

## BEFORE D-DAY

By KURT FISCHER

*An account of the events leading up to D-Day—as the Allies named the starting date of the invasion—helps one to understand the nature and significance of the great battle now being fought in France.*

**“T**HEY are coming!”

From German observation posts along the Atlantic Wall these words flashed around the world. They terminated a phase of World War II which had lasted almost three years. They heralded another which both sides had reason to consider decisive for the final outcome of the gigantic struggle.

The start of the Eastern campaign on June 22, 1941, had relieved Britain of the immediate threat of a German invasion and had presented her with a new ally, stronger than any she had been able to count on previously during this war. The two mightiest continental powers at loggerheads, exhausting their strength while England looked on: this indeed seemed an ideal solution of her troubles, consistent with her time-honored policy of the balance of power. But the staggering defeats and losses suffered by the Soviets at the start of the war changed the outlook. By the end of September 1941, some British newspapers began to advocate British offensive action on the Continent. The cue was taken up by the Moscow paper *Krasny Flot* and, on October 12, by the British Communist Party. After that, the whole matter boiled down to the slogan of the “Second Front.” No other issue has excited the minds in the Allied camp to a greater degree.

PROMISED FOR 1942 . . .

In his speech of November 6, 1941, the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Bolshevik Revolution, Stalin gave the nonexistence of a Second Front in Europe as one of the reasons for the retreat of the Red Army and asked for the opening of the Second Front “in the immediate future” (see our issue of November 1943, p. 297). In his address to the US Congress on December 26, 1941, Churchill answered by stressing

the need for further Anglo-American preparations, pointing to the severity of the battle of the Atlantic, and promising a large-scale offensive by 1943.

Moscow did not take this lying down. In March 1942 two Soviet Ambassadors, Maisky in London and Litvinov in Washington, publicly attacked the Churchill thesis of a Second Front in 1943. Next Lord Beaverbrook, former British Minister of Production, demanded the establishment of the Second Front, only to be promptly disavowed by Major Clement Attlee, speaking on behalf of the Prime Minister. Then came the Molotov visit to London, Washington, and back to London during late May and early June 1942; and on June 12, 1942, the White House announced: “The two governments arrived at a full understanding with regard to the creation of a Second Front in Europe in 1942.” Only when 1942 drew to a close without any invasion of Europe did Churchill admit that he had purposely lied. He explained on November 11, 1942, that he had felt justified in misleading his own side if the enemy might be deceived thereby.

The trouble was that the German High Command had not been deceived by the announcement of June 12. On June 28 its new offensive started to sweep across the southern plains toward the Volga and the Caucasus. On July 22, it seems, Stalin sent an ultimatum to the Allies insisting upon the immediate opening of the Second Front. Maisky and Litvinov added their pleas. Churchill suddenly flew to Moscow and, while still abroad, ordered the Dieppe enterprise of August 19. Evidently Stalin had not minced his words. The concentration of British forces for the undertaking indicated that it was meant to be more than a mere gesture. Its complete failure, on the other hand, gave the Allies an argument for further delay.

The dispute went on, reaching a climax in Stalin's letter of October 4 to an American press correspondent (see our issue of November 1942, p. 370), and his speech of November 6, 1942 (see our issue of November 1943, p. 300), in both of which he accused the Allies of not fulfilling their obligations. The Anglo-American landing in French North Africa on November 7, conceived by Roosevelt and Churchill as a compromise solution, at last put a temporary stop to discussions on the Second Front, the more so as three days later Roosevelt promised it for 1943.

#### . . . AND FOR 1943

Lord Beaverbrook's demand in the House of Lords in February 1943 for a Second Front started a new avalanche of opinions, both in the Anglo-American camp and in Moscow, continuing throughout the year without letup. The British and American leaders were in no hurry to waste their manpower on a risky attack against Western Europe, and tried instead with promises and hints to keep the Red Army on the offensive. For this purpose the British Prime Minister was not above using little tricks, such as the prediction of "heavy fighting in the Mediterranean and elsewhere before the leaves of autumn fall," in a speech made on June 30, 1943, just prior to the start of the great summer offensive of the Red Army. But Moscow showed little interest in poetry and never ceased to demand the opening of the Second Front. Only during the Teheran Conference (November 28 to December 1, 1943) was, according to the communiqué, a final accord apparently reached "as to the scope and timing of operations which will be undertaken from east, west and south."

Yet this failed to alleviate the inherent mistrust between the two camps. Leading the chorus in Moscow was the outspoken periodical *Voina i Rabochy Klass* which, above all, debunked the idea that the air offensive against Germany was any substitute—in complete contradiction to the words of the Chief of the US Army Air Corps, Major General Henry Arnold: "The massed bombing attacks against Europe are not a preliminary to invasion, they are the invasion." Nor did Moscow consider the landings in Sicily (July 10) and Italy (September 3) as a Second Front. Again vague hints were thrown out by Churchill to gain time, among them the one that well before the Ides of March (March 15) the world

would witness the greatest military undertaking history had ever known.

However right the Soviets were in suspecting that their Allies were withholding the Second Front in order to give them and the Germans time to bleed each other white, they went too far in denying that the strategy of the Allies had contributed to the Red Army's comeback. The mounting Allied air terror necessitated the organization of large defense forces all over Europe. The war in the Mediterranean was a latent threat to the Balkans and southern France and an acute menace to Italy. The Anglo-American "war of nerves" culminated in the treason of the House of Savoy. The growing invasion army on the British Isles was tying down German forces along a front reaching from Norway to the South of France. All of this was bound to tax the strength of Germany and contributed toward her decision to fight a defensive war for the time being.

#### 1944 — THE YEAR

Yet it appears that the German High Command actually did not expect the invasion before 1944. Allied strategy since North Africa had always made sure of superiority in numbers and material before embarking upon operations against the Germans. War production in the USA had to reach full capacity, and shipbuilding had to catch up with part of the losses sustained in the submarine war until the spring of 1943. Full-sized US armies had to be trained, flaws in armament to be adjusted.

There were, quite apart from Stalin's urging, a number of reasons impelling the venture of an invasion not later than during 1944. The further west the Red armies moved, the stronger became the Kremlin's influence in politics—with the European emigré governments and in territories occupied by the Anglo-Americans. The Soviet demands for "security" became insatiable, their territorial claims expanded. The progressive revelation of Stalin's designs was undermining one after another of the ostensible principles for which the Anglo-Americans professed to have entered the war. Their people at home were growing restless and dissatisfied. They wanted the war to come to an end. Their soldiers and civilians grew bewildered when asked what they were fighting for. In the USA the new presidential elections were approaching. By January 1944, for the first time in 13 years, the Democrats

had less than a numerical majority in the House of Representatives (217:218). Unless he could vindicate his policy through a military success, Roosevelt's defeat at the polls was a distinct possibility.

Besides these political considerations, there were also military ones. The Italian capitulation which, if exploited with daring and speed, might have threatened the German position in southern and south-eastern Europe, did not bring about a decision thanks to bold German countermeasures. In spite of the air war the morale of the German population was firm and the Reich's war production continued. Work on the Atlantic Wall never ceased, and fortifications grew in strength and depth. Nowhere on their westward advance did the Soviets succeed in an operational break-through or the annihilation of large German groups, and the front line as it stood in spring 1944 was not only much shorter but also included the natural defense positions of the Carpathian Mountains and the Pripet Marshes. Many divisions formerly employed as occupation troops in a partisan-infested territory several times the size of the Reich became available for other tasks. Total mobilization, ordered on January 28, 1943, was adding new formations to the German Army. Even considering the military consequences of the Badoglio surrender, the Allies had to count on the German forces available in the west becoming larger rather than smaller.

Both sides had been making the most elaborate preparations for the invasion battle as both fully appreciated its tremendous importance. The outcome of the battle between large forces on either side could be expected to have a far-reaching influence on the war as a whole. Hanson W. Baldwin, leading American military commentator, declared in an article appearing in *Foreign Affairs*: "The invasion of western Europe is the cornerstone of our whole strategy. If it fails, and this can be so, then we are done for."

#### ALLIED PREPARATIONS . . .

The draft did not begin in the USA until October 16, 1940. From a nucleus of some 180,000 men in the regular Army before general conscription, with little or no combat experience except against some Central American republics, it was to grow to 7.7 million troops. 3.5 million men were required by the Navy.

The campaigns in French North Africa and in the Mediterranean were to give some American divisions the fighting experience essential for the more difficult invasion of western Europe. A test under conditions of actual combat was also necessary for the production of arms. These had to be tried out by US troops before their manufacture could run up to mass production, maximum figures of which were expected for the end of 1943.

The merchant tonnage in Allied service had dwindled at an alarming rate up to the spring of 1943. Only then did the losses through submarines begin to recede and to be overtaken by new construction. Apart from the huge tonnage of ordinary ships required for an invasion, the Allies developed special vessels for amphibian operations, of which, according to the words of James Forrestal (then Undersecretary of the Navy) in January 1944, a total of 65,000 landing vessels was needed. Among these American landing vessels we find the "Crocodile," used for the transport of material, and the "Eureka" for that of men. Besides being able to carry 2,500 kilograms of material, the latter holds 25 men and attains a speed of 16 knots. Then there is the type of large landing barge which carries tanks and heavy arms and opens at the stern. The British have their "commando boats" for groups of 20 men, and the "D 14 landing craft" of heavier construction. For air transport, special giant glider planes were constructed in large numbers, among them the "Hamilcar" of British construction, which can carry a medium-sized tank or up to 120 men, and an "amphibian glider," which can land 12 fully equipped men near the coast.

That the invasion forces would consist preponderantly of Americans was admitted by Churchill in a roundabout way when he declared that the initial attack would be carried in about equal strength by US and British troops, but that with a prolonged battle the number of the former would swell. Among the British formations there were 200,000 Canadian soldiers ready to take part in the invasion. The total number of troops at the disposal of the invasion command was not made known. At the beginning of the year the American military commentator Major George Elliot estimated that 80 divisions were necessary for European landing operations, and it may be assumed that at least that many if not far more were assembled in the British Isles for a start.

Large reserves were, however, available in the USA to be ferried across the Atlantic when required.

#### ... AND PLANS

The plans for the invasion were drawn up prior to the Teheran and Cairo Conferences by US General Dwight Eisenhower and British Air Marshal Sir Arthur William Tedder who, at the end of December 1943, were appointed Supreme Commander and Deputy Supreme Commander of the invasion forces respectively. General Bernard Montgomery was to command the Allied ground forces in France, the combined air force being headed by Air Marshal Trafford Leigh-Mallory and the combined navies by Admiral Sir Bertram Ramsay. The mixed composition of the invasion forces, although not as pronounced as in the Mediterranean, worried General Eisenhower. Explaining Napoleon's victories by the fact that he was always facing a coalition, Eisenhower declared it his foremost task to weld the Allied General Staff into an organization which would exclude friction between the various Allied commands.

The Allied strategy as foreshadowed in utterances by leading military men did not spell audacity and surprise planning. The *London Times* reported on December 29, 1943, that caution was the first principle of Montgomery, and that no attack would be launched before violent bombings and artillery barrages had paved the way for the ground forces, and before supplies were assured. For the large-scale employment of the air force in battle and for transport purposes, some 500 airfields covering 250,000 acres were ready in England. This trust in the sheer weight of arms may explain Eisenhower's and Montgomery's belief that the war would be finished in 1944. Typical was the latter's statement of February 3: "We can and we will finish the war this year. I never put an army into the battle until I am quite certain that it is going to be a good show." This attitude also allowed the conclusion that the main battle for bridgeheads would be undertaken in areas close to Allied land bases whence an air umbrella of fighters and bombers could be sustained. Hence the Channel coast from Brittany to the Lowlands and the French Mediterranean coast—close to bases on Corsica—were particularly threatened.

#### GERMAN MEASURES

The German troops guarding Europe from the North Cape to the Pyrenees and thence

along the French Mediterranean coast to the Italian border were put under the command of Field Marshal Gerd von Rundstedt, with Colonel General von Falkenhorst heading the divisions stationed in Norway, while Field Marshals Rommel and Blaskowitz were attached to Rundstedt's headquarters in France. Field Marshal Sperrle was made Commander in Chief of the Luftwaffe formations in the west. The right flank of the anti-invasion armies was to be held by the 20th Mountain Army on the Arctic Ocean under the late Colonel General Dietl, the southern Italian flank by Field Marshal Kesselring's 10th Army, and the Balkan area by troops under the command of Field Marshal von Weichs.

The so-called Atlantic Wall, the fortifications all along the European coast line, is, of course, not a wall but a deeply echeloned system of defenses, essentially different from the Maginot Line and built with all the experiences of the last war years in mind. Ten million tons of reinforced concrete went into the building of thousands of fortifications along the French coast from the Channel to the Bay of Biscay alone. Large reserves of tanks and motorized divisions were kept in readiness, grouped in such a way as to permit their employment at any given place within a short time.

While in quantity the Germans could not expect to equal the Allies either in men or in material, their prowess was just as indisputable as their experience in modern warfare, and they knew that they had to fight for their very existence. Nothing was known about the distribution of the German forces. The *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* of March 5, 1944, reported the following Allied guess:

Northern Finland	10 divisions
Norway	12 "
Denmark and German Coast	10 "
France and Lowlands	45 "
Italy	25 "
Balkans	18 "
Eastern Front	180 "

300 divisions

To this must be added replacements and reserve divisions as well as the Luftwaffe and antiaircraft formations within Reich territory.

#### ON THE EVE

During the months preceding June 6, there was an increasing number of indications for



an early start of the invasion. As there was little or no surprise element left, leading statesmen and military chiefs talked freely about the coming events. Many statements and actions were part of a war of nerves, aimed both at the Axis and the neutrals. In April, for example, foreign diplomats in London were prohibited to leave the country, their mailbags being subject to censorship. But military preparations were also in full swing. Maneuvers and inspections were held, travel restrictions imposed, numerous blocks of houses and public buildings fitted out as hospitals in all parts of England, large areas closed to public traffic for "operational reasons," and the use of telephones restricted. War Secretary Henry Stimson made known that two communiqués would be issued daily by the Supreme Allied Command after the start of the invasion, one at 9 a.m. and the other at 9.30 p.m. GMT. More important than this was the increasing activity of the Allied naval and air forces. The latter made communication lines and industrial centers the main targets of their attacks, both in the Reich and in the occupied western territories, although the number of civilian victims in quarters devoid of military importance, especially in France, did not attest to any particular accuracy of aim. Weather conditions during May did not favor air operations, a fact which contributed toward delaying the invasion.

Excitement in Britain and the US ran particularly high during the last weeks and days prior to June 6. Editorial offices everywhere were in a state of tension. In the first half of May, American press reports circulated in South America that the invasion had begun. At the end of the month, a Sussex village was in an uproar after the parish clergyman had posted an official notice to the same effect. On June 4, Associated Press was out to land a scoop by flashing the news of the start of the invasion from London at 4.39 p.m.; and a scoop it might well have been despite the "kill" order given out two minutes later, for it was probably genuine information. As was to become known later, bad weather had necessitated a last-minute postponement of the invasion operations by twenty-four hours. On that same Sunday hardly a soldier was to be seen on London's sidewalks, but columns of tanks, guns, and ambulances were rolling through the city. New ordinances regarding ARP measures valid after June 5 appeared in all houses. By Sunday night British and American radio reporters had vanished from London, and on the following day neutral correspondents found virtually all important personages out of reach.

With the dawn of D-Day the guns took over where words had left off.

## CARTOON OF THE MONTH

By SAPAJOU

