

SEALING THEIR FATE

The Twenty-Two Days
That Decided World War II

DAVID DOWNING

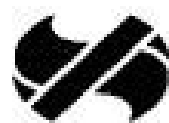


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SEALING THEIR FATE

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That Decided World War II

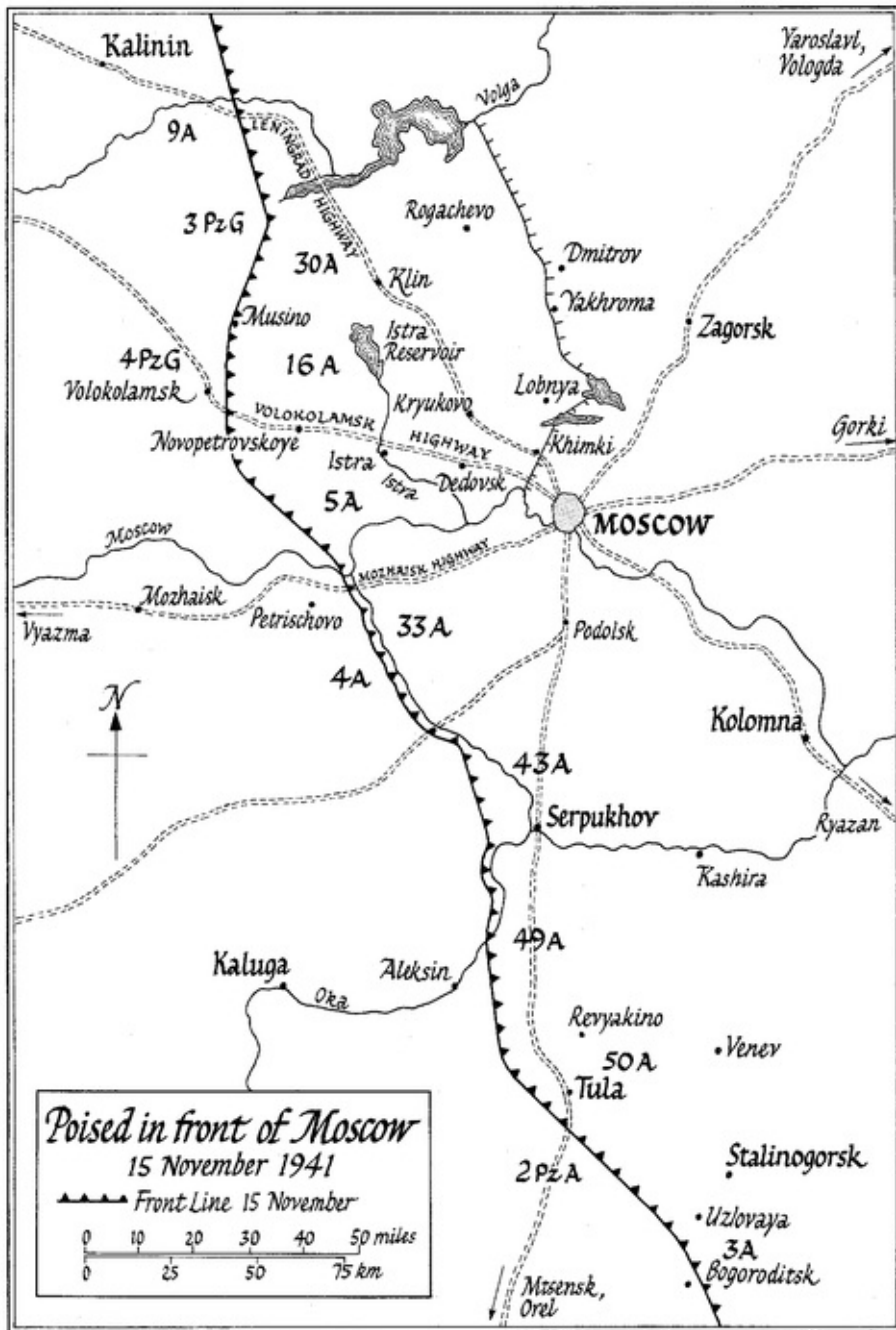
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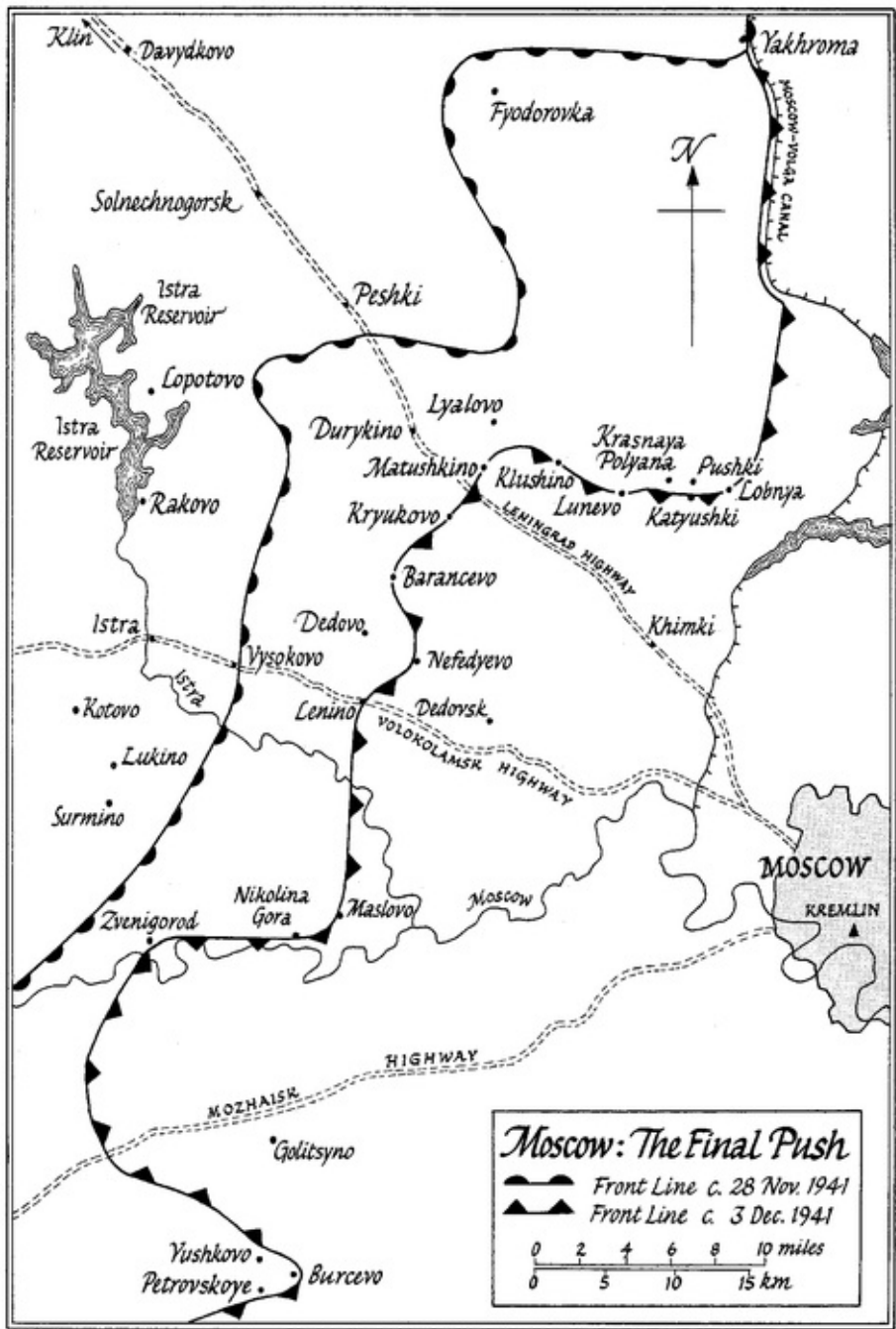


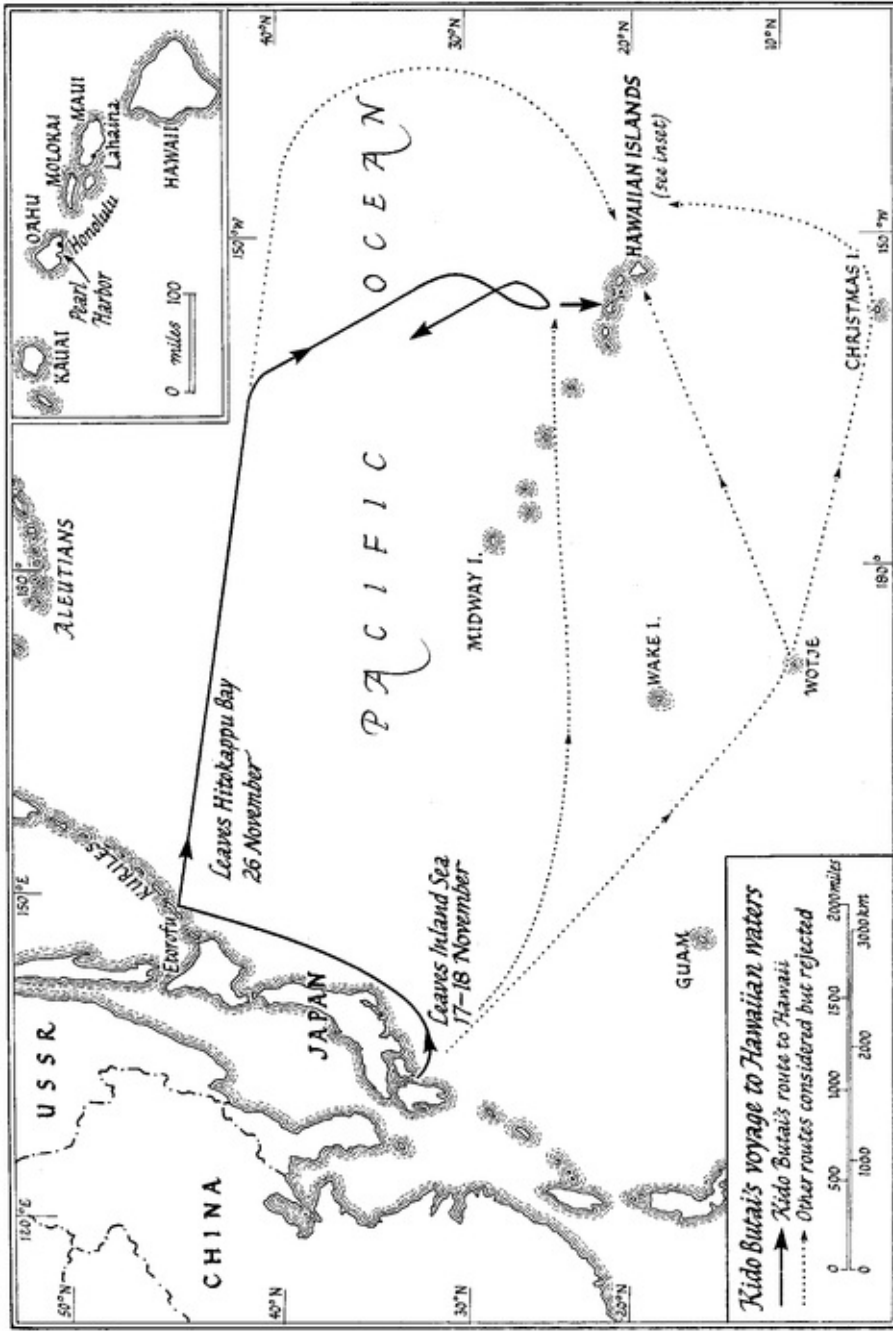
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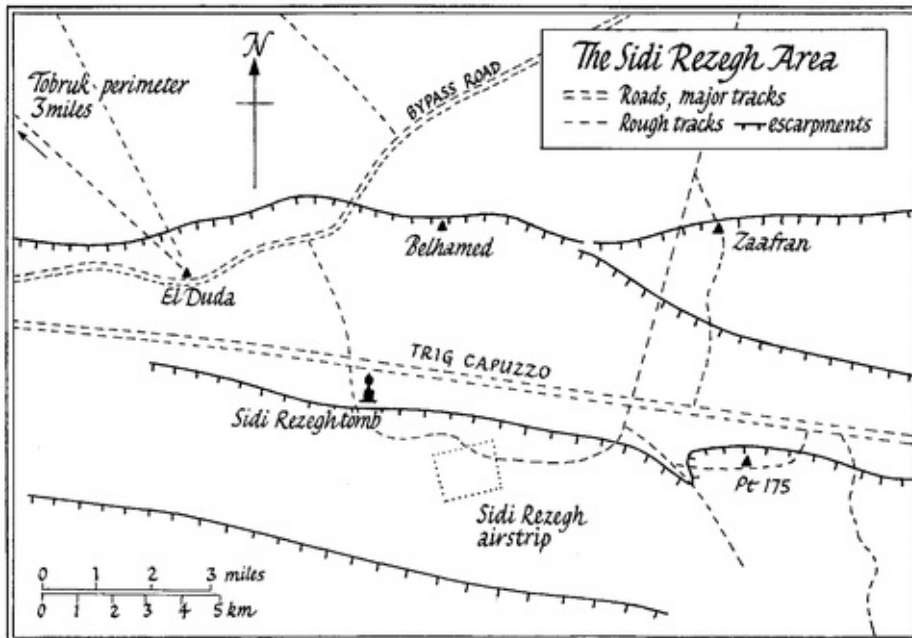
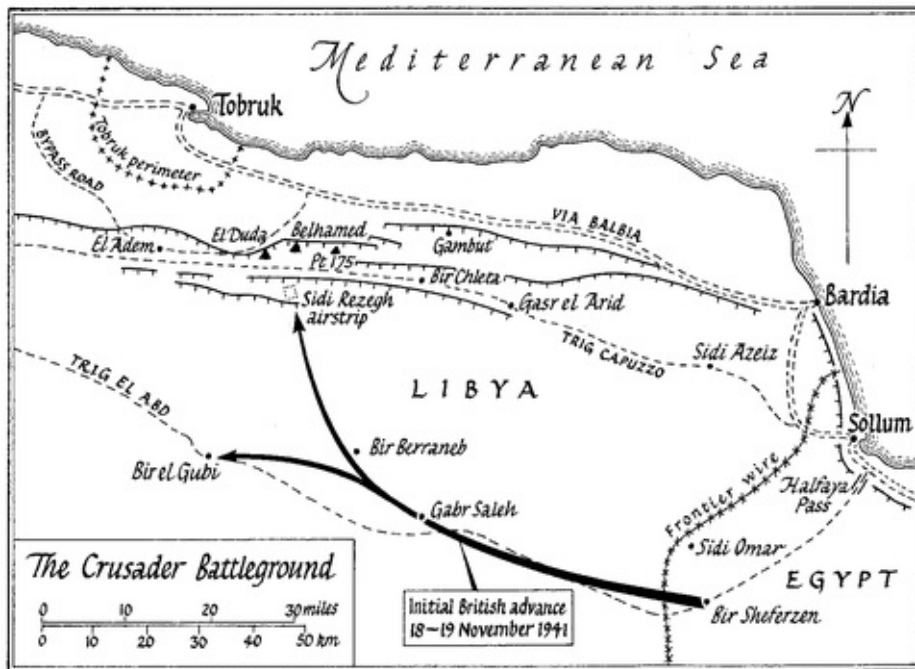
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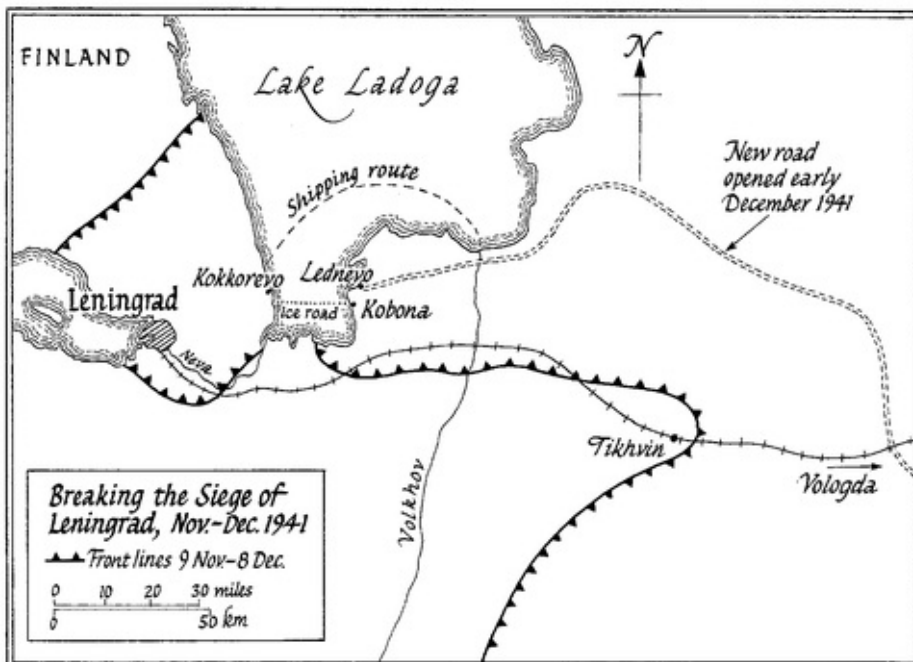
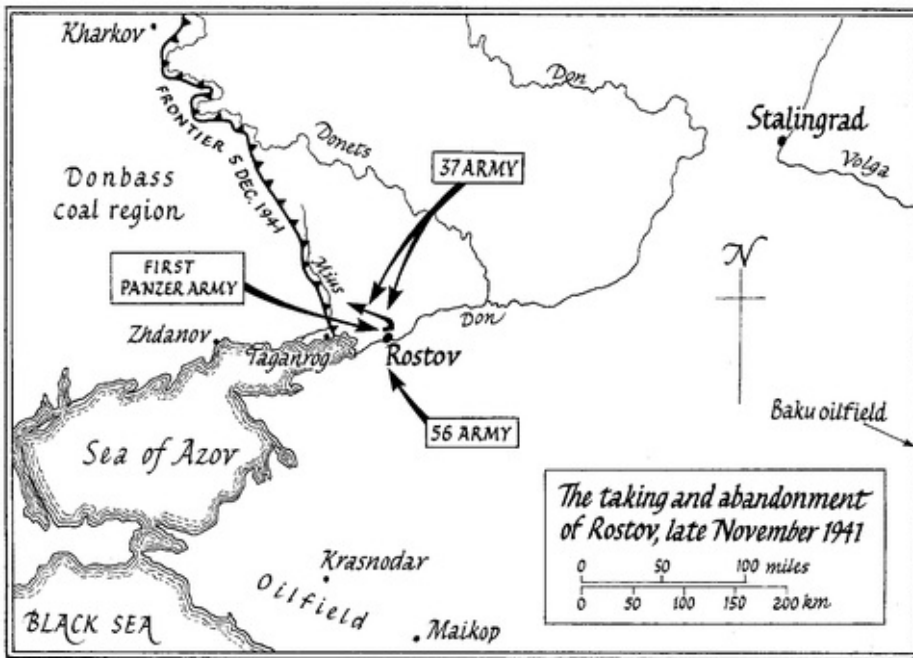
For my American parents-in-law, Bill and Betty Gilmore, who were married during these three weeks and then separated for almost four years by their country's sudden involvement in the war

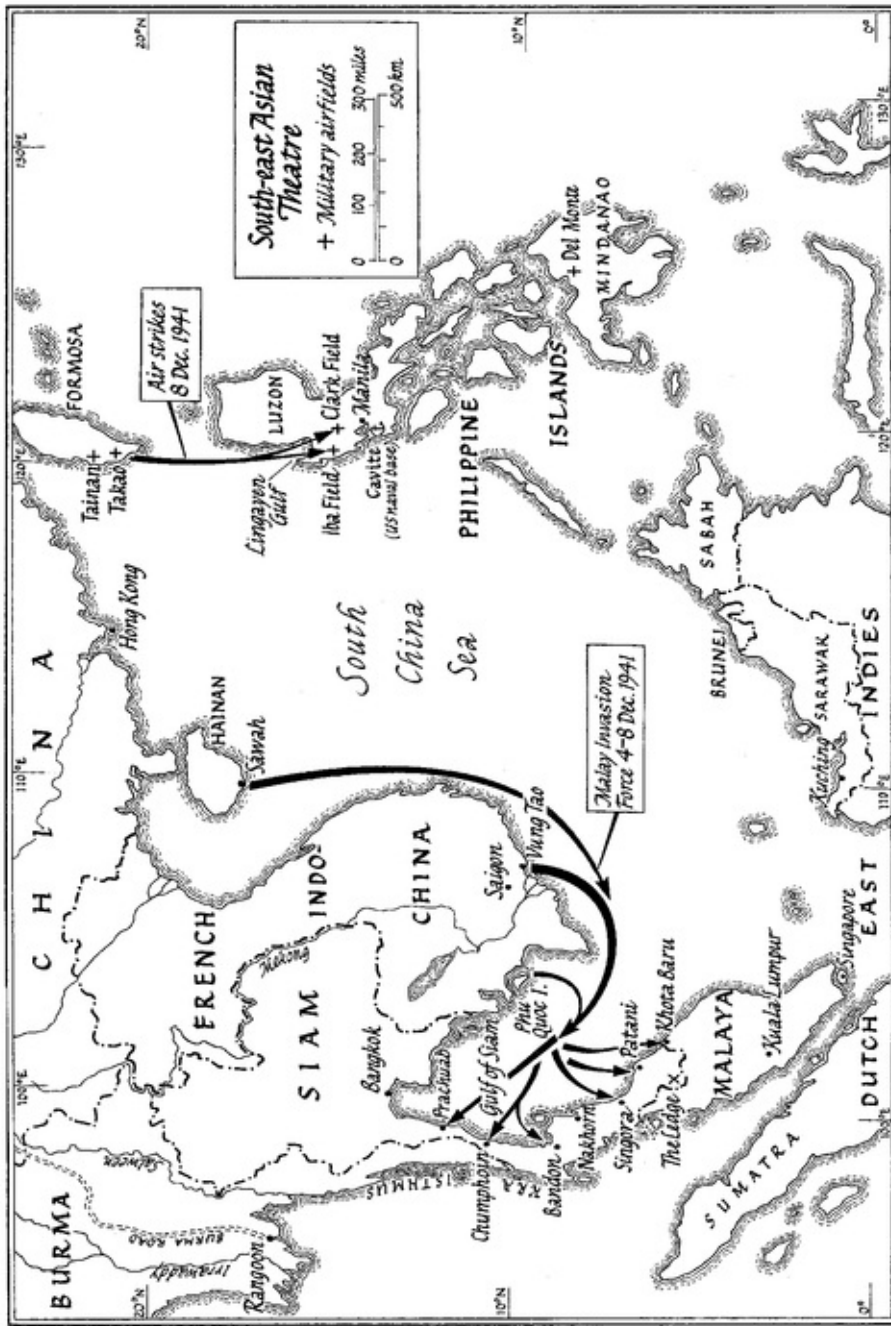












PROLOGUE

November 1941. The war in Europe had been under way for two years and two months. In that time Germany's armed forces had dismembered Poland, before turning west against Denmark, Norway, Holland, Belgium, Luxembourg and France. All had been occupied, leaving France's British ally to flee back across the English Channel. A German invasion of the British Isles was contemplated for the early autumn of 1940, but was indefinitely postponed when Göring's Luftwaffe failed to secure the essential control of the skies. Stalemated in the west, Adolf Hitler decided that the only road to British defeat led east. With Stalin's Soviet Union subjugated, and its vast resources - most notably of oil and grain - at Germany's command, he would have the power to face down both Britain and its fast-arming friend across the Atlantic. On 22 June 1941, following a Balkan side-trip to punish Yugoslavian defiance and prevent British intervention in Greece, Hitler took the plunge and invaded the Soviet Union. Success was swift in coming: millions of Soviets soldiers were killed or captured, thousands of tanks and planes destroyed. By mid-July the German panzers had advanced two-thirds the way to Moscow.

There was, however, no end in sight - Nazi brutality ensured that neither individual soldiers nor the regime in Moscow were offered any incentive to surrender. Soviet industry was moved east beyond German reach, further millions drafted into the Red Army. In late July the Wehrmacht, constrained by the increasing logistical difficulties inherent in operating so far from its bases, was forced to choose between taking the Ukraine and taking Moscow. Hitler opted for the former's grain, and the prospect of seizing the Caucasus oilfields which lay beyond. Another huge victory ensued, but the time taken and the wear caused to the motorized forces, meant that the march on Moscow could only resume in late September. Early successes were choked off by the autumn rains, and the adverse conditions which these created for motorized warfare. Further advances would be possible once the ground froze in November, but only for a few short weeks, until the first heavy snowfalls once again rendered movement next to impossible.

Many German military leaders doubted the wisdom of resuming the advance, but none offered a coherent alternative. Time was not on Nazi Germany's side. As the German population and war economy struggled to keep pace with the Wehrmacht's needs, German military strength was eroding both absolutely and relatively. If Moscow was not taken in these few weeks, the chances were high that it never would be. And if Moscow was not taken the war was effectively lost.

As far as the German political and military leadership were concerned, the war in Russia dwarfed all other aspects of their global struggle. In North Africa and the Mediterranean the chances of inflicting a major and perhaps decisive defeat on Britain had been allowed to slip by. Three German divisions under Rommel had been sent to save the Italian forces in North Africa, but he lacked the planes (needed in Russia) or the U-boats (needed in the Atlantic) to safeguard his Mediterranean lifeline, and without adequate supplies a limited success - like the capture of Tobruk - was the best he could hope for. The British, on the other hand, had few problems supplying their army in North Africa, and were about to launch a major offensive. Over the next three weeks, Crusader would demonstrate the

logistics were much more influential in deciding battles than brilliant generalship, well-designed weapons or technically proficient soldiers.

Between Russia and the English Channel, the war was only beginning. British bombing of Germany was sporadic and largely ineffective, and resistance movements in the occupied countries were, with the notable exception of those in Yugoslavia, still gathering in the shadows. While Russia's Jews were being slaughtered in their hundreds of thousands by execution squads, the future of Western and Central Europe's Jews - persecuted, ghettoized, but not yet killed in huge numbers - was about to be set in bureaucratic stone.

Six thousand miles to the east, another war had been under way for four years and four months. An armed clash at the Marco Polo Bridge south of Beijing in July 1937 had been used by the Japanese Army to justify an all-out invasion of central and southern China. Most of the major cities had fallen quickly, but further victories proved harder and harder to come by. By the summer of 1941 over 200,000 Japanese soldiers had given their lives for what looked increasingly like a forlorn hope. Reasoning that British and American aid to the Chinese was the main stumbling-block to their success, the Japanese sought to block the supply by occupying Indochina. The American reaction - embargoes on scrap iron and fuel which would eventually immobilize Japan's armed forces - left the Japanese in an even bigger hole. The leaders in Tokyo had a choice to make: climb out with hands held high or keep on digging. The former was out of the question.

MONDAY 17 NOVEMBER

Soon after sunrise the battleship *Nagato*, flagship of Admiral Isoroku Yamamoto, weighed anchor on Iwakuni and set sail for Saeki Bay on the eastern coast of Kyushu. The voyage across Japan's Inland Sea took around five hours, and it was past one o'clock when *Nagato* rounded the northern lip of the bay and the scattered ships of *Kido Butai*, the Japanese First Air Fleet, came into view.

At around 15.00 a small boat ferried Yamamoto and his staff officers across to the carrier *Akagi*, flagship of the First Air Fleet's commander-in-chief, Admiral Chuichi Nagumo. A hundred or so key officers from the other ships were already waiting on the *Akagi* flight deck to hear Yamamoto's farewell address. Unlike most of the twenty thousand men they commanded, these officers knew where *Kido Butai* was headed, and why. Many, like Nagumo and his chief of staff, Rear Admiral Ryunosuke Kusaka, had struggled long and hard to dissuade Yamamoto from proceeding with the operation, and, though the time for voicing them had passed, enormous doubts remained.

If anyone expected a gung-ho address from Yamamoto, eager for the fight and contemptuous of the enemy, they were disappointed. Addressing the ranks of white-uniformed men on the wind-blown flight deck, the commander-in-chief eschewed heady rhetoric and seemed less interested in inspiring his subordinates than in deflating any residual overconfidence. Japan had defeated many worthy opponents in the past, he said, but the Americans would be the toughest of them all. The fleet was relying on surprise, but it was always possible that the enemy would be waiting for them, and they might well have to fight their way to the target. This should not deter them - it was, after all, the custom of bushido to select an equal or stronger opponent.

Scanning the faces of Yamamoto's listeners, his chief of staff registered 'unshakable loyalty, determined resolution, even a degree of ferocity. But they were all self-composed. We cannot but expect some damage to us, yet I pray by the grace of heaven they will succeed in their objective.'¹

All adjourned to the wardroom for a sombre farewell feast. The traditional dried cuttlefish were consumed for happiness, handfuls of walnuts for victory. Glasses were raised to the glory of the Emperor. Before returning to the *Nagato*, Yamamoto surprised and pleased the assembled officers with an impromptu expression of confidence in the outcome.

An hour or so later Nagumo and Kusaka paid the return visit courtesy required, and drank a last toast to Operation Z's success. On their way back to *Akagi* they could see the carriers *Soryu* and *Hiryu* already under way, heading for the mouth of the darkening bay with their four destroyer escorts. Other ships followed at regular intervals through the evening, and aboard *Nagato* many of the crew lined the main deck to watch and wave them goodbye. Yamamoto was one of them, watching each ship through his binoculars until her silhouette faded into the horizon.

Akagi and her two-destroyer escort were the last to leave, weighing anchor just before midnight. With lights out and radios disabled to prevent the accidental transmission of signals, they slipped o

into the broad Pacific, hopefully lost to the eyes and ears of the enemy.

Earlier that Monday, the Japanese liner *Taiyo Maru* had arrived back in Yokohama from Honolulu bearing three intelligence officers and a wealth of information about ocean conditions and American military preparedness. They were collected by launch before the liner docked and rushed by car to the Navy Ministry in Tokyo, where high-ranking members of the Naval General Staff, Operations Section and Intelligence were anxiously waiting to hear their report.

Lieutenant-Commander Suguru Suzuki did most of the talking. After leaving Yokohama on 2 October, ostensibly on a purely commercial voyage, the liner had taken an unusual north-easterly route for the first couple of days, and then followed *Kido Butai's* intended route across the normally empty reaches of the northern Pacific. One of the three agents had been on deck every hour of the voyage, noting down the weather and sea conditions, constantly scanning the horizon for other vessels. The only storm had been short, and the *Taiyo Maru* had been less than two hundred miles from Oahu when the first American plane appeared in the sky.

During their five days at anchor in Honolulu, the agents had stayed aboard the liner. Nagao Kita, the Japanese consul general, had visited them on the first morning and taken ashore the Navy Ministry list of over a hundred questions, covering everything from the American fleet's weekend routine to the precise location of each and every military installation on the islands. Over the next few days, Kita had smuggled written answers past the American security guards with what seemed indecent ease: the various police and military agencies had all been too busy checking arriving and departing passengers to concern themselves with Japanese officialdom. When the liner left on 5 November, most of the questions had been answered. The *Taiyo Maru* had followed *Kido Butai's* intended route of return, on a more southerly course this time, close to the American outpost of Midway. The sea had been just as empty, the weather and conditions even better than on the outward voyage.

The mission had clearly been a success, but the more sanguine members of Suzuki's audience were not overly impressed. Many of the key questions remained unanswered. A single liner could apparently cross the northern Pacific unobserved, but a fleet of more than thirty warships? There was no definite information about American reconnaissance sweeps, no guarantee that the fleet would not be betrayed by a chance encounter with a submarine or merchantman. There was no surety that the American carriers - or any of the enemy's other capital ships, the battleships and heavy cruisers - would be in harbour when the attack was launched. It was still, as many of them had always insisted, a terrible gamble.

Still, much information of use to the task force had been gathered, and Suzuki was sent home in a pack for another trip. He would head north next day on the battleship *Hiei*, bound for *Kido Butai's* final assembly point in Etorofu's Hitokappu Bay, to brief Nagumo and the flight leaders.

Kido Butai's attack on Pearl Harbor was one of three major Japanese offensives provisionally scheduled for the same twenty-four hours. It would be 7 December in Hawaii, but further west, across the International Date Line, it would be 8 December when Japanese forces attacked on the one hand Thailand and northern Malaya, and on the other the Philippines.

To say that the British and American authorities in Malaya and the Philippines were expecting the attacks would be something of an overstatement. They were expecting the Japanese to try something or other at some indeterminate time in the future, but in all other respects wishful thinking was the order of the day. Neither the British nor the Americans were ready, and both managed to convince themselves that the Japanese would wait until they were. In the Philippines, the American C-in-C Douglas MacArthur, had recently told the newly appointed head of his air force, General Lewis H. Brereton, that a Japanese attack was unlikely before April. Brereton's early impressions of his new command's readiness had been far from encouraging, but he had hardly begun setting things right when MacArthur sent him off to check the facilities for forwarding future reinforcements across the south-western Pacific.

Brereton was in Australia on 17 November, a long way from the morning exercise being played out over Luzon. The 93rd Bomb Squadron's B-17s launched a mock attack on their Clark Field airbase some sixty miles north of Manila, and the 20th Pursuit Squadron's P-40Bs rose to intercept them. The latter found the former, but their engines proved so underpowered that the B-17s just left them behind. 'Our planes,' as one interceptor pilot wrote home to his sister, 'are not good enough to fight with.'²

A further five time zones to the west, Lieutenant Kurt Gruman of the German 87th Infantry Division was enjoying another clear sunny day in the countryside north-west of Moscow. The myriad bushes and trees draped with glittering snow and ice were 'almost like a fairy tale', only subverted by 'the bitter thunder of guns' in the distance.³ During the day he and his comrades were able to stand the cold, but at night it was beginning to torture them.

The temperature in the Moscow region had suddenly dropped around 7 November and seemed prone to further plummeting falls every few days. Wheeled movement was now possible both off-road and on, but only for a limited period - December's heavy snow would prove as much of a handicap to mobility as the late-autumn mud. And in every other respect the arrival of winter was bad news for the Germans. Their army had not been equipped to function in such temperatures. Weapons, tanks and lorries, even trains, all struggled to cope, while the soldiers were still wearing denim tunics and trousers and steel-soled boots that conducted the cold. The winter clothing was supposedly on its way but no one seemed to know when it would arrive. Frostbite was rapidly becoming commonplace, and stories began circulating of German night sentries found frozen solid when morning came.

It was almost as cold in the gloomy East Prussian forest six hundred miles to the west, but the two purpose-built compounds occupied by the Führer, his immediate entourage and those who were supposedly running his Russian campaign were well heated, and a true appreciation of conditions in the field required either imagination or a willingness to listen. Neither quality was much in evidence in mid-November 1941, either in the Wolfsschanze or at the nearby OKH (*Oberkommando des Heeres*, the Army High Command) headquarters. On their wall and table maps Moscow looked tantalizingly close, only fifty miles from the German front line, the sort of distance the panzers had been devouring in a couple of days a few months earlier. It was realized that conditions in November were more difficult than they had been in July, but Operation *Typhoon's* October surge towards Moscow had been slowed by supply problems and mud, not the Russians. Now that the ground was hard again, a fifty-mile advance was surely achievable.

Hitler had made his decision, and OKH had turned it into an operational plan. On 12 November

Chief of the General Staff General Franz Halder had boarded his personal train at Angerburg and journeyed overnight to Orsha, where Army Group Centre's commander, Field Marshal Fedor von Bock, had his headquarters. The chiefs of staff of all the German armies and army groups on the Eastern Front had been summoned to the conference which took place that day in a siding beside the town station. Many came expecting to debate the wisdom of a further offensive in 1941, but they were disappointed. Comments and questions were welcome, but the decision had already been taken.

Halder's presentation was unconvincing. He emphasized the enemy's weakness and supposed lack of reserves, but he and his audience were depressingly aware that their actual intelligence of Soviet troop movements reached little further east than Moscow. Halder also ignored or glossed over his own army's supply difficulties and reserve shortfalls. When the Quartermaster Field Office Chief protested that von Bock's armies could not be supplied as far forward as Moscow, Halder accepted his calculations yet insisted that OKH did 'not like to stand in Bock's way, if he thinks he can succeed'.⁴

Von Bock, it turned out, was Halder's only powerful ally at this meeting. The chiefs of staff listened with incredulity to the maximum and minimum advances which Hitler and OKH were now demanding in the expected six-week window of opportunity which lay between mud and deep snow. The maximum line ran from Vologda to Stalingrad via Gorky, two hundred and fifty miles beyond Moscow, the minimum a less ambitious but still breathtaking hundred miles beyond the Soviet capital.

The chiefs had their say. Army Groups North and South were opposed to any further offensive. Von Bock's chief of staff, General Hans von Greiffenberg, loyally refused to rule out an advance, but was keen to point out the difficulties. The chiefs of staff of the three infantry armies and three panzer groups, which made up Army Group Centre, all poured scorn on the proposed objectives. This was not May and they were not fighting in France, one exasperated chief told Halder.

It made no difference. Halder handed over the written orders, and the conference broke up. On 17 November the left wing of Army Group Centre would begin its push, the infantry of General Adolf Strauss's 9th Army moving east to cover the left flank of General Georg-Hans Reinhardt's 3rd Panzer Group as it advanced towards Klin and the Volga Reservoir. Further south, General Erich Hoepner's 4th Panzer Group would attack General Konstantin Rokossovsky's 30th Army on either side of the Volokolamsk highway leading into Moscow. On the right wing the German forces needed more preparation time, but the 2nd Army and 2nd Panzer Army would be in motion by 17 November, the former guarding the right flank of the latter as it swung in behind Moscow for the intended rendezvous with Reinhardt. Almost due west of the Soviet capital, the 4th Army would hold, pinning the Soviet forces that faced it while the panzer groups wreaked havoc in their rear. It had worked before, and Halder and von Bock clung to the precedents - not, perhaps, because they really believed it would work again, but because the alternatives were too awful to contemplate.

By that morning of 17 November the armoured spearheads of the 3rd and 4th Panzer Groups had punched several gaps in the defensive lines entrusted to the Soviet 30th and 16th Armies. General Georgi Zhukov, in overall command of the armies defending Moscow, had ordered his subordinates to launch probing attacks on the German infantry divisions which the German panzers had outpaced, hoping to find a vulnerable spot, anything to slow the gathering German tide. One such mission was allotted to the 44th Mongolian Cavalry Division, which had only just arrived from Tashkent in Central

The spot selected for its probing attack was a section of the front around fifteen miles north of Volokolamsk. It was held by the German 116th Infantry Division, with forward units stretched out along the slight ridge that ran east of the villages of Musino and Partenkovo. Three artillery batteries were deployed among them.

Dawn was a hazy affair, but the sun soon burned off the mist, and by 09.00 the German soldiers had a clear view across the mile of snow-dusted field that lay in front of them. At around 10.00 a forward observer spotted Red Army horsemen in the wood beyond, and the German infantry and artillery units were put on alert. An hour and a half later, four light tanks, T-26s, emerged from the trees and slowly advanced into the field. The Germans, guessing that this was just a probe, held their fire. Twenty minutes more, and a large cavalry force began emerging from the wood, forming up in long ranks on the far edge of the field.

‘It was an indescribably beautiful sight,’ one German soldier later recalled, ‘as on this clear and sunny winterscape, stirrup to stirrup, bent over their horses’ bodies and with brandished flashing sabres, the cavalry regiment raced in full attack across the field. It was as if the age of Mongol assaults had returned.’⁵ Other Germans were more astonished than entranced: ‘we could not believe that the enemy intended to attack us across this broad field, which lay open like a parade ground before us.’⁶

But they did. The artillerymen opened up with their 105-millimetre howitzers and quickly found their range. Men and horses were blown to pieces, spraying broken flesh and blood across the white snow. Panicked horses ran wild across the smoke-covered field, their discarded riders easy prey for the German machine guns. Those who could turned tail and ran.

‘It was,’ the second German soldier remembered, ‘impossible to imagine that after the annihilation of the first squadrons the nightmare sight would be repeated.’⁷ But it was. The Soviet cavalry reformed for a second charge, this time supported by two horse-drawn 76.2-millimetre howitzers of their own. It made no difference. Three hundred and fifty 105-millimetre shells tore into horsemen and guns, forcing the survivors back to the shelter of the trees. Hundreds of Red Army soldiers had died, and not a single German had received as much as a scratch. Few victories, in this or any other war, had been so comprehensive.

And yet. That evening, huddling for warmth in what shelter they could find, the German soldiers outside Musino might have asked each other some deeply disturbing questions. What sort of enemy charged across an open field brandishing sabres at machine guns and howitzers? A stupid one? Or one that was willing to sacrifice life upon life from a seemingly inexhaustible supply? And if the latter, how could such a foe be beaten? And what would happen if the day ever came when *he* was the one with the superior weapons?

That night another German division found out. Earlier that morning, 185 miles to the south-east, General Heinz Guderian’s 2nd Panzer Army had launched its offensive. The main attacks were south of the stubbornly held city of Tula, directed north and north-west, with the twin aims of advancing on Moscow and encircling Tula from the rear. The 112th Infantry Division advanced along the trailing right flank of the 24th Panzer Korps, and by nightfall was close to the town of Uzlovaya. The troops

went into bivouac, got as warm as they could and looked forward to a similar advance on the following day.

German reconnaissance had missed the presence of a newly detrained Siberian division in the area and an accompanying armoured brigade with a full roster of the relatively new and highly manoeuvrable T-34s. The 112th Division, working on the assumption that any Red Army units in the area had been thoroughly scattered by the panzer advance, was in for a shock. Shortly before midnight the forward sentries heard engines looming out of the night and soon made out the sloping shadows of around twenty T-34s. The alarm went up, but the division's ability to fight back was seriously limited. For one thing the German 37-millimetre anti-tank guns could take out a T-34 only at point-blank range; for another the gunners found that the packing grease on the shells had frozen solid and had to be scraped off before they would fit into the breech. And all this in darkness, fingers frozen and groggy from sleep, shells exploding amid and around them.

The regular infantry fared no better, their automatic weapons refusing to fire more than single shots. As the waves of Siberian infantry loomed into view behind the tanks, insultingly snug in their quilted white uniforms and felt-lined boots, racing forward and firing guns that actually worked the way they were supposed to, the denim-clad Germans broke and ran.

The panic, Guderian wrote, 'reached back as far as Bogorodisk', several miles to the rear. Earlier that evening, before hearing of the attack, the general had been writing a letter praising his 'brave troops', who were 'seizing all their advantages and are fighting with wonderful endurance despite all their handicaps'. But now perhaps they had reached their limits. The routing of the 112th Division was 'a warning that the combat ability of our infantry was at an end and that they should no longer be expected to perform difficult tasks'.⁸

Around 500 miles to the south of Tula - the German forces in the Soviet Union were now stretched along a 1,000-mile front - Army Group South's 1st Panzer Army had launched its attack across the Mius River that morning. Rostov, with its bridge across the wide River Don, was only forty miles away.

Both Field Marshal Gerd von Rundstedt, who commanded Army Group South, and General Ewald von Kleist, who commanded the 1st Panzer Army, had opposed this offensive. The worsening supply situation, the winter conditions, the general tiredness of soldiers and vehicles, all suggested failure. Rostov might be taken, but holding it would probably prove beyond them. And since the city mattered only as a stepping stone on the road to the Caucasus and its precious oil, its temporary seizure would be futile.

Back in East Prussia, things were seen differently. The oilfields seemed there for the taking, and stepping zones were for stepping on. Nazi Germany had only two major sources of the precious fluide that drove its tanks and planes - the Romanian fields around Ploesti and the synthetic oil plants at home - and they didn't produce enough. Like its future ally Japan, Nazi Germany was condemned to live with the permanent anxiety of running short. The oil of the Caucasus, which would dissolve that anxiety at a stroke, was worth almost any risk.

The first day of the German offensive proved successful enough. Von Kleist's two panzer divisions, with the SS *Leibstandarte* on their right, were almost halfway to Rostov by nightfall, leaving

substantial Red Army units scattered behind them. So far so familiar, it seemed, until the news arrived of a Soviet attack that same day. Marshal Timoshenko, the commander of the Soviet South-Western Front, had been gathering reserves for this moment, and that morning the 9th, 18th and 37th Armies supported by tank brigades, had launched an attack south-westwards, diagonally across the line of the intended German advance. The Soviets advanced ten miles that day, reducing the gap through which the Germans were now supplying their attack towards Rostov. If the city was taken, the takers might find themselves cut off.

At the northern end of the Eastern Front, Leningrad was into its third month of siege. The German Army Group North had cut the city's last rail link with the rest of Russia on 30 August, and its last road link on 9 September. This left the Soviets with only two ways of bringing in food and other much-needed supplies - by air, and by train via Tikhvin and Lednevo for shipping across nearby Lake Ladoga.

The soldiers of Army Group North had reached a point only seven miles from the Winter Palace in the second week of September, but shorn of Hoepner's 4th Panzer Group - transferred to Army Group Centre for Typhoon's assault on Moscow - they could advance no further. Hitler was not concerned. Remorseless aerial bombing and artillery bombardment would reduce the city to rubble; starvation and cold would claim its people. Determined to close every loophole, he ordered Field Marshal Wilhelm von Leeb to use his remaining armour in the taking of Tikhvin, another hundred miles to the east. On 8 November that city fell, and Leningrad's final lifeline with it.

Inside the city conditions rapidly deteriorated. As the temperature dropped, so fuel ran out, silencing the factories and immobilizing public transport. The bread ration had already been reduced three times, and on 13 November it was cut again, to 300 grammes a day - around 4 slices - for those still working, 150 grammes for those whose only occupation was keeping themselves warm. And even those grammes now contained twenty-five per cent of 'edible' cellulose. The city's daily consumption of flour had dropped by more than two-thirds in two months. Without a new lifeline Hitler would have his wish, and three million people would starve to death.

Lake Ladoga froze over every winter, and the idea of replacing the shipping route with a road laid across the ice had been discussed in October. The fall of Tikhvin, and the loss of rail connection which this involved, added another giant task to the Soviet list: the construction, in winter, of a 220-mile road through untamed forest and swamp to reach that section of the railway still in Soviet hands. While thousands were drafted in to pursue this project, others set to work building warehouses at either end of the projected ice road, and scientists in Leningrad puzzled over the details of travel on ice. How fast and how thick did water freeze at what temperatures? How many inches of ice were needed to support a fully loaded one-ton truck?

By the second full week of November the lake was beginning to freeze, and an hour before dawn on 17 November Lieutenant Leonid Sokolov led the roped-together members of the 88th Construction Battalion out across the ice from the lakeside town of Kokkorevo. Their destination was Kobon, twenty miles across the bay, at the eastern end of the intended 'road'. They were all wearing lifebelts and camouflage white, and carrying both weapons and ice tools.

It was a sunny day, but the wind was piercingly cold. The men ventured out across the creaking lake, leaving stakes with flags at hundred-metre intervals, making frequent stops to check the

thickness of the ice. It was four inches thick in most places, enough, or so the scientists had told them, to support a riderless horse, but as they neared the halfway point it grew thinner and finally disappeared in a large circle of open water. They slogged their way around its rim, until one man fell through the brittle perimeter and had to be pulled out. Dry clothes had been brought for such an eventuality, and the chain was soon edging gingerly onwards, first to the island of Zelenets, and then to the further shore, which was reached several hours after dark.

Sokolov radioed news of their arrival to Major Mozhayev, his superior in Kokkorevo. Mozhayev passed the good tidings on to Leningrad party headquarters and then, in a fit of glorious optimism, mounted his horse and followed the line of flags out across the frozen lake. Four hours later he, too, was in Kobona.

There might not be enough room on the available eastbound trains for the fuel, ammunition and winter clothing that the German troops desperately needed, but space was always found for the regime's favourite reading matter. The fortnightly *Das Reich* was considered, by its authors at least, essential for the maintenance of morale. How else would the troops know what they were killing and dying for?

The 16 November edition, which was now en route, featured an exhaustive explanation by Joseph Goebbels of the Jews' responsibility for the war. The Propaganda Minister began by reminding his readers of Hitler's prophecy in January 1939 - that if the Jews started another war the result would be 'the destruction of the Jewish race in Europe'. 'We are,' Goebbels added, 'seeing the fulfilment of that prophecy. The Jews are receiving a penalty that is certainly hard, but more than deserved.' Exactly what this penalty was he declined to say. The only punishment mentioned was the recent introduction of compulsory yellow stars for Jews still living in the Reich.

The numerousness of these stars had, Goebbels admitted, been a bit of a surprise to Berlin's non-Jewish citizens - the Jews had been so adept at concealing their presence. 'He had concealed himself, mimicked his surroundings, adopting the colour of the background, adjusted to the environment, in order to wait for the proper moment. Who among us had any idea that the enemy was beside him, that a silent or clever auditor was attending to conversations on the street, in the subway, or in the line outside cigarette shops? There are Jews one cannot recognize by external signs. These are the most dangerous. It always happens that when we take some measure against the Jews, English or American newspapers report it the next day. Even today the Jews still have secret connections to our enemies abroad and use these not only in their own cause, but in all military matters of the Reich as well. The enemy is in our midst.'

For the moment there was little to worry about. But what would happen if Germany lost the war? These 'harmless-looking Jewish chaps would suddenly become raging wolves. They would attack our women and children to carry out revenge.'

The German people needed to keep reminding themselves that this could happen. Because 'if we Germans have a fateful flaw in our national character, it is forgetfulness. This failing speaks well of our human decency and generosity, but not always for our political wisdom or intelligence. We think everyone else is as good natured as we are. The French threatened to dismember the Reich during the winter of 1939/40, saying that we and our families would have to stand in lines before their field kitchens to get something warm to eat. Our army defeated France in six weeks, after which we saw German soldiers giving bread and sausages to hungry French women and children, and gasoline

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