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Abstract

Since the end of World War Two, Hitler’s decision making when it comes to his strategic decisions have often been heavily criticised. This piece attempted to discover whether Hitler’s military strategy deserves the level of post war criticism that it receives and to determine whether his strategy directly led or contributed to Germany losing the Second World War.

The specific campaigns that have been examined to try and establish the accuracy of these questions are the German campaigns in the Scandinavian Countries, France and the Low Countries, the Soviet Union, as well as North Africa and Western Europe.

These campaigns showed that Hitler, as the Supreme Commander does deserve a large portion of the blame that has been given to Germany’s war strategy, but when the suggestions of his Senior Commanders and advisors are taken into account it uncovers a Hitler who was not as strategically inept as is sometimes claimed to be.
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To all soldiers, regardless of nationality who have fought and died
For their country

And to my Grandparents, the source of all my inspiration
Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my fiancée Sophie and my Mum Julie for all the time they have spent listening to me ramble on about Hitler and the Second World War, as well as everyone who has given me their support in writing this piece.
## Acronyms

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<th>Acronym</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tr>
<td>BEF</td>
<td>British Expeditionary Force</td>
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<tr>
<td>OKW</td>
<td>Oberkommando Der Wehrmacht</td>
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<td>OKH</td>
<td>Oberkommando Des Heeres</td>
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<td>RAF</td>
<td>Royal Air Force</td>
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<td>USAAF</td>
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**Introduction**

When it comes to reviewing Adolf Hitler’s role as the supreme military commander in the Nazi Third Reich, it would be easy to fall into the trap of basing our opinion of him in this role on the post war memoirs of the many German Generals, such as Franz Halder. These Generals have blamed Hitler for all the defeats and errors of command after 1942, while at the same time claimed the responsibility for Germany’s earlier, successful campaigns, on behalf of the Wehrmacht. It would also be extremely easy to disregard Adolf Hitler as the ‘opinionated corporal…who, out of his depth as a Supreme Commander…pulled Germany down to defeat’, and, while his conduct of the war especially in the latter years, were certainly questionable, to say that he was out of his comfort zone, as the supreme commander, and chiefly responsible for Germany’s demise is highly debateable. What must be remembered about Hitler’s career as a military commander is that Hitler accomplished many victories that his advisors and generals considered impossible to achieve, namely, masterminding the strategy that defeated the strongest land army, on paper at least, in six weeks, a feat that eluded the Kaiser’s Imperial Army in four years of combat. However, he also presided over a defeat at Stalingrad, which was arguably the turning point of the entire war in which, even if he was successful would have had little if any effect on the war.

To begin to assess Hitler as a military strategist during the Second World War, it is essential to remember that Hitler had served Kaiser Wilhelm’s German Army in the First World War. Hitler had served with distinction as a frontline infantryman, and had managed to gain the Iron Cross Second and First Class. Despite this achievement, Hitler had not managed to be promoted higher than a corporal, due to him lacking the necessary leadership qualities. As a result, this meant that Hitler saw at first-hand how orders passed down from the Generals were interpreted by the common soldier. This was to have a massive effect on his leadership and strategies during the Second World. The massive example of this during the First World War was the retreat to Siegfried Line to shorten the length of the front, where the army units

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2 Carr.W. Hitler, A Study in Personality and Politics p.78
4 Matthews, R. Hitler, Military Commander: p.9
designated to retreat to the Siegfried did not resist or fight a delaying action…over land soon to be evacuated⁶. For Hitler, this ‘crystallized the maxim that defence lines to the rear…exerted a magnetic force on the fighting troops’⁷ and would encourage the soldiers not to risk their own lives over land that was to be given up soon anyway. This had the effect of making Hitler convinced that defensive positions should not be built in the territory to the rear while soldiers were still defending territory, and that it was far better to have soldiers hold their ground, no matter what danger they were in, no matter how many casualties they suffered than allow them to fall back to the defensive line, even if it was more favourable⁸. This obviously would have serious, usually fatal, consequences for many German soldiers during the Second World War. Additionally, as Hitler only reached the rank of corporal, unlike all the Generals who would serve him in OKW (Oberkommando der Wehrmacht) and OKH (Oberkommando des Heeres), he never attended Staff College, or received training for army command. This would have the effect of Hitler treating the Generals with suspicion, as he thought that they would be more loyal to their Prussian military ideas rather than to National Socialism. This would have the effect of Hitler trying to assert his domination over them, in many cases by refusing to listen to their advice or just by dismissing them out of hand.

In this piece, Hitler’s strategy at the beginning of the Second World War, and his strategies that led to and were used during the main battles and campaigns of World War Two will be examined to see how far Hitler contributed to Germany’s defeat in the war. The specific campaigns that will be examined are The Scandinavian campaign, the invasion of France and the Low Countries and Battle of Britain, the Eastern Front, which includes the Battle of Stalingrad and the final chapter will examine the fall of ‘Fortress Europa’.

However, as Hitler was mainly concentrated with the German Army, the Kriegsmarine and Luftwaffe never really experienced the same level of interference from Hitler as the German Army; the focus of this paper will focus primarily on German land operations, with the Battle

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⁷ Schramm, P.E. *Hitler, The Man and the Military Leader*  p.154

⁸ Schramm, P.E. *Hitler, The Man and the Military Leader*  p.154
of Britain the only exception, where obviously the Luftwaffe was the only service to take an active role, and which Hitler intervened in.

The final battles of Germany, however, will not be covered. The reason for this is that this piece will be discussing Hitler’s contribution to Germany’s defeat. These reasons can only be found in the campaigns before 1945, whereas by 1945, the Second World War was already lost for Germany, and any action was simply just trying to delay the inevitable. Also, as this piece is focused solely on Hitler’s military strategy, his political and social policies will not be discussed.
Chapter 1 Western Europe and Scandinavia 1939-1941

When looking at the career of Hitler as a military strategist, it would be very easy to focus solely on the many, well documented military disasters that befell the German Wehrmacht, usually towards the latter years of the Second World War, and come to the conclusion that Hitler should have left the military strategy to the experts. To do so however, would be telling only half of the story of Hitler as a military strategist. To truly judge whether Hitler was ultimately responsible, or heavily contributed to Germany’s defeat, it is necessary to examine both of his successes and failures in this role. As a result, this chapter focuses on the early years of the war, at a time when the Germans were very successful in almost everything they attempted. In this chapter, Hitler’s decision making in the invasions of Denmark and Norway, the Low Countries and France, as well as during the Battle of Britain will be explored.

It must, however be stressed that during this period, especially with the invasion of Poland, Hitler largely left the leadership of the Army to the General Staff, and while he still had the final say on any matter, the army had more control than it would ever have as the war progressed. Hitler’s level of interference essentially up until the invasion of the Low Countries and France was generally restricted to setting timetables, deadlines and the direction the German’s would take next. For this reason, the invasion of Poland will not be covered in this piece.

Norway and Denmark

After the Polish Campaign was brought swiftly and successfully to its conclusion, Hitler immediately turned his attention to Western Europe. Instead of attacking France, he decided on March 3 1940, that the invasion of Norway and Denmark must commence before that happened. The reason for this was clear. During the Soviet Offensive against Finland, the Allies had come remarkably close to sending an Expeditionary Force to assist the Fins. This course of action would seriously have threatened the supply of Iron and Nickle from the Scandinavian Countries to Germany. If Germany could acquire naval and air bases in Norway, it also had the added benefit of preventing a repeat of the World War One blockade on Germany, and make it easier for German surface raiders and U-Boats to attack British commerce shipping. By the 9th April 1940, the British Force sent to Norway had been

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9 Goldston, R. _The Life and Death of Nazi Germany_ (Fawcett, Minnesota, 1983) p.135
evacuated, the raw materials vital to the Third Reich were safe, and the Kreigsmarine and Luftwaffe had bases all over Norway and Denmark which could be used against Allied shipping. Another, unintended consequence of the Scandinavia Campaign was that it ‘cemented Hitler’s fascination with Scandinavia …to the extent that the area received attention and troop numbers out of all proportions…to its military worth.\textsuperscript{11}

By deciding to invade Norway and Denmark, against the advice of many of his senior generals, Hitler had shown that he had a sense of grand strategy, which many of his generals lacked\textsuperscript{12}. Whereas the Generals were concerned about the potential losses of both men and equipment, they did not concern themselves with the details of securing the Nations supply lines or acquiring bases that could be vital in a future conflict with Britain. Certainly, in this case, Hitler was able to see the bigger picture than the generals, who looked at it only in its operational sense. However, when the plans for the invasions were placed before Hitler, he made very little changes before accepting them. The reason for this could be that the plans that were drawn up were mainly for the Kreigsmarine and consisted mainly of naval strategies, of which Hitler was never fully comfortable with.\textsuperscript{13} Also, during the Norwegian campaign, Hitler suffered, for the first time, the shock of a reverse. When a Royal Navy battleship, \textit{HMS Warspite} and her accompanying destroyers, attacked a German Destroyer flotilla, it sunk ten German destroyers, which left over two thousand German soldiers trapped. This caused Hitler in a ‘blind panic to order an immediate withdrawal…but general Jodl persuaded Hitler to hold on at Narvik…and by the end of April the Germans were in complete control of Norway\textsuperscript{14}. In the aftermath of the Scandinavian campaign, Hitler’s reputation as a military commander in Germany soared, and his weaknesses as a military commander became concealed to all but the Armed Forces leadership\textsuperscript{15}.

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\textsuperscript{11} Wilt, A. \textit{War from the Top: German and British Military Decision Making during World War 2} (Indiana University Press, Indiana, 1990) p.67 \\
\textsuperscript{12} Matthews, R. \textit{Hitler, Military Commander} p.116 \\
\textsuperscript{13} Matthews, R. \textit{Hitler, Military Commander} p.116 \\
\textsuperscript{14} Carr, W. \textit{Hitler, A Study in Personality and Politics} (Edward Arnold, London, 1978) p.89 \\
\end{flushright}
France and the Low Countries

Following the Scandinavian Campaigns, the next step in Hitler’s takeover of Europe was France and the Low Countries (Belgium and the Netherlands). In this area, the German High Command already had plans in place for the invasion of France. However, instead of a bold, radical plan which Hitler had in mind, what the plan amounted to was an enlarged, updated version of the Schlieffen Plan used by the Kaiser’s army in 1914 and had failed at the Battle of the Marne. Several German generals, von Manstein among them were ‘thoroughly dis-satisfied with the plan whose objective…was merely partial victory and limited territorial gains’¹⁷, and indeed, when Hitler saw the plan of Army Command he was said to have described it as ‘the ideas of a military cadet’¹⁸.

As luck would have it for Hitler, a German plane was forced to land at an airfield in Belgium that was carrying the German plan, and the officer carrying the plan had failed to destroy the document and it was subsequently captured by the Belgians. This incident, known as the Mechelen Incident gave Hitler the pretext to order that new invasion plans be drawn up.

At the same time that Hitler began to think of a southern thrust towards Sedan while encouraging the enemy to believe Holland and Belgium was the target¹⁹, von Manstein, separately of Hitler was also thinking along these lines. Like Hitler, von Manstein believed that the new plan had to be daring, with the element of surprise and further south²⁰. The plan that was advocated by Manstein was an armoured thrust into the wooded Ardennes region. However, von Manstein had a very difficult time trying to get the Army Chief’s to support his idea of a strike through the Ardennes, and general Halder even had von Manstein transferred to a divisional command in Stettin, to remove him.

When von Manstein was able to present his plan to Hitler, Hitler was adamant that this was the plan to be used²¹. Though Hitler and von Manstein agreed this was the best plan, Hitler still faced ‘opposition from the General Staff’²². Naturally, however, Hitler had his way and the von Manstein plan was put into effect. Hitler, for the large part, agreed with Manstein’s plan, but had added a part of his own idea to the plan. Hitler decided to launch the attack in

¹⁷ Bond, B. *France and Belgium 1939-1940* (Davies-Poynter, London, 1975) p.74
¹⁸ Kershaw, I. *Hitler, 1936-1945 Nemesis* p.291
¹⁹ Bond, B. *France and Belgium 1939-1940* p.75
²⁰ Kershaw, I. *Hitler, 1936-1945 Nemesis* p.290
²¹ Strawson, J. *Hitler as Military Commander* (B.T Batsford Ltd, London) p.100
²² Dulffer, J. *Nazi Germany 1933-1945 Faith and Annihilation* (E. Arnold, London, 1996) p.120
the North as originally planned, to draw the British and French into Belgium, but this was to be merely a feint attack\textsuperscript{23}.

As a result, Hitler, for first recognising the value of an offensive through the Ardennes, and then forcing, despite the misgivings of von Brauchitsch the Commander in Chief of the Army, and Halder Chief of General Staff, the plan to be put into effect\textsuperscript{24}, Hitler does deserve the credit for the campaign which led to the defeat of France, Belgium and the Netherlands. Even though von Manstein had thought up the intricate details of the plan, whereas Hitler had only thought of a general advance through the Ardennes, without Hitler’s backing, von Manstein’s plan would never have convinced the General Staff, and would never have been implemented. Thus, for this reason Hitler has to be given almost the full credit for this strategy. He was the Supreme Commander, and if the plan had backfired, it would have been his responsibility, which means, on the same note, as it worked perfectly the responsibility for the plan rested with Hitler as well.

When the attack came, the thrust through the Low Countries appeared to confirm to the Allies that the Germans were repeating the Schlieffen Plan. As such, a strong French force, along with the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) moved into Belgium\textsuperscript{25}. This meant that a large part of the Allied Army, were totally unprepared for the offensive through the Ardennes, and were not even in the right country to defend against it. This meant that as the German units advanced, the Allied Armies in Belgium had to fall back quickly, or face being isolated from their supply routes.

The speed of the German advance, as rapid as it was, was also, indirectly the cause of one of its most fatal mistakes. As the German’s broke through near Sedan, Hitler was recorded as shouting “it’s a miracle, an absolute miracle”\textsuperscript{26}. The speed of the advance had also surprised one of the key architects of the armoured force, Heinz Guderian, as well as some of the Field Commanders, such as von Rundstedt.

With the Allied Armies in a headlong retreat to the Channel ports, several senior German generals, including Kleist and von Rundstedt were concerned about possible Allied attacks on their southern flanks, and wanted the panzer advance to be paused to enable the supporting

\textsuperscript{23} Matthews, R. \textit{Hitler, Military Commander} p.128
\textsuperscript{24} Haffner, S. \textit{The Meaning of Hitler} p.69
\textsuperscript{25} Shennan, A. \textit{The Fall of France, 1940} (Longman, Harlow, 2000) p.2
\textsuperscript{26} Fraiser, K-H, Greenwood, J. \textit{The Blitzkrieg Legend: The 1940 Campaign in the West} (Naval Institute Press, Maryland, 2005) p.2
infantry to catch up with them. This feeling was reinforced when a major British counterattack at Arras on the 21st May, tried unsuccessfully, to break the flank of 7th Panzer Division commanded by Rommel. For Hitler, this confirmed to him that his fears of an allied attack which would separate the armoured spearheads from their infantry and supplies were coming true. While in reality, Rommel was only confronted by two tank battalions and a couple of infantry regiments, which he easily repulsed, the fact that the Allies had attempted this had brought concern the German High Command and Hitler particularly. The counterattack had also greatly worried Rundstedt, who, as commander of Army Group A, had issued a general order to halt, to let the infantry catch up to the panzers.

On the 24th May, Hitler met with Rundstedt at Charleville, the Army Group A’s headquarters. At this meeting, Rundstedt told Hitler that it was imperative that the armoured forces be allowed to link up with the ground forces. When faced with the cautious Rundstedt, who seemed to echo the Fuhrer’s concerns, Hitler agreed that the armoured formations should not cross the Canal Line towards Dunkirk, but should rather be held in reserve, to allow the formations the time they needed to resupply and rearm for future campaigns in the South of France. Rundstedt thought that due to the terrain, and the many canals surrounding Dunkirk, his armour would be better preparing for an offensive across the Somme, and that Bock’s infantry would be better suited for the role of capturing the surrounded allied army. For Hitler however, he saw this as an opportunity to prevent the final battle honours falling to the army, and decided to allow Goring and the Luftwaffe, who were much closer aligned to the Nazi Party, the honour of finishing off the stranded allied army.

The decision to allow the Luftwaffe the chance to finish off the allied armies on the beaches of Dunkirk however, proved to be one of the biggest mistakes of the entire war. The Luftwaffe had been designed as a tactical support air force, meaning it was not suited to the role in which it was now placed. Also, for two days, bad weather had caused the Luftwaffe to ground their planes, meaning that apart from the occasional artillery shell, the Germans were

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27 Bond, B. Britain, France and Belgium (Brassey’s, London, 1990) p.100
28 Matthews, R. Hitler, Military Commander p.134
29 Matthews, R. Hitler, Military Commander p.134
31 Bond, B. France and Belgium 1939-1940 p.163
32 Bond, B France and Belgium 1939-1940 p.164
33 Bond, B. France and Belgium 1939-1940 p.165
forced to stand and watch as thousands of British and French soldiers managed to escape to England ‘right under our very noses’.\(^{34}\)

By the time that Hitler had realized his mistake and had ordered the attack to resume, the clanking tracks of the panzer forces had been silent for two crucial days\(^ {35}\), and the British and French had managed to fortify the town of Dunkirk, which allowed the evacuation of the main BEF and French forces to proceed.

‘The Fuhrer is terribly nervous…frightened by his own success…afraid to take any chances and so would rather pull the reins on us’\(^ {36}\). This is what Franz Halder wrote in his diary on the 17\(^{th}\) May. Although this was a full week before the now infamous halt order, it accurately sums up Hitler during this period. However, in the years after the war, the German generals, in their memoirs, have placed the blame squarely on Hitler\(^ {37}\). Chief among them, in this case, was Rundstedt, the Army commander who ordered the initial halt order. The main question with this however, is it that really fair? According to many of the general’s memoirs, they could all have won the war for Germany, if they had not been prevented from doing so by Hitler\(^ {38}\), and while it is true that, in this case, the Panzers probably would have destroyed or captured the BEF and French soldiers on the beaches. What is not clear however is whether or not the order actually originated from Hitler.

What is clear from this incident is that Hitler overruled von Brauchitsch, who wanted to advance the tanks\(^ {39}\). It is also clear that Hitler opposed sending the Panzers against Dunkirk, but contrary to popular belief, had left the decision to the Field Commander\(^ {40}\). It was only after Rundstedt informed Hitler that he was also opposed sending the Panzers to deal with the BEF, did Hitler override von Brauchitsch. This is one of the few occasions where Hitler would leave the decision to a field commander, and if Hitler can be criticised for the escape of the BEF, it is for allowing the halt order to stand for three days, rather than for initiating the order. To Hitler’s credit, it was also he, not Rundstedt, who ordered the Panzer’s to resume their attack on Dunkirk\(^ {41}\), but by this time, the Allies had an effective perimeter

\(^{36}\) Strawson, J. *Hitler as Military Commander* p.110
\(^{37}\) Smith, R.B. *Hitler’s Generals* (Osprey, London, 1976) p.21
\(^{38}\) Haffner, S. *The Meaning of Hitler* p.68
\(^{39}\) Kershaw, I. *Hitler, 1936-1945, Nemesis* p.296
\(^{40}\) Smith, R.B. *Hitler’s Generals* p.21
\(^{41}\) Smith, R.B. *Hitler’s Generals* p.21
around the town. As the Supreme Commander, he must share some of the blame for this incident, but unlike what the Generals would write post war, it was not because of his constant interference or refusal to listen to their advice, but in this case it was for his lack of action, and actually listening to the advice of his field commander.

**Battle of Britain**

With the British Army thrown off the continent, Hitler was, for all intents and purposes, the master of Western, Central and Northern Europe. All that remained of the original enemies of Nazi Germany was Britain.

However, in view of the humiliating evacuation from Dunkirk and other ports, with the abandonment of virtually all of its equipment, vehicles and ammunition, Hitler thought that Britain would soon be seeking terms. When it became apparent that Britain, and Churchill, intended to fight on Hitler was surprised, but not overly concerned. Indeed, from a German viewpoint, Britain was insignificant, a nuisance, no longer a worthy threat.\(^{42}\)

However, when it came to planning the invasion of Britain, Operation Sealion, Hitler had showed little interest.\(^ {43}\) To begin with, Hitler was certain that Britain would seek peace. When this was shown to be incorrect, Hitler did order the preparation of plans for the invasion, but neither he nor the General Staff ever seriously gave consideration for actually launching the invasion.\(^ {44}\) This was because of the small channel of water between Britain and the rest of the continent. The English Channel was all that stood between Britain and defeat, yet the Wehrmacht, which had defeated France in six weeks, could not walk on water.\(^ {45}\) It needed either the Luftwaffe to defeat the Royal Air Force (RAF) and drive the Royal Navy out of the Channel, or for the Kreigsmarine to win control of the Channel from the Royal Navy before it could launch an amphibious invasion.

Hitler, as well as Admiral Raeder knew that the German Kreigsmarine, largely destroyed in the Norwegian Campaign, could and would never be able to defeat the Royal Navy or even achieve supremacy in the English Channel. This meant that the only service able to pave the way for the Invasion of Britain, was the Luftwaffe, under Hermann Goring. To do this, the Luftwaffe needed to destroy the RAF fighter command.

\(^{42}\) Davies, N. *Europe at War* p.86


\(^{44}\) Goldston, R. *The Life and Death* p145

\(^{45}\) Baldwin, H. *The Crucial Years* p.143
By and large, the Luftwaffe was, by Mid-August 1940, well on the way to crippling RAF Fighter Command. The attacks on the airfields were devastating, and many of the RAF’s pilots were being forced to undertake multiple sorties every day, yet on the 24th August, fate seemed to intervene and assist the British.

On the night of the 24th August 1940, several German bombers accidentally dropped bombs on the centre of London, instead of the docks. In response to this ‘deliberate’ attack on civilians, Churchill ordered that Berlin must also be bombed in retaliation. The Berlin raid, like many other early British raids were ‘minor pinpricks’, and probably cost the British more in machines and crews than they gained through destruction of German factories, but the key effect it had was not physical damage, but physiological. Hitler and Goring had promised the German people that not a single bomb would fall on German soil, and this had now been shown to be false. On September 4th 1940, Hitler further promised if the RAF dropped ‘4000 kilograms of bombs on Germany…we will drop one hundred and fifty thousand in one night’, and that the Luftwaffe would wipe British cities off of the map, if the RAF attacked German cities.

Because of a handful of lost German pilots who had mistakenly dropped Bombs on London, and because of an insignificant retaliatory raid on Berlin, Hitler, in a fit of rage, ordered that the Luftwaffe would shift the focus of its attacks from RAF Fighter Command, its airfields and production factories, to British cities, especially London. While London, and other cities, was heavily attacked, the shift in the target priorities allowed the RAF and its airfields to have the respite it needed to rearm and regroup its struggling fighters to enable them to remain in the fight. While the terror bombing of British Cities failed to break the resolve of the British people, the shift in targets allowed the RAF Fighter command the time to restore their force, and enable it, in turn, to break the resolve of the German Luftwaffe.

So, while Hitler had shown his strategic daringness in undertaking the invasions of Norway, Denmark, the Low Countries and France, this show of daring and boldness abandoned him when he was faced with Britain. The fact that Germany could overcome countries such as Poland, Denmark, Norway, Belgium and Holland came as no surprise, as

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46 Baldwin, H. *The Crucial Years* p.14
47 Baldwin, H. *The Crucial Years* p.14
49 Burleigh, M. *The Third Reich: A New History* p.760
50 Macksey, K. *Military Errors of World War Two* p.41
Germany should be able to overcome these whenever she felt like. But what confirmed Hitler to be a military genius was the six weeks reduction of France, which the Kaiser’s Army had not achieved in four years. While this meant that Hitler, to the German people, and Generals, like Keitel had become ‘the greatest military commander of all time’, he had also been prevented from defeating Britain because of the existence of the English Channel. He had also thrown away the one chance of being able to knock Britain out of the war, by recklessly allowing himself to be goaded by RAF Bomber Command into changing targets.

In the outcome of the War, Hitler’s decision to change targets proved fatal. While it seemed like the British problem, at least in German eyes, could be rectified when it was convenient to do so, the problem was that it never became possible for the Germans. This meant that when Hitler decided to turn his attention to the East, the British were still very much in the war, and the main thing that Hitler had wanted to avoid, a two front war, was now unavoidable.

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51 Haffner, S. The Meaning of Hitler p.68
53 Macksey, K. Military Errors of World War Two p.47
54 Davies, N. Europe at War 1939-1940 p. 87
Chapter Two- The Eastern Front

At the start of 1941, the overall situation was looking positive for Hitler and Germany. They had driven all of the Western Allies, with the exception of Great Britain, out of the war, and the British themselves were trapped on their island, only able to fight the German allies on the periphery of Europe and North Africa. While the Germans had failed to secure the air superiority needed to commence the start of Operation Sealion, it seemed at the time that unless a major event happened, such as Russia attacking Germany or America entering the war to support the British, that Britain would eventually be forced to seek peace within 1941.

This chapter will examine Hitler’s role in the campaign on the eastern front. In effect, this means that the initial planning of Barbarossa, as well as the crucial battles of Stalingrad, Moscow, Kursk and finally looking at Hitler’s strategic decisions on the whole for the Eastern Campaign outside of these main battles. Hitler’s decisions regarding withdrawals and troop movements will also be investigated to see whether the generals claim that they were hamstrung by Hitler. While the Eastern Front contained many crucial battles and decisions, only the most critical and decisive battles will be investigated to discover whether Hitler deserved to be criticised by his generals after the war.

With the strategic outlook looking very bleak for the enemies of Germany, the German generals, soldiers and citizens would have been forgiven thinking that 1941 would be a year in which they sat tight, soaked up the limited British resistance in the skies of Europe, and then eventually force the British to give up their hopeless resistance, either by bombing them to submission or starving them of resources and supplies.

Thus, when Hitler announced it was his decision to start a campaign in the east, even before the fighting in the west was over, in an effort to correct what he regarded as a war on the wrong front, some of the senior commanders, Admiral Raeder the most prominent, were concerned. While these commanders advocated that they wait till the British were forced out, the vast majority of the senior generals shared Hitler’s positive assumptions about the Wehrmacht and the weaknesses of Russia.

While many of the generals, certainly more so after the war, have shifted the blame onto Hitler for his decision to attack Soviet Russia and his objectives in Russia, what these

generals fail to remember is that even before they were informed of Hitler’s decision in regards to Russia, they had their operational planners to look into plans for a campaign in the east, and these provisional plans differed little from Hitler’s overall Barbarossa plans. They also forget that only Admiral Raeder spoke against Barbarossa, and according to Guderian “all the men at OKH and OKW with whom I spoke…evinced an unshakeable optimism…impervious to criticisms or objections”. This shows that, while the generals were quick to place the blame onto Hitler, and claim that Hitler’s pointless eastern adventure largely contributed to Germany losing the war, when it was planned, all of them agreed with his plans, and did not criticise or disagree with the Fuhrer’s plans. The only time where some of the senior commanders disagreed with Hitler was when they were discussing whether the main attack should be directed at Moscow or against vital Soviet war industry and grain growing regions. Where both Hitler and the senior generals were in complete agreement however was that they had no desire to fight for or in the cities, they argued, with some justification that the Battle for France had been won because they struck for the Channel not Paris or other cities. This was to be the case for Barbarossa. Hitler and his senior commanders had the same intention of what they deemed to be important, to envelope and destroy Russian Armed Forces, and all they differed in was how they would achieve this goal. They all agreed that Soviet forces would be destroyed in the immediate border regions by blitzkrieg on a large scale, however, Hitler argued that this would best be achieved by large flanking operations which would envelope the Soviet defensive forces, whereas the Army commanders favoured frontal thrusts towards the large cities where the Soviets would undoubtedly throw in massive amounts of reserves. In this regard, it is hard to argue against the strategy that Hitler and eventually his commanders settled on. During the early stages of the war, almost the entire Soviet Western forces were annihilated or captured, along with large quantities of equipment, and, to the Germans, made it look like the Soviets were on their last legs. By this time, a major obstacle to the relationship of Hitler and his senior generals and Army commanders was about to erupt. This was a key point in the eastern

57 Leach, B. German Strategy p.88
58 Clark, A. Barbarossa: The Russian-German Conflict, 1941-1945 (Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London, 1995) p.23
60 Clark, A. Barbarossa p.47
62 Leach, B. German Strategy p.110
campaign, the decision whether to target Moscow, the capital of the Soviet Union, or to target the economic and industrial regions in the Ukraine and around Leningrad.

**Moscow**

To the commander of Army Group Centre Fedor von Bock, and to many of the generals of OKW, the capture of Moscow was the main objective, second only to the destruction of the Russian armed forces. Now that the Soviet forces on the frontiers had been defeated, it seemed that the likeliest campaign would be against the Soviet capital. What was needed at this time was a rapid decision on which campaign was to be the priority. As it turned out, Hitler hesitated on whether to support the attack of Moscow or Leningrad, referring it as the most difficult decision of the campaign, and instead of making this important decision, Hitler put his energy into planning a changeover from combat troops into garrison soldiers.

When Hitler did indeed come to a decision, he favoured a new campaign towards Leningrad and the Baltic Sea. For this decision, Hitler has been criticised for allowing his fear of treading the same path as Napoleon, his desire to eradicate the birthplace of Bolshevism and his attraction to economic gains cloud his strategic judgement.

When the campaign in Army Group North’s theatre of Operations was over, von Bock of Army Group Centre, as well as General Halder and Field Marshal von Brauchitsch all favoured a continuation towards Moscow. Von Bock’s subordinate Panzer Group commander’s Guderian and Hoth also favoured driving towards Moscow. Hitler, however still stated that it was less important to advance eastwards as it was to destroy the enemy’s living forces wherever they were to be found. This meant that Hitler was still not convinced that a drive on Moscow was the best way to defeat the Soviet Union, and whenever his generals would bring up Moscow, Hitler would lecture them of the economics of war, and, on one occasion Guderian noted that all of Hitler’s senior generals would all nod in agreement with Hitler’s every sentence regarding Moscow.

Thus, when Hitler finally allowed von Bock to march on Moscow, so much time had passed that the Red Army had been able to reinforce the Armies before Moscow. As a result, to the

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63 Turney, A. *Disaster at Moscow: Von Bock’s Campaigns 1941-1942* (Cassell, London, 1970) p.27
65 Higgins, T. *Hitler and Russia* p.140
66 Leach, B. *German Strategy* p.110
67 Clark, A. *Barbarossa* p.78
68 Clark, A. *Barbarossa* p.111
Red Army, this was their ‘miracle of the Marne’, a result of Hitler’s aversion to support a drive on Moscow. Also a result of Hitler’s hesitance to begin a drive for Moscow was that when Army Group Centre did begin its drive to Moscow, the roads were turned into impassable mud pits by the rains that had arrived. This coupled with severe Soviet resistance caused Army Group Centre’s advance to ground down to a crawl with mounting casualties caused von Bock, as well as Hitler much concern, and, in an act that would not be repeated many times, Hitler decided to ask his von Bock, as his military commander in the field for his advice on what course of action he should take. For this, Bock felt “gratified that the highest military authority in Germany had seen fit to shoulder him…this responsibility”. For Bock, who still saw the glory available to him if he could capture Moscow informed the Fuhrer that Moscow could still indeed be taken. For Hitler, following the progress of Bock on his map in East Prussia, the field commander’s view, along with Halder’s confirmed that Moscow could be taken. And, for one of the only times in the war, he followed the advice of his field commander and allowed Army Group Centre to proceed.

As Army Group Centre was walking into a disaster, Bock had a change of heart and asked for the permission to withdraw and go over to the defensive. For Hitler, who had been told that Moscow was about to fall, this was a massive change. He ordered that limited withdrawals were allowed, but only to shorten the lines. Shortly afterwards, Hitler amended this order to his infamous “stand and fight…not another step backwards” order.

Although the order for no retreat had succeeded this time, it had stopped the German Wehrmacht following the example of Napoleon’s Grand Army, it would eventually have fateful consequences for Hitler and the Wehrmacht later in the eastern campaign. The disaster for the Wehrmacht at the gates of Moscow can be laid at the doors of Hitler, Bock and the commanders of OKW.

The Commanders of OKH, Halder and von Brauchitsch among them all advocated an attack on Moscow, even when it became apparent the extent of Soviet forces before Moscow. Von Bock can also be blamed, to a certain extent, for the disaster that the German forces sustained outside Moscow. Firstly, like OKH, he was one of the primary advocates for the drive on

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69 Higgins, T. Hitler and Russia p.142  
70 Turney, A. Disaster At Moscow p.111-112  
71 Turney, A. Disaster At Moscow p.139  
72 Turney, A. Disaster At Moscow p.158  
73 Turney, A. Disaster At Moscow p.158  
74 Higgins, T. Hitler and Russia p.187
Moscow, and secondly, he allowed his desire for glory and prestige as the Conqueror of Moscow to cloud his judgement when he was asked by Hitler if the drive should continue.

For Hitler, he must also share some of the blame for the disaster of Moscow. He allowed himself to be drawn between two distant objectives, Leningrad and Moscow. While his offensive towards Kiev had resulted in the capture of 'approximately 665,000 Red Army soldiers…and described as the greatest battle and victory in the history of the world’\textsuperscript{75}. It had also cost the Germans valuable time, which had caused the German Army around Moscow to up to the knees in mud\textsuperscript{76}, and to allow the Soviets to reinforce their defences. It could also be said, however, that Hitler had no intention of marching against Moscow and he had simply followed his senior commander’s wishes. Hitler himself had also said after the failure of Moscow that “I have never been for one moment convinced that…central areas of Bolshevik Russia was the key to victory…I condescended to my generals when they proposed to capture Moscow and Leningrad”\textsuperscript{77}.

The next decisive battle which will be examined to determine Hitler’s role in the military campaign on the Eastern Front is the Battle of Stalingrad. Above all of the battles on the Eastern Front, this battle is the one that stands out to most as the battle where Hitler’s blunders had a negative effect on the German war effort, and is considered as the turning point of the entire war.

**Stalingrad**

When the campaign for the east was being planned, Hitler had stated that the battle for Russia would not be fought in the cities of the Soviet Union, and that the names of the great Soviet cities were, quite simply place names on the map. However, when it came to Stalingrad, Hitler instantly became fixated with taking and holding the city which bore his rival’s name for reasons of prestige and morale\textsuperscript{78}. As such, when German forces started to engage Soviet forces within the city, for Hitler, there was no possibility of retreat, and both dictators, Hitler and Stalin, fed divisions into the meat grinder that was Stalingrad.

\textsuperscript{75} Higgins, T. *Hitler and Russia* p.159  
\textsuperscript{76} Turney, A. *Disaster at Moscow* p.131  
\textsuperscript{77} Turney, A. *Disaster at Moscow* p.169  
\textsuperscript{78} Higgins, T. *Hitler and Russia* p.238
The main intervention in Stalingrad, on Hitler’s part, was the situation regarding von Paulus and his Sixth Army and whether he was allowed to retreat or break out from the ruins of Stalingrad before the Soviet Army had encircled him and forced him to capitulate.

As the Soviet Army encircled Stalingrad as a result of their general offensive in 1942, Hitler at the “stroke of his pen”\textsuperscript{79} turned Stalingrad into a fortress city. Inside this Fortress there was “over a quarter of a million men, 100 tanks, almost 2000 guns and 10,000 trucks”\textsuperscript{80}. The order from Hitler turning Stalingrad into a fortress city was effectively a death sentence for the men of the mem of the Sixth Army, as well as their Rumanian and Croat allies. As a result of this, between the Don and the Volga, for the Soviets, an enormous prize was at stake\textsuperscript{81}. This prize they were all too willing to take from Hitler.

When looking for Hitler’s motives in the Battle for Stalingrad, it is easy to see why he issued the orders which he did, even though it led to the destruction of the Sixth Army. His decision to order the stand fast orders had saved the German Army in the first year, and so, was a valid strategy when German Armies were surrounded, even if they resulted in severe casualties\textsuperscript{82}. Another reason which heavily influenced Hitler during this battle, was Goring’s insistence that the Luftwaffe would be able to supply von Paulus with the five hundred tons of supplies that was needed to keep the Sixth Army fully supplied\textsuperscript{83}. When this was proved to be incorrect, it had meant that von Paulus missed arguably his last chance to break out, as well as leaving him trapped in the Stalingrad circle without the supplies needed to hold the Soviets at bay or to attempt a future break out.

By the time it became clear to Hitler that von Paulus and his Sixth Army were trapped in the ruins of Stalingrad, there was no realistic hope that von Paulus could break out, or that von Manstein’s relief column could break into Stalingrad. This meant that the Sixth Army in Stalingrad took on a new role for Hitler. By forcing von Paulus and the Sixth Army to remain in Stalingrad and sacrifice themselves, Hitler hoped to buy time to allow the rest of Army Group A to retreat across the river Don\textsuperscript{84}. This would be achieved, in Hitler’s eyes by forcing the Soviet divisions and Armies invested in Stalingrad to keep assaulting the Sixth Army, and,

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\textsuperscript{79} Erikson, J. \textit{The Road to Stalingrad} (Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London, 1975) p.470
\textsuperscript{80} Erikson, J. \textit{The Road to Stalingrad} p.470
\textsuperscript{81} Mellenthin, F.W. \textit{Panzer Battles} (University of Oklahoma Press, USA, 1982) p.225
\textsuperscript{82} Higgins, T. \textit{Hitler and Russia} p.188
\textsuperscript{83} Erikson, J. \textit{The Road to Stalingrad} p.471
\textsuperscript{84} Higgins, T. \textit{Hitler and Russia} p.257
every day that the Sixth Army had bought was a vital saving for the rest of the German Army Group\textsuperscript{85}.

It is clear from this event that Hitler himself was the chief architect of the disaster of Stalingrad. He allowed himself to ignore the very limited strategic value of Stalingrad and then overestimate its value as a matter of prestige and as a chance to show the world the superiority of National Socialism over Communism. However, it is also crucial to point out that, contrary to many of the accounts of German Generals post war, who contended that had von Paulus or Hitler understood the grave situation the Sixth Army found itself in, and had acted promptly, then they would have been able to have broken out of Stalingrad. What they don’t write about this point is that not only would this have been disobeying Hitler’s direct orders, it also assumes that von Paulus would have had the logistical strength and supplies to pull this break out off, which he certainly did not\textsuperscript{86}.

Like many of the factors that have so far been discussed, it was not only Hitler who should shoulder some of the blame. In the Stalingrad disaster, in order to allow Army Group A to retreat, Erich von Manstein, for once, approved the Fuhrer’s decision\textsuperscript{87}. Where Manstein can be absolved for blame is how the Sixth Army found itself in this situation, it would have been impossible to predict that Hitler would accept the destruction of an entire Army for the sake of a name of a city\textsuperscript{88}. This in itself shows us that while the fault for the destruction of the Sixth Army was Hitler’s, there were several other people who deserve their fair share of the blame. Obviously von Manstein, as he wasn’t as critical to Hitler’s order’s as he was in his book, \textit{Lost Victories}, and actually agreed with Hitler in this case. As well as Hermann Goring also deserves a portion of the blame, for reassuring Hitler that the Luftwaffe would be sufficient to keep the Sixth Army supplied in Stalingrad, which would obviously have influenced Hitler’s decision to hold in Stalingrad.

**Kursk**

The last of the big battles which will be examined is the Battle of Kursk. This battle has gone down in history as the largest tank battle, as well as “the first time a German Offensive had
been halted before it could break through enemy defences and penetrate to its strategic depths.\textsuperscript{89} The Kursk operation was planned by Von Manstein to destroy the Soviet forces in the Kursk Salient and was accepted by Hitler. However, whereas von Manstein wanted to launch the operation in April or early May, but Hitler intervened and ordered that it was to be postponed until Mid-June, then Mid-July in order to build up the depleted German tank forces to a level where the risk of defeat would be reduced\textsuperscript{90}. This of course, would eliminate any element of surprise that the Germans could have gained, and allowed the Soviet Armies to turn the Kursk Salient into a fortress that was the ‘strongest in the world’\textsuperscript{91}. 

Whereas Manstein and many of the commanders of OKH felt that the Germans had to attack, there were two main doubters to this plan. The first was Germany’s premier tank commander Heinz Guderian, who quite rightly stated that it was of “extreme indifference to the world whether we own Kursk or not…how many people even know where Kursk is?”\textsuperscript{92} And the second person who had struggled to see the benefits of the operation was, Adolf Hitler. When Guderian appealed to Hitler to cancel the operation, Hitler himself said that whenever he thought of the operation it turns my stomach\textsuperscript{93}. 

Hitler, however, when seeing the differences of opinion and conflict amongst his commanders, allowed himself to be influenced by General Zeitzler and Field Marshal Keitel. It has been suggested, particularly by General Warlimont, that Zeitzler exploited Hitler’s pathological abhorrence to withdrawals by suggesting that this was the only alternative to the operation\textsuperscript{94}. And Field Marshal Keitel then suggested to Hitler that Germany must attack the Soviets to reinforce the morale of Germany as well as the morale of Germany’s satellite countries\textsuperscript{95}. 

With Hitler now convinced of the need for the operation, Zeitzler now recommended to Hitler that the ideal force should consist of around ten to twelve panzer divisions along with supporting infantry, as only 5 divisions had been enough to recapture Kharkov, though Hitler contributed this to the introduction of the Tiger tank, which ‘one battalion was worth a

\textsuperscript{89} Glantz, D.M.\textit{ Soviet Military Intelligence in War} (Taylor and Francis, London, 2013) p.184
\textsuperscript{90} Overy, R.\textit{ Why the Allies Won} (Pimlico, London, 1995) p.106
\textsuperscript{91} Mellerenthin, F.W.\textit{ Panzer Battles} p.264
\textsuperscript{92} Clark, A.\textit{ Barbarossa} p.325
\textsuperscript{93} Guderian, H.\textit{ Panzer Leader} (Da Capo, New York, 1952) p.308
\textsuperscript{94} Clark, A.\textit{ Barbarossa} p.328
\textsuperscript{95} Clark, A.\textit{ Barbarossa} p.325
normal Panzer division\textsuperscript{96}. Due to this, Hitler decided that it would be best to postpone the offensive until more of the Tiger heavy tanks, as well as Panther and Elefant tank destroyers could become available, as these could be used to counter the overwhelming numbers of Soviet tanks, and as such, were vital to victory\textsuperscript{97}.

By delaying the offensive, Hitler guaranteed that whatever slim chance the German’s had of destroying the Soviet Salient at Kursk. By following the advice of his Chief of the General Staff and his Chief of OKW over the advice of his field commander, Hitler had thrown away the initiative on the eastern front for the Germans which was something that they would not be able to regain from the Soviets. What Hitler and his senior commanders had also failed to see was that by postponing the attack to reequip their own forces, this delay allowed the Soviets to do exactly the same, and in this regard, the Soviets were able to produce many more machines than the German economy could. Manstein was able to estimate that the Soviets were able to produce such large quantities of tanks that they could refit sixty armoured brigades every two months\textsuperscript{98}.

As a result of these significant battles, the German Armed forces arguably lost the eastern campaign, and, in the long term, also paved the way for them to lose the entire Second World War. In these battles, it is also impossible to identify Hitler as the chief cause of all of Germany’s problems on the eastern front.

Whereas Hitler rightly deserves the blame for the destruction of many German Wehrmacht divisions with his infamous no withdrawal orders, at the same time the very same order is credited with saving the Wehrmacht from having to commit the same humiliating withdrawal that Napoleon and his Grand Army had to take. What must also be mentioned is that, for the most part, Hitler and his generals agreed which objectives were vital, and, apart from some minor occasions, they never gave him a suitable alternative, or could not come up with a viable reason as to why they should not do that particular operation. It is also important to remember that the generals who have written post war memoirs have a free reign to write that it was Hitler who cost the Germans the campaign. For example, one of the most obvious post war publications comes from Franz Halder. In his pamphlet, he blames Hitler for all of the strategic errors Germany committed, while claiming credit, with the generals, for all the strategic brilliance during the war. It is harder to justify a disappointing reality than it is to

\textsuperscript{96} Clark, A. Barbarossa p.323 \\
\textsuperscript{97} Newton, S. Kursk: The German View (Da Capo Press, Cambridge, 2002) p.12 \\
\textsuperscript{98} Manstein, E. Lost Victories p.427
proclaim the virtues of a hypothetical alternative\textsuperscript{99}, and as the men who were responsible for this strategy, Keitel, Jodl and indeed Hitler, were killed or committed suicide before they could justify the basis of their strategy, it will always be easier for the other generals to claim they could have won the war by doing a particular strategy.

Also, for the most part, as soon as the war was over, it was in the surviving generals best and future interests to ‘minimize their responsibility for aggression…and for the strategic errors’\textsuperscript{100}, and, as he committed suicide, Hitler could be turned into the ultimate scapegoat and it would become practically impossible for historians to verify their version of events\textsuperscript{101}

\textsuperscript{99} Clark, A. Barbarossa p.87
\textsuperscript{100} Leach, B. German Strategy p.228
\textsuperscript{101} Leach, B. German Strategy p.228
Chapter Three: The Western Front

The war in the Western Europe was effectively over in 1941 when the British Army was driven from the continent, and apart from a series of Bomber Offensives over France, and a disastrous commando raid at Dieppe, the Western Allies of Britain along with the dominion countries, and America, it was not until the Invasion of Sicily and Italy that they would have a bridgehead in Europe.

Until the time came when they could land their forces on the European mainland, the only place where the Allies could effectively engage the Germany Armed Forces was in the periphery of Europe. As a result of Operation Barbarossa, Hitler’s attention was never fully focused on the African Campaign. The main operation in which Hitler intervened in Africa was during Operation Torch. And as such, Operation Torch, the Invasions of Sicily and Italy, as well as the Invasion of France and Western Europe are to be the focus of the investigation as to whether Hitler is or deserves most of the blame for Germany’s defeat.

North Africa

For the large part, Adolf Hitler had not planned to involve himself in Africa any more than was absolutely necessary\(^\text{102}\), with him viewing it as an area of interest to his Italian ally, Mussolini. However, when it became clear that the Italian’s could not hold back the British in Africa, Hitler was put under intense pressure by some of his commanders, particularly Admiral Raeder, that he should send aid to his Italian allies in Africa instead of committing himself to a campaign in Russia\(^\text{103}\). While Hitler was not to be moved from initiating an Eastern campaign, he did see the necessity to send military aid to the Italian army in North Africa. The Expeditionary Force which Hitler sent, the famous Afrika Korps, commanded by General Erwin Rommel, was put under the Italian Command structure, and as such, Hitler did not actively partake in the strategy involved. Rommel, in his time as commander of the Afrika Corps arguably had a greater degree of control over his tactics and strategy than any other German field commander. While the same conditions of no withdrawals or surrender were still in place, Hitler did not directly order, launch or change offensives as he would do in Russia, for example.


\(^{103}\) Higgins, T. Soft Underbelly p.25
This would change during Operation Torch. A key difference between the Allied Operation Torch in 1943, and the earlier German Offensives in Africa for Rommel was that he was no longer winning his battles. As such, Hitler began to view his suggestions with less respect than he had earlier, and on several occasions even told Rommel that his judgement of the situation was different to Rommel’s\(^{104}\). Thus, when Rommel gave Hitler his opinion that it would be better for Axis troops to depart from North Africa and prepare for the defence of Italy, he was received coldly by Hitler.

The German’s and the Italians had been given ample warning that an invasion of French North Africa was going to happen, a report from the Vatican even told Hitler that the landings would take place between October and mid-November 1942\(^ {105}\). The Axis and Hitler in particular did nothing to prepare for the invasion. When the Americans landed at Casablanca, however, Hitler was quick to react, he sent German forces to occupy Tunis, and even marched into unoccupied France, though this did nothing more than to swing to the Allied side French officers in North Africa\(^ {106}\).

With a bridgehead at Tunis, and the Allies seemingly halted, Mussolini and Hitler made a catastrophic error of judgement, and decided that the allied slowness to advance meant that they were weakening, and that meant that they could be counter attacked. Hitler and Mussolini decided to reinforce Tunis, and started to pour men and supplies into the port city, until the Axis forces in the beachhead numbered around 150,000\(^ {107}\). The biggest problem with this was that by this time, the British and the American Navies were dominating in the Mediterranean, and if this combined German and Italian force was to be defeated, it could not be evacuated\(^ {108}\).

When the Axis forces in North Africa had been driven back into Tunis, as at Stalingrad, Hitler proclaimed that all Axis forces in Africa had to stand or die and rejected Rommel’s advice that a swift evacuation to Southern Europe could repair the situation\(^ {109}\). As it turned out, mass surrenders of battle hardened Axis troops happened everywhere, and around

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\(^{105}\) Alexander, B. *How Hitler could have won World War Two* (Three Rivers Press, New York, 2000) p.170
\(^{106}\) Alexander, B. *Hitler* p.170
\(^{107}\) Alexander, B. *Hitler* p.173
\(^{108}\) Hart, B.H.L. *History of the Second World War* p.341
\(^{109}\) Alexander, B. *Hitler* p.188
150,000 to 200,000 Axis soldiers were marched into Prisoner of War camps\textsuperscript{110}, and were now useless to the Germans and Italians in any defence of Southern Europe.

For the second time in 1943, the threat of a loss of prestige hampered Hitler’s decision making and resulted in two of his best Army’s, the 6\textsuperscript{th} in Stalingrad and Armeegruppe Afrika, which included the veterans from Rommel’s Afrika Korps and the pick of the Italian Army\textsuperscript{111}, were now lost, and, had they been evacuated when Rommel had recommended, they could have made an allied attack on Sicily or Italy very expensive or even prohibitive for the Allies\textsuperscript{112}.

The biggest irony that came from the Tunis disaster, was that had Hitler, who was too busy planning his invasion of Russia reinforced Rommel when Rommel was defeating the Allies, then this disaster for the Axis probably would not have even happened. As it happened, Hitler and his General Staff had an aversion to mounting overseas expeditions that were “in reach of British sea power”\textsuperscript{113} failed to reinforce their success which would most likely have driven the British from North Africa and, crucially, the Suez Canal, yet were perfectly happy to reinforce failure that led to the needless destruction of vital men and equipment that would be desperately needed in the months to come.

After the Allied invasion of Italy, which had caused Mussolini to be toppled from power, then reinstated as a German puppet in the Republic of Salo (Northern Italy), it was obvious to the Germans that the next Allied Invasion would come in Western Europe across the English Channel.

**Normandy**

Due to the multi-front war that Hitler and the Wehrmacht found themselves in, von Rundstedt, the Commander in Chief of the West, found himself defending over three thousand miles of coastline, from the German frontier in the North of Europe, to the Italian frontier in the south, with only sixty divisions\textsuperscript{114}. The divisions were spread out in such a way that only the most likely places of an invasion were significantly, this meant that North-Eastern France had around one division per fifty miles, Normandy had one for every one hundred and twenty miles and the rest of the coast had one division for every two hundred and seventeen miles.

\textsuperscript{110} Alexander, B. *Hitler* p.193
\textsuperscript{111} Hart, B.H.L. *History of the Second World War* p.435
\textsuperscript{112} Alexander, B. *Hitler* p.193
\textsuperscript{113} Hart, B.H.L. *History of the Second World War* p.435
\textsuperscript{114} Hart, B.L.H. *The Other Side of the Hill* (Cassell and Company, London, 1948) p.237
This meant that the German Army needed to find a way to fortify the Channel Coast, which would allow them to honour their commitments on the Eastern Front, and also allow them to defend the Western Front in sufficient strength to have any hope of defeating the Western Allies.

This meant that the Germans were left with one option; they needed a series of fortifications which would allow them to defend strongpoints and stretches of the coastline, without having to rely on large troop numbers. As such, Hitler had planned to have a greatly increased Atlantic Wall which would be manned by three hundred thousand soldiers, with a reserve force of one hundred and fifty thousand\textsuperscript{115}.

While the Atlantic Wall was only ever expected to delay the Western Allies, the main German Force was expected to launch a counter attack as soon as it was established where the Allies were landing. This would cause deep discussions and debates between Field Marshal Rommel, the Commander of Army Group B in the Normandy region and von Rundstedt, the overall commander of Wehrmacht forces in the West. Von Rundstedt had advocated to Hitler that the forces being held in reverse, away from the coast, to allow the Germans to launch a massed counterattack against any Allied beachhead which might be established on the French coast\textsuperscript{116}. Whereas Rommel, who had faced the growing Allied air power had realised that any large scale movement of armour and trucks on the German side would be pulverised from the air long before they would even reach the coast. Due to this, Rommel reasoned that by positioning the reserve forces closer to the beaches, the risk of Allied air power destroying the units before they even engaged the Americans and British forces was less likely\textsuperscript{117}.

When he was faced with such a division of opinion between his two primary commanders Hitler panicked. He first agreed with Rommel, but the twenty four hours later he reversed his decision in favour of Rundstedt. This caused a furious Rommel to remark that ‘the last person out of Hitler’s door is always right’\textsuperscript{118}. He then remained undecided, and again reversed his decision, and decided that he would review his decision. This time, instead of favouring one field marshal over the other, he decided that he would have to order a compromise. This

\textsuperscript{117} Parker, R.A.C. *Struggle for Survival* p.196
\textsuperscript{118} Time-Life Books. *Fortress Europe* p.23
compromise by Hitler was a compromise that did not please anyone\textsuperscript{119}. It spilt up the panzer reserve, giving Rommel the command of the 21\textsuperscript{st} Panzer around Normandy, and creating a separate, independent reserve Panzer force under von Schweppenburg which would require Hitler’s personal authority before it could be moved\textsuperscript{120}. This left the German forces on the coast too weak to repeal the invaders, and then left the other German forces behind the coast too far away to have any effect on the landings.

As it turned out, the person who correctly guessed where exactly the Allies would land was Adolf Hitler. Ironically, it was his intuition, much mocked by his generals after the war had proved, on this occasion to be more accurate than the calculations of his professional soldiers\textsuperscript{121}. He then, for some reason, decided that any allied invasion that came that was not in the Pas de Calais area was only a diversionary tactic by which the Allies meant to draw the German’s away. This meant that, apart from some slight reinforcements nothing else was done in the Normandy area\textsuperscript{122}.

When the invasion had started, von Rundstedt had immediately alerted the Panzer Divisions that were being held in the reserve, but as Hitler was still asleep and no one had dared to wake him yet, Jodl, acting for the Fuhrer refused to authorise their deployment\textsuperscript{123}. This meant that by the time Hitler was awake, and authorised the deployment of the Panzer divisions, the Allied Armies were already ashore, and the USAAF and RAF were waiting for the large deployment to arrive, and thus, they were unable to penetrate through to the coast and unable to stop the Allies from strengthening their beachheads, just as Rommel had predicted before the landings\textsuperscript{124}.

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\begin{enumerate}
\item \textsuperscript{119} Overy, R. \textit{Why the Allies Won} p.190
\item \textsuperscript{120} Wilmot, C. \textit{The Struggle for Europe} (Wordsworth Editions, Hertfordshire, 1997) p.192
\item \textsuperscript{121} Hart, L.H.B. \textit{The Other Side of the Hill} p.246
\item \textsuperscript{122} Jackson, W.G.F. \textit{Overlord: Normandy 1944} (Davies Poynter, London 1978) p.166
\item \textsuperscript{123} Jackson, W.G.F. \textit{Overlord}: p.179
\item \textsuperscript{124} Time-Life Books. \textit{Fortress Europe} p.36
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Ardennes Offensive

By late 1944, the Western Front had finally stabilised, and a defensible line had been established\textsuperscript{125}, and now, thoughts of a counter attack in the West were now occupying Hitler’s mind. The planned offensive was Hitler’s last gamble and it was the most daring of his offensives\textsuperscript{126}. For this last offensive he wanted a force of Panzers to be gathered from divisions that had been taken out of the line, and fresh infantry divisions formed from Luftwaffe ground staff, from the Navy and from men taken from civilian work\textsuperscript{127}, as such the German forces assembled by Hitler for his great gamble consisted of the most formidable tank in the world, and infantry which were of First World War quality\textsuperscript{128}.

The offensive that Hitler wanted the German armed forces to achieve was to strike through the Ardennes Forest in December 1944, similar to his 1940 offensive, and drive towards Antwerp, cutting the Allied Armies into two, as well as cutting the British Army off from its supply bases in France. For Hitler, this was to be his ultimate victory, and as such he would not allow anyone to change his plan\textsuperscript{129}. This was exactly what von Rundstedt, the reinstated Commander in Chief of the West and Field Marshal Mode, commander of Army Group B wanted to do when they saw Hitler’s planned Offensive. They realised that the resources that Hitler’s planned offensive would require were simply beyond those that the Third Reich could acquire at that time. As such, they advocated to Hitler that a more limited offensive, targeted at the River Meuse and destroying the Allied Armies there could more easily be attainable and would not be a massive drain on resources, Hitler however, would not be moved from taking Antwerp\textsuperscript{130}.

For Hitler, who had worked with General Jodl to plan out the offensive, they had planned everything. From a timetable even down to a “mathematical calculation of petrol”\textsuperscript{131}, everything had been worked out, and so, for Hitler and Jodl, there was no reason why this plan could not be pulled off. The date for the offensive was even timed to coincide with bad weather which would ground the formidable Allied air forces. As it turned out, the Allied Air Forces were indeed grounded by the bad weather, and the German forces were able to cause

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\textsuperscript{125} Ellis, L.F. *Victory in the West vol 2: The Defeat of Germany* (Her Majesty's Stationary Office, London, 1968) p.74

\textsuperscript{126} Hart, L.B.H. *The Other of the Hill* p.283

\textsuperscript{127} Parker, R.A.C. *Struggle for Survival* p.196

\textsuperscript{128} Parker, R.A.C. *Struggle for Survival* p.212


\textsuperscript{130} Parker, R.A.C. *Struggle for Survival* p.198

\textsuperscript{131} Hart, L.B.H. *The Other of the Hill* p.283
great confusion among the four American divisions that they were released against. However, as Rundstedt and Model had predicted, the lack of resources available to the Germans had severely hampered them, added to this that the bad weather which had helped the German offensive at the beginning had now lifted, and the Allied Air power was now able to come into play.

The Ardennes Offensive, even though it has sometimes been called the von Rundstedt Offensive, was a product entirely of Hitler’s making, and had the Germans still possessed the resources and forces that they had possessed in 1940, then the offensive would have been a master strategic plan from Hitler. However, they did not possess the forces or the resources that they had in 1940, and they did not have the local air superiority like they had in 1940. These factors should have caused Hitler to abandon the plan, but he insisted that the Germans should attack, and in doing so he caused the German forces to suffer severe casualties, both in terms of men and machines, which would severely hamper the prospects of defending Germany in the next few months.

Apart from Hitler’s Ardennes Offensive, all of the German decisions were reactions to Allied movements. The Ardennes offensive was also the last large scale German action on the Western Front, apart from that offensive; the German Army largely remained on the defensive. When the German Army on the Western front was on the defensive, it was required to, like their counterparts on the Eastern Front, fight for every inch of territory instead of initiating fighting withdrawals that good military sense would dictate would be the correct course of action.

In September 1944, when the Allies took their first steps into Germany, the War in the West was taken up a notch, with Hitler declaring that the war effort had to be fanaticized and fought with the maximum severity. Hitler had decided that “every bunker, every block of houses in a German town, every German village…must become a fortification in which the enemy bleeds to death”. Hitler tried to reinforce the stand and die attitude with every idea he could think of, a Flying Special Tribunal executed the German officers who commanded

132 Hart, L.B.H. The Other of the Hill p.283
133 Hart, L.B.H. The Other of the Hill p.284
134 Ellis, L.F. Victory in the West p.354
135 Overy, R. Why the Allies won p.205
136 Kershaw, I. The End p.69
137 Kershaw, I. The End p.69
the German forces at Remagen\textsuperscript{138}, yet whatever efforts he tried, the soldiers of the Wehrmacht knew the end was coming and either withdrew or surrendered, with only the most fanatical soldiers, of whom most were of the SS remained and offered resistance\textsuperscript{139}

Since the end of the war, many of Hitler’s generals, in their post war memoirs have spoken out against Hitler’s infamous no-step back policy and his declarations that specific areas were now fortifications and fortresses. General Manteuffel explained to Liddell Hart that Hitler was quick to notice how the troops on the Eastern front fell back to such fortresses “like magnets”\textsuperscript{140}, and then they were able to offer the Soviets sufficient resistance which could buy other units time to prepare or withdraw. Manteuffel however, was also quick to point out that when pursuing such a policy, it was vital to offer the local commander the operational freedom to decide their actions, which should include the power to decide to withdraw, which, given his distrust of Army Commanders which had increased since the July 1944 bomb plot, Hitler was not inclined to give\textsuperscript{141}.

The main issue Hitler had, when he was trying to defend his ‘Fortress Europa’ was that he had a tendency to judge his military decisions on their prestige value. To Hitler, the idea of evacuating his forces, even from incredibly dangerous situations, was political suicide. Hitler remained convinced that Germany’s allies and potential allies would only carry on fighting in the face of German victories, and that withdrawals would be seen as a weakness which would encourage his allies to desert him. As such, to Hitler, the complete destruction of an army group, or the commitment and eventual loss of large forces to countries such as Scandinavia or in the Balkans where the allies had not landed was better than to retreat the units into better fighting positions for a later date.

Another main issue that Hitler faced while defending the occupied countries of Western and Northern Europe was the sheer size of his conquests. This issue was not helped by the fact that Hitler had committed his armed forces on a multi front war, against countries that were able to muster many more forces than his own, and against enemies that could out produce Germany in arms and equipment.

While only one of the factors discussed in this Chapter can be directly attributed solely to Hitler, the Ardennes Offensive, his operational instructions can be found in all of

\textsuperscript{138} Alexander, B. How Hitler could have won World War Two p.297
\textsuperscript{139} Alexander, B. How Hitler could have won World War Two p.297
\textsuperscript{140} Hart, L.B.H. The Other of the Hill p.292
\textsuperscript{141} Hart, L.B.H. The Other of the Hill p.292
them, very heavily. As such, while he deserves the sole criticism for the Ardennes attack, for the other factors, he must share the blame with his army commanders. In all of the other factors, Hitler was advised by Army Commanders who had given their agreement to his plan, or in some cases, the army commanders involved had argued over the strategy between themselves and Hitler had simply come down on one side, such as in Normandy.
Conclusion

When it comes to the question as to whether Hitler is to blame, as a military strategist, for Germany’s defeat in the Second World War, the account of one person is often used to confirm this point of view. That person is Franz Halder, Hitler’s one time Chief of the General Staff in his post war pamphlet, Hitler as War Lord. This pamphlet was used by Halder to criticise Hitler’s strategic planning, such as placing the fortifications of the Atlantic Wall in easy reach of Allied naval bombardments and declaring randomly selected towns and villages as strongpoints on the basis that it would strengthen the German defence\textsuperscript{142}, however, while these were mistakes made by Hitler, they were mistakes made in specific theatres of operations, rather than mistakes made in the sphere of strategy\textsuperscript{143}.

Even in this, it is difficult to actually criticise Hitler’s chosen strategy from a military point of view. In the early years, Hitler’s military strategy was a stunning success. The plan for the invasion of France and the Low Countries which came from Halder was rejected by Hitler who called it the work of military cadets\textsuperscript{144}. He replaced it, in part with help from von Manstein and von Rundstedt, to produce a plan which resulted in complete domination of the Western Europe, with the exception of Great Britain.

From 1942 onwards, Hitler’s strategy revolved around delaying the inevitable, and, in the face of the overwhelming forces facing Germany, he certainly achieved this. Nowhere is this delaying tactic more evident than in the Atlantic Wall, which was to be a new Westwall, screening the German western fronts while Germany’s attention was in the East\textsuperscript{145}. Halder, however, offers an alternative, arguing that a flexible system of operational warfare, with the assistance of strategic withdrawals could have helped Germany save the situation. However, when the full forces of the Allied Forces are taken into account, they could easily have exploited any strategic withdrawal and turned it into a general rout. So it is likely that such a strategy could very easily have only “hastened Germany’s final defeat”\textsuperscript{146}.

While Hitler’s strategy in the Second World War did lead to several disasters for the German Wehrmacht, notably Tunis, Stalingrad and the Ardennes Offensive of 1944 and led

\textsuperscript{142} Hinsley, F.H. *Hitler’s Strategy* (Cambridge University Press, London, 1951) p.234
\textsuperscript{143} Hinsley, F.H. *Hitler’s Strategy* p.234
\textsuperscript{145} Wilt, A. *The Atlantic Wall: Hitler’s defences in the West, 1941-1944* (Iowa State University, Iowa, 1975) p.32
\textsuperscript{146} Hinsley, F.H. *Hitler’s Strategy* p.235
Germany into ruin in 1945, to say that he was the sole cause of Germany’s demise from the brink of victory to unconditional surrender would be wrong. While Hitler was largely responsible, his generals almost to a man have managed to deflect their role in Germany’s defeat onto the nearest scapegoat, namely Hitler. By piling the blame for military defeat onto a man who had committed suicide, they were trying to ensure that their version of events could not be challenged. As they all seemingly closed ranks and told the same story, it was incredibly hard for historians to try and unravel or challenge their version of events. This obviously helps their cause when they claim the credit for Germany’s successful campaigns early in the war, and then to pass off all of Germany’s defeats to Hitler. However, when the details of the Fuhrer military meetings and conferences fully came to light, we see that Hitler was not a commander who solely relied on intuition or oblivious to rational considerations as was sometimes claimed, instead we can see that Hitler appeared to view all arguments for some time until he had arrived at a final decision. We see a Hitler that had an intense dislike of the Army General Staff, and on many occasions, when the General Staff and Hitler were in dispute, Hitler’s decision often proved to be the correct course of action, or at least the least damaging to the German position. The obvious example of this was the first stand and fight order issued by Hitler in the winter of 1941. The General Staff advocated a general retreat, whereas Hitler wanted the German forces to stay where they were. Hitler, as might be expected won the argument, and even Hitler’s biggest critics and opponents are “obliged to acknowledge that his decision was probably correct”. The consequence of this, however also confirmed to Hitler that he had a superior grasp of strategy than the officers of the General Staff, and as such, he had no issue in countermanding any of their orders or even dismissing them if they rejected his decisions. This would create the problem, that if a senior general disagreed with Hitler’s strategy, there was little they could do, either they protest the order, and find themselves dismissed or they could say nothing and go along with his order. As most of his senior generals chose the latter option, and then post war criticised General Jodl and Field Marshal Keitel in particular for being ‘mere orderlies’, with Keitel often called ‘Lakaitel’ or lackey.

147 Gilbert, F. *Hitler Directs his War* (Oxford University Press, New York, 1950) p.xx
148 Gilbert, F. *Hitler Directs his War* p.xx
149 Gilbert, F. *Hitler Directs his War* p.xx
150 Gilbert, F. *Hitler Directs his War* p.xxi
151 Gilbert, F. *Hitler Directs his War* p.xxi
As such, this means that when placing the blame for Germany’s strategic failures of the Second World War, Generals and Field Marshals have successfully managed to deflect the blame away from themselves, and into the direction of Hitler, though also Jodl and Keitel. Hitler, as Supreme Commander of the German Armed Forces will always have most, if not a significant portion of the blame for Germany’s mistakes. However, in defence of Hitler’s strategy, as well as his military thinking, he also deserves more credit than he currently receives.

Mostly, this is because of the terrible crimes that Hitler and the Nazi Party committed, but when looking solely at Hitler’s military record, it contains just as many successes as it does failures. He was the first to look at an armoured thrust through the Ardennes, successfully held the German position in Russia in late 1941 against the advice of the General Staff, and was even the first to recognise Normandy to be the landing area for the Allied Invasion of France. On the other hand, Hitler’s failures are also many, his decision to confirm Rundstedt’s halt order allowed the British Expeditionary Force to escape capture, his insistence on capturing Stalingrad caused immense casualties which Germany struggled to replace, he reinforced failure in North Africa which resulted in a disaster almost on the scale of Stalingrad and his general defence strategy caused hundreds of thousands of German soldiers to be sacrificed in random fortresses for no particular gain, or just simply bypassed (Army Group Courland) or even ignored as was the German Army in Norway.

Hitler’s military career was filled with successes and failures, and it is safe to say that, on the whole, German success, while costly to the Allies was not fatal, as they often lacked the resources or equipment to follow up any success, however, when the Germans made a mistake, no matter how small, the Allies were able to turn it into a fatal mistake. As soon as Germany lost the initiative, Hitler lost almost all of his skill which he had previously shown he had. Instead of planning imaginative and unexpected offensives, he turns into a commander desperately looking at the strategic map wondering when the next blow will come from

Hitler will always, naturally considering the power and final authority he possessed over Germany, receive most of the blame. While he was the Supreme Commander and the buck always stops with the person in charge, he is not the only individual who deserves blame, and he certainly is not the only individual who caused Germany to lose the Second World War.

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153 Trevor-Roper, H.R. Hitler’s War Directives p.xxiv
His generals and advisors also deserve to receive a fair share of the criticism. However, his Generals were successfully able to deflect any criticism onto Hitler which allowed them to maintain their reputations and create a barrier between the crimes of the Nazis and the gallantry of the Army and its commanders. This, along with the numerous crimes committed in Hitler’s name was enough for people to accept that Hitler caused the German defeat and that the Generals were doing all that they could, but were always fighting with one hand tied behind their back as they had to deal with Hitler.
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