

# **CONFLICT IN EUROPE 1935 – 45 Part One**

## **FINAL SCRIPT**

### **Main Title CONFLICT IN EUROPE 1935 - 1945**

#### **THE TREATY OF VERSAILLES & THE LEAGUE OF NATIONS**

##### Chapter Heading

The Great War of 1914-1918 was referred to as the 'war to end all wars.' It was the most bloody and destructive conflict Europe had ever known. The victorious nations assembled at Paris in January 1919 to plan for post-war Europe. However, they were far from united in their views on how Germany should be treated for her role.

German representatives reluctantly agreed to the terms of a peace treaty signed in the Hall of Mirrors at Versailles on June 28, 1919. They had unsuccessfully argued that the treaty was too harsh and contrary to the spirit of President Wilson's Fourteen Points, the basis for them accepting the Armistice. It is not surprising then that the imposed treaty, or 'diktat', left many Germans bitter and seeking revenge. Members of the German government involved in signing the treaty were referred to as the 'November criminals,' and accused of 'stabbing the German army in the back.'

The ensuing League of Nations, with its 'collective security', presented the best hope for peace in Europe after 1919. Collective security was the notion that members of the League would act to guarantee the safety of member states. However, by the early 1930s, the ability of the League to maintain peace was quickly eroding. It lacked the military force to support its decisions. It proved incapable of preventing Japanese aggression in Manchuria in 1931 and of dealing with the aggressive policies of Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany. The failure of the Disarmament Conference of 1934 was another setback for European stability. Mussolini's empire-building aspirations into North Africa in 1935, would be yet another failure for the League and "collective security". The future of peace in Europe was becoming cloudy.

#### **GROWING TENSIONS 1935 - 1937** Chapter Heading

In 1922, Benito Mussolini, Europe's first fascist dictator, came to power in Italy. Known as Il Duce, "the leader" to his followers, his aim was to restore Italy to its former glory by building an Italian Empire.

He asserted the importance of nationalism and militarism, with a foreign policy calculated to gain prestige for Italy within Europe. Mussolini sought a revision of the Paris Peace Settlement, believing Italy received nothing. The unsolved murders of three Italian officers prompted Mussolini to retaliate against Greece, ordering a brief occupation of the island of Corfu in 1923, known as The Corfu Incident. When Mussolini also began dictating the terms of compensation for the murders, it became clear the League was incapable of settling international disputes. During this period, Adolf Hitler wrote *Mein Kampf* while imprisoned for the political crimes he committed during his failed Putsch in Munich. In his book, he outlined Nazi ideology and expressed the opinion: “Germany would either be a world power or there would be no Germany”. On January 30<sup>th</sup>, 1933, Hitler became Chancellor of Germany. He pledged to undo the Treaty of Versailles and restore Germany to its position as a major European power. His first move was to withdraw from the League of Nations and the disarmament conferences. Despite the Versailles agreement and the burdens it imposed, Germany now had the population and overall economic strength to dominate Europe. This added a new dimension to international politics.

Hitler’s first challenge to the Versailles agreement came in March 1935, with the announcement of the creation of a German air force. As well, with the introduction of conscription, his army was expanded beyond the limit of 100,000 soldiers the treaty had demanded. Almost to the same day, Mussolini advanced against Abyssinia (now Ethiopia), the first move towards building his empire. Hailie Selassie, the Abyssinian emperor, asked the League of Nations to intervene, but Mussolini refused to let them arbitrate. In October 1935 the Italian army, numbering one hundred thousand men, invaded using artillery, tanks and over 400 aircraft against the poorly equipped and outnumbered Abyssinian army. The League of Nations imposed sanctions, while France and Britain did not support collective security against Italy. Previously, France had signed the “Franco-Italian Agreement” hoping for support against German aggression, while Britain, fearing retaliation from Mussolini, allowed Italian troops and supplies through the Suez Canal. Abyssinia became part of Italy’s new empire.

Hitler again defied the terms of the Treaty of Versailles and the League of Nations. He denounced the Locarno Pact and, in March 1936, his army marched into the Rhineland, a move that was in direct opposition to the Treaty, which had guaranteed French security. This strategic border region between France and Germany was to be kept free of troops.

The French, facing a general election in six weeks, chose to do nothing. For Hitler, the move into the Rhineland was a great success. The Germans fortified the zone, effectively isolating France, and became a direct threat to Holland and Belgium. Later that year, Germany and Japan signed the Anti-Comintern Pact, to defend each other from attack by the Soviet Union.

Hitler and Mussolini supported the fascist General Franco, who successfully staged a civil war lasting three years from 1936 against Spain's democratically elected government. Britain and France did not become involved and refused to sell arms to either side in the conflict. Germany and Italy supported Franco with arms, while the government troops received arms and military advisors from the Soviet Union. The Spanish Civil war gave the Germans the opportunity to trial new weapons. A number of new aircraft were also tested, notably the Messerschmitt Bf 109, which would become their frontline fighter during the Second World War. In October 1936, Germany and Italy formalised the Axis Alliance.

By 1937, France faced the prospect of sharing its borders with three potentially hostile dictators: Hitler in Germany, Mussolini in Italy and Franco in Spain.

### **THE ROAD TO WAR 1938 - 1939** Chapter Heading

Beginning in 1938, Germany made two decisive political moves that would strengthen its military presence in Europe, and eventually lead to war. The Treaty of Versailles had prevented the unification of Germany and Austria. Hitler had always believed that the two countries shared one race, and that Austria would return to the great German motherland. To accomplish this, the Nazi party in Austria had been strengthened. A plan was formulated for Nazi politicians to stage an uprising, giving the German army an excuse to intervene. Kurt von Schuschnigg, the Austrian chancellor, learned of the plot and visited Germany. But the meeting, orchestrated by Hitler was a disaster, with Hitler stating: "*cannons always speak a good language*". Von Schuschnigg was also on the end of one of Hitler's famous outbursts, which claimed that Austria had betrayed the German race, and that he had an historic mission. The build-up of German troops along the border forced Austria to concede to a series of demands. These included having members of the Austrian Nazi party in government.

In an attempt to foil German plans, Von Schushnigg wanted to hold a plebiscite, asking the Austrian people if they favoured a union or “Anschluss” with Germany. Fearing a vote opposing the union prompted Germany to prepare invasion plans. Von Schushnigg resigned when Hitler’s intention was clear. The German army was invited into Austria and the Anschluss was complete. France protested but did not act, while Britain’s Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain claimed there had always been a close affinity between Germany and Austria.

Czechoslovakia, a multi-racial state created by the Treaty of Versailles, was made vulnerable by this union. Within Czech borders were three million ethnic Germans, a group Hitler called Sudeten Germans. He claimed they were abused by the Czech government and demanded the territory, known as the Sudetenland, become part of Germany. Emil Hacha, the ageing Czech president, was not easily bullied. He had confidence in his excellent armed forces, and in the belief that France and Britain would support him. A series of meetings led to Chamberlain, Hitler, Mussolini and Edouard Daladier, the French leader, signing the Munich Agreement on September 29<sup>th</sup> 1938. The Sudetenland became part of Germany, and Czechoslovakia lost some of its strongest border defences. At the time of the Munich conference, Neville Chamberlain was pleased with the result and was seen as a peacemaker, claiming to have: “*achieved peace for our time*”. Hitler promised to respect the new borders but, a few months later in March 1939, his army moved into what was left of Czechoslovakia. At the same time Italy seized Albania.

Germany was in a better military position than ever before. This was made even stronger with the Nazi-Soviet Non-Aggression Pact signed in August 1939. The Pact was significant, as Germany had removed the threat of war on two fronts and had completely isolated Poland. From Stalin’s point of view, he needed to delay war as long as possible to strengthen his military position, after he had purged many of his experienced officers. The pact with Hitler would enable Germany to concentrate on France and Britain in the west, rather than make war on Russia. Alternatively, Hitler made no secret of the fact he intended to expand eastward, destroying communism, on his way to achieving Lebensraum or “living space” for the German people. He would wait for the opportunity to attack the Soviet Union. Europe was on the road to war and the policy of appeasement had failed, strengthening Germany’s position.

## **APPEASEMENT** Chapter Heading

Neville Chamberlain expected to be remembered as a great peacemaker. But he will forever be associated with the policy of appeasement, which was later seen by some historians as a weakness. He was no fool, but rather a victim of circumstances.

When Chamberlain became prime minister in 1937, Britons were not ready for war. Nor were they prepared to spend vast sums of money on defence at the expense of much-needed social reform. As well, his defence chiefs warned Chamberlain that Britain could not risk a war with either Germany or Italy while the Japanese threat in Asia was escalating. He therefore attempted diplomatic means of easing tension in Europe. Chamberlain also believed that the terms of the Treaty of Versailles had been too harsh on Germany, that it had the right to rearm, and to station troops in the Rhineland – after all, it was German territory. As well, the move to unify Germany with Austria was supported by an overwhelming majority of Austrians. Chamberlain's major mistake was to take Hitler at his word, since the German leader was willing to lie and bully outrageously. Appeasement had allowed Hitler to destroy the Paris Peace Settlement step by step and be more confident in his demands. After 1938, Chamberlain began rearming when it became clear Hitler could not be trusted.

Between 1935 and 1938, both Britain and France had greatly overestimated Germany's military strength, and opposing Hitler sooner may have prevented the need for war. At the time of the Czech crisis, the Soviet Union's hostility towards Hitler was clear, but Chamberlain's dislike of communism prevented him from enlisting Stalin as an ally. The signing of the Munich Agreement encouraged Hitler and ultimately led to his acquisition of Czechoslovakia's military equipment and industrial potential.

## **WAR – Poland, Holland, Belgium & France** Chapter Heading

In the 1920s and 30s, the German military developed new concepts for warfare. Departing from outdated methods used during World War 1, the approach emphasised surprise, judgement, speed and exploitation of enemy weaknesses. The German army, or *Wehrmacht*, developed its plans around the mobility of tanks, or panzers. When combined with the support of the air force, or *Luftwaffe*, it was tactically brilliant. The use of the Messerschmitt Bf 109 and medium-range bombers gave the army superiority over the battlefield.

On September 1<sup>st</sup> 1939, the German army attacked Poland. Reluctantly, two days later, the democratic powers including Britain and France declared war on Germany. During its operation, the Germans had used the military technique *Blitzkrieg* or lightning war. The Polish campaign was not a true test of German military superiority however. On September 17<sup>th</sup>, their action was supported by a Soviet attack on Poland from the east. Despite fighting bravely, Poland surrendered on September 28<sup>th</sup>. Germany and The Soviets took over 900,000 Polish prisoners. It is estimated around 80,000 Polish soldiers managed to cross the border into Romania, and continued to fight the Germans from France and Britain. The Polish civilian population was to suffer immensely under German occupation. They became slaves and academics, doctors, lawyers and the clergy were summarily executed to destroy any future re-establishment of Polish leadership.

There was little that could have saved Poland, but the allied powers missed a great opportunity. The best of the German forces had been committed to the Polish campaign, leaving their frontier with France extremely vulnerable. Even though superior in troops, tanks and airplanes, the French were content to remain behind the heavily fortified Maginot Line, which stretched for 240 kilometres. The British committed an Expeditionary Force of 158,000 troops into France and Belgium. The Royal Navy blockaded Germany and the Royal Air Force concentrated on dropping propaganda leaflets, rather than bombs. This period following the fall of Poland was known as “*the phoney war*”. The defensive mindset of the Allies continued, even as the Soviet Union attacked Finland in November 1939, and Germany overran Denmark and Norway in May of the next year.

Germany then turned its attention towards France, while Britain launched a poorly planned attack on German forces in Norway. Largely at the instigation of Winston Churchill, Lord of the Admiralty, the attack failed. But it was Chamberlain, not Churchill, who came under the harshest criticism. On May 10<sup>th</sup>, Chamberlain resigned and Churchill became prime minister. On the same day, Hitler unleashed “*case yellow*”, the German attacks on France and the low countries of Holland and Belgium. The Germans drew British and French troops into Belgium and, avoiding the Maginot Line, attacked further west. German tanks smashed through the lightly defended Ardennes region to the east, while other units pushed into Holland and Belgium. Allied and German forces were of comparable strength, but the latter was well organised, using its panzers in massed forces, while opposition tanks were scattered. The Luftwaffe supported the ground forces and quickly established control of the air.

For Britain, the priority was to rescue as many members of the Expeditionary Force as possible. Allied troops had been driven back to a small perimeter around the Channel port of Dunkirk. The massive evacuation plan was named Operation Dynamo. A number of factors assisted its success. The French 1<sup>st</sup> Army sacrificed itself in heavy fighting around Lille, while the British 1<sup>st</sup> Tank Brigade counter-attacked and slowed the thrust of the German Panzer Division near Arras. It is generally accepted Hitler ordered the eventual halt of German tanks, re-directing them to lead the attack on Paris. This left the Luftwaffe to attack Dunkirk. In one of the legendary stories of the war, the Royal Navy and a flotilla of small boats under constant air attack, rescued 338,000 British and French soldiers between May 27<sup>th</sup> and June 4<sup>th</sup>. With French resistance crumbling as the German army surged through northern France, Mussolini entered the war on Germany's side on June 10<sup>th</sup>. The German army occupied Paris four days later, and an armistice was signed with France on June 22<sup>nd</sup>. France was now under German control.

## **THE BATTLE OF BRITAIN & THE BLITZ** Chapter Heading

After the fall of France, Britain was alone. Hitler wished to sign an armistice with her in order to concentrate on his ultimate objective, Russia. But Winston Churchill refused, prompting Hitler to plan "Operation Sealion" an invasion of Britain. Grand Admiral Erich Raeder, the naval Commander-in-Chief, believed the Royal Navy to be far superior, seriously hampering any invasion. Hitler, although agreeing with Raeder's assessment, pressed on with the first phase. In July, 1940, the Luftwaffe began the Battle of Britain, attacking coastal ports and shipping lanes in the English Channel, without any significant success.

The second phase followed in with *Führer Directive No. 17 "The German Air Force is to overpower the English Air Force with all the forces at its command, in the shortest possible time."* For the first time the Luftwaffe, under the command of Herman Göring, would conduct a major air battle. This involved massed attacks on Fighter Command airfields of 11 Group in Southeast England. The Luftwaffe had approximately 2600 aircraft and 10,000 pilots, while the RAF had less than half the number of planes and about 1500 pilots. The head of Fighter Command, Air Vice Marshall Hugh Dowding, had pushed the government during the late 1930s to develop the very manoeuvrable Spitfire and Hurricane fighters, a crucial factor in the Battle of Britain.

Despite the enormous odds, Britain had a number of factors in its favour.

It used aircraft spotters, and had well-organized anti-aircraft defences. As well, the RAF had developed an excellent early warning radar system, which allowed planes to be scrambled into the air quickly and at the right time and place. Contributing to the RAF's advantage were the limitations of the Messerschmitt Bf 109. Though an excellent fighter, it was short on range and, after crossing the English Channel, had reduced operational time. In addition, Messerschmitts were required to escort and protect bombers at lower altitudes, limiting their manoeuvrability. Their greatest asset, their superior performance at high altitude, could therefore not be fully utilized against the RAF fighters.

Events on the 25<sup>th</sup> and 26<sup>th</sup> of August would alter the focus of German attacks on airfields and major ports. A small-scale raid on Berlin by RAF Bomber Command so enraged Hitler he demanded massed attacks on London and other British cities. Hitler threatened to obliterate them if bombing runs against Germany did not stop. Initially, the raids on British cities, referred to as "The Blitz", were conducted in daylight, but effective resistance by the RAF forced Germany to change to night bombing. Consequently, war industries could not be effectively targeted and the Luftwaffe suffered significant casualties. Hitler's mission to destroy the RAF and establish air superiority over Southern England failed. The Battle of Britain lasted only four months but exacted a heavy toll. In the skies over England, 446 RAF fighter pilots were killed, while Germany lost 1473 airmen, which included fighter pilots and bomber crews.

During the early days of the Battle of Britain, Winston Churchill spoke these now famous words: "*Never in the field of human conflict was so much owed by so many to so few.*" The end of this decisive conflict allowed Britain to rebuild its military forces and establish itself as an Allied stronghold. It would later serve as a base from which the liberation of Western Europe would be launched. The victory of the RAF forced Hitler to call off the projected invasion of Britain and turn his attention to Russia. The impact of the Blitz was considerable, with high casualty rates and damage to infrastructure and industry. Despite the tragedy and hardship, it only served to stiffen the morale of the British people. Total civilian losses from July to December 1940 were 23,000 dead and 32,000 wounded, with one air raid alone accounting for 3000 casualties.

## **CIVILIANS AT WAR** Chapter Heading

### EVACUATION – BRITAIN Sub Heading

Even before war was declared, British cities were at risk of bombing, making the safety of children a major priority. Beginning on September 1<sup>st</sup>, 1939, one and a half million children, some as young as three, were evacuated to the countryside. Parents could choose whether or not to send them. In organised groups supervised by teachers or volunteers, each child carried a gas mask, a change of clothes and a label bearing their personal details. Some were fortunate to find caring foster parents, and the period of evacuation held happy memories. For others, it was a time of ill treatment, neglect and misery.

At war's end, some children were orphaned or had their homes destroyed by the bombing. Others had been away so long they did not want to return home, or were not wanted. When the evacuation scheme ended in March 1946, five thousand two hundred children were still billeted with foster parents or accommodated in hostels.

#### EVACUATION – GERMANY Sub Heading

German parents were urged to evacuate their children from the major cities as well. By the summer of 1943 approximately 300,000 children had been removed from danger. A class system emerged as workers' children were sent away from their parents, while middle class families could leave together. Families that had evacuated often met with hostility in the countryside. They were blamed for food shortages, inflation, and a rising crime rate as a town and country rift developed. Some children were sent to Hitler Youth camps, established throughout the Reich and in occupied territories such as Poland and Hungary. Here, they undertook programmes of Nazi indoctrination.

#### EFFECTS OF BOMBING – GERMANY Sub Heading

Before September 1939, Germany put into place a system of air-raid precautions. Many aboveground, reinforced concrete bunkers were built in major cities. Early into the war, RAF Bomber Command decided to conduct raids at night, since daylight sorties had resulted in unacceptable losses of aircrews. Technical limitations at night also meant that intended targets were not effectively hit. As a result, area bombing was adopted. This much-criticised policy indiscriminately bombed not only factories and military installations, but also caused the widespread devastation of German cities. A controversial Air Ministry directive sited the primary objective of area bombing was to be the destruction of German civilian morale, regardless of casualties.

Air Marshall Sir Arthur “Bomber” Harris led Bomber Command from February 1942, and was severely criticised for this approach. The concept was not his but, once in office, he enthusiastically embraced it. Harris’s first spectacular success was a 1000-bomber raid on Cologne in May 1942, which devastated half the city. However, the city’s 500 public shelters kept the death toll to only 460. Despite some success, by March 1944 the bomber offensive had failed to reduce German war production or significantly break civilian morale.

The RAF began using incendiary bombs to start fires, resulting in considerable casualties. A raid on Hamburg in July 1943, created a firestorm with temperatures reaching 1000<sup>o</sup> C, killing an estimated 30,000 people. But the strategy was questionable: Had the Allies descended into the same ruthlessness as Hitler and his Nazis? Despite the suffering, life in German cities continued as best as possible. Ruined houses were patched up, and the homeless camped among the rubble waiting fatalistically for the next air raid. At the end of the war, more than 4 million homes were destroyed and 12 million people displaced.

#### EFFECTS OF BOMBING – BRITAIN Sub Heading significant

From the outset, British civilians were subjected to wartime security measures. Sandbags protected buildings and public places from the potential effect of bombing. And barbed wire was erected on beaches. Fearing the possibility of gas attacks, both adults and children were fitted with gas masks. The Home Guard was established as a secondary defence force. Nicknamed “Dad’s Army”, it comprised 1.5 million local volunteers who were ineligible for military service, usually due to their age. As well, the “blackout” was introduced. All houses were fitted with dense curtains to prevent their lights being seen by enemy night bombers. Air Raid Precaution Wardens enforced these restrictions. For protection, the government provided bomb shelters at low cost, or for free to those who could not afford them. The Anderson shelter, designed to sink into a back garden, was constructed from corrugated iron and covered with earth. The Morrison shelter, offered as an indoor alternative, resembled a steel cage with a solid top.

The nightly bombings caused great despair but, by November 1940, only 27 percent of the 3.2 million people of London were using their shelters. Some people become “trekkers”, working in the city during the day, and travelling to the safety of the countryside at night.

Others stayed in their beds and took the risk. Eventually, the government sanctioned the use of Tube stations for shelter. On average, 120,000 people stayed in The Tube at night, which provided sanitation and sometimes bunks. British cities had become the front line.

Hitler had a 'new weapon', the V1 flying bomb, which he unleashed on the British civilian population in June 1944. Nicknamed the 'doodlebug', these unmanned projectiles were fired from launching ramps in France. When they ran out of fuel, they dropped to earth and exploded. Anti-aircraft fire, fighter planes and barrage balloons brought about half of them down, but those that reached their targets caused morale to plummet in London and southern England. The supersonic V2 rocket replaced the V1 a few months later. It was inaudible and unstoppable, and could destroy a whole city block. The last of these rockets fell on April 1<sup>st</sup> 1945. By the end of the war, 43,000 British civilians had lost their lives.

## **OPERATION BARBAROSSA** Chapter Heading

As early as 1925, Hitler's 'Mein Kampf' forecast his invasion of the Soviet Union. In the summer of 1940, Germany had a raw materials crisis and, as a result, a potential collision with the Soviet Union over territory in the Balkans arose. If the Soviet Union fell to the Germans, it would further isolate the Allies, especially Britain. It would also allow German soldiers to be demobilised and returned to the workforce, and provide Germany with rich agricultural areas such as the Ukraine. However, the major objective for Hitler was the Baku Oilfields in the Caucasus, desperately needed to supply his enormous fuel requirements. Albert Speer, the German Minister for Armaments and War Production, later said, "The need for oil certainly was a prime motive". Despite opposition from many high-ranking generals, the directive for Operation Barbarossa was issued in Dec 1940, with the invasion eventually launched the following June. The operation was designed to crush the Russian army before winter.

'Operation Barbarossa' began with massive air strikes and blitzkrieg attacks. It was the largest invasion force ever seen up to that time. Three million German troops were organised into three armies, which quickly smashed through ill-prepared Soviet defences. The Army Group North under General von Leeb, reached Leningrad by mid-August. But, they were unable to capture the city, initiating a siege that would last until 1944. The Army Group Centre, commanded by General von Bock, conquered the Ukraine and continued a push towards Moscow. General von Rundstedt's Army Group South also advanced into the Ukraine, capturing the cities of Kiev and Rostov.

He then continued further south towards the Caucasus oil fields. The success of the campaign up to this point appeared to justify Hitler's view that the Stalinist state was rotten and would quickly crumble. In the first three weeks, the Red Army lost 2 million men, 3500 tanks and 6000 aircraft.

Operation Typhoon, the German offensive to capture Moscow, began in ideal weather conditions in early October. However, heavy rain set in a week later and the "mud season" slowed the advance. Within a month, freezing conditions and stronger resistance from Soviet forces paralysed the offensive. The *Wehrmacht* was not equipped for winter warfare. Frostbite and disease caused more casualties than did combat, and the dead and wounded reached 155,000 within three weeks. On November 17<sup>th</sup> 1941, panzer spearheads struggled to within 30 kilometres of Moscow's northern outskirts, but were halted by fierce counter attacks. After arguing with his chiefs of staff, an obstinate Hitler agreed to abandon the Moscow offensive for the winter and faced the possibility of being drawn into a war of attrition. Commander of Army Group South, General von Rundstedt wrote: "The vastness of Russia devours us".

## **NORTH AFRICA** Chapter Heading

Italy's entry into the war in June 1940, threatened Britain's control of Egypt and the Suez Canal. If the Italians took Egypt, the supply of Middle Eastern oil to Britain was in jeopardy. The canal was also crucial to the British Imperial Trade link with India, South-East Asia, Australia and New Zealand. Allied control of North Africa would open the way for possible counter-attacks on Italy and German occupied territories in the Mediterranean.

In 1940 the British Navy, though heavily outnumbered, established its dominance over the Italians at Calabria in July, Taranto in November and Cape Matapan in March 1941. The Royal Navy would maintain this dominance in the Mediterranean throughout the war. The British army in Egypt found things far more difficult. In December 1940 they had 98,000 troops, including two Australian divisions, facing a much larger Italian army to their west in Libya. The land war became a series of attacks and counter-attacks from both sides.

When it became clear that the Italians could not defeat the British, Hitler had to intervene. In February 1941 he sent General Erwin Rommel and a German army known as the Afrika Korps to support the Italians.

Rommel was a skilful tank commander, and although technically under Italian command, led his Afrika Korps against combined British and Commonwealth forces. Rommel quickly forced them into retreat, only to be met with resistance at Tobruk. The siege of Tobruk began on April 11, 1941 and lasted 240 days. The Australian 9<sup>th</sup> Division held the line for five months until relieved by British, Polish and Czech soldiers. The British were facing many challenges at this time. In April and May 1941, Greece and Crete fell to the advancing German army, with 27,000 Commonwealth troops captured and over two and a half thousand lives lost.

On December 7th, Japan's surprise attack on Pearl Harbour changed the course of the war. American President Roosevelt declared war on both Japan and Germany, bringing the might and power of the USA into the conflict in Europe.

At the same time at Stalingrad, a fierce battle was raging, the outcome of which would signal a major shift in the war.