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## Dönitz's plight

**On April 29, 1945**, Hitler - having ousted both his designated crown prince since the glory days; tubby Reichs Marshal Hermann Göring, and the sinister Minister of the Interior, Heinrich Himmler, 'der treue Heinrich', both for attempted usurping of power in the Third Reich<sup>1</sup> - cabled Grand-Admiral Karl Dönitz in Plön, Schleswig-Holstein and appointed him President of Germany as his chosen successor. In the same message he laid down a list of names for a new government. Dönitz, completely taken aback and not too happy with the new job<sup>2</sup>, reluctantly accepted the responsibility, but choose to neglect Hitler's list and form his own cabinet<sup>3</sup>, avoiding high-ranking Nazis, but nonetheless included some names that were tarnished in Nazi grime<sup>4</sup>.

That same day, German Commander-in-Chief of Army Group C, Heinrich von Vietinghoff, had signed the surrender of all German forces in Italy at the Royal Palace of Caserta, to become effective on May 2, 1945. Army Group C, having neither arms nor ammunition left after no supplies had reached them since early April had been forced to abandon their heavy weapons and vehicles due to Allied air strikes that had obliterated all bridges in the area. In short; their situation had become untenable.

**The following day**, April 30, a little over three-thirty in the afternoon, Adolf Hitler, for twelve years Germany's dictator, put a bullet in his head, simultaneously biting down on a cyanide vial for good measure. His long-time mistress and for thirty-six hours his legal 'Ehefrau', Eva Hitler, followed him in death. A subsequent laconic message from Reichsleiter Martin Bormann informed Dönitz that the testament 'was now in force'.

One day later the Grand Admiral spoke to the German people, informing them of the Führer's death and the transition of power. In the evening, around nine o'clock, Hamburg Radio warned the German people that a grave and important announcement was about to come. Suitable music from

Wagner and from Bruckner's Seventh Symphony was played to prepare listeners for the moment. At 10:25 p.m. the announcer went on:

**ANNOUNCER:** The German wireless broadcasts serious, important news for the German people.

(Three rolls of the drums are heard.)

**ANNOUNCER:** It is reported from Der Fuehrer's headquarters that our Fuehrer Adolf Hitler, fighting to the last breath against Bolshevism, fell for Germany this afternoon in his operational headquarters in the Reich Chancellery.

On April 30 Der Fuehrer appointed Grand Admiral Doenitz his successor. The grand admiral and successor of Der Fuehrer now speaks to the German people.

**DOENITZ:** German men and women, soldiers of the armed forces: Our Fuehrer, Adolf Hitler, has fallen. In the deepest sorrow and respect the German people bow.

At an early date he had recognized the frightful danger of Bolshevism and dedicated his existence to this struggle. At the end of his struggle, of his unswerving straight road of life, stands his hero's death in the capital of the German Reich. His life has been one single service for Germany. His activity in the fight against the Bolshevik storm flood concerned not only Europe but the entire civilized world.

Der Fuehrer has appointed me to be his successor...

Dönitz goes on to explain that his first task will be to save Germany from further destruction and bloodshed (from the 'Bolshevist enemy'), and even accuses the Allied of helping spread Bolshevism in Europe.

He praises what Germany have 'achieved in battle' as unique in history and assure the German people that he will strive to establish tolerable living conditions for them and asks for their help in this endeavor.

Lastly, he calls for the upholding of law and order and that all will do their duty for the common good. The National Anthem ends the broadcast

## Partial surrenders

**On May 2**, the Berlin Garrison under General der Artillerie, Helmuth Weidling, since April 24 a reluctant commandant of the Berlin forces, surrendered after a fortnight of futile resistance to the Red Army.



General Helmuth Weidling and staff after their surrender; Lt. Gen. Kurt Woytasch, Oberst Hans Refior and Lieutenant-General Walter Schmidt-Dankward.

As the guns fell silent, bleary-eyed Berliners emerged from their bunkers and cellars, hardly believing it was all over. One diarist wrote that she suddenly could hear birds sing.



The iconic photo of Pariser Platz, taken mid-morning on May 2, 1945. The wounded men on the pavement have just been ousted from the Adlon Hotel, as the Russians wanted to make use of the facilities themselves.

**On May 4**, a partial surrender for German armed forces in Holland, Belgium and Denmark, along with forces facing the Western Allied armies, was negotiated with Field Marshal Montgomery at Lüneburg Heath<sup>5</sup>. Dönitz hereafter tried to persuade the Allied to postpone the general surrender of the Wehrmacht a few days in order to allow as many German soldiers and civilians as possible to flee to the west, but Eisenhower's demand remained surrender on all fronts within 48 hours or hostilities would be resumed.



In Reims, Generaloberst Alfred Jodl signs the documents, watched by an exhausted Admiral von Friedeburg. Oxenius to Jodl's right.

**Thus, on May 7**, Generaloberst Alfred Jodl<sup>6</sup>, empowered by Dönitz, at Reims, France, signed the Instrument of Surrender for all German forces. He was accompanied by his adjutant, Major Wilhelm Oxenius and Admiral Hans-Georg von Friedeburg of the Kriegsmarine. Accepting the surrender and signing on behalf of the Allied was US General Walter Bedell Smith, Eisenhower's Chief-of-Staff.

For the Russian side, General Ivan Susloparov<sup>7</sup> signed as a witness, as did General Francois Sevez for France. The ceremony, which took place at 02:41 CET in the morning, thus formally ended the Second World War in Europe; in effect on May 8 at 23:01 CET (equal to one minute after midnight, British Double Summer Time).

After the signing, Jodl requested permission to speak, and pleaded;

*“With this signature the German people and the German Armed Forces are, for better or worse, delivered into the hands of the victors ... In this hour I can only express the hope that the victor will treat them with generosity”*

There was no reply from the Allied representatives...

## Surrender at Karlshorst

Stalin, however, was not a happy man at all. He demanded that an official act of surrender took place in Berlin, and that it would be headed by the victorious Soviet commander, Marshal of the Soviet Union, Georgij Konstantinovitj Zjukov.<sup>8</sup> It was to be a unique event, attended by the world press<sup>9</sup> and recorded for posterity; reflecting the leading role of the Red Army in the defeat of fascist Germany as well as honor the immense suffering of the Russian people.

Time was of the essence as western media had already been informed of the German capitulation the day before<sup>10</sup> and hectic preparations now unfolded to turn the temporary headquarter of Zhukov, a former Wehrmacht training facility [Heerespionierschule] at Karlshorst in Berlin-Lichtenberg, into a suitable venue for the ratification ceremony that would be the focus of the world's attention. The former officers' mess hall was hastily rearranged and decorated to suit the occasion, with a large arrangement of green-clothed tables for the victorious allies and smaller tables for adjutants and the representatives of vanquished Germany.

Proudly flying from the wall above were the standards of the victors and legend has it that frantic efforts were unfolded to locate a French flag. Failing this, one had to be made up by the Russians.<sup>11</sup>

## The proceedings

The German High Command was represented by Field Marshal Wilhelm Keitel, signing for the OKW/OKH, Admiral von Friedeburg for the Kriegsmarine and Colonel-General Stumpff for the Luftwaffe. Gregory Zhukov was to sign for the Soviet Union, Air Marshal Arthur Tedder for the Allied as Eisenhower's plenipotentiary<sup>12</sup>. Further, it had been agreed with Zhukov that General Jean de Lattre de Tassigny could sign for France, and Carl Spaatz, General and commander of the USSAF could sign specifically for the USA.

The German representatives were flown in early in the morning of May 8 and tucked away until the proceedings began. Around noon, Andrej Vyshinsky, a Soviet diplomat and Stalin's right-hand man, arrived from Moscow with fresh instructions and during the day a battle of Protocol over



the Instrument of Surrender unfolded. A key question was who was to sign, and Moscow held the position, that Tedder – signing for Eisenhower – was enough. Spaatz and de Lattre's signatures were in their opinion superfluous.

After much hullabaloo, drafts telexed back and forth; translated, then re-evaluated and corrected, then translated and sent again, a final document was at last accepted by all parties. Moscow agreed that French and American signatures could be accepted, provided they appeared 'as witnesses' under the main underwriters; Zhukov and Tedder. The original documents, Reims and Karlshorst, can be viewed here:

<https://bit.ly/3dGnJTb>

**As a result of all this**, however, the physical signing was delayed until nearly one o'clock in the morning of May 9, CET<sup>13</sup> and then back-dated to May 8 to be consistent with the Reims agreement and the public announcements of the surrender already made by Western media.<sup>14</sup>

As the proceedings began late in the evening, Keitel, when he was led in, behaved like a victor, raising his baton in greeting and walked briskly to the table where Zhukov was sitting, but was, somewhat subdued, ushered to his place at a side table along with the other German representatives. He was flanked by Stumpff to his right, looking rather indifferent, and von Friedeburg<sup>15</sup> to his left, the latter now looking terribly exhausted; dark rims under his eyes gave his head a skull-like appearance.



The signing itself, commencing on 00:16 CET<sup>16</sup>, was a relatively brief affair that left little initiative to the German delegation, albeit Keitel tried to win an extra 12-hour grace period before resistance by German troops would constitute a punishable breach. Eventually, he had to settle for a verbal promise to that effect by Zhukov. Having signed the documents, the German delegation was shown the door; Keitel's face solemn and blotched with suppressed anger<sup>17</sup>.

After the ceremony was over and the press had left the premises, a celebratory party was launched. According to legend, it eventually exaggerated to the point where the mess hall furniture was trashed; meaning what you see in there today are most likely replicas.

## The End

“Eisenhower’s refusal to the end to contemplate any breach of the coalition with the Soviet Union, his insistence at his<sup>18</sup> meeting with Jodl on 6 May upon unconditional surrender on all fronts, and the speed of the final moves to sign the capitulation had ruined Dönitz’s intention of bringing the troops in the east back to the west and keeping them out of the hands of the Red Army. At a cost of continuing the war for more than a week after Hitler’s death, Dönitz did partially succeed. In the overall balance, no more than around 30 per cent of the 10 million German troops entered Soviet captivity, though far more soldiers had fought in the east than in the west. Despite the flight to the west in the first week in May, the great majority of those on the eastern front when Dönitz took office were still there at Germany’s surrender. They were marched off to the east and forced to endure years of Soviet captivity. A great many did not return. On the best estimates, about a third of those captured during the entire war in the east, around a million German prisoners of war, died in Soviet hands.

Dönitz, as we have seen, had endeavored to postpone the inevitable defeat as long as possible, through a series of partial surrenders calculated to find time to bring back the troops – and, as a much lower priority, civilians – from the east, and also in the hope, if rapidly fading, that even now the wartime coalition of the western powers and the Soviet Union might crack. The strategy was largely, if not totally, a failure, and at a high cost.”

[Kershaw, *The End*, p. 375]

## Postwar

From 1945 to 1949, the premises at Karlshorst served as seat of the Soviet Military Administration in Berlin. In 1967, the building was turned into the ‘Museum of the Unconditional Surrender of Fascist Germany in the Great Patriotic War’ and remained in that shape until the end of the Cold War. In 1995, celebrating the 50 Anniversary of the end of the war, the ‘Deutsch-Russisches Museum’ opened, communicating the story of the Battle of Berlin and the eventual German surrender with a view from both sides.

## Today

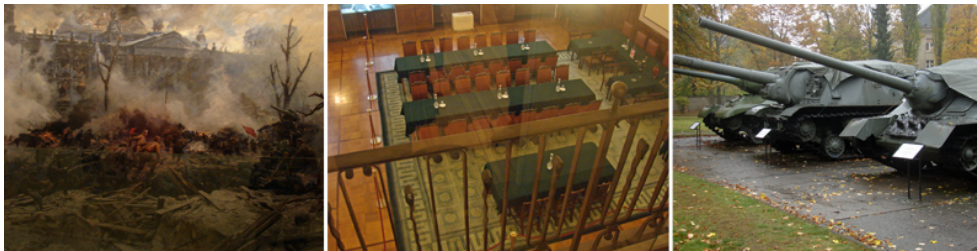
In my view, it’s a great, informative place to visit if you are interested in world history, and even though the interior may have been recreated, it was the actual venue of the surrender and some of the magic from those days still hangs in the air.

Measured with today’s yardstick, however, and – at least when I was there – lacking the interactive gismo’s and focus on entertaining that have become commonplace in many museums these days, it may appear a tad stale to younger generations, but there are a few vehicles of war in the courtyard that might excite.

If you take the S-3 to Karlshorst Station, it’s a relatively short walk; some 15 minutes. If memory serves, there is no admission fee.

Web: <https://www.museum-karlshorst.de/en/>

**Note:** Like most other European museums, Karlshorst is temporarily closed due to the Corona pandemic. Hopefully, we can see the end of this situation during the summer of 2021.



A few shots from my 2012 visit; large diorama depicting the storm on the Reichstag; a view over the venue from the gallery and a few of the armored vehicles in the courtyard. Probably looks different today.

## Recommended reading

Beevor, Antony: **Berlin, the downfall 1945**, © 2002, Penguin Books

Bernadotte, Count Folke: **The Fall of the Curtain**, © 1945, Cassell

Dönitz, Karl: **Ten Years and twenty Days**, © 2000, Cassell Military

Kershaw, Ian: **The End, Germany 1944-45**, © 2011, Penguin Books

Knappe, Siegfried: **Soldat**, © 1992, Dell Publishing

Le Tissier, Tony: **Berlin Battlefield Guide**, © 2008, Pen & Sword

Richie, Alexandra: **Faust's Metropolis**, © 1998, Harper Collins

Schellenberg, Walter: **The Memoirs of Hitler's Spymaster**, © 2006 André Deutsch

Schultz-Naumann, Joachim: **The Last Thirty Days**, © 1991, Madison Books

Shirer, William L.: **The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich**, © 1959, Simon & Schuster

Tolland, John: **The Last 100 Days**, © 1967, Bantam Books

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Göring's telegram of April 23, suggesting his take-over of power and Himmler's peace negotiations with Count Bernadotte.

<sup>2</sup> In his memoir; Inside the Third Reich, Speer mentions that during his last visit to the Bunker on April 26, Hitler asked him what he thought of Dönitz and his capabilities as a leader. Speer, suspecting that the Grand-Admiral was in play as Hitler's successor, answered in the positive. Dönitz would grouse over Speer's interference the next ten years in Spandau Prison.

<sup>3</sup> The Dönitz Cabinet, in which Albert Speer held the position of Minister of Industry & Production, was in office until May 23 where it was dissolved by the Allied and the members arrested [<https://bit.ly/3u6sScK>].

<sup>4</sup> Wilhelm Stuckart, who was to be Minister of the Interior, had participated in the Wannsee Conference where the 'Final Solution to the Jewish Problem' had been agreed, and Herbert Backe, designated Minister for Food & Agriculture was the author of the Hunger Plan of

1941, a calculated strategy for mass elimination of Soviet POWs by starvation. And there were many more bad apples in the basket.

<sup>5</sup> Alongside, Dönitz had empowered Walter Schellenberg, as his envoy, to travel to Sweden there from to establish contact with General Franz Friedrich Böhme, commander of the XVIII Mountain Corps and Hitler's plenipotentiary in Norway, to discuss surrender of the troops under his command. Böhme, however, his command unimpeded by war and troops in full combat preparedness, was unwilling to surrender unless he received a direct order from Dönitz. Before that could be issued, total capitulation of the Wehrmacht in Reims was in effect.

<sup>6</sup> Autumn Leaves? Somewhat pointlessly at this hour, Jodl would afterwards [May 10] be awarded the Oak Leaves to go with his Knights Cross, awarded four days earlier.

<sup>7</sup> Susloparov also partook in Karlshorst and was afterwards spirited off to Moscow post haste, into the hands of the NKVD. It was probably an unpleasant experience, but Susloparov did not, as some accounts have it, disappear in a Gulag. Postwar he trained diplomatic officers at the Military Diplomatic Academy in Moscow. He died in 1974.

<sup>8</sup> There was more than vanity and Russian pride to Stalin's demand; Jodl had signed in Reims as representative for Dönitz, the new German Head of State, but in his eagerness to extradite German soldiers and civilians to the west, he had not, as stipulated in the terms of surrender, laid down arms in the east. Thus, he had forfeited Stalin's trust and the Soviet leader insisted on a full military surrender, signed by the chiefs of the armed forces.

<sup>9</sup> Stalin's media expectations were apparently fulfilled. Antony Beevor describes how journalists and reporters "behaved like madmen; pushing generals aside to get a good position and even tried to worm in behind the top table, under the flags of the four allies".

<sup>10</sup> Eisenhower had ordered the media in Reims to postpone publication of the surrender for 48 hours. However, journalist Ed Kennedy, AP, broke the news prematurely and on 9:35 p.m. on May 7, the story hit the papers all over USA. Kennedy had his accreditation revoked and was shipped back – but he got the news story of his life.

<sup>11</sup> As the story goes, the Tricolor was hastily composed from a Nazi flag, a bed sheet and a pair of blue serge trousers. In their haste, the female army soldiers initially sewed the stripes together horizontally and thus produced a Dutch flag. De Lattre diplomatically corrected them.

<sup>12</sup> The reason for Eisenhower's absence was pathetically simple; as overall commander of the Allied Forces in Europe he would technically outrank Zhukov, and that was not to the Soviet Premier's liking.

<sup>13</sup> Ten years to the date, in 1955, West Germany would join the North Atlantic Treaty Organization [NATO]

<sup>14</sup> It is notable that William Shirer, in his monumental 'Rise and Fall' makes no mention of the ceremony at Karlshorst, but let WW2 in Europe end with the [actual] surrender in Reims. No unnecessary credit to the commies, perhaps?

<sup>15</sup> Admiral von Friedeburg followed Dönitz to Plön and later to Flensburg (Mürwik), where the provisional government was eventually arrested on May 23. The same evening von Friedeburg committed suicide with potassium cyanide.

<sup>16</sup> The Soviet government on their part never recognized the Reims surrender and made no public acknowledgement of it. Thus Karlshorst is the acknowledged venue of surrender and due to the time difference Russia celebrates Victory Day on May 9, whereas we in Europe and the United States celebrate VE Day on May 8.

<sup>17</sup> According to Kershaw, the German delegation was treated to an opulent meal with caviar and champagne. It is not quite clear though, whether they partook in the celebrations or dined for themselves. [The End, p. 372]. Afterwards, they were shipped back to Mürwik; Keitel was arrested on May 13, the remainder on May 23.

<sup>18</sup> Eisenhower, who "did not want to shake hands with a Nazi", left the negotiations to Bedell-Smith, but met Jodl briefly afterwards. Jodl saluted, Eisenhower did not.