

# BATTLEBOOK

## *Battle of Seelow Heights and the Fall of Berlin*



**Commanding General, United States Army Europe  
Senior Leader Staff Ride**

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DEPARTMENT OF THE ARMY  
UNITED STATES ARMY EUROPE  
UNIT 29351  
APO AE 09014-9351

22 September 2016

I am particularly excited about being able to spend time with you to examine, analyze, and discuss the actions and decisions of leaders involved in the Battle of Seelow Heights and the ultimate fall of Berlin to the Soviet Army in April and May of 1945. This is a battle that many in the United States are not aware of. However, I firmly believe that looking at this battle will help us sharpen our awareness of current times and how we can best serve our country and allies.

We will have a unique opportunity to walk over areas of a battlefield that can provide us with valuable lessons, both tactically and operationally. It will also give us a chance to look at how the Soviets conducted operations at the end of World War II, and extrapolate them to how these concepts still apply today to the current Russian Army. The Seelow Heights battlefield will also show us how the German Army rebuilt units that could still fight, and how leaders both at senior and small unit levels had a significant impact on this process.

We will also get a chance to engage in discussion at a few sites in Berlin. While there we will focus on how Berlin became divided and later reunited, and how the post-World War II world created a tense yet stable environment for change to gradually take place. Being in Berlin will allow us to engage with people from our host nation and to demonstrate the respect we have for our host and ally, and help foster a common understanding of things we all care about.

By studying the dilemmas faced by these Soldiers, both German and Russian, we will have the opportunity to think about our own leadership and the excellent Soldiers we are privileged to lead. I look forward to us examining the means and methods used by the German and Soviet armies as they faced off in the final major battle of World War II. This will enable us to better understand ourselves, our host nation, and allies as we continually prepare for an uncertain future.

*Army Strong! Strong Europe!*

*Y'all all Cold War  
Veterans living  
with the aftermath  
of the Battle and the  
strategic decision of  
Yalta. Will be great  
to be there with you!*

Frederick "Ben" Hodges  
Lieutenant General, U.S. Army  
Commanding General

## **Foreword**

Welcome to USAREUR Commanding General's Seelow Heights and Berlin Staff Ride. This ride follows the operations of the German Army Group Vistula as it defended the Oder River and the approaches to Berlin from the last major Soviet offensive on the Eastern Front in World War II.

The Eastern Front during the war was arguably one of the most grueling and ferocious campaigns in history. All told, as many as 16 million combat personnel died during the four year campaign, not to mention the deaths of over 14 million civilians. Even today, the total dead and missing is in dispute.

The war in the east also saw diverse coalitions in action. While often seen as a German-Soviet affair, many European nations committed troops to the conflict, sometimes on both sides at different times. At the start of the campaign in June 1941, Germany had assembled a coalition with Italy, Rumania, Hungary, Bulgaria, Finland, and Slovakia, and each of these committed troops to the fight. Even Spain committed a volunteer infantry division. Furthermore, as Germany drove deeper into the Soviet Union various nation groups within committed troops to the German cause, such as Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, as well as some Russians. Yet, by early 1945 as Germany stared at total defeat, only Slovakia and a small group of volunteers from the other nations remained.

Concurrently, the Soviet Union strove to build their own coalitions. By late 1943, they had units from Poland, and as the war progressed the Soviets demanded that Germany's erstwhile allies that they overran turn on their former partners. Thus, by the beginning of 1945 Germany was faced with units from Rumania and Hungary that had once been allied to them only a few months prior.

The culmination of the war in the east was the last Soviet assaults into Germany itself, especially the attack along the Oder River to capture the German capital, Berlin. It is this action that this staff ride is concerned with.

## **Concept and Objectives**

Staff Rides in USAREUR are leader training events that use the setting of a historical campaign or battle as the basis for FSO professional development. Staff rides address both the Operational and Self-development Domains of FM 7.0, in that they require each participant to establish what happened, and then, while standing on the ground where the action occurred, to critically analyze plans, orders, events, decisions, and the actions of leaders performing under severe stress. Only through active participation by each staff rider as a part of a group, grounded in preliminary study and looking for personal lessons applicable to today's or tomorrow's mission, is the enormous training value of a staff ride realized. The ultimate outcome for this staff ride is to build cohesion, leader development, readiness, and empowering our alliance.

## **Organization of the Material**

This Battlebook is fully digital and comes in four parts, but only the first three are necessary for the ride. The first is an introductory essay followed by primary source material of participants in the battle. This is followed by organizational diagrams and charts, and ends with a biographical section of key commanders involved with the battle. The second part is a Windows zip file with various maps that explain the battle, some being primary sources and others produced immediately after the war by German participants. The third part is a Windows zip file with staff ride maps. One is a reproduction of a U.S. Army topographical 1:100,000 map of the battle area. Another map shows the initial positions of the Soviet 8th Guards Army and German XI SS Corps on the Heights. This helps to orient participants to the key units involved in the first days of the action. Finally, a map is reproduced from a Bundeswehr staff study on the battle showing an overview of the entire campaign leading to the fall of Berlin. The fourth part is an optional supplemental reading being the entire Bundeswehr staff study on the heights and how they conduct their own staff ride. It is not necessary to download or use this last item for the USAREUR staff ride; it is provided as a supplement to those students who want to look at another perspective.

Regarding the maps, it is not recommended that participants print some of the maps, especially larger ones with small detail. Regarding the staff ride map, participants will be provided with one upon arrival at the hotel prior to attending the ride.

# *Battle of Seelow Heights and the Fall of Berlin, March-May 1945*

## *Campaign Preparations: An Operational Overview*

By Russ Rodgers  
USAREUR Command Historian

### **Introduction**

The collapse of the German Army Group Center in June and July of 1944 set the stage for the final campaigns in the northern half of the eastern front. Though estimates vary widely, the losses in that campaign were nothing short of catastrophic. The Germans lost almost a half million men, close to 2,500 tanks and self-propelled guns, over 55,000 other vehicles, and the organizational resources of 25 divisions. This campaign, called Operation BAGRATION by the Soviets, was their greatest victory against the German Army up to that point, and to celebrate 50,000 prisoners were paraded through Moscow on their way to a railhead for camps further to the east. Not only were German losses close to 25% of their manpower on the eastern front, but the territory lost brought Soviet forces to the border of the Reich. Desperate battles ensued in East Prussia, while a large concentration of German forces was cut off in the Courland peninsula further north.



German equipment smashed during the Soviet Army's Operation BAGRATION, June 1944.

A pause followed this disaster, but it was only the calm before the storm. Soviet forces, refitted and supplied, smashed their way from several bridgeheads on the Vistula River and advanced through Poland in January 1945. Lacking any defense in depth, the German front disintegrated, with Marshal Ivan Konev's 1st Ukrainian Front pushing west almost 300 miles. Near the end of the advance, Soviet units breached the Oder-Neiße River line, establishing several bridgeheads against almost no German opposition and but 60 kilometers from Berlin.

Words of encouragement and faith in victory from German senior military and political leaders caused a delay in the evacuation of the area, with the resulting consequences that long lines of refugees clogged the roads while repeatedly strafed by Soviet aircraft or overrun by marauding Soviet armored columns. Moreover, the stream of refugees made it difficult for those German units still cohesive enough to fight to maneuver effectively. The Germans left behind three major fortified cities, Thorn, Poznan and Breslau, which helped to slow the Soviet advance. In addition, a large portion of German forces, remnants of three armies, were still in areas of East Prussia and Pomerania to the north of the Soviet route of advance. Stavka, the Soviet High Command, decided it was better to destroy these forces before launching any assault on Berlin and through much of February this was accomplished.

German losses had again been massive and the effort needed to rebuild units or create new ones had become extremely difficult. Yet, by early March, a new German front began to take shape along the Oder and Neiße Rivers. The stage was set for the final battle for the German Third Reich.

### **The Political Situation**

Not only was the military situation bleak, but the political one was little better. Leading members of the National Socialist political elite, particularly the German Führer Adolf Hitler, believed that the Allied structure of cooperation was about to come apart, and thus staked the future of Germany on such a hope. While Allied cooperation was at times strained between the Big Three of the United States, Great Britain, and the Soviet Union, plans had already been developed for the formal occupation of a conquered Germany. Initially developed under the code name Rankin, a series of plans delineated how the Allies would respond to a variety of situations that could arise in Germany, such as continued resistance or total political collapse such as what happened in 1918. As the war progressed, the Rankin plans were superseded by Operation Eclipse, which was developed not only to prepare for the occupation of Germany, but also to keep the Soviet Union from moving outside of agreed upon boundaries of occupation, such as an effort to invade Denmark.

Even as the Western Allies were concerned about the Soviets overstepping their agreed upon bounds, the Soviet leadership, particularly Joseph Stalin were concerned their western counterparts might do the same. Agreements reached at the Yalta Conference, conducted between 4-11 February 1945, had developed a committee to deal with the dismemberment of Germany. This committee by and large followed the Eclipse plan regarding zones of occupation when they at last settled on a solution. The only real deviation from the original Eclipse plan was the addition of a French occupation zone in both southwest Germany and Berlin.



The Yalta Conference, attended by (left to right) Britain's Prime Minister Winston Churchill, the United States' President Franklin Roosevelt, and the Soviet Union's Joseph Stalin, confirmed the division of Germany set up by ECLIPSE.

Political efforts by the United States and Great Britain to wring concessions from the Soviet Union appeared marginally successful. The Soviets agreed to enter the war against Japan within two or three months after the surrender of Germany, and they also agreed to support free political elections in countries in Eastern Europe overrun by the Soviet Army. While Stalin demanded a Soviet sphere of influence in Eastern Europe, he still claimed that he was in favor of such a thing as a strong and independent Poland. Nevertheless, Soviet negotiators managed to get the Western Allies to agree on recognizing the Soviet-installed Communist government in Lublin as the legitimate ruling body for that nation. In addition to zones of occupation, negotiators agreed to continue holding to the position of unconditional surrender of German forces.

While it appeared that negotiators for the Western Allies had cornered Stalin in key areas, it would soon be painfully obvious that this was not the case. Indeed, when one of his senior diplomats noted that the agreement might hamstring the Soviet dictator's postwar ambitions,

Stalin is reported to have said, “never mind. We’ll do it our own way later.” The influence of Eclipse and Yalta would be felt on all sides and fronts, even as the Soviets thought the Western Allies would lunge for Berlin despite the agreement, and even as German forces fought desperate last-ditch actions to avoid the demand for unconditional surrender.

### **The German Army Prepares for the Main Soviet Offensive**

As the German military prepared to face the coming Soviet onslaught, there were significant challenges to face, many of them virtually insurmountable. The German Army High Command, or OKH, determined that it was necessary to create a new army group to control the forces along the Oder-Neiße line, along with those still in Pomerania. Named Army Group Vistula for the river already lost in Poland, one could almost think that its name represented some type of bad joke. Upon hearing of the new organization, the Soviets believed that perhaps the Germans were planning a major counteroffensive with the intent of securing the Vistula River line already lost. However, German military leaders had no such illusions, as fragments of shattered units were regrouped and rebuilt to form the semblance of a defensive front.

Colonel-General Heinz Guderian, at that time Chief of the OKH, had suggested that the commander of the new army group should be his deputy, General Walther Wenck, but this was summarily rejected. General Freiherr von Weichs’ name was floated as well, but Weichs was already unpopular among senior staff surrounding the Führer, and this suggestion was dropped. With seemingly nowhere to turn, Hitler chose SS-Reichsführer Heinrich Himmler, even though as a strictly political animal, Himmler had no qualifications whatsoever for the post. Appalled, Guderian managed to work in Wenck for the critical position of Chief of Staff for the



Dour and determined, Colonel-General Gotthard Heinrici was possibly one of the best minds in the German Army involving a defense of desperation.

new Army Group, but Wenck's injury in a car accident at a crucial moment ensured that Army Group Vistula would founder at whatever task it was assigned. With disaster looming in Pomerania, partly due to Himmler's mismanagement, Guderian at last managed to convince Hitler to release Himmler from command, securing Colonel-General Gotthard Heinrici as its new commander.

General Heinrici had been in Moravia in command of what was called Army Group Heinrici, a force that was composed of the 1st Panzer Army and the Hungarian 1st Army. He had gained a reputation as a tough leader in critical defensive battles. Having served as a staff officer in World War I, Heinrici was well suited for the task ahead of him, for in many ways the coming battle would resemble something closer to World War I trench warfare than the highly mobile actions more common in the early stages of World War II. While he was not necessarily popular with some of the senior staff at Hitler's headquarters, in large measure due to his blunt demeanor and religious convictions that conflicted with National Socialism, Heinrici's abilities were known to Hitler who had approved of his award of the diamonds to his Knights Cross just one month prior.

Heinrici took command on 20 March 1945, and faced a tremendous uphill struggle. His army group was composed of two armies. The Third Panzer under General Hasso von Manteuffel, held the line of the Oder from the Baltic Sea south to Bad Freienwalde. Manteuffel was a veteran of both eastern and western front combat and had just taken command of the army ten days before Heinrici's assumption of command of the Army Group. The next command was that of the 9th Army under General Theodor Busse, which held positions along the Oder River from Bad Freienwalde to just south of Frankfurt on the Oder. Busse was a veteran almost exclusively of the eastern front; his army held the positions immediately before the German capital of Berlin. Like Heinrici, both Manteuffel and Busse had served in World War I.

The coming of spring, coupled with severe logistical difficulties, had forced the Soviets to stop their advance along the Oder and Neiße Rivers. Snow melt and recent rain had swollen the rivers considerably, and thus the Soviets focused on preparing for future operations which included widening two bridgeheads across the Oder, both on either side of Küstrin. The Germans still held Küstrin, with a small corridor between the two bridgeheads through which the Germans

could keep the garrison supplied. With the Soviet offensive stalled, Army Group Vistula gained a margin of time to prepare for the battle to come.

Nevertheless, initiatives pushed by OKH and senior German leaders committed Heinrici, as the newly appointed commander, to a plan designed to destroy one of the Soviet bridgeheads between Küstrin and Frankfurt. The idea was to have the 9th Army commit five divisions to cross a single bridge at Frankfurt in order to launch an attack northward on the eastern side of the Oder River. Heinrici flatly told Guderian that the plan was impossible, and Guderian agreed. Yet, preparations initiated to launch the attack had weakened the slender corridor that linked Küstrin to the German front, allowing the Soviets to close it and isolate the garrison. Over the next week, in late March 1945, the 9th Army launched several counterattacks to reestablish contact with the Küstrin garrison, but each failed at a high cost of men and material. Heinrici at last suspended such attacks, focusing instead on preparing for the main Soviet assault. The city's beleaguered garrison finally broke out against Hitler's wishes on the night of 29 March.

With the issue of Küstrin now moot, a significant problem Heinrici faced regarding the coming Soviet assault was the depth of the prospective battlespace. His forward main line of defense, or *Hauptkampflinie* (HKL) was only 60 kms from Berlin. Tasked with stopping the Soviets short of the capital, there was very little space for his forces to maneuver to take the sting out of any Soviet offensive. Unlike in Russia, there was essentially no space to trade for time. This limited operational depth meant he would have to focus on more set-piece defensive techniques, developing fortified zones in depth much like trench line positions in World War I. It would be necessary for Army Group Vistula to inflict crippling losses on the initial Soviet attack if there was any hope of



Fuel was in such short supply that the Germans dug a number of tanks into the ground, converting them into pillboxes. Here Berlin children play in the turret of a buried Pzkw IV.

achieving his goal of allowing the western Allies to advance deeper into Germany and for him to evacuate as many military personnel and civilians as possible to the West.

But the limited operational depth was not as serious as a hindrance as it may have seemed, for considering the condition of German logistics any thought of a mobile battle was out of the question. The logistical situation by early 1945 was nothing less than dreadful, but it was not just because the German economy was not producing the necessary elements to wage modern war. It was also due in large measure to the smashed German infrastructure, such as shattered communications and transportation networks that meant that what was produced often did not reach the troops who needed it and when they needed it.

Fuel is the lifeblood of a modern army, yet was so limited that the Luftwaffe command assigned to support Army Group Vistula had barely enough on hand to fly essential reconnaissance missions. It was also a significant problem for German armor units, but as the quantity of tanks and other vehicles continued to decline, this problem did not severely limit tactical movement. However, it did make operational movement next to impossible. Heinrici understood this problem even when Hitler did not, and this in some ways formed the core point of contention between the two as the coming battle would unfold. For even as Hitler insisted on holding every piece of ground, he also insisted on launching wide-ranging operations of maneuver, operations that would require significant stocks of fuel available to the units in the field. Hitler now wanted to engage in early-war blitzkrieg style operations even though the means were no longer available. Heinrici knew better.

Ammunition was another area of shortage for the Army Group. But this problem was made worse by a significant shortage in equipment. Everything from rifles to artillery was difficult to procure; indeed, the only weapon system that seemed to be available in large quantities was the ubiquitous *panzerfaust* antitank rocket launcher. German units along the Oder River front were equipped with a hodgepodge of German, Italian, Czech, and even Soviet weapons, ranging from small arms to artillery. This mélange of weapons complicated an already overstrained German supply situation, and it was not uncommon for units to have Italian and Czech rifles but to be issued German ammunition. This crisis was so acute that German soldiers were offered a bounty of cigarettes and other hard to find delicacies for captured Soviet weapons and ammunition. And while the tanks and assault guns did not encounter the problem of

incompatible ammunition as much, the shortages for the armor vehicles were severe. In some cases they went into action with less than ten rounds on hand for each vehicle.

Besides fuel and ammunition shortages, another area where the German Army was in serious decline involved motor vehicle transport. Even as early as the spring of 1944, elite German units found it difficult to obtain sufficient transport. For example, the 2d SS-Das Reich Panzer Division, stationed in southwest France prior to the invasion of Normandy, was so deficient in motor transport that the unit had to deploy to Normandy in stages even after commandeering every civilian vehicle worth using in their area. The experience of this division was more the rule than the exception even then. But by early 1945, the Panzer and Panzergrenadier divisions were a mere shadow of their former selves, even when they could muster a foxhole strength similar to formations several years prior. Even if sufficient fuel was



Artillery vs. Flak—the German Army had severe shortages of the former. Above, a rare Hummel 150mm self-propelled artillery piece wrecked in Berlin. Below, a 105mm antiaircraft piece pressed into action on the Seelow Heights.



available, the divisions did not have the organic vehicles available to engage in any operational movement of note.

This deficiency in motor transport would play itself out in a more telling way, making it next to impossible for the German logistical system to distribute supplies from various warehouses, marshalling yards, and depots. Berlin had three large supply dumps established within its confines, but the means to move this equipment was so limited that much of the supplies held within never reached the troops in the field. One German officer later commented that they would have been far better off with ten or more small depots scattered throughout the city.

Artillery was another serious shortage faced by the Army Group. Even

when indirect fire artillery pieces were available there was often very little ammunition available for them. Long range artillery pieces were particularly in short supply, and as a consequence Heinrici was unable to use his artillery to interdict Soviet bridge building on the Oder River. This shortage of artillery was so severe that some divisions had no artillery assigned to them whatsoever. To compensate for the missing pieces, the anti-aircraft guns from various German cities already heavily damaged by the Allied bombing campaign were sent to the Oder front. The heavier pieces ranged in caliber from 88mm to 128mm, with the crews receiving hasty training on direct fire techniques. The flak artillery would turn out to be one of the bright spots of Heinrici's defense. As the batteries operated semi-independently they required very little training in coordinating their efforts with higher echelons. However, due to the limited supply of vehicles to tow the weapons, most of the guns had to be abandoned once they either ran out of ammunition or when their position was about to be overrun.

Of the 754 tanks and assault guns available to Army Group Vistula on the eve of the Soviet assault, only 37% were turreted tanks, the rest being the assault gun variety. While assault guns, with very limited traverse, are excellent on the defense and in ambush positions, they make for a poor substitute for a turreted tank. Turreted armor vehicles have a significant edge over their non-turreted cousins, especially in engagement time.

Statistical analysis of tank vs. tank engagements in World War II demonstrated that the tank to put aimed fire on its opponent first, even if the shot is not a hit, is the one to usually come out on top. A turreted vehicle can engage more rapidly even while on the offensive.



Tank vs. Assault Gun—above the Panther equipped with the revolutionary infrared night sight. A small number of these were issued to the Müncheberg Panzer Division. Below, the Jagdpanzer IV/70V with limited traverse, cited in German reports as a substitute for the Pzkw IV.



In the weeks before the Soviet assault, Heinrici stripped the armor from the 3rd Panzer Army, dispersing it to the units in the 9th Army and thereby giving Busse 512, or 68% of tanks and assault guns available. In doing this, he spread out his armor in much the same way the French did prior to the stunning German triumph over that nation in 1940. Nevertheless, because of the lack of fuel and transport, Heinrici understood that he had no other alternative. By and large the crews were decent and reasonably well-trained, and were able to acquit themselves well because Soviet armor would find itself jammed on the few roads available in the Oder valley, making them lucrative stationary targets. However, many of the units dispersed to the infantry in the line still had not had sufficient training above the platoon or company level.

Despite these shortcomings with his armor, there were a few units available to Heinrici that had more integrated training as well as a core of armor and transport. These were several Panzer and Panzergrenadier divisions that constituted what little reserve Heinrici had, and Guderian had expended considerable effort to rebuild them in an attempt to create a true mobile reserve. But not long after taking command, three of the best divisions (10th SS-Frundsberg Panzer; Führer Grenadier; and 25th Panzer) were transferred to the south to support Field Marshal Ferdinand Schörner's defense of Czechoslovakia. Both the 10th SS and 25th Panzer Divisions were quite lavishly equipped considering the state of the German Army at the time. As of mid-March, these three divisions

fielded over 250 tanks and assault guns, and would have been valuable assets for Heinrici when the Soviet offensive began. The removal of these units on the pretext that Prague was the true Soviet objective reduced Heinrici's available armor reserve by half. As an aside, it is worth



The final levy—youth and elderly pressed into the last defense. The *Volkssturm* men below are carrying the one piece of equipment that seemed to be everywhere: the ubiquitous and deadly *panzerfaust*.



noting that Stalin had earlier led General Dwight Eisenhower and other senior Allied leaders to believe that Prague was his primary objective, deceiving his allies in part because he suspected they would not honor the Yalta agreement or Eclipse plan. Hitler, too believed that Prague was the main objective, thus implying the possibility that Stalin's deception of his allies had inadvertently deceived Hitler through his intelligence service.

Besides equipment and logistics there was the ever-present challenge of manpower. While it is often stated that Germany was scraping the bottom of the barrel in search of men to fill the gaps torn in the ranks, the problem of manpower goes much deeper than age and physical fitness. Even prime military-age personnel are next to useless if not trained, not only individually but as part of a series of units in echelon. By the late summer of 1944, entire German divisions were being sent into combat not only with the minimal essentials of individual training, but next to no training beyond company, platoon, or even squad level. This made the integration of various weapons within a division problematic and served to debilitate unit performance. The key element that served to push beyond this issue was the small unit leader. Small unit leadership was essential in cementing German units into a cohesive element, and often managed to overcome some of the obstacles presented by lack of higher echelon training and coordination. In many ways, it was the small unit leader who provided German units with the toughness necessary to fight as well as they did. However, invigorating their small unit leadership came with a steep price, as the German High Command stripped the cadres out of virtually every training and replacement depot at hand to fill the leadership ranks. Even if Germany had managed to continue the war for another six months there was no longer the infrastructure available to train replacements.

The German formations developed for Army Group Vistula along the Oder River were a mix of seasoned professionals, called the "alte hasen," or old hares, and an assortment of youth and older men pressed into what were called alarm battalions. The problem was trying to integrate the alarm battalions, such as the *Volkssturm* units, into any form of integrated defensive posture. Unable to do this in many cases, the units ended up fighting as small elements in various tactical pockets, taking enormous losses in the process. During a briefing with Hitler before the battle, Heinrici stressed the fact that he had no operational reserve of note. In the process, Himmler, Reichmarshall Hermann Göring, and Admiral Karl Dönitz offered tens of thousands of

men from their personal empires to provide the flesh and blood for a reserve. However, Heinrici noted that these men, besides having no experience with ground combat, were not trained as integrated units. Nevertheless, thousands of these victims of power politics were pushed into the second line of defense just west of the Seelow Heights.

Another serious deficiency developing in the late-war German Army was the decline in their signals capability and its subsequent impact on command and control. This was in large measure because the army was combing all of the support services for personnel to fill the depleted ranks in combat units. An attempt was made to compensate by fielding new and better equipment, but the effort to replace personnel with a technological solution ran into the law of diminishing returns. By early 1945, functionality and reliability of signal units had become a serious problem that often derailed efforts on the battlefield. Simply put German command and control was no longer capable of highly mobile operations, being at best only suited for static set-piece defensive battles. Even more telling, Army Group Vistula was seriously deficient regarding what signal troops it was authorized to have, making the problem far worse. As German units would begin to move in the coming battle, whether to engage in counterattacks, shift position, or to withdraw, command and control would begin to quickly unravel, and operational control of the Army Group would, in the words of Heinrici's chief of staff Colonel Hans Georg Eismann, "slide off." Eismann's choice of words is apropos, because it describes succinctly how the deficient signals capability of the German Army impacted all aspects of operations in what seemed like subtle, and yet monumental ways.



A German staff section in action somewhere in Russia. late 1944. The need for combat troops led to drastic reductions in such personnel, especially in the critical area of command and control. The *Stabsfeldwebel* on the phone is the author's grandfather.

In facing the various deficiencies noted and confronting the realities of the Soviet superiority in artillery, Heinrici decided to develop an operational deception plan the likes of

which he had used before. Though simple, the plan would require extensive coordination, especially by small unit leaders, to pull off effectively. It involved the near complete evacuation of the forward German positions in the Oder Valley to take up new positions in a secondary line just about 1 to 2 kms from the base of Seelow Heights. In this way, the expected Soviet artillery bombardment would hit an empty area, allowing the defenders to be largely unscathed when the assault troops advanced. The key was timing, knowing precisely when to pull back just before the assault. Fortunately for Heinrici and his command, the Soviet ground forces followed what had now become an all too familiar routine, telegraphing their intentions as to when the main attack would begin.

Finally, once the battle started the German field commanders would have to face the problem of refugees choking the road network. While most were familiar with this issue to some degree, especially if they had been recently fighting in friendly territory, there is no evidence of any planning on the part of the German commanders to deal with how to overcome this flow of refugees that would impact their operations. Nevertheless, the effect was severe and during the course of the battle a number of references surface where commanders complain about refugees slowing their movement, but just as importantly, creating confusion and an overall drag upon unit effectiveness. Refugees not only clogged the roads but also attached themselves to the ground units seeking their protection and support. In the area of the 12th Army under General Wenck this was not as severe, as Wenck had more than enough food to distribute. But in other areas, such as the 9th Army, the consequences were significant.



The plight of the refugees was nothing short of nightmarish. Groups like these clung to German units in a desperate search for protection. The casualties among these people were enormous.

## Summary:

At one point during the battle, Heinrici and General Hans Krebs, the new Chief of the OKH would exchange harsh words on the telephone, with Heinrici contending that OKH wanted Army Group Vistula to fight a static fight, and yet also engage in wide ranging sweeps where units would have to march by foot upwards of 70 kms to engage in a counterattack. Heinrici needed the freedom to move, but not necessarily the freedom to maneuver. Without adequate transport, and even lacking fuel for what equipment he had, Heinrici had no ability to engage in wide ranging mobile operations against advancing Soviet forces, and instead wanted to be able to steadily withdraw westward through a succession of three prearranged defensive lines. Heinrici knew that his command could only hold on the river for a few days, and that beyond that his two armies would be in danger of become hens in a slaughterhouse. Yet, Hitler's orders to stand fast not only ensured that the armies couldn't escape, but that the victims were held steady.

## The Soviet Army Prepares for Their Final Offensive to take Berlin

The Soviet Army stalled on the Oder-Neiße River line largely because of supply difficulties. The Vistula-Oder Offensive of January had been only the third time they had really attempted to implement deep penetration operations on a grand scale, and while units and commanders were willing, the logistical infrastructure was still not mature enough to handle the tasks necessary to keep the pressure on. The operational depth in Poland was extensive, and by the end of the campaign Soviet units were strung out and exhausted.



Marshal Tukhachevsky developed innovative ideas of the "deep battle." However, Stalin considered him a threat and had him shot in 1937.

However, preparing for what the Soviet high command called Operation BERLIN was a different dynamic which presented both opportunity and unique problems. Late-war Soviet operational doctrine was beginning to accept the concepts of Marshal Mikhail Tukhachevsky's

“deep battle” even though the Marshal had been disgraced and shot during the Stalin purges of the late 1930s. Such a paradigm required extensively deep penetration through and beyond an enemy’s forward zone of defenses so as to disrupt and bypass any reserves before any major exploitation began.

To launch the projected assault, the Soviets massed three Fronts, or the equivalent of Army Groups along the Oder and Neißé Rivers. To the north, from the Baltic Sea to Zheden, was Marshal Konstantin Rokossovsky’s 2nd White Russian Front (also called Belorussian Front). From Zheden to Guben on the Neißé River was Marshal Georgy Zhukov’s 1st White Russian Front. And from Guben to just west of Krakow, stretched out over a very wide area, was Marshal Ivan Konev’s 1st Ukrainian Front. Konev and Zhukov were intense rivals, and during a meeting with Stalin prior to launching the offensive, the question of who should take Berlin was broached. There are several different accounts as to what precisely transpired, but despite promising Berlin to Zhukov in late 1944, Stalin left the question open as to who could actually seize the city. This nebulous “directive” would have enormous implications for the common Russian soldier on the ground.

The area of operations around Berlin was considered too shallow for a deep battle, which meant to Soviet planners that their exploitation would have to start sooner and engage German tactical reserves behind the lines. However, because of its shallow depth, the area presented a unique opportunity to allow Soviet forces to aggressively pursue and not be as concerned about their supply lines lagging behind. The drive to Berlin would be nothing more than a short bound, and Soviet units would be able to handle such an operation before becoming disorganized and starved of supplies. This was important for several reasons. First, there was the need to destroy the remaining German forces in the field. But the second was just as critical. Because Stalin had already intended to violate the Yalta agreement, he assumed the



Marshal Zhukov, who’s army would be the main force attacking towards Berlin.

Western Allies would do the same. The last thing he would want would be for the ground forces to be logistically spent just as they encountered American and British forces. If this were to occur, the Western Allies would be able to smash through the Soviet ground forces and secure a decisive victory at the very moment that the Soviet Union would be celebrating their triumph over Germany.

The shallow depth of the prospective battlefield, while hindering a deep battle, would make the logistical equation easier for Soviet planners to solve. As a consequence, Soviet ground force commanders were able to assemble a massive array of every conceivable weapon system and the fuel and ammunition needed to support them. In addition, the impact of Lend-Lease from the United States and Great Britain was bringing the Soviet Army to the stage where they could more easily sustain extensive mobile operations. While Lend-Lease supplied everything imaginable to the Soviet military, from aircraft to communications wire, arguably the most important item of the transfer was in the area of motorized transport. Over the course of the war, the United States alone sent the Soviet Union over 182,000 2 1/2 ton trucks, a number that represented 22% of the total wartime production of that type. An additional 418,000 trucks of all other types, for a total of 19% of all American wartime production, were shipped during the war, from Jeeps to the so-called “heavy-heavies” used for bulk transport.



Katyusha rocket launcher on a U.S. Lend-Lease Studebaker truck. The impact of Lend-Lease on the motorization of the Soviet Army is a subject often neglected by historians.

The impact of the motorization of the Soviet Army cannot be underscored enough. The Soviets used Lend-Lease trucks for field transport of infantry, as mounts for the Katyusha rocket launchers, and for the all-important movement of supplies. As an aside, it is interesting to note that despite the prevalence of American trucks in the Soviet inventory, Soviet propagandists were very careful to ensure that few if any photographs of these trucks ever leaked out through official channels. True to their Communist ideals, Soviet leaders wanted to maintain the image

that a Marxist nation was defeating their fascist foe with little or no help from their capitalist allies.

An additional aspect of the Soviet logistic plan was the building of bridges on the Oder River. Having established three bridgeheads over the river around Küstrin and Frankfurt, it was necessary to build an extensive network of bridges to facilitate the movement of troops and equipment not only into the bridgeheads for the immediate assault, but to provide rapid access for follow-up forces assembled east of the river and the supplies necessary to support them. At the time of the buildup the Oder River was swollen by both snowmelt and early spring rain. The current, normally one meter per second, had accelerated to two meters per second, and the water



The engineer's art—the building of Soviet bridges across the Oder River. Soviet bridge building was instrumental in the speed of the April offensive.



depth on the right, or east bank was about two meters while on the left bank it was four, with a maximum river depth of up to five meters. While the east bank was relatively firm, the west bank was awash and marshy, forcing Soviet engineers to extend bridges westward by over 100 meters.

Bridge building has become a trademark for Soviet/Russian operations over the years, and their efforts along the Oder River were no exception. The bridge at Zellin, which was just north of Küstrin, was 282 meters long and was completed in 12 days, even under periodic German artillery fire. Eleven major bridges were constructed, along with a number of smaller ancillary ones. German efforts to interdict them had mixed results. As the Soviets pushed their bridgeheads further west it became increasingly difficult for German artillery to interdict the construction efforts. Other

techniques were used, such as deploying Navy frogmen and floating mines down the river to destroy the pylons, or even desperate Kamikaze-style suicide attacks where a handful of pilots tried to dive their planes into the bridges.



A rare shot of a pair *Mistels* and their piggybacked fighters in flight. German attempts to interdict Soviet bridge building even included suicide attacks.

Possibly the most innovative effort by the Germans to interdict the bridges was the use of the *Mistel* aircraft configuration. This unique system involved coupling a fighter aircraft such as a Bf-109 or FW-190 piggybacked with a drone twin-engine medium bomber like the Ju-88. The nose of the bomber was redesigned to carry a large warhead, while the fighter was positioned on top to guide the system to the target. After release, the pilotless bomber was guided on its set course by autopilot. As ingenious as it

may sound, the system was notoriously inaccurate. Previous attempts to use it yielded mediocre results, and efforts to use it against the Soviet bridges over the Oder River resulted in only one bridge destroyed. In contrast, the suicide attacks of *Sondergruppe 4* were more successful, damaging 17 bridges in the first few days of the Soviet offensive. However, the Soviets had already stockpiled sufficient resources in the bridgeheads for their assault, and the bridges themselves were rebuilt soon after the strikes against them. Overall, Soviet bridge construction was a tremendous achievement, and much of the success of the coming battle was the result of this effort.



Russian troops loading rockets on *Katyusha* launchers. Over 1,500 were used by Zhukov in the assault on the Seelow Heights.

While the Germans lacked artillery and even ammunition for the weapons they had, the Soviets were masters of massed artillery fires by 1945. There are contradictory reports as to how many tubes Marshal Georgy Zhukov amassed prior to his assault, but he used at least over 15,000 artillery pieces and over 1,500 rocket launchers. Zhukov's plan was simple: blast his way through the crust of the German defense in the valley of the Oder and then unleash his two tank armies to exploit the breach and smash the German reserves beyond the Seelow Heights. This artillery preparation was also to be assisted by several thousand aircraft in the ground support role. Zhukov's massing of firepower was the greatest ever seen at that point, but a little knowledge of World War I history would have made him think twice. Even an understanding of such bombardment attacks like the American's Operation COBRA in July 1944 would have informed him that massed artillery creates its own problems for mobility. The Oder valley was already a difficult place for armor to operate, being flat, marshy, and intersected by numerous channels and ditches, some that were quite deep. His armor would be restricted mostly to the roads and an artillery bombardment of that magnitude would certainly churn up the roadbeds, making any advance by armor difficult at best. Nevertheless, there seems to be no indication that any of these ideas were brought forward in the planning. In addition, to help enhance the artillery bombardment, Zhukov had called upon the now unneeded Moscow air defense system to provide 143 searchlights to be switched on to blind the Germans. The plan was to so shock the defenders as to render them incapable of coherent resistance.

Zhukov's trump card in his planning was the two Guards tank armies in reserve. The 1st Guards Tank Army, commanded by Gen. Mikhail Katukov, was already in place several weeks prior to the attack, while the 2nd Guards Tank Army under Gen. Semyon Bogdanov, had spent a week redeploying from Pomerania where it had assisted in finishing



Tankers and supporting infantry of the 2nd Guards Tank Army load up on their T-34/85 tanks on the way to Berlin. The man in the center, with his hand to his mouth, is blowing a whistle to stand the men to.

off the remnants of German forces along the Baltic Sea. The Soviet plan was to use the two tank armies to exploit the breach, even if it was necessary for them to engage German reserves earlier than the concept of deep battle envisioned. For these two tank armies to exploit, there were three significant obstacles to overcome.

First, there was the Oder River. Both tank armies were positioned to the east of the river and would need to use a number of bridges to cross. Once having surmounted this obstacle, they would face the boggy terrain of the Oder valley. This would force the tanks and wheeled vehicles to stay mostly on the roads, and thus lead to the armies being strung out in columns miles long. The third obstacle was the Seelow Heights. Composed of sandy soil with steep slopes in many places, the tanks and wheeled vehicles would need to use roads to negotiate their way over the crest. However, it appears that not much consideration was given to these issues in Soviet planning, because the initial plan envisioned the tank armies exploiting after the assault armies had crossed the valley and seized the heights. This would effectively open the door for the exploitation force to breach the heights and then expand into attack formations as they pushed their way rapidly to the west over more favorable ground. However, things would not go to plan and Zhukov would commit the two tank armies prematurely on the first day of the attack. This decision jeopardized the entire exploitation plan.

Regarding manpower, the Soviets had their problems in this area just as the Germans did. However, most of the key Soviet formations were largely intact and had fought as cohesive units for well over a year or more. During the recent fighting and beyond, Soviet units would liberate many of their comrades who were held in German POW camps, and in turn would hastily arm them and throw them into battle as second line replacements. In addition,



Soviet infantry took tremendous casualties during the war.

the Soviets would build allied armies, such as two Polish formations to assist in the coming campaign. Nevertheless, most of the leading Soviet units were composed of battle-hardened veterans. Solder to soldier they may not have been equal to the Germans, and their small unit leadership was woefully inadequate, with a reliance on leadership from high echelons which significantly reduced flexibility and initiative during unfamiliar situations. Yet, Soviet units were reasonably well integrated and prepared for the coming attack. One area where the Soviet ground forces did encounter serious problems was in a loss of ardor among the assault troops. The war was clearly coming to an end, and human nature tends to create a deeper sense of caution and self-preservation within frontline personnel. This problem would show itself repeatedly during the entire campaign and would stand in stark contrast to the desperation the German defenders, fearful of Soviet captivity and occupation, would show.

In contrast to German Army, the Soviet Army already had a mediocre and somewhat static command and control system, which emphasized more direct leadership from higher echelon personnel to subordinate units. The lack of two-way radios within Soviet units meant that they were far less flexible to counter unexpected enemy movements, making them exceptionally vulnerable to flank and rear counterattacks. The command and control problems would become more acute the deeper Soviet units penetrated into a German defensive zone, and was also one of the reasons why German ad hoc formations, hastily patched together from shattered elements smashed in previous fights, could deliver significant counter strikes against Soviet spearheads, thus delaying or even defeating them. However, the shallow operational area presenting itself for Operation BERLIN meant that Soviet units would encounter fewer command and control problems during the exploitation phase than they did during such operations as the exploitation in Poland in January 1945.

In order to mask their intentions, the Soviets engaged in a massive deception effort, what they dub as *makarovka*. Zhukov ordered that tanks and other vehicles be openly rail loaded and moved to the north to a fictitious assembly area, complete with dummy positions and dummy radio traffic. In the meantime, the equipment rail loaded north would be returned at night and camouflaged to prevent detection. The plan was to convince the Germans that the main effort of the Soviet attack would come significantly to the north and south along the wings of Zhukov's command, rather than coming from the center. While quite elaborate, it appears to have not been

very successful, as German intelligence had a reasonably clear picture regarding Soviet deployment and preparations. However, some of the measures did apparently deceive Hitler and some leading officers in the High Command.

One other aspect of Soviet deception measures was their use of what were termed “Seydlitz Troops,” named after German General Walther von Seydlitz-Kurzbach. Seydlitz, as commander of the LI Corps trapped at Stalingrad, was convinced by the Soviets after his surrender to head up an anti-Nazi League of German Officers. While his own role in convincing German soldiers to abandon the cause of the Third Reich was largely nullified by the failure of the 20 July 1944 plot against Hitler, various German soldiers later recruited by the Soviets to infiltrate German lines continued to be called “Seydlitz Troops.” Their influence may have been inflated by Soviet propaganda, but their presence on the battlefield was real as attested to numerous encounters recorded by German officers and rank and file soldiers alike. These individuals attempted to impersonate officers and NCOs, typically ordering them to abandon positions so as to smooth the way for Soviet attacks. As the fighting progressed, one German soldier noted that the easiest way to identify such “Seydlitz Troops” was because they wore brand new uniforms, being in stark contrast to the German combat soldiers whose own clothing was now caked in mud and tattered from days of continuous action. While the presence of “Seydlitz Troops” was not decisive, they did sow doubt and confusion in the ranks of the German Army at critical moments on the battlefield.

Lastly, the issue of refugees never fit within the Soviet plan of attack, and indeed did not need to be included. The Soviet forces would have no compunction about ravaging such refugee columns if encountered, and thus presented only a minor obstacle to their advance. This had already been demonstrated amply during the Vistula-Oder operation through Poland.

### **Summary:**

Unlike the German Army, the Soviet forces lined up along the Vistula were, as noted by Guderian, massive and very capable. While the shallow nature of the projected area of operations presented a challenge to “deep battle” concepts, it simplified Soviet command and control, along with the logistical support. Additionally, Soviet divisions were more integrated than their

German counterparts, but because of superior small unit leadership, German units would continue to hold a tactical edge over them. Soviet senior leaders accepted this situation, knowing that they had the resources available to overpower the last remnants of the German Army. For the Soviet commanders, the important wildcard in the mix was two-fold: the artillery concentration, while awe inspiring, could easily prove to be counterproductive, with Soviet artillery exceeding the saturation point of effectiveness and thus becoming more of a hindrance to the ground troops than a help. The reverse of the wildcard was the searchlight plan. While tested on a training site, nobody knew what it would look like during such a massive artillery barrage. The artillery plan would be just one of Zhukov's several serious errors in planning, errors almost certainly created by the intense pressure he felt due to his rivalry with Konev. This rivalry would end up needlessly costing tens of thousands of lives in the coming battle.

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## **Appendix A: Overview of the Battle**

Chronological Outline of the Course of Events  
in the Battle for Berlin

- 31 January 1945 Weak motorized Russian forces penetrate across the ice of the Oder into the vicinity of Stausberg. Berlin is alerted.
- February - March The Oder defenses are built up.
- Early February General der Infanterie von Kortsfleisch, commanding general of Deputy Headquarters, III Corps, and at the same time Commander of the Berlin Defense area, is relieved by Generalleutnant Ritter von Hauenschild.
- 12 -15 April 1945 The Russians make preliminary attacks to widen the Kuestrin bridgehead.
- 16 April 1945 The Russians begin a large-scale offensive from the Kuestrin bridgehead and across the Neisse.
- 18 April 1945 Counterattack by the 18th Panzer Grenadier Division is unsuccessful. Oder and Neisse fronts collapse.
- 19 April 1945 Berlin is placed under the command of Army Group Vistula. The army group assigns SS Obergruppenfuhrer Steiner the task of safeguarding the Hohenzollern Canal and vainly requests the withdrawal of the center and right wing of the Ninth Army from the Oder. The Russians push forward from the south to the rear of the Ninth Army in the direction of Berlin.
- 20 April 1945 The Russians reach Baruth from the south. To the east of Berlin an unsuccessful counterattack is made by the 18th Panzer Grenadier Division and Panzer Grenadier Divisions "Nordland" and "Nederland." Army Group Vistula orders all available forces to be moved out of Berlin to the defense positions. Hitler decides to remain in Berlin. The Russians launch a large-scale offensive south of Stettin.
- 21 April 1945 The Soviets reach Zossen, Erkner, and Hopgarten.
- 22 April 1945 The Russians reach the Teltow Canal near Klein-Machnow from the south and the outskirts of the city at Weissensee and Pankow from the east. They cross the Havel River north of Spandau. Generalleutnant Reymann is replaced by Colonel Kaether. Army Group Vistula is excluded from command in Berlin; the city is placed under Hitler's personal command. Hitler moves Panzer Grenadier Division "Nordland" to Berlin. Army Group Vistula instructs Steiner to launch a relief attack. The LVI Panzer Corps receives orders to proceed to Berlin, but withdraws to the south.
- 23 April 1945 The Russians attack along the Teltow Canal, against Friedrichshein, and near Tegel. Generalleutnant Weidling becomes Commander of the Defense Area and moves the LVI Panzer Corps to Berlin. The Army High Command and the Wehrmacht High Command leave Berlin. Hitler orders an attack by the Twelfth Army from the southeast, aiming at Berlin.
- 24 April 1945 The Russians cross the Teltow Canal; strong fighting progresses in the eastern part of the city. The Russians advance west from Spandau and close off Berlin from the west. Steiner's troops are thrown back to their line of departure after attacking with initial successes.
- 25 April 1945 The Russians break through south of Stettin.
- 24 April - 1 May 1945 Berlin's defenders stage severe retarding actions.
- 29 April 1945 The Twelfth Army reaches Beelitz - Ferch. Generaloberst Heinrici is relieved of the command of Army Group Vistula.
- 30 April 1945 Hitler commits suicide. Remaining elements of the Ninth Army break through to the Twelfth Army.
- 1 May 1945 Negotiations for surrender are begun. Elements of the Berlin garrison attempt to escape.
- 2 May 1945 Berlin surrenders.

**Selection from:**  
**The Oder Front 1945**  
 by A. Stephan Hamilton

## OVERVIEW OF THE BATTLE

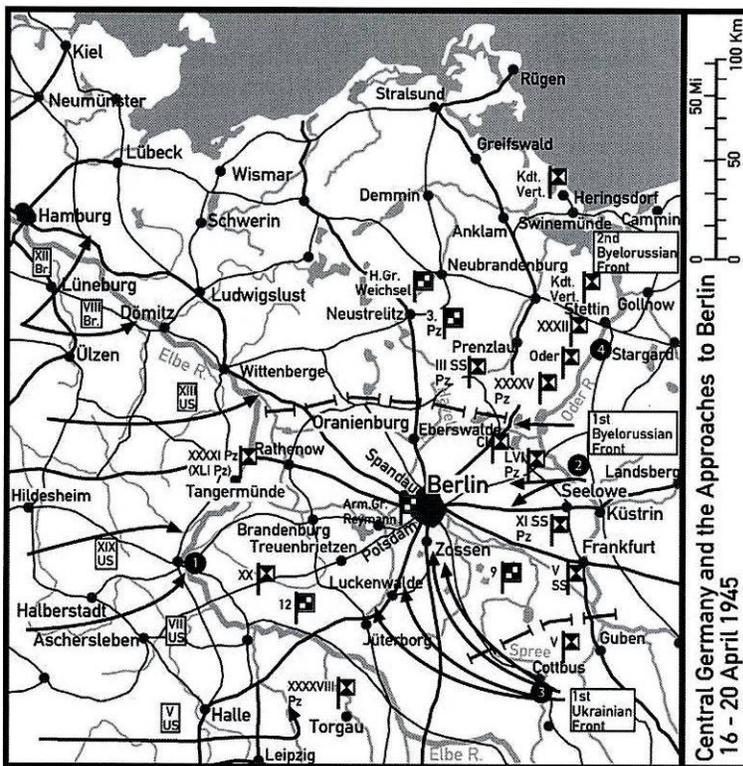
Understanding the component parts of the *Oderfront* battle is not easy without the use of maps. There were four distinct operations from the German perspective: 1) the defense, and retreat of the *3.Pz.Arme*e; 2) the defense and breakout of the *9.Arme*e; 3) the relief attacks east by the *12.Arme*e, and 4) the relief attack south by the *III. (germ.) SS Pz.Korps* and its subsequent defense of the southwest flank of the *3.Pz.Arme*e along with the *21.Arme*e. The intent in this section is to provide an overview of the fighting and the key events that shaped the battle's outcome. In this way the reader is able to visualize the scope of the fighting detailed in the following day-to-day section.

### OVERVIEW

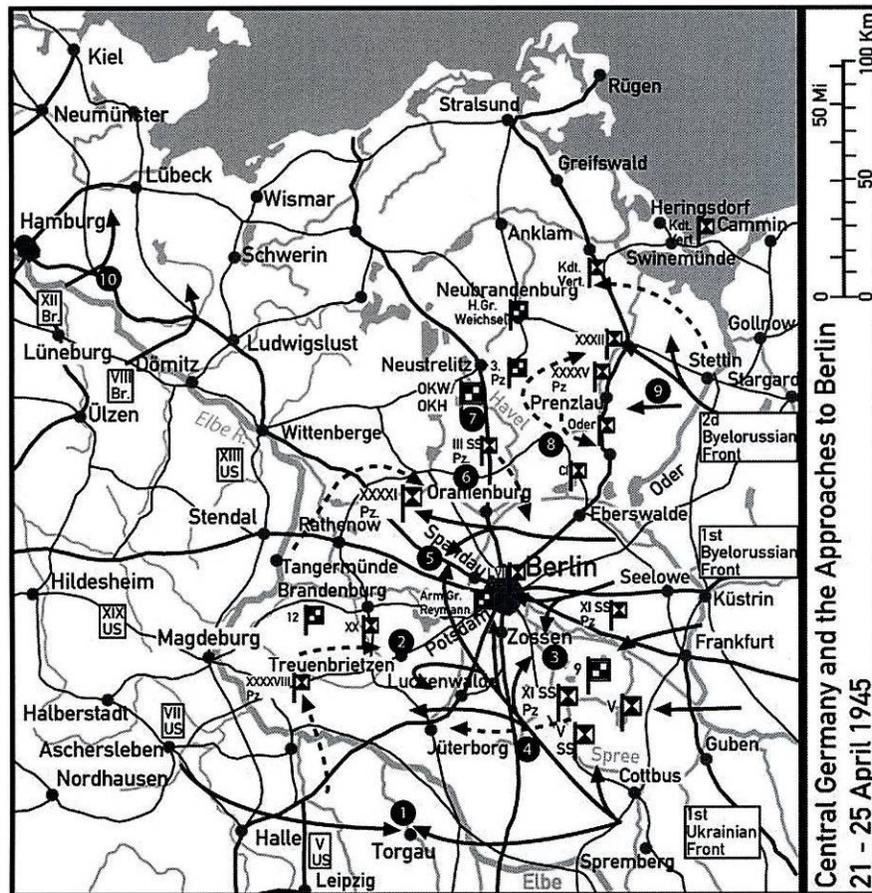
[SEE MAP 13] (1) By 15 April elements of the US 9th Army reached the Elbe River. Small bridgeheads were established across Elbe with the intent to secure a permanent crossing site for an advance on Berlin. Eisenhower, however, informed the US 9th Army commander General Omar Bradley by phone that there would be no further advance on Germany's capital. "The war is over for your men" Eisenhower bluntly informed Bradley. (2) Zhukov launched his assault across the *Oderbruch* toward the Seelow Heights at 0330 on 16 April. His forces did not advance far due to an elastic defense and effective German resistance conducted by Heinrici. It was not until 20 April before Zhukov's forces breached the final band of German defenses after the capture of Múncheberg. (3) Koniev breached the thin German defenses across his front on the first day over the NeiÙe River. Demonstrating excellent command of his armored forces, his tank spearheads crossed the Spree River two days later

and secured a bridgehead over the final natural obstacle in his way toward Berlin. His tank forces subsequently conducted a 50 km drive north nearly reaching Zossen (*OKW/OKH* wartime command HQ) by 20 April despite *OKW's ad hoc* efforts to block his forces. (4) There was no offensive activity against the *3.Pz.Arme*e as Rokossovsky was completing the deployment of his assault forces.

[SEE MAP 14] (1) On 25 April US and Soviet forces met each other at Torgau effectively cutting Germany and the *Reich* in two. (2) Wenck's *XX Korps* of the *12.Arme*e turned east on the orders of Keitel and moved into position along the line Treuenbrietzen-Beelitz. (3) Forces of both Koniev and Zhukov meet for the first time on 24 April cutting off



Map 13. Central Germany and the Approaches to Berlin 16-20 April 1945.

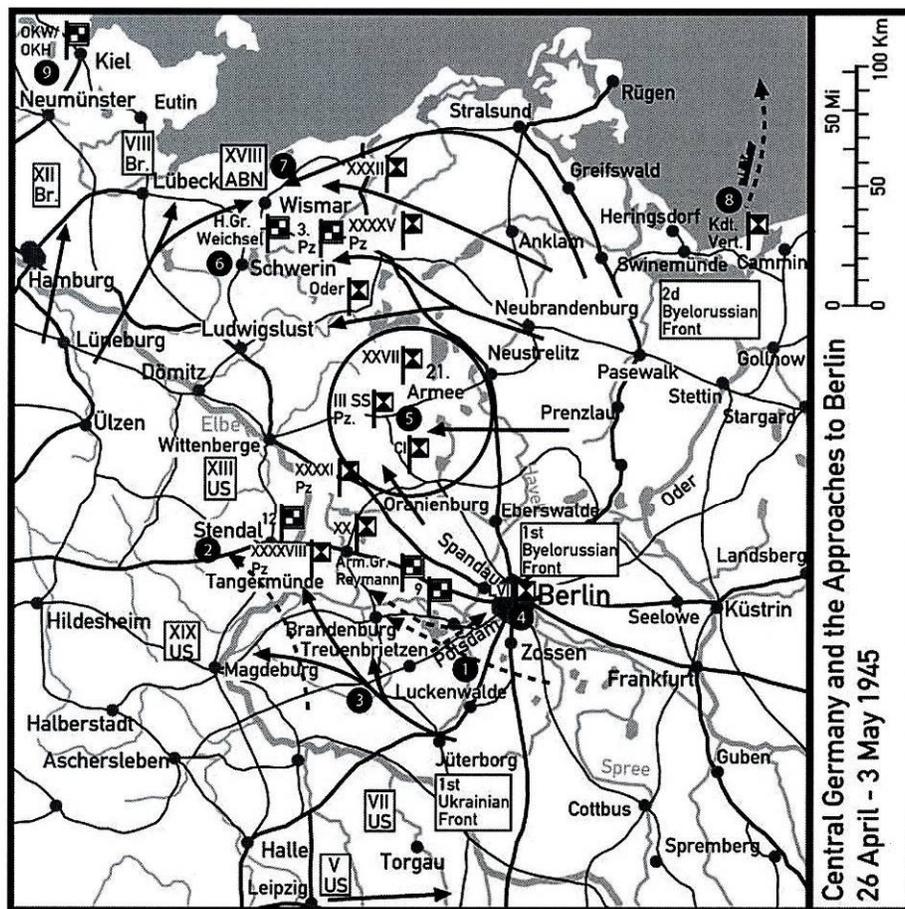


Map 14. Central Germany and the Approaches to Berlin 21-25 April 1945.

the *9. Armee* from the rest of the *H.Gr.* (4) On 25 April the *9. Armee* attempted to secure a breakout west, which failed against stiff Soviet resistance. (5) On 25 April Zhukov and Koniev's forces met between Berlin and Potsdam and encircled Berlin. The *Reich* Capital was now cut off from the rest of the *H.Gr.* (6) German forces moved to the area of Oranienburg in order to block any potential Soviet drive north. Keitel soon ordered them to launch a counter-attack against Zhukov's flank. The counter-attack was repulsed after initial success. (7) *OKW/OKH* moved north around Berlin and positioned its command staff at Rheinsberg. (8 & 9) German forces repositioned themselves in reaction to the offensive by the 2nd Belorussian Front that finally began against the *3. Pz. Armee* on 20 April. (10) British forces in the west began an offensive across the lower Elbe River.

[SEE MAP 15] (1) Wenck's *XX. Korps* launched a relief attack toward *Armeegruppe Spree* located in Potsdam while holding the line Treuenbrietzen-Beelitz. The German forces in Potsdam reached the *XX. Korps*, along with the *9. Armee* remnants driving west. (2) The combined German force of the *12. Armee*, *9. Armee*, and *Armeegruppe Spree*, along with tens of thousands of civilian refugees (some German accounts state that there were 100,000 refugees) withdrew

west toward the Elbe River and negotiated crossings were conducted with US Forces on the west bank. (3) Koniev's forces pursued the withdrawing German forces. (4) The Berlin garrison conducted several breakouts north, west and southwest on the evening of 1-2 May. Few participants in the breakout made it to German lines. Berlin officially capitulated to the Soviets on 2 May. (5) On 27 April *OKW* created the *21. Armee* that consisted of the *III. (germ.) SS Korps* from the *3. Pz. Armee*, the *CI. Korps* from the *9. Armee*, the *XVII. Korps* from the *4. Armee* and other *ad hoc* formations. The objective of the *21. Armee* was to protect the southwest flank of the *3. Pz. Armee*. (6) The remnants of *H.Gr. Weichsel* and the *3. Pz. Armee* withdrew west under significant Soviet pressure and surrendered piecemeal to the British and accompanying US forces (*XVIII Airborne Corps*) that crossed the lower Elbe. (7) There is no formal surrender of the *Heeresgruppe*. British and Soviet forces met for the first time along the Baltic Coast at Wismar on 3 May. (8) The seaborne evacuation of German forces and civilians remaining in *Verteidigungsbereich Swinemünde* and other points along the north German coast began on 4 May. (9) *OKW/OKH* moved northwest and ended the war in Mürwick on the Danish border.



Map 15. Central Germany and the Approaches to Berlin 26 April-3 May 1945.

### 3. Panzer Armee

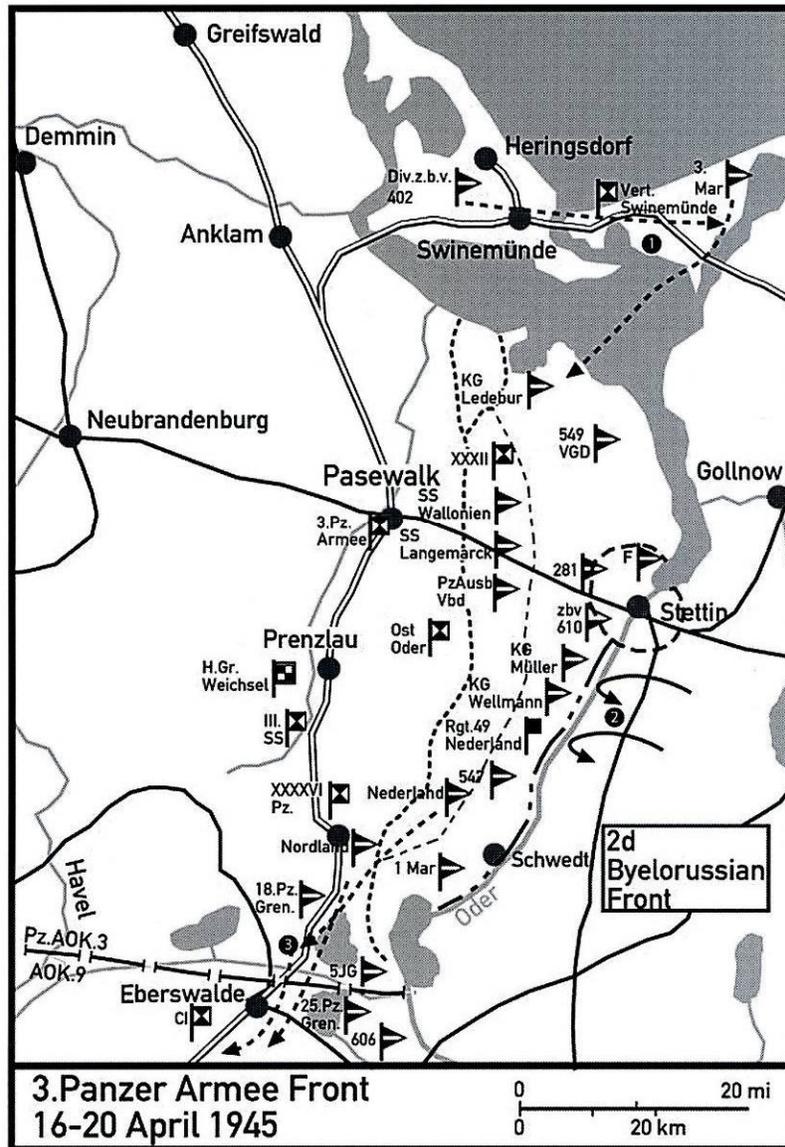
[SEE MAP 16] (1) The *3. Marine Division* is ordered transported from *Verteidigungsbereich* Swinemünde to the area along the southern flank of the *3. Pz. Armee*. (2) The Soviets launched several reconnaissance patrols across the Lower Oder near Stettin and Schwedt that were repulsed by the German defense. (3) The reserve divisions “Nordland,” “Nederland,” and *18. Pz. Gren. Div.* were ordered south to reinforce the critical sectors of the *9. Armee*.

[SEE MAP 17] (1) On 25 April Heinrici ordered the forces of *Festung* Stettin and other combat formations along the *HKL* to withdraw west to a new defense line in order to avoid their encirclement like the *9. Armee* to the south. Heinrici’s order to withdraw is done against the express wishes of *OKW/OKH* and without their knowledge. (2) The Soviets breached the *HKL* and the *Wotan Stellung* after five days of heavy fighting between Stettin and Schwedt. (3) The *3. Pz. Armee* had no operational reserves so a number of smaller *ad hoc* formations like *Pz. Ausb. Verb. ‘Ostsee’* are committed to the threatened sector. (4) Prenzlau became the focal point of battle on the *3. Pz. Armee* front. A two day battle occurred from 25-27 April. The *SS Regt. ‘Solar’* is mobilized west of Berlin and sent to the Prenzlau sector

where it conducts a solid defense for several days. (5) After the Soviet breakthrough along the northern sector of the *9. Armee* on 20 April, the remaining elements of the *CI. Korps* are forced north across the Finow Canal into the southern flank of the *3. Pz. Armee*. (6) The *25. Pz. Gren. Div.* of the *CI. Korps* was moved west and placed under command of *SS-Gruppenführer* Felix Steiner (commander of the *III. (germ.) SS Korps*) along with the *3. Marine Division*. The *25. Pz. Gren. Div.* was ordered to launch an attack south toward Berlin on 25 April. After making initial gains against the 1st Polish Army, the division’s lead elements were pushed back. Keitel’s goal was to relieve Berlin with this attack, while Heinrici hoped to disrupt Zhukov’s westward movement that threatened the rear of the *3. Pz. Armee*.

### 9. Armee and 12. Armee

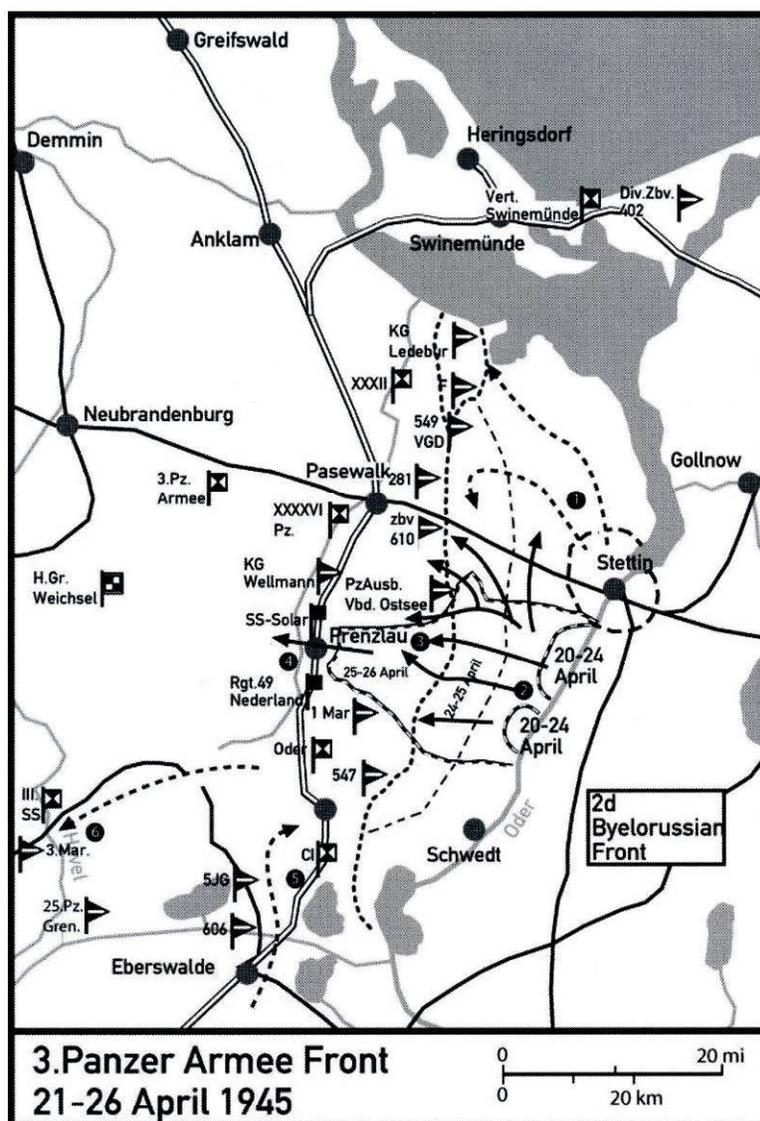
[SEE MAP 18] (1) Zhukov’s assault across the *Oderbruch* opposite the Seelow Heights hit empty air as Heinrici efficiently withdrew the forward elements of the *LVI. Pz. Korps* back before the start of the largest artillery barrage in WWII. It takes the combined weight of Zhukov’s 8th Guards Army and 1st Guards Tank Army nearly three days to advance only a few kilometers and breach the German



Map 16. 3. Panzer Armee Front 16-20 April 1945.

defenses and take the town of Seelow, Zhukov's formations suffer tens of thousands of casualties in the process. (2) To the south, Koniev breached the weak and seemingly ineffective German defenses along the Neiße River, followed by an expert crossing on the move of the Spree River, and then wheeled his tank forces northwest and advanced nearly 50 km in 24 hours. The *V.Korps* of *Heeresgruppe Mitte* (*Schörner*) was caught north of Koniev's advance and joined the *9.Armee*. The speed and direction of his advance took *OKW/OKH* by surprise. Hitler believed Koniev would drive south toward Prague and not north. (3) By 20 April Zhukov's combined 8th Guards and 1st Guards Tank Army captured Müncheberg along *Reichsbahn 1* and breached the *Wotan Stellung*. His forces wheeled southwest with the intent of encircling Berlin from the south. (4) Zhukov's

northern attack supported by the 3rd Shock Army and 2nd Guards Tank Army breached the *CI.Korps* between Wriezen and Prötzel driving the already weak 'Berlin' Division south into the *LVI.Pz.Korps* area of operations. This effectively split the *CI.Korps* from the rest of the *9.Armee*. Heinrici soon ordered the *CI.Korps* north to the southern flank of the *3.Pz.Armee*. (5) *OKW/OKH* ordered the mobilization of reserve *Reichsarbeitsdienst (RAD)* divisions and other *ad hoc* formations in order to halt Koniev's advance. Among those was the 'Friedrich Ludwig Jahn' Division. This division was still mobilizing when Koniev's forces attacked the formation. The remnants of this division retreated north and joined *Armeegruppe Spree* around Potsdam. (6) Caught in a pocket around Spremberg, several strong formations conducted a breakout south against orders to reach the northern lines of

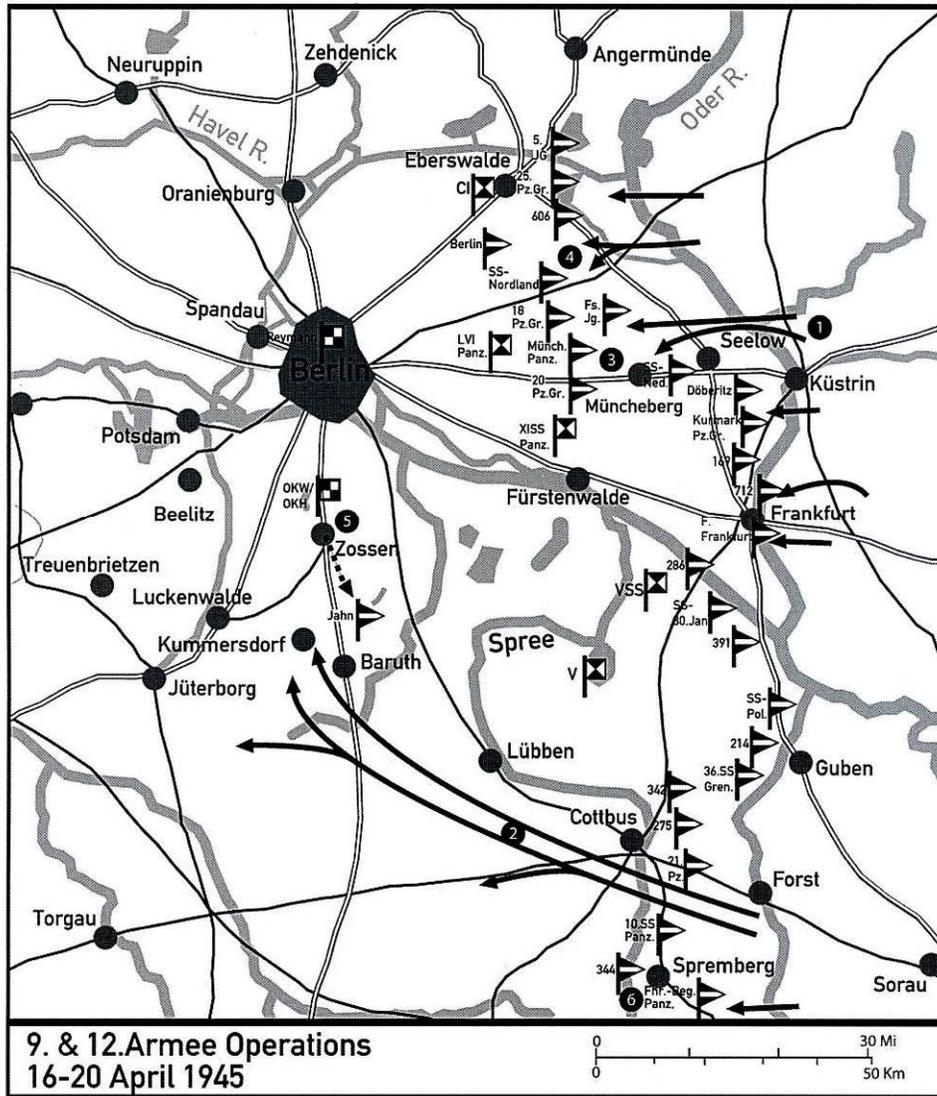


Map 17. 3. Panzer Armee Front 21-26 April 1945.

*Heeresgruppe Mitte (Armeegruppe Schörner)*. The deployment of the 10.SS Pz.Div. 'Frundsberg' (formerly of *H.Gr. Weichsel*) and *Führer Begleit Panzergrenadier Division* proved ineffective in halting Koniev's breakthrough.

[SEE MAP 19] (1) *General Weidling* ordered his *LVI. Pz.Korps* to attack south and reach the northern lines of the *9.Armee*. He was subsequently ordered by Hitler into Berlin on 24/25 April where he and his units became the city's unplanned defenders. (2) *Armeegruppe Spree* under the command of *General Reymann*, Berlin's former defensive commander, was established around Potsdam. Many of the *ad hoc* formations fielded to block Koniev's advance in the prior days made their back into Reymann's lines. (3) On 25 April, tank forces of Zhukov's 47th Army and Koniev's 4th Guards Tank Army met around the lake area between

Potsdam and Berlin cutting off Berlin from the rest of *H.Gr. Weichsel*. (4) The remnants of the *CI.Korps* were ordered to join the *3.Pz.Armee* and make their way through Eberswalde across the Finow Canal. (5) The *25.Pz.Gren.Div.* launched an attack south intended to relieve Berlin. Additional units were supposed to participate in the attack but they were not ready in time. The German attack caught the 1st Polish Army initially by surprise, but eventually the German attack was unsustainable and the grenadiers were forced back to their starting positions. (6) The *9.Armee* was ordered to hold the Oder River far longer than it should have. The inability of *Heinrici* to obtain operational freedom for the *9.Armee* from the *Führerbunker* ensured that it would be surrounded. If *Heinrici* had received operational freedom earlier he might have directed *Busse's* forces against either Zhukov

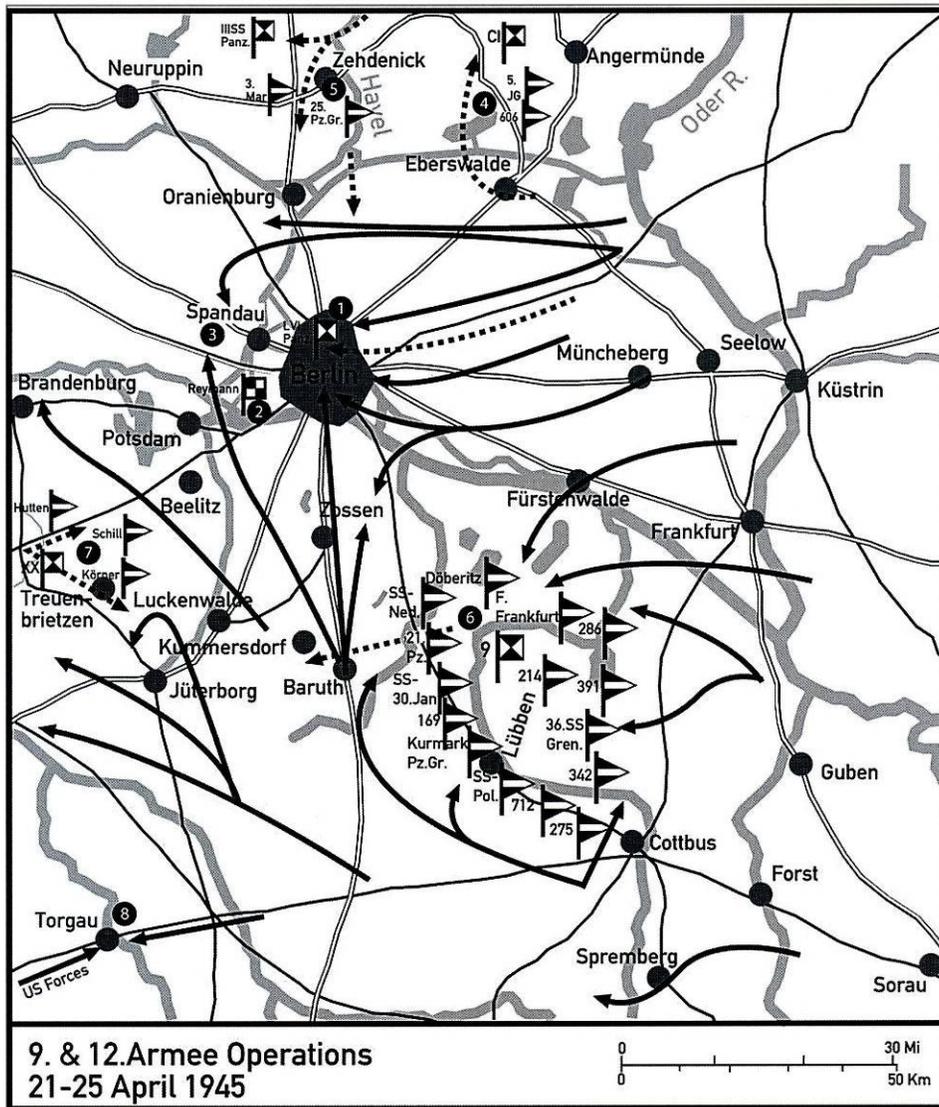


Map 18. 9. and 12. Armee Operations 16-20 April 1945.

or Koniev's advance in order to maintain a solid front and disrupt the Soviet forces. Unfortunately for Heinrici this didn't happen and the 9. Armee began its breakout efforts west by attempting to secure the passage to Baruth. Lead elements of the 21. Pz. Div. and 10. SS Aufklärungs Abteilung (caught north of Koniev's northwestern thrust on 20 April) launched their attack west on 25 April but were unsuccessful in initially forcing a breach in the Koniev's lines. (7) Koniev's vanguard of the 4th Guards Tank Army was initially surprised when they ran into lead elements of the XX. Korps' 'Theodore Körner' Division deploying at Treuenbrietzen. The XX. Korps was part of the general swing eastward of the westward facing 12. Armee that was ordered by Keitel to attack toward Berlin. (8) The Western Allies and Soviets met at Torgau splitting Germany and the Reich in half on 25 April. While the Western Allies did drive into the

Soviet zone of occupation outlined in 'Eclipse', Eisenhower established an artificial demarcation line along the Elbe River ordering a halt to any Western Allied drive on Berlin.

[SEE MAP 20] (1) German forces comprising the III. (germ.) SS Pz. Korps, and the CI. Korps withdrew northwest and became part of the 21. Armee established on 27 April to block any further advance of Zhukov's forces to the northwest behind the 3. Pz. Armee and into the area where OKW/OKH and the last remnants of the Third Reich's government remained. (2) Weidling ordered a breakout from Berlin for any German combat forces that wished to do so on the night of 1-2 May. A breakout was initially authorized by Hitler before he committed suicide providing that the soldiers continued to resist with other German forces outside the city. Goebbels countermanded that order after Hitler's death as he planned to use Berlin's defenders



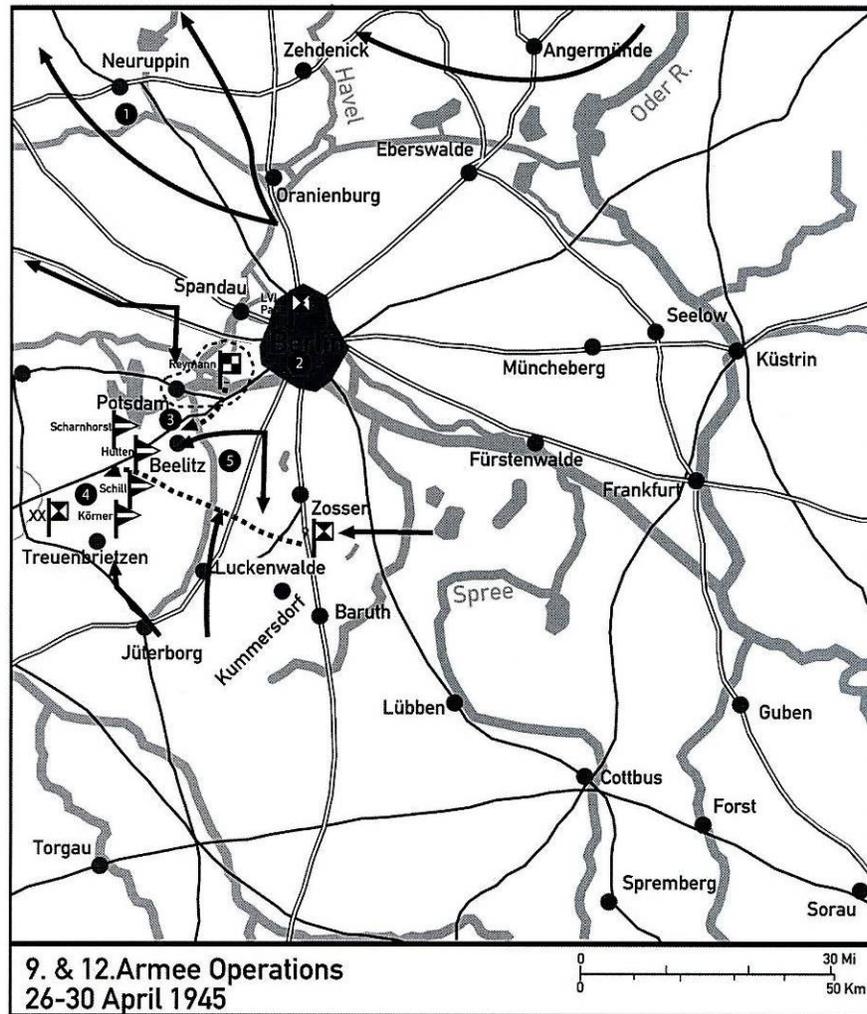
Map 19. 9. and 12. Armee Operations 21-25 April 1945.

to help his negotiations with the Soviets, which ultimately failed. Weidling capitulated to the Soviets on 2 May after Goebbels' suicide. (3) Three divisions of *XX. Korps*, 'Ferdinand von Schill', 'Scharnhorst', and 'Ulrich von Hutten' launched a final attack toward Potsdam on 28 April and reached Ferch just a few kilometers south of Reymann's lines. Reymann quickly ordered his remaining forces of *Armeegruppe Spree* to attack south. On 29/30 April his forces joined up with the forces of the *12. Armee* and quickly took up positions along the northern flank of Wenck's relief force. (4 and 5) Division 'Theodor von Körner' continued to hold the western flank against Soviet pressure, allowing the remnants of the *9. Armee* to reach the lines of the *12. Armee* just south of Beelitz. The combined forces under Wenck, along with tens of thousands of civilian refugees turned west and withdrew to the Elbe River, eventually passing over the

political demarcation line and surrendering to the US Forces on the western bank.

**Observations**

It is clear when looking at the above maps that the northern and southern flanks of the *9. Armee* were the decisive points in the fighting along the *Oderfront*. A striking facet of the battle is that the bulk of Zhukov's 1st Belorussian Front was operationally tied down taking Berlin in street fighting against a vastly inferior German force. Zhukov's overall success appears linked to three critical factors that greatly affected Heinrici's defense. First, Koniev's attack northwest split German forces south of Berlin, disrupted command and communication from Zossen and trapped the *9. Armee*. Second, Hitler's insistence that the *9. Armee* maintain its front along the Oder River prevented Heinrici from rapidly



Map 20. 9. and 12. Armee Operations 26-30 April 1945.

deploying those combat divisions against either Zhukov or Koniev until it no longer mattered. Third, the removal of the three key panzer divisions in early April to *Heeresgruppe Mitte* proved a waste of combat resources. Hitler's directive deprived Heinrici of an effective operational reserve and these divisions were ineffective in blunting Koniev's northern attack, because of their piecemeal deployment. The battle for the *Oderfront* reached its highpoint during the period 23-25 April. During these three days, *OKW/OKH* usurped Heinrici's authority by ordering the *LVI.Pz.Korps* into Berlin and refusing to let the *9. Armee* withdraw from the Oder River. With Berlin surrounded and the entire *9. Armee* rendered useless to Heinrici, it is no wonder that he ordered the *3. Pz. Armee* to conduct a fighting withdrawal west starting on 25 April without the permission of *OKW/OKH*. These factors prevented Heinrici from achieving his goals of preventing Berlin from becoming another 'Stalingrad' and holding the Soviets back long enough to force the Western Allies over the Elbe River.

**Appendix B**  
**Colonel General Heinrici's Report for Seelow Heights**

## Select Excerpts of Colonel General Gotthard Heinrici's Post-War Report MS T-9, as well as an additional post-war interview and supplemental material regarding activities in command of Army Group Vistula (*Heeresgruppe Weichsel*) prior to the main Soviet offensive

*Translated by A. Stephan Hamilton and used by permission*

References to AN are notes inserted by the original translator. References to EN refer to comments inserted by the staff ride packet editor. Items from the post-war interview are so noted; otherwise all other entries are from MS T-9.

### Heinrici discusses his appointment as Commander Army Group Vistula.

[From Heinrici's post-war interview]

On 20 March 1945 I received a telephone report that I had been appointed to the command of *Heeresgruppe Weichsel*. Up to that time I had been in command of the *1. Panzer Armee* which in February and March had been engaged in heavy fighting with the Russians who were attempting to burst into the area round about Cosel driving in the general direction of Leobschütz and on to Troppau and thence to occupy the rest of Upper Silesia which remained in German hands. At the report of my appointment I was extremely surprised. It was certainly known to me that I was hardly *persona grata* with Hitler. It was also clear to me that this would bring me into the greatest difficulties. The difficulties which cooperation with him, that is with Hitler, involved, were apparent to me through the reports of my *Heeresgruppe* commanders. And I also had the feeling that I was to play a key role in the last decisive battle which was to unfold around Berlin. Nevertheless, I did not quite know in what detail the difficulties were that were to beset me. My orderly officer had asked me whether I would accept the appointment. I replied:

"It is my duty. The same for a simple soldier who is posted to another formation, he is in no position to turn down his posting. I have to conduct myself as a soldier and to fight in the position to which I am assigned. I know that this is apparently an extremely difficult assignment. I will do all I possibly can in order to carry it out."

On 22 March I went by air early in the morning to Bautzen. It was no longer possible to fly directly to Berlin. A short time before the Chief of Staff of *Armeegruppe Schorner*, General von Xylander, had been shot down taking such a flight. And then I went in a splendid spring morning on to Zossen in order to meet the Chief of Staff, *Generaloberst* Guderian. The journey took me through a land filled with spring, through a land deep in peace. Of the destruction which had been wrought by enemy air attacks there was scarcely anything to be seen. It was only when we got to Kamenz and Senftenberg that we heard the howl of the air raid sirens and the loudspeakers which made the following announcement, "Enemy bomber formations over West[ern] Germany, direction of flight towards the Elbe and Saxony". And then we saw how the civilian population was to pass the next few hours in all anxiety.

The area of Zossen had been heavily [damaged] by a bombing attack. One part of the houses were destroyed and the others were very badly damaged; the Chief of the Operations section, *General* [Hans] Krebs was wearing a white turban round his head because during one air alert he had not taken any precautions and he had continued to work on in his room and he had

been wounded by a number of splinters. *Generaloberst* Guderian received me with the following words:

"I was able to obtain your appointment as Commander in Chief of *Heeresgruppe Weichsel* with Hitler. He was intent upon appointing *Generalleutnant*X [AN: Guderian never gave Heinrici a name. The person Guderian originally wanted to command the *Heeregruppe* was Walther Wenck]. I was concerned that you should be appointed because this is a situation where we need a man who has had actual experience of operations against the Russians. With Himmler it is simply impossible to carry on any further work. He has simply no idea of how military things go. He has no concept at all of tactical or operational questions. Things simply go over his head. It is high time that there should be some kind of change because we can reckon on a Russian attack against Berlin in a very short time. It is not possible to say with any certainty at the moment when this will begin. Nevertheless it could be in a few days. *The mission that you have been assigned, is extraordinarily difficult. Operations must be so handled that in every circumstance our worst enemy, that is Stalin, must be prevented from seeing Berlin.*" [Author's emphasis].

. . . And then I asked Guderian for his general assessment of the situation as a whole. Up till now the armies of the British and the Americans had halted on the western bank of the Rhine. Guderian emphasized once again that our mission was to hold the Oder at all costs. The possibility that the defensive battle against the eastern enemy [Soviets] might have a successful outcome seemed, as far as he was concerned, to depend on the fact that on the Oder there was as regards the German disposition an unknown number of armored fighting vehicles, around about 850 (eight hundred and fifty). But in General Guderian's general disposition there seemed to be some kind of internal excitement. He sketched out the kind of resistance which he met in his cooperation with Hitler and he was so worked up that I had the impression that the cooperation between these two men would not last very much longer. It was in the most critical terms that he spoke out against the military leadership of the *Führer*, his willfulness, and his assessment of the situation, which seemed to be far removed from reality and rested only on fantastical suggestions.

[According to Heinrici, Guderian's exact words were as follows]:

"The way the war is being run is unbelievable. The Ardennes offensive was a complete error. I repeatedly begged Hitler on my knees to get our troops out of the Ardennes and put them on the East Front because I knew the Russians would attack any day. And because our *Panzer* troops were tied down in the West the whole Polish front collapsed. When finally we got them back from the West, they were sent to Plattensee in Hungary and there launched a perfectly useless attack—with no reason or purpose. In Kurland there are 18 divisions defending for nothing. They are needed here! It is impossible to work. Twice a day I have to drive from here to Hitler's bunker—it's impossible. Then you get held up for hours there. They spend hours discussing nothing. I can't get any work done anymore. I'm either on the road or listening to drivel in the bunker."

[Upon leaving Zossen, Heinrici drove to his new HQ in Birkenheim located in a wooded area some 7.5 kilometers away. There he met with Himmler and conducted an excruciatingly long change of command. Heinrici relates the initial handover as follows]:

Himmler greeted me with the observation that it was very difficult for him to give up his post. He was convinced, or so he believed, that the *Führer* had a new greater mission for him and that this would be incompatible with the leadership and activity of *Heeresgruppe* command.... And he believed that in order to introduce me to the situation of the *Heeresgruppe* in the best way possible then he would explain to me [the situation] from the point of view of events as they had developed after he had taken over the *Heeresgruppe*. Then he went to the telephone and allowed the newly appointed *Chef des Generalstabes*, General Kinzel, and *Oberst* Eismann to come in. The latter, Eismann, had been introduced as a General staff officer in February among a staff that was composed of only *SS* people and he had occupied the position of *la* (Chief of Operations). Himmler then ordered that a pile of maps should be brought in so that with his own hand he might show me what his operational decisions had been. This part of the *Heeresgruppe* history was extremely uninteresting for me. I wanted to know about the present situation and above all about the coming offensive operations in the area of Frankfurt a.d.O that were to be undertaken. But Himmler went inane on. With the greatest verbosity he went into his experiences in Pomerania and soon lost himself in details. The stenographer who was taking these observations down for the military files laid his pencil down after a short while because the dictation simply had no coherence whatsoever. After a quarter of an hour *General* Kinzel asked that he should be allowed to leave as he had urgent business and also after a short time *Oberst* Eismann left. Then Himmler went into long perorations that 'the General Staff was guilty for the loss of Pomerania. He had always been interfered with and hindered from Berlin and his, i.e. Himmler's views, had been set aside. It was for precisely this reason that his plans had been destroyed and that failure had ensued.

### **Heinrici's provides an assessment of the background leading to the Battle for Berlin and preparations to defend the Oder River line.**

After the great successes it achieved in Poland and the German eastern provinces, the 1945 Russian winter campaign came to a halt on the Oder River in the area Guben—Frankfurt—Küstrin—Freienwalde. North of this area, southeast of Stettin, German forces assembled to attack the Russian's Northern flank. [AN: Operation *Sonnenwende*]

Advancing fast to Germany's border, the Russian offensive came to a natural halt in the continuation of their attack that forced them to reassemble the troops, rehabilitate the mobile units, arrange supply, and prepare for action again. In addition, difficulties caused by the winter weather, and battles for fortresses fiercely defended by the Germans like Posen, and Kolberg, scattered the Russian units in depth. The fact that the Russian soldiers had not been given a rule of conduct in their behavior towards the German population also contributed to many units' disintegrating into marauding troops that stayed in the hinterland in order to loot, rape, and kill. The discipline of the Russian troops or their junior leaders could not be considered equal [to their German counterparts], and this disintegration weakened their fighting power to a great extent. Moreover, senior Russian commanders felt extremely threatened along their right flank, due to operations by the German forces southeastwards of Stettin, and therefore decided to eliminate the impending danger from Pomerania first, before continuing the attack across die Oder River.

This decision did not alter Russian efforts to secure jumping-off spots for the planned attack on Berlin from bridgeheads where they had already reached the Oder. Above all, it was essential to get hold of key crossing points across the Oder where railway tracks and roads

converged. The chief crossing points between the Neifie and Oder Rivers, and Freienwalde, were primarily Frankfurt and Küstrin. Stettin would follow later as a key target, after things had been settled in Pomerania. Following their usual tactics, the Russians performed no frontal attack on Küstrin and Frankfurt, but tried to isolate them by using a pincer attack. The frozen ice on the Oder at the beginning of February made those outflanking maneuvers easier. In this way, a bridgehead was formed north of Fürstenberg, a smaller one south of Frankfurt, and two bigger ones south and north of Küstrin. The fortress Küstrin was now only connected to the hinterland by a corridor through which ran the main railway line and road from Berlin to Küstrin.

When the Russians reached the Oder, there were hardly any German troops present to defend it, apart from the *Volkssturm* and the *Ersatzbataillonen* in the garrisons. An initial defense line was established along the Oder, followed by the defense of Küstrin and Frankfurt using retreating soldiers, remnants of German army units that had collapsed in Poland and Pomerania, lightly injured and recovered soldiers, soldiers from local military authorities, military hospitals, and even rear echelon military staff. *Wehrkreiskommando III* in Berlin and *Wehrkreiskommando II* in Stettin sent reinforcements from their replacement pools. With the help of these motley units, it was possible to organize an initial resistance against the Russian attempts to build bridgeheads on the western shore of the Oder. The Germans were successful in holding Frankfurt and the old town of Küstrin, while they lost the new town of Küstrin. With great efforts they succeeded in repulsing the attack of the Russians on both sides of the two towns to an extent that the Russians could not encircle them or reach the range of hills [AN: the Seelow Heights] situated on the western side of the *Oderbruch* flats. This range of hills averages 30 to 50 meters higher than the *Oderbruch* and, from there, one has a wide view over the land that lies east of it. Therefore, being in possession of these hills was of great importance, not only for the attacker, but also for the defender. Only when he gained this range of hills, would the attacker, who came from the east, be in a position to prevent the defender from observing his movements and concentrations in the *Oderbruch*, and from using artillery counter-battery fire. Yet, for the defender, the range of hills formed the backbone of the position from which he had to fight.

There was already a similar situation during the war with Russia, where the Germans succeeded in getting a dangerous situation back into balance by organizing resistance out of nothing. This had been during the battle near Moscow, when on 20 December 1941 in bypassing the right wing of the *4.Armee*, the Russians had threatened the city of Kaluga—one of the most important road intersections behind the German troops standing at the gates of Moscow. Bakers, butchers, soldiers from the rear echelons, security forces, and hospitalized soldiers threw themselves into the battle against the Russian outflanking troops who were loaded on sledges and motor vehicles. They brought them to a halt right in the middle of Kaluga and defended the deeply frozen river Oka on both sides of the city for five days and nights, until regular troops from the frontline came to help. Their strong will enabled them to turn things to success, although the situation had seemed to be a lost cause at the start.

The German attack on the Russian northern flank [AN: Operation *Sonnenwende*], that started from the area southeast of Stettin at the end of February 1945, failed. Pomerania had to be abandoned, and also the bridgehead had to be withdrawn, which to the east of Stettin had first been held by the *3.Panzer Armee* until the beginning of March. Now *Heeresgruppe Weichsel* was standing on the western shore of the Oder with all its forces, with its right flank being the point south of Fürstenberg, where the Neiße River flows into the Oder River, and the left flank being the Baltic Sea.

Only a few small bridgeheads on the eastern bank could be held. These were: the 'outskirts' of Frankfurt, which protected the remaining firm and broad road bridge across the

Oder, the 'old town' of Küstrin (situated between Warthe and Oder rivers), the bridgehead Zehden east of Freienwalde, and the bridgehead Pölitz, north of Lake Dammsche (Dammscher See).

The bridgehead Zehden protected the floodgate which regulated the water-level where the Finow and Hohenzollern Canals met the Oder. It also supported the left flank of the German positions that were situated south of it, near the western bank of the Oder against elevated observation from the north. The Pölitz bridgehead kept the enemy away from the hydro-electric station there, which despite of the severe damages caused to it by a British air attack was still working, if only in an extremely limited way. While the German positions between the Zehden bridgehead and the *Autobahn* south of Stettin were situated on the western bank of the western (far more narrow) arm of the Oder, south of the Stettin harbor area, there were advanced bridgeheads reaching the eastern arm of the Oder. This was necessary to keep the thickly vegetated area between both arms of the Oder south of Stettin under German control, as they could not be overlooked. Following the Russian habit to use forests, marsh, and bushes to infiltrate into the enemy's positions, they were constantly trying to secure this territory for themselves and kept on attacking it. Their intention was to use this area as a staging-point for their later attacks on Stettin.

The Russians tried over and over again to expand the crossings of Frankfurt, Küstrin and Stettin during the first three weeks of March. They were fully aware of the importance of these towns to continue their attacks on the western bank of the Oder. The other few crossings of the Oder were, apart from Schwedt, situated on second rate communication roads or railway tracks. If you wanted to maneuver with large amounts of troops on the western bank of the Oder, you had to ensure the three previously mentioned main crossings were in your possession. In Frankfurt the energetic commander, *Oberst* Bieler (who was later killed [ED: this was incorrect. Bieler survived the war]), managed in a few weeks to build a reliable defense force from scattered soldiers, *Volkssturm*, and the military hospitals etc., that with the help of *Wehrkreis III* grew to a size of eighteen *Bataillone*. With their help he again and again succeeded in repelling the Russian attacks close to southern Frankfurt. In Küstrin about eight thousand soldiers were standing under the command of *SS-Führer* Reinefarth, who was especially chosen by Hitler for this difficult post. These forces were defending the old town of Küstrin that was only attacked by weak Russian assaults. The enemy instead was trying to penetrate the access to the town from the south, from the Göritz bridgehead south of Küstrin. Here the *25. Panzergrenadier Division* was deployed in the general line Alt-Tucheband—Neu-Manschnow and with its routine security made all Russian attacks fail. In the shrub [low-lying vegetation] area south of Stettin, the *281. Infanterie Division* was positioned. It had remained there after the battles for the bridgeheads and was persistently defending this protective position. In difficult fighting in the woods it kept on repelling the invading enemy and prevented him from coming closer to the town. Outside these focal points of the battle there was relative calmness on the front of *Heeresgruppe Weichsel* in the first weeks of March. There were only patrols and probing activity going on here, which the Russians used to find out where the German positions were running. The more the Oder flooded due to the start of the spring thaw in the Silesian mountains, the more this patrol activity waned. Nevertheless, some continuous small battles for the Reitwein Spur, south of Reitwein, are to be mentioned. The enemy was particularly disturbed by this higher elevation as it allowed observation into the Göritz bridgehead from above. The Reitwein Spur was lost only at the end of March, and was never taken back by the Germans.

In these weeks of March the ice on the Oder had broken. The river became a torrential stream that was in flood. As in every spring, the flats near Küstrin between the Oder and the Warthe, were flooded in most parts. From the Zehden bridgehead to Lake Dammsche near

Stettin, the entire flats of the Oder formed one united lake of 3 kilometers in breadth that was cut through by the western and eastern arms of the Oder like ditches. Their currents were so strong that a person swimming could not cope with them. The water-level on the flooded meadows of the flats reached about 1 meter.

The part of the Oder that was under the control of the *Heeresgruppe* stretched over from the mouth of the Neiße River to the Baltic Sea. In the south it was defended by the *9.Armee*, in the north by the *3.Panzer Armee*.

The natural borderline between both armies was the Finow Canal between Liebenwalde and Niederfinow, east of Eberswalde.

### **Heinrici describes the dispositions of his two armies, the 3rd Panzer under General Hasso von Manteuffel and the 9th Army under General Theodor Busse.**

Apart from the fortress garrisons of Frankfurt and Küstrin, the *9.Armee* had ten divisions divided into three corps that were employed at the front.

Two *Korps* of the *3. Panzer Armee* were located at the front, and as far as the GHQ was concerned, the coastal *Festung* Swinemünde as well. Later the fortress became more and more independent. The troops of the *3.Panzer Armee* were a mixture of *Volkssturm* and *Sicherung* [Security] *Divisions*, interspersed with French, Russian and Latvian formations of volunteers [AN: from the *Waffen-SS*]. It was only near the *Autobahn* south of Stettin, in the shrub land south of the mentioned town, and near Pölitz, where firmer formations were standing; that is to say the newly formed *1.Marine Division*, which consisted of naval soldiers on the *Autobahn*, and near Stettin was the *281.Division*, which had been mentioned earlier.

Behind the *Heeresgruppe* Front there were: At the utmost right wing:

- Two Russian divisions of volunteers of the Vlasov Army, which were not completely armed and, as such were not regarded as available for commitment.

In the Schorfheide (forest) around Karin hall [AN: Goring's castle and private grounds]:

- Cadres of two *Luftwaffe Fallschirmjäger* Divisions, which were both in the process of reorganization.

Southwest of Stettin:

- Remnants of the *5.Jäger-Division*, which had been ferried across from East Prussia to Swinemünde and had to be reorganized and newly equipped as well.

Moreover there were:

Northwest of Frankfurt:

- Two *SS Panzer Divisions* and one *Panzer Grenadier Division*.

Near Miiincheberg:

- Two *SS Panzer Divisions*, and the reinforced *Regiment Skorzeny* (very well equipped, armored special troop [EN: This unit was called *1001 Nächte*, or 1001 Nights).

Near Joachimsthal:

- One newly reorganized *Panzer Grenadier Division* (by combining the rest of two divisions). This group of mobile forces was under the command of the *XXXIX. Panzer Korps*, led by the *General der Panzertruppen* Karl Decker.

Furthermore, west of Angermünde there were:

- Two *SS Panzergrenadier Divisions*, (German natives from the Netherlands and Norway), and parts of the volunteer French Walloon division. These forces were subordinated to the *III.(germanische) SS Pz.Korps* led by *Generalleutnant* Martin Unrein. [EN: Unrein would be replaced by SS-General Felix Steiner on 6 March 1945. Unrein would go on to command the *Clausewitz Panzer Division* in its desperate attack south to relieve the *11. Armee* in the Harz Mountains].

In the Randow marshland (halfway between the lower Oder and the Ucker) was an entrenched Latvian volunteer division [*15.SS-Lett. Nr. 1*], which was not regarded as combat ready. In addition there were three assault gun brigades.

The artillery equipment of the units of both armies was completely non-uniform. It is impossible to name exact numbers now, because there is no documentation of this. Some of the divisions had lost their artillery in the course of the battles in January/February and could only partly be equipped with it again. According to estimations made after the war the artillery of the front divisions of the *9.Armee* consisted of about 228 light and 84 heavy guns. Besides there was the *Volksartillerie Korps* with 18 light, 10 heavy, and four [super-heavy railway] guns standing in the *9.Armee* sector. In addition to this, there were several hundred light and heavy anti-aircraft guns employed in the *9.Armee* sector, but their number cannot be given.

Except for the *1.Marine Division* and the *281.Division*, the units of the *3.Panzer Armee* had nearly no normal artillery. To compensate for missing batteries, anti-aircraft guns were used, which were taken from the well-equipped anti-aircraft defenses of Stettin and Pölitz. There had been about 600 to 700 anti-aircraft guns as far as I remember. However, most of them had to be taken off their mounts to be made temporarily mobile. Their operating crew had only been instructed to fight against air targets, not against ground targets. They did not have the equipment for observation nor signal communication platoons crucial to engaging ground targets. In addition, the extended trajectory of the guns made it impossible to use them in the same way as artillery used against ground targets.

Under these circumstances the anti-aircraft guns could not be regarded as adequate replacements for the artillery. It has to be stressed though, that they made a genuine effort to solve the tasks unusual for them and that they effectively supported the *3. Panzer Armee* in its fight for the Oder, inasmuch as this was possible.

The *9.Armee* divisions that were standing at the Front were almost all recently reorganized—except for the *169.Division*. Their units were made of replacements. *Volkssturm* had been brought in to bring the units up to strength, and recovered subordinated commanders and enlisted personnel were allotted to them to serve as cadre with combat experience. The cohesion of these units was relatively strong, but it was uncertain whether they would be able to withstand a large-scale attack. There was a huge lack of basic weapons in their authorized allotment of equipment. The *9.Armee* did its best to increase the level of training in these formations, thereby reducing tactical inefficiencies.

As mentioned, the *3.Panzer Armee* had no regular units apart from the *1.Marine Division*, the *281.Division* and the *610.Sicherungs Division*. The *1.Marine Division* had also been recently formed and its level of training was not equal to that of war-experienced combat divisions. For the most part the *610.Sicherungs Division* consisted of elderly police forces. The *Volkssturm* that was located in the area of the *3. Panzer Armee* had, first of all, been allocated to makeshift units, whose strength varied depending on the breadth of their defense area. *Festung* Stettin—with a

defensive zone amounting to more than 40 kilometers—had a garrison of six battalions!

Along with the Luftwaffe ground crew garrison situated in *Festung Swinemünde*, there were about 20,000 *Kriegsmarine* [sailors] who were subordinated to a *Kriegsmarine* commander of the fortress. Besides this *Kriegsmarine* commander, who was responsible for the defense against attacks from the sea, there was a *Wehrmacht* commander at the fortress who was responsible for the defense against attacks from land. Subordinated to this commander were:

The *3.Marine Division*: On the island of Wollin; a recent reorganization consisting of young and fresh sailors, however lacking in their level of training; it had only two batteries of artillery.

The *Ersatz* division of Wehrkreis II (Stettin) [AN: *402.Ausbildungs-Division*]: On the island of Usedom. It was a big recruiting depot without heavy arms and without artillery. The training of the enlisted personnel consisting of 18 and 19 year-olds had only just begun. They only had odd heavy infantry arms.

The *Heeresgruppe* knew that apart from the mentioned troops there were lots of other units of the *Ersatz-Heer*, schools etc., in the rear zone of their area. These were parts of the *Ersatz-Heer* that after 20 July 1944 had been subordinated to the *Reichsfuhrer-SS* Heinrich Himmler. On several occasions the *Heeresgruppe* sent several requests to *Feldmarschall* Wilhelm Keitel to have these forces subordinated under its command in order to use them for the defense of the Oder, but these requests were rejected with considerable harshness, for a man like Himmler could not be restrained in his power. Moreover, it became known from hearsay that there were many *Luftwaffe* and SS formations in the area between Berlin and the Baltic Sea, but neither the *Reichsmarschall* Hermann Goring nor the *Reichsfuhrer-SS* could give the *Heeresgruppe* any binding information on this. They deliberately used these tactics to veil the strength of their 'powerbase' [Hausmacht] from the *Heeresgruppe* and from Hitler's Headquarters.

A special military policy was also pursued by the *Reichsverteidigungskommissare* *Gauleiter*. They had special plans for the defense of the territories where they were in charge. They stockpiled weapons and secured *Volkssturm* battalions for themselves. Besides that they were making *Werwolf* preparations, which they kept "top secret" from the *Heeresgruppe*, as they were doing with all their military preparations. The *Heeresgruppe* learned about these wheeling and dealings only by chance.

One can see the irresponsible way in which these party-linked authorities used the scarce supplies from the fact that *Reichsmarschall* Goring was in a position to supply his *Fallschirmjäger* divisions near Karin hall with heavy arms 50% above their authorized strength. The front divisions of the *9.Armee* had a maximum of 70% of these, and the *Volkssturm* units of the *3. Panzer Armee* had deplorable infantry equipment. They had no field kitchens, no vehicles, no entrenching tools, no means of signal communication; the amount of heavy infantry weapons was, in part, alarmingly low.

With regards to the stock of ammunition, the situation was tense, but can still be described as sufficient. Artillery ammunition had to be economized; only the anti-aircraft artillery had reasonable supplies. A major concern was the fuel for motor vehicles and for aircraft. For the latter—at the beginning of the defensive battle in mid-April there were about three hundred bomber aircraft available for employment—there was little more than one daily

ration of fuel left.

This description of the state of the troops of *Heeresgruppe Weichsel* has been given more detail in order to illustrate their defensive power at that time. It seemed to be necessary to show this clearly, so that the later course of the battle could be assessed and the performance of the troops could be judged accordingly. It has already been mentioned that the obstacle that was formed by the Oder River played a very important role in considerably increasing the defensive resistance of these insufficient troops.

### **Heinrici describes his understanding of the Soviet dispositions and order of battle.**

There are no records left about the size and strength of the Russian forces. According to a newspaper article Marshal Zhukov said in a lecture that he had 22,000 guns and mortars, 4,000 tanks and 5,000 airplanes at his disposal for the attack on Berlin. I can tell from my memory that in the sector of Küstrin two Russian tank armies and several independent armored corps were attacking along with about 50 infantry divisions. In the sector of the *3. Panzer Armee* at least two Russian armored corps appeared later. Besides these armored units several assault gun brigades were fighting on the Russian side. During the battle a third Russian tank army advanced through the sector of the southern neighbor of *Heeresgruppe Weichsel* from Cottbus via Zossen—Luckenwalde to Berlin.

One look at the map revealed, without a need for further consideration, that the Russian attack on Berlin, which was imminent and nobody doubted, had to be expected in the sector of *Heeresgruppe Weichsel* with the main axis of advance coming from the area Frankfurt-an-der-Oder—Küstrin—Freienwalde, because the two major bridgeheads near Küstrin and the bridgeheads near Frankfurt-an-der-Oder formed a natural springboard on the western bank of the Oder River. From here, all *Autobahns* led concentrically to Berlin. After having crossed the Oder, there were no other natural obstacles that could hinder someone from advancing to the capital of the *Reich*. The hilly landscape between the Oder and Berlin, with its fairly dry ground consisting of sand and clay, was ideal for using tanks, whereas the situation was completely different in the sector of the *3. Panzer Armee* between Freienwalde and Stettin. First of all, there was the flooding of the Oder that formed an extraordinarily great obstacle. West of the river there were some areas formed by small rivers, lakes and boggy meadows that could not be underestimated and both led to a marshy and barely-usable woodland south of the Stettin lagoon (Stettiner *Haffi*, the Randow marshland and the Ucker river in the course of the line Stegelitz—Prenzlau—Pasewalk—Ockermünde. West of these sectors followed the area of the Mecklenburg Lakes (Mecklenburger Seenplatte) with their numerous larger and smaller stretches of water in the area Gransee—Neustrelitz—Neubrandenburg. The most southern part of the army's sector had less water but a huge forest, the so-called Schorfheide, which extended itself to the west into new endless forestland, marking its boundary. Consequently, the land between the Hohenzollern Canal and the Baltic Sea was far more difficult for operations than the area of the *9. Armee* south of it.

**Heinrici explains Operation *Bumerang* (Boomerang), a counterattack designed to wipe out the growing Soviet bridgeheads around Küstrin. The plan called for an attack from the Frankfurt/Oder bridgehead to advance up the eastern bank of the Oder to link up with the Küstrin bridgehead.**

[In a post-war interview, Heinrici, quotes Guderian's plan for *Bumerang* during their initial meeting at Zossen]

"... And at the same time you have been assigned a limited offensive undertaking. You see here on this map on both sides of Küstrin are two Russian bridgeheads over the Oder. The southern one is stacked high with Russian gun batteries. According to our air reconnaissance we reckon on something from six to eight hundred (600-800). If this mass of artillery were to open fire they would smash through our positions within a few hours. We are no longer in a position to assault this artillery mass with our *Luftwaffe* and our artillery can simply promise no success by counter-operations and therefore there is nothing else for it but that we should assault this bridgehead and take it out. The plan is that we should employ the bridgehead which is available to us which is the one by Frankfurt-an-der-Oder. Five divisions should be therefore moved to the east and then should swing to the north. The operation is by no means simple but it is the only possibility we have in order to remove the threat to us that comes from these bridgeheads. I do not know exactly what date has been fixed for the operation but I don't think I am making a mistake when I say that it is possibly early in the morning, or at the very latest the day after tomorrow. Now I am going to Berlin in order to have a conference with the *Führer*. Come with me and then you can report on the situation to him i.e. to Hitler, himself."

One glance at the map showed me that this operation, which had been planned at least in the manner in which it had been conceived here, was in fact extremely difficult and had scarcely any chance of success. It was quite impossible that five divisions should be collected into a narrow bridgehead on the eastern bank of the Oder. It would be necessary to have some previously prepared bridges which could be used during the course of the operation. But these bridges were under the fire of Russian guns. I gave voice therefore to my reservations over this operation as planned and I said to Guderian that on my next report to Hitler I would wish to be rid of it. If in a few hours the troops which had been entrusted to me were to begin so difficult an assignment then it would be necessary that I should look at the whole basis of the location and of their disposition. This seemed to me much more important than reporting to the *Führer*, which seemed to be merely of a kind of formal nature and really could bring nothing important in its train.

[Heinrici explains the coordination necessary to plan for *Bumerang*, and the disastrous consequences thereof; from his post-war interview]

In mid-March air reconnaissance and observation noticed that the Russians were increasingly strengthening the occupation of their bridgeheads on both sides of Küstrin. It could be seen clearly that the opponent was forming the point of main effort for the attack

[*Angriffsschwerpunkte*] here. Traffic from the east into the bridgeheads increased, mainly into the bridgehead of Göritz. Several bridge constructions, which had been started earlier on, were being continued with increased eagerness. Especially in the bridgehead south of Küstrin the number of batteries of the enemy was growing to an unusual size. Here artillery positions accumulated west as well as east of the Oder. Photographs taken from the air revealed that the territory looked like a honeycomb consisting of uncountable cells.

This massing of artillery would certainly become a strong danger for the defenders of the German positions opposite in the forthcoming attack, but the *Heeresgruppe* did not see any possibility for destroying this host of battery positions before the start of the Russian offensive. The German artillery did not have enough guns or ammunition for this mission. It was simply unable to carry out such a task and the German *Luftwaffe* was far too weak, and in addition, was operationally restricted by the extreme lack of fuel. What could be done to eliminate this dangerous artillery nest and to prevent it from leveling out the German positions and destroying their garrisons before the start of the assault of the Russian infantry?

As there was not sufficient technical equipment available to be successful, Hitler and his headquarters made the decision to clear the bridgehead south of Küstrin with an attack. However, the commander in chief of the *9.Armee* warned against this, for the Russians had securely entrenched themselves. It was doubtful if the front divisions, which had little combat experience, could cope with this difficult task. The commander in chief of the *9.Armee* therefore proposed to attack the bridgehead Zellin, located north of Küstrin, between Kienitz and Güstebiese, which was smaller in depth and contained [fewer enemy soldiers] in contrast to the southern bridgehead. Therefore, it seemed easier to be successful at this point and, although the immense massing of Russian artillery south of Küstrin could not be eliminated by this, the situation of the *9.Armee* should gain a considerable advantage by taking back the Oder bank north of Küstrin. Success in this operation would free up reserves that could be deployed for the defense of the positions south of Küstrin. However, Hitler decisively rejected this proposal. He insisted on the demand to break up the southern bridgehead. Since a frontal attack was not likely to be successful because of the strength and size of the opponent, he made the proposal to start the German attack from the small bridgehead in the suburban part of Frankfurt. Under cover of the Reppen Forest to the east, assault troops should advance from the bridgehead Frankfurt via Göritz to Küstrin, in this way outflank the Russian bridgehead and cut it off.

This avenue of approach, however, caused severe problems. The bridgehead Frankfurt was far too small to support the required assault troops, the size of which was calculated as five divisions. With considerable trouble it might have been possible to assemble between one and one and half divisions in it, but never the vehicles that belonged to these units, for the bridgehead was narrowly built up urban terrain with rather small streets going through it. There was only one firm—and admittedly broad—bridge across the Oder on this point, which was within the range of the enemy's guns and could be looked at from the higher enemy positions situated on the eastern bank of the river. It was planned to build a pontoon bridge as an auxiliary bridge north of the main bridge during the attack, but until this was finished, all motorized traffic and the divisions that could not be assembled in the bridgehead itself had to be led over this existing bridge. Four divisions were meant to be deployed from this defile, after having crossed the river one after the other; after having broken through the enemy's positions, they would have to move 20 kilometers from Frankfurt to Küstrin. Even if they met with light resistance immediately after the successful breakthrough, very soon the arrival of new, strong enemy forces had to be expected; the attacking German troops would then face them with the Oder River on their flank

and rear. There were great numbers of Russian forces located in the area southeast of Küstrin that were trained for the imminent offensive.

Hitler was informed about the difficulties of the attack on the part of the *9.Armee*. He recognized them, but nevertheless declared that the undertaking promised to be successful, because the enemy would not expect an attack from this direction in view of the difficulties regarding this approach, and would therefore be doubly surprised by it. At least the Chief of General Staff, *General der Infanterie* Hans Krebs, was sent to Frankfurt to assess the possibilities of an attack. He declared the operation to be practicable. For this reason the *9.Armee* was instructed to prepare for it.

In order to carry out such a difficult operation with so far-reaching aims, the best divisions had to be used. With great inner opposition the *9.Armee* decided to take away the *25.Panzergranadier Division*, which so far had successfully defended the corridor to Küstrin, from their current position and deploy it in the Frankfurt attack. The enemy soon found out about this change in the German position. Different behavior and probably also the bustle during the relief made it evident for them that the *25.Panzergranadier Division* had been replaced by other forces. Without hesitation, the Russians used this opportunity and took advantage of the new situation. On 22 March the Russians attacked the *20.Panzergranadier Division*, which had taken over the position of the *25.Panzergranadier Division*, penetrated the corridor to Küstrin and cut it off from its connection with the west. The fortress was now encircled by the Russians. At the time, this message reached *Heeresgruppe Weichsel* on 22 March around 1800, [when] the transition of command was being conducted [AN: between Heinrici and Himmler].

**With *Bumerang* cancelled due to the Soviet action that cut off Küstrin, Heinrici, having just assumed command of Army Group Vistula describes efforts to relieve the now beleaguered garrison of the fortress.**

[First Attempt to Relieve Küstrin]

*Generaloberst* Heinrici now replaced Himmler as the new commander-in-chief. [During the change of command] the *9.Armee* added to the previous information on the incidents around Küstrin that it had immediately started preparing for an attack to free [the fortress]. The army redeployed the forces which had been in this area before—namely the *20.Panzergranadier Division*, reinforced by a panzer division [*Pz.Div.Müncheberg*] for the counter-attack—in order to be able to carry out this attack as soon as possible, before the enemy could settle down for defense in his new positions.

The attack was started on the morning of [23] March under the leadership of the *XXXIX.Panzer Korps*. It began the frontal attack from the line Alt-Tucheband—Golzow in the direction of Küstrin. The panzers broke through the line of the enemy's infantry, and the panzergranadiers of the *20.Panzergranadier Division*, [AN: the *25.Pz. Gren.Div.* was responsible for the main attack east, the *20.Pz.Gren.Div.* did not participate in the first relief attempt] who were to follow after the initial success, were stopped not far in front of their own line by the severe defensive fire of the Russians, who immediately deployed all their reserves. The attack had to be stopped. The situation of the defenders who were encircled in the old town of Küstrin soon worsened after this failure. The enemy started to penetrate into the western suburbs of

Küstrin—Neubleyen and Kietz—and thus narrowed down the defensive ring [AN: Two panzergrenadier battalions of *Miincheberg* were cut off in the attack and remained with the garrison]. The heaviest artillery fire and ceaseless air raids wore down the power of resistance of the *Kampfgruppe* that was crowded together in the old town. The old casemates of the fortifications dating back to the time of Frederick the Great, in which they tried to find shelter, did not withstand the fire of shells and aircraft bombs. Heavy losses were suffered, and the end of this desperate battle was in sight.

Hitler was disappointed and at the same time indignant about the failure of this attack to free Küstrin. In absence of the commander-in-chief of the *Heeresgruppe* he sent for the commander-in-chief of the *9.Arme*e and presented him with heavy accusations. He demanded that the attack be repeated as soon as possible, to restore the connection to Küstrin, and after the fortress would have been freed, to further defend it. This was not only a matter of prestige, but also the result of factual considerations. Along the way between Frankfurt and the railway Wriezen — Königsberg/Nm. there was not one firm crossing over the Oder River except for the one in Küstrin. Many square kilometers of the surrounding area of the town—at the confluence of the Warthe and the Oder—were flooded. So for the enemy, being in possession of Küstrin with its firm route through the flood area made it significantly easier to prepare for the later large-scale attack. On the other hand, the *Heeresgruppe* could draw the conclusion from the messages it received about the tactical situation of the encircled fortress and the prevailing conditions that the defensive battle of the *Kampfgruppe* would very soon come to an end with the destruction of the 8,000 encircled German soldiers and military equipment that had been stockpiled in the town. It would make little difference for the development of the situation on the whole if Küstrin was taken over by the Russians one or two days earlier as a result of the escape of the defenders or shortly afterwards through the extermination of the *Kampfgruppe*, but these soldiers would be a welcome reinforcement for the German defense, if they were rescued.

On 24 March 1945 a battle pause was called by the *XXXIX. Pz.Korps* west of Küstrin. The question to be decided was that of which operations should be continued in the future? Should the *HKL* [EN: Hauptkampflinie, or main line of resistance] line be defended in the future? Should the troops at Küstrin continue to defend their positions or should they try to break out? Or, should we attempt to re-establish contact with Küstrin? Küstrin is undoubtedly a place with special meaning for the enemy as a point to cross over the Oder River, as an important road junction, and as an endpoint for the rail line. On the other hand, it is a certainty that a breakthrough attack from our current positions to Küstrin would be a tough battle with high casualties, especially since the few good divisions that the *Heeresgruppe* owns would be newly decimated, and that in the case that the attack was successful, a positional point would have been created which would be more difficult to defend. More thoughts that would give me pause were that the new battle around Küstrin would have a negative impact upon the already bad ammunition supply situation and that we would lose massive amounts of fuel. These are the reasons that have led me to decide not to order a new attack on Küstrin. These concerns should not only be considered from this point of view, but also from the point of view of the efforts to support the surrounded units, or efforts to attack the enemy at a particular point in order to make it more difficult to cross, or prepare to cross the Oder. No, the basis for our preparations and negotiations has to be getting the defense ready for the future Russian major attack, which will without a doubt be carried out with unusually great ferocity and power. Every weakening of our own combat power, whether it be through personnel or material losses, for example a reduction in our ammunition and fuel reserves, every worsening of the defensive capabilities of our position

must therefore be avoided. From this point of view, I think it would be best to use a limited thrust in order to get the defenders of Küstrin out of their fortifications and back to our positions, staying in our current positions while improving them in depth, and also incorporating the divisions that we picked up in the last battle into our ranks, ensuring that they are battle ready. Simultaneously, the small enemy bridgehead north-west of Küstrin by Kienitz and Groß Neuendorf should be deliberately attacked and removed, because this bridgehead creates a very real threat to the north flank of our positions west of Küstrin. For the enemy it would be an advantageous jumping off point for advancing through Wriezen, Strausberg, and onward in the direction of Berlin.

During a conversation, that I had in the morning of 25 March 1945 at XXXIX. *Panzer Korps* with the Commander 9. *Armee*, *General* Busse, he expressed the same point of view (as I explained in the preceding paragraphs). He added that if the attack against Küstrin was successful, there were many more troops there that could be used to strengthen our planned positions, and that could free up at least one more division to be deployed for future operations. He also had a particular concern that the use of artillery to support the attack could lead to a drastic reduction in our current ammunition supplies that would become essential for the defense's later operations.

Afterward, I drove to Berlin, asked for an audience with the *Fuhrer*, and in a meeting prior to the audience expressed my views to *General* Krebs, who represented *Generaloberst* Guderian. *General* Krebs acknowledged the disadvantages that enlarging the positions through the attack on Küstrin would bring with it. But he also made the counterpoint that Küstrin was such an important jump-off point for the enemy's attack preparations that we could under no circumstances leave it in enemy hands, without first doing our utmost to bring it back into our lines. He also saw in the possible destruction of further enemy divisions a great effect on the combat power of the opposition. This reason alone was enough to justify execution of the attack. Krebs also thought that a resounding defeat of the enemy would have a negative effect on their morale (24-25 March), that if another attack followed the first, it would be of so great an impact that it would substantially influence their preparations for an attack on Berlin in the sense that this would cause them to wait for further reinforcement and cause them to delay the attack significantly. His position was that this attack to reestablish contact with Küstrin must occur.

Later, I presented the attack plans to the *Fuhrer* and explained to him the tactical disadvantages that would result west of Küstrin because of our planned attack. I never got the chance to explain further about the disadvantageous impacts that it would have on the reconstitution of our troops and ammunition situation, because the *Fuhrer* interrupted me and said:

"Since we find ourselves in a totally defensive situation, the enemy has the possibility to build centers of gravity whenever and wherever they want and can therefore conduct successful attacks at will. Wherever it is possible, we must grab the opportunity to seize the initiative for ourselves. It is an intolerable condition that the enemy incurs no risk in leaving wide stretches of his front uncovered in order to concentrate his forces where he thinks we might attack. As a result, the following situation always develops during our defensive battles: the superior advantage of our opponents achieve breakthroughs. In counter-attacks or in order to seal off the position, we will deploy our reserves. They are unable to break through the enemy positions because they [the Soviets] are always stronger than them. The result is that they cannot be withdrawn from the front, but have to remain in their positions. For this reason, after a few days they are exhausted and new

reserves are called in to take their place. These defensive maneuvers never achieve their desired purpose. The enemy, who always has more forces at his disposal than we do, eventually pushes through and then we have suffered a defeat. Therefore we must deal with these situations in a different manner; we must attack their forces before they have achieved the concentrated force to attack. I would submit that we should not take the view to wait passively for the enemy to attack."

I recommended that we queue up another separate attack instead of the planned attack in the direction of Küstrin, which will once again go against the strength of the enemy. Success attacking the bridgehead of the enemy that is located northwest of Küstrin in the vicinity of Kienitz and Groß Neuendorf is possible with the minimum application of resources. This bridgehead becomes more dangerous for us the further we move our positions in the direction of Küstrin. It is at this time still thinly occupied, which gives the impression of an easy success. The Oder's bank can again be won, and forces could be saved for the main defensive line. The short-term attack goal fits with the training and capabilities of our troops. They are currently organized and positioned to conduct this attack without any problems and without great difficulty. I also see in the attack on this bridgehead the possibility to undertake an operation that would substantially improve our tactical situation that can be undertaken quickly and is well within the capabilities of our troops. The *Filhrer* answered that he allowed that all that had been said was true; the success of this attack would hamper the opposition, but not enough in the preparations for his major attack. He, the *Fiihrer*, didn't think it was enough to execute the attack with three divisions; the enemy must be attacked where he is strongest, and that would be in the area south of Küstrin. If and when the attack can achieve the goal of destroying the advancing Soviet forces, especially the artillery, then it could be considered a success that would have a great impact on the enemy's preparations for their great assault. Also, he was convinced that we would be occupying disadvantageous terrain in the vicinity of Kienitz and Groß Neuendorf. The west bank of the Oder there is lower than the east bank, which can be watched over from the heights of the Neumuehl forest. It was possible that we would be unable to hold the west bank for very long before we would be shot out of there by the Soviets. The enemy had been successful at that position on the Oder crossing before, and would succeed again if he came with enough forces. He [Hitler] envisioned an attack not on Kienitz and Groß Neuendorf, which would have to be regrettably postponed, but rather an important attack from the bridgehead of Frankfurt north toward Küstrin. Whether this attack would end at Küstrin or continue to the north would remain to be seen, depending on conditions on the ground during the battle. The greatest importance was attached to cutting off the enemy forces that were currently at the bridgehead of Lebus and were preparing to march north. They had already amassed considerable strength and would, when they were destroyed, create a significant hole in the enemy's attack plans. He admitted that this was a risky operation, but if it was carried out with an important belief in its success and especially with the element of surprise, then it had to work, because the enemy was not expecting an attack from this side. An important detail in the execution of this operation would be that forces advancing from Frankfurt would need to drive as far as possible through the *Stadtforst* to the east in the direction of Reppen. In conclusion, he felt that it was important that this attack from the bridgehead at Frankfurt advanced at least as far as Küstrin. The stipulation for the maneuver to be considered a complete success was that the lines of communication west of the Oder, over Gorgast and Genschmar to Küstrin, would be reestablished. Only then could the two points of attack be closed together. For these reasons he wanted the next named attack to be

carried out before the planned attack from Frankfurt. If it succeeded, it was to be expected that we would have won a postponement of the heavy assault on Berlin by 14 days or maybe even longer. This would have been (for him) a meaningful success, which would give him time to deploy more weapons that were just being produced. Even if the attack from Frankfurt did not fully break through to Küstrin, it would still be a great success if the bridgehead Lebus and the attack-ready enemy forces located just to the north were defeated. In this case, the possibility of moving the positions closer to Küstrin would have been up in the air. It could be considered later, shortly before the enemy launched his great attack, whether or not the positions in Küstrin should be reincorporated in to the main battle lines if it would have a momentary impact on the current situation.

#### [Second Attempt to Relieve Küstrin]

The *Heeresgruppe* was hesitating to use up the forces of the divisions that had been saved as a reserve in an attack to free the fortress, with an uncertain outcome, at this early point rather than to keep them in reserve for the imminent decisive battle for Berlin. After all that had happened it was likely that the enemy, who received a warning by the failed counter-attack, would do everything he could to fight back a repeated counter-attack and that the battle would be hard. All these reasons that the *Heeresgruppe* brought up against a second attack toward Küstrin were not accepted in Hitler's headquarters. Hitler gave orders to attack the town and forbade the *Kampfgruppe* to escape to the west.

To carry out this attack the *9.Armee* had to use units which had been assembled for the planned attack from the bridgehead Frankfurt. Hitler stuck firmly to this plan. After freeing Küstrin an attack should be started from Frankfurt. Now that parts of the divisions needed for this were also indispensable for the attack on Küstrin, he had no choice but to postpone the attack from Frankfurt.

Two panzergrenadier divisions, one panzer division and the very strong *Sonder-Regiment Skorzeny* [*'1001 Nächte' Kampfgruppe*] were employed for the attack: weaker forces were to make a frontal attack on the main road to Küstrin aimed at holding the enemy in place; the point of main effort was planned at the northern wing of the attack group, in order to break through to Küstrin coming in a wide movement north-west through the open territory south of Genschmar.

The second attack to relieve Küstrin was carried out on [27] March. After a concentrated artillery preparation supported by *Luftwaffe* attacks, the German panzers, which advanced south of Genschmar, almost reached the north-west suburbs of Küstrin. In spite of all fire support the panzergrenadiers once again fell behind them on the completely flat terrain that offered no shelter and could not occupy the scattered isolated farms south of Genschmar, from which the Russians defended themselves with desperate resistance. Shortly after the start of the battle, the enemy brought up reserves coming from Göritz in a long motorized column heading for Manschnow. They intervened in the battle by counter-attacking from the south. The German attack, which had made considerable progress during the first hours, grew weary and was finally stopped by the counter-attack of the defense. By the afternoon the panzergrenadiers began to withdraw to their lines of departure, unit by unit, as they were suffering heavy losses in the open terrain. Under these circumstances the panzers were left to fend for themselves and were also forced to withdraw from action. Not only did the second attempt to relieve Küstrin fail, but the resistance of the fortress *Kampfgruppe* collapsed in the face of the failed attempt to free them. Although Hitler himself signed more than one order demanding that the garrison of Küstrin stay

there until the last man was killed, the commander of the fortress, *SS-Obergruppenführer* Heinz Reinefarth, gave up and together with parts of the *Kampfgruppe* tried to fight his way through to the west during the night of 29-30 March. 800 men, more or less without weapons, with shattered morale and unfit for fighting, reached the German lines. By Hitler's order Reinefarth was immediately taken into custody to be sentenced [EN: Reinefarth not only avoided prosecution, but retained command of the survivors of the Festung. He survived the war]. At this point Küstrin was lost once and for all.

At this time the battles in this sector of the front came to an end. Cleverly taking advantage of the weak position that the German defense found itself in as a consequence of the relief of the *25.Panzergranadier Division*, the Russians had succeeded in gaining possession of the most important crossing over the Oder, which they had unsuccessfully been trying to take for nearly two months. On the German side, this success of the Russians had considerably worsened the situation in the middle of the *9.Armee*. Not only had they lost the fortress and the crossing over the Oder, but also forces equivalent in size to a division and a lot of material. Moreover, the battles to relieve Küstrin had severely affected some of the panzer and other divisions that were urgently needed for the main battle. As had happened many times during the whole war, Hitler had turned down all well-meant advice from the responsible commanders. The consequence was a serious weakening of the size of the German defense on the Oder, for the enemy now had managed to enlarge the two bridgeheads south and north of Küstrin to a wide starting position for his intended attacks. From Lebus to Güstebiese he was standing in a closed front on the western bank of the Oder, whereas on the German side the defense in the sector Alt-Tucheband—Golzow had to be completely reorganized.

### **Heinrici goes on to explain how the Soviet forces eliminated German bridgeheads in anticipation of their own offensive.**

In the days between 28-30 March the enemy started to eliminate the remaining bridgeheads on the eastern bank of the Oder that were still held by the Germans. In preparation for his later large-scale attack he wanted to secure complete freedom of action for himself. First of all, he attacked the bridgehead Zehden quite surprisingly with tanks. Under cover of heavy artillery fire he cleared ways through the minefields that protected the bridgehead. Through these passages the tanks moved forward and were not stopped by the strong anti-aircraft defense, which had been built up in the bridgehead (22 8.8cm anti-aircraft guns) and evidently failed. The garrison of the bridgehead, consisting of about three battalions, was driven back to the banks of the Oder and — as there was no solid connection from the bridgehead to the western bank of the Oder—had to rescue itself swimming or with the help of small boats. Only a fraction of the soldiers could escape over the Oder.

A little while after the attack on the bridgehead Zehden, the enemy also attacked the bridgehead Pölitz. Because of the wet and difficult terrain in which this bridgehead was situated, the Russians could only advance slowly and with much difficulty. When the situation was starting to get dangerous for the defenders of the bridgehead, which was slowly getting pushed together, the *Heeresgruppe*—on its own responsibility—gave the order to abandon the bridgehead. The troops and the equipment were rescued over the course of two nights by crossing the river with boats and ferries. Although the enemy was now standing on the eastern side of the river right across from the hydro-generation station, the station was still working at the instigation of its unusually forceful and brave manager. Until it was taken by the enemy, it

still produced some petrol, however little it may have been. In these days the enemy also launched new attacks on the forest very near the south-east of Stettin. They were repelled in fierce engagements by the *281.Division*. This advanced position of the German forces, which was of immense importance for the defense of Stettin, was held.

By 30 March the enemy had gained all the initial positions for the major attack on Berlin he could have counted on with regards to the current situation, except for the territory south of Stettin. On the other hand his intention had probably been to also win the dominating range of hills west of the Oder flats near Seelow by acting quickly after isolating Küstrin, but this hope had been destroyed by the counter-attacks of the *9.Armee* on 24 and 28 March. Thus, these attacks had at least brought one benefit for the defense of the Oder, though it was paid for dearly. Now, at the end of March, the situation at the Oder on the whole, and the state of the troops of *Heeresgruppe Weichsel* called for a decision on the part of the German leadership — whether to continue to destroy the strength of its troops in small battles or halt offensive action and confine itself exclusively to the preparation of the defense against the major Russian attack.

*Heeresgruppe Weichsel* suggested to Hitler's headquarters that they should refrain from all action that was not absolutely essential for the situation and therefore also give up the attack from the bridgehead Frankfurt. Hitler's headquarters agreed to this opinion and gave orders to concentrate all efforts on the renewal of the units and the preparation for the defense on the Oder.

### **Heinrici discusses efforts to interdict Soviet bridge building efforts.**

A special task for the artillery was targeting the enemy's bridge building, which after the loss of the positions near Kiistrin was no easy task. The places where the bridges were being built were so far away by now that only long-range guns could reach them, and for those there was only very limited ammunition available. It was, therefore, impossible to constantly shell the bridging points. Nevertheless, photographs taken from airplanes proved that once in a while the bridges were hit. But what use was it to even severely damage the bridge surface or to shoot single bridge piers to pieces? Damage like this could quickly be cleared away by the enemy. In the beginning, the *Luftwaffe* was often used to attack the bridges, but as there was a deficit of aviation fuel, it was impossible to attack them with stronger units. Attacks with single aircraft had effects that were not much greater than artillery fire. As soon as German aircraft came in sight, the Russians laid a smoke screen on their bridging points. The attacking aircraft were forced to climb higher into the air [to avoid the] strong anti-aircraft defense, and the fighter defense soon appeared. Under these circumstances the bomb releases of some German aircraft were also limited to a few successes. Another strategy that was applied was to fight the Russians' bridge building by placing mines into the Oder. They were launched into the river at Frankfurt an der Oder and were carried from there downstream. First, this method achieved considerable success. The Russians had to abandon one of their bridge constructions not far away from Lebus, but finally they secured their bridges with such a variety of net obstacles that even the mines could only cause any damage under lucky circumstances. The *Heeresgruppe* then ordered underwater demolition teams from the *Kriegsmarine* at the end of March. These were promised, but had to be sent from the Netherlands and never arrived. It would have been possible to employ them in the Oder. Finally the *Heeresgruppe* began to consider asking for the demolition of the large reservoir of Ottmaschau in Silesia by *Armeegruppe Schorner*. In this case a tremendous

tidal wave would have come down the Oder, which would probably have torn away the superstructure of the bridge, but not its piers. Yet, this positive effect would have had to be paid for with vast damage in the areas touched by the tidal wave and also with the loss of many lives among the civilian population. The *Heeresgruppe* refused to take on the responsibility for such an action, but agreed with *Armeegruppe Schorner* to keep the water level of the Oder at flood level by constantly letting out water from the above mentioned reservoir, because in early April the flood had started to recede as a result of the dry spring weather at the end of March. This way of regulating the Oder's water level allowed keeping it approximately at the highest level it had at the end of March.

Having done all this, all possible ways of disturbing and hindering the enemy's preparation for attack had been used. The strength and state of the *Luftwaffe* were not sufficient to be able to effectively attack the unloading stations, approach routes, and depots the enemy had in the hinterland. The aircraft and fuel that the *I.Fliegerkorps*, with which the *Heeresgruppe* cooperated, had at its disposal at the beginning of April had to be held back, so that it would still be possible to confront the enemy in the air, when the attack started. It had to be decided, which were the primary tasks the *Luftwaffe* should be given in this case?

Hitler gave orders to use the *Luftwaffe* against the Russian bridges when the assault began, but the *Heeresgruppe* decided to attack the enemy's armored points and to protect the airspace above its own artillery. From its point of view both actions seemed to be more important for the defense, the more so as it was certain that the enemy would already have brought forward strong forces over the bridges to the western bank, when the battle began.

In order to fight the enemy's bridges though, the commanding general of the *I.Fliegerkorps* took a special measure. In an appeal he asked who would be ready to volunteer as a so-called 'Kamikaze' and crash his aircraft and the bomb load hanging on it onto the Russian bridges. Twenty seven pilots volunteered (one major, several captains and second lieutenants as well as noncommissioned officers and *Luftwaffe* soldiers). They were concentrated in a special camp and prepared for their only and last mission.

**The following is a report from Luftwaffe unit II./KG 200 regarding the special *Mistel* missions. The *Mistel* aircraft were twin engine medium bombers, typically Ju-88s, that had a large explosive warhead set up in its nose. Attached on the top with struts was a single engine fighter, whose pilot would guide the flying bomb towards its target and release it. The flying bomb would then be guided into the target by radio control.**

Combat report concerning the attack on the railway bridge at Steinau,  
0900 Hours, 31 March 1945

*Gefechtsverband* Helbig with elements of II./KG 200 attacked with six [*Mistels*] against the railway bridge at Steinau, two Ju-88s and two Ju-188s, (as guides and support) against the bridge and, as a diversion, the railway station in Steinau.

Escort: 24Bf-109/G52

Take-off: 0723-0735 Hours

Landing: 1025-1038 Hours

Time of attack: 0905-0912 Hours

Altitude of attack: From 2,500-200m (for the [*Mistels*]), 2,500m (for the Ju-88s and Ju-188s)

Results: One [*Mistel*] 0905 Hours. Attack on the central part of the railway bridge. Well aimed. Results not observed. Finally low-level attack by Me-109. One [*Mistel*] hit right next to the eastern part of the bridge. One [*Mistel*] probable hit but no noticeable effect.

Experiences: Dropping out for technical reasons was very high — fifty per cent. Although we were dealing with old aircraft, in the future we must expect similar dropout rates for technical reasons because problems can occur if the aircraft stand around for a long time, even if they are well maintained. More distant targets are therefore compensated for using better aircraft. An attacking force of six [*Mistels*] against one bridge must therefore be regarded as the smallest force required for an adequate chance of success.

Fighter protection during the day must be stronger relatively as formation flying by the [*Mistels*] is not possible. Fighter protection of the [*Mistel*] formation in the existing case regarded as good. Fighters report naturally the considerable difficulty of carrying out their escort mission with a wide dispersal of aircraft ...

Photographs of the effect on the target confirm that it is possible to score success with [*Mistels*] against railway bridges despite very the small size of the target which, to be sure, places high demands on the ability of the aircrew.

### **With offensive actions suspended, Heinrici explains the measures taken to prepare the Oder River line against the anticipated Soviet assault.**

*Heeresgruppe Weichsel* identified that there were very strong Russian forces east of the line Frankfurt—Küstrin—Konigsberg/ Mm., while south of Frankfurt, up to the southern border of the *Heeresgruppe* sector and north of the *3.Panzer Armee* sector, there were only weaker units of the enemy. Only east of Stettin, around Altdamm, could a denser concentration of Russian troops be identified. Although the occupation of the area between Greifenhagen—Pyritz and Konigsberg/Nm. was not very heavy, movements of Russian combined-arms units from here to the direction of Küstrin could be observed during these days. They were recognized by *Luftwaffe* reconnaissance flights and by radio intercepts. Although the Russian command had ordered unconditional radio silence (and this was, on the whole, strictly obeyed), from time-to-time some troops used their radio sets and thus revealed their position and movements. Through this it was obvious that engineer and assault gun units, as well as tanks, were brought in to Küstrin from the north. In the area around the entire bridgehead on both sides of Küstrin, the enemy was enthusiastically working on the completion of his bridges. About 23 building sites were identified. Some of the bridges near Küstrin were of an enormous length, in order to be able to

overcome the flooded area. Their estimated length was up to 3000 meters. The Russians worked day and night on these construction sites and brought in immense masses of wood with trucks. Their artillery was rather passive at this point in time, economized on ammunition and only checked their firing data by occasional adjustment shots for direction. Nevertheless, the results of air reconnaissance and of the reconnaissance battalions clearly showed that, almost every day, new battery positions were added to the old ones. The Russians protected the bridge construction sites and the area of their artillery formations with strong ground defenses and fighter aircraft. Therefore, the few German reconnaissance airplanes had great difficulties in gaining insight into the enemy's preparation for attack. The general picture that the *Heeresgruppe* could draw from the incoming reports of all sections, branches of service, and reconnaissance elements, was the following: Between the point of confluence of the Neiße and the Oder Rivers south of Fürstenberg and the area close to southern Frankfurt there were no remarkable preparations for an attack to be noted. This was no surprise, if you take into account the conditions on the western bank of the Oder in this area. There were extensive forests, which spread from the Oder to the area near Berlin, with numerous rivers and lakes in between, so that this area was extremely inconvenient for the offensive use of larger troop units. Yet, in the area Frankfurt/Oder, Küstrin, Königsberg/Nm., a marked massing of the enemy's forces was going on. This was definitely the point of main effort in the Russian preparation for attack. North of this, on the lower reaches of the Oder, no preparation for attack could be recognized, except for the continuing troop masses near Altdamm in the Stettin area.

The idea that the *Heeresgruppe* gained of the enemy's plan for attack corresponded with what it had assumed from the terrain conditions and the enemy's behavior so far.

The new commander in chief of the *Heeresgruppe*, therefore, decided to further strengthen the centre of defense formed by the *9.Armee* on the Oder and to take in the overstretched defense lines of the divisions in the sector Frankfurt—Küstrin by introducing further units. There were only two infantry divisions available for this: the *5.Jäger-Division* southwest of Stettin and the *9.Fallschirmjäger Division* from the *Luftwaffe* reserve of *Reichsmarschall* Goring near Karinhall. After the commander in chief of the *Heeresgruppe* had made disparaging remarks about the *Luftwaffe* units, the *Reichsmarschall* did not send the other *Fallschirmjäger Division* located there to this *Heeresgruppe*, but to *Armeegruppe* Schorner, justifying this with an angry comment that its commander-in-chief was the only true "field general".

The *9.Fallschirmjäger Division* was located in the position northwest of Küstrin, on the northern wing of the *XI SS Korps*, and the *5.Jäger-Division* placed in the area east of Bad Freienwalde, on the northern wing of the *CI.Korps*. Later, the *1.Marine Division* that was situated on the *Autobahn* south of Stettin was transferred from there to the area southeast of Angermünde, as we seemed to be unsure if the enemy would use the rough wooded region to work his way forward into the direction of Eberswalde and to the *Autobahn*. The *610.Sicherungs Division*, which was positioned there, was transferred to the position of the *1.Marine Division* on the *Autobahn*. This re-positioning exhausted the *Heeresgruppe's* options to strengthen its defense in the central sector of the front. The only reserves it had at its disposal were the mobile units mentioned before. Therefore, replacing infantry losses holding the front-line during the major battle was out of the question, because the mobile forces had to be reserved for a more important task during the fight — the possible counter-attack. In the sectors in which an attack by the

Russians was not expected, that is to say at the right wing corps (*V.SS Korps*) and in the sector of the *3.Panzer Armee*, the [forward echelon of troops] were positioned [with huge gaps between the right and left flanks of neighboring forces] that could only be justified by the strong obstacle the Oder formed. In case of danger, these forces could not be counted on. As far as the *3.Panzer Armee* was concerned, these forces needed to be reorganized. It was necessary to form the *Volkssturm* into tactical units. This is how the *547. Volksgrenadier Division* was created in the sector Schwedt and the *549. Volksgrenadier Division* between Stettin and the southeastern point of the Stettin lagoon. Everything possible was done to make these units fitter for the fight, i.e. providing them with missing equipment etc., but nevertheless they caused extreme worries because of their composition and their incomplete equipment (just anti-aircraft guns, no artillery). Besides these organizational tasks, the positions had to be improved. While the Russians were busy building assembly trenches for their attacking troops in the bridgehead and improving the state of the roads and crossing-points over the numerous trenches in the Oder flats, the Germans tried to strengthen their defensive positions. In the sector of the southern *9.Armee* a lot had already been done for this. The army had been able to work on its defensive positions since the beginning of February. The first and second positions existed and as an operative position; the so-called *Wotan* position, about 20 kilometers behind the front, was under construction. The defensive positions constructed in the sector of the *3.Panzer Armee*, were in a poor condition. They were constructed in the first third of March by units that lacked practice in building defensive positions and were not properly equipped with the right construction equipment. Although great efforts were made, it was impossible to make up for the deficits and create the desired situation.

While on the one hand—within the bounds of possibility—everything was done to improve the German defensive power, on the other hand the fight against the opponent's preparation for attack could not be neglected. Every day, single Russian batteries were attacked by the German artillery, although it was obvious that this effort caused only limited human and material losses without considerably weakening the Russian artillery on the whole. There were always some annoying batteries on the side of the enemy though, which could use a warning for "cheeky" behavior. Moreover, the busy traffic in the sector of the enemy's large bridgehead coming from the hinterland and heading for his foremost positions, which could be increasingly observed during daytime as the start of the battle came closer, formed a frequently used target for the German artillery.

In the southern part of the *Heeresgruppe*, in the area between Fürstenberg and Frankfurt (apart from the bridgeheads situated there) and further to Lebus, as well as in the area of Güstebiese and up to the Baltic Sea, the main defense line of the German armies was so close to the river bank that they could see the water-level of the Oder. The heavy weapons were placed in a way that they could dominate the river's surface by direct fire. In the area of the *3.Panzer Armee*, 80% of all light anti-aircraft artillery available was, according to Hitler's orders, positioned close to the riverbank. Flanking positions were established as much as possible, in order to have a perfect effect by using crossfire.

In these sectors, the obstacle of the [Oder] River that was under direct fire seemed to ensure a reasonable defense, despite the alarmingly sparse number of forces on the defensive line. Still there was one matter of special concern left, the area west of Küstrin on the front of the large Russian bridgehead. It was here where the superior Russian artillery was standing, where the enemy had built numerous bridges, and it was here where after an appropriate preparation the Russian tanks would be able to move forward unhindered. In the meantime, radio intelligence

had found out that the 2nd Russian Tank Army was situated in the area southwest from here. Furthermore, on several occasions, assault gun brigades, independent armored force units, and their associated armored engineer battalions could be heard in this area.

### **Heinrici explains the differences he had with Hitler and other High Command leaders regarding a doctrine of defense.**

We have already shown that it was impossible to destroy this Russian artillery mass, either with the help of the *Luftwaffe* or with our own artillery, before the beginning of the attack. The only method which we could use in order to reduce the effect of this enemy preparatory fire was to evade it in due time. And this, in fact, was the method which the French had successfully used on 15 July 1918, and I, myself, had already in February, 1945, when I was with the *I. Panzer Armee*, brought it into operation and in that manner had managed to evade the destruction of my own troops by enemy fire. I gave the order that the proper dispositions were to be made for this evasion movement. I knew that this method of operation was extremely difficult to employ, because it induced the danger that our own troops, while in the course of their rearwards movement, were brought into it at a run, and also that it was not simple to choose the correct point of time to set the operation into movement. So that the effect of this evasive movement should not be lost, it must be put into operation at that point during the night before the beginning of the enemy's offensive operations; its success depends on fixing this point in time. These difficulties must be set in the balance, since there was no other method left open to us. The planned rearward movement, i.e. the planned withdrawal, was a conscious departure from the basic order of Hitler that, each foot of soil must be fought for with all possible means and that no meter must be given up voluntarily. I had taken it upon myself to introduce this tactic to Hitler and to explain it. Hitler himself had brought up the question with me how our troops might protect themselves better against enemy fire. He had given me an instruction, possibly, that several "mined" galleries should be built in our positions [EN: Hitler was thinking back to techniques he knew from World War I, a technique that required skilled personnel, as well as sufficient time and material, all of which were in short supply].

[Contrary to Hitler's position, Heinrici issued the following order almost immediately after taking command]:

#### Conduct of Operations in the Major Line of Battle— *HKL*

Experience has shown that, through the strong preparatory fire of a long planned major attack by the enemy, as for instance on 12 January 45 (thus not by all attacks), the units of the *HKL* suffer such heavy losses that the position is not usually held. It is paradoxical to expose the troops to the heaviest losses in the beginning of the battle, when no corresponding benefit for this can be achieved.

The possibility to avoid these losses is given in the characteristics of the major line of battle, or *HKL*. It is like the example of an enveloping attack in the hands of tactical leadership. It can be arranged that in such sectors it is necessary to hold certain important points. You will, for instance, not give up banks of wide rivers or lakes, or high ground in mountains. Also positions

in forests, in larger wooded areas, are not applicable in the major line of battle—*HKL*, because usually a major preparatory fire will not be used there and no breakthrough attack will take place.

The major line of battle—*HKL*, is mandatory, less to hold this or that contour line, but to prevent the enemy from breaking through on *Day One*. Otherwise, later into the battle it will hardly be any use [to hold non-important positions] as this will lead the defence to become a lasting retreat. The opponent will not be fooled more than once. This major battleline—*HKL* has served its purpose when:

- a) the troops are withdrawn before the first, usually best organized, preparatory fire and thus receive a morale boost,
- b) the enemy uselessly wastes a part of his ammunition,
- c) the enemy's infantry will attack into this [emptiness] and be brought into disorder,
- d) time is won to bring (forward) or shift reserves [into the area of enemy's attack].

All this was achieved against a major Russian attack on 10 March against the *Gen.Kdo.* with three divisions. In addition, the timely employment of mechanized corps was prevented, because the enemy's attack became uncertain. [AN: Heinrici is referring to his actions in the Carpathians before his assignment to *H.Gr. WeichseL*]

The withdrawal to the major line of battle—*HKL* may only begin on command. The Army gives the command, on the recommendation of the corps or division. The *Heeresgruppe* is to be informed on time.

Arbitrary action by junior officers is forbidden and punished.

The command for withdrawal must be given on time so that the reconstitution of the defense during the evening hours is made ready by the next morning. All preparations must be made so that the movement can take place on cue, without explanations or long commands.

The pulling back of the defense begins most appropriately in the evening at about at 2200 hours, as hostile attacks are, as of yet, rarely to be feared. Enough time is available to carry out the movement in the dark. The command to withdraw may never be issued after the start of hostile preparatory fire. This would induce the collapse of the troops' battle morale. If one was surprised by an attack, then nothing remains but to defend the previous *HKL*.

Key to the success of the withdrawal is correctly recognizing the moment of the hostile attack. It can be identified most certainly by prisoner [interrogations], yet better by deserters. Every means must be used in order to get the statements from such people. The more that preparation for the enemy's attack appears, the more necessary is it to bring in prisoners by force. Reconnaissance patrols' success usually comes as a stroke of luck. One will have to bring prisoners in through attacks.

The most exact picture of the enemy's intention, next to bringing in prisoners and deserters, is the sharp observation of hostile artillery fire (e.g., cessation of any firing), and above all the movements of hostile forces. The indications of the forthcoming attack are often strengthening of the vehicles and personnel movements into the frontline area. Heavier occupation of the [frontline] trenches, different behavior of the [forward] trench garrison, and appearance of soldiers with assault equipment, often provide an important reference in connection with prisoners' statements. On the basis of the results of all these observations, the evasive movement in the night must be carried out before the presumed attack.

Once the troops take possession of the main *HKL*, reserve combat outposts will be left in the previous defense line. Their strength—about 1/4-1/5 of the positional troops—is to be determined by the local situation. Whether they withdraw at the start of the enemy's rolling [artillery] barrage or the appearance of enemy infantry depends upon your order. The latter would be most often the rule, because your resistance—even if is weaker—will fragment and delay the enemy attack.

The distance between the *HKL* from the previous defensive line must be about 3km or more depending on circumstances. Lesser distances are not sufficient to be out of range of the majority of enemy fire. Armies in their sectors will determine the course of events for the battle of the *HKL*.

It is essential that, in the preparatory phase before a major enemy attack, all resources be used to prepare for it. All staffs and support staffs must use all resources under their control, with the employment of the civilian population, in the configuration and completed construction of defensive points with cover and concealment—particularly in our defensive depth zone—and also with emplaced mine fields. The frontline (if possible) should be configured as ambush zones with at least a 200-300 meter infantry field of fire. MG positions, command posts (shelters or cellars), artillery positions must be created.

The precondition for the successful reoccupation of the former main battle *HKL* is that the troops receive meticulous instructions. Every junior leader, each [machine-gun team or support weapon] must know and have, if possible, reconnoitered its position. Otherwise there is no guarantee that, after the next re-constitution, the defense will stand firmly in the coming [morning]. This must be unconditionally understood.

Likewise, every soldier must know the major line of battle—*HKL* must hold and that there can be no withdrawals from this position. Every junior leader is obligated to ensure that his soldiers will stand fast and must personally hold his position.

Should the withdrawal before the major line of battle—*HKL* turn out to have been premature, then the abandoned positions must be re-occupied immediately in the morning and any enemy penetrations must be thrown out. This also applies in the sector of the *4.Division* of the aforementioned *Gen.Kdosj*<sup>0</sup> In this case, we must act quickly to prevent the enemy (who would at this point only have sent recon troops forward) from strengthening their footholds.

It is obvious that the artillery must, in the same manner as the infantry, prepare itself for reorganization in support of the major line of battle—*HKL*.

Preparations for the major line of battle—*HKL* will on a large-scale resemble those required for one of the *Fuhrer's* "demonstrations of will" [for the defense].

I request the armies, in sectors where the operation will take place, to begin immediate preparation for the major line of battle—*HKL*. The conclusion of these preparations is to be reported by 31 March 45.

Signed,  
*Generaloberst* Heinrici

[AN: What is amazing about this order is that it is dated 24 March. The order was issued three days after Heinrici took command and before it was confirmed with Hitler or *OKH*. The fact that it was issued so quickly suggests that it may have been derived from an earlier order he issued while in command of *Armeegruppe Heinrici* in the Carpathians where he conducted the same type of defensive against the Soviets].

**Heinrici explains the efforts taken to rebuild the forces placed at his disposal and to make them as battle ready as possible.**

The preparation of the strong Russian artillery would level out the German positions in this area—on this there could be no doubt after all previous experiences with the Russians. The Commander-in-Chief of the *Heeresgruppe* was in doubt whether the newly positioned German units would prove to be morally up to this hurricane-like fire from the enemy. The righting qualities they had shown near Küstrin caused concern about their power of resistance. The Commander-in-Chief, therefore, decided to follow the pattern he had already tested successfully during the battles in Slovakia and withdraw his troops from the effects of the enemy's artillery the night just before the attack. With this, he would lose the present *HKL* and move to a new "major offensive" *HKL* situated 3 kilometers further west, running from Neu Podelzig along the Hauptgraben Canal and gradually connecting to the old position north of the railway between Berlin and Küstrin. The *HKL* therefore was still within the flats of the Oder, while close behind it the range of hills rose to about 40 meters. Thus the artillery did not lose its observation posts, from which it could overlook the flats of the Oder. Of course this limited step backwards could not completely protect the infantry of the defending divisions from the enemy's artillery fire, but there was hope that this could save them from being in the centre of the Russian preparatory fire. The commander-in-chief of the *9.Arme*e accepted this order from the *Heeresgruppe*, but was not totally convinced of it. He was afraid of withdrawing his maybe not too stable troops at the beginning of a battle, even if it was just a limited withdrawal, but as Hitler—against his habit—approved of this maneuver, by order of the *Heeresgruppe* all efforts were made to convert the rear defensive position in the middle of the *9.Arme*e into a 'major offensive' *HKL* and to prepare for withdrawal to it. Naturally this step backwards, which the army was supposed to do in order to escape from the enemy's main fire zone, was in itself not sufficient, but the terrain conditions (keeping the range of hills) made a further withdrawal impossible. Yet, on the whole, the *Heeresgruppe HKL* could not be transferred backwards a few kilometers more, because Berlin was too close to the defensive front; given the weakness of the German troops, the connection to

the protective Oder river in the southern and northern neighboring sectors had to be kept for as long as possible.

All these measures, which were taken to strengthen the defense, could not guarantee though that the troops would be successful in repelling the impending major Russian attack. The expected difference in the relation of power on both sides was so immense and the moral impetus was so clearly on the side of the aggressor that the Germans had to reckon on a failure in defending the Oder line. Should the enemy be successful in breaking through the defense line, behind it there were the armored units (mentioned on one of the first pages) standing ready for the counter-attack. The *9. Armee* intended to drive the enemy back to the Oder flats by a massed shock created by these forces from the range of hills, should he reach them.

The fighting qualities of these units were also different though. It has already been mentioned that some of them were in the middle of reorganization, while others were strongly affected by the battles around Küstrin. Above all, the condition of the 'ethnic German' divisions ('*Nederland*', '*Nordland*') and of the foreign divisions ('*Wallonieri*', '*Latvia*') seemed to be uncertain. The corps headquarters (*III. (Germ.) SS Panzer Korps*) gave special proof of its sense of duty, too. The Chief of Staff of this corps suddenly disappeared one night, taking with him part of the means of signal communication and some of the engineer soldiers, leaving a message that he intended to fight a partisan war on the Western Front. This task to him seemed more important than preparing the divisions he was in charge of for the fight against the Russian attack. Therefore, only a part of the mobile forces stationed in the rear area could be classified as having at least fighting qualities Class 2 (not suitable for far-reaching operations but only for limited attacks and defense). Hardly one of the mobile units could be called totally fit to fight in the true sense of the word.

In case of a Russian breakthrough should the counter-attack of the Panzer units fail, the *Heeresgruppe* would have no other choice than to withdraw to the Elbe River. Before giving an instruction on this to its armies, it enquired with the *Oberkommando des Heeres* [Army High Command] (*General Krebs*) about its operations plans. Up to that point, the *Heeresgruppe* had not received any instructions on the battle command from there, as was usual during the last year of war. The only order Hitler's headquarters had issued was to hold the position. Different instructions might negatively influence the willpower of resistance on the side of the command. Yet, now the general situation forced the highest command of the *Wehrmacht* [*Oberkommando der Wehrmacht*] to say something, for, in the meantime, the enemy coming from Western Germany had reached the area around Leipzig and near Magdeburg, while at the same time, a second powerful Russian point of main effort could be observed in front of the northern wing of *Armeegruppe Schorner* in Saxony. As the enemies from the east and the west had moved so close to each other, even Hitler thought that they might break through the small strip between the rivers Oder and Elbe that was still being defended by German troops. The operations staff of the *Wehrmacht* ordered that, in this case, the *Heeresgruppe Weichsel* should—while holding the lower part of the Oder between the Baltic Sea—Stettin and Eberswalde with the *3. Panzer Armee* and its southern half, the *9. Armee*—wheel back to the line of Eberswalde-Oranienburg-Havelberg, which was protected by canals and lakes, and there join the western defensive forces under the command of *Feldmarschall Ernst Busch*, which were standing along the lower Elbe. By this, a northern territory, consisting of the Uckermark, both parts of Mecklenburg and Schleswig-Holstein with Denmark and Norway, should be formed and defended under the High Command of *Großadmiral Karl Donitz*. *Armeegruppe Schorner*, in this case, should move back to Bohemia and hold the bordering mountains. Nobody said anything about how the encircled German troops in the northern territory should be supplied under these circumstances. This

operations plan of the highest command of the *Wehrmacht* was developed based on the belief that the lower reaches of the Oder from Freienwalde downwards as well as those of the Elbe from Havelberg downwards would be insurmountable obstacles, even if the defensive forces were weak.

Following these instructions from the operations staff of the [OKW], *H.Gr. Weichsel* gave orders to the *9. Armee* that, in case of failure on the front at the Oder, it should not wheel back to the south behind the Spree forest (Spreewald) and the bordering mountains in Saxony, as had been planned by the army, but around its left wing to the north. Consequently, in case of danger the northern wing of the *9. Armee* would be supported. Wheeling around this northern wing and avoiding Berlin, it should reach its new positions behind the Hohenzollern Canal and the Finow Canal.

Hitler had declared Berlin a Fortress. It was under the command of the *Oberkommando des Heeres*, not of *Heeresgruppe Weichsel*. Work on the fortification of the city was in progress and a defensive position was being built along the line of Erkner-Strausberg-Tiefensee. The outer defensive zone ran along the edge of the city, the inner one along the *S-Bahn* ring. There were insufficient forces available to defend this huge terrain: almost exclusively *Volkssturm* in the size of 92 battalions.<sup>45</sup> There was no artillery defense for Berlin.

### **Heinrici discusses the meetings at the Führerbunker prior to the main Soviet attack.**

Starting from around 5 April, the night air reconnaissance reported long motorized columns approaching the Oder from Danzig and East Prussia via Pomerania. Unloading could be observed in the area Frankfurt—Küstrin and also near Stargard, east of Stettin and south of it. There were many thousands of vehicles. Without any doubt the Russian Army command was bringing all forces from the eastern provinces up here that were available, now that the German defense had collapsed there [in East Prussia and Pomerania]. The previous judgment of the enemy's positions in front of *Heeresgruppe Weichsel* had to be fundamentally revised. The *Heeresgruppe* could no longer reckon on a Russian attack mainly restricted to the area Frankfurt—Küstrin—Freienwalde with only weaker secondary attacks north of it, but had to expect strong attacks also in the sector of the *3. Panzer Armee*. These might not be of the same force of impact as further down south, which was without a doubt still the enemy's axis of main effort, but would be hard enough to put the *Volkssturm* [units] of the *3. Panzer Armee* to a test, which they would hardly be up to with their limited fighting qualities. The army command was thinking about transferring the *3. Marine Division*, that was currently stationed on the island of Wollin to protect Swinemünde, to the area around Stettin, but its training standard was too low to justify its being exposed to a major battle. Moreover, the *Großadmiral* attached the greatest importance to the sea fortress being defended by *Marine* soldiers. Hence, the *Heeresgruppe* was not in a position to be able to strengthen the front of the *3. Panzer Armee*, but that wasn't all. Not only had the situation of the *Heeresgruppe* strength due to the Russians' new plans become completely insufficient, between 5-7 April, it also got orders from Hitler to give away the four best panzer divisions and *Verband Skorzeny* [EN: *1001 Nächte*] unit to *Armeegruppe Schorner* in Saxony. The panzer reserve of *Heeresgruppe Weichsel* thus dwindled to four usable divisions (*Panzer Division 'Doberitz'* [EN: he meant *Panzer Division Müncheberg*], the *18. Panzergrenadier Division*, the *25. Panzergrenadier Division*, *SS Panzergrenadier Division 'Nordland'*). Those panzer divisions with the most striking power were taken away from the *Heeresgruppe*. It was

also forced to give away the corps headquarter *XXXIX. Panzer Korps* (Decker), which was well-adjusted in the area around Berlin and used to working with its divisions. As a compensation it got only the half-motorized corps headquarters *LVI. Panzer Korps* under the command of *General der Artillerie* Helmuth Weidling. By giving away these units the defensive power of *Heeresgruppe Weichsel* experienced a weakening that could not be compensated against. The Commander-in-Chief of the *Heeresgruppe* brought this matter up at a briefing for Hitler on 8 April and demanded it be reversed. Hitler answered that this order went against the grain with him too, but the position of the enemy had forced him to decide this way. Opposite the northern wing of *Armeegruppe Schorner* in Saxon Lusatia the enemy had formed an even larger point of main effort than opposite *Heeresgruppe Weichsel*. It was here where the main attack was to be expected from the enemy and its last aim—according to Hitler—would be Prague. The attack on Berlin was only a containing offensive (to what extent his speech was influenced by *Armeegruppe Schorner* or the fear that the highest commands of Russia and America intended to unite [their forces] near Dresden has never become known). In any case Hitler refused to cancel the order and appeased the *Heeresgruppe* with the hint that the panzer divisions that had been taken away would be moved into assembly areas in a way that, in case of an emergency, he would allow them to intervene in the area of the *9. Armee* as well. The Commander-in-Chief of *Heeresgruppe Weichsel* then mentioned that, under these circumstances, he didn't see any possibility of holding the front on the Oder River, because up to now it had been planned to compensate for the lack of infantry reserves by counter-attacks of strong panzer forces. Now that the panzer divisions had been raked away, it became more important to be in the possession of infantry reserves, but since the Russian attacks could be expected across the whole length of the *Heeresgruppe's* front, enough forces could not be obtained from any of the sectors that were poorly equipped with manpower anyway, in order to fill the gaps in the *HKL* or even to compensate for the losses in the forward deployed divisions that would occur during a major attack. At this point Hitler did not know what to do about it either.

As had happened before in similar situations, *Reichsmarschall* Goring offered help. On the face of it his offer seemed to be convincing, but it lacked any truthfulness: he put 100,000 *Luftwaffe* ground personnel at the *Heeresgruppe's* disposal. He was joined by the *Reichsführer-SS* Himmler, who offered 25,000 soldiers from his inactive reserves. The *Kriegsmarine* also agreed to put the crews of the bigger ships, which could no longer conduct operations, at the *Heeresgruppe's* disposal. The objection raised by the *Heeresgruppe* that, due to their [lack of] present training, these individuals were not useable as ground soldiers in a major attack, was pushed aside. *General* Krebs found the solution to employ them as a security line in the second position behind especially endangered areas, where they would not be directly exposed to the psychological effect of the enemy's preparatory barrage. Hitler was satisfied by this solution. In fact, during the next few days about 30,000 soldiers from the *Luftwaffe* arrived, but their armament was extremely limited; they were not drawn up as units and had no equipment at all that they would need for a major attack. The *Wehrkreis II* and *III* now also provided other replacements, so that the following could be supplied:

To the *9. Armee*: - a *Fahnenjunker Regiment* and replacements from *Wehrkreis III* for the Frankfurt sector.

- 6,000 *Luftwaffe* soldiers as a replacement brigade for the second position in the Wriezen sector (further soldiers from the *Luftwaffe* could later be employed in the defensive position Berlin). To the *3. Panzer Armee*: - about 6,000 men from panzer replacement units and panzer schools for employment in the sector Schwedt-Greifenhagen.

The units coming from the *Kriegsmarine* were ordered to block the narrows of Hohenlychen, Feldberg, and Neubrandenburg in the third line, because they could not be employed any closer to the front, due to their absolute lack of experience in combat on land. The *9.Armee* and the *3-Panzer Armee* did their best to see to it that the soldiers lacking combat experience and totally inadequately equipped for their task would receive decent leadership and equipment.

As already mentioned, the *Heeresgruppe* planned to withdraw to a rear *HKL* in the sector between Frankfurt and Küstrin the night before the enemy's attack, thus surprising the enemy. In order for this measure to serve its purpose—that is, to make the enemy launch his preparatory fire uselessly into an abandoned position—the withdrawal was not to be carried out too early, so that the opponent could not recognize it. Therefore, it was necessary to find out the exact time the Russians had set for the attack, either by signal intelligence or by capturing prisoners. A number of raids were conducted for this purpose, but only a few prisoners could be captured. They could not or were not willing to say anything about the time for the attack. As the signal intelligence brought no results as well, the *Heeresgruppe* was groping in the dark about the planned time for the Russian attack, but the opponent's behavior after 10 April made it possible to conclude that the attack would take place in the next few days. The enemy had almost completely finished the bridge building. While the Russian positions in the area of Fiirstenberg up to the bridgehead south of Frankfurt was almost quiet, a strong influx of new troops into the enemy's positions near southern Frankfurt and between Lebus-Küstrin-Gustebiese could be recognized.

Within the enemy's bridgeheads, restlessness and lively movements could be observed. There were still displacements going on from the area of Stettin to the direction of Küstrin, but the influx of long motor columns to the area east of Stettin proved that attack troops were being brought into position here, too. Reconnaissance along the eastern bank of the Oder, on the front along the river between Schwedt and Greifenhagen, showed that preparation for the attack was starting there as well. Thus it was obvious that the decisive battle would soon begin, but still the *Heeresgruppe* did not know the date or time of the attack. Presumably the Russians only informed their assault troops about this at the last moment.

Under the recognition of these preparations on the enemy's side, the German units were brought to maximum readiness. The artillery started attacking the enemy's batteries, which on their part now also started to leave their cautious positions. At night the German guns kept the enemy's approach routes under fire, as far as they could reach. In the early morning hours, fire-for-destruction hit the Russian forward trenches. Fire on the bridge sites was also increased by the long-range batteries. Engineers from the *9.Armee* placed mines into the Oder at Frankfurt on a large-scale, in order to destroy the enemy's bridges. The German *Luftwaffe* had to continue to be kept in the background to conserve their weak forces for the main attack.

[From Heinrici's post-war interview]

On 4 or 5 April I gave a briefing before Hitler at the *Reich* Chancellery [*Fuhrerbunker*]. The room in the bunker was very small. There was a map table at which Hitler had seated himself and around the room ran a bench. Across from Hitler sat *Großadmiral* Donitz, then there was Himmler, and at the end of the table sat Goring, who had arrived somewhat late. Hitler sat here; I stood next to him at his left, since as briefing officer I could not stand on his right side because after the assassination attempt he was deaf in his right ear. Behind us, partly against the wall and partly in the hall which ran behind the bunker, stood Keitel, Gen. Krebs, then Jodl. Bormann was also there and the other members of the staff. As usual at these main briefings,

there were approx. 25-30 people. The briefing took place at 3 p.m. and I spoke for approx. 2 hours.

In my briefing I told Hitler: "My *Fuhrer*, I have done what I could to strengthen the troops, but I must say that I lack the reserves to fill the inevitable holes left by our losses." There followed a long embarrassed silence because no one could offer any help. I added that, according to my experience, in a major battle each division lost roughly speaking one battalion a day. If such a major battle were to last a week then at the end of the week there would be nothing left of the division. (One division was then composed of 7 battalions).

Then Hitler looked questioningly around the circle. Goring got up and said: "I place 100,000 *Luftwaffe* men at your disposal." And Himmler put 25,000 *SS* men at my disposal, and the *Kriegsmarine* also put 12,000 at my disposal. I said: "My *Fuhrer*, this is all very nice, but none of these are coordinated troop units and they also lack the necessary training in all weapons. These are uniformed people, but that is something different from a combat-ready unit." Hitler replied: "Then place them in the second line. We will certainly still have rifles to arm them with, and if there is a breakthrough somewhere, then it will be caught at that point by the second line."

I shrugged my shoulders and said that this seemed to me to be highly doubtful, since none of these people, whether they were from the *Luftwaffe*, the *Kriegsmarine*, or somewhere else, were prepared for a major battle which begins with hours of artillery barrages, supported by air force bombing raids, in such a way that no one can even lift his nose, and then perhaps to be confronted suddenly with hundreds of tanks rolling towards one—for this neither sailors nor air force men who have been doing guard duty at the air fields are prepared. Whereupon I was told: "If you have firm faith and confidence in yourself and radiate this over your men, then the battle will be the greatest defeat for the Russians." I have always taken the position that, when one is on the defensive, one should not be expected to remain in a position which the enemy knows. For then he can set up all his heavy weapons, such as shells and bombs, in order to destroy these positions. I have always maintained that, when such a major action is impending, one should make arrangements to disappear to the rear out of these known positions during the night before the attack. This should be done insofar as possible without the enemy noticing. Several weeks previously in Czechoslovakia, as I was fighting with the [*1. Panzer Armee*], I had brought this off with 100 per cent success. The enemy fired all his ammunition into empty trenches and, when he attacked, there was no one there. And then he did not know what was happening. Where were all the men? By the time he found them, the entire morning was gone and in this way it was too late to put his armored divisions into action. The time thus gained enabled us to bring the *2. Panzer Division* from the rear so that, in the second day of the battle, as the Russian armored units approached, our panzer units were there, where they had been missing previously. As a result, there was no breakthrough and the Russians were simply tied up. This operation was carried out completely against Hitler's orders, for he had laid down as a general rule that not one foot of ground was to be given up, although in Russia hundreds of thousands of kilometers were available. I told Hitler at the briefing that I wanted to use this tactic here as well, for in view of the strength of the artillery which the enemy had brought up at the Küstrin bridgehead, all the fortifications and trenches on our side would be seriously smashed and annihilated.

I therefore ordered that a second so-called major line of battle [*HKL*] be built at a certain distance behind the present main front line and ordered that the troops withdraw there during the previous night. This second line of battle was set up and, in the [*9. Armee* sector], the maneuver was successfully carried out, although there were some difficulties because the troops never understood the reason for this and raised objections. They declared: "We have been building for

four weeks and have made dugouts and want to defend our lives. Now, when the battle is about to begin, we are supposed to leave these nice constructions and to go away." It never occurred to them that nothing would be left of these nice fortifications if they were to fight, and nothing would be left of them [the soldiers] either. I have always used the comparison that, if I am in a steel mill, I don't put my head under the trip hammer that comes down and smashes it, but that I pull it back and go away in time. This tactic was, in this case also approved by Hitler, to the surprise of all listeners, and it was carried out in the southern part of the region of Frankfurt-ander-Oder [again, Heinrici means the *9.Armee* sector], up to halfway after Küstrin in the north. But there were many difficulties because the troops which were there could not always [understand] from an [appropriate mental] viewpoint—a withdrawal without an actual battle. [AN: I believe Heinrici means a mental picture of the situation; or even the internal psychological reconciliation by local commanders who were very used to the 'hold fast' doctrine declared by Hitler back in 1942, and clearly practiced under Himmler's tenure.]

Further north of Küstrin, this withdrawal did not even come into consideration because, in the days before the beginning of the main battle, the Russians had widened their bridgehead to such an extent that the area between the old front line and the new line to which we were supposed to withdraw was already in their possession. In addition, there was another consideration: the entire Oder sector is relatively close to Berlin. Here we could not back up 20 or 25 or 50 kilometers, we had, on the contrary, to dig in if possible close to the Oder. Secondly, there was another factor: the Oder valley is bordered on the west by a 30 to 50 meter plateau [Seelow Heights]. We had to hold these heights if we wanted to keep the enemy in the Oder valley and his crossing of the Oder under control. As soon as the enemy had taken this plateau, he could do in its shelter [meaning unobserved] anything he liked down in the valley, for example build bridges or whatever he wanted, whereas if we ourselves sat on the plateau, it was extraordinarily difficult for him if we could look down into his area.

## **Appendix C**

### **The Battle Through Primary Sources**

# The Attack on Seelow Heights: Planning and Execution

## Primary Source Selections

### The Fight for Küstrin

[Major von Lösecke, Cdr 90th Panzergrenadier Regiment, 20 PzGD describes the counterattacks to relieve Festung Küstrin. *Le Tissier-Zhukov* pp 88-89, 92-94]

On 23 March we took up a reserve position in the Pismühle area, 1,500 meters southeast of Seelow, but had to march back to Werbig in the early morning. At noon I was summoned to Divisional Headquarters. This sunny spring afternoon drive made one think of times of peace, although noise of combat could be heard in the distance. From Division I received the task of sending a battalion that evening to northwest of Alt Tucheband and, in combination with the 76th Panzergrenadier Regiment on the right and another infantry regiment on the left, of attacking the enemy positions at Manschnow and pushing forward as far as the "Alte Oder" east of that village and, if possible, establishing a bridgehead east of the "Alte Oder." In order to minimize the effects of the enemy air and artillery capabilities it was necessary to attack only at night.

During the drive to the assembly area my APC drove into a soft, clayey field and stuck fast. As all the radio communications equipment was on this vehicle, I could not leave it and had to wait. It was an unpleasant delay. The 3rd Battalion's assembly area northwest of Alt Tucheband was shared by the 8th Panzer Battalion, which had been allocated to my support.

As the tank commander had better radio communications with Division and the artillery, I climbed into his tank. My APC followed close behind. At the beginning of the attack we crossed the causeway forming the forward edge of the assembly area. We moved smoothly at first and soon crossed the road leading northward from the eastern end of Alt Tucheband, and the battalion broke through the first enemy positions. Shortly afterward the tanks reported a minefield and stopped. The leading company of the battalion reached the western farms



A Königstiger advances toward Küstrin, March 1945. The soft ground forced much of the armor to remain road-bound.

of Manschnow and encountered strong enemy resistance. While our right-hand neighbor was advancing only slowly the left-hand one did not even appear to have left its assembly area. Through its brave attack the 3rd Battalion had become a wedge thrust into the enemy front line and was now receiving fire from both flanks. The enemy artillery started

bombarding the whole of our assault area, while our own artillery only fired the odd shot into Manschnow. As the enemy minefields could not be cleared in the dark, the tanks had to remain where they were.

Despite courageous attempts the attack had stalled and casualties were mounting. Just before dawn I decided to curtail the taking of casualties by withdrawing the battalion to the start line without waiting for instructions from Division. The attack, which had been carried out with insufficient means to shatter the strong enemy bridgehead west of Kiistrin, had foundered. I set up my regimental command post in some buildings at Neu Tucheband. Shortly afterward the Divisional Commander, Colonel Scholze, arrived with another colonel and I made my report about the battle without holding anything back, describing the weak support from our own artillery, the strength of the enemy's defensive fire, the difficulty with the fire from the flanks, and the consequent heavy casualties sustained by the battalion. To the question why I had withdrawn the battalion, I explained that in that completely flat and open country the outbreak of day made all movement absolutely impossible. Consequently the withdrawal of the battalion had been a tactical necessity. To some quite sharp comments from my side about the higher command that could order such an attack with inadequate means, neither of the gentlemen replied. They were apparently convinced of the correctness of my conduct. Shortly afterward they excused themselves and climbed silently into their vehicle. While I had been addressing myself principally to Colonel Scholze, I had paid little attention to the other colonel, but as my adjutant informed me, it was in fact the Corps Commander who had been really listening to my account of my conduct and my views on the battle. Nevertheless, I am of the opinion that neither he nor Colonel Scholze had been responsible for giving the orders for this attack. These orders had come from the very highest level. Soon after this encounter we packed up and overtook the brave soldiers of the 3rd Battalion on their march back to Werbig.

As there were still some isolated German units in action between Alt and Neu Bleyen, once more orders came from the highest level to launch an attack on the enemy bridgehead. This was to be from the Heimstatten settlement by the troops stationed there, from Golzow by the 90th Panzergrenadier Regiment, from north of Golzow by the 76th Panzergrenadier Regiment, and north of it by the "Müncheberg" Panzer Division with its new tanks. I was given the task of driving hard south out of Golzow as far as the "Strom" ditch, then on southeast to the sports field one kilometer northwest of Gorgast, and then to attack Gorgast. The 76th Panzergrenadier Regiment was to attack via the Tannenhof to the sheep farm two kilometers north-northeast of Gorgast and then to press on in a southeasterly direction. As no significant participation by the Luftwaffe could be expected, the whole attack would have to be conducted at night.

I went with my battalion commanders on a reconnaissance of the land to be attacked across, which we viewed from a building due east of Golzow. The countryside was completely open and flat, dropping a little away to the north toward the brook, on which there were a few trees and bushes. The farmstead immediately south of the bridge 500 meters north of Golzow was still in our hands, while the other farmstead east of Golzow was occupied by the enemy, although lying north of the brook. In the distance one could see the colorful roofs of Gorgast, the greenhouses on the western edge and the tall clump of trees in the manor park.

I decided to split the regiment into widely separated echelons to advance in the order 2nd, 1st then 3rd Battalions. The 2nd Battalion would lead the main attack and was given the task of going via the sugar factory and the farmstead south of the bridge 500 meters northeast of Golzow, attacking in an easterly direction, of taking the farmstead near Point 11.5 (1,000 meters east of Golzow station) and the "Am Strom" farmstead two kilometers east of Golzow station, and of securing the F6rster Bridge 1400 metres north of Gorgast, in order to enable a continuation of the attack southeastward on Gorgast.

The 1st Battalion would follow deployed to the right, while the 3rd Battalion would remain in its assembly area west of Golzow at the disposal of the Regiment. A Tiger battalion would be available to support us in our attack and cooperated with the Regiment. The forward observers of the Infantry Gun Company and the 2nd Battalion of the 20th Artillery Regiment were also given their tasks on this reconnaissance as far as the artillery had not been given their own targets on divisional orders. Several artillery units would work on Gorgast, for which an allocation of 1,000 shells had been made.

On 26 March the regiment moved forward into the area west of Golzow. The move took place at night in order to conceal the preparations for attack from the enemy, and by morning everything had disappeared into the few farmsteads and barns.

On the 27th March the 2nd Battalion moved into the assembly area east of Golzow station while the 1st Battalion remained on the western edge of the village ready to follow deployed to the right. The Tiger battalion rolled forward at 0300 hours and the attack began. I had my command post in the building immediately east of Golzow station as it was the most practical from a communications point of view, for from here I could best reach all parts of the regiment, as well as the artillery, the tanks and Division while combat was in progress.

Our artillery bombarded Gorgast. Infantry weapons opened up. Soon came a message from the 2nd Battalion that they had broken through the first enemy lines. Further reports said that the right-hand company of the 2nd Battalion was engaged with the enemy in a strongly defended farmstead 1,000 meters east of the railway station, and that the left-hand company was under heavy enfilade fire from the sector north of the brook, where the 76th Panzer grenadier Regiment were attacking. One could hear heavy fire coming from there too. Finally the right-hand company of the 2nd Battalion took the farmstead, where the tanks remained in position. The left-hand company was also unable to advance as the enemy north of the brook were firmly ensconced in their buildings and were maintaining a constant enfilading fire on the regiment's whole front of attack. Our own tanks could not progress further because of enemy mines. The fighting came to a halt. In answer to the obviously nervous calls from Division, I could only repeat that enemy resistance had stiffened to such a degree that one could no longer expect a breakthrough before dawn. This gave me great concern for my 2nd and 1st Battalions. The latter had meanwhile been drawn into the fighting and had taken part in the assault on the farmstead, but needed to be got back under worthwhile cover so that when daylight came they would not be exposed to enemy fire without protection of any kind in completely open ground. However, I could not withdraw my troops without the tanks, as the tanks could not stay there without infantry protection.

The day began to dawn and what I feared occurred. As soon as the morning mist lifted, the enemy began to fire at the stationary tanks, which presented an easy target on the plain. At 1100 hours a bombardment by all calibres began, including "Stalin-organs."

The soldiers, receiving no support from either their own artillery or the Luftwaffe, began to leave their positions, at first individually and then in groups. It was a panic. I stopped them near the command post and led them forward once more. In a short while the old front line was regained. The enemy had not moved forward. In the evening we shortened the line so as to start making a line of defense. The tanks were towed away during the night of 28-29 March and the enemy artillery fire died down.

**[Regimental Signals Sergeant Fritz-Rudolf Averdieck, 90th PGR describes the same actions to relieve Küstrin. Le Tissier-Zhukov pp 89, 94, 98]**

On 22 March we carried out duties and training in Dobberin. We were woken up that morning by Russian artillery fire and drove to a reserve position near Seelow. Strong Russian air activity drew extensive anti-aircraft fire, which brought down seven bombers and fighters that day.

Next evening (the 23rd) we drove in the dusk as Russian air activity died down to an assembly point for a night attack in the Oderbruch near Seelow. A Volks Artillery Corps was supposed to be supporting us with 500 guns, and the attack was supposed to be conducted by several divisions from all sides and push forward to the Alte Oder. There was feverish activity on the roads as night fell. Infantry companies marched along widely spaced from each other, while tanks and armored personnel carriers (APCs) rolled forward in long columns. The attack was to commence at midnight, following an hour-long barrage. However, it soon appeared that nothing had been properly prepared. The Volks Artillery Corps officers were hardly trained, and only a few guns gave sporadic fire.

Then there was a delay in getting the attacking units under way while the tanks waited for the infantry and the infantry for the tanks. Eventually, some twenty minutes after the last shell, they started, but the Russians had had sufficient warning and the barrage of mortar and artillery fire that fell on them left our grenadiers with 50 percent casualties, and once a few of the tanks had driven over some openly laid mines, the advance stopped.

Then as the dawn approached (the 24th) we had to dig in and camouflage as the flat landscape gave long-range visibility and we could also expect strong air attacks. However, the day did not turn out to be as hot as expected, for our own air force was very active and



German infantry advance across the Oderbruch toward Küstrin. This photo underscores the open nature of the terrain in the valley.

shot down two enemy aircraft. That evening we were pulled back and put into Corps Reserve near Seelow.

After a full day's rest we prepared for another attack on 26 March. The aim was to push through to Küstrin via Golzow and Gorgast and relieve the hard pressed garrison of this fortress. In view of the exposed nature of the terrain we could only occupy our assembly areas and attack under cover of darkness. We reached the assembly area at midnight. There were some Tigers to support us and so I established radio contact with them. Our confidence mounted considerably as at 0300 hours a barrage burst forth from a number of guns and went on for an hour, after which we attacked. We drove through Golzow and soon attained our first objective. Then our company came under a terrible mortar barrage and suffered 50 percent casualties.

We drove back to the start line in our APC, which at least gave us cover from the sides. Three Tigers fell victim to mines, although there were still attempts, even as day broke, to carry the attack through to Gorgast. During the morning attacks and counterattacks went on until they were finally abandoned, and we were happy to be able to hold on to our positions with the weak forces remaining. Then came endless rocket, artillery and mortar fire, as well as air attacks.

Following a bombing attack, some of our troops took to flight and had to be brought back into line by the regimental commander himself. As the battalion command posts were only a few meters away from us, we used our manpack radios from the cellar of a building that was frequently badly rocked in these bombing attacks. The situation failed to calm down even when evening came. It was hardly dark when the "Lame Ducks" arrived and started dropping bombs and incendiaries on Golzow in a regular pattern, with several acting in unison. Bombs were exploding very close and soon most of the buildings were on fire from the incendiaries. Consequently, at midnight the commander decided to move his command post out of this inferno back about a kilometer to a farmstead. On our way our small convoy was attacked by a "Lame Duck" with incendiaries, the fire falling close around us.

Several quiet days then followed (28 March to 1 April) as a result of the weather being misty. There were some sporadic air attacks by day and night, including incendiaries, and the Russian artillery participated with smoke shells, putting an end to any ideas of launching an attack. Then on Easter Sunday (1 April) we were assigned to some new positions. The expected attack had yet to occur. We set up our command post in a large farmstead, the Annahof. From 1 to 13 April we went through a completely quiet period, although the Russians fired their smoke shells repeatedly. During a visit to the 1st Battalion I had the opportunity to examine the Russian-occupied country side and the place where we had stopped their attack. About fifty to sixty tanks stood shot-up in a small area. I listened to the radio a lot, including some beautiful opera, and also the catastrophic news from the Western Front.

Reichs Marshal Göring drove past once on a visit to the neighboring parachute division. Appeals and orders arrived to hold the Eastern Front at all costs, and to hold on to our positions, command posts and administrative areas to the last man. During this time 600 men managed to break through to us from the Küstrin Fortress, suffering heavy casualties from our own artillery. Then on the last evening we were offered something new. A Ju 88 with a fighter sat on top appeared under heavy Soviet anti-aircraft fire. Suddenly the lower aircraft was released and dived on its target, and a massive explosion

followed. As there was a shortage of fuel, the bomber had been filled with explosives and deliberately used in this manner. The soldiers dubbed this phenomenon "Father and son."

**[General Vasily Chuikov describes efforts to reduce Festung Küstrin around 28-29 March. Chuikov-*End of Third Reich* p. 167]**

The citadel itself was set on an island formed by the Oder and Warthe rivers. The spring flood had submerged all the approaches to the island. The only links between the citadel and the surrounding land were dykes and roads fanning out towards Berlin, Frankfurt, Posen and Stettin. Needless to say, the enemy had taken care to block these roads securely, covering the dykes and embankments with dugouts, pillboxes, trenches, caponiers, barbed wire, minefields and other defences. Our small subunits managed to come so close to the enemy fortifications that hand grenade and Panzerfaust exchanges went on almost round the clock. But we were unable to deploy large forces here since a single tank took up the whole width of a dyke.

**[SS-Schwere Panzer Abteilung 502 in action to relive Küstrin, 26 March 1945  
From *Armor Battles of the Waffen-SS, 1943-1945* by Will Fey]**

The 2. Company, with Schroif's platoon at the point, was guided through the open path by the command vehicle to continue the attack. Our platoon took over securing the flank to the left. Dawn was already breaking in the east, but ground fog greedily reduced visibility.

At that time the 3. Company should have reached the main trench on the right flank, but it, too, was stalled by mines. One Panzer was knocked out by a bazooka in the barbed wire and burned out. Another one was stuck in the minefield.

Then, they seemed to want to force a break through the Russian main line by using an armored reconnaissance vehicle company and pioneers. At high speed, dropping numerous smoke grenades as camouflage from the enemy, single personnel carriers raced from out of the depth of the minefield on the right. Under cover of this fog, the others followed in a row. In a daring drive the phalanx of steel raced up against the barbed wire obstacles and disappeared like ghosts into the sea of fog. The success of our attack was on razor's edge. Schroif passed through the path opened by the pioneers with all his vehicles and, together with the following infantry, faced the barbed wire entanglement. However, the enemy defenses, in particular the invisible machine guns on the flanks, were too strong. They forced the charging lines to the ground. Death-defying groups of infantrymen rose up again, charged into the raging fire and tried to reach the enemy trenches and sank, hit, one after the other to the ground. Machine guns hammered incessantly from the barbed wire.

Defensive fire from enemy artillery began and concentrated on the sector of the attack. The assault companies sought cover in the plentiful craters. The vast brown fields lay empty and abandoned, quickly turning into a landscape of craters, plowed time and again.

Enemy tanks surprised us, rolling, under cover of a farm behind the opposite lines and from an adjoining row of bushes and trees, to within 500 meters from us. Schroif took the first hit through the hull. With lightning speed all vehicles on the same frequency reacted to his alarm call. Seconds later the first enemy vehicle blew up in a flash of flames after all the Panzer turrets had swung toward the new targets.



Knocked out tanks from the failed attempt to relieve Küstrin. The King Tiger has its gun out of battery after the crew spiked it.

The second one tried to move on under cover of the explosion of his neighbor, but it suffered the same fate.

The flashes of fire followed each other so quickly that no one could claim the kill for himself alone with any certainty. We kept a very careful watch on this dangerous corner with our field glasses. By afternoon, four Russian tanks had burned out with oily black plumes of smoke in this deadly hideaway. The same was true for the Paks. Ten, even twenty times, the brave Red Army soldiers tried to crawl to their abandoned guns. But our gunners were on their toes, shooting them down on the spot. Still, the stoic determination of the Russians to reach their goal was admirable!

Based on the arriving radio messages and orders, the attack seemed at least to have stalled, if not broken off. Other enemy tanks were forced back or knocked out even as they left the opposite edge of town. Numerous columns of flames indicated successful Panzer battles. But this did not at all mean, despite the fact that the Panzers in the section to the right finally made progress against the defense, that the attack was successful until the main trench was crossed and the advance continued in the direction of Kustrin. To achieve this, we needed a path cleared by the pioneers through the mines since five vehicles were already stuck in a heap.

The fighting went back and forth throughout the morning. In the afternoon our armored reconnaissance platoon under Lieutenant Justus was requested to evacuate the critically wounded. He boldly raced up, dismounted his troops and arranged a security belt on the left flank.

Again, our machine guns hammered the Russian lines to provide cover for the operation. Then, the Panzers sitting in the minefield were to be towed out. We did not have enough power to pull the vehicles, which had rolled off their tracks. They had first to be put back on the tracks, which could only be done under cover of darkness. The gunners who bailed out to attach the heavy tow cables were a picture of courage and boldness. Around 3 P.M. all mobile Panzers, except for three that were left to continue to provide cover, were pulled back. During this, Schaubinger ran onto a mine and got helplessly stuck.

Hellwig and Oberhuber were attached to us to help with providing cover. This could be done only after all damaged vehicles were recovered. Then, finally, darkness came. Under its cover the promised salvage platoons were to come forward.

## **Preparing for the Attack on Seelow Heights**

### **Soviet Directives**

The following is a summation of Stalin's directives to his Front commanders several weeks before the major offensive began. Extracts from Hamilton, *The Oder Front 1945*

#### **[1st Belorussian Front: Zhukov's directive was signed by Stalin on 1 April and issued on 2 April]**

*Stavka* directive to Front commander (2 April 1945): To prepare and to conduct operations for the capture of the capital of Germany, BERLIN. To reach the line of the River Elbe not later than the 12th-15th day of operations.

##### *Operational deployment:*

- Main blow to be mounted westwards from the Küstrin bridgehead with 4 field and 2 tank armies.
- To secure the main assault group of the 1st Belorussian Front from the north and south, to mount two supporting blows each with 2 armies. . .
- The two tank armies operating with the main assault group to be employed — after the breakthrough— to exploit successes in the northerly and north-easterly outflanking of Berlin.

#### **[1st Ukrainian Front: Koniev's directive was signed by Stalin on 2 April and issued on 3 April. Koniev's directive left no doubt as to his Front's potential role in the conquest of Berlin]**

*Stavka* Directive to Front commander (3 April, 1945): To destroy enemy forces in the Cottbus area and south of Berlin. To reach Beelitz/Wittenberg line and thence the line of the Elbe up to Dresden not later than the 10th-12th day of operations.

##### *Operational Deployment:*

- Main blow to be mounted with 5 field and 2 tank armies, from the area of Triebel advancing in the general direction of Spremberg/Belzig ...
- Field and tank armies of the second echelon to exploit successes of main assault group.

##### *Additional directive to 1st Ukrainian Front:*

- To overcome the powerful enemy defense on the Küstrin/Berlin axis, the 1st Belorussian Front was directed to assemble the maximum density of troops per kilometer of front — 1 division per 7 kilometers of front; nevertheless, in the event of the rate of advance of the 1st Belorussian Front being slowed down, the 1st Ukrainian Front would switch its mobile forces on to Berlin, and thus be in a position to assist 1st Belorussian Front in the encirclement of the Berlin garrison and the storming of the Fascist capital.

**[2d Belorussian Front: Rokossovsky's directive was issued on 6 April]**

*Stavka* directive to Front commander (6 April, 1945):

- To force the Oder.
- To destroy the Stettin group of enemy forces.
- To reach line Anklam/Dammin/Waren/ Pritzwalk/Wittenberg not later than the 12th-15th day of operation.

*Operational deployment:*

- To operate from the region north of Schwedt in the general direction of Strelitz.
- To co-operate with the right flank of the 1st Belorussian Front in destroying the enemy by the Oder.
- To mount the main blow with 3 field armies, 3 tank corps, 1 mechanized and 1 cavalry corps.

**[Additional summary notes:**

*Stavka* also mandated an artillery density of no less than 250 barrels of 76mm and larger caliber guns per one kilometer of front! In total, the Soviets amassed 20 Field Armies, four Tank Armies and three Air Armies for the offensive totaling more than 42,000 guns, mortars and rockets, 6,300 tanks and assault guns, and 6,600 aircraft. More than two million soldiers were being organized for the operation. In terms of manpower, Heinrici was facing the fourth largest Soviet operation conducted during WWII. In terms of firepower, Heinrici was facing the largest artillery concentration in recorded history up to that time.]

**[General Sergei M. Shtemenko, Chief of the Operations Department of the Soviet General Staff, describes the planning for the offensive to take Berlin. Le Tissier-Zhukov pp 107-09]**

The work of the General Staff in planning the culminating attacks was made extremely complicated by Stalin's categorical decision concerning the special role of the 1st Byelorussian Front. The task of overcoming such a large city as Berlin, which had been prepared well in advance for defence, was beyond the capacity of one front, even such a powerful front as the 1st Byelorussian. The situation insistently demanded that at least the 1st Ukrainian Front should be aimed additionally at Berlin. Moreover, it was, of course, necessary to avoid an ineffectual frontal attack with the main forces.

We had to go back to the January idea of taking Berlin by means of out flanking attacks by the 1st Byelorussian Front from the north and north-west and the 1st Ukrainian Front from the south-west and west. The two Fronts were to linkup in the Brandenburg-Potsdam area. We based all our further calculations on the most unfavourable assumptions: the inevitability of heavy and prolonged fighting in the streets of Berlin, the possibility of German counterattacks from outside the ring of encirclement from the west and south-west, restoration of the enemy's defence to the west of Berlin and the

consequent need to continue the offensive. We even envisaged a situation in which the Western Allies for some reason might be unable to overcome the resistance of the enemy forces opposing them and find themselves held up for a long time.

[Shtemenko then records the events of the 1945 Easter weekend in Moscow: *Le Tissier-Zhukov* pp 108-09]

By this time the General Staff had all the basic ideas for the Berlin operation worked out. In the course of this work we kept in very close contact with the Front Chiefs-of-Staff, A.M. Bogolyubov, M.S. Malin and V.D. Sokolovsky (later with I.Y. Petrov) and, as soon as the first symptoms appeared that the Allies had designs on Berlin, Zhukov and Koniev were summoned to Moscow.

On March the 31st they and the General Staff considered what further operations the Fronts were to carry out. Marshal Koniev got very excited over the demarcation line between his Front and the 1st Byelorussian Front, which gave him no opportunity of striking a blow at Berlin. No one on the General Staff, however, could remove this obstacle.

On the next day, 1st April 1945, the plan of the Berlin operation was discussed at GHQ. A detailed report was given on the situation at the Fronts, and on Allied operations and their plans. Stalin drew the conclusion from this that we must take Berlin in the shortest possible time. The operation would have to be started not later than the 16th April and complete in not more than 12 to 15 days. The Front Commanders agreed to this and assured GHQ that the troops would be ready in time.

The Chief of the General Staff considered it necessary to draw the Supreme Commander's attention once again to the demarcation line between the two Fronts. It was emphasised that this line virtually excluded the armies of the 1st Ukrainian Front from direct participation in the fighting for Berlin, and this might make it difficult to carry out the operation as scheduled! Marshal Koniev spoke in the same vein, arguing in favour of aiming part of the forces of the 1st Ukrainian Front, particularly the tank armies, at the south-western suburbs of Berlin. Stalin decided on a compromise. He did not completely abandon his own idea, nor did he entirely reject Marshal Koniev's considerations, supported by the General Staff. On the map showing the plan of the operation he silently crossed out the section of the demarcation line that cut off the Ukrainian Front from Berlin, allowing it to go as far as Lubben (sixty kilometres to the south-east of the capital) and no further.

"Let the one who is first to break in take Berlin," he told us later.

**[German 9th Army Situation Report, 15 April 1945. *Le Tissier-Zhukov* pp 152-53]**

Daily Situation Report  
HQ 9th Army 15 Apr 45

The enemy did not start his offensive today as expected. No noteworthy combat occurred in the sectors of the Vth SS Mountain and XIth SS Panzer Corps, presumably because of the enemy's previous high losses in men and equipment.

Against the CIst Corps's front the enemy conducted some uncoordinated attacks supported by a few tanks, which although causing some trouble east of Letschin and west of Ortwig, brought little local success.

In detail:

In the Vth SS Mountain Corps's sector there was an unsuccessful enemy attack of company size near Wiesenau. The clearing of the enemy from a small sector of trenches northwest of Wiesenau has yet to be completed. Infantry wise, it was a quiet day in the Frankfurt Fortress area.

In the XIth SS Panzer Corps's sector, an enemy attack of battalion size took place against the 712th Infantry Division's forward positions near Elisenberg and down the Lebus-Schonfliess road, which was beaten back with a counterattack. The 169th Infantry Division rejected company-sized enemy attacks northeast and north of Podelzig, eliminating the breaches; however, the farm 500 meters south of the Vorwerk Podelzig [500 meters north of Podelzig station] could not be retaken by our troops because of the fierce resistance put up by the enemy. The forward positions on the right flank of the 303rd Infantry Division were pushed back to the Seelake stream.

The LVIth Panzer Corps, which took over command of the "Müncheberg" Panzer, 9th Parachute and 20th Panzergrenadier Divisions at 1530 hours, had to regain the forward positions in the "Müncheberg" Division's area. Several unsuccessful enemy attacks of company size took place against the 9th Parachute Division's front. Countermeasures are in progress to eliminate a local breach. After some initial success our attack to regain Zechin fell through against fierce enemy resistance.

In the CIst Corps's sector the enemy attacked the front of the 309th Infantry Division with two divisions after a strong preparatory bombardment with the main thrust east and north-east of Letschin, as well as west of Kienitz. Following the successful breach west of the Freigut and Jesar-Graben ditch, an enemy regimental group with armoured support reached as far as the farmsteads 500 meters east of the Letschin rifle range. A simultaneous attack of regimental strength from Rehfeld was stopped by our artillery fire. An enemy force of two battalions and six tanks that had broken through west of Amt Kienitz was eliminated. The Vossberg sugar factory, which had been lost at about 1300 hours, was regained by counterattack. The 606th Infantry Division cleared the enemy out of the southern part of Ortwig and prevented a further enemy thrust northwest of Neu Barnim with a counterattack. Near Karlsbiese several enemy attacks of battalion size were driven back.

The 5th Light Infantry Division defeated an enemy attempt to cross near Zackerick, destroying nine boats.

Our artillery brought lively disruptive fire and effective barrages to bear at night on enemy assembly areas and breaches, and by day supported our infantry's defensive fighting.

The Luftwaffe flew combat missions over the Oder bridges and attacked infantry concentrations and tanks to effect. Three tanks were destroyed. The enemy air force attacked our front line with ground-attack aircraft and fighters, dropping bombs and machine gunning.

**[Zhukov and Chuikov provide conflicting descriptions regarding the efforts to mask the buildup in the Oder River bridgeheads. Zhukov-Marshal of Victory Vol. II pp 358; Chuikov-End of Third Reich p. 176-77]**

Zhukov's post-war view:

The positions looked deserted in the daytime, but they came alive at night. Thousands of men worked with spades, crow-bars and picks in complete silence. The work was made more difficult by subsoil spring waters and the beginning of spring mud. More than 1,800,000 cubic metres of earth were excavated during those nights. On the morning of every next day no traces of the tremendous night work could be seen. Everything was carefully camouflaged.



General Chuikov (center) in his forward bunker on the Reitwein Spur. Chuikov was not too happy when Zhukov showed up with his entourage and took over the bunker.

Chuikov's post-war view:

It was impossible to ensure adequate concealment when the enemy had a good view over the bridgehead, and also the east bank of the Oder. When night fell German searchlights probed the surrounding territory. We did not open fire to put them out; the artillery was ordered to hold fire until the last minute and not betray its location. When the searchlights went off, reconnaissance aircraft would light up the valley with flares and the Germans could see all of it quite distinctly. As the trees were not yet in leaf, camouflage was difficult. Digging was out of the question on account of the spring floods and subsoil waters. As soon as you turned up the earth with a spade, the hole filled with muddy water.

**[Colonel General Katukov, commander of the 1st Guards Tank Army offers a description of Zhukov's pre-battle conference, 5-7 April 1945. Le Tissier-Zhukov p. 137]**

A look at the model and maps showed that we would not be able to repeat a variant of a deep breakthrough such as we had achieved between the Vistula and the Oder on this terrain. The conditions for a wide tank maneuver were lacking. With dogged, persistent fighting we would only be able to advance step by step and would have to bite our way through the enemy defences with bloody fighting. However, the victories of our troops in previous battles had given us much confidence. No one doubted that we would sweep aside the whole of the enemy fortifications on the approaches to Berlin.

**[Colonel General V.I. Kazakov, 1st Belorussian Front Artillery Commander explains the Soviet artillery plan. Le Tissier-Zhukov pp 142-43]**

The engagement of our artillery was preceded by a careful reconnaissance. Alone in the 1st Byelorussian Front's sector 7,000 firing positions and observation posts were deployed together with sixteen independent reconnaissance detachments, two artillery spotter aircraft squadrons and two observation balloon detachments, all for the necessary support of the artillery. Our spotter pilots flew 248 sorties, through which thousands of targets were identified, including 185 gun and mortar positions.

To defeat the enemy the strongest means had to be used, not only to break through the defensive positions but also to enable our infantry, motorized units and armored troops to make a rapid advance with the least losses.

To this end, the commander in chief of our front. Marshal G.K. Zhukov, demanded the substantial reinforcement of the artillery in the sectors of those armies on the main line of attack. The bringing forward of artillery into the sectors of these armies was particularly difficult, for it involved no less than ninety artillery and mortar regiments with 2,000 guns, mortars and rocket launchers (Katyushas), as well as 10,000 trucks and gun tractors being on the move. Road stretches of 200-280 kilometers were set aside for this. All these moves had to be carefully coordinated with the staff of other formations also redeploying their forces.

It so happened that on the instructions of our sector headquarters a further forty artillery and mortar regiments were brought forward by rail, which we also had to guide into their forming-up points. The preparations for the attack were carried out under



Soviet artillery lined up for bombardment. Such formations were only possible with near total air supremacy.

conditions of great secrecy and carefully camouflaged. By the beginning of the operation our front disposed of about 20,000 guns and mortars of all calibers, including 1,500 rocket launchers. At the breakthrough points on the enemy defenses there were 300 guns and mortars for every kilometer of front. During the Berlin Operation my observation post was furnished with signals equipment like never before. I was in direct contact with the artillery chiefs of the armies, the commanders of the three artillery corps on the main line of advance, the commanders of the artillery divisions and also some lesser units too.

## **The Main Attack Begins** *Day One, 16 April*

**[On 16 April at 0300, the Soviet artillery barrage commenced. Marshal Zhukov had two watches that he synchronized, handing General Chuikov one of them. Chuikov describes the artillery barrage unleashed at the set hour, Chuikov-*End of Third Reich* p. 178-79]**

The second hand on the Front Commander's watch completed its sweep, and in an instant it became light as day. In the flashes of artillery fire we saw the unfurled Guards colours moving forward along the trenches to the assault positions. A volcanic rumble resounded as 40,000 guns began to fire. The Oder valley seemed to rock. Fountains of dust and smoke shot up into the air.

**[Colonel General Kazakov provides his own description of the bombardment, Le Tissier-*Zhukov* p. 158]**

On 16 April at 0500 hours Moscow Time a mighty salvo from our massed artillery ripped through the silence of the night, announcing the beginning of the artillery preparation for the attack on Berlin. It was an eerie picture, as along the whole front the muzzle-flashes of tens of thousands of guns and the flashes of exploding shells burst into light. Particularly effective were the Katyusha rocket salvos. The basic power of this spectacle, which was much more frightening by night than by day, left an indelible impression on us old gunners.



An early morning view of a Soviet massed rocket bombardment.

**[German Lieutenant Tams provides his view of the barrage from his position at Seelow, Le Tissier-*Zhukov* p. 158]**

At 0300 hours on the morning of 16 April 1945 40,000 guns opened fire simultaneously. It seemed as if the dawn were suddenly upon us and then vanished again. The whole Oder valley bed shook. 40,000, a total known today, amounting to 333 to the kilometer. In the bridgehead it was as light as day. The hurricane of fire reached out to the Seelow Heights. It seemed as if the earth were reaching up into the sky like a dense wall. Everything around us started dancing, rattling about. Whatever was not securely fastened down fell from the shelves and cupboards. Pictures fell off the walls and crashed

to the floor. Glass splinters jumped out of window frames. We were soon covered in sand, dirt and glass splinters. None of us had experienced anything like it before, and would not have believed it possible. There was no escape. The greatest concentration of artillery fire in history was directed immediately in front of us. We had the impression that every square yard of earth would be ploughed up.

**[Gerd Wagner of the 9.Fallschirmjäger Division relates what he saw, Le Tissier-Zhukov pp 158-59]**

I, then a section leader in the 10th Company, 27th Parachute Regiment, had left the forward positions with my men in accordance with my orders only minutes before the opening bombardment to await it about a kilometer away near Gusow. Within a few seconds all the ten comrades of my section had fallen, and I found myself in a still smoking shell hole, wounded, a fact that I did not notice until I reached the second line. As far as the eye could see were burning farms, villages, smoke and clouds of fumes. An inferno.

**[Testimony of Friedhelm Schoneck, posted at Sietzing with the 309th Infantry Division, Le Tissier-Zhukov p. 159]**

It is 3 o'clock but still night. The night has gone mad. An ear-deafening din fills the air. In contrast to what we have experienced previously, this is no bombardment but a hurricane tearing apart everything in front of us, over us and behind us. The sky is glowing red as if it will crack open at any moment. The ground rocks, heaves and sways like a ship in a Force 10 gale. We crouch down in our defensive positions, our hands grasping our weapons in deadly fear, and our bodies shrunken into tiny crouching heaps at the bottom of the trench.

The bursting and howling of the shells, the whistling and hissing of shrapnel fills the air or what remains of it for us to breathe. Screams and orders are choked by steel, earth and the acrid smoke of the volcano that has suddenly opened up on top of us with incredible force. One would like to be a mole and dig oneself in a flash into the protective earth, would like to find a solution in nothingness, but we lie as naked as earthworms on a flat surface, exposed to a pitiless trampling, defenseless and without hope.

The infernal drumming continues. Into the middle of it dash hurtling furies, aircraft rushing in to attack right over our positions to complete the mad stirring of the whirling, bubbling witches' cauldron we find ourselves in. Our trench system has disappeared, collapsed or been flattened by thousands of shells and bombs. The dugout we are sitting in has become even narrower, the walls driven inward, packing us together like sardines in a tin can. We tremble and pray, the beads of rosaries slipping through soldiers' dirty hands. We have lost all shame. Dear God, hear us calling to you from this hell! Kyrie eleison! [EN: "Lord have mercy," an expression repeated in some Christian liturgies]

**[Zhukov describes the initial artillery barrage and searchlight use. Zhukov-Marshal of Victory Vol. II pp 364-65]**

At exactly three minutes before the beginning of the artillery preparation we all went out of the dugout and took up positions at the observation post which had been built with particular care by the 8th Army Chief of Engineers.

The entire vicinity beyond the Oder could be seen from here in the daytime. Now there was a morning mist there. I looked at my watch: it was five o'clock sharp. And at this moment, the vicinity was lighted up by the fire of many thousands of guns, mortars and the legendary Katyusha rocket launchers followed by a tremendous din from the discharges and explosions of shells and aircraft bombs. The continuous roar of bombers was steadily growing louder.

A few bursts of machine-gun fire were heard from the enemy side in the first seconds, and then everything quieted down. It seemed as if there were not a single living creature left on the enemy side. The enemy did not make a single shot during the 30-minute powerful artillery barrage. This showed that the enemy was completely suppressed and the defence system disrupted. For this reason it was decided to shorten the time of the artillery preparation and immediately begin the general offensive.

Thousands of flares of different colour flew into the air. This was the signal for 140 searchlights placed at intervals of 200 metres to flash spot lights equalling more than 100,000 million candlepowers, lighting up the battlefield and blinding the enemy and snatching objects for attack by our tanks and infantry from the darkness. It was a striking picture, and I remember having seen nothing like it during my whole life!

The artillery fire grew denser; the infantry and the tanks drove forward in a single wave, their attack accompanied by a double rolling barrage. By dawn our troops had taken the first position and began to attack the second.

With a large number of planes in the Berlin area the enemy was unable to use his air force effectively at night, while in the morning our attacking forces were at such close quarters with the enemy troops that their pilots could not bomb our forward units without risking hitting their own troops.

The Nazi troops were virtually swamped in a sea of fire and metal. A thick wall of dust and smoke hung in the air, and in places even the powerful anti-aircraft searchlights were unable to penetrate it, but this troubled no one.

Our aircraft flew above the field of battle in waves. A few hundred bombers hit targets that were too far for the artillery in the night. Other bombers cooperated with the troops in the morning and day time. More than 6,550 sorties were made on the first day of the battle.

It was planned for the artillery to make 1,197,000 shots, actually 1,236,000 shells were fired: 2,450 railway cars of shells or nearly 98,000 tons of metal hit the enemy. Enemy defences were being destroyed and suppressed to a depth of 8 kilometres, and some resistance points even to 10-12 kilometres.

**[Confusion reigned—on both sides—due to the massive bombardment. General Chuikov describes problems encountered due to the barrage, *Chuikov-End of Third Reich* p. 179]**

In the zone of the 8th Guards Army the glow of the artillery was so bright that from my command post we missed the moment when the searchlights were switched on. The Front Commander and I even asked what had happened, and were surprised to hear that the searchlights were already on.

I must say that though we admired the effect of the searchlights on the testing ground, we could not foresee how the ploy would work in practice on the battlefield. I saw the intense beams lighting up the swirling screen of fumes, dust and smoke whipping up over the enemy positions. The searchlights did not penetrate this screen, and it was difficult for us to watch the battle. To make it worse, there was a strong head wind. As a result, an impenetrable cloud of dust soon enveloped Height 81.5 where I had my command post. Visibility was down to nil and we had to rely on radiotelephone communications and liaison officers in exercising troop control. The dense cloud of smoke and dust also handicapped the actions of the advancing troops.

**[LTG Andrei Getman, Deputy Commander, 1st Guards Tank Army, had a much harsher indictment regarding Zhukov's use of searchlights, *Hamilton Oder 1945 Vol. I*, p. 130]**

[The searchlights] illuminated our infantry support tanks to the Germans! We simply didn't blind the main forces of the enemy and that was the disastrous thing!

**[Lieutenant Erich Hachtel, of the 75th Light Infantry Regiment, 5 Light Infantry Division near Königlich Reetz, and a commander of a heavy weapons company with 150mm howitzers and 120mm mortars, provides some idea of the level of confusion in the German lines, *Le Tissier-Zhukov* pp 163-64]**

At 0930 hours I was summoned to the regimental command post. Lieutenant Colonel Liebmann turned to me: "Mr Hachtel, have you contact with the front?" I replied in the negative, adding that I had had no contact since 0900 hours. I discovered that the regiment also no longer had contact with the 1st Battalion and so no one knew exactly what was happening. Lieutenant Colonel Liebmann looked at me and said: "Take your tracked motorcycle combination [EN: German- Kettenkrad] forward, make contact with the 1st Battalion and report back to me what it looks like up front." With this task I raced first south to a dike and then along this to the 'Oder-Stellung' near Neu Lietzegöricke. Soldiers lying in their holes on the left side of the dike looked at us in amazement. We had driven along the front line and the area around us with its shell holes reminded one of a moon landscape. They must have been soldiers of the 3rd Battalion under its commander, Major Sparrer, who with his unit was known as "Combat Group Sparrer."

We reached the shattered village of Neu Lietzegöricke and found the command post of the 1st Battalion of the 75th Light Infantry Regiment on a big square in the middle of the village. The battalion commander reported that everything in his sector was in order and firmly in our hands. A breach in his 1st Company's sector had been cleared and the assailants driven back into the Oder with cold steel. As I then learned, they had been members of a Polish division, as one could tell from the dead left behind. With this message on as yet positive progress in the fighting, I returned to the regimental staff. I then made my way to the left flank of our regiment to look at my platoon's firing positions. I drove alone on a motorcycle via Neu Ranft and then eastward along an arrow-straight road leading to Neu Küstrinchen.

**[Survivors of the initial bombardment describe the Soviet assault. Friedhelm Schoneck, who was with the 6th Company of the 652d Grenadier Regiment, 309th "Berlin" Infantry Division describes escape from an isolated position, Le Tissier-Zhukov p. 167]**

By late afternoon our position on the railway embankment was untenable. The ammunition was almost exhausted. The losses in dead and wounded were terrible. We were lying there, a forgotten outpost. There was no question of a command structure, everyone was fighting for himself alone without any set task or orders. But we were going to survive! Where the order actually came from, none of us could say. We got up and left that untenable position.

Going through Sietzing, which we left burning behind us, we reached the road to Wuschewier, but it was no longer a road, only a cratered landscape over which we staggered. The village was just a single heap of rubble. Shattered vehicles were scattered about as if in a scrap yard, with ammunition boxes and equipment around. In between, dead and yet more dead.

**[Kurt Keller II with the 1st Company, 1st Battalion, 2nd "Müncheberg" Panzergrenadier Regiment, describes surviving the barrage and then the actions taken to drive off the first Soviet incursions on the heights. Le Tissier-Zhukov pp 171-72]**

During the night of 14-15 April we relieved a parachute unit between [Neu] Tucheband and [Amt] Friedrichsaue in front of Golzow. From this time onward the front line was only thinly manned.

My assault platoon lay between the embankment of the Berlin-Küstrin railway line and a road leading to Golzow. Until the Russian attack on the morning of 16 April the command post of the 1st Company, under Second Lieutenant Schuler, was in the since disappeared crossing-keeper's cottage west of Golzow near the Annahof farmstead. We were not fully surprised by that famous Red Army barrage, as one member of our platoon spoke perfect Russian and had already told the company commander on the evening of 15 April when the attack would begin. Here one should note that we were only thirty meters from the Russians opposite.

The volume of the bombardment, which lasted several hours, was like an earthquake. Once the barrage had passed over us the Russians attacked with the aid of tanks and searchlights. The smoke screen started by the Russians moved westward toward Langsow and Werbig, so we shot out some of the searchlights with rifle and machinegun fire and then moved back under cover of the Russian smoke via our command post to the Annahof, where the battalion command post was, to regroup, which was done at about 0800 hours.

The battalion commander, a captain, ordered us to set up a new line of defense and to clear the neighboring copse of the Russians that had penetrated it, which we were able to do. The Annahof position was vacated when the news arrived that Russian tank units had thrust past us and were moving on the Werbig railway junction, threatening to encircle us.

We then set off with our battalion commander to the regimental command post near a stream in Langsow not far from the goods station. On the way I was slightly wounded for the second time that day and was bandaged in the cellar of the regimental command post.

As the Russians were trying to surround us, the troops gathered at the regimental command post. Some of the soldiers decided to withdraw toward the Eberswalde-Seelow railway line. I myself with a larger group tried to get past the goods station in Werbig, where there were some Russian T-34 tanks, and to break through toward Seelow or Reichstrasse 1.28

**[Sergeant Waldmuller of the 8th Panzer Battalion, describes an action with his tank near Alt Langsow just after the artillery bombardment. *Le Tissier-Zhukov* pp 172-173]**

A farm near us is on fire. It is still dark and a bit foggy. Our infantry are streaming back toward us in the dawning light. It is difficult to distinguish between our own and the enemy soldiers in the mist. The Russians have hardly any tanks in our sector, but are attacking with masses of infantry and antitank guns. We pull back westward along the village street. I get the task of securing the village's northwesterly exit. Russian infantry are bypassing the village to the north. The sun comes through and the fog lifts a little. Russian antitank guns and infantry push forward to the eastern end of the village street. Our platoon leader,

Second Lieutenant Scheuermann, gives the order for me to withdraw by the village's southwestern exit. We are the last vehicle! In turning round our driver, an old Afrika



A pair of German Panthers engaging Soviet tanks along the Oder River front. The left vehicle has just fired and backed off to change position. While taken in February, it gives some idea of the use of rapid fire and movement used by the German tank units.

Korps hand, drives into a heap of cobblestones, which cause our right track to come off. I radio for help. The vehicle in front of us, Sergeant Walter Bauer's SPG, comes back. Under fire from the Russian antitank guns and infantry, we attach his tow wire to our tank and our tow wire to our torn-off track. In this way, at the last second, he pulls out of the village for four kilometers to where we can fix our track again.

Meanwhile, some 200 meters away our platoon leader's tank has caught on fire inside, but once the fire has been extinguished, it is operational once more. Staff Sergeant Schild is appointed the new commander of our tank. We withdraw to a position in the woods near Diedersdorf. Our company commander, Lieutenant Kaut, is reported to have been killed.

**[General Chuikov describes the effect of German antitank measures on the Seelow Heights, or “Hardenberg-Stellung,” when Soviet forces reached the base of the heights. Chuikov-*End of Third Reich* p. 179-80]**

For the first two kilometres our rifle units and tanks advanced under cover of the moving barrage successfully, though slowly. But then the machines, which had to get past the streams and canals, began to be left behind. Coordinated action between artillery, infantry and tanks was thus lost. The moving barrage, which had been carefully calculated for a certain length of time, had to be stopped, and the artillery switched over to support of the infantry and tanks by means of consecutive concentration of fire on different points. The enemy conducted a particularly stiff resistance at the Haupt-Graben, which skirts the foot of the Seelow Heights. The spring floods had turned it into an impassable barrier for our tanks and self-propelled guns. The few bridges in the area were kept under enemy artillery and mortar fire from beyond the Seelow Heights and from dug-in tanks and self-propelled guns, all well camouflaged.

Our advance slowed down even more. The troops were unable to move until the engineers had set up crossings. Any kind of manoeuvre by motor vehicles or tanks was impossible for the roads were jammed, and to try and move across country, in this marshy valley with its well-mined fields, would have been impossible.

It was our Air Force that saved the day. Controlling the sky over the battlefield, our bombers, fighters and attack aircraft silenced the enemy batteries at the back of the German defence area. Finally the Haupt-Graben was crossed, and our troops began storming the Seelow Heights. By noon the 8th Guards Army had broken through the first two lines of enemy defences and reached the third, but failed to take it off the march.



*Volkssturm* personnel await a Soviet assault. German troops often fought in one-man fighting positions by and large separated from nearby friendly support.

The slopes of the Seelow Heights were too steep for our tanks and self-propelled guns, so they had to search for more gentle ways up. They found them along the roads that led to Seelow, Friedersdorf and Dolgelin, but there the Germans had formidable strong points which could be suppressed only by accurate and very powerful artillery fire. This meant that our artillery had to deploy closer to the Seelow Heights.

I issued an order saying that at 1400 hours [1200 hours local], after a 20 minute artillery barrage, Seelow, Friedersdorf and Dolgelin were to be attacked and the Seelow Heights taken. For this purpose I ordered the artillery to move forward and establish cooperation with the infantry and tanks.

**[Gunner Hans Hansen with the 3rd Battery, 1st Battalion, 26th Flak Regiment, 23rd Flak Division, which was deployed in a field west of the Sachsendorf-Dolgelin road, described his experience of the opening barrage. Le Tissier-Zhukov pp 179-80]**

This infernal, hellish storm continued with the break of day. The rays of the rising spring sun were unable to penetrate the thick haze of dust, smoke and mist that lay over the Oder landscape that morning. Instead an unusual twilight reigned when we dared to raise our heads from our holes as the fire subsided. But it was not peaceful. The barrage had only been a foretaste of the horror to come. The next act was staged by the Russian ground-attack aircraft, which, like unreal shadows, thrust through the swirling clouds of dust and smoke and spat out death and destruction on everything that still moved. One wave after another attacked our positions. We defended ourselves with an obstinate fury that partly arose from our fear, and achieved at least one being shot down, for our platoon had been spared casualties until then.

The next act: We then came under bombardment from mortars and "Stalin-Organs." The infantry in the line in front of us retreated. Whether this was as a result of orders to do so, or the soldiers were simply going of their own accord, we did not know. Our troop now formed what one might call a forward strong point. The Russian infantry came on fast. In front of us Russian machineguns began hammering away in a row of bushes. The situation seemed precarious. Then we too received the order to withdraw. We had to leave our guns behind as there was no chance of towing them away.



German 128mm FLAK engaging targets near Seelow Heights.

About a kilometer to the rear, the remains of shattered and scattered units were formed into a new defensive line along the Seelow-Dolgelin railway, in which we gunless flak soldiers were also inserted. The terrain was to our advantage, for the railway ran

through a hill in a cutting, and from the upper slope one had a good field of fire over the ground to the east, while the foot of the cutting provided us with some cover from artillery fire.

**[Zhukov explains his reasoning behind committing his tank armies on the first day. Zhukov-Marshal of Victory Vol. II pp 365-66]**

In the morning on April 16 Soviet troops advanced successfully on all sectors of the front. However, having recovered from the initial shock the enemy began to resist by means of his artillery and mortars from the Seelow Heights, while groups of bombers appeared from the Berlin direction. The closer our troops approached the Seelow Heights, the stronger became enemy resistance.

This natural defence line dominated over the surrounding terrain, had steep slopes and was a serious obstacle on the way to Berlin in all respects. It stood like a wall before our troops blocking the plateau where the battle at the nearest approaches to Berlin was to take place.

It was here, at the foot of the Seelow Heights that the Germans expected to stop our troops. It was here that they concentrated the largest amount of manpower and equipment.

The Seelow Heights not only restricted the actions of our tanks but were also a serious obstacle for artillery. They blocked the depth of enemy defence making it impossible to observe it from the ground on our side. The artillerymen had to overcome this difficulty by more intense fire and occasionally fired at random.

It was also important for enemy morale to hold on to this major line. Berlin lay behind it. Nazi propaganda made a point of the decisive importance and invincible strength of the Seelow Heights calling them "Berlin's Castle" or an "invincible fortress".

By 13:00 I clearly realized that the fire system of the enemy defence was largely intact there, and we would be unable to take the Seelow Heights in the battle array in which the offensive had been started and continued.

After seeking the advice of the army commanders we decided to commit both tank armies of generals Katukov and Bogdanov to battle in order to reinforce the attacking troops and break through the defence by all means. At 14:30 I watched the advance of the forward units of the 1st Guards Tank Army from my observation post.

**[General Katukov describes the moment he received Zhukov's order to throw the exploitation force into the battle in order to affect the breakthrough, Le Tissier, Zhukov p. 181]**

A telephone call interrupted our conversation. I recognized the voice of our front commander. He gave me the surprising order, even before the enemy resistance had been completely broken through, to take my 1st Guards Tank Army into the battle and complete the breakthrough of the tactical defense zone with 8th Guards Army.

**[General Kuznetsov, Commander 3d Shock Army explains why he believed the initial attack of the lead armies failed, leading to Zhukov's decision to send his two tank armies into the attack early, Hamilton *Oder 1945 Vol. I*, p. 130]**

The Germans knew just too well what our traditional method was—that after the reconnaissance actions then there would come the general assault. And so they were able to withdraw their main forces into the second line of the defenses, which is they were able to pull back some eight kilometers from the main combat line. Thus we were directing all our artillery fire on covering detachments but we were not striking at the main body of the enemy.

**[General Babadshanian, commanding the 11th Tank Corps explains what knowledge senior commanders had regarding the heights at Seelow. Le Tissier-*Zhukov* pp 189]**

Already during the conference on 5 April, several generals had drawn the front commander's [EN: Zhukov] attention forcibly to the fact that the main enemy defenses ran along the Seelow Heights, and that therefore the artillery and air strikes should be mainly concentrated on the Heights. Unfortunately their advice was not taken.

**[Zhukov explains the stress and tension he experienced, especially during a telephone conversation with Stalin, as he realized the opening attack was not going as planned. *Zhukov-Marshal of Victory Vol. II* pp 366-67]**

At 15:00 I called the Stavka and reported that the first and the second defensive positions of the enemy had been breached, the Front's troops had advanced up to 6 kilometres but had encountered serious resistance on the line of the Seelow Heights where enemy defences appeared to be largely intact. I committed both tank armies to the battle to reinforce the offensive of the infantry armies. I thought that tomorrow we would breach enemy defences by the end of the day.

Stalin listened attentively and then said calmly: "The enemy defence on Konev's Front has proved to be weak. He has easily crossed the Neisse and is advancing hardly meeting any resistance. Support the attack of your tank armies with bombers. Report in the evening how things will be going."

In the evening I reported to the Supreme Commander again about difficulties at the approaches to the Seelow Heights and said that the line could not be taken earlier than tomorrow evening.

This time Stalin spoke with me not as calmly as he had in the daytime. "You should not have committed the 1st Guards Tank Army to battle on the sector of the 8th Guards Army instead of where the Supreme Command had instructed." Then he added: "Are you certain you'll take the Seelow line tomorrow?"

Trying to appear calm I answered: "Tomorrow, April 17, by the end of the day the defence on the Seelow Heights will be breached. I believe that the more of his troops the

enemy hurls at our forces here, the quicker we will later take Berlin, because it is easier to defeat the enemy in the open field than in a city."

"We intend to order Konev to move Rybalko's and Lelyushenko's tank armies towards Berlin from the south and Rokossovsky to hurry with the force-crossing and also make a thrust outflanking Berlin from the north," Stalin said.

I answered: "Konev's tank armies have every possibility to advance rapidly, and they should be directed to Berlin, but Rokossovsky won't be able to start the offensive before April 23, because he will be delayed in forcing the Oder."

"Goodbye," said Stalin rather wryly instead of continuing and put down the receiver.

**[A Tiger company of SS-Schwere Panzer Abteilung 502, attached to the Kurmark Panzergrenadier Division, counterattacks near Dogelin, 16 April 1945. Extract from *Armor Battles of the Waffen-SS, 1943-1945* by Will Fey]**

It turned seven o'clock, eight o'clock.

Up til then, our Tiger company, which was attached to the Kurmark Division on the right front sector of the bridgehead, had not received orders to join the fighting. For half an hour before, we heard the pulsating noise of infantry fighting. The staccato hammering of the machine guns seemed to be moving closer.

The wall of our soldiers two to three kilometers ahead of us seemed to be withstanding the overwhelming assault of the Soviet regiments sure of victory. Nowhere could a withdrawal by our troops across the heights be observed. But, a breakthrough of entire groups of Russian tanks had to be expected at any moment. Judging by the time, the battle had reached its peak. We sat silently in our fighting vehicle and listened, everyone of us deep in thought, contemplating the fate of our comrades out there in the foxholes at the front lines. How often, during the years of war, had we ourselves been in the middle of it at the front, together with those who were facing hell out there, hands grasping the safety of the ground. Having to wait, helplessly, was so terribly difficult.

Around 8:30 the enemy artillery fire seemed to weaken. We constantly searched the burning villages and battle sectors covered in smoke with our field glasses for the reported enemy tanks. Without thinking, and not really hungry, we forced ourselves to eat the sandwiches that the radio operator had prepared.

Finally, at a few minutes before 9 A.M., we felt quite confident and believed that our own front lines had held together against the overwhelming onslaught. While the chief rushed ahead of the Panzers in his jeep to scout the terrain, Schaubinger led the company into position.

As the engines roared and the camouflage dropped off, our Panzer tracks pulled us out of the craters and the meter-high dirt walls onto the village road. In a wide detour the giants rolled backward, separated into platoons and well spaced, out of the village into the flat country. Some 300 meters further we were caught in a heavy bombing attack, but none of the vehicles was damaged.

All along the roads and country lanes, armored reserve units clanged their way to the front in deeply spaced marching columns. The commanding general of the II. SS-Panzerkorps, Obergruppenfuhrer

Kleinheisterkamp, himself on the way to the front, received our report on our orders and wished us much luck on the way. The company reached the regimental command post in the right sector of the division by way of Dolgelin and Falkenhagen at 1 P.M. We were to begin a counterattack on Schonfließ, held by the Russians, in two hours, together with an officer cadet battalion.

To the left and the right of the elevated railroad embankment east of Schonfließ, the remnants of the bravest fighting troops had dug into the ground, on the flank of the breakthrough, and thus cushioned the first push, just like a bridge pillar surrounded by a brown flood.

According to the briefing by the chief, we were to push into Schonfließ first, together with an assault party of officer cadets, then push the company ahead by radio, and, together with the battalion which was to have moved forward by then, carry the attack ahead to the railroad embankment. Because of the obstruction to the field of vision and the narrowness of the village street, action by the vehicles in formation was out of the question. It was now 2:30 P.M. Time was getting short, and we only had a few minutes left to discuss details of the attack with Schaubinger.

The time had come. Our steel giants broke out of the path through the woods in a long line into the sloping open fields and wound their way under cover of depressions in the terrain past deeply staggered positions, our Volkssturm men waving at us from their perimeters. A kilometer-long veil of dust whirled above us across the plain. In the wooded area to the right of Schonfließ, the infantry battalion, assembled for the attack, was waiting. It provided an assault team to come along with us. Without stopping we continued our way to the entrance of the village, flanked to the left and right by officer cadets of the war school.

We broke into the occupied village through a dangerous, narrow gorge, which offered room only for one Panzer at a time. The din from our tracks running over the tangle of telephone posts, bricks, and roofs, which had been blown off by the pressure



The mobile Command Post of the SS-Schwere Panzerabteilung 502 during the battle for Seelow Heights. Center stage is its command SS-LTC Kurt Hartrampf. Hartrampf was awarded the Knights Cross during this action and survived the war.

waves of explosions, echoed deafeningly from the ruins opposite us. The stink of hot oil rose as our Panzer hammered its deadly load into the gardens and house ruins. Occasionally, we spotted the brown uniforms of Russians among the rubble. Explosive shells and machine-gun salvos drove them from their positions. To the right and left of us dirt-brown men rose from cover and ran, bent over, toward the exits of the town. Blue clouds of smoke from the hand grenades of our infantry rose behind them, submachine guns rattled around the corners of houses. Many Russians jumped up, threw up their arms, and fell back. Others were hurled backward by unseen blows and did not rise again. Slowly, we made our way past the antitank barricade at the end of the village. The soft ground along the path welled up under the weight of our vehicle. Then, the barricade was behind us and we climbed from the valley into the open fields. Behind us, the officer cadets finished clearing Schonfließ with bold, daredevil actions.

The brown-green pasture land ahead was in full view, and it rose toward the railroad embankment, our real objective, some 1,500 meters away. We had to be prepared for antitank fire from there, at least for heavy artillery fire, but maybe even a tank attack. Up until then there was no movement in the dug-in positions along the embankment, halfway up.

While Schaubinger, as agreed, swung to the right we continued to roll ahead along the uphill path through the fields toward the underpass in die embankment. Two-hundred meters farther on we were stopped by trenches crossing the path at a right angle from which Russians appeared and immediately attacked us from the sides with bazookas. We barely managed to fight them off with hand grenades and submachine guns. Schaubinger, off to the side, faced the same situation. We agreed by radio to halt and wait until our company could rush up to our uphill positions. Since the Russians were cut off from any chance of escaping by our machine guns, they defended their trenches with utmost determination.

Shortly, our other vehicles pulled up at the edge of town and set up a firing line. The infantry battalion, too, had moved up through Schonfließ. The continuation of the counterattack was ordered. Regrettably, we could not overcome the trenches with direct fire, and, however often our daring assault teams attempted to break into the trenches from the sides, they were mowed down from above or smashed inside the trenches by barrages of hand grenades. In limidess exasperation we forced our way with our Panzer past the trenches, almost to die linesman's cabin. But we were immediately greatly threatened by approaching antitank teams, which we were barely able to hold off with hand grenades and submachine gun salvos. As long as our other Panzers did not follow, we could not remain up there by ourselves, so we pulled back to die line of the others. Schaubinger's Tiger received damage to the tracks and had to be released from action. We started out again to leave the trenches behind us.

While Harlander gave covering fire, Kuhnke rolled his Panzer across die fully manned trench, his tracks digging into the ground of the crumbling walls and the compressed bodies. It was always the same, terrible game.

The bitter, terrible fighting for the trenches went back and forth for hours. No decision could be brought about. Our own reinforcements were brought in, and we suffered severe losses.

**[General Heinrici, Commander Army Group Vistula describes the result of the first day's defense. Hamilton *Oder 1945 Vol. I*, p. 128 MS T-9]**

All-in-all by the evening of 16 April the outcome of the first day of the major attack did not seem to be too unsatisfactory, if one compared the weakness of the defense on the river with the superiority of the Russian attack. At least the enemy had not attained a breakthrough on this day. *General Krebs* called the result of the battle a "great success in defense". Still danger spots of special importance remained along the range of hills at Seelow and the area around Wriezen. Here, on the basis of the reports he got from the observation elements sent to the front, Hitler himself had in the afternoon of 16 April ordered the deployment of the *25.Panzer Grenadier Division* of the *9.Armeekorps*, which had been held in reserve, thus ignoring the *Heeresgruppe*. The *Heeresgruppe* hesitated to follow this instruction, for it intended to hold back its panzer reserves for the counter-attack and did not want to overexert them in supporting the front. But when the *9.Armeekorps* reported that a breakthrough was looming near Wriezen and that it had nothing at its disposal to prevent it and was asking for the deployment of the *25.Panzer Grenadier Division*, the *Heeresgruppe* decided to agree to its employment for the local counter-attack. As a replacement the *Heeresgruppe* asked Hitler's headquarters in the field to consent to releasing the *18.Panzer Grenadier Division*, which was standing near Joachimsthal and was in *OKH* reserve, to the *9.Armeekorps*. The *Heeresgruppe* was very concerned about the situation of the forces standing south of Wriezen—the *606.Division*, the *Division 'Berlin'* and the *9.Fallschirmjäger Division*. One could only get indistinct reports on the situation in their sectors. The division headquarters of the *Division 'Berlin'* had already fallen into the Russian's hands when it defended its command post in the area northeast of Neuhardenberg. At this point this division had already been through five days of hard fighting, and the *Heeresgruppe* was worried about how much longer it would be capable of effacing this pressure.

## *Day Two, 17 April*

**[Sergeant Averdieck describes the crisis his regiment faced on the second day of the Soviet assault. *Le Tissier-Zhukov* pp 199-201]**

At 0400 hours on 17 April our command post was moved back more centrally in our sector to Gusow railway station. We had hardly camouflaged the vehicle and moved into the cellar of the station when a tank alert was given. The tanks had come up the road without firing. At the same time the bomber squadron reappeared and started bombing a little to our rear. To add to our misfortunes, alarming reports were radioed from the battalions. The enemy was in the rear of the 1st and 2nd Battalions with tanks and infantry and the 3rd Battalion was falling back. At 0900 hours there was another bombardment on our forward positions, knocking out the radio APC of the 1st Battalion, and the crew of the 3rd Battalion's radio APC were injured by wood splinters. The section leader, although the most seriously wounded, nevertheless drove the vehicle back to the supply column himself.

The regiment was now in such disorder, for instance no communications or contact, that we had to withdraw under cover of some self-propelled guns (SPGs) and tanks to the next line of defense, the "Stein-Stellung" near Görldorf. It was none too soon, for we were already being fired at from the flank and were showered with wood splinters in the copse in which we stopped to assemble. When we arrived at midday with the remainder of the regiment at the "Stein-Stellung" it was already under shell fire and the Russians were assembling tanks and infantry opposite. Of our 1st and 2nd Battalions only a few scattered groups had come back, and these were now reorganized into a weak battalion. The command post was set up on the reverse slopes of the defense position. While the commanders were setting the sector boundaries, the enemy artillery and mortar fire steadily increased. Mortar bombs and salvos of rockets crashed down around us and it was getting more and more un-comfortable.

Suddenly there was another alarm. Somehow the Russians had got through our lines and were behind us. Before anyone knew what was happening our troops were leaving their positions. There was a mad rush by the staff to round up the soldiers and recover our positions with a counterattack. Soon machinegun and tank fire was coming from every direction. At dusk we went into the attack with the support of some 2cm anti-aircraft guns and tanks, although these heavy vehicles were not very maneuverable in the woods. We formed a blocking position on the corner of a wood with our APC. The fighting went on into the night but the old positions were not recovered."

**[Sergeant Waldmüller's tank of the 8th Panzer Battalion was engaged on the Heights near Seelow. He describes a close-quarter action. *Le Tissier-Zhukov* pp 201-02]**

The Russians attack in infantry masses, some drunk, and deployed in lines of up to three ranks deep. We defend ourselves with machineguns and high-explosive shells.

Russian snipers aim at our driver's viewing slit, scoring six hits on it; a seventh hit enters the depressed muzzle of the gun just as it is being fired. Fortunately the result is only a swelling of the gun barrel due to the high-explosive shell detonating there. The heat causes the camouflage net to catch fire, and the gun is useless. We drive back to our field workshops at Hoppegarten via Müncheberg, being stopped several times on the way by generals and high-ranking officers, who think that we are running away. We help ourselves to some food from abandoned houses. The workshops are in the woods. It rains and we sleep on the ground underneath our tank, still being disturbed by artillery strikes close by.

**[General Weidling, CO LVI Panzer Corps, describes the first two days in a post-battle interrogation quoted by Zhukov. *Zhukov-Marshal of Victory Vol. II* pp 365]**

On April 16, in the first hours of the offensive the Russians broke through on the right flank of the 101st Army Corps on the sector of Division Berlin, thereby threatening the left flank of the 56th Panzer Corps. In the second half of the day Russian tanks broke through on the sector of the 303rd Infantry Division, of part of the SS XI Panzer Corps, and threatened to attack units of Division Müncheberg from the flank. At the same time the Russians exerted strong pressure on the front of the sector occupied by my corps. In the early hours on April 17 units of my corps, suffering heavy losses, were forced to retreat to the heights east of Seelow....

**[Zhukov provides his post-war view of the how the attack was carried out. *Zhukov-Marshal of Victory Vol. II* pp 366-67]**

In the course of the fighting on April 16 and 17, and later, I repeatedly analyzed the way the operation had been carried out by the Front's forces to ascertain whether there were any mistakes in our decisions which could lead to the operation's failure.

There were no mistakes. It is to be admitted, however, that we made a slip which dragged out the fighting for one or two additional days in breaching the tactical zone.

In preparing for the operation we somewhat underestimated the complicated nature of the terrain in the Seelow Heights area where the enemy had an opportunity to organize a defence that was difficult to overcome. Situated 10 to 12 kilometres from our initial positions, having dug in deeply, particularly on the opposite slopes of the heights, the enemy managed to preserve his manpower and equipment from our artillery fire and air bombing. Of course we had a very limited time to prepare the Berlin operation but even that cannot serve, as an excuse.

I must assume the blame for the slip above all.

I think that the responsibility for not being sufficiently prepared to take the Seelow Heights on the army scale will be taken by the relevant army commanders, if not publicly then in private. In planning the artillery attack, account should have been taken of all the difficulties involved in destroying enemy defences in this area.

Today, a long time after the events, in pondering over the plan of the Berlin operation I have reached the conclusion that the defeat of the Berlin enemy group and the

taking of Berlin itself were done correctly, but it was also possible to carry out the operation in a somewhat different way.

There is no denying the fact that now, when everything is completely clear, it is much easier to draw up an offensive plan than at the time when we had to practically solve an equation with many unknowns. Nevertheless, I would like to share my thoughts on the subject.

**[General Heinrici describes the result of the first day's defense. Hamilton Oder 1945 Vol. I, p. 131 MS T-9]**

In the evening of 17 April, the combat situation in the area of the *Heeresgruppe* was as follows: the fortress garrison of Frankfurt had held their ground against the severe attacks the Russians carried out against the town from the south. North of Frankfurt, the troops held the territory along the line of the range of hills until Podelzig. Between Seelow and Neuhardenberg, it was impossible to define the exact situation of our own line. It seemed as if motley parts consisting of remnants of the different divisions that had been deployed in this sector were meagerly warding off the Russian attacks. The *Heeresgruppe* waited in vain for the arrival of the *18.Panzergranadier Division* that had been moved off from Joachimsthal, which together with the *25.Panzergranadier Division* was supposed to repel the enemy back to the Oder flats. The *25.Panzergranadier Division*, which in the beginning had been severely held up in its advance by enemy aircraft, did not manage to start a counter-attack near Wriezen. It had been employed by the local *Commandant* to defend the range of hills south of Wriezen and, together with the *606. Division*, was defending the area as well. The *5.Jager-Division*, having a long defensive flank between Wriezen and the Oder, was still standing in its position on the western riverbank. The *3.Panzer Armee* was totally holding the western bank of the Oder. On the eastern bank, it now suspected the enemy's main points of effort were preparing for attacks across the water near Schwedt, near Garth, and mainly near Stettin. The *3. Panzer Armee* came to this conclusion because active movement could be observed at these points, river-crossing equipment was brought here, trees were felled, and reconnaissance work carried out.

In the evening hours of 17 April, threatening news came from the southern neighbor of the *Heeresgruppe*, from the *4.Panzer Armee* of the *Armeegruppe Schorner*, which defended the area between Guben and Forst. The enemy had already, on 16 April, penetrated the so-called triangle of fortresses (Forst, Cottbus, and Spremberg). This especially strong fortification group had been meant to form the protection for the right flank of the *Heeresgruppe*. Now Russian infantry and tanks were already advancing near Cottbus, which was partly attacked by them, but also passed by with mobile troops. As a result of this, the right flank of the *9.Armee* was in danger.

**[General Busse, Commander 9th Army, explains the growing threat of encirclement and OKH's refusal to allow a withdrawal from the Oder River line. Le Tissier-Zhukov pp 207]**

On the evening of 17 April there was already a threat to our own far southern flank, which in a short time became such as to cause a withdrawal. Again HQ 9th Army, fully supported by Army Group [Vistula], tried to reach the OKH with the plea that because of the 9th Army's situation and in order to be able to hold on firmly to the boundary with the 3rd Panzer Army, it would be necessary to pull back before the front collapsed. All that the 9th Army got back was Hitler's sharp order to hold on to its front and to reestablish the position at the critical points with counterattacks.

### ***Day Three, 18 April***

**[Lieutenant Erich Hachtel describes how the line began to collapse at Wriezen. Le Tissier-Zhukov pp 210-211]**

On 18 April we were involved in some hard defensive fighting. The pressure came mainly from the south and there was the danger that our front on the Oder would be rolled up. Late that afternoon, I was driving along the road to Reetz, when I saw Sergeant Major Roth riding toward me on his horse, pulling a gun behind him. I stopped him and then saw brown masses coming across the fields toward us. I immediately ordered him to take up a firing position to the left of the road and he fired several ricochets at minimum elevation that did not fail to take effect. The attackers were thrown into disarray and withdrew, so that we had peace for a short while. Sergeant Major Roth was ordered to a new firing position, and rode off.

On the evening of the same day I was summoned to a commander's conference in the regimental command post for a briefing on the situation and receive new combat orders. In the middle of this conference, a sentry ran in shouting that the Russians were right in front of our command post. Lieutenant Colonel Liebmann calmly ordered: "Everyone out to beat off the enemy!" They had come up to within twenty-five meters of the command post. After about ten minutes the enemy had been driven off and the situation was once more firmly in our hands. The conference was concluded without further interruption and orders were given for the withdrawal of the front line to the Wriezen-Bad Freienwalde road, which were immediately put into effect and thus began the orderly withdrawal west to the Elbe.

We drove by night through Wriezen, which was lit by burning buildings, to our designated area. It was a horrible scene that we had to drive through. The streets of this town were burning in a firestorm, and we had to find our way through a maze of collapsed house fronts.

**[Sergeant Averdieck describes how the remnants of the 90th Panzergrenadier Regiment, 20th Panzergrenadier Division, withdrew from Worin towards Müncheberg. Le Tissier-Zhukov pp 217-218]**

As tanks drove into our flank from the left on the morning of 18 April our APC and the remaining vehicles were sent back a kilometer to Worin. The small, deserted village looked so peaceful, but hardly had we set ourselves up in a house that a cannonade of tank fire broke out in our corner. As we were at a crossroads we came under fire from heavy weapons and artillery fire, in which several soldiers standing by a bam several meters behind our APC were wounded. In these two days our signals platoon had suffered seventeen casualties. During the morning the companies withdrew to Worin and the command post found itself in the front line. The Regimental Commander himself

became a casualty. The divisional headquarters were only a few hundred meters away in the same village. To add to our misfortunes we had a mixture of petrol and diesel oil in our fuel tank so that the APC would only move very slowly and the engine had to be kept going. Our young Second Lieutenant, who had only been with the regiment a few days, had the daring plan to drive the APC over open country to the command post, for as the route was downhill, should we fall into a hole we would quickly come out again. As we started off we came under a real mortar barrage. The vehicle speeded up, backfiring several times, and we were ready to give up the ghost. After minutes that seemed to last for hours we reached the cover of a sunken lane and followed it to behind a barn where all kinds of vehicles had assembled, oddly enough failing to attract the attention of enemy aircraft.

The Russians were bombarding the supply routes that we would have to withdraw over later. As their tanks penetrated Worin I decided to leave the place with my lame APC and with luck creep over the hill to the edge of the woods to await further events. Splintering trees forced us to move back further into the wood. There was some heavy antiaircraft artillery hidden in a commanding position on the edge of the woods. Everyone was to withdraw to in front of Müncheberg during the afternoon, but our division was to take up the rear guard once more. Convoys of vehicles rolled through the woods to Jahnsfelde to join the main road back to Müncheberg. However, a short while later the last convoy returned with the news that we were cut off. There were only about two kilometers of woodland track to the positions and tanks in our rear (Jahnsfelde was already occupied by the enemy) and we could hear machinegun fire from that direction. We knew that there had been fighting on either side of us for some time, and now there was no way out. The divisional radio vehicle, which tried to make a breakout on its own, fell into Russian hands as it emerged from the woods with three out of its five-man crew. With our APC almost lame from its fuel problem the situation was particularly uncomfortable, especially as there were none of our own positions behind us. We prepared for action and aimed our machinegun in the direction from which we expected danger, at the same time preparing the vehicle for demolition.

Toward evening our companies withdrew from Worin to redeploy to Müncheberg. Everyone assembled in the woods, infantry, armor and vehicles. The only possibility was to break through to our lines along a route unknown to the enemy. Our Regimental Commander, a lieutenant, organized those on foot, and our APC was put on tow by a Tiger. At dusk we took up positions along the edge of the woods. Firing behind us indicated that Ivan had followed us into the woods from Worin. As soon as it was dark enough, we broke out of the woods and encountered no resistance. We passed through the burning village of Jahnsfelde without incident and reached the main road to Müncheberg



As the main ground forces advanced, Soviet artillery units were pushed forward as rapidly as the road network could handle them.

and then, a little later, our own lines, which we occupied immediately. Our APC was towed on into the town, where the fuel tank was emptied and refilled by our supply column.

**[Second Lieutenant Tarns was wounded in the right leg and foot during the fighting on the "Stein-Stellung", and was taken back to the Field Dressing Station at Jahnsfelde. Le Tissier-Zhukov pp 218]**

After I had been attended to professionally and bandaged, I was placed on a stretcher "outside." "Outside" was a place on the wide expanse of a football field, full of wounded lying in rows on stretchers. Suddenly, like lightning out of the sky, two Russian fighter-bombers flew low over the field dressing station and sawed lanes through the mass of helpless men with their machineguns. Filled with homicidal mania, the aircraft flew round a few times and attacked again and again.

Then, realizing how long it was taking to evacuate the wounded, as there were only four vehicles available, with the driver's agreement, I sat on the front left wing of a truck with my back to the direction of travel and hung on to the wing mirror. We were taken to a reserve hospital in Konigs Wusterhausen.<sup>22</sup>

**[General Katukov of the 1st Guards Tank Army related how the 3rd Guards Cavalry Corps was introduced into the fighting on Route 1 as a result of the delays encountered. Le Tissier-Zhukov pp 219]**

The counterattack did not ease off. The way things were going we could not count on the [8th Guards] Mechanized Corps making any headway. Something had to be done. I told Zhukov over the telephone what was happening, and asked him to send us some unit or other to secure our flank and take the pressure off Dremov's corps. Zhukov did not reply immediately. Apparently he was looking for a solution.

"There is a cavalry corps in my reserve. I will give the order straight away. The cavalry will come to you. And one thing more; guard your flank stubbornly as you advance, otherwise it will not just go badly for the tank army, but for the rest of the Front's units too!"

The cavalry corps did not keep us waiting long. Shortly afterward, it relieved the brigades of the Mechanized Corps deployed on the flank, thereby considerably easing the situation.

**[Gunner Hans Hansen witnessed some of the action north of Route 1. Le Tissier-Zhukov pp 219]**

On the morning of 18 April it started again. We were thrown into a sector of the front line a bit further to the north, between Seelow and Müncheberg. One could hardly talk of a front line, for, apart from two heavy flak batteries from our battalion and several infantry stragglers, there was nothing else available. We were deployed in this gap with the task

of providing infantry protection for the flak batteries. No sooner had we arrived than the Russians attacked head-on with a large armored force. It looked dangerous, as the fire-spitting monsters rolled slowly toward us, but the 88mm flak was superior, and the attack came to a halt in the concentrated fire of the heavy guns. Then the Russians changed their direction of attack further to our left, where they found no resistance worthy of the name, and rolled on past us. There was no doubt where they were going: to Berlin!

We held on to the position, despite heavy fire, until nightfall, while the howling of tank engines and the raiding of their tracks could be heard deep on our left flank and almost in our rear. The danger of encirclement finally became too great, and we had to withdraw.

**[Col. Hans Eismann, Chief of Staff for Army Group Vistula, had a telephone conversation with Reichmarschall Göring regarding the request by the 9th Falschirmjäger Division to be pulled out of the battle for rest. Le Tissier-Zhukov p. 221]**

Appraisal of the situation with the 9th Parachute Division has brought up the following: Divisional commander General Bräuer has not said that his division will quit the battlefield. Nevertheless, he reported that his units were completely disorganized and could no longer continue to keep up the hard fighting as they had so far. Then he asked the stupid question, whether he could stand down his division for twenty-four hours. I have sacked him and replaced him with Lieutenant Colonel Herrmann. The latter is an especially good leader. Apart from this I have sent the division reinforcements in the form of emergency units and had a special catch line established behind.

**[General Heinrici notes how the German defensive line began to collapse on 18 April. Hamilton Oder 1945 Vol. I, p. 134 MS T-9]**

In the course of the morning of 18 April, the resistance of the divisions of the *9.Armee* employed in the sector Seelow-Neuhardenberg broke. After six days of heavy fighting, their power of resistance came to an end. The *18. Panzergrenadier Division* arrived—belatedly—around noon to the combat zone, just in time to be able to catch the enemy northeast of Müncheberg. It was confronted with the leading tanks of the 2nd Russian Tank Army, which it could stop but not repel. Late in the afternoon of 18 April, the defense situation worsened in the area south of Seelow, too. The opponent began to gain ground in the direction of Heinersdorf. At this time in the evening, no forces were available here to fill the fast growing gap. Though the *Heeresgruppe*, had on 17 April, given the order to bring the divisions '*Nordland*' and '*Nederland*' to the *9.Armee* (in view of the imminent attack in the area of the *3. Panzer Armee* this had been a very difficult decision), they also did not arrive in time.

This slowness of the so-called mobile troops showed the lack of training of these motley divisions. In the evening of 18 April, the *9.Armee* began to break up south of Müncheberg. The forces that were located south of the point of breakthrough gave way in the direction of Fürstenwalde. Frankfurt, and the front, which stretched from south of the

town to Fürstenberg, and down to the point of confluence with the River Neiße, were—apart from a deep penetration south of Frankfurt—still standing unaffectedly.

At the same time coming from the sector of the *Armeegruppe Schorner* and gradually turning to the northwest, the first Russian forces were appearing in the deep flank and nearly behind the *9.Armee* near Lubbenau [AN: These were Koniev's forces]. The *Korps* of the *4. Panzer Armee*, the *V Armee Korps* was now isolated from its former unit and subordinated itself under the command of the *9.Armee.* sector Guben-Peitz-Burg in the Spreewald.

Also on this day, in the area of the *3.Panzer Armee*, the enemy tried to cross the Oder in single groups. North of Stettin, in the area of the *549.Volksgrenadier Division*, attempts were made to cross the Oder with combat patrols, but again the whole front was successfully defended. The impression the army gained about the enemy had, in the meantime, raised the expectation that his main attack would be made west of Altdamm on Stettin, and further south on the *Autobahn*. The only reserves of the army available, one regiment of the *281. Division* and the extremely weak *SS Division 'Wallonien*, were therefore put on alert on the *Autobahn* and north of it, behind the front.

## *Day Four, 19 April*

**[As the Soviets finally managed to begin their breakout, Zhukov issued instructions to avoid further confusion on the roads. Le Tissier-Zhukov pp 224-225]**

1. All army, corps, division and brigade commanders will visit their forward units and make a personal investigation of the situation, namely:
  - a. Location and nature of the enemy forces.
  - b. Location of own units and supporting arms, and exactly what they are doing.
  - c. Ammunition states of supporting arms and their fire-control organization.

2. By 1200 hours 19 April 1945 units will be put into order, tasks clearly defined, cooperation between units organised, and supplies of ammunition replenished. At 1200 hours a combined artillery and air preparation will commence and the enemy will then be attacked in conformity with the artillery preparation, the advance being developed according to plan. Coordination of action in the 3rd Shock and 2nd Guards Tank Armies' sector will be the responsibility of the commander of the 3rd Shock Army, and in the 8th Guards and 1st Guards Tank Armies' sector that of the commander of the 8th Guards Army.



A T-34/85 moving through an ineffectual barricade.

3. A traffic-control service will be organized forthwith to ensure strict order on the roads.
4. All transport vehicles of armored brigades and corps and those of corps and brigade rear services will be immediately taken off the roads and put under cover. In the future mechanized infantry will move on foot.
5. In order to maintain coordination of action between the rifle divisions and tank brigades, the Military Councils of the 3rd Shock and 8th Guards Armies will have their own responsible officers, with means of communication, in each tank brigade of the 1st and 2nd Guards Tank Armies, and the 1st and 2nd Guards Tank Armies will have theirs in the rifle divisions.
6. All officers who have shown themselves incapable of carrying out assignments and have displayed lack of resolution will be replaced by able and courageous officers.

**[Chuikov was highly critical of these orders, noting their late timing. Chuikov-*End of Third Reich* p. 158-59]**

This order arrived in our Army only on the morning of the 19th April, and by midday no one could have done anything. It was impossible to put into effect the recommendations on the organisation of coordination between the tank armies and the mixed armies within a few hours. It meant, after all, that everything was to be completely re-cast. This work should have been carried out by Front Headquarters when the operation was still in the planning stage, when there was plenty of time for it. And the main point was the question of what the tank armies were to do remained unsettled: were they operating independently, carrying out the Front Commander's order, or were they being attached as a supporting arm to the mixed armies?

Putting the responsibility for the coordinating action on the Army Commanders at a critical period in the development of the operation simply meant abdicating one's own responsibility and leaving it to be borne by others.

**[Zhukov continued to urge his forces on, as noted from the following order, cited by Chuikov, issued the evening of 19 April. Chuikov-*End of Third Reich* p. 185-86]**

The Front Commander has ordered:

1. The pace of the advance is to be increased without delay. Delay in the development of the Berlin Operation will result in the troops becoming exhausted and expending their ammunition without having taken Berlin.
2. All army commanders will locate themselves at the observation posts of their corps commanders on the main axis. I categorically forbid them to remain behind their formations.
3. The whole of the artillery, including the extra heavy, is to be brought up to the first echelon, not more than two to three kilometres behind the first echelon engaging the enemy. The artillery is to be engaged on those sectors decisive for the breakthrough. It is to be borne in mind that the enemy will resist all the way to Berlin, fighting for every bush and building. The tanks and SPGs must therefore not wait until the artillery has eliminated all opposition before them before advancing over cleared areas.
4. If we hit the enemy relentlessly and push forward on Berlin day and night, it will soon be ours.

**[Colonel Babadshanian of the 11th Guards Tank Corps, while effecting his own liaison with the infantry, was witness to an interesting episode. Le Tissier-*Zhukov* p. 226]**

After some bitter fighting at the Seelow Heights our troops reached the Third Defensive Strip in the Müncheberg-Diedersdorf sector. I drove to General Shemenkov's 29th Guards Rifle Corps command post with several officers of my own corps in order to

coordinate further developments with him. His staff had set themselves up in a rather grand manor house. We went through several rooms until we finally came to the area in which this rifle corps's staff were working. As soon as he greeted me, Shemenkov informed me that he would not be able to attack at 0800 hours as ordered. He had postponed the time of attack to 0900 hours.



Some Soviet units had to be goaded forcefully to attack into Berlin.

"That must be reported to Chuikov!" But Shemenkov paid no heed to me.

Early in the morning Chuikov and Katukov appeared. "Are the troops ready to attack?" asked Chuikov. Shemenkov tried to explain why he had postponed the attack.

"What do you mean, postponed?" roared Chuikov.

How this exchange developed further, I cannot say, for Katukov took me aside and whispered: "There is nothing more here for you to do. Drive back to your troops as quickly as possible. The order must be executed according to schedule!"

**[On the 19th Erich Wittor's squadron of the "Kurmark" Armored Reconnaissance Battalion was ordered to withdraw from near Neuentempel to Marxdorf, but found the village already occupied by the Soviets. The squadron took up a position on the edge of the woods overlooking the village from the south. Le Tissier *Zhukov* p. 232]**

The Waffen-SS *Königstiger* had taken up a position at the corner of the wood on my squadron's right flank. How useful this was we were soon to find out. Late in the afternoon some T-34 tanks tried to push forward on Marxdorf from the woods on our flank. With incredible accuracy, the Tiger's 88mm gun shot up tank after tank. Each shell caused the tank hit to explode immediately, and all that remained of the still fast-attacking tank were the glowing remains. There were no misses and our delight was indescribable. The brilliant position of our tank gave the Russians no chance to retaliate. It was only at nightfall that they were able to push through to Marxdorf with their tanks.

**[Chuikov describes how the Soviets seized Müncheberg, the vital road junction leading to Berlin. Chuikov-*End of Third Reich* p. 186-87]**

The 242nd Regiment of the 82nd Guards Rifle Division did some fine fighting during the battle for Müncheberg. The regiment's commander, Colonel Ivan Sukhorukov, a veteran of the battle of Stalingrad, made a bold and carefully considered decision. His regiment approached Müncheberg by the road running from the Oder. The enemy had

built numerous defence installations here. Leaving only one company in this sector, Sukhorukov ostensibly, in full view of enemy observers, pulled back his main forces, then swiftly entered the woods north of Müncheberg and from there attacked the town from the flanks and rear. His infantry operating in small groups was supported by tanks and self-propelled guns. Sukhorukov himself was with an infantry subunit in the centre of the regiment's battle order. House-to-house fighting lasted several hours. Carrying out their commander's orders, the troops tried to cut off the enemy's escape routes. They came to street intersections and, opening sudden fire, created the impression of having surrounded the place. The Germans panicked, which was exactly what Sukhorukov wanted, launching an all-out attack with his main forces, he finished off the enemy. The town was thus captured with our side suffering only minor losses.



T-34/85 from Konev's 1st Ukrainian Front moving through a forest south of Berlin. Konev was Zhukov's serious rival.

When the fighting for Müncheberg was over, I learned from the regimental surgeon that Ivan Sukhorukov had been gravely wounded in the chest and leg. I had him promptly evacuated to a hospital. On the recommendation of the Army Command, Colonel Sukhorukov was made Hero of the Soviet Union [EN: Sukhorukov survived the war].

**[Sergeant Averdieck of the 90th Panzergrenadier Regiment described the situation around Müncheberg that day. *Le Tissier-Zhukov* p. 234]**

The 19th April had hardly begun when I was woken from a few hours of death-like sleep by the headquarters staff with orders to prepare for an immediate move. As a result of enemy tanks breaking through our lines we would have to pull back yet again. As there was enough fuel, the little APC whose crew had been wounded by wood splinters was remanned and sent on in advance. We reached the new supply column location in a pine forest at noon and prepared our vehicle for action once more. We were in touch with the little APC, which reported being unable to get through to the regimental command post and that the situation was completely confused. Then I failed to get any further response to my transmissions. Later the crew returned on foot, their APC having suddenly been attacked by a T-34, which chased them and shot them up. Then we had to drive on straight away, having received urgent orders to move as enemy armored spearheads were only a kilometer from our position. Apparently the Russians were no longer meeting any resistance, our enormous supply columns being in full flight without any thought of putting up any resistance. The journey to Rildersdorf in the Berlin-Erkner area lasted

until 0300 hours. Close by was the horde of refugees that had been forced to leave their homes in the middle of the night with their pushcarts.

**[General Heinrici describes the chaos enveloping his Army Group as the Soviets continue to advance west of the Seelow Heights. Hamilton *Oder 1945 Vol. I*, p. 137-38 MS T-9]**

On 19 April the breakthrough in the sector of the *9.Armee* was becoming wider. The divisions '*Nordland*' and '*Nederland*' had been arriving around noon to the road from Berlin to Müncheberg and were employed for the counter-attack, but against the combined forces of the Russian 2nd and 1st Guards Tank Armies, these two weak combined units naturally did not have enough forces. In expectance of this, the Commander-in-Chief of *Heeresgruppe Weichsel* [EN: i.e. Heinrici] requested Hitler's permission to remove the *9.Armee* from the Oder and bring it back to the planned position on the Hohenzollern and Finow canals on both sides of Berlin, before this counter-attack took place. His request was rejected with harsh words, and he was told that this was the point of crisis within the battle, which had to be endured and turned into victory by the counter-attack of '*Nederland*' and '*Nordland*'. The Commander-in-Chief made it unambiguously clear that these divisions would not be able to penetrate the enemy's line. They were immediately pushed into defense and finally fulfilled the task of delaying the enemy's advancement in the direction of Berlin. South of the road leading from Berlin to Müncheberg, the infantry divisions were now retreating to the territory on both sides of Fürstenwalde. A defensive flank was formed stretching from here down to Frankfurt-an-der-Oder, while the troops fighting on the northern flank of the *9.Armee* found themselves forced to retreat to the direction of Eberswalde, where a fairly large bridgehead was beginning to form. It consisted of the remnants from the divisions of the *CI.Korps* and the *25.Panzer Grenadier Division*. In loose contact with the *25.Panzer Grenadier Division* was the *18.Panzer Grenadier Division*, fighting to the south near Prötzel, and the Divisions '*Nordland*' and '*Nederland*' that were fighting besides the forested area west of Müncheberg. The left flank of the *9.Armee's* southern group was standing behind the river Spree west of Fürstenwalde and had no link to the center of the defense.

Because of this development on the side of the *9.Armee*, the *1.Marine Division*, in addition to its front on the Oder, developed a southern flank on the Finow Canal that was stretching far to the west along the *3. Panzer Armee's* southern flank. In the afternoon of this day, it advanced from this southern flank over the Alte Oder near Hohensaaten, in order to keep the floodgate regulating the water level in German-occupied areas. Just like the *547. Volksgrenadier Division* situated north of it, it repelled a number of attacks over the Oder. South of Stettin, the enemy attempted to gain ground through the forested area of Podejuch to the direction of Stettin, but was repelled. The *Heeresgruppe* and the *3.Panzer Armee* were aware of the fact that the Russian's main attack over the Oder would soon start.

**[General Busse describes how he planned to move his 9th Army to the south of Berlin in preparation to withdraw westward. Le Tissier-Zhukov pp 237]**

The fighting on 19 April brought about a further yawning gap in the army's front. It was impossible to close the gaps. The wrestling by the army group and the [9th] Army for approval to break off had no success. The army had decided that the LVIIth Panzer Corps should withdraw toward the Spree west of Fürstenwalde and east of Erkner so as to cover the XIth SS Panzer Corps's left flank, and for the LVIIth Panzer Corps to cut off from the Spree sector east of Fürstenwalde/Erkner so that with them as a flank guard the Oder front could swing away south of Berlin.



As the 9th Army began to dissolve, surviving units caught in a pocket strove to escape westward. Many of the vehicles were abandoned along the way as they ran out of fuel.

### ***Summary of one Panzer Battalion's Action***

**[Panzer Abteilung Kummersdorf/Müncheberg: Summary extracts of after action reports from the Müncheberg Panzer Division. From *Tigers in Combat, Vol. II*, by Wolfgang Scheider]**

**Early February 1945:** Formed from the Armor Experimentation and Instructional Group at Kummersdorf. Initially earmarked for assignment to Kampfgruppe Panzer-Division "Jüterbog" (two tank companies).

**25 February 1945:** On hand: four Tiger IIs, one Tiger I, and one Jagdtiger. Five Tiger Is due in from depot-level maintenance.

**5 March 1945:** Panzer-Brigade "Müncheberg," which had been formed in February 1945, is directed to expand to Panzer-Division "Müncheberg" (order: OKH/GenSt d.H./Org.Abt. 1/1270/45 g.Kdos). The tank elements include Panzer-Abteilung "Müncheberg," the I./Panzer-Regiment 29 and Panzer-Abteilung Kummersdorf. The regimental staff is to be formed from Panzer-Regiment Stab z.b.V. Coburg (Coburg Special duty Tank Regiment Staff).

**14 March 1945:** Panzer-Abteilung Kummersdorf is consolidated with Panzer-Abteilung "Müncheberg:" The I./Panzer-Abteilung "Müncheberg" has eleven Panzer IVs (different

models), the 2./Panzer-Abteilung "Müncheberg" has ten Panthers and the 3./Panzer-Abteilung "Müncheberg" has eleven Tigers).

**15 March 1945:** Eight Tigers are operational. One Tiger is in short-term maintenance, two Tigers are in long-term maintenance and one Tiger is due in.



A Königtiger, probably from the Müncheberg Panzer Division, knocked out in front of the train station in the Potsdamer Platz.

**17 March 1945:** Assembly for the relief attack on Küstrin.

**22 March 1945:** The Russians attack after a ninety-minute artillery preparation. South of Reichsstraße 1, they hit the at Tucheband. They assault the 2./Panzer-Abteilung "Müncheberg" north of Reichsstraße 1 at Gorgast. The Tiger company, in reserve in Golzow, cannot start engaging in time due to the artillery shelling of the rear combat zone, but it is able to knock out several enemy tanks.

**27 March 1945:** Two Tigers operational; five in short-term maintenance; and two in long-term maintenance.

**5 April 1945:** Nine out of thirteen Tigers operational.

**6 April 1945:** Operational tanks: 7.

**10 April 1945:** Operational tanks: 9.

**15 April 1945:** Operational tanks: 10. One Tiger due in.



A Tiger I of the Müncheberg Panzer Division knocked out near the Brandenburg Gate.

**14-17 April 1945:** Defensive operations in the Seelow area followed by the occupation of blocking positions around Müncheberg. Following this, defensive operations in the "Hardenberg" Position. Finally, withdrawal to Berlin.

**1 May 1945:** The last five tanks are spotted in the vicinity of the Flak bunker near the city zoo. The last cohesive elements are eliminated there as well. Most of the tank crews continue the fight as infantry. The last Tiger I is abandoned several hundred meters away from the Brandenburg Gate.

***An Example of Soviet Propaganda at Work:***  
**Photo Analysis of the Raising of the Flag Over the Reichstag**

The Soviet Union was very propaganda savvy. Photographers traveling with the troops were well trained to meticulously stage and script many of their photos. However, there were plenty of photos taken that had no scripting, though only carefully selected shots of both categories were used in official releases. The following are examples of such propaganda at work with the raising of the Soviet flag over the Reichstag. Some items are very subtle, yet very important.



While the flag raising was a staged event, some of the photographs were not well scripted. The one above probably falls in such a category, being that the flag and men carrying it do not stand out from the background.



Another angle of the same group moving the flag to the Reichstag. While the previous photo may have been poorly planned the one above was more certainly posed. Indeed, it is possible that both photos were taken by the same photographer, and that realizing he did not get a good shot the first time, had the soldiers reenact the moment. This photo naturally became the one publicly released.



Arguably one of the more famous and well-known photos of the end of the war is the Soviet flag flying over the Reichstag. However, that photo was a series of shots showing how the stage was set for the ultimate photo op. An officer (center) is standing by, camera at the ready, to assist in the event.



The photo is taken and the propaganda shot is complete. Or is it?

After the film was developed at a lab, specially selected censors would examine the shot to determine that nothing was shown that was detrimental to the Soviet Union, or particularly to Stalin.

Missed by the photographer and others was the fact that the Soviet officer was wearing TWO watches, one on each wrist. Why would anyone wear two wristwatches?

As Soviet leaders were sensitive to accusations by their western allies that their soldiers were engaging in widespread rape and plunder, efforts were made to downplay or even deny such events. A watch on each arm was a subtle, though obvious signal that such accusations may have a ring of truth to them.





The officially released photo above, after being scrupulously examined by a censor. Now the watch on the right wrist is gone, and thus is saved the reputation of the Soviet soldier, and more importantly, Comrade Stalin.

The raising of the Soviet flag over the Reichstag highlights the importance of the information war, both then and now. Mediums change, but the essential methods and rationales remain: to control the information flow and establish the narrative.



## **Appendix D**

### **Kampfgruppe Porsch: a Bicycle Antitank Unit in Action**

## **Kampfgruppe Porsch**

### **Example of a bicycle antitank unit in action, April 1945**

From *Battle Group! German Kampfgruppen Action of World War II*, by James Lucas

In April 1945, the Red Army broke out of the confines of its bridgeheads on the Oder and soon two vast Soviet Fronts were overrunning the eastern provinces of Germany and thrusting towards the Reich's capital, Berlin. The destructive power of that giant Soviet offensive caused the Eastern Front to unravel and as Schulz-Naumann has described, battle groups was just one method which command staffs at all levels employed to knit the ruptured front together. These KGs were inserted into the battle line. Small groups of highly trained and absolutely determined soldiers who would stiffen the combat efficiency of neighbouring and perhaps less resolute units. It was with such "corset" units as the 500/600th Bewaehrungs — or Punishment — Battalion of Skorzeny's organisation that the Front was held together, and it is with Porsch's company of that battalion that this account deals.

In the British Army during the Second World War, men who were criminals in the military sense were confined in detention barracks, far removed from the dangers of the front line and were fed and well housed. This was not the case in continental armies where those types of men were grouped into special units and sent out on such dangerous



A bicycle antitank unit with *panzerfausts* similar to the one commanded by Porsch in the last weeks of the war.

missions as clearing minefields, leading death or glory charges or in other perilous ways, seeking to redeem their lost military honour. The 500/600th had carried out a number of spectacular operations and as a result of these successes its original role as a punishment detail was overlaid and hidden, the fighting skills of its soldiers becoming more prominent. In the last weeks of April, Russian pressure separated the company whose exploits we are to follow, from its parent battalion, part of Sturmbannfuehrer Milius's Kampfgruppe Solar, and that company became an independent command, a specialist, mobile, anti-tank detachment. In the great and heady days of Germany's military might mobile anti-tank units had been Panzer and heavy Panzer SP formations whose awesome, high-powered guns had "killed"

enemy armour up to 1km distant. By April 1945, the picture had changed and now this mobile, anti-tank company, known either as DORA II or as Kampfgruppe Porsch, was mounted on bicycles and armed with either short-range, rocket launchers or else with explosive charges. Once there had been centimetres of armour plate to protect the SP gunners. Now, the bicycle-mounted battle group went unarmoured into the fight, either firing its rocket weapons at ranges below 70m, or clambering onto the outside of moving tanks to affix a charge on the vehicle's outside, or to throw a grenade into its open turret.

Porsch, the young commander of the KG, had risen from recruit in 1941 to become, by 1945, a company commander decorated with the 2nd and 1st Classes of the Iron Cross, the German Cross in Gold, the golden close-combat badge, a mention in the German Army's Book of Honour and four badges on his arms signifying the single-handed destruction of that number of enemy tanks. He had led his company with flair and courage in past battles. In those of the last weeks of the war which he was to fight as a battle group leader, Porsch was to carry out spectacular acts of bravery which went unreported in the chaos which attended Germany's collapse.

During the last weeks of April 1945, the German hold upon the heights of Seelow, west of the River Oder, was broken and when that strong defensive line was swept away it released Russian formations which stormed across Brandenburg heading west towards Berlin. Those advancing spearheads, overrunning and dispersing what little opposition they met, had soon encircled in a number of pockets the German units which had had little chance to escape from the Seelow area. One of those pockets held DORA II. The local Red Army commander, believing that the German troops opposing him were broken and ready for the "kill", sent in a regiment of armoured vehicles to destroy any last vestiges of resistance. The first wave of that Russian advance was made up of heavy JS tanks with the lighter T34s forming the second wave. At high speed the armoured phalanx thundered towards the encircled Germans, intending to overawe the defenders and to force their quick surrender. To influence that decision, the tanks halted some distance from the German trench line and opened fire with their main armament and with on-board machine guns. Although the men of KG Porsch were well-dug in, the barrage inflicted casualties which had to be borne. The Grenadiers knew that they had to be patient; soon the enemy would close in and then their time would come. Within minutes the great steel machines had reached to within a few hundred metres of DORA II slit trenches. Above the battlefield noises Porsch shouted orders to his men, identifying for them the vehicles they were each to destroy. Then the first wave tanks were within killing range of the Panzerfaust and Panzerschreck launchers. Responding to the blast of the young commander's whistle, the soldiers of KG Porsch stood up, aimed their weapons and fired. Streaks of flame erupted from the tubes. The projectiles struck the

Russian machines and other flames were born as the heavy tanks caught fire. One, two, three — single "kills" were burning, but then as the melee between the German Grenadiers and the Russian tanks became general, a small group of machines which had penetrated as far as Porsch's company HQ was hit and set alight by satchel charges stuck to their exteriors.

Surprised by the fury of the battle group's opposition, the Soviet commander pulled back his tank regiment, changed its thrust line and sought to take DORA II from the right flank. That change of direction brought the Russian machines across a sector held by another of Skorzeny's units, other men who were specialists in close-quarter tank destruction techniques. Once again the Soviet armour recoiled. The defeat of his tanks decided the Red Army general. He would take out those troublesome Germans with artillery and infantry.

Although the Red Army commanders were well aware that the rate of fire of German machine guns was now as high as 2,000 rounds per minute, they still sent in their infantry in dense waves, shoulder to shoulder using the tactics employed in battles fought a century or more earlier. The long lines of Red infantrymen marched stolidly forward towards Porsch's battle group. Ahead of the first line of Russian soldiers the shells of their Army's violent creeping barrage crashed down, a barrage aimed at destroying the German defenders. Between that slowly advancing line of explosions and DORA IPs slit trenches, fell a rain of rockets as batteries of Katyusha projectors saturated the area. The explosions of the creeping barrage and the thunder of the Katyusha rocket projectiles had soon coalesced into a single blanket of noise, but at last the creeping barrage passed over the trench line. The Grenadiers knew that the time had come. The Red infantry formations were closing in. There was neither time nor need to set up the machine guns on tripods. The German machine gunners, resting their bipoded weapons on the crumbling earth parapets of the slit trenches, opened fire while others of the battle group projected grenades from rifle cup dischargers or flung hand grenades into the oncoming masses of men now only a few metres distant. The hysterical chattering of the MG 42s — their rate of fire so high and the sound they made so distinctive that Red Army soldiers called the weapon "Hitler's Saw" — traversed the Russian infantry line. The enemy fell in groups, bodies piling upon each other as the follow-up lines seeking to bring the advance forward were cut down in their turn. Under that murderous fire the Soviet infantry halted and began a slow retreat.

Gallant though the defence by KG Porsch had been, such isolated examples of selflessness and devotion to duty could not alter the fact that they could not hold out indefinitely and that a westward retreat had become inevitable. The battle group pulled back and was placed in reserve, a period of rest which was soon ended. A crisis at Lebus, where Russian tank masses were concentrating to attack the town, needed the immediate employment of Porsch and his men. The battle group set out but the press of refugee carts on

the road forward delayed it for so long that the town had fallen before the KG reached it. Another retreat westward had to be made, all the time harried by Soviet armoured advance guards and fighter-bomber assaults from the air. The exhausted bicycle-riders reached the German main battle line, passed through this and billeted for the night in a farm building only 300m behind the front line. During the night the detachments holding the line were either pulled back by order or were driven back by enemy assault. Porsch was awakened with the alarming news that the farmyard was filled with Russian soldiers. His men were quietly wakened, given their orders and put into battle. A few minutes of fast firing action was all the time it took to kill the enemy soldiers in the area and then, undertaking a cautious reconnaissance, the KG discovered that a neighbouring village was held by some combat engineers, the first of two groups of reinforcements to be taken on strength that day. The second was a group of Grenadiers belonging to the Dutch SS Division "Nederland". Made confident by this increase in the strength of his tiny command, Porsch decided to attack the surrounding Russian enemy and in a short, sharp action forced him back to Neu Zittau. During the fighting which marked the course of those early spring days was the celebration of the battle group's 125th "kill" and Porsch's 17th victory. On 26 April he learned he had been awarded the Knights Cross. One victory which his KG then gained, as if to celebrate their commander's honour, was a swift thrust through a Russian battalion position, an assault which captured the HQ staff of that enemy unit. Another successful operation, made together with some survivors of the "Frundsberg" Division, destroyed the men of a battery of Russian mortars and captured eight of the projectors.

From the sounds of battle heard on every side and especially from behind the Kampfgruppe's front, as well as from the weight of Russian artillery fire which now poured out upon it, it was clear that the group was projecting as a salient into the Russian line. It was time that a fresh attempt westwards was made to gain the German lines but they were never reached. Groups of civilians poured into the small salient held by KG Porsch, a German-held area in a country swarming with Red Army soldiers. The civilians were hoping to find in that small enclave some respite from the rapes and murders that were endemic in Red-held territory. Porsch could not abandon the defenceless civilians to the barbarities that would await them and delayed his withdrawal. Soon it was too late. A swift, precise Russian tank thrust cut the neck of the salient turning it into a pocket within which was trapped DORA II, the civilians and fragments of other German military units which had elected to join Porsch and fight.

Collecting his small group into a compact whole, Porsch led it in a march westward hoping to gain touch with the German battle front. In this attempt the KG men fought and defeated one Soviet unit after another as these tried to bar the slow-paced retreat. Attacked

from the air, subjected to artillery barrages, tank assault, cavalry charges and infantry attack, the pocket wandered across the heathland of Brandenburg seeking — not always successfully — to gain the protection of its few forested areas. It was at this point that the civilians left KG Porsch and without that burden the military units made better progress.

Although the Soviet main effort was concentrated upon Berlin and on destroying the last formal resistance in and around that city, there were a great many Russian units employed on "tidying-up" operations to take out the remaining pockets of German resistance now cut off and isolated far behind the Soviet front line. One such pocket of resistance was battle group Porsch and the strength of the original group had been reduced by the fury and constancy of the Red Army's assaults until it was made up of just 48 men.

The last act in the life of KG Porsch was played out between Markisch-Buchholz and Toepchin. A Russian infantry battalion surrounded the area and the officers of the German units trapped with the battle group accepted the Soviet ultimatum to surrender or be destroyed. Porsch gathered his few men and told them that there was the choice of surrender and captivity or certain death if they remained with him. All chose to stay with the young commander.

On the bitter field of Toepchin the Red Army battalion moved forward to attack the remnant of DORA II, now just a handful of men. The first in a series of Russian infantry attacks brought the KG losses. Seven men fell in that first assault and 18 were killed in the second. Attack after attack was made by the Red unit, but all failed without achieving the victory for which the Russian colonel was determined to achieve. At dawn on 28 April, the Soviets began a new series of attacks. The first of these was opened by a furious mortar barrage behind which Soviet infantry advanced to wipe out the defiant survivors of DORA II. The first attack was flung back but the end of the battle group's military life was fast approaching. Fully aware of the situation and also of what would face them as prisoners of war in the Soviet Union, those men who were badly wounded killed themselves with hand grenades or by pistol shot. When the Red battalion came in for a new assault the battle group had only one round of ammunition left and that its owner used to shoot himself.

Now there was nothing left but the hand to hand struggle, man against man and Porsch, raising the staff he had carved in the 1941 battles around Volkhov, led the last 11 of his men into their final attack. Furious though that charge was, it could have only one end. The battle group commander and a few of his men still alive when the scrimmage ended, obtained permission from the Russian colonel to bury their dead comrades. Kampfgruppe Porsch died on the battlefield of Toepchin, only a couple of days before Berlin fell, bringing with it the end of the war in Europe. Porsch endured more than a decade of solitary confinement in prison and returned to Germany, one of the very last to be repatriated.

**Appendix E**  
**Orders of Battle and Organization**

**The following tables illustrate the strengths, weaknesses, and significant differences between the German and Soviet forces deployed in April 1945.**

*Regarding the German Gliederung charts, a basic key to symbols is provided at the end of this section.*

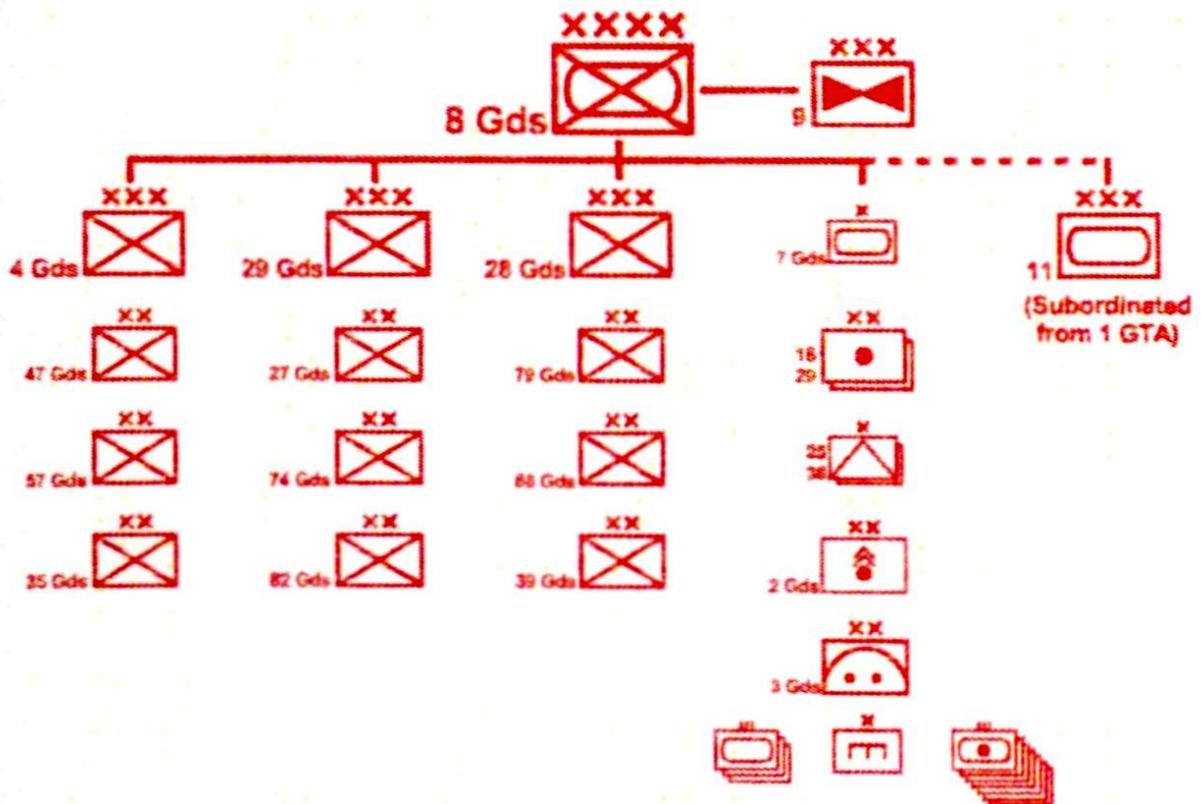
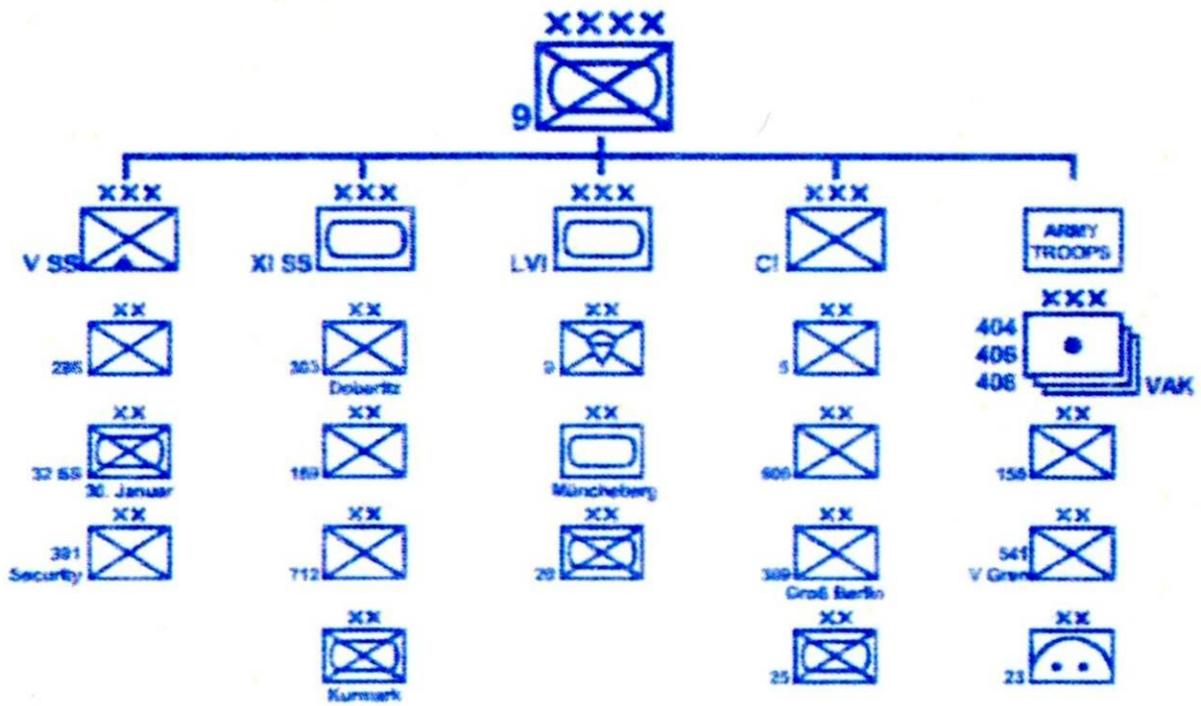
When looking at the organizational, or *Gliederung* charts for German divisions, several items stand out. The first is the armor strength of the 1945 Panzer division compared to the 1944 version. By 1945, losses in tanks and assault guns were so severe that the German High Command was forced to reduce the complement of tanks to the Panzer Division to where it had no more tanks than a Panzergrenadier division. According to the TO&E, the important distinctions between the Panzer and Panzergrenadier divisions had vanished.

However, the *Gliederung* tables only tell part of the story, for each division maintained their own organizational report, and these show a wide disparity between units regarding authorized strength and equipment vs. what they actually had on hand. Because of this, senior leaders could never know the true strength of many of their units, especially since unit leaders would do whatever they could to often hide what they had to prevent it from being confiscated for distribution to other units.

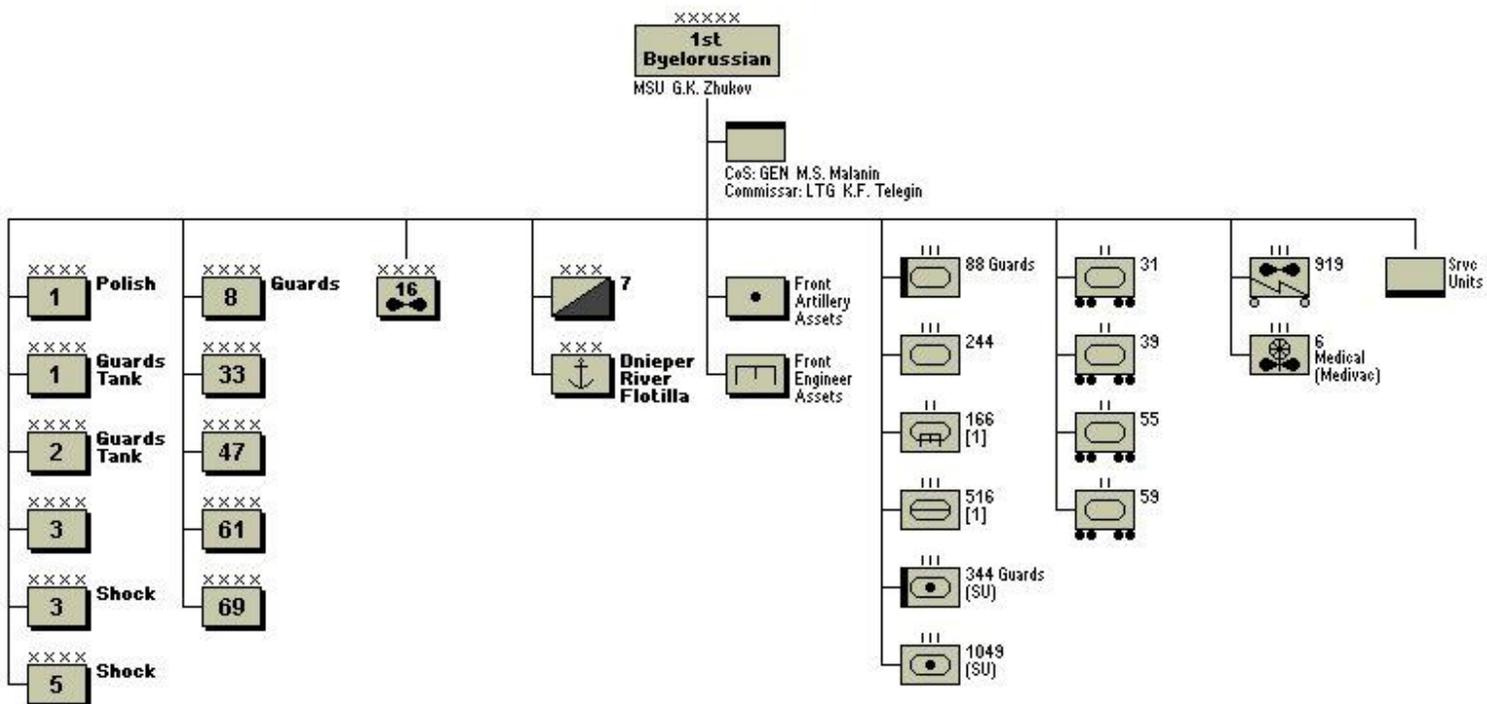
When looking at basic orders of battle, simple diagrams tell only a part of the story. Regarding Soviet units, organization size and numerical strengths do not indicate other weaknesses inherent in their organizational structure and equipment. Because of this, the typical Soviet division was equivalent to about half a German division (if both were full strength). Soviet tank corps were about the equivalent of a German Panzer division.

A unique division in the German structure was the Schatten (Shadow) Division. These units were hastily formed as holding formations with a basic staff and structure in which emergency units and other fragments could be poured in. As its frontline equivalent was depleted in combat, the Schatten Division could be deployed forward to flesh out the depleted formation. Some of the divisions in Army Group Vistula started as Schatten formations and only on the eve of the Soviet offensive were they formed sufficiently to be considered capable of any form of combat action.

# The German 9th Army Compared to the Soviet 8th Guards Army



Soviet Order of Battle  
**1st Byelorussian Front**  
 3 April 1945  
 (Service units not indicated)



[1] Detached from 2nd Assault Engineer Sapper Bde

## 9.ARMEE INFANTRY FIGHTING STRENGTH, 10 APRIL 1945

<b>XXXIX.Panzerkorps:</b>	
<i>Pz.Div. 'Müncheberg'</i>	1,986
<i>25.Pz.Gren.Div.</i>	5,605
	7,591
<b>unmitt. Unterstellt</b>	
<i>Festung Frankfurt</i>	13,945
<i>600. (russisch) Inf. Div.</i>	7,065
<b>C.I.A.K.</b>	
<i>Div. 'Berlin' (309.)</i>	5,926
<i>Div. 606</i>	5,495
<i>5.Jg.Div.</i>	4,970
	16,391
<b>XI.SS Pz.K.</b>	
<i>712.I.D.</i>	4,882
<i>169.I.D.</i>	5,956
<i>303.I.D.</i>	3,860
<i>20.Pz.Gren.Div.</i>	4,848
<i>9.Fs.Jg.Div.</i>	6,758
	30,654
<b>V. SS-Geb.K.</b>	
<i>391.Sich.Div</i>	4,537
<i>32.SS Div. '30. Januar'</i>	6,703
<i>286.I.D.</i>	3,950
	15,190
	<b>90,836</b>

### Notes

- 1 Richard Lakowski, *Seelow 1945: Die Entscheidungsschlacht an der Oder* (Berlin: Brandenburgisches Verlagshaus, 1994), p.49.

# H.GR. WEICHSEL PANZERS AND STURMGESCHÜTZE ON 15 APRIL 1945

Formation	Type	a	b	c	d
<b>A.O.K. 9</b>					
<i>Pz.Gren.Div. 'Kurmark'</i>					
<i>Pz.Jg.Abt. 'Kurmark'</i>	<i>Pz. IV</i>	3	-	-	3
	<i>Pz. (Flak) IV</i>	-	-	-	2
	<i>Jagd pz. 38</i>	16	-	1	-
<i>Pz.Abt. 'Brandenburg' II/26</i>	<i>Pz. V</i>	28	2	1	-
	<i>StuG. III</i>	12	-	-	-
<i>Pz.Div. 'Müncheberg'</i>					
<i>II/Pz.Abt.29</i>	<i>Pz. III</i>	1	-	-	-
	<i>Pz. IV</i>	2	-	1	-
	<i>Pz. (L)A IV2</i>	1	-	-	-
	<i>Pz. V</i>	21	-	-	2
	<i>Pz. VI</i>	10	-	3	1
	<i>Jagd pz. IV</i>	1	-	-	-
<i>20.Pz.Gren.Div.</i>	<i>StuG. III</i>	-	-	-	10
	<i>Pz. IV</i>	13	-	1	-
	<i>Pz. (Flak) IV</i>	3	-	-	-
	<i>Pz. (L)A IV</i>	16	-	-	-
<i>25.Pz.Gen.Div.</i>	<i>Pz. IV</i>	1	-	-	-
<i>Pz.Abt.5</i>	<i>Pz. (Flak) IV</i>	2	-	-	-
	<i>Pz. (L)A IV</i>	7	-	2	-
	<i>Pz. V</i>	30	3	1	-
<i>Pz.Jg.Abt.25</i>	<i>StuG. III</i>	31	-	-	-
	<i>StuG. IV</i>	-	-	-	2
	<i>Pz.(L)A IV</i>	12	-	-	-
	<i>Jagd pz. IV</i>	1	-	-	-
<i>5.Jäger.Div</i>					
<i>Pz.Jg.Kp.1005</i>	<i>StuG. III</i>	1	-	1	-
	<i>Pz.(L)A IV</i>	10	-	-	-
<i>SS Pz.Abt.502</i>	<i>Pz. VI</i>	29	-	1	-
	<i>Pz. (Flak) IV</i>	4	-	-	-
<i>Div. 'Berlin'</i>					
<i>Pz.Jg.Abt. 'Berlin'</i>	<i>StuG. III</i>	10	-	2	-
<i>Div. 'Döberitz'</i>	<i>StuG. III</i>	17	1	-	-
<i>Pz.Jg.Abt. 'Döberitz'</i>	<i>Pz.(L) IV</i>	7	-	2	-
<i>SS-Gren-Div. '30 Januar'</i>	<i>StuG. III</i>	20	-	2	-

Formation	Type				
<b>A.O.K. 9 (continued)</b>					
SS.Pz.Jg.Abt.32	StuH. 42	8	-	1	-
Fkl.Pz.Abt.303 14/3/3 169.Inf.Div.	StuG. III	10	-	-	-
Jagd pz.Kp.1230	Jagd pz. 38	10	-	-	-
Stu.Lehr Brig.111	StuG. III	33	-	-	-
	StuH. 42	9	-	-	-
	Pz.(L)A IV	6	-	-	-
Jagd pz.Komp.1129	Jagd pz. 38	11	-	1	-
Pz.Jagd-Abt.2	Jagd pz. 38	24	-	1	-
Sd.Tr.R.FSS.561 [SS Pz.Jagd- Abt 561]	Pz. IV	1	-	-	-
	Jagd pz. 38	16	2	-	-
SS Pz.Jagd-Abt 560	StuG. III	5	3	-	-
	Jagd pz. 38	37	1	6	-
9.Fallschirm.-Div.					
Pz.Jg.Abt.	StuG. III	-	-	1	-
	Jagd pz. 38	8	-	-	-
600.Inf.Div.(russ.)	Jagd pz. 38	8	-	2	-
	T-34	-	9	-	-
SS StuG.Abt.105	Stu.ital.L6	10	1	-	-
SS Pz.Komp.105	Stu.ital.L6	-	-	-	-
	Pz.m 13/40	7	3	-	-
<b>A.O.K. 9 total:</b>		<b>512</b>	<b>25</b>	<b>30</b>	<b>20</b>
<i>Einsatzbereit</i> (ready for commitment)		= 512	=90%		
<i>Kurze Instandsetzung</i> (short-term repair)		=25	=4%		
<i>Lange Instandsetzung</i> (long-term repair)		=30	=5%		
		<hr/>			
		567			
<i>In Zuführung</i> (being supplied)		<hr/>			
		20			
		<hr/>			
		587			
<b>Pz.A.O.K. 3</b>					
Pz. Jagd-Abt.1	StuG. III	4	-	-	-
	StuG. IV	11	1	-	-
	Jagd pz. 38	4	1	-	-
281.Inf.Div.					
Pz.Jagd.Abt.281	Jagd pz. 38	10	-	-	-
18. Pz.Gren.Div.	Pz. IV	27	-	-	1
Pz.Abt.183	Pz. (L)A IV	8	-	-	-
	Jagd pz. 38	19	-	4	-
SS-Freiw.Div.Niederland					
Pz.Jg.Abt.23	StuG. III	4	-	-	-
	StuH.	2	-	-	-
SS-Freiw.Div.Nordland	StuG. III	22	1	-	-
	Pz.(L)V IV	10	-	-	-
SS Pz.Abt.503	Pz. VI	10	-	2	-
	Pz.(Flak) IV	8	-	-	-
StuG.Brig. 184	StuG. III	23	-	1	-
	StuH. 42	8	-	-	2

Formation	Type				
<b>Pz.A.O.K. 3</b> (continued)					
<i>Pz. Ausb. Verb. Ostee</i>	<i>Pz. V</i>	1	1	-	-
	<i>Jagd pz. IV</i>	3	1	-	-
	<i>Jagd pz. 38</i>	3	-	-	-
<i>Pz. Jagd. Abt. 6</i>	<i>Jagd pz. 38</i>	17	-	2	-
<i>StuG. Brig. 210</i>	<i>StuG. III</i>	15	-	1	-
	<i>StuH. 42</i>	12	-	2	-
	<i>Pz.(L)V-A IV</i>	11	-	1	2
<b>Pz.A.O.K. 3 total:</b>		<b>232</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>5</b>
<i>Einsatzbereit</i> (ready for commitment)		=232	=93%		
<i>Kurze Instandsetzung</i> (short-term repair)		=5	=2%		
<i>Lange Instandsetzung</i> (long-term repair)		=13	=5%		
		<hr/>			
		250			
<i>In Zuführung</i> (being supplied)		5			
		<hr/>			
		255			
<hr/>					
<b>vert. Bereich Swinemünde:</b>					
<i>163. Inf. Div.</i>					
<i>Jagd. Pz. Komp. 1234</i>	<i>Jagd pz. 38</i>	10	-	-	-
<hr/>					
<b>Totals:</b>					
<i>A. O. K. 9</i>		512	25	30	20
<i>Pz. A. O. K. 3</i>		232	5	13	5
<i>Vert. Bereich Swinemünde</i>		10	-	-	-
		<hr/>			
<b>Heeresgruppe Weichsel totals:</b>		<b>754</b>	<b>30</b>	<b>43</b>	<b>25</b>
<i>Einsatzbereit</i> (ready for commitment)		=754	=91%		
<i>Kurze Instandsetzung</i> (short-term repair)		=30	=4%		
<i>Lange Instandsetzung</i> (long-term repair)		=43	=5%		
		<hr/>			
		827			
<i>In Zuführung</i> (being supplied)		25			
		<hr/>			
		852			

**Key:**

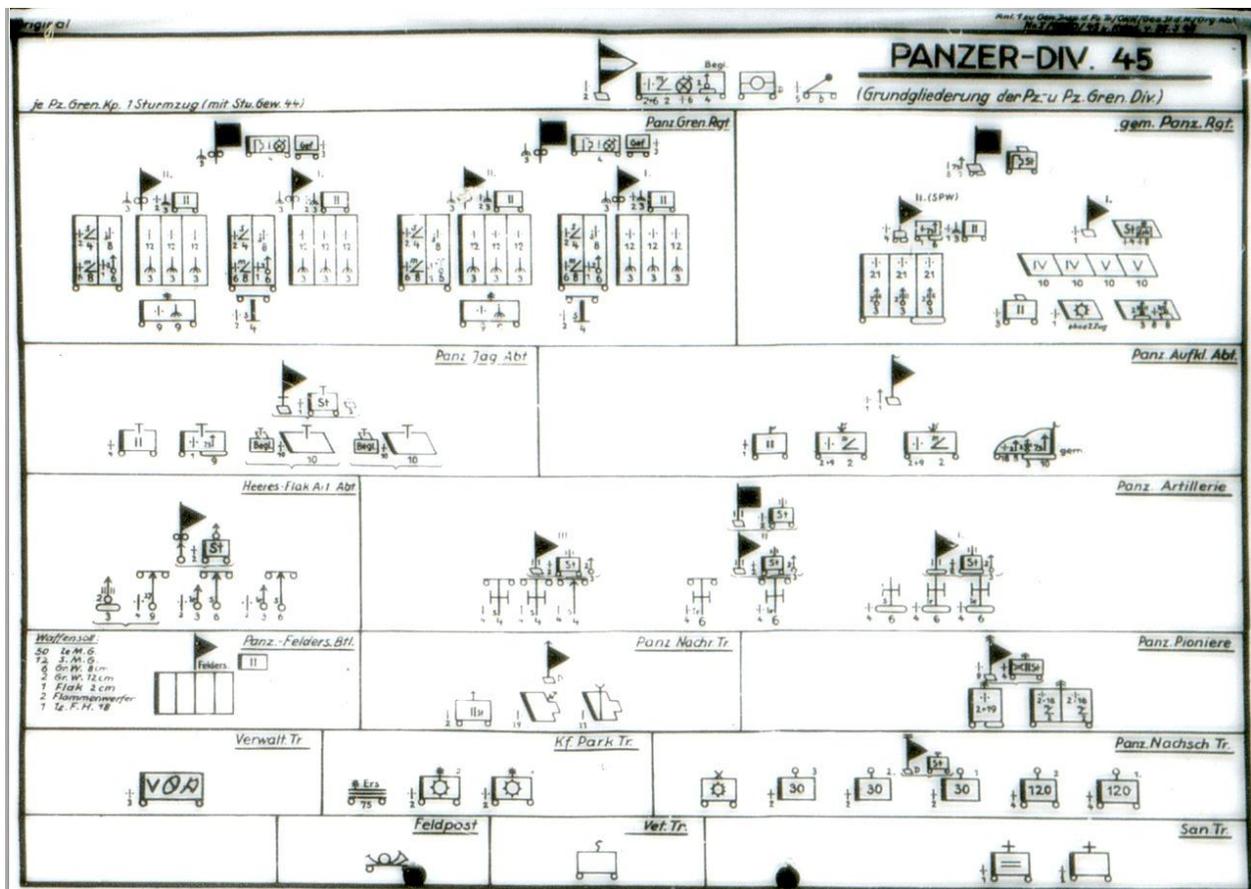
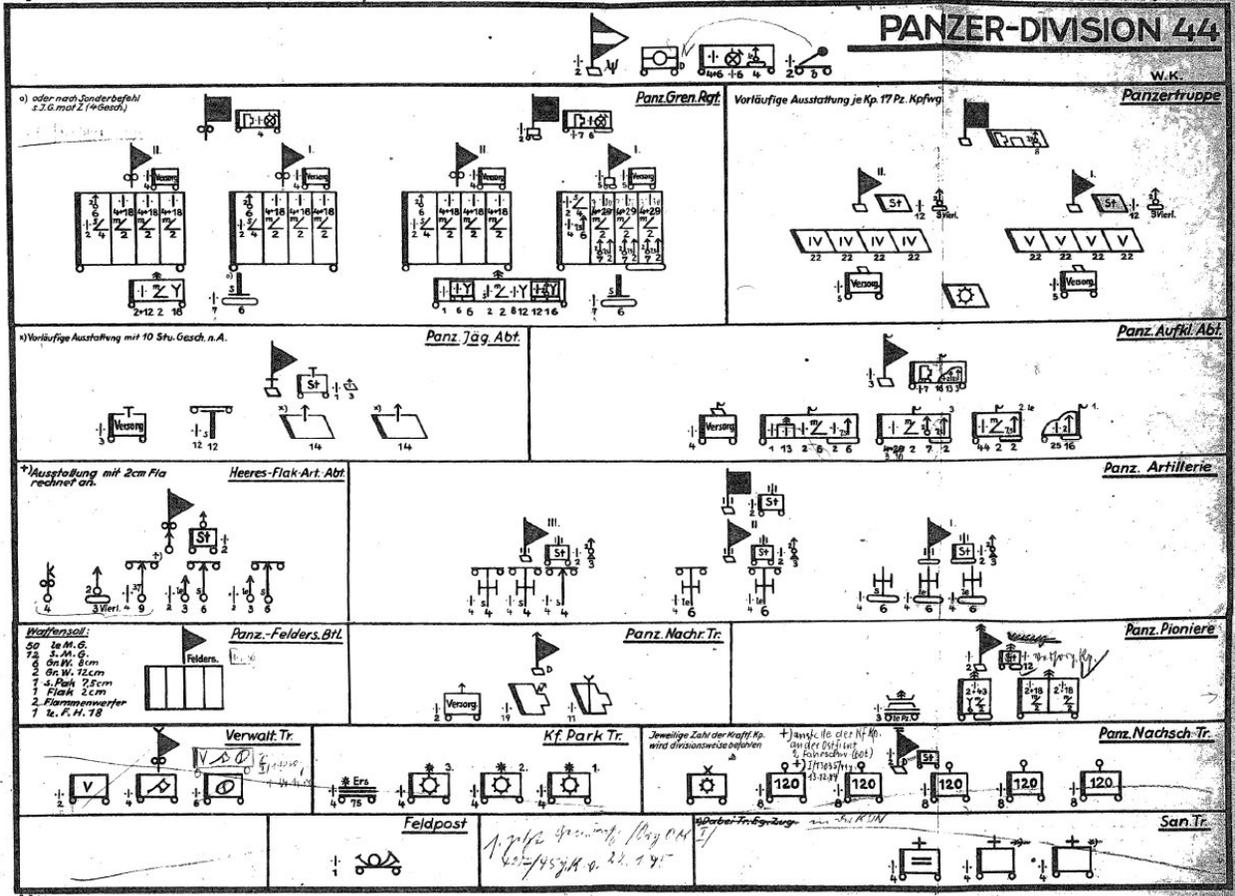
- a* = *Einsatzbereit* (ready for commitment)
- b* = *Kurze Instandsetzung* (short-term repair)
- c* = *Lange Instandsetzung* (long-term repair)
- d* = *Zuführung* (being supplied)

**Notes**

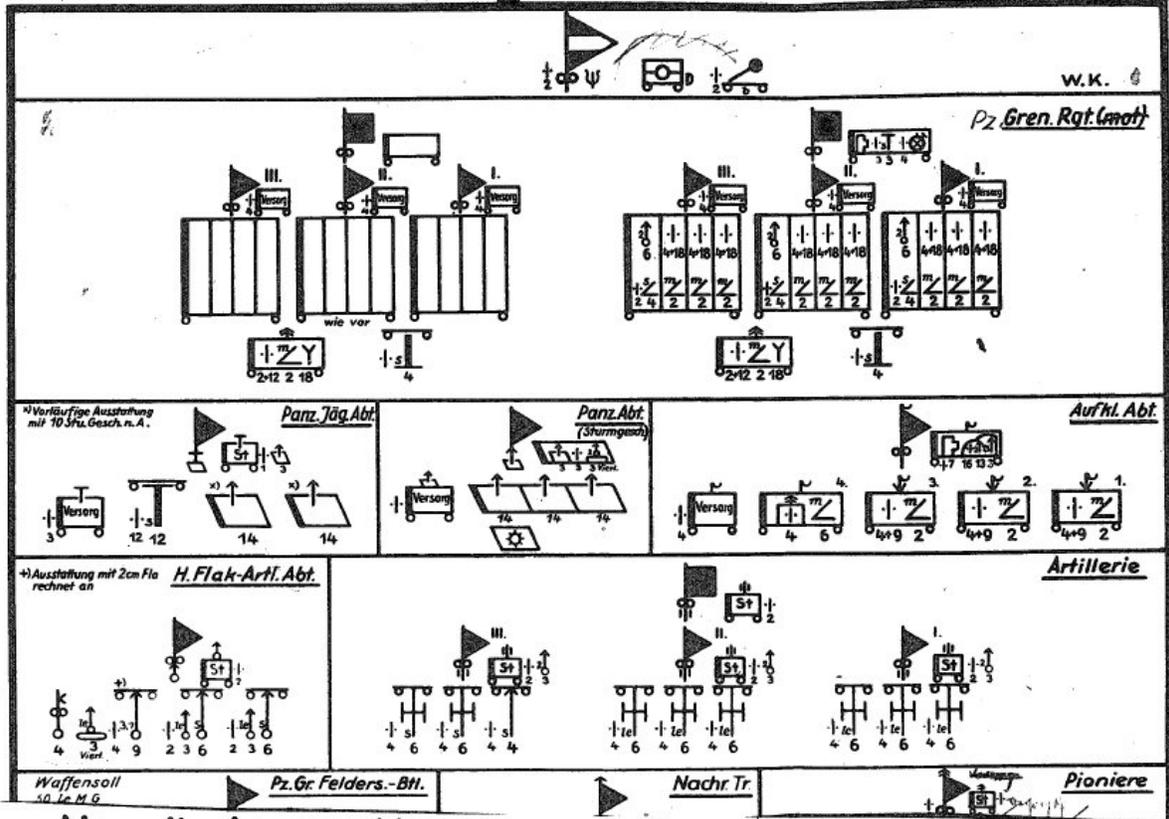
- 1 T-311/171/7223305-7.
- 2 This is the original notation in the document. The vehicle is perhaps better known as the *Jagdpanzer IV/70 (A)* (SdKfz 162/1).
- 3 This is the unit listed in the original document. However, Tessin shows no such unit in existence in 1945 – in December 1943 *Pz. Abt. 18*, originally part of *18. Panzer Division*, was merged into *s. Pz. Abt. 504* (Tigers) – see Georg Tessin, *Verbände und Truppen der deutschen Wehrmacht und Waffen-SS im Zweiten Weltkrieg 1939-1945 Vierter Band: Die Landstreitkräfte 15-30* (Frankfurt/Main: Mittler, no date), p.95. It's worth noting that at the time of this document *18. Pz. Gren. Div.* was in something of a state of flux, as it was receiving elements from *Pz. Div. 'Schlesien'* and *Pz. Div. 'Holstein'* during refitting. For 13 April 1945 Tessin (p.89) shows *18. Pz. Gren. Div.* possessing *gem. Pz. Rgt. 118* as its main armored component.

STRENGTH OF PANZER UNITS ON THE EASTERN FRONT ON 15 MARCH 1945

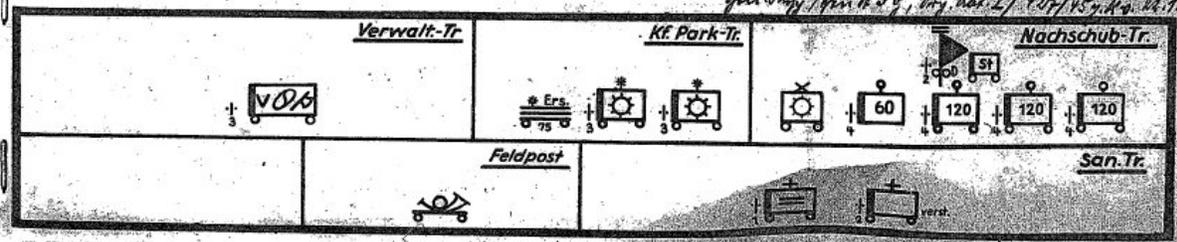
Unit Name	StuG	PzIVlg	PzIV/70	Flakpz	PzV	PzVI
<u>Heeresgruppe Sued</u>						
1.Pz.Div.	2 (1)	5 (2)			59 (10)	
3.Pz.Div.	7 (2)	14 (4)	11 (2)		39 (13)	
6.Pz.Div.		22 (4)		5 (3)	68 (19)	
13.Pz.Div.		18 (0)		1 (1)	5 (5)	
23.Pz.Div.	10 (7)	16 (6)	8 (0)	1 (0)	33 (7)	
232.Pz.Div. (Tatra)	1 (1)	1 (1)				
Pz.Div.FHH		18 (16)	3 (2)		19 (18)	
I./Pz.Rgt.24					32 (3)	
s.H.Pz.Abt.509				8 (2)		35 (8)
s.H.Pz.Abt.FHH				7 (2)		26 (19)
1.SS-Pz.Div.LSSAH	7 (3)	29 (14)	20 (2)	6 (3)	32 (18)	
s.SS.Pz.Abt.501				8 (1)		32 (8)
2.SS-Pz.Div.R	26 (7)	22 (14)	18 (7)	8 (4)	27 (17)	
3.SS-Pz.Div.T	17 (13)	17 (16)			17 (8)	9 (7)
5.SS-Pz.Div.W	5 (4)	4 (3)			18 (12)	
9.SS-Pz.Div.H	25 (11)	20 (11)	22 (10)	5 (3)	35 (12)	
12.SS-Pz.Div.HJ		23 (10)	30 (10)	8 (2)	24 (9)	
16.SS-Pz.Gr.Div.RF-SS	62 (47)					
<u>Heeresgruppe Mitte</u>						
8.Pz.Div.		42 (11)	30 (6)		10 (9)	
16.Pz.Div.	31 (8)	4 (0)	16 (8)		14 (10)	
17.Pz.Div.		14 (10)	19 (18)	3 (3)		
19.Pz.Div.		20 (20)	11 (9)		17 (16)	
20.Pz.Div.	13 (6)	21 (19)	10 (0)	2 (2)	9 (2)	
21.Pz.Div.	1 (1)	31 (17)	16 (14)	4 (4)	33 (14)	
Fuehr.Begl.Div.	43 (20)	10 (7)	20 (12)	5 (2)	20 (10)	
10.Pz.Gren.Div.	29 (20)		9 (8)			
Pz.Gren.Div.Brandenburg	17 (9)	1 (0)				
I./Pz.Rgt.39					23 (4)	
Pz.Abt.1 Stahnsdorf	23 (21)					
Pz.Abt.2 Stahnsdorf	18 (14)				13 (9)	
Fallsch.Pz.Div.1		20 (19)			20 (12)	1 (0)
18.SS-Pz.Gr.Div.HW	19 (5)					
<u>Heeresgruppe Weichsel</u>						
25.Pz.Div.	1 (0)	31 (11)	19 (12)		10 (3)	
Pz.Div.Schlesien		30 (20)	10 (3)			
Pz.Div.Muencheberg	4 (4)	4 (3)	1 (1)		11 (10)	11 (8)
Fuehr.Gren.Div.	34 (16)	3 (0)	7 (3)	3 (2)	26 (6)	
20.Pz.Gren.Div.		19 (0)	21 (21)	3 (3)		
25.Pz.Gren.Div.	30 (30)	1 (1)	20 (19)	2 (2)	32 (30)	
Pz.Gren.Div.Kurmark		3 (2)			38 (26)	1 (1)
II./Pz.Rgt.9		17 (9)	13 (9)			
10.SS-Pz.Div.F		32 (21)	8 (4)	8 (4)	50 (23)	
11.SS-Pz.Gren.Div.N	26 (13)				2 (0)	
s.SS.Pz.Abt.502						31 (31)
s.SS.Pz.Abt.503				8 (5)		12 (1)
<u>Heeresgruppe Nord</u>						
4.Pz.Div.	3 (2)	5 (2)			15 (7)	
5.Pz.Div.	5 (3)	17 (13)			14 (11)	
7.Pz.Div.	8 (5)	2 (1)	10 (6)		9 (5)	
24.Pz.Div.	3 (0)	3 (2)	5 (3)			
Pz.Gren.Div.G.D.	1 (0)	1 (0)			5 (1)	6 (6)
s.H.Pz.Abt.505						13 (12)
s.H.Pz.Abt.511						20 (11)
4.SS-Pol.Pz.Gren.Div.	24 (7)			8 (5)	2 (0)	
<u>Heeresgruppe Kurland</u>						
12.Pz.Div.	5 (4)	63 (56)				
14.Pz.Div.	17 (15)			2 (2)	36 (28)	
s.H.Pz.Abt.510						15 (13)
<b>Total Available (Operational)</b>	<b>545 (314)</b>	<b>603 (345)</b>	<b>357 (189)</b>	<b>97 (50)</b>	<b>776 (387)</b>	<b>212 (125)</b>



# Panzergranadier-Division 44



## Neugliederung Versorgungs-Truppen Pz. Gren. Div.



## Vorläufige Zahlenangaben zur Panz. Div. 45

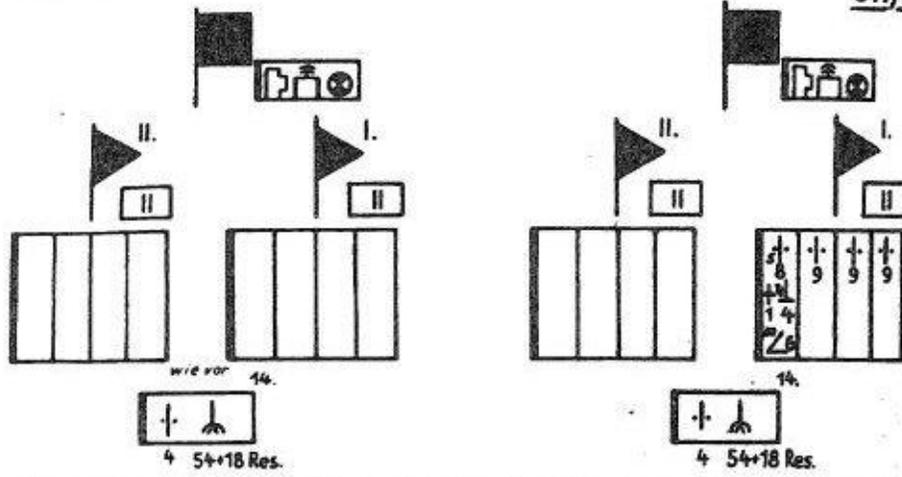
Bezeichnung	Gesamt-Kopf-stärke	Lkw	restl. Kfz	Panzer (Panzer-Pkz u. Panzer-R.)	SPW	Rad-späh	Jagd-panzer	Vergleich		
								Panz. Div. 45	Panz. Div. 44	
Div. Abt. Panz. Div. 45 (n. Regt. Org. der Panz. Div. u. Feldpost)	420	27	47	-	-	-	-	Kopfstärke	17922	13273
Gem. Panz. Rgt.								Lkw-Jah	1080	1198
3. Pz. Gren. Rgt. (mit 3 Stk. Kfz.)	106	12	13	2	2	-	-	restl. Kfz-Jah	1091	1190
I. (Panz. Abt.)	767	85	81	52	-	-	-	Panzer-Jah (einschl. Panzer-Jah n. A.)	54	165
II. (SPW Btl.)	488	32	27	-	47	-	-	SPW-Jah	90	288
Summe gem. Panz. Rgt.	1361	129	121	54	49	-	-	Radspähwagen-Jah	16	16
1. Panz. Gren. Rgt.								Jagdpanzer-Jah (einschl. Jagd-Panzer)	22	22
2. Panz. Gren. Rgt. (50 Stk. n. 10 Stk. Kfz.)	252	26	66	-	-	-	-			

# Schatten-Division (34.Welle)

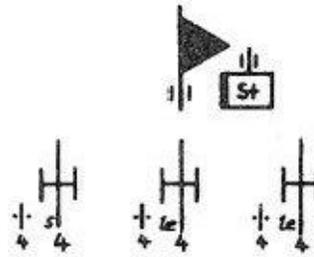
9

Stärken: gem. Grundgliederung Inf. Div. 45

Infanterie



Artillerie  
gem.



Pioniere



## SOVIET SOLDIER AND EQUIPMENT TOTALS FOR THE BERLIN STRATEGIC OFFENSIVE OPERATION

	2nd Belorussian Front	1st Belorussian Front	1st Ukrainian Front	1st and 2nd Polish Armies	Total
Soldiers	441,600	908,500	550,900	155,900	<b>2,056,900</b>
Tanks	644	1,795	1,388	?	3,827
Self-Propelled Guns	307	1,360	667	?	<b>2,334</b>
Anti-Tank Guns	770	2,306	1,444	?	<b>4,520</b>
Artillery 76mm and higher caliber	3,172	7,442	5,040	?	<b>15,654</b>
Mortars 82mm and higher caliber	2,770	7,186	5,225	?	<b>15,181</b>
Rocket Launchers	807	1,531	917	?	<b>3,255</b>
Anti-Aircraft Guns	801	1,665	945	?	<b>3,411</b>
Motor Vehicles	21,846	44,332	29,205	?	<b>95,383</b>
Aircraft (Fighters, Bombers, Reconnaissance, etc.,)	1,360	3,188	2,148	NA	<b>6,696</b>

### Notes

- 1 Krivosheev, *Soviet Casualties and Combat Losses in the Twentieth Century*, p.158 and Tieke, *Das Ende Zwischen Oder und Elbe: Der Kampf um Berlin 1945* p.506, quoting from *Voenno-istoricheskii Zhurnal* 1965. Compare with the Red Army Order of Battle found in (RC: 71/9).

## Soviet Ground Forces, 16 April 1945

### Fighting Strength, Numerical Strength and Losses

Name of force, period involved in operation	Fighting strength and numerical strength of troops at start of operation		Losses during the operation			
	No of formations	Numerical strength	Irrecoverable losses	Sick and wounded	Total	Average daily losses
2nd Byelorussian Front (minus 5th Guards Tank Army and 19th Army; whole period)	rifle divisions—33 cavalry divisions—3 tank corps—3 mechanised corps—1 ind. tank brigades—1 self-propelled artillery brigades—1	441,600	13,070	46,040	59,110	2,570
1st Byelorussian Front (whole period)	rifle divisions—72 cavalry divisions—6 tank corps—5 mechanised corps—2 ind. tank brigades—6 fortified areas—2 self-propelled artillery brigades—2	908,500	37,610	141,880	179,490	7,804
1st Ukrainian Front (3rd and 5th Guards, 3rd and 4th Guards Tank and 2nd Air Armies; 13th and 52nd Armies; whole period)	rifle divisions—44 cavalry divisions—3 tank corps—5 mechanised corps—4 ind. tank brigades—2 self-propelled artillery brigades—3	550,900	27,580	86,245	113,825	4,949
Dnieper Flotilla (whole period)	—	5,200	16	11	27	1
Baltic Fleet (ships and air force; 20.04–08.05.45)	—	—	15	8	23	1
Total	Divisions—161 Corps—20 Brigades—15 Fortified areas—2	1,906,200	78,291	274,184	352,475	15,325
1st and 2nd Polish Armies (whole period)	infantry divisions—10 tank corps—1 cavalry brigades—1	155,900	2,825	6,067	8,892	387

## Soviet Armor Units Deployed, 16 April 1945

<b>ORDER OF BATTLE: THE ASSAULT ON BERLIN (APRIL 1945)</b>			
<b>Front</b>	<b>Army</b>	<b>Corps</b>	<b>Brigade/Regiment</b>
2nd Byelorussian	Fifth Guards Tank	XXIX Tank	1st Tank & 4th Mech Bdes
1st Byelorussian	First Polish		4th Polish Heavy Tank, 13th Polish SP Assault Artillery
	Forty-Seventh		70th Guards Independent Tank Rgt
		IX Tank	23rd Tank, 95th Tank, 108th Tank
	Fifth Shock		11th Tank, 67th Guards Tank, 220th Tank, 92nd Independent Tank Rgt
	Eighth Guards		7th Guards Tank, 84th Guards Tank, 65th Independent Tank, 259th Independent Tank Rgts
	Sixty-Ninth		68th Tank, 12th SP Assault Artillery
	Thirty-Third		257th Independent Tank Rgt, 360th SP Assault Artillery, 361st SP Assault Artillery
	First Guards Tank	VIII Guards Mech	19th, 20th & 21st Guards Mechanized, 1st Guards Tank Bde, 48th Guards Tank, 353rd & 400th Guards SP Assault Artillery Rgts
		XI Guards Tank	40th, 44th & 45th Guards Tank, 27th Guards Mechanized, 362nd, 399th Guards, 1454 SP Assault Artillery Rgts
		XI Tank	20th, 36th & 65th Tank, 12th Motorized Rifle, 50th Guards Tank Rgt, 1461st & 1493rd SP Assault Artillery Rgts, 64th Guards Tank, 19th SP Assault Artillery, 11th Guards Independent Tank Rgt
	Second Guards Tank	I Mechanized	19th, 35th & 37th Mechanized, 219th Tank, 347th Guards, 75th & 1822nd SP Assault Artillery Rgts
		IX Guards tank	47th, 50th & 65th Guards Tank, 33rd Guards Mechanized, 341st, 369th & 386th Guards SP Assault Artillery Rgts
		XII Guards Tank	48th, 49th & 66th Guards Tank, 34th Guards Mechanized, 79th Guards Tank Rgt, 387th & 393rd Guards SP Assault Artillery Rgt, 6th Guards Independent Tank Rgt
	Third	XXXV, XL & XLI Rifle	1812th, 1888th & 1901st SP Assault Artillery Rgts
		II, III & VII Guards Cavalry	
		III & VIII Guards Tank	244th Independent Tank Rgts, 31st, 39th, 51st & 55th Independent Armoured Train

# Document illustrating losses in Army Group Vistula, early 1945

*VTB.*

Zahlenmässige Übersicht über Ersatzzuführungen  
und Verluste für die Zeit ab 1.2.45.

Ersatzzuführungen bis 15.3.45:

	<u>A.O.K. 9</u>	<u>Pz.A.O.K. 3</u>
Marsch-Kpn.-Btl.	4 736	4 404
Gen.Marsch-Kpn.-B.	300	1 302
Personalersatz	327	1 722
sonst.Einheiten (Versprengte, Ausb.Kp.usw.)	3 575	5 495
Aus Einheiten der Waffen-SS	1 052	11 822
	<u>9 990</u>	<u>24 745</u>
	*****	*****

Verluste bis 15.3.45:

Gefallene	90	3 887	96	1 840
Verwundete	360	18 488	327	8 312
Vermissten	<u>21</u>	<u>12 529</u>	<u>46</u>	<u>38 760</u>
	<u>471</u>	<u>34 904</u>	<u>469</u>	<u>48 912</u>
	****	*****	***	*****

Die angegebenen Zahlen sind noch nicht endgültig, da noch Nachmeldungen infolge der ungewöhnlich schweren Kämpfe zu erwarten sind und an einige Verbände Ersatzzuführungen unmittelbar unter Umgehung der H.Gr. durchgeführt werden, von denen die H.Gr. immer erst einige Tage später auf unmittelbare Anfrage Kenntnis erhält. *KH*

Document showing the need to use anti-aircraft guns in lieu of Artillery

*B 3/12*

Ia / Stoart H.Qu., 3.2.45 *Jan*

Aktennotiz

An Chef *R.* *0. Idk*

Ia  
Id  
Major Wersig

1.) Betr.: 24 le.F.H.18 aus Liegnitz.  
Harko 307 bei A.O.K. 9 meldet am 31.1.45 fernmündlich:  
Aus Liegnitz wurden zugeführt und sind bereits im Einsatz:  
5 le.F.H.18 an I/777  
11 le.F.H.18 an I/A.R.16  
8 le.F.H.18 an H.A.A.430 ✓

2.) Betr.: Volksartilleriekorps 408  
Nach fernmündlicher Unterrichtung durch Gen.d.Art. O.K.H. am 2.2.45 sind bisher 3 Züge angekommen. Ort und Gliederung nicht bekannt.

3.) Veränderungen in der Artillerie-Gliederung des A.O.K. 9 nach dem 28.1.45.

<p><u>XL. A.K.(Pz.)</u> 1 Rohr 12,2 cm(r) 1 Alarmbatterie 5 le.F.H. 24 Pak 8,8 cm im Raum Guben</p>	<p><u>Brückenkopf Küstrin</u> 6 s.Flak-Bttr. 24 Rohre 2 le.Flak-Bttr.24 Rohre Artillerie nicht bekannt</p>
<p><u>Festg.Frankfurt/Oder</u> 10 s.Flak-Bttr.40 Rohre 2 le.Flak-Bttr.24 Rohre Artillerie 1 le.F.H. (Rohre) 1 21 cm Mrs.18 8 7,62 cm (j) 1 15 cm K.18 2 15,5 cm s.F.H.(f) 1 15,2 (r) 1 12,2 (r) 21 Pak 8,8 cm</p>	<p><u>25. Pz.Gren.Div.</u> 2 Abt.le.F.H. 19 Rohre 1 Abt.s. F.H. 4 Rohre. Hierzu in Zuführung 3 s.F.H.18, 4 10 cm K.18 8 s.Flak-Bttr. 32 Rohre</p>
<p><i>25.Pz.</i> <i>H</i></p>	<p><u>606. Div.</u> 7 s.Flak-Bttr.,dav. 1 10,5 cm 34 R keine Artillerie</p>
	<p><u>Marine-Schützen-Brigade Angermünde</u> keine Flak, keine Artillerie 1 Sturmgesch.Brig. in Zuführung</p>

*M. Wersig*  
Oberst

# Post-war report showing the strength and losses of the German 9th Army

MS # R-79

## APPENDIX H

Strength of Ninth Army, at the beginning of April 1945

Personnel on duty (organic units, assigned GHQ units; security troops, Army supply and other troops; permanent installations, Administrative & service troops	German officers, offi- cials, non coms & men	168 413
	Hiwi or Hiwi aspirants	<u>2 765</u> 171 178
Personnel of Luftwaffe, SS, Foreign Units; Field Training Divisions, Navy and Volkssturm		43 537
Total		<u>214 615</u>
Reported below T/E&O strength	German, as above	51 551
Total combat effectives	Hiwi & Hiwi aspirants	<u>6 374</u> 272 540
Calculated T/E&O strength		
Total combat effectives		<u>74703</u>

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Above information based on: Iststaerkenmeldung, Army Group Weichsel,  
1 Apr 45, Anlage zu Obkdo. H. Gr. Weichsel, II b, Nr. 187/45, E. Kdos.,  
CRS Folder HL/217: Fehlstellenmeldung, Istaerkenmeldungen fuer LW, SS,  
etc. Divisionen.

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MS # R-79

APPENDIX H (Cont'd)

Strength of Ninth Army at the end of April 1945

From a chart dated 16 April the following incomplete strength figures for the period 16 to 21 April can be calculated:

	No. and ratings of Bns	Comb. effect	Corps total	Army total
V Corps	NO REPORT			
V SS Mountain Corps	3 strong	1200 - 1500		
	7 med.	2100 - 2450		
	6 average	1200 - 1300		
	1 under str.	<u>100 - 150</u>	4600 - 6750	
XI SS Panzer (uncertain figures)	8 strong	3200 - 4000		
	12 med.	3600 - 4200		
	4 average	800 - 1000		
	2 und.str.	200 - 300		
	1 destroyed	<u>below 100</u>	7800 - 9600	
Unknown subordination	11 strong	4400 - 5500		
	11 med.	3300 - 3850		
	3 average	<u>600 - 750</u>	8300 - 10100	

Total combat effectives of Ninth Army excl. of one corps: 20 000 30 450

As of 16 April or according to last report received (after 16 April but not later than 21 April) Ninth Army had: (incomplete reports)

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APPENDIX H (Cont'd)

Strength of Ninth Army at the end of April 1945

	on hand	operational
75-mm AT guns, mot. drawn or self prop.	261	10
88-mm AT guns, mot. drawn	81	1
Captured tanks	20	0
Tanks and Assault Guns, as of 16 Apr 45	664	51
" " " " , as of last report	698	31

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Information above assembled from: Chart attached to Situation Map,

Army Group Weichsel/Twelfth Army, 25 Apr 45.

Note: Existing documentary material of Army Group Weichsel may contain additional information. This material was not available at the time when this study was written.

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# German Army

## 1943-1945 Organizational Symbols

### SIZE, FUNCTION, MOBILITY

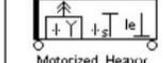
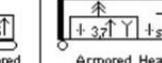
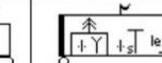

### WEAPON SYMBOLS

Classification												
Light	<i>le</i> with bipod	to 79mm		to 75mm	to 79mm	to 39mm	to 109mm	to 39mm	to 129mm	—	to 36mm	man-packed
Medium	<i>m</i> —	—		80 - 119mm	40 - 59mm	110 - 159mm	—	—	—	—	37 - 59mm	—
Heavy	<i>s</i> with tripod	over 80mm		over 76mm	over 120mm	60 - 89mm	160 - 219mm	100 - 209mm	130 - 209mm	210 - 249mm	60 - 159mm	vehicle-borne
Heaviest	<i>sw</i> over 15mm	—	—	—	over 90mm	over 220mm	over 210mm	over 210mm	over 250mm	over 160mm	—	

### INFANTRY INSPECTORATE UNITS


### ENGINEER INSPECTORATE UNITS


### PANZERTRUPPEN INSPECTORATE UNITS

 Motorized Infantry Platoon	 Motorized Infantry Company	 Motorized Heavy Company (Typical Example)	 Armored Infantry Platoon	 Armored Infantry Company	 Armored Flamethrower Platoon	 Armored Gun Platoon	 Armored Heavy Company (Typical Example)	 Motorized Infantry Gun Company	 Self-Propelled Infantry Gun Company		
 Motorcycle Recon. Platoon	 Motorcycle Recon. Company	 Kettenrad Recon. Company	 Motorized Recon. Company	 Armored Recon. Company	 Motorized Heavy Reconnaissance Company (Typical Example)	 Armored Car Platoon	 Armored Car Company (wheeled)	 Armored Car Company (half-tracked)	 Armored Car Company (tracked)	 Light Recon. Transport Column (mot)	
 Tank Platoon	 Tank Company	 Radio-Controlled Tank Co.	 Tank (Assault Gun) Company	 Assault Tank Company (Sturmpanzer)	 Headquarters Company	 Tank Maintenance Platoon	 Tank Maintenance Company	 Flame Tank Platoon	 Motorized Anti-Tank Company	 Self-Propelled Anti-Tank Company	 Light Panzer Transport Column (mot)

### ARTILLERY INSPECTORATE UNITS

 Light Field Gun Battery	 75mm Mtn. Gun Battery (GK 15)	 75mm Field Gun Battery (FK 16 nA)	 75mm Cav. Gun Battery (FK 16 nA)	 75mm Field Gun Battery (FK 18 nA)	 Assault Gun Battery (Sd.Kfz. 142)	 Light Field Howitzer Battery	 105mm Field Howitzer Bty. (L. FH 16)	 105mm Field Howitzer Bty. (L. FH 18)	 Heavy Field Howitzer Battery	 150mm Field Howitzer Bty. (s.lg. FH 13)	 150mm Field Howitzer Bty. (s. FH 18)
 105mm Gun Battery	 105mm Gun Battery (K 17)	 105mm Gun Battery (K 18)	 150mm Gun Battery (K 16)	 150mm Gun Battery (K 18)	 150mm Gun Battery (K 39)	 150mm Gun Battery (How. Base)	 170mm Gun Battery (How. Base)	 210mm Gun Battery (K 12)	 210mm Gun Battery (K 38)	 210mm Gun Battery (K 39)	 240mm Gun Battery (K 3)
 240mm Howitzer Bty (M 39)	 210mm Howitzer Bty (langeMörser)	 210mm Howitzer Bty. (M 18)	 305mm Howitzer Battery	 355mm Howitzer Bty. (M 1)	 600mm Howitzer Bty. (Karl Gerät)	 75mm Recoiless Bty. (LG 1)	 105mm Recoiless Bty. (LG 2)	 Army AA Searchlight Battery	 Army AA 20mm Flak Battery	 Army AA 37mm Flak Battery	 Army AA 88mm Flak Battery
 105mm Rocket Launcher Bty (Nb.W. 40)	 150mm Rocket Launcher Bty (Nb.W. 41)	 210mm Rocket Launcher Bty (Nb.W. 42)	 280/320mm RL Bty. (Nb.W. 41)	 300mm Rocket Launcher Bty (Nb.W. 42)	 Headquarters Battery (motorized)	 Hqs. Bty. Self-Propelled Battalion	 Hqs. Bty. Assault Gun Battalion	 Hqs. Bty. Army AA Battalion	 Hqs. Bty. Rocket Battalion	 Artillery Observation Battery	 Artillery Park
 Weather Platoon (motorized)	 Calibration Detachment (motorized)	 Mountain Calibration Detachment	 Calibration Platoon (motorized)	 Calibration Battery	 Artillery Observation Battery	 Sound-Ranging Battery	 Flash-Ranging Battery	 Balloon Platoon (motorized)	 Artillery Transport Column (mot)	 Army AA Transport Column (mot)	 Rocket Transport Column (mot)

### SIGNAL INSPECTORATE UNITS

 Signal Platoon (motorized)	 Signal Company (motorized)	 Telephone Company (motorized)	 Mountain Telephone Company	 Telephone Construction Company	 Wire Construction Company	 Telephone Operations Company	 Radio Company (motorized)	 Interception Company (motorized)	 Signal Company (armored)	 Radio Company (armored)	 Alternate
 Propaganda Company (motorized)	 War Correspondent Company (motorized)	 Kb									 Lt. Signal Transport Column (mot)

### REAR ECHELON UNITS

 Horse-Drawn Transport Col. (15t)	 Horse-Drawn Transport Col. (30t)	 Horse-Drawn Transport Col. (60t)	 Motor Transport Col. (30t)	 Motor Transport Col. (60t)	 Motor Transport Co. (90t)	 Motor Transport Co. (120t)	 Supply Company (motorized)	 Hvy. Supply Company (motorized)	 25cbm P.O.L. Column (mot)	 50cbm P.O.L. Column (mot)	 60cbm Water Transport Column (mot)
 Bakery Company (motorized)	 Butchery Company (motorized)	 Rations Administration Detachment	 Field Post Detachment (motorized)	 Military Police Platoon (motorized)	 Military Police Company (motorized)	 Field Hospital	 Medical Company (motorized)	 Ambulance Platoon (motorized)	 Veterinary Company	 Horse Transport Column (mot)	
 Motorcycle Messenger Platoon	 Workshop Company (motorized)	 Maintenance Company (motorized)	 Spare Parts Detachment (motorized)	 Spare Parts Column (motorized)	 Recovery Platoon (motorized)	 Tank Recovery Platoon	 Mapping Detachment (motorized)	 Printing Detachment (motorized)	 Printing Platoon (motorized)	 Trains (motorized)	 Technical Company (motorized)

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## Explanation of German Units and Organizational Symbols

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The symbols in this work are based on the official German handbook of military symbols (H.Dv. 272) of 23 May 1943, and the symbols of the organizational charts (Kriegsgliederung des Feldheeres – 1.07.1943) .

The 1943 organizational symbols were simplified. The anti-tank units now also used a representation of the basic anti-tank gun symbol itself. The weapons symbols themselves were no longer modified, but instead had information placed next to them.

In German organizational charts (and, as reflected in this work), the headquarters symbol represents two purposes. First, it indicated the size, function, and mobility of the unit. And, second, it also indicated the headquarters of that echelon itself. I.e., there was no separate symbol for this echelon's headquarters. For all headquarters units with (and sometimes important units without) separate KStN, the corresponding symbols were placed to the right of the echelon's symbol. The same applied to those units that were directly assigned to the echelon's headquarters.

The different functions and mobility additions were used to enhance the echelon's symbol to indicate a specific purpose. Company-sized units and sub-units symbols were also modified in a similar fashion.

An interesting feature of company and sub-unit symbols is that their size and shape dimensions could be altered to fit the diagram being depicted with them. Several infantry companies, for example, were placed side-by-side, elongated upwards, (so that all weapons symbols could fit within), and only the left-hand company had the thickened edge used to indicate its size (more of this below). The variations in size and shape followed the original configuration, so that the basic symbol was still recognizable as such.

The symbols were intended to be mnemonic. The headquarters symbols reflected the units' pennants used on vehicles or the standards themselves. (These flags and pennants were of different colors to represent the various combat arms, and usually had a number, letter, and/or heraldic symbol superimposed upon them). Hence, any German looking at one of these symbols could immediately recognize the unit type being depicted. The colors in real life were substituted by the unit function and mobility modifiers above and below the symbols. In addition, a simplified version of the organizational symbols was, for example, painted on unit vehicles.

The mobility of the unit was also quickly recognizable. The two small circles ('wheels') underneath a symbols identified the unit as being motorized. In case these wheels were over the symbol (applied only to artillery-type units), this indicated that the unit was motorized by half-tracked prime movers. Elongated ovals ('tracks') applied underneath the symbol meant that the unit was self-propelled. A wheel and a track symbol indicated a half tracked armored vehicle.

The lozenge symbol represented armor. All tank units used this symbol. It was shaped to reflect World War I tanks, and hence provided a good memory assist.

Aside from a very few specialized symbols, which were quickly memorized, all company-sized and smaller unit symbols tended to reflect the units' function or at least their main weapon. In most cases, a unit too difficult to depict easily was instead represented by a box with a corresponding abbreviation inside. In case it belonged to a particular arm, the arms symbol could be placed on top of or within this box. Where various modifiers applied, these were all added to the symbol.

Company-sized units had, somewhere within their symbol, a thickened part, usually a side.

Artillery Inspectorate and Army Anti-Aircraft firing artillery (tube, rocket-launcher, and anti-aircraft) batteries used the basic symbol without thickening. (Firing artillery in units smaller than battery size were depicted on a smaller scale).

Weapon identification was by means of information placed alongside the symbol: caliber to the left (if no modifier was indicated, it was a light weapon), identification to the right, the number of weapons were placed below.

None-firing batteries of the artillery arm followed the normal form of thickening a portion of the symbol to indicate their size.

Infantry anti-aircraft companies followed the normal practice, and the weapon symbols representing these types of companies had the upright stems thickened accordingly.

Where several columns, platoons, or detachments were gathered under a company headquarters, (such as a heavy company) – and each of these sub-units had its own KStN – these symbols were placed side-by-side within a box, with the left side thickened accordingly.

The Germans numbered their units on organizational charts from the right. I.e., the first company was on the far right, and the last company was on the far left. The same applied to battalions and regiments.

Units smaller than companies appeared on organizational charts only if they had their own Table of Organization. Exceptions occurred, particularly if headquarters sub-units had specialized equipment. They were depicted on a smaller scale than company-sized units.

#### **Staffel**

(Detachment) An elastic designation for several components under a headquarters section, these components being from section to platoon size. Often this was merely an administrative grouping, and the components were distributed to other sub-units in combat. It could either have its own small headquarters section, or one of the components' leaders could carry out a dual function.

#### **Kolonne**

(Column) An independent transportation unit, varying from company to platoon size, transporting equipment or supplies such as a bridge column (which in fact did not actually build the bridge it was transporting), or even as an light 'infantry' column (which consisted of a set number of horse-drawn vehicles capable of transporting a fixed tonnage).

#### **Zug**

(Platoon) An independent unit or the typical main sub-division of companies and batteries. Usually, the 1st and 2nd platoons in each company-sized unit, and also of independent platoons, were lead by a lieutenant, while the other platoons were headed by a senior NCO.

#### **Trupp**

(lit. Troop; Section) A small unit, equipped with specialized equipment; it could also be used as the designation for a headquarters echelon unit (*Kompanie-Trupp*: Company Headquarters; *Zug-Trupp*: Platoon Headquarters, etc.).

The units indicated below were not depicted as separate symbols.

#### **Halb-Zug**

(lit.: Half-Platoon) Some platoons, for example HMG Platoons, could be divided into two parts.

#### **Gruppe**

(Squad, Section) This was normally the smallest sub-unit that existed in the German Army. In this work, the word "Squad" has only been used for infantry and reconnaissance infantry units. All other units of this size have been designated as "Sections".

#### **Halb-Gruppe**

(lit. Half-Squad, i.e. Team) In the case of infantry and reconnaissance units, squads could be broken down into two parts. Infantry and reconnaissance squads were built up around the squad LMG. Where only one LMG was provided, the LMG team provided cover while the other team was the movement element. Where two LMG were available, the teams covered each other in turns. Reconnaissance teams, on the other hand, were trained to work independently, although they too could function as a squad.

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Please note that although these organizational symbols are similar to the tactical symbols used on vehicles to indicate their unit, they are **NOT** identical. The tactical symbols used on vehicles had a simplified system.

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**Appendix F**  
**Biographical Section**  
**Key Commanders During the Battle for Seelow Heights and Berlin**

## German:

Gotthard Heinrici (1886-1971)  
Commander, Army Group Vistula

Gotthard Heinrici was born on 25 Dec 1886 in Gumbinnen East Prussia. He followed the family tradition of military service joining the German army (95th Infantry Regt) in 1905 and served primarily as a staff officer on both Eastern and Western fronts during the First World War. After the war Heinrici remained in the army and was promoted to Major General in 1936 and Lieutenant General in 1938.



At the start of the Second World War Heinrici was promoted to General of Infantry and commanded 12th Corps, breaching the Maginot line in June 1940. He took command of the 43rd Corps during the French campaign and led in the early stages of the Russian campaign as part of Guderian's 2nd Panzer Army. In January 1942 he was given command of 4th Army, was promoted to Colonel General in Jan 1943, and remained with 4th Army until Jun 1944 developing successful defensive tactics against the Russians. The stress of campaigning on the Russian front had taken its toll, and Heinrici was required to take a month of sick leave in May, then being placed on the Führer Reserve until August 1944, at which time he was appointed to command the 1st Panzer Army in Southern Russia and Hungary.

On 20 March 1945, Heinrici was called upon to command Army Group Vistula, until his relief by Fieldmarshall Wilhelm Keitel on 29 April for conducting what was termed an unauthorized withdrawal. His relief was acrimonious, with senior officers at the high command accusing him of disobedience and declaring that Army Group Vistula wasn't worth anything. By this time, the Army Group had virtually ceased to exist, and his successors, at first General von Tippelskirch and afterwards General Student, found themselves in command of next to nothing.

Heinrici was captured by the British in May 1945 and remained in captivity until May 1948. He died in Waiblingen, Württemberg on 13 Dec 1971.

Theodor Busse (1897-1986)  
Commander, 9th Army

Theodor Busse was born in Frankfurt-an-der-Oder on 15 Dec. 1897, and joined the German Army as an officer cadet in 1915. Commissioned in 1917, Busse had field combat experience up to company command. He remained with the army after the end of the war, serving in unit leadership, instructor, and legal officer positions.

Busse was a General Staff officer in April 1939, and prepared a training program which was approved by the Chief of the General Staff in August. The program covered a period from 1 October 1939 to 30 September 1940. Between 1940 and 1942 he served as the Chief of Operations to General (later Field Marshal) Erich von Manstein in the 11th Army on the Eastern Front. He remained serving on Manstein's staff from 1942 until 1943 as Chief of Operations of Army Group Don and then from 1943 until 1944 he was Chief of Staff of Army Group South, both Army Groups on the Eastern Front. While serving with Army Group South he was awarded the Knight's Cross on 30 Jan. 1944. He spent a short time in reserve and was then appointed General Officer Commanding German 121st Infantry Division. In July 1944 he commanded I Corps.



Busse took command of the 9th Army on 19 January 1945. His command endured the Soviet assault through Poland and by March was reassembling its remnants on the Oder River as the primary army blocking direct Soviet access to Berlin. During the Battle of Seelow Heights, Busse's command was surrounded and almost destroyed, yet managed to break out to the west to link up with a relief column commanded by General Walther Wenck.

Busse initially escaped capture, traveling over 800 kms on a bicycle and posing as a common laborer, traveling salesman, and even the mayor of a nearby town. He was eventually taken prisoner when neighbors recognized him in Nördlingen in southern Germany where he had relocated his family. After his release he found employment in the postwar world as a Civil Defense director. He died on 21 Oct. 1986.

Hasso-Eccard Freiherr von Manteuffel (1897-1978)  
Commander, 3rd Panzer Army

Hasso von Manteuffel was born on 14 January 1897 to an aristocratic family that had deep military traditions in Prussian history, being a descendant of Field Marshal Edwin von Manteuffel. Already a cadet at the age of 11, Manteuffel entered military service as a 19 year old lieutenant with a Hussar Regiment. Wounded in October 1916, Manteuffel was given several staff assignments and remained with the army after the war, serving in cavalry units. By the mid-1930s, he had made the transition from horse cavalry to motorization, and by the late 1930s served as a consultant on armor warfare for OKH as well as being an instructor on armor tactics.



In May 1941, Manteuffel was given command of a motorized battalion of the 7th Panzer Division, and later rose to command that division in 1943 after a tour of duty in North Africa as an ad hoc divisional commander. By February 1944, Manteuffel was given command of the elite Großdeutschland Panzergrenadier Division with the express intent to build it into a corps-level organization. While commanding the division he smashed a Soviet offensive in Rumania at Targul Frumos. Promoted to General of Panzer Troops in September, Manteuffel took command of the 5th Panzer Army in the west, leading it during the Ardennes offensive until early 1945. On 10 March, 1945 he was given command of the 3rd Panzer Army along the Oder River and led it until the conclusion of the war, conducting a fighting withdrawal to the west to surrender his command to the British.

After the war and a brief period as a POW, Manteuffel initially worked in a bank and then for a manufacturing firm in Neuß. Voted into office at the local level, by 1953 Manteuffel turned to national politics, becoming a member of the Bundestag, ultimately retiring by 1957. He died at Dießen am Ammersee on 24 Sept. 1978.

Felix Steiner (1896-1966)  
Commander, III SS (Germanisches) Panzer Corps

Born to a Prussian family on 23 May 1896, Steiner, despite his connection to the Waffen-SS, was a professional soldier through and through. He entered the army in 1914 and saw action at the Battle of Tannenberg, a major German victory against Russian forces in East Prussia, and later saw service on the Western Front. He remained with the army after the war, serving in infantry units and various staff and police positions.

In 1935, Steiner switched to the SS-Verfügungstruppe, which was the early beginnings of the Waffen-SS. He served initially as a battalion commander and saw service in Poland and France during the first years of World War II. In December 1940, he was assigned to command the newly created 5th SS-Wiking Motorized Division, a unit that Steiner would be forever most associated with. Under his leadership the division was transformed into a panzergrenadier formation, and proved itself to be one of the most aggressive units on the attack.



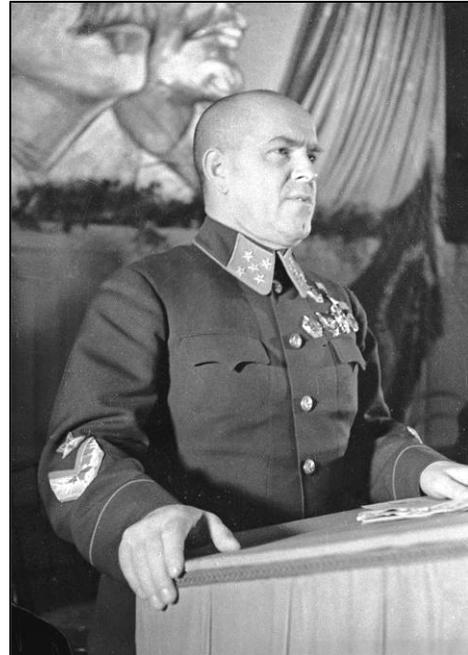
In May, 1943 Steiner was assigned the task of developing the III SS (Germanisches) Panzer Corps comprised of the Nordland and Nederland Divisions. He led this formation until 1944. On 28 January 1945, Steiner, now at the equivalent rank of full general, took command of the Eleventh SS Panzer Army under Army Group Vistula. The army was short-lived, lasting only about two months and taking part in Operation SONNENWENDE in mid-February 1945. Steiner returned to command the III SS Panzer Corps in March in an effort to rebuild its combat ability. However, his corps never went beyond the strength of a weak division and his forces only marginally participated in the final battles around Berlin. On 8 May 1945, Steiner surrendered his command to the British.

After the war, Steiner became very active with the lobbying organization HiAG in an effort to rehabilitate the reputation of the Waffen-SS. He died on 12 May, 1966.

## **Soviet:**

Georgy Zhukov (1896-1974)  
Commander, 1st White Russian Front

Born December 1, 1896, Zhukov was conscripted into the Imperial Russian Army during World War I and joined the Red Army in 1918. He served as a cavalry commander during the Russian Civil War, and afterward studied military science at the Frunze Military Academy (graduated 1931) as well as in Germany. He rose steadily through the ranks, and as head of Soviet forces in the Manchurian border region he directed a successful counteroffensive against Japanese forces there in 1939.



During the Winter War, which the Soviet Union fought against Finland at the outset of World War II, Zhukov served as chief of staff of the Soviet army. In January 1941 he was appointed chief of staff of the Red Army. After the Germans invaded the Soviet Union (June 1941), he organized the defense of Leningrad (St. Petersburg) and was then appointed Commander in Chief of the western front. He directed the defense of Moscow (autumn 1941) as well as the massive counteroffensive (December 1941) that drove the Germans' Army Group Centre back from central Russia. In August 1942, Zhukov was named Deputy Commissar of Defense and First Deputy Commander in Chief of Soviet Armed Forces. He became the chief member of Josef Stalin's personal supreme headquarters and figured prominently in the planning or execution of almost every major engagement in the war. He oversaw the defense of Stalingrad (late 1942) and planned and directed the counteroffensive that encircled the Germans' Sixth Army in that city (January 1943). He was named a Marshal of the Soviet Union soon afterward. Zhukov was heavily involved in the Battle of Kursk (July 1943). He commanded the Soviet offensive through Belorussia, which resulted in the collapse of the German Army Group Centre in 1944 and of German occupation of Poland and Czechoslovakia. In April 1945 he personally commanded the final assault on Berlin and then remained in Germany as commander of the Soviet occupation force. On 8 May 1945 he represented the Soviet Union at Germany's formal surrender.

In 1946 he received command of the Soviet ground forces, but in 1947 he was demoted to command the Odessa military district. Only after Stalin died (March 1953) did the new political leaders appoint Zhukov as a Deputy Minister of Defense (1953) and in 1955 Minister of Defense; at that time he was also elected an alternate member of the Presidium, being promoted to full membership in 1957. In October 1957 he was relieved of his ministry and dropped from the Central Committee by Khrushchev. Remaining in relative obscurity until Khrushchev fell from power (October 1964), Zhukov was later awarded the Order of Lenin (1966) and allowed to publish his autobiography in 1969. He died on 18 June 1974.

Ivan Konev (1897-1973)  
Commander, 1st Ukrainian Front

Born 28 December 1897, Konev was drafted into the Tsarist army in 1916. After the Russian Revolution (1918), he joined the Communist Party and the Red Army. During the Civil War, he fought against the White Russian Army of Alexandr V. Kolchak, organized guerrilla bands, and fought the Japanese. Konev participated in subduing the Kronstadt Rebellion (1921) against Bolshevik rule. He finished his military training at the Frunze Military Academy, graduating in 1926.



Konev was a general in the army when the Germans invaded the Soviet Union in June 1941, and it was he who led the first real counterattack of the war. He defeated the German tank expert General Heinz Guderian's advance on Moscow (December 1941) by employing the "Konev ambush" - a planned retreat of troops in the centre, with the flanks then snapping shut across the breach to trap the pursuing enemy. In the critical summer of 1942 he halted a large German force that had been sent to reinforce the German army at Stalingrad, and in the following year was involved in the battle of Kursk.

After his entrapment of 100,000 German troops in the Korsun salient, Konev was made a Marshal of the Soviet Union (March 1944). In August 1944 his 1st Ukrainian Front was the first to carry the fighting beyond Soviet frontiers, crossing the Vistula River, and, after sweeping across Poland, it was the first to march onto German soil. Konev's 1st Ukrainian Army advanced to the Oder River and, together with Marshal Georgy K. Zhukov's forces, entered and captured Berlin. His Front linked with the U.S. forces at Torgau on the Elbe.

After the defeat of Germany, Konev became supreme commissar for Austria (1945), succeeded Zhukov as a commander in Chief of Soviet ground forces (1946-50), and thereafter held various military posts on the ministerial level, including Commander in Chief of the Warsaw Pact forces (1955-60). In 1961 he was temporarily recalled to act as Commander in Chief of Soviet forces in East Germany, stepping down in 1962 although still retaining a post in the defense ministry. He died on 21 May 1973.

Konstantin Rokossovsky (1896-1968)  
Commander, 2nd White Russian Front

Born 21 December 1896, Rokossovsky served in the imperial army as a non-commissioned officer in World War I. In 1917 he joined the Red Army and served in the Civil War, rising through the ranks to various Far Eastern commands.

In 1938, he was arrested during the Stalinist purges under the pretext that he had plotted with Japanese imperialists in the Far East. Rokossovsky refused to sign a confession and endured multiple rounds of torture that left him with broken ribs and torn out fingernails. He was released without explanation in March 1940, but afterwards carried a handgun everywhere he went, having told his daughter that if another attempt was made to arrest him, he would not be taken alive.



Upon the German invasion of the Soviet Union, Rokossovsky played major roles in the battles of Moscow, Stalingrad, and Kursk. His greatest achievement was at Stalingrad when he directed six Soviet armies to entrap and annihilate the German Sixth Army. By 1944, Rokossovsky was in command of the 2nd White Russian Front, a post he held to the end of the war.

In 1949 he was named Soviet defense minister and deputy chairman of the Council of Ministers of Soviet-dominated Poland and was accorded the title Marshal of Poland. He held these positions until the return to power of former Communist Polish Worker's Party secretary Wlasyslaw Gomulka. Upon his expulsion by Gomulka (28 October 1956, on charges of attempting to stage a pro-Soviet coup), Rokossovsky returned to the U.S.S.R., where he was deputy minister of defense (1956 - 1962) and held various other military posts. He died in Moscow on 3 August 1968.

Vasili Chuikov (1900-1982)  
Commander, 8th Guards Army

Born 12 February 1900, Chuikov joined the Red Army at the age of 18 after the Russian Revolution. His first taste of battle in the Civil War occurred at Tsaritsyn (later named Stalingrad), and by the following year, in 1919, he was a member of the Communist Party and a regimental commander. He graduated from the M.V. Frunze Military Academy in 1925, took part in the Soviet invasion of Poland (1939) and in the Russo-Finnish War (1939 - 40), and had just finished serving as military attaché in China when he was called to Stalingrad to command the city's defense. In August 1942 the Germans launched a direct attack against Stalingrad, in November the Soviet forces began to counterattack and by the end of the year were on the offensive. General Chuikov subsequently led his forces into the Donets Basin and then into the Crimea and north to Belorussia before spearheading the Soviet drive to Berlin as commander of the 8th Guards Army. Chuikov accepted the German surrender of Berlin on 1 May 1945.



After the war he served with the Soviet occupation force in Germany (1945-53), commanding those forces from 1949. He headed the Kiev military district from 1953 to 1960 and thereafter held a variety of military assignments in Moscow. He was a candidate member of the Communist Party's Central Committee from 1952 to 1961 and a full member from 1961 until he died on 18 March 1982.

Mikhail Katukov (1900-1976)  
Commander, 1st Guards Tank Army

Born 17 September 1900, Katukov entered the Red Army as a private in 1919. He served during the Russian Civil War and later as a tank unit commander before World War II. In 1935, he graduated from the Stalin Military Academy and in July 1936 was promoted to captain. In 1938 he received his first major command, that being the 5th Light Tank Brigade of the 45th Mechanized Corps. He avoided being caught up in the Stalinist purges of the late 1930s.



During World War II, he commanded a tank brigade and was directly involved in stymieing the German advance on Moscow near Tula in December 1941. He later commanded the 1st Tank Brigade that launched a deep penetration of German lines in the Rzhev salient during Operation MARS in December 1942.

He received command of the 1st Guards Tank Army in 1943, which he led to the end of the war. He participated in the Battle of Kursk, his army being one of the ones heavily engaged with German panzer units on the southern shoulder of the salient. He later fought in operations near Lvov that led to the expulsion of German forces from western Ukraine, followed by the Vistula-Oder operation and the assault to take Berlin.

Katukov was awarded the title of the Hero of the Soviet Union twice (29 Sep. 1944 and 6 April 1945). Following the war he became commander of the mechanized forces of the Group of Soviet Forces in Germany (GSFG), and later Inspector General of the Army.

Semyon Ilyich Bogdanov (1894-1960)  
Commander, 2nd Guards Tank Army

Bogdanov was born in St. Petersburg in 1894, and joined the Red Army in 1918 after having served in the Tsarist Army in World War I. He was a veteran of the Russian Civil War, Russo-Polish War, and was involved in suppressing the Tambov Rebellion of 1920-21, a resistance movement to Soviet grain requisitions that saw the Soviet government use chemical weapons on armed peasants.

During the Stalinist purges Bogdanov was sentenced to two years in prison, but was rehabilitated soon after and resumed his career in the army. During World War II he initially served in the Soviet 30th Armored Division, was the deputy commander of the 5th Army from 1941 to 1942, commanded the 6th Mechanized Corps from 1942 to 1943, and took command of the 2nd Tank Army in September 1943, which received the honorific of "Guards" in November 1944. He commanded this army until the end of the war, including Operation BAGRATION, operations in Rumania, the Vistula-Oder operation, the destruction of German units in Pomerania, and finally the Battle of Berlin.

Bogdanov was twice named as Hero of the Soviet Union, and after the war command armored and mechanized forces in the newly created East Germany. In December 1948, he was named as commander of all armored forces in the Soviet Army. He died in 1960.



## Other Commanders of Note

### German:



Walther Wenck  
Commander, 12th Army



Mathias Kleinheisterkamp  
Commander, XI SS Corps



Helmut Weidling  
Commander, LVI Panzer Corps  
Last Commander, Berlin



Werner Mummert  
Commander, Müncheberg Panzer Division

Bruno Bräuer  
Commander, 9th Fallschirmjäger Division



Willy Langkeit,  
Commander, Kurmark Panzergrenadier Division



Josef Rauch  
Commander, 18th Panzergrenadier Division

Georg Scholze  
Commander, 20th Panzergrenadier Division



**Soviet:**

Lieutenant General Andrei Gettman  
Deputy Commander, 1st Guards Tank Army



Vasily Kuznetsov  
Commander, 3d Shock Army



Nikolai Bezarin  
Commander, 5th Shock Army



Vladimir Kolpakchi  
Commander, 69th Army

Stanislaw Poplawski  
Commander 1st Polish Army

