Recent weeks have brought the most severe crisis of this war experienced thus far, really the first genuine crisis, unfortunately not only a crisis for the leadership and the system, but also for Germany. It is symbolized by the name of Stalingrad.

From the diary of Ulrich von Hassell, 14 February 1943.

Three days after the attack on the Romanian positions on the Don, Soviet forces completed the encirclement of nearly 250,000 German soldiers in Stalingrad. All efforts at relief failed, and the last remnants of this force surrendered on 2 February 1943. In the meantime the whole German position in the Caucasus collapsed, and the armies which had advanced into the mountains and towards the oil fields there were forced into a desperate retreat, abandoning huge quantities of material. This was a military defeat unprecedented in German history. At the same time Rommel’s *Afrikakorps* was compelled to abandon Tripoli and to take up defensive positions in Tunisia. On 27 January the first American daylight bombing raid was made on Germany, and night after night German cities were targeted by British bombers. These military disasters were accompanied by significant diplomatic moves. On 17 December 1942 a Joint Allied Declaration was released in London, Washington, and Moscow. The British Foreign Secretary Anthony Eden read the text to the House of Commons, including this statement:

The German authorities … are now carrying into effect Hitler’s oft repeated intention to exterminate the Jewish people in Europe. From all the occupied countries Jews are being transported, in conditions of appalling horror and brutality, to Eastern Europe … The above-mentioned Governments and the French National Committee condemn in the strongest possible terms this bestial policy of cold-blooded extermination.

Significantly for Goebbels, Eden continued:

They reaffirm their solemn resolution to ensure that those responsible for these crimes shall not escape retribution, and to press on with the necessary practical measures to this end.
In January 1943 Churchill and Roosevelt met in Casablanca and announced their intention to compel Germany to an unconditional surrender.\(^3\)

Goebbels was at the centre of the unfolding crisis in Germany. Although he tried to conceal news of the encirclement at Stalingrad from the German people, he was as ever well-informed of developments there, and knew from the start of 1943 that the army trapped there was lost. He understood the difficulties involved in trying to supply the force in Tunisia, and heard rational voices calling for a total withdrawal from North Africa. Reports from the occupied territories and from neutral countries spoke of a rising tide of anti-German feeling. He recognized the gravity of the changed military situation, and the difficulties of representing this to an increasingly weary and sceptical German population. He responded with characteristic energy, and placed his hopes in a demand for ‘total war’. Not until 16 January did the German army’s regular communiqué allude to the encirclement of the force in Stalingrad; and it was only on 27 January that Goebbels gave instructions to the German press on how to prepare the public for the news that the fight there was coming to an end.\(^4\)

On 30 January 1943, he had the difficult job of facing the German public on the ten-year anniversary of the *Machtergreifung*, the Nazi ‘seizure of power’. Hitler, characteristically, refused to come to Berlin, and instead drafted a ‘proclamation’ which he asked Goebbels to read out at a mass meeting in the *Sportpalast*. The meeting was postponed for an hour at the last moment to minimize the possibility of disruption by British aircraft, but Goebbels rose to the occasion, delivering a rousing speech before reading Hitler’s more tedious proclamation. It was clearly an emotional occasion, and all present obviously recognized that Germany stood at a momentous point in its history. Himmler, Rosenberg, and Ley were among other senior figures present. Goebbels’ speech was frequently interrupted by supportive calls from his audience, and he found himself in the middle of ‘an ocean of enthusiasm’. It recalled, he thought, ‘the best times from the *Kampfzeit*’. During the delivery of Hitler’s proclamation, the air-raid sirens sounded, and anti-aircraft guns could be clearly heard outside, but Goebbels steel ed himself to continue as if nothing had happened. ‘Nobody’, he recorded, ‘got up from his place or showed the slightest sign of unease or nervousness.’ That evening, Hitler telephoned from Rastenburg to congratulate Goebbels, and also spent some time talking to Magda.\(^5\)

Over the next few days, the news of the surrender of all remaining pockets of German resistance in Stalingrad, together with their commanding officer, von Paulus, and 24 of his generals, filtered through. Goebbels shared Hitler’s dismay that Paulus had chosen to surrender rather than to commit suicide, but now had to present this unprecedented catastrophe to the German public. Goebbels, no stranger to the funeral ceremony, had decided that a ‘national-political lesson’ had to be learnt from Stalingrad; the ‘special announcement’ on the radio would be ‘very realistic, very sober, and completely without pathos’; all light music