



D-Day – 70th Anniversary

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THE Second World War contained many dramatic episodes but none was more memorable than the events of 70 years ago being commemorated in France today.

D-Day was the beginning of the liberation of France from Nazis. By the end of June the Allies had broken out of their bridgeheads in Normandy and were chasing the Germans out of France. In August Paris was liberated and, by the end of 1944, Allied armies had reached the Rhine and were poised to invade Germany itself.

This anniversary is particularly poignant as Stalin hailed D-Day as a brilliant success for his western allies: “The history of warfare knows no other similar undertaking in the breadth of its conception, in its gigantic dimensions and mastery of its performance.”

This was praise indeed from the leader of a country that had earlier in the war defeated the Germans in the truly gigantic battles of Leningrad, Moscow, Stalingrad, and Kursk.

The western Allies launched this greatest seaborne invasion in history when on June 6, 1944, an armada of 7,000 assorted ships crossed the English Channel to invade German-occupied France. The fleet arrived off the Normandy coast to begin a massive naval and aerial bombardment of enemy defences. Overnight thousands of paratroopers had already been dropped behind German lines and they were now joined by the first wave of 150,000 troops invading from the sea.

But the Germans did not relinquish their positions easily. On the first day alone the Allies suffered 10,000 casualties. One particular hotspot was that made famous by the film *Saving Private Ryan* — the American landing beach codenamed Omaha, which became a maelstrom of bullets and blood, explosions and injuries.

Although the majority of forces involved in the D-Day landings were American, British, and Canadian, units and representatives of virtually every nation allied to defeat the Nazis were present on the beaches of Normandy. Even though Ireland was neutral during the war, hundreds if not thousands of its citizens volunteered and served in every capacity during the invasion of France — as soldiers, sailors, airmen, paratroopers, nurses, doctors and padres.

Russian-Western differences over events in Ukraine have cast a contemporary political shadow over the anniversary. But the message president Vladimir Putin will be keen to convey is that this anniversary should continue to be a time of unity and reconciliation. Because, for the Russians, D-Day represents the moment when their western Allies finally and wholeheartedly committed themselves to the battle against Nazism. For the previous three years the Soviet Union had borne the brunt of fighting the anti-fascist war, suffering millions of casualties. Now Britain, the US, and the other Allied nations would take on their share of the ground-fighting burden.

D-Day had a long and complicated gestation. It was in the summer of 1941 that the Soviets began calling on the Allies to open a second front in France. They were desperate for any action that would bring some relief from the pressure of the massed German invasion of the Soviet Union that had begun in June. Stalin knew

his British ally could not sustain an invasion of the continent, but he believed even a failed landing would draw German forces away from the Eastern Front.

However, British prime minister Winston Churchill was not prepared to take the risk. Only in 1942 — after the US's entry into the war — did a second front in France become a serious proposition. By then, Churchill's priority was to relieve the British position in North Africa. He persuaded US president Roosevelt to postpone a second front in France in favour of an invasion of French colonies in Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia. The aim was to link up with an attack on German and Italian forces in Libya and Egypt, including General Irwin Rommel's famed Afrika Corps.

Operation Torch, as it was known, became the stepping-stone for Allied invasions of Sicily and Italy in 1943. This suited Churchill, who favoured attacking the so-called soft underbelly of the Axis powers in southern Europe. Italy proved to have a tough old gut, however, and operations in the Mediterranean drained the Allies of the resources for a second front in France.

Stalin was not impressed by Churchill's Mediterranean strategy and furious at the delay in opening a second front. With the support of Roosevelt, Stalin insisted on a second front in France in 1944.

The positive benefit of the Mediterranean strategy was that it provided invaluable experience in mounting large-scale amphibious operations involving complex coordination of sea, air, ground, and airborne forces. This knowledge was put to good use by the Allies in preparing Operation Overlord as the D-Day landings were called. Dwight D Eisenhower (who had supervised Operation Torch) was in overall command while the ground invasion was led by Anglo-Irish General Bernard Montgomery.

Although the Germans had been weakened considerably by the Red Army and by incessant Allied bombing raids, they were still able to mount a formidable defence in France. In 1942 Hitler had ordered the construction of an Atlantic Wall of coastal, beach, and inland defences. The closer D-Day came, the more troops the Germans deployed in France. By 1944 there were some 50 divisions waiting to meet the Allied invasion. For the Germans, the key issue was where the invasion would take place.

An elaborate Allied campaign deceived them into thinking the main force would land in the Calais area while Normandy landings were to play only a diversionary role. Rommel, in charge of the Atlantic Wall, wanted to fight the Allies on the beaches. Other German generals wanted to keep forces in reserve and attack when Allied fighters attempted to break out of their beachheads. The Germans tried both tactics, neither very effectively.

The Allies' meticulous planning and preparation, combined with overwhelming air and naval superiority, meant there was little chance D-Day would fail unless the weather was particularly bad. But the invasion could become bogged down on the shores of Normandy. Five divisions were landed in the first wave of attack, supported by three airborne divisions. To ensure sufficient supplies two artificial harbours — Mulberries — were constructed and towed across the channel. Fuel was provided by a cross-channel pipeline called Pluto.

The aim was to break out of the beachheads within 24 hours and to capture the city of Caen and the Port of Cherbourg within a few days. It took longer to dislodge the Germans from Caen and Cherbourg but when that did happen, German defences across France collapsed rapidly and in August the allies launched a second invasion of France from the south.

The Germans were also being assaulted on the Eastern Front since, at the end of June, the Red Army launched Operation Bagration. This Soviet offensive to drive the Germans out of Belorussia deployed 2.4m troops, 5200 tanks, 36,000 artillery pieces, and 5,300 aircraft, dwarfing the material deployed by the Allies in France. Without this operation, the Germans would have been free to redeploy troops to the Western Front.

D-Day did not determine the outcome of the war but it did shorten it. Without the second front in France it would have taken the Red Army two or even three years to fight its way to the beaches of Normandy. The war was won and lost on the Soviet-German front, but the western Allies made a significant and justly celebrated contribution to defeating Nazi forces when they launched D-Day.

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