As the war dragged on to its final year, the handwriting on the wall for Hitler became ever clearer. Yet, due to the overdose of Nazi indoctrination and the unceasing propaganda of Berlin, the majority of the Volksdeutsche failed to see it. Paradoxically, for a great part of the Swabians the recognition of the gravity of the situation came with the German occupation of Hungary in March, 1944.\(^1\) To be sure, most of the Volksbund faithful were at first greatly relieved when German troops marched into Hungary and took over strategic positions. The presence of the still well-equipped and disciplined German soldiers all over the country gave reassurance to those who feared that the mounting anti-German sentiments might erupt at any moment into Hungary's desertion of Hitler's camp. On the other hand, that part of the Volksdeutsche, mainly the erstwhile Bleyerists, which found it increasingly difficult to accept the monopoly of the Volksbund, realized quite clearly that the German occupation (which simply could not be ignored, whatever attitude the tightly censored news media might have assumed) could only end with disastrous results. That the great majority of Hungary's non-German population accepted the German occupation with the utmost misgivings and ill-feelings needs hardly to be emphasized. But even the simple German peasant in the countryside sensed - despite the constant reassurances to the contrary by the Volksbund and the new, completely nazified government in Budapest - that something was terribly wrong. If everything were really going so smoothly as asserted, why was the presence

\(^1\) On the cause and circumstances of the occupation, see Chapter X.
of combat-ready German troops necessary in Hungary? Hence, it is not surprising that under these conditions, Hungarian sentiments toward the Volksdeutsche and especially the Volksbündler turned from indifference or misgivings to open animosity, though nothing could be done while the German war machine controlled Hungary.

To substantiate these misgivings, the months which succeeded the German occupation brought about in rapid sequence the final acts of the Nazi downfall. In June came the invasion in Normandy, in July the ill-fated attempt on Hitler’s life, and in August the capitulation of Rumania, the latter having opened the way to Hungary’s very boundaries for the ever more pressing Red Army. From the late summer of 1944 onward the prelude to the grim end was visible and tangible in its full, terrible nakedness, except to a rapidly dwindling number of fanatics whose blind faith in a German victory simply could not be changed on the strength of reason and to those who preferred to be blind. The country’s war economy, which up to that time was comparatively not altogether bad, worsened rapidly, to break down finally by late fall. The morale of the general public, never in high gear in support of the war, turned from scepticism to open defeatism and passive resistance. The number of army deserters grew in direct proportion to the worsening of the military situation; the demoralized home front became heavy with tension and the expectation of the ominous. The relationship between the German troops stationed in Hungary and the civilian population – quite correct at the beginning – deteriorated also. Beginning in late summer (1944), the conduct of the German troops reached rapidly the inevitable nadir, which showed up in various chicaneries and undue requisitions on the local population, of molesting the women, and finally of the outright looting of residences and holdings left vacant by their owners who joined the swelling number of those fleeing westward.

By that time more and more horse-drawn peasant wagons packed with household goods and people appeared on the highways, in the cities, and even in the capital, moving slowly from the east, rueful vanguards of an oncoming disaster. The bombing from the air, which until the spring of 1944 was mercifully rare, relentlessly gained momentum with the closing in of the Allied forces; by autumn hardly a day passed without some devastating