DISOBEYING HITLER
ALSO BY RANDALL HANSEN

Fire and Fury: The Allied Bombing of Germany, 1942–1945
For Kieran
Hitler’s Germany has neither a past nor a future. Its only purpose is destruction, and destroyed it shall be.

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Contents

Introduction | 1

1. War, Atrocities, Resistance | 3
2. The Coup against Hitler | 25
3. From Failing Hands: The Coup in Paris | 30
4. Paris, July 20, 1944: The SS Locked Down | 38
5. The Resistance’s Last Hope: Rommel against Hitler | 45
6. Hitler’s Revenge | 59
7. Did a Prussian Save Paris? | 73
8. To Destroy the City of Light | 84
9. Paris in Revolt | 99
11. Normandy South: The Invasion of Southern France | 121
12. Forts and Fortresses: Toulon | 134
13. Europe’s Lifeline: Marseille | 142
15. To Destroy Germany: Hitler and Scorched Earth | 161
16. Fighting to the Last Man: The Allies at the Rhine | 172
17. Hitler Rages | 188
18. The Siege of Düsseldorf | 205
19. Dying So That They May Live: Central Germany | 232
20. Nuremberg’s Destruction, Heidelberg’s Salvation:  
    Southern Germany | 245
21. A Citizens’ Revolt: Augsburg | 257
22. “We, the women of Freiburg, beg you”:  
    The French Occupation of Southern Germany | 269
23. A House of Cards: The Soviet Assault on the Reich | 280
24. Saving Caspar David Friedrich’s City | 290
25. Finishing the Job That Bomber Harris Started: Hamburg | 298
26. Escaping the Soviet Net:  
    Walther Wenck and the Flight across the Elbe | 314

Conclusion | 324

Note on Approach, Sources, and Acknowledgements | 333
Notes | 338
The Defense and Surrender of German Cities in 1945 | 427
Glossary | 435
Works Cited | 438
Index | 455
INTRODUCTION

IN 1943, THE SOVIETS forced the German army to make multiple retreats in Russia. Adolf Hitler, Chancellor of Germany and leader of the National Socialist German Workers’ Party (NSDAP), had to decide what to do with territories evacuated by the German military. His answer was clear: the retreating Wehrmacht was to destroy everything in its wake. The enemy would recover only an “unusable, uninhabitable wasteland” in which “mines would continue to explode for months.” Vast swathes of Europe and Russia would be left blackened, desolate, and lifeless. Hitler’s original vision of racial domination was replaced by a similarly horrendous one: scorched earth.

As the Wehrmacht staggered backward on all fronts, Hitler transformed these musings into a series of concrete orders: to poison, block, and wreck all ports across Europe; to destroy Paris; to blow up industry, railroads, bridges, utilities supplies, and archives, museums, and other cultural institutions in Germany; and to defend every German city, street by street, house by house, all intended to cause massive destruction and loss of life. From September 1944, Hitler issued a death sentence for Germany. On September 7, he had an editorial published in the Nazi mouthpiece, the Völkischer Beobachter. “Not a German stalk of wheat,” it thundered, “is to feed the enemy, not a German mouth to give him information, not a German hand to offer him help. He is to find every footbridge destroyed, every road blocked—nothing
but death, annihilation and hatred will meet him.” Hitler, his minister for propaganda, Joseph Goebbels, and Heinrich Himmler, head of the SS, all agreed that “nothing that could be of any service to the enemy could be allowed to fall into his hands.”

Most German field marshals, generals, and Nazi Party officials were all too ready to obey Hitler. They sent tens of thousands of young men to their deaths; wilfully destroyed industry, bridges, and buildings; and launched a defence of cities and towns that resulted in their complete destruction. A small but morally and militarily important minority of soldiers and civilians, however, said no. As most other soldiers and party members fought on to the awful end, these officers, soldiers, and—above all—civilians chose to disobey. They sought to spare industry, electrical and gas installations, ports, bridges, and roads. And, as Allied armies pushed deep into the heart of Germany in 1945, they sought to prevent a pointless and wholly destructive military defence of their cities against British, American, French, and Soviet armies. If they failed, the price of disobedience was death.

This book tells their stories. It explores what resistance in Germany meant after the influential figures around Claus von Stauffenberg had been killed or were on the run following the failure on July 20, 1944, of his plot, codenamed “Valkyrie,” to assassinate Hitler. It examines how German officers lower down the chain of command responded to Hitler’s nihilistic orders for the destruction of Germany and Europe. And, above all, it shows how ordinary people—workers, architects, doctors, and priests—possessed the conviction, bravery, and guile necessary to throw themselves into a final act of resistance against the National Socialist regime.
On September 1, 1939, German planes appeared over the central Polish city of Wieluń. Their bomb bays opened. The synagogue, church, hospital, and houses below exploded. Horrified residents streamed out of the city. They found little respite: Stuka dive-bombers, which would terrify civilians across Europe, strafed them. Bodies littered the roads. The operation was repeated in dozens of cities across the country.

As the bombers laid waste to Poland’s cities, 1.5 million German soldiers poured across its borders from the west, north, and south. While Germany’s air force swept from the skies the few modern airplanes the Poles could muster, fast-moving German tanks burst through Polish positions, surrounded them, and destroyed them. The Polish government desperately hoped that the British and French would honour their guarantee to intervene. On September 17, foreign troops indeed arrived, but they were not Anglo-French: Stalin had ordered his forces to attack Poland from the east. The Poles put up a resistance that can only be described as heroic and managed to inflict 45,000 casualties on the Germans, but the outcome could not be doubted. By October, it was over. The Germans, at this point “enthusiastic advocates of unconditional surrender,” had utterly crushed Poland; more than a hundred thousand Polish soldiers were dead.

During and after the campaign, Wehrmacht tactics were uncompro- misingly brutal. Over the course of a three-week campaign, German forces
burned 531 towns and villages (with Warsaw and the province of Łódź suffering particularly heavy damage) and killed 16,376 people. As Polish towns and Polish divisions fell, German soldiers murdered thousands of prisoners of war, male civilians, women, and children.

As awful as their techniques were, Wehrmacht officers might have been able to justify them as tactical: any form of actual or potential resistance was crushed with the aim of subjugating Poland to German authority. The burning of villages, the shooting of prisoners, and the murder of civilians are hardly uncommon in the history of warfare, even if the German combination of new technology with old martial methods led to a far greater loss of life. But murder was more than tactical: it was an end in itself. Over the course of the campaign, mass, systematic murder displaced tactical killing by the German army, “renegade” murders by Waffen-SS units, and revenge killings by ethnic Germans. The Führer and his generals had redefined warfare. Civilians would not be killed in order to win a war; rather, the war would be waged and won so that the murder of civilians could be perfected. The National Socialist vision, which is difficult to comprehend in the scale of its horror, was one of endless domination, violence, and death.

The executions were primarily carried out by the SS units that participated in Poland’s occupation: the Einsatzgruppen der Sicherheitspolizei (special task forces of the Security Police, or Sipo, but, in reality, death squads). Organizationally, the SS, led by Heinrich Himmler and Hitler himself, was divided into the Party Secret Service (Sicherheitsdienst, or SD) and the Secret Police (Geheime Staatspolizei, or Gestapo), which together made up the broadly investigative and policing wings of state security. The apparatus also included the Criminal Police (Kriminalpolizei, or Kripo) and the Order Police (Ordnungspolizei, or Orpo); the latter included police services such as fire, water, and air protection, among others. The SS also had military (Waffen-SS) and paramilitary wings; it was under the latter that the Orpo’s police battalions murdered massive numbers of civilians. The Orpo also supplied five hundred men to the Einsatzgruppen.

Men from the Gestapo, the SD, and the Kripo were formed into five Einsatzgruppen, and one was attached to each of the invading armies. Later, two more Einsatzgruppen and one Einsatzkommando (from Danzig/
Gdańsk) were added, with a detachment of Orpo forming part of a seventh Einsatzgruppe. Together, they totalled almost three thousand men. The targets of these Einsatzgruppen were Polish nationalists, intellectuals, Roman Catholic clergy, and, of course, Jews.

In a typical operation, SS Sturmbannführer (Major) Kurt Eimann, commander of an SS regiment in the Free City of Danzig, recruited several thousand SS members into an auxiliary police force, the Eimann Battalion. In November, the battalion met a trainload of disabled people from Pomerania, who were loaded into trucks and driven into the forest. They were met by Polish political prisoners digging a pit. The first victim, a fifty-year-old woman, was led to the edge. Eimann pulled out a pistol, placed it at the base of her skull, and pulled the trigger. The murder of the other disabled people followed. The SS then killed the political prisoners, threw them on top of the pile of bodies, and covered the graves with dirt. That month, some 3,500 people would be shot and dumped into mass graves. During the Polish campaign, the Einsatzgruppen, backed up by other SS units and 100,000 ethnic Germans, murdered tens of thousands of Polish intellectuals, Jews, mental patients, prostitutes, Roma, and Sinti. They singled out Jews for particularly brutal treatment.

Although the SS committed the majority of the murders, the German army was hardly innocent. It worked with the Einsatzgruppen in pushing tens of thousands of Jews over the demarcation line into the Soviet zone, and its units sometimes shot civilians. But above all, the German army divided responsibilities between itself and the SS in a manner that provided the latter with carte blanche to commit mass murder. Led by General Quartermaster Eduard Wagner, the army negotiated agreements with the SS designed to contain, if possible, SS murder but above all to shield the German army from direct involvement in it. The effort failed on both counts. The German army tolerated in some cases the deliberate execution of civilians; in others, it provided indirect assistance through the provision of logistical support; and in still others, it directly participated in the executions. The German army, writes Holocaust historian Raul Hilberg, “went out of its way to turn over Jews to the Einsatzgruppen, to request actions against Jews, to participate in killing operations, and to shoot Jewish
hostages in ‘reprisal’ for attacks on occupation forces.” The army gave the SS a free hand to launch a genocidal campaign on an unimaginable scale while ensuring its own complicity. The SS tested these techniques in Poland. They perfected them farther east, in the Soviet Union, where millions of Jews stood in the path of the invading German army.

[ War ]

On June 22, 1941, over three million German troops—twice the number thrown at Poland—attacked the Soviet Union: it was Operation Barbarossa. Supported by the now familiar artillery barrage and aerial bombardment, three army groups (Heeresgruppen) moved into Soviet territory. Army Group North, commanded by Feldmarschall Wilhelm Ritter von Leeb, cut northeast through the Baltics and on toward Leningrad. Feldmarschall Fedor von Bock’s Army Group Centre, the most heavily armed and formidable of the three concentrations, pushed east through the Soviet Union toward Moscow. Finally, Army Group South, under Feldmarschall Gerd von Rundstedt, advanced southeast toward Odessa and Sevastopol. The Wehrmacht’s strategy relied on the overwhelming combination of mobility and power: rapidly moving divisions, particularly panzer divisions, would outmanoeuvre and surround the enemy as the blunt force of artillery, air, and infantry power destroyed it. The strategy was immensely effective: German forces repeatedly landed devastating blows on their dazed enemy. In just over two weeks, they captured some 400,000 Soviet soldiers, and Army Group Centre pushed on to Smolensk, the gateway to Moscow. These initial successes threw both Soviet High Command and Stalin himself into a state of shock.

In the southern theatre, Rundstedt’s Army Group South encountered the fiercest early resistance, although its gains look limited only in comparison to the rapid advances of the two army groups to the north. Early in the campaign, Army Group South captured 100,000 Soviet troops near Uman. Then, Army Group Centre’s Panzer Group 2 under Generaloberst Heinz Guderian advanced south to assist General der Infanterie Carl-Heinrich Stülpnagel’s Seventeenth Army in a successful encirclement of Kiev. Another 650,000 men fell into captivity.
The Seventeenth Army contained two of the most enigmatic officers of the Second World War: Stülpnagel himself, and Oberstleutnant Dietrich von Choltitz. Stülpnagel was a humanist, almost philosophical officer and a longtime opponent of Hitler. He had been intimately involved in 1938 coup preparations designed to overthrow Hitler after the Allies’ expected rejection of German claims on the Sudetenland. In the Polish campaign, he opposed SS crimes against civilians. Yet, less than two years later, he participated in those crimes. During the early days of Operation Barbarossa, the Seventeenth Army reached Lviv (German: Lemberg). As it did, retreating Soviet troops killed several thousand Ukrainian nationals imprisoned in the city. In response, German forces, both Wehrmacht and Einsatzgruppen, incited a retaliatory pogrom that killed four thousand Jews. According to one Soviet source, Stülpnagel planned the incitement and reported back to Berlin that it could be used as a model elsewhere. Such Selbtsreinigungsaktionen, or “self-cleaning actions,” would allow the Germans to spare manpower otherwise assigned to the murder of Jews while shifting responsibility for the killings onto the local population.

Although he resisted orders to shoot Soviet generals in reprisal for the killing of POWs, Stülpnagel also took part in German anti-partisan warfare, which resulted in the widespread revenge killing of innocents from July 1941. Anti-partisan warfare was bound up with the National Socialist equation of Judaism and Bolshevism, an equation that Stülpnagel took as read. On June 30, 1941, he signed the following anti-partisan order: “when the perpetrators of sabotage or attacks on soldiers cannot be identified, then Jews or Communists, particularly Jewish Komsomols [members of a Soviet youth league], should be shot as revenge.” In August, he noted that “Draconian measures” against the Jews led some Ukrainians to take pity on them. It was necessary, therefore, to educate the Ukrainian population in order to “obtain a resolute and more uniform rejection” of Jews. Stülpnagel saw no contradiction between this hardened anti-Semitism and a humanitarian concern for other civilians: in August 1941, he called for the “appropriate treatment and care of the civilian population in the occupied territories.”

Stülpnagel worked with the SS to implement anti-Jewish measures. In late September, he approached Sonderkommando 4b (part of Einsatzgruppe
C) with the request to annihilate the Jews of the central Ukrainian city of Kremenchuk in response to three cases of cable sabotage. By November, the Sonderkommando had killed thousands of Jews. In early October 1941, Stülpnagel requested a transfer away from the eastern front. He knew then—as he would for the rest of his life—that he was deeply implicated in National Socialist crimes. When his son asked him if Jews were being killed, Stülpnagel’s reply was: “You must remain pure.”

Stülpnagel’s crimes were hardly the only ones committed by the army, and in some cases officers did not wait for sabotage or suspected sabotage. Apparently hoping to have the whole awful business done with, commanders urged the Einsatzgruppen to get on with the killing, sometimes even providing men and materiel to make the SS’s job easier.

For his part, Dietrich von Choltitz made his mark in an early campaign that, thanks to Hitler, owed much more to classical warfare than it did to Blitzkrieg. After Kiev and Kharkiv, Rundstedt ordered the Romanian Fourth Army to capture the port of Odessa, which it did after a three-month siege. As Odessa fell on October 8, Army Group South pushed farther east, occupying most of the Crimean Peninsula by the end of the month. Only the important port city of Sevastopol held out. General Erich von Manstein, who had taken over command of the Eleventh Army after Generaloberst Eugen von Schobert’s death in early September, wished to bypass the city and make a dash for the oil-rich Caucasus. Hitler, however, never resisted the urge to attack a fortress, and he ordered Manstein to take the city. Hitler’s logic was that an attack would allow his forces to seize the port and protect its southern flank from naval assault as it advanced into the Caucasus.

In addition to his Eleventh Army, Manstein had the support of the Romanian Third Army and a regiment commanded by Choltitz. Sevastopol was a fortress guarding the approaches to the city’s great port, home to the Russian Black Sea Fleet. With Manstein’s army literally at its gates, Sevastopol remained under siege all winter. On June 2, Manstein ordered an artillery and aerial bombardment of the city. As the Luftwaffe hammered the city from the skies, great mortar guns shelled it below. Over one thousand tons of shells landed in the city, destroying it block by block. A single shell could pulverize anything in its path. On June 7, Manstein’s troops
began moving in. It was during this period that Choltitz acquired a reputation for brutality and unquestioning obedience to orders.

Despite the hammering they had taken, the Soviets put up a bitter resistance. When they ran out of ammunition, they attacked the Germans with their bare hands. But the combination of air, artillery, and infantry strength overcame the Soviets. On July 4, the Germans took Sevastopol. The Soviet Black Sea Fleet evacuated the port and retreated to the Caucasus. When the city fell into German hands, it looked like the face of the moon. The Soviets suffered appalling casualties. The agonies experienced by the citizens and defenders of Sevastopol deserve a much more prominent place in the collective memory than they currently enjoy.

The concentration of Germany’s heaviest guns on Sevastopol meant that they were unavailable for a siege upon another city: Leningrad. The first units of Leeb’s Army Group North reached the city by September 4. Soon, Leningrad and fully thirty Soviet divisions were encircled, waiting for the hammer’s blow.

It never fell. Rather than ordering his forces into the city, which they most likely would have taken, Hitler decided that they would remain outside it. Subjected to a heavy conventional artillery barrage, one without the concrete-busting super-artillery that was then being used on Sevastopol, the city would be starved into submission. Leningrad’s residents suffered terribly, and the plague of starvation would haunt them for two years. Soviet internal security reported its first case of cannibalism in December. By the time the siege was fully lifted in early 1944, approximately one million people had starved to death. Only the refusal of the Finns to close off all access points to the north of the city, which allowed the Soviets to provide a minimum of supplies, kept the situation from becoming worse still.

As the siege of Leningrad began, the bulk of the German forces in Army Group Centre had their eye on a bigger prize: Moscow itself. A staggering array of forces—almost two million men, two thousand tanks, and 1,390 aircraft—prepared for the assault on the Soviet capital: Operation Typhoon. On September 30, 1941, Bock ordered the attack. In a replay of the summer campaign, his troops at first surged forward, sending the eight Soviet armies standing in the path of the German advance reeling.