

CONCLUSION

This review of turning points in the Second World War challenges two widely held impressions of the war: first, that the conflict followed a well-marked, if often rocky, road to an Allied victory which was in the long run inevitable; and second, that the war consisted only of a long and bloody slogging match, punctuated by heroic battles but decided by attrition rather than by any feats of leadership or decisive battles. When we look at turning points, on the contrary, it appears that, so far from an Allied victory being a certainty, there were stages, even as late as 1944, when the balance of the conflict might well have tilted in favour of the other side. And while there were indeed long and gruelling battles, with appalling casualties, notably on the Russian front, there were also distinct events (or sometimes series of events) that reveal a pattern in the war.

First there was a period between mid-1940 and early 1942 that established the geographical shape of the war, and also outlined some of its characteristics. The German victory over France in May and June 1940 set the territorial framework of the war in western and central Europe for the next four years. The Germans dominated the whole of western Europe, and would have to be driven out of their conquered territories if they were to lose the war. But their victory in the west was incomplete. They failed to win the aerial Battle of Britain in the summer and autumn of 1940, and Britain survived, preserving a stronghold of resistance that was a beacon for opposition to Germany in Europe, and eventually offering the United States a base from which they could mount an invasion of the continent.

Next, in Operation BARBAROSSA (in the second half of 1941) Germany conquered vast territories in the Soviet Union, but failed to gain their final objectives – the capture of Moscow proved beyond their reach;

and the Soviet armies, despite terrible losses, remained intact and were able to launch a counter-offensive at the end of the year. As a result, the geography of the war in eastern Europe was settled in its turn, and the great Soviet-German struggle became a permanent feature of the war as a whole.

In the Pacific and East Asia, Japan struck at the American fleet at Pearl Harbor in December 1941, and then exploited its command of the oceans to conquer the whole of South-East Asia, with vast resources of oil, minerals and rubber. Japan also established, through groups of islands stretching from the North to the South Pacific, a long defensive line, which the Americans would have to breach if they were to attack Japan and win the war.

Taken together, these events in Europe and the Pacific marked the initial triumph of Germany in the west and Japan in the east, and also the limits of that triumph. The geographical framework of the war was settled in the almost two years between mid-1940 and early 1942. The Germans and Japanese had conquered territories where their grip would have to be broken if they were to be defeated in the war. But at the same time Britain and the Soviet Union had escaped defeat and begun to strike back; and the Americans too had held on and were setting out to develop their immense industrial and military resources for a counter-stroke. The framework thus set was to last until 1944, and in some cases until 1945.

There followed a period, from mid-1942 to mid-1943, in which the balance of power tilted away from Germany and Japan and in favour of the Allies, and it gradually became clear which side was going to win. Among the turning points that marked this phase of the war, the Battle of Midway Island in June 1942 was the sharpest of all, in that the decisive event could almost be timed to a specific ten minutes on 4 June 1942, when the domination of the Japanese aircraft-carrier fleet was broken, never to be restored. In the German-Soviet conflict, the Battle of Stalingrad between July 1942 and February 1943 destroyed the reputation of invincibility that had so far surrounded the German armies, and established a Soviet superiority which was never subsequently lost. This was a tremendous military and political victory, even though the Germans still held large areas of Soviet territory from which they were hard to dislodge. The Battle of the Atlantic between the Allied convoys and the German U-boats was a long and hard-fought struggle, which in one form or another lasted for most of the war; but its turning point was clearly marked in May 1943, when Admiral Dönitz withdrew his U-boats from the North Atlantic, never to

return in any strength. The fruits of this sudden victory were gathered over the following 12 months, as men and supplies crossed the ocean from America and Canada to Britain, building up the forces that were to invade France in 1944.

Meanwhile, a shift in the balance of power of a different character took place in late 1942 and early 1943, when the Germans and Japanese were decisively out-built by the factories and shipyards of their Allied opponents. In numbers of weapons and in the weight of war material and shipbuilding, the Allies established a superiority that was certain to be decisive *as long as* other non-material factors – morale, determination and unity – held firm.

By the end of this period of shifting balance, it became plain that the Germans and Japanese could certainly not win the war; but it was not yet sure that the Allies would win it, and exactly how they could do so. In Europe there was a severe strategic test to be passed – the seaborne invasion of France in the summer of 1944, an operation of immense difficulty and complexity. The Allies pulled it off, achieving a crucial success when the Germans still had a good chance of defeating the landing forces and driving them back into the sea. Politically, the three Allied powers had to grapple with the difficulties of coalition warfare, which increased in intensity as victory grew closer, and the unifying demands of survival gave way to competition for advantage in the post-war world. It was always possible that the alliance might crack under the strain, as Hitler hoped that it would; but in the event the three-power conferences at Teheran in late 1943 and Yalta in early 1945 enabled the Allies to maintain enough unity to carry the war through to a victorious conclusion.

Finally, the end of the war in the Pacific brought the whole conflict to an end, and marked the great transition from war to peace. The actual change was strangely slow in coming about. Militarily and materially, Japan was defeated by mid-July 1945, but refused to admit this until mid-August. Even the tremendous blows of the atomic bombs at Hiroshima and Nagasaki earlier in August and the Soviet entry into the Pacific war took time to sink in, and Japan was eventually compelled to surrender. But eventually the bombing stopped and the guns fell silent. The world emerged into something that was perhaps not quite peace but was certainly better than war.

Some of the turning points that brought about the Allied victory included a psychological and even a moral dimension of the highest importance. The Battle of Britain, for example, had a profound and lasting

effect on the British people, creating within them a confidence and determination that carried them through a long and exhausting war. The great air battle was fought by the few, but its effects were felt by many, and for a long time. In a rather similar way, the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor instilled in the American people an implacable resolve to punish their assailant, employing the full resources of their armed forces and war production, and using any degree of force that became available. On the Russian front, the Battle of Stalingrad marked a turning point for Soviet morale, breeding a certainty that the war could in fact be won, however great the German successes in the past. In all these cases the elements of public opinion and morale were as important as the material factors – perhaps even more so.

In these ways the apparently separate turning points established a pattern in the war, and determined its outcome – victory for the Allies and defeat for Germany and Japan. But what did it mean to win or lose a war of such an appalling scale and nature? The death of millions, whether soldiers or civilians; the destruction of whole cities; the flight of refugees, again in millions – does it make sense to describe these horrifying events in terms of victory or defeat? On the losing side, Germany and Japan had suffered immense material damage, mainly from air attack. Both were occupied by foreign troops, and both had their political systems reconstructed from outside. For some time, they lost their status as independent states. But in some respects there was only one victor, even on the winning side. The Soviet Union had suffered immense loss of life, and a fall in the number of births, with consequences for the population that inevitably stretched far into the future. Large parts of the country had undergone the ravages of German invasion and Soviet reconquest – some territories became battlefields four times in the course of the war. Britain was not invaded, but endured bombardment from the air and became the first target in the world for attack by rockets. The British people were worn down and exhausted by six years of war, and the country was left bankrupt and economically dependent upon the United States. Both the Soviet Union and Britain had won the war, but suffered effects that were in some ways as grave as if they had lost it. In the next few years they witnessed the disconcerting sight of their defeated opponents flourishing economically to a degree that they could not match. Even victory began to wear a hollow look.

Only the United States emerged as a material victor from the war. The country had not been invaded or bombed. Military casualties were far smaller

than those suffered by the Soviets – 274,000 against at least ten million, probably more. The American economy thrived during the war, largely through the stimulus provided by the demands of war itself. The United States emerged as a great military power, and for a time the only possessor of nuclear weapons. It was all a new and somewhat heady experience.

In the event, most of the victors had to find the fruits of their victory in non-material terms. There was a strong sense among all the Allied peoples that they were fighting in a war of good against evil – a ‘good war’ in a phrase that embodied an accepted truth. The major purposes of the war in Europe were to destroy Nazi tyranny and liberate the continent from German oppression. These aims were in large part achieved; though this success looked less convincing when the victorious alliance included the Stalinist regime in the Soviet Union, which oppressed its own people and imposed its own form of communist dictatorship on the countries that it controlled. ‘Liberation’ for the Poles meant that they exchanged one form of domination for another.

Even so, one result of the war was real enough. Over large parts of Europe, to paraphrase one of Churchill’s speeches, the curse of Hitler was lifted from the brows of men. The victors had not attained a golden age, or founded a new Jerusalem – though some of them had tried; but in an imperfect world the conclusive defeat of Nazism was no small achievement.

The results of the war, for good or ill, arose from its turning points. The Battle of Britain, the Battle of the Atlantic and the Normandy landings together decided that the British and Americans would control western Europe at the end of the war; while the Battle of Stalingrad and the two conferences at Teheran and Yalta secured the domination of eastern Europe for the Soviet Union. In the Pacific, the American victories over Japan imposed an American peace in that country. Turning points had established the shape of the war and decided its issue, and they then did much to shape the peace.