BATTLE OF THE BULGE

German Counteroffensive (Battle of the Bulge). In December 1944, Adolf Hitler directed an ambitious counteroffensive intended to regain the initiative in the west and compel the Allies to settle for a negotiated peace. Hitler’s generals were opposed to the plan, but the Führer’s will prevailed, and on 16 December some 30 German divisions launched the counteroffensive against Allied lines in the Ardennes region. The Allied defenses there had been thinned to provide troops for the autumn defensive, as the Allied leadership felt that the region’s difficult terrain would make it an unlikely location for enemy activity. The Allied units stationed on the Ardennes front line either were being refitted or were fresh units placed there to gain experience before going to more active areas. Hitler’s object was to drive through Antwerp and cut off and annihilate the British 21st Army Group and the U.S. First and Ninth Armies north of the Ardennes.

Aided by stormy weather, which grounded Allied planes and restricted observation, the surprise German attack made rapid gains at first. However, firm resistance by various isolated units provided time for the U.S. First and Ninth Armies to shift against the northern flank of the penetration, for the British to send reserves to secure the line to the Meuse, and for Patton’s Third Army to hit the salient from the south. Denied vital roads and hampered by air attacks when the weather cleared, the German assault resulted only in a large bulge in the Allied lines which did not even extend to the Meuse River, the Germans’ first objective. The Americans suffered some 75,000 casualties in the Battle of the Bulge, but the Germans lost 80,000 to 100,000. German strength had been irredeemably impaired. By the end of January 1945, American units had retaken all of the ground they had lost, and the defeat of Germany would be only a matter of time. In the east, the Red Army had opened a winter offensive that would carry them through to Berlin and beyond.