

# 28

## — CITY BATTLE —

# THE SIEGE OF BERLIN

The siege of cities seems an operation that belongs to an earlier age than that of the Second World War, whose campaigns appear to have been exclusively decided by the thrust of armoured columns, the descent of amphibious landing forces or the flight of bomber armadas. Cities, however, are as integral to the geography of war as great rivers or mountain ranges. An army – however well mechanised, indeed precisely because it is mechanised – can no more ignore a city than it can the Pripet Marshes or the defile of the Meuse. On the Eastern Front the three ‘cities of Bolshevism’ – Leningrad, Moscow and Stalingrad – which Hitler had marked out as the targets of the *Ostheer*’s advance had each brought one of his decisive campaigns to grief. His own designation of cities as fortresses – Calais, Dunkirk and the Ruhr complex in the west, Königsberg, Posen, Memel and Breslau in the east – had severely hindered the progress of his enemies’ armies towards the heartland of the Reich. Capital cities, with their maze of streets, dense complexes of stoutly constructed public buildings, labyrinths of sewers, tunnels and underground communications, storehouses of fuel and food, are military positions as strong as any an army can construct for the defence of frontiers, perhaps stronger indeed than the Maginot Line or the West Wall, which merely tried to replicate in artificial form the features that capital cities intrinsically embody. Hitler’s return to Berlin on 16 January 1945, and his decision by default not to leave it thereafter, ensured that the last great siege of the war, shorter than Leningrad’s but even more intense than Stalingrad’s, would be Berlin’s. The final moment at which he might have left Berlin, and over which he deliberately prevaricated, was his birthday, 20 April. ‘I must force the decision here’, he told his two

remaining secretaries on his birthday evening, 'or go down fighting.'

Berlin was a stout place for a last stand. It was unique among German cities in being large, modern and planned. Hamburg, densely packed around its port on the Elbe, had burned as if by spontaneous combustion in July 1943; the fragile and historic streets of Dresden had gone up like tinder in February 1945. Berlin, though heavily and consistently bombed throughout the war, was a tougher target. A complex of nineteenth- and twentieth-century apartment blocks standing on strong and deep cellars, and disposed at regular intervals along wide boulevards and avenues which served as effective fire-breaks, the city had lost about 25 per cent of its built-up area to Bomber Command during the Battle of Berlin between August 1943 and February 1944. Yet it had never suffered a firestorm, as Hamburg and Dresden had done, nor had its essential services been overwhelmed, and new roads had since been constructed. While the destruction of their dwellings had driven many Berliners into temporary accommodation or out of the city, the ruins left behind were as formidable military obstacles as the buildings left standing.

At the heart of the city, moreover, beat the pulse of Nazi resistance. Hitler's bunker had been constructed under the Reich Chancellery at the end of 1944. The bunker was a larger and deeper extension of an air-raid shelter dug in 1936. It contained eighteen tiny rooms, lay 55 feet under the Chancellery garden, had independent water, electricity and air-conditioning supplies and communicated with the outside world through a telephone switchboard and its own radio link. It also had its own kitchen, living quarters and copiously stocked storerooms. For anyone who liked living underground, it was completely self-sufficient. Although Hitler had spent extended periods of the war in spartan and semi-subterranean surroundings, at Rastenburg and Vinnitsa, he felt the need for fresh air; his after-dinner walks had been favourite occasions for his monologues. On 16 January, however, he descended from the Chancellery into the bunker and, apart from two excursions, on 25 February and 15 March, and occasional prowls about his old accommodation upstairs, he did not leave it for the next 105 days. The last battles of the Reich were conducted from the bunker conference room; so too was the Battle of Berlin.

Berlin did not have its own garrison. Throughout the war, except for the brief period of uneasy peace between the French armistice and Barbarossa, the German army had been at the front; the units of the Home Army which remained within the Reich performed recruitment or training functions. Inside the capital, the only unit of operational value was the Berlin Guard Battalion, out of which had grown the *Grossdeutschland* Division. It had figured largely in the suppression of the July Plot and was to fight in the siege of Berlin. However, the bulk of Berlin's defenders was to be supplied by Army Group Vistula as it fell back from the Oder on the capital. Its strength at the beginning of the siege was about 320,000, to oppose nearly 3 million men in Zhukov's, Konev's and Rokossovsky's fronts, and it comprised the Third Panzer and Ninth Armies. The most substantial force within Army Group Vistula was LVI Panzer Corps, containing the 18th Panzergrenadier and SS Nordland divisions, as well as fragments of the 20th Panzergrenadier and 9th Parachute

Divisions and the recently raised Müncheberg Division; Müncheberg belonged to a collection of 'shadow' formations, based on military schools and reinforcement units, without military experience. To them could be added a motley of *Volkssturm*, Hitler Youth, police, anti-aircraft and SS units; among the latter was the Charlemagne Assault Battalion of French SS men and a detachment of the SS Walloon Division, formed from pro-Nazi French Belgians commanded by the fanatically fascist Léon Degrelle, the man Hitler is alleged to have said he would have liked for a son, and who would lead it in a fight to the end over the ruins of the Reich Chancellery.

During the last weeks of March and the first of April Zhukov's and Konev's fronts assembled the force and supplies they would need for the assault on the city. Zhukov accumulated 7 million shells to supply his artillery, which was to be massed at a density of 295 guns to each attack kilometre; Konev, who needed to capture assault positions across the river Neisse from which to launch his offensive, had concentrated 120 engineer and thirteen bridging battalions to seize footholds, and 2150 aircraft to cover the operation.

While Zhukov and Konev were preparing for the great assault, Tolbukhin and Malinovsky opened the drive out of central Hungary on Vienna. On 1 April their tank columns began their race northward across the wide Danubian plain, brushing aside German armoured brigades which could put no more than seven to ten tanks in the field. By 6 April Tolbukhin's spearheads had entered the western and southern suburbs of Vienna and on 8 April there was intense fighting for the city centre. Local SS units fought fanatically, with total disregard for the safety of the monuments they made their strongpoints. Point-blank artillery duels broke out around the buildings of the Ring, there was fierce fighting in the Graben and the Kärtnerstrasse in the heart of the old city which had resisted the Turkish siege of 1683, and the Burgtheater and the Opera House were totally burnt out. Miraculously the Hofburg, the Albertina and the Kunsthistorischesmuseum survived; but when the survivors of the German garrison eventually dragged themselves northward over the Danube across the Reichsbrücke on 13 April one of the great treasure-houses of European civilisation lay burning and devastated in acres behind them.

### — Crossing the Rhine —

In the west too the great cities of the Reich were now falling to Allied attack. Eight armies were aligned along the west bank of the Rhine at the beginning of March, from north to south the Canadian First, Allied First Airborne, British Second, American Ninth, First, Third and Seventh and French First, the last facing the Black Forest on the far bank of the river. Patton's Third and Patch's Seventh Armies were still separated from the Rhine by the difficult terrain of the Eifel, but both succeeded in driving deep corridors to the river by 10 March. Eisenhower's plan for the Rhine crossing consisted of a deliberate assault on a wide front, with the heaviest effort to be made in the north by the Canadian, British and

American Ninth and First Armies, aimed at encircling the great industrial region of the Ruhr. The British Second and American Ninth Armies' operations, codenamed respectively Plunder and Grenade, were vast and spectacular offensives involving large numbers of amphibious craft, massive air and artillery preparations and the dropping of two divisions of the Allied Airborne Army behind the German defences on the east bank of the river. They began on 23 March and were lightly opposed; the Allied Liberation Army now contained eighty-five divisions and numbered 4 million men, while the real strength of the *Westheer* was only twenty-six divisions.

The evolution of Eisenhower's plan, however, had already been altered by a chance event. On 7 March spearheads of the US 9th Armoured Division, belonging to the First Army, had found an unguarded railway bridge across the Rhine at Remagen below Cologne and had rushed it to establish a bridgehead on the far side. It could not at first be exploited, but on 22 March Patton's Third Army established another bridgehead by surprise assault near Oppenheim. The German defences of the Rhine were therefore broken at two widely separated places, in the Ruhr and at its confluence with the river Main at Mainz, thus threatening the whole Wehrmacht position in the west with envelopment on a large scale. On 10 March Hitler had relieved Rundstedt of supreme command in the theatre (it was the old warrior's third and last dismissal) and replaced him with Kesselring, brought from Italy where he had so successfully contained the Anglo-American drive up the peninsula; but a change of commanders could not now deflect the inevitable penetration of Germany's western provinces by the seven Allied armies. While the British and Canadian armies pressed on into northern Germany, aiming towards Hamburg, the US Ninth and First Armies proceeded with the encirclement of the Ruhr and completed it on 1 April, forcing the surrender of 325,000 German soldiers and driving their commander, Model, to suicide. At the same time Patton's Third Army was embarking on a headlong thrust into southern Germany which at the beginning of May would have carried it to within thirty miles of both Prague and Vienna.

On the evening of 11 April the US Ninth Army reached the river Elbe, designated the previous year as the demarcation line between the Soviet and Western occupation zones in Germany. At Magdeburg the 2nd Armoured Division seized a bridgehead across the Elbe and next day the 83rd Division established another at Barby; their soldiers believed they were going to Berlin, since the 83rd Division was only fifty miles away after enlarging its bridgehead on 14 April. Word swiftly came down the line, however, that they were misled. Eisenhower was bound by the inter-Allied agreement, according to which his American forces in the central sector would stay where they were, while the British and Canadians continued to clear northern Germany and the southernmost American and French armies overran Bavaria and occupied the territory in which Allied intelligence suggested the Germans might be organising a 'national redoubt'. The capture of Berlin was to be left exclusively to the Red Army.

It was not, however, to be a simple operation of war, but a race between military



rivals. In November 1944 Stalin had promised Zhukov – who as his personal military adviser, senior army staff officer and operational commander was the principal architect of the Red Army's victories – that he should have the privilege of taking Berlin. Then on 1 April, at a Stavka meeting in Moscow devoted to ensuring that the Soviets and not the Western powers would be the first into the Reich capital, General A.I. Antonov of the General Staff posed the question how the demarcation line between Zhukov's and Konev's fronts should be drawn. To exclude Konev from the drive on Berlin would be to make the final operation more difficult than it need be. Stalin listened to the argument and then, drawing a pencil line on the situation map, designated their approach routes to within forty miles of the city. Thereafter, he said, 'Whoever breaks in first, let him take Berlin.'

### — The fall of Berlin —

The two fronts jumped off across the Oder on 16 April. On Zhukov's front the honour of leading the assault went to Chuikov's Eighth Guards Army (formerly the Sixty-Second Army, which had defended Stalingrad), whose soldiers had sworn an oath to fight without thought of retreat in the coming battle. German resistance was particularly strong in their sector, however, and at the end of the day it was Konev's front which had made greater progress. On 17 April Konev continued to make the faster advance, closing on the Spree, Berlin's river, and persuaded Stalin by telephone that he was now better placed to open the assault on the city from the south, rather from the direct eastern route on which Zhukov's armoured columns were labouring against fierce opposition by German anti-tank teams. Zhukov now lost patience with his subordinate commanders and demanded that they lead their formations against the German defences in person; officers who showed themselves 'incapable of carrying out assignments' or 'lack of resolution' were threatened with instant dismissal. This warning produced a sudden and notable increase in the pace of advance through the Seelow heights. By the evening of 19 April Zhukov's men had cracked all three lines of defences between the Oder and Berlin and stood ready to assault the city.

Rokossovsky's Second White Russian Front was now aiding Zhukov's advance by pressing the German defenders of the lower Oder, where their defences still held, from the north. Zhukov was more concerned by the urgent advance of Konev's front through Cottbus, on the Spree, to Zossen, the headquarters of OKH, since it threatened to take the capital's fashionable suburbs from the south. On the evening of 20 April, when Konev ordered his leading army 'categorically to break into Berlin tonight', Zhukov brought up the guns of the 6th Breakthrough Artillery Division and began the bombardment of the streets of the capital of the Third Reich.

**Above:** Troops of the British 8th Airborne Division advancing on the eastern bank of the Rhine on 25 March 1945 after landing by glider. **Left:** Doing things the American way, in which the logistics are large and the manner laconic.



On 20 April Hitler celebrated his fifty-sixth birthday with bizarre solemnity in the bunker, leaving it briefly to inspect an SS unit of the Frundsberg Division and to decorate a squad of Hitler Youth boys, orphans of the Allied bombing raid on Dresden, who were defending the capital. This was to be his last public appearance. His power over the Germans nevertheless remained intact. On 28 March he had dismissed Guderian as chief of staff of the German army and replaced him with General Hans Krebs, once military attaché in Moscow and now installed in the bunker at his side; soon the Führer would dismiss others who had managed to make their way to the bunker to offer their congratulations on his birthday, including Goering, as head of the Luftwaffe, and Himmler, as head of the SS. There would be no lack of Germans willing to carry out these orders; more impressively, there was no lack of Germans, whether or not intimidated by the 'flying courts martial' which had begun to hang deserters from lampposts, ready to continue the fight for the Nazi regime. Keitel and Jodl, intimates of every one of his command conferences throughout the war, left the bunker on 22 April to take refuge at Fürstenberg, thirty miles north of Berlin and conveniently close to Ravensbruck concentration camp, where a group of so-called *Prominenten*, well-connected foreign



Hitler celebrates his 56th birthday, tweaking the cheeks of the boy defenders of the Third Reich in the rubble-choked garden of the Chancellery.

prisoners, were held as hostages. Dönitz, the Grand Admiral, went to Plön, near Kiel on the Baltic, immediately after his last interview with the Führer on 21 April; he had transferred naval headquarters there during March. Speer, chief of war industry, came and went on 23 April; other visitors included Ribbentrop, still his Foreign Minister, his adjutant Julius Schaub, his naval representative Admiral Karl-Jesko von Puttkamer, and his personal physician Dr Theodor Morell, whom many in the inner circle believed had secured his privileged place by dosing Hitler with addictive drugs.

A few others actually overcame great danger to make their way to the bunker, including Goering's successor as commander of the Luftwaffe, General Robert Ritter von Greim, and the celebrated test pilot, Hanna Reitsch, who succeeded in landing on the East-West Axis in a training aircraft, while outside the bunker the garrison of Berlin kept up a ferocious struggle against the encroaching Russian formations throughout the week between 22 April, the day on which Hitler definitively announced his refusal to leave – 'Any man who wants may go! I stay here' – and his suicide on 30 April.

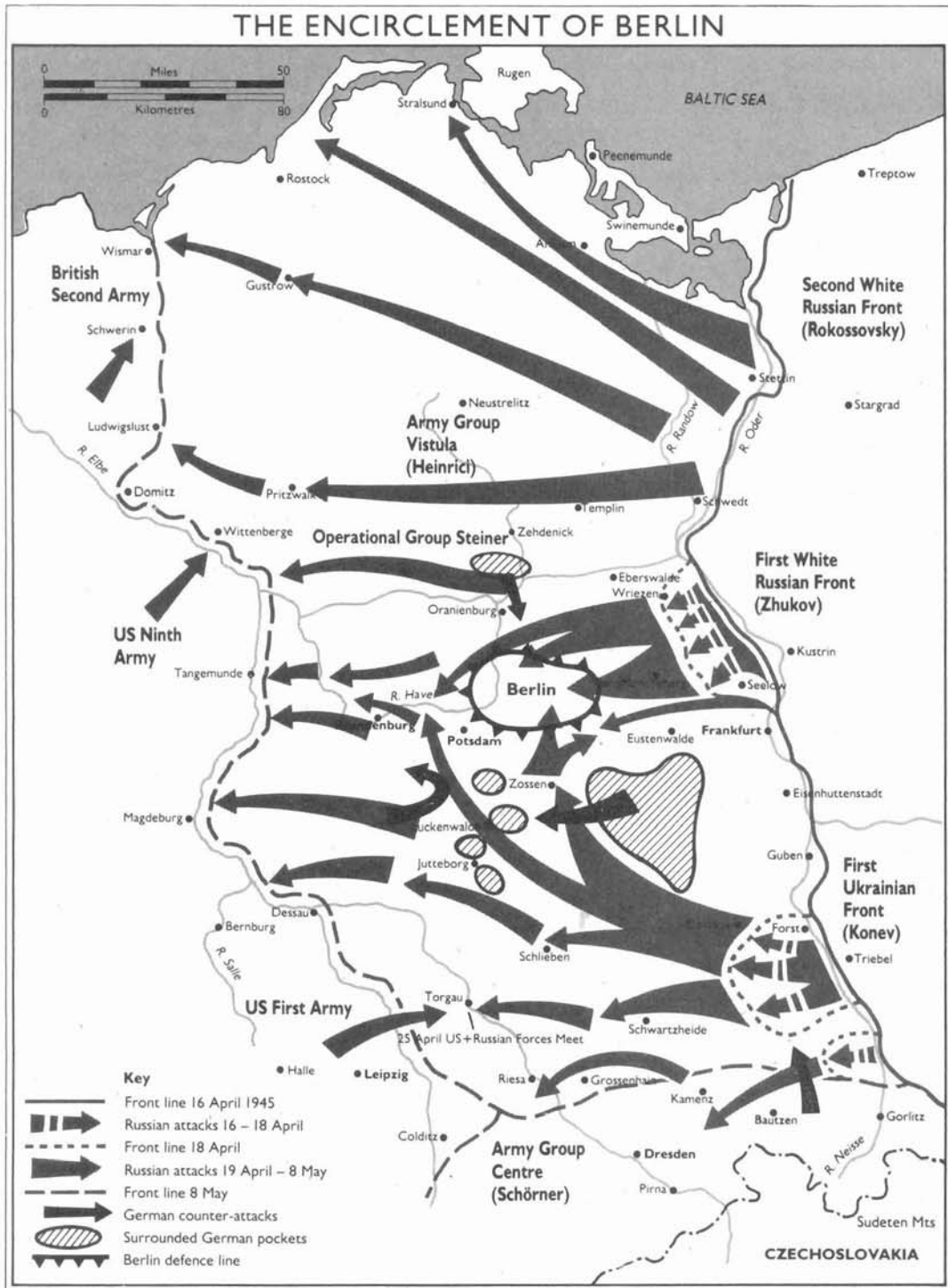
On the morning of 21 April, Zhukov's tanks entered the northern suburbs, and the units following them were regrouped for siege warfare: Chuikov, who had fought the Battle of Stalingrad, knew what was necessary. Assault groups were formed from a company of infantry, supported by half a dozen anti-tank guns, a troop of tank or assault guns, a couple of engineer platoons and a flamethrower platoon. According to the theory of siege warfare, assault weapons were used to blast or burn down resistance in the city blocks, into which the infantry then attacked. Overhead the heavy artillery and rocket-launchers threw crushing salvos to prepare the way for the next stage, house-to-house fighting. Medical teams stood close in the rear; street fighting produces exceptionally heavy casualties, not only from gunshot at short range but also from falls between storeys and the collapse of debris.

On 21 April, Zossen fell into the hands of Konev's front, its elaborate telephone and teleprinter centre still receiving messages from army units all over what remained of unconquered Germany. The next day Stalin finally delineated the thrust lines for the advance into central Berlin. Konev's sector was aligned on the Anhalter railway station, a position which ensured that his vanguard would be 150 yards away from the Reichstag and Hitler's bunker. Zhukov, whose troops were already dug deep into the city's streets, was to be the 'conqueror of Berlin' after all, as Stalin had promised the previous November.

However, German resistance was still stiffening. From his bunker Hitler constantly demanded the whereabouts of the two surviving military formations nearest the city, General Walther Wenck's Twelfth and General Theodor Busse's Ninth Armies. Although he railed at their failure to come to his rescue, both were fighting hard from the west and south-east to check or throw back the Soviet advance. Nevertheless by 25 April Konev and Zhukov had succeeded in encircling the city from south and north and were assembling unprecedented force to reduce resistance within it. For the final stage of the assault on the centre, Konev massed artillery at a density of 650 guns to the kilometre, literally almost wheel to wheel, and the Soviet 16th and 18th Air Armies had also been brought up to drive



# THE ENCIRCLEMENT OF BERLIN



away the remnants of the Luftwaffe still trying to fly munitions into the perimeter, either via Tempelhof, the inner Berlin airport, or on to the great avenue of the East–West Axis (by which Greim and Reitsch made their spectacular arrival and eventual departure) in the city centre.

On 26 April 464,000 Soviet troops, supported by 12,700 guns, 21,000 rocket-launchers and 1500 tanks, ringed the inner city ready to launch the final assault of the siege. The circumstances of the inhabitants were now frightful. Tens of thousands had crowded into the huge concrete 'flak towers', impervious to high explosive, which dominated the centre; the rest, almost without exception, had taken to the cellars, where living conditions rapidly became as squalid. Food was running short, so too was water, while the relentless bombardment had interrupted electrical and gas supplies and sewerage; behind the fighting troops, moreover, ranged those of the second echelon, many released prisoners of war with a bitter personal grievance against Germans of any age or sex, who vented their hatred by rape, loot and murder,

By 27 April, when a pall of smoke from burning buildings and the heat of combat rose a thousand feet above Berlin, the area of the city still in German hands had been reduced to a strip some ten miles long and three miles wide, running in an east–west direction. Hitler was demanding the whereabouts of Wenck; but Wenck had failed to break through, as had Busse's Ninth Army, while the remnants of Manteuffel's Third Panzer Army were withdrawing to the west. Berlin was now defended by remnants, including shreds of foreign SS units – Balts, and Frenchmen from the Charlemagne Division, as well as Degrelle's Walloons, whom the chaos of fighting had tossed into the environs of the bunker. On 28 April these last fanatics of the National Socialist revolution found themselves fighting for its government buildings in the Wilhelmstrasse, the Bendlerstrasse and near the Reich Chancellery itself. Professor John Erickson has described the scene:

The Tiergarten, Berlin's famous zoo, was a nightmare of flapping, screeching birds and broken, battered animals. The 'cellar tribes' who dominated the life of the city crept

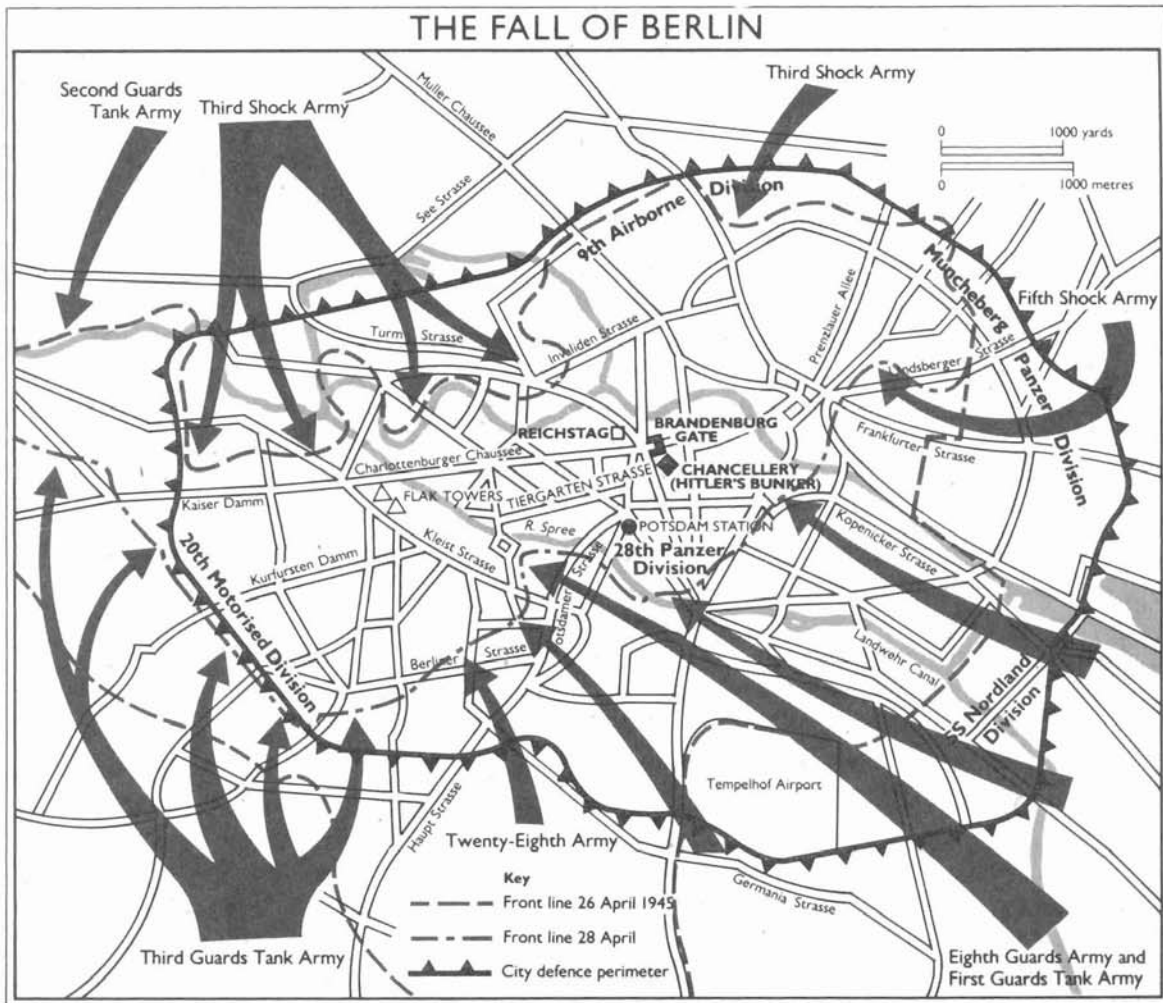


A broad smile from General Chuikov (centre), the hero of Stalingrad and in at the death during the Battle of Berlin as commander of Eighth Guards Army.

and crawled about, but adding to the horror of these tribalised communities clinging to life, sharing a little warmth and desperately improvised feeding, when the shelling stopped and the assault troops rolled through the houses and across the squares, there followed a brute, drunken, capricious mob of rapists and ignorant plunderers. . . . Where the Russians did not as yet rampage, the SS hunted down deserters and lynching commands hanged simple soldiers on the orders of young, hawk-faced officers who brooked no resistance or excuse.

On the same day the German defenders of the central area around the Reich Chancellery and the Reichstag tried to hold off the northern Russian thrust into this 'citadel', as it had been designated, by blowing the Moltke bridge over the river Spree. The demolition damaged but did not destroy it, and it was rushed early next morning under cover of darkness. There then followed a fierce battle for the Ministry of the Interior building 'Himmler's house', as the Russians dubbed it – and shortly afterwards for the Reichstag. Early on 29 April the fighting was less than a quarter of a mile from the Reich Chancellery, which was being demolished by heavy Russian shells, while 55 feet beneath the surface of the cratered garden Hitler was enacting the last decisions of his life. He spent the first part of the day dictating his 'political testament', enjoining the continuation of the struggle against Bolshevism and Jewry, and he then entrusted copies of this to reliable subordinates who were ordered to smuggle them through the fighting lines to OKW headquarters, to Field Marshal Schörner and to Grand Admiral Dönitz. By separate acts he appointed Schörner to succeed him as commander-in-chief of the German army and Dönitz as head of state. Dönitz's headquarters at Plön thus became the Reich's temporary seat of government, and he would remain there until 2 May, when he transferred to the naval academy at Mürwik, near Flensburg, in Schleswig-Holstein. Hitler also dismissed Speer, for recently revealed acts of insubordination in refusing to carry out a 'scorched earth' policy, and expelled Goering and Himmler from the Nazi Party, the former for daring to anticipate his promised succession to Hitler's place, the latter for having made unauthorised peace approaches to the Western Allies. He had already appointed Ritter von Greim commander of the Luftwaffe and specified eighteen other military and political appointments to Dönitz in the political testament. He also married Eva Braun, who had arrived in the bunker on 15 April, in a civil ceremony performed by a Berlin municipal official hastily recalled from his *Volkssturm* unit defending the 'citadel'.

Hitler had not slept during the night of 28/29 April and retired to his private quarters until the afternoon of 29 April. He attended the evening conference, which began at ten o'clock, but the meeting was a formality, since the balloon which supported the bunker's radio transmitting aerial had been shot down that morning and the telephone switchboard no longer communicated with the outside world. General Karl Weidling, the 'fortress' commander of Berlin, warned that the Russians would certainly break through to the Chancellery by 1 May, and urged that the troops remaining in action be ordered to break



The Battle of Berlin: the Russians advanced not only through the city's streets but also through courtyards, basements and buildings. In this fashion they secured entire blocks of the city, although at heavy cost.

out of Berlin. Hitler dismissed the possibility. It was clear that he was committed to his own end.

During the night of 29/30 April he took his farewells first from the women – secretaries, nurses, cooks – who had continued to attend him in the last weeks, then from the men – adjutants, party functionaries and officials. He slept briefly in the early morning of 30 April, attended his last situation conference, at which the SS commandant of the Chancellery, Wilhelm Mohnke, reported the progress of the fighting around the building, and

then adjourned for lunch with his two favourite secretaries, Gerda Christian and Traudl Junge, who had spent the long months with him at Rastenburg and Vinnitsa. They ate noodles and salad and talked sporadically about dogs; Hitler had just had his cherished Alsatian bitch, Blondi, and four pups destroyed with the poison he intended to use himself, and inspected the corpses to assure himself that it worked. Eva Braun, now Frau Hitler, remained in her quarters; then about three o'clock she emerged to join Hitler in shaking hands with Bormann, Goebbels and the other senior members of the entourage who remained in the bunker. Hitler then retired with her into the private quarters – where Frau Goebbels made a brief and hysterical irruption to plead that he escape to Berchtesgaden – and after a few minutes, measured by the funeral party which waited outside, together they took cyanide. Hitler simultaneously shot himself with a service pistol.

An hour earlier soldiers of Zhukov's front, belonging to the 1st Battalion, 756th Rifle Regiment, 150th Division of the Third Shock Army, had planted one of the nine Red Victory Banners (previously distributed to the army by its military soviet) on the second floor of the Reichstag, chosen as the point whose capture would symbolise the end of the siege of Berlin. The building had just been brought under direct fire by eighty-nine heavy Russian guns of 152 mm and 203 mm; but its German garrison was still intact and fighting. Combat within the building raged all afternoon and evening until at a little after ten o'clock a final assault allowed two Red Army men of the 1st Battalion of the 756th Regiment, Mikhail Yegorov and Meliton Kantaria, to hoist their Red Victory Banner on the Reichstag's dome.

The bodies of Hitler and his wife had by then been incinerated by the funeral party in a shell crater in the Chancellery garden. Once the flames, kindled with petrol brought from the Chancellery garage, had died down the remains of the bodies were buried in another shell crater nearby (from which they were to be disinterred by the Russians on 5 May). Shells were falling in the garden and in the Chancellery area, and fighting was raging in all the government buildings in the 'citadel'. Goebbels, appointed Reich Chancellor at the same time as Hitler nominated Dönitz to succeed him as head of state, nevertheless felt it important to make contact with the Russians to arrange a truce so that preparations could be made for peace talks, which, in the deluded atmosphere prevailing in the bunker, he believed were possible. Late in the evening of 30 April a colonel was sent as emissary to the nearest Russian headquarters, and early on the morning of 1 May General Krebs, since 28 March the army chief of staff, but formerly military attaché in Moscow (at the time of Barbarossa) and a Russian-speaker, went forward through the burning ruins to treat with the senior Soviet officer present. It was Chuikov, now the commander of the Eighth Guards Army, but who two years earlier had commanded the Russian defenders in the siege of Stalingrad.

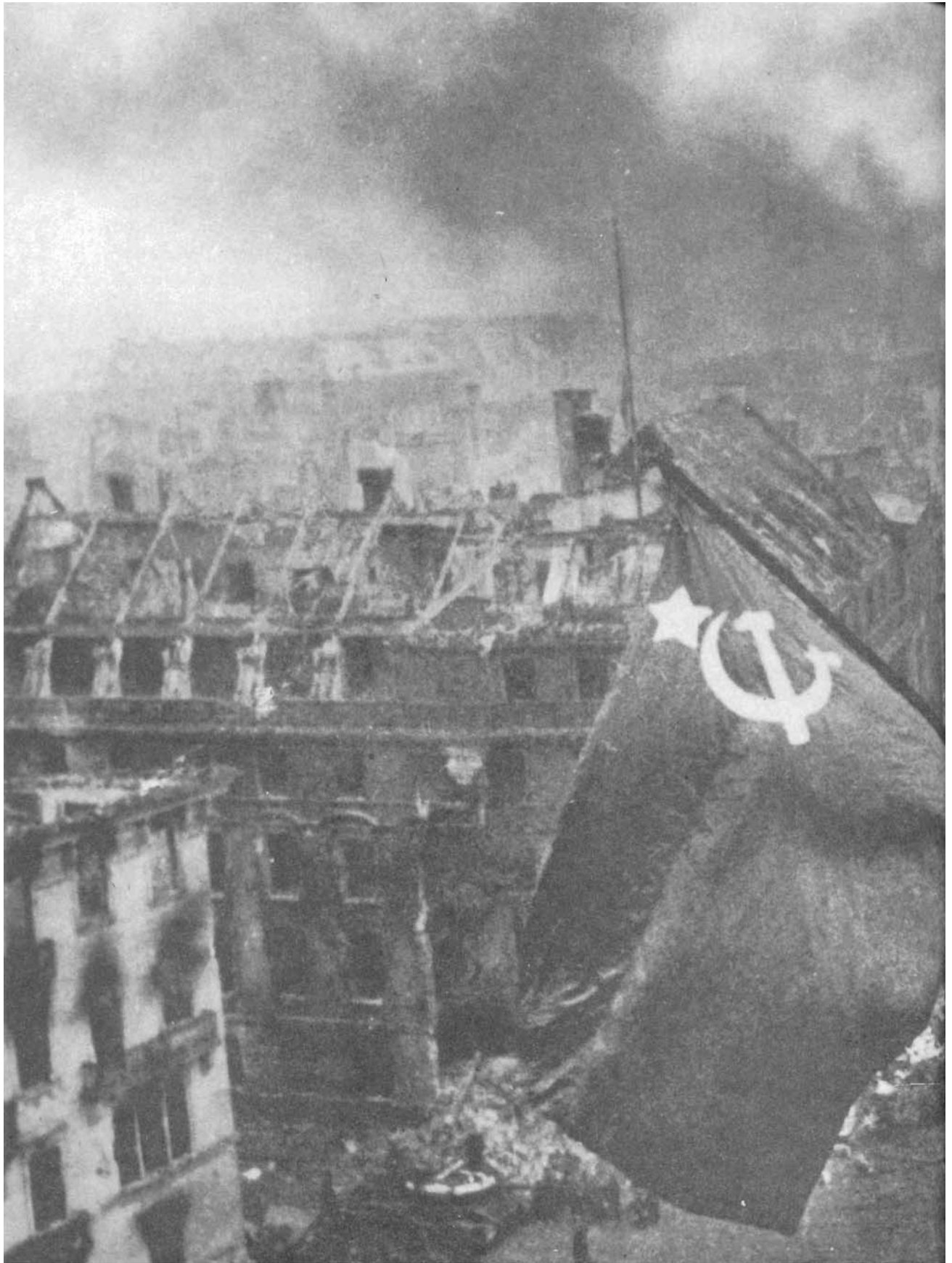
A strange four-sided conversation developed. Chuikov heard Krebs out and was then connected by telephone to Zhukov, who in turn spoke to Stalin in Moscow. 'Chuikov reporting,' the general said. 'General of Infantry Krebs is here. He has been authorised by the



German authorities to hold talks with us. He states that Hitler ended his life by suicide. I ask you to inform Comrade Stalin that power is now in the hands of Goebbels, Bormann and Admiral Dönitz. . . . Krebs suggests a cessation of military operations at once.' Krebs, however, like Bormann and Goebbels, remained deluded by the belief that the Allies would be ready to treat with Hitler's successors as if they were legitimate inheritors of the authority of a sovereign government. Stalin tired quickly of the conversation, declared abruptly that the only terms were unconditional surrender and went to bed. Zhukov persisted a little longer but then announced that he was sending his deputy, General Sokolovsky, and broke off communication. Sokolovsky and Chuikov between them engaged in interminable parleys with Krebs, who had difficulty in establishing his credentials, so murky were recent developments in the bunker (with which he communicated twice by runner). Eventually Chuikov's patience ran out. In the early afternoon of 1 May he told Krebs that the new government's powers were limited to 'the possibility of announcing that Hitler is dead, that Himmler is a traitor and to treat with three governments – USSR, USA and England – on *complete capitulation*'. To his own forces Chuikov sent the order: 'Pour on the shells . . . no more talks. Storm the place.' At 6.30 pm on 1 May every Soviet gun and rocket-launcher in Berlin opened fire on the unsubdued area. The eruption was signal enough to those remaining in the bunker that hopes of arranging a succession were illusory. About two hours later Goebbels and his wife – who had just killed her own six children by the administration of poison – committed suicide in the Chancellery garden close to Hitler's grave. Their bodies were more perfunctorily cremated and buried nearby. The rest of the bunker party, underlings as well as grandees like Bormann, now organised themselves into escape parties and made their way through the burning ruins towards what they hoped was safety in the outer suburbs. Meanwhile the Soviet troops – understandably reluctant to risk casualties in what were clearly the last minutes of the siege of Berlin – pressed inward behind continuous salvos of artillery fire. Early on the morning of 2 May LVI Panzer Corps transmitted a request for a ceasefire. At 6 am Weidling, the commandant of the Berlin 'fortress', surrendered to the Russians and was brought to Chuikov's headquarters, where he dictated the capitulation signal: 'On 30 April 1945 the Führer took his own life and thus it is that we who remain – having sworn him an oath of loyalty – are left alone. According to the Führer's orders, you, German soldiers, were to fight on for Berlin, in spite of the fact that ammunition had run out and in spite of the general situation, which makes further resistance on our part senseless. My orders are: to cease resistance forthwith.'

In John Erickson's words: 'At 3 pm on the afternoon of 2 May Soviet guns ceased to fire on Berlin. A great enveloping silence fell. Soviet troops cheered and shouted, breaking out the food and drink. Along what had once been Hitler's parade route, columns of

**Overleaf:** The Red Flag flies over the Reichstag. The Red Army lost over 300,000 men in the Battle for Berlin.







*The victors: Zhukov and his staff on the steps of the Reichstag. Zhukov was the outstanding Soviet commander of the war, but his very success undermined his relationship with Stalin.*

Soviet tanks were drawn up as for inspection, the crews jumping from their machines to embrace all and sundry at this new-found cease-fire.' The peace which surrounded them was one of the tomb. About 125,000 Berliners had died in the siege, a significant number by suicide; the suicides included Krebs and numbers of others in the bunker party. Yet probably tens of thousand of others died in the great migration of Germans from east to west in April, when 8 million left their homes in Prussia, Pomerania and Silesia to seek refuge from the Red Army in the Anglo-American occupation zones. By one of the most bizarre lapses of security in the entire war, the demarcation line agreed between Moscow,

London and Washington had become known to the Germans during 1944, and the last fight of the Wehrmacht in the west was motivated by the urge to hold open the line of retreat across the Elbe to the last possible moment. Civilians too seem to have learned where safety lay and to have pressed on ahead of the Red Army to reach it – but at terrible cost.

The cost to the Red Army of its victory in the siege of Berlin had also been terrible. Between 16 April and 8 May, Zhukov, Konev and Rokossovsky's fronts had lost 304,887 men killed, wounded and missing, 10 per cent of their strength and the heaviest casualty list suffered by the Red Army in any battle of the war (with the exception of the captive toll of the great encirclement battles of 1941). Moreover, the last sieges of the cities of the Reich were not yet over. Breslau held out until 6 May, its siege having cost the Russians 60,000 killed and wounded; in Prague, capital of the 'Reich Protectorate', the Czech National Army resistance group staged an uprising in which the puppet German 'Vlasov army' changed sides and skirmished against the SS garrison in the hope of delivering the city to the Americans – a vain hope, for which Vlasov's men paid a terrible price in blood when the Red Army entered it on 9 May.

By then, however, the war in what remained of Hitler's empire was almost everywhere over. A local armistice had been arranged in Italy, through the SS General Karl Wolff, on 29 April, scheduled for announcement on 2 May. On 3 May Admiral Hans von Friedeburg surrendered the German forces in Denmark, Holland and North Germany to Montgomery. On 7 May Jodl, dispatched by Dönitz from his makeshift seat of government at Flensburg in Schleswig-Holstein, signed a general surrender of German forces at Eisenhower's headquarters at Reims in France. It was confirmed at an inter-Allied meeting in Berlin on 10 May. Norway, which the Russians had fractionally penetrated only at the very north of the country from Finland in October 1944, was surrendered by its intact German garrison on 8 May. The Courland pocket capitulated on 9 May. Dunkirk, La Pallice, La Rochelle and Rochefort, the last of the 'Führer fortresses' in western Europe, surrendered on 9 May, as did the Channel Islands, Lorient and Saint-Nazaire on 10 May. The final surrender of the war in the West was at Heligoland on 11 May.

Peace brought no rest to the human flotsam of the war, which swirled in hordes between and behind the victorious armies. Ten million Wehrmacht prisoners, 8 million German refugees, 3 million Balkan fugitives, 2 million Russian prisoners of war, slave and forced labourers by the millions – and also the raw material of the 'displaced person' tragedy which was to haunt Europe for a decade after the war – washed about the battlefield. In Britain and America crowds thronged the streets on 8 May to celebrate 'VE Day'; in the Europe to which their soldiers had brought victory, the vanquished and their victims scratched for food and shelter in the ruins the war had wrought.