

# The Battle For Berlin

This last major offensive in Europe lasted from April 16 to May 2 1945, when the garrison surrendered two days after Hitler's suicide. Some fighting went on until May 8 when the Germans finally surrendered unconditionally.

Before April, after the Luftwaffe lost air superiority, the Western Allies had bombed Berlin to rubble. Berliners, living in cellars and shelters, were fatalistic in the face of impending downfall. They no longer feared being reported for anti Nazi comments; the "Heil Hitler" salute was dropped; reckless spending and sexual licence showed the social fabric was already disintegrating.

The Allies had agreed to divide Berlin once the Nazis were defeated, but Stalin wanted to take it before the Americans. The British too wanted to capture Berlin, finally defeat Germany, and influence post war politics in Europe. But Eisenhower, expecting Berlin to fall into the Soviet sphere, was not keen. He wanted minimal casualties and to concentrate on war with Japan; so he gave Stalin a free hand in his plans to take Berlin.

The Soviets formed a battle line east of Berlin along the Oder. Their objective was capture of the city and the Kaiser Wilhelm Institute where the Nazi nuclear programme was centred in Dahlem, a south-western suburb. Stalin knew the Western Allies were working on a uranium bomb. He had accelerated the Soviet nuclear programme but the Soviets lacked uranium; reserves in Europe were under Nazi control. Stalin, not knowing most material and personnel had been transferred west, hoped to seize the German supplies.

He split command of the Berlin Operation between Marshals Zhukov on the east and Konev in the south, in a race to take Berlin by Lenin's birthday, 22 April.

**16 April.** 3am Zhukov's artillery attacked the Seelow Heights and 110,000 men of the German 9th Army. The Germans, surprised and blinded by searchlights, could not resist but the bombardment churned up wet ground slowing the Russian tank advance. Tanks queued to cross River Oder. Marshall Zhukov failed to secure the area on the first day.

The bombardment was heard in Berlin sixty miles away where the people prepared for a siege.

To the south Marshal Konev's bombardment began at 4am. Assisted by heavy carpet bombing to weaken German defences, he crossed the Neisse River and advanced. That night Stalin redirected his assault to the south-west of Berlin, towards Dahlem.

**17 April.** Carpet bombing west of the Seelow Heights wiped out German command posts; German lines were in chaos and casualties overwhelmed the field hospitals. Although Zhukov faced a counter-attack by German tanks he secured the main road to Berlin and forged a gap between the German forces to the south and east.

To the south, where the German 4th Panzer Army tried to regroup, Marshal Konev split his army in two, forcing the Germans to retreat on a wider front.

The German 9th Army, pushed west, retreated to the southern outskirts, only to be encircled by Soviet forces from the south. Soviet forces also encroached from the north.

The retreating Germans had little air defence; tanks had no fuel; the artillery was out of ammunition; soldiers lacked both ammunition and food. Heinrich Himmler proclaimed German towns were to be defended at all costs but many soldiers deserted, not wanting to face the Soviets.

**18 April.** Konev's forces were 35 kilometres beyond the Spree. German home guard units were ordered out of the city to reinforce the 9th Army leaving Berlin defenceless, to save it from complete destruction in defiance of Himmler. Many Berliners assumed Berlin was an open city.

**19 April.** The German 9th Army began to disintegrate. On the main road retreating soldiers, and civilians seeking refuge in Berlin, were strafed and bombed by Soviet planes. Exhausted Germans could not form another defensive line; the retreat had become a rout.

**20 April.** Hitler's fifty sixth birthday. He made a rare exit from his bunker for a salute by the army, the SS and Hitler Youth, and met Speer, Goering, Doenitz, Keitel, and Ribbentrop.

The Soviets were shelling the city centre and entering the eastern and north-eastern outskirts. In the south they were close to meeting the Americans at Magdeburg. Berlin was now the front-line. Only mangled Wehrmacht and SS divisions, with Hitler Youth and 2000 police, were left to defend the inner city, commanded by SS Brigadier Mohnke.

**23 - 25 April.** Soviet units encircled the city, some reaching Templehof Airport inside the S-Bahn defence ring. Going west they met the British 21st Army Group, and met US forces near Torgau on the Elbe.

The Germans could now only delay matters with house to house fighting. The city layout, straight wide roads on mostly level ground, influenced the fighting. Most housing was only five storeys high, built around courtyards reached from the street by an alley.

The Soviets were in small assault groups supported by artillery; the Germans, experienced in urban fighting, put snipers and machine guns on upper floors and roofs above the level of tank fire and soldiers with anti-tank weapons in cellar windows at ground level. The Soviets learnt to send tanks down both sides of the street so that their cross fire countered German attacks, to advance through apartment blocks blasting holes in the walls, and to fight across roof tops and through attics. They mounted submachine-guns on tanks to fire into doorways and windows, and used flame throwers and grenades causing high casualties among the unevacuated civilian population.

**26 - 27 April.** Templehof Airport was captured and local women were rounded up to clear the runway. Zhukov set up a civil administration in the area captured. The Soviets had penetrated the S-Bahn ring and were shelling the city centre. The Germans held only a narrow strip 16 miles wide.

**28 April.** Himmler contacted the Western Allies to establish a cease fire. Hitler in a rage sent men to arrest him. The Soviets were one kilometre south of his bunker. Bulkheads under the Landwehr Canal were blown, up to cause flooding and slow the Soviet advance. Panic ensued in the U-Bahn tunnels killing thousands of civilians sheltering there; most deaths were from the crush, not drowning.

Stalin now ordered Marshal Konev south for the Prague Offensive and Zhukov had the honour of capturing Berlin. The Germans now held an area 9 miles by 3, between Alexander Platz and the Olympic stadium. To avoid fighting in tunnels and bunkers the Soviets sealed them off. By afternoon they were at the Moltke Bridge 500m from the Reichstag. By dusk they were across.

**29 April.** At 4am in Hitler's bunker General Burgdorf, Goebbels, Krebs and Bormann witnessed his will before he married Eva Braun. Directing the remaining German forces was impossible, but the leaders planned to break out of the bunker at 10pm the next day.

**30 April.** The Soviets planned to capture the Reichstag in time for the May Day parade in Moscow. But the district was heavily garrisoned; nearly 10,000 remaining German troops had retreated there. There were defences dug all round, a collapsed tunnel filled with water, and anti aircraft fire from the nearby Zoo bunker. The Soviet attack at 6am met heavy fire and they did not capture the Reichstag until the afternoon of 1 May, too late for May Day celebrations in Moscow.

After lunch Hitler and Braun said farewell to Goebbels, Bormann, General Krebs and the secretaries, returned to their room and killed themselves; Braun took prussic acid; Hitler shot himself in the head. Their bodies were taken up to the garden, doused in petrol and set alight. Hitler's death was not reported until 10.26pm the following night, but few Berliners heard the radio as there was no electricity.

After Hitler's suicide Goebbels and Bormann instructed Krebs to ask for a conditional ceasefire, recognising a new German government under Admiral Doenitz. The Soviets refused, insisting on unconditional surrender by May 1; after twenty minutes with no reply the Soviets continued their onslaught. By now fear of reprisals caused many Berliners to destroy evidence of Nazism, such as photographs of Hitler or family members in army uniform.

Goebbels and his wife murdered their six children by poison and committed suicide; their bodies were burnt too. The planned mass breakout from the bunker took place that evening, escaping by a railway tunnel to Friedrichstrasse station, but most were captured, sent to Moscow prisons or killed. Included were Bormann, Mohnke and the

secretaries. Traudl Junge and Gerda Christian, dressed as men, escaped west to the Americans. Generals Krebs and Burgdorf committed suicide in the bunker.

**2 May.** The Soviets stormed the Chancellery. Sporadic gunfire continued, from SS zealots fighting to the end, until remnants of the forces were flushed out of the cellars and subway tunnels. Soviet troops celebrated by firing signals and drinking whatever alcohol they could obtain. Some drank industrial solvent and took three days to die.

Civilians emerging from their shelters queued at Red Army field kitchens, set up by Zhukov to bring 'normality' to the war torn city. The wounded on both sides were laid in public areas to await treatment from the German Red Cross and improvised field hospitals were set up. Smoke from burning ruins enveloped the city and hundreds of corpses littered the streets.

All German men in uniform, even railway workers and firemen, were rounded up and many sent to Soviet labour camps to die from exhaustion and neglect. Over a million Berliners were homeless, living in cellars or air raid shelters for months after the war. There were widespread reports of rape by Red Army soldiers and high levels of looting. 95% of the tram system was destroyed and large parts of the U-Bahn and S-Bahn systems were under water. Hunger was endemic; as soon as the trains began running many travelled out to the countryside to forage for food.

**6 May.** The 'new' German government led by Doenitz signed a provisional unconditional surrender to the Western Allies, with effect from May 9. The signing of the full surrender document was repeated at Karlshorst with Soviet representatives present and the war on German soil was over.