Endgame

Although the Russian onslaught on the German capital was not the final battle in the Second World War its epic proportions and symbolic importance has, in immediate postwar and in contemporary history writing, made it the embodiment of those five years of struggle to quell the Nazi regime and put an end to its leader, Adolf Hitler's, megalomanic aspirations.

The tale of the battle is a never-ending story; it has been told over and over again and will continue to spellbind its readers for generations to come.

There is a direct link from the Battle for Berlin back to Hitler's Directive No. 21, dated December 18, 1940, tasking the German Wehrmacht with attacking and occupying the Soviet Union, crushing the Red Army in the process.

This undertaking, boldly initiated while Germany was still at war with Great Britain, was meant to – with a surprise attack on what was then an ally – eliminate any future military threat from the East; secure vital resources of oil and grain for Germany; obtain 'Lebensraum' for the country's planned expansion and at the same time force the English to the negotiation table before any intervention on behalf of the USA came into play.

But, like Napoleon before him, Hitler had bit off more than he could chew, overestimating his own military prowess and greatly miscalculating the capacity of the Soviets to survive the onslaught and recuperate. Sacrificing land for time, and accepting great losses of matériel and manpower, the Red Army retreated and drew the Germans deep into the vast plains of Russia.

At Stalingrad and Leningrad the offensive ground to a hold. Then, regrouping, drawing on countless numbers of fresh recruits, equipped with arms from factories translocated behind the Urals and aid from the Allied via the Murmansk convoys, the Russians eventually struck back in force. End of January 1943, the Sixth Army under Field Marshal Paulus

surrendered and in the midst of 1943 the tide of war had changed for good. From thereon the German campaign was in essence little but a fighting retreat.

By early spring in 1945, the Wehrmacht had been pushed back into Germany and the Red Army stood virtually at the gates of Berlin. The last, great obstacle was the natural moat formed by the Oder River, defended by a hotchpotch of troops, drawn from all branches of the battered Wehrmacht, armed and equipped with the leftovers of five years of warfare.

Amassing on the eastern bank[1] in the wee hours of April 16 was a plethora of men, tanks and artillery; more than one and a half million combat hardened soldiers under the overall command of Marshal of the Soviet Union, Georgij Konstantinovitj Zjukov.

"For the men of the First Byelorussian Front, the night of l5-16 April seemed to last for ever. Normally, Soviet troops were not told exactly when they were about to launch an offensive. They usually found out for themselves: tanks and guns would be brought forward to the front line during the hours of darkness; companies reinforced with extra men; the sergeant-majors would suddenly be more generous with the issue of ammunition; the soup would be thicker and have more fat in it.

But this time, everyone was informed by small leaflets handed out to each man, even those crouching in the most forward foxholes, right under the noses of the Germans. Zhukov's order of the day for l6 April was short and very much to the point: 'The enemy will be crushed along the shortest route to Berlin. The capital of Fascist Germany will be taken and the banner of victory planted over it.'

There had been stirring speeches from political officers: over 2000 men of Zhukov's front applied for party membership on 15 April. Some joined from enthusiasm, others were more interested in safeguarding their futures, or making sure that if they fell in the coming battle their families would be told - the army did not as a rule inform families of casualties, but the party did so for its members.

As night fell, every unit had been ordered to take its Guards colors to the front-line trenches, 'so that every soldier will see that he and his companions, men and officers, are going into battle with the unit's most precious symbol - the Red Banner symbolizing the revolutionary ideals and cherished aspirations of all honest men on earth to freedom and happiness for mankind '. Facing the banners, they renewed their pledges of allegiance."

[Fischer & Reed, Fall of Berlin, p. 309]

[1] Actually, the Russians had a small bridgehead on the western bank of the Oder as early as February. Zhukov, at that point, wanted to push on to Berlin, but was rebuffed by Stalin who feared overextended supply lines and flanking attacks by the enemy.

Steamrolling the Oder front

"Kill! Kill! None of the Germans are innocent, neither the living nor those not yet born. Follow the advice of Comrade Stalin and wipe out the Fascist Beast in his lair forever! Break the proud racial pride of the German women brutally! Take them in just revenge."

Ilya Ehrenberg, Russian poet and war correspondent (1881-1961) in a manifesto to the Red Army

"April 16, 1945.

The night is cold and windy. Wisps of fog drift over the plains at the Oder. The air is humid and salty. The wind carries the smell of fire and smoke from the east.

The men of the XI SS Panzer Corps are exhausted and overtired. None of them have been able to sleep. An eerie excitement reigns. And from beyond the front come noises that do not bode well; Engines roar incessantly over by the Russians, armored tracks rattle, metal clank against metal, countless steps echo through the night."

[Hitler's letzte Schlacht, p. 7]

THE BATTLE FOR BERLIN was heralded by three flares tracking across the approaching dawn of this early spring morning. Seconds later, the Russian artillery opened a barrage, unprecedented in history; a total exceeding 20.000 artillery pieces, 400 per mile of the front, sprayed millions of grenades and rockets towards the German lines for thirty minutes. The noise was stupefying. Allegedly, gunners experienced blood running from their ears, caused by the concussion of their firing, and survivors in nearby villages spoke of a strange, hot wind that howled through the forest. Then, as the barrage stopped, men and armor flooded over the Oder like a swarm of locust; on barges, pontoon bridges, rowboats and even swimming, shouting their "Urrah" battle cry as they went.

At this point, the commanding general Gregory Zhukov, believing he had an ingenious trick up his sleeve, actually shot himself severely in the foot and served his avant-garde on a silver platter to the defending German commander, Generaloberst Gotthard Heinrici. Positioned at 200 meter intervals between the Russian guns, more than 140 powerful searchlights were turned on, transforming the morning dim into bright daylight. It was supposed to work as a "chock-and-awe" tactic, blinding the enemy on the Seelower Heights, while at the same time illuminating the front for Zhukov's forces.

Unfortunately, the light did not manage to penetrate the enormous amount of dust and debris, hurled into the sky by the artillery barrage. What it *did* do, was to expose the attacking Russian soldiers and tanks clearly to enemy fire. And the Germans did not pass out on the opportunity. The Germans had a field day, picking targets at will, while Russian infantry was bogged down in the marshy soil, frantically calling for the lights to be switched off.

Sly Heinrici, a master of fighting retreat tactics and well versed in Russian military thinking, had utilized the wee hours of April 16th to order his frontline troops to retreat to the second defense line. As a result, much of the Russian shelling fell on abandoned trenches, causing only modest casualties. Now, taking advantage of the initial confusion in the Russian lines, he succeeded to equip his mighty adversary with a bloody nose.

AS FAR AWAY as the outskirts of the metropolis, seventy kilometers to the west, the start of the Russian onslaught was observed. Familiar with the sounds and shakes of aerial bombardment, alert Berliners immediately recognized that something very different was afoot here:

"On the eastern fringes of Berlin the hammering of the guns, less than thirty-five miles away, was like the sullen thunder of a far-off storm. In small villages and towns nearer the Oder there were some strange concussion effects. In the police station at Mahlsdorf books fell off their shelves and telephones rang for no reason. Lights dimmed and flickered in many areas. In Dahlwitz-Hoppegarten an air raid siren suddenly went berserk and no one could switch it off. Pictures fell from walls, windows and mirrors shattered. A cross hurtled down from the steeple of a church in Müncheberg, and everywhere dogs began to howl.

In the eastern districts of Berlin, the muffled sound echoed and re-echoed in the skeletal, fire-blackened ruins. The fragrant smell of burning pines wafted across the fringes of Köpenick. Along the edges of Weissensee and Lichtenberg a sudden wind caused curtains to whip and flap with ghostly abandon, and in Erkner some inhabitants of air raid shelters were jolted out of sleep, not by noise but by a sickening vibration of the earth."

[The Last Battle p. 358]

IN THE ARMY HEADQUARTERS at OKH/OKW Zossen some 70 kilometers south of Berlin, an exhausted General Krebs tries to assess the situation. Appointed Chief of Staff for the OKH only a fortnight before, replacing Generaloberst Heinz Guderian, who had finally fallen from grace after many clashes with Hitler, it was his responsibility to create an overview of the military situation for the conference in the Führerbunker later that day. It took a morning of frantic telephone calls for him and his adjutants Gerhard Boldt and Bernd Freytag von Loringhoven, and several glasses of vermouth to steady the stressed general, but around noon, he was ready for the ride north to Berlin, carrying an ominous report to his Führer.

"Involuntarily I found myself thinking of my comrades out there. By this time, the battle must have reached its climax. How often had I myself stood there in the thick of it, had I. like the men lying out there now in the hell of battle, dug my hands into the protective earth, somewhere in the vast expanse of the Russian countryside."

[Boldt, p. 110]

At the Oder, despite all of Heinrici's tactical skills and Zhukov's initial blunders, the outcome was a given; with a superiority of roughly 10:1, the Russians were bound to come out successful.

IN THE FÜHRERBUNKER PROPER, Adolf Hitler was fast asleep when the Russian attack started; ever the night owl he had hit his bunk only an hour before. Awoken by the anxious knock on the bedroom door by his valet, Heinz Linge, he was initially irritated, but quickly showed himself – for once unshaven and unkempt – as the reason for the early awakening became apparent.

Hitler had placed all his confidence in the strength of the 'Oder line', the river, in his imagination, being an almost insurmountable hindrance to a large military force. As a consequence, defense in depth at this forward line was all but non-existent and little attention had been placed on defensive work in and around the capital itself.

As it went, the pitched battle at the Seelow Heights, the only seriously fortified stronghold between the Red Army and Berlin, lasted some four days. On April 19, the sheer weight of men and material on the Russian side (some 20.000 tanks and artillery pieces and close to one million men) eventually crumbled the German defenses and forced them in retreat. Many attempts to establish new defensive lines were done by individual units, but lack of high-level command overview, lack of communication between units and the almost total absence of air support made any cohesive defense impossible.

Thus, once past the town of Seelow, some 15-17 kilometers from the Oder River, the Red Army steamrolled the German forces, hampered only by their own supply situation that intermittingly forced some units to halt, waiting for petrol and ammunition. The rapid advance continued in essence virtually unabated until the avant-garde reached the outskirts of Berlin proper, where serious street fighting slowed the progress considerably and was to take a great toll on attackers and defenders alike.

MAJOR KNAPPE, CHIEF OF STAFF to General Helmuth Weidling, commander of the LVI Panzerkorps, retreating from the Oder front to join the Berlin defenders, relates:

"The fierce German resistance persisted, even though we were outnumbered ten to one and our divisions were quickly becoming decimated. Every day, we suffered more and more losses – losses we could not make good – and finally the Russians began to break through. We were holding in the middle, but the Russians were streaming through on both sides and trying to get north and south of Berlin. They could have surrounded us, but for some reason they did not. They probably thought we had strong defensive lines east of Berlin, and they wanted to avoid them by going north and south of the city. If they had known that Berlin was defended only by Hitler Youth and Volkssturm, they could have cut us off and Berlin would have been theirs. When they reached our deep flanks, we had to fall back."

[Knappe, p. 12]

Defense of Berlin proper

"No cohesive, over-all plan for the defense of Berlin was ever actually prepared. All that existed was the stubborn determination of Hitler to defend the capital of the Reich. Circumstances were such that he gave no thought to defending the city until it was much too late for any kind of advance planning. Thus the city's defense was characterized only by a mass of improvisations. These reveal a state of total confusion in which the pressure of the enemy, the organizational chaos on the German side, and the catastrophic shortage of human and material resources for the defense combined with disastrous effect."

Generaloberst a.D. Franz Halder

Responsibility for the defense of the German capital (Kampfkommandant von Berlin - KB) had, on March 6th, been put in the hands of general Reymann, a Knights Cross recipient and veteran from the Russian front where he led various divisions in Army Group North, finally ending up encircled with his division in the Courland pocket from where he was extricated in October 1944. Reymann got the order to take over the defense of Berlin and prepare the city for battle only on March 6th, 1945.

Commanders in Verteidigungbereich Berlin (1 Feb - 2 May 45):
1 Feb - 2 Feb 45: General der Infanterie von Kortzfleisch,
2 Feb - 6 Mar 45: Generalleutnant Ritter von Hauenschild,
6 Mar - 24 Apr 45: Generlaleutnant Reymann,
24 Apr 45: Generalmajor Kather
24 Apr - 2 May 45: General der Artillerie Weidling (Source: Tieke/AXIS Forum)

Much to his dismay he discovered that practically no preparations had been carried out under his predecessor, general von Hauenschild; no evacuation of minors, women or the elderly; no stockpiles of food[2] and ammunition; no defensive positions of any importance prepared. Regardless of these shortcomings Reymann, a straightforward and practical man, did what he could to prepare the city for the attack that the top brass refused to see was coming, but little could be achieved at this point.

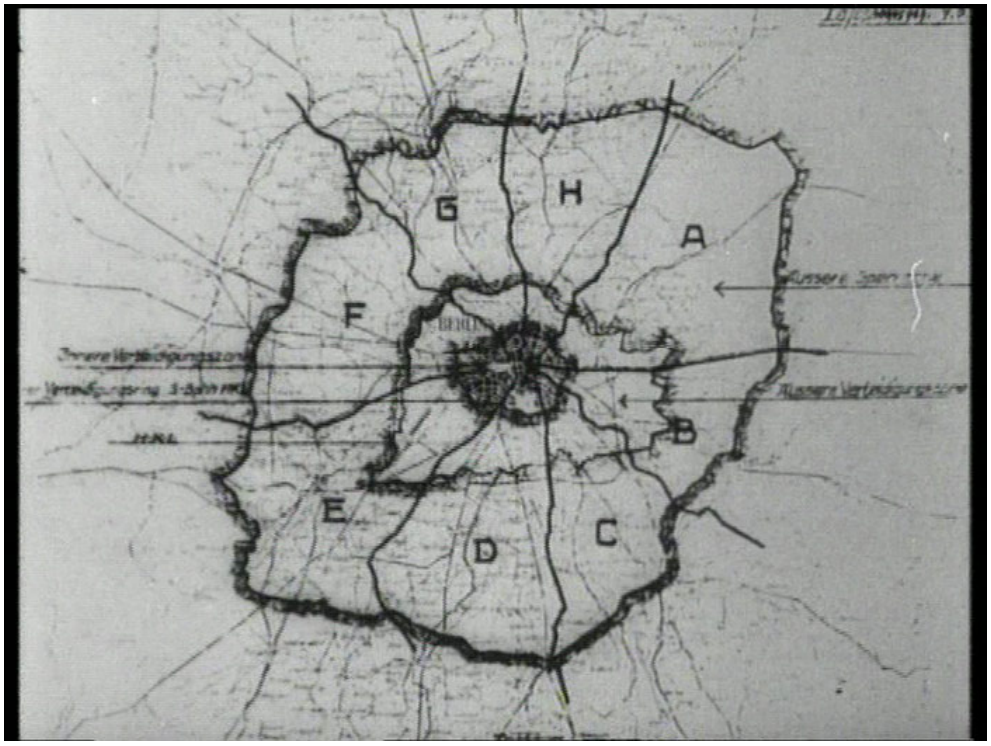
On March 9th, 1945, a hastily prepared defense plan was issued[3]. This plan – elaborated by General Reymann's Operations Officer, Major Sprotte – took its offset in relying heavily on the terrain surrounding Berlin, where a multitude of rivers, lakes and canals would present natural obstacles for the enemy's much feared armored forces.

The general idea for the defense of the city was thus based on a cordon consisting of three rings to keep the city core out of range of enemy artillery

[2] When Reymann argued that supplies of milk for the infants would soon dry out under a siege, Göbbels riposted that cows would be brought into the city beforehand. On Reymann's question what the cows would feed on, the loquacious Gauleiter had no answer.

[3] Grundsätzliche Befehl für die Vorbereitungen zur Verteidigung der Reichshauptstadt

fire and to allow defense in depth, named Outer ring, Inner ring and Zitadelle (the Citadel). The rings were divided into nine sectors with Z as the center and like slices of a pizza, named clockwise from A to H, with zone Z in the center.



Each zone had its own commandant with the rank of colonel or higher, reporting directly to the KB.

A: Bärenfänger, Erich, Oberstleutnant (Lieutenant-Colonel)
B: Clausen, Ernst, Oberst (Colonel)
C: Mootz, Oberst (Colonel)
D: Scheder, Generalmajor (Major-General)
E: Römhild, Oberstleutnant (Lieutenant-Colonel)
F: Eder, Oberst (Colonel)
G: Schäfer, Oberst (Colonel)
H: Rossbach, Oberstleutnant (Lieutenant-Colonel)
Z: Seifert, Oberstleutnant (Lieutenant-Colonel)

Outer defense ring

This position extended along a circumference of about one hundred kilometers. To provide a proper defense of this perimeter would have required least one hundred fully equipped, battle-worthy divisions (equal to a million troops), whereas Reymann had at his disposal as infantry some 60,000 Volkssturm troops, poorly trained and armed. In support, there were between twenty and thirty artillery batteries supplemented by the city's permanent antiaircraft units, all lacking ammunition.

Some modest preparatory work *had* been overseen by his predecessor, some road junctions were blocked and guarded by artillery, some trenches and tank-ditches had been dug, some defensive positions established in houses and such, but all in a somewhat unorganized manner and with little coherence in geography, tactics and command. One major obstacle was the scarcity of equipment such as radios and field telephones, which meant that

communications often had to rely on the public telephone network and on dispatch riders and runners.

"I was shocked when I found the prepared defense ring round Berlin. It was empty foxholes and trenches and roadblocks – completely unmanned! Disgustingly, I realized that it was no more than a line on a map. It had been Göbbels' responsibility, as defense commissar for Berlin, to prepare these defenses, but it was painfully obvious that he had no idea how to do it. So much for Göbbels ability to assume military responsibility. I managed to get maps of what were supposed to be the defense lines around Berlin so we could plan where to put our divisions when it came to that. All I found was a command post and a headquarters with several officers who were all amputees. They commanded no troops, and some of them did not even know where the prepared defenses were. Incompetence seemed to be the order of the day in Berlin"

[Knappe, p. 27]

Inner defense ring

Roughly following the Ringbahn, the track of the city's S-Bahn, the second line of defense at some points had a semblance with a medieval fortress. Elevated tracks had in some places walls several meters high, where underpasses were the only route enemy tanks could take. On other stretches, the tracks cut deep in the terrain creating ravines impassable for armor.

"The Inner Defense Ring stretched for 30 miles and was a much stronger position, being based on the appreciable obstacle formed by the S-Bahn ring of railway tracks linking the city's mainline stations. This ring of several parallel tracks, sometimes running along deep terrain cuttings, sometimes elevated on vast pylons or running along steep-sided embankments, provided a series of ready-made ramparts, anti-tank ditches or glacis, all of considerable width and giving good fields of fire to the defenders concealed in buildings along the inner perimeter4. Again all the roads crossing this obstacle were strongly barricaded. They were covered by well dug-in anti-tank weapons or 88 mm anti-aircraft guns, the latter being long famous for their effectiveness in the anti-tank role."

[Le Tissier, p. 18]

To make ends meet and take full advantage of this natural defensive line, Reymann would need troops, artillery, tanks, mines along with barbed wire and munitions aplenty. He had neither. Mines were in desperately short supply and even a fortification basic such as barbed wire was almost out of stock. As a result, the strongpoints that *were* completed were isolated pockets, which could fairly easily be bypassed by the enemy and lacked any real chance of prolonged resistance.

The available artillery, Reymann found out, came down to a few mobile Flak batteries, a few handfuls of immobile tanks, dug-in so that only their turrets were clear, covering approach roads and street intersections. There were a few tanks in the city, but they were not under his command, and their mobility severely hampered by the shortage of fuel.

As to munitions, a certain stockpiling had taken place in large storages outside the city. As it went, however, the rapid Russian advance would see several of these storages fall into enemy hands, before they could be relocated.

Under ideal conditions, Reymann pondered, he would need a minimum of 200.000 well-trained and battle hardened troops, if he should have any chance of defending Berlin according to the plan. He had nothing close to

[4] Anyone who has traveled on the Berlin S-Bahn Ring will recognize this description by Tony le Tissier.

this, merely a gathering of individuals that for most part were soldiers of name only; young kids, old geezers and miscellaneous servicemen from the police, fire brigade, postmen and railroad employees. Most of them were poorly trained and ill-equipped for battle.

"In all, one third of Reymann's men were unarmed. The remainder might as well have been. 'Their weapons,' he was to relate, 'came from every country that Germany had fought with or against. Besides our own issues, there were Italian, Russian, French, Czechoslovakian, Belgian, Dutch, Norwegian and English guns.' There were no less than fifteen different types of rifles and ten kinds of machine guns. Finding ammunition for this hodgepodge of arms was almost hopeless. Battalions equipped with Italian rifles were luckier than most: there was a maximum of twenty bullets apiece for them. Belgian guns, it was discovered, would accept a certain type of Czech bullets, but Belgian ammunition was useless in Czech rifles. There were few Greek arms, but for some reason there were vast quantities of Greek munitions. So desperate was the shortage that a way was found to re-machine Greek bullets so that they could be fired in Italian rifles. But such frantic improvisations hardly alleviated the overall problem. On this opening day of the Russian attack, the average ammunition supply of each Home Guardsman was about five rounds per rifle."

[The Last Battle, p. 383]

ON THE POSITIVE SIDE, Reymann could take some advantage of three formidable strongpoints; namely the Flak-towers at Humboldthain in the north, Friedrichshain in the east and the command central at Flakturm Zoo in the west. The latter could also cover the Government Quarter as well as Spreebogen, where the Reichstag and Ministry of the Interior were situated. Flak towers were fortress-like, forty meter high concrete structures, bristling with guns of various calibers[5]. Albeit constructed to protect Berlin against air raids, they assumed a ground defense role in the battle to come. A dozen or so auxiliary permanent flak positions scattered at various points in the city, on the flat rooftops of official buildings, were to become helpful as supporting batteries in the coming land battle.

[5] Of the three towers, only remnants of the Humboldthain tower exist today. Tours are available.

Desperate defense measures

Street barricades

The primary means of hindrance employed to slow down the Soviet advance and channel tanks into killing-zones were so-called 'Panzersperre'; street barricades[6]. These makeshift barriers were often made of disused tram cars, positioned across the street and filled with rubble from the thousands of derelict houses, or they could be established by digging down tram tracks or other heavy iron girders in a box pattern and fill the space inside with the rubble. Usually, a small passage allowed traffic to pass, and this would be blocked by Czech hedgehogs and Spanish riders at the approach of the enemy, or a rubble-filled streetcar would be rolled in place.

Such barricades were erected in numerous Berlin streets, but proved largely ineffective. Any barricade, to seriously impede the enemy, must be guarded and covered by sufficient fire from flanking positions. And that again was the problem; lack of manpower, lack of firepower, lack of weapons, and lack of ammunition.

Dug-in tanks

Soviet superiority in armor was overwhelming and in a desperate effort to counter this to at least some effect, and to bolster the system of barricades, the desperate solution was to establish positions where disabled German tanks – immobilized by lack of spare parts or due to the fuel situation – were dug-in at strategic positions along the enemy's potential approach roads, especially at street intersections.

This, of course, constituted a complete breach with the philosophy behind tank warfare, where mobility and speed is of the essence, but as the tanks, Panzer V and Panzer IV, were buried up to their turrets, they at least presented very small targets for enemy fire. Command of these miniature

6 These efforts gave birth to one of the many scornful jokes Berliners liked to entertain each other with in the final days: "It will take the Russians exactly two hours and five minutes to get past that barricade. Two hours laughing their asses off and five minutes to smash the barricade."

fortresses were in the hands of Panzer Kompanie (bo) Berlin (formed 22. January, 'bo' stands for 'Bodenständig'; fixed position), and the total amount of vehicles available was 10 Panzer V and 12 Panzer IV, sporting 75 mm guns.

Each position was manned with a tank commander, a gunner and a loader and protected against infantry with whatever Volkssturm or Hitlerjugend units were available. Little is known about the success rate of these contraptions, but given their low profile it is a fair assumption, that they probably knocked out several of the Russian tanks before themselves submitting to superior forces.

The distribution of such immobile mini-fortresses embraced the following (known) positions at main arteries leading into the city:

Bezirk	Position	Model
Wedding	Chausseestrasse at Dankes Kirche	Panzer V
Wedding	Badstrasse/ Pankstrasse	Panzer V
Pankow. Prenzlauer Berg	Prenzlauer Allee (?)	Panzer V
Pankow	Breite Strasse/Schloss Strasse	?
Lichtenberg	Frankfurter Allee/ Möllendorfstrasse	Panzer V
Lichtenberg	Frankfurter Allee/Gürtelstrasse	Panzer IV
Lichtenberg	Landsberger Allee/ Landsberger Chaussee	?
Treptow	Am Treptower Park	Panzer IV
Neukölln	Bergstrasse/Berliner Strasse	?
Tempelhof	Paradestrasse	?
Schöneberg	Hauptstrasse/ Kaiser Wilhelm Platz	Panzer V
Wilmersdorf	Kaiserallee/Badische Strasse	Panzer IV
Charlottenburg	Wilmersdorferstrasse/Kurfürstendamm	Panzer IV
Charlottenburg	Sophie-Charlotte-Platz	Panzer V

[Source: Forum Panzer Archiv]

Demolition of bridges

The view on bridges takes on a somewhat schizophrenic approach in war, in the sense that either party want to retain the use of the crossing for their own purposes, but deny the enemy the same opportunity. Consequently, bridges are fought tenaciously over and often blown at the very latest – sometime too late – time when enemy takeover is imminent.

In Berlin, as in any other metropolis, the demolition of bridges has several other aspects to it than the mere crossing of a waterway or railroad ravine. Bridges often also carry the piping and wiring of amenities such as electricity, telephone lines, water, central heating conduits, sewage and more, and interrupting these connections will cripple parts of the city, leaving the inhabitants without basic necessities. Strict military considerations, however, call for the demolition in order to create hindrances for the advancing enemy. This was especially true for the Citadel part of Berlin, where the Spree in the north and the Landwehrkanal in the south constitute a veritable medieval moat, impassable for armored vehicles, surrounding the city center.

Plans had been worked out for the demolition of Berlin's bridges, but as it went, Albert Speer – allegedly driven by considerations for the people of Berlin, but probably also with an eye to his legacy – managed to hamper the military priorities to some degree. He relates:

"So when Reymann insisted on preparing every bridge in Berlin for demolition, I drove to Heinrici's headquarters near Prenzlau. That was on April 15, one day before the beginning of the great Russian offensive against Berlin. For technical reinforcement I brought with me the Berlin municipal superintendent of roads, Langer, and the Berlin chief of the Reichsbahn, Beck. At my request Heinrici ordered Reymann to attend the conference. The two technicians demonstrated that the planned demolitions would mean the death of Berlin."

[Speer, p. 624]

Speer goes on to tell how Reymann – referring to Hitler's orders to defend Berlin by any means possible – argues that he must be able to blow bridges, but is opposed by Speer's argument that Berlin's war industry will be wiped out by the demolitions. He continues:

"General Reymann was in a quandary. He did not know what to do, Fortunately, General Heinrici came to the rescue with specific orders. The explosives were to be removed from the blasting charges on the vital arteries of the Berlin railroad and highway network. Bridges would be blown up only in the actual course of important military actions."

[Speer, p. 625]

In the end several bridges were demolished, causing the anticipated disruption of various services, but the devastation was not at total one. Some bridges, i.e. the Molkte Bridge connecting the Moabit Quarter with the Spreebogen, were only partly demolished due to lack of proper explosives. This would prove to be fatal for the defenders in the old Reichstag building.

Makeshift airstrip

At the beginning of the battle, Gatow and Tempelhof airports lay within the defensive perimeters, but it was envisioned that they might fall to the enemy. Consequently, the Charlottenburger Chaussee [today Strasse 17 Juni] through the Tiergarten was turned into a makeshift runway, using the 67 meter tall Siegessaule as a control tower. Only small aircraft could land and take-off safely, but there are (contested) reports that Ju52 have landed too, bringing supplies in and wounded out. One allegedly crashed at take-off, killing all aboard.

The Charlottenburger Chaussee early in the war where work with camouflage is in progress. To the best of my knowledge, no photos of the airstrip were taken.

Widening the airstrip to accommodate larger planes was vital if supply from the air should become feasible and Hitler's personal pilot, SS Gruppenführer Johann 'Hans' Baur, set about to have obstacles on either side of the Chaussee removed. That included cutting down trees a hundred years old along with the lampposts designed by Albert Speer.

This allegedly led to a heated argument on the runway with Speer who was leaving Berlin on April 26 after a brief visit to Hitler. Speer energetically protested the cutting down of trees in the Tiergarten (and his precious lamps), claiming authority in his capacity of Chief City Planner. Eventually, Baur got his way. [O'Donnell, p. 379]

The runway was most famously used by Generaloberst Ritter von Greim, accompanied by aviatrix Hanna Reitsch on April 28. The couple would leave beleaguered Berlin again close to midnight on April 29, Greim now a Generalfeldmarshal and supreme commander of the – virtually non-existent - Luftwaffe, just hours before Hitler's suicide. Allegedly - and in all probability - the last plane out of the beleaguered city.

The last Kampfkommandant

General Helmuth Reymann, Kampfkommandant von Berlin (KB) since March 6, never got on well with Göbbels, who, as Gauleiter of Berlin, considered himself the supreme commander also in strictly military affairs (of which he knew next to nothing), and after several encounters, Hitler finally, on April 22, dismissed the general from his position and gave him command of a skeleton force, somewhat laughably named the "Army Group Spree"[7], near Potsdam.

The position as Kampfkommandant was then, for a brief interlude, given to one Lieutenant-Colonel Ernst Käther – promoted Major-General in the process – whose prime qualification for the job was his reputation as an ardent Nazi. Käther's new position – and rank – held less than 48 hours; then, on April 24, the responsibility was bestowed on a more capable, albeit somewhat reluctant figure.

WHEN GENERAL HELMUTH WEIDLING, chief of the 56th Panzer Army, who had fought at the Oder front under Heinrici, but had been pressed back towards Berlin by overwhelming Soviet forces, was entrusted command of the defense of Berlin by Hitler (after having initially been summoned before a court martial for cowardice – see later), he immediately recognized that he faced a virtually impossible task[8]. Nonetheless this old fighter, known as "Bony Karl" among his troops, loyal to his oath did the little he could in terms of preparations, starting with an inventory of what resources were available.

What the so-called Fortress Berlin *could* muster to its defense was a hotchpotch of different forces, embracing very few of any real fighting value. Hopes were to a great extend pinned on the Volkssturm, a sort of Home Guard made up of conscripted men over (or under) the military age who were not already in the service. They were organized in two separate levies. Levy one embraced men up to sixty years of age, mainly WW1 veterans. They were, to a degree, uniformed and armed and had some training behind them. Levy two consisted of men in the same age group, but up until now employed in i.e. civil service or other capacities that prevented them from being called up until the very last hour, when fighting in the city

[7] An Army Group is usually a large formation, commanded by a Field Marshal, and consisting of up to a million men.

[8] Legend has it, that he commented on the appointment with the words, that he would rather have been shot. This, however, is not confirmed and Knappe, who was there, makes no mention of it.

was in full progress. They were usually fitted with an armband, stating: 'Deutsche Volkssturm Wehrmacht', as only identification and equipped with whatever was at hand; often just a Panzerfaust[9].

Estimations vary as to the number of Volkssturm members, but the figure probably rested in the vicinity of 40-60.000 men. These eight to twelve[10] brigades were bolstered by Hitlerjugend (Hitler Youth) formations, typically not better trained nor equipped than their senior comrades, but young and agile, quick learners and very fanatical – with the young man's stern belief in his own immortality. Just how many of these boys that were available in Berlin, is not quite clear; perhaps as many as 6000. Ad to this number maybe two or three thousand younger boys, not previously affiliated with the HJ, but ordered into the ranks during SS sweeps[11].

Calling the Berlin defenders a well-organized, well trained and well equipped military force would thus be overselling it. The fighting men, geezers and boys under KB's authority was more a kind of ragtag army, made up by all conceivable service branches; regular Wehrmacht soldiers, Kriegsmarine and Luftwaffe personnel, foreign volunteers and SS troops, mixed with policemen, firemen, railroad officials, senior citizens straight out of retirement homes and youngsters snapped from school.

Weidling brought with him the battered remnants of his 56th Panzer Corps. This had during the Oder battle been bolstered with miscellaneous units; the badly mauled 20th Panzer Grenadiers (often thrown in as a 'fire brigade' on various sections) and the Müncheberg Panzer Division, a sub-strength unit

9 Not all Volkssturm units were that badly equipped. For instance, the large Siemens Company was able to muster a fairly well-trained and equipped battalion of some 700 men under the command of seasoned WW1 veterans. [B9, 23]

10 In the last weeks and months of the war, army formations were somewhat inflated, and thus the number of available men mentioned would probably, at the time, have been referred to as 40 to 60 Brigades.

11 Quote Ruth Andreas-Friedrich

as so many German so-called divisions, and finally the 9th Parachute of the Hermann Göring Division. Allegedly crack troops in raffish outfits, but apparently unreliable as events would prove. Colonel Wöhlerman, Weidlings artillery commander, witnessed the mayhem. Everywhere, he said, were soldiers 'running away like madmen'. Even when he drew his pistol, the frantic paratroopers did not halt. He would later describe them as 'a threat to the whole course of battle'.

"Already demoralized by their initial exposure to the battle on the Heights, Göring's paratroopers panicked and broke as the Russian tanks, guns blazing, smashed into their lines"

[The Last Battle, p. 397]

To his advantage, Weidling was assigned the rugged 11th SS Volunteer Panzergrenadier Division Nordland, battle-hardened Easter Front veterans, comprised of Scandinavians, who were eventually to follow him all the way to Berlin, and eventually spearheaded the attempted break-out on May 2nd.

Remnants of the 11th SS Division Nordland in Friedrichstrasse on May 2nd after the battle

All his efforts in vain, Weidling and the 56th could not hold the front in the face of overwhelming forces and step by step they were pressed westwards to Berlin along with other units. Chaos reigned over the entire front and on April 22, Weidling was completely out of communication with any headquarter. Rumors started to circle that he had deliberately withdrawn his corps from the front (while it in fact was engaged in heavy fighting), and at last the rumors reached the Führerbunker. An order for the arrest and subsequent execution of the insubordinate general was issued. Upon learning that, 'Bony Karl' immediately set course for Voss Strasse, determined to cleanse himself of the accusations.

ENTERING THE CITY in the company of Siegfried Knappe, they found a spectacle belonging to a painting of Hieronymus Bosch:

"Smoke and dust covered the city. Streetcars were standing disabled in the streets, their electric wires dangling. In the eastern suburbs, many buildings were burning and the civilian population was queuing up in bread lines and in line to get water from any source that was still working. Civilians were everywhere, scurrying from cover to cover because of the artillery shells and bombs. To avoid creating a possible panic, Göbbels

had refused to issue orders for the civilians to leave the city, even women and children, and now thousands more were fleeing into Berlin from the east. Defending Berlin was obviously going to be very ugly business, and many civilians were going to die in the fighting.

[Knappe, p. 29]

Meeting the stern general in person and learning the true nature of things made the vacillating Führer flip flop his position once more and he ended up appointing Weidling Kampfkommandant von Berlin. This was by no means to the generals liking, but orders are orders and the loyal soldier reluctantly accepted the responsibility[12], a story to be told another time.

BREAKING THROUGH AT SEELOW, Zhukov's troops thus steamrolled westwards, crushing everything under their tracks. A horrific street battle ensued as they reached Berlin, but the result was a given. A mere fortnight after the Battle of the Oder commenced, the fighting was all over.

For the people of Berlin, emerging bleary-eyed from their cellars and bunkers, unaccustomed to the eerie sound of silence, a new kind of hardship was to begin; the struggle for survival in the moonscape of what was once their beautiful capital.

[12] Allegedly, Weidling pressed Hitler to promise that he, as KB, would have full authority and that no-one in the Führerbunker would interfere in his decisions. This was, of course, a promise, Hitler had no intention to keep.

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