

**Background:** Goebbels began a weekly newspaper called *Das Reich* in 1940. He generally wrote the lead article each week, in which he took special pride. This essay is dated 9 November 1941. The campaign against the Soviet Union, it was now clear, would not soon be over. Goebbels is trying to persuade Germans that they should put their full energies in winning the war, not wondering how long it might last. For a good discussion of Goebbels' wartime essays, see Bramsted's book [\*Goebbels and National Socialist Propaganda\*](#).

**The source:** "Wann oder Wie?", *Das eherne Herz* (Munich: Zentralverlag der NSDAP., 1943), pp. 78-84.

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## When or How?

by Joseph Goebbels

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Only during the course of this war has it become clear how sick postwar Europe was, and what comprehensive measures it needed, needs, and will need, to return it to health. Just as a harmless cold sometimes allows a series of other illnesses to take hold, an event not of particular significance in itself can plunge a whole region of the world into confusion. Those who do not understand politics, which is the process of history, sometimes believe that the occasion is the cause of great human catastrophes and national transformations. The shot fired in Sarajevo, for example, occasioned the World War, but did not cause it. Europe was ready for such a war, and had been for some years. Only Germany's leadership did not want to see the danger, and thus found itself in a war that it could have fought more effectively at an earlier time, but instead faced it at the worst possible time. When one knows that a pitiless enemy is seeking the best position from which to shoot, one is well advised to shoot first. An irresponsible national leadership lets things gradually intensify without wanting to see the danger. It gives the call to arms when it is too late.

It is thus understandable that during the course of a great struggle for the existence or death of whole nations, the actual occasion that led to the struggle fades from human thought. In the midst of the gigantic dimensions of the war today, the occasion of its beginning in August 1939 seems almost trivial. The city of Danzig was to return to the Reich, and Germany was to receive a corridor through a corridor. These more than modest requests on Germany's part were ignored by our enemies. Indeed, they were used as a pretext for war, with the consequences spreading like an earthquake across the continent. All the old or partially solved problems of Europe broke loose once again. Consider the questions facing Europe at the time. The Treaty of Versailles held our region in its chains, a socialist Germany with a growing population compressed into too small a space was being strangled by dying plutocracies, the young Axis powers were denied access to the riches and raw materials of the world and condemned to a slow decline ending in national death, England with the help of its obedient servants, was using any available opportunity to throw the continent into uproar and confusion, 170 million people in the Soviet Union were condemned to a wretched existence while Bolshevism was building an army that could fall upon the continent in a time of crisis, with the firm intention of bringing about barbaric national revolutions that would destroy economic, social, cultural, and community life.

These problems must all be resolved by this war, whether we like it or not. We must follow the laws in effect from its beginning. None of us has a way out any longer. We cannot postpone or delay anything. Each individual campaign of the war is necessary on its own. Were we not to fight them today, we would have to do so tomorrow, probably under much less favorable conditions. No one should imagine

that Europe's problems would have been solved had Poland given up Danzig and allowed a corridor, or if England and France had accepted the Führer's offer of peace at the end of the Polish campaign. Does anyone believe that England would have gone to sleep or that the Soviet Union would have concluded that it had built its revolutionary army only as a toy? No, war would have returned in a few years, with the difference that the enemy would have learned the military lessons of the Polish campaign and improved its weapons to a degree that might have been beyond our capacities to handle.

Fate treats us in a hard and pitiless way, but it intends our good. It forces us to make decisions that we might not make if our enemies seemed agreeable, which doubtless would mean a deadly threat later on. The basic problems of our region have become clear, and their solution can no longer be delayed. It is more than a solution to various territorial difficulties; it is a matter of everything. That explains the war's dimensions. There are connections between the various theaters of this war which sooner or later would have led to war, whatever the circumstances. In the midst of all the spiritual and physical burdens of this war, indeed of any war, we cannot forget that. The important question is not when the war will end, but rather how it will end. If we win, all is resolved: raw materials, food supplies, living space, the foundations of the social transformation of our state, and the national independence of the Axis powers. If we lose it, all that and much more will be lost: our whole national life itself.

That national life is exactly what our opponents question. They may differ in their ideas of how the Reich and its allies might be most efficiently and permanently destroyed. One calls for the dissolution of our military and economic unity, another for dividing us into smaller states, a third for birth control and the reduction of our population to 10 million, a fourth for the sterilization of every one of us under the age of sixty. But they all agree on one thing: in the firm resolve that if they once again defeat Germany, we must this time be crushed, destroyed, exterminated and wiped out. This time we cannot expect another Treaty of Versailles that would leave even the slightest chance of national recovery. The more hopeless the military situation looks for the other side, the more bloodthirsty their Old Testament fantasies of revenge become. Their slogans may sound seductive to the ears of the ignorant, but behind their humanitarian hypocritical phrases is a naked desire for destruction. The Axis powers are fighting for their very existence. The troubles and difficulties the war brings us all pale before the inferno that awaits us if we lose.

There is no point in concealing the truth. Clarity is never a cause of weakness, always a cause of strength. If a great national prophet had told the German people in 1917 everything that would happen to them after the capitulation of November 1918, we probably would have won the war instead of losing our breath in the last quarter of an hour. A political genius of the magnitude of Adolf Hitler was necessary to repair the damage done in November 1918 through a 20-year battle. Even then, his efforts often hung by a thread. There will be no second chance. The chance we have today is our greatest. It is also our last. We must every day be clear about that. The soldier must realize that as he goes into battle, the worker as he goes to work, the farmer, when he harvests the nation's daily bread, the engineer, the scientist, the civil servant, the doctor, the artist, wherever they may serve the nation. It must be our prayer every morning and every evening. It must be the motivating force of all we are and do.

We can win, and we will win. It will require a gigantic national effort by the whole people. No one can stand aside, it involves us all. Just as winning the war will benefit us all, losing it will destroy us all. As always at the decisive moments in our history, our people holds its fate in its own hand. We are the blacksmiths of our future, more today than ever before. We must show the other nations the way to end the general European confusion. Can we blame fate for giving us a last hard challenge before the last great triumph? Did anyone believe that our historic mission of reordering the continent would fall into our laps, without much exertion on our part? History gives no gifts, only opportunities. He who does not reach for and hold them loses everything.

That is how things are, and we must accept them as they are. We know all too well the great sacrifices

the war demands from nearly everyone. But are not the sacrifices of the defeated nations much greater than ours, even if they are no longer in the war? Although we are bearing the heaviest burdens of the war, we still have the highest living standard of any European nation. We must accept limitations in every area of life, but nowhere are they unbearable. We must work as never before. The battle for the destiny of our people demands the whole of our devotion, energy and readiness. However difficult it may be, however, one needs only to look around to find someone for whom things are even more difficult. The war is hardly just a matter for soldiers, it is a hard, bitter, and bloody necessity for the entire nation. We did not want this war, despite our constricted and almost hopeless situation back then; it was forced upon us. But now we are at war. The worst is behind us. Now it is the duty of every last man and woman in the country to be filled with a firm and resolute conviction that this war must be fought to a conclusion such that it need not be repeated. We owe that to ourselves and to our posterity.

Let us then work and fight until victory is ours! Do everything that will lead to victory and avoid everything that stands in its way. Do not ask when it will come, but rather do everything to be sure that it will come. The day will come when fate gives our nation and those who fought for it the laurel wreath of victory. Then the deep lines on the face of our people will shine with the blessing of the century.