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THE VISTULA AND THE DANUBE

The destruction of Army Group Centre had cast Germany's strategic position on the Eastern Front into ruins. The military implications were grave enough. The remnants of Army Group Centre now stood on the line of the Vistula less than 400 miles from Berlin, with the great Polish plain at its back and no obstacle but the river Oder between it and the capital. On the Baltic coast Army Group North, now commanded by Ferdinand Schörner, one of Hitler's chosen 'standfast' generals, was threatened by the Baltic fronts' thrust to Riga with encirclement in northern Latvia and Estonia – the 'Courland pocket' as it was called by OKH. From there the army group could be supplied only by sea, but Hitler would not allow the position to be abandoned because he insisted on preserving free use of the Baltic to train the crews of his new U-boats. The physical damage the army had suffered in the summer battles was staggering. Between June and September the number of dead on the Eastern Front rose to 215,000 and of missing to 627,000; when losses in the west were added in and the number of wounded included, the total rose to nearly 2 million, or as many casualties as the army had suffered from the beginning of the war until February 1943, including those of Stalingrad. By the end of 1944 106 divisions – a third of those in the order of battle – had been disbanded or rebuilt, more than the army had fielded on the eve of its victory era in September 1939.

Hitler resisted striking divisions from the order of battle. His solution to the massacre that had taken place, therefore, was to decree the formation of new divisions with the same number as the old, but now to be designated 'people's grenadier' (*Volksgrenadier*) divisions. Despite the rising output of the German arms industry, which Speer raised to

unprecedented heights in September 1944, the Volksgrenadier divisions were only 10,000 strong (divisions had contained 17,000 men in 1939), lacked anti-tank guns and mounted their reconnaissance battalions on bicycles. Even so only sixty-six Volksgrenadier divisions altogether could be formed to replace the seventy-five infantry divisions lost in the west and east during 1944. They were raised within the Home Army, command of which Hitler had given to the SS chief, Heinrich Himmler, in the aftermath of the July Plot. After 23 July the military salute was also abolished; instead all servicemen were required to give the 'Heil Hitler' with outstretched arm. Guderian, who replaced Zeitzler as chief of staff after 20 July, accepted this and the institution of military 'courts of honour' to strike suspects from the officer corps before they were tried by the people's courts.

The political implications of the outcome of Operation Bagration were even more menacing than the military ones. The Russian triumph threatened the integrity of the whole complex Balkan alliance Hitler had so painstakingly constructed through the Tripartite Pact between August 1940 and March 1941. On 20 August the Second and Third Ukrainian Fronts opened an offensive against Army Group South Ukraine and burst across the river Prut to the delta of the Danube in five days. The weight of the attack fell on the Romanian Third and Fourth Armies and the Romanians were panicked into changing sides. On 23 August King Michael staged a palace revolution in Bucharest, arrested Ion Antonescu, Hitler's Romanian collaborator, and replaced his government with one of 'national unity', which included communists. When Hitler responded by bombing Bucharest on 24 August, the King declared war on Germany. In demonstration of the country's change of heart, but also to avenge a national grievance, the surviving elements of the Romanian army at once invaded Hungary, still in Hitler's camp, to recover the province of Transylvania which had been transferred to Hungary under the terms of the Tripartite Pact of August 1940. The Russians would not at first accept the move as an act of co-belligerency. Having already overrun Ploesti and its oilfields, the jewel in the crown of Hitler's economic empire, they entered Bucharest as conquerors on 28 August. Not until 12 September did they concede an armistice, allowing Romania to retain Transylvania but taking back the provinces of Bessarabia and northern Bukovina which had been their local share of the spoils of the Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact.

Romania's defection provoked Bulgaria's. The Bulgarians, traditionally the most Russophile of Slavs, had been careful not to allow their accession to the Tripartite Pact in March 1941 to commit them to war against Russia. They had granted the German army basing and transit facilities; they had taken their share of Yugoslavia and also sent occupation troops to Greece; but no Bulgarian soldier had fought against the Red Army. Indeed the existence since 1943 of a small anti-German partisan movement inside the country made a change of sides easier to arrange. With the death of King Boris in August 1943 Hitler had been robbed of his most dependable Bulgarian supporter; the successor government, though rebuffed by the Western Allies when it explored the possibility of changing sides, knew it must disentangle itself from the German alliance. On the approach

of the Red Army, however, a 'Fatherland Front' proclaimed a national uprising on 9 September, supplanted the government – which had already asked Russia for a truce on 5 September – and took power. On 18 October the Red Army marched into Sofia and the 150,000-strong Bulgarian army went over to its side.

The collapse of the German front in the north had already forced Finland to reconsider its position. The Finns had never been ideological allies of Hitler. They were fiercely democratic – they had succeeded in retaining their national parliament even under tsarist rule – and their quarrel with Russia was a territorial one. Once they had regained during the Barbarossa campaign the territory they had been forced to concede at the end of the Winter War (together with land east of Lake Ladoga to which they had an historic claim) they had halted. As early as January 1944 they had made approaches to the Allies through Washington but had been warned that the Russian price for a separate peace would be high: a return to the 1940 frontier, the cession of Petsamo, centre of Finland's mineral industry and its outlet to the Arctic in the Far North, and a large financial indemnity. The terms had then seemed too harsh; as Bagration developed they came to look more attractive. During June the Finnish president, Risto Ryti, was personally confronted with conflicting demands from Hitler and Stalin: he must either formally reject a separate peace with Russia (the German ultimatum) or capitulate (the Russian ultimatum). Under pressure from Marshal Mannerheim, effectively Finland's leader, Ryti gave Ribbentrop his assurance that Finland would not make a separate peace. However, Mannerheim had privately resolved to use this assurance to fight for time. During July he managed to blunt the Russian attack on Finland's fortified frontier until the retreat of Army Group North had drawn the Russian northern fronts westward into the Baltic states. Then on 4 August he assumed the office of President, revoked Ryti's commitment and opened direct negotiations with Moscow. On 2 September he broke relations with Germany and on 19 September signed a treaty with Russia whose terms were much as they had been in January. The most important differences were a halving of the size of the indemnity, offset by the grant of a naval base on the Porkkala peninsula, near Helsinki, and a Finnish undertaking to disarm the German Twentieth Mountain Army in Lapland. As Mannerheim privately recognised, the Finnish army had neither the strength nor the will to drive the Twentieth Army out of the country into Norway, from which it was supplied, and the operation was not completed until April 1945, and then only with Russian help.

Despite the Finns' excellence as soldiers (they were alone among the Wehrmacht's allies in regarding themselves and being regarded, man for man, as the Germans' military equals, even superiors, by late 1944 Finland was peripheral to Hitler's strategic crisis. Hungary, on the far southern flank and next in the firing line after Romania and Bulgaria, was by contrast central to the defence of the Reich's outworks. The Hungarians too had a reputation as excellent soldiers which had been won in the service of the Habsburg emperors – and in rebellion against them. However, Admiral Horthy, the Hungarian dictator, had made the mistake of committing them to Operation Barbarossa against the

Red Army, which they were not equipped to fight once the shield of Wehrmacht protection had been withdrawn from them. The collapse of Army Group South Ukraine (renamed Army Group South in early September) and the defection of the Romanians now exposed them to a Soviet thrust which they lacked the power to repel, even from their strong positions in the Carpathians. Horthy hoped that he would be saved from choosing between the Germans and the Russians by an Anglo-American advance from Italy into Yugoslavia. Not only had the Allies been deflected by internal disagreement from such a manoeuvre; the Americans, with whom he was in contact through their ambassador in Switzerland, informed him in August that he must make his own arrangements with the Russians. As soon as the Romanians attacked his army in Transylvania, he had no option but to do so. A Hungarian delegation arrived in Moscow at the end of September to negotiate terms for a change of sides. Horthy, however, had unilaterally undermined the chances of doing so successfully by allowing Hitler in March to station German troops on Hungarian soil. When the Russians heightened their pressure on Horthy's delegates in Moscow by launching an attack into eastern Hungary towards Debrecen on 6 October, the occupation army – reinforced by three Panzer divisions – counter-attacked and blunted the advance. Hitler, moreover, had by now got wind of Horthy's impending treachery. He was aware that Horthy had issued orders to his First and Second Armies, which were still fighting Army Group South, to make a unilateral retreat; he also suspected that Horthy was on the point of announcing a change of sides. On 15 October, therefore, he authorised Skorzeny, his expert in such operations, to kidnap Horthy's son and then confronted the dictator with a demand that he transfer power to a pro-German replacement. Early on 16 October Horthy abdicated as Regent, and German troops took control of the whole of Budapest. The Second Ukrainian Front was by then only fifty miles from the Hungarian capital, but it was to remain safe in German hands for several months.

— Revolt in the Balkans —

Hitler had meanwhile also quashed another attempt at defection among his eastern satellites. Slovakia, ruled since October 1939, in the aftermath of Czechoslovakia's dismemberment, by Joseph Tiso, a signatory of the Tripartite Pact and a co-belligerent in the war against Russia, had been seething with internal discord since the spring. While the 'London' Czechs, legitimately the government in exile, looked to a post-war settlement to restore them to power, the dissident Slovaks, through the underground Czechoslovak Communist Party, were in contact with Moscow, which sponsored a small army in exile stationed on Russian territory. Part of the Slovak army of Monsignor Tiso's puppet state remained under German control on the Eastern Front; the rest, stationed at home, fell increasingly under patriot influence. A pro-Soviet partisan movement was also active in eastern Slovakia, towards which Operation Bagration had drawn the Fourth Ukrainian

Front at the beginning of August. At the end of August the pro-Soviet partisans precipitated action. Liaising directly with the Red Army and bypassing both the London Czechs and the dissidents' 'Slovak National Council', on 25 August they initiated a national uprising, in which they were joined by the home-based Slovak army, and looked for support to the Russians beyond the Carpathians. Their response was far more positive than it had been to the Polish Home Army in Warsaw. They at once sent liaison officers and initiated an offensive by the First and Fourth Ukrainian Fronts to come to the insurgents' rescue. They also airlifted parts of the Czech army in exile from Russia into Slovakia and embodied the rest in the Ukrainian fronts fighting to cross the Slovak passes through the Carpathians. However, pressure from without and within was not strong enough to overcome the response Hitler organised to preserve his position in Slovakia. Two German corps, XXIV Panzer and XI, were sent to man the Carpathian position, including the key Dukla Pass. At the end of September the Soviet Thirty-Eighth Army, assisted by the I Czechoslovak (exile) Corps, was still battering against the pass, and it did not fall until 6 October. Meanwhile the security troops which were so experienced in anti-partisan operations in the eastern theatre were being earmarked for commitment. Two SS divisions formed from ethnic minorities, the 18th *Horst Wessel* (racial German) and the 14th Galizian (Ukrainian), were concentrated for a counter-offensive, together with five German army divisions; by 18 October the Dirlewanger and Kaminski brigades had also been brought down from Warsaw to turn their murderous talents against the Slovaks. Between 18 and 20 October 'free Slovakia' was assaulted at eleven points and by the end of the month the insurrection was extinct. The Soviet Thirty-Eighth Army and the I Czechoslovak Corps (commanded by General Ludwik Svoboda, whom the Russians would install as Dubček's successor after the 'Prague Spring' of 1968) suffered 80,000 casualties in the effort to come to the insurgents' rescue; almost all the insurgents who did not escape into the hills died in combat or in concentration camps.

In the extreme south of his Balkan theatre, Hitler was to prove less successful at shoring up a defence than in Hungary and Slovakia. The occupation of Greece had been crumbling since the capitulation of the Italians in September 1943, when at least 12,000 of their weapons had fallen into the hands of the resistance. The Greek partisans had been fighting bravely and doggedly against the occupiers, as their forefathers had done in the war to liberate their homeland from the Turks 120 years earlier. Many of the British liaison officers whom SOE infiltrated into the Greek islands and mainland were touched by a Byronic afterglow, seeing themselves as successors to the philhellenes who had fought at the patriots' side in the War of Liberation in the 1820s. However, German reprisals against the villages near which the resistance attacks took place were ferocious; at the Nuremberg trial a prosecution lawyer was to testify that 'in Greece there are a thousand Lidices [Lidice was the Czech village obliterated after the assassination of Heydrich], their names unknown and their inhabitants forgotten.' Therefore much SOE effort was devoted to restraining rather than encouraging the partisans; but the British liaison officers had not been able to

check violence between the right and left wings of the resistance movement, which, as in Yugoslavia, obeyed different authorities – ELAS the Greek Communist Party, EDES the Greek government in exile in Cairo. The Germans restored and maintained order after the surrender of the Italians – whom they treated with almost as much brutality as any partisans they caught – but, as their Balkan position began to collapse, they evacuated the Greek islands (except for Crete and Rhodes) from 12 September and then on 12 October the whole of Greece. As they left and the British began to arrive, the first round of a civil war between ELAS and EDES broke out; it was to be quelled, at a tragic cost in British lives, by the intervention of the 2nd Parachute Brigade and other formations against ELAS at Christmas.

Army Group E, the German command in Greece and Albania, had a single hope of salvation, which was to find its way through the Ibar and Morava valleys to link up with Army Group F in Yugoslavia. The sudden onset of the Third Ukrainian Front, now supported by the Bulgarian Army, forced it to fight a desperate rearguard action. Meanwhile Army Group F was confronted by a Soviet assault on its eastern flank aimed at the Yugoslav capital, Belgrade. The Third Ukrainian Front had crossed the Yugoslav border on 6 September, prompting Tito to fly to Moscow from a British airfield on the Adriatic island of Vis to discuss the terms on which the Red Army would operate on Yugoslav territory. In a remarkable exercise in negotiation from weakness, Tito persuaded Stalin by 28 September to agree to lend troops from the Third Ukrainian Front for a joint assault on Belgrade but to withdraw them, leaving civil administration in Tito's hands, once the operational task was complete. The battle for Belgrade opened on 14 October and ended on 20 October; 15,000 German soldiers were killed and 9000 taken prisoner in the defence of the city. Tito paraded his Partisans through the streets as victors on 22 October; of his 'Belgrade battalion', which had fought the three-year partisan war, only two of its original members were still in the ranks.

The rest of Yugoslavia now lay open to an extension of the Soviet offensive; Army Group E, which had incorporated F, was holding an indefensible north-south flank which ran from the outskirts of Belgrade to the Albanian frontier. However, in mid-October Stalin had agreed with Churchill in Moscow a strange division of 'spheres of influence' in the Balkans which gave Britain a 50 per cent share in Yugoslavia. An odd streak of legalism in Soviet diplomacy lent this agreement force; but Stalin also had other fish to fry. Hitler's successful coup against Horthy in Budapest had destroyed the chance of making a quick advance, by a negotiated armistice, into the Hungarian plain. The approach to Vienna, up the Danube valley, would now have to be fought for; the force it would require meant that the Red Army could not afford to dissipate its strength in the mountains of central Yugoslavia, where conditions would put even the battered formations of Army Groups E and F on equal terms. On 18 October, therefore, the Stavka had ordered Tolbukhin to halt the Third Ukrainian Front west of Belgrade and turn its formations back to the Danube to take part in the coming battle of Hungary.

Hungary, however, had now been reinforced and parts of the Hungarian army (First and Second Armies) hijacked to fight on the German side. On 19 October Army Group South counter-attacked, and when Malinovsky's Second Ukrainian Front began its assault on 29 October, at Stalin's express orders 'to take Budapest as quickly as possible', it found twelve German divisions in its path. The Russian advance reached the eastern suburbs on 4 November but was then halted; when the assault was resumed on 11 November a sixteen-day battle ensued which left much of the city in ruins but still in German hands. By then the German front line, though withdrawn 100 miles since mid-October, rested from west to east on the strong defences of the river Drava, Lake Balaton and the flanks of the Carpathians. Vienna, the prize which Stalin sought, remained secure 150 miles away along the Danube.

The campaign in Hungary thereafter took on a logic of its own and proceeded quite separately from the Red Army's preparations on the far side of the Carpathians for the final advance into Germany. On 5 October Malinovsky's Second Ukrainian Front began an offensive designed to encircle Budapest from the north-west, while Tolbukhin's Third Ukrainian Front made a feint to the south of the city between Lake Balaton and the Danube. By 31 January the Third Ukrainian Front was within seven miles of the city centre and emissaries were sent forward to offer terms for a capitulation. The city was completely surrounded, the suffering of its inhabitants was intense, and the situation of the German and Hungarian defenders appeared hopeless. Hitler, however, had decided upon a Stalingrad-style Panzer rescue. He had dismissed the commander of the Sixth Army, Maximilian Fretter-Pico, on the Budapest front, to replace him with Hermann Balck, another 'standfast' general of the Model type, and in late December had brought IV Panzer Corps from Army Group Centre to stage a counter-attack in concert with III Panzer Corps, which was already on the scene. The attack by IV SS Panzer began on 18 January 1945 and during the next three weeks IV and III Panzer Corps fought savagely, switching from one axis to another by road and rail, in an awful warning to Malinovsky and Tolbukhin of what damage experienced German tank soldiers could still inflict on Soviet formations operating on stereotyped and predictable fixed lines of advance. By 24 January IV Panzer Corps had driven to within fifteen miles of the German perimeter in Budapest, and the defenders could have broken out to safety had that been Hitler's wish. As during Manstein's winter thrust to Stalingrad in December 1942, however, he wanted the city to be recaptured, not evacuated. This vain hope collapsed when IV Panzer Corps, after three weeks of frantic operations, ran out of steam.

Within the perimeter, meanwhile, the Russians had brought up dense concentrations of 152-mm guns and 203-mm howitzers to reduce the German positions block by block in Pest, the northern half of the city. Its garrison began to surrender *en masse* on 15 January, when they were trapped with their backs to the Danube. In Buda, Pest's twin city on the south bank, resistance held up fiercely until 5 February, when Malinovsky ordered a final assault. For a week the Germans stuck it out, taking to the sewers to frustrate the Russian

advance, but by 13 February they had no more room for manoeuvre and were overwhelmed. The Stavka claimed to have killed 50,000 German and Hungarian soldiers and taken 138,000 prisoners since 27 October; it is known that only 785 Germans and some 1000 Hungarians escaped from Budapest. The Red Army's own undisclosed losses in killed and wounded may have equalled those of the enemy.

There was to be one more battle fought in Hungary, at Lake Balaton, from which Hitler drew his last supplies of non-synthetic oil. By the time it opened on 15 February, however, a far greater battle was in preparation for the ultimate objective of the war itself: Berlin. Since early February Zhukov's First White Russian and Konev's First Ukrainian Fronts had been poised astride the river Oder, ready to launch themselves into the climactic offensive as soon as the Stavka defined the attack plan and made available the requisite forces. On 15 January Hitler had left the western headquarters in the Eifel mountains (*Amt 500*) from which he had overseen the Ardennes offensive to return to the Reich Chancellery. For all his talk of secret weapons that were still to bring victory, he sensed the approach of the final struggle and was resolved to be present on the field in person.

— The road to Berlin —

Hitler's Rastenburg headquarters in East Prussia, from which he had directed most of the war, was now in Russian hands. The Red Army's offensive north of the Carpathians had begun on 15 September 1944 when the three Baltic and the Leningrad Fronts had opened an attack on Schörner's Army Group North, designed to cut it off in the Baltic states from contact with Army Group Centre and its lines of communication into Germany through East Prussia. Schörner commanded some thirty divisions, disposed in well-fortified terrain, but lacked mobile forces with which to counter-attack. Though his army group was able to slow the Russian advance, therefore, it was not able to disrupt it and on 13 October, after an eight-day battle, Riga fell to Bagramyan's First Baltic Front. This breakthrough to the coast completed the encirclement of Army Group North (shortly to be renamed Courland) in the 'Courland pocket', where it would linger in pointless isolation until the end of the war; six separate battles were fought by the Red Army against it. Finland's defection in September allowed Schörner (before he was removed to command Army Group Centre in January) to improve its position by abandoning Estonia and concentrating his forces in Latvia. Its four dependent divisions in the port of Memel, between East Prussia and Lithuania, were also surrounded in October and held out until January 1945.

The Baltic front's clearance of the approaches to East Prussia (which a unit of the Third White Russian Front had actually entered on 17 August) now laid it open to major assault. Plans for the great offensive had been laid by the Stavka in early November and allotted the greater effort to the two fronts which lay most directly astride the route to Berlin, Konev's First Ukrainian and the First White Russian, command of which Stalin

conferred directly on Zhukov, in testimony of his proven strategic achievements. Each front now greatly exceeded any German army group in strength. Between them they controlled 163 rifle divisions, 32,000 guns, 6500 tanks and 4700 aircraft, or one-third of all current Soviet infantry strength and half the Red Army's tanks. Together they outnumbered the German formations opposite, Army Groups Centre and A, over twofold in infantry, nearly fourfold in armour, sevenfold in artillery and sixfold in airpower. For the first time in the war the Red Army had achieved both the human and material superiority that thitherto the Wehrmacht had only faced in the west. Army Groups Centre and A, now commanded by new generals, Hans Reinhardt and Josef Harpe, disposed between them of seventy-one divisions, 1800 tanks and 800 aircraft; all their formations were under strength, and their defensive capabilities depended greatly on the 'fortresses' which the Prussian and Silesian border towns – Königsberg, Insterburg, Folburg, Stettin, Küstrin, Breslau – had now been so designated by Hitler.

The Stavka plan was for Zhukov to lead off down the Warsaw–Berlin axis, while Konev aimed for Breslau. Both offensives were to be direct power-drives against the German defences, eschewing manoeuvre, in what had now become the Red Army's distinctive, brutal and terrifying means of making war. Over a million tons of supplies were brought up to Zhukov's front alone in the days before the attack; they were carried in 1200 trains and 22,000 of the American-supplied six-by-six trucks which were the backbone of the Soviet logistic system. Almost equal quantities were stockpiled behind Konev's front. The daily requirement of each front was 25,000 tons, less fuel and ammunition.

Konev's offensive opened first on 12 January 1945 behind a barrage fired by guns disposed at a density of 300 to each kilometre of front – an earthquake concentration of artillery power. By the evening of the first day his tanks had broken the front of the Fourth Panzer Army to a depth of twenty miles, in exactly the same sector as the Germans and Austrians had made their great breakthrough in the Gorlice–Tarnow battle against the tsar's army in 1915, but in the opposite direction. Cracow, the great Polish fortress-monastery city, was threatened; beyond it the way lay open to Breslau and the industrial regions of Silesia, where Speer had concentrated clusters of German armaments factories out of range of the Anglo-American bomber force.

Zhukov's offensive on the Warsaw–Berlin axis began two days later, behind another pulverising bombardment, from the Vistula bridgehead south of Warsaw. The city was quickly encircled, and inevitably decreed a 'fortress' by Hitler, but it fell on 17 January before the reinforcements he had allotted it could reach the defenders. On 20 January he announced, to the despair of his commanders both in the west and the east, that he was transferring the Sixth SS Panzer Army, just extricated from the débâcle of the Ardennes offensive, to the east: 'I'm going to attack the Russians where they least expect it. The Sixth SS Panzer Army is off to Budapest! If we start an offensive in Hungary, the Russians will have to go too.' This wild diversion of precious defensive resources demonstrated how little he grasped both the Wehrmacht's growing debility and the imperviousness of the

Russians to subsidiary manoeuvres; the Ukrainian fronts, as events would prove, could deal adequately with the Sixth SS Panzer Army's intervention, and Zhukov and Konev were not at all deflected from their drive on Berlin.

On 21 January, again clutching at straws, Hitler decreed the creation of a new army group, Vistula, command of which he gave to Himmler (also head of the Home Army), though he was quite unfitted to exercise military command, in the belief that loyalty to the Führer might prove a substitute for generalship. Army Group Vistula, positioned behind the threatened front, had almost no troops except *Volkssturm* units – the militia of Germans too young or too old to serve in the army which Hitler had set up on 25 September under Martin Bormann, the Nazi Party secretary.

— The advance to the Oder —

The *Volkssturm* would shortly be fighting for German territory. On 22 January Konev's First Ukrainian Front crossed the Oder at Steinau; Rokossovsky's Second White Russian Front, which had attacked across the Narew on 14 January, was by then deep into East Prussia. The arrival of the Red Army *en masse* on German soil provoked a stampede of refugees towards any tenuous outlet to safety. It was as if the submerged knowledge of what the Wehrmacht had done in the east had suddenly come to the surface, seized whole populations with terror and flung them on to the snowbound roads in an agony of urgency to put themselves beyond the reach of the Red Army's columns. In a few days 800 years of German settlement in the east were ended as 2 million East Prussians left homes, farms, villages and towns in a frantic trek towards the German interior or the coast; 450,000 were evacuated from the port of Pillau in the next few weeks, while another 900,000 sought rescue at Danzig, many of them trudging across the frozen waters of the Frisches Haff lagoon to reach it. Many escaped, many did not. As Professor John Erickson, no enemy to the Red Army, has described this terrible episode:

Speed, frenzy and savagery characterised the advance. Villages and small towns burned, while Soviet soldiers raped at will and wreaked an atavistic vengeance in those houses and homes decked out with any of the insignia or symbols of Nazism ... some fussily bedecked Nazi Party portrait photograph would be the signal to mow down the entire family amidst their tables, chairs and kitchenware. Columns of refugees, combined with groups of Allied prisoners uprooted from their camps, and slave labour no longer enslaved in farm or factory, trudged on foot or rode in farm carts, some to be charged down or crushed in a bloody smear of humans and horses by the juggernaut Soviet tank columns racing ahead with assault infantry astride the T-34s. Raped women were nailed by their hands to the farmcarts carrying their families. Under these lowering January skies and the gloom of late winter, families huddled in ditches or by the roadside, fathers intent on shooting their own children



The Red Army's drive into East Prussia. By the end of January 1945 the tip of the salient driven into eastern Germany was barely 50 miles from Berlin.

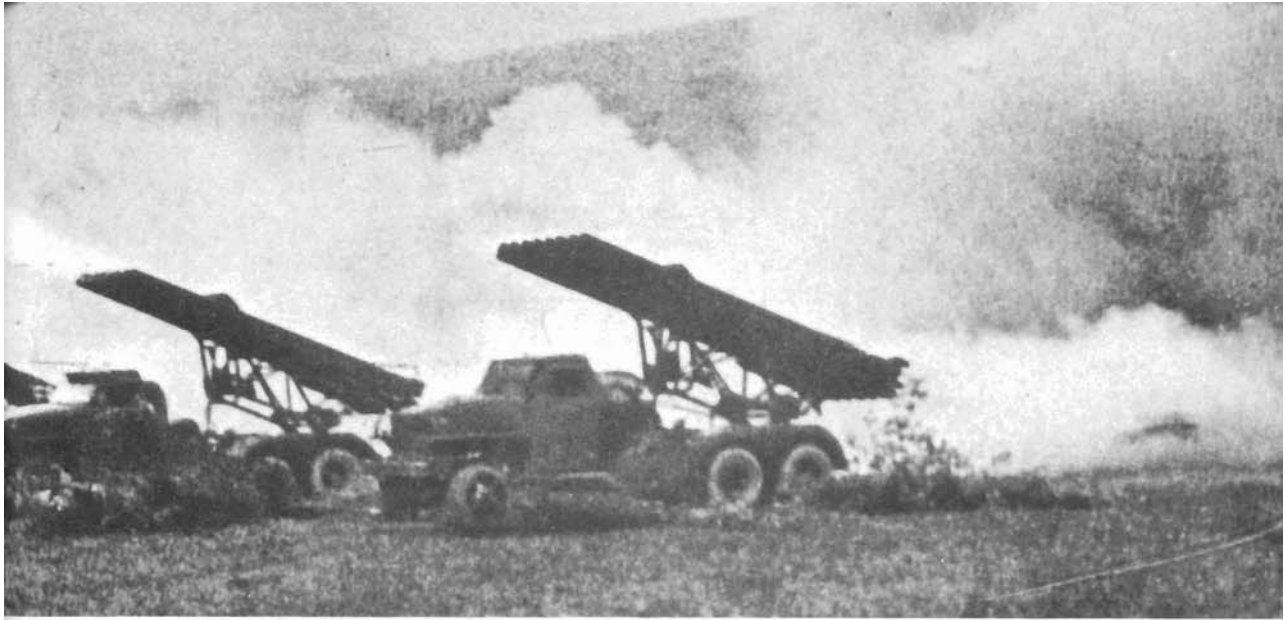
or waiting whimpering for what seemed the wrath of God to pass. The Soviet Front command finally intervened, with an order insisting on the restoration of military discipline and the implementation of 'norms of conduct' towards the enemy population. But this elemental tide surged on, impelled by the searing language of roadside posters and crudely daubed slogans proclaiming this and the land ahead 'the lair of the Fascist beast', a continuous incitement to brutalised ex-prisoners of



war now in the Soviet ranks or to the reluctant peasant conscripts dragged into the Red Army in its march through the Baltic states, men with pity for no one.

None of the German army groups north of the Carpathians could stem this onrush; the only impediment to Zhukov's and Konev's uninterrupted advance on Berlin was provided by the attenuation of their own supplies, which the enormous artillery preparations consumed at the rate of 50,000 tons for each million shells fired, losses in the ranks – divisional strengths in the two fronts averaged only 4000 at the end of January – and the resistance of the 'Führer fortresses'. On Rokossovsky's front Memel held out until 27 January, Thorn until 9 February, Königsberg until mid-April; on Zhukov's and Konev's, Posen (Poznan) held until 22 February, Küstrin until 29 March, Breslau until the day before the end of the war. The loss of other places brought the Red Army great propaganda sensation: on 21 January Rokossovsky's Second White Russian Front took Tannenberg, where a 'miracle' battle had saved East Prussia from the tsar in 1914, and from which the retreating Germans just managed to save the remains of the victor of that battle, Field Marshal Hindenburg, and the colours of the regiments he had commanded (they hang now in the hall of the Bundeswehr Officer Cadet School at Hamburg), before blowing up his memorial tomb. On 27 January Konev's First Ukrainian Front stumbled on the extermination camp of Auschwitz, chief place of the Holocaust, from which its operatives had not succeeded in removing the pathetic relics of the victims – clothes, dentures, spectacles and playthings. Meanwhile the strong places of Germany's eastern frontier, so many of them fortresses of the Teutonic knights who had once pushed the tentacles of *Germantum* eastward into the Slav lands, held out to block or menace the lines of advance which the Soviet fronts were punching westward towards Berlin.

By the beginning of February, however, as the Allied leaders gathered for the last great conference of the European war at Yalta in the Crimea, Zhukov's and Konev's fronts



A fearsome salvo fired by the Red Army's Katyusha rocket launchers, dubbed 'Stalin Organs' by German troops on the Eastern Front.

were firmly established on the line of the Oder, ready to begin their final advance on Berlin. The German army groups opposite them – now reorganised as Vistula and Centre, the latter commanded by the Führer-dedicated Schörner – were shadows of their former selves. In East Prussia the Third Panzer Army was still active, and was to launch a brief counter-attack against the flank of the Russian concentration on 15 February; on 17 February the Sixth SS Panzer Army opened Hitler's promised diversionary offensive against Tolbukhin's Third Ukrainian Front to the east of Lake Balaton in Hungary. But the sands were now running out fast for the Wehrmacht. On 13 February Dresden, the last undevastated city of the Reich and packed with refugees, but also stripped of anti-aircraft guns to bolster the anti-tank screen on the Oder front, was overwhelmed by a British bomber assault and burnt to the ground, with appalling loss of life. Although the figure sometimes quoted of 300,000 dead is grossly exaggerated, at least 30,000 were killed in the raid. The consequences of this attack, for which the champions of the strategic bombing have never been able to advance a convincing military justification, quickly became known throughout Germany and gravely depressed civilian morale in the last months of the war. The Lake Balaton offensive, though mounted with the last 600 tanks at Hitler's disposal as an uncommitted force, soon ran into immovable Russian defensive lines. Army Group E in Yugoslavia was meanwhile bending its front back towards the bastion of pro-German Croatia. The remnants of Army Group South gathered what strength they had left to bar the approaches to Vienna. But the crisis of the war hovered between Küstrin and Breslau where, along the Oder and the Neisse, Zhukov's and Konev's fronts stood ready to race the last forty-five miles to Berlin.