

Debating why the Allies won the Second World War

At what point did the Allies win the Second World War? Was the outcome predetermined from the weight of Allied economic resources? Was victory always beyond the reach of the Axis states? In the view of many military and economic historians, the outcome of the war was no longer in any doubt after December 1941. The Japanese surprise attack on Pearl Harbor and the German declaration of war on the United States brought together a coalition of Great Powers that could not fail to win so long as they continued to fight long enough. As R. A. C. Parker put it in *The Second World War* (Oxford, 2001), 'the Allies must win if they stayed together'.

The statistics make Parker's case persuasive. Even in the year most favourable to the Axis in fighting performance and strategic advantages, the Allies still possessed a healthy margin over their foes in wealth, exploited and untapped resources, weapons and manpower. After 1942, the superiority grew at an astronomical rate. Mark Harrison, a leading historian of the economics of the Second World War, argues in *The Economics of World War II* (Cambridge, 2000) that once the initial Axis attacks petered out, the 'economic fundamentals' reasserted themselves: 'The greater Allied capacity for taking risks, absorbing the cost of mistakes, replacing losses, and accumulating overwhelming quantitative superiority now turned against the Axis. Ultimately, economics determined the outcome.'

Richard Overy, in his *Why the Allies Won* (London, 1995), rejects the large dose of determinism in explanations based on statistics alone. He locates the war's turning point much later than the end of 1941. 'On the face of things,' he writes, 'no rational man in early 1942 would have guessed at the eventual outcome of the war.' A rich account of why the Allies won, Overy asserts, must consider a whole series of *contingent* factors. The war was as much a moral, political, technical and organizational contest as it was a race to stockpile resources. Scholars must explain why Germany, Italy and Japan failed to exploit their full productive potential in 1942 and thus lost their operational and strategic momentum. If the organizational weaknesses had been overcome by the aggressors, allowing them to realize their potential, then 'the Axis by 1942 might well have proved the irresistible force'. Quantity of men and arms, moreover, tells us little about *quality*. Remarkably quickly, the Allies managed to close the qualitative gap and rally their peoples to fight the long hard battles required to destroy the Axis. Even so, the critical campaigns of 1942 were won by the Allies by slender margins.