

VE Day

By April 1945 the atmosphere in Berlin was tense to the point of hysteria. The city being surrounded by the Red Army and the lack of any coherent intelligence combined to make Hitler even more unpredictable than usual. With the Russians less than a mile away he maintained a daily routine of conferences with his generals, keeping alive as long as possible the pretence of power. Between April 20th and 24th many of his entourage including Goering left for the south, and in the last week of his life Hitler shared the cramped accommodation of the Fuehrerbunker with his mistress Eva Braun, the Goebbels family and his surgeon. On the evening of April 26th the Russians began to shell the Chancellery and it became clear that resistance could not last much longer. The climax came on the night of April 28/29th when, having finally decided to end his life, Hitler married Eva Braun. Also during the course of the following day news arrived of Mussolini's death at the hands of Italian Partisans, and not wishing to meet a similar fate Hitler began his own preparations.

On April 30th, after saying farewell to Goebbels, Bormann and others of his staff, he and Eva returned to his suite and closed the door. After a brief pause those outside heard a single gunshot and on entering the room found both Hitler and Eva Braun dead. Hitler had shot himself and Eva had taken poison. On April 7th all the remaining German forces in Europe surrendered unconditionally to representatives of the USA, Great Britain, the USSR and France at Allied Headquarters in Rheims.

Each in their own way, the victorious powers began to celebrate the collapse of Nazi Germany. The actual end of combat actions was specified as 23.01 hours on May 8th, which was already May 9th in Eastern Europe. In London huge crowds gathered in Trafalgar Square and along the Mall to Buckingham Palace, where the King and Queen with their daughters and the Prime Minister appeared on the balcony before cheering crowds. Later in Whitehall Churchill addressed the crowds with a short speech saying;

God bless you all. This is your victory. In our long history, we have never seen a greater day than this. Everyone, man or woman, has done their best.

The crowd then began to sing “For He’s a Jolly Good Fellow”.

In the United States, the event coincided with President Truman’s 61st birthday. He dedicated the victory to the memory of his predecessor Franklin Roosevelt who had died less than a month earlier.

Tempering the celebrations somewhat, both Churchill and Truman pointed out that the war against Japan had not yet been won. In his radio broadcast on May 8th Churchill had already told the British people “We may allow ourselves a brief period of rejoicing as Japan remains unsubdued”. In America, broadcasting on the same day, Truman said “It is a victory only half won”.

Today in Europe many countries observe public holidays on the day each year, calling it Victory over Fascism Day or Liberation Day; in the UK, although not a public holiday, it is known as VE (Victory in Europe) Day.