

# This Day in History... May 8, 1945

## Victory in Europe Day

On May 8, 1945, Americans celebrated Germany's defeat with the first Victory in Europe Day. The news brought cheering crowds into the streets, but the celebration came with a clear reminder: World War II was not yet over.

The war in Europe ended in the ruins of Nazi Germany. By late April 1945, Soviet troops were fighting street by street through Berlin. American forces had already met Soviet troops at the Elbe River on April 25. Germany was split apart, its armies were collapsing, and its capital was surrounded.

Still, Adolf Hitler refused to accept defeat. He stayed in his bunker beneath the Reich Chancellery in Berlin, issuing orders that could no longer change the outcome. On April 30, 1945, Hitler and Eva Braun, whom he had married the day before, killed themselves. Their deaths did not end the fighting at once, but they removed the last symbol of Nazi resistance.

Grand Admiral Karl Dönitz, chosen by Hitler as his successor, tried to delay surrender in the east while moving as many German soldiers and civilians as possible toward the Western Allies. But Germany had no real choice left. On May 2, Berlin surrendered to the Soviets. German forces in Italy, the Netherlands, Denmark, and other areas soon laid down their arms.

The formal surrender came early on May 7, 1945, at Allied headquarters in Reims, France. General Dwight D. Eisenhower did not attend the signing ceremony in person. He sent his chief of staff, General Walter Bedell Smith, to represent the Western Allies. General Alfred Jodl signed for Germany at 2:41 a.m. The surrender was unconditional and was to take effect late on May 8.

After the signing, the German delegation was brought to Eisenhower's office. Eisenhower asked whether they understood the terms. They did. Germany's armed forces were now in the hands of the victors.

Soviet leader Joseph Stalin wanted a second surrender ceremony in Berlin, the city the Red Army had taken after a brutal final battle. That ceremony was held on May 8. Because of the time difference, it was already May 9 in Moscow. That is why Russia and several former Soviet republics mark Victory Day on May 9, while the United States, Britain, France, and many other nations remember May 8 as V-E Day.

In Britain, crowds filled the streets before the official announcement was even made. At 3 p.m., Prime Minister Winston Churchill spoke by radio and declared that the war against Germany was over. Later, King George VI, Queen Elizabeth,

Princess Elizabeth, Princess Margaret, and Churchill appeared on the balcony of Buckingham Palace. That night, the two princesses quietly joined the crowds outside the palace. Elizabeth, the future queen, later remembered the evening as one of the most memorable nights of her life.

In the United States, President Harry S. Truman announced the news from the White House. He had been president for less than a month. Franklin D. Roosevelt had died on April 12, only weeks before the victory he had worked toward. Truman told Americans, "This is a solemn but glorious hour," and said he wished Roosevelt had lived to see it. Flags were still at half-staff in Roosevelt's memory.

Across America, people poured into public squares, churches, offices, and streets. In New York City, crowds packed Times Square. Church bells rang. Factory whistles blew. Workers left their jobs to join the celebration. Many people laughed, cried, prayed, sang, or embraced strangers. For families with sons, husbands, and brothers in Europe, the news meant hope that soldiers might soon come home.

But the joy was restrained by one hard fact. The war in the Pacific was still raging. American forces were fighting Japan island by island, and no one knew how long that war would last. Truman reminded the country that victory in Europe was only part of the larger struggle.

Japan announced its surrender on August 14, 1945, after the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and the Soviet declaration of war against Japan. The formal surrender ceremony took place on September 2 aboard the USS *Missouri* in Tokyo Bay. Only then was World War II truly over.

V-E Day remained a day of relief, gratitude, and remembrance. It marked the defeat of Nazi Germany, but it also pointed toward the difficult work ahead: bringing troops home, rebuilding shattered nations, and trying to prevent another global war.



*This stamp image is based on Private First Class Paul Staub's photo of the bridge the Germans blew up the Elbe River.*



*The stamp director nor the stamp artist wanted to show the enemy on the stamp or a bunch of somber men. Therefore, it was decided to really zoom in on the document and hands signing the surrender.*



*V-E Day was also President Truman's 61st birthday*



*Japan's surrender months later ended the rest of the war.*

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