Hitler, as the elected leader of the largest party, became Chancellor of Germany in January 1933. He had come to power because Germany’s democratic politicians could do nothing to relieve the country’s misery. In March he was voted full power by the German Parliament. In a very short time he abolished democracy. Germany, thereafter, was run by Hitler and a small group of acolytes — a parody of Plato’s Republic. With huge political works and international barter deals, Hitler’s finance minister Hjalmar Schacht, ended the depression in Germany in 1936, the best economic performance anywhere. The rest is common knowledge. Hitler was a grand acquisitor seeking more land. His people, he said, needed lebensraum, room to live in. Hitler repudiated the peace treaty that had followed the First World War, stopped paying reparations, re-armed and scared Britain and France into appeasing him, vainly. He swallowed Austria and Czechoslovakia. Then he signed a deal with Russia whereby both attacked Poland and each took half of it. Thereupon, Britain and France declared war on Germany on 1 September 1939.

There followed a period of so-called phoney war when nothing much was happening. Then, in April and May 1940, with unprecedented speed, German forces took Holland, Belgium, Denmark, Norway, and France. A clutch of brilliant German generals had learned the lessons of the First World War: they nullified their opponents’ old fashioned defences by cutting through or around them with tanks, and they paralysed Anglo-French military transportation with dive-bombers.

Winston Churchill became Prime Minister of Great Britain. His spirit and oratory kept the British fighting through desperate times. The heroic Royal Air Force, outnumbered, but guided by radar, gradually beat back a German bombing campaign that was to have been a prelude to an invasion of Britain. President Roosevelt declared that America would be the arsenal of democracy, but by persevering in lonely adversity on land, air, and sea, it was the British who saved the free world.

Mussolini, Italy’s dictator, brought his country into the war on the side of Germany and attacked Greece through Albania in October 1940. The Italians were ignominiously beaten back; as they were, also, when they tried to attack Egypt from Cyrenaica, now Libya, which the Italians had taken from the Turks in 1911. Outnumbered eight to one but with more tanks than their opponents, the British had spectacular successes and captured 135,000 Italian troops out of 300,000.

In 1941, Germany overran Yugoslavia and Greece and attacked the Soviet Union. It was Hitler’s, like Napoleon’s, worst mistake.

Meanwhile Japan, who had invaded China in 1937, had become an ally of Germany, and took French Indochina in the summer of 1941. President Roosevelt froze all Japanese assets in the US and embargoed all shipments of oil and war material to Japan. So the Japanese committed their worst mistake: they attacked and heavily damaged the US fleet at Pearl Harbor, on 7 December 1941. They woke the American giant. The year 1941 was a hinge of fate.

Germany and Japan had successes. The Japanese controlled most of south-east Asia. The Germans almost reached Moscow and the Soviet oil fields, but were stopped. That the USSR eventually repulsed Germany’s attack is almost unbelievable, given what a mess Joseph Stalin, the Soviet dictator, had made of his country. He was — no mistake about it — a grand acquisitor who killed countless innocent people in peacetime to keep the territory he had.

Stalin grabbed more territory after the war. In the grip of a flawed ideology, communism, he collectivized and bureaucratized Soviet agriculture, which thereafter could hardly feed the people — there were huge famines. He nationalized every other economic activity. His central planning totally ignored the laws of supply and demand. Russians used to joke that centralized planning achieved the miracle whereby a Soviet store had nothing the people wanted and everything they did not want. Stalin starved or butchered millions, suspecting them
of disloyalty. Before the Second World War, he even killed his most successful military commanders, men who had distinguished themselves against the Germans in the First World War.

But the Russian people responded magnificently to the German attack, not only on the field of battle, not only by throwing up talented new military commanders, but also by producing sophisticated new weapons. Russian tanks became the most serviceable in the world, with greater range, speed, firepower, armor and fewer breakdowns than any other tank. The surrender of a German army at Stalingrad on 31 January 1943 was a clear omen of Hitler’s eventual defeat. On 5 July 1943, in the battle of the Kursk Salient – the largest tank battle in history – the Soviet forces crushed the Germans and advanced inexorably towards Berlin.

There were other crucial allied victories. The magnificent success of the American fleet at the battle of Midway and the bloody ejection of the Japanese from what they had captured in the Pacific were great military achievements. With American and Canadian help, the British won the long Atlantic battle against German submarines that would otherwise have starved Britain into submission.

Then there was El Alamein, the allied landings in North Africa, the south of France and finally D-Day, 6 June 1944, when American, British, and Canadian troops invaded Normandy. They came ashore through mines, across beaches swept by machine gun fire. The Americans had opted for the toughest beaches with the highest cliffs. Epic battles followed. The Germans were pushed back to their own soil. In May 1945 they surrendered.

Hitler had already committed suicide. He will be remembered as a monster who industrialized death, gassing human beings in so-called bathhouses, cremating them in ovens, 6 million of them. This was the Holocaust. On 20 January 1942, the Germans had completed their preparations for a ‘final solution’, the total extermination of Europe’s Jewish people, among them Jews who had fought bravely for Germany in the First World War. Germany also exterminated gypsies, cripples, the retarded, all for the ‘purity of the race’, a Platonic principle.

From a military point of view, they displayed magnificent fighting qualities, bravery, tactical and strategic skill, endurance. Towards the end, against overwhelming odds, they fought on fiercely. German civilians, under a constant rain of bombs, kept the arms and supplies flowing to the troops. German industrial production at the end of the war was the highest it had ever been – the factories had gone underground. But the honour for which the German officer caste had always cared was irrevocably tarnished by the Holocaust, by machine-gunning survivors of ships sunk by German submarines, and by mass butcheries of captured Polish officers and of the wives and children of resistance fighters (for example, 245 women and 207 children burned alive by the Germans in the French village of Oradour).

A bloody war. There is blame enough for both sides. Allied bomber fleets deliberately dropped incendiaries in a circle around their target which became a blazing funnel, sucking the oxygen out of a German city and asphyxiating civilians in their shelters. The Russians, on German soil, robbed and raped as the Germans had done on Russian soil. Even after the war, starving German girls had to sell their bodies for tins of food to victorious western allied soldiers.

More than 14 million European servicemen on both sides were killed or died of their wounds; 27 million European civilians were killed. The US forces lost 295,000 service men.

Japan surrendered in August 1945 after Hiroshima and Nagasaki were flattened by American atomic bombs. President Truman reasoned that if he didn’t use these bombs, 1 million American servicemen would lose their lives capturing Japan itself. Those who doubt him say that, when the bombs fell, diplomats were negotiating Japan’s surrender. But the Japanese were still fighting. Japanese dead in the war totaled 1,506,000 servicemen and 300,000 civilians. Did the destruction make the idea of a nuclear war among great powers unthinkable? We still hope so.