

# History of the Second World War: Western Allies Preparations to Land in France

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*By the latter stages of 1943, which is now 80 years ago, it was becoming clear to the regime in Nazi Germany that the Western Allies were going to attempt a major amphibious landing in 1944, probably in northern France, with the goals of driving the German Wehrmacht out of western Europe and bringing the region under long-term American control.*

The US and British planning for their invasion of western Europe was made much less arduous by the fact that Soviet Russia, almost entirely on its own, had effectively won the war in Europe by the end of 1943. More than two years after Adolf Hitler (on 22 June 1941) launched his brutal and unprovoked invasion of Russia, the Soviet Army had inflicted heavy damage on the Wehrmacht, and the latter was in retreat across the frontlines as 1944 approached.

In Western historical works, school books and films, the Allied landings in Normandy, France on 6 June 1944, referred to as "D-Day", are often portrayed as a turning point in World War II and which resulted in the Third Reich's demise. This ranks as a serious distortion of history. It was obvious as 1943 was drawing to a close that Russia had achieved an unassailable position in the conflict versus Nazi Germany, many months before the Anglo-American divisions arrived in western Europe. Had the American-led landings not occurred, the Russian forces would undoubtedly have still advanced to the centre of Berlin to overthrow the Nazi regime and demilitarise Germany.

Hitler, however, could not simply ignore the likelihood of an Anglo-American invasion of western Europe. In any case he was determined to cling on to as much of Nazi-occupied territory as possible. Hitler's desire to preserve Nazi hegemony was shown by his insistence, against the wishes of many of the Wehrmacht's commanders, to maintain German soldiers in North Africa through 1942 and into 1943; including after the German strategic position had become tenuous in North Africa.

During the period of the largest expansion of Nazism, in 1940 and 1941, little thought was

given in Berlin to strengthening German defences in western Europe. It was only after late 1941, when a Nazi victory in Russia was increasingly uncertain, that Hitler and the Wehrmacht high command began to focus some attention towards fortifying the western European coastlines against the American and British threat.

An American-led invasion of western Europe was partly related to defeating the Nazis there but, as briefly mentioned, it was also concerned with spreading US hegemony throughout western Europe. The US is an expansionist power that has long sought to control and intimidate other states.

According to historian Evan Mawdsley, at the end of January 1942 Hitler told his inner circle that Germany might not succeed in its war against Russia. Perhaps looking for welcome distractions elsewhere, that same month, January 1942, Hitler appointed Major-General Kurt Zeitzler, who was thought in Berlin to be a genius at logistics, to a Chief-of-Staff role in Nazi-occupied France. Organisation Todt, the Nazi construction and labour force, promptly increased the amount of concrete threefold that was poured into building and strengthening German defensive fortifications on the western European coastlines.

On 23 March 1942 Hitler issued a new directive relating to military affairs. This directive was concerned mainly with overcoming a huge enemy amphibious landing in western Europe, and organising and fortifying German defensive lines there, known as the Atlantic Wall, which would cover the western and northern coastlines of France, and the coastlines of Belgium, the Netherlands, Denmark and Norway. The Atlantic Wall would consist of bunkers, mortars, artillery and minefields.

Hitler stated on 23 March 1942, "Particularly grave dangers will arise if the enemy succeeds in taking our airfields, or in establishing airbases in the territory that he has captured. Moreover, our military installations and war industries that are in many instances located along or close to the coast, and which in part have valuable equipment, invite local raids by the enemy. Special attention must be paid to British preparations for landings on the open coast, for which numerous armoured landing craft suitable for the transportation of combat vehicles and heavy weapons are available. Large-scale parachute and glider operations are likewise to be expected... An immediate counterattack must annihilate landed enemy forces, or throw them back into the sea".

Less than five months later, on 13 August 1942 Hitler ordered the western coasts of Nazi-occupied Europe to be turned into an indestructible fortress. Six days afterward, on 19 August two Anglo-Canadian brigades consisting of just over 6,000 men made a landing at the port of Dieppe in the far north of France. The German soldiers at Dieppe, under Major-General Zeitzler's command, reacted strongly to the Allied incursion. The Germans inflicted debilitating casualties on the enemy, especially against the Canadians who outnumbered the British, and the Allied landing was defeated within a day. Those Canadian and British troops who were not killed, wounded or captured on the beaches, were forced to retreat out to sea in whatever vessels remained operational.

Hitler wanted up to 20 manned defensive positions to be erected for every kilometre of coastline in western Europe, where 300,000 German soldiers were to be positioned, supported by 150,000 reserve troops. Hitler believed that, between 450,000 to 500,000 well-armed men stationed in fortifications, could hold the Atlantic Wall against anything which the Western Allies could throw at them. Hitler outlined of the Atlantic Wall concrete

defences in the March 1942 directive, "Fortified areas and strongpoints are to be held to the last. They must never be forced to surrender because of a shortage of ammunition, rations, or water".

Organisation Todt, lacking the personnel and building materials needed, was worried it would not be able to meet Hitler's demands for the construction of fortifications. Their concerns would prove well-founded. In addition, Hitler actually directed little attention towards the open beaches.

Instead he was to grant top priority for the protection of U-boats when they were stationed ashore, followed by harbour defences for coastal traffic, harbour defences against enemy landings, and the defensive works in the German-held Channel Islands such as Jersey, Guernsey and Alderney, located a short distance off the coast of north-western France. Last priority was given to the defence of the beaches, where enemy troops were to eventually land in big numbers.

Despite Hitler's praising of the apparent greatness of the coastal fortifications, he did not attach primary importance to the structures. The Atlantic Wall would prove of scant use to Nazi Germany as its soldiers were being defeated by Russian armies in eastern and central Europe.

Regardless of that, after the Anglo-Canadian Dieppe landing of August 1942 seven combat-ready SS divisions were transferred to France. The following year, with the threat of a Western Allied invasion growing, on 4 November 1943 Hitler appointed one of the Wehrmacht's best known commanders, Field Marshal Erwin Rommel, to the post of Inspector General of the Atlantic Wall.

Rommel was inclined to believe the glowing Nazi propaganda reports about the Atlantic Wall. He began his inspection of the fortifications on 11 December 1943 in Copenhagen, the Danish capital city. Rommel then travelled along the North Sea coast, analysing the German defences there before finding himself in southern France, beside the Pyrenees whose peaks were covered in snow.

Rommel finished his inspection of the Atlantic Wall in late December 1943. He said the Nazi propaganda claims about the wall were an "enormous bluff" which had been concocted "more for the German people than for the enemy". Rommel was disturbed by what he saw. He learnt the Wehrmacht troop numbers along the Atlantic Wall were "barely adequate" to put up a strong defence against an Anglo-American landing, that there were not enough fortifications or minefields in place, and the German Navy and Luftwaffe were too weak to be of much assistance.

The Germans had no proper defence plans except around the large ports on the western European coastlines. In the port areas, Rommel discovered that not all of the defensive measures had been carried out. The Wehrmacht was hindered by a lack of smooth transportation routes along the coasts, and there was an ongoing shortage of land mines. Rommel found that almost every German commander he came across had different ideas about how to thwart an enemy landing. There was no overall policy in place to guide each commander.

Rommel believed that no matter what defences were constructed the coastline fortifications would, in the end, not be enough to decisively defeat a major enemy landing. One glaring

problem was the open beaches. If the Anglo-Americans were allowed to gather on the beaches armour, troops and guns in growing quantities, then western Europe would be lost to the Germans. This evidence of German weakness was again due to the fact the Russians were destroying the vast majority of the Wehrmacht's manpower and military equipment.

Rommel proposed that the correct strategy to overcome a Western Allied invasion, was to defeat the enemy soldiers on the beaches and then to disperse them out to sea. Author Samuel W. Mitcham noted that Rommel "did not believe the coastal defenses would hold. He felt that after the coast was penetrated, only a rapid counterattack by the mobile infantry and panzer divisions could defeat the Allies and throw them back into the sea. These units would have to be moved close to the coast, Rommel wrote, so that they would be in position to deliver the decisive blow".

Pertaining to the critical subject on how to neutralise a Western Allied invasion force, both Rommel and Hitler were in full agreement, initially at least. It seems very likely that the necessary strategy was to engage the enemy on the beaches and at the fringes of the water; to defeat them there by an overwhelming counterblow and before they could reinforce their tentative bridgeheads.

In the event of the Western Allies consolidating on the beaches, the primary obstacle before them was the Atlantic Wall. Should the wall be breached, beyond that the terrain in northern France is on average quite flat, open and suitable for military advances. The Western powers had the advantage of choosing the best landing sites, where the geography inland was beneficial to armoured progress. They could pick the time of year best suited to a landing when the ground would be mostly dry (summer time).

In 1943 and 1944 German troops overall were still of superior quality to American, British and Canadian troops, but the Western Allies had a significant advantage over the Wehrmacht in war matériel. Rommel had experienced Allied aerial prowess in the North African deserts, and the crucial role that a strong air force can have in modern warfare. American and British aircraft would inevitably become more influential in western Europe, should the Allies be allowed to gain a foothold on the beaches and beyond.

Rommel, on paper, was not the Commander-in-Chief of all German forces in western Europe in 1943 and 1944. That title was held since 8 March 1942 by Field Marshal Gerd von Rundstedt, one of the most senior officers in Nazi Germany who by 1942 had served in the military for half a century.

On 22 June 1941 Rundstedt commanded Army Group South in the Nazi invasion of the USSR. He was dismissed by Hitler from that position on 30 November 1941 for disobeying orders. Mitcham wrote that Rundstedt disagreed from the outset with Hitler's decision to attack Russia. The field marshal felt that invading Russia was too risky with Britain yet to be knocked out of the war, and that Nazi Germany could in future be faced with fighting on separate fronts.

Rundstedt's close colleague, General Leo Geyr von Schweppenburg, who was considered by the Nazis an expert in armoured warfare, said that Rundstedt lacked knowledge when it came to this type of combat. General Schweppenburg stated in 1947, "Of all the German generals, Field Marshal von Rundstedt knew the least of panzer tactics. He was an infantryman of the last generation [First World War]. He and his staff were armchair strategists who didn't like dirt, noise and tanks in general - as far as I know, Field Marshal

von Rundstedt was never in a tank”.

Schweppenburg’s comments are incredible considering that Rundstedt had commanded one of the three army groups which invaded Russia in the summer of 1941. In late 1943, as Rommel settled down in northern France, he was shocked by the lethargic attitude of Rundstedt and his staff. Nor was he encouraged by the feeling of discontent that many German troops were displaying in western Europe. “To me things look black”, Rommel said.

By 1944 Rundstedt himself was worn out by over 50 years of unbroken service in the army and needed to recuperate. Of greater significance, his opinions on how a Western Allied landing should be defeated were contrary to Rommel’s views. Rundstedt believed the key battles in France should be fought inland, far away from the beaches, around a week or more after the Allies made their landing; but Rundstedt had yet to witness Anglo-American aerial operations at work.

Mitcham wrote, “Unlike Rundstedt, Rommel wanted to fight the decisive battle at the water’s edge, correctly believing that Germany would never defeat the Western Allies if they were allowed time to consolidate their initial beachheads”.

After January 1944 Rommel became the most powerful military figure the Wehrmacht had west of Berlin. Rundstedt, recognising Rommel’s greater energy and drive, left the details of the upcoming conflict in western Europe to Rommel. The “Desert Fox”, as he was nicknamed in North Africa, possessed an ability for instilling fighting spirit into the troops under him and for restoring confidence. Rommel was also an offensive-minded risk taker whose risks had not always come off.

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