

LIFE AND WELLBEING HISTORY



Karl Dönitz (centre) after the founding of the Flensburg government.



Generaloberst Alfred Jodl (seated, second from right) signs the instruments of unconditional surrender in Reims, France, on May 7, 1945.

Marking the 75th anniversary of Victory in Europe Day (VE-Day) – May 8, 1945

The end of the cruellest, most destructive war in Europe

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The Normandy invasion by the Allies, which started on June 6, 1944, led to the beginning of the end of Nazi Germany, which finally occurred on May 8, 1945, after nearly six years of conflict in Europe.

During the latter stages of the Battle of Berlin, the Soviet forces encircled the city and nearly completed their conquest of the Reich's capital.

On April 30, 1945, Nazi leader Adolf Hitler, who was taking refuge in his bunker in the Berlin Chancellery, committed suicide with his newly-wed wife Eva Braun, and their corpses were burned. In his will, Hitler had nominated Admiral Karl Dönitz to succeed him as head of state. But Berlin fell just two days later, with American and Soviet forces linking up at Torgau on the river Elbe, and the area of Germany still under German military control split in two. Moreover, the Allies' rapid final advances in March 1945 had left the bulk of surviving German forces in isolated pockets of occupied territories, mostly outside the boundaries of pre-Nazi Germany.

Dönitz tried to form a government at Flensburg on the Danish border, and was joined there on May 2, 1945, by the German High Command, under Field Marshal Wilhelm Keitel. But although Dönitz sought to present his government as 'unpolitical', there was no repudiation of Nazism. Both the Soviets and the Americans were

adamant in not recognising Dönitz or the Flensburg government as capable of representing the German state.

On May 4, 1945, German forces acting under instruction from the Dönitz government and facing the British and Canadian 21st Army Group, signed an act of surrender at Lüneburg Heath to come into effect on May 5. However, the first Instrument of Surrender was signed in Reims, France, at 2.41am on May 7, 1945. It was to take effect at 11.01pm on May 8, the 48-hour grace period having been backdated to the start of final negotiations.

The unconditional surrender of the German Armed Forces was signed by Chief of Operations Staff Alfred Jodl. General Walter Bedell Smith signed on behalf of the Supreme Commander of the Allied Expeditionary Force and General Ivan Susloparov on behalf of the Soviet High Command. French Major-General François Sevez signed as the official witness.

A second surrender ceremony was organised in a manor on the outskirts of Berlin late on May 8, when it was already 12.16am of May 9 in Moscow due to the difference in time zones. Field-Marshal Keitel signed a final German Instrument of Surrender, which was also signed by Marshal Georgy Zhukov, on behalf of the Supreme High Command of the Red Army, and Air Chief Marshal Arthur Tedder, on behalf of the Allied Expeditionary Force, in the presence of General Carl Spaatz and General Jean de Lattre de Tassigny, as witnesses. The surrender was signed in the Soviet Army headquarters in Berlin-Karlshorst.

When it became clear that there was need for a second signing of the Act of Surrender, Eisenhower saw that it had become politically impossible to keep to the

original timetable of May 9, 1945. So it was eventually agreed that the western Allies would celebrate Victory in Europe Day (VE-Day) on May 8. The Soviet government made no public acknowledgement of the Reims signing and celebrated Victory Day on May 9, 1945.

As the news of Germany's defeat was announced, celebrations erupted throughout the western world, especially in Great Britain and North America. Over a million people celebrated in the streets through-

“The big bell of St John's Co-Cathedral rang, followed by the bells of all the churches of Malta and Gozo”

out Great Britain. In London, crowds gathered in Trafalgar Square and up the Mall to Buckingham Palace, where King George VI and Queen Elizabeth, accompanied by prime minister Winston Churchill, appeared on the balcony of the palace before the cheering crowds.

Malta, together with the rest of the free world, celebrated Victory in Europe Day too. In Valletta, Maltese civilians, British and servicemen from other Allied countries joined hands and marched down a beflagged Kingsway, Valletta, with bands playing and church bells ringing. When Victory Day in Europe was proclaimed by Churchill, the Maltese burst into applause on Palace Square. Then, the big bell of St John's Co-Cathedral rang, followed by the

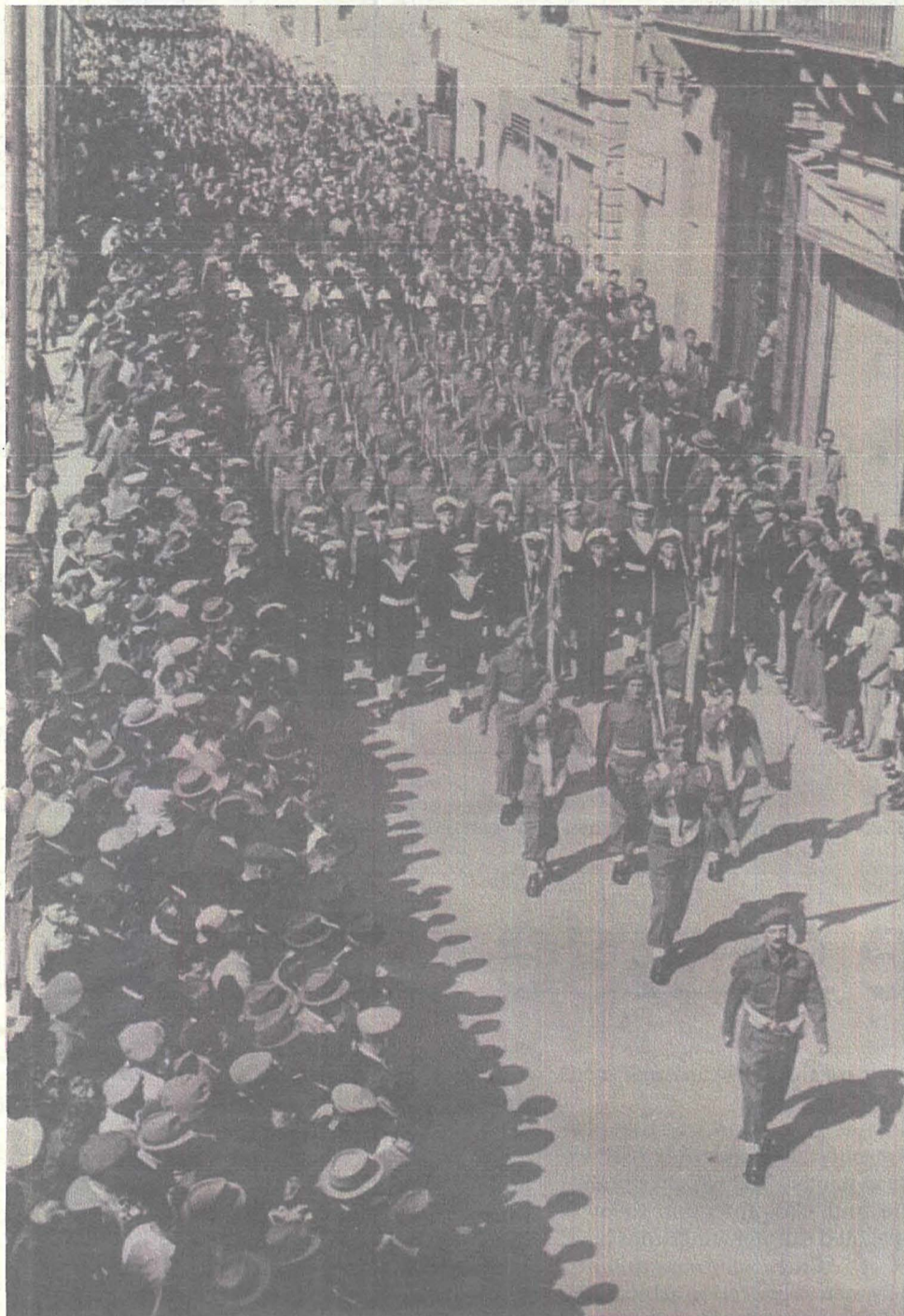
bells of all the churches of Malta and Gozo. Only a few minutes after the announcement of surrender on the afternoon of Monday, May 7, victory flags were flown in Valletta and throughout both islands. Such was the excitement that many a Stars and Stripes and Union Jack often went up flagpoles upside down before being subsequently rectified.

Valletta Museum custodian Costanzo Busuttill proudly states that his air raid chart and records show that they had been emphatically and definitely closed by Governor Lord Gort, Field Marshal Alexander and Admiral Cunningham on that Monday at 3.30pm. He donated the said records to Heritage Malta in 2007 and they now form part of the National War Museum's collection.

Meanwhile, Kingsway was crowded and in festive mood. The atmosphere, though more subdued since Malta had been out of the war for some time, was however not unsimilar to newflash descriptions of what was happening in Piccadilly and Leicester Square in London. Valletta and London, capitals of the two unbeaten islands of Europe, of the spearheads of the invasions of Hitler's formerly formidable fortress, experienced the same emotions and reacted to the unofficial news as one.

In clubs and bars among Maltese groups one heard the words: “What if the Battle of Britain had been lost?” And among English groups one heard the remark: “What if Malta had fallen? Would the war be over today?” Then came the strains of *Land of Hope and Glory*, and many a blitz-time song which in these quasi-normal times one was perhaps was shy to repeat.

When the testing time arrived it had found the garrison and people of Malta as



British troops and naval ratings march through Kingsway (Republic Street), Valletta. PHOTO: TIMES OF MALTA

sound and durable as the rock on which they had built their gun-posts and homes and into which they were to dig shelters for their womenfolk and children.

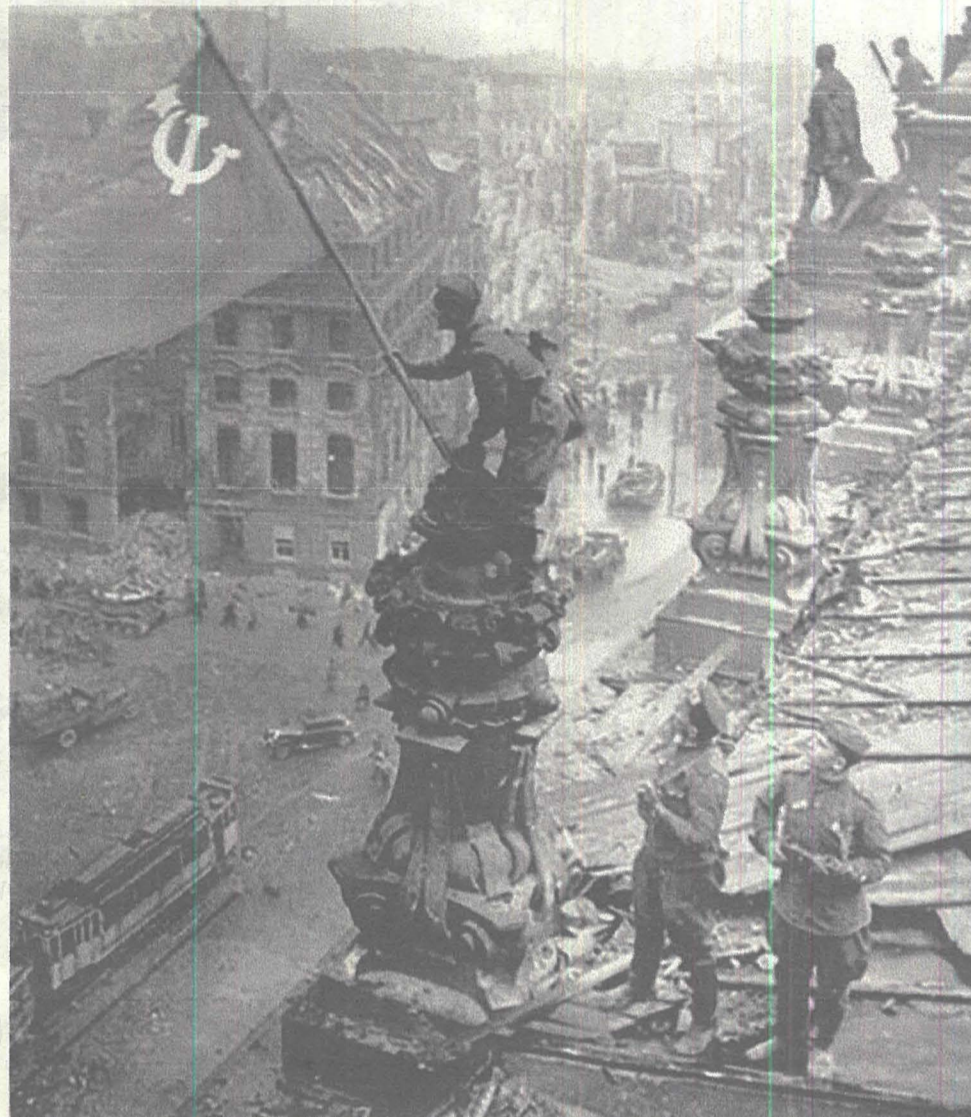
The example of those gallant men from the UK, the Commonwealth and the Empire who lived, fought and died in Malta, through the ebb and flow of the war, shall never be forgotten among the people of these islands. Gratitude towards them is unbounded and only equalled by the gratitude of all in these islands towards King George VI for his gracious award of the George Cross to Malta so as to "bear witness to the heroism and devotion of its people".

After five years and eight months of fighting, the unconditional surrender of the Germans and the announcement of VE-Day brought a definite end to World War II in Europe. It had been the most destructive and cruellest in human history, involving over 60 nations and some 110 million soldiers, leaving approximately 60 million victims, including six million Jews, victims of the Holocaust.

Nazi Germany was responsible for killing 2.7 million ethnic Poles and four million others who were deemed 'unworthy of life', which included the disabled

and mentally ill, Soviet prisoners of war, Roma (gypsies), homosexuals, Freemasons, and Jehovah's Witnesses. Soviet prisoners-of-war were kept in especially unbearable conditions, and 3.6 million Soviet POWs out of 5.7m died in Nazi camps during the war. Nazi Germany had used about 12 million European forced labourers from German occupied countries as a workforce in German industry, agriculture and war economy.

Malta too had suffered severely during the Luftwaffe ferocious attacks of 1941 and 1942 and the tight siege by the Axis to try to force the island to surrender. It is calculated that 1,468 Maltese civilians were killed, 3,720 Maltese civilians were injured, some 40,000 buildings demolished and around 17,000 tons of bombs were dropped on the island. April 1942 was the worst month and about 6,727 tons were dropped on Malta in a single day. According to Philip Vella's *Malta: Blitzed but not Beaten*, this exceeded any monthly tonnage of bombs dropped over the UK during the height of the Battle of Britain in the summer of 1940. The Siege Bell was inaugurated in 1992 to serve as a memorial to the 7,000 people who paid the final sacrifice during the Second Siege of Malta.



A soldier raising the Soviet flag above the ruins of the German Reichstag on May 2, 1945 – one of the most celebrated images of World War II.



Wartime flags of the victorious Allies and Malta hanging above a cannon at the National War Museum, Valletta. PHOTO: HERITAGE MALTA