months of intensive bombing, as he told Churchill in late 1943, Germany could be knocked out of the war. This, too, was an unrealistic ambition.

The bomber offensive slowed down over the winter of 1943/1944 as the German defences took a heavy toll of bombers flying both at night and by day. In March, the bombers were directed, despite vigorous opposition from the bomber commanders, to support the pre-invasion preparations by raiding communications and military supplies in France, including the sites from which the German army was expected to begin a cruise missile campaign against London using the first of the 'vengeance weapons', the V-1. There was in the end no viable alternative to the planned invasion if the Western Allies wanted to play a major part in defeating German forces and sharing with the Soviet Union in the occupation of Germany.

The invasion of France was planned on an enormous scale. Operation Neptune – the naval element in the 'Overlord' plan – involved 4,000 landing craft for men and vehicles on the invasion beaches, 1,000 warships and an assortment of 6,000 other cargo vessels, tankers, and auxiliary craft. They had to be organized on specified routes from numerous British ports which required complex schedules. English airfields were the bases for 12,000 aircraft of all kinds which flew bombing raids against communication targets behind the German front line, attacks against the Atlantic Wall, and tactical support for the invasion front line. Since German aircraft in Air Fleet 3 in France could muster only 125 fighter aircraft on the day of the Allied invasion, air supremacy was guaranteed. The ground invasion was planned for five beaches, two for the American army, three for the British and Canadian. The aim was to establish a beachhead quickly and to capture a major port. Destruction of the German army in north-west France would, it was hoped, open the path to the German frontier and perhaps force a German capitulation.

Inside France, the hope that the Western Allies really would invade in 1944 was rekindled. De Gaulle tried to impose some unity on the different movements, and in March 1944 the French Forces of the Interior were created, nominally under de Gaulle's command. Their forces numbered an estimated 40,000 but grew as invasion came nearer. They confronted not only the German occupiers but also the French Vichy regime whose armed police, the milice, hunted down resisters. The resistance, reinforced by numerous agents from SOE, supported 'Overlord' by a campaign against the French railway system and roads in northern France. Between April and June 1944, there were 1,713 acts of sabotage against the rail network, destroying more rolling stock than the air campaign. The effectiveness of the sabotage campaign has been questioned, but there seems no reason to doubt that damage to roads and rail inhibited German transport of men and equipment at a critical juncture. The resistance now represented the France of the future once the Germans had been driven out, although there were wide differences between the nationalist elements in the movement and the Communists, who had become a major factor in the resistance

and who expected a radical political alternative to Vichy, as in the partisan campaign in Italy, where they were in the majority.

The invasion was anticipated by the German defenders. In November 1943, Hitler's War Directive 51 highlighted the danger from the West and called for vigorous preparation to meet it. The Atlantic Wall was strengthened, new beach obstacles put in place, and the coastal artillery expanded, all under the command of Field Marshal Erwin Rommel, who had fought the Allies in North Africa. The chief requirement was to know where the Allies would land and at what date, but neither was certain right up to the moment when the invasion began in the early morning of 6 June 1944. The British and American armies in southern England mounted a complex campaign of deception, including the creation of an entirely phantom US First Army Group based in south-east England to create the impression that invasion would come across the shortest and most convenient route to the Pas de Calais in northeast France, or even the Belgian coast. The deception, codenamed Operation Fortitude, was an elaborate mix of false news fed by double agents, dummy camps and vehicles, fake radio messages to non-existent units, and so on. The German side overestimated Allied strength by 50 per cent as a result, and became fixated on the idea of a Calais invasion. Normandy was thought of as a diversionary attack or feint, and Hitler kept the bulk of German forces in the east of the occupied area, weakening the force where the invasion actually took place. Western France had fewer artillery pieces, very little armour, and a number of garrison divisions whose fighting power was not rated highly. Hitler also insisted that German forces should be divided between a section defending the coastline and a mobile reserve held further back, to be released to the main battle once it was identified. The deception, despite all the risks, worked well enough to keep German forces tied down in eastern France until July. The date of the invasion was more difficult to guess, not least because the Allies changed it from May to June to await more landing craft from the Italian theatre. The invasion was supposed to begin on 5 June, but poor weather postponed it for a day. The stormy conditions persuaded the German commanders that there was no present risk and Rommell returned briefly to Germany. When the assault began on the morning of 6 June, the German army was caught unprepared.

Even so, the Allied armies found the campaign heavy going. For American forces in Europe, this was the first full taste of battle. For many British and Canadian soldiers, this was also a baptism of fire. The beaches in Normandy were secured on the first night, though only after a fierce battle on Omaha beach – the American landing ground furthest to the west. By the following day, the Allies had landed 326,000 men, 54,000 vehicles, and 104,000 tons of supplies, and the flow continued. Despite advantages in the scale of equipment, tactical and strategic air support, a secure

logistic line across the Channel, the campaign moved very slowly against determined and skilful German resistance. The city of Caen was supposed to be captured in days, but was only occupied by the second week of July; the American First Army had more success in seizing the port of Cherbourg by 26 June but progress slowed after that. In truth, the German defence was one of desperation. Losses of vehicles and manpower could not be sustained and there were scant reinforcements. On 25 July, the American First and Third Armies launched Operation Cobra. They broke through the German defences and began to push into western France, reaching the town of Avranches and overrunning Britanny. Hitler ordered a counter-offensive of the remaining armoured divisions, but the operation launched from the town of Mortain on 7 August was brought to a halt and driven back. At the same time, Montgomery's army group around Caen at last broke the German line and pushed south, headed by the Polish First Armoured Division, brought to France some weeks before. The entire German force in western France faced encirclement, but many soldiers avoided the trap as it closed at the town of Falaise and fled eastwards towards the Seine. For the Allies, it was a major victory which broke the German hold on France and opened the way to the German frontier.

The victory in Normandy was paralleled by a smaller invasion in southern France, codenamed Operation Dragoon, designed to drive the Germans from the coast and to link up with Allied forces moving across France from the north. It was launched on 15 August, again with the advantage that the German commanders had not anticipated it. The American Seventh Army and a Free French army corps faced little resistance. The French liberated the southern coast as far as Toulon, while the American army drove the Germans back to the German frontier region and joined up with General George Patton's Third Army, which crossed the Seine River by 25 August and reached a point only 100 kilometres from the German border. At this point, de Gaulle insisted that Paris be liberated, although Eisenhower's plan had been to bypass it. A resistance rising in the city had already begun on 19 August with inconclusive results, but on 24 August General Philippe Leclerc's Free French forces reached the capital and the German garrison capitulated. De Gaulle led the Committee of National Liberation to the city and established a provisional government, in defiance of Roosevelt's preference to establish military rule as Allied forces had done in the liberated areas of Italy. France was fully liberated by September, although some French ports with German garrisons held out until almost the last days of the war. There erupted a period of violent revenge against the Vichy authorities, the milice, and anyone accused of collaborating. Order was now maintained by Free French Army units, many of them now filled with former resistance fighters. France regained its sovereignty as one of the Allied powers after four years of occupation.

Allied forces in the West hoped that the war would be over by the autumn of 1944 following the defeat of German armies in France and the heavy blow dealt to German Army Group Centre in Belorussia in June and July 1944, which brought the Red Army to the gates of Warsaw. Plans were laid to divide Germany into zones of occupation and to try German war criminals. But German resistance stiffened by the time the Allied armies reached the German and Dutch frontiers after liberating most of Belgium. In Britain, the advent of a new threat from the air, first from the V-1 cruise missile which hit from June 1944, then the V-2 rocket, which was launched from September onwards, weakened the morale after hopes that bombing was over and the war near an end. Most of the V-1 weapons were shot down by anti-aircraft shells armed with the new proximity fuse or by fighter aircraft; against the V-2 rocket there was no defence, but double agents fed false information about where the rockets landed, so that the German operators would send rockets to fall short of London. The campaign had little strategic impact, but it was a contrast to the areas that had been liberated, which were now free of any direct military threat, although a small number of V-weapons were directed at Paris and Antwerp.

In the west, Allied armies slowed down the pace of advance as they were now hundreds of kilometres from the main supply ports in France. Casualties were also high and German resistance stiffened. In Belgium, German forces retreated to the Walcheren peninsula, where they had to be neutralised to allow the port of Antwerp to re-open as a supply base. The First Canadian Army was given the task after clearing away German garrisons in the main port cities in northern France – Le Havre, Dunkirk, Calais, Boulogne – and then directed to Antwerp to eliminate the German threat. This took until November, by which time Montgomery (keen to reach into Germany before the American armies further south under General Omar Bradley) had launched an ambitious but unsuccessful airborne operation to seize Rhine crossings at Nijmegen and Arnhem in mid-September. The front settled down to be renewed again in 1945. In Italy, the front also came to a halt short of the aim to reach Bologna and Rimini; bad weather made progress across swollen rivers and treacherous mountains difficult, and Alexander halted the advance, waiting now until the spring. There was a prevailing view that the war would now continue well into 1945 given the determined German resistance.

There was some hope that the bombing campaign, renewed from September once Eisenhower released the bomber forces from his control, might end the war without the need for a costly invasion of the German homeland. The American Eighth Air Force concentrated now on suppressing the German Air Force, which was done by inflicting insupportable loss rates, and on destroying capital-intensive targets (oil, chemicals) and the German transport network. All three target systems proved to be an effective

use of strategic air power, and German war production reached a peak in 1944 before falling steadily downwards. British bombing continued to focus on area bombing of cities at night, which provided diminishing returns as the cities had already been reduced to ruins by earlier raids. The relentless pressure on German forces and economy persuaded Allied leaders that Germany was close to collapse, an attitude which resulted in misplaced complacency. Entirely concealed from Allied intelligence, Hitler ordered a counter-thrust. In Operation Autumn Mist, which opened in mid-December, final reserves of tanks, aircraft, and men were sent on a mission to divide the Allied line and recapture the port of Antwerp. The German commanders involved had little confidence in the attempt made in winter weather, and Allied armies and aircraft, after the initial shock, turned back the German line to its starting point. The campaign weakened what resistance remained and opened the way to a rapid defeat of German forces in the west in the spring of 1945.

The Western Allies focused almost entirely on the events in western and southern Europe. The Soviet occupation of eastern Poland and the establishment of a proto-government in the Lublin Committee, composed chiefly of communists, was evidence that the Polish government in exile in London was unlikely to influence the outcome in Poland. In August, the Polish Home Army began an uprising against the German occupiers in Warsaw, but the Western Allies could do little to assist beyond sending supplies by air, much of which fell into German hands. Records showed that out of 199 aircraft sorties by the RAF from Italian bases, only 30 reached Warsaw and dropped supplies on the city. Out of 1,300 canisters dropped by the Third American Air Division, only 388 reached the insurgents. The request by Jewish organizations for the Allies to bomb the rail lines running to Auschwitz to stop the transfer of Hungarian Jews to their deaths was turned down because it did not contribute to weakening the German war effort, which was the bombing priority.

In October 1944, Churchill flew to meet Stalin in Moscow, where he famously presented the Soviet dictator with a rough list of countries in Eastern Europe to be occupied and the percentage share of Soviet and British interest, though the handwritten document said nothing about Poland or Czechoslovakia. British leaders had been concerned in 1944 to create conditions that would allow British influence in Greece, Yugoslavia, and Hungary, to prevent the Soviet domination of the whole region. Churchill's discussion with Stalin was an attempt to reach an informal agreement, but the Soviet side increased the percentage of Soviet influence in Romania, Bulgaria, and Hungary to between 80 and 100 per cent, leaving Britain with effective interest only in Greece. Roosevelt disapproved of spheres

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of influence and offered little support. The net effect of British policy on Eastern Europe was to reduce any prospect of deflecting Stalin from imposing Soviet solutions on the areas captured by the Red Army. In turn, Stalin made very little effort to be involved in the policy of the Western Allies in Western Europe.

WESTERN EUROPE AFTER 1944

The final months of the Second World War in Western Europe saw the complete liberation of Italy and the Netherlands and the possibility of restoring democratic government here as well as France and Belgium. The last campaign, begun on a large scale in March 1945, broke what remained of German resistance very rapidly. British and Canadian forces cleared the Ruhr area and drove on to Hamburg, where Montgomery took the surrender of German forces in north Germany, Scandinavia and the Netherlands on 4 May; the American armies penetrated the German Westwall fortifications, crossed the Rhine and drove into central and southern Germany, reaching as far as Austria. By this time, the Red Army was closing on Berlin and moving through Czechoslovakia and Hungary. On 30 April, Hitler committed suicide and the German war effort collapsed. Surrender followed in Italy on 2 May, and a comprehensive and unconditional surrender was accepted by the new German government in the early hours of 7 May. Liberation in the West was once again, as in France in autumn 1944, a moment both of celebration and of retribution against collaborators and fascists, thousands of whom were murdered or assaulted. The Western Allies began to purge officials who had been implicated in the occupation in Italy, but the purges in France, Belgium and the Netherlands were conducted by the new provisional governments.

The freedoms that had been lost under German domination were broadly restored, but the economic problems generated by the occupation, together with the slow revival of an adequate level of food production, meant that for urban dwellers in particular there were still shortages and hardships to endure. Prisoners of war were rapidly returned home but without the indignities and penalties imposed by the Soviets on prisoners of war, subjected to interrogation and classification, some to be sent to the Gulag camps, some exiled from the major cities, and a fortunate minority who were allowed to return to their prewar lives. The Western Allies did not see the areas they liberated as a source of economic booty, and production was allowed to restart once there were enough resources and skilled labour. In Eastern Europe by contrast, the Soviet occupation saw the removal of machinery and equipment that had served the German war effort and the transfer to work in the Soviet Union of thousands of those who were

deemed to be a political threat or had collaborated with the Germans, or were the wrong class. In the areas occupied by the Red Army, the provisional regimes were communist-dominated, though not yet fully-fledged Communist regimes.

The liberated areas of Western Europe by contrast saw the re-emergence of political parties with strongly opposed ideological views and an arena of democratic conflict. Stalin hesitated to encourage Communist revolutionary activity, but Communism in Italy and France had its own history, and support for the parties in both countries did not signal support for an authoritarian system on Stalin's model but for social and economic reform that would benefit the working-class. In both countries, Britain and the United States tried to use their postwar influence to undermine the electoral success of Communism, and new constitutions and elections in both France and Italy did not bring a Communist government then, or since. The new Labour government elected in July 1945 in Britain was strongly anti-Communist as was the United States administration under President Harry S. Truman. The re-establishment of democracy and civil rights did not extend to the British, French, Belgian, and Dutch colonies where violent counter-insurgency campaigns were waged into the 1960s to match the violent counter-insurgency operations conducted by the Soviet Union in Eastern Europe.

From 1945 onwards the history of the two halves of Europe diverged sharply. British war aims had focused on defeating Germany and reversing the tide of fascism in western and southern Europe. Whether this would assist the peoples of central and Eastern Europe was a question with no clear answer even though the war had begun over the defence of Polish sovereignty. By the 1950s, the Cold War had turned Eastern Europe into part of the 'enemy' bloc, and whatever sympathy the West had had for the fate of the region began to dissipate until the 1980s when the first major cracks appeared in the Soviet bloc. It was chance that turned the war into a conflict to liberate Western Europe from German domination rather than a war to rescue Eastern Europe from the ambitions of the two totalitarian systems that alternately dominated it. The events of 1944 brought this reality sharply into focus.

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