

Also by Henri Michel

THE SHADOW WAR

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THE SECOND WORLD WAR

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IV THE CROSSING OF THE RHINE - THE BATTLE OF THE RUHR

When the Americans reached the left bank of the Rhine they frequently found the bridges destroyed; but after a prisoner had disclosed that the Ludendorff bridge at Remagen was to be blown up on March 7 at 4 p.m., the Americans were on the spot at 3.30; a broken wire prevented it from being electrically detonated from the other bank; the American sappers cut the wires and sank the explosives. After consulting Eisenhower, Bradley immediately took advantage of this stroke of luck; next day 8,000 men crossed by the bridge. The Germans vainly tried to destroy it by every conceivable means, artillery, air attack, human torpedoes and even V-2s. By the time the bridge collapsed it was already too late; and beyond the Rhine there were three American divisions occupying a pocket 30 miles wide by 10 miles long, which they had made impregnable by a concentration of guns of every kind.

After Patton's brilliant success on March 12-16, Bradley had ordered him to cross the Rhine at the double. After clearing the left bank from Coblenz to Mannheim, Patton crossed the river at Oppenheim on March 22 and declared that 'the whole world must know that he had crossed the Rhine ahead of Montgomery'.

The latter, it is true, had a stretch of water some 550 yards wide in front of him. In addition, he wanted to force the crossing in sufficient strength to set off rapidly afterwards on the other bank; he thus devoted a long time to assembling the heavy equipment needed to build several bridges simultaneously. On March 23 Montgomery was ready at last; behind a thick smoke screen he had an area of fifteen square miles shelled by more than 2,000 guns. At the same time two airborne divisions were dropped, not behind the enemy positions but on top of their artillery, a bold and dangerous operation which succeeded in taking the enemy by surprise and creating chaos in their ranks. However, the amphibious tanks crossed the river on their own. By the evening of the 24th the bridgehead was some thirty miles deep; by the 26th, seven bridges had been built across the Rhine, while those over the Issel were captured intact. As early as March 28, six armoured divisions were ready to strike out across the Münster plain.

On the same day the American Seventh Army also crossed the Rhine at Gernsheim, near Worms. Next, on March 31 it was the turn of the French First Army, to the west of Karlsruhe. By April 1, 1945, the battle of the Rhine was over and Eisenhower's victory was complete.

On April 2, the Ninth and First Armies joined hands at Lippstadt, closing up the Ruhr pocket where eighteen German divisions under

Model were shut in amongst the jumble of towns and factories; Model had not even tried to disengage from the enemy - where could he go? A siege war began, which Eisenhower entrusted to a new American army, the Fifteenth, under Gerow.

Eisenhower now systematically set about adding to and strengthening the bridges over the Rhine. American engineers worked wonders; eleven days after the capture of Wesel they had already built a bridge with a railway line; stores were piling up on the right bank; they could begin the pursuit in all directions at once, as Eisenhower wanted; the terrain no longer presented any great obstacle; the German motorways were wide open to the tanks and could not be defended, for they skirted the built-up areas where the enemy might make a stand; the straight stretches could even be turned into runways for aircraft.

Germany's defeat was practically complete; British and American disagreements were now a thing of the past. The problem now was to co-ordinate and to join hands with the Red Army; there were two sides to this; Eisenhower only considered it from the military angle, but Churchill was concerned above all with its political aspect.

V THE BATTLE OF BUDAPEST - THE USSR AND SOUTH-EAST EUROPE

While the Soviets were advancing in Pomerania and Silesia they had been marking time south of the Carpathians for some considerable time; but this semi-failure by their armies was amply compensated for by their political success in all the countries which the Red Army had entered.

At the beginning of December 1944 the Russians had with some difficulty advanced as far as Budapest and the shores of Lake Balaton. During December, Malinovski in the north and Tolbukhin in the south had attacked in conjunction with each other and had broken through the line of fortifications which had been hastily set up by the Germans round Budapest. By the end of the year street fighting had even begun in Pest.

The Hungarian Fascist Arrow Cross government had set about fortifying the city by mobilising the population to build defence works; since there were many desertions, public executions became a common event. Hitler was greatly interested in this operational area, for there were ss generals in command there. He ordered them to defend the city house by house, forbade them to attempt to leave and threatened to shoot as a deserter anyone who tried to join the German forces in the west. The Russians were therefore forced to lay siege to Pest and to the heights of Buda, where 70,000 men were making a stand.

In January 1945 General Gille's ss armoured corps tried in vain to

relieve the beleaguered city. The garrison then began to run short of provisions, since the attempted parachute drops made on a small area in bad weather had had no greater success than at Stalingrad; they were so short of petrol that their crews had to blow up seventy immobilised tanks.

On January 15, the Russians reached the main streets of Pest; they advanced along the underground railway and the Germans withdrew, blowing up the Danube bridges as they did so. On January 19, Gille made a renewed attack to relieve Buda, but in vain; the citadel was being pounded by Soviet artillery; completely demoralised, some Hungarian units went over to the Red Army. On February 11, the garrison surrendered – only 20,000 men succeeded in escaping. But Malinovski's advance towards Bratislava and Vienna as ordered by *Stavka* had been delayed by more than fifty days by this unexpected siege.

Meanwhile, the Germans continued to attack on both sides of the Danube. Against Guderian's advice Hitler decided to send reinforcements from the Ardennes to General Sepp Dietrich because the latter, a former butcher, was a long-standing Nazi. On March 6, the Germans began three simultaneous concentric counter-attacks with the main thrust taking place towards the Danube, south of Budapest, from the isthmus between Lake Balaton and Venezezi. A breach was made on the first day, but through lack of experience the raw German recruits failed to stick close enough to the tanks; the latter soon ran out of petrol and even of shells; after an advance of some eighteen miles they came to a halt.

On March 16, Malinovski and Tolbukhin took up the offensive together; their objective was Vienna. On March 27, the German position collapsed and on March 29 the Russians reached the Austrian frontier.

As the Red Army moved on, all the countries liberated by them rapidly underwent tremendous changes. First of all, as they drew near, Communist-controlled guerrilla activity broke out so as to pave the way; the Russians dropped arms, officers and instructors to the partisans by parachute; skirmishes started up again in Slovakia as early as February; in Hungary the Committee of National Unity, on which the Communists were represented, only just failed in an attempt at revolt which, had it succeeded, would have conspicuously shortened, if not entirely prevented, the siege of Budapest; but partisans were fighting both ahead of and behind the Red Army's lines.

At the same time armies were being raised in Romania (350,000 men) and in Bulgaria, which were incorporated into the Red Army to fight against the Germans. But above all the governments of the liberated countries contracted an alliance with the USSR as well as being reshuffled in accordance with the latter's wishes. In Yugoslavia a national coalition government was formed in Belgrade on March 7, 1945; with Tito as president, it contained twenty-three Communist members out of twenty-

eight, and all the key positions were in the hands of Titoists. In a letter to King Peter of Yugoslavia, Churchill recognised that 'events had disappointed his heartfelt desires and that he was no longer in a position to prevent what was happening in Yugoslavia'.

For his part, President Beneš had started negotiations both with the Czech Communists who had taken refuge in Moscow and with the USSR. They ended in the 'Kosice Programme' and the agreement of March 31, 1945, according to which the Czechoslovaks would be mobilised and armed by the USSR and a coalition government would be formed to which Communists would be admitted. Between the western powers and the USSR, Czechoslovakia under Beneš, who had not forgotten the Munich betrayal, had resolutely opted for the USSR.

But the most memorable and, for the British and Americans, the most worrying events had taken place in Romania. At the end of February Vyshinsky, Moscow's former public prosecutor and now the USSR's deputy Foreign Minister, had come to Bucharest barely sixteen days after the end of the Yalta Conference. The Communists' programme of expropriation, confiscation and nationalisation had split the Democratic National Front, from which Bratianu and Maniu had withdrawn. General Radescu's government, which had been gradually deprived of its powers, had proved powerless to prevent the spontaneous partition and redistribution of country estates, the collapse of the administration and the assumption of direct control of immense areas by the Red armies. Vyshinsky came and put the government out of its misery. He immediately went to the royal palace outside which Soviet armoured cars were carrying out manoeuvres, while other Russian units were disarming the Romanian security forces. King Michael put up a show of resistance and Vyshinsky gave him twenty-four hours to dismiss Radescu and replace him by Petru Groza, who belonged, indeed, to a wealthy bourgeois family but who hastened to give the Ministry of the Interior to a Communist, thus causing a wave of arrests.

Representations by London and Washington made no difference to this situation. Roosevelt suggested to Stalin forming a tripartite commission with the task of implementing in Romania the decision which had been taken unanimously at Yalta to allow each liberated people freely to choose its own institutions. On March 17, Stalin rejected the suggestion outright, on the pretext of military necessity.

VI CHURCHILL'S ANXIETIES AND PROPOSALS

Churchill, for his part, had carried out his policy in Greece and installed men of his own choice. The elections of March 31, 1945 were supervised

by British and American observers; fifty-four per cent of the votes went to the monarchists. The resulting royalist government, led by Tsaldaris, held a referendum: out of 1,500,000 votes cast, 1,162,000 were in favour of the monarchy. But the National Liberation Front (EAM) refused to accept this popular verdict and came out against the return of King George; it was determined to prevent it by force if necessary.

As far as the behaviour of the USSR was concerned, Churchill had expressed his anxiety even before Yalta. Whereas he had thought that the Red Army would be exhausted and stop once their national territory had been liberated, there they were advancing on Berlin, Vienna and Prague. For the British Premier, who was heir to a long diplomatic tradition of striking a balance of power in Europe, the war was beginning to take on a different look; the USSR was becoming a potential enemy. On the military plane, the advance westwards had to be stopped by a British and American counter-advance as far eastwards as possible; he urged Eisenhower to take action to achieve this. On the political plane he wrote to Roosevelt 'that all the great problems causing a division between Western and Eastern Europe must be settled before the armies of the democracies dissolve. I do not see why we should put on sack-cloth and ashes if by a mass surrender in the west we can reach the Elbe, or even beyond.' For him, the gloomy outlook ahead made it important to make an immediate return to the schemes which the British had always been advocating: to push on northwards as fast as possible, first of all in order to prevent the shores of the North Sea, Denmark and Norway from being taken over by the Russians and secondly and above all so that the British and Americans could be the first to enter Berlin, in order, wrote Churchill to Roosevelt on April 5, 'to show the Russians that there are limits to the amount of insults we can stand'. In the south, where the Russians were advancing more slowly through the wooded mountains of Slovakia, it was necessary to reach Prague before them 'so that Czechoslovakia would not follow the example of Yugoslavia', and also in order to be on an equal footing with them in Austria, since it was now impossible to prevent them from winning the race to Vienna.

Churchill was not absolutely convinced that Soviet policy would take a completely hostile turn; but he considered that the only way to prevent this was for the British and Americans to make a firm stand; the best way to maintain the alliance of the Big Three on an equal footing was for the Allied armies to advance as far as possible into eastern Europe. 'If the Red Army entered Vienna and Berlin at the same time,' he said, 'it would be convinced that it had played an overwhelming role in the joint victory and this would create great difficulties for the future.'

Churchill appealed once more to Roosevelt: 'Our friendship is the rock on which the future of the world will be built.' But the American President

by this time was in the last stages of his long illness; a great empty space had appeared in the White House which could not be filled by the slowly dying Hopkins or the inexperienced Truman; Roosevelt was no longer able and Truman did not know how. In the circumstances, the State Department was anxious above all to avoid a showdown with the Russians. It was the military men – that is to say Eisenhower, covered by Marshall, who was speaking on behalf of the President – who replied as military men to the political proposals and anxiety of Churchill.

While recognising that Berlin was 'the symbol of what remained of German power' and that there was nothing in their agreements with the Russians to prevent the British and Americans from trying to get there first, Eisenhower replied to Churchill that 'Berlin in itself was no longer an objective of primary importance'. Bradley thought that an advance on Berlin from the Elbe would cost him a hundred thousand lives and that his lines were too extended for the operation not to offer risks. The American point of view was put forward very decisively by Marshall, on behalf of Roosevelt: 'Our only aim must be to achieve a rapid and complete victory.'

For that purpose Eisenhower considered that it was necessary to join hands with the Russians as soon as possible in order to prevent the German armies from re-grouping. In addition, it was important to seize the areas where winter might help to protract the struggle, namely in Norway and above all in Austria, where there were some signs that Hitler was preparing his last stronghold for a stiff German resistance. The main British and American advance therefore took place not towards Berlin, but further to the south, towards Leipzig and Dresden, where the Russians were nearest, taking advantage of the narrower rivers; after that two related thrusts would be launched; in the north towards the Baltic and in the south towards the Tyrol. At the end of March, without more ado, Eisenhower communicated his plans to Stalin, as Commander-in-Chief to Commander-in-Chief, as if Stalin had not been in addition the political leader of the USSR.

Anglo-American exchange of opinions was turning into a series of monologues. Churchill realised the fact and with his amazing adaptability he apparently submitted to events which he was now no longer in a position to control. He was well aware that Britain could not do much on her own, without the support of the USA; moreover, the British Commonwealth was providing only a quarter of the forces invading Germany. Roosevelt's death had put an end once and for all to the relationship of friendship and trust which in spite of the discrepancy between their forces, had enabled Britain so often to put her point of view to the USA and even to impose it on her. On April 19, Churchill gave up the idea of capturing Berlin: 'The Russians have two million five hundred thousand

soldiers in the sector and the Americans have only twenty-five divisions on a huge front.' He nevertheless still thought it possible to outpace them in the direction of Lübeck in the north and Prague and Linz in the south. But in actual fact Eisenhower was from now on free to act as he chose, and his views had not changed.

VII THE BATTLE OF BERLIN

It is probable that the steps taken by Churchill, or at least what they knew of them, confirmed the Russians' fear that the British and Americans wanted to be the first to reach Berlin. Soviet historians of 'the great patriotic war' even allege that the Germans were prepared to open their defences to the British and American armies to enable them to forestall the Russians in their capital, even though they were nearly 190 miles away and the Red Army only about 45. There is no doubt in these circumstances that the Russians were making the capture of Berlin their chief objective and that they speeded up their operations in order to win the race against their allies. But the first requirement for success was for Zhukov's right flank to be protected against German counter-offensives from Pomerania. At the beginning of March Rokossovski (second Byelorussian front) reached Közlin on the Baltic. Then on March 19 Zhukov (first Byelorussian front) also arrived on the Baltic at Kolberg; the Germans had to evacuate part of their troops to the left bank of the Oder by sea. The Russians then set about conquering the mouth of the Vistula; on March 28, Gdynia was captured with the battleship *Gneisenau*; on March 30, Danzig fell. Further to the north Vassilevski (third Byelorussian front) reduced the German pockets of resistance in Brandenburg; Königsberg fell on April 10.

All the encircled positions which were pinning down Soviet forces were stormed one after another: Poznan, Graudenz and Glogau; only Breslau resisted until May 7. At the same time Zhukov extended the Küstrin bridgehead on the left bank of the Oder, which was the spring-board for the crucial offensive.

At the end of March the attack on Berlin was finally ready to be launched. Zhukov was given command of the operation. South of Berlin Koniev was to reach the Elbe in the direction of Dresden; in the north, Rokossovski was to protect Zhukov and then swoop down on Stettin and beyond. D-Day was fixed for April 16.

In all, the Red Army were deploying two million men, 41,000 guns, 6,300 tanks and 5,000 aircraft on a 250-mile front. But the stronghold of Berlin covered an area of some 350 square miles; the *U-Bahn* and other

underground tunnels and bridges gave the defenders great possibilities of manoeuvre; blocks of houses, bridges and canals formed natural pockets of resistance. In the relative lull, which was really the eve of battle, from March 12 to April 10, Hitler had grouped two armies on the Oder under General Heinrici and a considerable reserve force between Frankfurt and Berlin. Once again Guderian was in disgrace, and had been replaced by Krebs. Once again Hitler forbade any retreat; the order was: save Berlin and the enemy shall be crushed. The moment had come for the Führer to carry out the decision which he had expressed as early as November 1939: 'I will never surrender.' But Hitler was now no more than a shadow of his former self; he had lost the use of his right arm and his sense of balance; he was in a general state of physical decay; his body was kept going only by dint of pills and hypodermic injections of strychnine and hormones – as many as six a day. Gerhard Bolt, one of Guderian's aide-de-camps who had seen him in April 1945 described his hesitant walk, his bent body, his flaccid handshake, his anguished expression and his obvious senility. Germany's Führer had reached the point of exhaustion to which he had condemned his own people.

Soviet superiority was beyond dispute; on the lines of their intended thrust, respectively twenty-seven and twenty-two miles long, Zhukov and Koniev had concentrated 7,080 and 7,170 guns respectively. The attack began on April 12 at Küstrin and on the Neisse; it was checked for one day and then began again on the 13th. On April 16 the Berlin sky was darkened by clouds of Stormoviks. On April 19 its encirclement began. On the 22nd Zhukov's and Koniev's troops joined hands both to the east and to the west of the city, which was now completely surrounded. Voronov then set up a circle of 25,000 guns, nearly 1,000 to the mile, and hurled 25,000 tons of shells on to the city. On several occasions the Germans, who fought savagely to the bitter end, broke out of the encirclement but the Russians closed it up again. On April 29, the street-battle began; the Russians had built a whole armoury of special equipment – for example, tanks with ladders for forcing barricades. One by one the blocks of houses were captured; the Soviet Red Star was hoisted over the Brandenburg Gate.

Hitler kept his oath: 'I shall not under any circumstances survive my people's defeat.' On April 30, when he now ruled over only the few square yards of his underground bunker, the Führer put a bullet through his head and committed suicide together with Eva Braun, his constant companion, whom he had married; according to his wishes, both their bodies were burnt; the Russians were only 500 yards away. Goebbels did the same, after poisoning his wife and six children! At the moment of his death Hitler was virtually alone, abandoned by all his henchmen from happier days: Keitel, Jodl, Himmler, Ribbentrop and Speer.

On May 2 General Weidling handed over to Chuikov, who had defended Stalingrad, the last 70,000 defenders of Berlin. By this time all the German fronts had collapsed.

VIII THE END OF THE FIGHTING IN ITALY

In the middle of January 1945 the Germans had tried to sound out the British and Americans in order to separate them from the Russians; to this end Ribbentrop had sent delegates to Berne and Stockholm, but without success. In February 1945 a fresh attempt was made; the ss General Wolff made contact with the American secret services in Switzerland and then with the headquarters of Alexander, Wilson's successor in Italy. The British and Americans had not rejected these overtures which might have brought fighting in the peninsula to an end more quickly. But they demanded an unconditional surrender, as they informed the Russians on March 12. Stalin reacted very sharply; Molotov demanded an immediate end to the talks and a promise from the British never to restart them. In the end, since Wolff had probably been disowned by Himmler, and Kesselring, who was rather in favour of the talks, was replaced by von Vietinghoff, the contacts were broken off.

Nevertheless Stalin continued to show that he was not pleased. His greatest fear of all was obviously of a limited German surrender in the west, for this would have been a sort of replica of the German-Soviet pact. He accused his partners – saying that he knew all about it – of having negotiated with Kesselring for a rapid advance eastwards in exchange for concessions to Germany, once peace came.

For once Roosevelt was indignant that he could have been credited with such dark designs; his correspondence with Stalin took on an unusually sharp tone; he complained of having been 'basely wronged'; he stated his conviction that a break between the Russians and the Americans at this juncture would be 'an historic tragedy'. Stalin then calmed down and the incident had no serious consequences. On the contrary, one of Roosevelt's last messages to Churchill on April 12 reaffirmed the United States President's desire 'to minimise the Soviet problem as a whole because most of the day-to-day difficulties could be settled.' His successor, Truman, went even further and considered that the British and Americans must keep their promises to the Russians, even if the Russians did not keep theirs.

The only result of the incident was to delay the Allied offensive in Italy. The Allies had kept only twenty-three divisions on this minor front, the most hybrid collection imaginable – Americans, British and Commonwealth troops, Poles, Brazilians, Jews and Italians. Opposing them were

German troops of almost equal strength – including the Italians from Salò – but they were short of petrol and they were fighting with their backs to the Po. Alexander and Clark decided to break through along the Adriatic in the direction of Ferrara, between two flooded zones.

The offensive was launched on April 9; then on April 14 the Fifth Army attacked in the direction of Bologna. On the 20th the German withdrawal began; on the 23rd the Allies crossed the Po. At the same time there was a general uprising of the Italian partisans which was particularly effective in the cities. They had seized control in Milan and Venice; in Genoa they captured the 4,000 men in the garrison. For their part the Yugoslav partisans had occupied Klagenfurt, Zagreb, Split and Zadar and were advancing towards Trieste – which Tito had his eye on but which the British and Americans had promised to the Italians.

On April 24, Wolff reappeared in Switzerland, this time with full negotiating powers. Churchill informed Stalin, asked him to send representatives and stipulated that Alexander would receive an unconditional surrender from the enemy of an exclusively military nature. On April 29, when Hitler was still alive, the surrender was signed – not without some squabbling between Kesselring and von Vietinghoff who threatened each other with arrest. The surrender covered Carinthia, the Vorarlberg, the Tyrol, Salzburg and Italy as far as the Isonzo.

IX THE END OF THE FIGHTING IN GERMANY

Contrary to all logic the Germans had not evacuated the Ruhr. On March 31, Eisenhower sent out an appeal to Model 'to put an end to the butchery'; since Model did not reply, the Ruhr was hemmed in by the Allied Air Force, and systematically pounded with bombs. Model vainly tried to break out of the ring of fire; on April 14, the pocket in which he was enclosed was cut in two; on April 18, the whole garrison surrendered – 320,000 prisoners, of whom thirty were generals; Model committed suicide.

By this time, the British and Americans had not encountered any organised resistance for the last ten days and were advancing more quickly than the Russians, against whom the German soldiers were continuing to fight stubbornly. But Eisenhower, who was completely covered by Marshall – the American military authorities were left to their own devices as a result of the gap left in the White House by Roosevelt's death – was concerned solely with ensuring to the best of his ability that they should join up with the Russians. He continued to communicate his plans to Stalin – but Stalin did not do the same for him. Eisenhower suggested that the armies should meet on the middle Elbe; he consequently

gave Bradley priority for an advance across the centre of Germany, the operational argument being that the rivers were less wide and would be more easily crossed. Bradley therefore found himself in command of the Ninth Army, which had been taken away from Montgomery, and the Fifteenth Army which had been made available after the surrender of the Ruhr. The advance in the north and the south of Germany took second place to joining hands with the Red Army.

However, the British Second Army was pushing forward strongly towards Lüneberg, Hamburg and Bremen; on April 5, it crossed the Weser, on the 19th it reached the Elbe and on the 26th, Bremen; that same day a bridgehead was established on the Elbe; on May 1, Hamburg surrendered; on May 2 it was Lübeck's turn and on May 3 the British Army crossed the Kiel canal.

During this time the Canadian First Army had advanced between the Weser and Holland; on April 16 Groningen was captured. But the Germans blew up the dikes on the Zuyder Zee; Holland was cut off and experienced an unprecedented famine – people were dying in thousands. The Allies then entered into talks with Seiss Inquart, the Reich's High Commissioner; on April 28 a truce was agreed upon, enabling supply convoys to arrive.

In the centre Bradley and his Americans, advancing along the motorways, were going even faster, raking in prisoners while leaving behind a few pockets of resistance, in particular in the Harz. On April 10, Simpson captured Hanover; on the 13th he reached the Elbe but was unable to cross it; on the 18th he seized Magdeburg and joined hands with Hodges who had advanced seventy-five miles in five days. On April 14, Patton had entered Leipzig.

On April 25, the most spectacular event of the war occurred. At Torgau on the Mulde elements of the American Third Army met some Russians; on both sides cameras recorded for posterity a perfectly genuine display of joy and friendship. Every precaution had been taken to avoid incidents, since the language difference made it impossible to use radio – aircraft had already been firing on each other; flight lines were fixed, a system of identification was adopted and the dividing-line for the troops on the field was clearly marked out. For the American soldiers the event meant that the war was over and that they would soon be able to return home. The Russians had taken care to stipulate that they intended to take charge of mopping-up on the right bank of the Elbe and the banks of the Voltava, that is to say that they were reckoning on liberating Prague; on April 30 Eisenhower replied to them that he took note of the fact.

In the south, Patch had advanced between the Main and the Neckar, captured Nuremberg on April 19 and crossed the Danube on the 25th; on

May 2 Munich fell and on May 4 Leclerc was able to hoist over Hitler's Eagle's Nest in Berchtesgaden the flag which he had brought back from Kufra. Meanwhile, Delattre had advanced into the Black Forest, where he encircled 40,000 Waffen ss; Béthouart had reached the Swiss frontier at Schaffhausen and entered the Vorarlberg; Montsabert had surrounded Stuttgart, thus sparking off a major Franco-American incident, for the city was in the Americans' operational zone. Eisenhower asked the French to evacuate it; de Gaulle's reply was curt and uncompromising; at the same moment, in the Alps the French had entered the Aosta valley and refused to leave, despite the orders of Alexander and the protests of the Italians. 'De Gaulle showed himself to be over-sensitive and extraordinarily obstinate on what seemed to us minor points,' wrote Eisenhower; in order to make the French give in they had to be threatened with having their food supplies cut off.

However, the event most pregnant in consequences had occurred in Bohemia. On May 4, the American Third Army was making ready to attack Pilsen, while the Russians were still in Moravska Ostrava and Brno; the Americans were within some sixty miles of Prague; the Russians were more than 100 miles away; the Russians asked their allies not to go beyond Pilsen; on his own initiative Eisenhower agreed, again covered by Marshall who did not want to 'shed blood for political motives'; Truman himself gave his approval; Churchill had protested to the President, and then again on May 7 to the Commander-in-Chief, but in vain; the American troops halted and then turned back.

A few days previously the Czechs had formed a National Council with Albert Prazak as president; it was half recognised by the occupation authorities. On May 5 an insurrection broke out; the Communist party took control of it; barricades went up all over Prague. The Germans set about repressing the revolt and between the 5th and the 8th they had very little trouble in dealing with the insurgents who had been left to fight all alone. It was only on May 8 – after the general armistice – that General Schoerner, the last of the Nazis still to be fighting – signed the document arranging for his troops' withdrawal. It was not until the 9th that the Red Army entered the city; thus the Russians completed the occupation of Czechoslovakia which the Americans had left in their hands. By this time the German surrender had become effective everywhere.

X THE GERMAN SURRENDER

In March and April the Germans had again begun to make approaches to the western powers through their ambassador in Stockholm and then un-

expectedly by Himmler in person. On April 24, this sinister individual had informed Count Bernadotte that he was ready to surrender in the west, adding that he was in no way disposed to do the same in the east, for 'he still remained the sworn enemy of Communism'; the fate of those detained in concentration camps served as a basis for the negotiations, since Himmler had contemplated and perhaps even ordered that they should be totally exterminated. The British and American governments replied that they would accept nothing but an unconditional surrender on all fronts. Churchill informed Stalin, who for once proved satisfied.

In the north of Europe Marshal Busch, the commander in Norway, had made it known that General Lindemann, the commander in Denmark, and he were ready to surrender when the Allies reached the Baltic - while the Swedish general staff were examining the possibility of intervening in these two countries. On May 3, Admiral von Friedeburg suggested to Montgomery the idea of accepting the surrender of three armies which were fighting against the Russians; Montgomery refused. Thus the Wehrmacht was falling apart on all sides, but wherever possible on the side of the British and Americans. However, there was still a central authority, since Hitler had made Admiral Doenitz his successor; when the Admiral learned that he had been appointed he quickly surveyed the situation and realised that there was obviously no way out - even although on May 7 German units were still making bayonet charges shouting 'Heil Hitler'.

While army group commanders were urging him to allow them to surrender, Doenitz's only objective now was to enable as many German soldiers and civilians as possible who were fleeing from the Red Army to be captured by the British and Americans. Eisenhower had allowed his deputies to accept the surrender only of the German forces with whom they were in contact. In these circumstances, the armies in Denmark, Holland and the Friesian Isles surrendered to Montgomery on May 4. On May 5 Kesselring surrendered to Devers near Munich, Brandenberger to the Americans and French at Innsbruck and Lohr to Alexander.

That same day Marshal Keitel gave orders to offer no further resistance in the west, while Doenitz dissolved the Werwolf, which was theoretically in charge of guerrilla activity, and forbade acts of sabotage. However, more than a million Germans had been made prisoner in Italy and in Germany 2½ million had been captured by the British, French and Americans in only a few days. Many of them were men who had been fighting on the Russian front.

On May 5, Doenitz had sent Admiral von Friedeburg to General Eisenhower's headquarters in Rheims, hoping to gain a little time. Eisenhower immediately told him that he would accept only a general surrender on all fronts and he informed the Russians of the fact. They

replied that even if this was not the case Doenitz's offer should be rejected.

Doenitz then sent General Jodl to explain to Eisenhower that a surrender on all fronts was not desirable. Eisenhower threatened to drive the German civilians and soldiers who were fleeing from the Red Army back eastwards. Jodl submitted and Doenitz grudgingly gave in. After some difficulty in finding and drawing up a text which had in fact been ready since the end of April, at 2 a.m. on May 7 in Rheims, Jodl signed the act of surrender on all fronts, on behalf of the German high command.

Eisenhower had kept the Soviets informed and had asked them if they wanted any particular arrangement. The Soviets said that Zhukov would receive the German surrender in Berlin the next day. On reflection, Eisenhower saw no point in beginning the signing ceremony all over again and sent his deputy Tedder as a delegate. At about midnight, after several hours of discussion between the Allies to decide in what capacity and in what way Spaatz and Delattre would sign on behalf of the Americans and French, Keitel set Germany's signature on the document which sealed her defeat.

Other partial surrenders took place some time later, because of the remoteness or isolation of the troops. In Norway, while Terboven and several Nazi leaders committed suicide, 300,000 to 400,000 men who had been virtually wasted throughout the war surrendered on May 8. In Courland, delegates from the National Committee of Free Germany were brought in by motor-boat on May 9; General Hilpert took advantage of the breathing-space to evacuate 25,000 men - which was more difficult than he had expected, since Sweden had not supplied the coal which she had promised. The Heligoland garrison did not surrender until May 11.

In the west, the Dunkirk pocket which had been cut off by widespread flooding and by-passed by the French, was not liberated until the armistice. On the other hand, in Royan the FFT under General Larminat had finished mopping up the pocket there and had captured the island of Oléron. On May 9 the ports of La Pallice, La Rochelle and Rochefort had been handed over by the occupiers; the next day it was the turn of Lorient and St-Nazaire; in the islands the garrisons gave themselves up to their own French prisoners. It was also on May 9 that the 22,000 soldiers in the Channel Islands ceased being occupiers and became captives instead.

Thus 'the strange alliance', formed under the pressure of circumstances and strengthened by Hitler, although it had never asserted itself in really concerted action, had held good to the last, thanks to the stubbornness of the Germans and in spite of the cracks which had been appearing in it since Yalta. Neither the vicissitudes of war nor differences of opinion nor enemy operations had succeeded in breaking it up. Was it going to continue when peace came, now that Roosevelt, the man chiefly responsible

for instigating it, was dead? Was there not a risk that Germany would become a bone of contention among its members? It is true that one last enemy still remained to be beaten – Japan. In order to try to settle the controversial issues and prepare for victory in the Pacific the Big Three met for the last time, in Potsdam.

CHAPTER 4

The Potsdam Conference

ALTHOUGH the Big Three had depicted the Yalta Conference as representing a climax of friendship and trust, relations between them had considerably deteriorated since then. What were the reasons for this and is it possible to assign responsibility for it?

Churchill's distrust of the USSR was plainly in some ways inherent and in any event already existed before Stalin's suspicious policies could have aggravated it further. But since the Normandy landing, Britain's importance in the coalition had greatly diminished and her impetuous and much-admired leader now had only a semblance of equality of power and decision with his partners. Both in strategy and diplomacy, it was Roosevelt's opinions which had carried the day in the Anglo-American alliance; whether he wanted to or not, Churchill had had to resign himself to endorsing them: relations between the 'Big Powers' were therefore now becoming increasingly nothing but a dialogue between the USSR and the United States.

Roosevelt cannot be held responsible for the new atmosphere which arose after Yalta. Although it is probable that he had sometimes been sorely disappointed, he had overcome his disappointments and had not changed his opinions. His death, however, had put an end to his personal influence which had acted as a sort of charm and there was nothing to replace it. Although his less sophisticated successor, Truman, had listened more readily to the Cassandras of the White House – Harriman, Deane and Leahy above all – even to the extent of cancelling the USSR's lend-lease privileges a few hours after the signing of the armistice¹ – he had nevertheless not turned his predecessor's goodwill towards the USSR into systematic hostility. The hints of strain or failure to maintain agreements did not come from his side.

The same obviously cannot be said for Stalin. After Yalta, he had looked after the interests of the USSR by going against virtually all the agreements and even commitments which he had approved of or endorsed. What is surprising is that this had surprised the British and Americans. Yet it was obvious that although they had all used the same words, they did not all

1. As a result of Stalin's energetic protests, the measure was explained away as a mistake and withdrawn.