

How Did German Soldiers View World War Two in 1945?



Jonathan Trigg
17 April 2020

20th Century

World War Two



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By Christmas 1944 Hitler's empire had dwindled dramatically. The Anglo-Americans stood on the Reich's western border and had almost liberated Italy in the south. Meanwhile in the East, Stalin's Red Army had chased the Germans out of most of Eastern Europe and the Balkans.

Despite this, the Nazi dictator had no intention of capitulating and resolved instead to drag his people down with him into the abyss – the slaughter would go on.

The Battle of the Bulge – Nazi offensive in the West



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“Dear Ruth...I write during one of the great hours before an attack, full of excitement and expectation...Some believe in living, but life isn’t everything!... Above me is the terrific noise of artillery, the voice of war...Ruth! WE MARCH!!!!”



German troops advancing past abandoned American equipment during the Battle of the Bulge.

“...suddenly...the news that we’d been waiting for came at last – the German armies in the West had gone over to the attack...The Führer was leading us to final victory...all would turn out well in the end as long as we trusted in him.”

This was how many Germans greeted the news that once again their forces were on the offensive; this time in [Hitler’s lunge across the Ardennes towards Antwerp](#) in December 1944.

The former was a teenage *panzergrenadier* in the 12th SS-Panzer Division writing to his sister, the latter a private on the Eastern Front – both would see their hopes dashed as Hitler’s mad gamble turned to ashes.

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The Wehrmacht's last strategic reserve died in the forests and snows of Belgium's border lands that Christmas – some eighty thousand men were lost, along with six hundred irreplaceable panzers.



An American soldier escorts a German crewman from his wrecked Panther tank during the Battle of Elsenborn Ridge.

The East looms

With Berlin's attention focused on the Western Front, by mid-January 1945 Moscow had massed almost two and a quarter million men, seven thousand tanks, fourteen thousand guns and five thousand aircraft on the River Vistula in Poland.

They smashed into the 450,000 men, four thousand guns and twelve hundred panzers of Generaloberst Josef Harpe's *Heeresgruppe A* and crushed it.



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The Wehrmacht was reduced to shuttling exhausted troops to the East from the fighting in the West. Hans-Gerhard Starck, a senior NCO in Hitler's own bodyguard the 1st SS-Panzer Division 'Leibstandarte SS Adolf Hitler' was among them;



Lord Kitchener Face Covering



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“After the Ardennes we were transferred east...by train...constantly harassed by Allied jabos (fighter-bombers) we had to evacuate the train four times...once I woke up to find the train halted and empty...the floor of the carriage all around where I had been lying was peppered with 2cm cannon holes...I had been so tired I had slept through the attack.”

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Hungarian folly

Starck and his comrades weren't sent to the Vistula though, but on Hitler's express order to Hungary instead. Desperate to try and safeguard his last remaining oil wells at Nagykanizsa, the best of Germany's forces were shipped hundreds of miles to the south.

The fighting was bitter, as the *SS-Totenkopf* grenadier Andreas Fleischer recalled;

“I was wounded for the third time, a bullet hit me on the left side of my face and my left ear – it hurt like hell I can tell you, and there was blood everywhere, I couldn't see much out of my eye.”



Hungarian troops man a 7.5 cm Pak 40 antitank gun in a Budapest suburb. (Credit: Bundesarchiv / CC).

Six per cent of all German troops were, like Fleischer, wounded three or more times and returned to duty, while Helmut Schreiber – an eighteen-year-old cavalryman defending Budapest – was one of the half of all German soldiers who were wounded once;

“...during the house to house fighting I was wounded. First, I was hit in the head, luckily the bullet failed to pierce my steel helmet, but ten minutes later I was hit by another bullet which lodged in my right collar bone.

A comrade took me to the aid station beneath the castle...the cellars were full of badly wounded men lying on the floor with no beds, all of them covered in paper as they'd run out of proper bandages.”



AUDIO

with Roger Moorhouse

HITLER'S TITANIC

Roger Moorhouse is an historian of the Third Reich and World War Two, author of *The Devils' Alliance*, *Killing Hitler* & *Berlin at War*. In this fascinating episode, he discusses the worst maritime disaster in history: the sinking of the *Wilhelm Gustloff* in 1945.

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Eastern Germany empties

With the Soviet threat on their doorstep, and the Allies declaration that all German lands east of the River Oder would be given to Poland after the war, sixteen million east German civilians faced disaster.

Millions took to the roads, carrying their possessions in pathetic bundles. Soldiers like Hans Bernhard were desperate to try and protect them;

"...all those who had been in Russia knew what to expect if Bolshevism came to Germany."

The tragedy was horribly visible from the air, as the Luftwaffe fighter pilot, Norbert Hannig, saw for himself;

“...Soviet tanks...churning tracks sent up flurries of snow as they charged straight into the refugee column packed tightly on the road. Panic broke out. Horses bolted, wagons overturned, people ran into the open fields... The snow was stained red where they ploughed over man and beast...”

The Tiger tank driver Werner Block also witnessed the tragedy;

“The roads were full of refugees, totally full, we had to move them out of the way so we

could get by – a Tiger takes up a lot of room – and they would plead for us to take them with us, I remember one woman holding a young child up towards us begging to take him or her to safety, but we couldn't of course. Afterwards we didn't talk about it, we just wanted to pretend it hadn't happened.”



Bundesarchiv, Bild 183-J28905
Foto: v. Ang. 10. März 1945

Volkssturm militiamen in Königsberg during the Soviet's East Prussian Offensive. Credit: Bundesarchiv (CC).

The end

As the Red Army encircled Berlin, [the Anglo-Americans crossed the Rhine](#) into Germany's heart and the long-anticipated collapse finally happened.

Karl Jauss realized it was over;

“...for the first time we saw white flags on the houses.”

Jauss's comrade, Robert Vogt, was fighting in the Ruhr;

“It was pointless. We were gambling with our lives for a lost cause. It became clear that the

war was lost. So, we threw our weapons into a stream and, waving a white pocket handkerchief, moved towards the autobahn.”



Churchill tanks of 34th Tank Brigade in the Reichswald during Operation 'Veritable', 8 February 1945. Credit: Imperial War Museums / Commons.

Obergefreiter Henry Metelmann and his comrades were hiding in a cellar from the Americans.

“I said to my comrades; ‘Right, that’s it, we’re going to surrender.’ No-one objected...I fixed a dirty white towel to a broomstick...and, followed by my friends, I climbed up the cellar steps, opened the door and stepped out into the street.”

In the East it was a different story, as Hans Bernhard attested;

“Our motivation was simple, we had to keep the Russians out of our country.”

Eventually it was over. More than a week after Hitler’s suicide the shooting stopped.

Hendrik Verton; a Dutch SS volunteer was dumbstruck;

“I was simply stunned by the news...I realized that this was the fall of the Third Reich...for me it meant all that I had given, all I had sacrificed, was now null and void. We had lost.

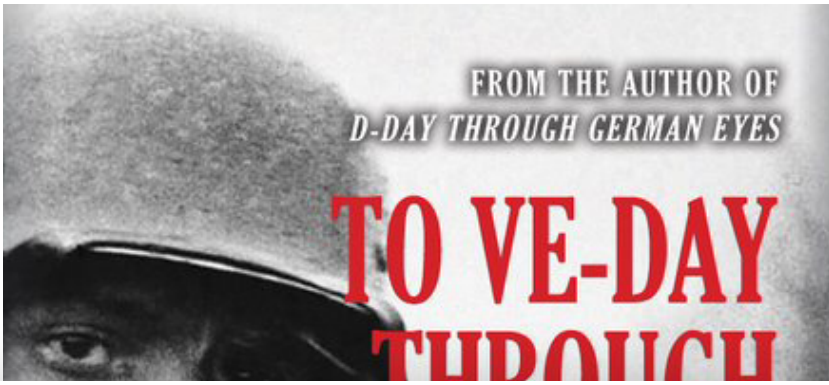


Just after midnight on 30th July 1945, the USS Indianapolis was struck by two Japanese torpedoes. For the next five nights, nearly 900 men struggled with battle injuries, shark attacks, dehydration, insanity, and eventually each other. Sara Vladic is one of the world's leading experts on the USS Indianapolis, having met and interviewed 108 of the ship's survivors. She joined Dan on the pod to recount this nightmarish event.

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Having passed out from the Royal Military Academy Sandhurst, Jonathan Trigg served as an infantry officer in the Royal Anglian Regiment, completing tours in Northern Ireland and Bosnia, as well as in the Gulf.

After working in the City, he now has his own business training the long-term unemployed to get them into work. His most recent book, [‘To VE-Day Through German Eyes’](#), was published on 15 April 2020 by [Amberley Publishing](#).



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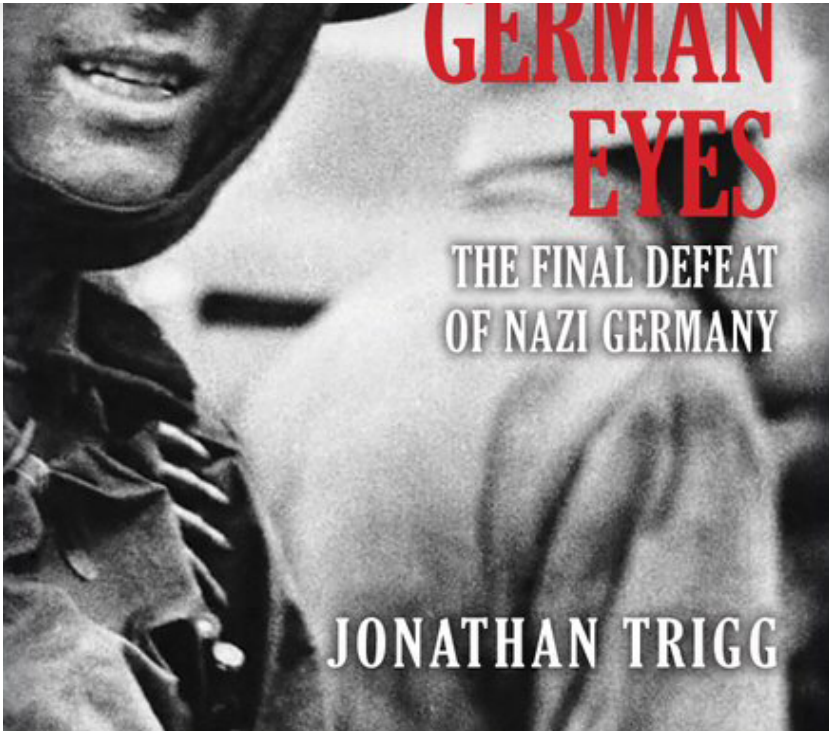
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Featured image: Volkssturm with Panzerabwehrwaffe outside Berlin 1945 (Credit: Bundesarchiv / CC).

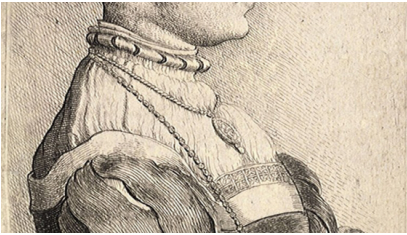


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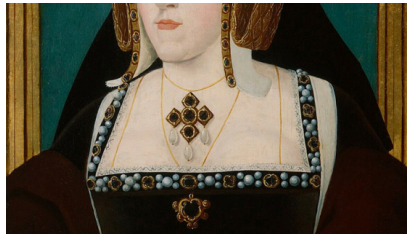
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